Tribute to
George Lamming
(May 11, 1930 - June 4, 2022)

By
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George Lamming died on June 4, 2022, at age ninety-four; he was widely considered the iconic man of Caribbean letters and a literary giant in his own right. Sir Hilary Beckles, Vice-Chancellor of the University of West Indies, in a special tribute described him as “a soldier of the Caribbean soul” (Stabroek News, June 8, 2022). At UWI, Lamming was a Professor/Writer-in-Residence at the Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, with an office at the eponymous George Lamming Pedagogical Centre. Indeed Lamming was more than a pioneering voice of Caribbean letters. Dr. Malashri Lal, Delhi University’s distinguished scholar, wrote to me upon reading my personalized epistolary tribute (Stabroek News, June 7, 2022): “George Lamming was a cultural icon to those of us reading Caribbean literature far away from the place. Your ‘letter’ builds a bridge across many cultures and literary influences.” Renowned poet Kamau Brathwaite and Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa-Thiong’o have alluded to Lamming’s novel, In the Castle of My Skin (1953), as an inspiration in starting their own writing careers. Sir Hilary Beckles added: “He was…the quintessential Caribbean progressive intellectual who transcended theory and grounded his existential engagements within the masses at the grassroots” (Stabroek News). And Lamming’s Castle, which won the Somerset Maugham Award, brought the attention of the English-speaking world to Caribbean literature, it has been claimed.

This novel has remained long with me after I first read it in my late teens, and would re-read it in my twenties. Significantly, all Lamming’s novels are reflective of the creative possibilities when Caribbean peoples were slowly, if ineluctably, coming out of colonialism—a sensibility and perspective I brought with me as a student of Canadian literature in the early 70’s, especially when I read Canadian poet Earle Birney’s poem “To George Lamming” in the course’s main text. Then I felt an immediate contiguity or closeness tied to a sense of myself as a “Caribbean person” living in the Lake Superior region. Lamming also interacted with other key Canadian literary figures, let it be known, like novelists Margaret Laurence, and not least with Barbadian-born Austin Clarke (for obvious reasons). And Lamming had told me about having been invited by Canada’s Tamarack magazine’s editor, William Toye, in the 60’s, to write for a special issue on the Caribbean—which ultimately became the book, Pleasures of Exile (1960), an important post-colonial text. Other novels by Lamming would include: The Emigrants (1954), Of Age and Innocence (1958), Season of Adventure (1960), Natives of My Person (1972), and Water with Berries (1972); and, he was more than the so-called first generation of Caribbean writers, I believe: a contention which still stands.

I last met Lamming over twenty years ago at the University of Miami (Coral Gables) where he was the resident Creative Writing instructor and where I’d been invited by the Lamming scholar Prof. Sandra Pouchet Paquet to lead a colloquium on Canadian literature and do a reading, which Lamming attended. Then, I cherished our brief conversations; and...
Lamming’s advice, as a creative writing instructor at the University of Miami to younger writers, like well-known Haitian-born American writer Edwidge Danticat: to slow down on the action, and focus on interiorization—the heart and soul of narrative technique, if architectonically, no doubt. At my own reading then, from Coastland: New and Selected Poems (Mosaic Press, 1989), I felt a slight anxiety upon reciting one of my signature pieces, “Lenin Park, Havana,” based on my visit to Cuba in 1982, and subliminally aware of how Lamming was taking my metaphors, mainly because of his own political stance and sensibility to Castro’s hegemony—juxtaposed with ambivalence in Miami’s political atmosphere about Communist-Marxist transformative ideals in Cuba. You see, Lamming’s favourite subject was the “Conquest of the Indies,” with race and creole identity imbedded in his epistemology of imperialism. (See my poem “Pearl & Me Walking,” appended here—from my volume, Unanimous Night: Black Moss Press, Ontario, 2009).

