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Visions of legacy: legacies of vision

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Introduction

The invitation to contribute to this volume provides an opportunity to orientate myself in times that I increasingly feel to be without compass. By so describing these times I mean that for me they are times when I am more often stuck on the horns of ambiguity – not so much about how to judge or characterise a given political situation but more about how to think and behave strategically in order to address that political situation. It involves, I think, a question of what kinds of new political subjectivity and oppositional practices might be developed collectively in order to move to that next step – the step towards *construct* that must necessarily follow the deconstruction of opposition. At the same time, the ambiguity that seems to pervade my thinking (or perhaps it is more an ambiguity of feeling or political subjectivity) these days appears to be related to the question of generational inheritance. Even with this there is a double-ness: involving both what I and ‘my generation’ assumed as part of our political inheritance and what I and ‘my generation’ have bequeathed as inheritance. One thing is for sure: I have lost the certainty of youth! Even while one expression of my condition of ambiguity is that I am not entirely sure to which generation I belong. In part this is simply a condition of disavowal (i.e. a simultaneous knowing and not knowing, as you will see when I sketch out the moments of my formation). But it is also, I think, an expression of the fact that there are no clearly defined or definable lines of direction between biographical age and for example, formations of feminism, anti-racism, allegiances to queer politics, anti-globalisation or environmental activism, struggles for bodily autonomy, practises of intimate life.... one could go on. Of course the body, in its materiality, may say otherwise but the sense of self as a political subject seems to lack (refuse?) any simple or fixed temporal location or teleology.

Yet one has a history and brings that history – and its ideological, social and psychic lineages – to bear on contemporary experiences and so this piece is a description of a conversation staged in my mind between an event that I attended at the Imperial War Museum in London in 2009 and a book about the political life and

legacy of a Caribbean woman called Claudia Jones. For many women involved in that version of feminism in Britain (now) called Black British feminism, Claudia Jones was an inspirational figure and heroine on a par with Angela Davis and Winnie Mandela yet there seems to be far too little knowledge of her and her work among feminist constituencies more broadly, which may be related to her political trajectory and the restrictions on imagined affiliations that result from racialisation of political imaginaries. As if it is only possible to hear and see as applicable to ‘me’/‘us’ as well as her and her and her voices and visions (whether historical or contemporary) if they are couched in some metaphorical mid-Atlantic accent, or a certain US accented theory or analysis seemingly able to speak not just to but ‘for’ all. Plus ça change but my desire in this piece is not organised around that seemingly intractable problem. Rather, as I have already indicated, my concern is to recount a mental ‘conversation’ between an event and a book¹ that offers an account and analysis of the work of Claudia Jones. That said it is not the full scope and details of the book with which I engage, rather it provides a selective jumping off point for some preoccupations that have a trans-Atlantic flavour.

First though a brief outline of some of the key biographical points in Claudia Jones political life is worthwhile. She was born in Trinidad in the early part of the twentieth century though grew up in the USA from the age of nine. Her political engagement began at an early age and she is remarkable for the reach of her activism and the breadth of her political vision – a vision that embraced culture as much as ideology as key tools in the armoury of emancipation politics. She was a member of the Communist Party in the USA and active in struggles for workers and women’s rights, racial equality and anti-colonialism, peace and international solidarity – a tireless round of activism that led to her being arrested three times with eventual imprisonment despite serious health problems. Eventually the US state deported her to Britain (as a national of a British colony) in 1955. In London she joined the British Communist Party but was also active and a leading figure in a number of West Indian organisations in London/England. She was founder and co-founder of the West Indian Workers and Student’s Association and the newspaper *West Indian Gazette* and significantly was the force behind the first London Carnival held in 1959, i.e. the event that would grow into the annual Notting Hill Carnival. She did this in the wake

¹*Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (2008), Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press

of the anti-black race riots in the late 1950s and in so doing set in train one of the most significant and lasting inscriptions of Caribbean presence in Britain. Claudia Jones' inexhaustible anti-imperialist activism meant that she worked within the parameters of the 'black Atlantic' that signals so powerfully the multi-sited character of trans-Atlantic conversations of whatever period. She died in 1964 and is buried alongside Karl Marx in Highgate cemetery in north London – and as the title of Carol Boyce Davis' book notes it is to the '*Left of Karl Marx*' that her grave and political vision lies². Her significance for black feminism in Britain is precisely her capacity to see and understand the array and shape of affiliations among numerous and on the surface unconnected struggles; her capacity for strategic thinking and political vision and her unrelenting global reach yet unshakeable Caribbean identification. For many of us she modelled a form of political subjectivity that is constituted across a multiplicity of identifications even while maintaining and making claim to a situated and particular identity.

