

Silencing the Radical Black Feminist: A Book Review of *Left of Karl Marx: The political life of Black Communist Claudia Jones*

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ABSTRACT

In their work *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* Carol Boyce Davies works to rescue Claudia Jones from obscurity and bring the brilliant intellectual back into dominant historical discourse. The Radical Black Feminist was erased from the history books because her intellectual thought posed a threat to the capitalist order. Claudia Jones spent her life working as a journalist allowing her intellectual thought to be brought to the masses in an attempt to build the consciousness of the people. She was key theoretician in the CPUSA and as a Black Radical Feminist Jones stood at the vanguard of revolutionary political thought working to push Marxism further left to account for the intersections of race, gender, and class. Therefore, leftist and Marxist political thought needed to be pushed further left to recognize the triple oppression that Black Women faced. Claudia Jones possessed a unique ability to speak across difference bringing different groups of people together. Her anti-capitalist political thought and this ability to bring people together was seen as a threat to the wealthy elite and the status quo, leading to her eventual deportation to Britain. This piece will work to highlight the life and contributions of Claudia Jones that has been given new life by Carol Boyce Davies.



Keywords: *Marxism, Intersectionality, Caribbean Political Thought, Black Radical Feminism, Historical Erasure*

BIO

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Buried in Highgate Cemetery in London, England is someone who is considered one of history's most radical thinkers. The cemetery in North London is the location where the radical philosopher Karl Marx was laid to rest.¹ The father of both Communism and Marxism Marx's work has stood the test of time. To the social elite and political right Marx and his philosophies are seen as a dangerous threat. To the political left however, Marx is considered a radical thinker advocating for radical and revolutionary change. His critique of capitalism and socialist ideals have been deeply influential to the left. However just to the left of Marx – unbeknownst to most – is an intellectual more radical than Marx himself. Often forgotten by the history books, with their contributions and struggle uncredited, this intellectual pushed Marxist thought further left and – as Carol Boyce Davies would argue – earned her spot being buried to the left of Karl Marx.² In *Left of Karl Marx: The political life of black communist Claudia Jones* Carol Boyce Davies works to retrieve the life and the brilliant work of the radical intellectual Claudia Jones. Conducting interviews, examining documents and looking through FBI files Davies makes use of the limited resources available to write an insightful biography on the life of Claudia Jones. Davies illuminates the amazing intellectual work that Jones produced as well as her activism and impact on the Caribbean community. The book *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* works to reclaim the life of Claudia Jones and illuminate her contributions in

pushing the limits of Marxism further left.

Claudia Jones was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad on February 21st, 1915 and immigrated with her family to Harlem, New York as a child; seeking the imagined American dream and instead receiving a nightmare³ of rampant urban poverty and racial oppression. Her working-class family faced oppression both because of their class position and status as Caribbean immigrants. This discrimination that her family faced, the poor economic situation and the denial of Black citizen rights led to Jones to organizing for and believe in the need for Black liberation.⁴ Jones grew up during a time when Jim Crow laws still existed in the United States and Black People were subjugated to white violence. Claudia Jones organized against Jim Crow and the racist discrimination it stood for.⁵ During this time, her mother passed away at the young age of thirty-seven at a workstation in the garment shop where she worked.⁶ This was a pivotal moment in Jones's life as she considered her mother's death to be as a result of the extreme exploitation of the capitalist system and saw it as endemic of the ways in which millions of working-class men and women suffer under this capitalist system.

Claudia Jones eventually began writing for an American-West Indian newspaper in which her father was the editor and throughout her life worked as a journalist to build the political consciousness of the working class.⁷ Working as a journalist outside of traditional academia, Jones' theorizations and politics was able to go

¹ Carol Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Duke University Press, 2007), 2.

² Davies, 2

³ Davies, 199

⁴ Davies, 199

⁵ Davies, 62

⁶ Davies, 199

⁷ Davies, 199

directly to the people. Carol Boyce Davies argues that intellectual activity is not always located within the ‘academy’ and Jones’s followed a long tradition of Black activists and radical Black intellectuals who used newspapers to communicate with the public.⁸ Jones wrote for the Young Communist League’s Weekly Review, CPUSA’s Daily Worker, and her “Half the World” column, and after her deportation to Britain, founded the West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News.⁹ In 1936 Claudia Jones officially joined the Communist Party and throughout her time in the party she wrote nine essays on women’s rights as well as continued her work as a journalist.¹⁰ In CPUSA Jones fought for the equality of women and was a leading theorizer linking issues that women faced to class struggle, anti-imperialism, and the anti-war movement.¹¹ Jones’s saw the exploitation and oppression of women as a result of capitalism which maintains patriarchal relations as a key component.

