SOURCE:
Meeks, Brian, Folke Lindahl, eds. New Caribbean Thought: A Reader. Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago: The University of the West Indies Press, 2001.
Call # F1623. N48 2001

Negotiating Caribbean Identities

STUART HALL

In this article I will address questions of Caribbean culture and identity. I want to suggest that such questions are not in any sense separate or removed from the problems of political mobilization, of cultural development, of economic development and so on. The more we know and see of the struggles of the societies of the periphery to make something of the slender resources available to them, the more important we understand the questions and problems of cultural identity to be in that process. I want to examine some of the themes of a topic that has been richly explored by Caribbean writers and artists – cultural identity presenting itself always as a problem to Caribbean people.

Why cultural identity should be a problem is not a mystery, but I want to probe this question of identity and why Caribbean writers, politicians, civic leaders, artists and others have been unable to leave worrying away at it. In doing so, I want to problematize to some extent the way we think about identity. I want to explore the term 'myth' itself – the English are not good at myth, always opposing it, on the one hand, to reality and, on the other hand, to truth, as though one has to choose between them. I specifically do not want to choose between myth and reality but to talk about the very real contemporary and historical effects of myths of identity. And I want to do so with one other purpose, which I hope will come through more clearly at the end. The

issue of cultural identity as a political quest now constitutes one of the most serious global problems at the start of the twenty-first century. The re-emergence of questions of ethnicity, of nationalism – the obduracy, the dangers and the pleasures of the rediscovery of identity in the modern world, inside and outside of Europe – places the question of cultural identity at the very centre of the contemporary political agenda. What I want to suggest is that despite the dilemmas and vicissitudes of identity through which Caribbean people have passed and continue to pass, we have a tiny but important message for the world about how to negotiate identity.

The Search for Essence

There is a very clear and powerful discourse about cultural identity, especially in the West. Indeed, most of us have lived through, and are still living through, an exercise in the definition and defence of a particular kind of British cultural identity. I was puzzled when Norman Tebbit asked which cricket team you would support, in order to discover whether you were "one of us", "one of them" or maybe neither.[1] My own response to that was, if you can tell me how many of the four hundred members of the British athletics team are properly British, I would be ready to answer the question about the cricket team; otherwise not. But the discourse of identity suggests that the culture of a people is at root – and the question of roots is very much at issue – a question of its essence, a question of the fundamentals of a culture. Histories come and go, peoples come and go, situations change, but somewhere down there throbs the culture to which we all belong. It provides a kind of ground for our identities: something to which we can return, something solid, something fixed, around which we can organize our identities and our sense of belongingness. And there is a sense that modern nations and peoples cannot survive for long and succeed without the capacity to touch ground, as it were, in the name of their cultural identities.

Now, the question of what constitutes a Caribbean cultural identity has been of extraordinary importance, especially in the twentieth century. Partly because of the dislocations of conquest, of colonization and slavery, partly because of the colonial relationship itself and the distortions of living in a world culturally dependent on and dominated by some centre outside the place where the majority of the people lived. But the question has also been important for counter-identities, providing sources on which the important movements of

decolonization, of independence, of nationalist consciousness in the region have been founded. In a sense, until it is possible to state who the subjects of independence movements are likely to be, and in whose name cultural decolonization is being conducted, it is not possible to complete the process. And that process involves the question of defining the people. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon speaks of what he calls a passionate research directed to the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some beautiful and splendid area whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and others (Fanon 1970). And as I have said, that passionate research by Caribbean writers, artists and political leaders, that quest for identity, has been the very form in which much of our artistic endeavour in all the Caribbean languages has been conducted in this century.

