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Spring June 12, 2011

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Confounding Identity
Exploring the Life and Discourse of Lucy E. Parsons

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Black By Default?

Lucy Parsons was born in Waco, Texas, in 1853 but moved to Chicago in 1873 where she lived until her death in 1942. She was a pivotal figure in several radical movements well into the early twentieth century causing the Chicago Police Department to label her “more dangerous than a thousand rioters.”¹ Scholars, including biographer Carolyn Ashbaugh, have categorized Parsons solely African American although she never embraced the designation herself. Lucy Parsons publicly claimed to possess Mexican and Native American extraction. As was often the case of nineteenth century social mores, ill-informed Whites with social agendas centered on White supremacy designed racial categories employing superficial visual characteristics such as skin color, facial features and hair texture. In order to maintain White preeminence racial descriptions were dichotomous labels of White or Black, generally resulting in individuals possessing one drop of any non-European blood being deemed Black by default.

Further confounding public perception, Lucy Parsons was essentially, but not legally, married to a White man. Her husband, moreover, was one of the four men hanged following the Haymarket Massacre that occurred in Chicago in 1886, a fact that often overshadows the significant contributions of Lucy Parsons. Contrived labels such as of *miscegenation* or *amalgamation* clouded the legacy of Lucy Parsons as mainstream newspapers and other contemporaries publicly relegated her solely to the category of Black for no other reason than to discredit her efforts as well as those of her husband.²

This essay analyzes the life and rhetoric of radical leftist agitator Lucy Parsons with the intention of providing a healthier understanding of the complicated world of racial identity politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While wider society – and even her death certificate – labeled her “Negro,”³ she was conversely accustomed to the concoction of nineteenth century Texas’ more complicated caste system that took into account all possible ethnic equations.

Coming from a birthplace where she might have considered herself anything from *Mestizo* to *Mulatto* or any other of the dozens of categories utilized at the time, she was not culturally prepared for wider society's monoracial designation of Black, and therefore scoffed at its validity.

In hindsight, onlookers often accuse Lucy Parsons of negating her African heritage for a seemingly more desirable ethnic identity. There is a sense, especially within the modern African American community, that a person of color self-labeling anything other than exclusively Black is virtually treasonous and committing a form of identity denial and self-hate. Criticism of notable individuals such as Barack Obama, Tiger Woods and others exemplify this sentiment of betrayal. In actuality, Lucy Parsons seemed to be holistically embracing her complete ethnic heritage, not merely a fraction of it. Therefore, the question must ultimately be posed as to how the legacy of those early externally defined racial and ethnic designations can provide a better consideration of multiracial designations in contemporary times.

Because the Chicago Police along with the Red Squad confiscated all of Lucy Parsons' diaries, journals, letters, and other personal effects at the time of her tragic death in 1942⁴, there exists no primary source material outside of her published work to indicate where she would have situated herself. There is also no birth record or extant primary source from her early years in Texas that could shed light on the situation. Additionally, Lucy Parsons' husband and both of her children pre-deceased her, leaving no descendant to define or defend her personal identity choice. Racial designation has therefore been relegated to modern scholars with varying agendas to place Parsons within their own limited categorization, often minimizing other aspects of her existence that may have been consequential to her way of thinking. African American, Latino and Native American scholars have categorically claimed her almost exclusively, each often downplaying the significance of the others' assertions.⁵

There is no doubt that Parsons was a woman of color, but not solely of African American, Mexican or Native American extraction. Her private designation would most likely consist of what we would currently label multiracial, inclusive of two or three ethnic categories. This was a practice commonly utilized in her Texas birthplace and other parts of the U.S. South and Mexico but not entirely understood by either her northern contemporaries or modern scholars, who generally categorize people of color Black by default.

It is only with a better-informed awareness of Parsons' personal identity that further serious research on the legacy of her agitation may successfully be conducted. As Lucy Parsons navigated through a world dominated by White males – especially recent European immigrants – the usually marginalized voice of a woman of color was often respected. It is imperative that commonly held beliefs regarding the ideology of the anarchist and labor movements be reexamined in an effort to understand how the unique paradigm of Lucy Parsons may have affected the principles of the movements in ways rarely considered.

“More Dangerous Than A Thousand Rioters”

Very little is known about the life of Lucy Parsons prior to her Chicago arrival in 1873. It is believed that she was born in March 1853 somewhere in or near Waco, Texas. Various sources claim that her last name prior to marriage could have been any of the following: Gaithings (or Gathens), Diaz, Waller, Carter, Hull, del Gather, or Gonzales. At one point, she claimed that her parent's names were Marie del Gather, a Mexican woman, and John Waller, a member of the Creek nation.⁶ On Lucy's death certificate, however, her parents' names are listed as Pedro Diaz and Marie Gonzalez. Many Latino academicians firmly contend that Lucy's maiden name was Gonzalez, while numerous African American scholars, on the other hand, utilize a maiden name of Gaithings derived from her alleged marriage to a Black man named Oliver Gaithings before her union with Albert Parsons.⁷

Parsons was born during a pivotal period prior to the Civil War when the powers-that-be were making determinations as to which new territories would legalize the enslavement of African Americans as well as shaping the future of Native Americans. It was a time of extreme racial tension in Texas, and there were many documented acts of violence against persons of color. Lucy Parsons wrote in later years that she was a first-hand witness to lynchings and brutal acts conducted by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.⁸

Many speculate that Lucy was married to an enslaved Black man by the name of Oliver Gaithings, an individual she was believed to have abandoned to marry former confederate soldier Albert Parsons.⁹ According to Albert Parsons' autobiography, however, Lucy was living with her uncle on his ranch in Buffalo Creek, Texas when they met. He also admitted that he had an affair with the wife of Gaithings but that Lucy was not that woman. Lucy and Albert's 1871 union provoked the mores of Texas at the time that forced them to flee the South for their own safety.¹⁰