I recall Lamming’s suggestion to me in Miami about the acceptance of forms of knowledge that go beyond academic knowledge: which he indicated was essentially archival knowledge, and that empirical experience and apprehension by the senses as significant, if not equally important to the creative writer in context of what’s called “the sovereignty of the imagination.” He was a constant reader, tied to his intellectual discipline, as I observed and interacted with him (and with the other writer, Earl Lovelace) at that time. Lamming also expressed the wish that I invite him to Canada—which I warmed to—because he was a remarkably gifted speaker. “We’re all born with a racial consciousness,” Lamming observed to me, ontologically, alluding to tension in the Caribbean region, especially in places like Trinidad and Guyana, about racial difference. Note that after Barbados, he’d lived in cosmopolitan Trinidad—he migrated there in 1946—and he knew intimately of class struggle and ethnic people’s inner lives (what he said about Indian contribution to the Caribbean is now commonplace). He was an admirer of Guyana’s Dr. Cheddi Jagan, and no less of historian Dr. Walter Rodney: he wrote the Introduction to Rodney’s History of the Guyanese Working Peoples.

In paying tribute at Lamming’s passing, Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley referenced a national commemoration that would take place, and identified Lamming’s traditional district of birth, Carrington Village outside of Bridgetown, and his attendance at Roebuck Boys’ School and Combermere, and that “he epitomised that voice and spirit that screamed Barbados and Caribbean” (Nation, June 8, 2022). Lamming had subsequently moved to London in 1950—incidentally, he and novelist Sam Selvon travelled in the same ship from the Caribbean and seen as part of the Windrush generation. Selvon (note his key novel, Lonely Londoners), when I got to know him better in Canada, would drop hints about this first meeting with Lamming and their literary provenance. Indeed Lamming developed a wide range of friendships in the hectic socio-political life in England in those days, after WWII, including friendships with the likes of CLR James: he helped to facilitate the publishing of James’s Beyond A Boundary, arguably the best book written about sports with the oft-quoted lines (derived from Rudyard Kipling)—“What do they know of cricket who only cricket know”—see reference in my God’s Spider (Peepal Tree Press, 2014), and echoed in my recent poem “Lord’s Cricket Ground” (Post-Colonial Text, Vol. 16, #2, 2-3).

For Lamming Guyanese novelist Edgar Mittelholzer was both role model and inspiration to Caribbean writers: “How I admired that man can only be grasped by those who know what it is to be summoned…to create a personal style of living…that ordered me to the one essential duty that would be my life,” he would write (Caribbean Beat, #55, May-June 2002); and Morning at...
the Office he deemed as Mittelholzer’s best novel. Attesting to the latter’s uncompromising Caribbeanness, Lamming also suggested that one can’t be a writer without knowing Nicolas Guillén and Aime Césaire, the pioneering voices of Cuba and Martinique. Litterateur-journalist Simon Lee (Trinidad) would introduce key context: “With his sense of history and political commitment, his charting of Caribbean consciousness begins with the age of discovery, while the Prospero/Caliban theme is as much a central motif in his work as the Haitian Ceremony of Souls” (Caribbean Beat, #55). Indeed three aspects of Caribbean history Lamming identified—discovery, emancipation, and the novel as a vehicle to express the collective experience (BBC Interview/Web, June 12, 2022).

Here I may mention how, initially, I’d looked forward to meeting Lamming at the February 1970 Caribbean writers and artists’ conference in Georgetown (see Andrew Salkey, Georgetown Journal, New Beacon Books, 1972) to which he’d been invited—an event known as the precursor to Carifesta I (the now well-known Caribbean arts and cultural special event in the region), though it was Sam Selvon and Austin Clarke I gravitated to at that special gathering with pan-African consciousness in the zeitgeist. Interestingly, novelist Wilson Harris’s observation, in context, about urban Guyanese society remains: “There is a curious nihilism here which intends to seep through the fabric of the society, and reduce everybody and everything, first, to a state of useless protestation and contradiction…” (Salkey, p. 249). Much later I would get a better view of Lamming at the Carifesta V event in Trinidad, in 1992, where he was a riveting keynote speaker drawing from his authentic working class and trade union background aligned to his literary forte.

As the years went by Lamming’s narrative technique, more than anything else, I have subliminally internalized: his view, for instance, that Caribbean inflection reflected in prose rhythms “cannot be written by any English writer, as we often work with more than one layer of language…in which you know the rhythm of the wind…the smell of the sea…the texture of the stone and rock,” and that “these are not objects outside of you: they are part of your consciousness” (BBC Interview, Web). This, not unexpectedly, is reflected in Lamming’s founding role as editor of Barbados’s pioneering Bim magazine, which carried a special issue to mark Lamming’s 80th birthday; and, also echoed in his 1966 edition of the Guyana and Barbados Independence issues of New World Quarterly—which I read closely with my own nascent nationalism.

