

THREE WORDS TOWARD CREOLIZATION

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In this brief essay I am going to examine the notion of creolization through three words: plantation, rhythm and performance. I ought to add right away that I don't mean these remarks to be taken as objective; they come simply out of my desire to see myself as person with a Caribbean identity, as I understand it.

Of course, using these three words in discourse concerning the Caribbean is hardly new. People have been writing uninterruptedly on them, from inside and outside the area, since the Sixteenth Century. In his critique of the plantation - seen as a macrosystem that functions in the world - Fray Bartolome de Las Casas said, around 1520: "As the [Hispaniola's] sugar mills grew every day so grew the need to put Negraes to work in them. [The Portuguese], seeing that we have such a need and that we pay well for them, go out every day to capture them, through any vile and iniquitous means that they can capture them with... As they themselves see that they are looked for and desired, they make unjust wars upon each other, and in other illicit ways they steal one another to be sold to the Portuguese, so that we ourselves are the cause of the sins that one and another commits, as well as those that we ourselves commit in buying them... Formerly when there were no sugar mills... we had never seen a Negroe dead from disease... but after they were put into the sugar mills... they found their death and their sickness... and for that reason bands of them run away whenever they can, and they rise up and inflict death a cruelty upon the Spaniards, in order to get out of their captivity," (Las Casas, III, 273-76).

Concerning creole rhythms and performances, we must remember that in 1573 the Town Government of Havana ordered that all of the free Negroes should be incorporated, with their songs and dances, into the festivals with which Corpus Christi was celebrated. These creole manifestations, formed from an interplay of European and African elements, reached Spain in the third quarter of the 16th Century - particularly the so-called zarabanda - and were commented on by Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Quevedo and other writers. Their popularity was so great in Spain that the Inquisition censured them more than once for being indecent.

If I mention these cases, it is only to note that the plantation system, as well as the creole rhythms and performances, had already provoked important comment in the distant past. Also, as we know, the use of the word *criollo* (creole), as both noun and adjective, dates from this period.

Of course the plantation is not the same thing to me that it was to Las Casas. For him it was a problem of his present time; it was a machine with no past that generated violence and sin in Hispaniola, Spain and Portugal - and the western coast of Africa. Las Casas never imagined that, as he was writing the paragraph that I have quoted, the complex dynamics unleashed by the growing demand for sugar and other plantation products would begin to figure in a new discourse - of which his words were a part - that would refer not just to the XVIth Century but also to future centuries and to large parts of America, Europe, Africa and Asia, that is, of the globe. But if Las Casas never saw the plantation as other than a problem of his present time, to me, four centuries later, it is the womb of my otherness, of my globality, if you will allow me this world; it is the

bifurcated center that exists inside and outside at the same time, near to and distant from all things that I can understand as my own: race, nationality, language, and religion.

Yes, I repeat, the plantation is my old and paradoxical homeland: it is the machine that Las Casas described, but it is also something more: the hollow center of the minuscule galaxy that gives shape to my identity. There, within, there are no organized histories or family trees; its tremendous and prolonged explosion has projected everything outward. There, as a child of the plantation, I am a mere fragment or an idea that spins around my own absence, in the way a drop of rain spins around the empty eye of the hurricane that set it going.

Well then, what relation do I find between the plantation and the process of creolization? Naturally, first of all, a relation of cause and effect; without the one we would not have the other. But I also see other relations. To my way of thinking none of our cultural manifestations is creolized, but is rather in a state of creolization. I think that creolization does not transform literature or music or language into a synthesis or anything that could be taken in essentialist terms; furthermore, it does not even lead these expressions into a predictable state of creolization. For me, creolization is a term with which we attempt to explain the unstable states that a Caribbean cultural object presents over time; for me this is not a process - a word that implies forward movement - but a discontinuous series of recurrences, of happenings, whose only law is change. Where does this instability come from? I think that this is the product of the plantation (the big bang of the universe that Caribbean things enclose), whose slow exploding throughout modern history threw out billions and billions of cultural fragments in all directions - fragments of diverse kinds that, in their endless voyage, come together in an instant to form a dance step, a linguistic trope, the line of a poem, and afterwards they repel each other to re-form and pull apart once more, and so on.

