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Claudia Jones and the 'West Indian Gazette'

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Contrary to popular belief, London carnival did not start in Notting Hill at the end of the 1960s, neither was the *West Indian World* the first Black newspaper in Britain. And it is appropriate, in a year that has seen the fortieth anniversary – and commemorations – of Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of blood' speech, to reflect on a fiftieth anniversary that is highly significant, in a positive sense, to the Black community in Britain, but is shamefully little known – the founding of the *West Indian Gazette (WIG)* under the inspiring leadership of Claudia Jones. Fifty years on, those whose job was that of midwife to *WIG* are nearly all dead.

Claudia Vera Cumberbatch Jones was born on 21 February 1915 in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad. She joined her parents in Harlem, New York when she was 9-years-old, they having migrated to the USA in 1924. Her mother died in 1927 when Claudia was 12. It is said that the Cumberbatch family was so poor that although Claudia did well at school, she did not attend her graduation as they could not afford a graduation gown for her.

In 1936 she joined the American Communist Party largely on account of its uncompromising defence of the Scottsboro 'boys'. By 1937, Claudia (now aged 22) was on the editorial staff of the *Daily Worker* and in 1938 became editor of the *Weekly Review*. During the second world war, the Young Communist League (YCL) was transformed into American Youth for Democracy, and she became editor of its monthly journal, *Spotlight*. In 1947, she was made executive secretary of the National Women's Commission and, in 1952, of the National Peace Commission. In 1953, she took over the editorship of *Negro Affairs*. In 1948, her communist activities led to her arrest and incarceration on Ellis Island and threatened deportation to Trinidad, then a Crown Colony. In 1951, aged only 36, she suffered her first heart attack and, between then and 1955, went into hospital several times. In 1955, the Supreme Court refused to hear her appeal against conviction and Claudia began her sentence of a year and a day at the Federal Reformatory for Women at Alderson, West Virginia. The next step was for her to be served with a deportation order. So, on 7 December 1955 at Harlem's

Hotel Theresa, some 350 people met to bid farewell to Claudia. She arrived in London two weeks later and, until her death nine years later in December 1964, she was to be a selfless and indefatigable fighter for the rights of peoples from Africa, Asia and the West Indies. Or, as the masthead of *WIG* would have it, 'Afro-Asian Caribbean [peoples]'.

Before *WIG* there were, of course, what could be called the house journals of organisations such as the Caribbean Labour Congress and Harold Moody's League of Coloured People, which brought out *The Keys*. There might have been many such organisations with their newsletters, but apparently none had reached the high street newsstands. Between *WIG* and the coming of the *West Indian World* were *Link*, *Carib*, *Anglo-Caribbean News*, *West Indies Observer* and *Magnet*. Almost all of these papers had writers who were at one time or the other associated with *WIG*.

To understand the role of *WIG* in its time, you must remember that there were, for example, only about half a dozen or so Black cricketers playing for the first-class counties. In football, there was a Black footballer at West Ham. There were no Black newsreaders or disc jockeys on the airwaves. White passengers would bounce straight up out of their seats on buses if a Black ('coloured') passenger was bold enough to sit next to them. Some public houses still operated a colour bar, covertly or otherwise. Many employers would say that they did not hire *coloureds* or *darkies* (if they were being polite). Landladies blamed the fact that they could not rent a room to a coloured person because the White neighbours would object.

The British Union of Fascists, with its lorry draped in the Union Jack, frequented the area opposite the Orange Luxury Coach Station, Brixton (now Windrush Square), from where its members would warn of the weakening of the sturdy British race through sexual liaisons. It would be reduced to the status of the Cape Coloured. Landlords and landladies still advertised rooms for rent under the legend: 'No Irish! No Coloureds!'. Brave White women who went out with coloured men were roundly insulted. White passengers still rubbed their hands on the coloured bus conductor's hair, for luck. For several years, the wall opposite St Matthews Church in Brixton, bore the legend 'Keep Britain White'!

The calls for the control of Black immigration were regular. Of course, no one in authority would declare himself as prejudiced. The British never were! It was just, as the excuse went, that it would have been better if these people were kept in their own countries and helped by grants from the British Exchequer. One Conservative MP, he with the sweeping moustache and a knighthood to boot, gave voice (on BBC Radio's Any Questions) to the thought that was apparently perplexing thousands of White parents. Asked Sir Gerald Nabarro, 'What would you do if your blonde blue-eyed daughter came home with a buck N****r and said she wanted to marry him?'

It was the right of each citizen to express his or her opinion that he/she did not want to live next door to one of *them*. In this atmosphere, you did not expect the shopkeeper to be civil and he/she invariably was not. You did not expect the policeman to be sympathetic when you asked for directions, and quite often he was not. Into this world was the *West Indian Gazette* born, like the goddess of mythology, fully armed ready for battle. It was not long in coming. In April 1958, four months after that famous flyer announcing *WIG*, Notting Hill, West London, and Robin Hood Chase, Nottingham, exploded with racial hatred. The normally liberal national dailies analysed the situation to the satisfaction of their readers by pointing out that what had taken place was an inevitable clash

between White hooligans and Black criminals. That brought home the shallow depth at which racism lurked under the social facade.