The couple arrived in Chicago during a national recession and following the 1871 fire that damaged much of the city's infrastructure and forced citizens out of work. Chicago was also a city with a burgeoning immigrant population consisting primarily of Czech, Bohemian, German, Polish and other European newcomers, most of which made up the city's labor pool. Since most individuals involved in radical politics were non-English-speaking European immigrants, Albert Parsons quickly became a leader in the English-speaking radical movement first in Chicago and later nationally. Lucy's reputation rapidly grew, and she became a significant leader in the movement in her own right. Albert's involvement with the national railroad strike of 1877 led to him being blacklisted while his prominence in labor movement circles greatly increased.¹¹

While Albert was active in labor politics, Lucy opened her own seamstress business and was heavily involved with the Working Women's Union of Chicago where she was a popular orator and writer. When Albert was fired from his job for political activity, Lucy became the sole

breadwinner for the entire family. By this time, Lucy and Albert had two children: one boy, Albert Richard Parsons, Jr. born in 1879 and a girl, Lulu Eda Parsons born in 1881.

In 1884, the International Working People's Association (IWPA) started publication of *The Alarm*. The first edition of the newspaper featured an article penned by Lucy Parsons on the front page entitled "To Tramps, The Unemployed, the Disinherited and Miserable." The essay was dedicated to those poor men and women forced to tramp around the city for sustenance. She advised them to avail themselves of "...methods of warfare which Science has placed in the hands of the poor man, and you will become a power in this or any other land. Learn the use of explosives!"¹² The "To Tramps" composition was later used in the trial against Lucy's husband and his co-defendants as an example of their propensity for violence allegedly inciting the general public to riot.

1886 began as a year of tremendous labor organization, especially with regard to the eight-hour movement. On May 4, 1886, a meeting to protest violent incidents three days earlier at McCormick Reaper was planned for Haymarket Square, a location where many public meetings were held. The entire Parsons family made their way to Haymarket Square at 10:00 p.m. where Albert made an impromptu speech. The weather turned foul, and the Parsons retreated to Zepf Hall one block away, at which time a still unknown party threw a bomb into the crowd at Haymarket Square resulting in the historic melee. After the dust settled, seven police officers and four workers were killed. Substantially more were wounded. Lucy remained in Chicago fighting off the police and reporters while Albert fled to Wisconsin. In an effort to coerce her to admit to knowledge of his whereabouts, the police arrested Lucy later the day of the massacre and several subsequent times during Albert's absence. She never revealed his hiding place. Albert later returned to Chicago and turned himself in to the authorities on June 21, 1886. His trial began in July 1886 with a total of six defendants.¹³

For the duration of Albert's time in prison Lucy led the campaign for vindication of all six defendants. She traveled throughout the country to speak on behalf of the persecuted sextet. While on tour, she was frequently arrested and severely criticized by the mainstream press for her passionate orations. On December 3, 1886, after a trial wrought with questionable testimony and jury tampering, four of the men were found guilty and sentenced to hang. After eighteen months of imprisonment, Albert and three of his co-defendants were hanged on November 11, 1887.¹⁴

The last decade of the 19th century continued to be full of exceptional life events for Lucy Parsons. Her daughter Lulu died on October 13, 1889, of lymphodenoma, a rare bone disease. On June 25, 1893, Waldheim Cemetery unveiled a monument to the Haymarket Martyrs. The next day – six years after their hanging – Illinois Governor Altgeld pardoned Albert Parsons along with his co-defendants Fielden, Schwab and Neebe.¹⁵

In 1898, the United States went to war with Spain in Cuba and Lucy's son Albert, now eighteen-years-old, enlisted to fight in the war. Lucy was an outspoken opponent to what she considered an imperialist war and had her son declared mentally ill and committed to the Illinois Northern Hospital for the Insane due to his desire to fight. He remained locked up for twenty years. It is believed that she never saw him alive again for he deteriorated and died of tuberculosis on August 15, 1919.¹⁶

The International Workers of the World (IWW) was founded in Chicago in June 1905 at a convention consisting of various radical activists who were opposed to the policies of the American Federation of Labor (AFL). Members of the IWW were nicknamed "Wobblies." Mother Jones was the first woman to join, and Lucy Parsons was the second. The Wobblies took the lead in organizing people of color and women at a time when most labor unions marginalized those populations. Lucy Parsons founded *The Liberator* in September 1905, a newspaper that focused on strikes, industrial conflict, and class struggle that was published under the IWW label.¹⁷

In February 1912, Lucy helped to form The Syndicalist League of North America.¹⁸ The organization was an extension of her belief that labor unions should be utilized as a potential force for revolutionary social change, replacing capitalism and the state with a new society democratically self-managed by workers. Lucy's predictions of further federal repression continued to come to fruition. Congress passed the Espionage Act in 1917 and the Sedition Act in 1918. Italian American anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti were accused of murders in 1920 and later executed in 1927. The federal government, in an effort to bust unions and intimidate radicals, concocted the "American Plan" in 1921. In Lucy's mind, these events and many more were a continuation of the governmental repression, persecution, and execution of the Haymarket martyrs.

By 1922, Lucy Parsons had a live-in partner named George Markam. While Lucy became active in pursuits surrounding the Communist Party, she was never a card-carrying member, a fact she stated in several letters to friends. By 1933 at the age of eighty, she was still a vital participant in such cases as the Scottsboro Boys in Alabama and with accused African American Communist Angelo Herndon. By now, Parsons had developed pleurisy and was virtually blind.

