


Smuggling guns into Kansas to resist the extension of slavery; watching the men of his first Civil War regiment square-dancing with one another, “their long arms looping in huge arcs, half the men marking themselves as women by tying a handkerchief to their arm”; recruiting the first regiment of freed slaves to serve in the Union Army, battling school segregation in the North after the war—and in the midst of this, somehow finding time to correspond with a brilliantly eccentric woman whom he would not meet until they had been exchanging letters for eight years—Wineapple’s Higginson is abundantly worthy of our attention.

Wineapple’s portrait of Emily Dickinson, on the

other hand, adds little to the existing biographical accounts on which she draws. Its lingering attachment to the figure of the poetess in white, untouched by history, marks a retreat from a great swath of contemporary Dickinson scholarship that explores the impact of the Civil War on her poetry, the changing modes of her writing over her lifespan, and her efforts to attach her writing to its situations of address rather than floating lyrically free of them. We are not bound to keep reproducing the dated critical story in which Dickinson stops all our clocks. More interesting is the Dickinson who almost emerges in Wineapple’s pages—the writer who learned to survive absolutisms, even her own,

even those asserted by a high romantic ideal of poetic vocation; who probably learned, along with some of Jane Austen’s heroines, that “the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people”; above all, the writer who modulated the poetry of her columnar self into a responsive art of living. 

Mary Loeffelholz is professor of English and vice provost for academic affairs at Northeastern University, and the author of *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Poetry* (2004).

A Radical Activist, Rediscovered

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

By Carole Boyce Davies

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008, 311 pp., \$22.95, paperback

Reviewed by Kate Weigand



Claudia Jones

feminism, transnational feminism, and the history of Communism. “Claudia Jones,” Davies explains,

lived and organized at the intersection of a variety of positionalities (anti-imperialism and decolonization struggles, activism for workers’ rights, the critique of the appropriation of black women’s labor, and the challenge to domestic and international racisms and their links to colonialism) and was therefore able to articulate them earlier than many of her contemporaries.

Jones’s pioneering political writing, speaking, and activism makes her, in Davies’s estimation, one of the leading radical black female activists and intellectuals of the twentieth century. The internment of her ashes in an obscure plot to the left of Karl Marx’s grave in London’s Highgate Cemetery, Davies’s title suggests, is a metaphor for her little-known but groundbreaking approaches to political activism and theory, which incorporated gender, race, migration, and culture and, in the process, radicalized traditional Marxism-Leninism.

As someone who has long been interested in the life and work of Claudia Jones, whose class- and race-conscious feminism I examined in my own book on the gender politics of American Communism after World War II (*Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation*, 2001), I know firsthand the frustration that comes from trying to understand a subject about whom there are very few sources. In the 1990s, when I was a graduate student with limited research funds looking for information about Jones’s life, almost all the details I could locate came from publications of various kinds, and none of those contained anything beyond the basic outlines of her existence. Carole Boyce Davies, a professor of Africana Studies and English at Cornell University, writes that it was this paucity of material that led her to begin searching systematically for more information about Jones. *Left of Karl Marx* is the result of her effort to reconstruct the details of Jones’s life and to restore her work to the discourse on black feminism, Communism, and the African diaspora.

After my own stymied efforts to locate archival material on Jones, I was very excited to hear about Davies’s book. Although she specifies that the book is “not a biography,” it traces the contours of Jones’s life from her birth as Claude Vera Cumberbatch in Belmont, Trinidad, in 1915, through her family’s arrival in New York City in 1924, her growing involvement in Communist Party politics and leadership in the 1930s through the early 1950s, her arrest and imprisonment by the US government for violating the anti-Communist McCarran and Smith Acts, her deportation to London in 1955, and her

new activist life in London’s Caribbean community. In her introduction, Davies tells the story of her determined effort to identify and track Jones’s social and political networks, as she hoped that each new contact might point her toward an unknown cache of material. That search—which culminated in the discovery of a collection of Jones’s papers and their placement in the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture—and Davies’s interviews with many of Jones’s friends and political comrades paid off. She answers many of my lingering questions about Jones’s family, her training as a journalist, her political struggles, and her personal relationships. Using this new information, Davies presents Jones as a living, breathing human being:

She was a helpful, sensitive person who could cook potatoes in five minutes. She liked having a nice coat, having her hair done, and looking good. She moved with a black, New York City style and tempo in the more formal London... She was serious, intuitive, and nice without arrogance. She liked a good time. She was a human being who wanted to do what she could for black people, but she was not antiwhite.

