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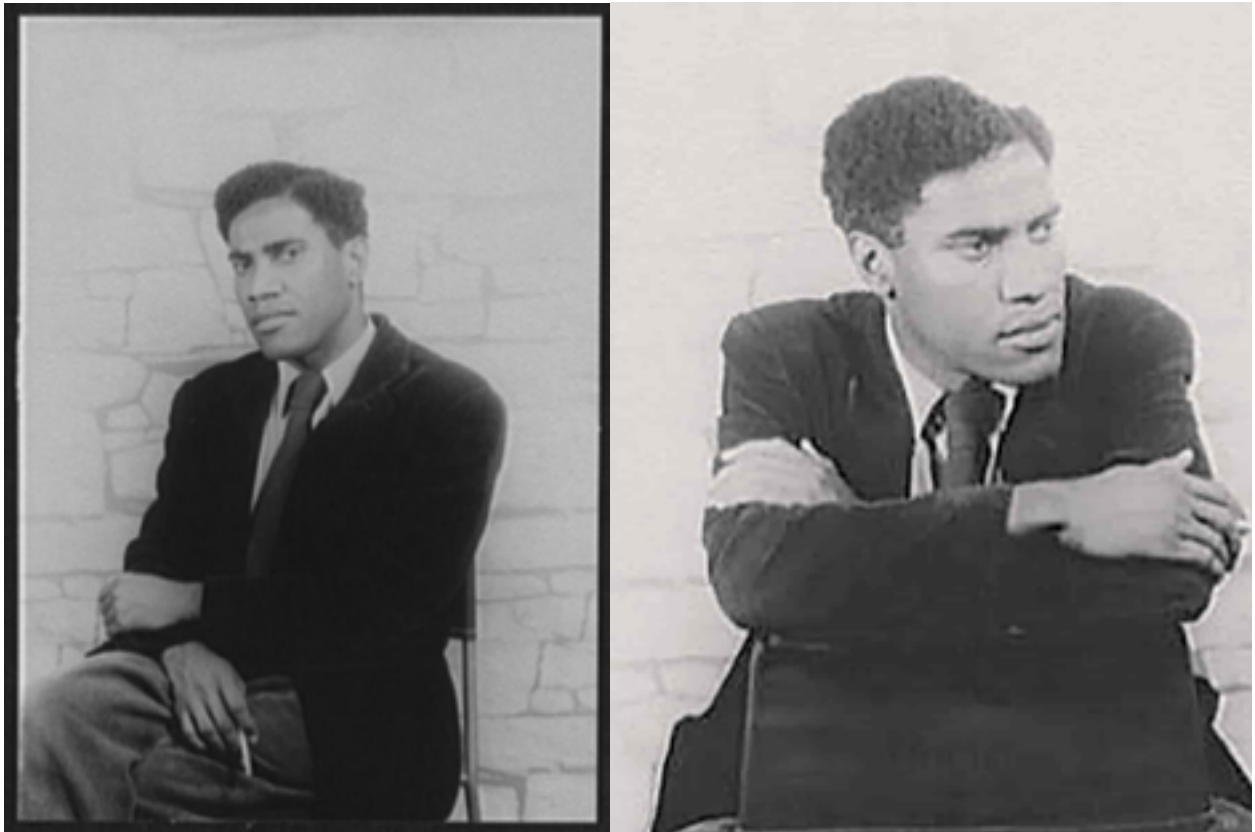
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George Lamming and Caribbean Political Conscience

Aaron Kamugisha



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For seventy years (1953–2022), George Lamming was the Anglophone Caribbean’s most consummately political author of fiction. *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), completed when he was an almost incomprehensible twenty three years old, was not the first novel published by a West Indian of the Windrush generation, as scholars of West Indian literature well know. It was, however, the novel that spoke beyond all others to the new moment in Caribbean history emergent with the 1930s labour rebellions and captured and catalysed a revolution in consciousness present throughout the decolonizing world. No greater

guide to the transformations in Anglophone Caribbean society in the late colonial period emerged than Lamming, who, especially in *Of Age and Innocence* (1958), *Season of Adventure* (1960), and *Natives of My Person* (1972), gave the towering fictional representations of the time, its promise, and its lurking tragedy. Indeed, the entire arc of his literary works represents one of the most profound meditations on the promise and pitfalls of decolonization in Anglophone Caribbean letters.

