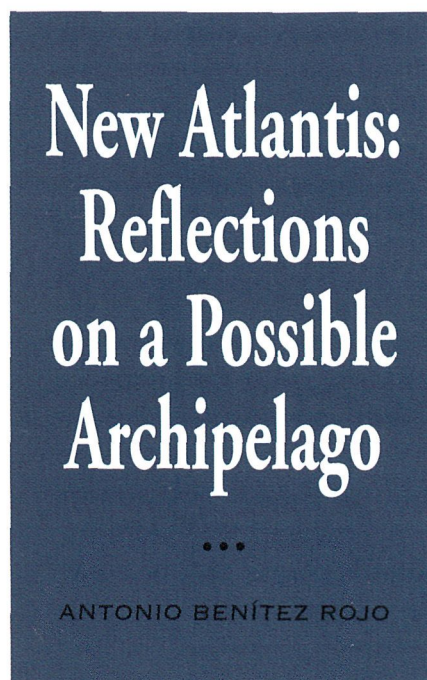


DOSSIER: ISLANDS

I can remember exactly the year in which, apart from feeling Cuban, I also began to feel West Indian. It was in 1944. My stepfather had been sent to Puerto Rico to organise the installation of an automatic telephone service there. As the ship bringing the new equipment was torpedoed by a German submarine, we had to stay in San Juan for almost a year and a half until another ship could be sent. As is natural in a thirteen-year-old boy, I had at first opposed the idea of leaving my neighbourhood and school friends in Havana to go and live in San Juan. However, within a very short time I realised that Cuba and Puerto Rico had a lot in common. San Juan, like Havana, had its *Castillo del Morro*, old cannons, colonial churches and plazas, baroque balconies, beaches and palm trees. The interiors of both islands were very similar. There were sugar, banana, and coffee plantations, and the country people lived more or less in the same way. The people were white, mulatto or black, as in Cuba, and they also liked to dance to music with a lively rhythm, eat *tostones*, oranges, *frijoles*, pork, and chicken with rice, and to drink coffee, beer and rum. I made new friends, and I couldn't see much difference between them and the friends I had left behind in Cuba. When the news arrived that the ship with the telephone equipment had been torpedoed and I realised that we would have to extend our stay I was very happy –and may those that died in the disaster forgive me.

I can also remember precisely when, in addition to feeling Cuban and West Indian, I felt Caribbean. It was in the summer of 1979, on the occasion of the CARIFESTA festival in Havana, which had previously been held in Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana. This festival gathered together musicians and



dance groups from all the Caribbean nations, and for days the theatres, stadiums, plazas and streets of Havana were the setting for cultural presentations by the numerous countries in the region. As I was a member of the technical commission which organised the event, I had the opportunity to meet a number of writers, painters and artists who were taking part in the festival. However, it wasn't until I saw how each country danced that my body realised there was one common denominator in all our cultures: rhythm. And not just that. The rhythm involved an action, a representation, a performance, which was extraordinarily similar to the Cuban. Of course, this had been written about before. For example, at the end of the 17th century, Father Labat had said:

*You are all in the boat together,
sailing in the same uncertain sea..
...nationality and race are not
important, just small and insignificant
labels compared with the message which
the spirit carries to me: and this is the*

*place and the predicament which history
has imposed on you... I saw it first in the
dance... the merengue in Haiti, the
beguine in Martinique, and today in my
old ears I can hear the echo of the
calypsos of Trinidad, Jamaica, Santa
Lucía, Antigua, Dominica and the
legendary Guyana... It is not by
accident that the sea which separates
your lands does not make differences to
the rhythm of your bodies.*

It is true that I had read this passage. However, I had not felt it personally, because until then I had not been lucky enough to see close up and successively the music and dance performances of all the Caribbean nations. When CARIFESTA finished I had no doubt that I was also Caribbean.

