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*Caribbean  
Discourse*

SELECTED ESSAYS

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*An Exploded Discourse*

THE UNCONSCIOUS, IDENTITY,  
AND METHOD

*Poetics and the Unconscious*

The main idea in this essay is that the Martinican as such is limited by a poetics that is incapable of *realizing* anything from a collective and time-honored body of knowledge. This poetics produces, on the contrary, in fits and starts a kind of pseudoknowledge through which an attempt is made to deny the Other's total and corrosive hold. An anti- (or counter-) poetics. One consequence is that the state of mind created in this way is untenable and that being untenable makes it an exemplary phenomenon, serving as an example, in the modern drama of creolization.

From the point of view of method, this discussion will perhaps be marked by passion and subjectivity, which I feel can be considered as part of the problem. It could end up being obscure, which would perhaps not make me unhappy, if you were willing to be my accomplices in obscurity.

In what "space" and in what way is this poetics articulated?

*Space, Earth, Landscape*

Martinican space is an antispaces, limited to the point of gnawing away at one's being, but diverse enough to multiply it into infinity. It is an island that is like an anthology of landscapes

defined as tropical. But it is not irrelevant to repeat at this point the statement that the Martinican never has the foresight or the unconscious urge to take control of this space. Any group that is limited by the stubborn inability to take control of its surroundings is a threatened group.

The land of suffering is abandoned. The land is not yet loved. The freed slave prefers the area surrounding the towns, where he is marginalized, to working for himself on the land. The land is the other's possession. The poetics of the land cannot then be a poetics of thrift, of patient repossession, of anticipation. It is a poetics of excess, where all is exhausted immediately. That is what was generally referred to when it was said, not so long ago, that we are overgrown children. We know that we must exhaust the rhythms of the land and expose the landscape to those various kinds of madness that they have put in us.

This boundless dimension in the landscape is also true of all the poetics of the New World. If this limitlessness is characteristic of the Americas, it is not so much because of an infinite variety of landscapes as of the fact that no poetics has been derived from their present reality. The solid virtues of the patient peasant are perhaps quickly acquired, but leave traces less quickly. The monster of industrialization has perhaps broken the link with the land (elsewhere), or else it is dispossession that (here in my land) has obliterated the link. But a scream is an act of excessiveness. Our land is excessive. I know, since I can in a few steps take it all in but can never exhaust it.

#### *Our Relationship with the Context*

In such a context, I feel we are faced with a seething inevitability, which does not necessarily make up our collective unconscious but certainly gives it direction. You will pick up a few examples that result from our history, and all of which unleash the counterpoetics that I referred to.

First the slave trade: being snatched away from our original matrix. The journey that has fixed in us the unceasing tug of Africa against which we must paradoxically struggle today in

order to take root in our rightful land. The motherland is also for us the inaccessible land.

Slavery, a struggle with no witnesses from which we perhaps have acquired the taste for repeating words that recall those rasping whispers deep in our throats, in the huts of the implacably silent world of slavery.

The loss of collective memory, the careful erasing of the past, which often makes our calendar nothing more than a series of natural calamities, not a linear progression, and so time keeps turning around in us.

The "liberation" of the slaves created another trauma, which comes from the trap of citizenship granted; that is, conceded; that is, imposed.

The only source of light ultimately was that of the transcendental presence of the Other, of his Visibility—colonizer or administrator—of his transparency fatally proposed as a model, because of which we have acquired a taste for obscurity, and for me the need to seek out obscurity, that which is not obvious, to assert for each community the right to a shared obscurity.

To which other determinant factors, some more useful than others, become attached.

The one and only season, for instance, this rhythmic plain-song, which denies us the pattern of seasonal change, that Western cultures benefit from but which allows us to live not only another rhythm but another notion of time.

The trap of folklore, to whose temptation we are so happy to succumb, relieved as we are thereby of not having to turn our folkloric existence into painful awareness.

Consequently, this is not a minor aspect of our counterpoetics, our lived history, to which we are introduced by our struggle without witnesses, the inability to create even an unconscious chronology, a result of the erasing of memory in all of us. For history is not only absence for us, it is vertigo. This time that was never ours, we must now possess. "We do not see it stretch into our past and calmly take us into tomorrow, but it explodes in us as a compact mass, pushing through a

dimension of emptiness where we must with difficulty and pain put it all *back together*.”

*Expression/Languages*

We see that the residue of our troubled unconscious is deposited in the structures of speech. That excess to which we must become accustomed. The word as uncertainty, the word as whisper, noise, a sonorous barrier to the silence imposed by darkness. The rhythm, continuously repeated because of a peculiar sense of time. Time, which needs to be undated. Opaqueness is a positive value to be opposed to any pseudo-humanist attempt to reduce us to the scale of some universal model. The welcome opaqueness, through which the other escapes me, obliging me to be vigilant whenever I approach. We would have to deconstruct French to make it serve us in all these ways. We will have to structure Creole in order to open it to these new possibilities.

