

Hazel V. Carby. *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands*. Verso, 2019. Pp. X, 400. £20.00.

*Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* by Hazel V. Carby is an intricate and complex work, starting with the book cover. The hardcover edition's black cloth shows a white rectangle in the centre, framing a black and white collage of four trimmed photographs. On top in the middle is a photograph of a 1930s street scene in Kingston, Jamaica, cut in the shape of the island. Below this scene on the lower right-hand side emerges the sceptical gaze of a young girl in a white dress, socks, and shoes. It is a photograph of the author, Hazel Carby, at the age of two, standing in "a typical London back yard" (100). In the upper section of the collage, on both sides of the street scene, is the portrait of the author's father, Carl Carby. The collage only reveals his left eye confronting the viewer directly: he looks friendly, bold, and inescapable. Considering position and size, the collage centres on the father's portrait. Yet this portrait is covered by the daughter on the right, the Kingston street scene in the centre, and an old manuscript on the left. The manuscript, written in English round hand, notes Lilly Carby's last will, in which the early nineteenth-century relative refers to "his goods and chattel which, of course, included his most valuable property, enslaved people" (Hazel Carby 2021, personal communication). While the black and white colouring, picture frame, and portrait evoke the nostalgia often associated with memorabilia, the collage and content complicate this sentimental reading as the book cover critically assembles personal, historical, and archival documents. Carby's text moves beyond forms of nostalgia by dispensing with a "yearning for a different time" (Boym xv) while meticulously connecting fragments from past centuries with the present, Jamaica with England, the personal with the historical and the political.

Indeed, *Imperial Intimacies* combines several different, even contradictory genres. On the front-page flap, the publisher, Verso Books, categorises the text as "History/Biography." This classification is further complicated by a third term that appears in the book title and again in the text, describing it as a "tale" (232). The book thus shifts between story, biography, and history to create a hybrid genre that has provoked questions and comments prior to its publication and after, for instance, from Marisa J. Fuentes (Fuentes 168), Patrick Sullivan (Carby, "Knowing Yourself"), and Jeffrey Williams (Carby, "Reconstructing Culture" 103). In an interview with the philologist Williams, Carby states: "It's not just a memoir; it's trying to use memory and history to play off each other" (Carby, "Reconstructing Culture" 103). Just as the collage on the book cover is a composition of fragments, *Imperial*

*Intimacies* engages in a process of reclaiming, reconstructing, and reassessing memories, histories, and archives.

The tale builds on a tradition of postcolonial autobiographical writing. It is prefaced with a long quote by the Jamaican cultural critic Stuart Hall, opening with the words “Identity is not only a story, a narrative which we tell ourselves about ourselves, it is stories which change with historical circumstances” (vii). The citation emphasises that identity is not essential, static, or homogeneous but that it is created by oneself and one’s environment in a dynamic, discontinuous, and open process. And it is exactly in this manner that readers experience the protagonists of Carby’s narrative. The text thereby builds on Hall’s own memoir, which was published posthumously with Bill Schwarz and which in turn was partly inspired by Edward Said’s memoir *Out of Place* (Hall and Schwarz 34, 172). Carby acknowledges that “the seeds of this book were sown in 1979 at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, where I began conversations with Stuart Hall about my father’s life in Jamaica. He asked me questions that made me realize how little I knew” (*Imperial Intimacies* 343). The similarity between the subtitle of Hall’s memoir “A Life Between Two Islands” and Carby’s text “A Tale of Two Islands” indicates this close connection; Carby thus continues and extends the critical work initiated by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies.

Yet Carby’s text also moves decisively beyond Hall’s colonial and postcolonial memoir. Hall explains that he “never wanted to write a memoir” but was much more interested in “the connections between ‘a life’ and ‘ideas’” (Hall and Schwarz 10). The political scientist Rupert Lewis therefore suggests that Hall’s text “is not so much a memoir as it is reflective theorising about colonial subjects” (Lewis 569). Carby’s text departs from Hall’s in this respect: whereas Hall details how personal and historical experiences inspire critical theories, Carby applies such theories to a careful and detailed historical analysis. Both texts emphasise the conflicts of subjects seeking agency within cultural, social, and political power dynamics. But while Hall aims to explore theoretical concepts, Carby employs an intricate theoretical framework not to discuss theory—the term “postcolonial,” for instance, does not come up once—but to illuminate specific historical lives and struggles.

At the centre of Carby’s narrative is a breathtaking and heartbreaking excavation of the genealogies of her white Welsh mother, Iris, and her Black Jamaican father, Carl. Over a period of twenty years, Carby collected her parents’ family memories, travelled to the places of her relatives and researched archives in Canada, Jamaica, the United Kingdom, and the United States. She traces, reconstructs, and retells the lives of six generations of her mother’s ancestry and seven generations of her father’s lineage back to an impoverished

English mason named Lilly Carby who was drafted into the military as a foot soldier and sent to Jamaica where he became a coffee planter and owner of enslaved people. By doing so, she demonstrates that “[t]he closely woven political, economic, social and cultural ties between Jamaica and England formed an imperial intimacy that had been rendered historically invisible” (Carby, *Imperial Intimacies* 201). In her astonishing analysis, Carby highlights how the protagonists of each generation struggled to find agency in the face of overpowering historical forces. Ancestors on her mother’s side were subjected to an internal colonisation of increasing state control and capitalist modernisation and those on her father’s side to external colonisation of Great Britain’s imperial forces, driven no less by the state and capitalist interests. While divided by the Atlantic Ocean and different forms of subjection, the two sides of Carby’s family are thus nonetheless intimately connected across centuries, continents, and cultures.

*Imperial Intimacies* is rich in careful analyses, poetic descriptions, and evocative theoretical insights. Carby’s father, for example, grew up in adverse circumstances in early twentieth-century Jamaica. In his early teens, he had to leave school to provide income for his family. Due to his lighter skin colour and perseverance, Carl Carby was able to take evening classes and rise from the position of bookkeeper’s assistant to clerk and, after World War II, to accountant. In her father’s accounting reports, written in a careful English round hand, Hazel Carby discerns the seemingly inescapable mark of British colonisation and her father’s indefatigable pursuit of accomplishment:

The techniques and technologies of imperial governance—the gracious script, the silencing of colonized existence, the dissimulation of language and the duplicity of financial transactions—coalesce in the imperial ledgers of enslavement on my desk in various states of decay. As the daughter of a bookkeeper I was familiar with the contours of these accounting pages; as a descendant of the enslaved I am simultaneously estranged from them. (Carby, *Imperial Intimacies* 252)

One of the text’s outstanding achievements is how it tirelessly works through historical tensions, frictions, and contradictions to reveal, contextualise, and thereby denaturalise them. Carby explains this method as assembling fragments into a montage (216). In such historical configurations, Carby’s *Imperial Intimacies* presents her subjects in the face of contradictory historical forces by using autobiography as critique.

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