

Woman Overboard: The Perils of Sailing the Black Atlantic, Deportation with Prejudice

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Homing pigeons gather aimlessly in the large yard on an island which lies in New York's great harbor. Occasionally a pigeon flies in front of the bay dotted with white caps and the pigeons scatter.

They either gather in a solid mass and noiselessly fly away together, or, with loud grace, flap their wings and soar away. . . . One flapped his wings 31 times before he ascended to fly over the massed brownstone buildings with numerous windows.

—Claudia Jones, in a letter to John Gates, editor of the *Daily Worker*, 1950

Claudia Jones's political positions, her capacity and willingness to use every avenue at her disposal to express her Communist ideologies and her feminist activism, marked her as a "radical black subject" in the eyes of the state, and as such she became a target for surveillance and persecution.¹ That her politics would also put her so far outside of the political mainstream within black American feminist circles, however, suggests her location as a West Indian, African American, woman, Communist, Pan-Africanist, feminist, peace activist, journalist, community organizer, and poet, may well have been more baggage than black feminists were willing to engage with fully. A number of questions came to mind after reading *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*, particularly when we consider

¹ Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 5; hereafter cited in the text.

Jones's relationship to a tradition of black radical thought and activism in the United States. Was her "voluntary departure" or, more aptly put, her "deportation with prejudice"² across the Atlantic to Britain (rather than Trinidad and Tobago) too great a distance to leave even a trace of her political and social contributions? Or could it be that her ability to choose to exercise her agency as a British subject/citizen and Trinidadian placed her in the realm of the "unrecoverable" black female subject in black radical politics in the United States? Did the "third space" of black Britain make her unrecognizable to black feminists a generation later in the United States and within the critical discourses of race, nation, and political action, when further complicated by what Jones herself defined as the double exploitation of women, both as workers and as women? Or are there other relevant critical debates that have not yet been brought to bear on histories of Caribbean radicalism in African American political and cultural history, particularly the political and social tensions between and among African Americans and West Indians around the question of civil rights and, later, the rights of "citizens"? All of these questions are implicitly part of the critical engagement about the life of Claudia Jones, her migration, her political activism, her insistence on expressing her political ideas, her incarceration, and ultimately her exile in London. However, these questions are also relevant to our contemporary condition of state-sanctioned "disappearances and deportations" and incarcerations due to political beliefs and actions in the wake of a post-9/11 America. The similarities in the political climate represented in *Left of Karl Marx* are astounding and their implications all the more troubling when we consider the current assault on civil liberties that naturally make us recall the McCarthy era in the United States.

I want to suggest that the reasons for Jones's disappearance/deportation/departure are attributable to all of the possibilities posed in the questions above. However, I would hasten to add that Jones's disappearance was not as complete as is suggested by Boyce Davies. Jones's ideological positions and activist praxis are represented and rendered (in equally meticulous detail and complexity) by black women writing during the same period as Jones's activism, a period that predates the black feminist movement; they created a body of work that is in its earliest formulations already diasporic and transnational. I am thinking here of the literary contributions of many of the same writers mentioned in *Left of Karl Marx*, particularly Paule Marshall and then later, if only by inference, Zora Neale Hurston. Boyce Davies

2 Robert James McWhirter, *The Criminal Lawyer's Guide to Immigration Law: Questions and Answers*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2006), 294. The term *prejudice* within immigration law carries with it a very specific set of implications. *Prejudice* in the context of deportation is defined thus:

As stated *supra*, to prevail in a collateral attack of the deportation the defendant must demonstrate that the violations in the deportation prejudiced him. *United States v. Proa-Tovar*, 975 F.2d592 (9th Cir. 1992) (en banc). In the Ninth Circuit, a defendant is "prejudiced" if he had "plausible grounds for relief from deportation."

The Fifth and Eighth Circuits require a somewhat greater showing holding that, "prejudice" means that there was a reasonable likelihood that but for the errors complained of, the defendant would not have been deported. (294)

Although these laws went into effect in the early 1990s, the recent move by the Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) to apply the laws retroactively to all convicted felons regardless of when they received their convictions makes the notion of "prejudice" in the context of deportation all the more troubling. The legal implications of the term suggests that Jones would certainly have had "plausible cause for relief," owing to her health condition. But the case against Claudia Jones rested on the government's ability to define, for its own purposes, how the term *American* (or *un-American*) applied to radical political figures such as Jones.

takes the position very early on that Jones and her political work must be read in the context of black intellectual traditions that do not emanate from institutionally sanctioned spaces, specifically academia. Moreover, *Left of Karl Marx* takes up the contemporary debate about political activism, intellectual work, and the sometimes-warm, sometimes-cold relationship within academia, to arrive finally at a location where intellectual work is no longer solely the purview of the academy.

