

# **Caribbean American Heritage Celebration 2023:**

## **GREAT MINDS ARE MADE IN THE CARIBBEAN**

**The Most Hon. P.J. Patterson, O.N., O.C.C.**

**Statesman in Residence,**

**P.J. Patterson Institute for Africa-Caribbean Advocacy**

**June 30, 2023**

1. The loss by Columbus of his compass marked the inaugural making of the modern world. The notion of a flat world was finally squashed. Despite the existence of its ancient tribal civilization, there was coinage of the New World. The existing indigenous populations became the instant victims of genocide, imperial conquests and plantation slavery.

Located at the cross roads of the North and South, at the junctions of East and West, Europeans “discovered” the azure Caribbean Sea which became for centuries the naval battleground for colonial piracy and supremacy.

Between 1670’s – early 1800’s three Caribbean islands were the Richest colonies in the world: Barbados; St Domingue and Jamaica. After the dual Haitian revolution, Cuba was the richest by the mid-

19<sup>th</sup> century.

The European invasion inaugurated within the Caribbean for centuries a series of highly forced population movements consisting of European plantation settlers, African enslaved labour, indentured subjects from the Indian sub-continent and parts of China. As societies which were racially complex, but with a distinctive black majority, our cornucopia of linguistic influences and cultural origins created a rich Caribbean melting pot. As the novelist, George Lamming observed, the Caribbean and therefore Caribbean thought, was animated by its history of oxygen.

2. The Caribbean intellectual tradition is one which is composed of formal conventional thought, infused by ancestral practices. Within Caribbean civilization, practices like vodou, myalism and santeria are not just Afro Caribbean religious practices; they are also systems of thought and elaborate forms of cosmology. When they first appeared in Caribbean life, they created alternatives to colonial forms of knowledge.

In the immediate post slavery period, the missionaries complained about what they called the “Africanization of Christianity.” This

emergence of myalism marked what Rex Nettleford called the “battle for space.” Later on, thinkers like Sylvia Wynter, following the Haitian intellectual Jean Price Mars, argued for a form of indigenization in the Caribbean; pummelling the African population to make this space by populating the landscape with their gods and spirits. These leading practitioners of Afro Caribbean religious figures, many of whom have also ben leading artists and musicians deserve due recognition in our deliberations today. Rastafari is a seminal example of this – now having widespread outreach in the Americas and even within Africa.

3. Caribbean thought has been of world significance in the areas of political thought, economic theory, historiography, literature, music, art, culture and innovation.

### **Political thought**

4. It was the Haitian revolution which abolished racial slavery and established the first black republic to win freedom and liberty within the Western Hemisphere for every human being who traversed its sovereign soil. Its 1805 Constitution also abolished the biological foundation of anti-black racism in the western world by proclaiming

that all Haitians were black, including the Poles and Germans who had deserted the Napoleonic army.

They had all joined in 1803, the black revolutionary army which was so named as a tribute to the native population decimated by Spanish and French colonialism.

This constitutional claim of political blackness revised the framing of anti-black racism as biology. That created the concept and the philosophy of negritude, formulated by Aime Césaire of Martinique and Leopold Senghor. This became one of the leading philosophical currents in the 1940's in the search to restore the cultural identity of black Africans.

In the period of decolonization, Frantz Fanon from Martinique emerged as a central figure of the African revolution and for radical anti-colonial political thought during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Césaire's seminal poem "Return to My Native Land" is a glittering marker in the 20<sup>th</sup> century annals of world poetry.

It was CLR James who formulated the idea of the mass democratic political party for the Caribbean. At the global level, James's work reformulated radical political thought, dismantling the prevalent idea of the then Soviet Union as a genuine socialist society and expounding the theoretical formulation of state capitalism as a new political concept.

The political activism and writings of George Padmore made him a pioneer of African independence and his formulation of Pan Africanism remains a cornerstone for black politics in modern times.

Of course, there is Marcus Mosiah Garvey who built the UNIA, the single largest black organization in the world in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His promotion of Black Nationalism - "Up you mighty race" - his advocacy for the liberation and unity of Africa - have resonated throughout the years on the battlefields and the assembly halls where decisions are made on our destiny as equal members of the human race. His oratory and writings are a source of constant inspiration in the struggles for justice everywhere. We should never abandon the campaign until he obtains the Presidential exoneration

for the travesty of justice he suffered in a trial riddled with prosecutorial misconduct.

The work of Anton de Kom from Suriname was critical to the defeat of fascism in the Netherlands.

As the United Kingdom is awakened to recognize, at long last, the tremendous work of rebuilding of Britain by the Windrush Generation, we should not forget Claudia Jones. She was a leading advocate of black women's struggles in Trinidad before she was deported to the UK. In London she emerged as a leading anti-racist campaigner and a founder of the Notting Hill carnival.

Another great daughter of the Caribbean, Mary Seacole, also deserves special mention in this discourse.