It is in testimony to and analysis of the importance and legacy of Claudia Jones' political life that Carol Boyce Davis delivers her book. She traces the roots and dimensions of Claudia Jones' politics and effects and locates her both in her times and in the formation of black feminist political praxis across the trans-Atlantic diaspora and beyond. The book is simultaneously a work of historical excavation and claim *and* an analysis for *this time* of the work involved in formation of political subjectivity and collectivity. It is a vital and fulsome contribution to an emergent Claudia Jones scholarship and challenges its readers to think through the contemporary relevance of Jones' vision and legacy.

What follows then is simultaneously a multi-sited trans-Atlantic conversation and a cross-generational one. It is multiply trans-Atlantic in that it implicitly traces the flow between the Caribbean, the USA and Britain of some of the ideas that informed the development of a certain moment of Black British feminism and it does so in conversation with aspects of Carol Boyce Davis's book on Claudia Jones who, as noted, was herself a multi-sited political subject. It is cross-generational in that it stages a conversation with a political progenitor as brought to me by Carol Boyce Davis and also in so far as it engages questions that arose in my mind as I listened to

² The full details of Claudia Jones' life are amply and sensitively covered in Boyce Davis' book. Another, though much shorter account of the life and legacy of Jones is also to be found in Buzz Johnson's "*I Think of My Mother*": *Notes on the Life and Times of Claudia Jones*, London: Karia Press.

the debates among a group of biographically younger women at the Imperial War Museum. It is also trans-Atlantic in that it reads the Imperial War Museum (IWM) event against the grain of some ideas raised in the book and intra-generational (in the biographical sense) in the conversation I have with the book's author.

In conversation

One Saturday morning in early March 2009, as the sun struggled to whisper its existence behind the grey clouds that filled the London sky, I made my way down Kennington Park Road on route to the Imperial War Museum. I was going to attend an event called to discuss the practice and politics of black women's hair, beauty and skin. The event had been organised by a group of young black women calling themselves *Inspired Black Women* who aim to educate and agitate about issues pertinent to the lives of black women – across a host of ethnic and national heritages – in contemporary London, Britain. They had recruited the help of *100 Black Men*, a group, as the name states, of black men equally concerned to educate and agitate around issues of race, racism and gender but with a specific appeal to young black men to stand up and take responsibility for themselves, each other, and the wider community. *100 Black Men* use film as a central tool in their work. *Inspired Black Women* collaborated with them for the event at the Imperial War Museum to organise a screening of three films that looked at the issues of hair, beauty and skin. They were attempting to take the pulse of community feelings about and responses to these issues and to initiate an on-going discussion³.

I was to meet my sistren Ann there, her daughter (and my god-daughter) being one of the founders of *Inspired Black Women*. We decided in advance that we would go not to contribute but listen as we were interested in hearing what the younger generation(s?) of women were saying and how they were analysing the issues. Women of all skin tones, hair styles and forms of beauty were represented and we wondered if and how this variety of black womanhood, this embodiment of the very themes to be discussed, would impact the discussions that were about to begin.

³ Since that event African-American comedian Chris Rock has brought out his wonderful and insightful film *Good Hair* in which the relationship black women (and men) have to their (women's) hair is humorously and painfully explored even while the infrastructure (products, salons, protocols) of black hair maintenance is queered. The film is as serious as your life, to use the telling phrase that Val Wilmer used to describe black jazz.

I couldn't help but be struck by the ironies that marked the occasion. First, that here we were in the *Imperial War Museum* to discuss ways in which legacies of the colonial inscription of black women's bodies intrude into the present of post-imperial Britain – and whether that mattered or not. Second, that we were meeting in one of the spaces charged with narrating and memorialising the national story in ways that allow for 'diversity' yet without radically disrupting its modernist inscription and taken-for-granted teleology. Third, that we were doing so at a time when Britain was once again involved in a neo-colonial *war* in a part of the world subject to its own histories of colonial subjection/inscription and resistance. And fourth, that after walking up the concourse into the face of the enormous cannon that sits at the façade of the museum, to get into the designated room we had to pass example after example of other war machines, stationary, mounted or air-bourne. What paradox!

