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'Americanité' or 'Antillanité'? Changing perspectives on identity in post-négritude Francophone Caribbean poetry

Analysis of Francophone Caribbean poetry focusing on the notions of Antillanité and Américanité as they relate to the work of Sonny Rupaire and Alfred Melon-Degras. The author emphasizes the varying impulses and allegiances which may confront the Francophone Caribbean writer wrestling with his identity.

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‘AMERICANITÉ’ OR ‘ANTILLANITÉ’? CHANGING
PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY IN POST-NÉGRITUDE
FRANCOPHONE CARIBBEAN POETRY

In the 1939 *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Aimé Césaire adumbrates a vision of regional identity which prefigures the concern of later generations with re-defining the geographical frontiers of belonging. Césaire's (1983:46-47) world begins with his own "calabash of an island," but the limitations suggested by this image of confinement are denied, a few lines further on, by the identification of Martinique as "my nonfence island":

What is mine, these few thousand deathbearers who mill in the calabash of an island and mine too, the archipelago arched with an anguished desire to negate itself, as if from maternal anxiety to protect this impossibly delicate tenuity separating one America from another; and these loins which secrete for Europe the hearty liquor of a Gulf Stream, and one of the two slopes of incandescence between which the Equator tightropewalks toward Europe. And my nonfence island, its brave audacity standing at the stern of this Polynesia, before it, Guadeloupe, split in two down its dorsal line and equal in poverty to us, Haiti where négritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity and the funny little tail of Florida where the strangulation of a nigger is being completed, and Africa gigantically caterpillaring up to the Hispanic foot of Europe its nakedness where Death scythes widely.¹

What is striking in the Césairean map of identity – so meticulously drawn – is the poet's refusal to be limited to one familiar island or even to the archipelago itself, whose curved shape becomes a metaphor for the situation of Caribbean man, not yet recovered from the prostration of slavery. The counter-discursive strategy of this Martinican/"black Frenchman" is revealed as he elaborates an Afrocentric world view, locating himself within an extended family in which Haiti, solitary in its upright posture of defiance

("Haiti where négritude rose for the first time"), occupies a position of privilege.

Despite the obvious parallels, however, Césaire's early vision of community differs significantly from that emerging in the literature of the last few decades, which may seem to constitute a deconstruction of Négritude, with its sometimes Manichean emphasis on racial difference. Other designations, such as that of "Antillanité" and the more recent formulation "Créolité," have sought to capture what is clearly a complex and even elusive reality. What these different options (perhaps way-stations in the quest for identity?) have in common with Césaire's position is refusal of both insularity and universalism – the menace of "dilution dans l'universel" (1956:15) made real by political integration into a distant Metropolis. Indeed the extent of the concern of French Caribbean intellectuals with the sort of self-definition epitomized by the term "négritude" is an ironic reminder of the still powerful hold on their people's imagination and political life by the colonial other, whose presence and dominance make compelling the assertion of difference.

Edouard Glissant, the outstanding poetic voice of the post-Négritude era, is the primary theoretician of "Antillanité," a concept which focuses on the reality of Caribbean syncretism and the project of Caribbean integration.² The notion of "Américanité" referred to in the title of this article is more problematic, since it posits the existence of a "New World" identity, or at least experience, encompassing the peoples of the Americas *and* the Caribbean.³ The term "créolité", on the other hand, shifts the focus of attention from geographical proximity to the fact of creolization. It is clear, however, that these concepts overlap to some extent, and a particularly enigmatic formula used in the provocatively entitled *Eloge de la créolité*, translated as *In Praise of Creoleness* (Bernabé, Chamoiseau & Confiant 1990), hints at the hazards of categorical pronouncement, of applying exclusive labels to an evolving identity: "Because of its constituent mosaic, Creoleness is an open specificity" (Bernabé, Chamoiseau & Confiant 1990:892). The present analysis is particularly concerned with the notions of Antillanité and Américanité as they relate to the work of two poets: Sonny Rupaire and Alfred Melon-Degras. This preliminary exploration of the complex semantics of self-definition is intended as a reminder of the varying impulses and allegiances which may confront the francophone Caribbean writer wrestling with a still-beleaguered identity.

