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ROOT VERSUS RHIZOME:

AN 'EPISTEMOLOGICAL BREAK' IN (FRANCOPHONE) CARIBBEAN THOUGHT?

The claim has frequently been made in recent times by prominent critics like Michael Dash and Richard Burton that the work of Edouard Glissant represents a decisive epistemological break not only in Francophone Caribbean thought but also in Caribbean cultural discourse in general. Dash, for example, contends in his Edouard Glissant that there has been a “*significant shift* from the traditional ideals of filiation, *enracinement* and belonging” (my emphasis; 147). In works like Caribbean Discourse, he claims, the “*epistemological break* with negritude is complete” (my emphasis; 148) because in “breaking free from the ideas of cultural purity, racial authenticity and ancestral origination, Glissant provides a way out of the temptation to relapse into indentitarian thought” (148).

Burton sounds a similar note. He contends that there are “three principal ways of thinking Difference in the contemporary French West Indies: the pre-modern (Négritude), the modern (Antillanité), and the postmodern (Creolité). Identity as . . . root, rhizome, and mangrove” (25).

His thesis is that thanks to Glissant’s ‘poetics of relation,’ French West Indian thought

has undergone an *epistemological shift* of major importance: identity is no longer imagined as a single tree rooted in the landscape . . . but as a tangled, proliferating growth, without beginning or end, containing within its myriad recesses infinite possibilities of interactive transformation. *Negritude’s conception of identity is ontological, that of Antillanité ecological.* (my emphases; 16)

My thesis here, however, is that such claims may be just a little inflated precisely because both the Negritude associated with Césaire and Glissant's Antillanité share what I would describe as the same underlying episteme or problematic.¹

It is certainly true that Negritude, at least in its earliest manifestations, is quite concerned with the rediscovery of the cultural 'roots' of the African majority in Martinique and Guadeloupe in particular and the African diaspora in general. Césaire in particular makes frequent use of what Liisa Malkki terms 'arborescent tropes' in poems such as Cahier d'un retour au pays natal to connote the subjectivity of the 'Antillais noir' whom Césaire labels at one point, not insignificantly, un "homme d'ensemencement" (123) [a man of germination]. Consider, for example, the following classic passage drawn from the poem:

Ma négritude n'est pas une pierre, sa surdité
 ruée contre la clameur du jour
 ma négritude n'est pas une taie d'eau morte
 sur l'oeil mort de la terre
 ma négritude n'est ni une tour ni une cathédrale

 elle plonge dans la chair rouge du sol
 elle plonge dans la chair ardente dun ciel
 elle troue l'accablement opaque de sa droite
 patience. (117)

In the Césairean schema, a manifest Frenchness is thought to have come to repress a latent 'African' or 'black' essence which it is the task of Négritude, in a manner not unlike Freudian

psychoanalytic theory and practice, in effect to liberate.

The quest to rediscover roots becomes one of the most important tropes by which the yearning to recapture a primordial African identity lost in the trauma of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is figured in Césaire's work. As Dash points out in The Other America, the “persistent dream of beginning again” (64) by wiping the slate clean, the “magical reconquest of purity as opposed to the recognition of contact and plurality” (64), inevitably led Césaire to imagine an Adamic “heterocosm outside of the contradictions of historical change and the plurality of contact and interaction” (65). It is the poet-messiah who has privileged access to this heterocosm, Césaire claims in “Poetry and Knowledge”:

one man is the salvation of humanity, one man puts humanity back in the universal concert, one man unties the human flowering with the universal flowering; that man is the poet. . . . [H]e has rooted himself in the earth, he has stretched out his arms, he has played with the sun, he has become a tree: he has blossomed, he has sung. (xlviii)

As Dash points out, “[r]adical poetics in the 1930s centered on an *organicist* dream of the union between man and nature . . . that was monologic, lyrical, and celebrated the primacy of the transcendental subject” (my emphasis; 61).

Dash is also right to underscore the pervasive influence of Césaire's work upon contemporary Anglophone Caribbean poets like Kamau Brathwaite in whose work, in Dash's words, the “project of formulating a Caribbean identity” (70) is often likewise “diverted into a nostalgia for a prelapsarian, mythical past” (70). He too makes frequent use of tropes of rootedness (and its inverse) in order to emphasise that black Caribbean peoples simply must

return, metaphorically and/or physically, to its cultural ‘roots’ in Africa. For the ex-African majority in the region, Brathwaite asserts, a return to the original ‘seed’ from which its present springs is absolutely indispensable. Brathwaite makes clear his thinking in this regard in Contradictory Omens: such a ‘return’ is indispensable because the “virtue of a plant” (59), he writes,

is in its seed; and however elaborate, and however beautiful a plant might become, it cannot escape its *essential beginning--the mysterious , triumphant life that goes on beneath its surface; the origin of all things.* (my emphasis; 59)

Brathwaite’s most important discursive strategy in conceptualising the cultural identity of the creole Caribbean is arguably, like Césaire’s, his use of arborescent tropes to connote the link between Caribbean creoles and their respective ancestors.²

