

**LITERARY THEORY AND THE CARIBBEAN:
THEORY, BELIEF AND DESIRE, or DESIGNING THEORY ***

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In respect of literary theory at least, the idea and fact of this conference are in themselves a manifestation of that (re)thinking which the conference seeks to promote, and a recognition that such (re)thinking has been taking place. The conference is a milestone by virtue of its objective of focussing on the theorizing of Caribbean culture and, in so doing, including literary theory as an integral part of the agenda. To put it another way, it is a sign of the times that an examination of the state of literary theory is being undertaken as part of an engagement with cultural theory. Of particular relevance here is Anthony Easthope's Literary into Cultural Theory (1997), and the fact that Easthope is Professor of English and Cultural Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Twenty years ago, when the Departments of English of the University of the West Indies held the first in what was to be a series of annual conferences on West Indian literature, the theme of that conference was, advisedly, "Critical Approaches to West Indian Literature." The rationale of the choice was that, not only had West Indian literature by then clearly established itself, but a respectable body of critical analysis was already emerging, and it was time to step back and do an audit, so to speak, of the approaches – a deliberately 'soft' substitute for 'theory.' 'Theory' was about to take over the literary academy. We would step back and take a critical look at how we had been going about the business of being critics and teachers, a look at the assumptions and principles on which we had been proceeding. However, as things turned out, that first conference on West Indian literature did not live up to the expectations of the conference theme. We were not quite ready for it. It was two years later that the MA degree by coursework was introduced, with Theory of Literature as the compulsory course; and it would be many years more before the first undergraduate course in theory was introduced.

And yet some of our major creative writers – notably Brathwaite, Harris, Walcott and Lamming – had already been theorizing, theorizing and differentiating the Caribbean, and in ways that would turn out to be signs of things to come. Small wonder that, for instance, the proponents of the notion of Postcolonial theory should find the writers just named to be among the sources of that theory, as witness Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back (1989), and their Post-colonial Studies Reader (1995). At that first West Indian literature conference, I presented a paper on Brathwaite as literary critic. In it I remarked that Brathwaite was in some ways more of a cultural critic than a literary critic properly speaking. I don't think that I used the phrase 'properly speaking,' but that is what I meant. One guarded more jealously than the notion of the literary 'properly speaking.' Now we are in a moment when traditional 'literary studies' is transmuting into 'cultural studies,' and the line of demarcation between the two is seminally blurred. Some English departments have become virtual Cultural Studies departments, even while cultural studies as a discipline is being defined. What is more, the Caribbean seems particularly ready ground for this development.

The explosion of Theory (with a capital 't') was in a way ironic for the West Indian literary academy. It came just when we were beginning to feel satisfied that the 'presence' of

West Indian literature had been affirmed, that a literary identity was being centered and grounded; but the postmodernist surge seemed to threaten all that – threaten the certainties of ‘presence’ and the referentiality of language and the stability of centered selves – and, in effect, to provoke anxious, if not always acknowledged, re-thinking. Would one, to stay at the so-called cutting edge, just go with the metropolitan tide, as usual, or simply defiantly ignore it? Or could one turn the new Theory to Caribbean advantage, use it to help define Caribbean difference and Caribbean being and Caribbean literariness? And might it not be a mistake, in the first place, to begin by assuming that ‘post-structuralist’ or ‘postmodern’ is *per se* non-Caribbean? Might it not be, for instance, that someone like Wilson Harris was using, out of his own head, some of the ideas that a Frenchman named Derrida was to institutionalize? In what way does a theory *belong* to the person who elaborates or institutionalizes it?

All theories are designs. They make patterns of things, even of chaos. They are also designs in that they have designs on us. The design that is theory is a projection of the theorist’s belief, and belief is a function of desire. To adjudicate between theories is to make discriminations in respect of the quality and the pleasure of designs and desires. It is, at bottom, a question of how each of us *prefers* to see or imagine the world or the Caribbean as the case may be. The truth-factor in theories is modified and complicated by this realization. Carolyn Cooper inadvertently helped me, when, speaking from the floor at an earlier session of this conference, she acknowledged that the question she had asked (whatever it was) was motivated by her “desire to assert an African specificity and identity.”