Cross-Currents of Diaspora

Why, then, is the identity of the Caribbean so problematic? It is a very large question, but let me suggest some of the reasons. First of all, if the search for identity always involves a search for origins, it is impossible to locate in the Caribbean an origin for its peoples. The indigenous peoples of the area very largely no longer exist, and they ceased to exist very soon after the European encounter. This is indeed the first trauma of identity in the Caribbean. Take the coat of arms of Jamaica, for example: it has two Arawak Indian figures supporting a shield in the middle, which is crossed by pineapples surmounted by an alligator. In 1983 the then prime minister of Jamaica, Edward Seaga, wanted to change the coat of arms on the ground that he could not find represented in it a single recognizable feature of Jamaican identity. "Can the crushed and extinct Arawaks," he asked, "represent the dauntless inhabitants of Jamaica? Does the low-slung near-extinct crocodile, a cold-blooded reptile, symbolize the warm soaring spirits of Jamaicans? Where does the pineapple, which was exported to Hawaii, appear prominently either in our history or in our folklore?" I mention this simply as a reminder that questions of identity are always questions about representation. They are always questions about the invention, not simply the discovery, of tradition. They are always exercises in selective memory, and they almost always involve the silencing of something in order to allow something else to speak.

Morris Cargill, a famous commentator on Jamaican affairs in the *Gleaner*, responded to Prime Minister Seaga, "What about a design containing entwined marijuana plants? Against a background of US dollar bills with Toyotas rampant and ladies couchant?" (Cargill 1987: 285). Silencing as well as remembering identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past; that is to say, it is always about narrative, the stories cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they came from. The one way in which it is impossible to resolve the problem of identity in the Caribbean is to try looking at it, as if a good look will tell you who the people are. During the period in which I was preparing my series on the Caribbean for the British Broadcasting Corporation, I had the occasion, in a relatively short space of time, to visit a large number of Caribbean islands, several of them for the first time.[2] I was staggered by the ethnic and cultural diversity I encountered. Not a single Caribbean island looks like any other in terms of its ethnic composition, including the different genetic and physical features and characteristics of the people. And that is before you touch the question of different languages and different cultural traditions that reflect the different colonizing cultures.

It may surprise some people to know that there are several Caribbean islands, large ones, in which blacks are nowhere near a majority of the population. There are now two important formerly British Caribbean societies where Indians are in the majority. In Cuba what you are struck by first of all is the continued persistence of white Hispanic settlement, then of the mestizo population, and only later of the black population. Haiti, which is in some ways the symbolic island of black culture, where one feels closer to the African inheritance than anywhere else, has a history in which the mulattos have played an absolutely vital historical role. Martinique is a bewildering place; it is, in my experience, more French than Paris – just slightly darker. The Dominican Republic is a place where it is possible to feel closer to Spain and to the Spanish tradition of Latin America than anywhere else I have been in the Caribbean. The melting-pot of the British islands produced a different combination of genetic features and factors everywhere, and in each island elements of other ethnic cultures – Chinese, Syrian, Lebanese, Portuguese, Jewish – are present. I know because I have a small proportion of practically all of them in my own inheritance. My background is African, also I am told Scottish – of pretty low descent, probably convict – East Indian and Portuguese Jew.

What is more, in another sense, everybody in the Caribbean comes from somewhere else, and it is not clear what has drawn them to the region and certainly not whether their motives were ever of the highest level of aspiration.

That is to say, their true cultures, the places they really come from, the traditions that really formed them, are somewhere else. The Caribbean is the first, the original and the purest diaspora. These days, blacks who have completed the triangular journey back to Britain sometimes speak of the emerging black British diaspora, but I have to tell them that they and I are twice diasporized. This is more than just a diaspora and living in a place where the centre is always somewhere else: we are the break with those originating cultural sources as passed through the traumas of violent rupture. I do not want to address the nature of this rupture, with the majority of the populations wrenched from their own cultures and inserted into the cultures of the colonizing plantation relations of slavery. I do not want to address the trauma of transportation, of the breaking up of linguistic and tribal and familial groups, or the brutal aftermath of Indian indenture. I simply want to make the point that in the histories of the migration, forced or free, of peoples who now compose the populations of these societies, whose cultural traces are everywhere intermingled with one another, there is always the stamp of historical violence and rupture.

