SARGASSO Interview

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Interview

Warrior of the Imaginary:
A Conversation with Patrick Chamoiseau

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JCC: Do you think that créolité, as a cultural project and imaginary, opens up a path towards the Caribbeanization of culture in the Antilles?

PC: Yes, that is, the concept of créolité allows us to understand the Caribbean, its heterogeneous nature, its diversity and multiplicity, something which has quite baffled the region’s scholars. They ask where the logic or the coherence within such an overwhelming, ubiquitous diversity is. From the paradigm of créolité we may better understand the profound unity hidden beneath the Caribbean’s apparent diversity. And not only the Caribbean, but the formation of all the Americas depends on a process of creolization, which is the massive and accelerated convergence of the world’s vast anthropological diversity: languages, races, cultures, etc. First and foremost, we should understand that the notions of créolité and creolization allow us to apprehend a unity concealed under the region’s diversity, and that both notions are connected within the generalized process of creolization that constituted the Americas. What happened when Columbus arrived here? This is the moment when the world effectively becomes interrelated, triggering a process of interaction and retroaction among different peoples, races, etc., a process which constituted the Americas. This general process of creolization resulted in the emergence of various créolités—Puerto Rican, Cuban or Martinican créolité—born out of the same process but at the same time different, due to
their specific anthropological components, their history, and other contingencies.

What we now need is, therefore, an anthropology of creolization. Faced with such a massive amalgam of cultural codes, peoples, ethnicities, and languages, we need to know how they combine themselves. What has remained? Why do certain cultural traits survive while others don’t? We still don’t really know the answer to these questions. Anthropological research during the 1950s insistently explored African cultural retentions, but we still can’t tell why certain African elements survived in some particular places and not in others. Furthermore, this anthropology of creolization would allow us to understand what is going on in the world today. The whole world has become part of a creolization process, one which will be best understood through the conscientious study of the various créolités in the Caribbean and Creole America.

Personally, I create an interactive loophole between Creoleness and creolization: the various créolités allow me to understand creolization, and creolization allows me to better understand the créolités. When we become aware of this loophole, and when we embrace an imaginary which, for the moment, we may call an imaginary of creolization, we may best explore the reality of the Caribbean and the Americas; we are more adept at configuring the immense amalgam which constitutes the Caribbean and Creole America. Thus, as a starting point, these two terms, Creoleness/creolization, are fundamental to the study of the Americas.

There is a third essential term, and it is Glissant who best explains it, which is the notion of “Relation,” with a capital “r.” He speaks of entering into Relation with others. A sufficient understanding of the dynamics between Creoleness and creolization, an inexhaustible subject, opens our minds to the concept of Relation. This concept allows us to understand that our space of creation, reflection, participation, and contact is no longer restricted to an insular or regional scale but takes place on a global level instead. We need to identify ways in which we may exist in a whole-world scale and scenario. This is what Glissant refers to by “Relation.” We are now at this fundamental stage.

In their reciprocally illuminating dynamics, Creoleness and creolization offer the keys to penetrate the paradigm of Relation, to embrace it as a privileged vision of ourselves and our world. For today, even if we try to picture a collective Caribbean organization, or even a pan-American organization, it cannot be conceived beyond mechanisms of interaction and solidarity with
the rest of the world. From now on, this is the scale at which we must construct ourselves and our communities.

Moreover, the intrinsic diversity of the Caribbean is of particular interest when we make the necessary comparison between the Caribbean Sea and the Mediterranean. Glissant states that the Mediterranean was characterized by its ability to condense, thus producing the world’s largest monotheist religions, while the Caribbean is characterized by its ability to diffract. The Caribbean embraces diversity, but this doesn’t necessarily place us in a privileged position to understand Relation because, when we live surrounded by relativism, diversity, and conflict, we feel the need to anchor ourselves in atavism and ancestry. This desire gave birth to the grand postulates of Negritude which simplified racism, the racism of a white caste, for example. These forms of racism still endure, and they prevent us from being fully conscious of our diversity. Even when we consciously recognize this diversity, we fail to perceive the dialectic relation between a diversity which unifies and that unity which cannot be understood except in the awareness of diversity. These notions are fundamental.

