

Traversing the Caribbean basin: Hybridities and Transformation*

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Resumo

Este artigo explora as estratégias identitárias de performance pública nos locais caribenhos da Diáspora Africana. Argumento que, ao ler o Caribe como uma zona de contato cultural, os padrões plurais de identidade caribenha que emergem, reescrevem as noções atuais sobre a difundida migração que marca a experiência regional. De fato, mostrarei que os vários traços continentais no Caribe interagem com um número de outros padrões culturais, resultado de um processo complexo de mistura que ocorreu não somente entre as tradições européia e africana, mas também entre as variadas tradições de uma multidão de outros grupos étnicos, incluindo aqueles do Sul da Ásia (Índia) e China, como também de grupos indígenas. A resultante diversidade lingüística e etno-cultural gerou não somente uma ruptura e transformação das tradições africanas, mas também uma África interagindo e sendo afetada por uma série crítica de alteridade caribenha. Os resultados desses encontros são perceptíveis pelas variadas categorias expressivas e performativas caribenhos na língua, música, dança e religião, para citar alguns exemplos. Derek Walcott, Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, Gisele Pineau, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant e Edward Brathwaite são aqueles que exploram várias facetas e características da experiência plural da região por meio de complexas nuances de inscrições de linguagem, caráter e tema.

**Recebido em Dezembro de 2004; aprovado em janeiro de 2005*

Palavras Chaves: Caribe, Hibridismo, Migração

Resumen

Este artículo explora las estrategias identitarias de performance pública en sitios caribeños de la Diáspora Africana. Afirmo que, leyendo el Caribe como zona cultural de contacto, los patrones plurales de la identidad del Caribe que emergen, reescriben las nociones actuales sobre la migración que enmarca la experiencia regional. De hecho, demostraré que los varios rastros continentales en el Caribe obran recíprocamente con un número de otros patrones culturales, resultado de un proceso complejo de mezcla que no se restringió a las tradiciones europeas y africanas, sino también a las tradiciones variadas de una multiplicidad de otros grupos étnicos, incluyendo los de Asia del Sur (la India) y de China, así como grupos indios. El resultado de la diversidad lingüística y etnocultural engendró no solamente una fractura y una transformación de las tradiciones africanas, sino también África que viene siendo afectada por una seria crítica de la alteridade caribeña. Los resultados de este encuentro son perceptibles a través de la gama de categorías expresivas y performativas caribeñas en la lengua, música, danza y religión, para citar apenas algunas. Derek Walcott, Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, Gisele Pineau, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant e Edward Brathwaite son los que exploran varias facetas y características de la experiencia plural de la región por medio de complejas inscripciones de la lengua, carácter y tema.

Palabras claves: Caribe, Hibridismo, Migración

Abstract

This paper will explore identitarian strategies of public performance in Caribbean sites of the African diáspora. I contend that, by reading the Caribbean as a cultural contact zone, the plural patterns of Caribbean identity that emerge rewrite current notions about the pervasive migrancy that marks the regional experience. Indeed, I will show that the several continental traces in the Caribbean interact with a number of other cultural patterns, the result of a complex process of blending which occurred not only between European and African traditions, but also between the varied traditions of a multitude of other ethnic groups, including those from South Asia (India) and China, as well as indigenous Indian groups. The resulting linguistic and ethnocultural diversity engendered not only a fracturing, and transformation of African continuities, but also an Africa interacting with

and impacted by a critical range of Caribbean otherness. The results of these encounters are perceptible across the range of Caribbean expressive and performative categories; in language music, dance, and religion, to name just a few. Derek Walcott, Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, Gisèle Pineau, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, and Edward Brathwaite, all of whom explore various facets and characteristics of the region's plural experience through complex, nuanced inscriptions of language, character, and theme.

