"There Was No Middle Ground": Anne Braden and the Southern Social Justice Movement

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Anne McCarty Braden is a southern white anti-racist activist who made a dramatic break with segregationist culture in the years just after World War II and committed her life to the cause of racial and social justice. Braden found her life's work and meaning through the racial justice movement in the South, and the longevity of her activism has made her into a sort of "conscience" for the white South, a reminder that whites bear an equal stake in opposing racism. This article is essentially biographical, framing her (1) political transformation; (2) early activism; (3) Kentucky sedition case and (4) overall contributions to racial change in the post-World War II South, in terms of race, gender, class, and place. A theme of the essay is Braden's broad-based vision of social change, which has provided important points of connection with most of the great social upheavals of this century, even though her own work has centered primarily on civil rights campaigns in the former plantation South. She has lived her life as a feminist and has brought a highly gendered presence to all of her organizing, raising questions of women's rights in every movement of which she has been a part and urging inclusiveness within the women's movement. Her commitment to trade unionism and economic justice also has led her to build alliances between southern civil rights crusades and union drives and economic reform projects in the Appalachian South.

Finally I came to realize that . . . no one can go untouched by segregation in the [S]outh. No white person, then as now, can be neutral on this question. Either you find a way to oppose the evil, or the evil becomes part of you and you are a part of it, and it winds itself around your soul like the arms of an octopus . . . if I did not oppose it, I was . . . responsible for its sins. There was no middle ground.

—Braden 1958, 30-1

Anne McCarty Braden wrote those words in The Wall Between, her 1958 memoir, to describe her transformation to what would be known today as a white anti-racist activist. The reissuance of her book this year (Univ. of Tenn. Press, forthcoming) presents an opportune moment for a fresh reading of Braden's experiences more generally. In a climate of subtle but resurgent racism, Braden's half century of racial justice activism in the South and her persistent clarion message that whites bear equal responsibility in opposing racism hold important insights for today's...
scholars and activists concerned with issues of race, class, gender, and region. The unbroken chain of her activism bears testament to her resilience, just as the relatively unchanging quality of her message bears witness to the powerful tenacity of racism.

This essay is essentially biographical, framing Braden’s political transformation in the post-World War II South in terms of race, gender, class, and place and examining her early activism and larger contributions to southern racial and social change. The essay is part of a larger biographical research project in which I have interviewed Braden extensively, attempting through oral history to highlight her unique voice and perspective and to tell her story in a way that bridges some of the barriers between subject and researcher.¹

Braden is what one of my colleagues would call a “transgressive” woman. Her life has crossed multiple boundaries and intersected with most of the great social upheavals of the twentieth century. She has consistently identified her anti-racist standpoint as that of white, southern, and woman long before the spread of identity politics popularized such labels. Imbued with a kind of Marxist, internationalist, militantly interracial, working-class ideology deeply influenced by Communist Party and other left-wing activists she met in postwar Kentucky, Braden has also long identified herself as a radical, a social indicator that won her intense opprobrium in the South of earlier decades. Radical perspective notwithstanding, Braden has positioned herself in the freedom movement in such a way that although she has remained deeply connected to African American communities and leadership, her primary task has been that of outreach to a broad spectrum of whites (and, to a lesser extent, to women’s groups). In that bridge-building process, she has become a sort of “conscience” for the white South who has kept alive an inclusive vision of racial and social justice both through her own work and through her influence on later activists.²

She is not well-known, however, except within the “other America” (her phrase) in which she has lived her adult life: the small but persistent sub-culture of social justice activists who have changed emphases in different generations but have been an ongoing feature, to a greater or lesser extent, of the U.S. social landscape throughout this century. Her influence has perhaps been most profound on those who experienced for a while the “beloved community” of the early-1960s southern civil rights movement, especially the first organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Sara Evans’s classic study of that organization identified Braden as “the most important adult white woman” to student activists—virtually the only southern white woman of her generation who was living a life that the young women and whites of SNCC could admire (1979, 48–9). Three decades after the demise of SNCC,
former members remain in awe of her commitment. (One former SNCC staffer interviewed for this writing told me somberly that I was “doing God’s work.”)\(^3\)

Braden appears—only at the margins—in any number of histories of the civil rights movement, either as a trusted adult advisor to youthful movement workers, as one of the few white southerners carrying on in the spirit of the southern race liberal from the New Deal era, or as a persistent grassroots activist who could be a liability at times because she had been branded a Communist in the 1950s. In her hometown of Louisville, Kentucky, she is not nearly so famous as she is infamous. Since her name peppered the headlines throughout 1954 after she and her husband were indicted for sedition for having bought a house in a white neighborhood on behalf of an African American family, she remained notorious for decades as one of the city’s leading resident “common-ists” and agitators.\(^4\)

Among feminist scholars, Braden’s work has received some attention, as Evans’s example indicates. Yet, as Kathleen Blee pointed out in a recent volume (1998), women activists in varied social movements have received less feminist examination than have women’s rights activists. Braden brings a highly gendered presence to all of her organizing activity, regardless of the issue, and has repeatedly raised questions of gender at some critical junctures in other social movements. Her experiences suggest that perhaps we should interpret the “women’s movement” more broadly.

