

## The artist Carl Abrahams and the cosmopolitan work of centring and peripheralising the self

The outsideness that Artists frequently claim for themselves presents a challenge for anthropologists.<sup>1</sup> To be an artist, from this standpoint, is to know the world beyond the limits of local ‘common sense’ (Geertz 1983). The privilege demanded by artists for their work is similarly extraterritorial: their products should not be treated just like any other thing; instead they constitute a rule for themselves outwith group laws or norms of consumption. In contrast and in response, the inclination of the anthropologist is to put the artist and their art back within its cultural boundary – to draw a contextual circle round their activities. We are confronted, then, by a problem of mutual encompassment. Exploring the life of a Jamaican painter, Carl Abrahams, I will give analytical priority to the words he used to account for himself and his art and the kind of world knowledge implied by them. Abrahams saw himself as a cosmopolite and his artwork as made against, beyond and outside the national culture he inhabited. What if, as anthropologists, we were to take claims like his seriously and ask in what sense they are true?

New possibilities opened up for the anthropology of art when Alfred Gell argued that we should rethink the work of art as a ‘technology of enchantment’ (1992). In a standard model, visible for example in Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984), art has been explained in terms of how certain types of consumer deploy it to distinguish themselves culturally. Gell argued that this structural-contextualising view tells us nothing about the work of art in itself; it merely redirects attention toward the social field where the work becomes a ‘vehicle for extraneous social and symbolic messages’. The art object, he proposed, ‘enchants’ us because, as an object, it resists our attempts at explaining the technique that went into its making. The artist is ‘half-technician and half-mystagogue’: art retains, even for anthropologists, a residue of the sacred. As anthropologists, we should for this reason muster the same scepticism in considering art that we would direct toward other aspects of religious or ritual behaviour. And here Gell draws on Maurice Bloch’s notion of ritual aesthetics as a kind of technical ‘propaganda’ directed at ‘duly socialized individuals in a network of intentionalities’ (Gell 1992:43).

At a certain point in his argument, Gell takes support for his perspective on art from Simmel's analysis of money, where Simmel argues that the value of money exists, from the subjective point of view, as a tense combination of desire and resistance (1990). Gell's cooption of Simmel is problematic, because Simmel, in his most significant study of art and an artist, *Rembrandt*, makes it clear that his views on money do not extend in a simple way to his understanding of art (2005). Here, on the one hand, Simmel, like Gell, argues that an approach to art that reduces the work to its social context is not an appreciation of art at all. In this respect there have always been two 'roads', Simmel proposes. There is the 'high road' of social-biographical contextualization, which explores the setting for the work while avoiding deeper claims about the art object itself. However, there is also the 'low road' where the artwork is viewed as a synthesis of technical effects - or 'specific effective forces' (Simmel 2005:1). Neither of these directions brings us definitively closer to understanding either the artist's or the viewer's experience of art. While Bourdieu's *Distinction* may well be considered an elaborate example of the 'high road',<sup>2</sup> Simmel would surely have viewed Gell's argument as a tactical pursuit of the 'low'. After all, the result of Gell's approach is that the experience of 'art' is reduced to a ratio – how successful, in technical-instrumental terms, has the art object been in resisting our comprehension?

In *Rembrandt*, Simmel proposes that 'the work of art corresponds neither to the spatial juxtaposition of aesthetic elements, nor to the historic sequence from which it derives'. Aesthetic experience instead involves an act of recognition where the work of art allows access to the inner life-world of the artist. The experience of an artwork is, then, an 'indivisible' response to the artist's inner life as it acquires unity in that particular work - it cannot be broken down further analytically without interposing merely conventional or technical considerations between ourselves and this inner life. So, the more important task in responding to art, beyond any formalising account, is to acknowledge that the work is a result of the project and intentionality of an artistic life. In this, Simmel follows Kant's view that aesthetic judgements are generated by feelings that cannot be grounded in rational or objective terms but which are nonetheless universally valid from the point of view of the individual concerned (Kant 1952). Technical or contextual explanations, which may be of great interest

(even to artists themselves), do not explain this most basic and central aspect of artistic experience as a subjective experience.

Gell would no doubt vigorously deny these special demands made for the universality of aesthetic experience, viewing them as elemental to art's mystagogic 'propaganda' (and likewise, from its angle, Bourdieu's *Distinction* explicitly posits itself against Kantian aesthetics). Hence Gell asserts that a certain positivistic iconoclasm (he uses the term 'methodological philistinism') is necessary for anthropologists; but he does not justify this insistence more than to say that the veils of art, like those of religiosity, *ought to be* stripped away. If we already have the answer, though, – art is technical enchantment – then why would we enquire any further into any specific art work or artist? This is not a stance that requires more than categorical reassurance now and again.

As I have suggested, it is by no means uncommon for artists to make claims akin to those that Simmel argues for; we find artists insisting that their work cannot be reduced to a particular social or historical context: nor is it merely a set of dazzling technical effects (albeit technique can be all-important): instead their work should be judged as the project, and expression of, a particular artistic life and practice. Carl Abrahams made precisely these kinds of claims to me when I talked to him during the early 1990s in conversations that were clearly intended to sum up his rejection of a view that would 'put him in his place' historically and contextually. For my part, to do his account retrospective justice is to give his manner of theorizing his own situation its due. To this end I have borrowed from Kant's *Anthropology* the idea of *weltkenntnis* – subjective world knowing or world knowledge – as a key. My goal here is not primarily to understand Abrahams' artwork, then, nor to put Abrahams back in his appropriate historico-cultural context: rather, my central concern is to give analytical priority to Carl Abrahams' own knowledge of the world. This involves also giving priority to the conflict between Abrahams and his cultural surroundings.

