

Episode 5: Marvel Cooke, a journalist for working people

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MARVEL COOKE (ep 5) CREDITS:

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Special thanks: WUNC for recording help, Kathryn Hunter-Williams for her brilliant acting skills!

MARVEL COOKE (ep 5) LINKS:

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[Edges of Time, The Life and Times of the Marvelous Marvel Cooke](#), forthcoming at Playmakers Repertory Theater in Chapel Hill, NC

[Jacqueline E. Lawton, playwright](#)

[Kathryn Hunter-Williams](#), UNC department of dramatic art

[Marvel Cooke interview and transcript](#) from the Washington Press Club Foundation

[Mariame Kaba, @prisonculture on Twitter](#)

[Marvel Cooke obituary, L.A. Times](#) (2000)

[“Bronx Slave Market” series PDFs](#) (1950) from NYU’s Undercover Reporting page

[McCarthy senate hearing transcripts](#) (1953)

[Raising Her Voice: African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History](#), by Rodger Streitmatter (1994)

[Carla Murphy](#), editor (we love you!)

[Echoing Ida](#), a Forward Together community of Black women and nonbinary writers

[The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity](#), by Lewis Raven Wallace (University of Chicago Press, 2019; available now!)

[View from Somewhere Tour Details](#)

MUSIC (in order of appearance):

- **Opus 9-3** by Podington Bear
- **Tango Mécanique** (The View from Somewhere Theme Song) by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky
- *Chill Percussion + Bass* by Dogbotic, Original Music for *The View from Somewhere*

- **Afterglow** by Podington Bear
- **Bliss** by Podington Bear
- Saratoga Swing by Ellington
- *Variation Two, Bass + Accordion by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **LA** by Podington Bear
- **Sensitive** by Podington Bear
- *Accordion Vamp by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*
- **In My Head** by Podington Bear
- *Chill Vibe + Snap by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

Episode 5, Marvel Cooke TRANSCRIPT:

Ramona Martinez: This is the View from Somewhere, a podcast about journalism with a purpose—I'm Ramona Martinez, the producer. This podcast is serialized, so if like what you hear today, go back and listen from the start.

An urgent note before you dive in: We're currently fundraising to get to the end of our season, and we need YOU to chip in. Check out View from somewhere dot com to make a donation—you can even get a gorgeous poster of Marvel Cooke or Ida B. Wells created by our in-house artist, Billy Dee. And, we have events in L.A. on December 7 and Oakland on December 11—the details are on view from somewhere dot com.

MUSIC: *Opus 9-3 by Podington Bear*

Lewis Raven Wallace: Marvel Cooke was at home in New York when she got the call. The United States Senate Subcommittee on Investigations, chaired by Senator Joseph McCarthy—yeah, that guy— wanted her to testify.

Marvel Cooke (played by Kathryn Hunter-Williams): I remember spending that weekend getting as beautiful as I know how to get, getting a very conservative, but beautiful dress out to wear. I felt so sorry for my husband. Here he is, married to this girl who looked like she was going to be a society somebody, and she gets herself in all this mess.

LEWIS: She was a society lady, in a way. She was the fair-skinned daughter of radical Black socialists from Mankato, Minnesota. She was a Communist, and an investigative journalist. She was a close friend of Paul Robeson, and had worked for W.E.B. Dubois. Marvel Cooke was a-MAY-zing. The McCarthy hearings, as you might remember, eventually became infamous for targeting journalists and entertainers, accusing them of Communist ties...

Joseph McCarthy clip: “Unless we make sure that there’s no infiltration of our government, then just as certain as you sit there, in the period of our lives, you will see a red world.”

LEWIS: That fall of 1953, she showed up dressed to the nines to talk before the all-white, all-male senate committee...she took the fifth—though she deigned to answer a couple of questions.