At the end of his book The Repeating Island (1996), Antonio Benitez-Rojo, after nearly three hundred pages of exploration and argument, finds himself concluding: “I start from the belief that Caribbeanness is a system full of noise and opacity, a nonlinear system, an unpredictable system, in short a chaotic system beyond the total reach of any specific kind of knowledge or interpretation of the world. / To my way of thinking. . . .” (294-295). Curiously, it would seem that the conclusion towards which he is writing is where he starts from, the *belief* that sets him going. I shall return to the substance of his statement; for now, what I call attention to his acknowledgement that everything starts from and comes down to *belief*, everything is a matter of one’s *way of thinking*: “I start from the belief”; “To my way of thinking” In Conflicting Readings: Variety and Validity in Interpretation (1990), Paul Armstrong observes that “understanding in both literary criticism and science is an inherently ambiguous matter of experimenting with always contestable hypotheses and making always debatable decisions about *what it seems better to believe*” (x; my emphasis). So too with Theory.

It is remarkable, yet perhaps hardly remarked on, how frequently in The Repeating Island the concept of desire and the word ‘desire’ recur as markers of the impulse of discourse. As when, for example, Benitez-Rojo says that “the culture of the Peoples of the Sea [meaning, among others, Caribbean culture] expresses the desire to sublimate social violence” (17), or that the Cuban reader will be able to “feel a reduced dose of the nationalism that he has projected on to the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre . . . only if his ego abandons for an instant his desire to feel Cuban only. . . .” (13). Or again:

[T]he search that the novel of the Caribbean undertakes strongly recalls the search for El Dorado. It is taken in like manner along many and varied routes by various means of travelling toward a hypothetical centre or origin. This imaginary point, which is fashioned by desire, is neither static nor

localizable, but rather in continual displacement. . . . (187)

If we consider, then, how some of the leading Caribbean writers have preferred to imagine the Caribbean in their theoretical statements, we find a significant degree of congruence, of overlapping agenda, of repetition with variation, in what it has seemed to them better to believe, enough that we may delineate the emergence of a native tradition of Theory. It may be useful to trace some of these repetitions-in-disparity. The similarities may help us to get a clearer grasp of the differences.

A primary informing principle of the theoretical adventure has been the articulating of paradigms to describe Caribbeanness, and metaphor has been the characteristic mode of the process. This resort to metaphor seems particularly significant, for although metaphor, in the wrong mouths, can be dangerously reductive, in its true nature it is a tactic that sustains nuance, suggestiveness and latency. It provides a process of argument that avoids rigidity and fixed, static positions, but in its eschewing of pretension to scientific precision, it runs the risk of vagueness. Interestingly enough, Glissant (and I am using Betsy Wing's translation of Poetics of Relation, 1997) even seems to suggest that the language of Caribbean poetics must be "poetic," as distinct from the language of what he calls "theoretician thought." He proposes a "poetics that is latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible." By contrast, "[t]heoretician thought, focussed on the basic and fundamental, and allying these with what is true, shies away from these uncertain paths" (32).

The metaphors and paradigms also characteristically seek to define Caribbeanness by contrast, explicit or implicit, with imputed Eurocentric biases. For instance, there is Brathwaite's missile/capsule paradigm in "Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms." 'Missile' signifies straight-line thinking and rigidity, conquering technological thrust; 'capsule,' 'space capsule' images the "culture of the circle," a curved space which "travels keeps miraculous intact despite the / intense outside heat / of the oppressor" (39). The missile / capsule model is repeated, but varied in Glissant's root / rhizome contrast in The Poetics of Relation, the contrast between "the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root" (14) and "the nonprojectile imaginary construct" (35). We must note, though, that the capsule is a closed construct, not "directly in contact with everything possible." A rhizome, as the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines it, is "a continuously growing, horizontal underground stem with lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals." Benitez-Rojo enhances these notions with the dimensions of sex and gender when he asserts that "the Caribbean is not an apocalyptic world; it is not a phallic world in pursuit of the vertical desires of ejaculation and castration" (10). It is a nice challenge to try to figure out the verticality of castration.

