

INTRODUCTION

Over the whole land, Negro women meet this triple exploitation — as workers, as women, as Negroes.

LOUISE THOMPSON, “TOWARD A BRIGHTER DAWN”

If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.

COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE STATEMENT, 1977

On 3 June 1935, “flying squads” of black women and children defiantly marched down Harlem’s 125th Street between Seventh and Eighth avenues, the neighborhood’s main commercial thoroughfare. They were one thousand strong. Chanting “Prices of meat must come down!” they demanded a 25 percent reduction in meat prices. Protestors held spontaneous street corner meetings about high-priced food and other pressing community concerns around high unemployment, bad housing, and inadequate social services. They meant business. Groups of women darted into white-owned grocery stores, confronting startled white merchants about why they sold high-priced, low-quality food to their black clientele. The demonstration was successful. Later that evening almost fifty stores agreed to immediately reduce food prices by 25 percent. The press in Harlem and within the U.S. Communist Party (CPUSA) reported this impressive victory. *New Masses* magazine, which was affiliated with the Party, lauded these women’s apparent working-class militancy, calling the action the “Revolt of the Housewives.”¹

By any measure, the protest vividly symbolized the CPUSA's ability to garner mass support and mobilize Harlem women at the grass-roots level around issues of survival and sustenance during the depths of the Depression. This demonstration also highlighted the key role black Communist women played in leading leftist movements. Much of this protest's success can be traced to Bonita Williams, a charismatic, working-class Communist from the Caribbean who headed Harlem Action Committee against the High Cost of Living, a group affiliated with the CPUSA. Her diligent pre-protest efforts gained broad-based community support for the action. Members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the black nationalist African Patriotic League, the Consolidated Tenants League, and the Communist-led League of Struggle for Negro Rights, as well as scores of politically unaffiliated working-class Harlem women, intermingled in the protest. The agreement with store owners brought Harlem Communists widespread praise in the community. Williams was elated.² The Party's official newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, quoted Williams: "Because of the unemployment and misery, the women are rallying rapidly to our fight against the high prices [of food]."³

Williams's comments succinctly captured the protestors' very practical motivations for taking part in these actions; they also shed light on her radical political outlook. For her, the Communist Party represented a powerful site for realizing black women's freedom, dignity, and respect. From her activism and her own firsthand experiences, she knew how high unemployment, homelessness, police brutality, de facto segregation, poor social services, hunger, and the high cost of living ravaged Depression-era Harlem. The global depression hit black women and their families particularly hard. For the next several years, Williams continued organizing in Party-affiliated groups around survival issues. Linking them to global struggles against fascism, white supremacy, and colonialism, she recognized black women as the gauge by which to measure democracy in the United States and globally.⁴

Williams is one of several black women radicals whom I profile in this book. They actively participated in movements affiliated with the CPUSA during the Old Left period, bookended by the Russian Revolution in 1917 and by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinist atrocities in 1956. Black women community organizers, social workers, artists, domestic workers, teachers, and writers enlisted in the Old Left Communist Party because they saw it as a powerful movement with real and imag-

ined links to the global political stage. Through the Party, they advanced black liberation, women's rights, decolonization, economic justice, peace, and international solidarity. The key figures in this story, who are covered at length here along with black male and white female and male Communists, are Audley "Queen Mother" Moore, Louise Thompson Patterson, Thyra Edwards, Bonita Williams, Williana Burroughs, Claudia Jones, Esther Cooper Jackson, Beulah Richardson (Beah Richards), Grace P. Campbell, Charlene Mitchell, and Sallye Bell Davis.⁵ Trailblazing activists and theoreticians, these black women gained reputations as leaders within the global Communist Left.⁶ I focus on their work in Harlem, the epicenter of the Communist Party's efforts in building national inroads into African American communities during the Old Left period. But I also examine their activism in Chicago and Birmingham, Alabama, and analyze their international travels to the Soviet Union and to Spain during its violent civil war during the late 1930s. Chronicling their varied, complex journeys through the Communist Left provides a theoretical and empirical template for appreciating how the international Left served as a key site where black women in the United States forged an innovative radical black feminist politics during the early and mid-twentieth-century that laid the groundwork for the black feminism of the 1970s.

Black Left Feminism

By tracing black women radicals' lives, this book recovers "black left feminism," a path-breaking brand of feminist politics that centers working-class women by combining black nationalist and American Communist Party (CPUSA) positions on race, gender, and class with black women radicals' own lived experiences. As coined by the literary scholar Mary Helen Washington, the term "black left feminism" describes the post-World War II literary work of black women radicals.⁷ In this book, I draw on, recast, and use this term as a conceptual framework for recovering a distinct radical black feminist politics and subject position forged by a small community of black women in the Communist Left during the Old Left period. Arguably, they constituted the most radical group of black women in the United States and globally during the mid-twentieth century. As I will show, the Communist Left served as a principal site and viable alternative for black women radicals to agitate for black freedom and black women's dignity outside of women's clubs, the church, and civil rights and black nationalist groups. "Black left

feminism” is useful for critically and broadly examining the gender, race, class, and sexual politics within black radicalism, American Communism, and U.S. women’s and transnational women’s movements from the 1920s through the 1950s and beyond. Black left feminism also provides a lens for appreciating the contours of twentieth-century black feminism and inter-generational linkages between black women of the Old Left and black feminists of the 1960s and 1970s.

Black left feminists’ key historical significance rested in their formulation of a theory of “triple oppression.” Emphasizing the connections among racial, gender, and class oppression, the theory posited that the eradication of one form of oppression requires the concurrent dismantlement of all types of oppression. This conceptual framework, now referred to by feminist scholars as intersectionality, is most commonly associated with black feminism of the 1970s, arguably most powerfully articulated in the black socialist feminist manifesto of 1977, the Combahee River Collective Statement.⁸ However, I show how black Communist women were the first to explicitly articulate this theoretical paradigm.

