



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

## Professor Emeritus Arnold Rampersad

Chancellor,

The Caribbean's most eminent biographer, Professor Emeritus Arnold Rampersad, traces intersections between personal and literary history and global affairs in unfolding the lives of cultural icons and literary geniuses.

Remembered from childhood as a shy, spindly, sensitive youngster, Arnold Rampersad belonged to a bookish group who embraced a V. S. Naipaul set-down by identifying themselves as the Pseudo-Intellectuals' Club. Despite the challenges of early, straightened circumstances, Arnold Rampersad refused to settle for a dream deferred. Reading voraciously in his passage from Belmont Boys and St Mary's College in Trinidad to Harvard University, Arnold Rampersad proceeded to teach at such universities as Columbia, Princeton and Stanford, providing leadership at Stanford as Senior Associate Dean and as Sara Hart Kimball Professor in the Humanities.

As his recent Eric Williams Memorial lecture underscored, his scholarship in Afro-American Culture directly illuminates Caribbean Studies. Author and editor of twelve books, and innumerable papers, he ranges from literature to sports, as in his work on Jackie Robinson, but soars in literary biography.

Chairing the editorial board for the *Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, in sixteen volumes, he authored the first, drawing critical acclaim. Then, his study of Ralph Ellison was the first full biography of that famously angry author, who responded caustically even to Rampersad in an interview for the Langston Hughes biography. Arnold Rampersad's probing of conflicted, even tormented writers remains compassionate while surgically keen, and his revelation of Ellison's genius and vulnerability substantiates Ellison's description

of his own life as a “lacerating experience.” Such ground-breaking work helped to theorize the blues as an art form through which the literature of Black America expresses the tragedy of a people hitherto denied tragic proportions.

Not only were his biographies of Hughes and Ellison finalists for the Pulitzer Prize and other major awards, but *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* was selected as an outstanding book by the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post*. Arnold Rampersad himself attracted fellowships like the Rockefeller, honorary doctorates, and the Berman Medal from Princeton, and was distinguished by The New York Public Library as a Literary Giant.

Observing that black poets pursue political power more than freedom, turning their pens “into instruments of attack”, Rampersad conveys a hallucinatory sense of communist politics in late 30’s Afro-American artists, who revealed themselves not as “numbed” but as “seething”. He observes poets under pressure to assail the political establishment, and raises the question of President Obama’s likely impact on poetry, there no longer being an “excuse” about having “no access to power”. Himself a victor rather than a victim of the colonial system, with a sense of responsibility rather than entitlement, he applies Caribbean awareness to Black American angst in lucid prose, dignified but never pompous, the flowering of an impeccable language ability that had early astonished schoolmates.

Yet, in person, his is an understated, often silent presence – *brandoid*, mused Derek Walcott on resemblances to Marlon Brando. Questioned about other sides to his personality, Arnold Rampersad responds, “alas there is no other side”, effacing himself with gentle flippancy. In him, Shakespeare’s peacetime ideal of “modest stillness and humility” is nuanced by subtle humour – what has been described as a “finely-tuned sense of the absurd”.

Meticulously confronting critique with history, veining poignant social commentary with incisive political analysis he renders the tensions in Afro-American sensibility at once harrowing and haunting. Even as Ellison wrote for dual audiences, white and black, Arnold Rampersad’s analyses resonate in Caribbean as in American experience, perhaps implicitly echoing *The Invisible Man*’s famous last line: “Who knows but that, on lower frequencies, I speak for you?”

Chancellor, I present Arnold Rampersad, and ask that by the authority vested in you by the Council and Senate of The University of the West Indies, you confer on him the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

St. Augustin’s Campus  
Friday 30<sup>th</sup> October, 2009