Anne Braden is not exactly representative, however, of southern white women of her generation, not even of radical southern white women of her generation (few though they may be). In the post-World War II South, she stood very nearly alone among other women of her race, class, region, and age in her renunciation of white privilege and her single-minded dedication to social and racial change. Her generation came after the women’s rights/social reform crusaders of the earlier part of the century and after the more broadly based “popular front” social protest provoked by the urgency of the Great Depression, but before the young activist women of the 1960s who helped to launch the student civil rights movement and later the anti-war and women’s liberation movements.\(^5\)

**Transformation**

Braden was born Anne Gambrell McCarty in 1924, during an era in which Jim Crow laws, disfranchisement, and degradation defined the southern African American experience. Her father, Gambrell McCarty, was a traveling salesman whose work for a feed company landed the family in Anniston, Alabama, when Anne was seven and her brother ten. Anita McCarty, Anne’s mother, did not work outside the home, but
nudged her daughter toward a writing career from an early age. Braden’s middle-class upbringing in Anniston gave her a heavy dose of what the novelist Lillian Smith (1949) has called “southern tradition” (meaning segregation and states’ rights undergirded by white supremacy, patriarchy, and a rather narrow brand of Christianity). Previous generations of her family, all Kentuckians, had been slaveholders and had without exception fought on the Confederate side in a state that was deeply divided internally. Braden’s mother in particular stressed to her the significance of the family’s elite southern heritage.

Like most white southerners, the McCartys were Democrats who—while not politically active—voted for Franklin Roosevelt but saw segregation as a cornerstone of their way of life. A deep religiosity nurtured by Braden’s social gospel-oriented Episcopal minister, who established youth programs to assist the children of Anniston’s poorest mill workers, offered the young adolescent her only critique of regional social conventions, instilling in her a sort of mission consciousness that would not fully reveal itself for years. Her seriousness sometimes worried her mother, especially when on her thirteenth birthday she wrote a poem that spoke of her commitment to living a “selfless life.” The young Anne knew nothing, however, of the Depression-era southern dramas being played out around her, such as the industrial union organizing drives in nearby Birmingham or the Scottsboro case in which nine young African American men had been sentenced to death for the rape of two white women and saved only though a public, international outcry. She later recalled that none of those stirrings of change impinged on me. I did know about poverty because everybody did to a certain extent during the Depression. And I did know about the separate black and white worlds.

The first glimpse of a wider world came only during World War II with her attendance at Stratford and Randolph-Macon, two exclusive Virginia women’s colleges (Braden 1989c).6

Collegiate life provoked an intellectual awakening in Braden. Those four years of living in a single-sex community, intensified by the urgency of wartime and the relative absence of men even in the larger society, encouraged her to excel, and she developed a love of learning. Through editing the college newspaper, she also discovered a passion for journalism and for hard work.

Going to women’s colleges gave me a chance to find myself, to begin thinking about myself as a woman. I don’t think I ever knew the excitement of an idea until I got to college. I felt like I’d wasted 16 years of my life. (Braden 1989d)

Surrounded by female mentors, many of whom were single, professional women, she also developed a proto-feminist gender consciousness. Probably the greatest impetus for Braden’s intellectual blossoming was
Harriet Fitzgerald, a Virginia alumna of Randolph-Macon who was now an artist in New York. Fitzgerald was political, a passionate supporter of organized labor who introduced Anne to Marx and Freud, and to an awareness that segregation was wrong.

We’d sit up all night talking about ideas. She had been through some sort of metamorphosis of her own while she was in college. She was a part of that generation of women in the twenties who decided to seek careers instead of marriage, and she was quite a liberal, kept coming back [South] and trying to shake things up there, never cutting herself off from her roots. She was just a profound influence on my life. I realized later that she was the first person I was ever in love with. It was not any overt sort of homosexual relationship because that would have scared me to death, but I’m talking about being in love with her in that she was what made life exciting and interesting. (Braden 1981a)

Braden has always maintained that she and her college peers caught the “spillover” from an earlier generation of feminists who were now teachers and alumnae of her colleges, and she left school with an expansive sense of her own agency (Braden 1989a).

When Braden graduated from Randolph-Macon in 1945, she was determined to become not a reformer but a great newspaperwoman. She rejected the life of a typical elite southern white woman, which meant, as she saw it, “being an ornament and not a human being” (Braden 1999). In the postwar era, ideas about women’s “place” were in a state of flux: a media and government blitz encouraging women to return to their homes ran counter to the image of the working, publicly achieving woman promoted by the wartime surge in women’s employment. The power of those messages, coupled with the domestic repression associated with the Cold War, largely accounts for the reduced social ferment of the 1950s in terms of widescale protest, especially concerning women’s rights. It does not, however, adequately explain the choices made by women like Anne Braden, who began adulthood with a career orientation that soon evolved into an immersion in social action. Braden’s experiences bring into sharper focus some components of the oppositional culture of the postwar era (1945–1960) even as they illustrate the tremendous conservatism of the period. Like some of her peers in the American left, Braden continued that path through marriage and motherhood with no real retreat into the domesticity so glorified in the popular culture in those years. It is probably helpful to view her generation as one of “transition rather than paradox,” as the historian Susan Hartmann suggests (1994, 84).7

As a young newspaper reporter first for her hometown Anniston Star and later for the Birmingham News and Age-Herald, Braden observed the harsh racial differentials endemic to Alabama courts. Feelings of revulsion drove her not to protest but to flee the deep South, returning to her
birthplace of Louisville to join the staff of the *Louisville Times* in 1947. There she encountered left-wing trade unionists and civil rights workers who were part of a post-World War II wave of activism to extend the promise of U.S. democracy begun with Roosevelt’s New Deal. The realization that there was a serious challenge being presented to segregation and to what felt to her like a suffocatingly stagnant society struck Braden like a strong wind, and she began to search for a new direction for her life, seeking out groups like the NAACP and other local organizations battling segregation.

In anyone’s life, it is the moments of epiphany or pain that bring about shifts in consciousness. The process Braden experienced in 1947/48 involved a personal and political transformation she has described as “turning myself inside out,” something she thinks white southerners of her generation and of the 1960s had to do as they became active for social change. Her words:

*I had to come to terms with the fact that my whole society—one that had been very good to me—my family, friends, the people I loved, and had never stopped loving, were just plain wrong. It’s a searingly painful process, but it’s not destructive, because once you do it, you are free.* [1997b]

From her perspective, the “open sesame” that first allowed her to develop a broad-based social critique was race—as she believes it has been for many white southerners who have participated in social change movements.

