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# Poetics of Relation



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Ann Arbor

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN PRESS**

## Closed Place, Open Word

### 1

The Plantation system spread, following the same structural principles, throughout the southern United States, the Caribbean islands, the Caribbean coast of Latin America, and the northeastern portion of Brazil. It extended throughout the countries (including those in the Indian Ocean), constituting what Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant call the territory of *créolité* [creoleness].<sup>1</sup> There are grounds for understanding why, despite very different linguistic areas engaged in very divergent political dynamics, the same organization would create a rhythm of economic production and form the basis for a style of life. That takes care of the spatial aspect.

Regarding time, or, if you will, our grasp of the histories that converged in these spaces, two other questions need to be addressed. The first concerns the system's evolution: Why was there no continuation of it anywhere—no social structure organically derived from it, with coherent or contradictory repercussions, inscribed in any enduring aspect? The Plantation system collapsed everywhere, brutally or progressively, without generating its own ways of superseding itself. The second question is even more amazing: How did a system that was so fragile give rise, paradoxically, to what are

seen as the modern vectors of civilization, in the not intolerant sense that this word henceforth holds for us?

Let us sum up in a few connected phrases what we know of the Plantation. It is an organization formed in a social pyramid, confined within an enclosure, functioning apparently as an autarky but actually dependent, and with a technical mode of production that cannot evolve because it is based on a slave structure.

A pyramid organization: everywhere after 1848 the origin of the mass of slaves, then workers, was African—or Hindu in the Caribbean; the middle level, managers, administrators, and overseers, were hired men of European origin, a small number of whom were replaced early in this century by people of color—once again in the Caribbean; at the top of the pyramid were the planters, colonists, or *békés*, as they were called in the Antilles, who strove to constitute a white pseudoaristocracy. I say pseudo because almost nowhere were these attempts at putting down roots within a tradition sanctioned by the stamp of time nor by any legitimacy of absolute filiation. Plantations, despite secreting manners and customs, from which cultures ensued, never established any tradition of great impact.

An enclosed place: each Plantation was defined by boundaries whose crossing was strictly forbidden; impossible to leave without written permission or unless authorized by some ritual exception, such as Carnival time. Chapel or church, stockrooms for distributing supplies or later the grocery store, infirmary or hospital: everything was taken care of within a closed circle. Now the following is what we need to understand: How could a series of autarkies, from one end to the other of the areas involved, from Louisiana to Martinique to Réunion, be capable of kinship? If each Plantation is considered as a closed entity, what is the principle inclining them to function in a similar manner?

Finally, the reality of slavery. It was decisive, of course, in the stagnation of production techniques. An insurmountable tendency toward technical irresponsibility resulted from it, especially among slaveholders. And when technical innovations, mechanization, and industrialization occurred, as they did, for example, in the southern United States, it was already too late. Social dynamics had taken other routes than cane traces, sugarcane alleys, or avenues of magnolias. As for the slaves or their close descendants, who had absolutely no interest in the Plantation's yield, they would be an exception to this technical irresponsibility because of their own need to guarantee daily survival on the edges of the system. This resulted in the widespread development of small occupations, or what is referred to in the Antilles as *djobs*, a habitual economy of bits and scraps. Technical irresponsibility on the one hand and a breakdown into individual operations on the other: immobility and fragmentation lay at the heart of the system eating away at it.

Let us, nonetheless, consult these ruins with their uncertain evidence, their extremely fragile monuments, their frequently incomplete, obliterated, or ambiguous archives. You can guess already what we are to discover: that the Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation. Within this universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization, forms of humanity stubbornly persisted. In this outmoded spot, on the margins of every dynamic, the tendencies of our modernity begin to be detectable. Our first attempt must be to locate just such contradictions.

One of these contradictions contrasts the tidy composition of such a universe—in which social hierarchy corresponds in maniacal, minute detail to a mercilessly maintained racial hierarchy—with the ambiguous complexities otherwise proceeding from it.

