

Cunliffe's little book *The Literature of the United States* about the extremely derogatory remarks that used to be made.

But one would have thought that by the end of the nineteenth century any serious critic of the English language would have stopped thinking that the language belonged to England. It stopped belonging to England a very long time ago.

1980

## Politics and Culture<sup>1</sup>

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Comrades and Friends. As most of you know I have never been a Minister of Government. Nor have I ever held public and distinguished office in any of the institutions of this region; and I own no wealth which would qualify me to be a donor of aid to the needy. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the University's decision to confer this honour must be related to the facts of my working life as a West Indian writer and their genuine recognition of this work as a possible contribution towards the cultural and political future of our people. I would like to express my appreciation of their judgment, and to do so on behalf of all of my colleagues, dead and alive, who have engaged in the art and labour of creating a literature on behalf of the peoples of all languages in the Caribbean. I think in this moment especially of Roger Mais of Jamaica, Edgar Mittelholzer of Guyana and E. M. Roach of Trinidad and Tobago. My debt and eternal gratitude to Frank Collymore of Barbados are already on permanent record.

Men make their own history but we can only make that portion of it which our concrete circumstances allow. We do not

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<sup>1</sup> In 1980, the University of the West Indies made Lamming an honorary Doctor of Letters. At the Graduation ceremony of that year, Lamming delivered an address at the Cave Hill Campus of the U.W.I. to the assembled graduates, faculty, staff, and other guests. This address, printed above in its entirety, was previously published in Kathleen Drayton and George Lamming, *The Most Important People in Barbados*, pp. 1-7.

choose the time or place of our birth, nor the parents who make this possible; but the process of our thought, the hidden nature of our needs, the character and quality of our imagination may be decisively influenced by these origins. Our struggle towards freedom is experienced always within the external constraints of Nature and the invisible limitations of our own consciousness.

I was born in a small village where the women were mothers and servants. The men worked by chance — casual labourers, house painters, shoemakers, sharpeners of knives, and messengers for a great variety of occasions. And since the island was small and could be viewed as one large cane farm, we lived within the shadow of the plantation and at the rigorous mercy of the merchant. Our relation to bread, our relation to God, our relation to the courts of law were influenced daily by these demons. We were the children of an old and enduring servant class.

Small size offers here, in its most extreme form, a social order which prevailed elsewhere in these islands. If culture is the means whereby people feed themselves and the ways in which they experience their existence, then poverty and the calculated impoverishment of the mind were essential ingredients of our culture.

For we had inherited a region which was not designed for social living. It was intended exclusively for production. Men and women and children were common hands summoned or ordered to create wealth, a source of fortune for hostile strangers. They were a reservoir of cheap labour, the material base on which kingdoms of luxury or convenience would be constructed elsewhere.

A dominant class, exclusively white, laid the foundations of a cultural force that would influence all our lives. It was the ideology of racism; a morality whose guiding principle was the excessive privilege of the skin. To be black was to be a commodity identified with the cheapest of labour. White was the symbol and source of all authority. The priest and the planter, school and church, legislation and the law, all gave the weight of their authority to this social and economic arrangement; and they did so in the name of decency, honour, and Christian democracy. And I want to emphasize that in spite of the modifications which we observe in contemporary West Indian society, we have never, never been truly liberated from the persistent legacy of this system. ]

This system of economic and cultural imperialism remains in profound conflict with the struggle of labour for an alternative society, a national dwelling-place which would be the material reward and the spiritual symbol of that labour; how to transform production into creative forms of social living that derive from the free and informed choice of those whose labour makes our survival possible. But the power of the system prevails.

You do not have to be a Marxist to recognise these truths, although, in my view, Marxist analysis provides us with the most penetrating insight into the formation of this system and the purpose which it serves. It is clear to me that no institution of learning, be it University or Labour College, in the modern world, especially in that vast area we name underdeveloped, and by which we mean exploited, can do its duty with honour and not come to terms with the fundamentals of Marxist thought. Just as you do not have to be a Christian to recognise the importance of coming to terms with the history and the radical significance of that great religion — only one, I remind you, among others. For oil, you will have noticed, has restored the authority and respect of Islam, even among bankers.