However, casting Jones as an intellectual in the traditional sense (quantifiably and qualitatively) narrows the field of possibilities for interpreting her ideological and political contributions in other, not-yet institutionally sanctioned spaces of critical engagement. One such space would certainly be African American and Caribbean women's narratives written during the period of Jones' political activism in the United States. Paule Marshall's novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (published in 1959), was ideologically banished from the African American literary canon and the black feminist landscape for nearly twenty years until it was rediscovered and republished by the Feminist Press in 1981. But what makes it an important text in this discussion are the literary affinities between Marshall's novel and Jones's own writing, not just in terms of style but through a shared cultural, political, and poetic landscape. It might seem too literal an interpretation to point out the shared architectural nuances in Marshall's novel (the coveted brownstone houses) and the landscape Jones imagines in a letter written to a friend during her imprisonment in "the McCarran Wing" at Ellis Island. She personifies herself as the pigeon that "flapped his wings 31 times before he ascended to fly over the massed brownstone buildings with numerous windows" (105). The letter, written five years before she is actually ordered deported, seems prophetic, calling to mind the same architecture Marshall deploys as a metaphor for the structure of American racial and political landscapes. Jones spent thirty-one years in the United States (1924–55), fighting and "flapping her wings" for the rights of oppressed and exploited people across the world, but nowhere was this effort fought as hard as in the case of black people in America. There is also an equally rich intertextuality between Jones's life, her writing, and Marshall's novel, as both writers attempt to imagine a political solidarity that transcends cultural, generational, geographical, and national boundaries.

The 1970s saw a decidedly black feminist shift occurring in African American literary circles. The appearance of Toni Cade Bambara's anthology *The Black Woman* (1970), and then Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978), shifted the grounds of the black literary and cultural landscapes in ways that were, for the period, unimaginable.³ Within some African American literary and cultural circles, these texts were received as nothing short of heretical and were read as part of a continuous effort to oppress black men, this time with the seal of approval of white Americans, or so the story went. Then, as now, the strength

3 For a more thorough account of this newly emerging literary and political landscape and how it was received by African American intellectuals of the time, see Calvin Hernton, "The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers," *Black American Literature Forum* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 139–45.

of these texts lay not simply in what they articulated—the need for a cultural landscape that acknowledged and addressed the lived realities of black women, particularly in the context of a burgeoning black nationalist movement that saw the oppression of black men as its primary site of engagement—but also in addressing (and arguably providing redress for) the legacy of erasure and silencing that had been the inheritance of black women since emancipation. These books were the first to acknowledge the systematic erasure of a tradition of black women’s writing in the United States and they were the first to call this process by its full name: black male privilege based on notions of male superiority. They offered readers a context through which to interpret, question, engage, and understand the disappearance and erasure of black women’s voices from the social and political landscapes in the United States (and later in the Caribbean region, Latin America, Africa, and other parts of the world affected by British and American imperialism). Subsequent critical interventions argued that it was not enough to simply “give voice” to the experiences of African American women in the United States through the social and political lens of black men.

This moment in black American literary history is a productive point of return, particularly for considering what is at stake in recuperating once-silenced, exiled black radical subjects. In other words, what does this recuperative act provide us with as a critically corrective lens or approach to navigating our way through an equally perilous political and cultural landscape. There is a shared sociopolitical trajectory that clearly suggests that Wallace and other feminist critics of her generation would have known of Jones’s efforts within the ranks of black political organizing in the United States. Claudia Jones’s contributions to the struggle for equality and justice for oppressed people globally, and, more specifically, for black and “third world” women, provide the basis for her ideological leanings, many of which situated her as left of socialists and Communists alike. It is fitting, then, that her political and ideological positions are best represented in her final resting place at Highgate Cemetery in London, in a plot to the left of Karl Marx. This intellectual and political historiography is concerned with the “deportation of the radical black female subject to an elsewhere” (4), one that lies beyond the Black Atlantic, beyond African American and Caribbean feminist theorizing.