Keywords: Caribbean, Hybridities, Migrancy

This paper will explore identitarian strategies of public performance across a number of Caribbean diasporic sites. In it I contend that, by reading the Caribbean as a cultural contact zone, the plural patterns of Caribbean identity that emerge rewrite longheld notions about the from and direction of the pervasive migrancy that has long marked the regional experience. Indeed, I will show that those continental traces still to be found in the Caribbean interact with a number of other cultural patterns, the result of a complex process of blending which occurred not only between European and African traditions, but also between the varied traditions of a multitude of other ethnic groups, including those from South Asia (India) and China, as well as indigenous Indian groups. The resulting linguistic and ethnocultural diversity engendered not only a fracturing and transformation of African continuities, but also an Africa interacting with and impacted by a critical range of Caribbean otherness. In other words, Caribbean societies and cultures should not be thought of as the result of a one-way process, of the unilateral imposition of European culture upon passive African recipients, but rather as the site and product of hybrid forces of cultural intersection and transformation. Indeed, the exploration of developmental

parallels between the Caribbean Basin and the Brazilian experience, especially with regard to the instantiation of hybrid patterns of language, music, religion and Carnival that draw on Africa-based cultures as a central source, appears to be a particularly promising field of inquiry.

Various studies have shown that slaves arriving in the Caribbean originated in widely dispersed areas; just those slaves brought to Saint-Domingue, for example, came from countries as disparate as Senegal, Angola, Mozambique, and Madagascar (MANUEL et al, 1995, p. 100).

With regard to the South a Asian axis, most recent estimates put the proportion of people of Indian descent at 30% in Guadeloupe 45% in Trinidad and Tobago, and 55 % in Guyana. Such percentages are the most visible result of the large-scale immigration of East Asians that occurred in the 19th century: as Eric Williams claims, most statistics show that of a total immigration of about one million people, approximately half a million Indians were introduced into the region during this period, with over 238 000 going to Guyana, 145 000 going to Trinidad, and 39 000 to Guadeloupe¹. These arrivals were freedmen, not slaves, with many if not most of them having signed a five-year contract. Other studies point to the remarkable consolidation of this population; by 1871 Indians constituted 25% of the population of Trinidad, of whom 16% were locally born. Thirty years later, local, or creole Indians made up almost 45% of this ethnic group, and soon, as Brereton writes, most “were off the estates, living in villages and scattered settlements as small cultivators... a settled Indian community emerged that was recognized as such by the rest of the society”² (1981, p. 106).

In a certain sense, Trinidad provides a remarkable microcosm not only of the scale and substance of Indian immigration into selected Caribbean territories, but of the

pluralism and became French and then English, resulting in a markedly mixed minority white creole population. As Brereton points out, this minority,

consisted of two main groups: there were the British officials and the English and Scottish merchants, planters and professionals resident in the island, and there were the white creoles, born in the island, descended from French, Spanish, English, Italian, or German immigrants who had settled in Trinidad since the eighteenth century (1981, p. 116).

As a result of its relatively late incorporation into the British Empire in 1797, Trinidad grew up as a remarkably polyglot and multicultural society even within the Caribbean framework. As Lewis points out, “unlike the other British possessions, it developed as an ethnically pluralist society” (1983, p. 309). As the chorus of transplanted, creolized Caribbean voices swelled to their *crescendo* of difference, and with varieties of African and Indian languages and religions added to this ever-increasing confluence of cultures, Trinidad would become the microcosmic arbiter of a Caribbean pattern of ethnic, religious, and cultural creole difference.

In conjunction with the large slave population and then with the later East Asian arrivals into the region, including Portuguese and Syrian/Lebanese components, all these groups would gradually influence and interact with each other over time and on several planes, ultimately giving rise to a particular Caribbean mode of being and believing that is visibly refracted in the domains of language, music, and religion, to name just a few. “Trinidad was home for these people”. Brereton writes (1981, p. 116), and their astonishing array of words appropriated from one culture and transformed and transplanted into another (*basody, hototo, lanyap, mamaguy, makafou'chet, tabanca,*

and of course the now universally-Caribbean expression *liming*), rhythms (chutney soca), festivals (Carnival, Divali, Eid, Hosay), and belief systems (Shango) bespeak an interstitial Caribbeanness that delights in — and derives its sense of identity in large part from — patterns of pluralism, play, and (re)invention. As Caribbean Nobel Laureate Walcott himself put it in the address marking his investiture, “I am only one-eighth the writer I might have been had I contained all the fragmented languages of Trinidad” (1981, p. 69).