This oppression of women is also part of a global struggle and a key to ending this oppression would be the dismantling of the capitalist system, which espouses patriarchal power relations, replacing it with a socialist system. Even though Jones and the CPUSA’s Women’s Commission dealt specifically with the needs of U.S women Jones’s feminism was internationalist. Jones’s biggest contribution during her time in CPUSA was she illuminated the intersections of race, class, gender, and imperialism.¹² This theorization allowed Jones to challenge the limits of CPUSA’s

theorization and had a profound influence on both Marxist thought and women’s movements that followed. Even though the CPUSA had many women in the party Jones had to fight against patriarchal power relations within the communist party; challenging longstanding norms in order for men in the CPUSA to take the oppression and exploitation that women faced seriously. Jones also fought against racist power relations illuminating that certain women held power while other women were subordinated based on race. Her theories on “triple jeopardy” of oppression and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class helped push CPUSA towards a truer theory of liberation. Claudia Jones was also an advocate for peace and the peaceful relations between nations. She linked war to imperialism and to issues of women’s rights, black rights and labor exploitation. As a part of this process, she pursued peace work and saw achieving peace to being tied to the dismantling of imperialism and capitalism. This is despite the fact that any anti-war stance in the United States was considered communist – therefore implicitly anti-America — and Claudia Jones was aware that her identification as a communist would lead to her multiple arrests and eventual deportation.

Throughout, her tenure in the CPUSA Jones faced multiple arrests under the Smith and McCarran-Walter Act which eventually led to her exile to Britain on October 23, 1955.¹³ This was a result of the United States War on Communism which in actuality was a war on anything that

⁸ Davies, 73

⁹ Davies, 72

¹⁰ Davies, 200

¹¹ Davies, 31

¹² Davies, 30

¹³ Davies, 194

¹⁴ Davies, 194

opposed the status quo.¹⁴ Following World War II and the growth of socialist liberation struggles around the world communism became constructed as a threat to American society. The United States elite feared the opposition of subjugated people in the United States who would throw off the chains of oppression and fight for radical change. Any political stance that opposed the dominant positionality, opposing capitalist and colonial institutions was seen as communist. Therefore, Claudia Jones was constructed as a threat to America because of her socialist beliefs and her desire to reorient society around the most vulnerable – Black women. Jones also presented a particular threat because of her ability to speak across divisions and bring people together. From this perspective, it is clear the Jones was deported because she was a Black Woman espousing ‘contrary’ political beliefs and activity leading to her construction as an enemy of the state. Claudia Jones’s identification as a Black Woman Communist of West Indian descent, which put her in opposition to racial discrimination and the white supremacist state that is the United States¹⁵

Facing deportation Jones desired being sent to Britain and comparably Britain thought this was better than her going to the Caribbean because they would be better equipped to handle her politics there.¹⁶ This is because during Jones’ deportation, the Caribbean was embroiled in revolutionary struggles for liberation and Britain did not want to risk a radical figure like Jones amplifying these voices. Her exile in England altered the nature of

her work as the Communist Party in Britain was excessively racist and she did not have the energy nor patience to fight against the same racism that she had fought to illuminate in the United States party.¹⁶ Davies illuminates that her emigration to the U.S led to Jones facing racism while with her migration to Britain she saw similar trends of racism leading to Pan-African politics of resistance and the internationalizing of her understanding of racism.¹⁸ This led her to focus more directly on the developing of a Caribbean community in England, pan-Africanism and internationalism. Claudia Jones worked closely with the Caribbean/African diaspora community as well as the Asian community and Eastern Europeans.¹⁹ Jones became a leading figure in the Caribbean community in Britain and she founded the West Indian Gazette which later became the West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News in 1957.²⁰ This newspaper was central to the development of a Caribbean community in Britain and she developed her internationalist politics covering issues in the Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean and connecting these issues to capitalism and the anti-imperialist struggle.

