

Preface: The Duty of Criticism

David Scott

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Many years ago, in 2000 or 2001, I believe, I had the incomparable pleasure of having Lloyd Best stay with me for a few days in New York, at my Columbia University apartment on 112th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue. He was en route to Montreal for a symposium or some such and seemed to have time to spare. Founder of the inaugural journal of anglophone Caribbean sovereignty, *New World Quarterly*, and the founding figure in the wider New World intellectual *movement*, Lloyd was an impressive and inspiring personality, in some sense for me a rich and complex embodiment of the *very* idea of a Caribbean intellectual. I had first met him in 1996 at a conference organized at the University of the West Indies, Mona, in honor of Rex Nettleford, and had conducted an interview with him then around precisely this question: the *vocation* of the intellectual. The interview was published in the first issue of *Small Axe* the following year, alongside my interview with his old friend and collaborator Stuart Hall.¹ Indeed, Stuart and Lloyd would be intellectuals I would always think of together as embodying, in a pronounced if not identical way (and beyond the content of their respective thinking), a certain intellectual *temperament* and *style*, a certain *attitude* to the calling of—the *duty* to live—a critical intellectual life. They were both intellectuals who responded not simply to an ideological or calculative reason for dissent but to an existential *compulsion* or a moral *obligation* to refuse to comply with the requirements of the status quo. Over the years, Lloyd and I kept in touch—I would see him occasionally in Trinidad—and we would

¹ In *Small Axe*, no. 1 (March 1997), see David Scott, “The Vocation of a Caribbean Intellectual: An Interview with Lloyd Best,” 119–39, and “Politics, Contingency, Strategy: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” 141–59. When Stuart returned briefly to Jamaica in 1964, he worked with Lloyd on *New World Quarterly*, no doubt bringing to bear his experience as the first editor of *New Left Review*.

endlessly plan to continue and complete the conversation started in the interview. But, alas, this would not happen.

And yet here Lloyd was in my apartment. He took it over. Not with things (he seemed a relatively light traveler) but with the vibrancy and nonchalance of his larger-than-life *presence*. Each morning he would go out and return with a couple of baguettes and a stack of newspapers, and he would eat and read, occasionally commenting on the news of the day. In the evenings, though, Lloyd spoke nonstop—about *everything* and *everybody*. Nothing was beyond the scope of his elegant and tidy mind, the reach of his animated reflective capacity. It was to me a Caribbean education. In Lloyd the distances between plain information, informed opinion, analytic interrogation, and sheer gossip were almost nonexistent; to him such distances were artificial boundaries. He moved fluidly among them all as though they were mere dimensions of a single epistemic order, fertile resources for the sole task to which his life was devoted: namely, *thinking* the Caribbean, making the Caribbean the *object* of his critical mind. As he moved seamlessly from one topic to another, inviting you to see the world from the point of view he was offering (this was always the gesture), you felt yourself in the company of someone who was cosmopolitan to a fault and yet at the same time, in a way that perhaps no longer exists, completely and indisputably West Indian.

Over the couple of days Lloyd stayed with me I saw no sign whatsoever of any formal writing, or indeed anything that would suggest preparation for an upcoming intellectual occasion. So the day before he was due to leave I ventured to ask him whether he had written a paper to deliver in Montreal. Lloyd looked at me in astonished disbelief edged with mock reproof, as though here at last I'd betrayed my true ignorance: "Paper?" he said to me. "Paper! Race and class boy . . . race and class. I been talking about that for more than thirty years!" I've thought about this off and on for a long time, how and why for me the remark, so rare and original, embodies a *kind* of intellectual orientation. The idea of a "paper," as the sign of a scholarly or even academic endeavor, was not, strictly speaking, anathema to Lloyd. He had, after all, written and delivered many papers. And the institution of the academy, moreover, though he certainly tried to change it, was not entirely irrelevant to his idea of what systematic learning required. But the paper and its performance, as certifying scholarly forms, were subsidiary, even incidental, to his overriding skepticism of the constraining powers of orthodoxy and to his profound insistence on the precedence and self-authoring integrity of the critical intelligence itself—his own, above all. The last time I saw Lloyd was at his home in Tunapuna, Trinidad, not very long before he passed away (in March 2007). As I walked into the house, I noticed his (and Sunity Maharaj's) children playing in the back, and as we sat down to talk I casually asked him why they weren't in school. Lloyd looked up at me wearily and retorted, "School? What can school teach them!" This was his essence, a lifelong dissident of conventional order, tilting at the windmill, "taking his licks," as Gordon Rohlehr has beautifully put it, "and pressing on in his faith in the people."²

² Gordon Rohlehr, "Lloyd Best: A Tribute," in *Perfected Fables Now: A Bookman Signs Off on Seven Decades* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2019), 173.