Lamming was the first of four exceptional creative writers of Barbadian heritage who played a signal role in the island's cultural decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century. Each of the other three authors—Kamau Brathwaite, Austin Clarke, and Paule Marshall—were indebted to him and, frankly, in awe of his work, as were writers throughout the diaspora. For Brathwaite, speaking here about his *own* consciousness, but doubtless also about that of the diasporic Caribbean literary community, “in 1953, George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* appeared and everything was transformed” (37), while for Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who discovered Lamming in East Africa, *In the Castle of My Skin* “marks a great moment in the praxis of decolonization” (qtd. in Pouchet Paquet 50).¹ Between 2016 and 2022, Barbados lost its first generation of great writers who did not merely chart but also effected a revolution in consciousness that wrested the island away from a stultifying colonial heritage to a new future in the world as an African diaspora nation.² Lamming was the first to announce himself to the world and, perhaps fittingly, the last to depart.

When his initial impulse towards fiction had been given a rest, Lamming’s steadfastness in maintaining his political commitments in the 1980s and through the turn of the century was itself remarkable. This was a time when so many drifted away, defeated and battered by the rightward turn of the region’s governments, or were seduced by neoliberalism and transformed into the spokespersons of its order for privilege, access, and economic survival. Lamming would have none of this and preferred to remain marooned on the east coast of Barbados at Bathsheba rather than signal a contentment with the neoliberal organization of Caribbean society. His courage can only be understood as cathected to an integrity of convictions that justice, truth, peace, and authentic decolonization must prevail, and that the radical writer has a duty to clear up the debris of lies and fictions that stand in their wake.

The terrain of his thought is vast and not easily rendered in a summary, and I will offer just a few aspects of Lamming’s compelling vision. His life work is an expression of ultimate commitment to the belief that Caribbean people must strive for an alternative form of self-governance beyond the racial capitalism bequeathed by colonialism, a quest that will take them in the direction of socialism—which he maintained was an expansion of democracy, not a diminution of it. The role of the intellectual in this transformation was, for Lamming, as for Frantz Fanon, to put themselves at the service of the people, a crucial and monumental responsibility. For Lamming, culture was fundamentally misunderstood even by the radical thinkers of the Caribbean; they failed to discern that it lay at the heart of the matter of social transformation. The “sovereignty of the imagination” (one of his signature phrases) is a style framed by anti-colonial convictions that Caribbean people must be free. The search for this freedom cannot surrender to the suspicions of

intra-regional nationalisms; instead, it is wedded to a regionalism that knows it is the true guide to Caribbean self-determination, as, without it, freedom will forever be elusive.

The power, conviction, and truth of this knowledge of the region's history and vision of its destiny are the reason why Lamming, for seventy years, was one of the region's most distinguished public intellectuals. Only Lamming could have been entrusted with the monumental and dangerous endeavour of delivering the eulogy for Walter Rodney. Only Lamming would have known the right words to say in tribute to those who perished amid the terrible fall of the Grenada Revolution. And when the Anglophone Caribbean's greatest twentieth-century man of letters, C. L. R. James, departed from this sphere of existence, it could be no one else than Lamming to provide a touching recognition of his life work (see "On the Murder," "C.L.R. James," and "Tragedy").

