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# Claudia Jones Research and Collections: Questions of Process & Knowledge Construction

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**Charisse Burden-Stelly**

**Charisse Burden-Stelly (CBS):** How did your interest in Claudia Jones come about?

**Carole Boyce Davies (CBD):** While teaching in the Oxford University African Studies summer project, as a young assistant professor in 1989, I went to visit Carolyn Cooper who was then a visiting scholar at the University of Birmingham. There I met Buzz Johnson who had just published *I Think of My Mother: Notes on the Life and Times of Claudia Jones* (1985). It is important to say here that the title of his book was a quote from Claudia Jones analyzing her mother's difficult pathway after migrating to the United States, ostensibly for a better life, but ended up working in the legendary speed-up factories in New York and an early death in her thirties. Her demise, attributed to overwork, unsanitary and unhealthy conditions, definitely influenced Claudia's subsequent political direction. Buzz, in promoting the work, kept chiding us that people like me doing feminist work should get to know Claudia Jones. While I credit Buzz for this initial encounter, in honesty, the book did not capture my current sense of the importance of who Claudia Jones was in its presentation. It seemed more like a small booklet published by his independent Karia Press. Still, in the following years, I would include one or two of the essays in various course syllabi on Black Women Writers or on the Caribbean.

Years later, I was asked by Stanlie James to join a formidable group of Black feminist scholars as faculty for a semester-long graduate seminar at the University of Wisconsin. For my presentation, I decided not to repeat the normal lineage and US-based history of Black feminism that others like bell hooks would, but instead find a way to incorporate how Caribbean feminist positions were being articulated and linked to an anti-imperialist approach. In my initial research, I found almost nothing in most collections. Even the Schomburg had only a copy of a short bio by Robin D.G. Kelley and a few newspaper items on her incarceration. Much of this process is documented in *Left of Karl Marx* (2008) though my thought then was more exploratory, curiosity about who this woman was, rather than beginning with the idea of producing a book.

My research journey then to see what else I could find began in earnest in London, whenever I would go there for family visits or to teach in Binghamton's London program. I began by doing interviews with people who knew Claudia; and interestingly many of them were very emotional in our discussions and each one gave me something of Claudia that she or he had collected. Each conversation heightened my respect for and admiration of this formidable woman. I began by writing conference papers on different aspects of her life that interested me (Carnival, deportation, the FBI files), and discovered each time I presented that there was so much enthusiasm and encouragement from the audience, that it became clear this was a project that I had to continue. I received a Fulbright Senior Professorship to the University of the West

Indies, St. Augustine; and there I worked on her Trinidadian origins, birthplace in Belmont, the process to get the original copy of her birth certificate, and did research at the Oilfields Workers Trade Union and talked with former Trinidad Labor Union friends of George Bowrin who had interviewed her in London. Once I documented her origins in Trinidad, and with the support and encouragement of my colleague Rhoda Reddock, then head of the Center for Gender and Development there, it became totally confirmed that there was a book manuscript in progress.

**CBS:** In what ways did your research on Claudia Jones enhance, complicate, challenge, or upend your ideas about Black/Third World Feminisms and intersectionality?

**CBD:** My work on Claudia Jones, which became *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Duke, 2008), definitely enhances and complicates, but does not so much “upend” ideas about Black/Third World Feminisms. Knowledge of Claudia Jones and her ideological positions on gender, race, and class provides additional dimensions to our limited understandings of the genesis of these positions. A Black left feminism remained outside of the frames of discussion of Black feminism for many years, only with a tacit assumption that it started with Angela Davis’ *Women, Race and Class* (1981). In fact, Angela Davis in that famous Chapter 10 was one of the only other places that one could find a brief discussion of Claudia Jones along with a group of other left feminists. Significantly, Angela never claimed that she originated that women, race, and class framing though it was often assigned to her. My research reveals that this had been a CPUSA position—advanced, articulated, and expressed consistently by Claudia Jones. In fact what my work indicates is that Angela is not a lone individual figure with a unique and aberrant position (which is a framing our societies like, and which Marika Sherwood also uses to describes Claudia) but one of an important line of Black left activist women throughout history. As a woman of Caribbean origin, Claudia Jones also extends our understanding of Caribbean feminism with its anti-colonial/anti-imperialist framing. So my work extends our knowledge of a range of Black feminisms.