Both Rupaire and Melon-Degras stretch and reach beyond island frontiers to assert a regional belonging. It is surely pertinent to note that their earliest published poems date from the late 1950s and the 1960s respectively, coinciding with a season of discontent with the departmental status –

a season marked by the increased repressiveness of the régime⁴ at a time when Caribbean neighbors and West African colonies alike were attaining independence.

The Martinican Melon-Degras is manifestly drawn to a Latin American identity, and one senses in his work “continental” yearnings which may reflect a claustrophobic need to escape the narrow confines of island space. Rupaïre, on the other hand, moves, in the collection ...*cette igname brisée qu'est ma terre natale* (1973), from the image of the island as fragment (the “broken yam” of the title) to that of his native Guadeloupe as integral part of a regional, “American” whole. Both writers interrogate the Eurocentric assumption of the islands’ insignificance, an assumption implicit in the famous statement made by Général de Gaulle during a visit to Martinique, quoted by Edouard Glissant in the epigraph to *Le discours antillais* (1976): “Entre l’Europe et l’Amérique, je ne vois que des poussières” (“Between Europe and America, I see nothing but dust”).⁵

L’Habit d’arlequin (1974), Melon-Degras’ first volume of poetry, is divided into sections which reveal the range of concerns of this Martinican of several worlds, patently ambivalent about his prolonged Parisian exile. The section entitled “Antillana” contains the poem *Fort-de-France* (1974:59), which presents a disquieting vision of futility and deprivation:

Sur la mer, sueur de ton front d’île,
sueur de ton bras vivant de Caravelle,
étranger à ma terre,
j’arrime à ton port.

...
L’imaginaire nombril renfrogné d’île
d’archipel, de continents,
est une lente convulsion d’ombres.

On the sea, sweat of your island forehead,
sweat of Caravelle your living arm,
stranger to my land,
I dock at your port.

...
The glum imaginary navel of island
of archipelago, of continents,
is a slow convulsion of shadows.

It is important to note that the poet moves, in a few brief lines, from the image of the island as vital, essential (Melon-Degras is no doubt alluding to

the colonial vision of Martinique as “gateway to the Americas”) to that of a marginal, “zombified” world. This deconstruction of the exotic stereotype of the island is continued in the bitter first lines of *O mon pays* (1974:54), in which one hears an ironic echo of de Gaulle’s dismissive words:

O mon pays honni dans ma chair
 aimé dans ta chair,
 émeraude des chants folkloriques
 perle des prospectus,
 poussière d’Antilles
 poussière de soleil!

Oh my country spurned in my flesh
 loved for your flesh,
 emerald of folk songs
 pearl of brochures,
 Antillean dust
 sun dust!

These lines are striking in their focus on contradiction and duality: that of the European outsider objectifying “native” and landscape, despising the one and celebrating the other, but also that of the Caribbean persona, whose visceral connection to this land/object does not preclude a certain distance as he contemplates a reality trivialized by the Other’s gaze.

In striking contrast to the ambiguous patriotism of *O mon pays* is the exuberant celebration of “America,” in the poem of that name from the section entitled “Tiers-Monde” (“Third World”). Melon-Degras (1974:107) identifies with a “continental splendor” which he associates with the pre-Columbian era:

Nous avons la poésie des noms qui chantent;
 Potosi, Aconcagua, Sierra Maestra,
 qui chantent la splendeur continentale,
 – Teotihuacán, Yucatán, Tulán, Chichén Itzá –
 et la syncope précolombienne d’apogée.

We have the poetry of names that sing;
 Potosi, Aconcagua, Sierra Maestra,
 that sing of continental splendor,
 – Teotihuacán, Yucatán, Tulán, Chichén Itzá –
 and the pre-Columbian syncopation of apogee.

This poem offers a striking example of the importance of naming for the historically dispossessed: through a ritual enumeration of sonorous place names, Melon-Degras reclaims the power wrested from the indigenous “American” peoples by the *conquistador*. These names appear to confer on the continent an ontological reality absent in the poet’s evocation of his own country, whose place names bear the stamp of colonialism. (In the poem already cited, the name “Fort-de-France,” which defines the “capital” of Martinique as French possession and stronghold, is used as an ironic refrain.)

