

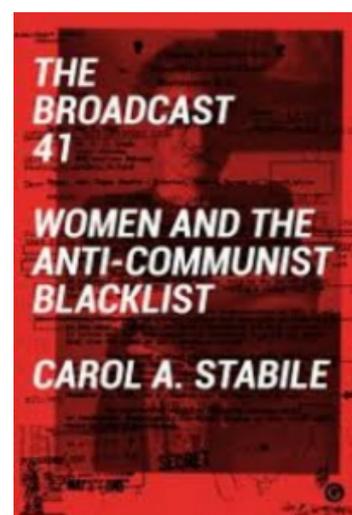
Book Review: The Broadcast 41: Women and the Anti-Communist Blacklist by Carol A. Stabile

In The Broadcast 41: Women and the Anti-Communist Blacklist, Carol A. Stabile explores the 41 women working in US television and radio who were blacklisted during the 1950s 'Red Scare', showing how the removal of these progressives from the media continues to reverberate into the twenty-first century. This is a fascinating and well-researched study, finds Max Lewontin, that contributes to the ongoing effort to recover the voices of women, immigrants and people of colour in the history of broadcasting and challenge the amnesia surrounding the impact of the anti-communist blacklist.

The Broadcast 41: Women and the Anti-Communist Blacklist. Carol A. Stabile. Goldsmiths Press. 2018.

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In September 1950, the musician and actress Hazel Scott sat before members of the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in Washington. 'I do not claim that the members of the entertainment world are holier, purer, more patriotic than any other group of citizens. We probably have our quota of dissidents, our quota of Communists, bigots, Fascists,' she [told](#) the committee, which included future US President Richard Nixon. As the host of the variety show, *The Hazel Scott Show*, which had begun airing in July on the DuMont television network, Scott had appeared voluntarily before HUAC in an effort to challenge what she [called](#) 'profiteers in patriotism': anti-communists – including three former FBI agents – who had produced *Red Channels*, a slim book purporting to detail 'Communist influence' across radio and TV. Ignoring Scott's defiant statement against 'the smear artist with a spray gun' that had made her one of four black women and 41 progressive women named in *Red Channels*, DuMont cancelled *The Hazel Scott Show* only a week after she testified before HUAC.



In her fascinating, well-researched new book *The Broadcast 41: Women and the Anti-Communist Blacklist*, Carol A. Stabile argues that the removal of Scott and other progressive women from radio and the burgeoning medium of television continues to reverberate into the twenty-first century. While American conservative commentators nostalgically point to a bygone era of 'family values' symbolised by 1950s TV shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, Stabile argues, this is instead the deliberate result of the aggressive removal of progressive voices, especially those of women and people of colour, from the American airwaves. 'This war', Stabile writes, 'was initiated by conservatives in the United States who called themselves anti-communists but who were arch-white supremacists, defenders of segregation and sexism, vehemently opposed to immigration' (xxii).

Some of the women whose lives and activism are detailed in *The Broadcast 41*, such as the writers Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker, singer and actress Lena Horne and actress Judy Holliday, are better known. But others, such as Scott, the concert pianist Ray Lev, radio commentator Lisa Sergio and actress Madeline Lee, are far less so, especially as pioneers of radio and TV. *The Broadcast 41* focuses on two intertwined stories: that of the 41 women named in *Red Channels* who had forged successful careers in broadcasting, particularly in New York City, in the 1930s and 1940s, and that of the anti-communist campaign, launched by three former FBI agents who called themselves the American Business Consultants, to remove them from the nascent medium of TV.



Image Credit: Portrait of Lena Horne, New York, between 1946 and 1948 ([William P. Gottlieb/Library of Congress/No Known Copyright Restrictions](#))

Stabile, a Professor of women's, gender and sexuality studies at the University of Oregon, makes a compelling case that this generation of women 'who lived in question marks' and scrutinised the world around them were shaped not only by their gender, but also by issues of race, class and migration (40). The sections woven throughout the book on representations of immigrant and diasporic voices in American broadcasting, such as the Jewish working-class immigrants of Gertrude Berg's radio and TV series *The Goldbergs*, and the Trinidad-born Scott as host of her own variety show, are particularly intriguing. Of Scott, Stabile writes, the American-born Horne told *Ebony* magazine she had taught her 'a new sense of pride' in being black, but also that Scott 'had a superiority that can be infuriating to an American Negro' because as someone from the West Indies, 'no one ever taught the Negroes they were inferior' (49). While not the primary focus of Stabile's book, this is an interesting counterpart to a growing body of scholarship exploring the role of Caribbean migrants as writers, artists and activists in diasporic communities in locations as disparate as [Harlem](#), [Boston](#) and [Cuba](#).