Inner life, world-knowing and worldview as dimensions of art and the artist

Carl Myrie Abrahams was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1911 and he died there in 2005. Against the grain of the nationalist art forms that developed in the island after World War II, Abrahams described himself in conversation with me as an ‘internationalist’ and was recognised by others as imaginatively and artistically a ‘citizen of the world’ (Strudwick 1983). During a life that spanned the apex of British colonial control in the Caribbean, and the struggles before and after independence, Abrahams’s cosmopolitan stance came to express both his detachment from Jamaican politics and his commitment to a distinctively Jamaican art. These were the crucial themes he continually returned to and tried to redefine by way of a diversity of autobiographical episodes.

In the lectures that make up his *Anthropology* Kant uses the term *weltkenntnis* to describe how, in the midst of living a life, someone develops concepts for how to live and how to know the world out of an unfolding process of self-education (Louden 2011:56-58). If, for Simmel *inner life* is the generative milieu in which the artist becomes her or himself - a personal milieu that can never in any strict way be broken down analytically (though it can be appreciated intuitively and aesthetically), then *weltkenntnis* indicates a series of attempts at, or essays in, explicit conceptual self-definition. In the process of making oneself explicit vis-à-vis world, certain autobiographically distinctive life events gain the status of crucial analogies according to which our current experience can be judged.

Thus contrasted, *inner life* and individual *world-knowledge* suggest subtly different facets of human individuality that are best appreciated and understood in their own right. Both can be likewise contrasted to the idea of *worldview* which suggests an unquestioned pre-preparation of interconnected concepts, symbols and imagery, ontological and moral values (cf. Jackson and Piette 2015).

Variouly in his work, Kant suggests that, from the point of view of the individual, self-conscious *weltkenntnis* and cosmopolitanism come to the same because the outermost frame for thought is not locally shared common sense but rather the world or cosmos at large. However, this assertion does not provide a stable vantage point. Cosmopolitanism only gains meaning as a process in which personal horizons are ‘enlarged’ and, as a result, changing concepts for how to live in an emerging world

community become available for reflection. As something achieved, cosmopolitanism is more notable in the collective history of humanity than it is in the 'complicated and unpredictable' life of any 'single individual' (Kant 1988:29).

### Interviewing Carl Abrahams

Listening to Abrahams describe his life was to experience a kind of world-knowing that was, without doubt, 'complicated and unpredictable'. It is tempting to say of Abrahams that he was eccentric - that he was literally 'outside the centre' of the middle class Jamaican milieu he was raised in. Certainly as anthropologists have shown there exists a widely shared 'mythology' of Jamaican middle class life (Alexander 1984:173-175, Austin-Broos 1994, Douglass 1992). But the degree of conformity to this mythology can be deceptive: the Jamaican has always been too heterodox to stabilize a comfortably shared worldview without a great deal of self-conscious ambiguation; tension and ambiguity have become crucial to the worldview itself.

As a category Jamaican middle-classness remains inherently unstable and heterogeneous. Hence, if Abrahams was eccentric it was not because he failed to fit with a highly formalized class mythology (Paul 2005). Instead his eccentric position came about precisely because of his uniquely personal attempts to resolve this instability and ambiguity of worldview - solutions which were often, from his point of view, a failure.

The social ground for Abrahams' cosmopolitanism and his art as he described it was part Czech Jewish, part 'brown' Jamaican, part English grammar school transposed to Jamaica, part pro-imperial and anglophile, part anti-colonial and pro-Jamaican, partly expecting recognition from the local art establishment, largely rejecting of and mostly resentful toward that establishment. Abrahams was clearly attached to certain aspects of the Jamaican middle class values he had grown up with, but these attachments were tensely poised with a search through his art for unifying principles with which to look at the world at large. What comes across in Abrahams' account of his own life, as perhaps in any auto-reflection, are contrary tendencies both toward centring and peripheralising personal experience. As a self-declared cosmopolite, Abrahams

positioned himself as peripheral to local concerns while simultaneously - contrarily - he sought a certain centrality and embeddedness for his enlarged view of the world.

I visited the painter intermittently between July and December 1991. Our long conversations offered an attractive interlude from what was by then the main trend of my fieldwork. I had come to Jamaica intending to study local artists like him, but instead I was increasingly drawn into events in my neighbourhood. Though not far away by bus, Abrahams' home encompassed a Jamaican world utterly different to the noisy<sup>3</sup> street-life I was now used to: the journal entry immediately before my first about the artist describes a friend being evicted, his belongings thrown out, the police called, someone else arriving in a truck to help - amongst other contingencies (Wardle 2000). Even if it had become tangential to my research (as I understood it at that time), it was still pleasant to walk off a side-street into the cool quiet of Abrahams' house blinded and shadowed by large trees; and it was striking how quickly the only other people there, the maid and Abrahams' sister, rather mysteriously melted into the background. After our meetings I sketched my retrospective impressions in narrative form as here:

The maid lets me into Carl Abraham's house: a typical colonial-style bungalow hidden behind thick vegetation. Now in his 80s, the painter is about 5'6", slim, a light brown complexion with a large soft nose, which he often prods gently, and a moustache that, with his greying curly hair, makes him look a little like Schweitzer. He has lived here for the last 23 years. He used to paint in his garage but now works through here, he explains, leading me via the large living room with its friendly mix of art deco and 1950s clutter, into what seems to be both his studio and his bedroom.

Abrahams used a distinct register; a smooth-edged middle class Jamaican English inflected with many personal idioms including curiously outdated expressions. I found these difficult to capture and would note down phrases as he spoke. He talked gently but became physically and vocally animated when he was engaged by one of his focal interests or *idées fixes*. At our second meeting I found him touching up a painting of 'the prophets in the fiery furnace'. There was a typical painterly concern with surfaces and spatial relationships: perhaps his most characteristic gesture are the

swirling fractaloid curves Abrahams uses, especially in his later work, to refigure whatever subject matter he is dealing with, but he also indicated what was for him a crucial personal theme, the closeness of art and religious practice:

“It look clean don’t?... There’s a crookedness there I don’ like... some patient work needed...” He is painting a picture which concerns “the fiery furnace.. procreation... the melting pot...” As usual, he begins to quote:

‘Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the son of God’

“Art”, he tells me, is “a relation of religion”: it should not be simply egotistical – “personalised and immortalised for art’s sake. I see it as bringing man to the creator”.