The binaries in these metaphorical contrasts correspond more or less to Benitez-Rojo's contrast between "white rhythms" and "copper, black, and yellow rhythms:"

[W]hite rhythms, basically, articulate themselves in a binary fashion; here is the rhythm of steps marching or running, of territorializing; it is the narrative of conquest and colonization, of the assembly line, of technological knowledge, of computers and positivist ideologies. . . . (20)

On the other hand,

The copper, black, and yellow rhythms, *if quite different from one another*, have something in common: they belong to the Peoples of the Sea. These rhythms, when compared to the ones mentioned earlier, appear as turbulent and erratic, or, if you like, as eruptions of gases and lava that issue from an elemental stratum, still in formation. . . . (26, my emphasis)

Incidentally, might 'erratic' have in it something of Glissant's concept of 'errantry,' which is consonant with the unpredictable, sideways, outward movement of the rhizome? And, speaking of movement, might not the erratic, the errant, and the rhizomoid recall Walcott's fascination with the crab image, as when, long ago, he said that "the sea-crab's cunning, halting, awkward grace" was "the syntactical envy of [his] hand" ("Sea-Crab")? In Walcott, in Harris too, the conceptual model of Caribbeanness shuns linearity, consolidation and stasis. Its "processes, dynamics and rhythms" inspire "multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs" (Benitez-Rojo 3) and "difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity ..." (Glissant 18). It is a movement of fluidity and flux and tides, of waves endlessly repeating themselves outward and returning.

So the sea becomes matrix-metaphor. For Benitez-Rojo, "the culture of the Caribbean, at least in its most distinctive aspect, is not terrestrial but aquatic, a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar" (11), and Caribbean peoples are among the "Peoples of the Sea." Incidentally, we will notice in "the cycles of clock and calendar" a dangerous version of the "culture of the circle," where the circle becomes trap and treadmill. Interestingly, as observed earlier, the "capsule" is a closed, curved space – moving, but closed, although presumably ready to discharge its energy. Brathwaite does seem to invest in the idea of an eventual wholeness, completeness, a unitary condition.

Anyway, to return to the sea: the twin epigraphs to Glissant's Poetics of Relation are Walcott's "The Sea is History" and Brathwaite's "The unity is sub-marine." These sea-changes of thought and self become Brathwaite's 'tidalectics' in "Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms," for "dialectics [as such] is another gun: a missile," whereas "in the culture of the circle 'success' moves outward from the centre to circumference and back again: a tidal dialectic: an ital dialectic: continuum across the peristyle" (42).

It seems only natural that the sea should have proven to be so appealing a metaphor to these writers for conceptualising Caribbean culture – the never-resting sea, which, at the end of Walcott's Omeros (1990), "was still going on" (325) – the protean sea (to borrow a name from another myth), "the noon's / stunned, amethystine sea" (Walcott Collected Poems, 309), "the infinite, boring, paradisal sea" (Collected Poems, 128), the sea of hurricanes and wild horses; the sea that unites and divides; the Caribbean Sea, now miscast as a basin by neo-colonialism – a curved space, circle of sorts, closed but open, receptacle of migrations, rippling back outward with new and reverse migrations, the sea that speaks of "all of the voyages" (Collected Poems, 286); beach that receives the seed and driftwood from across the seas; womb (Harris) of possibility, spawning the islands, "the repeating island;" curved mirror in which each can see herself (distorted), the face of her identity, but an identity that is inevitably refracted; the sea that becomes a metaphor for Walcott's idea of history.

