

“Learn the Use of Explosives!”

Jones, Jacqueline. *Goddess of Anarchy: The Life and Times of Lucy Parsons, American Radical*. New York: Basic Books, 2017. 480 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-07899-8.

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Jacqueline Jones’s newest work takes on the Herculean task of assessing Lucy Parsons, a larger-than-life figure who spent more time creating her public persona than leaving behind accurate records. Parsons is a difficult person to research because she cultivated various (often fictional) stories about herself during her lifetime. Nationally renowned from her ascent in radical circles in the 1880s until her death in the 1940s, Parsons was heroicized by her fans and vilified by her detractors. An outspoken orator much like her contemporaries—Mother Jones, Emma Goldman, Ida B. Wells, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn—Parsons was “unique as a woman of color with an aura of mystery” (174). As first a socialist and then an anarchist, she became one of the era’s most prolific writers and speakers. Parsons unequivocally championed the use of violence to spur social change, urging workers to “*learn the use of explosives*” because the “more oppressors dead, and the fewer alive, the freer will be the world” (as quoted, 101, 102). Her inflammatory rhetoric mirrored that of her husband, Albert Parsons, the Haymarket Martyr hung from the gallows after a bomb ripped through a labor rally in 1886. She joined the Industrial Workers of the World and the Communist-founded International Labor Defense and had no issue with challenging, or publicly feuding with, other leftists. Today, Lucy Parsons is largely overlooked as a radical figure or, if mentioned, only brought up in reference to her famous husband. Jones’s biography situates Lucy Parsons as a famous figure in her own right. Yet, rather than uncritically admiring her activism, Jones tackles Parsons’s enigmatic life by putting all of her “ironies and contradictions” at the center of the story (xi).

Contrary to the identity she crafted in her later years, Parsons was not born in Texas to Mexican and Indian parents but into slavery in Virginia in 1851. Brought to Texas in 1863 by her owner, Lucia, as she was then known, benefited from the brief period of opportunity the beginning of Reconstruction provided. She gained an education and experimented with the boundaries of social acceptability, especially when she fell in love with and married Albert Parsons, a one-time Confederate soldier turned Republican firebrand. Outrage about their interracial marriage, which was legally accomplished in the weeks before anti-miscegenation laws cracked down on unions such as theirs, spurred the couple to leave for Chicago in 1873. Her move to a new home came with a reinvented identity. Lucia Carter (the surname of her stepfather) became Lucy Eldine Gonzalez Parsons. As she became increasingly well-known for her radical ideologies in the Second City, Parsons guarded her private life assiduously

and learned the art of a “carefully crafted persona” (42). During and after the Haymarket Square bombing and the death of her husband, Parsons capitalized on her fame to make numerous speaking tours across the country. Police continually harassed and monitored her movements, and spectators and journalists clamored to learn more about the physically-striking woman who fearlessly hurled insults at the establishment. Parsons presented herself as a loving mother and wife and continually stoked the flames of Haymarket to push her ideas of a non-hierarchical society into her nineties, when she tragically died in a house fire.

As the reader witnesses Parsons’s transformation from ex-slave to seasoned anarchist, Jones uses the lens of radical activism to elucidate the many challenges and issues at the heart of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. Compelling snapshots of post-Civil War Waco, Texas; and turn-of-the-century, industrial Chicago illuminate the era’s racial limitations, class warfare, and rise of popular culture. Utilizing a wide range of public speeches and writings, census records, newspaper write-ups from all over the country, labor archives, and left-wing journals, Jones provides a richly detailed and well-written account of Parsons’s life and the historical era. Using speculation to fill in the silences (or inaccuracies) in the historical record, Jones does not get bogged down in the ideological strains of anarchism or the limitations of Parsons’s story. She can at times present so much detail about Parsons’s travel schedule or daily movements that the story may seem slow in places. However, the deep setting Jones paints of this time period is a valuable part of her writing.

There is much about Parsons’s life to admire, particularly in light of the limited number of women, especially women of color, in positions such as hers. But Jones presents plenty to criticize as well. Jones seems most disappointed in Parsons’s rejection of her African American roots and limited attention to the challenges of Jim Crow society. Her presentation of herself as a traditionally respectable wife and mother further belied her open sexuality and, sadly, she used the courts to commit her son to a mental asylum when he threatened to join the army during the Spanish-American War. Jones finds her “willful thoughtlessness about the consequences of what she advocated” incredibly naïve (349). Finally, frustration at Parsons’s falsehoods regarding her background emerge at points: Parsons, would, Jones writes, “pick and choose among ways of being in the world, always calculating, at times dissembling; just being Lucy Parsons must have been exhausting” (247). However, this is part of Jones’s task. She wants to present Parsons as a full, flesh-and-blood individual, rather than as a caricature. There are “few lives that are not an abundance of contradictions and shortcomings,” Jones reminds us (350).

In the hands of a terrific scholar such as Jones, Lucy Parsons gets the well-rounded and full attention she deserves. This is the first full-length biography of Parsons to dig deeply beneath the surface of her public persona. What emerges is a nuanced, engaging, and insightful read of a flawed but captivating American figure.