As an artist Abrahams was mystically inclined; painting took him away from what was commonly expected into a world of individual visionary experience. At 81, he was now more than ever at odds, or out of time, with his surroundings. Jamaican nationalism, colonial independence and the changing forms of race politics had by the early 1990s eroded taken-for-granted expectations that might once have helped his view of the world to cohere. It seemed that he had been left with memories that in many cases only he saw as explanatory – and he resented this. Clearly, one of his purposes in interviews and conversations like ours (of which he gave many over the years) was to set the record straight. He would return often to how the history of Jamaican art had been written so as to obscure his role in its development. This might seem objectively hard to comprehend given that Abrahams had been recognised and honoured frequently through a variety of prizes and public commissions; but he did not value these valuations and he rejected the historical assessment they implied.

He talked in long looping autobiographical descriptions: each story returning inevitably to a handful of exemplary individuals whom he indexed again and again especially Cliff Tyrell his cartoonist friend, Ernest Price the beloved headmaster of his former school, Calabar, the painter Augustus John as well as his artistic arch enemy Edna Manley, doyenne of Jamaican art and wife of the island’s former prime-

minister. These person-focused ‘loops of reasoning’ (Rapport 1993) gave stability to Abrahams’ traversal of the past and the present, offering fixed points in an imagined geography. Certainly, his dispute with Jamaican history and public culture was clear, but what made him fascinating to listen to were the terms of this disagreement, that is to say how he went about differentiating himself from his environment, fabricating a world-knowledge that was forcefully distinctive to himself.

As an “internationalist” artist or “citizen of the world”

In our conversations Abrahams insisted that he had always been an “internationalist” or cosmopolitan artist, but it often seemed hard, listening to him, for me to detach these claims from what appeared to be his Anglophilia. Perhaps, though, it is not necessary to do so, as I will explore further. The artists he admired were mostly English visitors to the island during the 1930s such as his friend the cartoonist Cliff Tyrell, or Esther Chapman who started the West Indian Review in 1934, and notably Augustus John with whom he had brief contact in 1937. These figures had played a dual role; negatively they demonstrated, as far as Abrahams was concerned, that Jamaica was a minor periphery of the imperial scheme with little to offer that was unique in the arts, but positively they gave a vista onto something aesthetically larger.

“I was an internationalist”, Abrahams now states looking back at his youth in the 1920s and 30s. He wanted to learn about the experience of all kinds of people. “I used to go from a bar to another bar and mix with a wide, wide group of people”. “I became more or less of an internationalist artist very young... grew up bigger than my contemporaries”.

Abrahams had to make his money selling cartoons. He mentions the importance of English cartoonist Cliff Tyrell for his own development. During the 1930s he had also received help from Bernard Webster who had “an artistic temperament”, being a designer of furniture [he had also attended Calabar school with Abrahams], and later from an “English Jewess”, Esther Chapman, who loved his caricatures. She decided to stay in Jamaica starting a magazine, The West Indian Review, which featured his work. Abrahams sold mostly to the Daily Gleaner (“there was only one newspaper”). He could make 10/- for a cartoon that got into print and then sell the originals too. He used to draw and sell sketches of visiting soldiers.



Abrahams' descriptions of this period were marked by a nostalgia which was certainly not present when he talked about his experience after the Second World War. In the inter-war period the colonial pattern of back and forth interaction was at its height. Middle class West Indians could travel (or remain in Jamaica) as nominally equal subjects of the imperial entity. Meanwhile, white colonial visitors – soldiers, tourists, teachers, artists, engineers – arrived in and left Jamaica. Educated youths like Abrahams benefited from this state of affairs both pragmatically and imaginatively. The same currency was used in Jamaica as elsewhere in the empire, tied, until 1914, to the gold standard. If they were not citizens of the entire world, middle class islanders like Abrahams could, minimally, claim to be citizens of approximately one quarter of it. However, this universality in principle also created contradictions: perhaps necessarily, it drew attention toward its opposite – the sense of being on the periphery, but also a feeling for the local and the difference between what existed locally versus the universal value set. Certainly, Abrahams felt confident in claiming both that he was an “internationalist” and that, at the same time, he was the first “Jamaican” artist: the two apparently contrary ideas seemed to spring from each other.

The English painter Augustus John had come to the island in 1937 [between March and May]. John “was the first to identify himself with us [the Jamaican artists]”. “He would go into a bar, drink rum and so on and observe”. Abrahams had done a cartoon of a local notable, Dr Oldfield, which was published in the Gleaner. Oldfield introduced Abrahams and Cliff Tyrell to John. “I was really struck, I saw the two local girls he had painted. Edna Manley and these people are so fictitious! This character [John] was out in the rays of sunlight studying the colours”. “Come to England he told me: I have a house in Kent where I can put you up”. Through Augustus John's influence, Abrahams gave up cartooning and became a painter fulltime. I asked him if Tyrell ever painted. “Tyrell was a painter with a pen: If Tyrell hadn't taken me to The Gleaner I would never have started”. Tyrell left the island shortly after their meeting with John, he says.

He, Abrahams, had become the first “Jamaican” artist: the first artist working in a distinctly Jamaican idiom “preaching” for a Jamaican art. “In those days [the 1930s] there was no cultural ground” for Jamaican artwork.

However, there remained a sense that whatever he had intended for Jamaican art at that time had never been fulfilled.

