

Responding to the Rhythms of Labor: Lola Ridge's Work Songs in *The Ghetto and Other Poems*

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Abstract

Although nearly forgotten by the end of the twentieth century, Irish-born poet Lola Ridge is now recognized as a highly influential, socially engaged writer and editor who was active in various Modernist and activist circles in the United States from 1907-1941. This essay discusses the lesser-known poems within the “Labor” section of her 1918 publication, *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. I suggest that these labor poems draw from and participate in the American traditions of work and sorrow songs, thereby positioning Ridge as an avant-garde poet of the working class, a kind of Modernist troubadour. I read Ridge’s “The Song of Iron” alongside Kane O’Donnell’s 1863 long poem, also titled “The Song of Iron,” drawing intertextual connections between these poems, both of which appropriate hymn-like rhythms that gesture toward the work and sorrow song traditions. I address how Ridge’s engagement with these traditions attempts to “make new” various images, metaphors, and cadences found in O’Donnell’s poem, and I situate Ridge’s “Labor” poems within the context of World War One, conscription, labor radicalization, and the suppression of free speech by the federal government. I offer close readings of select poems to further demonstrate her textual play with antiphony and other communal poetics and themes, all of which model on the page the collective action necessary to challenge the capitalist and imperialist aims of the modern era.

Keywords

Lola Ridge, *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, “The Song of Iron”, modernism, Kane O’Donnell, work songs, spirituals, labor poetry, working-class poetry, anti-war poetry

In 1919, the anarcho-socialist Leonard D. Abbott reviewed Lola Ridge’s debut book of poetry, *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, for the Ferrer Association’s *Modern School*. In his review, Abbott claims that “[t]wo Lola Ridges are revealed in her book. One is the artist. The other is the radical. Sometimes the two are merged” (Abbott 1919, p. 27). He proceeds to commend her “powers of observation [as well as] her passionate sympathy with the underdog and with all the movements that make for rebellion and freedom” (p. 27). Despite Abbott’s overwhelmingly positive and representative review, Ridge’s work was unknown to many students of poetry through most of the twentieth century. Louise Bernikow’s groundbreaking anthology from 1974, *Four Centuries of Women Poets in England and America, 1552-1950*, suggests that Ridge’s ostensible disappearance from the canons of American poetry is due to the “buried history within the buried history,” where “women on the left in America have been banished from contemporary consciousness by the slow erosion of neglect” (Bernikow 1974, p. 45). Terese Svoboda elaborates that Ridge was “twice-neglected” because she was a woman and a radical (Svoboda 2016, p. 6), and Nancy Berke draws from Cary Nelson to explain how Ridge could have been forgotten for so long, noting that “the critical practices of American literary culture during the Cold War helped create a severe cultural

amnesia about the preceding generation of radical poets, of which Ridge was a prominent member” (Berke 2010, p. 28).

Sustained scholarship on Ridge does not take root until the 2000s, though Ridge’s name appears in various memoirs and scholarly articles throughout the twentieth century. Kenneth Rexroth, for example, mentions Ridge in his 1961 essay, “The Influence of French Poetry on American,” where he refers to her as a socialist and as part of a collection of individuals associated with the little magazine *Others* that ushered in “modernism in American poetry” (Rexroth 1961, p. 155). In 1987, Ridge’s essay “Woman and the Creative Will” is mentioned in a footnote to Susan Stanford Friedman’s “Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse,” and in 1998, Susan Churchill’s “Making Space for ‘Others’: A History of a Modernist Little Magazine” mentions Ridge’s assistant editorial and contributor roles at *Others*, also in several footnotes. Ridge might still be a mere footnote in the annals of American poetry studies if not for recent scholarship that has worked to situate Ridge’s life and cultural productions within the social, political, and economic contexts of the early- and mid-twentieth century. A number of scholars have addressed Ridge’s influence as an editor, mentor, activist, and socially engaged poet. In particular, the works of Caroline Maun, Belinda Wheeler, Daniel Tobin, Nancy Berke, Linda Kinnahan, and, more recently, Francesca Bratton and Lucy Collins have helped resurrect Ridge from relative obscurity; in 2015, Terese Svoboda published the first-ever biography on Ridge, her fiercely researched *Anything that Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet*.

Many of these contributions have included astute analyses of Ridge’s long poem, “The Ghetto,” which was first published in April 1918 in *The New Republic* and again, significantly expanded, in *The Ghetto and Other Poems* in September that same year. “The Ghetto” offers a portrait of Jewish life on the Lower East Side, focusing on economic conditions, sexual agency, and grassroots organizing. As Nancy Berke concludes in “Ethnicity, Class, and Gender in Lola Ridge’s ‘The Ghetto’”: “Ridge’s articulation of the working-class Jewish community inside ‘The Ghetto’ is...always a community of women and men making themselves in the world” (Berke 1999, p. 79). Ridge’s depiction of Jewish women and men was thus markedly different from common literary portrayals in the early twentieth century; she avoided perceiving and describing “Jews as victims or as subhuman, ‘snarling a weird Yiddish,’ as Henry James had described them, or the Jew squatting on the windowsill in Eliot’s ‘Gerontion,’ or beneath the rats in his ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’” (Svoboda, *Radical Modernist* 2018). Indeed, Ridge celebrated the ghetto as a life-giving, life-affirming force, one where Jewish women and men of the Lower East Side were agents of their own change in the world.

Still, little attention has been given to the poems within Ridge’s “Labor” sequence, the third section of *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. At times, these poems offer the imagist snapshots that we see in “The Ghetto,” though they are much briefer than her long poem, and the language is often elevated—hyperbolic, even—expressing Ridge’s exuberance over her subject matter, as she does with the use of italics in part IX of “The Ghetto.” This essay suggests that several of the poems in her “Labor” sequence, namely “The Song of Iron,” “Frank Little at Calvary,” “Fuel,” “A Toast,” and “The Legion of Iron,” draw their themes and communal poetics from the traditions of American work and sorrow songs, which tended to draw from religious hymns and rhetoric. These poems thereby participate in a poetic and musical lineage that has long reminded audiences that there is power and liberative potential in collective struggle and action.

Responding to O’Donnell: Imagery, Sound, and Rhythms in “The Song[s] of Iron”

Several poems within Ridge's "Labor" sequence contain echoes of her travels along the factory belt, and her poem "The Song of Iron," appears to recontextualize a nineteenth-century long poem of the same title by [Daniel] Kane O'Donnell, which Ridge may have discovered on a trip to Pennsylvania.¹ O'Donnell was a journalist and poet from Philadelphia, PA, working at *The Press* through the 1860s as an editor, lead writer, and Civil War correspondent. In 1865, post-emancipation, O'Donnell served as assistant superintendent of education to the city of Charleston, South Carolina. There, O'Donnell and superintendent James Redpath demanded inclusive schooling, refusing to force Black children to attend segregated schools when their parents were paying taxes to finance schools for white children (McKivigan 2008, p. 105). In the late 1860s, he traveled to Cuba to "report on the progress of the revolutionary movement there" (Wilson and Fiske 1888, p. 558), and his poetry and critical works were published in various magazines, including the *New York Independent*, an abolitionist and pro-women's suffrage publication.

Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography writes that O'Donnell's poetry "display[s] great facility in versification and a rare talent for rendering homely subjects attractive" (Wilson and Fiske 1888, p. 558). Two of the "homely subjects" of interest to O'Donnell were mill work and slavery, both of which were explored in his long poem "The Song of Iron," which was published in his 1863 volume of poetry, *The Song of Iron, and The Song of Slaves*, as a celebration of iron work and its revolutionary power. The poem's conclusion sees the products of iron wielded by "man appeal[ing] for man" to break the chains of slavery and refers to "Freedom" as the "iron arm of God" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 23). This long poem is echoed in Ridge's own "Song of Iron," and reading the poems alongside each other highlights Ridge's modernist craft even as she embraces proletarian subjects and arguments.

Many other modernist poets, including Marianne Moore, H. D., and Amy Lowell, are known for their intertextual and allusive work, though Ridge's apparent source material stems from a significantly different tradition than that of most of her contemporaries. Ridge's intertextual work suggests that she straddled two poetic traditions—of the avant-garde and of labor—traditions that often seemed incompatible in terms of form and, at times, content. Reading Ridge's "Song of Iron" intertextually, and considering her recontextualization of O'Donnell's anti-slavery poem that celebrates the power of the American worker, helps readers understand Ridge's view of the role of a radical poet who is unapologetically on the side of working-class struggle. O'Donnell's "Song of Iron" is an anthem for iron workers who literally smash the chains of slavery within the context of the poem; Ridge's "Song of Iron" is also an anthem for iron workers, though who smash the many forces that oppress the working class in the context of the early twentieth century.

Both Ridge's and O'Donnell's "Song[s] of Iron" are labor *and* working-class poems, for they describe iron work and the tools of such labor; they also refer to their larger contexts (the American Civil War or WWI) as they generalize the experiences of American workers who, according to the poems, are key to liberation. These poems clearly share similar themes and political perspectives, but even more interesting

¹ After settling in New York City in 1908, Ridge's was an organizer for the Ferrer Association's Modern School where she founded and edited the first issue of its magazine, *Modern School*; here, she met and befriended Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. An anarchist herself—and prominent activist, poet, and editor—Ridge published her first book of poetry after having traveled with her partner, David Lawson, to upper New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Tennessee, and Missouri from 1914-1917 (Svoboda, 2016, p. 88). Four of these states border the Great Lakes and were thus sites for iron ore mining; in Pennsylvania and Michigan, major steel mills were operational during these years as well. Svoboda wonders in *Anything that Burns You* if Ridge and Lawson were "helping [Emma] Goldman on her tour" through these states, where Goldman delivered political and philosophical speeches (Svoboda 2016, p. 88).

is how Ridge simultaneously pays homage to O'Donnell's "Song of Iron" and makes his metaphors, images, and meters new. As Ridge recontextualizes O'Donnell's subject and argument, she invites readers to embrace a modernist poetics that is intimately tied to labor struggles. Ridge likewise aligns herself with past struggles for justice and echoes these struggles in her work, even as she experiments with form, revealing how art, even of the avant-garde, can have a social function and grow from more traditional poetic and musical forms.

The bulk of both poems craft exultations of labor in steel mills as they compose their "Song[s] of Iron," referring to specific parts of the blast furnaces. O'Donnell writes:

Beneath the chimney blazing,
 The canopy so murk,
 The gnomes with zeal amazing
 Are sweating at their work.
 ...
 Hark! In the blasty hollows
 The savage, suffering ore,
 Molt-white with heat infernal
 Groans from the open door (O'Donnell 1863, p. 6)

Like O'Donnell, Ridge's lines are end-stopped, encouraging a natural pause at the end of the line to absorb the images of blast furnaces. However, Ridge embraces a crisper set of images to describe the furnace. She writes:

How golden-hot the ore is
 From the cupola spurting,
 Tossing the flaming petals
 Over the silt and furnace ash —
 ...
 Out of the furnace mouth —
 Out of the giant mouth —
 The raging, turgid, mouth —
 Fall fiery blossoms (Ridge 1918, p. 50)

O'Donnell's images of a "chimney blazing" and "canopy so murk," while clear, feel familiar, and likely would have to Ridge as well. Thus, in her rendering, the "cupola [is] spurting...flaming petals." Ridge likewise maintains O'Donnell's personification of the furnace door as a mouth (O'Donnell's door is "groaning"), though for Ridge, the emphasis is on the size and expansion of the door with her repetition of words with soft "g" sounds and stressed first syllables ("giant," "raging," "turgid"). Ridge evokes sounds in the mills with her precise words and rhythms, whereas O'Donnell describes or names these sounds.

Similarly, both poets use the color and word "gold" to describe scenes of furnaces and molten iron, scenes that would have been familiar to them both given their travels. Describing the flames that spew from the furnace doors, O'Donnell writes that "Gold issues from the tomb! / Ho! for this gold of iron! / Hurrah! the wonder-glow" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 6), focusing more on the jubilant exclamations and rhyme scheme of

the stanza than the imagery within the line. Ridge's descriptions of fire in motion, however, anticipate Futurist renderings of similar images. Out of the "cupola" fly "fiery blossoms" colored "the gold of buttercups / in a field at sunset / or huskier gold of dandelions, / Warmed in sun-leavings" (Ridge 1918, p. 50). These lines focus on various hues of gold within the mill, emphasizing what is simultaneously seen and felt (such as the almost blinding warmth of a sunset) over what is being expressed emotionally, as in O'Donnell's poem ("Ho!" and "Hurrah!").

Ridge's poem likewise juxtaposes two incongruous images—fire and flowers—which ultimately challenges any association of fire with hell and death and nature with life. In Ridge's formulation, the "flaming petals" and "molten flowers" are evidence of god-like creative work (Ridge 1918, p. 50; 51), the furnaces a source of life and living for the steel mill community. O'Donnell, too, conflates heaven and hell, god and devil, in his poem, noting that the iron workers are "Angels...hard at work in hell" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 6). He also sees their work as a source of life, or perhaps resurrection: "Gold issues from the tomb!" Ridge allows her sharp, surprising images and incongruity to reveal these connotations, whereas O'Donnell relies on more familiar and religious metaphors to achieve a similar end.

"The Song[s] of Iron" do not just share similar metaphors and images of mills and furnaces, however; they likewise employ related yet varying patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables within their lines. O'Donnell's poem maintains a traditional, though rhythmic, iambic trimeter throughout his entire long poem, with hyper-metrical odd lines that end in an unstressed syllable, thus giving his poem the flow of a hymn that could be sung. Ridge's lines do not follow a consistent meter, though they still attend to the aural qualities of her poem. In the aforementioned passage, she begins, like O'Donnell, in iambic trimeter with a hyper-metrical first line: "How gólden-hót the óre is"; however, she follows with two lines in trochaic trimeter:

Fróm the cúpola spúrting,
Tóssing the fláming pétals

Doing so allows Ridge to initially echo O'Donnell's hymn-like rhythm, and then disrupt it to emphasize the motion of "spurting," "tossing," and "flaming." In Ridge's poem, sound and rhythm give rise to image.

The second set of four lines then emphasizes the "mouth" of the furnace, not only with the visual repetition of this word and the extended pause suggested by the dashes at the end of the lines, but also with her meter: a dactyl ("Out of the") is followed by a trochee ("furnace") and concludes with an accented final syllable ("mouth"):

Out of the furnace mouth —
Out of the giant mouth —
The raging, turgid, mouth —
Fall fiery blossoms (Ridge 1918, p. 50)

The final line slightly inverts the meter of the previous two with a stressed syllable, a dactyl, and a trochee, again emphasizing the incongruity of the images of fire and blossoms. O'Donnell's long poem is thus clearly present in Ridge's "Song of Iron," though Ridge's rhythms and images are unmistakably modern: she initially plays with cadences more familiar to nineteenth-century closed forms, only to disrupt them to emphasize the image.