In addition to expanding our understanding of Jones as a person, Davies’s discussions of Jones’s journalism, political writing, and poetry make an insightful and well-documented case for Jones’s status as a significant intellectual leader within Caribbean intellectual traditions, black US



Finally, *Left of Karl Marx* restores Jones's political work in England to the historical record. The material on Jones's deportation and her immersion in London's Caribbean community, from her arrival in December 1955 until her death almost exactly nine years later, covers new ground by providing both information about her activities and theoretical insights about their significance. Davies suggests that Jones's rejection of deportation to Trinidad and her arrangement instead of a "voluntary departure" to England illustrates her decision to "step out of the dominant discourse surrounding her and into her own discourse." In London, she established a new life and identity that asserted her status as an African American, emphasized her participation in the Caribbean diaspora, and embraced pan-Africanism and internationalism. Whereas other writing about Jones (my own included) concludes with her departure from the United States, *Left of*

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Karl Marx reveals the details of Jones's day-to-day relationships and activities in London. She founded the *West Indian Gazette*, launched London's first Carnival, and organized Caribbean concerts, talent shows, and beauty contests—all of which solidified the Caribbean community in England and mobilized support for Caribbean independence and anti-imperialist struggles more generally. Davies is at her best demonstrating how Jones's work in England—most of which took place outside the domain of the British Communist Party—expanded and deepened her intellectual and political significance rather than limiting it.

Thus, the book's strengths stem from Davies's impressive search for and integration of new biographical material, and her ability to contextualize Claudia Jones and her work. Its weakness, in my view, lies in its emphasis on Jones as an exceptional individual (although she certainly was one). Davies doesn't provide enough context to explain either Jones's rise to prominence in the world of radical New York in the 1930s and 1940s or her unfortunate position as a political target in the anti-Communist 1950s. Although she pays lip service to Communism as a central influence on Jones during her New York years, Davies does not fully appreciate the degree to which the Communist Party shaped the lives and ideas of its members and leaders. I was surprised, for example, that in her discussion of Jones's intellectual achievements Davies did not mention the party's commitment to training promising working-class men and women to speak and write. It served as an educational institution for people like Jones who did not have the resources to attend college.

Even more important, Davies doesn't explain the genesis of Jones's feminist politics, leaving the reader to assume that they arose organically from her experiences as a black woman. She writes that Jones "brought an explicitly women's-rights orientation to the politics of the Communist Party USA and its organizations," implying that it was Jones who brought feminist ideas to the attention of American Communists. In fact, she was only one of

many black and white women who struggled, before and after World War II, to make race and gender central categories of Communist analysis.

In part because of Davies's lack of familiarity with the world of American Communism, she overemphasizes change in her discussion of Jones's post-1955 political work in England. Citing Jones's difficult relationship with the Communist Party of Great Britain, which did not welcome her with open arms, Davies writes that Jones's immersion in the Caribbean community took her political work in a new direction, which embraced the transformative potential of cultural activities. Rather, I would argue that Jones brought American Communist sensibilities about political culture to her work in England. Her commitment to organizing Carnival and other Caribbean cultural events in London mirrored American Communists' efforts to create alternative cultural activities and institutions that could nourish, politicize, and empower communities of oppressed people.

In the end, however, the strengths of *Left of Karl Marx* outweigh its problems. Readers interested in black feminism, the left, the Afro-Caribbean diaspora, and transnationalism will benefit a great deal from Davies's efforts to tell Claudia Jones's story and restore her activist and intellectual contributions to those discourses. Davies ends her book by writing, "As always, as one comes to the end of a project as formidable as this one, there are always new revelations to be made, additional information to be factored. I see this project as reopening even as it closes." With any luck, this book's revival of Claudia Jones's life and its illustration of her importance will bring even more sources to light and finally make possible a full biography of this important thinker and organizer. ☺

Kate Weigand is an independent historian living and working in Western Massachusetts. She is the author of *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (2001).



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