Now interrupting himself, perhaps triggered by memories of his difficulties in becoming a painter, he enters an angry fugue, which he pursues for a few minutes. The Jamaicans “are not creative people: they start citing the impression that they are held back by colonialism or some damn thing... whole island gone to hell... absolutely impossible... these few people [the Manley family] sit and drain the money and it absolutely wasted!”

Whatever his Anglophile tendencies implied, Abrahams did not want to be English. When, during World War II, he went to England with the RAF he could have remained there with relative ease, he told me. Others like the sculptor Ronald Moody, who came from a very similar professional ‘coloured’ middle class background to Abrahams, moved permanently to, and found success in Europe. Abrahams chose not to. What engaged him was not England itself, which he described as wet and cold, but an Anglophone world of the imagination with many universal and transcultural features.

It had been Mr Price, Abrahams says, the headmaster of Calabar school, “that marvelous Englishman”, who first exposed him to “Greek culture and so on”. At this point he stands up, becoming lyrical and quoting widely:

‘When beggars die, there are no comets seen,  
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes’

“I remembered all of Shakespeare it still guides me... And Grey’s elegy”:

‘Full many a flower is born to blush unseen  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air’

This “sphere of culture” provided Abrahams with a “philosophic tenor” which “I never divert from... I still keep back in that age of Tennyson and hey

The artist Carl Abrahams and the cosmopolitan work of centring and peripheralising the self.  
Winner of the 2013 J.B. Donne essay prize.

nonny...” Then he shows me a cartoon of horsemen riding into a tunnel and reads the caption: “They are not to reason why; they got to do and die”. He pulls out another draft for a cartoon against the [first] gulf war. “War is antiquated” he says: “the attainment the West has done; they are acting like little children!”:

‘Such... tricks... as make the angels weep’

Abrahams had, he reiterates, always preferred the world of culture “written in the books of the Eighteenth Century”.

#### An eccentric exemplar of the Jamaican middle class?

In the 1950s, the anthropologist R.T. Smith argued that Anglophone West Indian culture was structured by a pyramid of values at the apex of which were ‘things English’ (1956). V.S. Naipaul satirised this situation in his novelistic depiction of West Indian ‘mimic men’ who could only mime Englishness without ever developing a character of their own (1967). Other commentators have suggested that the consensus Smith describes was only ever one dimension of a field marked also by elements of humorous ambiguity and violent resentment (Wardle 2007). Certainly, Abrahams’ views conformed to Smith’s picture at one level, but we can also note that an aspect of Abrahams’ “preaching” for a Jamaican art was precisely to differentiate himself in this respect from what was specifically English. He was not a Jamaican nationalist in any political sense, Jamaican politics revolted him, but the notion of a specifically Jamaican art formed a counterpoint. In fact, his paintings evidence very little that is identifiably English either in content or in general aesthetic terms. What then did he mean by a “Jamaican” art? Whatever he intended it fitted only in an indirect and ambiguous way with the nationalist art that actually developed in the lead up to, and after, independence. Growing up, as Abrahams put it, ‘bigger’ and ‘faster’ than those around him, meant there was an irrevocable incompatibility of scale between himself and the culture he dwelt in.

Abrahams was born into a social class, the professional middle class which possessed distinctive cultural features and was enjoying a particular moment in the island’s history. In 1865, after a revolt by landless black Jamaicans and a brutal backlash by

forces directed by the colonial governor, the planter class had reluctantly handed over control of Jamaica to administration from London. Apart from a sequence of natural disasters, including an earthquake that destroyed large parts of Kingston in 1907, the ensuing period was one of relative colonial pax. And of the three strata it was the middle class who gained most from crown colony government. Dramatic changes would come only later with the fall out from the First World War. However there already existed three central dilemmas for this grouping.

First, in aggregate, the middle class was small and relatively isolated in its interests; caught between the rurally based mass society of emancipated slaves and the tiny, mostly white, plantation-owning elite. A contemporary observer, De Lisser, suggests that in this period little more than ten percent of the island population worked in the trades and professions (De Lisser 1913:53). Likewise, in 1911, the year of Abrahams' birth, only approximately 800 children out of close to a million islanders enrolled in senior school. Second, in the Caribbean, social class was notoriously and complexly imbricated with race. Viewed as a hierarchy, the middle class was widely identified as 'coloured' or of 'mixed blood' - though in economic terms its make-up was multiplex: it included Whites, Blacks, Syrians, Chinese, and its members drew on an intricate lexicon of racial characteristics to talk about themselves and their inheritance. Nevertheless, the idea of race-mixture or 'light complexion' complicated any simple identification of the middle class with the national community, which was overall and predominantly black. The third issue was that the middle classes, by way of education, spoke, if not a different language, then a radically differentiated form of Anglophone creole to that of the mass of 'black' lower class Jamaicans (who, again, were not all phenotypically black).

Abrahams' father, a Jewish immigrant from the Austro-Hungarian empire, represented a new, technocratic element in the middle class. He had disembarked, an engineer with a specialism in motor-cars, at the exact moment that the demand for these had arrived too. 1911 was a high point of Jamaica's prosperity as a crown colony, buoyed partly by the success of the new export mono-crop, bananas, and marked by a sudden exponential rise in expenditure on automobiles (De Lisser 1913:178). We do not know what Abrahams senior made of the existing Jewish cultural life he encountered, but Jewishness had long roots on the island in a

Sephardi community that preceded colonisation by the English in 1655. Either way, he seemed to have an opaque presence in Abrahams memories.

Abrahams describes himself as inheriting “an English quality” from his mother while his father’s background made him a product of “the Jewish nucleus”. His father was one of three Czech engineer brothers who came to Jamaica at the turn of the [Twentieth] Century. He became a motor mechanic (“the first on the island”) and began making cars in 1906. “He was a genius in his own way”: but “working with his hands” made him something of a “misfit”. Their relationship was never close, nor did the old man encourage Abrahams in any particular direction. He remembered, at about the age of four or five, how he was playing with his rattle. His father called him into his study and asked him to demonstrate its action: “he never displayed any emotions even to his wife”. However, he bought American illustrations of “great works” which the son copied assiduously. Later, Abrahams did a certain amount of amateur car designing; his brother, who took a job in the workshop itself, was “illiterate”. I discover later that Abrahams uses this word quite liberally as a term of abuse.