The severance of the Afro-Caribbean majority from its cultural roots / ancestral origins is a theme to which Brathwaite (among others) insistently returns time and again and which he figures by means of a plethora of tropes that exist in a complex inter-relationship with the predominant arborescent trope: quasi-biblical tropes of diaspora (exile) and return, organic tropes of (up)rootedness and transplantation, familial tropes of maternity and estrangement, pathological tropes of illness and recuperation, and neo-Freudian tropes of repression and self-expression. Brathwaite often depicts Africa as the ancestral ‘motherlands’ from which its ‘children’ have been traumatically exiled: this, in his diagnosis, is the Caribbean’s primal scene, the cause of all the “hidden problems” (6) of the region. Hence, comments such as: the “[m]ulatto creole” (6) is “less whole, less sure” (6) than his pure white counterpart precisely because it has been “cast adrift/away from its white mother” (6). Stressing that the region is “really involved with two

mothers” (6), not one, Africa as well as Europe, Brathwaite avers that the ex-African majority in the region has been more adversely affected than its counterparts by its separation from its motherland: “notions of the Mother” (39), he contends in a markedly Freudian vein, have been forcibly expunged from the collective consciousness of the region by a gigantic act of repression. Africa has remained, however, the “*submerged* mother of the creole system” (my emphasis; 6). In more recent times, he writes, the “influence of Africa, acting upon her particular centres in the creole context” (6) has been able to create “another shifting of values (Garvey, Malcolm, Black Power) in the same way that the Euro-American step-mother continues to create effects upon the total creole society through power” (6).

As is the case with Césaire, an almost romantic yearning to return to that prior, primal and paradisaical state of innocence and purity lost in the course of the tragic fall synonymous with slavery is palpable in both Brathwaite’s poetics and poetry. For Brathwaite, the problem which West Indian history necessarily foregrounds for the historically disenfranchised, ex-African majority during the post-Emancipation period is that of what he describes as cultural authenticity, homogeneity and autonomy. The consequence of this is the fact that, as Brathwaite puts it in Contradictory Omens, a “constant theme in today’s West Indies is that we should stop imitating other peoples, and do our own thing” (55). Although Brathwaite accepts that the creolisation of the region’s culture is a historical fact, he seems to view it as something of a tragedy which has befallen all concerned, especially members of the African diaspora whose cultural identity prior to colonialism, slavery, and racism has been irredeemably tainted thereby. If cultural intermixture, fragmentation, heterogeneity, displacement, decentredness, mimicry and self-deception are the historical reality, purity, wholeness, homogeneity, autochthony, centredness, authenticity, and

self-awareness would seem to be Brathwaite's ideals.³

As many have pointed out, however, notwithstanding its countless positive contributions to the ideological liberation of members of the African diaspora in the first half of this century, the limitations of Negritude (as well as of thinking inspired by Negritude) were also many and self-evident. Burton, for example, stresses that when it came

to *defining* the 'African' or 'black' essence, the Negritude writers turned, *faute de mieux*, to European concepts of the primitive . . . and to ideas of the 'African' (of 'Negro' or 'black') personality contained in the writings of European Africanists.

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As a result, many of Negritude's fiercest critics have not hesitated to view it, in Burton's words,

not as a counter-discourse to assimilationism but as a sub-discourse within it,

[which] even as it consciously challenges the dominant ideology, tends

unconsciously to reproduce and perpetuate its underlying thought patterns. . . .

[T]o the essence of Frenchness it opposes a putative essence of blackness or

Africanness and, in so doing, it fails to escape the transcendent, antihistorical terms

in which assimilationism is formulated. Above all, Négritude may invert a

stereotypical European definition of blackness and black culture, divesting it of its

overtly racist character and transforming the negative into the positive, yet the

underlying structure of that definition is retained. Négritude in this view merely . .

. enmeshes the black African or West Indian still more tightly in the assimilationist

problematic or scheme of things even as it seems to release the repressed and

repudiated black 'essence' within him. (9)

The view is, in short, that Césaire, in falling prey to dualism, merely ended up reproducing the “underlying episteme of the very universalism his works appear to denounce” (12). This is arguably so not least because of what Burton terms ‘heteronomy,’ that is, the tendency of Negritude to “look outwards to ‘mother Africa’ for its models and values, just as assimilationism looked for its to the distant *mère-patrie*” (15).

The main tenor of more recent criticisms directed against Césaire and company is that, having defended ‘black’ or ‘African’ particularity against the threat of French assimilationism, Negritude was guilty in turn of not paying sufficient attention to the Antillean specificity of Martinique and Guadeloupe, that is, to their complex *creole* particularity. There is a strong feeling among the proponents of Antillanité and Creolité, as Burton puts it, that the Antilles “as a result of three centuries and more of sustained physical and cultural *métissage*” (10) is “certainly not--whatever else they are or may be--‘African’ or ‘black’ in the immediately verifiable way in which” (10) Sénégal and other African nations are. Most of its critics admit that Negritude is not a static doctrine in that its world view, at least in its Martiniquan expression, has shifted along with Césaire’s changing outlook. Under the influence of Marxism, it certainly shed first a great deal of its quasi-mystical Senghorian trappings and progressively moved away from the notion of a trans-historical black ‘essence.’ However, in the eyes of Glissant and other members of the succeeding Antillanité school, Césaire continued to privilege in his analysis of Francophone Caribbean culture the undoubted continuities linking Africa to the Caribbean over the no less real *discontinuities* brought about by slavery. Furthermore, he paid little attention to the non-African--European, East Indian, Amerindian--components in its make-up. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, Burton stresses, Glissant and others condemn the fact that Césaire placed little

emphasis

on the multiple processes whereby all the constituent elements of Caribbean culture interacted with each other and were transformed--creolised--into something neither 'African,' 'European nor whatever but seized of its inalienable quiddity. (12)

By ignoring the processes of creolisation at work in Antillean society, in short, Césaire continued to demonstrate in any number of ways an undeniable "preference for the 'pure' (the 'African' or the 'European') over the 'impure' (the creole)" (12).

