Caribbean Identity- The Martinicain Perspective

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Since the 1950’s, there has been an increasing interest in the francophone Caribbean. It has been seen that scholars such as Aime Cesaire were urging the French Caribbean to abandon their obsession of the metropolis and make significant attempts to create a cultural homogeneity within the region. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is renewed interest in the francophone Caribbean as the region is at an historical crossroad. Scholars such as Anthony Bogues, Anthony Payne, Vaughn Lewis and Anthony Bryan indicate that attempts should be made to unify the region and solidify their connections. This would insulate the region against the forces of the international arena and especially the colonizing metropolis.

Edouard Glissant is a distinguished essayist, playwright, novelist and poet who was born in 1928, in the lowlands of Martinique. By 1938, he started classes at Lycee Schoelcher where Aime Cesaire taught him. He was exposed to Cesaire’s ideas of black consciousness and the value of literary creativity as an exemplary activity for the dispossessed colonial imagination. His association with Andre Breton, leader and theorist of the surrealist movement further compounded the importance of the cultural homogeneity and the notion of identifying with the black self. In 1946, Glissant went to France on a scholarship where explored the world of the collective unconscious that was informed by the “new novelists” and also his association with Barthes, Sollers and avant-garde literary circles in Paris.
Glissant maintained his link with the Caribbean through Franz Fanon, and reading the intense work of Saint John Perse. He was a participant of the first Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in 1956 but should not be seen as a negritude writer. He has looked beyond the simplification of the negritude movement.

In 1981, Glissant published two books which dealt with the crisis of productivity and identity faced of the French Caribbean and the various barriers to the future development to the Caribbean region. His books are Le Discours Antillais (West Indian Discourse) and La Case du Commandeur (The Foreman’s Cabin). In his work, Glissant described the Martinician as a happy zombie and a passive consumer. The zombification of the typical Martinician was highlighted when he depicted, one of his character, in his book “La case du commandeur” - Mycea existed by staring at a colour television that broadcasts French programs, living off French welfare and mesmerized by French consumerism.

The Martinique that once existed as a viable plantation economy has been reduced to have an absence of any local or self-supporting productivity. This lack of productivity is perpetuated by policies of the overseas government and the notion that it is an integral part of France being an Overseas Department. Martinique has developed to become a “Consumer colony” where the demand of the Martinicain is fashioned off the metropolitan French consumer. However, unlike the metropolitan French, the Martinician is seen as non-productive, lacks both capital investment and technical skills, and has been conditioned to be passive as on the authoritarian plantation system. This has been achieved by:
The erosion of the economic base
- The division of the working class
- The absence of a national bourgeoisie
- The suppression of local self-supporting productivity

The passivity and impotence of the Martinician has been proven to be a farce as when the Allied brocade prevented the supplied from the German occupied France the creativity of the Martinician was displayed. This creativity was quickly erased at the end of the world war when France reinstated its dominion. Instead of creativity, the people were and encouraged to believe the generosity of France and to pursue citizenship and the material benefits of the departmental status. The consequences were:
- Economic dependency
- Political impotence
- Social imbalances- massive migration to France and an influx of metropolitan French, "the genocide of substitution." This creates artificial affluence and a new consumer culture.

It was Hegel, who stated that:

The West has history

The Amerindian has pre-history but

The African has non-history.

Glissant disposes of the idea of a single history. He argued that the Caribbean is a victim of non-history and therefore our history is based on that of the colonizers. It is seen that
there is no collective memory shared by the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean as the respective colonizers determine the history of each. Hence there is no sense of chronology and only recollection of pseudo-events that happened elsewhere. This lack of historical consciousness is manipulated to justify the advent of slavery as the sublimation of a people.

The Caribbean intellectuals have instead perpetuated the notion of derivativeness. It is seen that the Caribbean follows a discursive order based on a set of procedures. These procedures map the antecedents of Caribbean ideas without their innovations. Lewis (Bogues, pg. 34) argues that the Caribbean intellectual history is born out of first, the influence of the European metropolitan modes of thoughts on the Caribbean; and second, the creolizing movement assimilated and absorbed the European modes of thought and reshape it into an unique requirement of Caribbean society.