In contrast to his father, Abrahams’ mother clearly drew her values from the longstanding ‘coloured’ segment of Jamaican society. Abrahams way of describing her suggests that she was the privileged but illegitimate child of a white military officer and a black or coloured mistress. So, while his father seemed somewhat indifferent to the pattern of British colonial values, his mother was deeply engaged with them.

Abrahams mother “had an English background” through a Colonel Rose. “She never forgot that: we had to wear Eton collars” which the other boys would write on. He remembers a white bowler hat that his mother made him wear to church in which he looked particularly conspicuous. Subsequently, going to school wearing this hat “I could feel it was going to upset them”. “At 11am the hat was still there on the peg. When 12 o clock came it was gone”. Abrahams searched everywhere but finally accepted that it had disappeared and that he might “get a licking [a beating]; but after all ‘thank God the hat

had gone”’. Coming out of school he noticed that a large crowd of boys were playing football; about forty or so. As he passed through the crowd he realised it was his hat they were playing with, muddy and tattered. “You learnt to defend your talents: they try to destroy you if you have something they don’t have”’.

In contrast, references by Abrahams to his siblings were vague and dismissive.<sup>4</sup>

Abrahams had six brothers and two sisters, none of whom he seems to have friendly relations with. One brother “does nothing but travel and waste money”. He characterises his siblings as “materialist”. He is living with one sister but finds the arrangement “irritating”. I ask whether Abrahams had had children. No, he never had any “liking for procreation”, he tells me. He could see “this thing [the world around him] would turn into a sour pudding”. “I realised that to breed is small... a destructiveness to it”

“As a Jamaican, my people never suit to me... to a certain extent I learnt faster than any human being who ever lived... my teachers and my mother were precious... those things motivated me”’.

#### Mr Price and Calabar school

During the interviews, Abrahams constantly returned to one figure in particular: the English headmaster of Calabar school, “that marvelous man” Ernest Price. It was Price who, while Abrahams was a pupil at Calabar, encouraged him to become an artist: “Price was very fond of me and cherished my art: he was my greatest patron”, he said. The Reverend Ernest Price arrived in Jamaica in 1910 as the senior Baptist missionary to the island. In 1912, he founded Calabar school with the help of a fellow missionary David Davies. Price remained headmaster of Calabar until 1937 and later Davies took the headship. Abrahams never mentioned Davies - an Australian, born in the outback - but Strudwick reproduces a cartoon of him, drawn by Abrahams in his school copy of Macauley’s *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1983).

The involvement of the Baptists in building, and their choice of name for, Calabar school was significant. The Baptist Theological College, Calabar, had been founded in Trelawney parish in 1843. However, the name Calabar had its origins in an

infamous slaving port in Nigeria. Baptist missionaries had fought prominently for the abolition of slavery in the previous century and, on emancipation, they had helped establish 'free village' communities; rural settlements centred on a church where former slaves could settle as peasant farmers (Besson 2002). While Anglicanism and Catholicism were closely identified with the plantation owners who had supported slavery, the Baptist following overlapped class divisions. Lower class Jamaicans often attended the Baptist church while still practising their own spirit-centred religious concepts in parallel: for them the Baptist church offered favourable elements of social 'respectability'. The middle classes also supported the Baptists' emphasis on the merits of education since this would reinforce their standing (perhaps with particular regard to the planter class who had often had less schooling than they).

"The fact that I can remember details of his behaviour from when I was seven is a sign that he had a more than normal philosophic impression on my being". Price was "so precise and absolutely prolific. He did some wonderful things... visiting the boys' bedrooms to make sure they were asleep.... He knew their habits; some would pretend they were snoring... There was a joke that he asked one new boy 'are you sleeping?' and the boy had replied 'yes sir'; the boy said 'yes sir, I am sleeping'". Abrahams chuckles at this memory.

"If he [Price] was a man who was in charge of the world it would be a perfect place". If he found anything bad in your character, however, "he would lick [beat] it out of you". A certain schoolmaster, Mr Miller, used to play the saxophone, but Price stopped him because "certain instruments breed up the passions".

Now he abruptly remembers one of Price's sayings "when I leave Jamaica it will be Price-less".

The school founded by Price and Davies derived its style and curriculum from British public and grammar schools. It was intended that students of Calabar would become public servants both in Jamaica and in other parts of the empire including, most prestigiously, in the Indian civil service. As in schools of this kind elsewhere, there was an emphasis on knowing the European classics and on the virtues of sport. CLR James has indicated, with regard to the colonial education system and the game cricket, how both institutions could symbolise universal principles that individuals in

any part of the empire could aspire to; albeit this universality-in-principle created particular contradictions (James 1963). Curiously, though, Abrahams insisted that the headmaster himself, Price, was philosophically opposed to sport.

“Price was a marvelous man... they don’t make them like that again... But Price was dead against sports”. As far as he was concerned sports were “the virus by which all wars start”. It was at this time that “I got sports out of my system... I became more like him [Price] than anything else... one had to get a stringent drainage of what was wrong out of one’s system”. He now points to English football hooliganism and drug use by sportsmen: “you can’t run faster than a puppy; it’s just damn foolishness”.

Abrahams launches into a long story about how at school he beat a fellow pupil - Geddes (“he was illiterate”) - in a sporting contest. When Geddes became the head of a major manufacturer, he in turn thwarted Abrahams’ attempts to gain a commission for a mural the company was sponsoring.

