■ *Introduction: the repeating island*

In recent decades we have begun to see a clearer outline to the profile of a group of American nations whose colonial experiences and languages have been different, but which share certain undeniable features. I mean the countries usually called "Caribbean" or "of the Caribbean basin." This designation might serve a foreign purpose—the great powers' need to recodify the world's territory better to know, to dominate it—as well as a local one, self-referential, directed toward fixing the furtive image of collective Being. Whatever its motive, this urge to systematize the region's political, economic, social, and anthropological dynamics is a very recent thing. For it is certain that the Caribbean basin, although it includes the first American lands to be explored, conquered, and colonized by Europe, is still, especially in the discourse of the social sciences, one of the least known regions of the modern world.

The main obstacles to any global study of the Caribbean's societies, insular or continental, are exactly those things that scholars usually adduce to define the area: its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and impermanence; its syncretism, etc. This unexpected mix of obstacles and properties is not, of course, mere happenstance. What happens is that postindustrial society—to use a newfangled term—navigates the Caribbean with judgments and intentions that are like those of Columbus; that is, it lands scientists, investors, and technologists—the new (dis)coverers—who come to apply the dog-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

mas and methods that had served them well where they came from, and who can't see that these refer only to realities back home. So they get into the habit of defining the Caribbean in terms of its resistance to the different methodologies summoned to investigate it. This is not to say that the definitions we read here and there of pan-Caribbean society are false or useless. I would say, to the contrary, that they are potentially as productive as the first reading of a book, in which, as Barthes said, the reader inevitably reads himself. I think, nevertheless, that the time has come for postindustrial society to start rereading the Caribbean, that is, to do the kind of reading in which every text begins to reveal its own textuality.

This second reading is not going to be easy at all. The Caribbean space, remember, is saturated with messages—"language games," Lyotard would call them—sent out in five European languages (Spanish, English, French, Dutch, and Portuguese), not counting aboriginal languages which, together with the different local dialects (Surinamtongo, Papiamento, *Créole,* etc.), complicate enormously any communication from one extreme of the ambit to another. Further, the spectrum of Caribbean codes is so varied and dense that it holds the region suspended in a soup of signs. It has been said many times that the Caribbean is the union of the diverse, and maybe that is true. In any case, my own rereading has taken me along different paths, and I can no longer arrive at such admirably precise reductions.

In this (today's) rereading, I propose, for example, to start with something concrete and easily demonstrated, a geographical fact: that the Antilles are an island bridge connecting, in "another way," North and South America. This geographical accident gives the entire area, including its continental foci, the character of an archipelago, that is, a discontinuous conjunction (of what?): unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools, clumps of bubbles, frayed seaweed, sunken galleons, crashing breakers, flying fish, seagull squawks, downpours, nighttime phosphorescences, eddies and pools, uncertain voyages of signification; in short, a field of observation quite in tune with the objectives of Chaos. I have capitalized this word to indicate that I'm not referring to chaos as conventionally defined, but rather to the new scientific perspective, so called, that has now begun to revolutionize the world of scientific research, that is, *Chaos* to mean that, within the (dis)order that swarms around what we already know of as Nature, it is possible to observe dynamic states or regularities that repeat themselves globally. I think that this recent interest of the scientific disciplines, which owes a lot to mathematical speculation and to holography, brings along with it a philosophical attitude (a new way of reading the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

concepts of chance and necessity, of particularity and universality) which little by little is sure to permeate other fields of knowledge.

Quite recently, for example, economics and certain branches of the humanities have begun to be examined under this brand-new paradigm, constituting perhaps the most inquisitive and encompassing step that postmodernity has taken up until now. In truth, the field in which Chaos may be observed is extremely vast, for it includes all phenomena that depend on the passage of time; Chaos looks toward everything that repeats, reproduces, grows, decays, unfolds, flows, spins, vibrates, seethes; it is as interested in the evolution of the solar system as in the stock market's crashes, as involved in cardiac arrhythmia as in the novel or in myth. Thus Chaos provides a space in which the pure sciences connect with the social sciences, and both of them connect with art and the cultural tradition. Of course, any such diagrammatic connections must suppose very different languages and a communication that is hardly ever direct, but for the reader who is attuned to Chaos, there will be an opening upon unexpected corridors allowing passage from one point to another in the labyrinth. In this book I have tried to analyze certain aspects of the Caribbean while under the influence of this attitude, whose end is not to find results, but processes, dynamics, and rhythms that show themselves within the marginal, the regional, the incoherent, the heterogeneous, or, if you like, the unpredictable that coexists with us in our everyday world.

To experience this exploration has been instructive as well as surprising to me, since within the sociocultural fluidity that the Caribbean archipelago presents, within its historiographic turbulence and its ethnological and linguistic clamor, within its generalized instability of vertigo and hurricane, one can sense the features of an island that "repeats" itself, unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs. I have emphasized the word *repeats* because I want to give the term the almost paradoxical sense with which it appears in the discourse of Chaos, where every repetition is a practice that necessarily entails a difference and a step toward nothingness (according to the principle of entropy proposed by thermodynamics in the last century); however, in the midst of this irreversible change, Nature can produce a figure as complex, as highly organized, and as intense as the one that the human eye catches when it sees a quivering hummingbird drinking from a flower.

Which one, then, would be the repeating island, Jamaica, Aruba, Puerto Rico, Miami, Haiti, Recife? Certainly none of the ones that we know. That

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

original, that island at the center, is as impossible to reach as the hypothetical Antillas that reappeared time and again, always fleetingly, in the cosmographers' charts. This is again because the Caribbean is not a common archipelago, but a meta-archipelago (an exalted quality that Hellas possessed, and the great Malay archipelago as well), and as a meta-archipelago it has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center. Thus the Caribbean flows outward past the limits of its own sea with a vengeance, and its *ultima Thule* may be found on the outskirts of Bombay, near the low and murmuring shores of Gambia, in a Cantonese tavern of circa 1850, at a Balinese temple, in an old Bristol pub, in a commercial warehouse in Bordeaux at the time of Colbert, in a windmill beside the Zuider Zee, at a cafe in a barrio of Manhattan, in the existential *saudade* of an old Portuguese lyric. But what is it that repeats? Tropisms, in series; movements in approximate direction. Let's say the unforeseen relation between a dance movement and the baroque spiral of a colonial railing. But this theme will be discussed later, although the Caribbean really is that and much more; it is the last of the great meta-archipelagoes. If someone needed a visual explanation, a graphic picture of what the Caribbean is, I would refer him to the spiral chaos of the Milky Way, the unpredictable flux of transformative plasma that spins calmly in our globe's firmament, that sketches in an "other" shape that keeps changing, with some objects born to light while others disappear into the womb of darkness; change, transit, return, fluxes of sidereal matter.

There is nothing marvelous in this, or even enviable, as will be seen. A few paragraphs back, when I proposed a rereading of the Caribbean, I suggested as a point of departure the unargued fact that the Antilles are an island bridge connecting, "in a certain way," South and North America, that is, a machine of spume that links the narrative of the search for El Dorado with the narrative of the finding of El Dorado; or if you like, the discourse of myth with the discourse of history; or even, the discourse of resistance with the language of power. I made a point of the phrase "in a certain way" because if we were to take the Central American ligament as our connection between continents, the result would be much less fruitful and would not suit the purposes of this book. That connection gains objective importance only on maps concerned with our current situation seen as geography, geopolitics, military strategy, and finance. These are maps of the pragmatic type which we all know and carry within us, and which therefore give us a first reading of the world. The words "a certain way" are the signs of my intention to give meaning to this text as an object of

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

rereading, of a "certain kind of" reading. In my reading, the link that really counts is the one made by the Caribbean machine, whose flux, whose noise, whose presence covers the map of world history's contingencies, through the great changes in economic discourse to the vast collisions of races and cultures that humankind has seen.