Three years ago I was invited to visit Tenerife by the Menéndez y Pelayo International University, and later on by the La Laguna University. I had never visited the Canary Islands. Naturally, I knew something of the history of these islands, particularly Tenerife, for in my book *El mar de las lentejas* (The Sea of Lentils), I had told the story of the trade connection between the Ponte, Adeje y Garachico, and Hawkings families of Plymouth. It is also true that I knew about the extensive emigration from the Canary Islands to Cuba, and that point that the founding work of Cuban literature, *Espejo de paciencia* (Mirror of Patience) was written at the beginning of the 17th Century by Silvestre de Balboa, born in Tenerife. But, touring Tenerife and the other occurred in Puerto Rico and CARIFESTA. To begin with, the Spanish spoken was very similar to that of Cuba; there were even linguistic twists and words, like *guagua*, which were used in both Cuba and Puerto Rico but not in mainland Spain or in the rest of Spanish America. There

were also beaches, palm trees, and plantations, and the old architecture was very reminiscent of certain Spanish Caribbean cities and villages. Another custom in common was that of eating bananas and eating *mojo* in certain dishes. It is true that there were no black people, but I did observe people with darker skins than those of mainland Spain. Knowing as I did that sugar plantations had existed on various Canary islands along with African slaves, I thought it was very possible that part of the population had African or Berber blood. And this, of course, brought us closer together. But what struck me most was the people's way of behaving, which was very similar to that of the Caribbean people. They had the same generosity, spontaneity, and smiling, open character [1]. It was then that, besides feeling Cuban and West Indian and Caribbean, I also began to feel a little like a Canary Islander.

If I have recounted these personal experiences, it is because, curiously enough, they correspond to what has happened to the discourse which we nowadays call Caribbean, and which I propose to call N.A. [2]. Naturally, at first there only existed discourses which had gone from Creole to national, which is to say, a Haitian discourse, a Cuban, Jamaican, and so on. At the end of the 19th Century, these discourses began to group themselves into linguistic blocks; thus there appeared a Spanish West Indian discourse, a West Indian discourse, etc. Then, in our century there arose an overall West Indian discourse which, shattering the old colonial conception, followed certain models which were repeated within the archipelago. Contributing to this effort were, among others, the works of Fernando Ortiz, Jean Price-Mars, Jacques Roumain, Jean-Stéphen Alexis, C.L.R. James, Aimé Césaire, Luis Palés Matos, Emilio Ballangas, Nicolás

Guillén, Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera and others. Although at the beginning this discourse had focused on the major impact of the African diaspora in the different island cultures and societies, defining such concepts as transculturation and miscegenation, relatively recently it expanded its base of reference to include American territories in the Caribbean, as well as the global study of the socio-cultural phenomenon of the area within the concept of creoleness. This new idea now not only referred to the encounter of European and African people in the region, but also included the contribution of other groups, principally the Amerindians and Asians. In a parallel way, the idea of the Caribbean with characteristics of its own, not only became universally known, but gave rise to many historical, economic, sociological and literary works, among others those by Eric Williams, Sidney Mintz, Manuel Moreno Fragonals, Arturo Morales Carrión, Juan Bosch and Franklin Knight. Moreover, enterprises for economic co-operation like CARIFESTA and later CARICOM were established. The arts were represented by the CARIFESTA festivals of which I have already spoken. It was during this period when the West Indian discourse was becoming more widely known that it took the name of the Caribbean discourse. More recently, this discourse has increased its points of reference in a search for connecting links with a large part of the world, especially the Atlantic area, in accordance with certain common principles. This perspective can be seen in many works of literary and cultural analysis, such as the *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* by Wilson Harris, *Poétique de la relation* by Edouard Glissant, *Eloge de la créolité*, by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseay and Raphaël Confiant, and my own book *La isla que se repite: el Caribe y la*

perspectiva posmoderna [The Island that Repeats Itself: The Caribbean and the Post-modern Perspective] [3].

For the sake of brevity, on making this inventory I have had to summarise an enormous amount of information referring to the depth and extent of the discourse which is now usually called Caribbean and which, here today, I propose to call Atlantic or the discourse of the New Atlantis [4]. For example, study of the first stage, which is to say, the stage of West Indian discourse, would lead us to say that the most pertinent attempts to define a common culture began in the 1920s and reached their highpoint in the 1930s and 1940s. They all shared the same wish: to emphasise the importance of the African heritage in the region. These efforts were influenced by a number of events which in the main took place outside the Caribbean, the globalisation of events, as is the case today. Among them was the popularity of African art in Europe; the ideas of Leo Frobenius and Oswald Spengler, the participation of black troops in the First World War; the upsurge of black nationalism in the United States; the literature created by the authors of what was called the Harlem Renaissance; the Pan-African agenda of Marcus Garvey –also pioneered from Harlem– and finally the impact of surrealism and the music of Gershwin and Stravinsky. Among the events exerting influence today are post-modern art and thought. In the West Indies, where the predominant population has always been black and mulatto, looking towards Africa served many practical purposes. Firstly, it helped free the black man from the feeling of cultural and social inferiority which slavery had imposed on him, providing him with a common ethnological mother country beyond the ocean (instrumental to this purpose was the doctrine of the Jamaican, Marcus