**CBS:** How do you think Claudia Jones’s communism, Marxism, and anti-imperialism influenced her analysis of “triple oppression”?

**CBD:** All of these components were central to her “triple oppression” conceptual framing. I spent a great deal of time debating with several dogmatic Marxist friends who claimed that Claudia was a Marxist and not a feminist. My position is that Black feminism is never an either/or framing whether we are talking about race or class. Claudia Jones clearly articulated all three of these positions. She was definite about representing workers, women, and Black rights in her framing without sacrificing one for the other. I think that once a woman like Claudia Jones, with her history—entered the movement—she could not simply stay with a class position only, but positioned herself, her mother, her colleagues, her experiences with racism, sexism, classism as a working-class woman and immigrant, as critical to these debates. In *Claudia Jones, Beyond Containment: Autobiographical Reflections, Essays and Poems* (Ayeibia, 2011), I deliberately included all her essays and organized them according to their emphases on anti-imperialist work, Black radical thought, critique of the carceral state, and articulation of the space for work on

Black women. It also includes an afterword from Alrick X. Cambridge, “When Socialist Values Harmonise with Human Desire for Liberation. Assessing Claudia Jones’ Politics” (207-220).

**CBS:** Does triple exploitation differ in substantive ways from the concept of intersectionality popularized by Kimberlè Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and others? If so, how?

**CBD:** It differs for sure, but only conceptually, not so much in intent. Intersectionality, which is a laudable Black feminist position, presupposes these intersecting oppressions, which meet in the presence of Black/Third World women. In fact, Kimberlè Crenshaw diagrams well how this is applicable in the field of law, showing how Black women can be rendered invisible in particular singular race or class-based contexts. It is at the intersections of these positions then that she positions Black women, and one can see it so vividly articulated in that particular critical race feminist position. A recent work which I reviewed has suggested the need for a “complicated intersectionality” to account for Black women from different locations and in different contexts (Esnard and Cobb-Roberts, *Black Women, Academe, and the Tenure Process in the United States and the Caribbean*, 2018).

In many ways, intersectionality borrows and expands on the framework articulated in Combahee about interlocking oppressions (See especially comments by Barbara Smith in Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, 2017). Triple exploitation differs in the sense that Claudia Jones articulates the “super-exploitation of Black women” which is defined as perhaps layered within the context of a Marxist labor framework as opposed to meeting at an intersection. In the “super exploitation” framing, dialectically materialist in orientation, all workers have their labor exploited under capitalist work relations, however those workers also have the ability to exploit the labor of other class fractions, and often Black women/women of color are precisely in that class fraction that can have their labor “super exploited” in the home and in the work place. So it is less an equal and intersecting location for ALL Black women. Working class Black women or women of color depending on their location in a hierarchy can also be exploited by other Black women or Black men with the class power and access to do so.

**CBS:** Why did you decide to bring Claudia Jones’s collections to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture? What did that process include? Were there other locations you were considering?

**CBD:** One day, while engaged in research in London, I met up with a few friends in a Brixton café, and there one of them pointed out a man who was Claudia Jones’s last assistant and was a London activist named Ricky Cambridge who for years edited a journal called *The Black Liberator*. I was able to organize a meeting with him and when I interviewed him about Claudia, he gave me quite a bit of detail but kept telling me that her papers must be somewhere in Hempstead, one of her last residences. A year or so later, Janice Shinebourne, a Guyanese writer friend who resides in London called to tell me that she knew someone who had Claudia’s papers and that I should contact Diane Langford who was the person in possession of them. I