From Columbus's machine to the sugar-making machine

Let's be realistic: the Atlantic is the Atlantic (with all its port cities) because it was once engendered by the copulation of Europe—that insatiable solar bull—with the Caribbean archipelago; the Atlantic is today the Atlantic (the navel of capitalism) because Europe, in its mercantilist laboratory, conceived the project of inseminating the Caribbean womb with the blood of Africa; the Atlantic is today the Atlantic (NATO, World Bank, New York Stock Exchange, European Economic Community, etc.) because it was the painfully delivered child of the Caribbean, whose vagina was stretched between continental clamps, between the *encomienda* of Indians and the slaveholding plantation, between the servitude of the coolie and the discrimination toward the *criollo,* between commercial monopoly and piracy, between the runaway slave settlement and the governor's palace; all Europe pulling on the forceps to help at the birth of the Atlantic: Columbus, Cabral, Cortés, de Soto, Hawkins, Drake, Hein, Rodney, Surcouf . . . After the blood and salt water spurts, quickly sew up torn flesh and apply the antiseptic tinctures, the gauze and surgical plaster; then the febrile wait through the forming of a scar: suppurating, always suppurating.

Its having given birth, however, to an ocean of such universal prestige is not the only reason that the Caribbean is a meta-archipelago. There are other reasons of equal weight. For example, it is possible to defend successfully the hypothesis that without deliveries from the Caribbean womb Western capital accumulation would not have been sufficient to effect a move, within a little more than two centuries, from the so-called Mercantilist Revolution to the Industrial Revolution. In fact, the history of the Caribbean is one of the main strands in the history of capitalism, and vice versa. This conclusion may be called polemical, and perhaps it is. This is surely not the place to argue the issue, but there's always room for some observations.

The machine that Christopher Columbus hammered into shape in Hispaniola was a kind of *bricolage,* something like a medieval vacuum cleaner. The flow of Nature in the island was interrupted by the suction of an

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

iron mouth, taken thence through a transatlantic tube to be deposited and redistributed in Spain. When I speak of Nature in the island, I do so in integral terms: Indians and their handicrafts, nuggets of gold and samples of other minerals, native species of plants and animals, and also some words like *tabaco, canoa, hamaca,* etc. All this struck the Spanish court as meager and tepid (especially the words), so that nobody—except Columbus—had any illusions about the New World. A machine of the same model (think of a forge with its sparkling clangor and combustion), with an extra bolt here and a bellows over there, was installed in Puerto Rico, in Jamaica, in Cuba, and in a few miserable settlements on terra firma. At the time of the great conquests—the fall of the upland civilizations of the Aztecs, the Incas, and the Chibchas—Columbus's machine was quickly remodeled and, carried on Indians' backs over the sierras, set into motion in a half dozen new places. It is possible to fix the date when this machine began working. It happened in the spring of 1523, when Cortés, manipulating the levers and pedals, smelted down a part of the treasure of Tenochtitlán and selected a smattering of deluxe objects to be sent through the transatlantic tube. But this prototype was so defective that the transporting machine—the tubing—got irreparably broken some ten leagues from Cape San Vicente, in Portugal. French privateers captured two of the three inadequate caravels that carried the treasure to Spain, and the Emperor Charles V lost his whole share (20 percent) of that year's Mexican revenue. This couldn't be allowed to happen again. The machine had to be perfected.

I think I ought to clarify at this point that when I speak of a machine I am starting from Deleuze and Guattari's concept. I am talking about the machine of machines, the machine machine machine machine; which is to say that every machine is a conjunction of machines coupled together, and each one of these interrupts the flow of the previous one; it will be said rightly that one can picture any machine alternatively in terms of flow and interruption. Such a notion, as we will see, is fundamental to our rereading of the Caribbean, for it will permit us to pass on to an even more important one.

In any case, in the years that followed the Cape San Vicente disaster the Spaniards introduced major technological changes and surprising elaborations in their American machine. This was so much the case that, by around 1565, Columbus's small and rudimentary machine had evolved into the Grandest Machine on Earth. This is absolutely certain. It's proven by statistics: in the first century of Spanish colonization this machine yielded more than one-third of all the gold produced in the whole world during

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

those years. The machine produced not only gold but also silver, emeralds, diamonds, topaze, pearls, and more. The quantity of molten silver that fell in droplets from that enormous shelf was such that the haughtiest families of Potosí, after dining, tossed their silver service out the window along with the leftover food. These fabulous deliveries of precious metals were the result of various innovations, for example: guaranteeing the availability of the necessary cheap manpower in the mines through a system known as the *mita;* using wind energy and marine currents to speed up the flow of oceanic transportation; implanting a costly system of security and control from the River Plate estuary to the Guadalquivir. But, above all, establishing the system called *la flota,* the fleet. Without the fleet system the Spaniards would not have been able to hoard within the walls of Seville any more gold or silver than they could fit into their pockets.

We know who thought up this extraordinary machine: Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, a cruel Asturian of genius. If this man, or someone else, had not invented the fleet system, the Caribbean would still be there, but it might not be a meta-archipelago.

Menéndez de Avilés's machine was complex in the extreme and quite beyond the reach of any nation but Spain. It was a machine made up of a naval machine, a military machine, a bureaucratic machine, a commercial machine, an extractive machine, a political machine, a legal machine, a religious machine, that is, an entire huge assemblage of machines which there is no point in continuing to name. The only thing that matters here is that it was a Caribbean machine; a machine installed in the Caribbean Sea and coupled to the Atlantic and the Pacific. The perfected model of this machine was set in motion in 1565, although it had been tested in a trial run a bit earlier. In 1562 Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, commanding forty-nine sailing ships, set off from Spain with the dream of stanching the leaks of gold and silver caused by shipwrecks and pirate or privateer attacks. His plan was this: all navigation between the West Indies and Seville (the only port that allowed transatlantic trade) would be undertaken in convoys consisting of cargo ships, warships, and light craft for reconnaissance and dispatch; the cargoes of gold and silver were to be boarded only on given dates and in only a few Caribbean ports (Cartagena, Nombre de Dios, San Juan de Ulúa, and some other secondary ones); forts would be built and garrisons stationed not only at these ports but also at those defending the entrances to the Caribbean (San Juan de Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, Santiago de Cuba, the eastern coast of Florida, and, especially, Havana); all of these ports would be bases for squadrons of coast guard and patrol

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

ships, whose mission would be to sweep the waters and coastal keys clean of pirates, privateers, and smugglers, while at the same time providing rescue service to convoys in trouble. (The plan was approved. Its lineaments were so solid that 375 years later, during the Second World War, the Allies adopted it to defend against attack from German submarines, cruisers, and planes.)

Generally the name *flota* (fleet) is given to the convoys that twice a year entered the Caribbean to come back to Seville with the great riches of America. But this is not entirely correct. The fleet system was itself a machine of ports, anchorages, sea walls, lookouts, fortresses, garrisons, militias, shipyards, storehouses, depots, offices, workshops, hospitals, inns, taverns, plazas, churches, palaces, streets, and roads that led to the mining ports of the Pacific along a sleeve of mule trains laid out over the Isthmus of Panama. It was a powerful machine of machines knowingly articulated to suit the Caribbean's geography, and its machines were geared to be able to take greatest advantage of the energy of the Gulf Stream and the region's trade winds. The fleet system created all of the cities of the Spanish Caribbean and it made them, for better or for worse, what they are today, Havana in particular. It was there that both fleets (those of Cartagena and Veracruz) joined to form an imposing convoy of more than a hundred ships to begin the return voyage together. In 1565 Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, after slaughtering, with indifferent calm, nearly five hundred Huguenots who had settled in Florida, finished his network of fortified cities with the founding of St. Augustine, today the oldest city in the United States.