A couple of days later the book arrived through my letter box and I was able to find immediately material and argumentation from Jones that would help me make further sense of the contradictions as well as indicating generational continuities and duties. For it was clear that in the hands and mind of Claudia Jones, those pieces of anti-peace equipment could be seized upon as an opportunity to tell us why the struggle for peace now as then is as central to black women's lives as is/was access to care, work and equality of pay for jobs across the breadth of the economy. Boyce Davis states it thus: "...the formulation "peace work" gives us perhaps the most significant overarching and organizing moral framework in which to locate all of her positions. It accounts for and describes her various contributions to a range of struggles for human justice" (p.213).

That it did so was testimony to the expectation with which I had awaited this book. I had known for a few years before its publication that Carole Boyce -Davis had been researching the political life and legacy of Claudia Jones. I had long looked forward to the moment when I would hold a copy in my hands and absorb all there was to learn about one of our founding mothers. I was excited by the prospect of seeing how Boyce-Davis would approach organising a narrative of the political importance of such a huge, but too often inadequately remembered or valorised, figure such as Claudia Jones, inadequately remembered by feminists as well as those on the left, if such a divide makes any real political sense.

When it finally arrived on my desk in the troubled times of 2009, I was keen to see what inferences might be drawn from both the legacy of Claudia Jones and the

book itself about the character and possibilities of the current conjuncture as played out across the social and political landscape of Britain. And once I had the book – had held it, read it and scrutinised every photograph - I was filled with inspiration and thoughts about the travel of political ideas and alliances across the Atlantic. I was also reminded that the USA is only one among several edges on the western side of the Atlantic and that the edges encapsulated in the Caribbean have also been locations from which political ideas and subjectivities have emerged and influenced the making of feminism in post-imperial Britain⁴. Thinking about this stirred in me a desire to have something of a conversation about the disjunctions between the vocabularies of interpretation and representation which predominated in Claudia Jones' times and in which she claimed her place and those which characterise the times which frame the book as an intervention into debates about the politics of transnational feminist praxis and which were so alive in the IWM event.

Reading the book sent me on a trail: I went up to Highgate, to Claudia Jones' grave not having been there for a number of years; I re-read other pieces by Carole Boyce Davis: her 'Remembering Beryl Gilroy' piece in *Jenda* and a later piece from the same journal on Condoleeza Rice⁵; I looked back at my old pamphlets from *OWAAD* and old copies of *Speak Out*, that the Brixton Black Women's Group, of which I was a long standing member, used to publish; I remembered stories my parents told me about some of the places referred to in the book such as Victory House, the Paramount club on Tottenham Court Road; I remembered that Andre Shevington had been a friend of my own birth father; that our house (a crumbling tenement of rented rooms in Kilburn Park⁶ that was occupied by people from the Caribbean) had a petrol lamp thrown into it at the time of the Notting Hill riots; the incessant, necessary and joyful music that poured out of every floor carrying bluebeat, and jazz and church songs into the decaying London street. I remembered Ricky and Cecil and Gerlin and Althea and Eddie, Jessica and Eric⁷; and 1976 Carnival and the emergence of a strong black feminist voice in Britain.

⁴ To say nothing of those 'edges' formed on the western boundaries of the continent of Africa.

⁵ Carole Boyce Davies, (2002) 'Remembering Beryl Gilroy', *Jenda: a journal of culture and African women's studies*, vol.2, no.1; and (2006) 'CON-DOL-EE-ZZA: diaspora, transnationalism or the limits of domestic racial or feminist discourses', *Jenda*, issue 9

⁶ This is approximately within a two mile radius from Ladbroke Grove, the epicentre of the Notting Hill riots.

⁷ These were among the people who were both central figures in the development of a progressive black political praxis in Britain and were key to my own formation as a black radical and feminist. I knew them in the following capacities (but these are only a few of the notable contributions they

It was clear that while Boyce Davis' book was about the life and political legacy of an extraordinary foremother of feminism in Britain it also spoken parts of my life in a personal and intimate way as well as politically. Indeed as an intervention, I felt that the book reminded its readers of the value and central pedagogical importance of the political work of recuperation of key black women foremothers. This is clear in the book's insistence on 'taking space' and in the double-movement captured in Boyce Davis' definition of the 'radical black female subject' as simultaneously the embodied and sentient individual *and* the public position that is articulated in a particular praxis of black female consciousness and subjectivity. Both dimensions must be recognised and engaged with if women like Claudia Jones are to be accorded the all round respect they are due.