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Lloyd Best was committed to the duty of criticism. This duty informed, I think, not merely a professional or disciplinary identity but, more importantly, the moral responsibility of an intellectual way of life. The idea of a way of life was internal to Lloyd's idea of what being an intellectual was all about. Take for instance his well-known essay "Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom," delivered as an address at the Second Conference on West Indian Affairs held in Montreal in October 1966 and published in the Cropover issue of *New World Quarterly* in 1967.³ This of course is the locus classicus of Lloyd's intervention around the question of the intellectual function, and, needless to say, it has been much discussed.⁴ Memorably, the essay sketches the tasks and challenges of criticism against the background of the first half decade of anglophone Caribbean political sovereignty and lays out the senses in which constitutional decolonization has not been accompanied by the decolonization of the "sugar plantation' variant of the colonial mind" (13).⁵ Part of the problem, for example, with the Marxism that was increasingly attractive to a Caribbean generation a few years younger, and a good deal more impatient, than Lloyd, was precisely that it too offered precious little room for the creative and self-critical powers of the imaginative faculty: "The concession it makes to the social imagination in the way of freedom to re-shape the social matrix by precepts not deriving from the existing intellectual order is too tiny" (21). Moreover, though himself a man of action, Lloyd refused to fetishize "action" as a domain set apart from this imagination. To the contrary, for him not only are thought and action integrated but, as he famously said, "Thought is the action for us" (29).

But it is important to appreciate that Lloyd was not here merely replacing one dogma for another, black dog for monkey, offering the theoretical privilege of intellectualism in place of the mechanical vacancy of activism. Rather, he was urging a new conception of intellectual action that displaced the reductivism of this recurring binary. What was at stake for Lloyd in the liberation of the intellectual function from the constraints both of the colonial mentality and of Marxism (sometimes barely distinguishable from each other) was not only a resolute antideterminism. It was also the recognition that the epistemic problem concerning a way of thinking was better thought of in terms of the habitus of the moral problem of a way of being. The duty of criticism can now be more richly formulated, I believe, as a moral commitment to what Lloyd felicitously called, in the penultimate section of "Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom," a "mode of living." "To change the world," he writes, "it is not enough to announce our intention to do so when we get the power. We have also, it seems to me,

3 Lloyd Best, "Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom," *New World Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (Cropover, 1967): 13–34. Hereafter cited in the text.

4 See the essays collected in Selwyn Ryan, ed., *Independent Thought and Caribbean Freedom: Essays in Honour of Lloyd Best* (St. Augustine: Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies, University of the West Indies, 2003). See also Norman Girvan, "New World and Its Critics," in Brian Meeks and Norman Girvan, eds., *The Thought of New World: The Quest for Decolonisation* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2010), 3–29; in the same volume, see the splendid portrait captured by Anthony Bagues, Brian Meeks, and Norman Girvan in "A Caribbean Life: An Interview with Lloyd Best," 221–327.

5 It is important to add that the essay has a regional orientation, not merely a narrow *British* Caribbean one, but it is the latter that propels its formulations.

to demonstrate the sorts of changes we are aiming at by starting to live them now . . . so far as is possible.” Notably, this conception of a critical life entailed altering our sense of the relation between *change* and *time* and *responsibility*. As Lloyd goes on: “To shift the focus into our mode of living as an instrument of social change is to imply that real change is a comparatively slow process. It results from the patient and purposeful building which each of us undertakes in the personal sphere. It takes time and many rounds of fresh initiative to transform an individual breakaway into a social movement” (32). In this sense, then, the duty of criticism belongs to the domain of what Alexander Nehamas would call an *art* of living.⁶

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This year, 2021, marks twenty-five years of *Small Axe*. It feels like almost a lifetime’s worth of journal work. But of course it is not—not quite; and even if it was, it wouldn’t be enough. No single life is enough. That is why we have traditions. One evening in Trinidad, Lloyd was driving me back to Port of Spain after an event we’d attended at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, and I was expressing to him my frustration about the limited and mixed reception of the then fledgling *Small Axe*. Lloyd listened silently, thoughtfully, and after a while (and I think, now, with the whole weight of his successive experience of *New World Quarterly*, *Tapia*, and the *Trinidad and Tobago Review*) he said, and I’m paraphrasing, “You can’t know in advance what the effect of *Small Axe* will be. You have to wait and see.” The duty of criticism, I now recognize, does not come with guarantees. It is the adventure of the journey that matters, with all the contingencies and risk of failure involved. *New World Quarterly* was an unrepeatable historic event in the intellectual life of the early postindependence anglophone Caribbean. *Small Axe* belongs to its own and very different Caribbean conjuncture. Navigating this conjuncture over the past twenty-five years has presented us with its fair share of challenges—but it has also been a richly rewarding experience, to me anyway, without equal. Let us together hope that the years to come will be as rewarding, even as, undoubtedly, they will be filled with their own trials and vexed demands.

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6 Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Again, the instance of Stuart Hall is instructive; see David Scott, “A Sense of Displacement: Stuart Hall’s Art of Living” (inaugural Stuart Hall Distinguished Lecture, International Conference on Stuart Hall, University of the West Indies, Mona, 2 June 2017; Henry L. Gates Jr. Lecture, Yale University, 26 April 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SffzLStSXsw).