Left of Karl Marx maps out a trajectory of black feminist political thought, asserting that the frequency of overlapping ideological interpretations of black women’s rights as workers, mothers, and women should have made Claudia Jones an integral part of black American feminist theorizing and organizing. The tangible evidence of her radical subjectivity (her intellectual labor through journalism, poetry, political essays, speeches, and organizing) is certainly in step with, if it does not predate, many of the positions espoused by black feminist critics of the next generation. Explaining what she believes may be the political thought among black feminists of the period, Boyce Davies notes:

In her introduction to her 1990s reprint of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* titled “How I Saw it Then; How I See it Now,” [Michelle] Wallace references postcolonial criticism and the problematizing of home but offers her critique as well: “I don’t think *they* begin to exhaust

what we can possibly say about *our* relationship to 'other worlds' beyond the hegemony of the West. Afro-Americans are not immigrants although *we* have always wanted recent arrivals from the Caribbean and Africa among *us*. As a group, *we* have been in the Americas longer than anyone apart from the Indians." (12; emphasis mine)

The major point of analysis here is where and how disciplinary and political lines are drawn within scholarly circles between those who "do African Diaspora (international) work" and those who "do U.S. (domestic) research in the United States" (12). However, I would want to complicate this assertion by adding that the lines of division run much deeper than the disciplinary and geographical terrains among black feminist intellectuals in the United States. The semantics of inclusion/exclusion and the different positionalities (*they*, *we*, *us*, and *our*) that are rejected, embraced, and/or invited to participate in black American nationalist discourses make it clear that the stakes in the debate extend well beyond academic disciplines.

The phrase "recent arrivals from the Caribbean" is deployed as a very exacting measurement of bloodlines in the North American landscape and so too is the precise historical framing of the statement that after Native Americans, African Americans "have been in the Americas longer than anyone." Wallace is careful to not include the second-generation Caribbean-Americans who can lay claim to belonging in the latter categories of inclusion (*we* and *our*). By asserting that African Americans are "not immigrants," the discourse of birthrights (a dubious one, given the hard fought battles for black Americans to be granted full rights under the US Constitution) is evoked as a not-so-subtle reminder that citizenship has its privileges, and "belonging" is one of them. Even the agents of the Justice Department took note of this in reports on political activities in black communities in Harlem. Winston James, in *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in America, 1900–1932*, cites a Department of Justice agent's report: "'I beg to state,' reported the indefatigable special agent, code-named 'P-38,' from the heart of Harlem in March 1921, 'that nearly all these Negro radicals carry the *Bolshevik [sic] red card* and pay their monthly dues. . . . It might be interesting to learn that nearly all of them are West Indian men who have not been naturalized or even in possession of their first papers.'"⁴ Despite the fact that many black Americans and West Indians worked in close quarters to bring about social change, activists like Claudia Jones and C. L. R. James, among others, were reminded in no uncertain terms that, though they saw their plight as intimately tied to those of black Americans, they were not American.

The idea of "belonging," particularly in the context of citizenship, is worthy of further reflection here. I am deploying this term in the sense evoked by M. NourbeSe Philip in her discussion of African diaspora subjects in newly emergent nation-states such as Canada.⁵ The term circulates through a number of discursive registers where belonging signifies on the condition of "being a long time" (to *be long*), a phrase founded on the notion of being long in a

4 Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in America, 1900–1932* (New York: Verso, 1997), 2; emphasis in original.

5 Patricia J. Saunders, "Trying Tongues, E-raced Identities, and the Possibilities of Be/longing: Conversations with NourbeSe Philip," in "Caribbean Canadian Writing," special issue, *Journal of West Indian Literature* 14, nos. 1–2 (November 2005): 202–19.