Of course, the peoples thus inserted into these old colonizing plantation societies instantly polarized. And if anyone is still under the illusion that questions of culture can ever be discussed free from and outside of questions of power, one has only to look at the Caribbean to understand how for centuries every cultural characteristic and trait had its class, colour and racial inscription. One could read off from the populations to the cultures, and from the cultures to the populations, and each was ranked in an order of cultural power. It is impossible to approach Caribbean culture without understanding the way it was continually inscribed by questions of power. Of course, that inscription of culture in power relations did not remain polarized in Caribbean society, but I now understand that one of the things I was myself running away from when I came to England to study in 1951 was a society that was profoundly culturally graded, which is what the old postcolonial society I grew up in was like. Of course, those cultural relations did not remain fixed, and the relative cultures were quickly open to integration, assimilation and cross-influence. They were almost never self-contained. They became subject at once to complex processes of assimilation, translation, adaptation, resistance, reselection and so on. In a deep sense they became diasporic societies. For wherever one finds diasporas, one always finds precisely those complicated processes of negotiation and transculturation that characterize Caribbean culture. I do not want to try and sketch the cultural relations of that period, simply to identify three key processes that are at work creating the enormously refined and delicate tracery, the complexities of cultural identification, in Caribbean society in that time.

Survival and Assimilation

The first process, and especially with respect to the populations that had been enslaved, has been the retention of old customs, the retention of cultural traits from Africa; customs and traditions that were retained in and through slavery, in plantation, in religion, partly in language, in folk customs, in music, in dance, in all those forms of expressive culture that allowed men and women to survive the trauma of slavery. The customs have not remained wholly intact, never pure, never untouched by the culture of Victorian and pre-Victorian English society, never outside of Christianity or entirely outside the reach of the church, never without at least some small instruction in the Bible. Rather, they have been always surrounded by the colonizing culture, but importantly – and to some extent today, imperatively – retaining something of the connection. They have been often unrecognized, often evident only in practice, or often unreflected. Nevertheless, in everyday life, in so far as it was possible, the traditions were maintaining some kind of subterranean link with what was often called 'the other Caribbean': the Caribbean that was not recognized, that could not speak, that had no official records, no official account of its own transportation, no official historians, but it had an oral life that retained an umbilical connection with the African homeland and culture.

But let us not forget that retention characterized the colonizing cultures as well as the colonized. For if you look at the Little Englands, the Little Spains and the Little Frances that were created by the colonizers, if you consider this kind of fossilized replica, with the usual colonial cultural lag – people are always more Victorian when taking tea in the Himalayas than when taking tea in Leamington – they were keeping alive the memory of their own homes and homelands and traditions and customs. This very important double aspect of retention has marked Caribbean culture form the earliest colonial encounters.

The second profound process is that of assimilation, of dragging the whole society into some imitative relationship with this other culture that one could never quite reach. When one talks about assimilation in the Caribbean, one always feels Caribbean people constantly leaning forward, almost about to tip over, striving to reach somewhere else. My mother used to tell me that if she

could only get hold of the right records, she would be able to stitch together a kind of genealogy for her household – not one that led to the West Coast of Africa, believe me, but a genealogy that would connect her, she was not quite sure, to the ruling house of the Austro-Hungarian Empire or the lairds of Scotland, one way or the other. She probably thought that in the quadrangle of Merton College, Oxford, I might stumble across one of these secret stones that would somehow convert me into what clearly I was formed, brought up, reared, taught, educated, nursed and nurtured to be: a kind of black Englishman. When I first went home in the mid 1960s, my parents said to me, "I hope they don't take you to be one of those immigrants over there." And the funny thing is, I had never called myself or thought of myself as an immigrant before. But having once been hailed or interpellated, I owned up at once: that is what I am. In that moment I migrated. Again, the word 'black' had never been uttered in my household or anywhere in Jamaica in my hearing, in my entire youth and adolescence – though there were all kinds of other ways of naming, and large numbers of people were very black indeed. So it was not until the mid 1960s, on another visit home, that my parents said to me, "There's all this black consciousness, black movement in the United States. I hope it's not having an influence over there", that I realized I had just changed identity again. I owned up once more and said, "Actually, you know, I am exactly what in Britain we are starting to call black." Which is a sort of footnote to say identity is not only a story, a narrative we tell ourselves about ourselves; it is a set of stories that change with historical circumstances, and identity shifts with the way in which we think, hear and experience them. Far from only coming from the still small point of truth inside us, identities actually come from outside; they are the way in which we are recognized and then come to step into the place of the recognitions others give us. Without the others there is no self, there is no self-recognition.