By analyzing the relationship between race, gender, and class, black left feminists countered prevailing assumptions within the CPUSA and the black Left that constructed the “worker” as a white male factory laborer, the “working woman” as white, and the shop floor as the determinant of class consciousness. Instead, black women in the CPUSA recognized how black women’s employment as domestics in white women’s homes, their subjugation to racialized sexual violence and the denigration of their bodies and reputations by their oppressors, and the intractable issues facing diasporic communities’ very survival were critical in shaping black women’s materiality and consciousness. Given black women’s location at the interstices of multiple oppressions, black left feminists charged that black women across the African diaspora, not white working-class men, represented the vanguard for transformative change globally. In doing so, black women radicals attempted to rethink Marxism-Leninism and re-center the Communist Left by advancing black working-class women’s concerns as central, not peripheral, to black and women’s liberation, and the world revolution. For these reasons, black Communist women devoted special attention to organizing and protecting black working-class women and to forging transnational ties of political solidarity with women across the black diaspora and beyond.⁹

Although I use the term “black left feminism,” my subjects would prob-

ably not have self-identified as “feminists.” (In fact, later in life, after the advent of the modern women’s movement, some vocally rejected the term.) Communists during the Old Left period reviled “feminism” as bourgeois and separatist, associating it with the self-identified feminists of the National Woman’s Party (NWP). Pursuing a legalistic strategy for women’s equality, the NWP agitated against protective legislation and for the Equal Rights Amendment beginning in 1923. By the 1940s, the NWP had become increasingly conservative, anti-Communist, racist, and anti-Semitic. Not surprisingly, Communists wanted nothing to do with this type of feminism.¹⁰

Nonetheless, naming them as feminists makes analytical sense. They can be called “feminists” because they understood gender, race, and class in intersectional terms and as interlocking systems of oppression. Because black Communist women were convinced that black women possessed a unique standpoint, their work in the Party exemplified an awareness of black women’s “multiple consciousness.”¹¹ While calling for self-determination for black people globally, black Communist women nonetheless challenged the CPUSA’s masculinist articulations of what it termed the “Negro Question” and the agendas and sexist practices of Communist and non-Communist black male leaders.¹² Black women radicals took seriously the CPUSA’s Marxist-Leninist approaches to what it called the “Woman Question.” Influenced both by Soviet family policy and traditions of black women’s community leadership, black Communist women demanded what the historian Kim Butler has described as “full freedom”: exercising all the rights and privileges of first-class citizenship, with special concern for the protection of black women’s bodies, rights, and dignity.¹³

The activism of black Communist women at times resembled that of their counterparts in church, women’s clubs, and the black nationalist Garvey movement. Like them, black left feminists resourcefully pursued social justice and developed global visions in organizational settings that were not always responsive to their needs. Agitating on multiple fronts and in multiple communities, domestically and internationally, black Communist women often practiced a pragmatic, coalitional approach for political organizing with ideologically divergent black and non-black organizations and people.¹⁴ Indeed, black left feminists saw no contradiction in pursuing interracial, left-wing, separatist, liberal, local, and internationalist political strategies, often simultaneously. They focused on winning tangible victories for underserved, disfranchised black communities and workers, and

for victims of social injustice and racial violence, particularly black female survivors of interracial sexual assault. Foreshadowing U.S. feminists of the 1970s, black Communist women understood the idea that “the personal is political.” Black left feminists and some of their male partners and comrades proffered what today would be called “progressive black masculinity,” a term the critical race theorist and legal scholar Athena Mutua uses to describe “unique and innovative practices of the masculine self actively engaged in struggles to transform social structures of domination.” For black left feminists, eradicating sexism and rethinking prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity constituted a key site of struggle.¹⁵ Their politics were “leftist” in that they unequivocally opposed capitalism and imperialism. For them, socialism was essential to black and women’s liberation. And they looked to the Soviet Union as a revolutionary ally to black people everywhere and a model for building new, modern democratic societies.

Interventions

This book moves black women from the margins to the center of narratives about black radicalism, diasporic social movements, U.S. and transnational women’s movements, and American Communism during the early and mid-twentieth century. Until recently, scholarship on early and mid-twentieth-century U.S. black women’s activism has focused almost entirely on the church, women’s clubs, and the Garvey movement. Scholars and writers, among them Deborah Gray White, Bettye Collier-Thomas, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Paula J. Giddings, and Ula Y. Taylor, have written probing accounts of black women’s crucial role in making these organizations powerful institutions for political and social change in black communities. Focusing primarily on upwardly mobile, urban, middle-class, educated women, these studies show how club, church, and Garveyite women formulated multiple variants of black feminism. Challenging the sexism of black male spokespersons, these women saw themselves as leaders of the “race.” They positioned themselves at the frontlines of struggles against lynching, Jim Crow, and colonialism, as well as for the survival and sustenance of black communities across the globe. These studies also provide useful insight into how gender and sexuality structured relations of power within these organizations and framed discussions of female respectability.¹⁶

This overwhelming attention to the church, women’s clubs, and the Garvey movement has rendered invisible a more radical aspect of black

women's history. My book reveals the ways a small group of black women defiantly rejected the middle-class political agendas and cultural sensibilities of traditional black protest groups and looked to Communism as a fulcrum for radical change and transnational political solidarity. These standard narratives additionally have elided the Communist Left as an important site for black feminist praxis and the practice of transgressive sexualities.