JCC: In that respect, Trinidadians of Indian descent become Creole subjects even if they only marry among themselves or are brought up within a relatively enclosed “East Indian” community.

PC: Yes, given the fact that there is no culture which is not hybrid or mixed. That is, every culture must be considered as survival software. A human community constructs, on a limited scale, epistemic and survival software in order to live and get by within its particular environment. This survival software is passed on to later generations through gods, rituals, traditions, and other practices. Thus, cultures are like tools for knowing the world one lives in, but they are tools which exclude and isolate as well, because cultures construct their own absolutes and values. Within a culture, I have my god. If another god wants to cross into my delimited space, I could not accept it because I have my own god. So, it is in the very nature of culture to simultaneously enable and impede my knowledge of the world.

But all cultures fundamentally use what they find in their surroundings to shape themselves. Therefore, when two tribes or societies confront each other, even if they fight they will likely borrow from each other. Thus, there has always been cultural hybridization. In all great ancient civilizations, there
were always channels for social and commercial interchange. The difference between these interaction processes and creolization is that the first took place throughout a period of thousands of years, making their evolution and results almost imperceptible. Whereas colonization is a comparatively sudden shock, an explosion: in a brutal manner, Europeans, Amerindians, and Africans find themselves entangled in the plantations [...]. When we consider the massive and accelerated nature of this interaction of diversity within the colonial plantation, we see that it is not that different from what is taking place in the world today.

In the contemporary world, the processes of contact among diverse populations, of hybridization and interaction, unfold in brutal and violent ways. We don’t have the time to stand back and take it all in; everything gets to us so fast through the television . . . and that makes the whole difference. In the past, societies in contact have also produced mestizaje, but creolization goes beyond mere hybridization (although it is part of it). Creolization is chaotic, a disorder with unforeseen consequences. Hybridization is predictable, due to the fact that it involves what could be considered two absolutes: an absolute A mixes with an absolute B with more or less expected results. Whereas we can’t tell beforehand what will be the result of creolization; it could be all sorts of things. For example, Césaire is a product of creolization. He presents a black, African phenotype, but he is a Western humanist. In a similar manner, we see that the best scholars of the Hindu world in Martinique are chabins, and the best specialists on Africa are often mulattnes. The consequences of creolization are impossible to ascertain.

Therefore, the sphere of creolization is equally a space of hybridization, crossbreeding, rupture, racism, and of complex anthropological components. For example, here in Martinique the békés remain together; they don’t want to mix themselves, or form part of a larger synthesis. Thus, you become aware that creolization is not an ideal, harmonious process. It is rather chaos and disorder, a disorder we may also see today at a global level.

On a global scale, Relation will also produce chaos. There will always be manifestations of ethnic or racial fundamentalisms, religious fundamentalisms, or sectarian nationalisms because every time we are plunged into a whirlpool of diversity and alterity, we feel the need to seek shelter within ancient atavistic structures. Therefore, we should expect numerous conflicts to continue arising from the current unfolding of creolization and Relation at a global scale; it seems inevitable.
This is why I often say that I am a warrior of the imaginary, for such a warrior is the one who may remain alert in the face of such chaotic circumstances. This figure does not imply any aggressive or dominant agenda; this is a very pacific warrior. What defines this warrior is his or her constant alertness and vigilance, his or her will to remain always on guard, according to the unfolding events. Within the space of Relation and creolization, we must embrace a warrior imaginary. This entails giving the utmost importance to the fact that today we must try to preserve all cultures, that all that diversity is the true wealth of the world. This diversity will, however, continue to provoke conflicting processes of solidarity and antagonism, of synthesis, hybridization, and rupture. It will be hard to live in these conflictive spaces, unless one possesses an imaginary of Relation, and towards this end I’ve made myself a warrior of the imaginary.

JCC: Your most ambitious novel, *Biblique des derniers gestes*, tellingly opposes “the buried country” with “the official country.” Could you explain the specific way in which you are using these terms?

PC: The buried country is everything which plantation society produced in terms of traditional popular culture; thus it stands for all Creole culture.

JCC: Like medical practices?