From about the 1960's onwards, however, these particular emphases changed with the gradual rise to prominence of the Antillanité school of thought which formed itself around the ideas of Glissant, whose influence is only beginning to be fully appreciated in the Anglophone Caribbean. Antillanité, by contrast to Négritude's emphasis on the persistence of African cultural forms in the Caribbean, sought to stress the fabrication of a specifically Caribbean and, as such, creolised form of cultural identity. The emphasis in so doing was upon the articulation of some sense of a complex and hybrid Antillean specificity, as opposed to merely trying to trace the persistence of certain African residues. Where, through a simple act of dualistic inversion, Négritude had sought to erect in opposition to the European 'Self' a monolithic 'Other' made up of a single substance or essence by which he or she was clearly differentiated, Antillanité sought instead to stress that neither the identity of the European nor that of his/her Other could be thought apart from each other, the one being caught up with the other in a dialectical relationship of interdependence. Burton puts it this way: "[i]n contrast to Négritude's obsession with the 'pure,' Antillanité makes of *le métissage*, understood both culturally and, presumably, racially, a

supremely positive, indeed, constitutive principle” (15).

The major thrust of Glissant’s work has been to show that the process of what has come to be called creolisation in the so-called ‘New World,’ albeit historically inevitable, has not received from Caribbean cultural theorists and critics its due share of attention. Creolisation is a process the outcome of which is unpredictable: its ceaseless combination of its constituent elements can only be arrested by some arbitrary Procrustean act as a result of which creole identity is, as such, forever in the process of transforming and even revolutionising itself. It is from this point of view that Antillanité may be said to have in large part done away with both the retrospective and exotopic / heteronomic orientation, that is, the tendency to look to the past and to elsewhere (rather than the here and now) in an effort to understand the cultural identity of the region, that is the hallmark of both assimilationism and Negritude. It is as a result of that Antillanité is arguably “less a quest for origins than a project for the future” (Burton 15).

These different emphases are summed up in the distinction which Glissant attempts to draw between the notion of ‘identity as root’ which informs Césaire’s work and his own notion of ‘identity as rhizome.’ Under the former rubric, he subsumes all modes of thinking which would assign a simple origin or root to a given individual or group. A prime consequence of such a notion, he points out, is that it always functions to exclude others: those who cannot trace their origins to the same root by definition do not belong. The root is, in biological terms, the absorbing and anchoring organ of a vascular plant. Glissant 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. It is, as such, what Glissant describes in The Poetics of Relation as a “stock taking all upon

itself and killing all around it” (11) for which reason he describes this model of identity as a predatory or totalitarian one. It is precisely this model of identity which, Glissant astutely points out, historically informed European imperialism, racism and ethnocentrism and which was responsible for its most vicious excesses.

By contrast, Glissant’s notion of ‘rhizome-identity’ conceives of subjectivity less in linear or diachronic terms, that is, less in terms of possessing a single source, than in geographical and synchronic terms, that is, in terms of relation. What matters more, in Glissant’s schema, is one’s *relationships* with others. (As Paul Gilroy would put it later, it matters less where you are from than where you are at.) Glissant finds the rhizome, an underground *horizontal* stem often swollen and tuber-shaped because it stores food reserves, a useful trope to connote the richness and inevitability of the self’s relation to otherness. “Rhizomatic thought” (11), Glissant propounds, is the “principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (11). The rhizome is, as Glissant puts it, an “enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently” (The Poetics of Relation 11). In other words, while the rhizome maintains the idea of rootedness, it also “challenges that of a totalitarian root” (11). Hence, his particular fondness for the image of the mangrove which the later Creolité movement would come to find particularly appealing: he likes the notion of “[s]ubmarine roots: that is, floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its network of branches” (Caribbean Discourse 67).

Dash sums it all up this way in Edouard Glissant: in the ‘root-identity’ model, identity is characterised by a “central, predatory, downward-growing shaft” (179) whereas ‘rhizome-

identity' is characterised "by the horizontal encounter, not depth, and infinite, multiple network of branching roots" (179). This emphasis on the indispensability of the Other to the one's sense of self is why, arguably, the most disturbing phrase for Glissant to be found in Césaire's Cahier is when the latter proclaims with regard to the European's arrogance: "je veux cet égoïsme beau" (91).

However, this distinction between root and rhizome proffered by Glissant, itself borrowed in slightly altered form from Deleuze and Guattari, is a simplistic one that needs to be scrutinised more carefully. Burton explicitly makes the claim, for example, that Césaire and company sought to formulate the specificity of black persons of African descent "in essentially *racial-ontological* rather than *historical-dialectical* terms" (9). Elsewhere he asserts that "Negritude's conception of identity is *ontological*, that of Antillanité *ecological*" (my emphases; 16). Should we accept the binary oppositions between root and rhizome, origin and inter-relationship, organicism and geography, race and culture, being (stasis) and becoming (history), dualism and dialectic, 'ontology' and 'ecology' posited by Glissant and his supporters? Is Antillanité's 'poetics of relation' in fact informed by a dialectical problematic, one arguably more pertinent to the site par excellence of cultural encounters that is the New World? Is this a totally different problematic from the dualism of Negritude whose organic emphasis on roots is thought to be hopelessly mired in an anachronistic and particularly Eurocentric framework?

