

Claudia Jones: a Fictional Interview

by Rohan Rice

This was a speech initially given at the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, UK on 12/09/15 for the Malcolm X Movement's 'Claudia Jones research project'. The part of Claudia was read by Margaret Atugonza.

Introduction

Teju Cole said:

“Livelier, it seems to me, than the question, ‘Who has influenced you?’ is another one, much less frequently asked: ‘With whom are you communicating?’. [...] Possibly this question is rarer because our society values hierarchies over networks, fathers over friends. But if you say X influenced Y and leave it at that, you have stated something much less alive than showing how X, Y, A, B, and N are in communication with each other, and even how, within a given network, streams of influence can sometimes run upstream.”

Reasons for quotation:

- 1) I've been volunteering with the Malcolm X Movement since July this year, and this quote for me perfectly encompasses the values of the movement. It's a movement that works across a plane, one that contains the struggles of all the people of the Global South, to unify and keep us in dialogue, rather than prioritising one people's struggle over another's. I have learnt a lot from brother Sukant and all the intelligent and inspiring volunteers of the MXM, but all of this came from dialogue, not downwards to one another, but across us. On this project we have been with our elders who knew Claudia Jones, but they have not just talked at us but been in conversation with us. It hasn't just been about what Claudia did, but who she was surrounded by. How much did she influence them as much as they influence her?
- 2) I chose it also as a means of explaining why I framed my research in the format that I have: that of a fictional interview. Rather than trying to prove my point, or rather, trying to prove a point of Claudia's, I wanted to come together with her and create a dialogue, which in turn, hopefully creates a dialogue with you too. I wanted to work with her and not just around her. Because if I've learnt anything from Claudia it is that unification with like-minded individuals is the first and most important step of our peoples' struggle. This unification will create a dialogue and this dialogue can be projected even further through the strength of our numbers.

Interview

This interview is entirely imagined. All answers by Claudia Jones are direct quotations taken from her various essays found in the collection, 'Claudia Jones: Beyond Containment' ed. Carole Boyce Davies, unless specifically stated.

RR: So Claudia, I want to keep away too much from biography, but I am curious to hear about your first involvement in politics.

CJ: [Well], I have early recollections of being hurt by youngsters of my own age who mouthed anti-West Indian propaganda against me and my sisters. But by the time I reached Junior High School, I had formed friendships and become integrated in the student body and was nominated in Harriet Beecher Stowe Junior High for the highest office in the school and was subsequently elected Mayor [...]. One incident I recall with some pride today; namely that running with me then, as President of the Board of Alderman, was a young Chinese girl. Numerous teachers tried to pressure me to refuse her as a running mate, on the grounds that she was Chinese and that had the situation been reversed this would not happen in the China of that day. I refused to be drawn in or to accede to any such narrow concept – choosing instead to have her as my running mate. [...] We were elected by an overwhelming majority of the students, proving the teachers wrong and showing the internationalist approach of the student body. (p.11)

RR: Even from a young age then you were adopting the internationalist ideas of the Communist party and fighting against white supremacy.

CJ: [Yes], it was out of my Jim Crow experiences as a young Negro woman, experiences likewise born of working-class poverty that led me in search of why these things had to be, [then leading] me to join the Young Communist League and to choose at the age of 18 the philosophy of my life, the science of Marxism-Leninism – that philosophy that not only rejects racist ideas, but is the antithesis of them (p.9).

RR: So you feel the Communist cause is the one best aligned with the struggle of black peoples in the United States?

CJ: My passionate adherence to the idea of fighting for full unequivocal equality for my people, the Negro people, which as a Communist I believe can only be achieved allied to the cause of the working class. (p.6)

RR: And for you—as you’ve so stated before—this is best seen through the example set by the Soviet Union, is it?

CJ: This system called capitalism, with all of its talk of free enterprise is free all right, but for the bankers and Wall Street, for the German bankers, for the Bank of England, for the French bankers. Can you dream what it would mean to have the worry of a job eliminated? What if it was law that your security, your job, was guaranteed? Then you could finish high school, college. This is what the youth of the Soviet Union [had] because they live[d] in a socialist society. (p.41)

RR: You mentioned just before about your experiences of growing up under Jim Crow. You talk a lot about its subversive nature in your essay ‘Jim Crow in Uniform’, namely its sacrifice of black people in US wars. How is it that the black population is still ready to take up arms for their country when its the government deprives them of basic human rights and kills them in cold blood in its streets?

CJ: In our own communities, [...] the bubble of the false theory of a ‘white man’s war’ quickly explodes amidst the rising cost of living [and] the corresponding lowering of income. [But yes], the negro population is delivered not only as cannon fodder but the acute brunt of the war crisis is felt by them. (p.30)

RR: And naturally the media plays a large part in this too, in both the UK and US.