But how do “we use” these languages? What is in our context the relationship with the other (the link to the group) that creates a communal fraternity and authorizes the link with others? This link with the other is itself uncertain, threatened. Our expression suffers as a form of communication.

There has been much comment on the use of antiphrasis in Martinican speech. It appears that the Martinican is afraid of expression that is positive and semiotically straightforward. To my mind, a possible explanation can be found in what I call the phenomenon of immediacy—that is, in this: the fact that the relation to the outside is never filtered for us by exposure to a technical environment. Because he does not know how to handle tools, the Martinican is unwilling to consider expression as a tool. He uses it, therefore, as the ultimate medium and makes it into a strategy for diversion. This allows us to understand how such a “small” people can contain such an overarticulate elite. That is where we must begin. We use ornate expressions and circumlocutions (a diversionary tactic) in order to better demonstrate our real powerlessness. The poetics of Creole uses this ploy of diversion in order to clarify.

The French Caribbean elite apply it to French in order to obfuscate. The word must be mastered. But such a mastery will be insignificant unless it is an integral part of a resolute collective act—a political act.

The counterpoetics I spoke about, and which indeed we never stop referring to at every turn, does not spring spontaneously and innocently from how we express ourselves in everyday communication. It is literally its unconscious rhythm. That is why I call it a counterpoetics. It indicates the instinctive denial that has not yet been structured into a conscious and collective refusal.

Rather than carrying on endlessly about this, which would be a pleasant possibility but not a practical one here, I prefer to illustrate this counterpoetics with a small study I did of the deformation of an inscription that is put on automobiles. I will offer my impressions, as a writer involved in this venture and not as a specialist who is elaborating an argument. I will try to summarize a few points of this study.

*Creolization*

This concerns the warning (printed on a sticker): “NE ROULEZ PAS TROP PRÈS” distributed by the road safety association. Statistics show (we should distrust them) that approximately 20 percent of Martinican drivers have stuck it to the rear windshield of their cars, after collecting this sticker when they pick up their cars. About 20 percent of the latter make some adjustment, if necessary using scissors, to this command “NE ROULEZ PAS TROP PRÈS” by creolizing it.

What is interesting is the number and the significance of the variations in rewriting this warning. I must point out that the drivers have as reference the expression in French and that consequently the variations are extremely revealing. Here are a few: (1) “PAS ROULEZ TROP PRÈS.” I note that in Martinican Creole one ought to be able to write: “PAS ROULE TRO PRE.” The significance of doing without the *s* in “pas,” the *z* in “roulez,” the *p* in “trop,” and the *s* in “près” is great, and is not only related to the phonetic transcription, but to the very

structure of Creole. We can therefore identify a certain number of examples, ten out of a total twenty-five, with "PAS ROULEZ TROP PRÈS." We also find: (2) "PAS ROULEZ TROP PRÉ"; (3) "PAS ROULÉ TROP PRÈS"; (4) "PAS ROULÉ TROP PRÉ"; (5) "ROULEZ PAS TROP PRÈS." This last variation is extremely Creole (it affirms the command and warns you, before modifying it with the limiting negative), and that is a more significant manipulation of the expression than simply removing a few letters.

There are also some dramatic variations. That is, the individual can cut several stickers and amuse himself by combining them. So you can get: (6) "OU TROP PRÉ." Which is not a warning but an aggressive command. I have also picked out: (7) "PAS OULE TRO PRE," in which the *r* in "roulez" has disappeared. I will comment on this version later. Finally we find: (8) "ROULEZ," which is the opposite of the original warning. And one of these stickers even exclaimed: (9) "ROULEZ PAPA!"

This example of a counterpoetics is valuable. First, keep in mind that we are dealing with people who have cars and not with dispossessed peasants. When we are considering these variations, we cannot therefore put them down to ignorance. Second, Creole really appears to be derived from French. Third, there is evidence of deliberate cultural opposition to, if not the established order, at least the order as given. Fourth, there is a noticeable variety in these formulations, with a marked preference for the expression "PAS ROULEZ TROP PRÈS," with no change in the French spelling. The version "PA OULE TRO PRE" intrigued me. It was at the exit of a Monoprix discount department store. And it was a mixed couple, this time a young Frenchman recently arrived in Martinique and who had married (or lived with) a Martinican female. Because he had been told (or he had noticed) that Martinicans do not pronounce the *r*, he had reduced the sticker to "PA OULE TRO PRE." It is an extremely interesting example not only of a French formulation but of the interference of a French formula. The belief that it is necessary to suppress the *r* because Martinicans do not pronounce it is a ludicrous mistake. Mili-

tant promoters of Creole have nevertheless taken the same approach; in many cases they suppress the *r* and replace it with a *w*, for example. So they will write *pawol* for the Creole equivalent to the French *parole*. Even if this *w* seems valid (almost all the writers replace *moin* with *mwin*), it introduces an extra difficulty in reading that I do not feel is justified.