Garvey called *Back to Africa*. Secondly, the feeling of cultural pride helped the black masses to emerge from the social and political passivity imposed by colonial domination (the most important example of this is the Black movement organised by Aimé Césaire of Martinique together with Léopold Senghore of Senegal). Thirdly, in the case of Haiti, it aided in the reinterpretation of the national culture, extolling the old traditions maintained by the peasants (in this the work of Jean-Price Mars was of vital importance). Fourthly, in the Spanish West Indies, and above all in Cuba, where the black minority suffered discrimination, the new African conscience led to the development of a kind of modern nationalism in which the building of the nation was not seen as the exclusive work of the Creole whites (here I should mention the Afro-Cuban Fernando Ortiz, and the black poetry of Puerto Rican Luis Palés Matos, the Cuban Nicolás Guillén, and Dominican Manuel del Cabral, among others). Speaking only of Cuba, I must mention the emergence of a truly national painting –ranging from Víctor Manuel to Wilfredo Lam, and including the sculpture of Teodoro Ramos–, the literature of Lydia Cabrera and Alejo Carpentier, the Afro-Cuban symphonic music of Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García Caturla, the emergence of an interracial national lyrical theatre –from *La niña Rita* by Ernesto Lecuona and Eliseo Grenet to *Cecilia Valdés* by Gonzalo Roig–, and the popularisation of what was then called black and mulatto music: the rumba, conga, son, and later, the mamba and the chachachá.

Today, looking back on this period, it must be concluded that the West Indies discourse, although a necessary forerunner in the organisation of a Caribbean discourse, was full of reductionist proposals. For example, in

general the discourse was centred only on aspects related to Africa and Europe, disregarding the socio-cultural contributions of Indo-America, China, India, Java and the Middle Eastern nations. But, above all, it disregarded the influence of North America on the culture of the region. Another very common error was considering the numerous different African and European cultures as if they were homogeneous contrasting units, either thinking, in the light of Spengler's work, that western civilisation had entered a period of decadence, to be replaced by African civilisation, or describing West Indian culture as neo-African (a term invented by the German Janheinz Jahn); or else, from the most extreme position of the black movement, manipulating the ideas of race, culture and power; or thinking that European and African culture, in their West Indian interracial dialectic, had crystallised into a stable synthesis –a mixed or mulatto culture–, an opinion held a one time by Guillén among others.

The formative stage of the Caribbean discourse, when the West Indies discourse went beyond its territorial references and dismantled the Europe-Africa dual state so as to include other ethnological components, came with to the decolonisation process which occurred after the Second World War, and with the concept of the existence of a Third World, an idea presented at the Bandung Conference of 1955. It also coincided with the highpoint of structuralist thought in Europe and with the critical theory of Teodoro Adorno and the Circle of Frankfurt, and above all, with the triumph of the Marxist revolution in Cuba and the "New Left" in Europe and the United States. Although the dual Europe-Africa, black-white, African culture-Western culture disappeared during this stage, new dualities were constructed. For

example, anthropological discourse –influenced by decolonisation, the expansion of Marxist thought and structuralist analysis– began to define Caribbean culture in terms of binary oppositions such as dominant culture–subjugated culture, popular culture–elitist culture, dependent culture–sovereign culture, etc., in which the work of Frantz Fanon stood out. Examples of a less radical position, although with a dual undertone, are seen in literature in the theory of magic realism defended by the Haitian Jean Stéphen Alexis and Cuba's Alejo Carpentier; in history, in the works of the Trinidadian Eric Williams and the Cuban Manuel Moreno Fraginales; in cultural anthropology, in the work of the Brazilian Darcy Ribeiro, who, inspired by nationalism, understood the nations of the Caribbean and Brazil to be "new nations", disconnected from Europe and Africa, as was their "new" culture.

