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## In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature

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## In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature

### Abstract

Master Prospère and slave Caliban, Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday, King Christophe and Fool Hugonin, the disincarnate ego and the incarnate other - the confrontation between the castaway subject and the cast-out other in the Caribbean makes these universal images of the divided self, the dissociated sensibility, more acute and pervasive. The Caribbean writer is haunted by the darker implications of these polarities. His imagination is constantly drawn to these contrastive mental spaces which symbolically reflect the relationship between power and the promise of its subversion, between spiritual pretence and its demonic underside, between the self-certain subject and the liberating thrust of Otherness. The individual artist's unsettling focus on these precarious dichotomies ultimately constitutes a tradition built around redefining the subject, reacting against cultural and psychological estrangement and, in its most visionary manifestation, creating a poetics of a fissured, constantly changing space.

# In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature

Nous sommes enfermé à l'extérieur  
de nous mêmes.

Paul Valéry

toute île appelle  
toute île est veuve

Aimé Césaire

## EX-ISLE

Master Prospero and slave Caliban, Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday, King Christophe and Fool Hugonin, the disincarnate ego and the incarnate other – the confrontation between the castaway subject and the cast-out other in the Caribbean makes these universal images of the divided self, the dissociated sensibility, more acute and pervasive. The Caribbean writer is haunted by the darker implications of these polarities. His imagination is constantly drawn to these contrastive mental spaces which symbolically reflect the relationship between power and the promise of its subversion, between spiritual pretence and its demonic underside, between the self-certain subject and the liberating thrust of Otherness. The individual artist's unsettling focus on these precarious dichotomies ultimately constitutes a tradition built around redefining the subject, reacting against cultural and psychological estrangement and, in its most visionary manifestation, creating a poetics of a fissured, constantly changing space.

In a region made ominously intelligible because of systems of domination, in which origins are obscured or degenerate into self-serving fictions, traumatised by dependency, the quest for self-formation is the only valid imaginative response. The task of consciousness becomes necessary in a world that is the product of others' dreams, where systems of knowledge and signification are enforced in order to produce docility, constraint and helplessness. Active self-formation or 'subjectification', a major concern of

modern critical theory (cf. Michel Foucault), is a phenomenon which occurs with obsessive frequency in Caribbean writing. Establishing a new authority or authorship is one of those vital continuities in Caribbean literature that has created the possibility of a redistribution of discourse, of re-presenting self. For instance, the Martinican novelist Edouard Glissant and the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, independently of each other, focus on the question of self-formation, the process of 'becoming' in terms of images of space, threatened but constantly reasserting itself. In Harris's imagination,

Two oceans, symbolic and real, impinge on modern Guyana. The Atlantic has tested the coastland peoples for generations. They have fought a long battle with the sea to maintain their homes. The vast interior at their back is another, equally complex, ocean that rises into a 'sounding cliff' or majestic waterfall within rainforest, savannah, rock, river.<sup>1</sup>

For Glissant the dialectic between stable and unstable, real and unreal, voiced and unvoiced is equally inscribed in Caribbean space:

The sea is always an envelope, something extra, that which is outside everything and which forms a definite border, but which has a shaping and defining power at the same time.... In this place of acceptance and denial, this line of trees contains the essentials of wisdom, it teaches moderation and at the same time inspires audacity.<sup>2</sup>

This view of the psyche as a constantly shifting site where the known or the knowable tentatively emerges from the world of flux, of latent possibilities, points to the special manifestation of self-definition in the Caribbean imagination. It is precisely this dialectic between said and not only unsaid but unsayable that dictates theme, technique and ideological orientation for the Caribbean writer. There are those who focus on the known and the real as an exclusive area of concern and who can explain all structures as part of rational knowable order. The self-certain subject, free to confer meaning on his or her world, to wrest the land from Prospero's signifying grasp, is the exemplary figure in this fiction. For other writers, the world exists prior to and independent of subject. They concentrate on that area of experience which exceeds explanation, on the deconstruction of the sovereign subject. The constructive subject's grasp of the world is always inadequate. There is always an irreducible unknown, a Derridean *différence*, those 'aporias' which resist systematic interpretation. In the first instance, the structuring ego longs for a world of alternative stable meanings, of fixed values. The second provides a radical critique of the privileged subject. In this view, the individual subject is simply the site, the threshold where collective subject finds articulation, where private and public,

individual and group interact. The apotheosis of the subject and the decentred subject, the poetics of rupture and 'relation', are the determining factors in a Caribbean literary tradition.