All these populations would have brought with them their languages, cultural patterns, and religious practices, which slowly would have been integrated into the larger cultural whole, thus transforming in their turn the shape, substance and expression of Caribbean diasporic identity. The resulting regional diversity engendered not only a fracturing and multiplying of cultural continuities, but an emergent, critical multivalency. This plural perspective underwrote on going exchanges and developments that both adapted strands of the implanted colonial culture and crucially transformed distinct aspects of the arriving populations from other areas. It is thus hybridity’s role in formulative alternative discursive positions, rather than the binary framework driving hybridity itself, that becomes crucial in understanding the Caribbean process of creolization. The ways in which we have viewed the Caribbean as a postcolonial society — as transformed. Indeed, the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic pluralism that is at the center of Caribbean creoleness rewrites traditional notions of hybridity and, implicitly, identity. As Bhabha put it:

The importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity... is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority (1990, p. 211).

This process of borrowing and transformation is critical, as Bilby and Largey explain, "it is within this complex process of creolization... [that] Caribbean peoples have fashioned new, distinctly local genres out of elements taken from disparate ideology and of local traditions as well as those borrowed from international styles (1995, p. 2). These strategies of transformation and recombination ultimately produced the distinctive multivalency of Caribbean performance culture.

The results of these encounters are perceptible across the range of Caribbean expressive and performative categories. In language music, dance, and religion, to name just a few. Indeed, such varied but related regional theoretical concepts as Glissant's (1991, p. 33) [trans. mine]. In this silence that marks "the first rupture" there are already the traces of creolized patterns of foubing and transformation that would be further re-sited and fragmented in their subsequent encounter with the variety of cultural axes that ultimately came to determine the expression of Caribbean identity.

Across the board and over time, Caribbean peoples have fashioned new, distinctly local genres out of elements taken from disparate traditions, from the complex rhythms and tropical sociopolitical commentary of calypso to the whirlwind of ethnic, cultural, and historical affirmation that is Carnival. Of the many rhythms that infuse the Caribbean cultural landscape, including reggae, ska, calypso, soca, zouk, cadence, compass, salsa, son, timba, and rumba, most can trace their primary origins back to a set of African roots with a greater or lesser degree of accuracy. As this by no means exhaustive list demonstrates, the rhythmic panorama of the region is neither singular nor homogeneous, and to say the least, such variables as there are can be traced back to intersections of both ethnic and imperial influences. As Manuel, Bilby and Lagey point out, "Caribbean musics have evolved in a complex process of creolization, in

which Caribbean peoples have fashioned new, distinctly local genres out of elements taken from disparate traditions — primarily African and European” (1995, p. 2). Contemporary Caribbean musical styles, then, such as zouk, calypso and reggae are the direct descendants of a covert, clandestine plantation communication system shrouded in secrecy and arcane and based on drumming and patterns of dissimulation. They were produced by local forces of cultural interation that adopted and adapted the existing hybrid patterns inscribed by Africa and Europe, making them into something intrinsically, incontrovertibly, yet uniquely Caribbean.

From its beginnings during slavery as the monopoly of the white planter and creole classes, Carnival was slowly infused by the growth of the slave population and, as Peter Mason points out in his study *Bacchanal!*, was radically transformed during the period after emancipation. Over time, it increasingly took on the trappings of masquerade competition, neighborhood rivalry, and encompassed far more religious, cultural, and aesthetic diversity, embodying and reflecting the eclecticism of its celebrants. Carnival celebrations in most of the Caribbean are marked by the conflation of cultural heterogeneity, costumed tradition, and performative panache. They offer a unique challenge to dominant theoretical paradigms about hybridity which tend to stress European/African cultural mixtures, almost to the exclusion of all else. Brereton, for example, points out clearly that Carnival “combined, of course, Catholic and southern European influences with African traditions... it never lost its liveliness or its anarchic folk spirit, out of which both the calypso and later, the steel band, would emerge” (1989, p. 106). Yet one can perceive the clear presence of a myriad of other cultural influences in the Caribbean carnival, including, French, Spanish, and East Asian, to name just a few. Through the inter/action of such a wide variety of ethnic and cultural elements, their doubled, transformative

presence allows Carnival, for example, to reflect, say, both pre-Lenten themes and indigenous temporalities in dominantly Catholic postcolonial Caribbean territories like Guadeloupe, Martinique, and Trinidad. In contrast, in non-Catholic-dominated islands — like Antigua or Barbados, for example — carnival emerged from, or was merged into, what Brereton calls “Other popular festivals... held on the first of August in the British colonies to mark Emancipation Day and often also to celebrate Cropover (the sugar harvest)” (1989, p. 106). Thus while carnival may, and does, integrate religious and historical themes into its panoply of troupes, it is also explicitly linked to the cultural and historical affirmations of celebrating emancipation, independence, and other secular and cultural motifs. It is not so much a celebratory flouting and reversal of Caribbean society’s accepted rules and norms as a hybrid engine of cultural empowerment.