“People spend all their time watching cricket! Could you compare a cricketer with an inventor?” he says, perhaps recollecting his father. “People lack philosophy... speed is not progress... cultured people are far better than people who can take a bat and lick a ball; it’s childish!”.

Beyond Abrahams’ childhood memories of him, Rev. Price had become a major figure in Jamaican public life by this time. Apart from his work for the Baptist mission and for Calabar school, he served on the Jamaican board of education. He also took a progressive position on mass education which involved him, amongst other venues, at events organised by the working class black activist, Marcus Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in 1914. The black internationalism that Garvey argued for had arisen from working or lower class experiences of transnational migration that were worlds apart from the expectations of the educated middle class. Price strongly and publicly criticised Garvey’s leadership, Marcus Garvey’s son eventually studied at Calabar school suggesting, perhaps, a degree of mutual respect (Hill 1992).

Abrahams described an early life bounded by middle class values and insulated from larger events, but he must, even in childhood, have been aware of Garvey’s standing.



Later, retrospectively, Abrahams painted him. Did Garveyism, the boldest internationalist movement of the time, inform Abrahams' own view? If it did, then it never appeared explicitly in Abrahams' self-reckoning.

#### On Edna Manley and the art establishment

In the interviews, Abrahams reserved a special and visceral hostility for the sculptress Edna Manley who remained the preeminent figure in the Jamaican art world from the late 1930s until she died in 1987. Though Edna Manley (nee Swithenbank) was born in Yorkshire in 1900, her mother came from a family of wealthy white Jamaican plantation owners, the Shearers. In 1921, she married her Jamaican cousin, Norman Manley, an Oxford Rhodes scholar and war veteran. Norman Manley emerged as a leading barrister in Jamaica and during the 1920s his career followed a seemingly conservative pattern.<sup>5</sup> However, as economic conditions on the island worsened during the 1930s, he became a prominent anti-colonial union leader. When Jamaica's two main parties formed in 1938, he led the People's National Party, while its main political opposition, the populist Jamaica Labour Party, was controlled by his cousin, Alexander Bustamante. Ultimately, both Bustamante and Manley would be prime ministers of Jamaica. Another cousin, Hugh Shearer inherited leadership of the JLP briefly in the 1960s. Edna Manley's son, Michael Manley, became prime minister in 1972. In fact, the political history of Jamaica continued to turn on these extended family connections until Michael Manley died in 1997.

Whatever her increasingly tight-knit centrality in the kin-network of Jamaican politics, Edna Manley was, initially at least, like Abrahams, a cosmopolite, as the early entries in her published diaries indicate (1989). In 1921 she had joined the St Martin's School of Art studying there with two other Yorkshire born artists, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. With them she joined the 'London Group' - an art collective which, at that time, was particularly influenced by the primitivist and cubist trends protagonised by Jacob Epstein and Gaudier Brzeska. In Jamaica, however, married to a leading pro-nationalist, her work acquired a new meaning. In 1937, she exhibited a sculpture, 'Negro Aroused', which was viewed by the anti-colonial movement as capturing the political mood of the times: in due course it became 'the undisputed icon of Jamaican cultural nationalism' (Poopeye 1998:73).

Abrahams had begun to develop and show his art in the same few years Manley achieved success with ‘Negro Aroused’ but he, of course, drew on quite different artistic sources. Likewise, for his part, he deeply resented the history of Jamaican art that came to be written with Edna Manley as its epicentre. In particular, he loathed ‘Negro Aroused’. Early in our first interview I told him about what I was interested in, the social background to artistic developments in Jamaica.

He responds that this will be difficult because Edna Manley and her “pimps” have perverted the history of art in Jamaica. I notice now, and in the ensuing conversation, that Abrahams often talks about his nemesis Edna Manley in the present tense, as if she were still alive. He recounts how a Jew, Da Costa, made a gallery of his own house – Manley took it over and “took all the credit”: my guess is that he is referring to the Jamaica School of Art [now Edna Manley College].

Of the artists who were around at that time, Edna Manley “set them against me”. The “Institute [of Jamaica]’s” claim that “Manley started everything” is untrue: as to her famous sculpture ‘Negro Aroused’ – “I would burn it”. “Tribalism - through that awful thing she has stirred up all sorts of trouble”. “The Institute” and “her friends” have bent history: “she got all these little pimps who play her part”.

Though he never stated it in clear terms, the clash with Manley, and by extension with the history of Jamaican art, was about what a ‘Jamaican’ art should mean:

In opposition to “tribalism” Abrahams tells me that he had always promoted a “local art developed out of the peasantry”: he was the first to paint “Poco[mania] scenes, calypso bands and market scenes”. In contrast, Edna Manley “would never see herself in a market or a calypso band” because “she was too busy trying to make her way up”.

Where an art historian might talk about how primitivist sculptural trends were coopted by nascent Jamaican nationalism, Abrahams saw Manley's art as "tribalist". Whatever can be said about his polemic in general and the class sentiment underlying it (his view that Manley was too busy social climbing), the last of Abrahams' claims, that Manley had ignored local scenes, was not strictly true. Edna Manley had also portrayed local cultural forms including the spirit religion, Pocomania/Pukumina, but in a very different mode to Abrahams. His paintings of these scenes were touched by

cartoonish empathetic humour, her sculptures were full of politically charged intent.



Mural for the Banana Board - detail

In 1955 Abrahams was able to give his artistic response to Manley. Commissioned to paint a mural for the stairwell of the offices of the Jamaican Banana Board, Abrahams created a triptych of scenes from the industry. In its central panel a worker, stripped to the waist, grapples with a mighty bunch of bananas; muscles tensed and brow furrowed, his trousers are marked with sap. Behind him ant-like figures carry fruit to waiting ships.

His is a generic worker-hero, but unlike 'Negro Aroused', Abrahams also aimed to portray a fully individuated human being.