Their keen attention to rhythm and sound, in addition to their poetic subject, points to both Ridge's and O'Donnell's participation in the tradition of American work song, a subset of labor or working-class poetry. American work songs have a long history among working-class communities, and these songs commonly adopted the meter of popular church hymns or gospels so the melodies would be familiar to workers and their families. Sometimes the lyrics of the hymns or gospels remained but were made ironic, sorrowful, or liberative when sung within a new context. Other times new lyrics were set to familiar tunes, often for satirical or humorous effect. As Richard Flacks explains in "The American Labor Song Tradition":

Music, sung or listened to on the job, can be a great aid in relieving drudgery and sustaining mutuality. Song-making is especially characteristic of social situations in which people work and live together under conditions set by bosses and masters, doing hard labor, knowing that they can control neither the work itself nor the return from it. (Flacks 2017, p. 286)

According to Flacks, such social situations have been found among sailors, cowboys, rail workers, lumberjacks, and chain gangs, but especially within mining communities and among enslaved people of African descent (p. 286). Soldiers and laundry workers, too, have relied on the work song to coordinate their labor and break the tedium of arduous tasks. The rhythm of these songs could organize both the work and opposition to oppressive working conditions, particularly when the lyrics were modified with a pro-labor message, as in both O'Donnell's and Ridge's poems. One natural, though not guaranteed, outcome of the work song is the forging of a community, or the recognition or strengthening of an already existing community.

Perhaps the best-known compilation of work songs and work anthems is commonly referred to as the *Little Red Songbook*, first produced in 1909 by the Spokane branch of the Industrial Workers of the World. Officially titled *I.W.W. Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent*, the *Little Red Songbook* aimed to relay songs that:

hold up flaunted wealth and threadbare morality to scorn, songs that lampoon our masters and the parasitic vermin, such as the employment-sharks and their kind, who bedevil the workers...They will be songs sowing the seeds of discontent and rebellion...to stir the workers into action. (qtd. in Fava 2016, p. 304)

The book gathered selections by Joe Hill, Ralph Chaplin, and T-Bone Slim, among others. These songs may have been keenly sung on the job to "reliev[e] drudgery and sustain...mutuality" (Flacks 2017, p. 286), but they were also sung on the picket line to coordinate and inspire a new kind of labor: organizing to demand improved working conditions.

O'Donnell's long poem, published in the middle of the American Civil War, anticipates the work song tradition of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century with its regular hymn-like structure and end rhymes, but also with its political content. Indeed, O'Donnell's poem metamorphoses into a work anthem in its final stanzas as it calls for the abolition of slavery. Initially imagining a battle between Mars (god of war) and Vulcan (god of fire and metal work), O'Donnell writes of the potential for fire and metal work to unite with war and "Crush out the monstrous treason" of slavery (O'Donnell 1863, p. 22). To O'Donnell, the Civil War was the "time of iron" (p. 21), not in terms of iron's productivity in the 1860s, but because

of its potential to aid in the abolition of slavery. Referencing O'Donnell's home state of Pennsylvania, a site of iron ore mining and steel mill work in the 1860s, his speaker notes that the "mines and forges / Are vast in craft and power"; they have the creative potential to usher in the "iron hour" of "revolution" (p. 21). He concedes that this "battle" is "dire," however, noting that "Two hundred thousand Irons / Have gone into the fire!" (p. 21). This is the only instance of O'Donnell capitalizing "iron" in his long poem, and it does not seem to be accidental. The "Two thousand Irons" that "Have gone into the fire" refer both to weapons created for war and to the soldiers who wield these weapons to become "Iron" personified as they "Clank! clank! on chain and rivet" (p. 23). Published two years into the Civil War, it is even possible that O'Donnell is referencing the estimated number of dead soldiers at that point, drawing a connection between metal work, war, and death. These two lines call to mind the layout of mill towns, with graveyards on high ground overlooking factories. An early photograph of the steelworks in Bethlehem, PA—not far from Philadelphia—also draws a connection between labor in the mills and death (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Evans, W. 1935. *Bethlehem Graveyard and Steel Mill*. Pennsylvania. Photograph. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USF342- 001167-A [P&P] LOT 1329. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.36750/> Witnessing views like this in the 1860s during wartime would have extended the meaning of the large white cross, a marker of death for mill worker and soldier alike.

Toward the conclusion of O'Donnell's poem, the speaker wonders, "Shall Slavery chain the ages / And link the time to shame?" Still, he calls on "iron armies" to literally strike against these chains:

Down on your myriad anvils
 Let all the hammers light,
 Crush out the monstrous treason
 And shape the wrong to right.
 Clank! clank! on chain and rivet,
 Upon the limbs of thrall,
 At work are all the hammers—
 Hurrah! the shackles fall! (O'Donnell 1863, pp. 22-23)

The song of iron, for O'Donnell, is a song of “undying freedom”; the fuel for this song is comprised of metal work, metal worker, and union soldier—“man appeal[ing] for man” (O'Donnell 1863, p. 23). His work song becomes work anthem, calling northern men to “Rise” together since “blest be the struggle” for this “brand of Freedom” that makes all the “shackles fall” (p. 23).

Although Ridge's participation in the work song tradition might not be as obvious as O'Donnell's, Ridge's contemporary, Alfred Kreyborg, actually alludes to work songs in his favorable review of *The Ghetto and Other Poems* in *Poetry Magazine*. He writes that “‘The Song of Iron’ is an exhortation to labor swinging to the rhythm of a paean, and a warning to ‘Dictators-late Lords of the Iron’...Underneath the hammering rhythm, as relentless as a machine and as primitively nude as the animal, surges the call of mate to mate” (Kreyborg 1919, p. 338). His image of “labor swinging” in “rhythm” references both the pacing and coordination of work; his suggestion that the poetic lines serve as a “warning” to bosses and “call” to fellow workers likewise categorizes this poem as an anthem meant to inspire other workers to rise and unite in collective action. Other reviews of *The Ghetto and Other Poems* also focused on the musical qualities of Ridge's poetic project. Conrad Aiken, for instance, argues that the “latent harmonies” of the poetry “are never evoked,” but that, for Ridge's particular project, perhaps “she ha[d] already reached...the right pitch” (Aiken 1919, p. 84). Leonard D. Abbott discusses the “deepest note of the book”: Ridge's “unflinching loyalty to the revolutionary ideal” (Abbott 1919, p. 28). And Louis Untermeyer writes that Ridge's poems “are all sharply written in different keys, but they are intuitively harmonized. They vibrate in unison” (Untermeyer 1919, p. 7). These musical comparisons are not mere metaphor; clearly, these reviewers reflect on Ridge's work as they might a song, suggesting that the “auditory imagination,” as poet Amy Lowell referred to it in the January 1917 issue of *The Dial*, is of particular importance to Ridge's work. Lowell's essay suggests that writing, and the mass reproduction of it, hindered the reading public's ability to attend to speech and sound, atrophying its potential to hear the “‘beat’ of poetry, its musical quality, [which] is exactly which differentiates it from prose” (Lowell 1917, p. 46). Lowell further claims that the general reading public's “auditory imagination” in the modern era “is not nearly so well developed as [its] visual” (46). *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, however, demonstrates Ridge's careful attention to both image and sound; in fact, image and sound create and build upon each other.