However, black Communist women are beginning to receive their just due. A growing body of exciting work by Carole Boyce Davies, Mary Helen Washington, Robin D. G. Kelley, Dayo F. Gore, Paula J. Saunders, Gerald Horne, Lashawn Harris, Mark Naison, Kevin Gaines, and Marika Sherwood have excavated the life and work of several black women of the Old Left. These include Claudia Jones, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and Victoria (Vicki) Garvin. This work has begun to chart black women's leadership in Communist-affiliated labor and civil rights organizations, trace the connections between black women militants of the Old Left and those of the civil rights–Black Power era, analyze black women radicals' construction of non-normative sexualities, and examine the CPUSA as a site for forging feminism, transnational identities, and political alliances. Uncovering these histories has expanded our understanding of black radicalism by challenging previous phallogocentric readings thereof and highlighting the key roles black women played in leftist movements.¹⁷ Still, much work remains to be done on black women's involvement in the Communist Left.

When black Communist women do make an appearance in existing scholarly accounts, these accounts often focus on the Depression or on the post–World War II period, overlooking how black women's radicalism evolved over an extended period of time. Moreover, these studies tend to treat them as individuals. I show how they were part of a community of black women radicals whose collective history spanned more than fifty years. Claudia Jones is a case in point. Many critics have focused singularly on this pioneering Trinidad-born black Communist woman. One of the CPUSA's leading theoreticians on the Negro Question and the Woman Question, as well as the preeminent black woman in the Old Left, she popularized the concept of “triple oppression” in the postwar Communist Left.¹⁸

Carole Boyce Davies's *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* provides a useful starting point for examining this collective history of black women's radicalism located within the Communist Left. Boyce Davies insightfully discusses Jones's life and legacy. Boyce

Davies asserts that Jones embodied a “radical black female subject,” a politics and identity that was internationalist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist in breadth and committed to the liberation of all people. For Boyce Davies, Jones’s burial immediately to the left of Karl Marx’s grave in London’s Highgate Cemetery is a fitting metaphor for explaining how she expanded and rethought Marxism-Leninism by incorporating race and gender into her political work.¹⁹

Jones’s key intervention, Boyce Davies argues, was her thesis on the “superexploitation of black women.” Derived from Marxist-Leninist thought, superexploitation refers to uniquely severe, persistent, and dehumanizing forms of capitalist exploitation.²⁰ Jones, however, refashioned this concept by accounting for black women. Her thesis referred “to the ways in which black women’s labor is assumed; the way they are relegated to service work by all sectors of society, with the complicity of progressive and white women’s and labor interests (including those on the Left). It related to their low salary, compared with the level of work they are asked to give in return.”²¹ In a unique move, Jones located “much of this treatment in the superexploitation of black women as mothers.” In other words, the capitalist process brutally exploited black women’s role as breadwinners and protectors of families by forcing them to work back-breaking, menial service sector jobs, often under the threat of rape, to ensure the survival of their families and black communities.²² Jones, however, did not view black women as victims. Rather, due to their place at the bottom of the political economy and their relegation to the service sector, Jones forcefully charged that triply oppressed black women constituted the vanguard for transformative change. Additionally, Boyce Davies calls attention to the virulent persecution Jones endured during what leftists called the McCarthy period, the moment of government crackdowns against left-wing activism in the 1950s.²³ Due to her visibility in the Communist Party and her outspoken criticism of Jim Crow, colonialism, and U.S. Cold War politics, U.S. rulers persecuted Jones, deporting her to Great Britain in 1955. However, Boyce Davies stresses Jones’s resilience in the face of Cold War anti-Communist repression. In London, where she lived her final years, Jones continued her radical political work. Reconfiguring Marxism-Leninism by championing black liberation, women’s rights, decolonization, and peace, Boyce Davies frames Jones as one of the most brilliant, innovative black feminist and radical thinkers of the twentieth century.²⁴

My term “black left feminism” and Boyce Davies’s paradigm of the “radical black female subject” have much in common. I have chosen the former because it evokes and usefully grounds black Communist women’s lives in the complex history of the U.S. and global Communist movements. Moreover, “black left feminism” illustrates how black women radicals such as Jones did not formulate their ideas in isolation.

I situate Jones’s life and work within a community of black women radicals, showing how black Communist women’s concerns for and theorization of black women’s exploitation, particularly as domestics, were crucial to the making of black left feminism from its very beginnings. Fighting for the dignity, rights, and protection of single, destitute black mothers was central to the work of Grace P. Campbell, a nationally renowned, Harlem-based social worker who held the distinction as the first black woman to officially join the CPUSA. She too wrote about black working-class women’s marginal status, appreciating how public policy, structural inequalities, and cultural biases worked in tandem to oppress them. She was not alone in drawing these conclusions. Louise Thompson Patterson, a bohemian, world traveler, and major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, wrote in her prescient article of 1936, “Toward a Brighter Dawn,” about the ways in which black women faced “triple exploitation,” thereby positioning them as the vanguard of social change. Similarly, Esther Cooper Jackson, a dynamic activist intellectual based in Birmingham, Alabama, historicized and chronicled black female domestics’ exploitation and resistance in a master’s thesis in 1940. Claudia Jones proffered the most elaborate discussion of “triple oppression” in her landmark essay of 1949, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” By focusing on the entire Old Left period, I show how black women radicals’ thinking evolved over four decades in response to their lived experiences, local and global events, and collaborations between themselves, politically mainstream black women activists, and white Communist women and black male radicals.²⁵

Calling attention to black left feminism expands the boundaries of what is commonly understood as black feminism. Black women’s participation in the Communist Party reveals the ideological complexities and contours of twentieth-century black women’s activism. Recognizing these tendencies affirms the black feminist theorist Joy James’s observation that “there is no ‘master’ narrative that frames the concerns of all black women.” She

adds: “Black women activists and feminists are not uniformly progressive.”²⁶ These are insightful points. Without question, black Communist women’s staunch anti-capitalist politics differentiated them from their more politically mainstream sisters in the club movement, church, and civil rights and black nationalist organizations. Still, black women radicals often collaborated with them. However, the former were keenly aware of the political and ideological differences between them.