There is more too. A more signalled by the conjunction of the two occurrences. For me the conjunction of my receipt of the book on Claudia Jones and the meeting at the Imperial War Museum seemed un-coincidental, as if it had been somehow arranged by those who have crossed – urging me to engage the questions of intergenerational inheritance, what constitutes the political today and how mobilisations might be convened under its sign. At least these were among the questions that I read as posed by the IWM event and as enfolded into the core of this adroitly crafted, meticulously researched and oh so *urgent* exposition and analysis of the life, thought and contribution of Claudia Jones. Questions that are themselves part of a transatlantic conversation that crosses decades, generations and very different political times.

At their heart seems to be this. How, in the wake of the demise of discourses of the political that posited a single direction of travel within a Manichean structure of

made). Jessica and Eric Huntley ran a black bookshop in the Ealing area of London from which they both cultivated black and anti-colonial consciousness and hosted numerous events connected with those political visions. Althea and Eddie Lecointe were similarly active in the Finsbury Park area of London. Ricky Cambridge and Cecil Gutzmore were the founders of the *Black Liberator* a Althusserian influenced theoretical journal dedicated to black, anti-imperialist and class struggle. Cecil was also a key figure in the Brixton Defence Campaign that we in the Brixton Black Women's Group were also centrally involved with and which was set up in the wake of the Brixton Riots in 1981. The campaign offered legal and political defence and monitored the activities of the police and the direction of thinking that culminated in the Scarman report into the causes of the riots (or what we referred to as riotous rebellion). Of these though it was Gerlin Bean who was the most fundamental influence on my political formation: she showed me what it meant to be a black feminist and still remain connected to black community struggles and more importantly she modelled the kind of courage it takes to be a political activist. She is deserving of her own publically recorded tribute and analysis, and who knows someday some of us may get together to do it.

antagonism and the emergence of new vocabularies and epistemologies through which injustice, exploitation and oppression are articulated, might it be possible to engage in the recuperation of a political subject located in the 'old' language and transform that act of recuperation into an intervention into the gender, anti-racist, sexual and class politics articulated in the 'new' vocabularies?

Posing this question requires, I think, a distinction between two things. On the one hand, the legacy of Claudia Jones and what we might do with that legacy (alongside that of other key figures and struggles). On the other hand, works of recuperation, such as this book, but understood more broadly as deploying in (its) their own right the very legacies (it) they excavate and animate as a means of making (its) their own political stands. This then requires that readers of works such as this (that re-enter the many centuries long trans-Atlantic conversations) hold that distinction whilst recognising that in the recuperation and the history lesson lies a call to arms including a challenge to examine the reader's own location as regards the 'radical black female subject'.

Earlier I gave a hint about the location from which I engaged the Jones book in the context of this essay. Given my last point maybe it is appropriate that I expand on that a little because it gives greater clarity to why I see the issues posed to a larger stage are also keenly felt at a personal level. I situate my formation at the crossing points of four 'moments'. There was the moment of transformation of the relation between state and citizen in Britain in the development of the welfare state in which the languages of class provided the grammar and vocabulary for all kinds of antagonisms and unequal relations and struggles for social justice.

There was the Claudia Jones' 'moment' when 'the empire came home', an arrival in part propelled in response to the huge demand for labour in which a set of imperial global relations was utilised as the conduit through which to meet the labour shortages. 'They' were now 'here' and there was a collapse of the spatial relations of empire, with its economies and knowledge frames of 'race' and racialised gender, that were deeply inscribed in the British social formation and national imaginary but which were consistently disavowed. Nevertheless our presence and the demands and claims we were to make were soon to give rise to a language of 'race' as the grammar through which to articulate social antagonism and social claim. This was coupled with the 'moment' of anti-imperialism. What these struggles did was to provide a language of the international and the non-aligned as a site of struggle, often through

discourses of nationalism – but including the possibility of an emergent political subjectivity of ‘anti-imperialist’.