Jones journalism was key to developing a political consciousness for those that read but illuminating the social relations relating these groups to come together in solidarity. Claudia Jones helped develop the growing London Caribbean community through her journalism, activism and the establishing of the London Carnival. The carnival was part of Caribbean culture

¹⁵ Davies, 33

¹⁶ Davies, 145

¹⁷ Davies, 170

¹⁸ Davies, 6

¹⁹ Davies, 6

²⁰ Davies, 172

and this event worked to resist, “Euro-American bourgeois aesthetics, imperialism and cultural hegemony, and political and racial oppression. Carnivals, in the African diaspora tradition, demonstrate the joy that its people experience in ‘taking space.’ A number of scholars have identified the generating elements of Caribbean carnivals generally.”²¹ As Jones shows through her work with the London Carnival, culture is important in the development of sustainable communities and Jones saw that community was key to the development to the success of any struggle against capitalism and colonialism. Davies says, “for Jones, as the title of her article indicates, art and culture, if linked deliberately to human freedom as fundamental aspects of human self-assertion and expression, provide the impetus for human liberation: A people’s culture is the genesis of their liberation!”²² In this way, Jones sees culture as integral to any and all liberation struggles. Colonialism fought to erase the history of the colonized as well as their culture enforcing Eurocentric traditions upon the subaltern. They called this a civilizing mission, but they did this to weaken the people’s resistance to the colonial system therefore culture is key to its destruction. In the individualizing system of capitalism and the erasure of the colonized culture, cultural resurgence is integral to uniting the colonized people and mobilizing against these racist systems. The capitalist and colonial powers may have guns or tanks, but the colonized people have culture, and they have community.

Carol Boyce Davies illustrates how Claudia Jones has expanded and pushed Marxist theory further left to include both race and gender as the work of Karl Marx and Marxist theorists before Jones lacked an analysis of these perspectives. These theorizations chose not to illuminate the racist, patriarchal and white supremacist nature of capitalism. Davies therefore in her work such as *An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Women* illuminate that Black Women were not simply discriminated and exploited based on class but face a “triple jeopardy” based on their class, race and gender.²³ Karl Marx saw all of history as being a conflict between classes, between the elite in society, the working class and the peasant class. Marx offers a robust critique of capitalism that shows that capitalism is an exploitative system that exploits the working class. In a capitalist society there is the bourgeoisie, capitalist or elite class that owns the land and means of production. The other class is the proletariat or working class, which owns neither land nor the means of production therefore all they have to sell to meet their basic needs for survival is their labor. The philosopher promoted a theory of society that saw a movement from feudalism through capitalist to socialism.²⁴ Therefore Marx promoted the overthrowing of the capitalist system and the ruling elite through revolutionary struggle and the establishing of a socialist society that is ruled by a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’²⁵ His critique of capitalism and socialist ideals have been deeply influential to the political left but a gap in his analysis is the question of race or gender. Marx could not see past his own

²¹ Davies, 33

²² Davies, 145

²³ Davies, 170

²⁴ Davies, 6

²⁵ Davies, 6

as a white European man and this limited any accounts of colonization or the struggle of women. Even though Marx's scope was limited others worked to expand Marxism. Lenin for example similarly sought to advance Marxism further to include issues of colonialism, imperialism, and provide an analysis of women in society.²⁶

Even with the contributions of Lenin it was the radical intellectuals of the Caribbean that pushed Marxism further left to illuminate how class and race were co-constitutes of each other. It was the works of Black intellectuals such as C.L.R James that argue class is racialized because the first proletariat was the enslaved Black person.²⁷ James demonstrates here, as well as other scholars in the Black Radical Tradition, that class and capitalism are both racialized. Integral to the development of the capitalist system was the dispossession of land from Indigenous People and the exploitation of enslaved Black Labor. Capitalism is built on not only the exploitation of the working class but the exploitation of a racialized working class. Colonization worked to subjugate racialized people politically, economically, and socially for the expansion and development of the capitalist system. The process of colonization created stability for the resources of the colonized people to be stolen, labor to be exploited and a market that was controlled by the colonizing power. This led to the transferring of wealth from the Caribbean and the Global South to the elite in the Global North. Therefore, imperialism is

directly tied to capitalism.