Black leftist women also shift the history of black women’s activism by moving beyond the view of women as solely local, grass-roots organizers. Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard’s anthology *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* is useful for rethinking this point. They challenge the “bridge leadership” framework that defines black women civil rights activists primarily as behind-the-scenes organizers.²⁷ I show how many black Communist women functioned both as grass-roots organizers and visible, formal leaders within the Communist Left. This was true for Audley Moore. A brilliant organic intellectual and lifelong Garveyite, she emerged as one of the Harlem Communist Party’s most able community organizers and visible leaders during the 1930s and 1940s.²⁸ Esther Cooper Jackson also fits this description. During World War II, she served as the executive secretary of the Southern Negro Youth Congress, an organization based in Birmingham, Alabama, that was a militant forerunner of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of the 1960s. But she also agitated at the grass-roots level and traveled internationally. Black women’s ranking positions within Party-affiliated movements speak to the unique leadership opportunities they often found outside of traditional black protest groups to agitate for social justice and racial equality.²⁹

Another key difference between black left feminists and their politically mainstream counterparts concerned their divergent understandings of female respectability and representations as sites for social intervention. The historian Lashawn Harris provides useful insight into this matter in her study of African American Communist women during the 1930s. She argues that black Communist women “modified or rejected certain aspects of the politics of respectability because they were neither seeking legitimacy from whites for their institution building, nor were these women trying to reconstruct black images through proper etiquette or accomplished housewifery.”³⁰

By examining the entire Old Left period, my book uncovers how black women radicals formulated unique discourses and practices of respectability

over the course of forty years that both challenged and adhered to what the historian Victoria W. Wolcott has termed “bourgeois respectability.”³¹ She defines it as early twentieth-century middle-class “black female activists’ desire to act as unblemished representatives of the race and to reform the behavior of their working-class sisters.” Middle-class activists, many of whom actively participated in the church and women’s clubs, often viewed the behaviors of the black female working class as socially dangerous, reinforcing prevailing images of black women’s perceived hypersexuality and immorality. As such, the church and women’s clubs promoted temperance, thrift, cleanliness of person and property, the nuclear family, and sexual purity to uplift impoverished black women and communities.³² In contrast to this stance, many black left feminists openly defied heteronormative gender conventions. Some rejected traditional marriage. Others supported free love and willfully participated in the transgressive sexual underworlds found in bohemian and leftist communities. Many were unafraid to speak openly about sexual violence committed against black women by white men.

Black left feminists connected their non-normative articulations of female respectability with representation. Taking a cue from the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, I use the term “representation” to refer to matters of citizenship and grass-roots political organizing on a global scale as well as to how language and systems of knowledge production are created, produced, and circulated to create meanings.³³ I should note that black women radicals did not use the term “representation” to describe their work. This is my intervention. However, their politics did evidence an appreciation of the connection between meaning, language, domination, and resistance.

This intersectional view was most evident in the poem “A Black Woman Speaks of White Womanhood, of White Supremacy, of Peace” by the actress, poet, and leftist activist Beulah Richardson in 1951. Tracing black women’s oppression and resistance from slavery through the post-World War II period, she links denigrating images of black women and their disfranchisement to the rape and impoverishment of black women and the genocidal conditions facing black communities.³⁴ Arguably, she recognized what the black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins has termed “controlling images,” stereotypical depictions of black women “as mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas” used to construct black women as “the Other,” thereby justifying their oppression.³⁵ At the same time, the poem affirms the cultural critic bell hooks’s understanding of how representations of black

women stand as a significant site for political resistance and cultural and cognitive transformation: “The issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move away from dualistic thinking about good and bad.”³⁶ For black women radicals, representation was more than simply a contest around the meanings of language and a basis for political organizing. It was a matter of survival.

Black left feminists were hardly the first black women to appreciate representation and respectability as key sites for social contestation. Club and church women since the nineteenth century had centered respectability and cultural representations to their activism.³⁷ However, black Communist women made a key intervention in this discourse. They often demanded dignity, rights, and protection of black womanhood premised on three fundamentally linked assumptions: first, that adherence to middle-class notions of respectability did not protect black women from rape, violence, denigrating cultural representations, disfranchisement, and economic exploitation; second, that heteronormative, middle-class constructions and practices of sexuality actually inhibited black women’s and men’s freedom; third, that a socialist revolution that was attentive to dismantling racism, sexism, capitalism, and imperialism simultaneously was essential to black women’s liberation. Black women radicals and their male partners and allies were neither always successful nor interested and invested in articulating alternative ideas and practices of respectability. Sometimes they knowingly embraced and strategically employed prevailing gender conventions. Still, black left feminists’ efforts in cultivating non-normative gender sensibilities speaks to the diverse understandings of representation and respectability within early and mid-twentieth-century black communities and to how some black women viewed the Communist Left as a site for personal autonomy and sexual freedom.