The answer to all these questions is, I think, no. I would contend that both 'root-identity' and 'rhizome-identity' are informed by a neo-Hegelian historical materialist notion of the dialectic. But as is the case with many neo-Hegelians, different camps have sought to emphasise different levels of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis triad. Some, like Césaire, have deemed it imperative to

remain at the level of thesis-antithesis in order to thoroughly sound out the dialectical interaction of European and African in an effort to emphasise the historically marginalised half of the pair. Others like Wilson Harris, Derek Walcott or Glissant himself have sought to focus on the second level, emphasising the synthetic outcome of the dialectical process of inter-relationship under consideration. To put this another way, it ought to be clear from his Discourse on Colonialism that Césaire is only too aware of the Self/other, Master/slave dialectic which has so brutally informed Caribbean history. His point (like Brathwaite's, arguably) is, however, that this encounter has not historically been an equal one and that before a meeting of equals can occur, a few steps back must be taken, a retrogression of sorts must occur in order that a salutary process of cultural and psychological recuperation be not only undertaken but also brought to successful completion. Both Negritude and Antillanité are informed by a dialectical epistemological framework which results in conceptions of subjectivity which are not, in fact, very far apart from each other. From this point of view, the claim that the transition from Negritude to Antillanité constitutes a radical epistemic or paradigmatic shift (in the Foucauldian and Kuhnian senses, respectively, of these terms) does not, in my view, hold much water.

This is why I think that Orlando Patterson's distinction between 'segmentary' and 'synthetic' modes of creolisation is credibly applied in this instance to an understanding of the differences between Negritude and Antillanité. By "segmentary creolisation" (316), Patterson intends "that process of development in which each group, in the new setting, creates its own version of a local culture" (316). Patterson identifies at least two obvious types of segmentary creolisation in the Caribbean: the Euro-West Indian (which is largely European in form and content) and the Afro-West Indian (a "peasant culture, forged partly out of the torn shreds and

remnants of surviving African culture and out of a creative response to the exigencies of small-scale peasant agriculture” [317]). With synthetic creolisation, however, the “group attempts to forge a local culture which combines elements from all the available cultural resources” (319).

Patterson’s point is that synthetic creolisation

seeks to unite all the different segmentary cultures into a unified national culture; it is, indeed, the dialectical synthesis of the various antithetical segmentary Creole cultures. Segmentary creolisation, by its very nature, resists such unification.

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Patterson associates synthetic creolisation with the brown-skinned middle class, “draws heavily on Euro-West Indian culture for its instrumental components and on Afro-West Indian segmentary Creole for its expressive institutions and symbols” (319).

Césaire’s segmentary model of creolisation is a function, understandably, of the time and the place in which he wrote. As Burton himself points out, Negritude

predates the departmentalisation of Martinique and Guadeloupe and in many ways responds to a different set of problems than the later concepts of Antillanité and Creolité which are essentially counters to the processes of cultural homogenisation released by political assimilation in 1946. (8-9)

Glissant may confidently proclaim in later years that

[t]oday the French Caribbean individual does not deny the African part of himself; he does not have, in reaction, to go to the extreme of celebrating it exclusively. He must *recognise* it. He understands that from all this history . . . *another reality* has come about. He is no longer forced to reject strategically the European

elements in his composition, although they continue to be a source of alienation, since he knows he can choose between them. He can see that alienation first and foremost resides in the impossibility of choice, in the arbitrary imposition of values. . . . He can conceive that synthesis is not a process of bastardisation as he used to be told, but a productive activity through which each element is enriched. He has become Caribbean. (8)

But would such certitude have been possible in later years without, notwithstanding its limitations, Césaire's initial groundbreaking work? Would Glissant's cherished 'alterité' have been thinkable were it not for Césaire's earlier efforts to first define the very 'opacité' (or 'thickness, in Clifford Geertz's sense of the term) of Antillean culture which Glissant is also so fond?

It is from this perspective that I would suggest that it is better to think in terms of there being what Derrideans might term a certain 'play of difference,' rather than sheer distinction, between the respective models proposed by Césaire and Glissant. These are less binary opposites than categories closely related the one to the other. Glissant, from this perspective, offers an important and corrective supplement to Césaire's formulations in its attempt to set right a certain imbalance, to correct certain limitations, and to warn against the exclusivist dangers inherent in the latter's model of identity. This is why Dash is probably a little harsh on Brathwaite when, stressing only his preoccupation with roots, he compares him only to Césaire. However, to do this is in effect to ignore the equally Glissant-like dialectical and historical materialist emphases in his work in general as well as the complex quest in particular to articulate a model of creolisation pertinent to the Anglophone Caribbean without sacrificing that sense of African specificity repressed by imperialism, slavery, and racism. As I have argued elsewhere, Brathwaite's desire to

formulate a ‘new parochial wholeness’ may be an ambivalent concept, at worst a contradiction in terms and at best a paradox, but it is arguably a brave and necessary attempt all the same.⁴

Moreover, even Glissant’s work is not immune to certain shortcomings and aporia. There is, for example, an ironic surplus of signification where the very concept of the rhizome is concerned. Glissant opts for the latter precisely because, by contrast to the vertical and predatory connotations of the root, the rhizome signifies transversality, that is, it suggests the necessity and the inevitability of reaching out to the other and of seeking accommodation. The rhizome in fact, however, is no less predatory than any form of root system. It spreads *itself* out horizontally and, as such, does not mix with other species. It is not for nothing that a favourite trope deployed by biologists to connote this movement is one of imperial hegemony: they often speak of rhizomatic plants like ferns as systematically ‘colonising their habitat.’

