



SOJOURNING FOR FREEDOM

Black Women, American Communism,
and the Making of Black Left Feminism

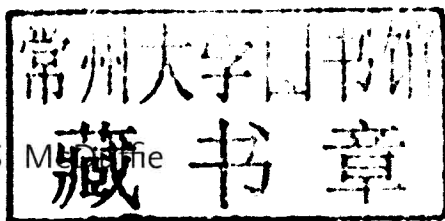
Erik S. McDuffie

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*Black Women, American Communism,
and the Making of Black Left Feminism*

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For my parents,
James and Marion McDuffie;
my wife, Marlah;
and our children, Amaya-Soledad
and Amir Wendell Robeson

In loving memory of
Margaret and Clifford Chandler,
maternal grandparents;
Annie Lou McDuffie,
paternal great-grandmother;
Marian Stanley,
maternal great-grandmother;
and Dorothy Weeks,
great-aunt

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For everything else, I am deeply grateful to God and the ancestors.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	<i>Afro-American</i> (Baltimore)
ABB	African Blood Brotherhood
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AN	<i>Amsterdam News</i> (New York)
ANLC	American Negro Labor Congress
AYC	American Youth Congress
AYD	American Youth for Democracy
AWD	<i>Atlanta Daily World</i>
CAA	Council on African Affairs
CAW	Congress of American Women
CD	<i>Chicago Defender</i>
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
Comintern	Communist International
CPA	Communist Political Association
CPUSA	Communist Party, USA
CRC	Civil Rights Congress
DW	<i>Daily Worker</i>
DWU	Domestic Workers Union
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FO	<i>Fraternal Outlook</i>
FR	<i>Freedom</i>
FSAA	Records Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917–1925) Records
HDH Papers	Hermina Dumont Huiswoud Papers
HL	<i>Harlem Liberator</i>
HTL	Harlem Tenants League
ILD	International Labor Defense

ITUC-NW	International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers
IWO	International Workers Order
LSNR	League of Struggle for Negro Rights
LTP Papers	Louise Thompson Patterson Papers
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAARPR	National Alliance against Racial and Political Repression
NACW	National Association of Colored Women
NC	<i>Negro Champion</i>
NCNW	National Council of Negro Women
NLPCW	National League for the Protection of Colored Women
NMU	National Maritime Union
NNC	National Negro Congress
NO	<i>New Order</i>
NTWIU	Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union
NUCFAD	National United Committee to Free Angela Davis
NW	<i>Negro World</i>
NWC	National Women's Commission
NWP	National Woman's Party
NYA	<i>New York Age</i>
NYT	<i>New York Times</i>
PA	<i>Political Affairs</i>
PC	<i>Pittsburgh Courier</i>
PO	<i>Party Organizer</i>
PV	<i>People's Voice</i>
RA	The Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI)
SCHW	Southern Conference for Human Welfare
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
SNYC	Southern Negro Youth Congress
SPA	Socialist Party of America
TL	<i>The Liberator</i>
TWWA	Third World Women's Alliance
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
WCEJ	Women's Committee for Equal Justice
WFDY	World Federation of Democratic Youth
WIDF	Women's International Democratic Federation
WP	Workers Party
WPA	Works Progress Administration
YCL	Young Communist League
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

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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