Remembering Rex

It was not the elegance of the dress nor the eloquence of speech. Nor was it the fact that he had a profound grasp, better than most, of the complexities of Caribbean history, of the vibrant polyphonic textures of the region’s cultural practices and their meanings; nor was it the fact that he was Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies. Rather it was the fact that as you engaged with him you quickly realized that you were speaking with or listening to an intellectual for whom the word had a special meaning. For Rex, to be an intellectual was to operate as a maroon. But he was a special maroon, one for whom the mainstream should always be engaged. For Rex to be maroon-like was to always create space for those whose lives had been shaped by that ubiquitous Caribbean institution the “cane piece.” To be a maroon was to build institutional spaces of culture, of education, of politics and most importantly of ways of life that were decolonized.

Rex was born in colonial Jamaica. It was a Jamaica in which the black population was to labour in the cane fields bending their backs, living in sub-human conditions without any political voice and where to be black was a sign of both so-called racial and class inferiority. If he was born under colonial conditions he came of age as the various streams of the anti-colonial nationalist movement began to make their mark. There was an ethos to this movement at the time which was to become one feature of his life, as he would put in the 1971 introduction of his edited volume, *Manley and the New Jamaica*: “Excellence is not determined by flashes of glitter but rather by sustained application.” To be an anti-colonial subject required in Rex’s mind two things: excellence and finding a language of thinking, of feeling and of practices which were outside the boundaries of the colonial framework. It was this quest for such a language which sustained his preoccupation with the dance. Long before the discipline of what we now call cultural studies emerged, Rex was clear that it was cultural practices of the ordinary Jamaican which could sustain a national community. But colonial power had made a mighty effort to erase these practices; the social formations which emerged in part as a result of the anti-colonial movement oftentimes wanted no part of this culture of the “folk” since it longed to escape its roots. For these social formations and many in the new Jamaica, the political independence project was about carving out a space in which there was a Jamaican identity that eschewed the remarkable adaptation of African cultural forms. In writing about the dance and the body Rex noted: One’s body belongs only to oneself...the language by which the body expresses itself does not have to be anyone else’s language...even when there are borrowings they can be given shape and form on the borrower’s own terms.” It was this preoccupation with finding a language and forms of practices which grounded one of his major conceptual formulations about Caribbean society, as a society in which the “battle for space” was a central feature of our region. He writes:

“In the Caribbean world, where colonial dependency, superordinate/subordinate, powerful/powerless categories determined social reality from its modern
beginnings dating back at least four centuries such dialectical relationships have been central to human existence as a matter of course. The ensuing battle for space...constitutes the force vitale of a still groping society.”

For Rex this “battle for space” provoked both an “arts of the imagination” and systems of thought. This is why he always paid attention to the ordinary in Caribbean society. It is why when he returned from Oxford he took up Sir Phillip Sherlock’s invitation to work at what was then known as “extra mural.” It is why for most of his time on the Mona campus he positioned himself in his office at Gibraltar Camp Road, not located in any disciplinary department but on the margins. There he built the Trade Union Education Institute (now the Hugh Lawson Shearer Centre), developing a model of continuous education in Jamaica and the Caribbean while devoting his enormous energies to other building institutions in independent Jamaica. For Rex, sustainability was only possible through institution building, and even if one disagreed with him sometimes about directions, you had to agree that there could be not a national community without institutions and that these should be built.

Like many of his generation in the Caribbean who came of age with the anti-colonial movement Rex had a deep commitment to the Caribbean. At both the analytical and the level of deep practices and ways of life the Caribbean had “uniqueness.” He writes about the region:

“They may not have created what have become the great wonders of the world but they have built tremendous innate structures in terms of how people relate and interact. They have created thought systems, ontologies, and cosmologies and from this a Caribbean way of knowing, a Caribbean way of seeing, nurtured not out of magic though the Caribbean imagination is fertile...but out of empirical experience of a collision of cultures in a world that has been physically inhabited over time.”

His was a task to weave the Caribbean way of knowing into an art form as well as to find ways of writing which would be outside the conventional forms of disciplinary protocols. Thus we will always remember his radio commentaries, his public statements to hundreds of audiences. These were performances in which his extraordinary erudition melded with the soil of the people and from which unforgettable phrases would emerge.

For us in the Centre for Caribbean Thought he was a guide and mentor. He encouraged our enterprise. He opened the VC’s house to our guests, he spoke at our conferences and book launches and he made it clear that the centre was central to institutional building at the University of the West Indies. In a conversation two days before he was struck down, he said to a member of the centre that his generation had cleared a path but that the generation after his now had the task of extending that path while making it known to the next generation. In carrying out this task we have agreed to dedicate our entire book series, Caribbean Reasonings, to his memory. In a December letter to a member of the Centre, Rex wrote that we are in state of “chassis”. He had previously noted that. “The first thing which our economists and other decision takers must do is to trust and respect the people from below.” Perhaps it is our collective failure to heed this advice why we are in “chassis.” But Rex was always hopeful, he had a hope born out of a profound grasp of our history and in remembering and honouring him
we should recall what he said: “The Caribbean is crying out for new ways of living...it beckons us to...this task. Are we ready?

Sincerely,
Centre For Caribbean Thought

Brian Meeks, Director
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& staff: Eleanor Williams & Beverley Sutherland-Lewis