

## Carby, H. (2019) *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands*. Verso.

Review by Jamie Owen Daniel

As has often been discussed, one of the most common components of working-class memoirs is the trauma of feeling one has had to give up a sense of belonging, of being rooted in a working-class community, culture, and family, in order to work as an academic or in another professional field. In order to ‘move up,’ one has to learn new ways of self-presentation, new cultural norms, that can make one feel less at home at ‘home’ and that one belongs ‘neither here nor there.’

Another typical component is an insistence on combining autobiography and data/research, the first traditionally marked as ‘personal,’ or merely personal, the latter as more ‘objective,’ detached, generalizable, and therefore ‘factual.’ For many of us, this insistence on the legitimation of our personal experience as a valuable way of knowing is the greatest strength of these memoirs. Christine Walley, Jack Metzgar, and others have provided us with brilliant foundational examples of this form of what Sherry Linkon refers to as ‘scholarly personal narratives.’

Hazel Carby’s challenging memoir both confirms the value of using academic research and analytical skills to enrich a very personal memoir and complicates the assumption that the writer necessarily ever belonged, ever felt at home, in the working-class culture and community in which she was raised. In her case, trauma was caused by growing up in that community, not by leaving it. In documenting her experience and that of her mixed-race family, she raises important questions for how we generalize about working-class memoir writing.

Carby was born in 1948 in Devon, England, the eldest of two children of a white working-class mother and a Black RAF pilot born and raised in Jamaica who settled in England after the war. The rich social density of her memoir, which laboriously details the work lives of her forebearers, also characterizes other memoirs by British working-class women academics, from Carolyn Steedman’s 1986 *Landscape for a Good Woman* to Alison Light’s more recent *Common People: In Pursuit of My Ancestors*. Steedman, born in 1947, and Light, 1955, like Carby document the labor of their working-class parents’ families and the extent to which they had to constantly uproot themselves to find work. Both write from the same period of childhood, but with no attention to the growing racial tensions within the class at that time, when unprecedented numbers of non-white subjects of the British colonies emigrated to Britain for work. For both Steedman and Light, the English working class was white.

For Carby, pointedly, there was the white working class and then her multiracial working-class family, constantly antagonized and belittled by the former. In one of the book’s chapters in which the sense of anger that runs throughout the book is most apparent, she documents her father Carl Carby’s pride in having served his country—Great Britain—as a fighter pilot, even after government officials mocked him and refused to believe his claims of having served.

As the book documents, juxtaposing family history with documentation, the dissolution of the British Empire after World War II meant the loss of status and the resources from the colonies upon which Britain had depended. It also meant the loss of jobs at home in ports, mills, coal yards, and manufacturing. To complicate these losses, the image of the Empire that was constantly reinforced and celebrated had been one of white Britains dominating brown and black colonial subjects, to whom they were assumed to be intellectually and culturally superior. The presence of Black Jamaicans like Carby's father in post-war Britain troubled and gave the lie to that image, resulting in both fear and deep resentment.

This resentment has been constantly exploited, sometimes explicitly (for example, in Peters Griffith's 1964 parliamentary campaign slogan, 'If you want an [n-word] for a neighbor, vote labour') and sometimes more indirectly, as a way to maintain the idea that proper Britishness, and especially Englishness, is white, and to keep the British working class divided against itself. As Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall pointed out in 1980, 'Britain's long imperial hegemony, and the intimacy of the relationship between capitalist development at home and colonial conquest overseas, laid the trace of an active racism in British popular consciousness...penetrating deep into the working class itself.'

Carby's memories of childhood are thus dominated by racialized humiliation at school, from teachers as well as other children who refused to acknowledge her as British, and by tension at home due to limitations her parents faced because of their interracial marriage. After repeatedly being asked 'where are you from' and responding that she was, like her classmates, born in England, she recalls how

[s]chool friends would ask, 'but how did you get here'? Being black British was incomprehensible, an impossibility between two mutually exclusive terms. Insisting that she was both placed her at the nexus of a domestic ambiguity that made her white teachers and classmates uncomfortable, so she learnt to live with being an unresolvable contradiction...Being black, there was no flexibility or malleability to her unbelonging. (p. 84)

Using what Adrienne Rich famously referred to as the 'asbestos gloves' of the third person to be able to write about experiences too painful to refer to directly, Carby's first person 'I' becomes 'the girl' when she writes about being thus humiliated and silenced by other children and teachers. And 'the girl' was also silenced, until this writing, about having been raped as a nine-year old by a white neighborhood boy, who afterwards 'issued a warning, 'just don't tell anyone.' She never did' (p. 58).

Race and gender dominate this memoir—both of which are embodied, quite literally, in her body but also, as she discovers, in her name. After much painstaking research, the trained historian learns that 'Carby' was the name of a working-class white Englishman who, like others who were able to 'jump class' in this way throughout the colonial Empire, became a wealthy plantation owner in Jamaica. Her research reveals not only that he enslaved Black people, but also that he most likely impregnated an enslaved Black woman who was one of her Jamaican ancestors. Just as she was assaulted as a child by a white neighbor boy, her very name is a reminder of the racialized sexual violence that was commonplace in Jamaica and elsewhere, during the supposedly

‘civilizing’ colonial occupation. She is thus, with bitter irony, a ‘child of Empire,’ but not in the way white British children were taught to understand themselves to be.

*Imperial Intimacies* confirms that there is no one working class that is positioned once and for always outside of or in opposition to dominant interests and ideologies. The extent to which white working-class Britain has been coopted by the fantasy of a common nationalist identity is well documented here. Rather, there are working-class histories sometimes radically differentiated by place, gender, and so often, by race, that sometimes intersect but often do not. For Carby, as for many other Black British scholars and activists, ‘race ‘ in Hall’s words, ‘[has been] ...the modality in which class is ‘lived,’ the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through.’ This has [had] consequences for the whole class.’

Thus, if Carby, who since 1984 has taught at Yale and written extensively on African-American, Black feminist, and Black Atlantic writers and thinkers, understands herself as belonging anywhere, it is not to the English working-class, but to the Black Atlantic diaspora of those whose classed experiences have been as complex and alienating as hers.

### **Reviewer Bio**

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