But there are and will be other metaphors for imagining Caribbeanness and Caribbean poetics. Pamela Mordecai argues for the prism (an image also used by Benitez-Rojo) in her PhD thesis on West Indian poetry as exemplified by Brathwaite and Walcott. Her 'prismatic vision' proposes not only a mode of cognition, but also a poetic procedure, one in which disjunction rather than linearity and binarism is the operative principle, and which marks its source as non-Western, indeed African. Curdella Forbes, in her PhD thesis, uses the figure of the hermaphrodite, drawing it from her interpretation of gender roles in slave resistance, in order to (re-)read West Indian fiction, in particular the novels of Lamming

and Selvon, "through the lens of gender."

Other tropes used to figure the Caribbeanness of Caribbean literature are drawn from the folk and vernacular expressive arts. They carry much the same values as the ones already mentioned. Like the sea, however fluid, however uncontained, however indeterminate they may be, they do 'ground' the conceptions they represent in 'a local habitation and a name.' All is not abandoned to what Mimi Sheller called, in another presentation at this conference, "the free-floating gate-keepers of global culture." Long before Houston Baker, Jr. proposed his blues matrix for reading African-American literature (1984), Brathwaite had published his essay on "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" (1967-1968). Now, latterly, we have Kwame Dawes's 'reggae aesthetic,' and Evelyn O'Callaghan's 'dub / version model' for Caribbean women's writing, and Benitez-Rojo's carnival:

Of all possible sociocultural practices, the carnival – or any other equivalent festival – is the one that best expresses the strategies that the people of the Caribbean have for speaking at once of themselves and their relation with the world, with history, with tradition, with nature, with God. (294)

'With history.' The figures and movements, the figures of movement that these writers propose are ultimately a way of dealing imaginatively with the problematics of history, time, power and identity that the Caribbean mind must engage. All of them begin with a recognition of the history of violence and human cataclysm out of which Caribbean society was born, a recognition of the legacy of fragmentation we have inherited and which we seem wilfully to perpetuate. As I have suggested elsewhere, when Walcott, for instance, advances the notion of going 'beyond history,' he is not talking about turning a blind eye to the past. All the theoretical models these writers advance grapple, in different ways, and perhaps to different degrees of success, with the fact of violence and the challenge of how not to perpetuate it

In "Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms," Brathwaite surveys the paradigm of revolution in Western history, and then proposes in its place his paradigm of "tidalectics;" but it is not clear how this would work. Both Harris and Walcott seek ways out of what Walcott sees in "The Muse of History" (1974) as a mechanistic / deterministic cycle of "recrimination and despair" (37). Walcott asks, "[W]ho in the New World does not have a horror of the past, whether his ancestor was torturer or victim? Who, in the depth of conscience, is not silently screaming for pardon or revenge?" (39). In Benitez-Rojo's view, "the cultural discourse of the Peoples of the Sea attempts through real or symbolic sacrifice, to neutral violence and to refer society to the transhistorical codes of Nature" (17).

I find particularly congenial to *my own* desire the way in which Glissant establishes the nexus between the notions of identity, power, root and decolonization:

identity, at least as far as the Western peoples who made up the great majority of voyagers, discoverers, and conquerors were concerned, constitutes itself implicitly at first ('my root is the strongest') and then is explicitly exported as a value ('a person's worth is determined by his root'). The conquered or visited peoples are thus forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror. A tragic variation of a search for an identity. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification and annihilation

triggered by their invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an 'opposite,' for colonized peoples identity will be primarily 'opposed' – that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit. (17)

This is a prophecy of sorts. Will it ever be fulfilled?