These three tributes do far more than the work of mourning: they provide perceptive reminders to Lamming's audience of political commitment and the struggle for the new Caribbean society waiting to be born. His eulogy to Rodney was delivered after having been granted just forty-eight hours in the country by the ruling administration. Yet Lamming had the courage to declare, "Today, we meet in a dangerous land, and at the most dangerous of times. The danger may be that supreme authority, the supervising conscience of the nation, has ceased to recognize or respect any minimum requirement of ordinary human decency" ("On the Murder" 184). Lamming's warning to the assembled that "democracy has never, never, been an organic part of our experience, from conquest through slavery and colonization to the present arrangements we endure," and his praise for the "integrity of commitment" of Rodney were a warning that the Caribbean Left would never forget the authoritarianism and repression that had now culminated in state-sanctioned murder (184). At the memorial service for Maurice Bishop and his comrades in the Grenada Revolution, he compared Rodney and Bishop as committed revolutionaries and "subversive traitors to that tradition" of contentment with neocolonial relations of power, conspicuous consumption, and bourgeois decadence that had emerged in the postcolonial Caribbean ("Tragedy" 240).³ The last of these three great tributes, to James, is on first glance the most touching and the least resolutely political. Lamming notes that he wants to discuss James in a "very personal way," and his description of James as an "evangelist" may well cause surprise. His elaboration on James's voice clarifies: "This eloquence was of a different order. He literally believed what he was saying. There was no distance between head and tongue; and each judgement established a direct and organic connection between what was said and how he felt" ("C.L.R. James" 195).

This splendid intellectual candour is the reflection of a political commitment that does not have to hesitate, doubt, or prevaricate. Rather, it is compelled forward resolutely by convictions that take their inspiration from working people's struggles. In this tribute, we read of James but discover Lamming.

It is for this reason that my enduring memory of Lamming will be of his contribution to Caribbean political conscience. Lamming became, at some point in the late 1970s, not just one of the greatest living novelists of the region or the most avowedly political of them all. He became the *political conscience* of the region. *Conscience* is a word used far less in

Caribbean circles than *consciousness*; Lamming's life compels us to a deeper understanding of both. In his life work, we see avowed principles that guided every speech and essay, that stood behind each of his novels. Taken together, they are far more than a prolegomenon to Caribbean freedom, but an actual living design for what Caribbean self-determination might be beyond our post-independence neocolonial entrapment.

My last words here are personal. I knew Lamming for over twenty years. I had long conversations with him occasionally, and while we were always cordial, we were never close. I attended lectures by him that remain among the most insightful I have ever witnessed by any speaker, most notably his Earl Warner Memorial Lecture in 2004 ("Culture"). I was touched deeply by *In the Castle of My Skin*, as I spent many of my childhood days in Carrington Village, where two of my great-aunts lived, one just one road over from the avenue in which Lamming grew up. Yet it was only many years into adulthood that I came to understand that it was the socialist commitment and political conscience seen best in Lamming, the most important Barbadian radical political thinker of the twentieth century, that allowed a working-class boy like me from an income-insecure household to create a way in this world. As long as there is a Caribbean, Lamming's vision will have resonance and power.

Notes

- ¹ Marshall has also spoken of the importance of *In the Castle of My Skin* to her; see James and Hathaway 37, 113. See also Ngugi.
- ² They passed as follows: Clarke in 2016, Marshall in 2019, Brathwaite in 2020, Lamming in 2022.
- ³ See also Lamming's tremendous, scathing critique of the postcolonial political elite, "Honorable Member."

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include numerous scholarly articles in academic journals; an anthology, *3 Jamaican Plays*; and *My Mother's Last Dance*, an anthology of poems available through the University of Toronto Press.

Sadé Gordon is a PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Miami. Her areas of scholarly interest lie in Caribbean space, migration, and Afro-diasporic feminisms. Her latest project *Finding Our Mothers' Garden: The Feminine Spirit in Aerial Space*, explores artist Firelei Baez's visualization of an Afro-diasporic global feminine network in her *Untitled* mural, which takes a turn towards the spirit to answer Alice Walker's call in "In Search of Our Mothers' Garden."

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