Let us summarize the conclusions to this rather rough inquiry. This is an example of counterpoetics: a silly exercise; an attempt to escape the French language by using variations, neither agreed on nor thought through; the inability to settle a common way of writing; subversion of the original meaning; opposition to an order originating elsewhere; creation of a "counterorder."

#### *Caribbeaness*

What do such practices reveal? Naturally, the ambiguities of the relationship between Creole and French, to which we will return presently. But also for the community an awareness of the ambiguity, and that therein lies a problem that has to be solved. And, if the Martinican intuitively grasps the ambiguity of both his relationship with French and his relationship with Creole—the imposed language and the deposed language respectively—it is perhaps because he has the unconscious sense that a basic dimension is missing in his relation to time and space, and that is the Caribbean dimension. As opposed to the unilateral relationship with the Metropolis, the multidimensional nature of the diverse Caribbean. As opposed to the constraints of one language, the creation of self-expression.

The islands of the Caribbean, no matter how idealistic such an assertion appears today, are in the world of the Americas no less of an entity, threatened before coming to light, conceived only by intellectuals and not yet taken into account by the people. It is no less true to say that this is the framework, the support, that would ensure the domination of uncertainty and ambiguity. What interests us now is the possibility for the Caribbean people, whether Creole-speaking, francophone, anglophone, or hispanophone, to attempt the

same process beyond the languages spoken, a process that is related to expression. Let us then examine this problematic of self-expression.

*Self-Expression*

There are, as we have seen, no languages or language spoken in Martinique, neither Creole nor French, that have been “naturally” developed by and for us Martinicans because of our experience of collective, proclaimed, denied, or seized responsibility at all levels. The official language, French, is not the people’s language. This is why we, the elite, speak it so correctly. The language of the people, Creole, is not the language of the nation. I do not simply mean that Creole is the victim of the conditions of its existence, but that because of that, Creole has not been able so far to reflect on itself—neither as popular wisdom nor as a conscious decision by the elite; that Creole falls short of its potential; that perhaps in the host of proverbs and sayings that it communicates, at least in Martinique, there is none to provoke the sort of turning of language on itself, that critical or mocking attitude to its glossary or syntax that causes a language, literally or by reflection, to become a form of self-expression.<sup>1</sup> Creole is also a concession made by the Other for his own purposes in his dealings

1. *On the other hand*, we often take great pleasure in ridiculing our use of the French language. As in this popular refrain (in 1977) in the dance halls when a woman dancing the tango whispers (ungrammatically, with respect to French):

Quand je danse la tango  
je me sens tourdir  
j’ai envie de vomir  
ma pié me font mal  
j’ai lasse.

This play on the original form of expression is not given in the Creole text. Furthermore, it uses the creolization of the French text to produce the bilingual play. A metalinguistics (insofar as it is an analysis of grammar, etc.) could not compensate for such a deficiency, but rather simply risks rationalizing it. Self-scrutiny emerges from the constant exercise of responsibility, first and foremost. It is perhaps political before being “linguistic.”

with our world. We have seized this concession to use it for our own purposes, just as our suffering in this tiny country has made it, not our property, but our only possible advantage in our dealings with the Other—but having seized it does not make it into a means of self-expression, nor has our only advantage become a nation.

They claim there is no real bilingualism in the French Lesser Antilles because the Creole language is nothing more than a deformation of French. The dilemma is really that we note the absence of both a responsible use of the two languages and a collective exercise in self-expression. What is called bilingualism finds here a rather special manifestation. We are collectively spoken by our words much more than we use them, whether these words are French or Creole, and whether each individual can handle them properly or not.<sup>2</sup>

Our problem is therefore not to create an awareness of an obvious linguistic phenomenon—Creole—that could have preceded the disfiguring influence of French and would await the moment of its rebirth. Creole was not, in some idyllic past, and is not yet our national language. To claim that Creole has always been our national language is to even further obscure, in this triumphant version, the disturbing self-doubt that is the source of our insecurity but that also establishes our presence. We know that for Creole to have the chance of becoming the national language of Martinicans, such a complete change in structures would be required that it is idle to talk about it at this time. We also know that such a promotion of Creole could not result from a decision made by the elite. We know, ultimately, that at that time the ambiguity of the relationship of French to Creole would disappear and that each Martinican would have access to the sociocultural means of using French without a sense of alienation, of speaking Creole without feeling confined by its limitations.

2. That is why one of our most frequently used rhetorical strategies is that of association: one word releasing through assonance or by inner logic a series of other words, and so on.

