

Review of *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* by Carol Boyce Davies, Duke University Press, Durham, 2008.

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Left of Karl Marx by Carol Boyce Davies is an engaging and long over due scholarly treatment of the life of one of most important and yet obscure Black radicals—Claudia Jones. The Trinidadian born Jones (1915-1964) was a contemporary of more famous male Black radicals: Du Bois, C.L.R. James and Richard Wright. Jones was deeply informed by Marxism; and like her contemporaries, struggled with Marxism's applicability to Black life. Cedric Robinson's publication of *Black Marxism*, a path-breaking treatment of Black radicalism and Marxism, provides the historical, political and theoretical context for the emergence of Black radicals like Jones. Yet, despite its genius, Robinson's treatment was preoccupied with men. Gendering the Black radical tradition as male obscures our understanding of the numerous women, who, like Du Bois, James and Wright, rediscovered Black radical traditions and challenged Marxism's hold on radical social change. Davies treatment of Jones is an invaluable corrective to the male-centered analyses of the Black radical tradition, and perhaps more importantly, it resurrects a vital Black radical activist.

Jones' obscurity is by no means a reflection on her political legacy. As Davies points out, it sadly reflects that "women are not generally assigned importance as intellectual subjects" (Davies, p. 34). A valiant fighter for social justice for oppressed people globally, Jones left an indelible mark on the world. Buried in Higate cemetery to the left of her political mentor Karl Marx, Davies illustrates how Jones' spatial location in death continues her lifelong struggle to radicalize, rethink and expand the political limitations of Marxism. *To The Left of Karl Marx* is "an apt metaphor", writes Davies for this fascinating study (Davies, p. 2).

Early in the text Davies argues, her book is not a biography. *Left of Karl Marx* is part of a unique tradition of critical studies of political figures and artists. Davies' study is reminiscent of *Saint Genet*, Jean-Paul Sartre's critical biography of playwright Jean Genet. Part biography, part philosophical treatise and part literary criticism, *Saint Genet* uses biography to explore the art and politics of Genet. Through examining Genet, one gets a sense of France in the post-War years. *Left of Karl Marx* is part political biography, part Black diasporic analysis and part Black feminist critique. Like *Saint Genet*, Davies uses Jones' life to unpack the complex political terrain of the mid-twentieth century. Examining the political life of Jones acquaints readers with the radical politics Blacks participated in. Davies denies the links to biography to assure readers, particularly those in academia, that her study is scholarly in its approach and rigorous in its engagement. However, biography is undeniably an important element of her study and does not detract from its rigor nor diminish its scholarship; rather it adds a dynamic interstice to Jones' political and intellectual excavation. Thoroughly researched, Davis treatment of Jones connects her elusive and fragmented life. Scholars and students across disciplines will find something useful in this book. Historians will find Davies archival research pulled from, like Jones herself, multiple sites across the western world, worthy of praise. Moreover, they will find her impact on Black radicalism fascinating. For feminists, this study of Jones represents an expansion of the theories and figures that define the field. For Black Studies, *Left of Karl Marx* is an invaluable study that demands the field reevaluate its overemphasis on race and make gender and sexuality central.

By unearthing Jones' prison writing, Davies broadens the literary canon of writings produced by Black prisoners. George Jackson, Assata Shakur, Angela Y. Davis, and Mumia Abu-Jamal, loom large in Black American prison literature. Davies excavation of Jones' prison writing not only alters how we historicize this literature, but also situates it within a diasporic framework. Moreover, Davies analysis regarding the ways deportation acted as an extended incarceration for Jones, enables researchers of

prisoner writing to expand the carceral literary canon and complicate notions that the prison is the only site for prison writing.

At times, *Left of Karl Marx* goes awry. For example, in the introduction, Davies critiques U.S. Black feminisms for what she terms its rootedness in “its own particular domestic borders” (Davies, p. 16). Davies critique pushes U.S. Black feminists forward by demanding that it extend itself to women of color across the global south; a position that Black feminists like Jackie Alexander have spent much time calling for. Yet, her critiques are at times unsympathetic to the racial and gender terrain Black feminists have and continue to respond to. Indeed, the terms on which Black feminists engage hegemonic masculinity and white supremacy are grounded on their particular articulation in North America. Nevertheless, Davies is able to use this tension productively to theorize the ways in which U.S. Black feminists have and remain complicit in the scholarly erasure of Jones. On the other hand, there is much to be said about the ways in which the anti-communist movement of the 1940’s and 1950’s ensured her erasure. It was not until the radicalizing of the Black freedom movement in the late 1960’s and the emergence of Angela Davis, that public discourse about communism, particularly its relevance to Black peoples lives was altered, by which time, Jones had been neatly buried under decades of anticommunism.

Davies study of Jones could have been greatly enhanced by a sustained engagement with Marxism. While she rightly critiques Marx and Marxism for its white male universality, she does not take up Marxist theory and demonstrate exactly how Marxism erases the particular oppressive formations of woman of color. Here, her metaphor loses its analytical strength. Davies could have more forcefully made her case and utilized her metaphor better by having an ongoing conversation (in the way that Jones did throughout her life) with Marx and the limits of Marxist theory.

Overall, *Left of Karl Marx* is a fascinating study of a political figure that deserves recognition. Carol Boyce Davies has done a service to Black Studies and Women and Gender Studies by

resurrecting this champion of justice. Now that this difficult work has been done, it is our job to engage it.