Cooke: He said, "Where were you born?" and I said, "Oh, I was born in Minnesota, across the St. Croix River from where Senator McCarthy comes, but we're not all the same out that way." It just came out like that. And the place just howled, you know. (laughter)

THEME MUSIC: *Tango Mécanique (The View from Somewhere Theme Song)* by Kirk Pearson and Julian Korzeniowsky

LEWIS: So that’s Marvel Cooke, the subject of our episode today. And this is the View from Somewhere, a podcast about journalism with a purpose, I’m Lewis Raven Wallace. We recover the stories of marginalized journalists, who have pushed back on mainstream “objectivity” and created their own ways of telling true stories.

On the last episode, we heard about Sandy Nelson, a lesbian socialist who waged a seven-year legal battle for the right of journalists to participate in protest. And we learned about the first journalist I could find who lost his job for supposedly lacking “objectivity.” Like Marvel Cooke, both of them were also labor organizers...

So I’ve been learning that “objectivity” has been weaponized against dissenting voices: Labor activists, women, queer people, people of color. And it makes me think about *all* the journalists whose careers were cut short, and whose work never quite made it out to the rest of us in the world. Not just because of objectivity, but because of oppression in general—objectivity has just been a tool of that oppression. But it’s a subtle one, because it gives this rational, professional line of reasoning for excluding people.

Now I’m trying to find my people, the journalists who’ve been telling the stories that needed to be told whether or not they could access official channels. And—guess what—I’m not the only one on this search.

MUSIC: *Chill Percussion + Bass by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

JACQUELINE E. LAWTON: I’m particularly interested in what black journalist are saying, how they are covering what is happening in our country right now....

LEWIS: Jacqueline E. Lawton is an assistant professor in dramatic art at University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and a member of the PlayMakers Repertory Company.

JACQUELINE: And so I literally googled ‘black woman journalist,’ and a lot of different people came up, but then I saw Marvel Cooke, and I had never heard of her before.

LEWIS: She’s writing a play called Edges of Time—a one-woman show all about Marvel Cooke. The actor, Kathryn Hunter-Williams, is reading Cooke’s lines in this episode.

Lawton was scandalized that she hadn’t heard of Cooke...Cooke organized the first black newspaper guild in the country, stood up to Joseph McCarthy, and did some groundbreaking investigative reporting. She lived from 1901 to the year 2000—BUT most people don’t know who she is. After the McCarthy hearings in 1953, she never worked in journalism again.

Jacqueline: I started the play in 1963 with Birmingham Bombing. The loss of those four girls. When I read the newspaper articles during that time, it covers facts and details. And it talks about how the police are wanting order, they don’t want protests in the streets, they don’t want a public outcry.

MUSIC: *Afterglow* by Podington Bear

Jacqueline: And yet four young girls are killed in an act of racial violence...what the Black community needs is justice, not order first, and I think about how Marvel would’ve covered that story. We would’ve known about those four little girls, we would have known about their family, we would have known about the heartbreak of their community, and we would have understood why they were taking to the streets...And then thinking that she stopped writing in the late 1950s, that meant we didn’t have her voice to cover what was going on in our country.>>

LEWIS: / learned about Cooke in a conversation with Mariame Kaba, @prisonculture on Twitter, who does a lot of work resurrecting the histories of other important Black women. I want to name Mariame here because so many Black women’s labor and ideas have gone into pretty much ANY good work I’m doing now, as a white trans person, and her work uplifting other Black women is really amazing...

MUSIC: *Bliss* by Podington Bear

LEWIS: So. Back to our heroine...Marvel Cooke in the early 1900s is living in Mankato, Minnesota...

Jacqueline: Father was a pullman porter, and her mom was a teacher and a housekeeper. And so they meet on the train, and they end up falling in love, they move to Minnesota. And then from there we see a little bit of Marvel’s life as a child, being the only Black family in this middle class white community in Minnesota, Minneapolis.

LEWIS: She was the first black girl to go to her high school and one of the only black women at the University of Minnesota. After she finished college in 1925 she went to New York, and was basically like, *seeya Minnesota!*

MUSIC: *Saratoga Swing by Duke Ellington*

Cooke: And when I saw Harlem, I thought it was the most beautiful place in the world to live, you know. Mmmhm. [Laughter.] I thought, "This is where I want to be."

