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The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?

Author(s): Derek Walcott

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DEREK WALCOTT

*Director, Trinidad Theatre Resort*

*Port-of-Spain, Trinidad*

*THE CARIBBEAN:*

*Culture or Mimicry?*

We live in the shadow of an America that is economically benign yet politically malevolent. That malevolence, because of its size, threatens an eclipse of identity, but the shadow is as inescapable as that of any previous empire. But we were American even while we were British, if only in the geographical sense, and now that the shadow of the British Empire has passed through and over us in the Caribbean, we ask ourselves if, in the spiritual or cultural sense, we must become American. We have broken up the archipelago into nations, and in each nation we attempt to assert characteristics of the national identity. Everyone knows that these are pretexts of power if such power is seen as political. This is what the politician would describe as reality, but the reality is absurd. In the case of my own identity, or my realness if you like, it is an absurdity that I can live with; being both American and West Indian is an ambiguity without a crisis, for I find that the more West Indian I become, the more I can accept my dependence on America as

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a professional writer, not because America owes me a living from historical guilt, nor that it needs my presence, but because we share this part of the world, and have shared it for centuries now, even as conqueror and victim, as exploiter and exploited. What has happened here has happened to us. In other words that shadow is less malevolent than it appears, and we can absorb it because we know that America is black, that so much of its labor, its speech, its music, its very style of living is generated by what is now cunningly and carefully isolated as "black" culture, that what is most original in it has come out of its ghettos, its river-cultures, its plantations. Power itself is ephemeral, unstable. It is the least important aspect of any culture, who rules.

So, in the Caribbean, we do not pretend to exercise power in the historical sense. I think that what our politicians define as power, the need for it, or the lack of it should have another name; that, like America, what energizes our society is the spiritual force of a culture shaping itself, and it can do this without the formula of politics.

To talk about the contribution of the black man to American culture or civilization is absurd, because it is the black who energized that culture, who styles it, just as it is the black who preserved and energized its faith. The most significant experience in America's recent past is this revolution, and it is a revolution that was designed by the poets and intellectuals of our powerless archipelago, by West Indians like Garvey, Cesaire, Fanon, Padmore, and Stokely if you wish, and so our definitions of power must go beyond the immediately political. We can see this and still keep distinctions. In fact it is only because these leaders could make distinctions that they could see the necessity for certain actions. And that is what I mean by being both West Indian and American. This is not schizophrenia. Remember our experience of different empires. Those experiences have been absorbed. To us, in many ways, America is a young country, and that is why the metaphor exists in the minds of every revolutionary. Many of us in the Caribbean still hold the ideal of the archipelago, just as you here hold to the

metaphor named America. If I speak in the tone of metaphor among men who are more practical in their approach to problems, it is because I do not think that as men of the Americas, we are different. Our society may be less complex. It is obviously powerless. What I hope to explore is that society's validity, its reality.

To begin with, we are poor. That gives us a privilege. The poor always claim intimacy with God over the rich. Emergent countries simplify man's political visions in like manner because they are reduced to essentials. Like faith, it remains the American problem, how to be rich and still good, how to be great and exercise compassion.

Perhaps powerlessness leaves the Third World, the ex-colonial world, no alternative but to imitate those systems offered to or forced on it by the major powers, their political systems which must alter their common life, their art, their language, their philosophy. On the other hand, the bitterness of the colonial experience, its degradations of dependency and its cynicism of older "values" tempts the Third World with spiritual alternatives. These alternatives will be violent, the total rejection through revolution, for example, or cunning, or conservative, by which I mean the open assimilation of what is considered from the metropolitan center to be most useful. But whichever method is applied, it is obvious that the metamorphosis is beginning. Large sections of the population of this earth have nothing to lose after their history of slavery, colonialism, famine, economic exploitation, patronage, contempt. But the tragedy is that most of its politicians are trapped in the concept of a world proposed by those who rule it, and these politicians see progress as inevitability. They have forgotten the desperate authority of the man who has nothing. In that sense Naipaul is right, that their mimicry of power defrauds their own people. Such politicians insist on describing potential in the same terms as those whom they must serve; they talk to us in the bewildering code of world markets, and so forth. They use, in short, the calculus of contemporary history, and that gives them and us the illusion that we really contribute to the destiny of

mankind, to foreign policy. We align ourselves to this bloc or that, to that way of life or the other, and it is this tiredness, which falls so quickly on the powerless, that horrifies Naipaul; but the truth is that there is something else going on, that this is not the force of the current, and that its surface may be littered with the despairs of broken systems and of failed experiments, that the river, stilled, may reflect, mirror, mimic other images, but that is not its depth.