country, landscape, or place, as is the case with First Nations people in the Canadian context. Another register is that of desire (*longing*) for being-in-the-world in the existential sense. The embodiment of this concept is still connected to physical place/space, through history, traditions, and so on, a “homeland” where you live, celebrate births, mourn, bury and remember the dead, worship gods, and carry out other cultural rituals. Both of these conceptualizations of belonging are measured in relation to time: one through years, decades, generations; the other through traditions, rituals, and ultimately, narratives that tie the subject to the land through practices, relationships, and memories that are embedded in the land as much as they are embedded in the body of the subject or citizen.⁶ In this regard, Wallace’s comment about presence (length of time) in the United States is indeed very instructive. She is not so subtly reminding her reading audience that while African diaspora immigrants share a political history with African Americans, they do not have a claim in the same way as those who are citizens, those who share bloodlines and traditions in North America. This issue emerges again in the ideological positions of black American feminist critics reflecting on their relationship to other global feminist movements and it also rings very familiar in recent debates about whether West Indians should continue to be included among the beneficiaries of affirmative action in institutions of higher learning in the United States.⁷

We cannot ignore the pace of Jones’s rise to prominence in the black American political landscape: by 1935 she was involved in Scottsboro Boys organizing and by 1937 she was the associate editor of the *Weekly Review* and secretary of the executive committee of the Young Communist League in Harlem. Her political and intellectual work in New York included a persistent program of journalistic writing and publishing, speeches, and community organizing to agitate for an end to the exploitation of black women. All of these approaches formed part of her continued political life when she arrived in London, with one notable difference. Almost immediately after she arrived in London and founded the *West Indian Gazette*, she embraced a political program that included a strong cultural component. Within four years of her arrival in London, Jones launched the first London Caribbean Carnival in St. Pancras Hall. This is worthy of note because there were numerous cultural and civic associations in New York at the time, particularly in West Indian communities, not to mention the cultural renaissance taking place in Harlem. I am not suggesting that Jones’s approach to race politics in London needed to be the same there as it was in the United States. But we can imagine that her familiarity with the subversive values of Carnival and other cultural traditions in anticolonial movements across the Caribbean influenced her development of the Caribbean Carnival in London. In other words, I am suggesting that it was her cultural familiarity with British colonialism and its

6 For a more exhaustive discussion of this debate about place and identity, see J. Edward Chamberlin, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Reimagining Home and Sacred Space* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2003).

7 For a more detailed account of this debate, see Sara Rimer and Karen W. Arenson, “Top Colleges Take More Blacks, but Which Ones?” *New York Times*, 24 June 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/24/education/24AFFI.final.html?ex=1089200432&ei=1&en=3d41359e87810295>; and Darryl Fears, “In Diversity Push, Top Universities Enrolling More Black Immigrants: Critics Say Effort Favors Elite Foreigners, Leaves Out Americans,” *Washington Post*, 6 March 2007.

contingent modes of social and cultural oppression that made this new approach to political activism feasible for Jones in London in a way that was not as readily available to her in the United States.

Sisters on a Sinking Ship: When Blood(lines) Thicker Than Water, It's Best You Try and Swim to Shore

Another instructive moment in *Left of Karl Marx* brings us back to my earlier assertion that reading Jones through black women's literature might enhance our understanding of Jones's "deportation" from black feminist theorizing. Continuing her genealogy of black feminist theorizing, Boyce Davies examines the underlying assumptions that inform the theorizing of another major figure in African American feminist theory, Patricia Hill Collins:

Her [Patricia Hill Collins] essay "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Social Significance of Black Feminist Thought" is perhaps most instructive. It is based entirely on a position grounded in U.S. parochialism and by its very construction marks the limits of "outsider within" positionality. Beginning with the case of the domestic worker who knows the house better than the mistress allows her to construct black feminist intellectuals within a similar relationship to white feminists. The subject of the address is white women, with a U.S. definition of naturalized, essentialized race as marker, which thus allows her to develop what she calls "standpoint epistemology," that is, that U.S. black women as a group all see the world from a particular angle. (13)

The metaphor of the "domestic worker" who "knows the house better than the mistress" is particularly relevant because Jones, and other left-leaning feminists before her, recognized that the working conditions, rights, and compensation for black women working as domestic laborers or *day workers* in New York was a situation that needed to be addressed rigorously. That Collins deploys this metaphor to describe the relationship between black and white feminists highlights the same point made in Wallace's statement: not all black feminists are "members of the family," no matter their relationship to those in the household (i.e., the United States). A less polite way of putting it would be to say that they may be as close as family, but at the end of the day, "they are hired help." They may live in, even look after the children, do the laundry, cook, and eat in the house, but they do not belong (in either sense of the word) to the household.

