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The transnational Black feminist politics of Claudia Jones

Carole Boyce-Davies

There are several entry points for examining the activist/intellectual who became Claudia Jones. Among these, her Caribbean American identity remains prominent. But in her later years, she would be central to the development of a Black British political identity after choosing exile in the then English colonial center of London. There, her Panfricanism and transnational activism were honed and practiced. Consistently though, she is readable cumulatively through her transnational Black left feminist activism. In other words, what we can define now as transnational Black feminism was retrospectively for Jones not only the art of navigating a variety of complex positions around race, gender, class, and nation through the generative experiences of migration across three geographical locations. An interesting blend of theoretical and practical positions created a life that preceded discourses of intersectionality, finding a place for art and culture as well; finding also a sense of personal political style that captured these identities.

Claudia Vera Cumberbatch was born in Belmont, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, in 1915 and migrated with her siblings to join her parents in Harlem, New York City, in 1924. In that same year, another Trinidadian of note, pianist Hazel Scott, who would later marry Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., would have a similar trajectory, migrating to New York also in 1924 and similarly being targeted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) during the McCarthy era. In her case, because she refused to perform before segregated audiences and was an outspoken advocate for Black Civil Rights, the political harassment she received led to her migrating to Paris, where she lived throughout the 1950s. Dancer Pearl Primus, also from Trinidad, would also migrate with family to New York City in 1923 at the age of four and begin the development of her international African dance career there.

Clearly, the post–Panama Canal migratory period from the Caribbean to the United States produced one of the formative demographic movements that created the New York Caribbean American creative-political communities to which they belonged (Watkins-Owens, 1996). Claudia Jones, for her part, would attend elementary and secondary schools in New York but followed a more distinct political trajectory as she joined the Young Communist League of the CPUSA (Communist Party USA) at the age of 18, which defined her life of activism. Here, she developed oratory, community organizing, and journalistic skills, which were usable throughout her life professionally and economically. Claudia Vera Cumberbatch, who would take the name Claudia Jones as her activist name, a protective shield after she joined the CPUSA, is known for
advancing the “super-exploitation of the Black woman” as a concept which identifies the ways that Black women’s labor is multiply exploited by a variety of other “class fractions” – Black men, white women, white men – rendering her multiply and super-exploited in her relations with the rest of society. But beyond that formation, her activist and intellectual understandings of the Black woman as a political and economic subject meant that she understood the Black woman in a transnational context borne of not only her own experiences as a young Afro-Caribbean woman, living and working in cosmopolitan centers like New York and London, but also her study of and encounter with other Black women from a variety of locations.

Transnational Black feminist politics

According to Julia Sudbury in “Feminist Critiques, Transnational Landscapes, Abolitionist Visions,” the introduction to Global Lockdown: Race, Gender, and the Prison-Industrial Complex, transnational feminism is part of a “wider anti-imperialist, anticapitalist endeavor.” As she further explains:

Unlike global feminism, transnational feminist practices do not depict “women’s oppression” as unitary or universal. Nor do they subscribe to the vision of women’s experience as a fragmented mosaic of cultural and national difference. Rather this approach focuses on the linkages that emerge out of transnational networks of economic and social relations.

The actual position of the Claudia Jones gravestone marker, to the left of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, London, as one confronts the Marx bust, is the generative image for the titling of my work, Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones (2008), where I assert that in many ways, Claudia Jones’s work pre-dates what is defined today as transnational Black feminism or anti-imperialist Black feminism. Jacqui Alexander, in her chapter “Transnationalism, Sexuality, and the State: Modernity’s Traditions at the Height of Empire,” from her book Pedagogies of Crossing (Alexander, 2006), has perhaps one of the most detailed articulations of some of the discursive positions that transnational Black feminism advances. She sees it as a response, for example, to a great deal of “entanglement between state and corporate power” (182). She raises a series of questions aimed at unpacking the nature of state’s “heterosexualizing of the nation … a way of looking at how feminist praxis can address state’s investments in sexuality within formulations of transnationalism” (182). Her conclusion is that:

As we recognize that the nation-state matters more to some than to others, we also need to recognize that the borders of the nation-state cannot be positioned as hermetically sealed or epistemically partial. Our knowledge-making projects must therefore move across state-constructed borders to develop frameworks that are simultaneously intersubjective, comparative and relational, yet historically specific and grounded.