Glissant moves away from the conventional reduction of Caribbean history and seeks to explain the racial melodrama, the existing confusion of the literary change and fissures that comprises Caribbean history. This is a new dimension to the history of the Caribbean people. He stated that “man is not the privileged subject of knowledge; he gradually becomes its object.” What man knows becomes man. Hence man (the Caribbean) has to be demystified and this points to the master theme that is the quest for individual identity (Caribbean Identity). Like Paget Henry, Glissant called for an African Caribbean philosophical dimension to the Caribbean intellectual tradition.
As pointed out by scholars such as George Beckford and Aime Cesaire, there is a similarity in colonizing history in the Caribbean islands—economic, social and cultural. The shared past includes slavery, the cultivation of the plantation culture, maroons' resistance, forgotten concrete knowledge of Africa and the evolution of the Creole society. If this history is not redeemed, there will prevail a sense of sterility and frustration. An understanding and acceptance of the past is the key to mastering the future.

Singham states that there is learnt helplessness that saps the creative synergy of the colonized. This learnt helplessness strengthens the concept of small size and inviability that is put as deterrence to national independence. Lindsay refers to this notion of resource insufficiency as a myth. Glissant re-affirms his faith in the future of small countries and indicated that there needs to be more collaboration in business and leisure activities, and among research and professional pursuits. The improvements that France has made on Martinique make it a more desirable place than the other Caribbean countries. This Glissant argues is a façade as there is an environment of perpetual tension, anxiety, racial confrontation and uncontrolled urges. Therefore the Martinician is devoid of dignity or stability which would deepen their identity crisis.

There is some amount of ambiguity that is detected as “missed opportunities” by Glissant. First, the Martinician missed the opportunity of proclaiming the maroon slave-that protested against the European culture— as a national hero. Instead, the European view of seeing the maroon as a work-shirker and a deviant was accepted. Second, with
the decree of abolition in 1848, a new civil status was granted to the former slaves. The promise a real liberation was overwhelming, as the freed slaves were illiterate, penniless, unsure of themselves and unable to see themselves as a real community. Since they perceived themselves unable to form a nation and embark on an autonomous system of production, there was a smooth transition from slavery-based capitalism to becoming paid labour. This can be seen as a fear of independence and the difficult task of forging an identity. It was easier to pursue the mirage of abolition, French citizenship and then Departmental status.

The process of assimilation plagues the Martinician, as the French culture and way of life overshadows the culture of the majority (Blacks/Africans). Assimilation has meant that there is a denial of the collective memory and regional identity. Unlike the Haitians who have made the Creole a national language, the Martinicians have held unto the French language. Glissant remarked that the Martinicains “speak French better than the French do.” Henry contests the creolizing process and instead notes the process as hybridization. Hybridization is seen as the process of replacing one culture and identity with that of another hence giving the appearance of mimic men.

The task of forging the new identity is placed on the shoulders of the scholars, artists and writers- such as Glissant. It is these individuals who are able to delve into deep memories and highlight latent traces of information. This information will replace the lack of knowledge and attempt to give definition to the existing void and steer the region into the creation of an overarching identity. It is the writers and artists who should design a new
discourse, a new representation for those who are trapped in silence. Glissant believes that it is writers who should restore the forgotten memory and highlight the surviving links between the diverse communities of the region, to demonstrate continuity across time and space.

Glissant states that the revaluation of the notion of self and maintains that the era of naïve faith in individualism is over. The individual works of Caribbean think tanks are scattered abroad and insufficient work is being done in the region; there should be a link between link between individual activism and collective destiny. Glissant started Martinician Studies Institute, Journal Acoma (1971)- which stressed the psychological and cultural dispossession of the Martinician mind and elaborated, on the poetics of the Americans- Carpentier, Guillen, Newda. More relevant work of this kind has to be dedicated to the deepening of the Caribbean identity.

As already stated, the Caribbean is at an historical crossroad in the 21st century. The time has come for the re-defining of the Caribbean region, thereby creating a Caribbean space that includes the English, Spanish, French and Dutch Caribbean. The redefined Caribbean should include the active participation of all in the creation of a region, a people, and a civilization. A creation that emerges not because of undue influence of outside forces but is cultivated in spite of such and has constructed its own regional identity.
Bibliography


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