

Babel. Antilles

Manifesto for a less isolated archipelago

1. Setting the ground

This Manifesto has a specific birthplace. This birthplace is very far, yet very close to the Antilles, as first and foremost it's not a real place, more an imaginary one. This place is called Babel, a literary festival that each year invites a guest culture and the writers who create it, paying special attention to the phenomenon of hybridization and border crossing. Translation, understood as linguistic hospitality, is the *raison d'être* of the festival, and a most powerful and refined means for relation and exchange.

Babel takes place in Bellinzona, Switzerland: a country that in itself represents an ongoing experiment in combining several cultures and languages and, therefore, in translation. In 2014 Babel focused on the Antilles, inviting writers from Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad and Tobago. Many of them met for the first time. Many of them could not follow the others' readings because of the linguistic barrier. Many of them have never been able to read the others' work because of the lack of translations. Yet, despite these forms of isolation, much wider than the stretches of seawater dividing the Caribbean islands, these writers showed profound kinships.

Nowhere in the world can be found such a wide, ancient and rooted *mestizaje* of cultures, that came together almost at once, as in the Antilles. The Antilles can be considered a global village *ante-litteram* where the whole world can look back to catch glimpses of its future. And nowhere in the world do writers show such a liberating attitude towards language, reaching out to grab what is there and what is theirs, considering standard language, nation language and Creole, spoken and written forms, simply as the flexible borders of a continuum where the most effective materials for literary creation can be found. Nowhere in the world are separate tongues made into language on such a large scale and with such literary results.

Moreover, this linguistic freedom is an indicator of something that these writers share on an even deeper level, even coming from countries thoroughly isolated from one another. Namely, a profound attachment to their local reality: they work with spoken elements to bring to the page the living voice of their people. Yet, what is extraordinary is that their people are at once both local and international. They are as rooted in their Creole cultures as they are rooted in the European traditions, and in African or Indian or Chinese or Syrian influences. All of this is one.

This challenge, if met with due respect, care and courage, is the very opposite of the leveling *mondialisation*, it is a *mondialité* (E. Glissant) open to every culture of the world, without ever denying their particularity, aiming to relate them and by relating them rediscover once again where one is coming from, where one is going to.

This impulse is already at work in an impressive number of writers coming from the Antilles (not to speak of musicians and other artists), despite the current state of affairs in which writers deal with the reality of their own island, within their linguistic domain. This shows the potential embedded in the perspective of expanding this poetic of relation, from within each island, to between all islands.

2. Crossing the water

Currently, few translations exist of Caribbean writers' work in other Caribbean languages, distribution is poor and occasions for encounter and exchange are rare.

To change this situation, many aspects need improving at several levels, but the most urgent are: the creation of a healthy book industry, supporting publishers and the formation of literary professionals and expanded readerships; the facilitation of distribution and promotion, with international treaties and support for bookshops and literary festivals.

There are already many people, in the various islands, working in this direction. But support and facilitation at political and economic levels are imperative.

Political level

- 1) introduce tax incentives for publishing houses that publish a certain number of translated titles per annum;
- 2) introduce tax incentives for book distribution between the islands, stipulating international agreements to reduce the tax on books coming from the Caribbean region;
- 5) require that economic agreements among the different language countries in the Caribbean region have a cultural dimension, for instance by donating a set percent to cultural organizations;
- 4) simplify the administrative process to allow writers to travel freely between islands;
- 5) invest in education to form and expand the readership;
- 6) universities could undertake to publish a certain number of newly translated titles each year in collaboration with local commercial publishers.

Economic level

Economic support must come both from the public and the private sectors.

The public sector, considering that it aims to preserve productive and human capital, as well as cultural capital: cultural enterprises face constant difficulties, and their impact on society can be compared to that of any private company that the State bails out to prevent unemployment, only in this case we're talking about the unemployment of ideas.

The private sector, considering that industries are driven by customer demand, must participate in creating a readership for the literatures of the region.

By activating these two sectors, the goals would be:

- 1) educational and professional formation of translators and editors, who can provide new, well translated literatures across the linguistic divides;
- 2) the formation of critics and cultural operators to perform the role of public educators to inform and engage new readers, creating an appetite for translated works;
- 3) financial support for festivals and events that aim to create a wider and deeper market for books;
- 4) creation of national prizes for publishers and bookshops;
- 5) investment in marketing and promotion of books by forms of sponsoring;
- 6) financial support for regional e-magazines that promote newly translated work to new readers.

At stake is not that vague and bulky concept, culture, but the very vision of the Antilles that writers both preserve and expand, absorbing and using all influences at hand to speak of their own reality to their people and the whole world alike. By doing so they root the islands in the sea of time, of

change, which may otherwise carry them adrift and eventually turn them into a peninsula of the United States, of Emigration or of Globalization.

At the same time, this vision can turn the Caribbean archipelago into a source of inspiration for the world, drawing rhizomes of meridians and parallels from the archipelago to form a map where these islands appear for what they can be: *traits d'union* bringing continents together.

This Manifesto has been written by Babel, where the power of these encounters and exchanges was apparent. It will now be signed by the writers who made and make it happen, then taken on, on a more concrete level, by Caribbean organizations that do and will make it happen, time and again.

3. Signatures

Patrick Chamoiseau (Martinique)

Elizabeth Walcott-Hachshaw (Trinidad & Tobago)

Earl Lovelace (Trinidad & Tobago)

Abilio Estévez (Cuba)

Robert Antoni (Bahamas)

Rita Indiana (Republica Dominicana)

Lyonel Trouillot (Haïti)

Kei Miller (Jamaica)