Responding to Sorrow: Ridge's “Song of Iron” and the Poetics of Spirituals

The aural poetics of Ridge's work and how they underscore the social themes and images of her poetic project are likewise reminiscent of spirituals, what W.E.B. Dubois called “sorrow songs” in his *Souls of Black Folk* in 1903. These songs were initially created by enslaved people of African descent during the pre-Emancipation period, and while it may seem incongruous to label such spirituals as “work songs,” since slaves were not paid for their labor, the music they constructed grew out of work, out of their forced labor, and forged a community. According to Bill V. Mullen, spirituals are indeed work songs, and they “initiate a continuous thread of African-American music as the expressive genre most prototypic of the experience of African-American working-class oppression and resistance” (Mullen 2017, p. 267). These related themes of working-class oppression and resistance, as well as the forging of a community through song, are central to Ridge's “Labor” section. Too, an understanding of the heterophonic poetics of spirituals aids in our understanding of the poetics at work in Ridge's poems, particular in her use of ellipses as they appear at the end of “The Song of Iron.”

Katherine Clay Bassard's 1999 *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* lucidly theorizes the construction and poetics of slave spirituals, arguing that

their meanings are often highly oversimplified. Bassard sets out to complicate how we receive and understand the spirituals' poetics, first by exploring how enslaved Africans performed and thereby created community. For one, spirituals often collapsed boundaries between performer(s) and listener(s) or observer(s), as many spirituals were created by antiphony, or call and response patterns, whereby a leader called out with a line and others responded individually or together, thus creating discordant harmonies. Eileen Southern, too, has explained that the spirituals often consisted of "overlapping call-and-response patterns" (qtd. in Bassard 1999, p. 136), or multi-layered antiphons, which created heterophony, or musical texts in which the same melody, in this case various call and response patterns, was sung in different ways at the same time by multiple performers.

Labor movements have even been known to adopt spirituals as communal work songs to strengthen their struggle for improved working conditions, as when they modified the pronouns of the nineteenth-century spiritual "I Shall Not Be Moved," to "We Shall Not Be Moved" in the 1950s. David Spener notes that:

It is not surprising that many labor-union songs were drawn from the repertoire of church songs, given the intense religiosity of both black and white workers in many industries, especially those who labored in the coal mines, textile mills, and cotton and tobacco plantations of the rural southern United States. (Spener 2016, p. 41)

Given Ridge's anarchist education and understanding of the essential role that community, community-building, and song play in revolutionary historical change, it is not surprising that "The Song of Iron" employs a communal poetics reminiscent of nineteenth-century spirituals and early twentieth-century work songs to both document the pernicious effects of capitalism in the early 1900s and to provide a liberative, hopeful vision for the future of a people who suffer within this economic system.

Ridge's "Song of Iron" is driven by a thundering underbeat and a severe energy. The singular speaker of Part I first notes that she is waiting for the "clangorous music" and the "blooded, implacable Word" of "Iron singing" (Ridge 1918, p. 49). The speaker's "blood leaps in [her] arteries" and her "spirit is inundated with the tumultuous passion of [the thought of the Iron's] Voice" (p. 49). In her impassioned prayer to the Iron-god, the speaker implores, "Pour through my soul / Thy molten, world-whelming song" (p. 50). Part I thus presents the speaker waiting, "Like a new Mary" (p. 50), for the conception of Iron's song so she may, in turn, birth it for the world.

This same speaker is present in Part II of "The Song of Iron," but rather than beseeching the Iron-god, she speaks to her fellow worker. At first it may seem that this speaker is actually a factory boss, as she orders the "workman" to "Charge the blast furnace... / Open the valves — / Drive the fires high...[and again to] charge the converter" (p. 50). However, she later addresses the workman as "comrade" (p. 51), and we see that amid the oppressive, quick-burning fires of the iron crucibles, there is something more than smelted iron ore bubbling. While the workers "Drive the fires high," feeding the insatiable "furnace mouth," they, too, are being nourished, since "out of these molten flowers [of iron], / Shall shape the heavy fruit" that the speaker so desperately prays for in Part I (pp. 49-51). The images of flowers and fruit throughout Part II suggest that something is being grown and nurtured within the strenuous iron work. Indeed, the speaker asks her comrade:

Do you not see —
Through the lucent haze

Out of the converter rising —
 In the spirals of fire
 Smiting and blinding,
 A shadowy shape
 White as a flame of sacrifice,
 Like a lily swaying? (p. 51)

The speaker beseeches her fellow worker to fuel Iron's song to create a certain collective, "nurturing" consciousness (Ridge 1918, p. 51). She wants to remember and recall the ghostly, "shadowy shape" emblematic of all the workers who were killed in the factories and mines, sacrificed to work, represented by the funeral "lily swaying" (p. 51). Iron's song, then, does not sing of the praises of hard labor, as would O'Donnell's miners in his "Song of Iron"; instead, it sings of the memory and liberation of all who have died working in deplorable conditions. This song, like the molten iron itself, is thus one of energized hope, signaled by the floral imagery of "blossoms," "buttercups," and "dandelions" used to describe the iron ore (p. 50). But since this song penetrates even the "arteries" (p. 49), this hope literally mobilizes the workers to move deliberately in service of all past and future "flame[s] of sacrifice" (p. 51).

Part III then follows this conversation between workers, where one of them, trembling, still waits for the "mighty quickening" of what is to come (Ridge 1918, p. 52). She notes that the earth is pregnant with Iron's song and heat, like all of life awaits its violent birth. Then, in Part IV, the "implacable Word" arrives and is:

Sung to the rhythm of prisons dismantled,
 Manacles riven and ramparts defaced...
 (Hearts death-anointed yet hearing life calling...)
 Ankle chains bursting and gallows unbraced... (p. 52)

The "chanted and thundered...articulate tongues of Iron" sing a song of freedom for all prisoners (p. 52), including the oppressed and exploited workers. This "dissonant baying" tears "converters...from their axis" and flings "the furnaces [into the] vomiting fire" (pp. 52-53). These images echo the final stanza of O'Donnell's "Song of Iron," where "Clank! clank! on chain and rivet, / Upon the limbs of thrall, / At work are all the hammers / Hurrah! the shackles fall!" (O'Donnell 1863, p. 23). However, in Ridge's poem, the speaker, now united with her fellow workers, has actually become the song of Iron and is liberating its message by demanding that the "Dictators — late Lords of the Iron, [who are] Shut in [their] council rooms" witness the destruction of the crucibles and hear the "Gnashing of steel serpents twisting and dying... / Screeching of steam-glutted cauldrons rending" (Ridge 1918, pp. 52-53), while the "Hands inexorable, [are] marring / What hands had so cunningly moulded" (53). Significantly, there is not only one pair of hands violently destroying the crucibles that have been constructed by the ideologies and men of capitalism. Instead, Part IV of Ridge's "The Song of Iron" subtly depicts a crucial shift from the singular "I" at the outset of the poem to a collective "we" at the end. As is common in nineteenth century spirituals, we see what seems to be an individual praying to her Lord in Part I meld into a collective group and together becoming the "blare of the rude molten music of Iron..." (p. 53), freeing all prisoners of their earthly toil.