Given the skewed structures of growing up in such a society, of attempting, whatever social rank or position in the racial colour structure you occupy, to negotiate the complexities of who out of these complicated sets of stories you could possibly be, where you find in the mirror of history a point of identification or recognition for yourself, it is not surprising that Caribbean people of all kinds, of all classes and positions, experience the question of positioning themselves in a cultural identity as an enigma, as a problem, as an open question. There are many writings about this question, but for me, the overwhelmingly powerful statement is to be found in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, for only in Fanon does one understand the internal traumas of

identity that are the consequence of colonization and enslavement: not just the external processes of pressures of exploitation but the way that, internally, one comes to collude with an objectification of oneself that is a profound misrecognition of one's own identity. Consequently, against this background in the New World and in the Caribbean – the attempts in the twentieth century to reach for independence, to decolonize, the movements in the nineteenth century in the Hispanic Caribbean societies for independence from Spain, the attempts to regenerate and ground the political and social life of the society not in an absent picture or image that could never be fulfilled or in the nostalgia for something outside the society but in the complicated realities and negotiations of that society itself – is a question that had to entail the redefinition of identity. Without it there could have been no independence of any kind. And one of the complexities of perplexities of the independence movement – certainly in the British Caribbean islands – is that, in the early phases of those movements, so-called political independence from the colonial power occurred but the cultural revolution of identity did not.

Africa and Modernity

For the third process, which will form the rest of my chapter, I want to start by looking at some of the other attempts to name the unnameable, to consider the possibilities of cultural identification, of the different traditions of the peoples for whom, on the whole, there were no cultural models, the peoples at the bottom of the society. That process involved a renegotiation, a rediscovery of Africa. The political movements in the New World in the twentieth century have had to pass through the re-encounter with Africa. The African diasporas of the New World have been in one way or another incapable of finding a place in modern history without the symbolic return to Africa. It has taken many forms; it has been embodied in many movements both intellectual and popular. Perhaps best known, in an intellectual sense, is the movement around the notion of Negritude, around the discovery of blackness, the affirmation of an African personality, very much associated with the name of Aimé Césaire, and of the group around Césaire in Paris and afterwards, coming out of Martinique (that tiny society described above, in a rather pejorative way, as the most French place I have encountered in the Caribbean, certainly, but also the birthplace of both Fanon and of Césaire). Césaire's work lay in plucking out of that Caribbean culture with which he was familiar, the strands

that related most profoundly back to the valorization of the African connection, the rediscovery of the African connection, of African consciousness, of African personality and of African cultural traditions.

I was fortunate enough in the programme on Martinique to be able to include an interview with Aimé Césaire, who must be nearly twice my age and looks about half of it, wonderfully fit and resilient. In that interview one can see the enormous pleasure with which he describes the story of having gone to Africa and discovered for the first time the source of the masks of the Martinique carnival which he had played in and helped to make when he was a boy. Suddenly there was the flash of recognition, the continuity of the broken and ruptured tradition. The enormously important work that flowed from his involvement in the Negritude movement – not only the poems and the poetry and the writing which has come out of that inspiration, of the recognition of a Caribbean consciousness with the African past, but also the work he has inspired in Martinique, amongst the poets and painters and sculptors – is a profound revelation of how creative this symbolic reconnection has been.

And yet, of course, the paradox is that when Aimé Césaire opens his mouth he speaks the most exquisitely formed, beautifully articulated lycée French. "I am," he says, "French, my mind is French." Looking for the right parallel, he says, "Like if you went to Oxford you would be English. I went to a French school, I was taught the French language, I wasn't allowed to use *kreyole* at home, I learned only French classical literature. There's a strong tradition of assimilation; I went, of course, to Paris where all bright young Mariniquans went." And because of the tradition of political assimilation, he has in fact done what no black British Caribbean person has ever done, which is to sit in the parliament of his own metropolitan society. Nevertheless, when Aimé Césaire started to write poetry, he wanted, because of his interest, alerted and alive to the subterranean sources of identity and cultural creativity in his own being, to break with the models of French classical poetry. His notebook, *Return to My Native Land,* shows how much that is a language that, in its open roaring brilliance, has broken free from those classical models. He becomes a surrealist poet.