Rounding out a list of further conflicts with Edna Manley, Abrahams again quotes:

'The world is gone so bad, that wren's make prey where eagles dare not perch'

### Centring and peripheralising the self

What, finally are we to make of Abrahams' claim to be an international or cosmopolitan artist and likewise his autobiographical staging of this claim against what he saw as a parochial nationalist art under the leadership of Edna Manley? Whether we look at it from a collective social standpoint, or from a subjective one, cosmopolitanism describes a process of reimagining the world and thereby changing

the relationship to it. In the cosmopolitan literature diverse spatial metaphors are deployed to describe this: we talk of cosmopolitanism as a shift in personal or group horizon whereby new worlds are disclosed, as the expansion and addition of circles of relationship, or as an aesthetic and moral enlargement of the imaginative field (Delanty 2014, Josephides and Hall 2014, Wardle 2010). In this regard, perhaps above all, two features stood out in my conversations with Abrahams. On the one side there was his hostility toward and need to progressively differentiate himself from his contemporaries and vis-à-vis his socio-cultural surroundings. On the other was his complex ambivalent regard for the white Anglophone colonial world that had provided an educational grounding for his internationalism. These dispositions, and their contrary pulls, clearly fed the highly distinctive form and content of his art – its humorous cartoonlike ambiguity, and increasingly its wave-like distortions and scintillations of form.

One way to consider these features is to think of them in terms of the combined practices of centring and peripheralising that any individual engages in with regard to their own life. Adapting the classic Marxist notion, Patrick Baker has applied the dyad of centre-periphery relations to life in the Caribbean island of Dominica to think about how human communities organise ecological niches for themselves. To ‘centre’ is to reshape the environment toward a reproducible balance of energy loss and energy gain. When local activity is absorbed into larger socio-economic processes, as West Indians were via the sugar-slavery complex, what has been a centre becomes the periphery of another energy system. But this kind of absorption into an external value system is never absolute and there always necessarily exist countervailing forces – the paradoxical conflicts of dependence and autonomy – combining activity toward further localisation vis-a-vis the pulls of global peripheralisation (Baker 1994).

According to London-centred imperial value schemes, Jamaican cultural expression could never escape being geographically peripheral and developmentally tardy: it was perpetually ‘timed out’ by movements at the epicentre (Fabian 1983, Wainwright 2011). Within the colony and the post-colony a public politics of centering and peripheralising certain kinds of cultural expression was likewise in play (e.g. Thomas 2006). Abrahams’ art practice was not caused by that play of public values, but it clearly unfolded in recognition (and rejection) of it. The symbolic-conceptual forms

that time and space acquire for the autobiographical self – the artist in this case – are always other and inequivalent to these general cultural evaluations that circulate within a social group at a particular historical moment (Simmel 1990:446-448, Wardle 2015, 2016).

Abrahams' cosmopolitanism was a stance but also a process in which his inner life and his *weltkenntnis* imaginatively outgrew and outpaced the objective field of values appearing around him. In Jamaica, as elsewhere in the Anglophone Caribbean, the sense of being in the imperial periphery instigated attempts to adopt and adapt cultural forms from the metropolis. The same process triggered unforeseen, ambiguous and chaotic juxtapositions to be re-centred within individual and collective life and thought. Here we could compare an uncritical imitative cosmopolitanism, one that copies unreflectively some attractive socially distant influence, with a response like Abrahams' that is genuinely complex in terms of its intuitive, and its conceptually explicit, differentiation and regeneration of elements.

Carl Abrahams was born just as the unwinding of British colonial culture and institutions had begun. He lived through the movements toward national independence and on for another four decades as Jamaica became an increasingly unstable nation state. Collectively the Jamaican middle class established a certain centrality for itself in values of educational achievement and, to use Alexander's term, a mythology that placed it between the white planter class and the black masses. Much of the symbolism and many of the ideas entailed in this worldview (behavioural norms regarding taste, phenotype, class distinction) have been tensely and chaotically held together vis-à-vis the centrifugal reality of power centred in Britain, and later in the U.S. Abrahams described his art and his cosmopolitanism in terms of an extreme dissatisfaction with his social milieu and its values and a constant quest for other principles and further means of expression. To accept Abrahams' claim to be a cosmopolite is, then, to acknowledge the divergence between his *weltkenntnis* and his cultural surroundings and to appreciate his restless struggle toward self-differentiation and his search for alternatives in making aesthetic and moral sense of the world.

#### A challenge for the anthropology of art

Simmel tells us that, both the historical-contextual and the technical ways of explaining art, however valuable the results, ultimately remain exterior to the primary experience of artwork as the expression of an inner life – the artist’s but also reflexively the viewer’s. There is a challenge here for the anthropology of art. Simmel does not demand that formal, technical or generally contextualizing interpretations of art should henceforth cease, he simply argues that these understandings do not truly engage with the artistic life – they cannot give complete explanations of the artwork in the way they often claim to.

What then is the viable end of an anthropology of art; is it to provide an explanation that is conceptually more complete than the one presented by the artist and his work? Certainly if we view art as always a kind of propaganda - the more successful the artwork, the better the propaganda - then art is explained in a certain sense; but this type of explanation is bound to be true to itself - it is explanation *a priori*, hence its basis is unwittingly both generic and metaphysical. From where does this need to outflank the art work and the artist derive? Perhaps it comes from a desire to see anthropology as a positive and theoretically driven science that will always encompass while setting the stage for what it has encompassed. But there is a danger here if the lens is reversed; is not anthropology also setting itself up as a ‘technology of enchantment’ – dazzling with its power to explain life-worlds? In the case presented here, where the concern is with the self-expressed world-knowing of a particular person, it is the asymmetry and asynchrony between the artist and the surrounding cultural arena that stands out. A cosmopolitan anthropology might well be more open to the idea that people must move beyond their own horizons or concepts as they centre and peripheralise their lives; that they are absolutely constrained neither by a delimited cultural context nor a routine set of habits or techniques. A cosmopolitan anthropology of art might likewise have less to do with explanations of these kinds and more with an open-ended listening to life-worlds-in-transit. This, of course, would still involve care and attention.