I also think that in the coming together and pulling apart of those fragments many kinds of forces are at work. In my country, Cuba, for example, the arrival of the radio, the victrola, the recording industry and the cinema contributed to the popularity of the son, the rumba, and the conga in the decade of the 1920s. Before then, this kind of music existed only among the Negro population and was not accepted as anything like a national music. Now then, once these rhythms had been internalized by the majority of Cubans, they in turn contributed to the formation of what was known then as Afro-Cuban culture, in whose more prestigious place there appeared the symphonic music of Amadeo Roldan and Alejandro Garcia Caturla, the negrista poetry of Nicolas Guillen, the magic realism of Alejo Carpentier, the essays of Fernando Ortiz and Lydia Cabrera, and the painting of Wilfredo Lam. At the same time, something else was happening. In 1916, a group of distinguished Negro veterans of the War with Spain (1895-98) had asked the Pope to designate as Cuba's patron saint the Virgin of la Caridad, a dark-skinned virgin. The Pope granted this request immediately, perhaps not knowing that to many black Cubans the Virgin of La Caridad was the Oshun of santeria. So, as the so-called black music make its influence known in other cultural forms, santeria legitimized itself along with Catholicism as a national religion, having an influence also on music, painting, dance, theatre, literature, and even on language - for example, words of African origin like chevere, ashe, mayombe, bembé, ebbo, ekobio, babalawo, asere, ireme, orisha, and bilongo started being used extensively during those years. If we visit Cuba, we observe that now nobody speaks of Afro-Cuban manifestations: what was once something

concerning Negroes before 1920, and then was Afro-Cuban, is now simply Cuban. One might think that all this has happened because Cuban culture has been subject to an accelerated process of Africanization. But that is not the case: the public practice of Afro-Cuban religions was prohibited by the Cuban government until quite recently, and negrista literature and negrista symphonic music stopped being produced many years ago, and the painting of Wilfredo Lam is made now for tourists alone. In fact, Cuban culture, like any other culture to be born on the plantation, has for many years had African, European, Asian and American components, and these components, in a state of creolization, approach or withdraw from each other according to situations that are created by unforeseeable forces. If it is the case that I have taken the example of Cuba here, it is really a situation that is spread throughout the Caribbean. For example, both the First and Second World Wars - unforeseeable events - played a part in the coming to the fore of African components of Caribbean culture. To many, this seemed then to be a new thing, but in fact these components were already there, and will always be there.

In short, the only thing we can be completely sure of is that any state of creolization that might present a cultural object at a given time must inevitably refer to the plantation. If I were to employ the jargon of Chaos here, I would say that the plantation is the strange attractor of all of the possible states of creolization, given that all of them, in their disorder, hide forms of order that look for their guiding model in the black hole of the plantation. And so it could be said that the plantation repeats itself endlessly in the different states of creolization that come out here and there in language and music, dance and literature, food and theater; in sum: the carnival.

Now I will go on to explain what I mean by Caribbean performance and rhythm. In this case I will make examples of some works of fiction. Certainly, for this I could make use of paragraphs by Wilson Harris, Alejo Carpentier, Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Maryse Conde, but I prefer to cite more recent writers. Here is something that was written by Caryl Phillips, of St. Kitts, in his novel Crossing the River: "A long way from home... For two hundred and fifty years I have listened. To the haunting voices. Singing: Mercy, Mercy... Listened to voices hoping for Freedom. Democracy. Singing: Baby baby. Where did our love go? Samba. Calypso. Jazz. Sketches of Spain in Harlem... I have listened to the voice that cried: I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have listened to the sounds of an African carnival in Trinidad. In Rio. In New Orleans. On the far bank of the river, a drum continues to be beaten... A guilty father. Always listening. There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return. A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my beloved children. Bought two strong man-boys and a proud girl. But they arrived on the far bank of the river, loved. (Phillips, 236-37)

How would I define this novel's performance? In the first place, I would say that the praise that English critics gave to Crossing the River was deserved - the critic in the Times Literary Supplement said, "A triumphant piece of writing." Second, I would look in these reviews for judgments about its performance. For example: "Its beauty lies in its very ellipses and suppressions... Phillips has a fine ironic sense of time. Crossing the River is dense with event and ingeniously structured." Curiously, none of these critics speaks about rhythm, and nevertheless I think that for Phillips rhythm is an important preoccupation. "Where did our love go? Samba. Calypso. Jazz. Sketches of Spain in

