

The *West Indian Gazette*: Claudia Jones and the black press in Britain

By Donald Hinds

Abstract: The *West Indian Gazette*, edited by Claudia Jones, and on which Donald Hinds was a writer, was one of the most influential pioneers of a genuinely independent black press in Britain. To say that Claudia herself was a communist, feminist and anti-imperialist does not express the dynamism and humanity of her politics, or their innovative nature – including the introduction of the first black carnival in Britain. She, and the *Gazette*, were immensely important in the creation of the black community in Britain from the late 1950s onwards, as it was beset by an ongoing and crude racism, including the riots of Notting Hill and Nottingham.

Keywords: 1958 riots, CPUSA, *Magnet*, Notting Hill Carnival

The *West Indian Gazette* (WIG), like a child from the insalubrious part of town, was born into a struggle and its life was destined to be short, tortuous, and at times bruising. WIG, as it came to be affectionately called, spent its first six years of its seven years' existence in two crowded, chaotic and untidy rooms above Theo Campbell's record shop at 250 Brixton Road, SW9. It was indeed a child of the slums, it had not been conceived in Brixton and its parentage was uncertain.

I have written this before! When a writer resorts to quoting himself, be warned, he is either lost for words in more ways than one, or he is awfully sure of himself.

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* 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'. Arrested in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931, they were charged with raping two white girls on a goods train. The blacks were about to be charged with fighting a gang of white boys also on the train, when two white girls dressed as if they were boys (this was after all 1931) said that the blacks had raped them. Suddenly events took a more menacing turn. The stage was now set for one of America's most notorious court cases of the 1930s. The Communist Party leapt to the fore, hiring for the defence a famous New York lawyer who had never before lost a case. The reason that the Communists had become so involved in what was then called Negro affairs dates from the 1928 Comintern (Communist International) and can quickly be told. Joseph Stalin had made it known that he was disappointed with the poor effort of the American Communist Party in recruiting blacks into it. So, by the 1930s, the Party was second only to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in its efforts as champion of the rights of people of colour.

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]'.

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The claim that *WIG* was the first black newspaper in Britain must be qualified by the term 'commercial' black newspaper. As the sole voice

of the black community between 1958 and 1965, it was sold for sixpence (2.5p) and it accepted what advertisements came its way. The latter were mainly from small entrepreneurs operating clubs, hairdressing salons and the occasional entertainments that had some coloured members, as we were then called, in their casts. The biggest advertiser for several years was the Grimaldi Siosa Line, whose ships the *Auriga*, the *Ascona*, the *Begona* and *Castel Verde* among others plied the Caribbean sea route to Britain. This line was mainly responsible for transporting the majority of Caribbean migrants to British shores between 1948 and the mid-1960s.

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*.

Among them, *Magnet* had the promise of sound commercial backing. It had offices near Warren Street, near London University, and experienced newspaper people from the liberal end of the national trade helped in designing the new paper. It first appeared in March 1965 with Jan Carew as editor. Although my name remained on the masthead of *WIG* until its final demise in July 1965, I had accepted Carew's invitation to write for *Magnet*. Teaming up with Sid Burke as photographer, we covered the second election defeat of Patrick Gordon Walker during the first six months of Labour coming to power under Harold Wilson. Gordon Walker's first defeat was, of course, Smethwick, where voters were given the stark choice: 'If you want a Nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour!' Gordon Walker's second defeat was in the erstwhile safe Labour seat of Leyton.

Malcolm X had visited Britain and Carew met him in Birmingham and interviewed him for *Magnet*. Carew left shortly after that and several people who drifted from one paper to the other were involved with *Magnet*. Colour magazines and glossies made their appearances simultaneously with the above-named papers. There were *Tropic*, *Flamingo*, *Daylight International*, *Cinnamon* and *Sepia*. Up to the mid-1960s, the *Gazette* had the longest life-span of all these publications.