The focus on the constructive subject in modernism and in Sartrean existentialism allows us insight into one of those imaginative structures. The post-modernist dismantling of the subject and insistence on the relation between humanity and cosmos provides the critical tools for examining the other direction taken by the creative imagination. This is what Glissant means when he points to the 'lived modernity' of the Caribbean. In *Le discours antillais* he examines the urgency with which the question of the problematics of the subject and the discourse of otherness is posed. He sees Caribbean writing as preoccupied with the issue of incompleteness and as a creative rupture with the petrified and alienated self of the colonial world.

We need to develop a poetics of the 'subject', if only because we have too long been 'objectified' or rather, 'objected to'.... The text must for us (in our lived experience) be destabilized because it must belong to a shared reality and it is perhaps at this point that we actually relate to those ideas that emerged elsewhere. The author must be demythified, certainly, because he must be integrated into a common resolve. The 'collective we' becomes the site for the generative system and the true subject.<sup>3</sup>

The demystification of the author as authoritarian voice is not a gratuitous devaluation of human agency but a refocussing of attention on the inescapable shaping force of otherness, of the collectivity. Similarly, Harris's view of structuralism is critical of its belief that all structures can be rationally defined. But he approves of its insistence on looking beneath the surface. He is concerned with deflating articulate consciousness, as Glissant is, and valorising the 'inarticulate'.

What we can salvage from structuralism at its best, I think, is the descent it encourages the serious arts to make into 'inarticulate' layers of community beneath static systems whose 'articulacy' is biased. The 'inarticulate' layers may be equated with variables of the unconscious. (*Explorations*, p. 132)

Both Harris and Glissant are indicating in their assertion of the links between humanity and cosmos, in their demythification of omniscience and 'articulacy', the ways in which issues that have long preoccupied the Caribbean writer are now a major philosophical issue in post-modernist thought. In this way, the radical scepticism of post-modernism overlaps with the creative intuition of Caribbean writing.

In the various readings and rewritings of the Prospero, Caliban and Ariel relationship in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, we can trace the Caribbean preoccupation with the divided sensibility and gradual redefinition of the

subject on the imaginative level. The conventional Caribbean re-reading of *The Tempest* asserts Caliban's right to power and repossession of the island. Caliban's structuring, sovereign subjectivity is opposed to Prospero's intrusive presence. The only example we have of a deconstructive reading of Shakespeare's play is Césaire's *Une tempête* which replaces the apotheosis of Caliban with a mysterious island-space which no one can possess. The island is full of noises, the discourse of otherness which falls into the zone of the unknowable, of a disconcerting elusiveness. At the end of Césaire's play both Prospero's reluctant appeal for human warmth and Caliban's aggressive songs of freedom are drowned by the sounds of the island. The only character who is not in a state of 'ex-isle' is Ariel, who represents an exemplary responsiveness to the landscape. In Ariel's *disponibilité*, the 'inarticulacy' of the island finds expression. The militant discourse of the self-assertive subject is replaced by a reticent, de-centred voice. The primacy of the Césairean imagination in the Caribbean is its capacity to conceive of the deconstructed subject, the abolition of all dualisms and the poetic expression of the unspeakable. In Césaire's work, Ariel represents an ideal moment of fusion, of androgynous wholeness, of the integrating capacity of the threshold sensibility.

The imaginative concern with the subject in the Caribbean is fundamental to the phenomenal reality of the text. It is responsible for a system of imagery in Caribbean literature whose centre is the body. The body is an endlessly suggestive sign through which the process of 'subjectification' is mediated and expressed. Corporeal imagery in the Caribbean indicates the tensions that underlie the process of self-characterisation, of the *récupération de soi* in the individual imagination. The ever shifting, unstable relationship between body and non-body, between dis-membering and re-membering, is a continuous aesthetic and thematic concern. The importance of this opposition in all cultures is noted by Octavio Paz:

Whatever the word and the particular meaning of *body* and *non-body* within each civilisation, the relationship between these two signs is not, and cannot be, anything but unstable.<sup>4</sup>

The mediation between spirit and flesh, disincarnate subject and incarnate other, conservative denial of the body and its subverse resurrection, is particularly acute in the Caribbean because of the corporeal as well as psychic nature of alienation. The dual nature of repression in the Caribbean, both verbal and carnal, is the focus of Glissant's attention in *La discours antillais*:

... the alienated body of the slave, during slavery, is in fact deprived, as if to make the emptiness complete, of language.... When the body is liberated (when the day comes) it accompanies the shout, which is explosive. (p. 238)

In linking the frantic shout and the frenzied body, Glissant underlines the inextricable relationship between verbal and physical self-assertion, *cri* and *corps*. Similarly Harris points to the corrective and reconstructive potential that is released when possession in Haitian *vodun* liberates the individual body. At the beginning 'the dancer regards himself or herself as one in full command of two legs, a pair of arms', but when possessed he is drawn into 'the womb of space' as 'conventional memory is erased' and he becomes a 'dramatic agent of consciousness'.<sup>5</sup>

The use of corporeal imagery as an index to the process of self-formation is extensive in Caribbean literature. There are no chronological linguistic or ideological barriers to the Caribbean writer's use of the image of the body in dealing symbolically with the issue of 'subjectification'. Two areas of its use will constitute our short survey: *The Word Made Flesh* – the return of the ex-centric persona to the island-body in a Césairean poetics of the subject – and *Mutation, Metamorphosis and Androgyny* – images of the body that abolish or transcend all binary systems, in which an androgynous indeterminacy exists.

## THE WORD MADE FLESH

In Césaire's writing the body has the last word. In his poetry and theatre he re-enacts the need to reintegrate the exiled subject in the lost body. In his epic poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Césaire imagines the journey of the disembodied subject across the estranging waters and the eventual reintegration of the body with the *pays natal*. The need to undergo a sea-change is the dilemma of the Césairean subject but this journey is different from other journeys to the New World. Césaire's journey is not one of conquest, nor is the world 'new'. That fiction is part of the heroic mythification of Columbus, who conceived of the island as an empty vessel into which his fantasies could be poured.

The dream of the untouched, complete world, the thing for ourselves alone, the dream of Shangri-la, is an enduring human fantasy. It fell to the Spaniards to have the unique experience.<sup>6</sup>

Césaire's journey is not to a prelapsarian Eden but a fallen world, a defiled body. His is a voyage beyond illusion. To go forward is to return; the past holds the key to the future; retrospection is vision. Césaire's 'New World adventure' is a terrible ordeal since the object of the expedition is a malodorous, lacerated body silently suppurating in a sea of congealed blood.

In order to embrace this mutilated *pays natal*, the subject must overcome his or her initial revulsion. He or she must radically redefine notions of time, space, beauty and power before return becomes possible, and must strip away all illusions – whether that of heroic prodigal, solemn demiurge or New World African – empty consciousness of all pretensions ('overboard with alien riches/overboard with my real lies') in order to achieve reintegration.<sup>7</sup> The end of exile, the triumph over the estranging sea, is only possible when the subject feels his or her bonds with the lost body of the native land. The ego-centred attitude of saviour or reformer must yield to a humble realisation that the discourse of the island-body is more powerful. The *pays natal* is the realm of viscous damp where familiar meanings dissolve, of the unspeakable that eludes the systematising word.

The importance of Césaire's contribution to a tradition of Caribbean writing is his passionate concern with psychic 're-memberment', with the successful incarnation of the displaced subject. Without reference to Césaire, Harris describes this concern as 'a new corpus of sensibility' which imaginatively releases the deep archetypal resonances of 'the theme of the phantom limb – the re-assembly of dismembered man or god' (*Explorations*, p. 27). The *Cahier* ends with a triumphant vision of sensory plenitude as the subject is possessed by the lost island-body. In the final movement of this poem, the 'wound of the waters' yields its secret as it becomes the pupil of the eye, the navel of the world, an integrating Omphalos. The dream of '*La Rencontre Bien Totale*', the ecstatic abolition of all dualism, haunts Césaire's imagination. In Césaire's essay *Poésie et Connaissance* (1944) he describes the poetic ideal as a capacity to transcend oppositions, to achieve André Breton's vision of a 'certain point in mind' which could exist beyond contradictions. The dynamic image at the end of the *Cahier* – of the spiral, plunging in two directions – is an imaginative representation of the power of the reanimated body. The ideal of a restless, protean physicality is constantly invoked in his poetry. As *Intimité marine*, he states his poetic identity in terms of 'the neck of an enraged horse, as a giant snake. I coil I uncoil I leap'.

The images of dismemberment and reintegration so passionately stated in Césaire's epic poem recur throughout his poetic *oeuvre*. For instance the poem '*Corps perdu*' (which gives its name to the collection of poems) specifically deals with the retrieval of the lost body. Another poem that

restates the theme of dismemberment is '*Dit d'errance*', which does invoke 'archetypal resonances', in Harris's words, in its reference to the indestructibility of the Egyptian god Osiris. The poetic subject assumes all dismemberments which have existed.