learned that the papers had been in the possession of another writer for some time, as she was planning to write a historical novel on Claudia. I made contact with Diane Langford and one night, Ricky and I, who had become a research partner, accompanied me to Hampstead and Diane's home where we found two boxes and went through them as she contemplated what to do with these papers—wanting to place them in a secure location. Ricky kept lamenting that Claudia had much more in her archives, including an autobiography she had started. Diane was worried about having these papers in her possession and described having lent them to the BBC for a documentary, to Marika Sherwood, and to Merle Collins and had loaned some of the material to Donald Hinds, all of whom were working on writing something on Claudia Jones. She felt then that the collection needed to be secured. Immediately, I thought of the Schomburg and encouraged Dianne that that would be a fitting way of bringing Claudia back to the United States and to the Harlem she loved. She travelled to the Schomburg to make the arrangements and a deposit under my direction. The next year, I bought two large suitcases and packed the two boxes of material into them, and traveled with great trepidation with them back to the U.S., and to Northwestern University where I was then working, and began a process of documenting what was in the collection, scanning some things, organizing the material in preparation for it to go to the Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture much to the bated excitement of Dianne Lachataner. We agreed (Ricky, Dianne, her daughter Claudia Manchanda and I, that tThe Schomburg was the best location for such an archive because of Claudia's residential and political Harlem connections, her deportation from the U.S., and a kind of political need to return her to the community where she spent most of her life. Claudia Manchanda also wanted a more public availability of the material, perhaps on an on-line site, and definitely the collection which has become *Beyond Containment* and which acknowledges her for this reason.

**CBS:** How did earlier works on Claudia Jones by people like Lydia Lindsey, Buzz Johnson, Marika Sherwood, and Donald Hinds influence and/or shape your work on Claudia Jones? How did your examination of Jones's life and politics differ from earlier explorations?

**CBD:** Each of these earlier works provides critical components in piecing together the larger portrait of Claudia Jones. I realized in process that this woman who I started studying quite casually was indeed one of those larger than life figures, and that I was fortunate to have access and the professional resources to help her be known again and located in the group of major Caribbean, Black left and women activists. Lydia Lindsey was amazingly generous whenever we met, providing me with copies of material she had collected. I am still awaiting her work, coming from the historian's eye and with, I am sure, a much more extensive scanning of the archives as historians are wont to do. Marika Sherwood, Donald Hinds, and Colin Prescod organized the Claudia Jones Symposium which produced a great deal of discussion and documentation of the significance of Claudia Jones in London and led to their joint editing of *Claudia Jones: A Life in Exile* (1996), with a long introduction by Marika. Colin Prescod knew Claudia Jones as a child as she was a friend of his family who visited them frequently, and Donald Hinds had worked with Claudia on the *West Indian Gazette*. But before Marika, there was the Claudia Jones Organization and a pamphlet and exhibition by the Camden Black Sisters—*Claudia Jones, 1915-1964: A Woman of Our Times* (1988). There was also a Ph.D. dissertation by Claudia May titled *Nuances of Un-*

*American Literature(s)*, *In Search of Claudia Jones: A Literary Retrospective of the Life, Times and Works of an Activist Writer* (Berkeley, 1996). All of this is documented and listed in the bibliography of *Left of Karl Marx* (2008). In fact, when I wrote my book, I was expecting Lydia Lindsey’s to follow soon after so I tended to not do as much of the historical excavation she had already done. I still hope she finds time in the midst of demanding teaching commitments to publish her work.

**CBS:** Since the publication of *Left of Karl Marx* and *Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment*, an array of scholars including Eric McDuffie, Denise Lynn, Jacqueline Castledine, Dayo F. Gore, and Charisse Burden-Stelly have written on Claudia Jones from a variety of perspectives, e.g., postmodern feminism, Black left feminism, Black Marxism, and radical political theory. What is your assessment of this recent scholarship, and what types of future interventions would you like to see?