It could not be. You see, the degradations have already been endured; they have been endured to the point of irrelevancy. In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it was sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention.

The phrase "the mimic men," which so many English-speaking West Indian intellectuals have so eagerly, almost masochistically taken to themselves, originates in the East Indian novelist Vidia Naipaul, who uses it as the title for one of his novels. Mr. Naipaul's epitaph on all West Indian endeavor has not aborted the passion with which West Indian culture continues to procreate this mimicry, because life, if we can call it that in the archipelago, defiantly continues.

To mimic, one needs a mirror, and, if I understand Mr. Naipaul correctly, our pantomime is conducted before a projection of ourselves which in its smallest gestures is based on metropolitan references. No gesture, according to this philosophy, is authentic, every sentence is a quotation, every movement either ambitious or pathetic, and because it is mimicry, uncreative. The indictment is crippling, but, like all insults, it contains an astonishing truth. The only thing is that it is not, to my mind, only the West Indies which is being insulted by Naipaul, but all endeavor in this half of the world, in broader definition: the American endeavor.

I use the word American regardless of genetic variety and origin. Once the meridian of European civilization has been crossed, according to the theory, we have entered a mirror

where there can only be simulations of self-discovery. The civilized virtues on the other side of this mirror are the virtues of social order, a lineally clear hierarchy, direction, purpose, balance. With these things, so we were taught, some social justice and the exercise of racial memory which is tradition. Somehow, the cord is cut by that meridian. Yet a return is also impossible, for we cannot return to what we have never been. The truth in all this is, of course, the amnesia of the American, particularly of the African. Most of our definitions of American culture are fragmentary, based on the gleam of racial memory which pierces this amnesia. The Old World, whether it is represented by the light of Europe or of Asia or of Africa, is the rhythm by which we remember. What we have carried over, apart from a few desultorily performed customs, is language. When language itself is condemned as mimicry, then the condition is hopeless and men are no more than jackdaws, parrots, myna birds, apes.

The idea of the American as ape is heartening, however, for in the imitation of apes there is something more ancient than the first human effort. The absurdity of pursuing the anthropological idea of mimicry then, if we are to believe science, would lead us to the image of the first ape applauding the gestures of what we must call the first man. Here the contention crumbles because there is no scientific distinction possible between the last ape and the first man, there is no memory or history of the moment when man stopped imitating the ape, his ancestor, and became human. Therefore, everything is mere repetition. Did the first ape look at his reflection in the mirror of a pond in astonishment or in terror? Could it, or he, identify its or himself, and what name was given to that image? And was it at that moment of the self-naming grunt, a grunt delivered either in terror or in amusement, that the ape became man? And was that the beginning of the human ego and our history?

Advance some thousand years, protract the concept of evolution to the crossing of the mirror and the meridian of Alexander VI, and, like that instant of self-recognition or self-disgust, which are the same, what was the moment when

the old ape of the Old World saw himself anew and became another, or, was paralyzed with the knowledge that henceforth, everything he did in the New World, on the other side of the mirror, could only be a parody of the past? Of course there is no such moment, just as there is no such moment for science of the transition from ape to man.

Columbus kneels on the sand of San Salvador. That is a moment. Bilbao, or Keats's Cortez looks on the Pacific. That is another moment. Lewis and Clark behold whatever they beheld, and that is yet another moment. What do they behold? They behold the images of themselves beholding. They are looking into the mirror of the sea, (the phrase is mimicked from Joseph Conrad), or the mirror of the plain, the desert, or the sky. We in the Americas are taught this as a succession of illuminations, lightning moments that must crystallize and irradiate memory if we are to believe in a chain of such illuminations known as history. To make a swift leap, probably without the mimicry of Aristotelian logic; because these illuminations are literary and not in the experience of American man, they are worthless. We cannot focus on a single ancestor, that moment of ape to man if you wish, or its reverse, depending on what side of the mirror you are favoring, when the black felt that he had crossed the meridian, when the East Indian had, or the Portuguese, or the Chinese, or the Old World Jew. There was no line in the sea which said, this is new, this is the frontier, the boundary of endeavor, and henceforth everything can only be mimicry. But there was such a moment for every individual American, and that moment was both surrender and claim, both possession and dispossession. The issue is the claim.