Nowhere are the complexities of ethnic solidarity and belonging during the 1930s and 1940s more thoroughly examined than in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.⁸ The novel engages the same political issues that Jones tackles in her activism, and does so through a similar explicit critique of race, class, and gender exploitation of black working women in America during World War II. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* emerged briefly in the early

8 Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959; reprint, New York: Feminist Press, 1981).

accounting of Jones's activist efforts to address the "double exploitation" of working women and mothers through capitalism and by male superiority. However, it is evoked only as a secondary source in relation to Jones's continued efforts to ensure that women's rights were also an integral part of the political agenda within the Communist Party. Ironically though, the novel also offers a particularly productive occasion for dialogue about Claudia Jones's "black radical subjectivity" and the extent to which her own individualism within the landscape of black American politics made it possible (and even desirable) for Jones to be erased from black feminist theorizing for so long. Equally important to my consideration is the assertion that "almost none of the literature on diaspora has dealt in any substantive way with the issue of deportation and/or the 'other politics of diaspora'" (137). However, I would contend that Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* may well be one of the earliest texts by a black woman writer to deal with deportation (both as a trope and as a political reality for Africans in the diaspora) and the "other politics of diaspora," by which I mean the social and cultural complexities that attend these forced (and voluntary) departures from communities and nation-states.

On the most basic level, critics have commented on Marshall's novel as a classic bildungsroman, where the protagonist, young Selina Boyce, comes of age as a second-generation Caribbean American living in New York City. On a more complex level, however, the novel also addresses questions of materialism, ethnic solidarity, gender identity, political consciousness, community, belonging, and exile. In a household where even her daughter (Selina) refers to her as "the mother," Silla Boyce is represented as an omniscient force who controls everything in the universe: the weather, the minds of other women, economic decisions in the household, and, most important, words. Arguably, Silla can be read as an embodiment of a small portion of "half the world" that Claudia Jones addresses in her newspaper column by the same name. The Barbadian women who meet in Silla's kitchen to cook discuss everything from contraception, their opposition to the war and sending their children to die to protect Britain while they are still treated as second-class citizens in the colonies, child rearing practices, and economic strategies for surviving in the racist landscape of the United States.⁹ Silla Boyce is characterized as "the mother of all mothers," one who certainly fits the critical paradigm of defender of the black family described in Jones's "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of Negro Women" (37–39). Silla does "day work" and later finds work in a factory making machinery for the war. The factory, in Marshall's poetic language becomes a place where it is difficult to tell where the machines end and human beings begin. This description is surely a commentary on industrialized capitalism and the dehumanizing nature of labor in this system. But this novel is also critically concerned with the effects of this system on both mothers and children. Silla is slowly revealed as a woman, worker, and mother who has to secure the financial well-being of her family by any means necessary.

9 These conversations closely parallel the social realities outlined by Boyce Davies in relation to African American soldiers "experiencing Jim Crow racism," and to "several domestic issues pertaining to women (who suffered from the most deprivation during wartime)" being "sidelined by the war effort" (49).

However, the unrelenting materialism within the West Indian community emerges as a source of contention that divides the household and pits both Selina and her father, Deighton, against the rest of the community. Marshall's portrayal of West Indians arriving in the United States in the late 1930s is telling, not only because of what it reveals about the shifting patterns of immigration (from the Dutch-English and the Scotch-Irish to the new generation of West Indian immigrants) but because of what it explicitly demarcates as some of the fundamental differences (across generations) within the largely immigrant "household of America" that threatened to sever community bonds within the "black community." Marshall writes:

For a long time it had been only the whites, each generation unraveling in a quiet skein of years behind the green shades. But now in 1939 the last of them were discreetly dying behind those shades of selling the houses and moving away. And as they left, the West Indians slowly edged their way in. Like a dark sea, nudging its way onto a white beach and staining the sand, they came. The West Indians, especially the Barbadians who never owned anything perhaps but a few poor acres in a poor land, loved the houses with the same fierce idolatry as they had the land on their obscure islands.¹⁰