(Alexander, 2006, 253–4)

Along the way, Alexander sees “modernity” as a more polite wording of neo-imperial projects. Thus, she does not want to see transnational time as linear but rather, palimpsestic, a series of traces on which are inscribed new formations of the same.

Examining the literature on transnational Black feminism, I was able to conclude that transnational Black feminist work recognizes that our current geographical locations are products of multiple historical processes, many of which we had no control over, which have produced us, as
subjects, in various “nation-states” of the world, having to interact with other similarly or differently produced individuals. These displacements are the end-product of some very hateful processes: wars of domination, colonialisms, enslavements, holocausts, encampments, dispossession, and genocide. Thus, preliminarily, transnational or cross-cultural feminist work has to assess how we were produced as subjects in the wake of European Enlightenment and modernism, colonialism, and their various enterprises. More recent structural adjustments, economic globalization and the transnational movement of capital in its search for cheap labor sources worldwide, are re-produced under various nationalist/regional and global imperatives.

Minimally, then, we are accounting for a large international community, which continues to engage feminism from a variety of ethnic locations other than U.S. Black feminist positions. Transnational feminism would arise preliminarily from one larger assumption: working cross-culturally is an essential feature of our contemporary world, and our own specific locations and identities must be part of the basis of our analyses. With this in mind, then, any contemporary cultural and political work that wants to move out of fixity and specific imperialistic interpolations has to account for its particular location, articulate its own specificity, and move towards the recognition of the existence of other cultures and political realities in some cross-cultural/trans-locational way. The category “Black woman” or “Black feminism” deployed in a limited nation-state way is thereby re-defined, based on the experiences of a number of Black women internationally.

My earlier formulation of “migratory subjectivity” (Boyce Davies, 1994) accounted for the ways our identities are formulated in movement. And in some ways, its meaning may be considered here as generative, as it is through migration of bodies, ideas, and perspectives that one gets to the transnational. Perhaps the most critical recognition, in doing transnational feminist work, is understanding that the nation-states in which we live as subjects have been produced out of specific political imperatives and histories and therefore seek to contain, arbitrarily, a variety of peoples subject to the whims of these same nation-state enterprises. Thus, African Americans/Caribbean Americans in the United States end up carrying some of the weight of U.S. imperialism and its manifestations in war efforts and capitalist expansion. The series of persons displaced via global economic processes, who must constantly reconcile themselves to existing emotionally and physically in different spaces, may enter what is popularly referred to now as diaspora, a space that resists centering even as it identifies longing, homelands, and a myth of origin. Still, there are those who remain outside diaspora or live in intersecting diasporas. “Migrating subjects,” as I have argued, already consistently negotiate borders in assertive ways, challenging the entrenched meanings of those in intact locations, crossing and re-crossing them, making them sites of transformation.

A growing body of scholarship, produced by Black women/women of color themselves, is systematically addressing the specificities of women’s lives in myriad locations, identifying what the particularities of gender, sex, sexuality, race, class, and so on mean when looked at with different lenses or at least when removed from the fixed location of “under western eyes” (Talpade Mohanty 1991). Beverly Guy-Sheftall’s overview, “Speaking For Ourselves: Feminisms in the African Diaspora” (2003: 27–43), offers a range of Black feminist contributors and positions across the African diaspora, beginning with Anna Julia Cooper and ranging through the Casely-Hayfords to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti to the contemporary contributors to black feminist production internationally. Transnational Black feminist work, which accounts for some of these movements and migratory journeys as they also attempt to make connections, makes meaning based on a variety of these experiences and is reflected as well in the kind of gender work that Jones did from a variety of political positions and geographical locations. And there is sufficient evidence, as Guy-Sheftall reveals, that these women often worked collaboratively across
continents. Amy Ashwood Garvey, Eslanda Goode Robeson, Charlene Mitchell, Anna Davin, and Jones maintained an international friendship and communication and were supportive of each other’s projects, crossing oceans at times. Jones is identified as attending the same meeting as Funmilayo Ransome Kuti at the World Congress of Women in the USSR in 1963 (Sherwood et al., 1999, 110).

