

QUESTION 7:The Terms “West Indian” and “Caribbean” and the colonial problematizing of identity

A little bit of everything makes my world an interesting place
 and while we're on the *subject* of diversity
 WE ARE NOT ONE *BIG RACE!*
 and there's no *country* called “the islands”
 and no, I'm not from there.

From “Crossfire” by Staceyann Chin

What are we? Who are we? Where are we going? These are the questions that plague *us*. Christopher Columbus' error in geography left *us* with the term “West Indies”. He decided that since he was planning on going to India anyway he would *just* give wherever he landed that name anyway in an effort to cover *up* his navigational miscalculation. The very name is a contradiction since “Indies” means “East” ergo the Indies cannot be in the West! Moreover it creates confusion for those whose ancestry is in India and have the confusing designator of “East Indians who are from the West Indies”! The word “Caribbean” is no better since it is a derivative of the name that Columbus gave to his implacable Amerindian foes. The name “Carib” is from the Spanish caribes meaning “cannibals”. This slander can also be attributed to Columbus. So as it stands we have two terms, one of which is geographically contradictory while the other is derived from a demeaning myth. Knowing this, how then do we define *ourselves*?

For convenience in this discourse I will refer to the “Caribbean” to speak about the region. The Caribbean as a unified region conferring some sense of collective citizenship and community is a figment of the imagination. “The Caribbean” is a geographical expression often associated with a site, a sea and several islands. Many tourists will tell you that they have been to the Caribbean and that it is a real place. They have seen Caribbean people and can attest to a Caribbean reality. There are also many who ascribe to the idea of people having a unique “Caribbeanness”. This is insulting seeing as for many the idea of somewhere “Caribbean” is embedded in western fantasy involving sun, sand and sea and frolicking natives. The truth is that Caribbean even as a geographical expression is extremely imprecise. Some experts include Florida, Belize, Honduras, Columbia, Venezuela and the Yucatan along with Guyana and the islands of the archipelago, while others omit them. The Caribbean as a definite place is not only imaginational but arbitrary since no country carries the word “Caribbean” in any part in its name so the region stops and starts wherever we choose to assign borders. Beyond geography the immense diversity of the peoples residing there creates further complications. There are Africans, Europeans, Asian Indians, Chinese, Aboriginal Indians, Syrians, Lebanese and then the many mixes – mestizos, mulattos and “douglas” and so on ad infinitum. All these people speak a multitude of languages – English, Spanish, French, Dutch, Papiamentu, sranan tongo, kromanti, kreyol, Hindustani, Bhojpuri etc. We are inescapably heterogeneous and co-exist in societies that are multi-lingual, multi-stratified and multi-racial. Therefore the construction of our identity is caught up in contradictions. Many of us are “nowhereians”¹ – blends so complex that we do not fit into any of the accepted categories.

¹ Norman Girvan, Caribseek Kaleidoscope E-zine, June 4th 2002

It used to be fashionable to try to pin a collective identity on the people of the Caribbean. Now we have to accept the reality of the many different cultural identities co-existing and that an identity by means of integration could be a dangerous. This is what the broad names of “Caribbean” and “West Indian” do. They lump everyone together into an amalgamous group with no distinctions between people and it precisely this type of terminology that lends itself to the forming of regional stereotypes. This lofty ideal of an “integrative identity” begs the question of integration into what, on whose terms and who will be the arbiter of what constitutes this so-called Caribbean culture? If we start with enslavement we realize that the term African came to mean much more in the New World than the Old. The blending of Africans and Amerindians required the formation of new concepts of identity. Identity is defines as being oneself and not another, but from the beginning, the African identity in the Caribbean entailed being oneself and another for after being uprooted and sold as chattel Africans had to develop new ontological systems to retain their humanness. They learned how to share collective memories and knowledge and adapt to their new situation. Therefore Africanness as an identity changed from generation to generation as irrelevant information was discarded. The same can be said for the other ethnic groups which came to join them. Identity in the Caribbean is a fluid entity, shifting shape to suit the vessel.

The terms “West Indian” and “Caribbean” are ultimately found wanting since they assume the form of hegemonic cultural claims that works to omit or marginalize some communities. “Identities are potentially dangerous constructs and can be

manipulated for oppressive ends.”² There are no common denominators in the Caribbean which simplify the classification process. As Richardson notes,

“Regionality as expressed by regional characteristics in the Caribbean is an abstraction...imported and local geographical variables have combined so that it is in reality a regional mosaic of subtle complexity and incredible variety; regularities identified in one regional locale – to the chagrin of those who seek broad regional generalizations – are often absent in the next.”³

