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Book Reviews

LOOKING LEFT OF KARL MARX TO (RE)CLAIM A PIONEER OF RADICAL BLACK, ANTI-RACIST, ANTI-IMPERIALIST, TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM

Carole Boyce Davies

Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007, xxvii + 311 pp., ISBN 13-978-0-8223-4096-6

Some five years ago, I worked for a small African women's non-governmental, non-profit organization in London. One of my colleagues came to work early one Monday morning and reported that *the* most exciting part of her visit to Karl Marx's grave the previous weekend, had been the discovery that: 'A black woman was buried right next to him!' We all looked up from our work: 'Who was she?' 'Where was she from?' 'How did she come to be buried there?' 'Why had we not heard of her before and why did none of us know that she occupied such an auspicious burial place?'

It transpired that a few of us *had* heard of Claudia Jones (1915–64), but all we knew about her was that she had been the founder of the now world renowned Notting Hill (London) Carnival. None of us knew of her literal burial position to the left of Marx's grave, nor of her life as a radical, feminist theorist and activist, whose ideological position was also to the left of Marx. In *Left of Karl Marx*, Carole Boyce Davies undertakes the long-overdue and monumental task of restoring Claudia Jones to her rightful place within US, UK and Caribbean left politics, and within anti-racist, anti-imperialist and feminist theorizing and activism dating back to the 1940s.

Boyce Davies's stated aim in this book is to restore Claudia Jones, as a 'radical black female subject', whose political life and work was of singular importance, to the 'US political consciousness' from which she had been literally and figuratively 'deported' during the McCarthy era (p. 2). Boyce Davies also aims to locate Jones as a pioneering theorist and activist within current feminist discourse, who was one of the earliest advocates and practitioners of transnational feminism. *Left of Karl Marx* reads as a tribute to the considerable, but previously overlooked, legacy of Claudia Jones.

In the first two chapters, Boyce Davies documents Claudia Jones's political life and work as a workers' rights, women's rights and anti-imperialist activist and journalist. Chapter 3 comprises an analysis of the body of poetry written by Jones while she was incarcerated by the US government; while Chapter 4 details Jones's eventual deportation from the US and her arrival in the UK, where she continued

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to play a high profile role in black/African Caribbean diasporic politics and cultural life. The penultimate chapter of the book takes a close look at *the* contribution for which Jones is most frequently remembered: the founding of the Notting Hill Carnival. The book concludes with a juxtaposition of Jones's autobiographical writings, in which she defined her political work as 'peace work', and the mountain of intelligence gathered by the FBI in its case against Jones, in which her political work was presented as un-American 'ideological criminality' (p. 197).

Left of Karl Marx amply and admirably addresses all of the 'Who?', 'What?' and 'When?' questions that my colleagues and I posed when we initially learned of the location of Claudia Jones's burial place. Going far beyond this, however, what Boyce Davies offers to her readers with this book, is a masterful piece of scholarship, made accessible by the author's skilful presentation of facts, narrative and analysis.

Three aspects of Boyce Davies's analysis in *Left of Karl Marx* struck me as particularly relevant and important for contemporary feminist theorizing and activism: intersectionality; the use of creative writing to resist state-led oppression and discrimination; and transnational feminism. The issue of intersectionality is foregrounded first in the choice of subject: as a Marxist-Leninist black woman, born in the Caribbean and living and working in the US during the McCarthy years, Claudia Jones physically embodied a number of intersections, including 'race', class, gender and imperialism (p. 30). Boyce Davies's analysis brings to the fore the ways in which Jones's experiential knowledge of the negative effects of these intersections in 1940s America was a key motivation for Jones's political and ideological stance, to the left of Karl Marx. Boyce Davies argues that, at 'the core' of Jones's 'left-of-Karl-Marx' position (p. 51) was her unwillingness to reduce everything to the economic. Jones understood, experientially and politically, that what was 'outside of (a Marxist) analysis' (gender and 'race', for example) was central to any serious appreciation of the crippling effects of 'the superexploitation of the black woman' (p. 2). In effect, Jones was one of the earliest to recognize and articulate how and why the intersections of 'race', class and gender meant that black women in America laboured under a specific type of 'superexploitation'. As an avowed communist, Jones remained faithful to the party line in her writings; but as Boyce Davies explains, she also brought a 'black nationalist' perspective to bear on her work by addressing issues that affected the African-American community exclusively and disproportionately, such as the Jim Crow laws (p. 77).

Left of Karl Marx acquaints the reader with how Jones 'practiced her activism and communicated her positions through journalism' (p. 69). Jones published a weekly Sunday column titled 'Half the World' throughout the 1950s, which aimed to reach and organize a female audience and also to give 'the woman question' a higher profile within the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). Boyce Davies argues that this column's logic, as devised by Jones, was a materialist-feminist one, according to which women's position (as half the world's population) should be matched in their access to resources and in the ways in which they are represented and identified. However, Jones was also very clear that gender could not and should not be viewed as *the* primary basis on which women suffered discrimination and patriarchal subordination. Instead, she asserted that 'the triply-oppressed status of the Negro woman is a barometer of the status of all women, and . . . the fight for the full, economic, political and social equality of the Negro woman is in the vital self-interest of the white workers, in the vital interest of the fight to realize equality for all women' (p. 40).

