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**(RE)CONCEPTUALISING CARIBBEAN CULTURAL IDENTITY:
 EPISTEMIC SHIFTS**

It is probably true that Caribbean people, possibly like most people everywhere, assume not only that their identity is something that can simply be pointed out and documented, something that simply exists out there and can as such be empirically apprehended, but also that there is little disagreement as to what exactly constitutes that identity. From this point of view, Caribbean identity is an unproblematic given that we can all, more or less, agree upon. However, such a view of identity, while commonplace, is arguably inaccurate. My argument here is not that Caribbean people do not have an identity: people always do, in fact. It is, rather, that identity is not something immutable and transhistorical but, by contrast, something always *en procès*, as the French would say, a term that is really a double entendre in that *en procès* implies both 'in process / on trial.' That is, identity is a phenomenon that is always historically and culturally specific and, as a result, continually in flux, awaiting new definitions as new circumstances arise, and, thus, open to deliberation and liable to provoke sometimes acrimonious debate.

An often overlooked element in the process of defining an identity is one's choice of metaphors and tropes by which to discuss it. For many philosophers and cultural theorists, tropes are more than mere rhetorical ornaments or garnishes in the sense in which, since at least Alexander Pope, we have been encouraged to view them. That is, they are more than wit merely to advantage dressed. In fact, recourse to metaphor may be unavoidable in any attempt to apprehend reality. This is why many Phenomenologists in particular conclude, in a manner disturbing to some, that there are no facts, only interpretations. Their goal in so saying, I should point out, is not to deny that particular phenomena exist per se. People always have, for example, an identity. It is, rather, to underscore that one's choice of metaphor and, by extension, framework of thinking (what some in the field of cultural and critical theory today would term a paradigm or *problematic*) entirely determine precisely how one conceptualises a particular phenomenon and, thus, what one takes to be factual. It should also be borne in mind that each metaphor / trope does not spring into use out of thin blue air, as it were: each framework of thinking has a traceable genealogy and, thus, specifiable history.

A good example of this process of metaphorisation can be glimpsed in the discussions and debates that continue to circle around the issue of how to define Caribbean identity. I do not hope to offer in this small space an exhaustive survey of all the various ways in which Caribbean people have over the years conceptualised their identity, a process that is arguably not continuous and unbroken but characterised by what some today would call 'epistemic shifts' or revolutionary breaks with the past. Such an undertaking is beyond the limited scope of the present essay. Besides, such an undertaking assumes that the *Caribbean* is a monolithic concept that can be defined in unidimensional terms that would inevitably do an injustice to the linguistic, ethnic, racial, etc. diversity and complexity of the actual Caribbean. My own much more modest goal is to discuss merely two or three important concepts of identity that have predominated in the anglophone and francophone Caribbean from about the early twentieth century and to show that the choice of foundational metaphor / trope shapes an entire vision of Caribbean identity which can then be advanced as fact by its most ardent adherents and used to form the basis for political

praxis.¹

One of the most important models of Caribbean identity is centred around the trope of the root. Since at least the 1930s and the rise to prominence of the Negritude movement in the French-speaking Caribbean and West Africa, eminent thinkers ranging from Aimé Césaire (e.g. in The Discourse on Colonialism) to Kamau Brathwaite (see his Roots) more recently have sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly encouraged us to compare our identity to a plant / tree and to think of the true source of our being as being found in the root thereof. There is, of course, a temporal dimension to this trope: the life of every plant originates in a seed. Therefore, to understand one's identity in the present necessarily involves one in a quest ultimately for origins, for the seed which brought one into existence. This quest, influenced at least in part by the rise to ascendancy in the nineteenth century of Romantic historicism in general and the views of thinkers like J. G. Herder in particular, is most often depicted in terms of a quest for one's cultural roots. To understand the manifest present, in short, one must make a return of sorts to the past latent therein.

Descendants of the European coloniser in the region have long taken great delight in discovering / composing family trees in a quest to identify their ancestral origins. This has been almost always, arguably, in an effort to prove their racial purity, that is, the degree to which their identity has not in fact been 'tainted' by the stain of creole impurity. A similar admiration for their cultural roots in the Indian sub-continent and China has also historically been encouraged among the descendants of the waves of indentured immigrants that arrived in the region in the nineteenth century. By contrast, it has been only since at least the Negritude movement that the descendants of enslaved Africans have been encouraged to take great delight in their African heritage in an effort to recuperate an identity and sensibility that pre-existed and was, thus, unaffected by the ravages of European colonialism. Such a view is at the very heart of recent attempts in Barbados, for example, to construct a newly *Africanised*, as it were, nationalist discourse that seeks to construct a sense of Barbadian identity that reflects this long denied and denigrated African heritage. This 'roots' model of identity arguably continues to be the dominant paradigm of identity informing not only political praxis at the national level but also popular consciousness where the articulation of identity is concerned.