5. Even as we intensify the compelling demand for reparations, it is appropriate to reflect on the brilliant work of scholarship which revealed the compelling reason why slavery was in fact abandoned.

“Capitalism and Slavery” reveals the irrefutable analysis of another great intellectual mind, Dr Eric Williams, later to become a Founding Father of the Caribbean Community.

It seems most appropriate to mention here the historical work of Dr Walter Rodney, particularly for his narrative on “How Europe Underdeveloped Africa” which will forever be a seminal work in African history and political learning.

Dare we forget Sir Arthur Lewis, the first Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies?

1979 Nobel Prize winner in Economic Science for his pioneering research into economic development with an emphasis on developing countries.

- Transfer of labour from a traditional to a modern capitalist sector where there is an excessive supply of labour.
- Transforming surplus labour from subsistence levels, from traditional agriculture to a modern industrial sector.

## Literature

6. Not only has the Caribbean produced the Nobel Laureates, Derrick Walcott and Vidia Naipaul, but there have been other novelists who have also transformed world literature: George Lamming, Maryse Conde, Edwidge Danticat, Samuel Selwou, Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris, Jacques Romain, Patrick Chamoiseau, whose novel *Texaco* rewrote aspects of French. Lamming utilised his literary skills as a political activist to influence existentialist thought. The University of the West Indies is proud to claim as one of its own Derek Walcott, who in breaking the traditional barriers of race and language was not afraid to delve into our post colonial history.

Then there is the incomparable Nicolas Guillen, the Cuban architect of *poesia negra*. The work of Cuban novelist Aljeo Carpentier has created the literary genre of the marvellous in his remarkable novel on the Haitian Revolution – *The Kingdom of this World*.

Antenor Firmin is the author of the most critical book on black equality written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century- *The Equality of the Human Races* (1885) is the first sustained philosophical and anthropological refutation of scientific racism. The work of Jean Price Mars' on the cultural anthropology of blackness and Africanisms in Haiti opened



the door for the development for scores of subsequent theories later on about African retentions in the region. His 1928 book, *So Spoke Uncle* is a path breaking book in exploring the culture of the Caribbean.

The vast body of Caribbean writing has been a singular contribution to world literature.

### **Art**

7. Caribbean art has created new art forms and categories. There is no world history of art without the names of Hector Hypollite from Haiti and Wiferdo Lam from Cuba. The latter's work redefined black compositional and his 1943 masterpiece, *The Jungle*. He proclaimed that for him, "art was about decolonization." Edouard Glissant from Martinique and Jacques Alexis from Haiti created the category for Caribbean art, "the marvellous real".

### **Music and Design**

8. As we duly applaud the impressive contribution of the illustrious Caribbean progeny in so many spheres of human endeavour, we

need to be mindful and fittingly recognize how much of that intellectual ferment has come from the people themselves nowhere more so than in the area of art, design, music and forms of cultural celebration.

It is no wonder that those innovative talents resulted in the only new musical instrument of the twentieth century – the steel pan – from the land of the Humming Bird. The players can with skills equal to the greatest symphony orchestras treat us to the music of Beethoven, the Beatles, Bob Marley or Irving Berlin to portray the messages of social protest from Harry Belafante to Peter Tosh. .

There have inarguably been outstanding legends in the creative fields – Lord Kitchener, Mighty Sparrow, Calypso Rose, David Rudder, Peter Minshall.

But it is “We the people” who make the Festivals – Junkanoo, Masquerade, Mass, Carnival – the enslaved who created music, dance and performances to mock their masters and release their spirits in celebrations that blend all our ethnic origins, exposure and rhythmic skills.

Then there are the various genres of music: Rhumba, Zouk from Guadeloupe, Mento, Reggae and Ska from Jamaica; Merengue in the Dominican Republic; Mambo, and Cha-cha-cha from Cuba were musical forms which have been dominant on the market charts. King Stitt and URoy ruled the day before any American star converted their disc jockey style into this ....

Caribbean and South African origins are also prevalent in visual art where colourful patterns and designs, jewellery, and ornaments inspired by life in the Caribbean and South Africas have influenced global fashions and designs.

### **Climate Change**

9. Our geographic location and fragile eco-systems render the Caribbean vulnerable to natural disasters of every kind. For us, global warming is no idle threat and so our brightest have engaged in the scientific studies pertaining to climate change.

As we celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the University of the West Indies, attention is drawn to the award of the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize shared with Al Gore to Professor Emeritus Anthony Chen, of the Physics Department at the University of the West Indies as a member of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change 4<sup>th</sup> Assessment.

We must remain on the cutting edge of science for our survival.

10.The Caribbean intellectual tradition is a profound one and it has made extensive contributions to the questions about being human and what that means for the world. Let us recognize the complexity of this tradition and also be attentive to its popular forms as we seek to transcend commercial boundaries. Out of our diversity and the exuberant intellectual legacy it has already spawned, we will create our own identity and mould a great Caribbean civilization to reflect our rich tapestry and release our full capacity for excellence and innovation.