PC: Medical practices and also, in a way, music. Thus, every element of popular culture produced under the system of slavery was gradually rejected in favor of French culture. Obviously, you must have noticed how, everything here is mostly French on the surface, like when you turn on the radio or the TV. There is a general regard of French culture, which responds mostly to French-Occidental values, and everything that comes from the deepest recesses of our country is buried, just as the memory of slavery is buried. In general, people here don’t want to hear about slavery. They would say, yes, we know all that. So even *that* is buried within ourselves. You see, there is a part of us which is generally underestimated, and so it is not appreciated or celebrated but buried within ourselves. It is here, in my opinion, where the true emancipation must start. We must begin by exhuming those cultural values; and not in order to find refuge there, or to find solace in a belated traditionalism, but exhuming them in order to better position ourselves vis-à-vis the whole world. I try to make that distinction very clear.
JCC: And the official country?

PC: The official country is, then, all that official French culture; and it is also a kind of illusion which aims to make us believe that only since becoming a département we have gained access to progress and reached self-fulfillment, that existence as a département is our best option. The official country is made of all the beliefs and illusions which constitute our system of dependency, the welfare state, and collective irresponsibility. Those politicians in the Conseille Général or the Conseille Régional have the impression that they control everything in Martinique, even our destinies, while in fact they control very little. And most people still believe that the only way we can exist in the world is under the present conditions: dependent on France, under French protection and assistantship. This creates something like an official second skin, the official country with its subordinated imaginary, the imaginary of dependency and welfare that create something like a second skin covering the deeper realities of our country.

JCC: It seems obvious to me that the capitalist modernization of our islands has, among other things, produced the cultural burials and dislocations you have just described.

PC: Yes, that is — It's true that colonization here meant genocide and "ethnocide;" it's also true that today the world is threatened by the forces of standardization and homogenization; that seems obvious. On the other hand, the contemporary world presents two contradictory trends. Glissant distinguishes between globalization (mondialisation) and globalness (mondialité).

Globalization corresponds to a neo-liberal vision of a uniform and homogeneous world that threatens traditional human progress. We must take into account this neo-liberal discourse, this finance capitalism intent on acquiring a global space and market for its operations, which together produce the concept of globalization. At the same time, though, people throughout the world become increasingly aware of their distinct existence and of their diversity. In this respect, Glissant speaks of a globalness movement (mondialité) as corresponding to the consciousness that we all live in a global space, and that this world contains a multiplicity of languages, cultures, and peoples. When we witness the anti-globalization movement, we see that it
consists of people coming from everywhere in the world, conscious of their existence and above all conscious that theirs is a common struggle.

So there are two opposing movements: one towards homogenization and the contestation of diversity, the other towards the celebration and affirmation of diversity. We have no choice but to balance ourselves between those two poles; this does not mean that the struggle is futile. We must fight, but let us take note of Heraclitus who long ago observed that contraries can’t be separated. Therefore, every time that the forces of homogenization and standardization advance, the consciousness and the need for diversity will grow accordingly. All our existence within Relation will show this interaction between uniformity and diversity.

JCC: Do you think that cultural transformation, while inevitable, could signify a process of accretion and continuity, rather than a process of erasure and substitution?

PC: Glissant has an insightful saying that goes: “I may change when I open myself to interaction with others, without losing myself or distorting myself in the process.” (Je peux changer en échangeant sans me perdre ou me dénaturer.) That is, we may safely experience the world’s diversity. I believe that while defending my culture, my Creole language, and my self-inscription in Martinique, I am also the beneficiary of all other cultures and languages, of everything that human beings have ever produced. What is, in fact, all of the world’s diversity? It comes from a small group of Homo sapiens that, at a given moment, dared to create the first expressions of globalization. That is, they burst through the world’s ensemble, and suddenly found themselves isolated, each group enclosed within its own logic, each group creating its culture, its language, its gods, its absolutes.

Today, such absolutes are in crisis. The doors have been opened, so that absolutes meet each other and clash. The problem lies in understanding that those creations are our treasure, because all those cultural and anthropological absolutes have, nevertheless, produced wonders: linguistic, artistic, spiritual wonders, which belong to all of us because they have all been produced by us, by Homo sapiens.