*I found that in talking to [other] white southerners, they have had very similar experiences. The details were different from mine, but for all of us who got involved in the social justice movement, the starting point was race because that was so obvious. It was easier to see [the corruption of white society] in the South than in other parts of the country. It was easier then than now. . . . Once you recognize the painful fact that you have benefitted because African-Americans have suffered, the entire structure you’ve identified with begins to crumble, and everything in the society comes into question.* [1984; 1997b]

That emotionally turbulent period in her life deeply colored the vision of social change she has held ever since. Braden has always maintained that the consequence of centuries-long exploitation of African Americans in U.S. society is that “it takes an explosion,” individually and societally, to get white people to act against racism. For this young woman of conscience at mid-century, the ugly face of Jim Crow segregation provoked, psychically, such an explosion [Braden 1997a].

Braden’s interior wrestling with her views on race began before she ever left Alabama, and merely intensified once she met civil rights crusaders in Kentucky. But the painful change she endured from 1947 to 1948 also involved class.
In that year I think I changed sides in the class struggle. Before that I had not even known there was one. Like most people who identify with the upper class, I didn't think there were any social/economic classes. Essentially I came to identify with the oppressed instead of the oppressor, which changed my whole world view. When I realized that I had grown up part of a privileged class that enjoyed its place in society because not only black people but because most of the rest of the population was subjugated, I really had to turn the world as I saw it and the world within myself [inside out]. It was a lot to manage all at once. . . . I had a very emotional feeling about [our country's] democratic rights, and now I was coming to terms with the fact that these things really weren't rights but were privileges I had gotten because of my class. I remember crying—and I don't cry easily, wondering about whether I was turning against my own people. (1997b; 1989c)

The working-class perspective she adopted has stayed with her through subsequent decades. Ironically, the idealism that propelled her was nurtured by the same sense of entitlement that had been part and parcel of her rather privileged upbringing. After years of discomfort with southern race relations and a nagging sense of inner discontentment, as if she had not quite found her niche, Braden now thoroughly repudiated the Jim Crow society around her and committed herself to its downfall (Braden 1997b).

She has looked back on that painful but pivotal moment:

In anybody's life there is a time that's a turning point, and this was the turning point in my life. Everything else is anticlimactic. I hope I've grown since then, but for me the real change was from being a woman of the white privileged class in the South to being what I consider a revolutionary. (1981b)

During her early months in Louisville in 1947, a multiplicity of influences crashed in on Braden (who was then still Anne McCarty) and prompted her to question her value system. But the most profound of them was certainly Carl Braden, a working-class trade unionist and fellow reporter at the Times—ten years her senior—who introduced her to the labor movement and became her political mentor and co-worker. The notion that Braden's anti-capitalist, anti-racist perspective grew out of her falling in love with Carl and his ideas is too simplistic. She herself has always explained the attraction as having worked in a reverse fashion.

It was my early association with him—long before I realized I was in love with him—that introduced me to the working-class perspective. . . . What attracted me to him was the movement he represented, the kind of social vision he represented and the feeling of being with somebody that I would really be in tune with, intellectually. (1997b; 1981a, 17)

In college Braden had seen marriage as entirely "sterile," a kind of "living death" consisting of bridge parties and trips to the country club. Yet she found with Carl the same sort of intellectual excitement she had
only known before with her friend Harriet Fitzgerald. When the two also discovered that they were physically compatible, they became a “team,” as Braden has put it, and realized they wanted to spend their lives living and working together. Only through a bond of such intensity could she break free of what she had come to see as the “prison” of class privilege. Years later, looking back on her marriage, Braden reflected that

[I] never wanted to find my identity through a man, but to a certain extent that’s what I ended up doing . . . the emotional pull to him helped me to shake loose from the ties of my past. (Braden 1999)

The two shared not just a personal compatibility but a social commitment that became the groundwire for their relations to each other and to the world. In the postwar era, as birth rates soared and ages at first marriage declined, single women continued to enjoy greater independence, but family and personal relations also continued to exert a powerful claim on young women, particularly those of Braden’s background. In that context, marriage was almost a given for a partnership as close as theirs.8

The couple formalized their romantic and working partnership in mid-1948, and Braden later characterized her choice as “marrying not just a man but a movement.” The “stars in my eyes,” as she has described their first year or two together, soon gave way to a more realistic complementarity. They frequently argued on tactics, as she was more of a relationship builder in her approach, as opposed to his more brusque, take-the-bull-by-the-horns manner (Braden 1989a; 1999).

Ironically, just as Braden discovered the new world opened to her through the social justice movement, social criticism began to lose what respectability it had gained during the crisis of the Depression. Her first real political involvement was in Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party campaign for the presidency in 1948, which energized reformers in the South because of Wallace’s radically pro-civil rights and anti-Cold War program. As Patricia Sullivan’s 1996 work on New Deal reformers illustrates, however, Wallace’s southern sweep represented the “last gasp” of popular front progressivism in the region, reflecting both the power that people’s movements had achieved over the last decade and the resurgence of racism and reaction accompanying postwar conservatism and the dramatic intensification of domestic anticommunist ideology. In 1948, social protest abounded at the grassroots level, but the fortunes of liberal and leftist reformers were changing amid a cultural anticommunist hysteria generated by the gathering Cold War.

In the South, criticisms of “communist” social dissent gained particular saliency when the targets overlapped with challenges to segregation, as they frequently did. Over the next few years the developing cultural and political consensus on anticommunism made possible a
domestic anticommunist "witch hunt" in the United States unparalleled among other western nations, destroying personal lives, careers, and widespread social activism. In the South, that witch hunt all but silenced what white opposition to the racial status quo had been brewing during the previous decades. Even in 1948, Braden realized that she was crossing a momentous boundary in joining what she has called "an outlaw movement" (1989b).