Another model of Caribbean identity that subsequently rose to prominence, especially in the francophone Caribbean, has challenged some of these notions, especially the almost exclusive focus on the past. Thinkers like Frantz Fanon (especially in essays like "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" and "On National Culture," both of which are to be found in his seminal The Wretched of the Earth) and, later, Édouard Glissant (the name most closely associated with the so-called *Antillanité* movement and whose views are outlined in English in his Caribbean Discourse), have sought to draw attention to some of the flaws inherent in the quest for roots and the short-sightedness of the Negritude movement in particular. Some thinkers such as J. Michael Dash consider that it is possible to conceptualise the transition from Negritude to Antillanité in terms of a radical epistemic shift. If for the Negritude thinkers, the root is the dominant trope, for

¹For further details on some aspects of the argument found here, see my "Root Versus Rhizome: An 'Epistemological Break' in Francophone Caribbean Thought?" Journal of West Indian Literature 9.1 (2000): 12-41.

thinkers like Glissant, influenced by contemporary French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, among others, the preferred trope is the rhizome. The root is, in biological terms, the absorbing and anchoring organ of a vascular plant. Negritude-influenced thinkers would seem to have in mind in particular the *tap* root which is the system in which the primary root, notwithstanding some ancillary branching, forms a dominant central axis that penetrates *vertically* and deeply into the soil. The rhizome, by contrast, is an underground *horizontal* stem, often swollen and tuber-shaped because it stores food reserves, and as such a useful trope to connote the richness and inevitability of the self's relation to otherness. The use of the trope of the rhizome conceptualises identity less in linear or diachronic or historical terms, that is, less in terms of possessing a single source in the distant past, than in geographical or synchronic or spatial terms, that is, in terms of relations that more often than not commence in the past but continue to exist in the present.

The comparison of Caribbean identity to the rhizome, rather than the root, is the basic principle informing what Glissant calls the 'Poetics of Relation' in which each and every identity is primarily shaped by the self's relation to others, rather than by simply and unproblematically being grounded in the past. What matters, in Glissant's schema, is less the self's roots per se than the relation of self to other. (As another important Caribbean cultural theorist Paul Gilroy would put it later, it matters less where you are originally from than where you are at in the present.) In this schema, there is no identity simply waiting to be found again and, thus, capable of being reasserted in its pristine form. Identity is entirely a provisional construct, a product of social intercourse both within the region and internationally that changes as these relationships themselves vary.

In many ways, clearly, the model of cultural identity proposed by Glissant et al. is a variation on the creolisation thesis, itself another popular paradigm (advanced by thinkers like Kamau Brathwaite in his The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica) of Caribbean cultural identity in general and of the process of cultural intermixture in particular which resulted from the confrontation of the several races / cultures in the region. This is a model that is largely dialectical in thrust, emphasising that out of the conflict / combination of thesis and antithesis emerges a synthesis of the best that the thesis and antithesis have respectively to offer. Caribbean cultural identity is, from this perspective, a fusion of component elements to form a new whole, predicated upon but different from the cultures that comprise it. Where the emphasis of some thinkers like Wilson Harris or Derek Walcott is on the advantages afforded by synthesis and as a result of which the Caribbean person is something akin to a New World Adam in the process of forging and naming a new reality, in the work of others there is often implied, albeit not always, a certain hankering after cultural / racial purity. From this point of view, creolisation was inevitable but also something of a tragedy that has befallen us in the region. It is a process that has functioned to dilute the original and pure identities that existed prior to the history of European imperialism, trans-Atlantic slavery, and colonialism. This is why some thinkers have sought in recent times to critique the creolisation thesis for advancing a brown or mixed or syncretic model of Caribbean identity and downplaying the black or African basis of the identity of the majority of the population in most of the nations of the region, that is, for elevating the inevitability of syncreticism or intermixture over the necessity to recuperate racial / cultural purity.

A number of questions consequently arises from this briefest of overviews is this. Firstly, precisely how do the parameters specific to each paradigm determine how we conceptualise our

selves and, by extension, public policy? Has one such paradigm predominated? What are some of the limitations inherent in any of these models? What difference would it make if, in conceptualising our identity, one were to deploy the metaphor of the rhizome (or, indeed, other metaphors) as opposed to the trope of the root? Exactly how might the various nationalist discourses in the Caribbean that have emerged in recent years be reshaped by the different emphases informing those alternative models of Caribbean cultural identity (e.g. that advanced by the Jamaican Stuart Hall) which are beyond the scope of this essay and which may not constitute at present the dominant discourse on identity in the region (even though some have begun with increasing frequency to be debated in regional academic centres)? Were we to accept their premises, how might they compel us to rethink how we see ourselves, both individually and en masse? How, for example, might we be forced to rethink (yet again) what it means to be a Barbadian? What differences in governmental policies, beneficial or disadvantageous, might be the practical result of such a process of rethinking? It is the exciting possibilities afforded by questions such as these which may point the way forward to a future in the region untrammelled by sectarian division and ethnic violence. But we will not get to this point if first we do not comprehend that Caribbean identity is not an immutable given but a flexible construct, and if we do not pay careful attention to something seemingly as trivial as the metaphors by which we attempt to make sense of such things.