LEWIS: She started out at W.E.B. DuBois' paper, the Crisis, the official paper of the NAACP—DuBois had been a suitor of her mother's long ago, that's a whole other story. Point being she found herself right at the center of Black America, the Harlem Renaissance, working and hanging out with hugely influential people like DuBois and Richard Wright. After the Crisis she ended up getting a job at the mainstream Black paper for Harlem, the Amsterdam news in the early 1930s. And that was where she started both her journalism and her labor organizing.

Cooke: The women's editor at the Amsterdam News was a college graduate. I think she went to Hunter. But I've never known anyone dumber. Not everybody who graduates from college is bright. Oh, I hated that job. But I wanted to stay in New York.

LEWIS: She stuck it out, doing menial tasks under the women's editor, whom she said couldn't write for shit. One day she was randomly tasked with writing some copy for the paper, and a more senior editor took notice.

Cooke: I wrote this filler, and he said, "You wrote that?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You shouldn't be here as secretary. You should be writing."

MUSIC: *Variation Two, Bass + Accordion by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

LEWIS: So she started to get some writing assignments. But she was also frustrated that the paper didn't seem to be doing much for the community.

Cooke: I grew up feeling that one must do something for our people, you know, join a crusade. I grew up in a crusading family, and here I found that here's a Black paper just following the dictates of society, not making any impression at all, not addressing the problems that faced people in this area. I wasn't happy about it. It was just a paycheck for me.

LEWIS: It was just a paycheck, and the paycheck wasn't even good. And right around this time, she learned about a new union for journalists—people who delivered papers had organized unions before, but not the writers.

Cooke: I was considered a little rebellious. "Tend to your work," I was told. So I did tend to my work. It was during this period that we got organized in the Newspaper Guild.

MUSIC: *LA by Podington Bear*

LEWIS: The Newspaper Guild was founded in New York in 1934.

Cooke: We formed a unit of the Newspaper Guild in my apartment—I had a large apartment then. We realized that we should ask the owners of the paper for recognition of the Guild. That's all we were going to ask.

LW: And just asking for recognition led to a lock out, followed by a long strike. Suddenly Cooke was out picketing, getting arrested...

[Siren sounds]

Cooke: It was not ladylike to don picket signs and march up and down. It thrilled me. I never minded getting out there on the picket line, and I enjoyed going to jail, even though I knew that the women's editor shivered at the thought.

LEWIS: Eventually, the owner gave in, sold the paper and the employees got a big raise from the new boss when they were rehired. It was one of the first times in history when black workers had won their demands in a strike, and it might have been the first journalists' strike ever.

Now almost nine decades later, we see journalists trying to unionize all over again—standing up to a whole new kind of consolidation and exploitation in digital media. I think about how Cooke's skills as an organizer were so important to journalism back then...and how different journalism would be now, if organizers and activists hadn't been pushed out so many times over...

Cooke went on to a number of other firsts—she eventually left the Amsterdam News to become the first woman reporter at another Black paper in New York, the People's Voice. And then later, became the first Black woman to work at a mainstream leftist white paper, the Daily Compass, in 1949. That was where she revisited a story she'd worked on in the 30s, with activist Ella Baker...

Jacqueline: Marvel Cooke's most well known feature is about the Bronx slave market, and it covers black women who worked as housekeepers. They were called the paper bag brigade, because they carried their work clothes in paper bags, and stood along the street corners in various places in New York, and white women would hire them for housekeeping for the day. And so she went underground, undercover basically and worked as a housekeeper and then told the story in a six-part series.

LEWIS: The stories were passionate and intense...

MUSIC: *Sensitive by Podington Bear*

Cooke: “I was a slave.”

LW: She wrote that slave markets grew during each economic downturn.