The concluding stanzas of “The Song of Iron” then present what could be read as overlapping antiphons signaling the “onward progress[ion]” of Iron’s song (Ridge 2018, p. 53). In the original edition printed by B. W. Huebsch in 1918, over half the lines of the sixth stanza end with ellipses:

Gnashing of steel serpents twisting and dying...
 Screeching of steam-glutted cauldrons rending...
 Shock of leviathans prone on each other...
 Scaled flanks touching, ore entering ore...
 Steel haunches closing and grappling and swaying
 In the waltz of the mating locked mammoths of iron,
 Tasting the turbulent fury of living,
 Mad with a moment's exuberant living!
 Crash of devastating hammers despoiling...
 Hands inexorable, marring
 What hands had so cunningly moulded...(p. 53)

While Ridge certainly includes ellipses throughout *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, the frequency of them toward the end of “The Song of Iron” is visually remarkable. Indeed, three of the four final lines of the poem also end with ellipses:

Till the ear, tortured, shrieks for cessation
 Of the raving inharmonies hatefully mingling...
 The fierce obligato the steel pipes are screaming...
 The blare of the rude molten music of Iron...(p. 53)

Most scholars agree that Ridge’s ellipses throughout *The Ghetto and Other Poems* generally suggest an occasion for pause, rather than omission of thoughts or words. However, most of these poems do not include three or four sets of ellipses in consecutive lines. The departure in punctuation here signals a departure in the ellipses’ function in this poem, suggesting that the action of the line is not yet finished, but is interrupted by further action, signaled, too, by the frequent use of gerund phrasing: they are “chords never final but onward progressing” (Ridge 1918, p. 53).

But these ellipses also suggest that a kind of echoing of the thunderous initial utterance of the lines takes place within the space of the ellipses, invisible to the eye, but audible nonetheless. Like a heterophonic musical score, variations of the same melody are suggested by the ellipses and interact with each other, with accompanying “voices” coming “some beats behind the [first] voice, or arriv[ing] sooner at the end of each period” (qtd. in Napier 91), creating “octaves discordantly clashing” (p. 53). On one hand, a group of iron workers create the “Screeching of steam-glutted cauldrons rending...,” but before this screeching can finish its work—its line or song—another group of workers comprise a “Shock of leviathans prone on each other...” This “monstrous fusion of sound” and these “raving inharmonies” may seem to some listeners, like the “Dictators — late Lords of the Iron” (p. 53; 52), to be a form of auditory torture. However, these heterophonic disharmonies reflect and create a specific locus of resistance in which various actions (gnashings, screechings, shocks)—various tunes—build from each other to become a song, a collective of workers calling and responding, overlapping their songs and actions to torture the effects of the “Dictators.” The newly shaped iron workers produce a heterophonic song that signals a collective comprised of “Majestic discordances / Greater than harmonies...” (p. 20). The progression of the text—

with the shift from singular “I” to a collective “we,” in addition to the heterophony reflected in the ellipses at the end of the poem—mirrors the poetics of a spiritual, thereby employing a textually communal poetics that reflect a liberative community of workers and that emphasize communal action, in this case, the stoppage of work and even destruction of the tools of their labor.

Responding to Working-Class Radicalization and WWI

Like O’Donnell’s “Song of Iron,” which responds to and participates in an abolitionist call in the mid-1800s, Ridge’s labor poems respond to their historical moment. While anti-slavery speech was criminalized in several southern states during the decades leading to the Civil War, O’Donnell was not at risk for imprisonment for his anti-slavery rhetoric and poetry in Pennsylvania. For Ridge, however, publishing her pro-labor, anti-war ideas was quite dangerous due to federal laws that applied to all states. In fact, when “The Ghetto” was initially published on April 13, 1918 in *The New Republic*, it contained only three parts, which focused primarily on her Imagist snapshots of life in the ghetto, with special attention to the economic and imaginative lives of Jewish women. The poem did not include its later lines that observe union organizing meetings, nor did it include lines from her poems in the “Labor” section. Perhaps Ridge was still crafting her long poem, as well as many of the other poems in the book, or perhaps Ridge was aware of the context in which she was publishing. Indeed, the upper right corner of *The New Republic* that first published “The Ghetto” includes a note from Albert S. Burleson, Postmaster General from 1913-1921:

When you finish reading this magazine place a one-cent stamp on this notice, hand same to any postal employee and it will be placed in the hands of our soldiers and sailors at the front. No wrapping—no address—

During WWI, Burleson initiated programs to deliver reading materials to soldiers with ease. But his support for the troops, combined with his conservative, racist politics and policies led him to be a staunch enforcer of the Espionage Act of 1917, which “was used to round up not just antiwar speakers, but to control the growing labor radicalism in the country,” including members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and socialists who were in the public eye (Kindig 2008). Perhaps most infamous was Burleson’s suppression of left-wing print journals, which he refused to mail, asserting that the content of the publications violated the Espionage Act. Burleson’s claim held up in court, which concluded that, while circulation of the press is protected under the First Amendment, the circulation through the mail system is not. In “Art and Politics, Dissent and Repression: *The Masses Magazine* Versus the Government, 1917-1918,” John Sayer explains that a “dozen or so socialist publications had been banned from the mails the first week the Act was in effect. Within five months every leading socialist publication had been barred from the mails at least once, many for weeks at a time” (Sayer 1988, p. 53). Significantly, in November 1917, affiliates of *The Masses* were indicted: “Five editors, the business manager, and one contributor were charged with conspiring to cause mutiny and refusal of duty in the military and attempting to obstruct recruiting and enlistment” (Sayer 1988, p. 55). Notably, one contributor, Josephine Bell, was included in the indictment because of her poem—“A Tribute”—that celebrated Ridge’s friends and comrades, anarchists and anti-war activists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. The poem reads:

Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman
Are in prison,
Although the night is tremblingly beautiful

And the sound of water climbs down the rocks
 And the breath of the night air moves through multitudes
 and multitudes of leaves
 That love to waste themselves for the sake of the summer.
 Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman
 Are in prison tonight.
 But they have made themselves elemental forces,
 Like the water that climbs down the rocks;
 Like the wind in the leaves;
 Like the gentle night that holds us;
 They are working on our destinies;
 They are forging the love of the nations;
 * * *
 Tonight they lie in prison. (qtd. in Sayer 1988, p. 57)

Ridge would have been aware of these draconian attacks on the First Amendment, as well as the tangible consequences of being charged with violating the Espionage Act. Perhaps the truncated form of “The Ghetto” in April 1918 was due to some reservations on her part about its ability to be circulated if other sections of the poem had been printed. Ridge would have also been aware of the American Federation of Labor’s official support of the War, and that only the members of the Industrial Workers of the World remained outspoken in their opposition to the draft and imperial war, even if the governing board of the IWW did not take an official stand against conscription.

In fact, ten years earlier in 1908, Ridge designed the cover art for Emma Goldman’s pamphlet *Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty* (Figure 2), which “depicts ‘Patriotism,’ a woman in armor pinioning a prostrate female ‘Liberty’” (Svoboda 2018).