With the various trajectories accounted for, it is not difficult to begin a process of recognition of the various positionalities we occupy/have occupied historically. This is the process that for me, offers the possibilities for the transformation of the unequal bases of our arrangements. The context in which I want to locate this particular work on Jones is one that recognizes the transnational as it relates to the local. For Jones herself was able to link the specific struggles of women from a variety of locations to those of women in world hegemonic powers like the United States.

As cultural critic Stuart Hall (1991) appropriately asserted well before the popular discourses of globalization, the global has now become the local; indeed, they (the global and the local) are imbricated, one in the other. Separating them masks the ways in which capital traffics in global ways. Media, markets, and communications of various sorts produce a multiplicity of possibilities. At the same time, they continue to exact a toll on those left out or exploited by these same processes. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, in their introduction to Scattered Hegemonies. Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices (1994), see the transnational as problematizing purely locational politics of global–local or center–periphery. They would assert that “transnational linkages influence every level of social existence. Thus the effects of configurations of practices at those levels are varied and historically specific” (13). Caren Kaplan in “The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Critical Practice” sees this formulation by Adrienne Rich as attempting the “dewesternization of the feminist movement.”

Feminist thinking in the presence of globalization, in my view, cannot help but be minimally transnational. A more fully relational scholarship and activism allows us to find models of this kind of work that already existed in prior and current activist/intellectual work (Eisenstein, 2019). Claudia Jones had clearly already gestured to this interconnection as early as the 1940s. Thus, we can more definitively embrace a history of transnational Black feminist work, making a distinction between work as activism and Black feminist theory as ideas solely. The Claudia Jones model reveals a labor-intensive set of activities that link activist work with intellectual work. For those of us working in this phase of capitalist globalization, and in the presence of a phenomenal rise in the distinctions between those with and without access to power and resources, a refined critique of imperialism in its many forms has to be redesigned. A feminism that sees the other only as subject of research and not as creator of meaning, or cannot make the fine class distinctions or take the kind of political risks that earlier generations took, would have little relevance.

Jones was a ground-up activist who not only lived her life as a transnational Black feminist subject but also articulated these positions conceptually in her practice as in her ideas. For her, the transnational was a fundamental feature of understanding the local. Her clarity about the nature of Euro-American imperialism, honed in her Marxism–Leninism, afforded her an ability to assert resisting positions, not only to capitalism and imperialism but also to patriarchal dominance. Jones lived and organized at the intersection of a variety of positionalities – anti-imperialism and decolonization struggles, activism for workers’ rights, the critique of appropriation of Black women’s labor, and the challenge to domestic and international racisms and their links to colonialism – and therefore, was able to articulate them in ways that preceded many contemporary articulations of transnational African diaspora/feminist politics.

Angela Davis, in an interview in Abolition and Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture (2005), sees a link “between the internationalism of Karl Marx’s era and the new globalisms we are seeking to build today.” Davis makes further links with the global assembly line that
has already been well documented in her discussion of the commodity that Marx identified in *Capital*, which “penetrated every aspect of people’s lives all over the world in ways that have no historical precedent” (25). She also identifies her affinity with the Pan-Africanism of W.E.B. DuBois, which made links with people in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

This is what in my viewpoint, puts Claudia Jones and a range of left individuals like her on the other side of Marx. Jones would also do the same in her journalism in *The Daily Worker* and eventually in her work on the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News* (Boyce Davies, 2008, Chapters 2 and 5). In the former, she spends a great deal of her time identifying the “half the world” logic in terms of accounting for women’s lives globally located in struggle, and Black women in particular, and then in the *West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News*, she gives space and voice to the articulation of political movements across the African world.