Furthermore, Glissant’s ‘rhizome-identity’ fails to constitute a radical epistemological rupture or paradigm shift from Négritude’s ‘root-identity’ not least because both share an *organicist* problematic.⁵ What so many of us forget is that thinking about people as if they are plants is not only not inevitable but historically- and culturally-specific. Organicism is one of the most important legacies bequeathed by nineteenth century Romanticism to both those who struggled to consolidate the nation-state *within* Europe and those still struggling to build nations in the wake of European imperialism. The *seemingly* divergent points of view of thinkers like Césaire and Glissant are both perhaps best explained by reference to what A. O. Lovejoy and others have described as the “diversitarianism” (94) or particularism synonymous with Romanticism. Rejecting the view widespread during the Enlightenment that human nature is everywhere the same (so-called universalism or what Lovejoy terms “uniformitarianism” [294]),

the Romantics were of the view, rather, that specific human communities were unified by the common essence which its members shared and which accordingly differentiated them from other human communities. Lovejoy contends that if there is one factor which unites all the various manifestations of Romanticism and which has been its most enduring legacy, for good and bad, it is the “distrust of universal formulas” (293), resulting in the “cultivation of individual, national, and racial peculiarities” (293) and the “validation . . . of originality” (294). The rejection of universalism and the embrace of diversitarianism which distinguished the Romantics from their predecessors are explicable, in turn, by reference to the organicist and historicist framework of thinking that rose to prominence at the end of the eighteenth century. To be precise, the notion that different species of plant were necessarily the products of diverse conditions of climate and soil translated itself into a theory of individualism and cultural relativism.

According to historians of ideas, in the late eighteenth century, the organism began to replace the mechanism as the prototype of all dynamic wholes and biology to replace Newtonian mechanics as the prime source of the analogies most frequently employed in processes of intellection. In particular, it is the life cycle of the plant, as M. H. Abrams put it, which begins to replace mechanical tropes as the “great source of concepts, which migrating into other provinces, were modifying the general character of ideation” (204). There was, accordingly, a predisposition to attribute a plant-like development to persons and institutes alike. As Abrams, puts it, in a “fully fledged organology” (218), any human or human artefact is “envisioned as germinating, without anyone’s deliberate plan or intent, and as fulfilling its destiny through an inner urgency, feeding on the materials of its time and place in order to proliferate into its ultimate and living form” (219). Moreover, there is great emphasis placed on the mutual dependence or common purpose of all its

parts as a result of which the whole is thought to be greater than the sum of its parts. Again and again, recourse is increasingly made to the life cycle of the plant in particular, especially its birth in a particular soil and climate, its assimilation of elements drawn from that environment, its maturation, decay and death, and its organic unity. Hence, the frequent employment of tropes of vegetable growth and decay: of rooting, germination, budding, blossoming, and withering away. Moreover, organicism and historicism are two sides of the same coin in that thinking “patterned on a growing plant” (Abrams 219) encouraged a tendency to think developmentally rather than in terms of immutability: “much that hitherto been conceived as Being is now seen as itself a Becoming--the universe itself is a process being reconceptualised in terms of Becoming” (219). As such, organicism also fostered what Abrams also calls a “genetic habit of mind” (219): “to understand anything is to know how it has come about” (219) and, thus, to understand its origin. Organic change, that is, the “orderly emergence of inner forms” (219) is held to “constitute the very essence of things” (219).

The “founding father of historical organology” (Abrams 219) and, by extension, of the related notions of nationalism and the *volksgeist* was J. G. Herder. Most scholars of nationalism (such as Anthony Smith) agree that where modern nationalism is concerned all roads lead to Herder. Herder’s favourite analogy for describing personal and collective identity is, clearly, the life-process of the plant. It is this which may be his most important legacy to modern discourse on personal and collective identity. “Like a tree have I grown” (qtd. in Abrams, 184), he writes: the “germ was there; but air, earth, and all the elements, which I did not myself provide, had to make their contribution to form the germ, the fruit, the tree” (184). Time and again, Herder exhibits a definite propensity to seek genetic explications of a wide range of human phenomena

that are couched most often in organic tropes. The reason for so doing, he points out, is that the “botanist cannot obtain a complete knowledge of a plant, unless he follow it from the seed, through its germination, blossoming, and decay” (Herder 38). Given Herder’s often unrecognised importance for the models of the nation and of cultural identity which inform both Anti-colonial and African American thought, it is useful at this point to provide a detailed overview of his thought.

Herder believed that there is no such thing as a universal human essence and, thus, that human culture is not everywhere alike. Offering what some might argue is merely a variant of autochthonous myths of identity, Herder is of the view the uniqueness of each culture is attributable to a variety of existential factors. The distinctive features of each human community are the product of a particular climate, geographical, biological, and other physical factors:

As a mineral water derives its component parts, its operative powers, and its flavour, from the soil through which it flows; so the ancient character of nations arose from the family features, the climate, the way of life and education, the early actions and employments, that were peculiar to them. (36)

“The cultivation of a people is the flower of its existence” (41), Herder writes. Arguing that each culture has become what it is “through a given series of causes and effects” (39), Herder is of the view that over time a distinctive cultural tradition is formed and handed down in immutable form from generation to generation, something summed up by the term the *volksgeist*. According to Herder, any community is made one by the common memories and values accumulated in this way. An understanding of the distinctive features of each such tradition must be sought in its original roots precisely because it was the “manners of the fathers” (36) which “took deep root,

and became the internal prototype of the race” (36).

Herder also believed that this cultural tradition is expressed through the actions and thoughts of each member of the community. Since there are central patterns in terms of which each culture can be identified, to be a member of an identifiable group is to think and act in a certain way, in the light of specific conceptions of reality and, thus, particular values. Berlin sums it up this way: “to be fully human, . . . one must belong somewhere, to some group or some historical stream which cannot be defined save in the genetic terms of a tradition, a milieu and a culture” (198). The principle medium of the conceptions and values of a culture is its language. In language, he writes, “dwell its entire world of tradition, history, religion, principles of existence; its whole heart and soul” (qtd. in Berlin, 165). “Language expresses the collective experience of the group” (qtd. in Berlin, 169), he also writes, as a result of which in the “works of the imagination and feeling the entire soul of a nation reveals itself most clearly” (qtd. in Berlin, 181). Herder extols, consequently, the virtues of originality and invention: man must “cease to be in contradiction with himself” (qtd. in Berlin, 179) and to “return to himself” (qtd. in Berlin, 179); men must aim to “find themselves” (qtd. in Berlin, 179) and to “learn not to think in other people’s thoughts” (qtd. in Berlin, 179). Imitation, thus, is tantamount to a betrayal of the self. The ever-present danger is the temptation to “speak the words of strangers” (qtd. in Berlin, 180) which “wean us from our own thoughts” (qtd. in Berlin, 180).