Because the terms are so political the inhabitants of the region are ambivalent in their acceptance of a definition imposed from without. Central Americans tend to identify themselves as belonging to “the Isthmus” and refer to their Eastern Coast as “the Atlantic” while in the Hispanic islands, identification is with Latin America on linguistic, cultural and historical grounds. The term “Caribbean” is problematic insofar as it denotes the denial of their Hispanic identity. It also meant being grouped with non-Hispanic islands which were still under colonial rule and overwhelmingly African. As Puerto Rican writer Julio Rodriguez states,

“For Puerto Ricans the term antillean has a clear significance but not the terms Caribbean or Caribbeanness. The former make us part of the historical and cultural experience of the Greater Antilles, the latter...imposes upon us a suprahistorical category, an invented sociological, anthropological and ethnological character that is Anglophone in origin and functions against the colonized person”⁴

² Edward Said, “*East Isn’t East*”, Times Literary Supplement, February 1995, pg.3

³ B.C.Richardson, *The Caribbean in the Wider World 1492-1992*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pg.4

⁴ Norman Givran, *Reinterpreting the Caribbean*, <http://www.acs-aec.org/rei1.htm>

In 1976 Fidel Castro decisively designated as Latin African rather than Latin American, and more recently stating that “the Caribbean people of African origin are part of Our America.”⁵

The same ambivalence is evident in Non-Hispanics. The majority of the islands remained simply the “West Indies” or “The Antilles” until the 20th Century. The inhabitants were called “West Indians” or “Antilleans”. Haiti was the one exception, viewed as African, Francophone and uniquely Haitian. In the 1940’s the term “Caribbean” began to gain some currency. For Anglophones the crucial transition was the replacement of the West Indies Federation by the Caribbean Free Trade Association (CARIFTA) and the formation of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Caribbean Development Bank. The first two were founded as exclusively Anglophone organizations. Anglophones tend to guard their “West Indian” definition closely and appear to fear domination by the more populous Hispanic countries. It may be said that Hispanics tend to see themselves as Caribbean and Latin American, Anglophones as Caribbean and West Indian. Dutch islands still call themselves the “Antilles” while the French territories have status as overseas departments of the French Republic and citizens are French citizens.

As a subjective phenomenon, identity imparts a sense of solidarity and belonging. Deprived of this dimension of life we feel diminished, unhappy, disconnected and rootless. This “rootlessness” is typical of the Caribbean. We have been thrown together as a “hodge-podge” of people and now cannot make head or tail of our origins. Identity usually has an element of “we-they” antipathies which may be

⁵ Norman Givran, *Reinterpreting the Caribbean*, <http://www.acs-aec.org/rei1.htm>

benignly or overtly hostile. To belong is to simultaneously include and exclude. While we can do this via language it is increasingly difficult to do so on the basis of race or culture because there are so many of us who are not any particular thing or from any particular place. Identity is also a permutation of homeland, but Caribbean homelands are not ancient places where our ancestors have always lived so to extract identity by virtue of history is also a task. As Derek Walcott points out⁶

“The sigh of history rises over ruins, not over landscapes and in the Antilles there are few ruins to sigh over...That is the basis of the Antillean experience, this shipwreck of fragments these echoes, these shards of huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs. They survived the *Middle Passage* and the *Fatel Razack*, the ship that carried the first indentured Indians from the port of *Madras* to the cane fields, that carried the chained Cromwellian convict and the *Shephardic Jew*, the Chinese grocer and the *Lebanese* merchant selling clothes samples on his bicycle.”⁶

Knowing all these things, there are few solutions. Some take a Nationalist perspective saying that we should define ourselves according to the country that we are from, but of course this is problem in larger countries such and Trinidad, Jamaica and Guyana where there are distinct racial groups and cultures which exist beyond the mere designators of Trinidadian, Jamaican or Guyanese. This type is problematic as it seeks to homogenize all people and ignores the internal pluralism that exists. Others say that the name of the region is no what is in question so we should just ignore it and break stereotypes through action. Personally I do not see a way of collectively re-naming the Caribbean. Any attempt to assign a single title to the many people is to deny the complexity inherent in the region and the validity of the diverse ethnic links and

⁶ D. Walcott, *The Antilles: Fragments of An Epic Memory* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), pg.5

“concedes humanity, a past, a particularity and a pride only to one particular group”.⁷

Obviously the name “West Indian” is passé and should no longer be used if only because it is so misguided so as to be laughable. The roots of the Caribbean are in miscegenation – both racial and cultural. We have a way of life that embraces yet divides and fragments. With such a schizophrenic image we can only attempt to engender mutual respect and acceptance of all the cultures which are housed within our countries. Admittedly the assignment of the name “Caribbean” and the connotations that it carries is burdensome but we have little choice now. We must construct our identity as a positive one, beyond any imperialist labels arbitrarily chosen and claim our place in the world.

⁷ V.S. Naipaul, <http://www.guyanaunderseige.com>