As we speak in our astonishment of the inexhaustible richness of the Mexican and Peruvian mines, we should think of them as machines joined to other machines; we should see them in terms of production (flow and interruption). Such mining machines, by themselves, would not have been much help in accumulating European capital. Without the Caribbean machine (from Columbus's prototype to the working model of Menéndez de Avilés), Europeans would have been in the absurd position of the gambler who hits the jackpot at the slot machine but who has no hat in which to catch his winnings.

We can speak, nevertheless, of a Caribbean machine as important or more so than the fleet machine. This machine, this extraordinary machine, exists today, that is, it repeats itself continuously. It's called: the plantation. Its prototypes were born in the Near East, just after the time of the Crusades, and moved toward the West. In the fifteenth century the Portuguese installed their own model in the Cape Verde Islands and on Madeira,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

with astonishing success. There were certain entrepreneurs—like the Jew Cristóbal de Ponte and the *Sharif* of Berbery—who tried to construct machines of this family in the Canaries and on the Moroccan coast, but the venture was too big for any single man. It turned out that an entire kingdom, a mercantilist monarchy, would be needed to get the big machine going with its gears, its wheels, and its mills. I want to insist that Europeans finally controlled the construction, maintenance, technology, and proliferation of the plantation machines, especially those that produced sugar. (This family of machines almost always makes cane sugar, coffee, cacao, cotton, indigo, tea, bananas, pineapples, fibers, and other goods whose cultivation is impossible or too expensive in the temperate zones; furthermore, it usually produces the Plantation, capitalized to indicate not just the presence of plantations but also the type of society that results from their use and abuse.)

So much has already been written about all of this that it is not worth the effort even to sketch out the incredible and dolorous history of this machine. Still, something must be said, just a few things. For one: the singular feature of this machine is that it produced no fewer than ten million African slaves and thousands of coolies (from India, China, and Malaysia). All this, however, is not all: the plantation machines turned out mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism (see Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*), African underdevelopment (see Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*), Caribbean population (see Ramiro Guerra, *Sugar and Society in the Caribbean*); they produced imperialism, wars, colonial blocs, rebellions, repressions, sugar islands, runaway slave settlements, air and naval bases, revolutions of all sorts, and even a "free associated state" next to an unfree socialist state.

You will say that this catalog is unnecessary, that the whole subject is already too well known. (The theme of the plantation will be treated in some of the subsequent chapters as well.) But how is one to establish finally that the Caribbean is not just a multiethnic sea or a group of islands divided by different languages and by the categories Greater and Lesser Antilles, Windward Islands, and Leeward Islands? In short, how do we establish that the Caribbean is an important historico-economic sea and, further, a cultural meta-archipelago without center and without limits, a chaos within which there is an island that proliferates endlessly, each copy a different one, founding and refounding ethnological materials like a cloud will do with its vapor? If this is now understood, then there is no need to keep on depending on the old history books. Let's talk then of the Caribbean

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

that we can see, touch, smell, hear, taste; the Caribbean of the senses, the Caribbean of sentiment and pre-sentiment.

From the apocalypse to chaos

I can isolate with frightening exactitude—like the hero of Sartre's novel—the moment at which I reached the age of reason. It was a stunning October afternoon, years ago, when the atomization of the meta-archipelago under the dread umbrella of nuclear catastrophe seemed imminent. The children of Havana, at least in my neighborhood, had been evacuated; a grave silence fell over the streets and the sea. While the state bureaucracy searched for news off the shortwave or hid behind official speeches and communiqués, two old black women passed "in a certain kind of way" beneath my balcony. I cannot describe this "certain kind of way"; I will say only that there was a kind of ancient and golden powder between their gnarled legs, a scent of basil and mint in their dress, a symbolic, ritual wisdom in their gesture and their gay chatter. I knew then at once that there would be no apocalypse. The swords and the archangels and the beasts and the trumpets and the breaking of the last seal were not going to come, for the simple reason that the Caribbean is not an apocalyptic world; it is not a phallic world in pursuit of the vertical desires of ejaculation and castration. The notion of the apocalypse is not important within the culture of the Caribbean. The choices of all or nothing, for or against, honor or blood have little to do with the culture of the Caribbean. These are ideological propositions articulated in Europe which the Caribbean shares only in declamatory terms, or, better, in terms of a first reading. In Chicago a beaten soul says: "I can't take it any more," and gives himself up to drugs or to the most desperate violence. In Havana, he would say: "The thing to do is not die," or perhaps: "Here I am, fucked but happy."

The so-called October crisis or missile crisis was not won by J.F.K. or by N.K. or much less by F.C. (statesmen always wind up abbreviated in these great events that they themselves created); it was won by the culture of the Caribbean, together with the loss that any win implies. If this had happened, let's say, in Berlin, children there would now be discovering hand tools and learning to make fire with sticks. The plantation of atomic projectiles sown in Cuba was a Russian machine, a machine of the steppes, historically terrestrial. It was a machine that carried the culture of the horse and of yogurt, the cossack and the mouzhik, the birch and the rye, the ancient caravans and the Siberian railroad; a culture where the land

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

is everything and the sea a forgotten memory. But the culture of the Caribbean, at least in its most distinctive aspect, is not terrestrial but aquatic, a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar. The Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity. It is, in the final analysis, a culture of the meta-archipelago: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes; it is a feed-back machine with asymmetrical workings, like the sea, the wind, the clouds, the uncanny novel, the food chain, the music of Malaya, Gödel's theorem and fractal mathematics. It will be said that in that case Hellas does not meet our canon for meta-archipelagoes. But yes, it meets it. What's happened is that Western thought has kept on thinking of itself as the diachronic repetition on an ancient polemic. I am referring to the repressive and fallacious machine made up of the binary opposition Aristotle *versus* Plato. Greek thought has been subjected to such sleight of hand that Plato's version of Socrates has been accepted as the limit of the tolerable, while the glowing constellation of ideas that made up the Greek heaven by way of the Pre-Socratics, the Sophists, and the Gnostics has been ignored or distorted. This magnificent firmament has been reduced almost as if we were to erase every star in the sky but Castor and Pollux. Certainly, Greek thought was much more than this philosophical duel between Plato and Aristotle. It's just that certain not entirely symmetrical ideas scandalized the faith of the Middle Ages, modern rationalism, and the functionalist positivism of our time, and it's not necessary to pursue this matter, because we're speaking here of the Caribbean. Let's say good-bye to Hellas, applauding the idea of a forgotten sage, Thales of Miletus: water is the beginning of all things.

Then how can we describe the culture of the Caribbean in any way other than by calling it a feedback machine? Nobody has to rack his brains to come up with an answer; it's in the public domain. If I were to have to put it in one word I would say: performance. But performance not only in terms of scenic interpretation but also in terms of the execution of a ritual, that is, that "certain way" in which the two Negro women who conjured away the apocalypse were walking. In this "certain kind of way" there is expressed the mystic or magical (if you like) loam of the civilizations that contributed to the formation of Caribbean culture. Of course there have been some things written about this too, although I think that there's a lot of cloth left to be cut. For example, when we speak of the genesis of Caribbean culture we are given two alternatives: either we are told that

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

the complex syncretism of Caribbean cultural expressions—what I shall call here *supersyncretism* to distinguish it from similar forms—arose out of the collision of European, African, and Asian components within the Plantation, or that this syncretism flows along working with ethnological machines that are quite distant in space and remote in time, that is, machines "of a certain kind" that one would have to look for in the subsoils of all of the continents. But, I ask, why not take both alternatives as valid, and not just those but others as well? Why pursue a Euclidian coherence that the world—and the Caribbean above all—is very far from having?

Certainly, in order to reread the Caribbean we have to visit the sources from which the widely various elements that contributed to the formation of its culture flowed. This unforeseen journey tempts us because as soon as we succeed in establishing and identifying as separate any of the signifiers that make up the supersyncretic manifestation that we're studying, there comes a moment of erratic displacement of its signifiers toward other spatio-temporal points, be they in Europe, Africa, Asia, or America, or in all these continents at once. When these points of departure are nonetheless reached, a new chaotic flight of signifiers will occur, and so on ad infinitum.