Cooke: “Twice I was hired by the hour at less than the wage asked by the women of the market. Both times I went home mad—mad for all the Negro women down through the ages who have been lashed by the stinging whip of economic oppression. Once I was approached by a predatory male who made unseemly and unmistakable advances. And I was mad all over again.”

LEWIS: She experienced being cheated, harassed, lied to...alongside other Black women who were going through that *every day* to survive.

Cooke: “Woolworth’s on 170th St. was beginning to feel like home to me. It seemed natural to be standing there with my sister slaves, all of us with paper bags, containing our work clothes, under our arms. I recognized many of the people who passed. I no longer felt ‘new.’ But I was not at peace. Hundreds of years of history weighed upon me. I was the slave traded for two truck horses on a Memphis street corner in 1849. I was the slave trading my brawn for a pittance on a Bronx street corner in 1949. As I stood there waiting to be bought, I lived through a century of indignity.”

LEWIS: At the end of the series she recommended a bunch of reforms, some of which were actually implemented by the city of New York.

Jacqueline: And so I read that series, and I’m thinking. What else could we have learned about our community, not just injustices that have happened, the hardship that happened, but also real celebrations of our community, real achievements of our community, through her voice.

LEWIS: What stories didn’t we hear because Marvel Cooke didn’t stay in journalism?

MUSIC: *Accordion Vamp by Dogbotic, Original Music for The View from Somewhere*

LW: The Daily Compass ran out of money and shut down in 1952. And then in 1953, Cooke and many of the other employees of the Compass were called before McCarthy’s senate committee. He was going after really anyone who might be affiliated with communism, and it had created an environment of fear, blacklisting, people ratting each other out...Jacqueline Lawton and I both took notice, because Cooke was being asked to snitch.

Jacqueline: Mostly she plead the fifth, and plead the fifth with much attitude and conviction...

Cooke: By this time, I was pretty calm about McCarthy. I thought he was a little sleaze ball, you know, and I felt so superior to him.

LEWIS: She didn't snitch. But also, she wasn't working in journalism anymore. And the Compass was the last time she would work in journalism—anyone affiliated with the paper had a hard time finding work, but especially her, as a Black woman in the 1950s already facing legal segregation and discrimination.

Jacqueline: And also that she was writing at a time, she was a journalist at a time when newspapers were the way we were getting our news, although in the 50s television was slowly making its way in, but as a Black woman she would not be on television. And so as the news was transitioning from print to TV, just as politically she was being, you know her politics were being weaponized against her, there was no room for her in print or in television as a Black woman, and that's another reason that calls me to write about her and her story.

LEWIS: So Cooke organized one of the first ever strikes of editorial workers. Was the first Black woman in a big white paper in New York City. Stood up to Joseph McCarthy. And then was almost erased from history. Which I find...upsetting.

Carla Murphy: Yeah. Um. Sorry, listen deep sigh, 'cause, I've been a journalist since at least or officially since 2005 and this conversation has been consistent.

Lewis: This is Carla Murphy, the editorial consultant for this episode of the podcast...she's a freelance journalist based in New York...

Carla: So I'm not surprised but because you know, I think she's me in an earlier time and I am bothered that I don't, that I've never heard of her, that I don't know her story that I don't know her contributions which are massive. It makes it difficult to do this work knowing that it's kind of like walking into a room and knowing that there are like literally like I don't know five hundred silent people who are also walking into that room with you but they're completely erased and gone. And that will probably happen to you too and that will probably happen to tons of other journalists of color to other marginalized journalists that are out there. We get into this work to make a difference. And then when you get into the work you realize that you realize your power position very keenly and that calls into question, well can I help this particular community make decisions around criminal justice reform for example, if I don't have any power, if I'm not going to be listened to.

Lewis: What do you do, Carla to kind of cope with or just be with that reality of like every time you walk into a room in the journalism world you you're carrying with you all these erased histories? How do you kind of honor that or hold that?

Carla: Uh, drink a lot. No I'm kidding. [laughter]

Lewis: Therapy you know? Get a good therapist?