Harlem - Phillips says - "I have listened to an African Carnival in Trinidad. In Rio. In New Orleans. On the far bank of the river, a drum continues to be beaten." Clearly, it is obvious that Phillips, as a son of the plantation, brings his own literature toward the rhythms of the samba, the calypso, and jazz. And that's not all, the kind of punctuation that he uses to separate his words, along with the number of syllables in his words and the syntax that connects them, give a rhythmic meaning to his narrative discourse. Where does this rhythm come from? From within Phillips. So we might say that the performance of his literary language - what critics see as ellipses and suppressions, and so forth - is dictated by the writer's interior rhythms. These rhythms might seem African, but in fact they are not entirely so. Africa, as Phillips says, is irrecoverable: "There are no paths in water. No signposts. There is no return." It is true that the rhythms of the samba and of calypso have their origin in Africa, but only so if we understand rhythm to be a sequence of internal pulsations. For these pulsations to become rhythms, they must be wrapped in sounds. The pulsations that the rhythm of the samba follows are of African origin, we know that they belong to Bantu culture, but the sound of the samba is not a totally African one, just as it is not completely European. One could think then that it is Brazilian, but I would say that is so only at first sight: if we were to try to find the origin of these rhythmic sounds, that have the participation of many instruments along with the human voice and the rubbing of shoes against the floor (the way it is danced), we would see that this complex polyrhythmic system began to take shape within the plantation.

Natalio Galan, a Cuban musicologist, said that within every rhythmic motif there lies a centuries-old mystery (Galan, 12). I think that he was right; hidden within the samba there are the ancient pulsations brought by the African diaspora, the memory of sacred drums and the words of the griot; there are also the rhythms of the sugar mill's machines, the machete-stroke that cuts the cane, the overseer's lash, and the planter's language, music and dance; later there came other rhythms, from India, from China, from Java, and finally all these rhythms mixed with each other to form a network of rhythmic flows whose most notable expressions today are salsa, Latin Jazz and West Coast African music. This complex polyrhythmic orchestration, whose interplay was organized on the plantation and now it lies within the memory of the people of the Caribbean, it is what dictates Phillips' performance; that is, his Crossing the River, the way it is written, the way it sounds - "on the far bank of the river, a drum continues to be beaten" - a novel in a state of creolization.

Now let's take another recent novel, also eulogized by the critics, The Longest Memory (1994), by Fred D'Aguiar, of Guyana: "You do not want to know my past nor do you want to know my name for the simple reason that I have none and would have to make it up to please you... I just was boy, mule, nigger, slave or whatever else anyone chose to call me." (D'Aguiar, 1) Here we have first of all the reproduction of the plantation's void. Of course the slave in the novel has a name; he is called Whitechapel, his master's name. But is this his real name? In my own case, do I see myself as Spanish for the simple reason that my name is Spanish? Then what is my real name, the one that corresponds to my identity? Nevertheless, if I had been born in Spain and I had my very name, it would suit my identity without any conflict. If you look closely, there is no Caribbean person who wants to be Caribbean who carries his own true name, just as his skin does not pertain to any fixed race of Man. The novels of Phillips and D'Aguiar, like others I will mention, are written in English. But none of them are totally English: they are Caribbean,

and they are so because of their performance: structure, theme, character, conflict, and technique, language: poetics.

Concerning the performance of The Longest Memory, one would have to say that its chapters, stylistically speaking, are different from one another: the first is formed by a monologue spoken by a slave who has betrayed his son; the second by a planter's monologue; the third, an overseer's diary; the fourth, by the words of a slave woman; the fifth, a poem; the sixth, a dialogue among planters; the seventh, by the words of a white woman who teaches a slave to read; the eleventh by an editorial in a Virginia newspaper, and so on. What adjectives did the critics use to describe this brilliant performance? Dense, intense, compact, controversial... No European critic said of The Longest Memory that it was a novel of great rhythmic complexity. Nevertheless, Fred D'Aguiar, in his attempt to describe the plantation, wrote something like a symphony for percussion in which each character interprets a different rhythm; that is, a work of polyrhythmic density that gathers rhythms from the whole world. It is precisely because of this that I believe Caribbean literature to be the most universal of all. Not just that, I think that the more Caribbean it is - the more complex and artistic its state of creolization - the more readers it will find in the world. This reality is beginning to be understood by some publishing houses, and believe me; they are going to do a good business.

Obviously, one cannot say that all Caribbean fiction is of a historic character. Nevertheless, even though its action might take place in the 20th Century, the Caribbean novel always refers back to the plantation through its rhythm and its performance. Let's look at a story entitled "Children of the Sea." by Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-American writer: "Do you want to know how people go to the bathroom on the boat? Probably the same way they did on those slave ships years ago. They set aside a little corner for that. When I have to pee, I just pull it, lean over the rail, and do it very quickly. When I have to do the other thing, I rip a piece of something, squat down and do it, and throw the waste into the sea. I am always embarrassed by the smell. It is so demeaning having to squat in front of so many people. People turn away, but not always. At times I wonder if there is really land on the other side of the sea. Maybe the sea is endless. Like my love for you." (Danticat, 15)