Let's take as an example a syncretic object that has been well studied, let's say, the cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre (still followed by many Cubans). If we were to analyze this cult—presuming that it hasn't been done before—we would necessarily come upon a date (1605) and a place (el Cobre, near Santiago de Cuba); that is, within the spatio-temporal frame where the cult was first articulated upon three sources of meaning: one of aboriginal origin (the Taino deity Atabey or Atabex), another native to Europe (the Virgin of *Illescas*), and finally, another from Africa (the Yoruba *orisha* Oshun). For many anthropologists the history of this cult would begin or end here, and of course they would give reasons to explain this arbitrary break in the chain of signifiers. They would say, perhaps, that the people who today inhabit the Antilles are "new," and therefore their earlier situation, their tradition of being "a certain kind of way," should not count; they would say that with the disappearance of the Antillean aborigine during the first century of colonization these islands were left unconnected to the Indoamerican mechanisms, thus providing a "new" space for "new" men to create a "new" society and, with it, a "new" culture that can no longer be taken as an extension of those that brought the "new" inhabitants. Thus the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre would turn out to be exclusively Cuban, and as the patron saint of Cuba she would ap-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

pear in a kind of panoply along with the flag, the coat of arms, the statues of the founders, the map of the island, the royal palms, and the national anthem; she would be, in short, an attribute of Cuba's civic religion and nothing more.

Fine; I share this systemic focus, although only within the perspective offered by a first reading in which—as we know—the reader reads himself. But it happens to be the case that after several close readings of the Virgen and her cult it is possible for a Cuban reader to be seduced by the materials that he has been reading, and he should feel a reduced dose of the nationalism that he has projected on to the Virgen. This will happen only if his ego abandons for an instant his desire to feel Cuban only, a feeling that has offered him the mirage of a safe place under the cover of a nationality that connects him to the land and to the fathers of the country. If this momentary wavering should occur, the reader would cease to inscribe himself within the space of the Cuban and would set out venturing along the roads of limitless chaos that any advanced rereading offers. This being so, he would have to leap outside of the statist, statistical Cuba after searching for the wandering signifiers that inform the cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. For a moment, just for a moment, the Virgen and the reader will cease to be Cuban.

The first surprise or perplexity that the triptych Atabey-Nuestra Señora-Oshun presents us is that it is not "original" but rather "originating." In fact, Atabey, the Taino deity, is a syncretic object in itself, one whose signifiers deliver to us another signifier that is somewhat unforeseen: Orehu, mother of waters to the Arawaks of the Guianas. This voyage of signification is a heady one for more than one reason. In the first place it involves the grand epic of the Arawaks; the departure from the Amazon basin, the ascension of the Orinoco, the arrival at the Caribbean coast, the meticulous settlement of each island until arriving at Cuba, the still obscure encounter with the Mayans of Yucatan, the ritual game of the ball of resin, the "other" connection between both subcontinental masses (such was the forgotten feat of these people). In the second place, it involves also the no less grand epic of the Caribs: the Arawak islands as objects of Carib desire; construction of large canoes, preparations for war, raids on the coastal islands, Trinidad, Tobago, Margarita, ravishing the women, victory feasts. Then the invasion stage, Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, Martinique, Dominica, Guadeloupe, the killing of the Arawaks, the glorious cannibalism of men and of words, *carib, calib, cannibal,* and *Caliban;* finally, the Sea of the Caribs, from Guyana to the Virgin Islands, the sea that isolated the Ara-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

waks (*Tainos*) from the Greater Antilles, that cut the connection with the South American coast but not the continuity of cultural flow: Atabey-Orehu, the flux of signifiers that crossed the spatio-temporal barrier of the Caribbean to continue linking Cuba with the Orinoco and Amazon basins; Atabey-Orehu, progenitor of the supreme being of the Tainos, mother of the Taino lakes and rivers, protector of feminine ebbs and flows, of the great mysteries of the blood that women experience, and there, at the other end of the Antillean arc, the Great Mother of Waters, the immediacy of the matriarchy, the beginning of the cultivation of the yucca, the ritual orgy, incest, the sacrifice of the virgin male, blood and earth.

There is something enormously old and powerful in this, I know; a contradictory vertigo which there is no reason to interrupt, and so we reach the point at which the image of Our Lady venerated in el Cobre is, also, a syncretic object, produced by two quite distinct images of the Virgin Mary, which were to wind up in the hands of the chiefs of Cueiba and Macaca, and which were adored simultaneously as Atabey and as Nuestra Señora (this last in the form of an amulet). Imagine for a moment these chiefs' perplexity when they saw, for the first time, what no Taino had seen before: the image, in color, of the Mother of the Supreme Being, the lone progenitor of Yucahu Bagua Maorocoti, who now turned out to be, in addition, the mother of the god of those bearded, yucca-colored men; she who, according to them, protected them from death and injury in war. *Ave Maria,* these Indians would learn to say as they worshipped their Atabey, who at one time had been Orehu, and before that the Great Arawak Mother. *Ave Maria,* Francisco Sánchez de Moya, a sixteenth-century Spanish captain, would surely say when he received the commission and the order to make the crossing to Cuba to start copper foundries in the mines of El Prado. *Ave Maria,* he would say once again when he wrapped the image of Nuestra Señora de Illescas, of whom he was a devotee, among his shirts to protect him from the dangerous storms and shipwrecks of the hazardous passage to the Indies. *Ave Maria,* he would repeat on the day he placed it upon the humble altar in the solitary hermitage of Santiago del Prado, the merest hut for the poor Indians and Negroes who worked the copper mines.

But the image, that of Nuestra Señora de Illescas, brought to Cuba by the good captain, had a long history behind it. It is itself another syncretic object. The chain of signifiers now takes us across the Renaissance to the Middle Ages. It leads us to Byzantium, the unique, the magnificent, where among all kinds of heresies and pagan practices the cult of the Virgin Mary was born (a cult unforeseen by the Doctors of the Church).

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

There in Byzantium, among the splendors of its icons and mosaics, a likeness of the Virgin Mary and her Child may have been plundered by some crusading and voracious knight, or acquired by a seller of relics, or copied on the retina of some pious pilgrim. At any rate the suspicious cult of the Virgin Mary filtered surreptitiously into Europe. Surely it would not have gone very far on its own, but this happened at the beginning of the twelfth century, the legendary epoch of the troubadours and of *fin amour,* when Woman ceased to be Eve, the dirty and damned seducer of Adam and ally of the Serpent. She was washed, perfumed, and sumptuously dressed to suit the scope of her new image: the Lady. Then, the cult of Our Lady spread like fire through gunpowder, and one fine day it arrived at Illescas, a few miles away from Toledo.

Ave Maria, the slaves at the El Prado mines repeated aloud, and quickly, in an undertone that the priest could not hear, they added: *Oshun Yeye.* For that miraculous altar image was for them one of the most conspicuous *orishas* of the Yoruba pantheon: Oshun Yeye Moro, the perfumed whore; Oshun Kayode, the gay dancer; Oshun Aña, the lover of the drum; Oshun Akuara, she who mixes love potions; Oshun Ede, the *grande dame;* Oshun Fumike, she who gives children to sterile women; Oshun Funke, the wise one; Oshun Kole-Kole, the wicked sorceress.

Oshun, as a syncretic object, is as dizzying as her honeyed dance and yellow bandanas. She is traditionally the Lady of the Rivers, but some of her avatars relate her to the bays and the seashores. Her most prized objects are amber, coral, and yellow metals; her favorite foods are honey, squash, and sweets that contain eggs. Sometimes she shows herself to be gentle and ministering, above all in women's matters and those of love; at other times she shows herself to be insensitive, capricious, and voluble, and she can even become nasty and treacherous; in these darker apparitions we also see her as an old carrion-eating witch and as the *orisha* of death.