Lucy's last public appearance was on February 23, 1941, when she delivered a fiery speech to strikers at the International Harvester in Chicago. Lucy Parsons died in an apartment fire on March 7, 1942 when she was unable to find an exit. Her companion, George Markam died two days later as a result of injuries incurred upon entering the burning apartment to save his paramour. She was feared even after death as the Red Squad removed and later destroyed her complete library and all other possessions.¹⁹

Boundaries Built

The America into which Lucy Parsons was born in 1853 was fraught with artificial definitions of racial and ethnic categories. There were three races to contend with in nineteenth century

America: Negroid, Caucasoid and Mongoloid, the first two holding the greatest significance in the American context. All other ethnic considerations were marginalized. In the majority of the country, race was delineated utilizing a Black/White axis to characterize social hierarchies. Much of this was rooted in the institution of enslavement and the legislation that codified relations between enslaved and enslaver. The dominant White political and social structure narrowly defined race and social power by employing physical features typified by salient visual traits. There was a fallacious use of science to justify these determinations.

The physical features that were most significant to European Americans were skin color, cranial and/or facial features, and hair texture. Divergence in skin tones was and is the most outwardly discernable phenotypical distinction of humans. During the nineteenth century, many equated darker skin with lack of intelligence.²⁰ Thus, possessing darker skin resulted in an inferior class status and lower levels of political inclusion.

Pseudo sciences based on physical differences were concocted during the nineteenth century to support racial distinctions and maintain White supremacy. The most popular were *phrenology*, *physiognomy* and *craniometry*, all rooted in studying cranial and facial features to determine intelligence and personality. A human skull measurement device was invented in order to measure the skulls of various ethnic groups thereby producing quantitative data to determine propensity for crime, deviant behavior, and intelligence levels.²¹ Needless to say, people of color did not fare well in these studies. In addition to skin color and cranial concerns, hair texture was also considered to be a racial marker. A coarser hair type meant that an individual was closer to the African phenotype and therefore the social status was lower.²²

Further clouding Lucy Parsons' experience were ideas of *miscegenation*. Miscegenation was the term utilized to label the notion of the interbreeding of people of different races. Anti-

miscegenation laws in the United States were first introduced in the eighteenth century and were maintained until the last one was repealed in 1967 due to the *Loving v. Virginia* legal case.²³

Lucy was deeply affected by miscegenation legislation on two fronts. First, she was the offspring of an interracial union. Neither of her parents was of strictly European descent and Lucy claimed that her mother was Mexican and her father was Native American. Second, Lucy was in a committed relationship with a White man. It is important to note that she was *in a relationship with* Albert Parsons rather than *legally married* because any governmentally sanctioned union between the two was illegal in both Texas and Illinois.

Anti-miscegenation legislation was originally passed in Texas in 1837 and in Illinois in 1828.²⁴ Illinois later repealed anti-miscegenation laws in 1874, although only between Blacks and Whites with no mention of unions between other racial or ethnic groups.²⁵ It is unclear whether Lucy and Albert Parsons legally married in Chicago after the law was repealed in 1874, but it is doubtful that they did. Anti-miscegenation laws were rooted in a capitalist consideration to ensure the transmission of power only to White male heirs. Interracial marriages were therefore invalidated to keep property in White hands. Even in the northern city of Chicago with its abundance of immigrants, the Parsons continued to experience discrimination related to their interracial union until Albert's death in 1887. This reality forced the couple to repeatedly move from flat to flat once their neighbors grew weary of the couple's unorthodox union.²⁶

The situation was complicated further when the Parsons decided to start a family. Their first child, Albert Richard Parsons, Jr. was born in Chicago on September 14, 1879, and his birth certificate classified him as "Negro."²⁷ The couple's second child, a girl named Lulu Eda Parsons was born two years later on April 20, 1881, and her race was denoted "Nigger" on her birth certificate.²⁸ Almost from the nation's inception, U.S. officials determined the race of the child according to the race of the mother as was dictated in the Slave Codes of most states.²⁹ Because

Lucy Parsons was labeled Black due to her outward appearance her offspring were labeled likewise.

Another custom that affected Lucy and her children was the practice of *hyperdescent*. *Hyperdescent* was the assignment of mixed-race children to the race that was considered subordinate.³⁰ For offspring labeled Black prior to the Civil War, this tradition was financially beneficial in the South to maintain greater wealth for slave owners. Following the abolishment of slavery, the “one drop” rule was more prevalent in an effort to maintain the purity of the White race. Classifications of *mulatto*, *quadroon* and *octoroon* aside, anyone with any African ancestry was labeled Black by default. For those possessing Native American heritage, issues of blood quantum came into play for reasons generally rooted in land ownership, a concept that will be discussed further in the paper at a later time. All forms of hyperdescent practices reinforced White supremacy.

Another issue related to interracial marriages dealt with the nineteenth century theory of *hybrid degeneracy*. *Hybrid degeneracy* was an ideology contending that people of multiracial heritage were genetically inferior to both or all of their parent races.³¹ This was a philosophy that advocated the purity of all races but most importantly the purity of the White race. Both Lucy Parsons and her children were victims of this line of thinking. For someone to fully embrace this ideology necessitated a temporary suspension of all belief in standard theories of non-White racial inferiority. Hybrid degeneracy demanded at least feigned advocacy of the redeeming qualities of non-White racial and ethnic groups by Whites themselves. This in turn would encourage people of color to also support the basic premise of avoiding the reproduction of multiracial children in order to preserve their own racial purity.

The desire to safeguard White supremacy led to tactics that ranged from pseudo science to formal legislation. All were intended to maintain White racial purity as well as to keep all

monetary wealth within the White community. In order to reach these goals, it was crucial that justification be readily apparent to everyone in society, no matter their race or ethnicity. Consequently, Whites understood that people of color were required to fully embrace these ideologies as true and just in order for White supremacy to thrive.