Although the threat of communism was in the headlines nearly every day by the time Braden moved to Louisville as a young adult, the flowering social movements spawned by postwar popular-front organizing were still wide open, and for her, they beckoned as a spiritual home after she began to perceive the glaring inequalities in the culture that had produced her. Soon after she went through the inner turmoil from which she emerged as a radical, she heard, from an older African American Communist, William Patterson, about an idea that offered her a new sense of place. She has reiterated that point many times throughout subsequent decades.

The culture I grew up in was fascist; I couldn't have my roots there. But he told me I had a choice: I could be a part of the world of the lynchers, or I could join the "other America"—the whole lineage of people who had opposed slavery and injustice. That's what I joined... it gave me a connection to a past and a future to be part of a long chain of struggle that was here before [me] and will be here when [I'm] gone. That became a very real concept to me all my life; it still is.

That "other America" has been a source of Braden's resiliency in the face of intense, sustained repression. In embracing a new community, she became part of a small but tenacious network of resisters who failed to be silenced by the oppressive social climate and—in her case—by the powerful cultural prescriptions surrounding white southern womanhood (Braden 1999).

Anne Braden adopted an activism that took aim at many of the values her family of origin held dear; yet she took great pains to keep intact her connection to that family in spite of their ideological differences and the anguish those differences caused all concerned. While rejecting the southern tradition of her upbringing, she has maintained the regional identity and deep sense of place that went hand in hand with it. Part of that attachment derived from the emphasis her family had always seemed to place on their own history, and the self-consciously "southern-ness" of the culture of her growing-up years. To call that identity "Confederate" would be overly simplistic, but it was rooted in a vision of southern distinctiveness that was very much bound up with the aristocracy of the plantation South and a proslavery ideology that had, by the time of her birth, transformed into a sentimentality for the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy.
Yet once she became a radical, Braden developed a very different orientation toward her southern past than that of her forebears. She turned to discovering the oppositional traditions of racial and social protest in southern history, developing over the years a passionate interest in radical Reconstruction and in the currents of southern “progressive” dissent that had rippled silently past her as a child. Braden cultivated as mentors older regional figures from the New Deal era who were still active, such as Virginia Durr of Alabama, who became her close friend and co-worker. She read African American history and adopted a new kind of southern identity that became an integral part of her self-concept (Braden 1997a).

When she moved to Louisville in 1947, Braden first saw her stay there as only a stopping point in a journey that would take her out of the South and on to greater success as a journalist in a northern city. Once she turned her life around, she renounced career ambition but felt a responsibility to stay and help cure the regional ills that had prompted her metamorphosis. Early in her activist career, Braden was advised (also by William Patterson) that as a white person she should reach out to other whites. Whenever she could, she acted on that advice—the same later offered to whites by Malcolm X (1965, 376)—though always within the framework of multi-racial organizing. By the mid-1950s, when her local activism grew to include national organizing, she found that speaking against racism as a white southerner was unique enough to make listeners sit up and take notice. Within the region, speaking as a southern white woman in the postwar era, Braden’s class privilege, enmeshed with her race, gender, and regional background, created for her a kind of shield many other activists simply did not enjoy. Up to a point, she was freer to criticize regional conventions and she maximized that discursive space, inadvertently benefitting from the kind of male “protectionism” toward elite southern white women that she herself decried and that the historian LeeAnn Whites (1993) has identified as having shaped southern gender relations in the South since the Civil War. The limits of that so-called “protection” are also evident, however, in the intense repression and marginalized status—even within the civil rights movement—that Braden endured from the time of her 1954 sedition case until well into the 1980s as a result of anticommunist ideology that branded her as “red.”

Early Activism

In the late-1940s Anne and Carl Braden left mainstream journalism and worked as publicists in the left wing of the labor movement and in various local efforts to topple segregation. In all of those contexts, Braden found various points of contact with the Communist Party (CP). She did not identify wholly with the CP, but her politics were strongly influenced by
Communists who led many of the civil rights and labor campaigns she encountered in her early activism. She saw such figures as more heroic than demonic and experienced in that milieu a vision and practice of interracial cooperation she found nowhere else. As the Cold War intensified in the 1950s, she also took note that racist and anticommunist ideologues in her midst were frequently one and the same. Her refusal to denounce or to disassociate herself from the CP and its doctrines brought down a hail of criticism on her in the Cold War era and throughout the 1960s and 1970s as anticommunist fears lingered, but she remained loyal to the popular-front collaboration that had informed her political transformation, and resolute that placing Communists “outside the pale of humanity” effectively made it treasonous to criticize capitalism or offer virtually any social dissent. She has explained it thus:

_It became very important, not just as a matter of principle, but as a matter of practical politics, not to give in to that. Either you resisted it or you were a part of it. There was no neutral ground. Whether you were a Communist or not, if you answered the question, you were conceding to the assumption that the very question was the test of whether you could be considered a human being or not._ [Braden 1989b]

Another part of leftist ideology that appealed to Braden was its longstanding critique of male supremacy and acknowledgment that women as a group had unique concerns. Although neither she nor leftist sub-culture saw personal relations between men and women as a compelling political issue, Communists and their allies at least paid some attention to the status of women and promoted female activism. The Bradens’ own marriage was highly unconventional, by the standards of the day, in its relative egalitarianism. For most of their lives together, the two took turns with domestic duties at home, caring for their children and traveling the region as field organizers. As her political sophistication grew, Anne Braden frequently criticized male supremacy among her movement colleagues and promoted women’s leadership. From the early years of her activism, she found it both personally rewarding and politically effective to work with women’s organizations ranging from a Women’s Auxiliary of the left-leaning Farm Equipment Workers’ Union to the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Women’s rights was not the key issue in such efforts, but she consistently sought to expand women’s freedoms in the context of wider social justice activities.11

Both Bradens were committed socialists, but the push to focus on racial injustices always emanated from Anne. Opposing segregation became for her, in her words, “a compulsion,” and, in the context of burgeoning African American crusades around them, she pushed Carl hard on that issue, so much so that they came to devote most of their activist energies in that direction. In 1950 they helped to launch an “Interracial Hospital...
Movement” in Louisville, and they began working locally in support of school desegregation in the period leading up to Brown [Braden 1989c].