On the other hand, the definition of a common form of expression beyond the languages used, in keeping with the reality of a multilingual Caribbean, is, in my opinion, now possible through a kind of intellectual and necessarily elitist choice.

A popular revolution would certainly make Martinique an integral part of the Caribbean, and, by freeing us from an antipoetics, would allow the Martinican people to choose either one of the two languages they use, or to combine them into a new form of expression. But in the more embattled present circumstances, the challenge of an antipoetics, deliberately creating new forms of expression, with a more limiting, less developed, less free function, would allow us from this very moment to engage in the quest for self-expression and prepare for the future.

Our aim is to forge for ourselves, by either one of these not necessarily mutually exclusive ways, and based on the defective grasp of two languages whose control was never collectively mastered, a form of expression through which we could consciously face our ambiguities and fix ourselves firmly in the uncertain possibilities of the word made ours.

We must, however, in formulating this alternative that questions the past, take note of the use of Creole in popular protest movements. Such an activity, in fact, releases Creole from its irresponsibility and makes it into a weapon in its own struggle. But the world lives its history too quickly; we do not have the time to slowly "meditate" on Creole. All the people together or an elitist group, liberated poetics or defiant antipoetics, we must force self-expression into existence because it does not have the time to mature through some slow evolution. Perhaps we do not have the time to wait for the precious linguists. When they catch up with us, it could well be to explore the traces of what has already happened.

Like a strange planet, self-expression beckons. For those who have never seen words bloom, the first articulations are unpromising and clumsy. The second will be daring and selective. If this does not happen, we will not have a voice. I mean

that passion would preserve us from a concern for minutiae—inevitable, perhaps, but easily avoided—that would allow us perhaps to "study" the Creole language, but by depriving it of its own sense of organization. A systematic linguistics can uselessly entangle a threatened language.

#### *Identity*

This is what I call cultural identity. An identity on its guard, in which the relationship with the Other shapes the self without fixing it under an oppressive force. That is what we see everywhere in the world: each people wants to declare its own identity.

#### *The Space, the Poetics*

Is there anywhere else in the world where such human waste takes place and that the world has no time to notice? Not great catastrophes that are like monumental phenomena in the history of the world, but the shadowy accretions of misfortune, the unseen erosion of a cornered people, the unnoticed disappearance, the slow loss of identity, the suffering without consequence?

If we posit that the issue of this collective and silent death must be removed from the economic dimension, if we argue that it can only be dealt with on the political level, it also seems that poetics, the implicit or explicit manipulation of self-expression, is at the same time the only weapon that memory has against this human waste and the only place to shed light on it, both in terms of an awareness of our place in the world and our reflection on the necessary and disalienated relationship with the Other. To declare one's own identity is to write the world into existence.

If, therefore, when we deal with our own history, we adopt (we Caribbean people) the various European languages and adapt them, no one will teach us how to do this. We will perhaps be the ones to teach others a new poetics and, leaving behind the poetics of not-knowing (counterpoetics), will initiate others into a new chapter in the history of mankind. In-

deed, we may be the ones (except in the eventuality of some monolithic language that suddenly descends and covers over all our countries<sup>3</sup>) who will fuse, one with the other, these new forms of expression through our combined poetics, and far removed from abstract universality, with the fertile yet difficult relationship with our willed, collective need for obscurity.

3. For instance, a "universal English": *francophonie* is also built around (that is beyond our concerns) the obsession with such domination. The linguistic imperialisms of the West continue to struggle for control *through us*.

*On the Teaching of Literatures*

We are dealing in this instance with literatures in French from outside of France. Teaching them poses a problem, especially at the university level. The temptation is great to treat them as parallel to French literature and to draw limiting conclusions from the comparison. I have had occasion to protest against some assertions, curiously enough advanced by the very ones whose mission ought to have been to fight for these literatures. Here are a few of them.

*These are not literatures that allow a human being to understand himself and to be himself.*

This is not, sir, the "humanist" objective of these literatures. If you take "understand himself" to mean rediscovering one's *raison d'être* in the world, these literary works certainly have their contribution to make. We do, yes, opt for indulging one's individuality. Such luxuries are open only to those who know who they are and are not alienated from themselves.

*The lecturer will describe as classics works that are not.*

The idea of a "classic," pertinent in the context of European literatures, comes from teaching a "cumulative" notion of cultures. A people's quest for themselves is an equally absorbing object of scrutiny. The false starts and the fumbblings will be discounted later.

*We are using an instrument (the vehicle of communication) that does not correspond completely to who we are.*

To say that is to dignify a language beyond its due. In our present world, the equivalence between self and language is an aberration that disguises the reality of dominance. Let us challenge the latter with the weapon of self-expression: our relationship with language, or languages which we use.

*The individual (in our countries) is painfully divided between two cultures.*