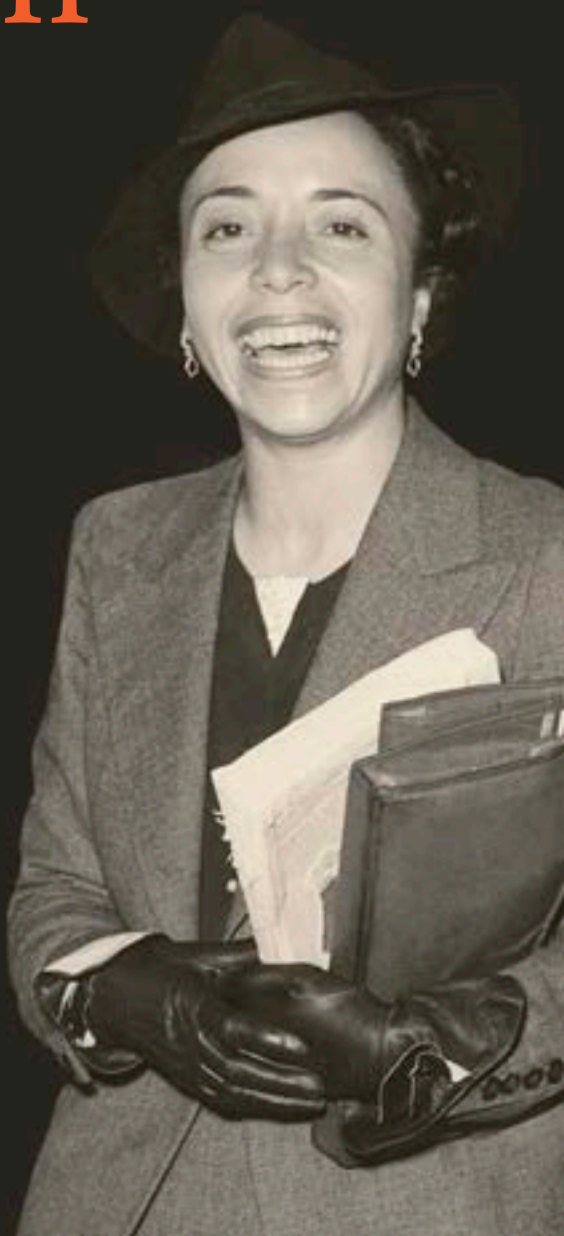
# Louise Thompson Patterson

## *A Life of Struggle for Justice*



KEITH GILYARD

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## *A Life of Struggle for Justice*

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Cover art: Louise Thompson Patterson in Europe, 1930s. Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

Frontispiece: Louise Thompson Patterson; her daughter, MaryLouise Patterson; and young students in the Soviet Union, early 1960s. Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

*For Ramón J. Jiménez (1948–2016)*

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*A gallery appears after p. 144.*

## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| AIMS | American Institute for Marxist Studies |
| CAA | Council on African Affairs |
| CES | Congregational Education Society |
| CIO | Congress of Industrial Organizations |
| CPUSA | Communist Party USA |
| CRC | Civil Rights Congress |
| FBI | Federal Bureau of Investigation |
| HBCU | Historically Black College or University |
| ILD | International Labor Defense |
| IWO | International Workers Order |
| NAACP | National Association for the Advancement of Colored People |
| NAARPR | National Alliance against Racist and Political Repression |
| NNC | National Negro Congress |
| UPWA | United Packinghouse Workers of America |
| YMCA | Young Men's Christian Association |
| YWCA | Young Women's Christian Association |