**CBD:** Black left scholarship is a wide-open field. I am so proud of the work of the next generation of scholars who are engaging Black left work deliberately. Indeed, they are each contributing necessary angles. After the preliminary work of Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945-1995* (2013) and Mary Helen Washington’s *The Other Black List: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (2015), we have a whole new generation of scholars advancing the library of Black left scholarship. For example, Zifeng Liu—one of my current graduate students who I met in Beijing in 2015 when I was doing a sabbatical at Beijing Foreign Studies University—has done research and written about Claudia Jones and Vicki Garvin in China. Scholarship has to be approached as consistently being advanced as more knowledge becomes available. A new field of Black left studies, thankfully, has a new life by a new generation of scholars, so much work is to be done, so many figures need to be explored, organizations to be studied. I taught Black Left Feminism last semester at Cornell University and students in that class are already in the process of advancing this field. New texts like Sara Rezeszutek Haviland’s *James and Esther Cooper Jackson: Love and Courage in the Black Freedom Movement* (2015) explore Black left activism from a variety of angles. I am hoping to see new work on Benjamin Davis, for example who was a political prisoner incarcerated for being a Black left activist as was Claudia Jones. Paula Seniors of Virginia Polytechnic Institute has a contract for a book on Mae Mallory and the left activism which ran parallel to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s.

**CBS:** Claudia Jones’s story is, in part, one of persistent state repression. How did this state violence based on her multiple forms of “otherness”—Black, woman, “foreigner,” non-citizen, Communist, worker—particularly impact her health, relationships, and security?

**CBD:** This is such an important topic. I believe the combination for Claudia was deadly. However, I saw a strange pattern in the course of my research—, i.e., that almost all the members of their group of Communists died in and around 1964. [Benjamin Davis - August, 1964; Elizabeth Gurley Flynn - September, 1964; Claudia Jones - December, 1964; Pettis Perry - July, 1965]. Somebody needs to study this conjunction particularly given the combination of incarceration, state surveillance, and other related factors.



**CBS:** “An End to the Neglect of the Problem of the Negro Woman!” is arguably Claudia Jones’s most popular piece and has been anthologized in a number of collections like *Let Nobody Turn Us Around* and *Words of Fire*. Why do you think this piece has remained relevant for seven decades?

**CBD:** I think it is an essay that goes directly to its target population—the Black woman—and the ways in which we were/are not being accounted for in a range of processes (personal, social, political). And indeed accounting for Black women has driven the fields of Black Women’s Studies, Black Feminism, Critical Race Theory, and related courses at universities, syllabi in history, literature, political science, for example as appeared in Hull, Scott and Smith, *But Some of Us Are Brave* (1985), with its amazing title. Additionally, it makes the point that there is a whole other historical trajectory for Black women’s work and activism. The introduction to *Want to Start a Revolution?* (Gore, Theoharis and Woodard, 2009) makes this point well. Of course, the language of “problem” and “Negro woman” in that Jones essay is dated and locked into its time frame, but the substantive argument about how Black women are often left outside of the frames of analysis, or from major consideration even in left movements was at the core of this timeless essay. I still think it should be read though along with “We Seek Full Equality for Women” (1949) which is even more deliberate in making the argument for women’s rights.

**CBS:** In your opinion, what are some of Jones’s most important, lesser known writings from which we can draw lessons about our current moment of White nationalist revanchism, neo-fascism, neocolonialism, militarism, and entrenched (but declining) U.S. imperialism? What can we learn from Claudia Jones about world revolution?

**CBD:** I like to use her piece on “American Imperialism and the British West Indies” (1958) because it is one of the best analyses of what was taking place in the Caribbean at the end of colonialism and the handover of the Caribbean by the British to the United States. In fact, I co-wrote an essay with a colleague titled “Imperial Penetrations and Caribbean Nationalism: Between ‘A Dying Colonialism’ and Rising American Hegemony” [*New Centennial Review* 3:3, (Fall, 2003): 131-149] to talk about precisely this issue. But Claudia was ahead of her time in articulating precisely how Caribbean freedom was being “mortgaged” to American business interests in the handoff between the United Kingdom and the United States given their “special relationship.” Her “The Caribbean Community in Britain,” (*Freedomways*, 1964) is also a good piece to document the Caribbean Diaspora in Europe and is, I believe, her last published essay. *Claudia Jones Beyond Containment* includes all her essays in one place. But there is a whole other project for someone who wants to study all her journalism. I have read one essay on this topic but this is an area I was not able to cover and which I see as a great future project for a young scholar interested in the use of media in activism.