Airtight seals were apparently the rule of the Plantation. Not simply the tight social barrier but also an irremediable

break between forms of sensibility, despite each one's effects upon the other. Saint-John Perse and Faulkner, two authors born in Plantation regions and to whom I constantly turn, not surprisingly, with my questions, provide us with a chance to assess this split. We recall the famous description, if it is a description, in *Éloges*:

*but I shall still long remember  
mute faces, the colour of papaya and of boredom that  
paused like burnt-out stars behind our chairs . . .*<sup>2</sup>

That papaya and that boredom—seeing people as things—do not so much emphasize the poet's distance as they reveal the radical separation (that impossible apartheid) presiding over the life of the emotions in the Plantation. I have also noted that Faulkner, who spoke so frequently of blacks, never sets out to write one of the interior monologues, of which he is such a master, for one of these characters; whereas he dares do so for some of the mulattoes in his work and even, in a tour de force now classic, for the idiot Benjy at the beginning of his novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Thus Lucas, the black character who is the principal hero of *Intruder in the Dust*, is never interiorized by Faulkner; he is described entirely through postures and gestures, a silhouette filled in against a horizon. *Intruder in the Dust* is not a novel concerning an essence but, rather, an attempt at a phenomenological approach. In the same novel Faulkner, moreover, is explicit about his narrator's understanding—or lack thereof—of the southern black: "Because he knew Lucas Beauchamp too—as well that is as any white person knew him. Better than any maybe."<sup>3</sup> As if the novelist, rejected by members of his class and misunderstood by the black Americans who have had access to his work, had premonitions of an impossibility brought to a head by history. The break exerts itself here.

But the break did not form delimited territories, in which the various levels of population were sectioned off. The claim

that they were reciprocally extraneous did not prevent contaminations, inevitable within the enclosure of the Plantation. Despite the insistent, cold ferocity of Father Labat's writing, for example, beneath the words of this seventeenth-century chronicler of the Antilles one can feel a curiosity, riveted, anxious, and obsessive, whenever he broaches the subject of these slaves that he struggles so hard to keep calm. Fear, fantasies, and perhaps a barely willing flicker of complicity form the undercurrent of the revolts and repressions. The long list of martyrdoms is also a long *métissage*, whether involuntary or intentional.

A second contradiction contrasts the Plantation's will to autarky with its dependence, in reality, in relation to the external world. The transactions it fostered with this world took place in the elementary form of the exchange of goods, usually at a loss. Payment was in kind, or as an equivalent exchange value, which led to accumulation neither of experience nor of capital. Nowhere did the Planters manage to set up organisms that were sufficiently solid and autonomous to allow them to have access to the control of a market, means of international transportation, an independent system of money, or an efficient and specific representation in foreign markets. The Plantations, entities turned in upon themselves, paradoxically, have all the symptoms of extroversion. They are dependent, by nature, on someplace elsewhere. In their practice of importing and exporting, the established politics is not decided from within. One could say, in fact, that, socially, the Plantation is not the product of a politics but the emanation of a fantasy.

And, if we come even closer to this enclosed place, this Locus Solus, trying to imagine what its inner ramifications may be, auscultating the memory or guts inside it, then the contradictions become madness. I shall not attempt any description here. This current year would not suffice. And we are familiar enough with the countless novels and films inspired by this universe to know already that, from north to south and from west to east, the same conditions of life

repeat themselves. Rather, I shall turn to another synthesizing aspect, in this case both oral and written expression—literature—stemming either directly or indirectly from the Plantation.

2

No matter which region we contemplate from among those covered by the system, we find the same trajectory and almost the same forms of expression. We could mark out three moments: literary production—first as an act of survival, then as a dead end or a delusion, finally as an effort or passion of memory.

An act of survival. In the silent universe of the Plantation, oral expression, the only form possible for the slaves, was discontinuously organized. As tales, proverbs, sayings, songs appeared—as much in the Creole-speaking world as elsewhere—they bore the stamp of this discontinuity. The texts seem to neglect the essentials of something that Western realism, from the beginning, had been able to cover so well: the situation of landscapes, the lesson of scenery, the reading of customs, the description of the motives of characters. Almost never does one find in them any concrete relating of daily facts and deeds; what one does find, on the other hand, is a symbolic evocation of situations. As if these texts were striving for disguise beneath the symbol, working to say without saying. This is what I have referred to elsewhere as *detour*,<sup>4</sup> and this is where discontinuity struggles; the same discontinuity the Maroons created through that other *detour* called *marronnage*.

Here we have a form of literature striving to express some-

thing it is forbidden to refer to and finding risky retorts to this organic censorship every time. The oral literature of the Plantations is consequently akin to other subsistence—survival—techniques set in place by the slaves and their immediate descendants. Everywhere that the obligation to get around the rule of silence existed a literature was created that has no “natural” continuity, if one may put it that way, but, rather, bursts forth in snatches and fragments. The storyteller is a handyman, the *djobbeur* of the collective soul.