The Blood Quantum Conundrum

Historically, *blood quantum* was the government's way of determining the amount of non-White ancestry possessed by an individual and was usually expressed in fractions. The practice of calculating *blood quantum* was utilized for a myriad of social and political reasons. In modern times, many within the Native American community continue to officially utilize and embrace the notion of blood quantum as a means to express ethnic pride with regards to levels of "pure" blood untainted by non-Native American derivatives. Therefore, this form of hyperdescent practice is now embraced as a means to self-determine one's own identity.³²

The use of fractional amounts of blood to determine the heritage of mixed blood individuals dates back to before the formal structural creation of the United States. At first a part of English common law, many English colonies later developed the practice to deal with the rapid mixture of European colonizers with non-Anglo populations. Within the context of the United States, blood quantum was used to describe the offspring of European colonists with either Native Americans or enslaved Africans. These laws would determine such weighty concerns as property rights and legal rights including access to the courts and the like.³³

The earliest example of American utilization of blood quantum laws occurred in Virginia in 1705 when a statute designated "...every person who shall have one-fourth or more Negro blood, shall, in like manner be deemed a mulatto."³⁴ Virginia later extended blood quantum to include the Native American population stating "...every person not a colored person, having one-fourth or

more of Indian blood” was henceforth designated Indian.³⁵ Other states followed suit, and by the nineteenth century several states had some type of blood quantum statute on the books.

In most cases, blood quantum designations for Blacks were determined by the race of the mother. Even when an infant appeared by all accounts to be White, if the mother was classified Black so was the child, and in most cases that child was therefore considered chattel. Fundamentally, mixed-race progeny were classified Black by default for capitalistic purposes of increased wealth accumulation.

Usage of blood quantum in the Native American community had entirely different foundations but often was a means to the same end. The notion of blood quantum existed prior to the extension of federal authority over tribal territory, but the further development of the practice was manipulated in such a way so that the federal government would maintain greater benefit. The use of blood quantum accelerated during the period between 1817-1871, a time generally referred to as the *Treaty Period*.³⁶ Labels such as *half-blood*, *half-breed* or *quarter-blood* were used to categorize any individual possessing any percentage of Native American blood, no matter the nation or mixture thereof.

Blood quantum designations were utilized by the federal government by the mid-nineteenth century for determination of membership to a tribe, which translated to benefits such as land grants. Therefore, the early foundations of governmental blood quantum designations had both political and economic implications. As time passed, Native Americans began to embrace the notion of blood quantum and consequentially defined the concept into something still possessing political implications, but also rooted in social and cultural identity status.

Although widely utilized on local and state levels, blood quantum was not officially employed to document Native American heritage until the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.³⁷ From that point until today, Native Americans were issued a blood quantum card that they

were required to carry on their person indicating percentage of Indian blood. During the 1960's and onward, it became a sense of pride to possess higher quantities of Native American blood and carrying one's blood quantum card is now a sign of pride. Those whose blood quantum percentages were not properly documented or that contained questionable validation experienced community prejudice, suspicion and discrimination.³⁸

During Lucy Parsons' time in Texas between 1853 and 1873, the practice of determining blood quantum was active. It was likely a privately understood designation that she carried with her to Chicago, although it was not readily understood in the North. As far as those in the North were concerned, the issue of ethnic identity had little to do with percentages of Native American, Spanish or African American blood a person possessed; rather, the previously mentioned superficial visual markers such as skin color or hair type were the predominant designators. Although Lucy Parsons may have utilized the Texas notions of blood quantum in her equations of ethnic identity, those she encountered in Chicago as well as the national press continued to label her Black by default.

A Cornucopia of Labels

Related to blood quantum, definitions of racial and ethnic identity in Texas during the nineteenth century consisted of various complicated equations all designed to ensure a widespread understanding of the local social hierarchy. This hierarchy was comprised of far more categories than the dual system of Black and White under which much of the United States was operating. Lucy Parsons lived the first twenty years of her life in Waco, an East Central Texas town approximately 100 miles south of Dallas and the seat of McLennan County.

Originally, the geographical area now known as Waco was inhabited by a subgroup of the Wichita nation called the *Huaco*, the influence for the name Waco. It is unclear which Native American nation that Lucy Parsons might have descended from, but several times she indicated

that her mother was indigenous Mexican and her father was a member of the Creek nation. In 1886, she claimed, “My ancestors were here before any Europeans. They went forth to meet Cortés when he landed on the Pacific slope.”³⁹ Publically, Lucy Parsons made it perfectly clear that she was descended from individuals who inhabited Mexican territory long before either Europeans or Africans were a part of the mix. Her claims would have made her a part of several different Texas racial categories at that time.

While unlikely, Lucy Parsons may have referred to herself as *Mestiza*. During the nineteenth century in Texas, a mestiza was a person of mixed blood, generally consisting of a mixture of Spanish and Native American extractions. *Mestizo* was a term that was used primarily in most parts of the Spanish empire, a term that would describe much of the Latin American population then and now. It was primarily utilized prior to the American Civil War, but if Lucy Parsons’ family used the term, she may have retained an understanding of the word’s meaning and perpetuated it for self-identity purposes. Usage of the mestiza designation essentially ended with the end of enslavement once there was an admission that Blacks could officially be part of the ethnic equation. The French had a related term – *Métis* – a label utilized in parts of central and western Canada. Many tri-racial groups such as the Melungeons, Brass Ankles and the Redbones still utilize the term mestizo today to indicate not solely Spanish and Native American heritages, but African blood as well.⁴⁰

Related to the word mestizo, another more commonly utilized term to describe multiracial individuals during the nineteenth century was *mulatto*. A *Mulatto* was generally considered to be a person with one White parent and one Black parent, or any individual who has a combination of Black and White ancestry. The etymology of the term is often argued, however many agree that the word mulatto was derived from the Spanish word *mula* meaning mule, which is the hybrid offspring of a horse and a donkey. While the term may have been initiated in Spanish colonies, it

quickly became a common designation in all parts of the United States to describe anyone possessing a combination of European and African ancestry. Although common throughout America's history, by 1930 mulatto existed as an official category on the U.S. Census.⁴¹

Terms related to mulatto such as *quadroon* and *octoroon* were ways to further delineate blood quantum for individuals with African and European ancestry. While a mulatto was a fifty/fifty designation, quadroon indicated one Black grandparent and octoroon one Black great grandparent. These labels were often used in mainstream newspapers to describe Lucy Parsons. "Mrs. Lucy Parsons, the mulatto wife of the condemned Anarchist Parsons..."⁴², and "Mrs. Lucy Parsons, the quadroon Anarchist of Chicago..."⁴³ are but two examples of the way that society classified Lucy Parsons as some semblance of Black by default.