Soon to come was the moment of feminism, and though it required a year in Sri Lanka before I was able to adopt the identity of feminist, what this (and the other ‘new social movements’) signalled was a widening of the political agenda around antagonisms and inequalities that were themselves subjugated or ignored within dominant paradigms of oppositional politics. This nomenclature marked a shift from convening around and mobilisation of a classed and/or anti-colonial political subject and the emergence of new political and social subjects of the kind Boyce-Davis conjures in her notion of the ‘radical black female subject’ that Claudia Jones embodies.

In describing the contexts of my formation as political subject I am attempting to draw attention to an important element in this trans-Atlantic conversation which is that I am among that constituency of black women in Britain who might claim to be direct descendents of Claudia Jones’ work as public intellectual and activist. This is especially true in terms of the black feminism that Boyce-Davis ascribes to Jones and others among her comrades. From this ground a political (diasporic) subjectivity developed that led me to – and was reinforced by – participation in black British feminist praxis. As a member of Brixton Black Women’s Group and one of the co-founders of OWWAD, a feminist base was established from which I could engage in trade union, anti-imperialist, anti-racist and (what I would now call) queer politics.

What this means is that there is a certain articulation of black feminism that has genealogical connection (but with inevitable development) to the political visions, theorisation and practice of Claudia Jones. For example Boyce-Davis argues:

The point remains that black feminist theorising of the varying interconnections between race, class, and gender were operative in the early determining of a black feminist practice, as it was in the succeeding generation (p.44)

And a resounding and faithful echo can be found in this:

We discussed ...the experiences we had upon first arriving in Britain, the types of jobs we are doing and the ways Black women are being exploited and discriminated against in employment, the housing conditions we face and the education that we and our children are (not) getting, the many health

issues which concern us, the different forms of State harassment we are facing, ... the situation of our sisters in the Third World.⁸

Boyce-Davis is referring to the work of Claudia Jones and others in the 1940s and 1950s and my reference comes from an *OWAAD* document published on the cusp of the 1980s, on the cusp of what Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques were to call ‘new times’⁹. These times were simultaneously constituted by and constitutive of Thatcherism (and the US counterpart in ‘Reagonomics’; the bourgeois backlash against Manley in Jamaica and the general rise of IMF-led retrenchment throughout the Caribbean) and their inauguration of the neo-liberal modes of state-craft and governmentality that profoundly ruptured the post-second world war settlements across and beyond the multi-axial configuration that is the trans-Atlantic. In both statements there seems to be a repetition across geographies and generations.

Yet there is something in this repetition that begs yet more pressing questions. On the one hand, we can ask what were the material- ideological continuities that made it possible to sustain this kind of vocabulary of struggle with its implicit theorisation of the links between systems of exploitation and oppression – what in today’s language we might refer to as the mutually constitutive relations among them? In this regard one feature that seems to be particularly significant is that the impact of the social, political, economic and cultural changes that were to announce themselves under the signs of ‘global retrenchment’, ‘the end of the cold war’, ‘post-Fordism’, ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postmodernism’ were not yet fully discernible. Nor had the full impact of the claims made by ‘new social movements’ on the terms of what elsewhere I have referred to as ‘subordinated inclusions’¹⁰ in the social relations of citizenship been fully articulated or felt. This meant that the vocabularies and grammars that had emerged in different historical conditions maintained their capacity to articulate claims made in the name of social justice for a while.

On the other, (and this is perhaps the more substantial question) we can ask how did the norms of intelligibility make possible the kinds of political subjectivity through which those located across the matrix of mutually constitutive systems of exploitation and oppression could ‘know’ themselves: know themselves as agentic

⁸ Editorial of first issue of *FOWAAD!* the newsletter of *OWAAD*, July 1979

⁹ Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques, *New Times*, London: Lawrence and Wishart

¹⁰ Gail Lewis, ‘Coming Apart at the Seams: the crises of the welfare state’, in Gordon Hughes and Gail Lewis (eds), (1998) *Unsettling Welfare: the reconstruction of social policy*, London: Routledge

subjects capable of (indeed compelled to) producing such a black feminist praxis that was trans-Atlantic, indeed transnational in its orientation?