Exile from one’s natural homeland, consequently, is an unnatural state of affairs even if often unavoidable (given that, for Herder, the history of humanity is one of migration). He argues that just as transplanted plants wither in unsympathetic climes, so too do humans. If

every one of these nations had remained in its place, the Earth might have been

considered as a garden, where in one spot one human national plant, in another, another, bloomed in its proper figure and nature. (36)

But, he continues, “as men are not firmly rooted plants” (36), they “must in time remove from their place to some other more or less different” (36). The result is the adulteration of one’s original culture and, thus, the betrayal, at least to some degree, of one’s true self:

though they might adhere to the manners of their forefathers with an obstinacy almost equal to the instinct of the brute, and even apply to their new mountains, rivers, towns, and establishments, the names of their primitive land; it would be impossible for them to remain eternally the same in every respect, under any considerable alteration of soil and climate. Here, the transplanted people would construct a wasp’s nest, or anthill, after their own fashion. The style would be a compound arising from the ideas imbibed in their original country, and those inspired by the new: and this may commonly be called the youthful bloom of the nation. (Herder 36)

Deracination, therefore, is the thing to be avoided at all costs. “Though the tree lift it head” (Herder 37), Herder sermonises, “and overshadow whole quarters of the Globe, it if be not rooted in the earth, a single blast of wind may overturn it” (37). As Berlin points out, no “writer has stressed more” (197), at least prior to the advent of African American or Anti-colonial discourse which both undoubtedly found their inspiration in Herder, the “damage done to human beings by being torn from the only conditions in which their history has made it possible for them to live full lives” (197).

Herder’s cultural pluralism, his belief not merely in the multiplicity but, more importantly,

in the uniqueness and incommensurability of different cultures has evidently had a profound influence upon modern notions of individual and collective identity. As Berlin points out,

All regionalists, all defenders of the local against the universal, all champions of deeply rooted forms of life, both reactionary and progressive, . . . owe something, whether they know it or not, to the doctrines which Herder introduced into European thought. (176)

The principal symptom of Herder's influence upon those engaged in the process of 'nation-building' in the wake of European imperialism is the preponderance of the 'roots' trope which in each case implies an organic model of identity structured along the lines adumbrated above.

Last but not least, even the rhizome is not immune to the charges of essentialism to which organicist thinking in general is prone.⁶ Paul De Man underscores the ahistoricism which inheres in the use of organicist tropes to convey identity. He contends that in natural objects such as flowers, "existence and essence" (67) are thought to "coincide . . . at all times" (67). That is, their "becoming coincides at all times with the mode of their own being" (67). It is "as flowers" (67), then, "that their history is what it is, totally defined by their identity" (67). Moreover, all particular flowers are patterned on a master design or template that transcends history and of which they are so many physical manifestations. De Man's target is evidently Plato's belief in a world of Ideal Forms or Essences:

particular flowers can establish an immediate identity with an original Flower, of which they are as many particular manifestations. The original entity, which has to contain an infinity of manifestations of a common essence, in an infinity of places and at an infinity of moments, is necessarily transcendental. Trying to conceive of

the natural object in terms of origin leads to a transcendental concept of the Idea: the quest for the Idea that takes the natural object for its starting-point begins with the incarnated 'minute particular' and works its way upwards towards a transcendental essence. Beyond the Idea, it searches for Being as the category which contains essences in the same manner that the Idea contains particulars. Because they are natural objects, flowers originate as incarnations of a transcendental principle. (68)

Clearly, organic tropes are designed to connote the existence of a fixed and eternal essence at the core of identity which results in the view, for example, that people have an essential and underlying identity which is the same and unchanging for all eternity. Conversely, uprootedness evidently serves as an image of the traumatic nature of being severed from the very ground of one's being, that is, from one's 'true' self.

The quest for such essences, Foucault makes clear, is synonymous with a quest for origins, the Platonic nature of which he also critiques. "The pursuit of the origin" (78) is, he writes in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," an

attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities . . . [T]his search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to 'that which was already there'. . . . However, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in

piecemeal fashion from alien forms. (78)

Foucault points out, importantly, that the inevitable corollaries of the notion of origin is a sense of “unbroken continuity” (81) or tradition (the belief that the “past actively exists in the present, that it continues secretly to animate the present, having imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes” [81]) as well as a teleological sense (the notion, for example, of the “destiny of a people” [81]). Tradition and teleology are two sides of the same coin and equally specious. What a genealogical approach reveals is not the “roots of our identity” (95), not the “continuities . . . in which our present is rooted” (95) and which augur the future, but the “dissipation” (95) of identity. This is because, as Foucault warns, “being does not lie at the root of . . . what we are, but the exteriority of accidents” (81).

This critique of essentialism informs Stuart Hall’s own rejection of the predominant way in which cultural identity has come to be conceptualised in the Caribbean. In the traditional scheme of things, identity is viewed, he writes,

in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. . . . This ‘oneness’, underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence of ‘Caribbeanness’, of the black experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express. . . . (393)

Hall acknowledges that for a culture such as the Caribbean that is the historical product of a brutal involuntary diaspora, this way of thinking about identity has played an indispensable role in the recuperation of ‘self’ which has figured so prominently in modern Caribbean cultural

discourse. Such a “conception of cultural identity played a crucial role in all post-colonial struggles” (393), he points out, as a result of which the “rediscovery of this identity” (393) is often the object of ‘passionate research’” (393). In the Caribbean, he stresses, Africa is the “name of the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the centre of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning which, until recently, it lacked” (394).