Aimé Césaire has never, as you perhaps know, argued for the independence of Martinique. Martinique has a very particular position: it is an internal department of France. Those of you who want to be crude and materialist about it had better see the kinds of facilities that status gives Martiniquan people and compare these with the facilities available to most of the other peoples of the Caribbean islands before you decide that their department status is terrible. Nevertheless, my own feeling, though I have no enormous evidence for this, is that the reluctance of Césaire to break the French connection is not only a material one but also a spiritual one. He went to the Schoelcher lycée. Schoelcher was an important early Martiniquan figure, and in celebrating an anniversary of Schoelcher, Césaire said, "He associated in our minds the word France and the word liberty, and that bounds us to France by every fibre of our hearts and every power of our minds." He said, "I know only one France: the France of the Revolution, the France of Toussaint L'Ouverture. So much for the Gothic cathedrals."

So much indeed for Gothic cathedrals. The France with which Césaire identifies, and it has played, of course, a most profound role in Caribbean history, is one France and not another. It is the France of the revolution, the France of *liberté, egalité, fraternité,* the France that Toussaint L'Ouverture heard, of course, the France that mobilized and touched the imagination of slaves and others in Haiti before the revolution. And yet in the actual accounts of the revolution that we have, one of the most difficult historical passages to negotiate is precisely how much, in the spark of the various things that went into the making of the Haitian Revolution, can be attributed to the ruptures sweeping out in the wake of the French Revolution, on the one hand, and to the long experience of a severe and brutal regime on the plantations themselves, what one might call the revolutionary school of life itself, on the other. There were also, of course, the traditions of Africa and of African resistance, and of marronage in the plantation villages themselves. We do not know. It is an impossible enigma to sort out, in one of the most momentous historical events of Caribbean history, to what the different elements that come together in that revolutionary conjuncture can be attributed.

Césaire was influenced in part by his contact at an early age with an important movement in the United States that now goes under the title of the Harlem Renaissance. It was an important movement among writers, such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Van Vechten, intellectuals and artists in New York in the early years of the twentieth century, and it had an important influence on a variety of Caribbean writers, poets and artists. One of the important things that the movement of the Harlem Renaissance did was to speak about the importance and the cultural and aesthetic distinctiveness of the black American contribution to American culture. The other important thing that movement did was to stake a claim for the American blacks in the centre and at the heart of modernism itself. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance did not wish to be located and

ghettoized as ethnic artists only able to speak on behalf of a marginal experience, confined and immured in the past, locked out of the claim to modern life. They said that the experience of blacks in the New World, their historical trajectory into and through the complex histories of colonization, conquest and enslavement is distinct and unique and it empowers people to speak in a distinctive voice. But it is not a voice outside of and excluded from the production of modernity in the twentieth century. It is another kind of modernity. It is a vernacular modernity; it is the modernity of hybrid black music in its enormous variety throughout the New World – the sound of marginal peoples staking a claim to the New World. I say that as a kind of metaphor, just in case you misunderstood the point I was trying to make about Aimé Césaire. I do not see him as an assimilationist Frenchman, deeply in bad faith because he is invoking Africa. I am trying to do something else. I am talking about the only way in which Africa can be relived and rediscovered by New World blacks who are diasporized irrevocably, who cannot go back through the eye of the needle.

A Cultural Revolution

Finally, a point about going back through the eye of the needle. There was a famous moment during the explosion of Rastafarianism in Jamaica in the 1960s when a somewhat beleaguered prime minister said, "Well, perhaps you ought to go back to Africa. You've talked about it so much, you say you came from there, you say you're still in slavery here, you're not in a free land, the promised land is back there where somebody took you from, perhaps you ought to go back and see." Of course, some people did go back and see. Of course, they did not go back to where they came from; that was not the Africa they were talking about. Between the Africa that they came from and the Africa that they wanted to go back to, two absolutely critical things had intervened. One is that Africa had moved on. One has to say it now and again to somewhat nostalgic and sentimental nationalists in the Caribbean, Africa is not waiting there in the fifteenth or seventeenth century, waiting for you to roll back across the Atlantic and rediscover it in its tribal purity, waiting there in its prelogical mentality, waiting to be awoken from inside by its returning sons and daughters. It is grappling with the problems of acquired immune deficiency syndrome, underdevelopment and mounting debt. It is trying to feed its people; it is trying to understand what democracy means against the background of a colonial regime that ruptured and broke and recut and reorganized peoples and tribes and societies in a horrendous shake-up of their entire cognitive and social world. That is what twentieth-century Africa is trying to do. There is no fifteenth-century Mother Africa waiting there to succour her children. In that literal sense, they wanted to go somewhere else, they wanted to go to the other place that had intervened, that other Africa constructed in the language and the rituals of Rastafarianism.

