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### **Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture by Kathlene McDonald (review)**

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“The Arch Apostate,” Whitfield depicts the great orator brought low by his endorsement of the Compromise of 1850, “now prostrate, groveling in the dust” (67). Elsewhere, the problem of language in general appears fundamental to the religious justification of the slave system: “How long, oh Lord! shall such vile deeds be acted in thy holy name[?]” (63). In a curious turn, the idea of the name projected across history also appears in Whitfield’s treatment of black subjects. The ode “To Cinque,” the leader of the Amistad rebellion, focuses on its subject’s survival in writing: “Thy name shall stand on history’s leaf, / Amid the mighty and the brave: / Thy name shall shine, a glorious light . . .” (49). In each of these cases, Whitfield works through problems at the intersection of orality and literature that would go on, later in the nineteenth century, to contextualize the emergence of the vernacular as the cardinal value in African American literature.

Whitfield’s work, and its representation in this generous volume, begs an expanded conception of Black Romanticism. Whitfield’s advocacy in both prose and verse adds a voice to the revolutionary period then ending that substantially broadens the historical picture. In addition to consistently measuring America of the 1850s against colonial and early republican ideals of freedom, he refers to contemporary European revolutions, connecting Webster’s early work with the struggle for Greek Independence, and elsewhere compares abolition to the Hungarian Revolution. Whitfield consistently contextualizes these transformations in the language of Romantic cosmology: “boundless space” and “glittering spheres” appear as frames for his ideas of American freedom (75, 78). Like Whitman, he also several times imagines his poetic persona taking flight over vast expanses. Whitfield constructs himself as a genius in the sense held up recently by Keith Leonard: an individual whose energy and creativity enlarges the possibilities of his race. However, like Poe, this responsibility weighed heavily on him, and more than a few lyrics mention his “burning” or “throbbing brain” (91, 70). Levine and Wilson have finally given us an opportunity to survey Whitfield’s accomplishments in their full and contradictory complexity.

—Matt Sandler

McDonald, Kathlene. *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2012.

Resurrecting the voices of the obscured and censored, and revealing the Leftist proclivities of revered authors, Kathlene McDonald’s *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture* documents the contributions of a Left feminist perspective to “the history and culture of the American Left, the history of feminism in the United States, and US women’s literary history” (8). McDonald’s book exceeds the specificity of her argument: “that women writers drew on the rhetoric of antifascism to critique the cultural and ideological aspects of women’s oppression,” offering a comprehensive and expansive overview of “the largely neglected story” of the feminist Left and the literature it produced during the postwar period (6). McDonald’s work recovers the voices erased by McCarthy-era censorship and illustrates the contributions of African American female artists and activists to Leftist debates, as early critics of intersecting axes of oppression.

Refreshingly written in clear, vibrant prose, making it accessible to nonacademic readers, *Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture* is an earnest and engaging exploration of the “often-reciprocal relationship” between Left feminist debates and the cultural texts that emerged amidst the hostile conservative climate of mid-twentieth-century America. In comparison to the array of work detailing Leftist feminist writing of the 1930s and 1940s, McDonald’s study probes the relatively overlooked postwar period for its contributions to Left feminist history. As McDonald makes explicit, her work contributes a literary-historical perspective to the extant studies detailing second-wave feminism’s indebtedness to the Old Left. These include Kate Weigand’s *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (2001), Gerda Lerner’s *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography* (2002), and in the context of black feminism, Kevin Gaines’s “From Center to Margin: Internationalism and the Origins of Black Feminism” (2002) and Dayo F. Gore’s *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (2011). Though avowedly not a work of literary criticism, the intellectual magnitude of her scholarship should not be overlooked. McDonald’s detailed historical inquiries into how female authors used literature to proliferate the possibilities available to women will likely prove useful to those examining the time period, either with or without a theoretical bent.

*Feminism, the Left, and Postwar Literary Culture* begins by contextualizing the literary works McDonald discusses, tracing the contours of Left feminist culture through debates over the “Woman Question” and the use of antifascist rhetoric within Communist party publications. The central chapters of McDonald’s book crystallize around three major figures of women’s literary history: Martha Dodd, Alice Childress, and Lorraine Hansberry. Using the stories of their radicalizations to inform her readings, McDonald carefully identifies the elements of racial, gender, and economic critique that give their oeuvres social and political gravity. She reads their works as historical documents and cultural texts, informed by and participating in the debates of the postwar period. For McDonald, these are political texts that dramatize the prejudices and injustices that their authors fought to eradicate. As McDonald makes clear, the feminist perspectives of Dodd, Childress, and Hansberry contributed to the Communist Party’s gradually increasing willingness to address women’s issues in their visions of a more just and equitable society.