This multiple aspect of Oshun makes us think at once of the contradictions of Aphrodite. Both goddesses, one as much as the other, are at once "luminous" and "dark"; they reign over a place where men find both pleasure and death, love and hate, voluptuousity and betrayal. Both goddesses came from the sea and inhabit the marine, fluvial, and vaginal tides; both seduce gods and men, and both protect cosmetics and prostitution.

The correspondences between the Greek and Yoruba pantheons have been noted, but they have not been explained. How to explain, to give another example, the unusual parallel of Hermes and Elegua? Both are "the travelers," the "messengers of the gods," the "keepers of the gates,"

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

"lords of the thresholds"; both were adored in the form of phallic stone figures, both protect crossroads, highways, and commerce, and both can show themselves in the figure of a man with a cane who rests his body's weight on one foot alone. Both sponsor the start of any activity, make transactions smooth, and are the only ones to pass through the terrible spaces that mediate the Supreme Being and the gods, the gods and the dead, the living and the dead. Both, finally, appear as naughty, mendacious children, or as tricky and lascivious old men; both are the "givers of discourse" and they preside over the word, over mysteries, transformations, processes, and changes; they are the alpha and omega of things. For this reason, certain Yoruba ceremonies begin and end with Elegua's dance.

In the same way, Africa and Aphrodite have more in common than the Greek root that unites their names; there is a flow of marine foam that connects two civilizations "in another way," from within the turbulence of chaos, two civilizations doubly separated by geography and history. The cult of the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre can be read as a Cuban cult, but it can also be reread—one reading does not negate the other—as a meta-archipelagic text, a meeting or confluence of marine flowings that connects the Niger with the Mississippi, the China Sea with the Orinoco, the Parthenon with a fried food stand in an alley in Paramaribo.

The peoples of the sea, or better, the Peoples of the Sea proliferate incessantly while differentiating themselves from one another, traveling together toward the infinite. Certain dynamics of their culture also repeat and sail through the seas of time without reaching anywhere. If I were to put this in two words, they would be: performance and rhythm. And nonetheless, I would have to add something more: the notion that we have called "in a certain kind of way," something remote that reproduces itself and that carries the desire to sublimate apocalypse and violence; something obscure that comes from the performance and that one makes his own in a very special way; concretely, it takes away the space that separates the onlooker from the participant.

From rhythm to polyrhythm

Nature is the flux of an unknowable feedback machine that society interrupts constantly with the most varied and noisy rhythms. Each rhythm is itself a flux cut through by other rhythms, and we can pursue fluxes upon rhythms endlessly. Well then, the culture of the Peoples of the Sea is a flux interrupted by rhythms which attempt to silence the noises with which

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

their own social formation interrupts the discourse of Nature. If this definition should seem abstruse, we could simplify it by saying that the cultural discourse of the Peoples of the Sea attempts, through real or symbolic sacrifice, to neutralize violence and to refer society to the transhistorical codes of Nature. Of course, as the codes of Nature are neither limited nor fixed, nor even intelligible, the culture of the Peoples of the Sea expresses the desire to sublimate social violence through referring itself to a space that can only be intuited through the poetic, since it always puts forth an area of chaos. In this paradoxical space, in which one has the illusion of experiencing a totality, there appear to be no repressions or contradictions; there is no desire other than that of maintaining oneself within the limits of this zone for the longest possible time, in free orbit, beyond imprisonment or liberty.

All machines have their master codes, and the codebook to the cultural machine of the Peoples of the Sea is made up of a network of subcodes holding together cosmogonies, mythic bestiaries, remote pharmacopoeias, oracles, profound ceremonies, and the mysteries and alchemies of antiquity. One of these subcodes may lead us into the labyrinth of Minos, another to the Tower of Babel, another to the Arawak version of the Flood, another to the secrets of Eleusis, another to the garden of the unicorn, others to the sacred books of India and China and to the divining *cauris* of West Africa. The keys to this vast hermetic labyrinth refer us to "another" wisdom that lies forgotten in the foundation of the postindustrial world, since at one time it was the only form of knowledge there. Clearly, I don't have an interest at this point in saying that all peoples are or at one time were Peoples of the Sea. What I do care to establish is that the people of the Caribbean still are this in part, and everything seems to indicate that they will continue to be so for some time, even within the interplay of dynamics that carry models of knowledge proper to modernity and postmodernity. In the Caribbean, epistemological transparency has not displaced the dregs and sediments of the cosmological arcana, the spatterings of sacrificial blood—as we shall see in the chapter on the work of Fernando Ortiz—but rather, unlike what happens in the West, scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge coexist as differences within the same system.

Then what kind of performance is observed before or beyond the chaos of Caribbean culture? The ritual of supersyncretic beliefs? Dance? Music? By themselves, none of these in particular. The regularities that the culture of the Caribbean shows begin from its intention to reread (rewrite) the march of Nature in terms of rhythms "of a certain kind." I'll give an ex-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

ample right away: Let's suppose that we beat upon a drum with a single blow and set its skin to vibrating. Let's suppose that this sound stretches until it forms something like a salami. Well, here comes the interruptive action of the Caribbean machine; it starts slicing pieces of sound in an unforeseen, improbable, and finally impossible way.

To anyone interested in the way machines function, I ought to say that the Caribbean machine is not a Deleuze and Guattari model of the kind we saw some pages back (the machine machine machine). The specifications of that model are clear and final: here is a flow machine; we hook up an interrupting machine, to which another interrupting machine is then connected, making the previous interruptor appear to be in motion. We're dealing with a system of relative machines, given that, according to how it's seen, the same machine may be one of flow or of interruption. The Caribbean machine, on the other hand, is something more: it is a technological-poetic machine, or, if you like, a metamachine of differences whose poetic mechanism cannot be diagrammed in conventional dimensions, and whose user's manual is found dispersed in a state of plasma within the chaos of its own network of codes and subcodes. It is a machine very different from those we've been discussing up to now. In any event, the notion of polyrhythm (rhythms cut through by other rhythms, which are cut by still other rhythms)—if it takes us to the point at which the central rhythm is displaced by other rhythms in such a way as to make it fix a center no longer, then to transcend into a state of flux—may fairly define the type of performance that characterizes the Caribbean cultural machine. A moment will be reached in which it will no longer be clear whether the salami of sound is cut by the rhythms or these are cut by the salami or it is cut in its slices or these are cut by slices of rhythm. This is by way of saying that rhythm, in the codes of the Caribbean, precedes music, including percussion itself. It is something that was *already there,* amid the noise; something very ancient and dark to which the drummer's hand and the drumhead connect on a given moment; a kind of scapegoat, offered in sacrifice, which can be glimpsed in the air when one lets himself be carried away by a battery of *batá* drums (secret drums to whose beats the *orishas,* the living and the dead, all dance).

It would, however, be a mistake to think that the Caribbean rhythm connects only to percussion. The Caribbean rhythm is in fact a metarhythm which can be arrived at through any system of signs, whether it be dance, music, language, text, or body language, etc. Let's say that one begins to walk and all of a sudden he realizes that he is walking "well," that is, not

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

just with his feet, but also with other parts of his body, which nonetheless adjusts admirably to the rhythm of his steps. It is quite possible that the walker in this circumstance might experience a mild and happy sensation of well-being. All right, there's nothing particularly special about this yet, nothing that we could call "Caribbean"; we've simply taken up the conventional notion of polyrhythm, which presupposed a central rhythm (the rhythm of footsteps). It's possible, though, that a person might feel that he wants to walk not with his feet alone, and to this end he imbues the muscles of his neck, back, abdomen, arms, in short all his muscles, with their own rhythm, different from the rhythm of his footsteps, which no longer dominate. If this should come to pass—which finally would be only a transitory performance—he would be walking like the anti-apocalyptic old women. What has happened is that the center of the rhythmic ensemble formed by the footsteps has been displaced, and now it runs from muscle to muscle, stopping here and there and illuminating in intermittent succession, like a firefly, each rhythmic focus of the body.