By uncovering black left women’s stories, this book joins a growing literature in reconfiguring the periodization of twentieth-century black feminism and U.S. women’s movements. Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard’s *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* provides a useful starting point in mapping the connections between black women militants in the struggles of the Old Left and those in the struggles of the civil rights–Black Power era. The anthology emphasizes the intergenerational connections between black women radicals involved

in Communist and non-Communist movements in the 1940s and 1950s with younger militants in civil rights and Black Power groups.³⁸

My intention here is to construct an alternative genealogy of twentieth-century black feminism by recognizing black left feminism as an important progenitor for the black feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. Black Communist women's work demonstrates how the years from the 1920s to the 1950s were hardly a period of feminist abeyance as was once believed.³⁹ By no means am I suggesting that twentieth-century black feminism developed in a linear fashion. It did not. The Cold War, together with local and regional distinctions in African American women's experiences as well as global events, had major implications in shaping the trajectory of black feminism, shrouding and even in some cases discrediting veteran black women radicals' work in the eyes of the younger generation of black female militants in the 1960s and 1970s. But as I show, there were also direct intellectual, political, and personal linkages between black left feminists and younger black women. The term "triple oppression," the signature theoretical paradigm of black feminism in the 1970s, originated with black left feminists. Moreover, many feminists of the Old Left mentored young black feminists, presaging much of their work, most notably their "vanguard center" approach to politics. "Since Black women," the sociologist Benita Roth writes, "were at the intersection of oppressive structures, [black feminists of the 1970s] reasoned that their liberation would mean the liberation of all people."⁴⁰

Uncovering these intergenerational connections reconfigures previous conclusions about the roots of the black feminism of the 1970s. Much of the recent scholarship on black feminist organizations of the 1960s and 1970s, notably by Kimberly Springer, Benita Roth, Premilla Nadasen, and Stephen Ward, has either focused on recovering black women's involvement in "second wave feminism" or charted how black women fashioned their own distinct feminist politics during these years.⁴¹ For the most part, these works identify the civil rights movement as the "parent" movement to black feminism of those two decades.⁴² This scholarship also locates the emergence of black feminist groups, such as the Third World Women's Alliance and the Combahee River Collective, primarily as a response to the infamous Moynihan Report of 1965 and the "resurgent masculinism of Black Liberation."⁴³

By recovering these linkages, I join historians like Nadasen, who question the usefulness of the wave metaphor for understanding U.S. feminist struggles, which "neatly package[s] the women's rights movement into

peaks and troughs” by excluding women of color’s involvement in feminist struggles and by “re-inscribing gender as the primary category of analysis that defines feminism.”⁴⁴ More problematically, the wave metaphor frames these movements narrowly through a parochial lens of American exceptionalism, overlooking how transnational exchange and global developments informed U.S. feminists’ work. Given their transnational sensibility and influence on young activists in civil rights, Black Power, and black feminist movements, the history of black left feminism provides a missing link in the narrative of twentieth-century black freedom and feminist movements.

Excavating the stories of black Communist women renders them visible in broader scholarship on women’s involvement in U.S. labor and leftist movements. Employing the term “black left feminism” is useful to this end. The term enables me to engage the growing body of scholarship on “left feminism” and “labor feminism.” The historian Ellen Dubois describes the former term as a feminist politics of the Old Left that fused “a recognition of the systemic oppression of women” with an awareness of the intersections between race, gender, and class.⁴⁵ Similarly, the latter concept refers to a mid-twentieth-century “variant of feminism that put the needs of working-class women at its core and . . . championed the labor movement as the principle vehicle through which the lives of the majority of women could be bettered” as the historian Dorothy Sue Cobble puts it.⁴⁶ While both Dubois and Cobble make nods to an intersectional analysis, black women’s participation in leftist movements remains marginal to this scholarship. Given this, examining black women radicals’ lives opens up different conversations, revealing not only their presence in the Communist Left, but also how black and white Communist women often grappled differently with issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, and politics.

While I am concerned with uncovering the collective history of black left feminism and its interventions in black women’s activism and U.S. women’s movements, in this book I also chart black women’s political and intellectual engagement with the black radical tradition.⁴⁷ Discussions in *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* (2009) on Carole Boyce Davies’s *Left of Karl Marx* and Claudia Jones’s life and legacy are a useful starting point in exploring these connections.⁴⁸ Boyce Davies notes how, until recently, most scholars have, in essence, written black women out of the black radical tradition. She attributes this to the masculinist framings of black radicalism, together with the legacy of Cold War anti-Communism, in shrouding

black women leftists from scholarly examination of black radicalism. “Black women,” she writes, “have become sisters outside of the black radical intellectual tradition.” The relative invisibility of Claudia Jones from this scholarship and popular memory is, in Boyce Davies’s view, but one example.⁴⁹ Extending Boyce Davies’s discussions, the historian Kevin Gaines emphasizes how the lingering legacy of Cold War anti-Communism in the U.S. academy led scholars to dismiss the black-red encounter and activists like Jones.⁵⁰ Similarly, the black feminist theorist Patricia J. Saunders focuses on “sailing” and deportation to flesh out the role of Cold War repression with its concomitant racist and sexist politics in obscuring Jones’s life, as well as her resilience in advancing a diasporic, feminist, radical politics in the face of persecution.⁵¹ For Boyce Davies, Gaines, and Saunders, the recovery of Jones contains broader implications that extend far beyond prising open canonical narratives of black radicalism and black feminism. Acknowledging Jones as a “radical black female subject,” these scholars argue, challenges the legacies of Cold War anti-Communism and contemporary U.S. hegemonic global agendas that seek to stifle political debate and dissent and promote war, racism, imperialism, and women’s subordination.⁵²

In this book, I shift this conversation from its singular focus on Jones and her relation to the black radical tradition to a wider analysis of black leftist women’s collective engagement with black radicalism during the entire Old Left period. Calling attention to black left feminism demonstrates how black women collectively forged their own coherent, free-standing, radical praxis within this larger black radical tradition. This occurred often under seemingly intractable obstacles both inside and outside of the CPUSA from the 1920s through the 1950s. Understanding black left feminism in these terms historicizes postwar radical black feminism. This framework also provides an entry point for understanding how black women demanded a voice in the CPUSA, how black left feminism evolved over time and space, and how black radical men, black communities, and the state responded to black women radicals. Most of all, black left feminism shows how black radicalism is not a gender neutral category. Black radicalism has always been gendered; that is, the political programs, articulations, and “freedom dreams” of black radical activists and intellectuals are invariably informed and shaped by a complex interplay of gender, race, sexuality, class, and politics.⁵³