In highlighting this aspect of Jones's work, Boyce Davies ensures that feminists today are able to (re)claim one of our earliest and most insightful socialist feminist theorists and activists. Jones's work is an invaluable resource for those engaged in the ongoing debates about how not only to describe and understand the ways in which intersectionalities operate to marginalize women and deny them their rights, but also ultimately how to work towards change.

A second key aspect of Boyce Davies's analysis highlights the ways in which Claudia Jones also embodied resistance to the normative and normalizing tendencies of an oppressive state machinery. The two middle chapters of the book consider in detail the convoluted strategies and twisted fabrications used by the American state to bring communists like Claudia Jones to trial; as well as the resistance offered by such activists. Boyce Davies frames the poetry written by Jones during her four periods of incarceration in the US as a form of 'prison blues, expressing both pain and resistance' (p. 102). As a creative form of resistance, prison blues allows the incarcerated subject to express and assert their humanity in conditions that are designed to have exactly the opposite effect (p. 104). Boyce Davies's approach here gives the reader some further insights into the complex dimensions of Claudia Jones's character and skills, since it introduces us to her creativity. We also get to understand how Jones deployed that creativity during one of the most difficult periods in her life: as a protective shield, but also as a tool for continued struggle and resistance.

In Chapter 2, Boyce Davies asserts that the FBI used Jones's work as a journalist as the evidence for her 'arrest, trial, imprisonment and deportation' (p. 71). As Boyce Davies argues, Jones's writings were purposefully misinterpreted and analysed in biased ways, so as to prove Jones's 'ideological criminality' (p. 197). The inclusion of Jones's prison writings shows how crucial writing was to her political life, and how effectively she was able to wield her pen to political ends in both states of freedom and incarceration. Once again, Claudia Jones (re)emerges as a pioneer: this time in the long tradition of using creative writing as a vessel for women's and feminist politics and activism and as a creative tool of self-affirmation and resistance.

The third aspect of Boyce Davies's analysis that is particularly noteworthy here is framed by an 'African diaspora framework that is internationalist in orientation' (p. 5), which Boyce Davies uses to capture Jones as a radical black female subject, whose body and politics traversed and connected a number of geographical locations. The author locates Jones as a woman with 'roots' in the Caribbean (Jones was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1915), but also as a woman who held internationally/diasporically 'routed' political positions and was also literally 'routed' through living in the US from the age of eight, being deported from there to England in 1955 and retaining a 'sister outsider' status in both locations (p. 25). The impact of these multiple positionings on Jones's political theorizing and activism was that she was always clear about the links and parallels between the local oppressions suffered by workers and by black women in the US and UK contexts, and similar struggles in international contexts. So, for example, in one of her testimonies to the court prior to her deportation from the US, Jones urged 'American mother, Negro women and white, to write, to emulate the peace struggles of their anti-fascist sisters in Latin America, in the new European democracies, in the Soviet Union, in Asia and Africa' (p. 54). In essence, then, Claudia

Jones's work represents an important milestone in the history of the theorizing of transnational feminist positions, dating back to the 1940s.

Furthermore, as Boyce Davies argues, in recovering the figure of Claudia Jones, 'we can more definitively embrace a history of transnational black feminist *work*' (p. 23). This is because Jones not only theorized the transnational aspects of the anti-racist, feminist, anti-imperialist, anti-war and anti-capitalist struggles in which she was engaged, but she was also engaged in 'a labor-intensive set of activities that link activism with intellectuality' (p. 23). Jones's political life and work teach us how to *think* about and conceptualize feminism transnationally, as well as how to *do* transnational feminism.

It has only been possible to discuss a small part of Boyce Davies's rigorous analysis and well-presented narrative of the political life of Claudia Jones here. What I sought to convey was that there is much for us to learn, as feminists today, from all that Jones managed to accomplish in her relatively short life. In *Left of Karl Marx*, Carole Boyce Davies offers us a first class passage on that journey of (re)discovery.

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QUEER INQUIRY AND THE RELEVANCE OF SEXUALITY

G.E. Haggerty and M. McGarry, eds
A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies
 Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, 478 pp., ISBN 978-1-4051-1329-8

Focusing less on what LGBT/Q studies is and more on the work that it does, the overarching call of this multidisciplinary collection is to take sex seriously, looking at the ways in which it is fundamentally linked to wider social mappings, asking what sexuality stands in for, and how it structures the worlds in which we live. At the beginning of a century marked by the politics of war and terrorism against which sex has been variously cast as a side-issue, a non-issue and a frivolous distraction from these 'more serious' and pressing concerns, the editors argue that 'analyses of sexuality are more relevant than ever' (p. 1).

The volume – which brings together two dozen contributions by established and emerging scholars – articulates the continued relevance of queer studies by drawing on it variously to reassert the centrality of sex in understanding contemporary culture. An impressive 'snapshot' of current queer thinking, and the most up-to-date overview of new work in this area, the volume shows sexuality as integrally threaded through the political, social and economic fabric of society. In doing this, the work here reinforces, but also takes on, the – traditionally feminist and by now very queer – call to interrogate and dismantle the public/private binary that has relegated sex and intimacy to the private sphere deeming it at once a 'private' and, simultaneously, an acutely public, affair.

By asserting the continued importance of queer thinking without negating the usefulness of speaking from positions of identity, the volume effectively talks about the dynamics of heteronormativity in a tangible way without simplifying