The Civil Rights Congress (CRC), perhaps more than any other organization, captured Anne Braden’s interest because of its vigorous legal defense of African Americans it identified as facing racist treatment in southern courts. Like its forerunner the International Labor Defense, CRC combined legal defense with mobilizing public opinion. In May, 1951, Braden traveled to Mississippi, one of only three white southerners to participate in a CRC-sponsored white women’s delegation protesting the execution of Willie McGee, an African American facing the death penalty for the alleged 1945 rape of a white woman. As spokeswoman for the group, Braden stated, “We are here because we are determined that no more innocent men shall die in the name of southern white womanhood.” The group was taken into “protective custody” [an irony that did not escape Braden when they were escorted to jail], and ordered to leave the state. Three days later, after a protracted legal battle and in spite of new evidence suggesting the alleged victim had been McGee’s long-standing mistress, McGee was executed in front of a cheering crowd of 700.12

Braden’s rough treatment at the hands of a Mississippi police officer, who upon discovering she was a native southerner told her she “ought to be shot,” bolstered her conviction that southern whites—and especially southern white women—had a unique responsibility to oppose racism because protecting them had been the justification of so much violence against African-American men. She wrote and spoke widely about the experience. Yet her public association with the CRC also left her and her spouse more vulnerable to the charge of “subversive,” as the group was by now one of the leading targets of the escalating anticommunist campaign. Looking back on their association with the CRC and a variety of other so-called “communist front” groups as the climate around them became steadily more anticommunist, Braden reflected that “it was probably a [strategic] mistake, but I think if I had it to do over, I’d do the same thing,” considering the sense of urgency they felt as the Cold War crystallized and U.S. policies shifted to the right [Braden1989c].13

“Sedition” in Louisville14

Anne Braden might have remained one of many local activists whose stories go untold, had it not been for one decision that did not at the time seem monumental. In May of 1954, only days before the Supreme Court handed down the Brown decision on school desegregation, Braden and her husband acted as the “fronts” for an African American couple unable to buy the home they wanted because of Louisville’s segregated housing
practices. The Bradens became the targets of harassment and death threats immediately upon Andrew and Charlotte Wade’s move into their new home, while the Wades received more graphically violent messages (rocks through windows and a cross burning, for example). By summertime, despite armed self-defense, police surveillance, and numerous attempts at community mediation, the house was dynamited one Saturday night while the Wades were outside on the porch.14

The Bradens found themselves the target of the ensuing grand jury investigation, with questioning focused not on the neighborhood’s dramatic rejection of the Wade family, but on Anne and Carl’s beliefs, associations, and in particular their reading materials. Kentucky’s commonwealth attorney had devised a theory placing them at the head of a Communist plot, staging both the purchase and the subsequent destruction to destabilize race relations. Louisville reacted to the notion in much the same way the nation had in recent years seized upon similar accusations by Senator Joseph McCarthy and others. Anne and Carl Braden and five others—two women and three men, all white—were indicted on charges of “advocating, suggesting, or teaching . . . sedition.” No attempt was made during the trial to link either Braden to the bombing. The real charge was Communism, and the underlying issue—never really dealt with by the court—was their violation of the racial boundaries of segregation.15

Amid the hysterical fear of Communism that punctuated the era, Carl Braden was convicted of sedition in December, 1954, and sentenced to a $5,000 fine and 15 years’ imprisonment (that conviction was overturned in 1956 by the U.S. Supreme Court). The actual bombers were never sought or brought to justice, the Wades were never allowed to live in their new house, and neither Anne Braden nor her other co-defendants ever stood trial. As the so-called leaders of a Communist cell in Louisville, both Braden and her husband were widely excoriated in the press.

Although she shared equally in the community ostracism they received, her status as a mere “wife” in Cold-War America defined her as implicitly subsidiary, leaving her free to agitate for justice in the case during the critical eight months of Carl’s imprisonment. After she raised the overwhelming $40,000 for his bail (highest ever posted in Kentucky), the two spent the following year publicizing the injustices in the case and building what she has always called a “fightback,” a technique they were to employ many times thereafter. As she has explained it, “Our approach, our whole psychology was to fight back. . . . They gave us a platform and we used it” [Braden 1989c].16
A Life in the Other America

As Braden has since recalled it, what began as a devastating crisis ultimately propelled her into a lifetime of civil rights activism by introducing her to a community of “subversives” across the nation who were fighting back against the powerful silencing of the witch hunt. Within the beleaguered left of the period, the “Braden case” became a kind of cause célèbre because of the obviously segregationist motivation driving the anticomunist prosecutions. The couple toured the country, using the case as a platform to reach southerners of both races and to inform civil liberties advocates outside the region of the links being made between southern efforts against segregation and charges of Communist subversion. On a fund-raising trip to New York in 1955, for example, Braden met Ella Baker, who was then active in the New York City NAACP and later became probably the most inspirational adult leader of student activists of the 1960s. When Baker arranged speaking engagements for Braden to publicize the sedition case in northern black communities, the two began a collaboration that lasted until Baker’s death in 1986.17

All of the sedition defendants lost their jobs because of the case, and the Bradens were the only ones who managed to stay in Louisville. In mid-1957 the couple became regional field organizers for the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), an interracial civil rights organization set up in 1946 as an arm of the older Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the prime Depression-era outlet for white southerners seeking regional social reform. After the demise of the Southern Conference, SCEF had become a single-issue action group dedicated to generating southern support for desegregation, especially among whites. That task suited Braden perfectly.