However, Hall questions whether such an approach to conceptualising the subjectivity of Caribbean peoples can ever succeed in merely “unearthing that which the colonial experience buried and overlaid” (393). The reason for this is that there is, in his view, no original, pre-colonial essence simply waiting to be rediscovered. Indeed, Hall is adamant that the self is not a trans-historical given, that is,

not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. (395)

Rather, cultural identity is a

matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our

sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (394)

Cultural identity is constituted, in short, by the “unstable points of identification . . . which are made, within the discourses of history and culture” (394).

In the course of the foregoing, I have been implicitly arguing that 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. They are more than wit merely to advantage dressed. In fact, metaphoricity may be unavoidable in any attempt to apprehend the ‘Real.’ If Post-Saussurean thought has succeeded in underscoring anything, it is the problematic nature of the relationship between the ‘Real’ and human consciousness as well as the inextricable role therein of language. As Saussure’s seminal critique of traditional linguistic models of signification has shown, at a purely theoretical level (*langue*), the sign signifies not by merely and unproblematically labelling a referent but by virtue of the relationship of similarity / difference which it shares with the other signs that comprise the sign system.⁷ Given that the meaning of each sign arises from its inter-relationships with other signs, any attempt to signify the ‘Real’ necessarily involves one in the ultimately metaphorical process of making comparisons and contrasts.

Hayden White puts it all this way in Tropics of Discourse: all discourses designed to “make sense of such problematical topics as human nature, culture, society, and history” (1) are suspended, as it were, between the “data” (1) or phenomena themselves and the “structures of consciousness with which we are trying to grasp them” (1). Any discourse is, as such, a

“*mediative* enterprise” (4) that moves uneasily “‘to and fro’ between received encodings of experience” (4), on the one hand, and the “clutter of phenomena which refuses incorporation into conventionalised notions of ‘reality,’ ‘truth,’ or possibility” (4), on the other. The reason for this is that any discourse is a product of the “processes of consciousness by which a given area of experience . . . is assimilated by analogy to those areas of experience felt to be *already* understood as to their *essential* natures” (5). This process of comprehension is tropological in nature “for what is involved in the rendering of the unfamiliar into the familiar is a troping that is generally figurative” (5). (White identifies four such “modalities of figuration” [3] or ‘master tropes’: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.) This is why the attempt to “*mark out*” (1) an area of human experience, to “*define* its contours, *identify* the elements in its field, and discern the kinds of relationships that obtain among them” (1) leads one inexorably to the question of the “adequacy of the language used in analysing the field to the objects that appear to occupy it” (1). Discourse, White stresses, “effects this adequation by a *prefigurative* move that is more tropical than logical” (1). ‘Tropics,’ White writes, is the “process by which all discourse *constitutes* the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyse objectively” (2). With discourses, therefore, it is no sense seeking to verify “their fidelity to the facts of the subject being discussed” (3) precisely because it is the discourses themselves that are “intended to *constitute* the ground whereon to decide *what shall count as fact* in the matters under consideration and to determine *what mode of comprehension* is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted” (3).

Consequently, the frequent use of a particular metaphor or trope, that is, the tendency to compare two particular signs or groups of signs, signals a specific way of apprehending reality

and betrays, thus, a specific problematic or epistemological framework. Robert Sternberg underscores the importance of understanding the precise nature of the metaphors upon which research is predicated. He contends that the “root source” (3) of the “questions” (3) raised on any topic consists in the “model, or metaphor, that drives the theory and research” (3). He is worth quoting at length:

By becoming aware of the metaphors underlying their theories and research, and of the specific questions that their metaphors generate, scientists [or, indeed, any thinkers] should become more aware of both the range and boundaries of their theories with respect to the phenomenon they seek to investigate. In particular, scientists [any thinkers] may have a better idea both of the questions that their theories can address and of those that they cannot address because of the limitations of the metaphors upon which they are predicated. (5)

In other words, metaphors / tropes / problematics allow us to ‘see’ in specifiable ways at the same time that they also prevent us from ‘seeing’ in others. Each such way of seeing also has, Foucauldians remind us, a historically and culturally specifiable genealogy. Moreover, although my focus in this essay is on what White terms the process of ‘tropological prefiguration,’ that is, the process whereby a phenomenon such as personal or collective identity, for example, is turned into a concept by means of botanical tropes, it should be borne in mind that each utterance consists in both a paradigmatic and syntagmatic axis, that is, possesses both a mimetic and a diegetic dimension. Hence, the indispensability of what White calls ‘emplotment,’ the turning of chronological occurrences into familiar plot-structures (tragedy, comedy, etc.) in the discursive construction of the Real.⁸

In a schema which discursively constructs personal and collective identity along the axes of origin / unity / purity, the creolisation resulting from involuntary diaspora is necessarily depicted as a tragedy that has befallen us in the region. Rootlessness and exile are accordingly portrayed as phenomena to be deeply regretted precisely because they are thought to involve a scission from that primordial essence allegedly at the core of all identity. Fragmentation and cultural intermixture are deplored because they are considered anathema to the wholeness and autonomy claimed to constitute the natural condition of human beings. The historical fact of creolisation is, consequently, often worn as an unavoidable but regrettable badge of shame. This is because the hybridity resulting therefrom would have to undergo a process akin to distillation in order to separate out once more its component elements and thus reveal the 'true' ethnicities in their pure and original forms distinct from the acculturated crust which overlays them. These and other narratives such as these constitute for many the ultimate tragedy of the Middle Passage.