That the evocation of a grandiose past is not innocuous becomes clear a few lines further on (1974:107), as “the poetry of names that sing” becomes the poetry of revolution:

... me redire la poésie des noms qui chantent,
et la voix des fleuves qui grondent la ferveur,
et le sang de la terre spoliée,
et le chant de la terre qui s'insurge...

... repeating to myself the poetry of names that sing,
and the voice of rivers which rumble their fervor,
and the blood of the plundered land,
and the song of the rebellious land...

The emphasis in this poem on the vast rivers of the continent may appear to reflect a Latin American rather than an exclusively West Indian sensibility: whereas island identity is delimited by the surrounding waters of the sea, Melon-Degras is able to suggest endless possibility and power by focusing on the fast-flowing rivers of South America – recalling Césaire’s invocation of the Congo in the *Cahier*. In the following lines (1974:106), the impressive physical presence of the continent is implicitly contrasted to its commercial exploitation, and its formidable rivers seem to speak a warning:

Redites-moi les clameurs latentes du Popocatepetl
et le fugace délire utile de l'Orénoque.
Redites-moi l'aube de terre du Parana
et les tentacules à brandir de l'Amazone...
le guano du Pérou, la canne de Porto-Rico,
le bétail argentin, les bananiers du Guatemala
et la malédiction primordiale du ver dans le fruit
de la United Fruit.

Tell me again of the latent clamor of the Popocatepetl
 and the fleeting necessary delirium of the Orinoco.
 Tell me of the awakening earth of the Parana
 and the tentacles to be brandished by the Amazon...
 and the guano of Peru, the cane of Puerto Rico,
 Argentine cattle, Guatemalan banana-trees
 and the original curse of the worm in the fruit
 of United Fruit.

The last lines quoted make it clear that Melon-Degras' *Américanité* is not predicated on an assumption of affinity with all the peoples of the New World; the full ambiguity of the title emerges here. Later lines of the poem (1974:108) reveal a vehement anti-"Americanism" which is in marked contrast to the almost liturgical solemnity of the beginning:

Je dis que le Texas est au Mexique
 et qu'à plus forte raison
 le Panama est au Panama,
 le Vénézuëla est au Vénézuëla,
 l'Equateur à l'Equateur,
 le Honduras au Honduras
 et Cuba à Cuba.
 Je dis que les valets sont aux yankees,
 que les crimes de la C.I.A. sont aux yankees...

I say that Texas belongs to Mexico
 and all the more so
 Panama to Panama,
 Venezuela to Venezuela,
 Ecuador to Ecuador,
 Honduras to Honduras
 and Cuba to Cuba.
 I say that the valets belong to the Yankees,
 that the CIA crimes belong to the Yankees...

The final verse of the poem (1974:108-9) – clearly shaped by a youthful idealism – elucidates its vision of revolution and reconstruction. In this connection, the dedication to Che Guevara, killed in 1967, two years before the date of the poem, is a reminder of the resonance of the Cuban Revolution among young French Caribbean intellectuals of the time:

Redites-moi le soleil de mémoire du Che,
 redites-moi les flots du devenir,
 redites-moi les chants de la nuit à l'aube...
 Et voici donc, mes frères, ma pierre nouvelle,
 mon offrande impatiente inouïe,
 voici mon bras, mon amour, ma colère,
 et voici de notre terre, l'intarissable devenir.

Tell me again of the sun of Che's memory,
 tell me of the floods of the future,
 tell me of the songs of night becoming dawn...
 And so, my brothers, here is my new stone,
 my impatient unheard-of offering,
 here my arm, my love, my wrath,
 And here the uncheckable future of our land.

What I find most interesting here is the ambiguity of "notre terre," in the final line. The poet has already, in verses previously cited, slipped into the skin of a Latin American persona, but the emphasis on the singular possessive in the penultimate line might indicate that he is now speaking in his own voice, making a personal declaration of allegiance rather than a token statement of solidarity with the Third World. Whether "notre terre" refers to "America" or to Martinique is perhaps an appropriate ambiguity in the work of a poet who consistently refuses the tyranny of "fences" – to return to Césaire's image of a "non-fence island." In fact the title of the collection from which this poem is taken, *L'Habit d'arlequin*, may be interpreted to mean that Melon-Degras sees his identity as essentially plural.