Along with all the other things that happened during our sedition case, the disturbing thing [we saw] was that there seemed to be so few white people who were openly supporting the whole new civil rights movement that had burst forth. So one of the things I came away with was a passion to play some part in changing the patterns of people’s thinking here. I have been the main push on this, but Carl was committed to it too. I knew white people were there somewhere, and we had to get to them. A lot of the whites who had been active earlier in the south had been caught in the witch hunts and run out. [Braden 1981b]18

Already outcasts in Louisville, the Bradens went to work for an outcast organization, a decision which brought them further stigmatization by the larger society. As successor to the older Southern Conference, which had been the target of a 1947 House Un-American Activities Committee report accusing the organization of “guilt by association,” by virtue of “interlocking with Communist causes,” SCEF was under constant attack.
Although there were no known members of the CP in SCEF by the mid-1950s, its failure to outlaw Communists from its ranks made it—and as a consequence, Braden—an ongoing target of controversy.

Despite the power of groups such as the White Citizens’ Councils and the rise of “massive resistance” as a dominant political direction for southern whites, Anne and Carl Braden managed to uncover and nurture several small groups of white southern integrationists in most southern states, many of whom had been active in the earlier Southern Conference movement. In her role as editor of the Southern Patriot newspaper, which had approximately 2200 readers in and out of the South (Reed 1991, 241 n.36), Braden soon doubled the size and tripled the circulation of the paper. She used it as a vehicle for building community among southern readers by profiling the fledgling, white-led “save our schools” movements and by soliciting essays from white supporters such as “Why I believe in integration.”

The Bradens often tried to keep their regional organizing quiet because politicians across the region who had followed the Louisville case responded to their presence in local communities by referring to them as “reds” once again, charges that also cast doubts on local associates. Whether opinion-makers acted out of a genuine fear of suspected Communists or merely to discredit any civil rights efforts by local whites, their actions had the latter effect. For the hearty few whites who did speak out, the SCEF network and the Bradens’ periodic visits were a lifeline.

When Anne Braden visited the Highlander Folk School for the first time in the fall of 1957 for its 25th anniversary celebration, she met Martin Luther King. King needed a lift to a convention in Louisville, and his car ride with Braden through the winding mountains of east Tennessee and Kentucky gave him the opportunity to hear not only about the Wade case but about her political transformation. King later told his wife that he could not believe such a white woman existed, a response echoed by many African American leaders with whom Braden established close ties during this period. She strengthened relations among white and black integrationists by providing in-depth coverage in the Patriot of black civil rights protest. Braden sought out African American leaders such as Birmingham’s Fred Shuttlesworth, who joined the SCEF board in 1958. She and Carl carried on a steady campaign, including a major pamphlet and mass media contacts, which brought the Birmingham movement its first national attention—a pattern the Bradens repeated in many locales. Often virtually alone in her role as a white woman civil rights leader, Braden made a point of building cross-racial female solidarity with women like Ruby Shuttlesworth and Coretta Scott King by frequent correspondence and expressions of support for what sometimes seemed like a lonely battle (Braden 1989b; 1997a).
Partly because of the couple’s close collaboration, and partly because of cultural stereotypes of married women at mid-century, many who worked with the pair thought of them jointly, as one entity. In some respects, the Bradens even saw themselves that way. Rather than ever perceiving any particular sense of loss of her individuality as a married woman, Braden deeply internalized the notion of herself and Carl as a team, “the Bradens,” as they came to be known. Whatever power differential had existed in their marriage in its early days leveled out considerably once Anne developed more confidence in her own effectiveness. Because her marriage was unique insofar as Carl facilitated rather than stifled her activism, she never fully understood women who accepted more restrictive partnerships, and she encouraged them to resist.22

Even before the revived women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s lifted up the concept of female autonomy, she made it a personal crusade to ignite female activism. She had this to say of the era: “I always considered I had a mission in life to get women out of the kitchen and involved in things” (qtd. in Evans 1979, 50).

Not surprisingly, she frequently found herself battling these women’s partners. Some were segregationists who objected to dissent from the racial order by their wives or anyone else. Yet others were leftists themselves who nevertheless expected that their wives’ outreach activities take a back seat to their domestic duties. Exasperated with such sexism even within the movement, Braden wrote to a friend in 1958 that

_I think a lot of our problems would be solved if we could just get rid of the men and leave this matter to the young people and the women.... I’m considering devoting myself full-time to setting up an organization known as the National Association to encourage intelligent women to divorce their stupid husbands._

Her comments were hyperbolic and joking, but her frustration was real: that year she lost two women from the SCEF board due to nagging resistance from their husbands (Braden 1958b).

In July 1958, Anne Braden’s book, _The Wall Between_, which told the story of their sedition case, appeared to mixed reviews. Regionally, the media ignored it or grudgingly acknowledged her talent as a writer; nationally, it became a nonfiction finalist for the 1958 National Book Award. Eight days after the book’s release, while vacationing on the coast in Rhode Island, the couple received subpoenas giving them 48 hours’ notice to get to Atlanta for testimony before a House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearing (“Anne Braden book . . .” 1958; Braden, Carl 1959).

There, Carl Braden called on First Amendment rights in his refusal to answer the committee’s questions regarding his beliefs and associations, maintaining that the true purpose of southern hearings was to discourage civil rights efforts, and requesting that the committee investigate anti-
black violence regionally. His call was reinforced by a SCEF-sponsored letter initiated by Board Member Modjeska Simkins of South Carolina and signed by 200 African American civil rights leaders criticizing the southern HUAC hearings and defending Braden and other white southern integrationists ("Braden mum . . ." 1958, 2A; Braden 1989e; "Southern Negro leaders protest" 1958).