Where European immigrants could "become white" after a few generations if they so chose, black immigrants are identified primarily based on color and are seen immediately as an impending force poised to leave their mark or "stains" on the American landscape. More important, in the 1981 Feminist Press reprint of the novel, Mary Helen Washington describes the nuanced complexities of the terrain undertaken by writers like Marshall. It was no doubt a landscape that Claudia Jones knew intimately on a personal and political level, and also a landscape being excavated some forty-five years later in search of plausible explanations for Jones's "deportation" from black feminist theorizing. According to Washington,

by skin color, by their African origin, their colonized status, the West Indians of Paule Marshall's novel are inexorably connected to all Black Americans, but it is their distinctiveness that yields the peculiar themes and images of this novel. The Boyce family does not belong to the tradition that created such American novels as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* or Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* or Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. These transplanted Barbadians are an employed, literate, ambitious, property-owning, upwardly mobile, tough community of first-generation immigrants. Not one person in this novel is unemployed. These people came to "this man country," as they call it, *on purpose*, as willfully as many white immigrants; and they exercised their collective force to get what they need and want.¹¹

Washington gives voice in her response to the novel and, more importantly, in the context of African American feminist criticism, to what had remained "inside conversations" between embittered communities and expressed in African American magazines and newspapers from as early as the 1920s and through the 1980s.¹² However, by engaging these tensions through a

¹⁰ Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, 4.

¹¹ Mary Helen Washington, afterword to Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, 312; emphasis in original.

¹² Winston James has an extensive bibliography of these conversations in the footnotes to his prologue in *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*; see also note 19, here.

tradition of writing that represents the range of African American cultural and political experiences (written by black men *and* women), Washington offers readers a context for interpreting the complex realities represented in these different accounts of black life and black community in the United States. And as she notes, these differences have everything to do with the varied lived experiences and worldviews that the protagonists are born, and grow, into. Naturally, the term “born” is being used with all of its insinuations of citizenship and belonging (even if, as is the case with black Americans at the time, it was second-class citizenship).

But we must also be clear that the position of the “outsider within” that informs Hill Collins’s and Wallace’s interpretations of black American feminist theorizing also has a first cousin in the West Indian community in Marshall’s novel. Just as the semantics of inclusion and exclusion demarcate how belonging will be determined, the same is true of West Indian perspectives about African Americans in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. During a meeting of the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen, a member stands up and publicly suggests that they cross out the word “Barbadian” and replace it with the word “Negro”; in short, that they include African Americans in their organization. The response of the association members is swift and decisive as their “faces are contorted with wrath, [their] arms punctuate the air with outrage and the basement is hot with their anger.”¹³ The men in the association are insistent on a course of action (through material wealth—they plan to build a credit union—and property acquisition) that will put them as close to the American ideal (whiteness) as they can get, and in their eyes, casting their lot with African Americans will do nothing more than set them back.

Ethnic solidarity and adherence to tradition are the yardsticks for measuring belonging and loyalty in the Bajan community. Silla’s husband, Deighton, is summarily evicted, first figuratively from the Bajan community, and later literally from the country when (after selling his land) Silla calls the immigration authorities and informs them of his status as an “illegal alien.” From the beginning of the novel he is constructed as an “alien/outsider,” a walking contradiction constantly referred to as the “beautiful ugly” father; unwilling to work, lounging in the sunroom, spending the money from Silla’s sale of his land frivolously on his children, all while Silla is working to “buy house.” Marshall’s novel includes a number of protagonists who adhere to what can only be described as a range of perverse subversions of capitalist systems of exploitation. Suggie Skeete (a boarder in the house) works, but only to support her lifestyle of drinking, partying, and keeping a steady flow of lovers in tow to pass the weekends. Like Deighton, she too is evicted from the community and later from the house because she is an “undesirable tenant,” an alien of sorts, particularly to the women in the Bajan community. In other words, Marshall’s novel makes it clear that the black and West Indian communities also exercise power and impose discipline on those who refuse to adhere to the conditions

13 Washington, afterword, 318.

for their inclusion in the community. The production of “deportable subjects” is not solely the dominion of the nation-state.

Like Ships Passing in the Night: Race, Gender, and the Problem of Black Consciousness for Radical Black Feminists

Look even closer. . . . Men in shirtsleeves or rough lumber jackets peer out from occasional windows on the right end of the yard, looking out on the bay, where now and then, on this foggy, rain-swept day, foghorns cry their warning to occasional vessels. . . . Some ships are more beautiful than others. There are tugs and passenger ships.