Feminists’ ongoing repudiation, engagement, and critique of Marxism is well documented, requiring all sorts of qualifiers – red feminism, Marxist-feminism – and so on in order to relocate the gender issue at the same level as class and not solely in bourgeois family operations. Sylvia Wynter, for her part, in “Beyond Liberal and Marxist Feminisms: Toward an Autonomous Frame of Reference” (1982), argues that all these models are still limited frames of reference that operate within Western conceptions of the human.

**A radical life**

Entering the United States at the age of eight, Claudia experienced the effects of U.S. racial capitalism directly and as a result, saw her family’s condition as linked to that of other struggling Black people, many of whom had also moved from the rural Jim Crow South to urban poverty in the North. Indeed, her educational and political formations were cultivated in New York. Her political affiliations and positions are reflected in the range of descriptors with which she is identified: advocate for Black rights, political activist, feminist, communist, anti-imperialist, journalist, community organizer. Her professional training as a journalist gave her the skills to work in that field, moving from early articles in Black newspapers to her work in the Young Communist League’s *Weekly Review* and a steady movement through the editorial ranks. In each of these cases, her work as a journalist paralleled other political positions and served as a means of public education and organizing. Her work on the *Weekly Review* accompanied her service as education director for New York State of the Young Communist League. Her subsequent work on *The Worker* and *Daily Worker* paralleled her position as secretary of the National Women’s Commission of the CPUSA.

Because of her activity in organizing working-class communities for the Communist Party, Claudia Jones became targeted for surveillance by the FBI, was imprisoned three times by the U.S. government, and was finally sentenced to a year at the Federal Women’s Prison in Alderson, West Virginia before being deported in 1955 under the notorious Smith Act and McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, also known as the Immigration and Nationality Act. She is identified as one of 13 communists tried and imprisoned for having communist ideas in the United States and thus also became a political prisoner. Still a British subject then, she spent the years from 1955 to 1964 doing political and cultural organizing among the Black London community, and is known particularly for founding and editing *The West Indian Gazette and Afro-Asian Caribbean News* and for organizing the first Caribbean Carnival in 1958, which has now become known in its outdoor street carnival version as the famous Notting Hill Carnival. A number of community organizations in London have been named after Jones, but for years she was dis-remembered in the United States and the Caribbean. Jones died in her sleep on Christmas Eve, 1964, and following an almost state-level funeral of left activists, she was interred to the left of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, London.
Deported from the United States during the McCarthy period, she was meant to be erased. Making her way to London, doubly and then triply “diasporized,” as Stuart Hall describes the London diaspora experience, Jones arrived in London just after the Windrush (1948), the first ocean liner to begin the massive influx of Caribbeans into London and which has given its name to an entire generation of “West Indian” migrants. She was able, therefore, to have a role in providing institutions for the burgeoning Black community in London. Far from ever abandoning her Marxist politics, she found ways to re-shape it, as I argue in *Left of Karl Marx* (2008), which expanded Marxism to account for Black women, people of color, and African Caribbean migrants to Europe. She so impacted that society that her burial left of Karl Marx is a fitting statement of the nature of her politics, as of her life.

Claudia Jones’s art of Black left feminism is marked by the practice of a radical transnational poetics marked by insightful political analysis and action. Her entire range of theoretical and creative articulations describes a transnational Black feminism, informed by her communist identification – articulated in space, place, and time, and using a variety of images (in both poetry and prose) to articulate self as well as a range of theoretical positions. It is a movement outside what Glissant called “forced poetics” to “natural poetics” (*Caribbean Discourse*, 120). For him in “natural poetics,”

> [E]ven if the destiny of a community should be a miserable one, or its existence threatened, these poetics are the result of activity with the social body … The most violent challenge to an established order can emerge from a natural poetics when there is a continuity between the challenged order and the order that negates it.