Of course the process that I just described is no more than a didactic example, and therefore somewhat mediocre. I haven't even mentioned one of the most important dynamics working toward the decentering of the polyrhythmic system. I'm talking about the very complex phenomenon usually called improvisation. Without it one could never arrive at the optimal rhythm for each particular muscle; one has to give them their freedom to look around at their own risk. Thus, before a person can walk "in a certain kind of way," his entire body must pass through an improvisational stage.

This theme is nowhere near exhausted, but we have to keep moving. I know that there must be doubts and questions at this point, and I'll try to anticipate a few. Someone might ask, for example, what the use is of walking "in a certain kind of way." In fact, there's not much use in it; not even dancing "in a certain kind of way" is of much use if the scale of values that we use corresponds only with a technological machine coupled to an industrial machine coupled to a commercial machine. A jazz improvisation (jazz being a kind of music that dwells within the Caribbean orbit), which achieves a decentering of the canon by which a piece has been interpreted previously, is hardly useful either. The improvisation can be taped by a record company, but the product is a recording, not the improvisation, which is linked indissolubly with a space and time that cannot be reproduced. Of course the company in question will try to persuade us that it is not selling us a phantom. And this company or another will try to convince us that if we acquire certain audio components we'll be able to hear the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

phantom improvisation better than the improvisation itself. Which is not necessarily false, of course. The deception lies in giving out that "listening" is the only sense touched by improvisation. In fact, improvisation, if it has reached a level that I've been calling "a certain kind of way," has penetrated all of the percipient spaces of those present, and it is precisely this shifting "totality" that leads them to perceive the impossible unity, the absent locus, the center that has taken off and yet is still there, dominating and dominated by the soloist's performance. It is this "totality" that leads those present to another "totality": that of rhythm-flux, but not that of rhythms and fluxes that belong to industrial production, to computers, to psychoanalysis, to synchronicity and diachronicity. The only useful thing about dancing or playing an instrument "in a certain kind of way" lies in the attempt to move an audience into a realm where the tensions that lead to confrontation are inoperative.

The case here is that we are speaking about traditional culture and its impact on Caribbean beings, not about technological knowledge or capitalist consuming practices, and in cultural terms to do something "in a certain kind of way" is always an important matter, since it is an attempt to sublimate violence. Further, it seems that it will keep on being important independently of the power relations of a political, economic, and even cultural nature that exist between the Caribbean and the West. Contrary to the opinions of many, I see no solid reasons to think that the culture of the Peoples of the Sea is negatively affected by the cultural "consumerism" of the industrial societies. When a people's culture conserves ancient dynamics that play "in a certain kind of way," these resist being displaced by external territorializing forms and they propose to coexist with them through syncretic processes. But aren't such processes perhaps a denaturing phenomenon? False. They are enriching, since they contribute to the widening of the play of differences. To begin with, there is no pure cultural form, not even the religious ones. Culture is a discourse, a language, and as such it has no beginning or end and is always in transformation, since it is always looking for the way to signify what it cannot manage to signify. It is true that in comparison with other important discourses—political, economic, social—cultural discourse is the one that most resists change. Its intrinsic desire, one might say, is one of conservation, as it is linked to the ancestral desire of human groups to differentiate themselves as much as possible from one another. Thus we may speak of cultural forms that are more or less regional, national, subcontinental, and even continental. But this in no way denies the heterogeneity of such forms.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

A syncretic artifact is not a synthesis, but rather a signifier made of differences. What happens is that, in the melting pot of societies that the world provides, syncretic processes realize themselves through an economy in whose modality of exchange the signifier of *there*—of the Other—is consumed ("read") according to local codes that are already in existence; that is, codes from *here*. Therefore we can agree on the well-known phrase that China did not become Buddhist but rather Buddhism became Chinese. In the case of the Caribbean, it is easy to see that what we call traditional culture refers to an interplay of supersyncretic signifiers whose principal "centers" are localized in preindustrial Europe, in the sub-Saharan regions of Africa, and in certain island and coastal zones of southern Asia. What happens when there arrives, or there is imposed commercially, a "foreign" signifier, let's say the big band music of the forties or the rock music of the past thirty years? Well, among other things, the mambo, the cha-cha-cha, the bossa nova, the bolero, salsa, and reggae happen; that is to say, Caribbean music did not become Anglo-Saxon but rather the latter became Caribbean within a play of differences. Certainly there were changes (different musical instruments, different tunes, different arrangements), but the rhythm and the way of expressing oneself "in a certain kind of way" kept on being Caribbean. In reality, it could be said that, in the Caribbean, the "foreign" interacts with the "traditional" like a ray of light with a prism; that is, they produce phenomena of reflection, refraction, and decomposition. But the light keeps on being light; furthermore, the eye's camera comes out the winner, since spectacular optical performances unfold which almost always induce pleasure, or at least curiosity.

Thus the only thing that walking, dancing, playing an instrument, singing, or writing "in a certain kind of way" are good for is to displace the participants toward a poetic territory marked by an aesthetic of pleasure, or better, an aesthetic whose desire is nonviolence. This voyage "in a certain kind of way," from which one always returns—as in dreams—with the uncertainty of not having lived the past but an immemorial present, can be embarked upon by any kind of performer; it's enough that he should connect to the traditional rhythm that floats within him and without him, within and without those present. The easiest vehicle to take is improvisation, doing something all of a sudden, without thinking about it, without giving reason the chance to resist being abducted through more self-reflexive forms of aesthetic experience, irony for example. Yes, I know, it will be said that a poetic voyage is within reach of any of the earth's inhabitants. But of course, achieving the poetic is not exclusive to any human

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

group; what *is* characteristic of the Caribbean peoples is that, in fundamental aspect, their aesthetic experience occurs within the framework of rituals and representations of a collective, ahistorical, and improvisatory nature. Later on, in the chapter devoted to Alejo Carpentier and Wilson Harris, we shall see the differences that there can be between those voyages in pursuit of the furtive *locus* of "Caribbeanness."

In any event, we can say that the Caribbean performance, including the ordinary act of walking, does not reflect back on the performer alone but rather it also directs itself toward a public in search of a carnivalesque catharsis that proposes to divert excesses of violence and that in the final analysis was *already there*. Perhaps that is why the most natural forms of Caribbean cultural expression are dance and popular music; that is why Caribbean people excel more in the spectator sports (boxing, baseball, basketball, cricket, gymnastics, track and field, etc.) than in the more subdued, austere sports where space for the performer is less visible (swimming), or is constrained by the nature of the rules of the sport itself, or perhaps the silence required of the audience (shooting, fencing, riding, diving, tennis, etc.).

Although boxing is a sport that many people detest, think for a moment about the capacity to symbolize ritual action that boxing offers: the contenders dancing on the mat, their bouncing off the ropes, the elegant jab and sidestep, the flourish of the bolo punch and the uppercut, the implicit rhythm in all weaving, the boxers' improvised theatrical gestures (faces, challenges, disdainful smiles), the choosing to be villain in one round and gentleman in the next, the performances of the supporting players (the referee who breaks up a clinch, the cornermen with their sponges and towels, the cut man, the doctor who scrutinizes the wounds, the announcer with his fantastic tuxedo, the judges attentively looking on, the bell man), and all of that on an elevated and perfectly illumined space, filled with silks and colors, blood spattering, the flash of the cameras, the shouts and whistles, the drama of the knockdown (will he get up or won't he?), the crowd on its feet, the cheering, the winner's upraised arm. It's no surprise that the people of the Caribbean should be good boxers and also, of course, good musicians, good singers, good dancers, and good writers.