None of this was strange to Claudia Jones. She was a seasoned campaigner who had won the support and admiration of such towering characters as W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson. During those months from late summer to the autumn of 1958, the *Gazette's* office did more business meeting worried Blacks than did the Migrants' Service Department. As we went into 1959, politicians from what was referred to as the British Caribbean were seen going up those stairs to talk to Claudia or she was invited to their hotels. Some of those whom she met were Norman Manley of Jamaica, Eric Williams of Trinidad and Tobago, Cheddi Jagan of British Guiana, Phyllis Allfrey and Carl La Corbinière of the ailing West Indian Federation.

It was in this climate of expectations dashed that the idea of a carnival was conceived. Claudia asked for suggestions which would wash the taste of Notting Hill and Nottingham out of our mouths. It was then that someone, most likely a Trinidadian, suggested that we should have a carnival – in winter? It was December of 1958. Everybody laughed, and then Claudia called us to order. 'Why not?' she asked. 'Could it not be held in a hall, somewhere?' Yes it could, and it was held in St Pancras town hall in January 1959. The BBC televised it. The London papers were not pleased to see and hear hundreds of Blacks doing the jump-up in a hall near you, or them. Five more carnivals followed annually, up to 1964. For the second carnival, held at Seymour Hall, the great calypsonian the Mighty Sparrow was brought over from the land of carnival, Trinidad. None of those who were active in helping to bring the first Caribbean-style carnival in modern times to St Pancras on 31 January 1959 – including Sam King, Jimmy Fairweather, Nadia Cattouse, Cy Grant, Gloria Cameron – argued that Claudia started the Notting Hill carnival. But it seems incredible that those who took carnival on to the streets of Notting Hill in the late 1960s were unaware of the six carnivals between 1959 and 1964, albeit in halls.

WIG took its role as a newspaper seriously. It was not merely a vehicle to bring the news of what was happening back home and in the diaspora to Britain. It also commented on the arts in all their forms, at a time when Black performers were getting the crumbs, which fell from the production tables. *WIG* was talking up Cy Grant, Nadia Cattouse, Pearl Prescod, Edric Connor and Pearl Connor, Nina Baden-Semper, Corrine Skinner-Carter, Bascoe Holder, among others. It reviewed the novels of George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, E. R. Braithwaite and Jan Carew. It reviewed the works of artists and sculptors such as Aubrey Williams and Ronald Moody. It published poems and stories. Its trenchant editorials did not stop at Britain but had an opinion on the what, where and why of the cold war's hot spots.

The *Gazette* did not make enough to pay for contributions. Claudia herself was not a salaried editor. She had rent and other bills to pay, so her upkeep was another burden on the wobbly finances of the paper. There is evidence enough from letters of demands and threats of lawsuits among her papers to satisfy any sceptic. Only two people brought money to the *Gazette* in the early days. Sam King, who later became mayor of Southwark and the second Black man (after J. R. Archer during the first world war) to hold that post in a London borough. King sold the first 100 copies of the first edition of *WIG* and did not take a commission. And James Fairweather, *WIG's* advertisement manager, badgered the proprietors of furniture stores to give something back to the community after doing so

well out of Black householders. They bought advertisements in the paper, which also brought them more custom.

The *Gazette* struggled on, hardly able to keep its publication deadlines three months consecutively. Yet looking over Claudia's papers and photographs, there were events which *WIG* sponsored that were public spirited and appealed to the community, and not only to raise funds for the paper. One such event was in response to Hurricane Flora which devastated Jamaica in 1963. As always, Claudia was able to get the endorsement of leading Black figures from the literary and entertainment fields, including C. L. R. James, George Lamming, Andrew Salkey, Samuel Selvon and, from entertainment, Edric and Pearl Connor, Nadia Cattouse, Pearl Prescod and Gloria Cameron. Perhaps what the Black community at the time remembered most were the Paul Robeson concerts at Lambeth town hall, Brixton, and St Pancras town hall, when the great man revealed his generosity to a fellow fighter and friend by using his immense talent and precious time to promote a good cause.

WIG was present to celebrate Castro's revolution by promoting the film *Island Aflame*. It shook its fist at the Congo civil war and the abandonment of Patrice Lumumba. It printed the picture of Lumumba without his spectacles, bound and in a truck to be delivered into the hands of his rival Moise Tshombe, the West's place-man in Katanga. It reported the Sharpeville Massacre and the Rivonia Trials. The names of Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Robert Sobukwe were known to *WIG*'s readers – freedom fighters labelled by the British national broadsheets as troublemakers at best and terrorists by definition. There was no louder voice than *WIG*'s on Commonwealth issues or on decolonisation. There was the expectation of the West Indies Federation which sent visiting politicians climbing those stairs at the back of Theo's record shop [at 250 Brixton Road, SW9] up to the *Gazette*'s editorial office. And then there was the racial hatred of Notting Hill and Nottingham.

Looking back, it seems preposterous that the only coherent voice from the Black community in Britain was a monthly paper that was so strapped for cash, it often could not find the £100 needed to pay the printers. And, thinking back, it is frightening to contemplate which was in worst shape, the appalling finances of the paper or Claudia's health. They were inextricably bound together and the death of one hastened the demise of the other. The paper finally folded eight months and four editions after Claudia's own death, in December 1964.

Donald Hinds was among London's first Black bus conductors, worked with Claudia Jones on the West Indian Gazette (1958-1965); wrote *Journey to an Illusion* (Heinemann, 1966) trained as a teacher; wrote *Black Peoples of the Americas* (Collins Educational, 1992); and, with Marika Sherwood and Colin Prescod, contributed to *Claudia Jones: a Life in Exile* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1999).