Black intellectuals in the Caribbean worked to expand Marxism to include race but it was not until Claudia Jones that gender began to become an integral part of this analysis. It was the work of Black Women such as Claudia Jones that expanded Marxism to include not only race but gender. Claudia Jones argues that while all workers are being exploited Black Women are in a position of "super exploitation" because of their class, race and gender.²⁸ Jones theorization was grounded in communist theory and in the emancipation of all the working class but as a working-class Black Woman herself she saw that the emancipation of Black Women was central to full emancipation of the working class. Jones says that Black Women are "the most oppressed stratum of the whole population," and then says "Capitalists exploit woman doubly, both as workers and women. Woman has to face special oppression in every field in capitalist society- as a worker- a wife, and a homebuilder and a citizen."²⁹ Jones illuminates here that women are doubly oppressed because of their gender but Black Women are at the most oppressed because they are also oppressed because of their race. Jones then argues that Black Women are often the heads of households in Black communities and that the entire community would remain in poverty if Black Women continued to face this triple jeopardy.³⁰

²⁶ Davies, 212

²⁷ C.L.R James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and The San Domingo Revolution* (Penguin, 1989), 329.

²⁸ Davies, 2

²⁹ Davies, 41

³⁰ Davies, 41

³¹ Davies, 30

Claudia Jones in *For New Approaches to Our Work Among Women* illuminates that Black Women are restricted to the lowest paying jobs such as a domestic labor and not only makes less money than men but make less than half the pay of white women. This illuminates that Black Women were being oppressed for their class, race and gender. Claudia Jones also illuminates here that certain women, while oppressed by men, hold positions of power over other women based on their racial position. Even in the CPUSA Jones had to struggle to show that mainstream feminism did not account for the specific experiences of Black or racialized women and Jones struggled to fight against these power relations. Robin D.G Kelley says, “the structural position of Black People-Black Women in particular- in the political economy placed them in the vanguard of the revolution.”³² Black Women are the most exploited and the most vulnerable in society therefore because of their position Jones sees them as the driving force to make change. This is definitely illuminated through *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* which similarly demonstrates the ways in which Claudia Jones and the Black Women she influenced are the vanguard of radical change.

Throughout her life Claudia Jones had made profound impacts on Marxism, Black Feminism and the developing of a Caribbean community in London. Jones pushed those on the left to include in their politics the super exploitation of Black Women and to see the intersections of class, race and gender. As an internationalist Jones illuminated the social relations

connecting the working class struggles and the struggles for liberation across the globe to an oppressive system of capitalism. Jones founded the London Carnival and worked to establish a Caribbean community in London. With all the labor and all the impact she has not received the credit for all her accomplishments throughout her life. The name Claudia Jones remains unuttered, slipping out of dominant discourses and historical narratives. In this respect, Claudia Jones remains a forgotten, unsung hero of the left. In Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* the author argues that all history are narratives constructed by power.³³ History is not about truth but constructing narratives that serve the ruling class and those in power. The elite decide what is allowed to be remembered and what is to be forgotten. Claudia Jones was someone that the elite in society wanted silenced because her radical politics could lead to change which threatened the status quo.

Claudia Jones was a Black feminist, a Marxist-Leninist, and an internationalist that could speak through difference to unite groups of people in the struggle against the system of capitalism and colonialism. She was both anti-racist and anti-patriarchal seeing these being inherently linked to the globalized system of capitalism and colonialism. Jones’s politics were anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist threatening the agenda of the elite in society. She was trying to reorient society to take care of the people and the most vulnerable. Claudia Jones was erased from the archives of history because of this threat she caused to the capitalist system

³² Davies, 38

³³ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*, (Beacon Press, 1995), 29.

and the profit of the elite in society. The Smith and McCarran-Walter Act were launched as weapons to incarcerate and deport radical change from occurring. These legal codes were used to criminalize all those desired the radical reorientation of society to be centered on the needs of the people and not the elite. The state's goal was the stopping of these ideas from spreading across America causing the oppressed working class to rise up against their oppressors. They also feared the colonized people such as Black People rising up, as was occurring throughout the Caribbean and the Global South at the time.