The ever-increasing movement of populations and cultures across boundaries and borders — one which has characterized the region from the colonial through the contemporary period — denotes a critical shift in definitions of nationalism and its concomitant bodies politic, creating, in Bhabha’s words, a “double and split time of national representation that leads us to question the homogeneous and horizontal view associated with the nation’s imagined community” (1994, p. 144). These modulations of the traditional terms in which the nation can be narrated occasion, in their turn, further transformations in the tensions grounding the representation of identity and culture. In this regard, the work of Maryse Condé of Guadeloupe has long interrogated, in both narrative and thematic terms, the myriad questions underlying the ambiguities of exile, identity, and cultural displacement that mark the diversified realities of the francophone Caribbean, especially the fifty-year-long phenomenon of French overseas departmentalization. Her construction of an avowedly

polyvocalic diasporic discourse that would account for complex regional patterns of social and cultural diversity acknowledges hybridities of history and language in the formation of identity, and, importantly, also takes cognizance of identity as a transformative practice. Condé's main discursive themes of exile, displacement, birth/place, and the insistent circularity underpinning origins or cultural heritage for the post/colonial subject, center on the impossibility of recognizing oneself as simply either a Caribbean or a French subject. In Condé's world, the cultural and discursive circularity to which her protagonist are made subject is both the product of and the preamble to a creole nomadism that ultimately dis-places fixed notions of Guadeloupean history and its corollaries of place; her subjects eventually grasp the necessity of abandoning their quest for a singular space in a favor of a creative cultural *métissage* (CONDÉ, 1995, p. 305-310).

In the Anglophone Caribbean, the work of Derek Walcott transforms the hybrid ambivalences of his colonial Caribbean heritage into a discourse of creolized difference, adapting the manifold ethnic and linguistic striations of the region as he adopts the doublé-voiced disposition of a transnational consciousness. The primary trait that inflects Walcott's voice, a compound discursive strategy which allows him to maintain the cultural pluralism of "this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian" (1970, p.10) State of creative tension, is to valorize the languages and traditions of the cultural frontier through performance, distilling the migratory moments of the Caribbean's Creole diaspora into recitative retellings of doubleness. In his prize-winning poem *Omeros*, as he restages the colonial parade, the cultures of France, England and Holland have their place along with those of Africa and Índia, as the patterns of historical force that have eventuated not only the cultural pluralism of which his own history as well as his work are primary symbols displace the disjunctures of a

diasporic condition that continues to contextualize the construction of a composite regional identity. In what are perhaps the most famous lines from his *The Schooner Flight*, his subversion of binary axes undergirds his panegyric to Caribbean pluralism, which has become a sort of rallying cry for Caribbean regionalism, "I had a sound colonial education/I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me/ and either I'm nobody or I'm a nation". The bastard, the hybrid, affirms the differential authority of the polyvalence that subtends his own apparent ambivalence.

In conclusion, these conjunctures of sign and act, communication and performance, turn on transformation and polyphony to write the Caribbean creole identity, and reinforce the relational patterns of difference that limn the many localities of the regional diasporic experience. These patterns transform the traditional diasporic corollaries of migrancy and pluralism into transnational patterns of identity and belonging. These cross-fertilizations and processes of contact and (ex)change energize contemporary performance, producing a diverse Caribbeanness whose primary characteristic is the subversion of the hermetic traditions and hegemonic visions of metropolitan modernity.

Notes

- 1 Not only do William's statistics cover most of the territories, he also demonstrates the numerical scale and ethnic scope and variety of Immigration into the Caribbean during this period. Apart from India, other countries that became sources for this new labor force included Portugal, China, Japan, Africa, and Indonésia, as well as Scotland, Ireland, and other European countries. See principally p. 348-350 of *From Columbus to Castro*.
- 2 Brereton provides an overview of these and other immigration developments in her chapter "the Newcomers", p. 96-115.

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