Though this phenomenon is widespread throughout the system, nonetheless, it is within the Creole-speaking realm that it stands out most conspicuously. That is because, in addition to this obligation to get around something, the Creole language has another, internal obligation: to renew itself in every instance on the basis of a series of forgettings. Forgetting, that is, integration, of what it starts from: the multiplicity of African languages on the one hand and European ones on the other, the nostalgia, finally, for the Caribbean remains of these.\* The linguistic movement of creolization proceeded through very rapid, interrupted, successive settlements of these contributions; the synthesis resulting from this process never became fixed in its terms, despite having asserted from the beginning the durability of its structures. In other words, the Creole text is never presented linguistically as an edict or a relay, on the basis of which some literary progression might be detected, with another text coming along to perfect the former, and so on. I do not know if this diffraction (through which multilingualism is, perhaps, really at work, in an underground way, for one of the first known times in the history of humanities) is indicative of all languages in formation—here, for example, we would have to study the European Middle Ages—or if it is entirely attribut-

\*It is the problem of “forgetting” that has made the various Creole dialects so fragile—in comparison to the languages composing them, especially French wherever it is in authority, as in Guadeloupe and Martinique.



able to the particular situation of the Plantation in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean.

Then delusion. Unlike this oral and popular literature, though equally discontinuous, another, written and elitist literature developed. The colonists and the Planters, as well as the travelers who visited them, were possessed of a real need to justify the system. To fantasize legitimacy. And, of course, this is why, unlike what happened in the oral texts, the description of reality would turn out to be indispensable to them—and irrefutable in their terms. Reality was fantasized here as well, its image the product of a disguised apology rather than that of an austere realism. One condition of the process was that conventional landscape be pushed to extremes—the gentleness and beauty of it—particularly in the islands of the Caribbean. There is something of an involuntary Parnassus in the novels and pamphlets written by colonists of Santo Domingo and Martinique: the same propensity to blot out the shudders of life, that is, the turbulent realities of the Plantation, beneath the conventional splendor of scenery.

Another convention provided the occasion for a specific category of writing. The supposedly receptive lasciviousness of the slaves, mulatto women and men who were of mixed blood, and the animal savagery with which the Africans were credited, produced an abundant supply for the erotic literature flourishing in the islands from the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century. In this manner, from one blind spot to the next, a literature of illusion came into being, one moreover that, every now and then, was not lacking charm or an old-fashioned grace. Lafcadio Hearn, an international reporter and a writer as well, came from Louisiana to the Antilles at the turn of the century, sending us a much embellished report.

Memory. After the System collapsed the literatures that had asserted themselves within its space developed, for the most

part, from the general traits so sketchily indicated here, either consenting to them or taking an opposite course. Thus, Caribbean literatures, whether in English, Spanish, or French, tended to introduce obscurities and breaks—like so many detours—into the material they dealt with; putting into practice, like the Plantation tales, processes of intensification, breathlessness, digression, and immersion of individual psychology within the drama of a common destiny. The symbolism of situations prevailed over the refinement of realisms, by encompassing, transcending, and shedding light upon it. This, of course, is equally true of a writer of Creole such as the Haitian Franketienne as of a novelist from the United States such as Toni Morrison.

So, too, the works that appeared in these countries went against the convention of a falsely legitimizing landscape scenery and conceived of landscape as basically implicated in a story, in which it too was a vivid character.

So, finally, historical *marronage* intensified over time to exert a creative *marronage*, whose numerous forms of expression began to form the basis for a continuity. Which made it no longer possible to consider these literatures as exotic appendages of a French, Spanish, or English literary corpus; rather, they entered suddenly, with the force of a tradition that they built themselves, into the relation of cultures.

But the truth is that their concern, its driving force and hidden design, is the derangement of the memory, which determines, along with imagination, our only way to tame time.

Just how were our memory and our time buffeted by the Plantation? Within the space apart that it comprised, the always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, thereby breaking the clear, linear order to which Western thought had imparted such brilliance. So Alejo Carpentier and Faulkner are of the same mind, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Lezama Lima go together, I recognize myself in Derek Wal-

cott, we take delight in the coils of time in García Márquez's century of solitude. The ruins of the Plantation have affected American cultures all around.