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. One trade unionist even suggested that the oil we put on our bodies after a bath was offensive – that at a time when the more hygiene conscious of the population went to the public baths once per week. It is ironic that, fifty years on, curried chicken and rice is now the nation's most popular takeaway food. In the 1950s and 1960s, curries and other well-seasoned dishes offended the majority of the population.

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 Nigger and said she wanted to marry him?' (this question was edited out of the repeat broadcast the next day).

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. You longed, as did Alvin Bennett in his novel *Because They Know Not*, to find that neighbour who was going around telling landlords not to rent rooms to blacks because he did not want to live so close to them. Find that neighbour and convince him that you were a decent sort of chap, and this colour thing would be history. 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.

Claudia was the one with a finger on the pulse of British society.

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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 British media also sought Claudia's opinions.

Some young coloureds, then still in their teens, gathered around Claudia and the *WIG*, among them Della McKenzie, Carmen Spencer, Diana Grant-Somers, Olive Chen, Brenda Tigh, June Allison Bayley and many others. Young writers included Ken Kelly from Trinidad who wrote a good humorous piece for *Punch* and later went to Germany, contributed to the *Rund Funk* and published a collection of plays in German under the title *Der Minister und seine Sippe* (The Minister and his Tribe). Then there was Lindsay Barrett, whose novel *A Song for Mumu* held out great promise before he was lost to academia somewhere in Africa. I did the occasional pieces of broadcasting for the BBC Caribbean Programme. Many of us were busily writing the great West Indian novel. My publications to date consist of two and one-third books in the shops now. They are *Journey to an Illusion*, *Black Peoples of the Americas* and, in collaboration with Marika Sherwood and Colin Prescod, a biography of the great lady herself: *Claudia Jones: a life in exile* (and, of course, there is a drawer full of rejected novels).

We all loved Claudia and respected her, but we were not always there for her. Some people were very cautious of her Communist connections at a time when the cold war was at its hottest. The majority had families and all had their livings to make. Somewhere in my chaotic filing system is a cry from the heart to me written in Claudia's bold handwriting: 'Where are you? Have you forgotten us?', which revealed the awful truth. I was not as readily accessible to the cause and the great woman as I would like to think. The years were ticking away and the family expanding. In some cases, the artist and his family suffer for his art and in other cases the art must lie dormant for the sake of the demands of the family.

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.

Ken Kelly and I were the principal reporters, but we rarely ventured outside London. We were trappers rather than hunters of news. We would wait for newsworthy personalities to stop off in London, on their way to conferences, and then interview them. My biggest catch was James Baldwin right after the publication of *Another Country*. Radical writers from all over the globe would send in stories. Among them, W. E. B. Du Bois and his wife Shirley Graham wrote from China and Ghana. George Padmore exchanged correspondence with Claudia from Kwame Nkrumah's party headquarters in Accra. Claudia herself travelled to Russia and China and Managing Director Manchanda was visiting China when Claudia died.

However, I think it is fair for me to claim the singular honour of being the only *WIG* reporter to be sent abroad to cover a specific event for the paper. The *Gazette* paid £15 towards my fare and two-week stay in Vienna in August 1959 to cover the Seventh World Festival of Youths and Students. Thousands of young people, courtesy of the sponsorship of the USSR, descended on the Austrian capital for that fortnight. For me, a lad from the hills above the Yallahs River, St Thomas, Jamaica, it was a once in a life-time opportunity. I attended my first opera and ballet performances (did I actually see the young Nureyev dance?). I heard Paul Robeson sing 'Ole Man River' on the banks of the Danube. I even learnt to say 'you are a very beautiful girl' in German. I journeyed home through Czechoslovakia and East Germany, as a consolation for not being able to get an invitation to visit either Russia or China.