The moment then, that a writer in the Caribbean, an American man, puts down a word—not only the first writer whoever he was, in Naipaul's view, but every writer since—at that moment he is a mimic, a mirror man, he is the ape beholding himself. This is supposed to be true as well of the dancer, the sculptor, the citizen, anyone in the Caribbean who is fated to unoriginality. So, of course, is Mr. Naipaul, whose curse extends to saying of this place that “nothing has ever been

created in the West Indies, and nothing will ever be created.” Precisely, precisely. We create nothing, but that is to move from anthropological absurdity to pseudo-philosophical rubbish, to discuss the reality of nothing, the mathematical conundrum of zero and infinity. Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for quite long time, because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before.

The ceremony which best exemplifies this attitude to history is the ritual of Carnival. This is a mass art form which came out of nothing, which emerged from the sanctions imposed on it. The banning of African drumming led to the discovery of the garbage can cover as a potential musical instrument whose subtlety of range, transferred to the empty oil drum, increases yearly, and the calypso itself emerged from a sense of mimicry, of patterning its form both on satire and self-satire. The impromptu elements of the calypso, like the improvisation and invention of steelband music, supersedes its traditional origins, that is, the steeldrum supersedes the attempt to copy melody from the xylophone and the drum, the calypso supersedes its ancient ritual forms in group chanting. From the viewpoint of history, these forms originated in imitation if you want, and ended in invention; and the same is true of the Carnival costume, its intricate, massive and delicate sculpture improvised without a self-conscious awe of reality, for the simple duplication of ancient sculptures is not enough to make a true Carnival costume. Here are three forms, originating from the mass, which are original and temporarily as inimitable as what they first attempted to copy. They were made from nothing, in their resulting forms it is hard to point to mere imitation.

But more significant than this is the attitude to such a prolixity of creative will that is jeered at as the “Carnival mentality.” The carnival mentality seriously, solemnly dedicates itself to the concept of waste, of ephemera, of built-in obsolescence, but this is not the built-in obsolescence of manufacture but of art, because in Carnival the creative energy is strictly regulated to its own season. Last year’s intricate sculptures are discarded as immediately valueless when it is midnight on Shrove Tuesday, last year’s songs cannot be sung

this year, nor last year's tunes, and so an entire population of craftsmen and spectators compel themselves to this regeneration of perpetually making it new, and by that rhythm create a backlog of music, design, song, popular poetry which is as strictly observed as the rhythm of cane harvest and cane-burning, of both industry and religion. The energy alone is overwhelming, and best of all, on one stage, at any moment, the simultaneity of historical legends, epochs, characters, without historical sequence or propriety is accepted as a concept.

Mimicry is an act of imagination, and, in some animals and insects, endemic cunning. Lizards, chameleons, most butterflies, and certain insects adapt the immediate subtleties of color and even of texture both as defense and as lure. Camouflage, whether it is in the grass-blade stripes of the tiger or the eyed hide of the leopard, is mimicry, or more than that, it is design. What if the man in the New World needs mimicry as design, both as defense and as lure. We take as long as other fellow creatures in the natural world to adapt and then blend into our habitats, whether we possess these environments by forced migration or by instinct. That is genetics. Culture must move faster, defensively. Everyone knows that there are differences between say plains cultures and sea cultures, or mountain cultures and jungle cultures, and if we see that in the Caribbean particularly, creatures from these different regions, forced into a common environment, still carry over their genetic coloring, their racial or tribal camouflage, the result, for a long time, can only be a bewildering variety that must race its differences rapidly into stasis, into recognition. The rapidity with which this is happening in the Caribbean looks like confusion.

But those who see only disorder, futility, and chaos must look for the patterns which they produce, and they will find in those patterns contradicting strains which often were not meant to adapt, far more survive. There were those who did not survive, not by weakness but by a process of imperialistic defoliation which blasted defiance; and this process, genocide, is what destroyed the original, destroyed the Aztec, and American Indian, and the Caribbean Indian. All right, let us say what these had was not a culture, not a civilization, but a way of life,

then, a way with their own gods and language and domestic or marital customs. The point is that they broke, that they were resilient for awhile but were broken. These have gone. They left few ruins, since the ego was tribal, not individualistic, pagan if you want, not Christian. We can praise them for not imitating, but even imitation decimated them, or has humiliated them like the aborigine and the American Indian. What have we been offered here as an alternative but suicide. I do not know if apes commit suicide—their mimicry is not that far advanced—but men do, and it appears too, certain cultures.

