

“Reinventing Jamaica”

Conference Address

Dr. Basil K. Bryan
Consul General of Jamaica

Dr. Marable, distinguished panelists, ladies and gentlemen:

For anyone who understands the history of the relationship between Jamaica and black America, and also the important links between Jamaica and Columbia University, to be asked to address this conference is indeed a great honor. That the invitation should come from the Institute for Research in African-American Studies and bear the imprimatur of Professor Manning Marable is added confirmation of the strong relationship that Jamaica holds with black America.

I need only mention the long and proud history of this relationship and the mobilizing of U.S. public opinion into action in support of Jamaica's cause on numerous occasions. From the dawn of the twentieth century, through Harlem, and later on through the civil rights struggles to the present period, we have witnessed this solidarity, which remains

a constant reminder of this important relationship.

As the Consul General of Jamaica in New York, I am pleased to add my personal welcome to the participants from Jamaica, who themselves have made significant contributions in furthering the understanding and relationship that Jamaica holds with the African-American community in the United States.

As is often and very well said, we came across on the same boat, it's just that we were dropped off at different ports.

I am pleased to share some thoughts concerning the relationship between Jamaica and black America. It is both ironic and promising that very often it takes being out of Jamaica and among friends for us not only to realize the beauty of this special relationship but to come together as a family, relinquishing the accidental division of race, class, ethnicity, and nationality in order to contemplate

and fulfill this legacy of togetherness bequeathed to us by many of our common heroes, such as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B Du Bois, Claude McKay, and Dr. Martin Luther King.

With respect to outward migration, difficult economic and social conditions have played a significant role in the movement of Jamaicans, particularly black Jamaicans, to other countries in search of opportunities.

Throughout the twentieth century, we have witnessed a series of major migration movements from Jamaica to the following places:

- (a) Panama—to work in the building of the Panama Canal
- (b) Costa Rica—to work on the then-expanding railway system
- (c) Cuba—during the development and expansion of the railway system and the expansion of sugar and tobacco plantations
- (d) England—particularly the 1950s and 1960s, to undertake mostly low-skilled jobs

What is important to note is that in all of these instances of large-scale migrations, there is one common factor: It was largely a migration of men seeking employment with the intention of earning money to send to their families in Jamaica and with solid plans that after the work was over they themselves would return to their families.

The early movement of Jamaicans and other West Indians to the United States began in earnest at the juncture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Even before the migration movement to the United States (to Harlem in particular) and the emergence of the Garvey movement, the introduction of bananas to American menus by the United Fruit Company led to a movement of Jamaicans, largely from the parishes of Portland and St. Mary, to Boston,

mostly as low-level workers, but particularly as domestic servants to wealthy white Bostonians. In fact, it was the development of the banana trade that was the genesis of Jamaica's tourist industry.

During the period 1910 to 1920, there was a large migration of Jamaicans who settled in Harlem. Why Harlem? New York being what it was, even in those early days, and with Harlem at its zenith, it was only natural that black Jamaicans would migrate to Harlem to settle among Americans who looked like themselves—that is, black Americans. Harlem at that time was the center of black life and culture, and every black person on the "who's who" circuit could be found in Harlem.

The impact of this nascent Jamaican settlement in the heart of black America led to the phenomenal rise to power of Marcus Garvey, who found a receptive audience in Harlem, leading to the establishment (in Harlem) of the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1916.

The Garvey movement galvanized blacks (Jamaicans, West Indians, and Americans) into a powerful and unifying force for change.

Of course, this success in mobilizing so many disillusioned and disheartened people of color into a united force was to engender its own share of concerned jealousy with the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and W.E.B. Du Bois.

In any event, it was from this early beginning between black Americans and black Jamaicans and other West Indians that sprung many black Americans who were to rise to prominence in later years, leading the struggles for civil rights and other changes from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Today, the relationship between Jamaica and black America continues. Jamaicans have been there at the front with black Americans in the struggles for civil and human rights.

Early on in this common cause, in the 1920s, it was another Jamaican, Claude McKay, who was to defiantly declare the intention of blacks to stand up against racism and violence with his epochal poem:

*if we must die—let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious
spot . . .
Oh, kinsmen! We must meet the common
foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us
brave,
And for their thousands blows deal one
death-blow!
What though before us lies the open
grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cow-
ardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting!
Like men we will face the murderous,
Cowardly pack pressed to the wall,
Dying, but fighting back!*

McKay as poet, critic, writer, and activist was to play a significant role during the Harlem Renaissance and the search for dignity and respect.

Jamaicans have been in the trenches with black Americans but have also celebrated with black Americans at the highest level, including the recent appointment of U.S. Secretary of State, General Colin L. Powell, the U.S.-born son of Jamaican immigrants.

In the political arena, this relationship continues to be evidenced through the close relationship of Jamaica with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), a relationship that began from the very beginning of the CBC. Jamaicans are proud to also note that the congressional representative from Houston, Hon. Sheila Jackson Lee, is yet another example of the long relationship between Jamaicans and

black Americans. At other levels in the political order, such as state or local offices, are found several native Jamaicans as well as those of Jamaican and black American descent. Despite the fact that it is now almost commonplace, that unity continues and should not be taken for granted.

Often the question is asked, how is it that a country as small as Jamaica can have such a high profile? Or, how can Jamaicans have such influence throughout the world, coming from a background of such a paucity of resources?

This high profile presents Jamaicans with unique challenges as well as opportunities. Consider the following: Just ten years ago, the Internet was almost nonexistent; today, no country—including developing ones—can escape its reach. What this means is that information to and from Jamaica is only a click away.

It is very well known that the playing field is not level and seems to be worsening, given new expectations of globalization, the digital and technological revolution, environmental concerns, and so on. More developed countries were never subjected to such pressures at a similar stage in development.

Let us, however, be fortified, and with a greater purpose continue our search for solutions to persistent problems.

In the words of someone who holds heroic status for both black Americans and Jamaicans, Marcus Mosiah Garvey—whose words were to be popularized by another common hero, Bob Marley—let us deliver our minds from mental slavery, always with our eyes on the prize, marching on as brothers and sisters in a common cause.

Or, in the words of yet another hero common to both Jamaicans and black Americans, James Weldon Johnson, "Let us march on until victory is won."