While mestizo and mulatto were the most commonly employed national labels of the time, there were other local terms that were less mainstream and products of the Spanish influence on Texas culture. *Casta* was a term that was used mostly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Spanish America to describe as a whole the mixed-race people that appeared in the post-Conquest period. There are vestiges of that label still existent in Texas culture today. In most of the Spanish empire during the nineteenth century and even today, the label *zambo* was utilized to identify individuals in the Americas who are of mixed African and Native American ancestry. It is believed but not fully substantiated that this is the derivation of the pejorative slur *sambo* in American culture. While an *Indio* was an individual of a Native American nation, a *criollo* was a person who was of pure Spanish descent.

All of these terms were floating around in Lucy Parsons' Texas childhood experience. She may have been labeled any one or combination of these designations. Therefore, upon leaving the Texas that she resided in for the first twenty years of her life in 1873, there is no doubt that she would have carried those designations with her as she asserted her own racial and ethnic identity

in the North. The notion of being deemed Black by default would not have been foreign to Parsons, but would not have conformed to the way she most likely viewed herself. It is probable that her lifelong efforts to confound mainstream America's dichotomous ethnic labels were seemingly a political attempt to expand the boundaries of these parochial designations. By challenging these common misconceptions, Lucy Parsons was to have a profound and paradigm shifting influence upon the radical leftist movements of her time.

Iconoclast

Lucy Parsons spent her first twenty years in Texas where racial ambiguity and the inclusiveness of several ethnicities was acceptable. After her relocation to Chicago in 1873, she came face to face with wider American society's propensity towards defining anyone not entirely White as Black by default. Lucy Parsons spent the greater part of her life fighting this limited definition of her ethnic identity and making gallant attempts at expanding those conforming definitions. While Parsons supported conventional ideas concerning marriage, her interracial union with a White man, as well as her radical leftist politics complicated matters as she willingly pushed herself into the margins of "acceptable society."

Whenever an iconoclast challenges treasured cultural norms, society has a way of pushing back to discredit the naysayer and thus further marginalize divergent paradigms. Lucy Parsons was subtly but forcefully persistent in her efforts to dispute the dominant paradigm of racial and ethnic classifications in the United States by establishing and defending an identity that was entirely organic. Her decades long public agitation within the labor and anarchist movements put her on the center stage within struggles, protests and activities dominated by White men, thus confounding the boundaries of the movement itself. She subsequently altered the ideology that arose from that movement, a fact that is often overlooked in accounts of the period. The mistaken assertion is often made that she merely echoed the rhetoric of her popular husband and had limited

original thought that was rooted in her individual experience. Nothing could be further from the truth, as Lucy Parsons never shied away from gendered views and publicly espoused opinions far more extreme than her husband.

Since many assume that much of Lucy's evaluation at that time mirrored that of her husband, many also would assert that her analysis was as Alan Calmer described, "primitive, unformed and vague."⁴⁴ It is impossible to determine who influenced whom, but gender bias regrettably assumes Albert's masculine supremacy over the couple's ideological leanings. Many of the books read by Chicago labor union activists like Lucy and Albert at that time were heavily influenced by the city's German immigrants. The two would have been familiar with the ideas of William Godwin, Mikhail Bakunin, Marx and Engels, Wedemeyer, and anything related to the French Revolution. It is evident that Lucy was groping with the appropriate ideology with which to scrutinize the deplorable circumstances of Chicago's masses during the 1880s, not to mention how to retrofit race, ethnicity and gender into a class analysis.

Early in her career, Parsons seemed to partially decide upon a school of thought heavily steeped in the French utopian school that espoused the "natural rights" of men. This school of thought believed that a society that cooperated would see an improvement in overall productivity levels. Laborers would be rewarded for their efforts according to their contribution.⁴⁵ Lucy Parsons' ultimate political ideology was *anarcho-syndicalist*. She was an *anarchist* in the sense that she advocated the absence of government and a *syndicalist* in that she was a proponent of transferring the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution to workers' unions. This designation is far off the beaten path for women of color in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because Lucy Parsons was erroneously categorized solely as Black, she has recently become a favorite topic of research in the realm of Black Studies scholarship, thus perpetuating faulty labels.

In the canon of African American research, the ideologies of Parsons' contemporaries including Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell are readily appreciated because they addressed issues of racism in a central manner, as would be expected of Blacks during the era of Jim Crow. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D.G. Kelley comments, "The most prominent black woman radical of the late nineteenth century, Lucy Parsons, wrote eloquently about the oppression of women and the working class, but ignored race."⁴⁶ Since Parsons did not embrace an African American ethnic identity, her paradigm would have been decidedly different than her self-identified African American counterparts. She did not view racial oppression as central to her analysis. This is more complicated to contend with since marginalization of women of color was generally in reference to the White male paradigm, not to other women of color.

Simply defining the center as White, male and middle class as compared to the margin populated by women of color is also valid in the case of Lucy Parsons. Nonetheless, one must also include the group of influential Black leaders of the time as closer to the aforementioned center than Lucy Parsons could have ever hoped to situate herself. This is to say, that as ostracized as members of the Black vanguard were during the time of the Nadir, Lucy Parsons fell even further outside of that accepted circle, thus a more difficult candidate for so-called Ethnic Studies scholarship.