That is the process by which we were Christianized. The imitation of Christ, the mimicry of God as a man. In that sense the first Christian is also not only the first man but the first ape, since before that everything was hearsay. The imitation of Christ must be carried into human life and social exchange, we are responsible for our brother, we are not responsible to ourselves but to God, and while this is admirable and true, how true is it that the imitation of God leads to human perfectibility, how necessary is it for us to mimic the supreme good, the perfect annihilation of present, past, and future since God is without them, so that a man who has achieved that spiritual mimicry immediately annihilates all sense of time. “Take no thought of the morrow” is the same as “history is bunk”; the first is from Christ, the second from Henry Ford. But Ford is the divine example of American materialist man. Ford is an inventor, Ford created cars, Edison created light, and so it goes. What surrounds all of us as mimic men is that gratitude which acknowledges those achievements as creation. We are thus taught specific distances between the word invention and the word creation, between the inventor and the creator. We invent nothing, that is, no object. We do not have the resources, we can argue. Well, neither did Ford, neither did Edison. But electricity and light and even the idea of the car existed before they were discovered. They were not creations, they are also mimicry, originating from the existence and the accidents of natural elements. We continue far enough and we arrive at Voltaire confronting Nietzsche: “It is necessary to invent God,”

and "God is dead." Join both, and that is our twentieth-century credo. "It is necessary to invent a God who is dead."

Where have cultures originated? By the force of natural surroundings. You build according to the topography of where you live. You are what you eat, and so on; you mystify what you see, you create what you need spiritually, a god for each need.

If religion is not a life, if it is not itself mere mimicry of some unappeasable fear, then is not the good man a man who needs nothing? And I do not mean a man who does not need a car, nor electricity, nor television or whatever else we have failed to invent in the Caribbean, but a man who does not need them in the religious sense, a man who is dependent on the elements, who inhabits them, and takes his life from them. Even further, the ideal man does not need literature, religion, art, or even another, for there is ideally only himself and God. What he needs he makes, and what he makes will become more subtle in its uses, dependent on the subtlety of his needs or the proliferation of his creature comforts. That pursuit takes him further away from his mystical relation to the universe, thins its mystery, distances the idea of prayer, awe, spiritual necessity, until he can ask, surrounded by his own creations, "who needs God?"

No, cultures can only be created out of this knowledge of nothing, and in deeper than the superficial, existential sense, we in the Caribbean know all about nothing. We know that we owe Europe either revenge or nothing, and it is better to have nothing than revenge. We owe the past revenge or nothing, and revenge is uncreative. We may not even need literature, not that we are beyond it, but in the archipelago particularly, nature, the elements if you want, are so new, so overpowering in their presence that awe is deeper than articulation of awe. To name is to contradict. The awe of God or of the universe is the unnameable, and this has nothing to do with literacy. It is better for us to be a race of illiterates who retain this awe than to be godless, without mystery. A pygmy is better than an atheist. Sophistication is human wisdom and we who are the dregs of that old history, its victims, its transients, its

dispossessed know what the old wisdom brought. What is called mimicry is the painful, new, laborious uttering that comes out of belief, not out of doubt. The votive man is silent, the cynical is articulate. Ask any poet which he would prefer, poetry or silence, poetry or wisdom, and he would answer wisdom. It is his journey to self-annihilation, to beginning again.

History, taught as morality, is religion. History, taught as action, is art. Those are the only uses to which we, mocked as a people without history, can put it. Because we have no choice but to view history as fiction or as religion, then our use of it will be idiosyncratic, personal, and therefore, creative. All of this is beyond the sociological, even beyond the "civilized" assessment of our endeavor, beyond mimicry. The stripped and naked man, however abused, however disabused of old beliefs, instinctually, even desperately begins again as craftsman. In the indication of the slightest necessary gesture of ordering the world around him, of losing his old name and rechristening himself, in the arduous enunciation of a dimmed alphabet, in the shaping of tools, pen or spade, is the whole, profound sigh of human optimism, of what we in the archipelago still believe in: work and hope. It is out of this that the New World, or the Third World, should begin.

Theoretical and idealistic though this sounds, it is our duty as poets to reiterate it. The embittered despair of a New World writer like Naipaul is also part of that impatience and irascibility at the mere repetition of human error which passes for history, and that irascibility is also a belief in possibility. The New World originated in hypocrisy and genocide, so it is not a question for us, of returning to an Eden or of creating Utopia; out of the sordid and degrading beginning of the West Indies, we could only go further in decency and regret. Poets and satirists are afflicted with the superior stupidity which believes that societies can be renewed, and one of the most nourishing sites for such a renewal, however visionary it may seem, is the American archipelago.