This study also redresses a historical redaction: the Leftist activities of female authors during the postwar period. McDonald compiles an archive of powerful arguments and representations that challenged the racist and sexist images of women as “white, middle-class, heterosexual, married mother[s] and homemaker[s]” (21). Specifically, she focuses on female authors intimately involved in Communist party activities whose work recognizes the need for solidarity, coalitions, and intersectional analyses of oppression given what McDonald identifies as the fascist nature of racism, sexism, and class disparity.

In her first chapter, “Domestic Ideology as Containment Ideology,” McDonald charts the historical context of her analysis and elaborates upon one of her critical terms: domestic ideology. Her portrait of the historical period foregrounds the American postwar zeal for patriotism and the contentious debates over American identity. Given this intense national fervor, both the Right and the Left sought to capitalize on the momentum and demonstrate their patriotism. Whereas Senator Joseph McCarthy and the members of the House Un-American Activities Committee demonstrated their national pride by demonizing those involved in Communist politics, Leftist women writers like Martha Dodd argued that

being American meant fighting against oppression and intolerance. McDonald's attention to this period reveals how a shift to an "antifascist framework" allowed the Left to extend their analyses of oppression by including race in addition to class and gender. Unlike in earlier decades, feminist writers during this period began drawing connections between cultural representations of women and repressive ideologies.

McDonald identifies the dominant ideologies of the postwar period as containment and consensus, bolstered by the culture industry's image of the happy housewife. In reaction to domestic ideology, female Leftist authors sought to denaturalize the images of women umbilically tethered to the home by providing historical evidence of alternatives and models of women imagined otherwise. These include films that portray women's labor organizations (*Salt of the Earth*), pamphlets on women's contributions to war efforts, and publications urging the Communist party to place the "Woman Question" at the center of their platform. McDonald analyzes the impact of race-conscious organizations like the National Negro Congress and the Congress of American Women in gaining recognition for the validity of gender issues within the Party. Within these constellated efforts a common theme emerges: feminist authors aligning fascism and oppression in order to channel antifascist energies towards women's liberation. McDonald adroitly argues that women affiliated with the Old Left were pioneering analyses of oppression along class, gender, and racial lines. These early forms of intersectional analysis, detailed in later chapters through the work of Claudia Jones and Alice Childress, did not yet include critiques of sexual normativity, as McDonald explores through the life and work of Lorraine Hansberry.

Chapter 2, "Fighting Fascism at Home and Abroad: The Cold War Exile of Martha Dodd," demonstrates the importance of recovery work, without which our portrait of postwar Left feminism would be bereft of Dodd's critical voice. Dodd's work testifies to a sea-change that McDonald identifies following World War II: Communist women shifting away from models of antifascist fighters abroad, and instead championing images of American activists. Horrified by the similarities she witnessed firsthand between Nazi Germany and McCarthy-era terror, Dodd's work argues that anti-communism, racism, economic exploitation, and gender inequality are all forms of fascist control. According to McDonald, Dodd's novels and short stories illustrate the tensions and contradictions within the Communist Party's nascent debates over the "Woman Question." Not only does Dodd trace intersecting axes of oppression, her strongest models of resistance are female heroines who repeatedly take stands against injustice.

In addition to recovering the work of Martha Dodd, looking past the aura of scandal that has surrounded her persona to the significance of her writing, McDonald breathes new life into the work of Alice Childress by juxtaposing her ideas alongside the work of Claudia Jones. Although the theme of racial prejudice surfaces in Dodd's short story "Maria," McDonald explores issues of race in depth in her third chapter, "'In Her Full Courage and Dignity': Alice Childress, and the Struggle against Black Women's Triple Oppression." McDonald reads Childress's dramas and periodical columns through the political injunctions of a contemporary interlocutor, Claudia Jones. In Jones's 1949 article, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!" she issues a clarion call for the Party to pay attention to the triple oppression of African American women. By juxtaposing Jones's injunctions with Childress's characters, McDonald reads Childress's work as an effort to educate people in the "special problems of Negro women" and galvanize working-class

black women's radical activism. Though her work may have reached a broader audience, Childress's plays were intended as provocations to the Left to address their own racism and chauvinism. In addition to critiquing stereotypical representations of black women, Childress proffered examples of alternatives, most notably, through her Mildred columns published in *Freedom*. Mildred, "an outspoken and militant working-class heroine," both educated the Left about women's issues and helped black women understand their place within the Left (66). McDonald is especially attentive to Childress's sensitivity towards her readers: Childress used Mildred's companion Marge to anticipate and address readers' legitimate reservations about becoming involved in militant activities. By examining Childress's work in the context of her Leftist activity, overlooked by previous scholars, McDonald uses Childress to help illustrate the continuity of radical feminist thinking in the postwar period that predates its explosion in the 1960s and 1970s.