Claudia Jones was deported not only for being a communist, but a Black Woman that identified as a communist. Davies says, "Claudia was able to identify all the specific rationales for her deportation but all of which came down to the fact that she, a black woman assumed the identity of being a communist, as did Angela Davis two decades later, namely someone who struggles through an organized Communist Party effort to bring about an egalitarian society free from class, race, and gender injustices. Her political identity as a communist, added to her identification as Caribbean, complicated even further, in the view of the ins, her rights to U.S. citizenship."³⁴ As a Black Women Jones encountered both patriarchy and anti-Black racism throughout her life. Being a Black Women she was constructed as a threat or a dangerous other to America's white supremacist society. Black Women are at the bottom of the social order and through their othering are constructed as not belonging to the central

tenants of the American State. This combined with her being constructed as a communist, a threat to the capitalist order, lead to her erasure Jones similarly has fallen out of the history of leftist politics due to the ways in which she constantly pushed back against racism and patriarchy that existed amongst the left. This illuminates that in liberation, revolutionary struggle and organizing that women are often told to put their dream of equality on hold until after the struggle at which point, their efforts for female liberation are again ignored or erased.

The life of Claudia Jones demonstrates the ways in which women fight revolutionary struggles on multiple fronts. The struggle against capitalism or the working-class struggle, the struggle against patriarchy or for women's equality, and the struggle against racism or the struggle for racial equality. Therefore, her identity as a Black Women and the fact that she would not wait until after the revolution to challenge both racist and patriarchal power relations led to her conflict with white men and women within the party. Her politics, her race, her gender, and her ability to build sodality between movements lead to her erasure. Davies says, "While a domestic U.S. approach is appropriate for fleshing out the specifics of African American feminist political history in the United States, such a position remains bordered within the U.S. narrative of conquest and domination and thus accompanies the "deportation of the radical black female subject" to an elsewhere, outside the terms of the given U.S. discourse. For this reason as well, there tended to be a consistent deportation of class analysis

³⁴ Davies, 173

³⁵ Davies, 4

also to this elsewhere, though there would be fairly frequent mention of class in a variety of formulations.”³⁵

Davies illuminates here the radical Black female subject did not belong in the U.S because of their race, gender and their politics of creating a better world. This is an important demonstration of the ways in which neoliberalism begun to seep into identity politics and divide the people. Without class analysis people began to only theorize the links between race and gender not being able to connect issues of racism or gender to the structural system of capitalism. Therefore, there was a weakening of political thought that led to people dividing themselves among their identities instead of bringing each other together against the struggle against capitalism. This individualism and division are caused by the deporting of class and the new neoliberal order. The class struggle is integral to bringing different groups together and demystifying the social relations that connect racial and gender struggles to the capitalist system. Claudia Jones’s erasure was because she could see these links and unite the people against the system of capitalism.

The book *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* works to recover the Radical Black Women and reclaim the life of Claudia Jones to illuminate her contributions to pushing the left further left. It works to uncover the life of a revolutionary Women who spent her life struggling against racism, patriarchy and the capitalist system. Jones pushed leftist political thought and Marxism further left by illuminating the intersections of race, class

and gender. Her immigration to the United States and the racism she faced taught her the need for Black liberation. Her deportation to Britain and the racism she saw there furthered her political thought showing her that the struggle against racism was an international struggle. This led to growing of Pan-African aspect of her political thought. Being part of the African diaspora led her to not subscribe to a certain nationalistic identity. This combined with her understanding of the class struggle being an international struggle against the oppressive system of capitalism led her to work with people from different communities, races and political groups. This paper has sought to demonstrate the ways in which Claudia Jones’ ability to speak and unite people across difference ultimately lead to her silencing and erasure. Even with her silencing Davies illuminates that in the decades following Jones’s death there was a peace movement spreading across the United States, decolonization and socialist struggles across the Global South and a feminist movement.³⁶ Even with attempts by the United States to erase Jones, it is clear that her political thought was resonating throughout these movements and her struggle were carried on. This book, the work and life of Claudia Jones is integral for all those on the radical left envisioning radical different world. Carol Boyce Davies does a splendid job recovering Claudia Jones and the Black Radical Women illuminating that their position to the left of Karl Marx has been rightfully earned.

³⁶ Davies, 233

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