Nevertheless, Carl Braden was cited for contempt of Congress and served one year in prison in 1961. Government officials’ sentimentalized views about women and motherhood probably shielded Anne from a similar fate. Federal marshals excused her from testifying after she insisted that the government provide transportation to Atlanta for her two children and oversight for them during the hearing. While southern political officials of the era were quick to call her a “common-ist” and worse, they on several occasions reserved more extreme forms of repression for her husband. The result was that Anne Braden continued to proselytize for civil rights and civil liberties during Carl’s imprisonment and thereafter (Braden 1989e).

In terms of their activism, Anne and Carl Braden were “survivors” of the 1950s rather than casualties of it, as were many of their early coworkers. Once the 1960s dawned and the student sit-ins which ultimately broke segregation began, Anne Braden characterized the students’ actions in a letter to a friend as the “beginning of a new day.” In the upcoming decade, she continued to fight the marginalized status in which she was placed by the continuing power of anticommunism, but she had a new set of allies in the young students who now joined the movement in throngs. Julian Bond remembered that in 1960 he and his friends were impressed with her journalistic skills and political savvy even though elder activists warned them to avoid the Bradens because their radical reputation could smear the emerging movement. Braden generously shared her press contacts with SNCC workers, and she gave the student sit-ins their first truly analytical coverage in the pages of the Patriot in early 1960, which helped youthful leaders to shape as well as promote their dramatic campaign to break down racial barriers (Braden 1960; Bond 1997).

Like Ella Baker, Braden was committed to a decentralized model of leadership that respected the students’ autonomy and offered them political insights without trying to control them. As the movement broadened, hers was a persistent voice for interracial unity that respected African American leadership but sought greater white participation, and she worked tirelessly to set up the funds for a SNCC “white student project” that enabled organizing on white southern campuses after 1961. Braden envisioned hiring a woman to head the project, and she took SNCC men to task for their assumption that only males were suitably hearty for the job. “My feminist blood was boiling,” she wrote to a woman friend after one such confrontation, but no woman was ever appointed (Braden 1963).23
Braden’s “Old Left” vision of a radical interracialism that was also anti-capitalist was a consistent feature of her message to the SNCC generation (and beyond). As Anthony Dunbar (1981) has argued, it was that very urge to unite blacks and whites around common economic interests that southern politicians sought so desperately to discredit through anticommunist smear campaigns, but without thoroughgoing success. With the passage of civil and voting rights laws in 1964 and 1965, when the movement seemed to wield real power, SCEF expanded its program to include regional economic reforms. Braden has recently described those efforts:

*Once there was this powerful black movement, it was realistic to start talking about poverty, economic injustice, building unions. Not that racism was eradicated, but there was a real change in the attitudes of white people in the [S]outh who had never been near the movement. . . . We [in SCEF] felt the African-American movement was key to changing society, but we felt its logical allies were working-class whites, and that coalition has never existed very long or viably because of racism. We thought Appalachia was one of the places this work could flower. . . . though there were a lot of false starts.*

The Bradens and younger recruits who had come into SCEF developed a “Southern Mountain Project” to include Appalachia in their regional organizing. Internal disputes and new anticommunist repression provided setbacks in Tennessee, but a fledgling alliance took root in eastern Kentucky, to the chagrin of local authorities and coal operators. The Bradens’ involvement in that initiative was only in a coordinating capacity, but their names were still “fire words,” as she has put it, in Kentucky. In 1967 the pair faced a second sedition indictment in Appalachian Pike County. By this time, however, Braden’s alleged “Communism” failed to condemn her. Instead, the case was dismissed on the first day of the hearing (Braden 1981b; 1999).24

Braden was also one of the staunchest white supporters of Black Power advocates who raised critiques of capitalism along with their disclaimer of white leadership. She cautioned disillusioned white southern SNCC activists, however, against a corresponding “white consciousness” that separated them from interracialism (Klibaner 1989, 228–32).

Especially for young white women in SNCC, Braden’s example of strong, enduring activism and her patient attention to their personal dilemmas made her into something of a mother figure, but one who was both more awe-inspiring and accepting, as well as closer to their own ages, than were most of their own mothers. The close relationships she formed with the young women who found their way to SNCC in the early-1960s helped to impart both her radicalism and a kind of nascent feminist consciousness to a succeeding generation of activists with whom she continued to collaborate as they revived the women’s movement.

When the mass civil rights movement blended back into the larger
social fabric after about 1968, Braden’s role shifted somewhat, but her determination to do her part in advocating southern social justice was unyielding. She then brought her influence and, by now, seniority, to bear on the women’s and antiwar movements of the 1970s and 1980s, delivering to a variety of social movements her message of white responsibility to oppose racism, and calls for a broader social vision of economic, racial, and gender justice. She spoke always from the vantage point of a white southern woman, and that social identity gave her a way to be heard, even though her “communistic” reputation continued to shadow her, especially in her hometown of Louisville.

For more than two decades she has acted without the familiar camaraderie of her partner, who died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 1975. She reflected recently that “when Carl died, I was devastated. I should have taken the time to figure out the rest of my life.” Instead, she continued with the same activist agenda she had long pursued. To a great extent, Carl Braden helped to shape her politics and life direction. Yet she continued in that direction as a strikingly independent woman with a political approach more rooted in community-building than was his. After his death she made no significant changes in her allegiances or her activism, nor has she ever remarried (Braden 1999).