These are the words of a revolutionary student who, to avoid dying at the hands of the tonton-macoutes, has decided to flee to the United States in a little boat. As we see, in his voyage he relives the middle passage that connects Africa with America in the plantation's macrosystem. Later, when the boat takes on water, the humiliated passengers are forced to throw all of their belongings into the sea, including the clothes that they are wearing. Finally, they all drown, and their naked bodies keep company with the innumerable children of the sea to have disappeared beneath the waters of the black Atlantic. This story's narrative discourse, like those of Crossing the River and The Longest Memory, is read in a fragmentary manner: in a series of fragments we read the words of the man in the boat; in another series the words of his sweetheart in Haiti, who tells a story that is no less painful. Each one of the individual narratives has its own typography and its own rhythm. The title of Danticat's book is Kric? Krac!, written in creole, and it alludes to the peasant custom of telling stories: Kric?, the one who wants to hear a story asks; Krac!, the narrator responds on agreeing to tell one. Naturally, we associate the dialogic structure of the story with the book's title - furthermore, the boat's passengers tell stories according to the rules of Kric? Krac! But it is also obvious that,

through this double game; Danticat puts herself in contact with the reader. Her literature, granted that it is written in American English, is deliberately connected with the Haitian and creole oral traditions. According to the silly labels that we use in this country, Danticat is a Haitian-American: in fact her identity is in the hyphen, that is, in neither place; Danticat is a Caribbean writer.

Now let's take another recent novel, Divina Trace (1992), written by Robert Antoni, of Trinidad. "...oy oy oy yo-yuga, yoyucta da-bamba da-bamba oy benedictus que venit in nomine Domini oy lumen de lumine de Deum verum de Deo vero oy Marie concue sans peche priez por nous qui avons recours a vous Sainte Catherine del Carmen purisima hermosa azucena maravilla ayudame cuidame fortaleceme socorredme favoreceme fuente de bondad de gracia y de misericordia silverfish flying starpetals exploding bursting out sudden silent from below the bow..." (Antoni, 231) What kind of language is this? The language of the plantation, including Latin, the language in which the Mass was said. The review of Divina Trace that was published in the Washington Post said: This is magical realism with an avant-garde twist, as if Garcia Marquez and Joyce had themselves engaged in unholy cohabitation." We can express this same opinion in other words: the magic realism of the Caribbean and the experiment of the modernist European novel come together here in a chaotic performance. The result is a bifurcated novel, fractal, gaseous; a novel whose performance can be placed quite near the big bang of the plantation. There is something more in Divina Trace, something of real genius. On pages 203 and 204 there is nothing written; it is a metal page that performs the function of a mirror. As readers look at themselves in it, they will see a grotesquely disfigured face. This, naturally, is part of the novel's double performance: in the mirror, the western reader will read a joke or an irony or a mystery, but the Caribbean reader will read any of his/her multiple masks (there will always be a mask).

But there is something more to say about the mirror in Divina Trace. The novel's plot develops around a monstrous character, half child and half frog, conceived by a mysterious woman named Magdalena, half saint and half whore. Nonetheless, as the novel progresses, we see that nobody knows much about this child: "Some called him the jabjab heself," a character says, "son of Manfrog, the folktale devil-sprite who waits on a tree to rape young virgins at dusk. Others saw nothing peculiar in the child a-tall. Some even said the child was beautiful, perfect: that the child was the reflection of the viewer. Some argued the hex of an obeah spell. Others the curse of Magdalena's obsession with swamp Maraval... Still others... said he was the result of a congenital abnormality which caused him to appear like a frog... Son, we can resign weselves to only this: there is no logical explanation. We will never know." (Antoni, 58-59)

With these words Robert Antoni pushes the reader to a place that is filled with debate: each reader will project in the mirror not just his/her face but also his/her ideology - every mirror is a text in which the observer reads himself. For some the reflected image will be that of the creole, for others it will be a native of some country in the Caribbean, for others it will be the reflection of his/her own race, and so forth. But, clearly, these reflections invested with the political and social ideas of the observer will never be coherent images, but rather distorted ones; they will be images in flux, or rather, images in search of their own images. And so, the mirror of Divina Trace can reflect the faces of many kinds of Caribbean readers, but always, in the end, it will reflect an identity in a

state of creolization, a reflection that oscillates between history and myth; that is, a paradoxical mask launched into the distance by the explosion of the plantation.

To conclude, the performances of Phillips, D'Aguiar, Danticat, and Antoni can also be seen as attempts to represent the trip to the origins of Caribbeanness, or if you prefer, the voyage of the fragmented Caribbean self in search of its hidden unity. Can this unity be found within the black hole of the plantation? My answer would be: yes and no. A performer, through his performance, can resolve the paradox of his identity. But only poetically. As the character in Divina Trace says, for a paradox there is no logical explanation.

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