From a different vantage point, however, it may be possible to envisage that the notion of creolisation can give rise to romances of loss and recovery, exile and return, only if one accepts the view that there is something originary to be lost in the first place or that there is something waiting to be rediscovered in the primordial homelands in which all cultures are alleged to originate and to which one can, from this point of view, simply return. Fragmentation and impurity can constitute a tragedy, mimicry an object of satire only if one assumes that the self can or ought to be whole and pure or, indeed, that there is a 'self' to which to be 'true.' Rootedness can be elegised only if one ultimately believes that there is an organically whole, pure and ultimately transcendental self at our core from which we have been severed and with which we must at all costs be reunited. Maybe, therefore, if we are ever to overcome the traumas derived

from our collective past and which continue to inhabit our present so completely, the imperative may be to alter our present understanding of identity, the historically and culturally-specific and ultimately essentialist model bequeathed to us by the ex-coloniser which has encouraged us to always understand where we come from in order to understand who we are. Maybe this is not an unimportant part of who we are but only a part. Maybe it is only in recognising this that we will manage to actually leave our brutal past behind, turn to the present, and set our sights on the future where at least part of our gaze should always be fixed in the first place.

Accordingly, if the answers one gets depend at least largely on the kinds of questions asked, if the 'facts' at which one arrives is determined at least in part by the types of narrative one deploys, it may very well behoove us to consider fresh perspectives on the nature of identity. Such fresh perspectives may beget significantly different ways of looking at ourselves and of viewing the problems which we face. These may, moreover, allow us in turn to formulate alternative solutions to these problems other than the tried and allegedly true. This is certainly the admirable impetus behind the claims made on behalf of Glissant's *Antillanité*. There is at least one Caribbean thinker whose recent work, in offering us these fresh perspectives, might very well constitute a radical epistemological break with the dominant discourse in the study of Caribbean culture. But Stuart Hall's work, largely informed as it is by (Post-)Saussurean notions of difference rather than a dialectical problematic, is beyond the scope of the present essay.⁹

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ENDNOTES

1. In this paper, I use the terms 'episteme' and 'problematic' as roughly synonymous. 'Episteme' is Foucault's term for what de Certeau describes as the "epistemological foundation" (173) which makes possible the cast of thought peculiar to an epoch and a place. ('Episteme' is a term which has much in common with Thomas Kuhn's notion of 'paradigm.')

De Certeau explains:
Between the many institutions, experiences, and doctrines of an age, he [Foucault] detects a coherence which, though not explicit, is nonetheless the condition and organising principle of a culture. There is, therefore, order. (172)

This order, however, is a "ground that escapes the notice of the very people whose ideas and exchanges it provides the foundation for" (172). In a manner similar to Kuhn, Foucault is of the view in The Order of Things that epistemes shift over time but not according to any discernible pattern or order: there is discontinuity rather than continuity, rupture rather than tradition.

'Problematic' is, on the other hand, an Althusserian term. Althusser stresses that within the empiricist scheme of things, knowledge is considered a "real part of the real object" (38) from which the perceiving subject, however, is separated by the "veil, the dross of impurities, of the inessential which steal the essential from us" (36). Accordingly, to know is to penetrate in order to abstract from the real object its essence, the possession of which is then called knowledge. Althusser suggests, however, that there are in fact two distinct objects, the real object, which exists independently of the process of knowing, as opposed to the object of knowledge. From this point of view, knowledge is less an act of penetration than one of "production" (24). To be precise, "thought's labour on its raw material" (42) consists in the "transformation of intuition and representation into concepts" (42). As a result of this, access to the thing-in-itself is always already mediated by a structure of representation.

For Althusser, consequently, any body of knowledge can only "pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its *problematic*, which constitutes its absolute and definite conditions of possibility" (my emphasis; 24). Any object situated within this horizon is accordingly visible, any sighting thereof being merely the "necessary reflection of the field on its objects" (25). By the same token, what remains invisible is also the necessary effect of that which the conceptual framework allows to be seen precisely because "they are not objects of this theory, because they are forbidden by it" (26).

2. For more details on the widespread use of arborescent trope to connote identity, see Liisa Malkki's essay.

3. Autochthony is the belief that one's ancestors sprang from the Earth. Some of the earliest examples of autochthonous discourse (often centred around the legendary figure of Antaeus) are to be found in several of Plato's dialogues. The claim to be 'sons of the soil' or genetically connected to or born from the land upon which one lives is a characteristic strategy of self-identification and self-validation throughout the history of Western civilisation, if not elsewhere.

4. For more details on this, see my “Towards a ‘New Parochial Wholeness’: Brathwaite’s Dialectical Model of Creolisation.”

5. As we shall see, there are important links between organicism in general and ‘arborescent’ thinking (de/racination) in particular, on the one hand, and the myth of autochthony, on the other.

6. See also in this regard my “‘Roots’: Towards a Genealogy of the ‘Barbadian Personality.’”

7. For a more detailed discussion of Saussure’s model of the sign, Derrida’s important revision of Saussure, and the metaphoricity inevitable in all attempts to signify the Real (what Hayden White terms ‘tropological prefiguration’), see the section entitled ‘The Paradigmatic Axis’ in my “The Literary Nature of the Historical Text: Some Implications of the Postmodernist Critique of ‘Realism’ for Caribbean Historiography.”

8. See in this regard the section entitled ‘The Syntagmatic Axis’ in the “The Literary Nature of the Historical Text.”

9. For further details on this shift, see my “From Dialectic to Différance: Rethinking Creolisation.”