In this context it seems significant that this repeated theoretical-political position emerged from spaces in which Caribbean, African (continental) and south Asian women were working to craft a politics of presence in multiple arena of social and political practice in late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s Britain. I think this connects to the argument (in chapter 4 of Boyce Davis' book) about the way Claudia Jones re-made herself when, upon her deportation from the USA, she chose to come to London as the location of her 'exile'. One condition of possibility for this choice was that London had already become a centre of Caribbean anti-colonial consciousness and activity and recognising this extends beyond the life and activism of Claudia Jones and expands the sense of legacy bequeathed my own and subsequent generations of black feminisms. An expansion of legacy premised on two things. First, that the capacity of the state, even in its more repressive aspects, to determine our subjectivities and the 'selves' we become is not total. Second, that there exist within the parameters of geographies of domination (whether these be colonial, global capital, military) counter-geographies within which new modes of connection and belonging may be crafted outside of the modernist logics of the nation. This is a point made so beautifully by Claudia Jones: "What is an ocean between us? We know how to build bridges" (p.131) but in a different accent than how I express it here. A shift in accent that speaks to the shifting vocabularies associated with different generations of activists and their formulation of the political problematic. The way we pose questions then (even in apparent repetition) is an inter-generational issue.

In relation to feminist praxis the point is to note both the possibility for a new crafting of self facilitated by the state's (and hegemonic discourse) inability to totalise and the range of women who, in the 1970s-1990s version of black feminism in Britain, were encompassed in the vocabulary of 'black'. For in its multi-ethnicity and multi-nationality this black feminism had already disrupted the national inscription of black women's struggles and political visions. Thus, there was already a possibility that the modernist and colonial logic of the nation, as well as the modes of racist and sexual and gender subordination and exclusion connected with it, could be greeted as unintelligible, subject to critique and contestation from other, counter-discourses of belonging that had a multi-sited trans-Atlantic and transnational provenance. As I read it this is precisely what is gestured to by Claudia Jones when in connection with her

tireless work to establish a London carnival in the image of that in Trinidad, she says that carnival is the “spirit of a people that cannot be contained, that which therefore contains the genesis of their own (self-articulated) freedom” (p.182).

Boyce-Davis contrasts such an approach to our African-American counterparts for whom, she argues, there was a tendency at this time toward a privileging of race or gender as the primary dimension of analysis and moreover, that this was framed within a *national narrative* (p.4). It is also in contrast to what appeared to be the political sensibility at the event at the Imperial War Museum where, despite the multi-ethnicity of the audience, the horizons seemed to be encapsulated in a frame of the national, or at most a bi-national geography of black women’s possibility that stretched between Britain and the USA.

For those of us in Britain whose visions of the political were formed in the context of another conjuncture it was as if there was a direct line of ideological inheritance from Claudia Jones in that we always drew legitimacy for our claims/demands/analyses from a more complex and multi-polar trans-Atlantic geography and, widening out from there, by locating our struggles in an international, anti-imperial frame that also held the state as significant object in sight. To frame our politics thus was to resist the norm of intelligibility that is the ‘nation’ and the constructed correspondence between territoriality and the creation of belonging, subjectivity - especially political subjectivity and action. It also resists a narrowed version of the trans-Atlantic to only Europe and the USA – or at most Europe, the USA and Canada - especially in what we might call orthodox feminist discussions about trans-Atlantic conversations, connections and disjunctions.

In my mind the more expansive imaginary might be formulated as a point about excess, excess in relation to subjects and subjectivity in the context of discourses of nation and oppression and exploitation. Excess in the sense of pushing-out, overflowing, resisting constraint or intelligibility within dominant (dare I say hegemonic) systems of representation and meaning-making and transnational feminism is one locus of praxis that simultaneously embodies and enacts this excess: It is

the understanding that the nation-states in which we live as subjects have been produced out of specific political imperatives and histories and that they therefore seek to contain, arbitrarily, a variety of peoples subject to the whims of these same nation-state enterprises” (p.21).

So, in thinking about excess, I repeat that it seems significant that black British feminism's repeat of Jones vision emerged in the spaces in which Caribbean, African and south Asian women sort to craft a politics of presence. It speaks a genealogy not just of biographical or geographical heritage, or even of one of the refrains around which we united as 'black' – 'we are here because you were there'. Or rather it is this latter but refracted through another lens in the colonial/anti-colonial optic. This is the issue of what the Cuban writer Benítez-Rojo calls the 'repeating island'¹¹ in which he claims that a feature of the repeat is the character of the struggle for nation/ality in the context of the radical hybridity and syncretism that the shared, if differentiated, history (especially of the plantation) of the Caribbean produced. While cautioning against a drift to an idealist characterisation of the Caribbean as zone of contact that successfully and finally resists inscription into the modernist discourse of the nation with a discrete territorial boundedness, Hitchcock¹² argues that the Caribbean both rearticulates national identity *and* numerous forms of identitarian positions that differently configure as "one "crosses" the Caribbean" (p.28).