Much later it dawned on me that this was part of Claudia's plan to educate me. To her it must have been a mid-twentieth century equivalent of the Grand Tour. The Festival was part of the Soviet Union's cold war campaign against the West. This greatly annoyed the Americans who were there, although not with an official delegation, to counter the Soviet Union's propaganda with missionary zeal. It was educational to see the two mighty power blocs up close at work during those two weeks, trading verbal punches for the minds of those they did not seriously consider as equals but as hewers of wood and drawers of water. The Americans had a booth at every event where they thought the hydra-headed beast of Soviet propaganda would raise its many heads. And there were many, perhaps too many, American tourists there with cameras at the ready. 'Can you not see that this is just Soviet propaganda?', one of the young men supervising a booth at a park in the centre of Vienna asked me. 'I am aware of that', I replied. 'Why don't you hold a festival like this in Georgia, or some other southern state and invite the world. I will come', then feistily added, 'if you can guarantee my safety from the Ku Klux Klan.' The American Civil Rights Movement was taking hold of our consciousness on this side of the Atlantic. In May the same year,

the state of Alabama had banned a children's book because it showed a black rabbit marrying a white one! The young man gave me a copy of *The New Class: an analysis of the Communist system* by Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas. It has taken pride of place among the growing list of books which I will read one day.

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 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 up to the *Gazette*'s editorial office. And then there was the racial hatred of Notting Hill and Nottingham.

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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.

Today I read the current crop of black newspapers bulging with advertisements and occupying space on shelves of high street newsagents, and for a moment I am green as a Martian with jealousy. These papers may not accept it, and at times I find it hard to believe it myself, but they are heirs to *WIG*'s legacy. It was the progenitor of all black journals published in this country. I salute their success, but they have not got the link which bound *WIG* to its readers. Certainly I have not read an article to match the intellectual might of Jan Carew's 'What is a West Indian?', published in *WIG* in April 1959. I have not read an article to match Claudia's editorials on the Rivonia Trials. Try this: 'If this be treason, Mandela, Sisulu's cause is ours.' Perhaps papers today no longer lead but merely inform. Therein lies the difference.

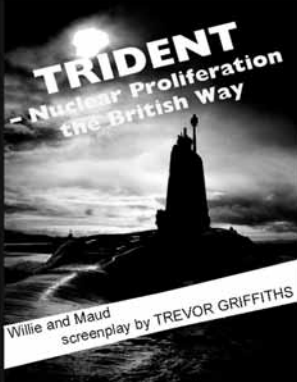
When Claudia died, a great hole was ripped in the fabric of our society. In December 1964, the black community in London was widowed. For a while it was leaderless. Today, there are black people in positions that would have been thought no more than a comedian's throwaway line, if anyone had been bold enough to aspire to them then. For instance in an early issue (not among my collection) there was the picture of a black actor in a police uniform. I sold a copy to a police officer who had wandered into Brixton bus garage (did I not say that I earned my living as a bus conductor?). The PC laughed so much that he bought two more copies for his mates back at the station – the idea that there could be black police officers was such a great joke. I guessed some people felt the same way about having a black member of parliament when Dr David Pitt ran on the Labour Party ticket for Clapham, an erstwhile safe seat, and lost.

This year Claudia would have been a venerable 93-year-old. She might have remained poor but would have been rich in dignity. Had the *Gazette* managed to escape its financial stranglehold and become solvent, I had been promised that I was in line to be its first paid member of staff. Perhaps I might have inherited the editor's chair and already made sure of the succession. What flights of fancy! I have no idea if the carnivals would have transferred from the halls to the streets amicably. But this I know, that the young woman who wrote those editorials on the Rivonia Trials, who saw and understood the motives of Robert Sobukwe, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela would never have abandoned their cause when they were abandoned on that flat windswept South Atlantic island. In 1993, she would have resumed the editorial chair again at 78 as editor emerita to lead the loud hosannas celebrating the release of Mandela.

Even now I hear her voice: 'Donald, I asked for 3,000 words. This is far too long.' And then that smile, 'but if I ask you to cut it, you would only make it 5,000. What am I going to do with you? Give it here.'

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*).

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