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**IN MEMORY OF A “QUALITY BLACK”:<sup>1</sup>  
RALSTON MILTON “REX” NETTLEFORD  
(1933-2010)**

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*Marva A. Phillips*

Marcus Garvey, Father of Black Nationalism and Black Power and Jamaica’s first National Hero holds a place of prominence in Jamaica and Black peoples’ struggle against colonialism and the pernicious racism which anchored the system of slavery and later capitalism. His activism against racial oppression expressed in Black Nationalism, black pride, black dignity, black industry and self-reliance resonated throughout a world where Black people were constantly being denied humanity. Garvey’s ideas were to live on in the minds of many ordinary people in Jamaica and the world and found continuity in the work and life of many advocates and adherents of the



Photo source: The University of the West Indies.

international Garveyite movement and beyond. This was to be expected because Garvey himself philosophised that “what you do today that is worthwhile inspires others to act at some future time” (Garvey 1986:1). One of those who were inspired “to act at some future time” was the late RALSTON MILTON “REX” NETTLEFORD who came to loathe racism and the plantation society in much the same way Garvey did. Like Garvey, Nettleford rejected Eurocentric ideologies of defining self and the social group, of which he was a part, and recognised and accepted Ethiopia as the cradle of Africa, and Ethiopians as the base of the colonial plantation society which had outlived slavery. Black Nationalism and self liberation were, therefore, the central themes running through much of Nettleford’s intellectual output and practical involvement with his own people. No wonder, Garvey’s rallying cry to the descendants of slaves, “Emancipate yourself from mental slavery” also became the cry of the renowned Nettleford who embodied the aspirations of generations of

Black Jamaicans and black people the world over.

Ralston Milton "Rex" Nettleford, one of the Caribbean's finest intellects and creative artistes, was born in rural Jamaica on February 3, 1933. In Jamaica, as in the western world, the dichotomy between rural and urban pits growing up in the former as a handicap. For Nettleford who was to achieve the greatest success any human being could ever hope for, growing up in a rural Trelawny community and later Montego Bay (the country's second city, but still regarded locally as "rural") gave him strength of character. Born a little over 45 years after Marcus Garvey, Nettleford was the composed expression of Marcus Garvey's advice to black people the world over: "Up you mighty race; you can accomplish what you will". Rex, as he was affectionately called, did accomplish this, and over his 77 years, he danced to the "rhythm of Africa" while harmonising with "the melody of Europe," expressing, at the same time, his anxiety for the cooperation of all social groups in Jamaica towards the common good. Nettleford wrote:

There must be the liberation of the Jamaican black, whether he (*sic*) be peasant, proletarian or struggling middle class, from the chains of self-contempt, self-doubt and cynicism. Correspondingly, there will have to be the liberation of Jamaican whites, real and functional, from the bondage of a lop-sided creole culture which tends to maintain for them an untenable position of privilege. (Nettleford 1998:210-211)

With the gift of knowledge and the ability to create knowledge coupled with a commitment to the development of humankind, particularly to improve the quality of life of the racially and economically oppressed in his native Jamaica through education, this creative genius was to spend the greater part of his academic life as Director, Extra-Mural Department/Department of Extra-Mural Studies, University of the West Indies (UWI) and Head, Trade Union Education Institute. The Extra-Mural Department was later to become the School of Continuing Studies. In 1996, he was appointed Deputy Vice Chancellor and Vice Chancellor on the retirement of Sir Allister McIntyre. At the time of his death, he was Vice Chancellor Emeritus, a well deserved title.

With an emphasis on self-liberation and social transformation, Nettleford constantly urged all Jamaicans and by extension, the black world to develop a passion for liberation, equality and justice, cherished notions which promise a world free of unnecessary exploitation. For Nettleford Emancipation from slavery did not start and end on August 1, 1838 or 1834. His view was that Emancipation was an ongoing dynamic process, a continuing struggle, which centred on liberation from historical and contemporary bondage brought on by the machinations of white solipsism.

His writings centre on the survival of a transported people who through culture, race, class and protest seek personhood. The 1960

study "The Ras Tafari Movement In Kingston Jamaica" conducted by M.G. Smith, Roy Augier and Rex Nettleford brought to the fore the socio-political significance of the Rastafari as an anti-colonial, anti-racist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist force in the matrix of social change. His understanding and respect for this group of radical thinkers, not only influenced his personal relationships, but also his literary, cultural and academic work.