What are you new graduates really doing here this evening? What will be your business when you leave? Where shall you stand in relation to that system which will offer you a marketplace for the highest bidder for your skills? These questions have their origin in my novel, *Season of Adventure*, in which I offered the prediction that the new independence arrangements would, inevitably, fail; and in which I examined the predicament of a political assassin, Powell, whom I called my brother.

Until the age of ten, Powell and I had lived together equal in the affection of two mothers. Powell had my dreams; and I had lived his passion. Identical in years, and stage by stage, Powell and I were taught in the same Primary School.

And then the division came. I got a public scholarship which started my migration into another world, a world whose roots were the same, but whose style of living was entirely different from what my childhood knew. It had earned me a privilege which now shut Powell and the whole village right out of my future. I had lived as near to Powell as my skin to the hand it darkens. And yet! Yet, I forgot the village as men forget a war, and attached myself to this new world which was so recent and so slight beside the weight of what had gone before. Instinctively I attached myself to that new

privilege; and in spite of all my effort, I am not free of its embrace even to this day.

I believe deep in my bones that the mad impulses which drove Powell to his criminal defeat was largely my doing. I will not have this explained away by talk about environment; nor can I allow my own moral infirmity to be transferred to a foreign conscience called imperialist. I shall go beyond my grave in the knowledge that I am responsible for what happened to my brother.

Powell resides somewhere in my heart, with a dubious love, some strange nameless shadow of regret, and yet with the deepest, deepest, nostalgia. For I have never felt myself to be an honest part of anything since the world of his childhood deserted me.

And here we encounter one of the sharpest contradictions of our inheritance. You are a minority; and you are a minority because education is scarce; and was intended to be a scarcity so that it might serve as an instrument of continuing social stratification, an index of privilege and status, a deformed habit of material self-improvement. This has created acute problems for all forms of leadership. The political leader is the educated one. He leads from above. It has also complicated the role of the intellectuals in their relation to the mass of the population. These are men and women who live and work in an orbit of privilege, and share in those material interests which bind them to the dominant ruling group. Their relation to the mass of the population is a dubious relation; it is a fragile relation; and in some circumstances it is an utterly fraudulent relation. This scarcity of education amidst the mass of our people has given this minority an easy access to comfort; it confers a superficial and sometimes tyrannical authority. It breeds a dangerous self-importance.

The power of the old white planters derived from what they owned. The power of the new black planters derives from what they know. To explode the mystique of the educated one while retaining a genuine respect for the creative power of learning: that is the task of organised labour.

Our recent exercise in sovereignty may yet degenerate into an electoral pantomime, a four — or five — year party go-round, orchestrated by foreign interests, unless organised labour throughout the West Indies can eliminate this obstacle of disparity in practical learning between a technical and bureaucratic elite and a labouring mass whose main argument is confined to questions of wages and conditions of service.

Whom does your labour serve? And towards what vision of mankind?

The symptoms of this minority class extravagance have already received attention from the most distinguished of your writers across more than one generation, and have been recorded with bitter regret by so humane a poet and person as Derek Walcott of St. Lucia. The time is night; the ritual is the party assembled in one of the new temples built to the glory of the Prophet, Hilton.

In our upside-down hotel, in that air-conditioned roomful of vengeful party-hacks  
lunch-drunk, scotch-drunk, cigar and brandy-stoned,  
arguing, insulting till incoherence cracks . . .

. . . Guilt, Sweated  
out in glut, while outside, a black wind  
circles the room with jasmine, like a whore's  
perfume or second secretary's lotion. Fear those laws  
which ex-slaves praise with passion. Pissed, dead  
drunk, I soar to hellish light. In the lobby,  
cigars with eyes like agents drilling me.

