

*Sojourning for freedom: Black women, American communism and the making of black left feminism.* By Erik McDuffie. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011

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Erik S. McDuffie's *Sojourning for freedom: Black women, American communism and the making of black left feminism* is one of those rare books that thoroughly transforms the way we see things. In far too many historic portrayals black radicals are always men, communists are white men, and feminists are white women. McDuffie's *Sojourning for Freedom* makes it clear that from the beginning of the twentieth century, black women were central to radical movements, to American communism and to U.S. and transnational women's movements.

*Sojourning for freedom* conveys the history of black left feminism by showing readers the lives of an extraordinary group of women. Through archival work and oral history McDuffie tells the story of a group of black women, based in New York City's Harlem, who used community level organising, journalism, and international travel to develop innovative politics that were radical, transnational and feminist. We see them travelling, to Harlem from the Caribbean and the U.S. South, and from Harlem to international gatherings of communists in the Soviet Union. They travelled into and out of relationships, remained committed to revolution, and pushed the boundaries of sexual politics and conventional marriage as they raised children with the support of a community of radicals.

McDuffie introduces readers to Audley "Queen Mother" Moore, Louise Thompson Patterson, Thyra Edwards, Bonita Williams, Williana Burroughs, Claudia Jones, Esther Cooper Jackson, Beulah Richardson, Grace P. Campbell, Charlene Mitchell, and Sallye Bell Davis, activists and critical thinkers who reformulated Marxist critiques of capitalism by putting black women at the center of the struggle. Doctrinaire communists believed that the fight against exploitation had to arise from men on the factory floor. Harlem's

black women radicals developed new politics grounded in the experience of black women. While communists focused their movement on industrial male workers, black left feminists identified black women domestic workers as the central figures in their vision of revolution. They formulated a theory of “triple oppression” to explain the position of black women oppressed by race, gender and class. McDuffie describes their politics as “black left feminism.” It is an accurate description though it is not the way these women would have described themselves. Without using the word “feminist,” they wrote about and organised on behalf of the particular exploitation of black women.

McDuffie begins his narrative with the first generation of African American communists, such as Grace P. Campbell, the daughter of a Jamaican immigrant, who ran for public office in New York as a socialist in 1920. He follows the lives of Harlem’s black women radicals into the 1930s, the Communist Party USA’s greatest period of mobilisation. Claudia Jones migrated to the United States from Trinidad as a child. As a young woman she was mobilised into action by the 1935 Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Initially she joined the African Patriotic League, a pan-African organisation. Encountering sexism within the organisation, she turned instead to the Communist Party, in which she saw the possibility for full participation in a transnational, multiracial, anti-imperialist movement.

Louise Thompson was raised by her mother who worked as a domestic servant. Thompson made her way to Harlem where her apartment became the gathering place for New York’s black radical intellectuals and artists. Her involvement with the Communist Party led her to travel to the Soviet Union, remarkably, as part of a group of 21 black men and women invited to take part in a Soviet propaganda film about the dreadful state of race relations in the United States. The film was never made but Thompson and her fellow travelers were inspired by their visit to the new socialist nation. The trip strengthened their vision of an international anti-racist and anti-capitalist movement. Black women’s leadership grew through the 1940s as women like Claudia Jones articulated a transnational feminist political agenda that was often to the left of official party line.

In the 1950s the government sought to eliminate communist thought and activism in the United States through persecution and deportation. Senator Joe McCarthy, whose name has come to stand for the repression of the period, fuelled the flames of anti-communism by making false claims about

the dangers and extent of communist infiltration into the U.S. government. Black left feminists continued to write and organise in the 1950s, but the direction of their writing was affected by a political climate that stifled free speech. They fought anti-communist persecution on the basis of their positions as mothers, a strategy termed “familialism” by historian Deborah Gerson. Nonetheless, it was in this period that Louise Thompson Patterson and others formed the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a black radical group led by women with a transnational vision that aimed to “fight for peace and freedom in the nation and the world”(177-178). They put the oppression of black women in an international context and allied themselves with South African anti-apartheid activists.

The Sojourners for Truth and Justice did not survive the overwhelming force of anti-communism. McCarthyism crushed radicalism within the United States. Children of communists are known among radicals as “red diaper babies.” I was one of those. I recognised in McDuffie’s account the ways in which communist families, while under attack by the government, formed communities to provide safe and culturally rich spaces in which to raise their children. Families survived but the radical movement was decimated. Members fled radical organisations, Claudia Jones was arrested, jailed and deported. As a result, theoretical positions articulated by black women radicals in the 1950s appeared new to feminists in the 1970s. That such analyses had to be re-discovered is one of the tragic outcomes of the repressions of the McCarthy period in the United States.

McDuffie restores the broken links between earlier and later movements. By focusing on the work of radical black women he rewrites the history of the American Communist Left. He also shows that conventional accounts of women’s movements have missed a foundational chapter.