About twenty years ago structuralist thought went into a decline, and was replaced by the so-called post-structuralist thought and shortly after by post-modernism. As we know, this new situation corresponded with the decline of Marxist ideology in the world, the end of the cold war, and the collapse of the socialist bloc, the end of apartheid, European unity and the so-called process of globalisation, the development of cybernetics, communications and the access to knowledge. It is true that there are still some dualisms around, but I think that some of them have some reason for being, at least until the most extreme cases of economic, racial, sexual and cultural differences in the world can be resolved peacefully.

However, in these last two decades the Caribbean discourse, blown by the winds of post-modernity, has reached a new moment, characterised by a lesser tendency to see things in black or white and a greater consciousness of the

complexity of their own phenomenon. To this end, the contributions made by such historians as Braudel, Wallerstein and White, as well as the philosophers Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze, and the mathematicians and scientists Mandelbrot, Ruelle, Lorez and Prigogine have helped today's researchers to understand that the Caribbean system is unusually complex. In the region's economic and socio-cultural discourse, for example, we can observe how the dynamics of Caribbean existence are historically linked to such macro-factors as the exploration and conquests arising from European expansionism, the impact of the Atlantic economy on the development of capitalism, the consequences of military and trade rivalries among European empires, smuggling and piracy, the development of the plantation economy, the effects of African colonisation and the import of African slaves, the hiring of an Asian workforce, the influence of European thought on civil and armed battles for independence, the cultural and political influence of the United States, and others.

Naturally, this perspective has not only led us to see the Caribbean as more complex, but also as more extensive, and at the same time less coherent and stable, more diverse and fragmented. So much so, that now if we wished to speak of a West Indianhood or a Caribbean-ness from the viewpoint of structuralist thought, it would be impossible, for our arguments would seem to be products of arbitrary reductionisms and simplifications. For example, I have here a fact which was not perceived by the first Caribbeanists); really a rather disquieting fact: it is impossible to delimit the borders of the Caribbean. If we begin from the physical geography, the area would only include those territories with coasts on the Caribbean

Sea, thus excluding those that give on to the Gulf of Mexico, such as the Bahamas, the Turks and Caicos, Barbados, Guyana, Cayenne and Surinam, nations which are usually considered to be part of the Caribbean; on the other hand, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, which are considered to be part of Central America, would be included. If we applied socio-economic criteria, the Caribbean could be studied in terms of the American plantation economy, which is to say, of those parts of the American continent where a plantation slave economy was developed. However, if this standard of judgement were strictly adhered to, the Caribbean would also include, besides the West Indies, a large section of the United States and Brazil, and the coastal regions of South America and the ancient viceroyalty of Peru, which give on to the Pacific. Even if this criteria was discounted and the Caribbean reduced to a more manageable area, the West Indies let us say, there would still exist very clear contradictions. For example, if we tried to identify the archipelago commencing from a common nationalism, we would see at once that the population of the West Indies lacks a common consciousness. For the immense majority of the population of the Caribbean, the region appears as fragmented in linguistic blocs representing the different colonial powers which dominated the region, among which were Spain, England, France and Holland. Neither is it practical to try to discover an ethnological pattern common to the whole region. Although it is true that people from America, Europe, Africa and Asia converged on the islands, their cultures were very different as was their distribution throughout the region. Moreover, the political pluralism to be found in the West Indies could not be

more chaotic. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the Dominican Republic is a "multi-party republic", Cuba is a "unitary and socialist" republic, Puerto Rico is an "associated free state" of the United States, Curaçao is a "non-metropolitan territory of the Low Countries", Martinique is an "overseas department of France", the Virgin Isles are "non-incorporated territories of the United States", St. Kitts and Nevis comprise a "federal republic", and Dominica is an island "community" in the British Commonwealth and whose form of government is a constitutional monarchy.

So, given the difficulty of establishing accurately the geographic, socio-economic, ethnological and political borders of the area, terms like "Caribbean culture", "Caribbean" and "Caribbean-ness" should be taken as constantly moving and changing, unstable concepts. With this way of thinking the question of identifying the Caribbean borders *a priori* does not constitute a serious problem. From this new viewpoint, the Caribbean would transcend the borders of both the Caribbean Sea and the American plantation, comprising an open macro-system whose origins would be beyond recovery, dispersed in time and space through America, Europe, African and Asia, that is to say, the world. Therefore, the post-modern researcher tends to study the Caribbean from the observation of correlations and patterns that are repeated here and there in a group of cases whose universe he considers to be unknown from the very beginning. In addition, this hypothetical researcher would reject certain models, methods or interpretations coming from European historicism (for example, the works by Hegel and Marx), replacing them with such narratives as the myth and the novel (proposition of Wilson

Harris), thus compensating for the loss of the past which affects the collective memory of the nations in the region. He would also reject the ideas of “unity”, “centre”, “homogeneity”, “synthesis”, “stability”, “coherence”, etc. To sum up, for the post-modern researcher the Caribbean system would be non-central, heteroclitic, ambivalent when not paradoxical, and it would be in a constant state of change, or if you prefer, in a continuous process of unpredictable creolisation.