Although she was involved in Communist Party activities, Lucy Parsons was never a card-carrying member of the party as her biographer and many other modern-day academics have contended. It would seem that several scholars, including Carolyn Ashbaugh and Angela Y. Davis amongst others, place her in the communist category because it, too, is a comfortable classification to comprehend and defend for African American activists at this time. Although Parsons was deeply involved with such African American-related Communist Party legal cases as the Scottsboro Nine in Alabama and Angelo Herndon, her beliefs as a true anarchist precluded her

from formally joining the party, a fact that she repeatedly espoused in letters and other communication.

To lump her in with prominent African American communists such as Paul Robeson, Claudia Jones or Richard Wright seems like an obvious and straightforward designation but is a fallacious categorization. In her seminal work *Women, Race & Class*, Angela Y. Davis includes Lucy Parsons in a chapter entitled “Communist Women” stating, “Her political development ranged from her youthful advocacy of anarchism to her membership in the Communist party during her mature years.”⁴⁷ Understanding that Davis is a communist herself, it is easy to understand why she would contend that moving from an anarchist ideology to a communist one would be a positive progression. The puzzling aspect of Davis’ essay on Lucy Parsons is her perpetuation of the notion that Parsons was a Black woman with no other possible ethnic ancestry.

Davis utilizes Parsons’ involvement in the labor organization International Workers of the World (IWW) to further substantiate claims that she was a member of the Communist Party. Davis endorses Parsons’ IWW affiliation – and by extension, the Communist Party – by stating that at the time it “...focused explicit attention on the special problems of Black people,” and that it “...stood with the Negro.”⁴⁸ These claims are a further attempt to comfortably lump Lucy Parsons into the world of Black female radicals at the time while the reality is that she did not fit in this category. Never embracing an African American heritage, Lucy Parsons never placed race at the center of her analyses; rather, she marginalized the special circumstances of African American workers as an extension of class discrimination. A far cry from arguments made not only by more mainstream African American leaders, but also by radicals who did affiliate with the Communist Party such as Claudia Jones.

Furthermore, Lucy Parsons held great disdain for anyone involved in reform. She considered herself a revolutionary and thought anyone not fighting to completely tear down the status quo in

order to replace it with a non-capitalist system was wasting her time. Most African American leaders at the time were concerned with entrée into exclusive White society and fought to dismantle Jim Crow, not destroy the entire American social, political and economic infrastructure. I would contend that the fact that Lucy Parsons did not self-identify monoracially as African American-influenced her choice to reject the commonly accepted Black political agenda during the era. In an effort to force her to fit into the widely accepted round hole of Black politics at the time, modern scholars attempt to coerce the square peg that is Lucy Parsons into an ethnic and social paradigm that she did not embrace. This, in turn, substantiates artificial European attempts at racial and ethnic categories while simultaneously negating Parsons' early efforts to redefine those externally imposed boundaries herself.

In the book *White Enough to Be American?: Race Mixing, Indigenous People, and the Boundaries of State and Nation*, Lauren L. Basson posits a theory of boundary challenges that sheds new light on the lives of multiracial individuals during the turn of the twentieth century. Basson claims that individuals of mixed descent confronted the racial classifications delineated to protect the pure homogeneous notions of whiteness on three levels. First, individuals possessing more than one racial or ethnic identity defied standard monracial categories by the mere fact of their physical presence. Second, public radical figures such as Lucy Parsons challenged dominant paradigms of American citizenship through defiant actions to dismantle the social and political infrastructure. And third, persons of mixed heritage often possessed multiple loyalties, a fact that challenged American ideals of exclusive affiliation to one cause or group. Lucy Parsons fits comfortably within this notion of boundary challenge and exhibited these principles through her public activism.

Yet, how did Lucy Parsons' radical activities and identity defiance affect the already marginalized labor and anarchist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century?

By being *present* as a non-White woman and by being vocal about the reality of her presence, Lucy Parsons defied the standard labor narrative of the underpaid White male worker striving under the hardships of capitalism to support his wife and children. White males also dominated the best-known anarchist expressions of the time, with the occasional White female thrown in for good measure. Oftentimes, not even making the effort to be inclusive of non-White and female voices, the mid and late nineteenth century radical movement was a hostile place for someone not willing to hide the reality of her identity. The mere fact that Lucy Parsons was present fundamentally changed the focus and direction of leftist social politics because there was no longer the ability to deny the presence of *other*.

Inability to refute experiences outside of one's own personal or collective paradigm forces adjustment from the probable course of action. Therefore, Lucy's presence in the radical movement at that time altered the movement's direction by forcing the collective membership to contend with the reality of her womanhood and multiple heritages. That coupled with Lucy's firebrand oratory style and dissenting approach to human rights violations made her a force not to be ignored. Following Haymarket, the fact that Lucy was the widow of one of the martyrs ceased to be her point of recognition; rather, her unique place in the world and her ability to give trifocal voice to its validity became the core of her ability to enact change. Lucy Parsons embraces society's propensity to render her invisible not as a detriment but as a weapon of power, therefore engendering her with a compelling vantage point with which to better understand and communicate the propensity of the American power structure exploit an underclass unable to defend itself.