Within this context, his life's work focused on issues of race, culture, identity, class and contemporary emancipation, from the vestiges of slavery and colonialism. His recognition that education would encourage appreciation and respect for self and would effect a socially transformed Caribbean society through a process of re-education from de-colonisation led him to view education as a liberating force.

Like the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, Nettleford saw a connection between liberation from class, race, economic and political domination and the development of a social consciousness among the disadvantaged through the kind of education which locates the oppressed at the centre of learning. Freire believed that "in order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (Freire 1996:31). With this in mind, Nettleford spent his whole academic career expressing solidarity with those persons who experienced social and ideological marginalisation in their own society. He understood the critical nature of extra-mural activity. During his tenure as Director, Extra-Mural Department/Department of Extra-Mural Studies/School of Continuing Studies, he constantly encouraged all members of the academic staff in the art and science of breaking down that wall which separated the UWI's internal and external programmes and to bring to Caribbean people higher education, through life-long learning for those who did not have the benefit of secondary education but who could, through extra-mural studies, become creators of their own destiny. Not many of us can appreciate an Extra-Mural Department. Rex Nettleford did and did so without apology. His was a project of social justice.

It is in the same way that Professor Nettleford never wavered in his support for women as witnessed in his embrace of the extra-mural Women and Development Unit (WAND) and its programme of activity. It was a programme of activity which involved working towards ensuring not only the "integration of women in the development process", but also one of encouraging women to go beyond the confines of their traditional roles and to develop their skills, their minds, their ideological awareness and to improve their quality of life through education, training, advocacy, activism and community investment. His unwavering support for women

was further expressed when he accepted without hesitation the trade union project, The Project for the Development of Caribbean Women in Trade Unions that was rejected by a national trade union umbrella organization, into the Department of Extra Mural Studies through the Trade Union Education Institute (TUEI). It was then that I had the privilege and opportunity to work along with him and to be exposed to his understanding of equality, justice and his respect for the marginalized; in this particular instance a group of young Caribbean trade union women.

He supported women and their interests to the end. In commenting on the lecture series, "Forever Indebted to Women" (2007-2008) to honour trade union women in the Caribbean, organised and hosted by the TUEI which by then had been renamed the Hugh Lawson Shearer Trade Union Education Institute, he was to write in his last *Foreword* for the December 2009 Special "Forever Indebted to Women" Issue of *Caribbean Quarterly* for which he was editor from 1970 to 2010:

I myself was delighted to have had the opportunity to participate since both the Hugh Lawson Trade Union Education Institute and the Open Campus were once part of the School of Continuing Studies (formerly the Department of Extra-Mural Studies) which operated under my direction in the days when such activities were decidedly 'outside the walls.' The keen interest in women accepting a central role in our Caribbean world led to the Women and Development Unit (WAND) located at the Cave Hill campus. In the early eighties, the then TUEI produced the landmark monograph *Understanding Women's Agenda* to serve as an interactive learning tool for the use of trade unionists and activists seeking equality for women.

We are forever indebted to Professor Nettleford who so selflessly worked to advance a cause so that "poor people pickney"<sup>2</sup> can be victors, agents of change and subjects of history in a region built on systems of discrimination and institutionalised male authority.

Ralston Milton "Rex" Nettleford, Vice Chancellor Emeritus, eminent scholar, visionary, luminary, creative and artistic genius, a fierce Black Jamaican nationalist and a committed Caribbean regionalist was, indeed, "a light shining from the West."<sup>3</sup>

Gone, but not forgotten, Ralston Milton "Rex" Nettleford will live on in the hearts and minds of many, and in the annals of history because "what you do today that is worthwhile inspires others to act at some future time."

Thanks for your inspiration my friend, my colleague, and my teacher. I miss you and will always miss you and our lively discussions in which we sometimes agree to disagree. *Requiem in pace.*

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "Quality Blacks" is one of Nettleford's favourite terms.
- <sup>2</sup> Jamaican word for "children," often used by Nettleford.
- <sup>3</sup> Taken from the motto of the University of the West Indies which Nettleford served for fifty-seven years.