Examining the making of black left feminism is critical for understanding key interventions in black feminism and black radicalism and appreci-

ating the contours therein. I am concerned with understanding the process of *how* a small group of black women, who hailed from divergent social backgrounds and geographic locations both inside and outside the United States, became radicalized, joined the CPUSA, came to understand themselves as diasporic and transnational citizens, forged a dynamic community of left-wing activists, and profoundly shaped modern black feminism. Their radicalizations were not inevitable. In order to demonstrate this point, this book provides biographical sketches detailing how a unique interplay between local and global events and their lived experiences brought these women into the CPUSA, shaped their experiences within it, and nurtured their global sensibilities.

Examining a community of black women radicals also provides insight into the making of black left feminist collective identities. They were consciously aware that they constituted a small but dynamic community of black women radicals. Their shared experiences, solidarities, domestic and global traveling, and complicated relationship with the Communist Left as a whole forged this sensibility.⁵⁴ Kimberly Springer's work on black feminist organizations of the 1970s is useful for appreciating this process. Combining black feminist theory and social movement theory, she advances the term "interstitial politics" for describing the varied ways black feminists creatively "fit their activism into their daily life schedules" and "developed a collective identity and basis for organizing that reflected the intersecting nature of black womanhood."⁵⁵ They forged an oppositional consciousness, a viewpoint rooted in lived experience that provides individuals with "the ability to read the current situations of power and self-consciously choos[e] and adopt . . . the ideological form best suited to push against its configurations." Oppositional consciousness became crucial to collective identity formation.⁵⁶ Although not without some tension, black Communist women balanced the rigorous demands of Party work into busy daily schedules, with their politics and collective identities forming in the interstices of "blacks," "women," "Communists," and other subject positions in local and transnational contexts. At the same time, black left feminists' collective identity formation was always in the making. It was neither static nor complete. Moreover, their ideological outlooks did not always cohere. Rather, due to varied social backgrounds, locations within the Party hierarchy, and activism, as well as differing effects of state repression on their lives, black women radicals traveled multiple paths through the Communist Left. Indeed, there was

no monolithic black Communist woman's experience. Rather, there were many. It was this tension between common and individual experiences within the Communist Left that helps explain both the dynamism of black left feminism and its contradictions.⁵⁷

Charting the making and practice of a transnational black women's radical politics also provides insight into black left feminism's interventions in black radicalism and black feminism and reinterpreting the history of the U.S. and African diaspora during the early and mid-twentieth century. Once again, discussions of Carole Boyce Davies's *Left of Karl Marx* are instructive in framing my approach here.⁵⁸ The study of Jones as a "radical black female subject" and her persecution, Carole Boyce Davies, Kevin Gaines, and Patricia Saunders argue, provides a framework for reassessing scholarly narratives of black radicalism that often have elided conjectures between African American freedom struggles, African and Caribbean decolonization, feminism, and Cold War anti-Communist repression.⁵⁹

Here, I am especially interested in how black Communist women collectively pursued a transnational political approach. In his book, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003), the literary scholar Brent Hayes Edwards provides a point of departure for uncovering a radical, transnational, black feminist politics. He insightfully observes how black diasporic radicals in interwar Harlem, London, and Paris, such as George Padmore, Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, and T. Ras Makonnen, invented a "'Black International,' an explicitly anticapitalist alliance of peoples of African descent from different countries around the world" through "uneasy, shifting affiliations" with the Communist International (Comintern), Moscow's arm responsible for fomenting world revolution.⁶⁰ Diasporic radicals' "experience of migration to Europe," Edwards adds, together with their "exposure to the centers of imperial domination," nurtured this politics. Hence, they led and participated in protest groups, such as the Paris-based Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre and League Against Imperialism, a leftist, anti-colonial organization established by the Comintern. Women, however, are conspicuously absent in Edwards's account of the "black international."⁶¹

In this book, I challenge Edwards's erasure of black women's involvement in the production of what I call a "black women's international." Black women radicals never explicitly used this term. But through their activism, journalism, and overseas travel, we can see how they practiced a radical

internationalist, feminist politics within the U.S. and global Communist Left that was committed to building transnational political alliances with women of color and politically progressive white women from around the world. For these reasons, they were constantly on the move, both domestically and internationally. Calling attention to the “black women’s international” and following black women radicals to the Soviet Union and across the world reveals the gendered contours of black internationalism. Gender, sexuality, and class always circumscribed black women’s ability to travel across territorial boundaries and interpret the world. Black left feminists’ special concern for women’s status globally shows how internationalism appealed differently to black Communist women than it did to their black male and white comrades. These women’s transnational politics often diverged from those of club and church women, providing another example of political and ideological differences between black Communist and non-Communist women.