In her chapter on "Antiracism, Anticolonialism, and the Contradictory Left Feminism of Lorraine Hansberry," McDonald attempts, as have others before her, to explain the apparent discrepancies between Hansberry's radical politics and less-obviously Leftist dramas. Whereas scholars such as Adrienne Rich and Karen Malpede have suggested that Hansberry self-censored her radical feminism, McDonald uses Hansberry's involvement with the Left feminist community to tease out the subtle critiques rooted in her work. Unlike the previous authors McDonald analyzes, Hansberry engages with sexuality in her critique of domestic ideology. Hansberry's anonymous letters, published in the lesbian journal *The Ladder*, argued that women looking to challenge their oppression needed also to consider the pressure to conform to sexual standards (what could be considered the implicit heteronormativity of domestic ideology). Through a reading of Hansberry's last and little known play, *Les Blancs*, McDonald also demonstrates how Hansberry's analysis of black resistance movements extended to an anticolonial perspective, anticipating the intersectional analyses of oppression that would surge in popularity during the years to come.

The final chapter, "Ask Him If He's Tried It at Home: Making the Personal Political," argues that the use of antifascist rhetoric to refute domestic ideologies directly influenced second-wave feminism's insistence that the personal is political. A major concern of women who made up the postwar Left was the discrepancy between theory and practice—the Party's affirmations of equality were notably absent in their personal relationships. Both the fictional and nonfictional writings of the postwar period suggest that the very men and women committed to fighting for a more just and equitable society struggled to engage in equal relationships. Though they did not solve this uneven dynamic, female authors expressed their anger in writing and indicted Leftist racists and chauvinists for their hypocrisy. Rather than assuming that Left feminist anti-racists laid dormant during the postwar period, either silenced by McCarthy-era oppression or as yet unawakened to the injustices within liberal party politics, McDonald's scholarship highlights the heroic women engaged in the Sisyphean battles for social justice that are still being waged today.

McDonald's most significant contributions to the history and culture of the American Left, the history of feminism in the United States, and US women's literary history are her recovery of Martha Dodd and recontextualization of Alice Childress and Lorraine Hansberry given their Leftist activity. Though each chapter could stand alone, together they add up to a compelling case for the continuity of Left feminist thought from the postwar

period through the flourishing of second-wave feminist theory and social movements in the 1960s and 1970s. As McDonald makes explicit in her epilogue, telling the story of this continuity extends the vibrant tradition of feminist resistance to oppression in America, “a tradition that has largely been erased by the red-baiting of the McCarthy era” (109). Woven together by the stories that defined the Left feminist intellectual culture during the postwar period, Kathlene McDonald’s thoughtful study revitalizes the voices of a community of women raging against injustices amidst a stifling culture of silence and repression.

—Danica Savonick

Williams Evans, Freddie. *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. Lafayette, LA: U of Louisiana at Lafayette P, 2011.

The site of performance of indigenous African cultural practices comes alive in Freddie Williams Evans’s book *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. Using newspaper articles, historical records, eyewitness accounts, travel narratives, and contemporary scholarship, Evans paints a vibrant picture of Congo Square as a place of cultural expression for free and enslaved people of African descent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New Orleans. Along with a chronology of the historical events and ensuing laws that impacted the weekly gatherings at Congo Square, Evans includes images and maps of the site and photographs of the performers, spectators, and other participants partaking in the festive mood the square continues to inspire.

In the foreword, Dr. J. H. Kwabena ‘Nketia sums up the importance of Evans’s work with her reference to the evolution of African cultures across the diaspora as “survivals” (xii). The inhumanity and brutality of the transatlantic slave trade failed to erase the oral histories and belief systems those that survived the tumultuous voyage carried with them. As Evans states, “such conscious and willful continuation of African culture in Congo Square conveys the agency of the gatherers in celebrating and preserving their heritage” (2). This is evident in the syncretism of Catholicism and Vodou. While the *Code Noir* decreed that all persons under French colonial rule be baptized in the Catholic or Protestant faith, Evans’s examination of the distinct cultural practices among various African ethnic groups and Haitian immigrants reveals the preservation of traditional belief systems along with the integration of Western religious practices.

Evans begins by providing an overview of the indigenous groups that occupied what is now New Orleans before French rule, the city’s reconfiguration as the population increased, and Congo Square’s significance as a historical landmark that celebrates the musical genius of Louis Armstrong, Mahalia Jackson, Sidney Bechet, and many other talented New Orleans natives. Originally part of a common route for Native Americans to access the Mississippi River to trade, fish, and hunt, as well as the area where they honored their ancestors and held celebrations, the vicinity of Congo Square was mainly an Indian portage that delineated the city limits (9).<sup>1</sup> As Evans’s research shows, it became a place where enslaved Africans congregated on Sundays for a brief reprieve from their daily toil; a space that signified cultural memory, traditional spiritual practices, and artistic expression.