(*Glissant, 1989, 120*)

In the work of Jones, we can observe a radical poetics operating in her poetic contributions, written mostly during incarceration, and in her political essays. Jones would herself own the idea of Black radicalism conceptually in *Ben Davis, Fighter for Freedom*, which was a spirited defense of communist Congressman Ben Davis, who was tried and also incarcerated for communism in the group of communist leaders before Claudia’s, by stating that:

> The very core of all Negro history is then, there are those who tell us that to be radical and black means three strikes against us, or to be black and red is even worse … The very core of all Negro history is radicalism against conformity to chattel slavery, radicalism against the betrayal of the demands of Reconstruction, radicalism in relation to non-acceptance of the status quo.

(*Jones, 1954, 36–7*)

Indeed, all scholars who did any Black activism at that time, according to Gerald Horne in *Black and Red* (1985), were considered communist; intellectual work and activist work of all Black people was assigned to communism. Witch hunts, deportation, arrests, and detention were common. The FBI became the machinery used to document and target Black entertainers – poets like Langston Hughes, dancers like Pearl Primus, singers like Paul Robeson, and activists of all kinds. This would be continued in the deadly assault on Black leadership and subsequent organizations like the Black Panther Party and a range of activists and intellectuals who were not communist (Boyce Davies, 2008, chapter 6).

The result is the strategic conflation today of “left” as anything that critiques conservatism. People who were actually leftists, like Jones, would be the object of the most intense reprisal, including imprisonment as political prisoners and finally, deportation. But, as we shall see, she was able to turn this towards creating something even more beautiful for the Caribbean diaspora in London: a Caribbean diaspora–focused newspaper and the London Carnival.
Still, one has to identify a black radical intellectual tradition to which many scholars would consciously belong. Several Caribbean scholars are indicated as representatives of this tradition: Eric Williams, Lloyd Best, Sylvia Wynter, C.L.R. James, and Amy Ashwood Garvey are exemplars. As Robin D.G. Kelley described the Black radical tradition, there were several scholars and activists trying to figure out the “global implications of black revolt.” Significantly in this process, they tended to embrace “some kind of diasporic sensibility, shaped by anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.” Thus he was able to conclude that “black intellectual and historical traditions, profoundly shaped historical scholarship on Black people in the New World” (Kelley, 1999, 1047).

It is important to say as well that much of the intellectual activity of the time of Jones remained outside the university. Most major institutions of higher learning were closed to Black people… There were few PhDs at the time, and often the intellectuals of the stature of a John Henrik Clarke (1915–98), an organic intellectual and pioneer of the field of Black Studies, were more respected than those in the academy. Not only that, but scholars like poet Melvin Tolson (1898–1966), memorialized in the film The Great Debaters (2007), saw the care, nurturing, and advancement of students as a sacred mission to make them be the best they could be; his role as a community activist was just as important.

It is in these pioneering actions that the field of Black Studies got its founding energies and logic of transformation. Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950) founded the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALAH) to promote historical research and to publish books on black life and history. He, too, would be considered by the FBI to be a subversive. It is in that context of the struggles for Black political and intellectual recognition and the legacy of Black women’s self-assertion that Claudia Jones had pronounced at her trial: “you do not assume that black women can think, and speak and write” (Jones, 1953).

Conclusion

Claudia Jones’s “why are they afraid of the words of one black woman?” resonates. In the speech for which she was eventually arrested, “International Women’s Day and the Struggle for Peace” (1950), she asserts that as far as the question of Black and white women workers are concerned, “left progressives in unions and elsewhere have contributed to the gross lack of awareness of the need to struggle for women’s demands.” This is a point she would reaffirm consistently and appears more firmly in her classic 1949 essay, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman.”

Jones, definitely a transatlantic activist, a Black radical intellectual from the Caribbean, and a Black left transnational feminist, moved Marxism-Leninism to another place and re-opened it for different utility, particularly because she addressed in her time those issues that Marx and Lenin left unarticulated. Indeed, it is my assertion that Claudia Jones, who had already provided superb analyses of the issue of Black women’s “super-exploitation” and an understanding and articulation of the role of the “third world” in left politics, is part of the ongoing process of recuperation. Her anti-imperialism, truly international in nature, allowed her to make decided links with other women struggling for liberation in a variety of locations, even as her own personal autobiography is implicated in her transnational approach.

Bibliography