Traveling to the Soviet Union was vital to nurturing black leftist women’s global outlooks. To analyze these encounters, I draw from the recent work of the linguistic scholar Joy Gleason Carew and the historian Maxim Matusevich. Carew examines the impact of the Soviet Union on black travelers: “Frustrated with the limitations of a racist United States and escaping from their own arenas of terror, a number of blacks went to Russia in search of the Soviet promise of a better society.” The “quest for dignity and opportunity,” she adds, lured black Americans to the Soviet Union from its beginnings to its collapse.⁶² Similarly, Matusevich observes how black travelers in their memoirs “often cast their entrance into Soviet society in terms reminiscent of a religious awakening.”⁶³ For these travelers, the Soviet Union enabled them to imagine new kinds of transnational alliances and construct new lives. Inspired by their Soviet encounters, black radicals returned home with a new sense of determination to mobilize black communities against racism and social inequalities. This certainly applied to black women leftists who visited the Soviet Union. But I also emphasize how the Soviet Union had special meaning to them in ways largely unexplored in Carew’s and Matusevich’s works.⁶⁴

Examining black women’s encounters in the Soviet Union reveals its importance as a political terrain for cultivating black left feminism. Several black Communist women spent extensive time in the Soviet Union. These included Louise Thompson Patterson and Williana Burroughs, a New York schoolteacher, journalist, and radical community activist. Treated with dignity and respect there, black women radicals felt a refreshing sense of per-

sonal freedom unknown to them back home as blacks and as women. Soviet women's enhanced rights intrigued them, bolstering their feminist sensibilities and oppositional consciousness. Transformed by these encounters in the Soviet Union, black women radicals rethought dominant gender and sexual norms and came to appreciate the global connections between racism, sexism, capitalism, and imperialism like never before. Traveling to the Soviet Union, moreover, stoked their interest in building transnational women's political alliances and helped to forge community among black women leftists. Sojourning to the Soviet Union also fostered their sense of "transnational citizenship," what Kevin Gaines describes as a notion of international solidarity with racially and nationally oppressed people that informed black women radicals' subjectivities and civic engagement upon returning home.⁶⁵ The importance of the Soviet Union in framing their global visions underscores how "black internationalism," as Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelley remind us, "does not always come out of Africa, nor is it necessarily engaged with pan-Africanism or other kinds of black-isms. Indeed, sometimes it lives through or is integrally tied to other kinds of international movements—socialism, communism, feminism, surrealism, religions such as Islam, and so on."⁶⁶

The Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a short-lived, Harlem-based black left feminist group in the 1950s, best evidenced this point. The only organization of its kind formed during the entire Old Left period, the Sojourners forged a leftist, gendered vision of diaspora that viewed black women as the vanguard for radical global social change.⁶⁷ For the Sojourners, cultivating transnational political ties with women across the diaspora and what is now referred to as the Global South, as well as racially sincere white women progressives, against U.S. Cold War policy and colonialism was critical to advancing the group's black left feminist agenda. At the same time, the Sojourners' black radical, feminist, transnational politics made them easy targets for state repression during the height of the McCarthy period, forcing the group to shut down.⁶⁸ Uncovering the history of the "black women's international" through the Sojourners and black leftist women's global travels reveals how they collectively formulated their own practice of transnational politics and provides a lens for reconfiguring a range of histories during the early and mid-twentieth-century.

In addition to examining black leftist women's interventions in black feminism and black radicalism, this book also looks at black women's com-

plicated relationship to the CPUSA. Without question, the black-red encounter and the CPUSA's relationship to the Soviet Union remain controversial topics.⁶⁹ Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* of 1967, which argued that a racially insincere Communist Party duped blacks into supporting its conspiratorial agenda and sidetracked the formulation of an independent black political agenda, still looms large in framing scholarly debates and popular memory about the black-red encounter.⁷⁰ More recent scholarship, however, by Robin D. G. Kelley, Nell Irvin Painter, Gerald Horne, Martha Biondi, Mark Solomon, and Mark Naison have called Cruse's arguments into question. These scholars argue instead that blacks joined the Communist Party because they saw it as a militantly anti-racist movement committed to black liberation, economic justice, anti-imperialism, internationalism, the celebration of black culture, and to varying degrees women's rights. Emphasizing that blacks brought their own understandings of freedom and justice rooted in African American traditions of resistance with them into the CPUSA, these scholars discuss how black Communists grappled with its racism, sexism, and sectarianism. Although these scholars discuss black women, their day-to-day encounters in the Party are not central to these studies.⁷¹

Emphasizing the agency of black Communist women, I examine how they negotiated the contours of and tensions around gender, race, class, and sexuality, and politics within the CPUSA. Shifting political lines within the CPUSA, its positions on the Negro Question and the Woman Question, and local and global events created unique opportunities and imposed striking limitations on how black Communist women carried out their work. As disciplined Communists, black women radicals certainly tried their best to implement the Party policy, whether it came from Moscow or from local officials.⁷² They sometimes defended inexcusable positions taken by Party officials and the Soviet Union. And they proudly and openly identified as Communists. At the same time, I show how black women radicals were unapologetic in challenging the racism and sexism within the Communist Party, as well as the sexist agendas of black men both inside and outside the Party. Black Communist women remained organically connected to black communities, viewing black women as their key constituents and drawing inspiration from them. Additionally, black Communist women consciously and explicitly saw themselves as carrying out the work of their militant predecessors, such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman.

Similarly, I look at how the CPUSA's unique movement culture, which promoted interracialism and "the Marxist analysis of politics and economics into a way of life," both attracted black Communist women and often alienated and marginalized them.⁷³ They found unique, exciting opportunities to forge political, personal, and sometimes intimate relationships with their white comrades. But they also frequently encountered what Communists called "white chauvinism" and "male chauvinism" within the CPUSA and the internationalist Left.

Given their distinct political ideology and social status as black women in a predominately white, male radical organization, they often functioned as "outsiders within."⁷⁴ In other words, although many emerged as ranking leaders within the Communist Left, they were never fully equal participants within it. In this regard their experiences resembled those of more famous civil rights activists of the 1960s, such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, among black male civil rights leaders. As Baker's biographer Barbara Ransby puts it: "[Baker] was close to the centers of power within the black community, but she was always a critical and conditional outsider, a status informed by her gender, class loyalties, and political ideology."⁷⁵ This observation applies to black women radicals' positionality as outsiders within the CPUSA. Through speaking with one another, they came to realize that their individual grievances with racism, male chauvinism, and sectarianism within the Party were in fact collective problems facing black women in the Communist Left, prompting some black women radicals to break from it.