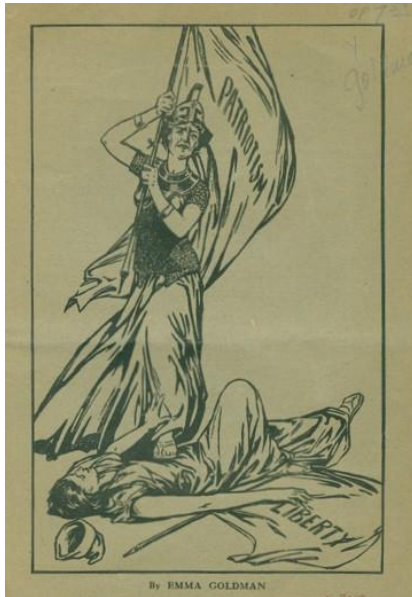


Figure 2. Ridge, L., Artist. 1908. *Cover Design for Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty by Emma Goldman*. Drawing. Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History Repository, SSC-MS-00131. https://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/yaddo/popups/pop_15cov.html

Although they did not always agree on how to organize,² Ridge and Goldman were comrades, especially when Ridge first arrived in New York City. Ridge would have known of Goldman's imprisonment when she was charged with violating the Selective Service Act of 1917 after encouraging young men not to register for the draft. Ridge's consistent commitment to anti-authoritarianism, steadfast celebration of libertarianism, and her relationship with and illustration for Goldman reveal how she surely felt about Goldman's incarceration and eventual deportation, as well as the Espionage and Sedition Acts. Perhaps she even read Bell's tribute to Goldman and Berkman aloud in solidarity. What we know for certain, though, is that Ridge's *The Ghetto and Other Poems* was published in the wake of a growing labor movement, conscription, global war, and the repressive Acts that were passed following the United States' entrance into WWI in 1917. And in September 1918, B. W. Huebsch, known for publishing now classic works of literature that openly address an array of controversial topics, published "The Ghetto" in its nine-part form, along with forty-two other poems, some of which previously appeared in other left-wing magazines from the time. Quite possibly, Ridge intended for her shortened version of "The Ghetto" from *The New Republic* to drum up praise and interest among poets and critics alike, enticing them to experience the full force of her revolutionary poems—including those in her "Labor" section—when the book came out later than same year.

Of these radical poems, "Frank Little at Calvary," the fourth in her "Labor" sequence, is most often discussed. This poem commemorates the lynching and immortalizes the spirit of Frank Little: anti-capitalist, anti-war activist, and member of the IWW. Little was murdered for his union organizing activities and anti-war speeches in 1917 in Butte, Montana, where copper miners were striking for improved working and safety conditions after 168 miners were killed in a horrific accident just a month earlier. Little's rhetoric, "urging miners to strike and 'fight the capitalists but not the Germans'" (Carroll 2016), reveals his understanding that WWI, which the US had just entered a few months prior, was being fought by the poor and working-class for the benefit of rich men and imperialist endeavors. Little's sentiment is echoed in Ridge's "Legion of Iron," published in the "Labor" sequence of *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. The speaker of this poem wonders what would happen if:

...the armies halted...
 And the train mid-way on the mountain
 And idle men chaffing across the trenches...
 And the cursing and lamentation
 And the clamor for grain shut in the mills of the world?
 What if they stayed apart,
 Inscrutably smiling,
 Leaving the ground encumbered with dead wire
 And the sea to row-boats
 And the lands marooned –
 Till Time should like a paralytic sit,
 A mildewed hulk above the nations squatting? (Ridge 1918, pp. 59-60)

² In *Anything that Burns You*, Terese Svoboda notes that "Ridge wrote in her 1940 diary: 'We [Goldman and I] parted spiritually—in silence—neither speaking of that which had parted us. It was only that she could brook no independence of action in any associate—indeed she did not want associates but disciples—and I realized sadly I was no disciple'" (Svoboda 2016, p. 85).

For Ridge and Little, work stoppages are the source of anti-war and working-class power. She imagines “armies halt[ing] and men sitting “idle...across the trenches” while trains are no longer roaring and while grain is “shut in the mills of the world.” Without this labor, imperial wars and capitalist businesses stop, and the power is placed in the hands of the many—the workers.

Ridge’s “Frank Little at Calvary,” which precedes “The Legion of Iron,” positions Little as a labor martyr: “He walked under the shadow of the Hill” (Ridge 1918, p. 54), a reference to the site of Jesus’ crucifixion, and he “summoned” workers to lay down the tools of their labor. When the “Lords of the Hill... heard out of the silence of wheels / The answer ringing / In endless reverberations” (p. 54), they prepared for their lynching of Little. As Lucy Collins lucidly explains: “Exceptionally, in this poem, it is not the clamour of outright protest that makes the authorities fearful, but rather the silence that ensues as the men abandon their work” (Collins 2023, p. 1133). Driven by this fear, the authorities:

...covered up their faces
 And crept upon him as he slept...
 Out of eye-holes in black cloth
 They looked upon him who had flung
 Between them and their ancient prey
 The frail barricade of his life...
 And when night – that has connived at so much –
 Was heavy with the unborn day,
 They haled him from his bed... (p. 54)

Ridge’s description of black-hooded predators dragging Little “from his bed” reveals her sympathy for the organizer and disgust for his murder, further cementing her political position that strikes and organizing are clearly powerful tactics to threaten the agents of capitalism, especially if they are willing to pay off vigilantes to murder for the sake of war and profits, as they likely did with Little.

Heterophonic Call and Response in “Fuel,” “A Toast,” and “The Legion of Iron”

Several other of Ridge’s work poems, specifically “Fuel,” “A Toast,” and “The Legion of Iron,” challenged and continue to challenge reining imperialist and capitalist systems and ideologies. These three poems, individually and collectively, rely on communal poetics and call and response patterns to present their song of protest and liberation. “Fuel,” positioned between “The Legion of Iron” and “A Toast,” devotes a specific voice or perspective to each of its three stanzas, though they all respond to the same question, “Do ‘common men’ need art?” The poetics of “Fuel” thus enacts a type of heterophony: the poem’s texture comes from three stanzas addressing the same theme, yet with variegated voices and tones. The first stanza reads:

What of the silence of the keys
 And silvery hands? The iron sings...
 Though bows lie broken on the strings,
 The fly-wheels turn eternally...(Ridge 1918, p. 61)

The first three lines focus on abstractions and posit a philosophical question about music and art: “What of the silence of the keys / And silvery hands?” The speaker innocently wonders where the beautiful music

has gone since “bows lie broken on the strings.” Experience has taught the speaker, though, that the sound she now hears is the “iron sing[ing]”; thus, our speaker reveals that art is dying or is being forgotten for the sake of hard labor. The image of “fly-wheels turn[ing] eternally” signals that the sacrifice of art for oppressive work has been happening for ages and may continue indefinitely. The first speaker or voice of “Fuel” quietly ponders the reality that iron workers need not hear the songs of the pianos, harps, or violins; their music will be the song of iron only (importantly, this particular iron song is distinct from the one in “The Song of Iron”; note that “iron” in this poem is not capitalized, not personified, as it is in the previously discussed poem). We can detect the speaker’s discomfort in the first stanza, though, through the repetition of the “s” sound throughout these lines, but particularly in the first two: “What of the silence of the keys / And silvery hands? The iron sings...” The serpentine “hiss” present at the outset both softens and troubles the first voice’s ponderings, as she realizes that some form of evil resides in the hard labor forced in the factories.

The poem’s second speaker or voice, which is present in the next four lines of the poem, addresses a different version of the same theme; that is, while the sense of the next few lines is the same, like a heterophonic musical score, the tone is different. Thus, this poem approximates heterophony because of the variegated, yet thematically similar, senses of each stanza. The second voice also reflects on the futility of art and dreams, though the tone feels more urgent, unlike the pensive pace of the first four lines:

Bring fuel — drive the fires high...
Throw all this artist-lumber in
And foolish dreams of making things...
(Ten million men are called to die.) (Ridge 1918, p. 61)

The speaker constructs imperatives: workers are to “Bring fuel — drive the fires high... / Throw all this artist-lumber in.” The directives seem to come from someone in charge, like a factory boss bent on keeping the fire burning with no care for the workers or their dreams. In fact, this second voice delights in destroying the workers’ “foolish dreams of making things,” telling them to annihilate all art and beauty in service of work and, essentially, war and destruction.