The language and rituals of Rastafarianism speak indeed of Africa, of Ethiopia, of Babylon, of the promised lánd and of those who are still in suffering. But like every chiliastic language that has been snatched by the black people of the New World diasporas out of the jaws of Christianity and then turned on its head, or read against the grain, or crossed by something else – and the New World is absolutely replete with them – it is impossible, in my experience, to understand black culture and black civilization in the New World without understanding the cultural role of religion, through the distorted languages of the one Book that anybody would teach them to read. What they felt was, "I have no voice, I have no history, I have come from a place to which I cannot go back and which I have never seen. I used to speak a language which I can no longer speak. I had ancestors whom I cannot find, they worshipped gods whose names I do not know." Against this sense of profound rupture, the metaphors of a new kind of imposed religion can be reworked and become a language in which a certain kind of history is retold, in which aspirations of liberation and freedom can be expressed for the first time, in which what I would call the 'imagined community' of Africa can be symbolically reconstructed.

When I left Jamaica in the 1950s it was a society that did not and could not have acknowledged itself to be largely black. When I went back to Jamaica at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s, it was a society even poorer in material terms than when I had left it, but it had passed through the most profound cultural revolution. It had grounded itself where it existed. It was not any longer trying to be something else, trying to match up to some other image, trying to become something it could not. It had all the problems in the world sticking together, finding the wherewithal to get to the next week, but in terms of trying to understand ordinary people – the important thing was the new realization that they could speak the language that they ordinarily spoke to one another anywhere. The biggest shock for me was listening to Jamaican radio. I could not believe my ears that anybody would be quite so bold as to speak patois, to read the news in that accent. My entire education,

my mother's whole career, had been specifically designed to prevent anybody at all, and me in particular, from reading anything of importance in that language. Of course, you could say all kinds of other things, in the small interchange of everyday life, but important things had to be said, goodness knows, in another tongue. To encounter people who can speak with one another in exactly that transformation of Standard English which is patois, which is creole – the hundreds of different creole and semi-creole languages that cover the face of the Caribbean in one place or another – that these have become, as it were, the languages in which important things can be said, in which important aspirations and hopes can be formulated, in which an important grasp of the histories that have made these places can be written down, in which artists are willing, for the first time, the first generation, to practise, that is what I call a cultural revolution.

And it was, in my view, one made by the cultural revolution of Rastafarianism. Certainly, not everybody became Rasta, although there was a moment in the 1960s when it was pretty hard not to be Rasta. I once interviewed a very old Rastafarian figure about the large numbers of Kingston intellectuals and students who were growing their locks down to their ankles. And I asked him, as part of a long interview about the nature of Rastafarianism, how he had got into it, and so on: "What do you think of these weekend Rastas, these middle class Rastas? Do you think they're up to anything? Do you think they can reason?" And he said, "You know, I don't say anything against them, I don't think anything against them, because in my church everybody reasons for themselves. So if they want to reason in that way, that's their business." Well, I thought, that was a nice gentle remark; but I wanted to nail him, so I said, "Listen to me now, isn't Haile Selassie dead? He's dead, how can the Son of God be dead?" And he said to me, "When last you hear the truth about the Son of God from the mass media?"

You see, it was not the literal Africa to which people wanted to return, it was the language – the symbolic language for describing what suffering was like; it was a metaphor for where they were, as the metaphors of Moses and the metaphors of the train to the North, and the metaphors of freedom, and the metaphors of passing across to the promised land, have always been metaphors, a language with a double register, a literal and a symbolic register. The point was not that some people, a few, could only live with themselves and discover their identities by literally going back to Africa – though some did, not often with great success – but that a whole people symbolically

re-engaged with an experience that enabled them to find a language in which they could retell and appropriate their own histories.