#### Acknowledgements.

My thanks to the RAI J.B. Donne Prize Essay Committee and to three unnamed JRAI reviewers. Part of this paper was originally presented at the conference ‘Meanings and Uses of Cosmopolitanism’, Bergen 21<sup>st</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> June 2012. I am grateful to the organisers of that event, Kathinka Froystad and Vigdis Broch-Due, for providing the opportunity

to formulate some of the themes discussed here. I am indebted to the Banana Board, Kingston Jamaica, for permission to photograph the mural by Carl Abrahams illustrated in this article.



Mural for the Banana Board, 1955.

---

<sup>1</sup> A list of artists displaying these characteristics would be very long. In the Caribbean setting an outstanding case is Price's study of Martiniquan outsider artist, Médard Aribot (2006). Rapport's rich analyses of Stanley Spencer indicate elements of a similar pattern in a very different setting (2003) and Victor Turner's classic description of Muchona the Hornet suggests that comparable features can be found outside the frame of modernist individualism.

<sup>2</sup> The editor of *Rembrandt*, Alan Scott, underlines this point (Simmel 2005:xvii)

<sup>3</sup> This word is used to signal an issue of aesthetics which there is not space to discuss here (Henriques 2011, Wardle 2015).

<sup>4</sup> In notable contrast, in a brief published comment, Aimee De Lisser refers to Abrahams' family as 'people who excel in whatever they do' (in Strudwick 1983:7)

<sup>5</sup> In 1929 Manley twice prosecuted Marcus Garvey, on the first, occasion instigating his removal from the parish council seat to which he had been elected as leader of the island's first political party; the People's Political Party (Brown 1976:174).

## References

Alexander, Jack. 1984. 'Love, Race, Slavery, and Sexuality in Jamaican Images of the Family' in Smith, R.T. (ed.) *Kinship Ideology and Practice in Latin America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. Kingston: The Jamaica Times Limited.

- Austin-Broos, Diane. 1994. Race/Class: Jamaica's Discourse of Heritable Identity. *New West Indian Guide*, 64(3&4):213-233.
- Baker, Patrick. 1994. *Centring the Periphery: Chaos, Order, and the Ethnohistory of Dominica*. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press.
- Besson, Jean. *Martha Brae's Two Histories: European Expansion and Caribbean Culture-Building in Jamaica*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Brown, Wayne. 1976. *Edna Manley: The Private Years*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Delanty, Gerard. 'Not All Is Lost in Translation: World Varieties of Cosmopolitanism'. *Cultural Sociology* (published online 14 May 2014).
- De Lisser, Herbert. 1913. *Twentieth Century Jamaica*.
- Douglass, Lisa. 1992. *The Power of Sentiment: Love, Hierarchy, and the Jamaican Family Elite*. Boulder: Westview.
- Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1983. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gell, Alfred. 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology' in Coote, J. and A. Shelton (eds.) *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Henriques, Julian. 2011. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*. London: Continuum Press.
- Hill, Robert. 1992. *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers: 1826-1919*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jackson, Michael and Albert Piette (eds) 2015. *What is Existential Anthropology*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- James, Cyril. L.R. 1963. *Beyond a Boundary*. London: Stanley Paul & Co.
- Josephides, L. and A. Hall (eds.) 2014. *We the Cosmopolitans*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1952. *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1988. *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*. Indianapolis: Hackett.



- Louden, Robert. 2011. *Kant's Human Being: Essays on his Theory of Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Manley, Edna. 1989. *The Diaries*. Kingston: Heinemann.
- Naipaul, Vidiadhar. S. 1967. *The Mimic Men*. London: Picador.
- Paul, Annie. 2005. 'Father Abrahams' *Caribbean Beat* 75 (<http://caribbean-beat.com/father-abrahams#axzz3ObOaWrrE>)
- Poopeye, Veerle. 1998. *Caribbean Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Price, Richard. 2006. *The Convict and the Colonel*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rapport, Nigel. 1993. *Diverse Worldviews in an English Village*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Rapport, Nigel. 2003. *I am Dynamite: An Alternative Anthropology of Power*. New York: Routledge.
- Simmel, Georg. 1990[1900]. *The Philosophy of Money*. London: Routledge.
- Simmel, Georg. 2005[1916]. *Rembrandt*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Raymond. 1956. *The Negro Family in British Guiana: Family Structure and Social Status in the Villages*. London: Routledge.
- Strudwick, Nora. 1983. *Carl Abrahams, Artist and Visionary*. Kingston: Pomegranate Press.
- Thomas, Deborah. 2006 'Public Bodies: Virginity Testing, Redemption Songs, and Racial Respect in Jamaica' *Journal of Latin American Anthropology*, 11(1):1-36.
- Turner, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wainwright, Leon. 2011. *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wardle, Huon. 2000. *An Ethnography of Cosmopolitanism in Kingston, Jamaica*. New York: Edwin Mellen.
- Wardle, Huon. 2007. 'A Groundwork for West Indian Cultural Openness' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13(3):567-583.
- Wardle, Huon. 2010. 'A Cosmopolitan Anthropology?' Introduction to a special edition of *Social Anthropology* 18(4):381-388.
- Wardle, Huon. 2015. 'Ras Dizzy 1932-2008' *Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press and the W.E.B. Dubois Institute.

Wardle, Huon. 2015. 'An End to Imagining?' in Harris, M. and N. Rapport (eds) *Reflections of Imagination*. Oxford: Ashgate.

Wardle, Huon. 2016. 'Times of the Self in Kingston, Jamaica' *Special Issue of Ethnos* (forthcoming).