These shrewd factory owners then transform into politicians who are not simply fueling a factory, but a Great War, and they parenthetically remark, perhaps behind closed doors, that the fuel must be in continual supply because “Ten million men are called to die.” This line alludes to two important realities: that the steel mills supplied necessary materials for the war effort during WWI and that this war called millions of soldiers to the front lines, many of whom were killed or maimed. One important photo that alludes to the mass of men shipping out to war was actually censored for years but was printed on the cover of the *New York Tribune Graphic* in September 1918 (Figure 3), the same month and year that *The Ghetto and Other Poems* was published.



Figure 3. *The New York Tribune*. Sept. 8, 1918. *Front Page of the New-York Tribune Graphic*. Newspaper Image. New York, NY. Available online: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83030214/1918-09-08/ed-1/?sp=1&r=-0.316,0.085,1.436,0.832,0> (accessed on 27 September 2024).

The top photo depicts a crowd of American soldiers “aboard one of the first American transports sailing for France,” according to the caption. The anonymous faces of the men are framed at the top of the photo by the transport ship’s smokestacks—most likely made of steel. These men being hauled off to war were thus being transported by a ship and with weapons that were manufactured, at least in part, in the factories within which some of these men worked at home. These “ten million men [were] called to die” in the war, but the poem reminds readers that an entire steel industry at home helped prepare for the war, helped pave the way for the deaths of so many men with creative potential, so many men with “dreams of making things.” With the same meter and rhyme scheme as the first four lines, and with the same basic theme, the urgent and somber voice of “Fuel’s” second stanza dissonantly responds to the basic question, “Do ‘common men’ need art?” According to the politicians, the answer is “no.” Together, the first two stanzas of this poem create discordant, discomfiting, and complex responses by two separate voices musing over the same question, the same “call.”

The poem’s final three lines yield yet another response, contributing to the poem’s overall heterophony. The third voice’s tone falls between the first two voices, pragmatically asking, “what dreams have these [common men] to hide from death?” The poem’s third voice explains that the “common men,” the workers who are also the “fuel” for war, “have no hour for books or art,” as they are forever working and “sweat[ing] to keep their common breath.” This third voice seems to prescribe war as a noble, glorified alternative to hard work in the factory; war, indeed is the “common man’s” new art! Thus, the heterophonic poetics contribute to an overall somber tone in “Fuel.” The poem’s link between worker, soldier, and death echoes O’Donnell’s “Song of Iron,” where the speaker notes that “Two thousand Irons / Have gone into the fire,” a probable conflation of worker and soldier during the Civil War.

Readers might easily mistake Ridge's song-poem of protest to be completely despairing, without a hopeful future for the "common man." However, her likely deliberate choice of the word "apart" in line nine is more than mere filler to maintain a rhyme scheme. The final four lines again read:

As for the common men apart,
Who sweat to keep their common breath,
And have no hour for books or art —
What dreams have these to hide from death! (Ridge 1918, p. 61)

Careful attention to this one small word continues to reveal Ridge's vision of communal liberation through collective struggle. She not only uses poetic "tactics," such heterophony, within this single poem; she also subtly reveals that liberation is achieved within community. The "common men" in these final lines are "apart" from each other, sweating and dreaming alone. Because of their lack of collective consciousness or action, they will indeed become fuel for work and war.

But Ridge's word "apart" in "Fuel" gestures toward the previous poem in the book, "The Legion of Iron," to posit a vision for communal action whereby workers, united in consciousness and action, actually stop the capitalist machine that drives men to war. In "The Legion of Iron," the speaker describes the laborers' silent yet present working-class consciousness. Their routine work has "planned [them] to resistance / Like steel that has cooled in the trough" and has taught them how to "conquer, withstand, overthrow" (Ridge 1918, p. 59); they know "force as a brother / And power as something to play with" (p. 59). Ridge's lines call to mind a photograph from 1906 of a group of iron workers from Pittsburgh, PA (Figure 4):



Figure 4. 1906. *Rolling Mill Crew*. Photograph. Pittsburgh, PA. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation Collection Photographs, 1864-1953, MSP 33, Library and Archives Division, Senator John Heinz History Center. MSP33.B005.F24.I02. Available online: <https://historicpittsburgh.org/islandora/object/pitt%3AMSP33.B005.F24.I02> (accessed on 27 September 2024).

In the image, two rows of men pose for a camera, and because of the seated/standing positions of the workers and the contrasts between light and dark in the image, viewers' eyes are drawn first to the arms and hands in the photograph. In several sets of hands, men hold tools for their work in the rolling mill; curiously, though, these tools appear in the photo as weapons. One worker seated in the front row, for example, grins as he balances multiple tools that resemble swords, as if preparing for a duel, while the man seated next to him seems to be positioned to swing his tool in battle. While Ridge likely did not view this image (it was not published in any newspaper or magazine), the lines of her poem suggest at least a familiarity with such imagery and her awareness that metal workers literally hold the tools in their hands

to fight against their oppressive working conditions. Importantly, the men in the photograph are not working, not wielding their tools for work. This stoppage of work is key to any labor movement's struggle to improve working conditions. Both the image of the *Rolling Mill Crew* and Ridge's "The Legion of Iron" suggest that, because of their experiences in doing hard labor together, workers have gained the seeds of working-class strength and consciousness necessary to overthrow the system that oppresses them and eventually leads them to death.

In two short lines between the two longer stanzas of "The Legion of Iron," the speaker wonders: "But what if they stood aside / Who hold the earth so careless in the crook of their arms?" (Ridge 1918, p. 59). The speaker answers herself near the end of the poem and reminds her readers that their communal power lies not in passively accepting their positions in society ("holding the earth so careless"), but by actively choosing not to work—to stand "apart" from the capitalist machine. She writes: "What if they stayed *apart*, / Inscrutably smiling" (p. 60, emphasis added), like the man smiling in the front row of the *Rolling Mill Crew* photograph with his sword-like tools. Ridge's use of the word "apart" in this poem distinguishes it from "Fuel": in "Fuel," the men are standing apart from each other, which weakens their community; in "The Legion of Iron," the speaker encourages the men to collectively stand "apart" from labor and war. Should this power be exercised, we would see "the armies halted... / And the train mid-way on the mountain" (p. 59); indeed, "Time" would "like a paralytic sit" (p. 60). The workers, when organized in community, have the power to halt all work, all wars—even time—so that they and their demands are even greater than the nations that depend on their labor. Because of their collective power and consciousness and choice not to be so "careless" with their power as workers, they will no longer be alienated from each other and will instead become communion for each other, nourishing their comrades to have the strength to fight their oppression.

Yet another, perhaps more obvious reading of the "Legion of Iron" exists, one in which the subject of the poem, the "they" of first line, is not iron workers but a collective of bosses and politicians who abuse their power. These men in charge might be the ones who "hold the earth so careless" and worry about tools rusting when they "see... blood as a slip of the iron" (Ridge 1918, p. 59). In this interpretation, "stand[ing] apart" refers to the bosses and politicians backing down, removing themselves from the economic and production equation (an unlikely circumstance). The rhetorical questions that persist throughout the poem thus ask readers to imagine what the world might be like without this "legion of iron," without the orchestrators of imperial wars and oppressive work. Art—in this case Ridge's poem—provides fuel for creative thought: can readers imagine a world without bosses/generals, dangerous working conditions, and war? The rhetorical questions directly address the audience, nudging them into thought and, ideally, creative action.