From literature to carnival

One might think that literature is a solitary art as private and quiet as prayer. Not true. Literature is one of the most exhibitionistic expressions

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

in the world. This is because it is a stream of texts and there are few things as exhibitionist as a text. It should be remembered that what a performer writes—the word *author* has justifiably fallen into disuse—is not a text, but something previous and qualitatively different: a pre-text. For a pre-text to transform itself into a text, certain stages, certain requisites, which I won't list for reasons of space and argument, must be gone through. I'll content myself by saying that the text is born when it is read by the Other: the reader. From this moment on text and reader connect with each other like a machine of reciprocal seductions. With each reading the reader seduces the text, transforms it, makes it his own; with each reading the text seduces the reader, transforms him, makes him its own. If this double seduction reaches the intensity of "a certain kind of way," both the text and the reader will transcend their statistical limits and will drift toward the decentered center of the paradoxical. This possible impossibility has been studied philosophically, epistemologically, through the discourse of poststructuralism. But poststructuralist discourse corresponds to postindustrial discourse, both discourses of so-called postmodernity. Caribbean discourse is in many respects prestructuralist and preindustrial, and to make matters worse, a contrapuntal discourse that when seen à la Caribbean would look like a *rumba,* and when seen à la Europe like a perpetually moving baroque fugue, in which the voices meet once never to meet again. I mean by this that the space of "a certain kind of way" is explained by poststructuralist thought as episteme—for example, Derrida's notion of *différance*—while Caribbean discourse, as well as being capable of occupying it in theoretical terms, floods it with a poetic and vital stream navigated by Eros and Dionysus, by Oshun and Elegua, by the Great Mother of the Arawaks and the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre, all of them defusing violence, the blind violence with which the Caribbean social dynamics collide, the violence organized by slavery, despotic colonialism, and the Plantation.

And so the Caribbean text is excessive, dense, uncanny, asymmetrical, entropic, hermetic, all this because, in the fashion of a zoo or bestiary, it opens its doors to two great orders of reading: one of a secondary type, epistemological, profane, diurnal, and linked to the West—the world outside—where the text uncoils itself and quivers like a fantastic beast to be the object of knowledge and desire; another the principal order, teleological, ritual, nocturnal, and referring to the Caribbean itself, where the text unfolds its bisexual sphinxlike monstrosity toward the void of its impossible origin, and dreams that it incorporates this, or is incorporated by it.

A pertinent question would be: how can we begin to talk of Carib-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

bean literature when its very existence is questionable? The question, of course, would allude more than anything to the polylingualism that seems to divide irreparably the letters of the Caribbean. But I would respond to this question with another: is it any more prudent to consider *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as a representative example of the Spanish novel, or the work of Césaire as an achievement of French poetry, or Machado de Assis as a Portuguese writer, or Wilson Harris as an English writer who left his homeland (Guyana) to live as an exile in England? Certainly not. Clearly, one could quickly argue that what I've just said doesn't prove the existence of a Caribbean literature, and that what in fact exist are local literatures, written from within the Caribbean's different linguistic blocs. I agree with this proposition, but only in terms of a first reading. Beneath the turbulence of *árbol, arbre,* tree, etc., there is an island that repeats itself until transforming into a meta-archipelago and reaching the most widely separated transhistorical frontiers of the globe. There's no center or circumference, but there are common dynamics that express themselves in a more or less regular way within the chaos and then, gradually, begin assimilating into African, European, Indoamerican, and Asian contexts up to the vanishing point. What's a good example of this trip to the source? The field of literature is always conflictive (narrow nationalism, resentments, rivalries); my example will not be a literary but a political performer: Martin Luther King. This man was able to be a Caribbean person without ceasing to be a North American, and vice versa. His African ancestry, the texture of his humanism, the ancient wisdom embodied in his pronouncements and strategies, his improvisatory vocation, his ability to seduce and be seduced, and, above all, his vehement condition as a dreamer (*I have a dream* . . .) and as an authentic performer make up the Caribbean side of a man unquestionably idiosyncratic in North America. Martin Luther King occupies and fills the space in which the Caribbean connects to the North American, a space of which jazz is also a sign.

To persevere in the attempt to refer the culture of the Caribbean to geography—other than to call it a meta-archipelago—is a debilitating and scarcely productive project. There are performers who were born in the Caribbean and who are not Caribbean by their performance; there are others who were born near or far away and nevertheless *are*. This doesn't excuse the fact, which I pointed out earlier, that there are common tropisms, and that these are seen with greater frequency within the marine flows that extend from the mouth of the Amazon to the Mississippi delta, that bathe the north coasts of South and Central America, the old Arawak-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

Carib island bridge, and parts of the United States that are not completely integrated into its technological marrow; furthermore, we would perhaps have to count New York, a city where the density of Caribbean population is noticeable, but, as I said, these geographical speculations leave a lot to be desired. Antilleans, for example, tend to roam the entire world in search of the centers of their Caribbeanness, constituting one of our century's most notable migratory flows. The Antilleans' insularity does not impel them toward isolation, but on the contrary, toward travel, toward exploration, toward the search for fluvial and marine routes. One needn't forget that it was men from the Antilles who constructed the Panama Canal.

Well then, it is necessary to mention at least some of the common regularities which, in a state of flight, the Caribbean's multilinguistic literature presents. In this respect I think that the most perceptible movement that the Caribbean text carries out is, paradoxically, the one that tends to project it outside its generic ambit: a metonymic displacement toward scenic, ritual, and mythological forms, that is, toward machines that specialize in producing bifurcations and paradoxes. This attempt to evade the nets of strictly literary intertextuality always results, naturally, in a resounding failure. In the last analysis, a text is and will be a text ad infinitum, no matter how much it tries to hide itself as something else. Nonetheless, this failed project leaves its mark on the text's surface, and leaves it not so much as the trace of a frustrated act but rather as a will to persevere in flight. It can be said that Caribbean texts are fugitive by nature, constituting a marginal catalog that involves a desire for nonviolence. Thus we have it that the Caribbean *Bildungsroman* does not usually conclude with the hero's saying good-bye to the stage of apprenticeship in terms of a clean slate, nor does the dramatic structure of the Caribbean text ordinarily conclude with the phallic orgasm of climax, but rather with a kind of coda which, for example, would be interpreted in the Cuban popular theater by a rumba danced by the entire cast. If we look at the Caribbean's most representative novels we see that their narrative discourse is constantly disrupted, and at times almost annulled, by heteroclitic, fractal, baroque, or arboreal forms, which propose themselves as vehicles to drive the reader and the text to the marginal and ritually initiating territory of the absence of violence.

All of this refers, nevertheless, to a first reading of the Caribbean text. A rereading would require of us a stop to look at the rhythms proper to Caribbean literature. Here we will soon notice the presence of several rhythmic sources: Indoamerica, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Well, as we know, the polyrhythmic play that makes up the copper, black, yellow, and white rhythms