The troubled and failed attempt to establish West Indian Federation in the 1950s provides a painful reminder that there were (and are) no guarantees that the 'repeating island' imaginary will manifest in the institutionalisation of a deterritorialised unity in multiplicity. Yet had it succeeded "Federation in the Caribbean [would have been] the first of a series of great steps required to ensure full national independence as a whole and self government for its units" (p.90) so said an edition of *West Indian Gazette*. So this would seem to suggest that the transnational feminist imaginary articulated in both the politics of Claudia Jones and black British feminism was cultivated in the social and political horizons that emerged from Caribbean cultural and historical specificity. A stance that simultaneously looked inward to the 'here, now' and outwards to multiple places of origin resisting the enclosing of spaces and subjects within stable borders of nation-state formations. Indeed this is one of the central legacies of the trans-Atlantic subject Claudia Jones¹³

¹¹ Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1992) *The Repeating Island: the Caribbean and the postmodern perspective*, Durham: Duke

¹² Peter Hitchcock, (2003) *Imaginary States: studies in cultural transnationalism*

¹³ Boyce Davis' book makes it clear that this was both a rationale for the establishment of *West Indian Gazette*, which Jones co-founded, and the logic of Carnival in its British manifestation with its multiple valency as response to racist murder, declaration of presence, claim to belonging and demonstration of origins in an 'elsewhere' that had much to offer the new location.

It also seems clear that for Claudia Jones the specificity of black women's angle of vision derives from their multiple locations in systems of oppression and their super-exploitation in capitalist social relations. This is not to be read as a claim for hierarchy of oppressions but rather that their mutuality results in a kaleidoscopic vision as well as a more multiply layered lived experience of intersecting oppressions and exploitation. For Jones it is an angle of vision and insight derived from her own experiences and those of her mother and sisters (p.44) that was to allow her "to see the connections between their family's singular struggles" (p.199) and the more generalised conditions of life and struggles of black and working class people. Posed in this way it does seem to anticipate the formulations articulated by many of the black feminists of the 1980s, 1990s and beyond.

Yet viewed through a feminist optic formulated in more post-structuralist terms and/or with the accent that concerns about the sociality of affect and emotions brings, I also wonder whether what is central here *is precisely* the issue of subjectivity, despite the fact that Boyce Davis quotes Claudia Jones as saying:

The responsibility for overcoming these special forms of white chauvinism rests, not with the '*subjectivity*' of Negro women as it is often put, but squarely on the shoulders of white men and white women. Negro men have a responsibility particularly in relation to rooting out attitudes of male superiority as regards women in general (p.46, my emphasis).

I can hear the echo of a particular moment of challenge to white feminists (of all political hues) about this very issue of responsibility for racism and for its eradication. But reading this statement from Jones with the grain of what the Boyce Davis book tells us about the pedagogical spaces of Claudia Jones' learning and knowledge production (her own experience and that of other black women around her; her geographical movement from Trinidad, to NYC, to London; and her movement of vision back and forth across a communist world alongside a 'black Atlantic') does seem to place subjectivity as one of the sites that is very much at stake in the demarcation of the political. And this too, I think, was part of the implicit logic of some of the debate at the IWM about hair, skin, beauty.

By this I mean that maybe we need to distinguish between two things that seem to me be another central message of Claudia Jones and Boyce Davis' reading of Claudia Jones. In so far as this quotation is a forceful statement that black women bear no responsibility for the conditions of super-exploitation and oppression that we

(then and now) are subject to, it seems uncontroversial. But I am not sure that this means subjectivity is redundant or marginal for doesn't subjectivity enter in another, different way? Doesn't it enter as gesturing toward an excavation, articulation and theorisation of what kinds of 'self' is possible and what kinds of collective subject is both possible and necessary if the conditions of our individual and collective subjugation are to be challenged? I guess this is to pose the question in the context of paradigms established by the convergence of poststructuralist, postcolonial and psychosocial epistemology which view 'the subject' as always formed within the discursive realms and practices of their times.