I have mentioned the intellectual movement of Negritude. I have referred to another important movement, not in the Caribbean, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, and I have talked about the cultural revolution in the wake of Rastafarianism. One of the most important things that people outside the Caribbean know about Rastafarianism is that it produced the greatest reggae artist in the world, Bob Marley. And I think many Europeans believe that reggae is a secret African music that we have had tucked in our slave knapsacks for three or four centuries, that we have hid out in the bush, practised at night when nobody was looking; and gradually as things changed we brought it out and began to play it a little, feed it slowly across the airwaves. But as anybody from the Caribbean would know, reggae was born in the 1960s. Actually, it was the answer to ska. When I returned to Jamaica I heard these two musical traditions. In *The Invention of Tradition*, the collection edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, it is explained that many British traditions people believe have been around since Edward I were actually developed by Elgar or Disraeli, the day before yesterday. Well, reggae is a product of the invention of the tradition. It is a music of the 1960s, its impact on the rest of the world comes not just through preservation – though it is rooted in the long-retained traditions of African drumming – but by being the fusion, the crossing, of that retained tradition with a number of other musics. The most powerful instruments of its world propagation were those deeply tribal instruments: the transistor set, the recording studio, the gigantic sound system. That is how this deeply profound spiritual music of Africa that we have been treasuring got here.

Reggae music and Rastafarianism not only provided a kind of black consciousness and identification for people in Jamaica but it saved the second generation of young black people in British society. Is this an old identity or a new one? Is it an ancient culture preserved, treasured, to which it is possible to go back? Is it something produced out of nowhere? It is of course none of those things. No cultural identity is produced out of thin air. It is produced out of those historical experiences, those cultural traditions, those lost and marginal languages, those marginalized experiences, those peoples and histories that remain unwritten. Those are the specific roots of identity. On the other hand, identity itself is not the rediscovery of them but what they as cultural resources allow a people to produce. Identity is not in the past to be found but in the future to be constructed. And I say that not because I think therefore

that Caribbean people can ever give up the symbolic activity of trying to know more about the past from which they come, for only in that way can they discover and rediscover the resources through which identity can be constructed. But I remain profoundly convinced that their identities for the twenty-first century do not lie in taking old identities literally but in using the enormously rich and complex cultural heritages, to which history has made them heir, as the different musics out of which a Caribbean sound might one day be produced.

I want to end by quoting a passage from C.L.R. James, about a talk he had just heard by the Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris:

> I went the other day to the West Indian students' hostel to hear Wilson Harris speak on the West Indian novel. Well, in the end, we decided we should print it. I was told I could write an introduction [a wonderfully C.L.R. James phrase, that!]; Learie Constantine had paid for it, and I have the proofs here. Harris is speaking about the West Indian novel, and I want to read one extract, because we can't have a talk about Wilson Harris without your hearing something that Harris says for himself. Harris says, "The special point I want to make in regard to the West Indies is that the pursuit of a strange and subtle goal, melting pot, call it what you like, is the mainstream, though the unacknowledged tradition, of the Americas. And the significance of this is akin to the European preoccupation with alchemy, with the growth of experimental science, the poetry of science, as well as the explosive nature which is informed by a solution of images, agnostic humility, and essential beauty rather than vested in a fixed assumption and classification of things." (James 1980: 167–68)

Notes

1. Norman Tebbit was then a member of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative cabinet.
2. Stuart Hall, *Redemption Song* (BBC/Ambrose Video, 1991).

References

Cargill, Morris. 1987. *Morris Cargill: A Selection of His Writings in the* Gleaner, *1952–85*. Kingston, Jamaica: Tropical Publishers.

Césaire, Aimé. 1968. *Return to My Native Land*. Paris: Presence Africaine.

Fanon, Frantz. 1970. *Black Skins, White Masks*. London: Palladin.

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

James, C.L.R. 1980. *Spheres of Existence: Selected Writings*, vol. 2. London: Allison and Busby.