CJ: The newspapers are saying in our time, some of the things they said in Jesse Clipper’s time. They are saying that this war [...] is a war ‘to preserve democracy’. They say that it is a ‘holy crusade’, which will decide whether freedom and democracy will forever prevail, or whether force and violence will rule the world.

The newspapers ask you and me to believe this. But how can we believe this when we are aware of the fact that democracy has been a farce to some 500,000,000 enslaved colonials under the domination of English rule. Can this war give the kind of real democracy which previous centuries did not give? We're sorry if we cannot believe this, just because the newspapers say so. No, the colonial peoples, black and white, cannot support this war. (p.27-28)

RR: But some would say there is still greater democracy where we are now, and that you go too far by drawing parallels of the US to Nazi Germany. Do you think these criticisms are unfair?

CJ: In Hitler['s] Germany, the fascists [...] in destroying all democratic rights and gains made by labour and the people for generations, they outlawed the Communist Party of Germany and murdered and jailed countless numbers of its best fighters. The concentration camps and crematoriums claimed thousands of Communists – but also thousands of plain anti-fascists and plain citizens of Germany who considered themselves democrats.

Today, in our country there are those who do not only want to 'find masters' anew for our people; they want to rob our people of it honoured and respected leadership – leadership of *any* persuasion who refuse to kowtow with heads tied and knees bowed to satisfy themselves with crumbs from reaction's tables. (p.130).

RR: And you yourself have been on the receiving end of this. It's no exaggeration to say you were a leader and freedom fighter for many black people. Was it because you refused "to kowtow with heads tied and knees bowed", that you were deported in 1955 from the US?

CJ: [Essentially, yes]. I was victim of the McCarthyite hysteria against independent political ideas in the USA – a hysteria which penalizes anyone who holds idea contrary to the official pro-war, pro-reactionary, pro-fascist line of the white ruling class of that country. I was deported from the USA because as a Negro woman Communist of West Indian descent, I was a thorn in their side in my opposition to Jim Crow racist discrimination against 16 million Negro Americans in the United States, in my work for redress of these grievances, for unity of Negro and white workers, for women's rights and my general political activity [...] urging to change the present foreign and domestic policy in the US. [...] I was deported because I urged prosecution of the lynchers rather than the prosecution of the Communists and other

democratic Americans who oppose the lynchers and big financiers and warmongers, the real advocates of force and violence in the USA. (p.16-17)

RR: It's a common trend of American and British foreign as well as domestic policy: to paint a target on the back of what the government likes to call 'terrorists' to distract us from their own wrongdoings. It's obvious when we look at a story like yours that anyone in the USA who truly begins to stir an inquisition of his or her government is soon neutered.

CJ: For over 300 years the best fighters of our people have had a price on their heads! Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, William Wells Brown and many other Negro leaders had a price on their heads! [...] Why is this so? Because in every period of history, scapegoats have been singled out by reaction - and usually amongst these scapegoats are the most principled and incorruptible fighters for social progress. They are singled out to terrify and immobilize the people, by pointing to them as an 'example' of what will happen to others! (p.129)

RR: We're nearly at a close, but I want to end by asking you specifically about Britain, a country that you were forced to get to know intimately after your expulsion from the USA. We have sometimes in the pass been accused of ignoring our problems with race compared to other countries like the USA, who talk so openly about it. Yet, to those of who haven't had the benefit of being white, this hasn't ever meant racial prejudice has ever gone away. How is it, do you think, that Britain can continue to ignore its problems domestically as well as justify its maliciously racist foreign policy?

CJ: There is reluctance on the part of virtually all sections of British public opinion to assess the fundamental reasons for the existence of racial prejudice. The citizens of the 'Mother of Democracies' do not yet recognize that the roots of racism in Britain are deep and were laid in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through British conquests of India, Africa and great parts of Asia as well as the British Caribbean. All the resources of official propaganda and education, the superstructure of British imperialism, were permeated with projecting the oppressed colonial peoples as 'lesser breeds', as 'inferior coloured peoples', 'natives', 'savages' and the like - in short, 'the white man's burden'.

These rationalizations all served to build a justification for wholesale exploitation, exterminations and looting of the islands by British imperialism. The great wealth of present-

day British monopoly-capital was built on the robbery of coloured peoples by such firms as Unilever and the East African Company to Tate and Lyle and Booker Brothers in the Caribbean.

These artificial divisions and antagonisms between British and colonial workers, already costly in toll of generations of colonial wars and ever-recurrent crises, have delayed fundamental social change in Britain and form the very bases of colour prejudice. (p.170)

RR: Thank you for your time, Claudia.

[The document was updated on 01/04/2021 to fix some typos]