The difference today is that many among those who resent Western domination and standardization will tend to confine themselves within their particular wonders, and reject [any external influence or presence]. But this

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involves becoming entangled in a process of asphyxia. Our solution cannot be rejecting the wonders of others. Even if the West is the greatest predator on Earth, there are magnificent wonders to be gained from our Occidental dimension, and it would be a pity to deprive ourselves of them. The difficulty lies in opening ourselves to the world without losing that which defines us and, at the same time, enriching ourselves with all the wonders that the world offers.

If I defend my Creole tongue, I do it in the name of all languages. I defend my culture in the name of all cultures because I need them as well. Ultimately, I personalize the Amerindian saying—'I can’t remember if it was the Apaches or the Sioux—'I am the guardian of the Creole tongue; I am the guardian of Creole culture.' Like you, you are the guardian of Puerto Rican culture, etc., because we are the repositories of a treasure that we must place within our common lot. We are each responsible for our treasure. This is important.

The other fundamental consideration is that we cannot exist on a global plane but from a particular space; we cannot live in an abstract ‘never land.’ This place [a particular place] usually corresponds to your native land. In my case, it is Martinique, but I believe that from now on people will be able to choose their native land. I mean that, under the influence of Relation, someone born in Puerto Rico could come to Martinique and feel at home that they would say: ‘this is where I belong’ and so Martinique would become their native land. Your place represents the space from which you organize your existence and your struggles in the world. It could be your native land or any other country in the world.

Thus, we may choose our native land; and in the following years we will see that, although emigrants at this moment seem to be all converging towards the most developed countries, migration waves will become more determined by the spreading of the imaginary of Relation than by economic motivations. That is, some people will leave the United States to live in the Marquise Islands, and those from the Marquise Islands may move to Japan. Everybody around the world will be searching for their native land, the place where they feel more at ease and most fulfilled; where they will be in a better position to experience the world. By doing so, we will free ourselves from those territorial, ontological, or racial absolutes and adopt a new perspective. The fact that my skin is black doesn’t mean that I feel closer to African writers, for example. I am closer to any white writer from the Caribbean, due to
our similar imaginaries, than to an African writer, despite my sense of solidarity and my ties to Africa. I am closer to any hispanophone or anglophone writer from the Caribbean than to any French writer. The mere act of writing in French does not determine my belonging to French literature. I belong to the literature of Creole America. This is a fundamental principle.

We must understand that the great communities of writers and artists will be determined, not by the traditional signs of identity—skin color, language, gods, and place of birth—but by the structure of our imaginary. If someone is a writer from Martinique, it doesn’t necessarily follow that he will be my brother in letters. My brother in literature may be born in Japan, Puerto Rico, France, or Germany. Now, it is a particular rapport with the world, and with the world’s diversity, which ultimately determines our loyalties and our sense of belonging to a human community. The rest of it, all those ancient signs of identity—race, language, history, territory—all that is going to break into pieces.

JCC: In *Biblique des derniers gestes*, Balthazar Bodule-Jules laments how Martinique has been trapped under neocolonial conditions: “encayé sous un néocolonialisme.” Does that imply that Antillean culture cannot follow the path of a Caribbeanist or a Creolisté without political independence?

PC: No. I think that Balthazar Bodule-Jules is the ancient rebel, and I make a precise distinction between the rebel and the warrior. The rebel depends on that which he is fighting against. That is, we witnessed this at the time of the African independences during the sixties, when the leaders and nationalists inverted the terms of subjection. They replaced one dominant class with another. We see how independent African states like the Congo remain subjected. Seventy-five per cent of all the Congo’s wealth is still being absorbed by well-established French companies.

Thus, we notice how the rebel does not frontally engage the dynamics of domination and just inverts the dynamics of power. So in a way he depends on that which he fights against. At the opening of *Biblique des derniers gestes*, Balthazar Bodule-Jules is a rebel. He lives in subordination, and he wants to invert the terms of that subjection. The warrior is a different story. As a rebel, Bodule-Jules will try to liberate his country. In the process, he becomes aware of the fact that he is failing. Why have liberation movements failed in our countries?
Those countries who freed themselves from colonialism, such as Vietnam, Algeria, and those countries in Africa, possessed an absolute with which they opposed the conqueror’s absolute because these are atavistic countries with very ancient traditions. In their situation, the colonialist had said, “My language, my skin, my god is the most beautiful;” and they just answered back, “No, it is my language, my skin . . .” One absolute was trying to dispel another absolute.