Above all, it would be a constant carnival. The researcher would naturally spurn the idea that the Caribbean is a synthesis or an approach to it; that is, he would be inclined to see the system as a tempestuous interplay of differences (suggested by Glissant). However, although post-modern thought serves to tear down old absolutes, such an attitude also sets limits. For example, the discourse of post-modernity poses as scientific, that is to say, ethnocentric, a proposition it shares with modern discourse. Thus, both exclude beliefs, myths, musical, dance and oral folklore, and other popular traditions, which is to say, they do not recognise the authority of what Lyotard calls “narrative knowledge”, on which outlying societies culturally depend to a large extent. My ideas with regard to the subject under discussion are simple and complex at the same time: to study these societies it is necessary to take into account, *simultaneously, these three paradigms of knowledge*, which are, the modern, the post-modern, and the narrative, which I prefer to call the narrative of the Peoples of the Sea. It is precisely here, where my proposal comes into play, which is that the discourse on the Caribbean should stop calling itself that and form a more widely based discourse, which, for want of a better name, I have called the new-Atlantic discourse.

Once again I will say that I shall

not repeat my ideas on the New Atlantis here, for they can be found outlined in the brief essay that appears in the catalogue for the exhibition. But I will emphasise that there do exist points of support with which to prepare this new discourse. These points are to be found scattered around the Atlantic, and, besides forming islands, they comprise a network of complex nodules in which Atlantic knowledge is concentrated, at least since the age of discoveries and island conquests, and the beginning of the plantations. What is more, like all networks, the New Atlantis archipelago is connected to masses or forces that pull her, which in our case would be the mainlands of Europe, Africa and America. Up to now, it must be concluded that the strongest tugs have come from Europe. Pierre Chanu, Braudel, and Wallerstein, for example, examine our great archipelago in their excellent works on the Atlantic, but they do it from the a European viewpoint, and particularly with regard to trade and the establishing of an Atlantic economy, within what has come to be called the “European world system” or “world capitalist system”. However, our islands are not as European as even we like to think –perhaps because this is what we were taught in school. They also contain much of America and Africa which tends to be ignored. Moreover, it must be concluded that without the presence of this great archipelago that I imagine –an archipelago of 270,000 km² and 44,000,000 inhabitants– neither Europe, nor Africa, nor America would be what they are today.

What exactly is my proposal?

Firstly, starting from the experience gained in the study of the Caribbean, to observe the patterns of differences that repeat themselves in the Atlantic islands here and there. There are comparable phenomenon which being of public

domain could act as starting points, the consumption of bananas, let us say, or the study of the growth of the plantation, and even, nowadays, the in-depth study of tourism. Even more, in Cuba, for example, when I was a child, the people spoke fearfully of the witchcraft of the Canary Islands. Well, what differences are there between the Canary Islands beliefs or practices, which I know nothing about, and those of the Cape Verde Islands, Haiti, Cuba, etc.? On the other hand, we already know that the Canary Islands lament influenced Cuban and Puerto Rican folklore. But more serious research into the question of rhythm is needed, and this, in itself, would constitute a second stage of study. I am not referring solely to music and dance rhythms, but also the rhythms to be seen in the visual arts, in poetry, in the way of walking and talking. These rhythms, in fact, stem from internal rhythms, secret structures that we all carry within ourselves as socio-cultural implants. If we visit successively London and New York, for example, it is made clear to us that each vibrates with a rhythm of its own. Do there exist island rhythms which bring us closer together, rhythms which pick up the play of the waves with the Atlantic horizon? Intuitively, I would say yes. But only research and discourse can answer this question properly.

[1] Orlando, Cristina, Alicia.

[2] See catalogue text for a brief explanation.

[3] The idea has been presented but not developed. Reunion.

[4] *De allá para acá, de acá para allá* [From there to here, from here to there]. Juan Manuel García Rana.