All that ever was dismembered  
in me has been dismembered  
all that ever was mutilated  
in me has been mutilated...<sup>8</sup>

As Gregson Davis points out in his reading of the poem, the lines 'the goddess piece by fragment/put back together her dissevered lover' specifically refer to the reconstitution of Osiris by Isis. Césaire has a special priority in Caribbean writing because of this vision of the re-membered body.

In his vision of verbal carnality, Césaire breaks free from an alternative tendency to concentrate on the self-certain subject in Caribbean writing. For instance, what distinguishes Césaire from St. John Perse is the latter's tendency to confine himself to the knowable and ignore or deny that which is elusive or incomplete. As Glissant observes,

We see that in Perse's writing the more intense the feeling of drifting, the more stable the language becomes.... As if the pure architecture of language was the first response, the only one, to the loss created by wandering.... The threshold of this impossible construction, suddenly emerging from the realm of fragile disharmonies, is the word and the word is also the roof. The flesh transfigured into word.<sup>9</sup>

The imposition of a verbal architecture on the evanescent, the sovereign subject's capacity to voice all meanings, is seen as a deep reflex in Perse's sensibility. This longing for the virtues of clarity, a patrician syntax, an elegant diction, is shared by many early writers who insisted on imposing a disincarnate aesthetic on the mystery and shapelessness of reality. Césaire's work, in its de-centring of the sovereign subject, provides a sustained and radical critique of the structuring ego. His most dramatic deflation of the reconstructive demiurge is in the character of King Christophe, who attempts to reshape the natural contour, rhythm and smell of the bodies in his kingdom through costume, posture and perfume. The revolt of his own body precedes the mutiny of the collective body. Christophe's failed oppression of the body has its verbal parallel, as he attempts to impose his high-minded rhetoric on the polyphony of voices and sounds of the lower strata. He goes to his death with the mocking voice of Hugonin and the voodoo drums ringing in his ears.

## MUTATION, METAMORPHOSIS AND ANDROGYNY

Césaire's writing never ceases to insist on the unstable nature of the world. His horror of stasis (*durcir le beau*), his belief that stability is a mirage, has created the possibility of isolating the ideal of unencumbered physical movement or the refusal of corporeal determinism in Caribbean literature. The ideal of revolutionary self-assertiveness is expressed through corporeal imagery. For instance, Frantz Fanon attempts to rewrite the body of colonised man, creating a new subject from the dismemberment and castration inflicted by the coloniser's destructive gaze. In *The Wretched of Earth*, Fanon equates a reanimated body with the liberated voice of the revolutionary intellectual:

It is a vigorous style, alive with rhythms, struck through and through with bursting life....<sup>13</sup> The new movement gives rise to a new rhythm of life and to forgotten muscular tensions, and develops the imagination.<sup>10</sup>

Fanon's images of verbal muscularity have a resonance in Caribbean writing in which revolutionary potential is evoked through the resurrected flesh. The reanimated body of the land in Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* and the erotic carnality of René Depestre's *Rainbow for the Christian West* are clear examples of spiritual awakening expressed in images of revitalised physicality.

The rewriting or reinventing of the subject does not always take the form of virile images of sexual hubris. Corporeal metamorphosis can take a totally different direction if the subject is defined in terms of an exemplary reticence or evasiveness. In Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel *The Bridge of Beyond*, the corporeal ideal is one of resilience, slipperiness and manoeuvrability. Bodies are repeatable, can be dissolved or can defy the force of gravity. For instance, Télumée deals with personal tragedy by imagining herself as floating free of the world and its destructive force:

Then I would lie on the ground and try to dissolve my flesh: I would fill myself with bubbles and suddenly go light – a leg would be no longer there, then an arm, my head and whole body faded into the air, and I was floating.<sup>11</sup>

Her fantasy of an unencumbered body is an imaginative strategy designed to resist the desecrating force of her oppressive world. Schwarz-Bart's novel is a tribute to the survival of a particular group of women because of their imaginative powers. Her narrative is built around the tensions that separate the transcendental from the existential. Her main character yearns for a

world divested of fixed, determining matter. The *morne* or hill which offers refuge exerts a vertical pull on the protagonist to counteract the downward pull of the plains with which fiery destruction and physical entrapment are associated.