—Claudia Jones, letter to John Gates, editor of the *Daily Worker*, 1950

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

There is no doubt that the colonial and imperialist history of the Americas binds West Indians, Africans, and African Americans together inexorably. However, as many African diaspora scholars have noted, the peculiar institution of American racism, and its concomitant deployment of terror (lynching, Klu Klux Klan cross burnings, Jim Crow laws, etc.) contributed to unique lived experiences for black people born (and raised) during the period of segregation in the United States. The notion of laying claim to Americanness was, understandably, a dubious proposition in light of the contradictions they lived as human beings, as workers, and as American citizens. With this in mind, what did it mean for West Indians like Claudia Jones (and the countless other immigrants who fought alongside black Americans) to claim solidarity with their black brothers and sisters, while also publicly expressing feminist, Communist, and Marxist-Leninist ideologies and positions? This had to have struck many activists, intellectuals, and people in the broader community as not only odd but most definitely foreign. History tells us that many black Americans welcomed the solidarity and support in the struggle, but there are also numerous accounts (particularly during the Garvey era in Harlem) that suggest that their presence was not as welcomed, and was, in fact, seen as an invasion by blacks who were culturally and ideologically “alien” to them.

An editorial in New York’s oldest black newspaper, the *New York Age*, described the members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as “undesirable aliens whose presence in this country is a dangerous intrusion.” They should, it continued, “be deported to the islands whence they came, the same as any other group of anarchist.” With its repeated reference to

Garvey's supporters as an unnaturalized "group of aliens," and as an "alien crew," not to mention "*undesirable aliens*," the *Age* was, in effect, calling for the deportation of all Caribbean migrants. They should be deported, said the *Age*, "so that they may return under the British flag that they honor so greatly. They will play no such monkey shines under that."¹⁴

This passage is not merely about disliking West Indians, it is an ideological opposition based on the belief that West Indians were trying to do in America, what they had not done (and allegedly could not do) in their respective homelands.

By the time Claudia Jones is actively involved in movements for equality for all black people and her peace activism, the sentiment was certainly shifting not only in black communities in Harlem but also across the United States and the rest of the world. But the painful reality of her erasure is that, like Deighton and Suggie, Claudia Jones was not recognizable (to put it politely) to her community. She had become an "undesirable alien" through her hyper-embodiment of the "radical black female subject." In this regard, she is also—to an extent—like Silla, willing to do whatever was necessary to protect and express her ideas and convictions in words and actions; insisting always (and everywhere) that every institution capable of exercising power address the racial and gender biases, practices, and policies that marginalize and exploit women. In fact, it is in this last regard that I read Jones's letter from Ellis Island prison as part of a burgeoning black feminist literature emerging during this period—and alongside the opening manifesto that frames Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, rather than in the tradition of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. Although, according to Boyce Davies, Douglass's "recognition of freedom in the free movement of ships and birds" (107) speaks to the political and human desire to exercise agency and political expression through free movement, this fundamental level has never been a privilege extended to black women. It has historically been an opportunity they have had to fight for, demand, steal and die for, even after it was extended to white women and black men. The price of the ticket is a dear one indeed for women who insist on taking charge of these modalities of political expression, mobility, and ultimately the willingness to choose to identify themselves by conflicting and at times contradictory identities (for Jones, be it black American, Communist, feminist, Marxist-Leninist, British subject/citizen, and finally a Trinidadian, once she "voluntarily departs" for London).

I consider the evocation of ships in her letter from Ellis Island, therefore, as part of feminist politics that borrows the trope of the sea in order to resist the limitations placed on black women like Claudia Jones, Paule Marshall, and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as on the women they create: Silla Boyce, Selina Boyce, Janie Starks, and countless other literary contemporaries.