Those scholars designating Lucy Parsons as Black by default are perpetuating the traditional American dichotomous racial designation and negating the entirety of her life's experiences, clouding her viewpoint, and diminishing her impact upon the radical movement to which she

committed her life. Lucy's lone biographer Carolyn Ashbaugh states in the first sentence of *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary*, "Lucy Parsons was black, a woman, and working class..."⁴⁹ In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D.G. Kelley states, "Lucy Parsons was one of the most prominent black woman radicals of the late nineteenth century..."⁵⁰ Darlene Clark Hines includes Lucy Parsons in her massive encyclopedia *Black Women in America* and states that "Parsons was the first black woman to play a prominent role in the American Left..."⁵¹ The fact that Lucy Parsons has been given the recognition she deserves in the past several years is magnificent; however, the fact that she is being placed within the narrow category of Black with no regards to her many possible heritage distinctions blatantly ignores her personal identity and limits the possibility of a complete analysis of her contributions.

These limitations have led to a dearth in scholarship described by Gale Ahrens where, "...we know even less about her association with Mexicans and Native Americans than we do about her association with African Americans."⁵² This is troubling because if Lucy Parsons self identified as Mexican and Native American, any scholarship that denies those associations misses a substantial aspect not only of the world view from which she operated but also how that world view contributed to the movement of which she was a part. Therefore, the very scholars who boldly reintroduced the world to the important efforts of Lucy Parsons are also responsible for pigeonholing her accomplishments into the narrow world of African American female scholarship and limiting the scope of her work in much the same way the Parsons' contemporaries too discredited her work utilizing the same practice of labeling her Black by default.

Conclusion

Because of a lack of historical evidence and ambiguous record keeping, there is no way to know the true ethnic identity of either Lucy Parsons or her private predilection on the subject. We do know that she made public pronouncements indicating that she proudly embraced a heritage of

Native American and Mexican, yet those assertions are often ignored in order to place her in the comfortable category of Black. Because of the complicated racial designations in the land of her birth, her self-identity was more complex than mainstream America was capable of comprehending then and apparently now.

Externally imposed identity classifications are utilized by society as a means to simplify analysis, but artificially boil down a complicated situation to a most straightforward common denominator that does not adequately capture the authentic circumstance. The outcome is specious scholarship that is built upon by subsequent academics that fail to look beyond the external to adequately determine the contextual factors that clouded the primary situation from the start. In the case of Lucy Parsons, the simple ethnic classification of Black by the majority of scholars limits the level of analysis concerning her contributions to the labor and anarchist movements. The label of Black places Parsons in a canon of scholarship that, although crucial, is not adequate for her circumstance in history. It negates the wholeness of her experience.

In studying Parsons and individuals like her in the future, a concerted effort must be put forth to better utilize contextual historical evidence coupled with public self-identification as a means to impart the impact of multiracial identity upon movements rarely touched by women, or people of color outside of the Black/White binary designation. How did racial and ethnic identity of movement agitators affect the direction and momentum of the labor movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? What there an equally significant impact upon anarchist theory and practice? How did the seemingly marginal nature of Lucy Parsons' politics affect the early Black civil rights movement, a movement of which she never considered herself a part, but one that the mainstream media attempted to place her?

All of these questions and more remain unanswered because of the legacy of dichotomous racial and ethnic designations. Scholars such as Lauren L. Basson, Maria P.P. Root and others are

in the forefront of studying the affects multi-heritage identity politics on various social and political movements. Unfortunately, labor history and anarchist scholars are not yet at this point, and this is where much of the research is currently being conducted on the contributions of Lucy Parsons. Much can be learned once there is an escape from the comfortable realm of binary ethnic identity designations with regards to Lucy Parsons. The true impact of her work can only be fully appreciated once she is no longer labeled Black by default.

¹ Watkins, Nancy (2008-11-09). "Who Loves Lucy?" *Chicago Tribune Magazine* (Tribune Co.): pp. 23.

² Newspapers of the day were replete with speculations of Lucy Parsons' ethnic identity. Oftentimes, reporters would seek out individuals that may have known the Lucy and Albert prior to their Chicago arrival, thereby adding validity to Parsons' questionable character. One example is the September 16, 1886 edition of *The New York Times* that states, "He says her romantic story of her mother being an Indian woman and her father a Mexican is false, and that she is in reality a mulatto, her mother being a negro and her father a white man."

³ Avrich, Paul. *The Haymarket Tragedy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986, page 12

⁴ Ben Reitman to Mr. Johnson, Director F.B.I., Chicago, Aug. 15, 1942. Ben L. Reitman Papers, the Manuscript Collection, University of Illinois at Chicago.

⁵ Darlene Clark Hine includes Lucy Parsons in her encyclopedia *Black Women in America*, paying no attention to any other ethnic identity. Likewise, Vicki L. Ruiz includes Lucy Parsons in her work *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia*.

⁶ In an article in the *New York Times*, October 17, 1886, page 9, Lucy Parsons stated, "My ancestors on my mother's side greeted the white man as he first planted his feet on the newly-discovered continent, and met Cortez when he marched against Montezuma."

⁷ "A Parsons Family Affair," *The Galveston Daily News*, September 9, 1886.

⁸ Ahrens, Gale. *Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality & Solidarity, Writings & Speeches, 1878-1937*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishers, 2004, page 4.

⁹ "A Parsons Family Affair," *The Galveston Daily News*, September 9, 1886. *The Chicago Tribune* eventually picked up this story and many others on this topic in the wake of Albert's imprisonment and trial. This particular article stated, "Mrs. Lucy Parsons, wife of the condemned anarchist, Albert R. Parsons, will look upon the face, if she reads the Chicago papers of the husband deserted in Waco to become the mistress of Albert R. Parsons. It is said that Parsons married her in Chicago. Oliver Gathens is a negro – not light colored, either."

¹⁰ Ashbaugh, Carolyn. *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary*. Chicago, IL: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1976, page 15.

¹¹ Nelson, Bruce. *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870-1900*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988, page 41.

¹² Chicago Historical Society, Haymarket Collection.