Appropriately, in "A Toast," which immediately follows "Fuel," Ridge's speaker reflects on the "common men" who went off to war, as well as those who "stood aside." She "toasts," first, the men who served in World War I, though she is not honoring their patriotism or bravery. The speaker refers to these men as the "Heroes who died for evil, / Believing the evil was good" (Ridge 1918, p. 62). They have been victims of capitalism's "greed [that is] never sated, / [Which] barter[s] the souls in [its] snares, / That were trapped in the lusts [it] created / For incense and masses and prayers" (p. 62). The poem's logic suggests that the soldiers or "fuel" for war, the "common" workers, are lured in by an "imbecile God," who perpetuates capitalist greed, "Deal[ing]" and "Trad[ing]," with what seems to be no way out (p. 62). Organized religion then seeks to cover up this greed, since the traditional and sacrificial altars are insatiably greedy as well.

Ridge also honors a second group in “A Toast”: the revolutionaries who resisted World War I and likely those who supported the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. She refers to these revolutionaries as the “Breakers, the Bold, the Despoilers, / Who dreamed of a world over-thrown” and who “died for the millions of toilers,” such as American and Russian workers in WWI (Ridge 1918, p. 63). Ridge’s “A Toast” re-members those who were maimed or had died for lies on the Western Front, or, because of their radical politics—their standing “aside” and “apart”—had been “Outlawed” or “Branded...red-handed” (p. 63). Perhaps Ridge had Emma Goldman in mind when she crafted this poem, for Goldman was surely one of those outlaws, having been arrested for rioting, educating about birth control, and encouraging workers to resist the draft during WWI.

It is also possible that Ridge had an image in mind from the August 1916 issue of the *International Socialist Review* (Figure 5), captioned as “Just a few red girls at the Finnish picnic”:



Figure 5. Dawson, George, Photographer. Aug. 1916. *Just a Few Red Girls at the Finnish Picnic*. Digital scan of photograph. *The International Socialist Review* 17.2: p. 78. Available online: <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/isr/v17n02-aug-1916-ISR-riaz-ocr.pdf> (accessed on 27 September 2024).

The photo features a group of women draped with pennants reading, “One Big Union,” the motto of the IWW. These women were “rebel girls”: members and supporters of the IWW, which organized the Mesabi Iron Range Strike of 1916, a legendary battle between workers and owners of the Oliver Mining Company in Minnesota. Ridge’s toast to the “devoted, red-handed” echoes the ISR’s description of the group of women as “red girls” who were “Bold” in support of the striking miners (Ridge 1918, p. 63), often participating in protest parades by carrying signs that “framed the strike as a struggle not over mining conditions but the wellbeing of miners’ households” (LaVigne 2016, p. 95). David LaVigne concludes in “Rebel Girls: Women in the Mesabi Iron Range Strike of 1916” that such actions “shamed strikebreakers...heartened striking miners to carry on the fight [and] increased union membership and aided fund-raising” (LaVigne 2016, p. 95). The women rebels’ actions thus extended the community of laborers who “dream[ed]...of a world over-thrown” (Ridge 1918, p. 63). Thus, when Ridge’s poem “A Toast” refers to the “Brotherhood not understood” (p. 63), she is not referring to a gender-specific “brotherhood,” but rather a collective of men and women committed to revolutionary activity.

Ridge depicts these revolutionaries with a Blakean re-visioning of martyrdom, since her martyrs are not those “anointed of heaven”; instead, her martyrs are anointed by “Hell”—by the revolutionary spirit that sought to overthrow the systems that lead to the soldiers’ deaths and the workers’ endless toil. When “A Toast” is considered alongside “Fuel” and “The Legion of Iron,” we see a dialogue in which one poem continually remakes the next, particularly with respect to the phrases “common men” and “standing apart.” Much like the heterophonic lines toward the end of “The Song of Iron,” these three poems are meant to interact with each other and collectively sing a song of communion and communal action in which workers are called to organize together for their own liberation.

Put in the context of local and international labor movements, a global war, and suppressive laws at home, *The Ghetto and Other Poems* can be understood as a site for Ridge to express her commitment to working-class struggle against oppression. Her “Labor” poems in particular respond to her adopted nation’s call during wartime, and her response does not disappoint. A revolutionary spirit—anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist—moves through this section of poems. Nowhere is this truer than in the first two lines of her “Dedication,” where she collapses the boundary between the voice of her speaker and her own voice as a poet: “I would be a torch unto your hand / A lamp unto your forehead, Labor” (Ridge 1918, p. 48). Some might argue that she overstates the importance of poetry to working class struggle when she conflates her words with a miner’s torch or head lamp, but they would be wrong. Poetry in many forms, including work song, has long been integral to working-class lives and movements, and *The Ghetto and Other Poems* suggests that poetry of the avant-garde also has a place in working-class struggle and resistance. “The Song of Iron” does not “reveal...a poet who...has lost contact with the earth, with the ‘common men apart’” (Tobin 2004, p. 80); rather, “The Song of Iron,” in addition to other “Labor” poems, are grounded in images of working-class labor and struggle and in discussions of the “common man’s” resistance and power. Her message of the importance of community and collective action is also beautifully rendered through her attention to sound and experimentation with punctuation.

Like other modernist poets, Ridge was interested in making sense of the significant changes brought on by the violence of the modern era; however, her view of historical change, which is explored throughout *The Ghetto and Other Poems* overall, knows that a clean break from traditions and their symbolic systems is both impossible and ahistorical. In the struggle for revolution, it is especially important to maintain a sense of class consciousness that builds and learns from past struggle and movements. However, Ridge knew early on that it might take time for her poetic and political vision to be appreciated and to materialize, which she makes clear in the next two lines of her “Dedication” poem. The entire first stanza reads:

I would be a torch unto your hand,
A lamp upon your forehead, Labor,
In the wild darkness before the Dawn
That I shall never see...(Ridge 1918, p. 48)

Ridge understood that she might not see the “Dawn” of a new, liberated day, but that it would be “Better” for her to have participated in the “last grand charge...Scattering a brief fire about [our] feet” than to have not struggled at all, only to become a “taper forgotten in the dawn” (p. 48). Not participating in the revolutionary struggle—through her art, editorship, or political action—would be akin to “[b]urning out the wick” (p. 48). Her anarcho-libertarianism—and her refusal to be pinned down easily—allowed her to unapologetically speak to two audiences: the avant-garde poetry circles of which she was a key player and the labor/grassroots activist circles of which she was an organizer and participant. Ridge trusted that her

agitating, discordant, revelatory words and ideas would burn, even if faintly over half a century, to eventually fan the flames of discontent within working-class struggle, art, and scholarship. It is tempting to conclude that Ridge was ahead of her time with her early publications, but to do so would be inaccurate. Ridge was precisely of her time, a visionary capable of reading her historical moment and responding to it with resonant poems that invited her readers to discern how they, too, might be of service to the revolutionary ideal.

Author Bio:

Michelle B. Gaffey began her professional career as a high school and middle school English teacher, though she has been teaching composition and literature at the college level for over two decades. A multiple award-winning educator, she has co-developed various integrative learning experiences, including service-learning projects (most notably, her “Community Listening Project”); an undergraduate critical reading course (Afrofuturist Coming-of-Age Stories); and an interdisciplinary, action-learning course (Women Versus Sweatshops). Michelle was a first-generation college student, originally from northern Appalachia. Her working-class roots are at the heart of her scholarship, pedagogy, and activism. She currently lives with her family in Virginia.

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