For Glissant, the relationship between self and other is crucial: "Most of the nations that have gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power – the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root – rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other" (14). This relationship must involve, he argues, the knowledge that the Other is within us and affects how we evolve as well as the bulk of our conceptions and the development of our 'sensibility.' Rimbaud's 'I is an other' is literal in terms of history. In spite of ourselves, a sort of "consciousness of consciousness" opens us up and turns each of us into a disconcerted actor in the poetics of Relation. (27)¹

And Benitez-Rojo expresses the idea of the necessary "fundamental relationship with the Other" in a formulation that refuses the idea of cultural purity:

To begin with, there is no pure cultural form, not even the religious ones. Culture is a discourse, a language, and as such it has no beginning or end and is always in transformation. . . . It is true that in comparison with other important discourses – political, economic, social – cultural discourse is the one that most resists change. Its intrinsic desire, one might say, is one of conservation, as it is linked to the ancestral desire of human groups to differentiate themselves as much as possible from one another. Thus we may speak of cultural forms that are more or less regional, national, sub-continental, and even continental. But this in no way denies the heterogeneity of such forms. (20)

It is easy enough to talk about Caribbeanness in general in relation to the Other. We must also remember to be concerned about the relationships, the differences and tensions *within* a general Caribbeanness, between self and other, between individuals, groups, factions, landscapes, and so on. There are many Caribbeans.

One fault line around which these relationships and differences arrange themselves is the much-theorised oral-scribal divide. Existing as it does within the mode of language, it speaks to all the other divides, oppositions, dialogues, whether of race, or class, or gender, as the case may be. Here is Glissant: "[t]hroughout the book [Poetics of Relation] I return again and again to what I have so long considered the main themes of such a poetics, the dialectics between the oral and the written, the thought of multi-lingualism. . . ." (35)

This interest is an important factor in the shift, especially in its Caribbean manifestation, from Literary Studies to Cultural studies, to which I referred at the outset, the shift of focus from so-called high culture to popular culture. A challenge here for scholarship and pedagogy is how to bring the 'literary' and the 'popular' into active relationship. In the academy, at the most obvious level, it is a matter of going beyond simply having some courses on the curriculum, say in an English department, in scribal, 'high' literature, and some in the popular, oral forms.

¹Interestingly enough, Walcott, in the first manuscript version of Another Life, in the Library of the University of the West Indies, Mona campus, also seizes approvingly on Rimbaud's dictum, in considering the challenge of writing autobiography.

Ultimately, the design and desire of some influential Caribbean theory works toward positing the Caribbean as a model for world imagination. In the varieties of this model, the marginalized and rejected is, so to speak, redeemed, in specific terms of its marginalization and rejection. Benitez-Rojo's version of the dream-vision is immanent, say, in his question "how do we establish that the Caribbean is an important hisorico-economic sea and, further, a cultural meta-archipelago without centre and without limits . . .?" (9) This 'cultural meta-archipelago' might seem to be a virtual archetype of the postmodern, a de-centred and endlessly open field of possibility, but one in which the principle of relationship is instinct. And here is Glissant: "[t]he Caribbean, as far as I am concerned, may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation presents itself most visibly, one of the explosive regions where it seems to be gathering strength" (33).

The models being imaged in such formulations no doubt lend themselves to, even invite appropriation by 'the world,' the now much globalized world – an appropriation that could gut them of their Caribbean specificity and applicability and, in effect, neutralize them. If I am not mistaken, this is a fear that was being voiced by Mimi Sheller in her paper at this conference. Well, such a dilemma, if it *is* one, is only another dialectic in which we have to live and move and find our being. Nor do these models represent, as some might say, a 'quick fix,' from which we have to re-awaken to the brutal realities around us in the Caribbean. The theorizing of a Walcott, or a Glissant, or a Benitez-Rojo, no less than that of a Brathwaite or a Harris, does not pretend to offer a prescription for specific socio-economic ills of the Caribbean. But it is fraught with a deep awareness of those ills and their historical roots, and of a capacity for healing that is as real as those ills.

So I end with a quotation from Walcott, which I shall leave to speak for itself:

Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole. The glue that fits the pieces is the sealing of its original shape. It is such a love that reassembles our African and Asiatic fragments, the cracked heirloom whose restoration shows its white scars. This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles. . . . Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent. ("The Antilles: Fragments of an Epic Memory," 69)

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