Using a wealth of FBI records and other government and archival sources, including [newly requested](#) FBI files, the book's middle chapters, Three, Four and Five, detail the campaign of surveillance, harassment and intimidation that shadowed this diverse group of 'redacted women'. This campaign was rooted in what Stabile terms 'G-Man masculinity', which privileged a white, male, native-born and Christian viewpoint and labelled those it saw as not fitting this mould as suspicious and potentially subversive. G-Man masculinity was also accompanied by homophobia, which labelled progressive men as 'cream-puffs' (76), while the former FBI agents of the American Business Consultants used knowledge of informants' sexualities to pressure them to inform on progressives (117). Stabile argues that the xenophobic, misogynistic culture of the FBI itself, as run for nearly five decades by director J. Edgar Hoover, played a key role in creating this norm of G-Man masculinity. Chapter Three, which examines the role of the FBI's public relations efforts – including books and articles written under Hoover's byline for popular magazines, police procedural TV shows such as *This is Your FBI* and ongoing relationships with 'friendly journalists', such as gossip columnists Igor Cassini and Hedda Hopper – is particularly engaging. It offers a close look at what forces underlay the repression of progressive voices in broadcasting.

One slight critique, however, concerns a mention of the Bureau's surveillance efforts prior to Hoover's ascendance (85-86). Drawing on William Maxwell's *FB Eyes*, the book does not make it clear that, despite its history of misogyny and racism, the Bureau of Investigation (the FBI's predecessor) and other government agencies employed [black agents and informants](#) during World War I as they sought to link black activists with pro-Germanism and subsequently Bolshevism (filmmaker and musician Boots Riley [recently offered](#) a similar critique of Spike Lee's film *Black KKKlansman*). While the authorship of the FBI's 1919 publication *Radicalism and Sedition Among the Negroes as Reflected in their Publications* has [been disputed](#) by scholars, one potential influence is Walter Loving, an African American agent in the War Department's Military Intelligence Branch who assembled a series of detailed reports on black activists and publications during and after World War I. In late 1918, Loving focused particularly on [journalist Ida B. Wells](#) – who once lived upstairs from the family of Broadcast 41 member Vera Caspary in Chicago. He urged 'especial attention' be [paid to](#) Wells' application for a passport to travel to Paris to protest racial conditions in the US following the end of World War I. 'I believe she is considered by all of the Intelligence officers as one of the most dangerous negro agitators,' a BI official subsequently wrote to the State Department in January 1919.

Several sections of the book point to links between the repressive 'G-Man masculinity' of the blacklist and the present. Nostalgic messages offered by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s and Donald Trump today offering to return America to a mythic past, Stabile argues, draw on anti-communist narratives achieved through the suppression of dissenting voices. Trump, for example, was mentored by Roy Cohn, who served as Senator Joseph McCarthy's chief counsel and represented the anti-communist group AWARE in a successful libel suit filed by radio personality John Henry Faulk regarding his listing in *Red Channels* (138).

The final chapter, 'Red Lassie', offers a 'counterfactual history' of television in the wake of the blacklist. Using a wealth of unproduced scripts, projects and lesser-known stories written and collected by Broadcast 41 members such as writers Caspary, Shirley Graham and actress and singer Fredi Washington, this provides a compelling look at what the future of broadcasting in the year 1960 could have looked like if these women's voices were not deliberately silenced. In the book's conclusion, Stabile links this history – so named because several blacklisted writers ironically found a voice for their humanitarian perspectives on the children's show *Lassie* – with contemporary US TV shows created by and starring women and people of colour, including *Insecure*, *Atlanta* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*.

The Broadcast 41 offers an insightful, persuasive history of the American conservative movement that united to suppress the voices of progressive women in broadcasting, and how their perspectives continue to remain relevant today. Stabile's frequent connections between the environment of the 1950s and contemporary US politics – such as the #MeToo movement and the FBI's targeting of ['black identity extremists'](#) – may offer a way into this lesser-known history for a broad audience of readers. This ongoing effort to recover the voices of women, immigrants and people of colour in broadcasting offers a vibrant alternative to what she terms the continuing 'historical amnesia' surrounding the anti-communist blacklist.

Max Lewontin is a master's student in history at King's College London. His research interests include black internationalism, print culture, transnational history and the history of surveillance. [Read more by Max Lewontin.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.