In Schwarz-Bart's tale of female endurance, the subject is not aggressively impulsive but values suppleness and taciturn stoicism. In the face of the insults of her *béké* mistress Mme. Desaragne, she is 'ready to dodge, to slip between the meshes of the trap she was weaving with her breath'. She clings to this image of elusiveness until Mme. Desaragne disappears like starch dissolved in water. Schwarz-Bart's novel demonstrates the corrective power of the folk imagination. We have insight into a process of psychic *marronnage* that allows the individual to survive even in the most vulnerable circumstances.

This image of an ever-changing body emerges as an even more suggestive symbol in the work of Alejo Carpentier. In it an aesthetic of incompleteness offers an insight into a world where forms are unstable, where an intricate branching, adaptation and accretion governs the existence of all things. Carpentier's imagery is best explained in the symbolism of the grotesque as described by the Russian critic Bakhtin, in which the body 'is not something completed and finished, but open, uncompleted'.<sup>12</sup> In Carpentier's novel *Explosion in a Cathedral*, we are presented with a teeming world inhabited by fluid, evanescent form. Nothing has a fixed contour in this submarine world in which matter cannot be discriminated from non-matter. Esteban, Carpentier's protagonist, realises that this world resists being named or structured. In its unspeakable nature it defies the efforts of the comprehending subject:

Carried into a world of symbiosis, standing up to his neck in pools whose water was kept perpetually foaming by cascading waves, and was broken, torn, shattered, by the hungry bite of jagged rocks, Esteban marvelled to realise how the language of these islands had made use of agglutinations, verbal amalgams and metaphors to convey the formal ambiguity of things which participated in several essences at once.<sup>13</sup>

The ambiguous space imagined by Carpentier is akin to Harris's zone of 'inarticulacy' or Bakhtin's 'unpublicized spheres of speech' in which 'the dividing lines between objects and phenomena are drawn quite differently than in the prevailing picture of the world' (p. 421). Esteban's field of vision does not focus on the concrete and the static but on a world of infinite metamorphosis that seems to defy language itself. It illustrates Harris's conception of Caribbean consciousness caught between sea and forest.

Post-modernism concentrates on the inadequacy of interpretation and the disorienting reality of the unexplainable. Caribbean writing exploits precisely this terrain of the unspeakable. In the radical questioning of the need to totalise, systematise and control, the Caribbean writer is a natural deconstructionist who praises latency, formlessness and plurality. In order to survive, the Caribbean sensibility must spontaneously decipher and interpret the sign systems of those who wish to dominate and control. The writing of the region goes beyond simply creating alternative systems to reflect the futility of all attempts to construct total systems, to assert the powers of the structuring subject. It is not simply a matter of deploying Caliban's militant idiom against Prospero's signifying authority. It is, perhaps, a matter of demonstrating the opacity and inexhaustibility of a world that resists systematic construction or transcendent meaning.

## NOTES

1. Wilson Harris, *Explorations* (Aarhus: Dangaroo Press, 1981), p. 7.
2. Edouard Glissant, *The Ripening*, trans. Michael Dash (1958; London: Heinemann, 1985), pp. 40-41.
3. \_\_\_\_\_, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: du Seuil, 1981), pp. 257-58.
4. Octavio Paz, *Conjunctions and Disjunctions* (New York: Seaver Books, 1982), p. 45.
5. Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society* (London: New Beacon, 1973), p. 51. Harris's treatment of limbo also suggests its capacity to unleash new physical and imaginative possibilities. See his *History, Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas* (Georgetown: National History and Arts Council, 1970); *Caribbean Quarterly*, 15,2 (1970), pp. 1-32.
6. V.S. Naipaul, *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 224.
7. There is a revealing misinterpretation of the Césairean persona by Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* (London: Cape, 1968), in which Aimé Césaire epitomises black virility, 'the big gun from Martinique' as opposed to the epicene figure of James Baldwin.
8. Gregson Davis, ed. *Twenty Poems of Aimé Césaire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), p. 102.
9. Edouard Glissant, 'St. John Perse et les Antillais', *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 178, (Feb. 1976), p. 68. A useful comparison might be made between Césaire's *Cahier* and Perse's *Anabase*, since the former is a voyage of return and in the latter the nomadic traveller is never released from wandering.
10. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 177.
11. Simone Schwarz-Bart, *The Bridge of Beyond*, trans. Barbara Bray (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 104.
12. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 364.
13. Alejo Carpentier, *Explosion in a Cathedral*, trans. John Sturrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 185.