

## C. L. R. JAMES "THE ARTIST IN THE CARIBBEAN" (1959)

Deirdre Blackett

At a lecture given by James at the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies, he asserts that "his intention was to demonstrate how 'the analysis of the artist in the Caribbean properly done, was a pointer to the general social and political problems there' (183).

James begins by giving a definition of an artist, "a person who uses one, sometimes more than one medium of communication with exceptional force" (183). Then points out that a very important factor in the Caribbean artists scope is that of the medium or modes of communication available (183). James explains that "an artistic medium is a thoroughly artificial construction through which an individual is able to express the world around him" (183). The variety of such mediums may be very vast for example the equipment used by the movie director, prose or even music (183). However wide ranging these mediums may be, the

exceptional mastery in the medium is intimately related to the natural surroundings in which the artist has grown up, to the society in which he lives, and his national and even regional ancestry; these may or may not be directly related to the specific artistic tradition which he has inherited or encounters in his search for a mode of expression, but they most often are. (183)

In other words regardless of where the knowledge was acquired to master a particular artistic medium most artists and by extension their work, are usually largely linked to the land of the artists early childhood (183).

Concerned with the 'great artist' (184), James refers to Shakespeare. Examining and linking his work to the historical time period in which he wrote. James asserts that the "incomparable vividness and facility of expression" (184) of Shakespeare's writing has much to do with his national origin of that time. James then raises a pertinent question of whether there is

any medium so native in the Caribbean, so rooted in the tight association which I have made between national surroundings, historical development and artistic tradition, is there any such medium in the Caribbean from which the artist can draw that strength which makes him a supreme practitioner? (184)

Stating that in the Caribbean there is no such "artistic tradition" (184) and we are merely "using forms borrowed from other civilisations (184). Therefore we have no "artistic roots . . . from which we can instinctively draw sustenance" (184), and this accounts for the lack in our artistic tradition in the Caribbean (185).

James goes on to state that "a supreme artist exercises an influence on the national consciousness which is incalculable. He is created by it but he himself illuminates and amplifies it, bringing the past up to date and charting the future" (185). Asserting that these artists are indeed very important to "succeeding generations of artists, intellectuals, journalists, and indirectly to ordinary citizen" (185) concerning "inspiration of concept, language, technique" (185). However there is an aspect that James is more concerned with; that of the "immediate influence of the great artist upon the society in which he actually lived" (186). Examining the work of Shakespeare today can by no means have the same "new" (186) and "exciting" (186) impact on our society and it would have had on the proletariat of his day.

Narrowing in on the Caribbean artist James proposes we are not lost completely lost where the "history of art" (186) is concerned but for example, islands like Barbados and

Trinidad are "already very close in their demographic structure to the cities of ancient Greece and the Italian towns of the middle ages" (187); therefore the social structure in which we live is moving forward to a more conducive environment for the development of art (187).

Mentioning some renowned Caribbean writers such as Lamming, Naipaul and Vic Reid; he states that although gifted these writers are indeed limited. Asserting that We cannot force the growth of the artist. But we can force and accelerate the growth of the conditions in which he can make the best of the gifts that he has been fortunate enough to be born with. (187)

James draws on the example of the art of Sparrow. Just as Shakespeare used a national art form to express himself and highlight the views and contentions of the society and proletariat of that time period; Sparrow

uses the calypso tradition, the way in which he extends it, the way in which he makes it a vehicle for the most acute observations on the social life and political developments around him, for his genuine musicianship, his wit and his humour. (188)

The use of a national form to a national audience is a huge contributing factor to Sparrows success (188). James declares that "when our local dramatists and artists can evoke the popular response of a Sparrow, the artists in the Caribbean would have arrived" (188).

In conclusion, James presses that it is imperative that our Caribbean artists and writers feel that they can come home because he is unable to understand how a "national artistic tradition" (188) could be used to work of a foreign audience (188). James continues that what the Caribbean artists needs is the "creation of a national consciousness" (189).

if the threads of a tradition can be discovered among us and made into a whole, if we are shocked into recognition of what we are and what we are not, with the power that this will bring, it is the great artist who will do it. (189)

Therefore using this Hegelian notion of recognition or consciousness through negation, James argues that it is the great artist who will do this and in effect commence that creation of a society conducive to the supreme artist (189).