Such was the case with Queen Mother Audley Moore. Her frustration, she claimed, with painful encounters with racism, sexism, and sectarianism within the Party eventually drove her out of it in 1950. By the early 1960s, she had reinvented herself into an ardent black nationalist, embracing all things "African" and vehemently rejecting interracialism. Years before Black Power militants made it commonplace, she wore African garb. For her, wearing African clothing was a critical step in decolonizing the mind of internalized racism. Attaining a mythical status as a revered elder mentor to young black nationalists, she emerged as a key founder of Black Power and the modern reparations movement.⁷⁶ Moore's break from the Party vividly demonstrated how black women's affiliations with it were always fraught with tensions and contradictions.

This book offers a model for interpreting the continuing debates about the Cold War's impact on the U.S. black freedom movement. Recently, scholars have debated the usefulness of the "long civil rights movement"



Audley "Queen Mother"
Moore, circa 1980s. CREDIT:
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paradigm that understands the African American freedom movement from the 1930s through the 1970s as a continuum of struggle.⁷⁷ Critics charge that this paradigm overlooks ruptures within the black freedom movement by downplaying the destructive impact of the Cold War on black radicalism and overlooking the ideological differences among black movements.⁷⁸

Taking a different position, this book highlights both the breaks and the continuities in the black freedom movement and black women's struggles before and after the red scare by examining the personal and political costs of anti-Communism on black left feminists.⁷⁹ Black Communist women pursued their most sophisticated work during the McCarthy period. Claudia Jones wrote prolifically during these years about black women's triple oppression. Inspired by her writings and Beulah Richardson's "A Black Woman Speaks," postwar African American militancy, and global decolonization, the Sojourners pursued their militant, transnational program.⁸⁰

But the Cold War also marked an extremely difficult moment for other

black women radicals. They suffered tremendously under the onslaught of anti-Communist repression, decimating the Communist Left as a viable social movement. The case of Claudia Jones is but one example. After years of arrests and trials, authorities jailed Claudia Jones for violating the Smith Act of 1940, a law forbidding the advocacy of violently overthrowing the U.S. government, and then deported her. Esther Cooper Jackson, too, suffered during these years. Her husband, James E. Jackson Jr., a Communist Party leader, absconded for nearly five years to avoid arrest for allegedly violating the Smith Act. In addition, anti-Communism played a crucial part in shutting down the Sojourners. This repression seriously isolated many committed anti-racist, internationally minded activists for a brief but crucial moment from the emergent civil rights movement and the global stage.⁸¹ At the same time, I stress that as destructive as McCarthyism was on the Communist Left and on black women radicals' lives, it squelched neither their black left feminism nor their dreams of democracy at home and abroad. That many of these black women emerged from the Cold War committed to building new leftist movements is a testament to their historical importance.

Sources

This book depicts the lives and struggles of black women radicals through archival materials, including their personal papers, records of the CPUSA, the Communist International, black left and non-Communist-affiliated black protest groups, and FBI surveillance files.⁸² This book also uses black Communist women's writings, Communist, African American, and mainstream newspapers, more than forty oral interviews I conducted, and interviews by other scholars. Unfortunately, of the women chronicled here only one wrote her autobiography—Louise Thompson Patterson, who received heavy assistance from the literary scholar Margaret Wilkerson. Despite this, Patterson's memoir was neither completed nor published. And while many black women radicals wrote prolifically, most of their work focused on party building, community activism, and political theorizing, with little discussion of their inner lives.⁸³

To fill these gaps, I draw heavily on more than forty oral histories that I conducted with veteran black women radicals, many of whom are now in their nineties, as well as their spouses, associates, and children. These interviews helped me appreciate the complexity, brilliance, and legacy of black left feminism in ways that would have been impossible had I relied solely

on archival documents. But these testimonies have limitations. In his study of the links between the personal and the political in the lives of American Communists, the historian James Barrett persuasively observes a prevailing tendency in Communists' autobiographical practice: "The narrative builds to a moment of conversion to socialism and then marches through a process of movement building in which the author is important only insofar as her/his story helps to explain the development of the party and its fate."⁸⁴ This accurately describes numerous self-narratives of my subjects. For example, much of what Claudia Jones discloses about her public and personal life comes from one eight-paged, typed letter to William Z. Foster, the CPUSA national secretary, on 6 December 1955, just weeks after her release from prison and days before her deportation. Given that she was a Communist true believer, a victim of McCarthyism, extremely ill in part from her long persecution by anti-Communists, had an investment in publicly defending the Party, and was writing to its head, her self-narrative demands analysis. Similarly, Queen Mother Moore's oral testimonies from the 1970s and 1980s, too, need careful reading. Her reinvention into a strident black nationalist, investment in promoting herself as a revered, elder mentor to Black Power militants, selective memory, and tendency of deliberately obscuring her past requires us to question the reliability of her oral testimonies.⁸⁵

This book is by no means a comprehensive study of black women's involvement in the CPUSA. But it does represent a critical intervention—one that examines and refigures a history that has failed, up to this point, to give sustained attention to black Communist women who struggled formidably to challenge the Communist Left's neglect of black women's issues, and who, despite their frustrations with the CPUSA, still saw it as a powerful vehicle for agitating for the dignity and rights of black people everywhere, particularly women, outside of traditional black protest groups. The women chronicled here were important not only because they enjoyed remarkable careers as key organizers, high-profile leaders, theoreticians, writers, and world travelers. Significantly and more broadly, these women's lives also reveal the complex interplay between race, gender, class, sexuality, and politics within American Communism, provide a genealogy for intersectional thought and black feminism, and reveal the ideological complexities of twentieth-century black feminism and transnational women's movements.