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

(a conventional way of differentiating them) that issue from these sources has been described and analyzed in the most diverse ways and through the most varied disciplines. Clearly, nothing like that will be done here. In this book there will be discussion only of some regularities that break off from the interplay of those rhythms. For example, white rhythms, basically, articulate themselves in a binary fashion; here is the rhythm of steps marching or running, of territorializing; it is the narrative of conquest and colonization, of the assembly line, of technological knowledge, of computers and positivist ideologies; in general these rhythms are indifferent to their social impact; they are narcissistic rhythms, obsessed with their own legitimation, carrying guilt, alienation, and signs of death which they hide by proposing themselves as the best rhythms existing now or ever. The copper, black, and yellow rhythms, if quite different from one another, have something in common: they belong to the Peoples of the Sea. These rhythms, when compared to the ones mentioned earlier, appear as turbulent and erratic, or, if you like, as eruptions of gases and lava that issue from an elemental stratum, still in formation; in this respect they are rhythms without a past, or better, rhythms whose past is in the present, and they legitimize themselves by themselves. (This theme will be touched on again in Chapter 4.) One might think that there is an irremediable contradiction between the two kinds of rhythms, and in fact there is, but only within the confines of a first reading. The dialectic of this contradiction would take us to the moment of synthesis: *mestizo* rhythm, *mulato* rhythm. But a rereading would make it apparent that *mestizaje* is not a synthesis, but rather the opposite. It can't be such a thing because nothing that is ostensibly syncretic constitutes a stable point. The high regard for *mestizaje,* the *mestizaje* solution, did not originate in Africa or Indoamerica or with any People of the Sea. It involves a positivistic and logocentric argument, an argument that sees in the biological, economic, and cultural whitening of Caribbean society a series of successive steps toward "progress." And as such it refers to conquest, to slavery, neocolonialism, and dependence. Within the realities of a rereading, *mestizaje* is nothing more than a concentration of differences, a tangle of dynamics obtained by means of a greater density of the Caribbean object, as we saw in the case of the Virgen del Cobre, who, by the way, is known as "la Virgen mulata." Then, at a given moment in our rereading, the binary oppositions Europe/Indoamerica, Europe/Africa, and Europe/Asia do not resolve themselves into the synthesis of *mestizaje,* but rather they resolve into insoluble differential equations, which repeat their unknowns through the ages of the meta-archipelago. The literature of the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

Caribbean can be read as a *mestizo* text, but also as a stream of texts in flight, in intense differentiation among themselves and within whose complex coexistence there are vague regularities, usually paradoxical. The Caribbean poem and novel are not only projects for ironizing a set of values taken as universal; they are, also, projects that communicate their own turbulence, their own clash, and their own void, the swirling black hole of social violence produced by the *encomienda* and the plantation, that is, their otherness, their peripheral asymmetry with regard to the West.

Thus Caribbean literature cannot free itself totally of the multiethnic society upon which it floats, and it tells us of its fragmentation and instability: that of the Negro who studied in London or in Paris, that of the white who believes in voodoo, that of the Negro who wants to find his identity in Africa, that of the mulatto who wants to be white, that of the white man who loves a black woman and vice versa, that of the rich black man and poor white man, that of the mulatto woman who passes for white and has a black child, that of the mulatto who says that the races do not exist. Add to these differences those that resulted—and still result in certain regions—from the encounter of the Indoamerican with the European and of the latter with the Asian. Finally, add to all of this the unstable system of relations which, amid uncompromising alliances and conflicts, brings together and separates the Native American and the African, the Native American and the Asian, the Asian and the African, but why go on with this? What model of the human sciences can predict what will happen in the Caribbean next year, next month, next week? We are dealing obviously with an unpredictable society that originated in the most violent currents and eddies of modern history where sexual and class differences are overlaid with differences of an ethnographic nature. (This theme is continued in Chapter 6.) Nevertheless, to reduce the Caribbean to the single factor of its instability would also be an error; the Caribbean is that and much more, including much more than what will be dealt with in this book.

In any case, the impossibility of being able to assume a stable identity, even the color that one wears in his skin, can only be made right through the possibility of existing "in a certain kind of way" in the midst of the sound and fury of chaos. To this end, the most viable route to take, it's clear, is that of the meta-archipelago itself, above all the paths that lead to the semipagan hagiography of the Middle Ages and to African beliefs. It is in this space that the majority of the Caribbean cults are articulated, cults that by their nature unleash multiple popular expressions: myth, music, dance, song, theater. This is why the Caribbean text, to transcend its own

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

cloister, must avail itself of these models in search of routes that might lead, at least symbolically, to an extratextual point of social nonviolence and psychic reconstitution of the Self. The routes, iridescent and transitory as a rainbow, cross at all points the network of binary dynamics extended by the West. The result is a text that speaks of a critical coexistence of rhythms, a polyrhythmic ensemble whose central binary rhythm is decentered when the performer (writer/reader) and the text try to escape "in a certain kind of way."

It will be said that this coexistence is false, that finally it ends up as a system formed by the opposition Peoples of the Sea / Europe and its historical derivations. A rereading of this point, nevertheless, would have more imaginative consequences. Relations between Peoples of the Sea and the West, like all power relations, are not simply antagonistic. For example, at bottom, all the Peoples of the Sea want to occupy the place that they occupy geographically, but they would also like to occupy the place of the West, and vice versa. Put differently, any Person of the Sea, without ceasing to be such, would like at bottom to have an industrial machine, one of flow and interruption, to be perhaps in the world of theory, science, and technology. In a parallel fashion, the world made by the Industrial Revolution, without ceasing to be such, would like at times to be in the place of the Peoples of the Sea, where it once was; it would like to live immersed in Nature and in the poetic, that is, it would like once more to own a machine that flows and interrupts at the same time. The signs of the existence of this double paradox of desire are wherever you look—the New Age movement and the environmental movement in the United States and Europe, the industrializing plans and taste for the artificial in the Third World—and I'll return to this contradictory theme in the last chapter. With matters in this state, the opposition of theoretical machine versus poetic machine, epistemological machine versus teleological machine, power machine versus resistance machine, and others of the like will be quite other than fixed poles that always face each other as enemies. In reality, the supposed fixity of these poles would be undermined by an entire gamut of relations that are not necessarily antagonistic, to open up a complex and unstable kind of existing that points to the void, to the lack of something, to repetitive and rhythmic insufficiency which, finally, is the most visible determinism to be drawn in the Caribbean.

And finally I want to make it clear that to undertake a rereading of the Caribbean gives one no license to fall into idealizations. In the first place, as Freud would see, the popular tradition is also in the last analysis a machine

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user

that is not free from repression. Certainly it is no technologico-positivist machine that is indifferent to the conserving of certain social linkages, but in its ahistoricity it perpetuates myths and fables that attempt to legitimate the law of patriarchy and hide the violence inherent in every sociological origin. Further—following René Girard's reasoning—we can agree that the ritual sacrifice practiced in the symbolic societies implied a desire to sublimate public violence, but this desire was emitted from the sphere of power and pursued objectives of social control.

In the second place, the critical coexistence that I have spoken of tends to unfold in the most unpredictable and diverse forms. An island can, at a given moment, bring closer together or move farther apart cultural components of diverse origins with the worst of possible results—which, luckily, is not the rule—while on a contiguous island the seething and constant interplay of transcontinental spume generates a fortunate product. This chance circumstance makes it possible that, for example, the degree of Africanization in each local culture will vary from island to island, and that the Plantation's acculturating impact will make itself known asymmetrically.

As to the rest, the Caribbean text shows the specific features of the supersyncretic culture from which it emerges. It is, without a doubt, a consummate performer, with recourse to the most daring improvisations to keep from being trapped within its own textuality. (I refer the reader to Chapter 7.) In its most spontaneous form it can be seen in terms of the *carnaval,* the great Caribbean celebration that spreads out through the most varied systems of signs: music, song, dance, myth, language, food, dress, body expression. There is something strongly feminine in this extraordinary *fiesta:* its flux, its diffuse sensuality, its generative force, its capacity to nourish and conserve (juices, spring, pollen, rain, seed, shoot, ritual sacrifice—these are words that come to stay). Think of the dancing flourishes, the rhythms of the conga, the samba, the masks, the hoods, the men dressed and painted as women, the bottles of rum, the sweets, the confetti and colored streamers, the hubbub, the carousal, the flutes, the drums, the cornet and the trombone, the teasing, the jealousy, the whistles and the faces, the razor that draws blood, death, life, reality in forward and reverse, torrents of people who flood the streets, the night lit up like an endless dream, the figure of a centipede that comes together and then breaks up, that winds and stretches beneath the ritual's rhythm, that flees the rhythm without escaping it, putting off its defeat, stealing off and hiding itself, imbedding itself finally in the rhythm, always in the rhythm, the beat of the chaos of the islands.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/596095/9780822382058-001.pdf
by COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY user