2005

Caribbean Literature (Francophone)

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CARIBBEAN LITERATURE (FRANCOPHONE), or Antillean literature, is the literature in French from Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, and Haiti. Except in the case of Haiti, this literature developed along three major concepts: **negritude**, Caribbeanness, and **Creoleness**. Critics trace its origins to the rise of the negritude movement (in the 1930s), when black students, intellectuals, and artists revolted against France's assimilation policies to adopt an ideology aimed at restoring black and African values embedded in popular culture. The literary landmark

was undoubtedly **Aimé Césaire**'s *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, 1939).

Four centuries of slavery and colonization had a debilitating effect on the Antilleans' psyche, fostering the belief that rescue from savagery was possible only through Western culture. For **Frantz Fanon** (*Black Skin, White Masks*), this existential crisis created in the slave a pathological self-hate that undermined his social equilibrium in a race-conscious community. When, after the **Haitian Revolution** and Haiti's independence (1804) and the abolition of slavery (1848), the mostly French-educated middle class took to writing, their main goal was to conceal the barbaric side of Africa and uphold the virtues of Western culture. Writers, ashamed of black culture, imitated French masters (Hugo, Baudelaire, Rimbaud) to enlist full acceptance into the mainstream. However, some writers, such as Oruno-Lara and Suzanne Cascade, recognized their roots. Precursors of the black pride rationale included the *indigenist* movement, ideas from Cuba, and the **Harlem Renaissance** in the United States. In Haiti, the U.S. occupation (1915–1934) rekindled interests in indigenous culture as a patriotic reaction to outside domination. Jean Price-Mars's *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle* and the journal *La Revue Indigène* played a pivotal role in the revival. The Cuban poet **Nicolás Guillén** had celebrated the African heritage that shaped Cuban popular culture. In the United States, the experience of the Harlem Renaissance writers (**Claude McKay**, **Langston Hughes**, James W. Johnson, Sterling Brown) and musicians already articulated the main tenets of black pride, as Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* illustrated.

In the 1930s, new ways of thinking that informed movements such as **surrealism**, dadaism, and cubism created an atmosphere of doubt that challenged assumptions of universal values embodied in Western proclamations. Negritude joined in by denouncing derogatory ontological claims and by revalorizing the African foundation of the Caribbean culture. This newly found source of pride initiated a rich crop of literary writings on the islands. Leading figures included Césaire, Léon-G. Damas, René Ménil, Etienne Léro, **Jacques Roumain**, Stephen Aléxis, Guy Tirolien, Joseph Zobel, and Carl Brouard. The recurrent themes were the suffering during slavery, colonization, exploitation, and nostalgia for Africa. Poetry was the most dynamic literary field in which Césaire was the dominant voice. Following in the footsteps of René Maran, novelists explored the past of the islands and their connections to Africa. In Haiti, the "roman paysan" depicted with realism the cornerstone elements (storytelling, voodoo, customs) of the popular culture. In drama, Césaire was also the main playwright with *La Tragédie du roi Christophe, Une Saison au Congo*, and *Une Tempête*. The journal *Présence Africaine* and the two international congresses of black writers and artists (Paris, 1956; and Rome, 1959) enlisted an important participation by Caribbean writers.

Negritude as an umbrella concept could not account for the complexity of Caribbean experience. Different political choices (departmentalization for the French West Indies and independence for African colonies) set Africa and the Caribbean on different paths. **Maryse Condé** illustrates the failure to reconnect with the motherland, whereas Myriam Warner-Vieyra's experience came out differently. The specificity of the French Caribbean islands required new conceptualizations of identity quest and addressed vital issues; Caribbeanness and Creoleness were the responses.

The emphasis on Caribbeanness also made important contributions to the growth of Francophone Caribbean literature. In *The Caribbean Discourse,* Glissant situates the identity quest within the context defined by the constant creative flux of uprooting and transformation. The desire to valorize the very conditions Caribbeans were facing urged writers to focus on pressing issues (poverty, alienation, economic dependence) relevant to their survival. Such writers rejected the trap of the negritude dichotomy based on the dualistic oppositions Africa versus Europe and black versus white. Rather than advocating a return to a pristine Africa that no one could actually recapture, Glissant recognizes the duty of the artist to restore the disrupted history by unearthing and linking the cultural past overshadowed by the traumatic lives under slavery to a meaningful future. He believes that the foundation of his world is the cross-cultural experience resulting from a network of rhizomic relations in need of recognition and validation.

During this time, women writers emerged and gained in scope and substance. Leading figures include Simone Schwarz-Bart, Michèle Lacrosil, Condé, Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Gisèle Pineau, Jacqueline Manicon, and Ina Césaire. Schwarz-Bart's novel *The Bridge of Beyond* (*Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle,* 1972) is the prototype of a new wave of Francophone Caribbean writing by women.

As developed in a seminal work entitled *In Praise of Creoleness* (*Eloge de la Créolité,* 1989) by Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, the concept of Creoleness has exerted an important influence on recent Francophone writing from the Caribbean. This concept insists on the Creole language and culture as the cornerstone of society. It recognizes the specificity of the Caribbean Islands and their racial diversity, popular culture, language, and multiethnic history, and valorizes literature that contributes to the ongoing establishment of a viable Creole cultural identity in the Caribbean.

Meanwhile in Haiti, economic and political hardships stretching from the Duvaliers to Aristide forced out many writers and intellectuals, thus creating diasporic sites where they debate issues relevant to Haiti. Writers working from North America include Gérard Étienne, Joël Lerosier, Emile Ollivier, Dany Laferrière, Anthony Phelps, and Edwige Danticat; from France, Jean Métellus, René Depestre, and Jean-Claude Charles; from Africa, Jean-François Brierre, Roger Dorsainville, and Félix Morisseau-Leroy. Meanwhile, writing in Creole reached a peak with Frankétienne (*Dézafi,* a novel) and gained in prestige in Martinique (Confiant's *Jik deye do Bondye* and *Bitako-A*) and Guadeloupe.

Recent directions in Francophone Caribbean literature reflect its peculiar geographical position and the complex nature of its cultural and political mix. If Martinicans write from their country, dislocation—forced or voluntary—remains a determining factor in the career of other French Caribbean writers. Many Francophone works and writers have received recognition through two most prestigious French literary prizes. Maran's *Batouala* (1921) and Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992) received the Prix Goncourt; Glissant's *La Lézarde* (1958) and *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* (1988) received the Renaudot.

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