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# Introduction

On May 8, 1933, the diminutive and fair-skinned Louise Thompson, wearing a wraparound spring coat tied at the waist and looking determined, strode in a light but steady rain through the streets of Washington, DC. Having floated on the political left for several years, the confident thirty-one-year-old was now firmly grounded in a direct-action campaign as the principal organizer of a high-profile protest in support of the Scottsboro Nine. For a portion of the route from Florida and New York Avenues (in the northeastern section of the District of Columbia) to the White House, she had her left arm interlocked with the right arm of Ruby Bates, one of the two white women who had falsely accused the nine African American males of rape in Alabama two years earlier, a charge that had sparked an international firestorm. Plagued by a guilty conscience, Bates had changed course and had testified and demonstrated on behalf of the accused, who by that time had been convicted. Most had been sentenced to death. Bates's other arm was entwined with the right arm of Janie Patterson, the mother of Haywood Patterson, one of the defendants. Louise, Bates, and Patterson walked amid five thousand marchers, many of whom bore placards demanding justice not only for the Scottsboro Nine but also for death-row inmate Euel Lee, imprisoned labor leader Tom Mooney, and fledgling activist Angelo Herndon.[1]

Inside the White House, Louise mingled with a group of twenty-five demonstrators who demanded to see President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and refused to accept the word of Colonel Louis McHenry Howe, who received them politely, that the chief executive was busy in a conference. The hassled officer reached the president by phone, and FDR's words poured clearly from the receiver, audible to the entire group: "I will not see the

committee."[2] After Louise, Bates, and Patterson, along with several others, spoke to Howe, they left a petition containing more than 200,000 signatures.[3]

After additional stops, the marchers eventually retreated to nearby Seaton Park. The demonstration—the first mass rally in Washington for racial justice—ended after a series of speakers held forth on the significance of the event and addressed an array of social issues. For her part, the jaunty Louise hailed the gathering as a watershed moment of interracial solidarity and noted the role of numerous women who "scoffed at hardship" to test the promise of mass protest. She argued that the day's actions were a harbinger of further political activism in the nation's capital and predicted that subsequent marches would number one million participants. It would not happen anytime soon. It would take Louis Farrakhan, who ironically was born the week of that Scottsboro march, to attain that number.[4]

But Louise's accomplishments over the course of a decades-long radical career of social activism are remarkable. She remained a pint-sized but potent hammer in a wave of counterattacks against Jim Crow. She was one of the early African American graduates of the University of California, Berkeley; a pioneering instructor at Pine Bluff Agricultural, Mechanical, and Normal School in Arkansas and at Hampton Institute in Virginia; and a valued cultural and political worker during the Harlem Renaissance. Her friends and acquaintances included W. E. B. Du Bois, Aaron Douglas, Augusta Savage, Arna Bontemps, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes, and her first husband was the talented but tormented writer Wallace Thurman. She was central, along with Paul Robeson, to the labor fraternalism movement in the 1930s and 1940s. She steered proto-black-feminist activities in the 1950s with Charlotta Bass, Beah Richards, and others; was crucial to the efforts to free political prisoners, most notably Angela Davis, in the 1970s; and operated as a progressive intellectual and cultural resource in the 1980s and 1990s. In short, she embodied resistance to racial, economic, and gender exploitation, moving beyond theory to action. A socialist because she viewed such a political economy to be the key to eradicating poverty, racism, and sexism, she formed a long-term, vital political partnership with her second husband, the black Communist William L. Patterson, one of the most important American freedom fighters of the twentieth century and a victim of McCarthyism. Whether her political forecast was correct remains to be determined. Certainly, the problems that concerned her have not been eliminated under capitalism.

This book conveys the crucial events in the life of Louise Thompson Patterson, as she ultimately became known. Her portrait has remained blurry

to date because, although numerous scholars have referred to her, no systematic and sustained attempt to represent clearly her actions and interiority has emerged; thus, smudges mar the literature. For example, Hampton Institute did not terminate her employment, as is widely reported. She resigned.[5] Neither did she ever divorce Thurman, which is another popular notion. In fact, she presented herself as the widow Mrs. Thurman when applying for her second marriage license.[6] But beyond getting some of the major facts straight and illustrating her formidable activism, this book is concerned with a psychological or at least interactive depiction of her.