While the “women’s movement,” as we commonly think of it, has not been the primary site for Anne Braden’s activism, she has lived her life as a feminist and repeatedly emphasized women’s self-determination in all social campaigns in which she has participated. Today, more a local heroine than a pariah, Braden works unrelentingly in community efforts in Louisville to enlist white involvement in anti-racist causes, her leadership in half a century of regional civil rights campaigns understood by only a portion of those who know her local work. The ostracism of bygone days, together with a lifelong humility, gave her the habit of staying in the background in movement activities, but over the years she has—like many organizers—found that habit an effective tactic for cultivating new leadership. Although her radicalism made her seem menacing in earlier decades, her voice has consistently been one of unity and peace-making within the spectrum of left-leaning activism, and her embrace of identity politics has sought to make connections rather than divisions.

Braden’s reputation in Louisville has improved, but her subversiveness remains in her continued calls for a reinvigorated white response to racism as part of a movement toward broader social justice. With a focus on whiteness that prefigured the outpouring of social science literature on the subject in the 1990s, her identity is also still deeply bound up with “southern-ness.” Her claim to a social identity as a white southerner, informed by her generation’s experiences, has consistently foregrounded the subversive elements of that identity, insisting that “southern-ness” by its very nature must take a position on racism. Braden’s stance as an
anti-racist southern white woman was filtered through the lens of her transitional generation, on the front lines of post-World War II racial, gender, and economic upheaval and the last to see Jim Crow segregation so blatant and static on the southern cultural and political landscape.

She has expressed a certain impatience with charges from friends that she is "living in the past" by her steady gaze on racism and on the value of collective action. Yet assaults on affirmative action, the rollback of social assistance to disadvantaged people, and politicians' insistence that society is now "color-blind" suggest that racism is all too present, and her message still disturbingly relevant (Braden 1997a).

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Notes

1. My approach to this project has been strongly influenced by the work of several theorists on methodology in history and the social sciences, especially the following: Gaventa (1991), Olsen and Shopes (1991), and Frisch (1992).

2. The notion of the transgressive woman was impressed upon me by Fon Gordon of the University of Kentucky.

3. The phrase "the other America" is Braden's, not to be confused with the same phrase used by author Michael Harrington.

4. While there are others like them, the portrayals mentioned here are drawn from, respectively, Carson (1981); Reed (1991); and Branch (1988); I have borrowed the colloquial southern usage of "common-ist" from Honey (1993, 54).

5. On early twentieth-century southern white women's rights activism, see, for example, Wheeler (1993); Salamond (1988) and Durr (1985) examine the lives of southern women involved in social change efforts of the New Deal era; the term "popular front" was originally coined by the Communist Party to define a strategy of left-liberal alliance that was interrupted by the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1939, but renewed informally after World War II and continued into the postwar era even after purges of CP supporters from liberal coalitions became commonplace (Klehr 1984).

6. The biographical material on Braden in this essay is culled from various interviews I conducted with her between 1989 and 1999, unless otherwise indicated.
7. May (1982), for example, argues the correlation between the Cold War and gender roles; all of the essays in Meyerowitz's 1994 anthology—particularly her own—provide a broader reinterpretation of women's roles in the 1950s using as a point of departure Friedan's (1963) bestseller, which popularized the postwar resurgence of female domesticity as "the feminine mystique"; for more on women whose political and social struggles were not stilled by the 1950s cultural climate, see, especially, the Cobble and Lynn essays, both in Meyerowitz (1994).


9. For Braden's writing on the perils of southern white males' protectionism toward white women, see her 1972 pamphlet on that topic.

10. For a more thorough analysis of the influence of CP ideology in the civil rights and labor movements, see Korstad and Lichtenstein (1988); Braden's views are detailed in various interviews with author, especially 1989b and 1997a.

11. It should be noted, however, that while a gender-based social critique was evident in the Communist Party and other left-wing groups of the era, it was a distinctly background issue and not a focal point for political or even significant internal struggle in this era. For more on feminist ideologies in mid-twentieth century radicalism, see Shaffer (1979); Trimberger (1979); and Meyerowitz (1994); Braden (1989b and 1994b); Braden's influence as a role model is explored in depth in Evans (1979, 48–50).

12. For more on the International Labor Defense, see Carter (1969); Braden (1994); Jackson Daily News (1951); "City white woman told she should be shot for attempting to defend Negro man's life in Mississippi" (1951); more on the McGee case can be found in Dittmer (1994, 21–22).

13. "City White Woman . . ." (1951); for more on the CRC, see Horne (1988). William Patterson, CRC's leader and founder, was first indicted in 1950 for failure to register the group as a "communist front" organization under the newly passed McCarran Internal Securities Act—the most severe of 38 pieces of anticommunist legislation to be introduced before the U.S. Congress that year. Thus began a protracted government campaign to force the CRC to disband.

14. For a more thorough study of the sedition case, see Braden (1958, University of Tennessee Press forthcoming).

15. Louisville Courier-Journal, 4 October 1954, "At Least We Shall Soon Learn What Evidence Is"; see also Louisville Courier-Journal editorial, 17 September 1954, "The Crime was Bombing, not Beliefs," for an examination of these issues.

17. Miscellaneous references in Box 26, Folder 4, of the Carl and Anne Braden Papers, Mss. 6, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin [hereinafter referred to as Braden Papers, SHSW].

18. Memo, Carl and Anne Braden to James Dombrowski and Aubrey Williams, n.d., in Box 27, Folder 1, Braden Papers, SHSW; for more information on the SCHW and SCEF, see Reed (1991).


20. See Box 32, Folder 2, Braden Papers, SHSW, for examples of local clippings and other materials critical of Anne Braden in Birmingham and Montgomery, for instance; for more on SCEF work in the 1950s, see Klibaner (1989).

21. See also Fred Shuttlesworth’s comments in Morris (1984, 171).

22. References to “the Bradens” are numerous, but the concept was first brought to my attention by Bond (1997); Braden (1998).

23. For more on the white student project, see Carson (1981, 52–53).

24. More on this project can be found in Klibaner (1989, 223–234).

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