Carla: And you know you have to laugh to like, and laughter is a way to deal with it right, cause it's kind of weighty, and it's not on you to solve as the individual quite frankly right. You can only solve these things together collectively. So I guess, I'll say this, how do I cope? I think that's a long answer that definitely includes therapy....I think I learned to cope by stepping away from journalism for a bit. Quite frankly. I learned self care by being around writers but not necessarily journalists. I think especially if you're a writer who does any kind of social justice coverage, and if you come from a marginalized community, I think that the support of the public of say the activated community is super super important. I think that you need the community to be a counterweight quite frankly to newsroom politics.

Lewis: Yeah. So like tap into the community that you do have outside of the newsroom...

Carla: Yeah definitely. And get them to show their power because I think newsrooms react. They do. Newsrooms are quite reactive and they do react to people power.

THEME/TRANSITION

LEWIS: People power. Thanks for that, Carla. That's what Marvel Cooke was trying to build—for herself and other journalists, for herself and other Black women. She worked with Civil Rights legend Ella Baker in the 30s...in the 70s, she organized with the support committee for Angela Davis.

There's no full-length biography of her. Just an oral history, recorded in 1989 by a journalist named Kathleen Currie, for the Washington Press Club Foundation. Reading the transcripts, I was intrigued, but also irritated to come across this part where Currie asks Cooke whether or not she could be objective—because she was a communist.

Cooke: I think it made me a better reporter, because I was interested in the conditions under which people had to work and live. That would come through in the things I would write.

LEWIS: The interviewer pushed back, almost condescending. “There’s a kind of vaunted rule of journalism that journalists are objective,” she says in the transcript. “That’s right,” Cooke replies. “That’s right.” “Did you ever have problems being objective on any of these stories?” the interviewer asked.

Cooke: “No. I think some editors had problems with me reporting things as I saw them.”

THEME MUSIC

LEWIS: Jacqueline Lawton’s play about Marvel Cooke, *Edges of Time*, will be running from April 29th to May 3rd of 2020, at Playmakers repertory company in Chapel Hill. That’s at Playmakersrep.org. A very special thanks to Kathryn Hunter-Williams, who will play Marvel Cooke and appeared as her on this episode.

LEWIS: Next time on the View from Somewhere...

Laura Palmer:...I know in my bones that I went to Vietnam with all the answers, and I left proud of ability to understand the questions, to realize that...although my basic opposition to the war never changed, I could see how many shades of grey there were.

LEWIS: Two reporters who were also anti-war activists tell their stories of the Vietnam era. If you want to learn more about Marvel Cooke and the first journalism union, check out my book the View from Somewhere from the University of Chicago Press. Also, I really hope to see you at my upcoming events in L.A. and the Bay Area—those details are on our website, viewfromsomewhere dot com.

A big thanks to Carla Murphy, our editorial consultant...who loves AIR QUOTES almost as much as I do...

Carla: I think that a lot of mainstream journalists assume that if you're a Black woman, and you're covering quote unquote black topics, then that means you're quote unquote too close, to be quote unquote objective, I'm so sorry for all the air quotes, but there's just tons of problems with all that. [laughs]

LEWIS: And, remember that smart human from episode one who said "objectivity is the ideology of the status quo"? That's Ramona Martinez. The producer behind all of this. Thank you Ramona, you're so amazing!

Ramona:

Awwww, thank you Lewis. Our theme music is composed by Dogbotic, with additional music by Podington Bear. Our logo is by Billy Dee, and Roxana Bendezu of Migrant Roots Media runs our social media. All that is funded in part by our wonderful Kickstarter supporters, and by YOU!

If you'd like to help the View from Somewhere make it to the end of our season, go to View from Somewhere dot com and click on the donate button. Any amount helps, and thank you gifts include Billy Dee's beautiful Marvel Cooke and Ida B. Wells posters, as well as signed copies of the book. You can also give us a review and some stars in the iTunes store. Talk to you in a couple weeks!

Marvel Cooke is like the forgotten sea...who forgets an entire sea?