Superficially at least, the poetry of the Guadeloupean Sonny Rupaïre (1940-91) appears inextricably linked to his island of origin. Yet it rapidly becomes clear that his assumption of a national and regional identity is not without angst, that his sense of belonging is sometimes undermined by a historical "unbelonging." The title of the collection, to which I have already alluded, focuses on separation and fragmentation, and this theme is developed in the poem *De quelle amazone*. Rupaïre (1973:32) presents a somber vision of an island fragment, a "breast" detached from a continental body:

de quelle Amazone l'archipel caraïbe en arc
avec ce noeud
ou cette île
ou ce sein
en plein milieu fiché à la limite de tension
frangé de mer
ou d'écume
ou de lait.

of which Amazon the bow of the Caribbean archipelago
with this knot or this island or this breast
planted right in the middle flexed to the limit
fringed with sea or foam or milk.

The detached island “breast” is able to rediscover the lost unity, not by a return to a continental motherland, but by integration (“en plein milieu fiché”) in this defiant archipelago.

It is surely significant that Rupaïre chooses to return, in the final poem in French of this bilingual volume, to the image of a united chain of islands. *Ultra-marine* (1973:62-63) reminds us of the extent to which Caribbean identity is bound up with a sea which is symbol both of belonging and separation. In one of the few personal references in what is a very public poetry, Rupaïre dedicates this "seascape" to "Tiny ma compagne qui se trouve outre-mer" ("Tiny my companion who is overseas"). The emphasis in this poem on the condition of exile is a reminder that the Guadeloupean writer was obliged to spend several years away from his native land as a result of his decision to desert the French Army at the time of the Algerian War, rather than fight on the side of the colonizer. The resonance of *Ultra-marine* is derived, however, from its larger vision of perennial voyagers, reluctant or voluntary.

The first three verses focus on the many “crossings” of the colonial era, and on the contemporary phenomenon of organized emigration from the “départements”. It is the last verse, however, that I find particularly suggestive; in playing, as he does throughout the poem, on the expression “outre-mer,” Rupaïre subverts the assumptions of the dominant discourse, reflected in the official designation of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guyane as “départements d’outre-mer”:

Je suis d'outre-mer:
 de la mer de désespérance
 où de Caracas à Guantánamo s'agitent
 sur les flots inlassablement
 les mains vertes d'une humanité naufragée.
 Je suis outre-mer:
 de Saint-Domingue à Trinidad
 parenthèse verte d'îles américaines
 si riches de leur dénuement
 et si pauvres dans leur richesse.
 Et je brave à pleins bras la violence des flots vers le soleil
 vers le soleil

vers le soleil.

I am from overseas:
 from the sea of desperation
 where from Caracas to Guantánamo wave
 tirelessly on the waters
 the green hands of a shipwrecked humanity.
 I am overseas:
 from Santo Domingo to Trinidad
 green parenthesis of American islands
 so rich in their destitution
 and so poor in their richness.
 And I brave the violence of the waves reaching out to the sun
 to the sun

to the sun.

The poet is, of course, interrogating the subjective notions of “center” and “periphery,” recognizing that for a Guadeloupean, to say “Je suis d'outre-mer” is equivalent to participating in one's own marginalization.

This last verse of *Ultra-marine* suggests that the real “sea” that defines Caribbean identity is not the Atlantic Ocean implicitly referred to in the official formula, but the waters of the Caribbean, which both link and separate Guadeloupe and Jamaica. To refute the reinforcement of the balkanization of the colonial era, the poet privileges a shared Caribbean experience (in this he appears close to the Antillanité envisaged by Glissant). While the initial focus of the final stanza is on an experience of despair and futility – Rupaïre's “shipwrecked humanity” is reminiscent of Derek Walcott's “Castaway” – the paradoxes inherent in its imagery reflect a cautious optimism. His islands are strangely formidable, more substantial than the