¹³ Linder, Douglas O. "The Haymarket Riot and Subsequent Trial: An Account," from the Chicago Historical Society Haymarket History Project.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Parsons, Lucy E., ed. *Gov. John P. Altgeld's Pardon of the Anarchists and His Masterly Review of the Haymarket Riot*. Chicago, IL: Lucy E. Parsons, Publisher, 1893.

¹⁶ Illinois Department of Public Health, death certificate for Albert Richard Parsons, Jr. dated August 15, 1919.

¹⁷ The entire short-lived publication run of *The Liberator* is available at the Newberry Library in Chicago, IL dating from the first issue dated September 3, 1905 until the last issue dated April 15, 1906.

¹⁸ Brissenden, Paul Frederick. *The I.W.W.: A Study of American Syndicalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1920, page 276.

¹⁹ "Lucy Parsons, Blind Anarchist, Burned to Death: First Husband Hanged as Haymarket Rioter." *Chicago Daily Tribune*; March 8, 1942, page 10.

²⁰ Darwin, Charles. *Descent of Man*. New York: Classic Books International, 2009. Darwin states among other assertions, "The races differ also in constitution, in acclimatization and in liability to certain diseases. Their mental characteristics are likewise very distinct; chiefly as it would appear in their emotional, but partly in their intellectual faculties," page 122.

²¹ Van Wyhe, John. *Phrenology and the Origins of Victorian Scientific Naturalism: Science, Technology and Culture 1700-1945*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004, page 17.

²² Darwin, Charles. *Descent of Man*. New York: Classic Books International, 2009, page 127.

- ²³ Pascoe, Peggy. "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America." *Journal of American History* 83, no. 1 (1996), page 53.
- ²⁴ Hollinger, David A. "Amalgamation and Hypodescent: The Question of Ethnoracial Mixture in the History of the United States," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 108, Issue 5, page 15.
- ²⁵ The law specifically applies to the marriage of those who were once enslaved, but the law was amended to also include those individuals engaged in what the state labeled miscegenation practices. See *Annotated Statutes of the State of Illinois with Digested Notes of Decisions on the General Statutes of the State*. Chapter 89, Marriages, paragraph 19. "That all marriages that have been contracted wherein one or both of the parties were slaves at the time, shall be considered equally valid and binding as though the parties thereunto were free and the child or children of such marriages shall be deemed legitimate and placed upon exactly the same footing as to the right to inherit property as well from their brothers, issues and other relations as from their parents) as any child or children born of parents who were lawfully wedded and not slaves. The provisions of this Act shall extend to all marriages entered into between such slaves, whether contracted and entered into within or without this States, so far as the right to inherit property with this State is concerned."
- ²⁶ Ashbaugh, Carolyn. *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary*. Chicago, IL: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1976, page 17.
- ²⁷ Cook County Department of Vital Statistics, birth certificate of Albert Richard Parsons, Jr.
- ²⁸ Cook County Department of Vital Statistics, birth certificate of Lulu Eda Parsons.
- ²⁹ The Slave code of Virginia in 1662 states " Whereas some doubts have arisen whether children got by any Englishmen upon a Negro shall be slave or Free, Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present Grand assembly, that all children born in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother."
- ³⁰ Hollinger, David A. "Amalgamation and Hypodescent: The Question of Ethnoracial Mixture in the History of the United States," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 108, Issue 5, page 7.
- ³¹ Brown, Ursula M. *The Interracial Experience: Growing Up Black/White Racially Mixed in the United States*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2000, page 37.
- ³² Wilson, Terry P. "Blood Quantum: Native American Mixed Bloods," in Root, Maria P.P., ed. *Racially Mixed People in America*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., page 108.
- ³³ *Ibid*, page 112.
- ³⁴ 1785 Va. Acts ch. LXXVIII, § 1, 12 Statutes At Large 184 (William Waller Hening ed., 1823)
- ³⁵ Spruhan, Paul. "A Legal History of Blood Quantum in Federal Indian Law to 1935," *South Dakota Law Review*, Vol. 51, 2006, page 5.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, page 10.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, page 12.
- ³⁸ Wilson, Terry P. "Blood Quantum: Native American Mixed Bloods," in Root, Maria P.P., ed. *Racially Mixed People in America*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., page 120.
- ³⁹ *Aurora Daily Express*, November 6, 1886.
- ⁴⁰ Daniel, G. Reginald, "Passers and Pluralists: Subverting the Racial Divide, in Root, Maria P.P., ed. *Racially Mixed People in America*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., page 102
- ⁴¹ Gibson, Campbell and Kay Jung. "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C., September 2002.
- ⁴² *Boston Evening Transcript*, Vol. LIX, No. 18,273, November 19, 1886, page 1.
- ⁴³ *The New York Times*, November 1, 1886.
- ⁴⁴ Calmer, Alan. *Labor Agitator: The Story of Albert R. Parsons* (New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1937), page 53.
- ⁴⁵ Burleigh, Michael, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), page 124.
- ⁴⁶ Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002, page 41.
- ⁴⁷ Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. New York: Vintage Books, 1983, page 152. In all fairness, Davis was relying heavily upon Carolyn Ashbaugh's biography of Lucy Parsons which was published a mere five years before *Women, Race & Class*. When Ashbaugh's biography was released, this was the first time that many had even heard of Lucy Parsons, so Davis' reliance upon that source is understandable. What is disconcerting is that subsequently, scholars not only rely upon Ashbaugh, but then back up the communist membership assertion with the Davis book, thus perpetuating fallacious information in scholarship that followed.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, page 151.
- ⁴⁹ Ashbaugh, Carolyn. *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishers, 1976, page 6.
- ⁵⁰ Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002, page 41.
- ⁵¹ Hine, Darlene Clark, ed. *Black Women in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, page 919.
- ⁵² Ahrens, Gale. *Lucy Parsons: Freedom, Equality & Solidarity, Writings & Speeches, 1878-1937*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishers, 2004, page 19.

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