

**LABOR OF LOVE,
LABOR OF SORROW:
BLACK WOMEN, WORK,
AND THE FAMILY FROM
SLAVERY TO THE PRESENT**

Jacqueline Jones. New York: Basic Books, 1985.

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Beautifully and lovingly written, Jacqueline Jones' historical study of the labour of American black women, inside and outside of their homes, is an important contribution to women's history. Equally important, it clarifies why generalizations about the nature of women's oppression must be made carefully and always take into account matters of race and class. Her study shows that the double oppression of racism and sexism has confined and constrained the lives of black women in ways that make generalizations arising from an analysis of either phenomenon alone woefully inadequate. The specific history covered is, of course, American; however, the contours of that history and the questions it raises have application to the Canadian context and to the search for general theories of women's oppression.

Divided into eight chapters and an Epilogue, each covering a separate historical period, *Labor of Love* surveys black women's labour inside and outside the home, comparing it to that of their white counterparts. It analyzes how their labour affected their families, their roles in their communities, their relations to black men. Jones argues that because labour studies have neglected agricultural labour and ignored the fact that the patterns of women's employment they describe excluded black women, generalizations arising from them do not necessarily obtain for those women, and perhaps are themselves in need of re-examination. The history of black women's wage labour is largely a history of agricultural work, domestic labour and industrial labour of the most marginal, lowest, dirtiest and worst paid variety. Not until the 1960s, for example, were black women employed to any extent in clerical and sales positions, about 40 years after white women gained access to those positions.

Aside from the intrinsic interest of the material, *Labor of Love* poses crucial questions about the interrelation of gender, race and class. For example, as black

women's labour history is largely a history of domestic labour, it raises questions about how attitudes arising out of race and class cause women to oppress other women and the meaning of that oppression. Thematic in black women's history is the fight to contribute their domestic and nurturing skills to their own families in the face of social structures and institutions that actively forced them to provide those services instead to white families.

The degree to which black families could control their own destinies is a central question in each period. Theoretically Emancipation allowed family autonomy and the right of the man to act as *pater familias*, but these rights were challenged and abrogated when the family decided that its women would not enter the labour force. Jones argues that sharecropping, the occupation of the vast majority of Southern black families until a change in farming policy destroyed the system during the Depression, ironically provided black families a measure of autonomy, for the family worked as a unit to sustain itself, allocating the labour of its various members as it chose or required. The conversion to wage labour, however, gave whites even more leverage over whether black women worked for wages in their fields and homes.

Urbanization brought a different set of problems, all ultimately racist in origin. Both black women and black men constituted a marginal work force, largely relegated to the occupations whites would not take. In the North, their marginal situation was constantly threatened by waves of immigrants, who displaced them until they gained a better foothold in the workforce and the society. Wage scales differentiated not only by gender but also by race, and thus what little work black women obtained in industrial settings constituted a threat to white women workers. Moreover, gains made by whites often resulted in blacks being displaced by machines. In the cities, black women sought to establish the kinds of community and kinship networks which had sustained them in the rural south and devoted themselves to the institutions, particularly the church and club, that provided them with support. As they had in the South, they continued to care for those who could not sustain themselves. A mark of black urban families in both North and South has been the number of unrelated persons living in the household, a function of both the practice of taking in boarders as well as the custom of com-

munity assistance. These patterns provided black families with support, but also increased women's labour in the home. Moreover, from the beginning, but more intensely with the growth of suburbs and the movement of industry outside the urban core, the kind of work available was distant and even out of reach.

Jones writes as well of the aspirations of generations of black women for themselves and their families, their passionate devotion to education for themselves and their children, their crucial role in the Civil Rights Movement and in the union movement, their untiring support of institutions which served the communities in which they lived. She examines in particular detail the centrality of black women to the Civil Rights Movement and analyzes how the influential black magazine *Ebony* portrayed middle-class working women while white magazines actively promulgated women's role in the home. The weakest part of Jones' study (because it is tentative and "politic") is her analysis of how and why the American women's movement has served black women so badly. Perhaps rightly so, she is reluctant to take up the issue of black gender relations, but given what precedes this section, one might expect a more incisive discussion of both that issue and the various stances of black feminists.

If there is a general argument in *Labor of Love* it is to show the obscenity of the Moynihan Report which condemned black women for the weakness of the black nuclear family, as well as of all welfare programmes that purport to help households headed by women but which condemn them for being in the position of requiring assistance and make as a condition for the continuance of aid that they remain in it. She concludes with a criticism of the current climate in the United States, both its reactionary economic policies and its glorification of the family, as particularly destructive for American black families and suggests that the demise of the American left after Viet Nam has eradicated any hope for significant change.

As Jones herself suggests in the Epilogue, her study is merely a prologue to an understanding of the condition of Afro-American women and it is not an analysis of how the intersection of race, gender and class created that condition. Rather, it provides wonderfully evocative data for meditation and analysis, far more than can be conveyed in such a short review.