What places Marshall's first novel alongside works like *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and—to some extent—*Invisible Man*, is the fact that it is much more than a study of double consciousness;

14 James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia*, 4, quoting an article from *New York Age*, 16 August 1924; emphasis mine.

it depicts not just a reductive world of blackness and whiteness but “that sense, many-sided and shifting reality which is the world we live in and the world we make” (Baldwin, “Many Thousands” 603). It is for this reason that, rather than veils and shadows, images of the sea and of prisms are critical to *Brown Girl*—images that do not seek to divide but to contain contradiction. The predominant theme of *Brown Girl* is not invisibility but the problems of vision that are experienced by a central character who sees the world—and her own blackness—from a number of different perspectives: as an African American, a Barbadian immigrant, and a woman.¹⁵

By couching Claudia Jones’s life and writing in a black women’s literary tradition, we make her less of an anomaly; she seems to “belong” among the women in these narrative representations of the black trans-Atlantic and in the larger canon of black diaspora writing. Her “deportation” from black feminist theorizing and African American history had everything to do with her location as a West Indian immigrant who took the ideological position of embodying and living multiple political perspectives and cultural identities at a time when institutionally and socially this was not an option for black people, and least of all for black women. It is a fact that Jones is acutely aware of this on a number of levels even after she leaves the United States. Take, for example, her letter to Eric Williams after she has been denied a British passport for travel to the Soviet Union. She writes unapologetically of her denial:

Besides being questionable, this seems to be a case of discrimination against me personally and as a citizen of Trinidad and the UK. If my assumptions are invalid as regards discrimination, then now that my qualification of residency has been met, and I have secured a prominent recommender, my own physician, certainly there should be no difficulty in what ought to be a routine matter. If it is a question of political views, this would not apply if I were of English birth since such people of all political persuasions, including Marxist, are not denied the right to travel out of England, because of their political views. Am I then to conclude that this special discrimination holds against me solely as a West Indian woman? (146)

Jones uses the same language and rhetorical strategies in her column in the *Daily Worker* on 10 November 1955, in which she comments on the possibility of deportation for her political views (156). In this regard both of Jones’s letters go to great lengths to demarcate the extent to which the problems of black consciousness for women are distinctly different from those for men. It is the same difference delineated by the narrator of Hurston’s novel: “Ships at a distance have *every man’s* wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight.”¹⁶ The literary and political trope of the ship and the freedom, mobility, and choice it represents were traditionally the domain of men, even when “they are mocked to death by time.” However, the black women that Marshall and Hurston imagined (and created) were women like Claudia Jones who set sail across the Atlantic, with their multiple (and growing) political and cultural identities in tow, and begin, with the support

15 Gavin Jones, “‘The Sea Ain’ Got No Back Door’: The Problems of Black Consciousness in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*,” *African American Review* 32, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 602.

16 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 9; emphasis mine.

of new communities in London to “act and do things accordingly” (9).¹⁷ When she arrives in London, she draws her West Indian/Trinidadian/British identities closer and turns these identities and her energies toward serving the Caribbean communities there, directly alongside the social experience and identities she formulated and embodied while in the United States.

Even before black American (and later, Caribbean and other African diaspora) feminists were trying to consolidate whole communities of women, Claudia Jones would have seemed too much of a “radical expression of how the black self, when it exists at the intersections of ethnicity, nationhood, and gender has its wholeness challenged by alternative and frequently conflicting definitions.”¹⁸ She would have been unrecognizable in her many faces and embodiments of selfhood, and like ships in the night, black feminists in the Caribbean and in the United States would have passed her by without knowing that their dreams were on board and were still struggling to become truths. In the epigraph that frames this section, Jones admonishes us to “look even closer” so that we can make out the multiple, contradictory, conflicting passengers: identities and ideologies that she sees and lives—even while in prison. The “black radical female subjects” afloat in this sea of diasporic consciousness are now made less “alien” in this text and with this generation of feminist intellectuals and activists. But once again, there are tempests that threaten the journeywomen who insist that diasporic identities are in no way limited to cultural, political, geographical, or national boundaries.¹⁹

17 Boyce Davies notes that Jones’s letter to Eric Williams is one of the first instances in which she identifies herself as a Caribbean woman, despite the fact that she was still administratively a “British subject” (146).

18 Gavin Jones, “The Sea Ain’ Got No Back Door,” 604.

19 See Faith Smith, “Crosses/Crossroads/Crossings,” *Small Axe*, no. 24 (October 2007): 130–38, an incisive critique of the work of M. Jacqui Alexander, another feminist critic whose research and scholarship as well as her activism resembles that of Claudia Jones. Like Boyce Davies’s critique of black feminist critics and their silence on Jones, Smith is “struck by the apparent lack of convergence between Alexander’s work and that of the senior feminist social scientists in the [Caribbean] region who are roughly speaking of her generation and who work on gender, sexuality, citizenship and the state” (133–34).