What caused Louise to become politicized and act as she did? How did she construct the bountiful and elongated sample size—she was born in 1901 and died in 1999—that is a gift to current intellectuals and practitioners concerned with social change and progressive intervention? Relying on her unfinished memoir and other unpublished materials, her published articles and association writings, several hundred hours of audiotapes and videos produced as part of the Louise Thompson Patterson Memoirs Project sponsored by the Department of African American Studies at Berkeley, and the records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as interviews I conducted, I have provided a provisional answer in the following pages. In brief, a deeply felt color consciousness and sense of isolation and persecution as a child in the American West created a passionate yearning for justice, humanism, and community. In her view, this yearning was best consummated through the cultivation of a rebellious identity and participation in radical movements and projects. This story is largely one of a woman who rejected offers and opportunities to construct a sterling mainstream reputation and to pursue a materially comfortable professional life. Instead, despite the privilege of a college education and even her light complexion, she opted to traverse the harder path and committed herself to some of the most difficult struggles of her times for political transformation. All along she understood her predicament and the weight of her choice. As a young woman, she wrote to her best friend, "I know that my course won't be easy—I am saturated in bourgeois ideology and some of it is hard to get away from. I feel the necessity of maintaining a measure of economic security. But beside the march of world events my own seems very insignificant."[7]

Demonstrating her grasp of color politics in America, Louise noted in an interview in 1988 that the United States had been at odds with all other countries in its adoption of the one-drop rule for determining whether to characterize someone as black. Moreover, she understood that when those

in power designated a person as black, they were classifying him or her as inferior. Specifically addressing the practice of such labeling during enslavement, she explained, "It was a question of private property."[8] Yet, unlike many postmodernists, particularly light-skinned African Americans, Louise was not preoccupied with drawing intraethnic distinctions, promoting talk of hybridity, or listening to claims about one-half or one-quarter ethnic membership. She knew that the only genetically pure thing we all are is human, but the narrative of the black freedom struggle in America totally captivated her. She embraced it as one who was fully Negro or black or Afro-American—all designations she used for herself at various times. In an essay titled "What Makes One an American Negro," she wrote of how the "greed for maintaining property rights and exploitation helped in the welding together of this new people—American Negroes—who with varying degrees of racial strains, forced into a new language, made to form a new culture from their now vague African background and the present life in America, emerged not as Africans or Europeans, but as a new people who have enriched not only the economy of America but given it its finest cultural contributions."[9] Rather than lingering on the ontological or biological nature of these new people, Louise concerned herself with how to position them for continued achievement. She settled on the view—and never wavered in it—that a leftist orientation offered the best way forward as an ethnic group.

Regarding her self-described status as a rebel, she considered it "just part of my makeup, I think." Of course, she was not suggesting that rebellion resided in her DNA. She meant that by the time she had come of age, she was determined to challenge the situations she thought unjust.[10] The roots of that resolve lay in a difficult childhood scarred by racism, and her public vocalizing of discontent began to manifest itself during her undergraduate days.

This volume contributes to the growing and much-needed scholarship on "black left feminism" or the "radical black female subject."[11] It joins recent biographies about several of Patterson's political allies and contemporaries, including Barbara Ransby's *Eslanda* on Eslanda Robeson, Gerald Horne's *Race Woman* on Shirley Graham Du Bois, Gregg Andrews's *Thyra J. Edwards,* and Carol Boyce Davies's *Left of Karl Marx* on Claudia Jones. This book also aligns with important themed analyses that consider Louise, such as Erik S. McDuffie's *Sojourning for Freedom* and Dayo Gore's *Radicalism at the Crossroads.*

Louise admirably and sometimes stunningly advanced a series of interconnected liberation efforts through such rhetorical efforts as writing, speak-

ing, and demonstrating, as well as through handling a variety of movement logistics and serving as a key officer and organizer in several important organizations. To study her is to witness the courage, sacrifice, discipline, vision, and fortitude needed to organize and work over the course of a long lifetime for justice and liberation for all people.

# NOTES

### Introduction

1. Lee, a sixty-year-old black man, had been convicted of murder in Maryland. After the U.S. Supreme Court refused to overturn his conviction, Maryland executed him on October 28, 1933. Mooney, a white labor leader, had been convicted of the Preparedness Day Bombing, which occurred in San Francisco on July 22, 1916. He was pardoned in 1939 after twenty-two years in prison. Herndon, who turned twenty years old two days before the march, had been arrested in Atlanta the previous year for possessing Communist literature and organizing industrial workers, both black and white. After several convictions and appeals—and two years in prison—Herndon was cleared for good in 1937.