Our situation in the Caribbean is more complicated because we were born under colonial conditions. Those who were here before us, the Amerindians, were mostly the victims of genocide. This means that when today we want to occupy our sovereign place in the world, the colonizer lives within us, the French live within us; Africa is within us, the West is within us. We cannot claim a cultural hinterland, an atavism which we may throw at the face of our masters . . .

JCC: A foundational myth?

PC: We don’t have a foundational myth, and that made it difficult. And this is what leads us back to the figure of the warrior. Balthazar Bodule-Jules notices that all his efforts as a rebel have failed, that such rebellion is not working. Even those who free themselves from colonial subjection fail to emancipate their spirit, their imaginary. At the moment of his death, he becomes a warrior. In effect, he is going to understand that the paths towards liberation have changed. The issue is not inverting the terms of domination, but changing the nature of the battleground.

JCC: The rules of the game.

PC: The rules of the game. For example, here we have a Creole language dominated by the French language. The rebel is going to say, “I now place Creole at the top and discard French.” He inverts the terms of domination. On the other hand, the warrior says, “No language shall dominate over another. I’m going to try to construct a multi-linguistic imaginary for my children, so that from an early age on they develop a taste for all languages. This new imaginary will allow them to feel comfortable with many languages and to imaginatively experience a desire, a respect, a taste for all languages in the world.” If we achieve this, we will have saved all languages. If my child
listens to many languages and lives in a multilingual space since early childhood, he is going to defend Creole, but he is also going to defend other languages because he will know that no language can save itself in isolation. The English language which is now the hegemonic language in the world is not Shakespeare's language. It dominates to such a degree that it is in the process of degenerating into a technico-commercial code very distant from the richness, beauty, and depth of Shakespeare's language. Then, we become aware that in cultural processes and in processes of self-discovery and affirmation, absolute hegemony and vertical domination produce disintegration. What must be celebrated instead is cross-cultural enrichment. No language or culture can be saved in isolation. We all need one another; no individual person today may reach fulfillment without entering in Relation with others.

I firmly believe that here, we stand for an anthropological, collective, and historical entity which needs its sovereignty. We cannot renounce our sovereignty. On the other hand, this does not mean that we should therefore build a nation-state. I cannot guarantee what shape this sovereignty will take, or what possible forms the newly constructed could take. It might not follow the model of a Nation-State. Nevertheless, we cannot renounce our right to a full autonomy, to a full responsibility, a full sovereignty within the world. We can't renounce that.

JCC: Could you predict an ideal scenario for these cultural processes to unfold?

PC: What I am after, and this is probably what's behind all my work and behind Glissant's work, is the project of inserting the Relational imaginary in people's consciousness; making them understand as clearly as possible that, if such an imaginary becomes widespread, it will produce the new politicians, and generate the new administrative and political structures. I am, like you, troubled by the thought of what the State will be like in the XXI century. I certainly don't want to see the consolidation and triumph of the neo-liberal system. So we must fight to prevent that system from imposing its views.

Certainly, no people or community should renounce the right to a sovereign existence in the world, but we must still identify its specific configurations. If we try to find ready-made remedies too quickly, before first letting the poetic of Relation pervade us, we could make many mistakes. At the moment, we must try to impregnate ourselves with the imaginary of Relation,
which is capable of producing new solutions and new models for our political and administrative needs.

JCC: Without forcing the events...

PC: Well, yes, there are obvious accelerations. Here, the status quo appears to be solid. People have found their comfort zone in dependency and in the welfare state, but maybe in a few years we will see an explosion. Besides, the potential of art as an instrument of change is incredible. Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, published during the 1930s altered everything: our rapport with Africa, our rapport with our skin... While no one really read the *Cahier*, it was nevertheless part of all decolonization movements of the 1960s. The *Cahier* is such a difficult text that even when we read it we can hardly understand it. Thus, you can see how the power of art, or how aesthetic and artistic knowledge can modify people's psyches and minds, and produce unexpected events, volcanic eruptions. I have great faith in the powers of aesthetic and artistic consummation.