To return to the point I made earlier in this essay. Such a framing was not of course paradigmatic in Claudia Jones' time, but it is in these times. And since reading and thinking about trans-Atlantic conversations that stretch across the last half of the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries extends our political sensibilities beyond the labour of 'simple' reclamation and into an *intervention* engaging the question of what constitutes the political in these times I think maybe we need to hold the question of subjectivity in this fuller or more expanded sense. It is to emphasise a question posed by Boyce Davis: "What are all the in/visible identities that remain hidden as a dominant discourse is constituted?" (p.21), and which is echoed in the conception of 'migratory subjectivity'¹⁴ whereby she traces black feminisms' contestatory politics to mobile and multiple locations.

By way of drawing to a close I want to return to the occasion at the Imperial War Museum for in my reading that event did seem to indicate a shift in orientation that may have some bearing on the contemporary significance of the trans-Atlantic legacies of Claudia Jones. Some of this is already signalled by the location – the Imperial War Museum the ironies of which I have already referred to. But there is another point of central significance that speaks to the politics of 'race' and nation in the Britain of now. In many ways things feel far removed from the times, languages and epistemologies that predominated in Claudia Jones' lifetime. Despite the institutionalisation of Carnival and the proliferation of cultural forms that traverse the British social terrain this is a moment in which a discourse of the multicultural has been displaced while at the same time being identified as causing the chief antagonisms and problems that scar the horizons of the social. In its stead a discourse

¹⁴ *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, 1994, New York, Routledge

of Britishness is being promoted in a way that stresses homogeneity and attempts to enfold what are called the settled minority populations (us Caribbeans among them) into the reconfigured nation as part of the conditionality of citizenship. So institutions demarcated as key sites dedicated to the memorialisation of the national story, such as the Imperial War Museum, open their doors to ‘minority’ events in a gesture toward that enfolding and as an indication of our acceptance of the terms of citizenship.

I have spoken too about how shifting vocabularies have implications for the ways in which the political is conceived and how political identities can be articulated. In this context what was notable at the event was the subtle but significant shifts in the ways in which enduring issues related to how black women’s bodies are represented and indeed enter into global circuits of production and consumption via ‘products’ for hair, skin and beauty were spoken. Absent were both the languages of the anti-colonial and the languages of the postcolonial and in their stead a more atomised vocabulary and grammar seemed to prevail in which ownership of self was spoken in terms of an individual act of authenticity dependent on any woman’s personal preferences. Each utterance was to be named as the property of the individual as opposed to any collective subject and this ownership was taken as a sign of groundedness.

This is not to say that heartfelt outrage was absent, or that there was no echo of a vocabulary of exploitation and oppression and pursuit for social justice. There was and this took the form of an implicit opposition to the corporate capital of the cosmetics industry with the idealised “white, blonde woman” as the beacon of beauty and the recognition that this had a global reach. But within this, the orientation was inward, toward the nation as if the objective was not to undo the national as much as find a place within it. Not the multiple visions of Claudia Jones’ anti-colonial, anti-racist, internationalist, pan-Africanist, Caribbean feminist and Marxist-Leninist project but a much more introspective and circumscribed political vision.

So this is where Boyce Davis’ book appears as an intervention. For in its act of recuperation it demonstrates the continued relevance of Claudia Jones’ commitment to a struggle for connection across multiple constituencies with varied needs and understandings. In reading Jones’ life we learn that the political always has to be constituted in practice with the resources available. While we have to work hard in the reading to draw inferences about the character of now its very structure offers the tools with which we might begin that mapping. For it speaks continually to excess

and to what might be involved (and at stake) in the continual crafting and re-crafting of individual and collective subjectivity as we survey the life and political vision of Claudia Jones across a multiplicity of trans-Atlantic sites and struggles. In doing that it resists any attempt to contain and restrain that life within any linearity or the borders of any particular nation-state and shows that like selves and experience, the constitution of history must itself be historicised even while it always exceeds attempts at recuperation. Jones' life and Boyce Davis' rendering of it proffer a legacy of vision that speaks of possible futures – futures that might be fashioned from the smallest and most unlikely locations, even perhaps from the talk among a few tens of black women meeting together in the impossible space of the Imperial War Museum.