2. See T. R. Poston, "145,000 Protest to Roosevelt," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 10, 1933.

3. Figure given by Louise Thompson in "And So We Marched," *Working Woman*, June 1933, 6.

4. Farrakhan was the leading figure in the Million Man March on October 16, 1995. Estimates of the actual crowd size vary, but some do claim that there were a million participants.

5. L. Patterson, interview by Evelyn Louise Crawford, June 17, 1989, transcript, 24, box 28, folder 7, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

6. FBI Report, September 24, 1941, Louise Thompson Patterson FBI/FOIA Chicago File 100-4092.

7. Louise Thompson to Nebby Crawford, January 16, 1931, quoted in Crawford and Patterson, *Letters from Langston*, 38.

8. L. Patterson with Verdell Burdine and Otto Rutherford, interview by Margaret Wilkerson and Beverly John, June 2, 1988, transcript, 24, box 27, folder 16, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers.

9. L. Patterson, "What Makes One an American Negro," box 20, folder 22, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers.

10. L. Patterson, interview by Evelyn Louise Crawford, March 18, 1990, transcript, 28, box 28, folder 13, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers.

11. Erik S. McDuffie attributes the term *black left feminism*, a concept that frames his book *Sojourning for Freedom*, to Mary Helen Washington. See McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 3; Washington, "Alice Childress," 185. For discussion of the radical black female subject, see Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*, xv, 1–27.

#### Chapter 1: Louise Alone, 1901–1916

1. Louise, in an unpublished memoir segment titled "Chapter 1," claims that her mother was nineteen years old at the time. "Chapter 1," unpublished memoir, 3, box 19, folder 15, Louise Thompson Patterson Papers. However, both U.S. census records and Lulu's Illinois marriage license indicate that she had reached the age of twenty-four by September 9, 1901.

2. L. Patterson, "Chapter 1," unpublished memoir, 6.

3. Spear, *Black Chicago*, 1.

4. Spear, *Black Chicago*, 12.

5. Spear, *Black Chicago*, 7, 29.

6. The council was the successor to the Afro-American League, which operated from 1890 to 1893. Inspired by the journalist T. Thomas Fortune, who also founded the league, the council, mainly headed by Alexander Walters, lasted until 1907.

7. Attempting to attract people who were disenchanted with some of the established congregations, the Institutional Church and Social Settlement eventually featured a nursery and a kindergarten; a mother's club; an employment bureau; a print shop; a gymnasium; classes in sewing, cooking, and music; lectures by prominent figures; concerts; and space for meetings. See Spear, *Black Chicago*, 95–96.

8. See Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*.

9. State of Illinois Marriage License 307578.

10. L. Patterson, "Chapter 1," unpublished memoir, 7.

11. Although she began calling herself Louise at this time, I have used Lulu, rather than Louise, throughout to avoid confusion.

12. L. Patterson, "Chapter 1," unpublished memoir, 6–7. I cannot confirm the diagnosis or speak to the combination of health problems she might have encountered, but the symptoms reported are more associated with polio than measles.

13. L. Patterson, "Chapter 1," unpublished memoir, 6–7.

14. See Hobbs, *Cayton Legacy*, 15–16.

15. Hobbs, *Cayton Legacy*, 16–18.

16. See H. Cayton Jr., *Long Old Road*, 21.

17. The Klondike Gold Rush is also known as the Yukon Gold Rush, the Alaska Gold Rush, and the Last Great Gold Rush.

18. See Berton, *Klondike*, 396.

19. Population statistic cited from Hobbs, *Cayton Legacy*, 24.

20. H. Cayton Jr., *Long Old Road*, 3.

21. L. Patterson, "Chapter 1," unpublished memoir, 8–9.

22. L. Patterson, "Chapter 1," unpublished memoir, 7–8.

23. Population figure from Aycock and Scott, *Joe Gans*, 153.