George Lamming would advance the view that the West Indian writer adds a new rhythm to the English language and to the mechanics of speech itself, especially the influence of peasant and working-class peoples’ rhythms and cadence: how they talk and express themselves, and which English literature needed a long time ago in “nourishing the novel” because it was essentially class-based contextually in tonality and rhythm. Lamming added, insightfully: “The language of the middle class is a strange invention. It is always three or four removes from the mechanics of feeling” (BBC Interview). It is worth emphasizing, I feel, is that in the introduction to the 1983 American edition of Castle, Lamming writes: “The novel has had a peculiar function in the Caribbean. The writer’s preoccupation has been mainly with the poor, and fiction has served as a way of restoring these lives—this world of men and women from down below—to a proper order of attention; to make their reality the supreme concern of the total society. But along with this desire, there was also the writer’s recognition that this world, in spite of its long history of deprivation, represented the womb from which he himself had sprung, and the richest collective reservoir of experience on which the creative imagination could draw.”
Essentially, *Castle* is viewed as semi-autobiographical (*bildungsroman*), and “experimentation was the only way to capture the unique experience of Lamming,” suggested critic Brett Johnson (*The Modernist Review*, Nov. 10, 2020) in his view of modernism, and that *Castle* can also be seen as a reworking of James Joyce’s iconic *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Indeed, *Castle* has an enduring resonance for me living in Canada—it inspired my writing an early poem named “Castles” I dedicated to Lamming—published in my volume, *This Planet Earth* (Borealis Press, 1979, p. 78), with the lines:

*If I do not have*

castles in my skin

do not blame me

for I am myself

heritage folds

wrapped around

without stucco—

only stone now

and spiralling stairs…

knowing that I am

indeed the value

of my skin and flesh…

With Lamming’s passing, perhaps it can still be suggested that the old Caribbean literary generation has come and will have seemed gone. Interestingly, Trinidad’s Kenneth Ramchand, pioneering literary critic, once said that there are no Caribbean novelists as such, but only short-story writers (*Bim*, Vol. 1, #1:10); Ramchand means this in an appreciative way of narrative technique, with the numinous aligned to the story’s tight form with inherent stylistic elements in an evolving modernism in narrative manner overall. This, to me, only confirms George Lamming’s excellence as novelist (and essayist) within the proclaimed “sovereignty of the imagination.”
PEARL & ME WALKING

Going to the George Lamming seminar
on the conquest of the Indies
at the University of Miami
(Coral Gables, South Florida),
I inhale the Cuban-American
air, with los exilios—
the heat swelters,
Hispanic everywhere.

Pearl from Washington, DC,
originally from Jamaica—
she says,
worries to know—
why I’m not perspiring.

My veins are made of ice,
I tell her in jest
as I am still part
of the Americas,
but Canada no less
protesting the embargo
on trade in Cuba—
now front page news,
on my return to Ottawa.

(July 10, 1996)

BIO

Cyril Dabydeen -- “a noted Canadian poet” (House of Commons, Ottawa). His books include: My Undiscovered Country/Stories, God’s Spider, My Multi-Ethnic Friends/Stories, and Imaginary Origins: New and Selected Poems, My Brahmin Days and Other Stories, and The Wizard Swami (novel). His Drums of My Flesh, is a Guyana Prize winner for best novel, and was nominated for the IMPAC Dublin Prize. Cyril’s work has appeared in over sixty literary anthologies, e.g., Poetry, The Critical Quarterly, Canadian Literature, the Oxford, Penguin, and Heinemann Books of Caribbean Verse, and Singing in the Dark: Lockdown Poems (Penguin/Random House, India, 2020). He juried for Canada’s Governor General’s Award (poetry) and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (U/Oklahoma). He taught Writing at the University of Ottawa and worked extensively in government. He holds post-graduate degrees from Queen’s University, Canada. He is Ottawa Poet Laureate Emeritus.