Throughout the literature of the Caribbean, this theme of spiritual dispossession and self-mutilation remains central to the thought and perception of your writers; and it's no wonder that the gradual infiltration of their books into the education of our youth is made a cause of grave concern.

But it is the function of the writer to return a society to itself; and in this respect, your writers have been the major historians of the feeling of your people. To separate them by open or hidden forms of censorship from a generation which needs to be provided with a firm sense of historical continuity would be to inflict upon us a second stage of isolation.

We started out as men, some of us younger than you graduates, who had to conduct the most bitter struggle simply to retain a minimum of confidence in ourselves, and in our feeling that we could, with a little luck and a fair chance, do what our instincts and our gifts demanded. Ridicule and a habitual neglect were the social barriers which always threatened us with destruction. And in desperation we started on that fateful journey which had always been the saving doom of our people. We took flight; hence the phrase and paradox which would become a continuing source of argument, my own *Pleasures of Exile*.

But it is often forgotten that we did not leave as men, certified and equipped to bargain in the intellectual market places

of Europe. Like other forms of migrant labour, we were journeying, hopeful and powerless, towards an expectation. This exile was, then, a historical necessity, and the logical consequence of that social and economic order I have asked you to consider and reject.

But such are the contradictions of this imperial arrangement, that this same power which had organised the castration of our creative energies, would be responsible for returning our names where they belonged. The enemy had rescued us from total anonymity. That is the pleasure and paradox of that exile. And our modest achievement has been that, in spite of this separation from the sources we needed for our survival, we were able to produce a body of work which would, in time, become the base from which other men would carve their own careers as teachers and critics in this University and similar places throughout the world.

Which brings us back where we began: to the charmed circles of the educated ones, and the obstacles of disparity in practical learning between that minority and the starved mass of our populations. One stage towards a solution would be to use the communications media in the service of your literature and on behalf of those whose lives have made it possible.

But the media, as it functions today, is the major agency of that cultural imperialism we would escape; a major obstacle in our progress towards the liberation of this region.

These reflections are not spontaneous. They have a certain origin; they have grown out of a particular soil. They have been fertilised, so to speak, by a certain reservoir of experience; and they travel with me like a passport everywhere.

Half a century is long and not so long. For it was the triumph of the Cuban revolutionary response that alerted many of us to the fact that a new chapter had begun in the politics and cultural life of the Caribbean people. And Cuba is an integral part of our historical reality. In 1960 the economic and cultural boycott of that country was total. In 1979 all the island parishes of the Caribbean met in Havana to participate in the Third Caribbean Festival of Arts. Caribbean literature in English had discovered through Cuban publications in Spanish a new intellectual and blood connection with the reading classes of the Spanish speaking Americas. The Jamaica National Dance Company had become a regular and prestigious feature in Cuban cultural life. Half a century is really not so long!

And we have now a criterion of achievement in the miraculous birth and flowering of the Cuban revolution; the

most profound and creative political event in this region in my lifetime, and in the lifetime of all of you here this evening. It was fought by the Cuban people; but it was not won for the Cuban people alone.

Such a battle against the exploitation of your region is also your battle. The victory is one you can honourably share. And it must always be rewarded by a pan-Caribbean embrace; and defended, whenever necessary, by a pan-Caribbean resolution. Yet Cuba must not be applauded for the wrong reasons, or taken as the final prescription for change. Out of the concrete circumstance of our reality each must forge the appropriate method towards the model which transforms.

So that when the question is asked again "What were you really doing here in this Cave without a Hill, and what was your business when you left?" Your answer may be taken from Martin Carter of Guyana, the truest, the purest, and the most authentic poetic voice of my generation:

And so  
if you see me  
looking at your hands  
listening when you speak  
marching in your ranks  
you must know  
I do not sleep to dream,  
but dream to change the world.