And, whatever the value of the explanations or the publicity Alex Haley afforded us with *Roots*, we have a strong sense that the overly certain affiliation invoked there does not really suit the vivid genius of our countries. Memory in our works is not a calendar memory; our experience of time does not keep company with the rhythms of month and year alone; it is aggravated by the void, the final sentence of the Plantation; our generations are caught up within an extended family in which our root stocks have diffused and everyone had two names, an official one and an essential one—the nickname given by his community. And when in the end it all began to shift, or rather collapse, when the unstoppable evolution had emptied the enclosure of people to reassemble them in the margins of cities, what remained, what still remains, is the dark side of this impossible memory, which has a louder voice and one that carries farther than any chronicle or census.

The disintegration of the system left its marks. Almost everywhere planter castes degenerated into fixed roles, in which memory no longer functioned except as decor—as landscape had formerly done. Occasionally, they were able to switch to commerce; otherwise, they went to pieces in melancholy. Former employees here and there formed groups of so-called poor whites, who fed the ideologies of racist terror. In the Caribbean and in Latin America the burgeoning shantytowns drew masses of the destitute and transformed the rhythm of their voices. In the islands black and Hindu farmers went to war against arbitrariness and absolute poverty. In the United States southern blacks went up North, following the “underground railroad,” toward cities that were becoming violently dehumanized, where, nonetheless the Harlem writers, for example, wrote their Renaissance upon the walls of solitude. Thus, urban literature made its appearance in Bahia, New York, Jacmel, or Fort-de-France. The Plantation

region, having joined with the endless terrain of haciendas or latifundio, spread thin to end up in mazes of sheet metal and concrete in which our common future takes its chances. This second Plantation matrix, after that of the slave ship, is where we must return to track our difficult and opaque sources.

3

It is not just literature. When we examine how speech functions in this Plantation realm, we observe that there are several almost codified types of expression. Direct, elementary speech, articulating the rudimentary language necessary to get work done; stifled speech, corresponding to the silence of this world in which knowing how to read and write is forbidden; deferred or disguised speech, in which men and women who are gagged keep their words close. The Creole language integrated these three modes and made them jazz.

It is understandable that in this universe every cry was an event. Night in the cabins gave birth to this other enormous silence from which music, inescapable, a murmur at first, finally burst out into this long shout—a music of reserved spirituality through which the body suddenly expresses itself. Monotonous chants, syncopated, broken by prohibitions, set free by the entire thrust of bodies, produced their language from one end of this world to the other. These musical expressions born of silence: Negro spirituals and blues, persisting in towns and growing cities; jazz, *biguines*, and calypso, bursting into barrios and shantytowns; salsas and reggae, assembled everything blunt and direct, painfully stifled, and patiently differed into this varied speech. This was the cry of the Plantation, transfigured into the speech of the world.

For three centuries of constraint had borne down so hard that, when this speech took root, it sprouted in the very midst of the field of modernity; that is, it grew for everyone. This is the only sort of universality there is: when, from a specific enclosure, the deepest voice cries out.

4

Negative explanations for what is unique to the system are clear: the decisive impact of the African population, but with the horrors of the slave trade as its beginning; the grasping opposition to change inherent in pro-slavery assumptions; the dependent relationship with the outside world that all Plantations had in common.

But one can also see how this monstrously abortive failure, composed of so many solitary instances of sterility, had a positive effect on some portion of contemporary histories. — How? is your question. How can you claim that such an anomaly could have contributed to what you call modernity? — I believe I have answered this question or at least left clues about how it may be answered.

The Plantation, like a laboratory, displays most clearly the opposed forces of the oral and the written at work—one of the most deep-rooted topics of discussion in our contemporary landscape. It is there that multilingualism, that threatened dimension of our universe, can be observed for one of the first times, organically forming and disintegrating. It is also within the Plantation that the meeting of cultures is most clearly and directly observable, though none of the inhabitants had the slightest hint that this was really about a clash of cultures. Here we are able to discover a few of the formational laws of the cultural *métissage* that concerns us all. It is

essential that we investigate historicity—that conjunction of a passion for self-definition and an obsession with time that is also one of the ambitions of contemporary literatures—in the extensions of the Plantation, in the things to which it gave birth at the very instant it vanished as a functional unit. *Baroque speech, inspired by all possible speech*, was ardently created in these same extensions and loudly calls out to us from them. The Plantation is one of the bellies of the world, not the only one, one among so many others, but it has the advantage of being able to be studied with the utmost precision. Thus, the boundary, its structural weakness, becomes our advantage. And in the end its seclusion has been conquered. The place was closed, but the word derived from it remains open. This is one part, a limited part, of the lesson of the world.