“poussière d’Antilles” evoked in Melon-Degras’ poem of painful self-deprecation. The “mains vertes” of these Caribbean “Antilles” promise survival and creativity, recalling the many luxuriant trees whose ability to withstand the seasonal onslaught of hurricane winds may seem as perplexing as the resilience of the region itself. A similar paradox is captured in the image of the “parenthèse verte d’îles américaines.” Once again, the shape of the archipelago is suggestive, functioning here as a trope of the position in world politics of a region seen by some to be in the “backyard” of the United States (the ambiguity inherent in the adjective “américaines” is a source of irony). This image of marginalization translates a creeping disenchantment, particularly apparent when one compares this poem to *De quelle amazone*, written three years earlier (in 1964), in which a defiant archipelago aimed its arrow at an anonymous aggressor. Yet Rupaïre clearly believes in the creative possibilities implicit in the color green, in the “wealth” of a region materially disadvantaged, and that fundamental optimism is apparent in the final progression through the raging waters.

In conclusion, I cannot completely evade the question incorporated in my title, a question which was intended to reflect complex, overlapping affinities, rather than to suggest the possibility – or the desirability – of neat classification. In this analysis of the work of two poets who seem to embody “changing perspectives on identity” in French Caribbean poetry, I was keenly aware of the difficulties inherent in a rigid demarcation of ideological options. A cautionary remark by Gordon Rohlehr (1976:245) on “the inadequacy of an approach to Caribbean poetry which divides writers into irreconcilable schools or camps” is as applicable to francophone writers as to those from the English-speaking territories. One option or impulse clearly does not exclude the other(s), and Melon-Degras and Rupaïre both reflect in their work elements of Antillanité and Américanité, although the former term better translates the stronger “Pan-Caribbean” impulse which I sense in the poetry of Rupaïre. Perhaps the dynamism of Caribbean identity, and its literary expressions, is best illustrated by the fact that from 1968, Rupaïre chose to write exclusively in the vernacular, privileging and reclaiming his “créolité.”

While the limits of this analysis have made it impossible to focus on a wide selection of texts, I think it is clear that the two writers have in common the refusal of the imperialism of a Eurocentric configuration of community. It is interesting to note that their work illustrates a tendency among French Caribbean writers of the “second generation” to self-consciously distance themselves from the canonical texts of Négritude in order to construct their own myths of identity: it is significant that neither Melon-Degras nor Rupaïre emphasizes the affinities of Afro-Caribbean peoples with the

ancestral continent. Yet, ironically, in their deconstruction of the assimilationist discourse of French colonialism, they emerge as heirs to a Césairean tradition of subversion of an essentially racist ideology.

NOTES

1. The original reads (Césaire 1983:46): Ce qui est à moi, ces quelques milliers de mortiférés qui tournent en rond dans la calebasse d'une île et ce qui est à moi aussi, l'archipel arqué comme le désir inquiet de se nier, on dirait une anxiété maternelle pour protéger la ténuité plus délicate qui sépare l'une de l'autre Amérique; et ses flancs qui secrètent pour l'Europe la bonne liqueur d'un Gulf Stream, et l'un des deux versants d'incandescence entre quoi l'Equateur funambule vers l'Afrique. Et mon île non-clôture, sa claire audace debout à l'arrière de cette polynésie, devant elle, la Guadeloupe fendue en deux de sa raie dorsale et de même misère que nous, Haïti où la négritude se mit debout pour la première fois et dit qu'elle croyait à son humanité et la comique petite queue de la Floride où d'un nègre s'achève la strangulation, et l'Afrique gigantesquement chenillant jusqu'au pied hispanique de l'Europe, sa nudité où la mort fauche à larges andains.
2. See for example his treatment of the topic in *Le discours antillais*.
3. In *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude* (1980:87), the Haitian René Depestre elaborates a concept of "Américanité" based on what he describes as "un processus universel de créolisation américaine"; the writer seems to identify particularly with a community extending from the South of the United States to the North of Brazil (1980:84).
4. A striking example is the official repression of the Pointe-à-Pitre demonstrations of 1967, resulting in some thirty civilian deaths.
5. This and all subsequent translations are my own.

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