Caribbean integration: can cultural production succeed where politics and economics have failed?

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“Caribbean people are already integrated. The only people who don’t know it are the governments.”

These are the words of George Beckford, a great Caribbean thinker. He was referring to the way in which the domain of culture and of popular intercourse among Caribbean people, converges; while it diverges from the world of politics and government. Beckford’s insight is a useful point of departure for my reflections.

Cultural activists have long detached the notion of Caribbean from political borders. In the 1960s The New World Group held that the Caribbean was practically synonymous with ‘plantation America’, an area that stretches from the Northeast of Brazil to the South of the United States.

A few weeks ago I was in Brazil, in a part of that country that is about as far away from the Caribbean as you can get¹. But, as I had occasion to remind my audience,

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¹ Florianopolis, capital of Santa Catarina state, in the south of Brazil.
Brazil and the Caribbean are profoundly connected to one another by shared historical experience.

It is a little known fact, for instance, that of the over 12 million enslaved Africans who traversed the Middle Passage over roughly 400 years, an estimated 3 million were landed in Brazil.

Long before Sugar was King in the Caribbean islands, it reigned in the Brazilian Northeast. In the 17th century the Dutch had a sugar colony in Brazil. The British and the French, as well, had colonial outposts at places on the Atlantic coast of northern Brazil. Places with unfamiliar names like Amapa, Belem, and Sao Luis. Places that, were we to visit, there would be instant recognition of sights, smells and sounds.

From a cultural perspective, these places might be considered as part of the Caribbean—as are Cayenne, Paramaribo and Georgetown.

Let us focus on the archipelago. As everyone knows, one of its most striking features is political fragmentation. Besides its 16 independent states there are some 22 entities that are non-independent territories of one kind or another, affiliated with four different metropolitan powers.²

They are mostly small, or very small. Only six countries have a population greater than 1 million. 16 have less than 100,000 people.

² These numbers include the independent states of Belize, Guyana and Suriname and the territory of French Guyana.
Their people speak Spanish, English, French, Dutch, Papiamentu, Kreyol, Patois, and Srinamtongue, Spanglish and many other local dialects or Creole languages.

Yet Caribbean people, in their unending propensity to buy, sell and work where they can; have shown almost absolute disregard for these artificially imposed barriers of government and of language.

Few Caribbean countries better exemplify this creative intermingling than St Maarten.

Every time I come here I am struck by this. On the way here today, my flight was piloted by a Jamaican, I was driven from the airport by a St Maartener, we passed a community called ‘Haititown’, further down I saw a Roti shop which I assume to be Guyanese, Trinidadian Soca and Jamaican reggae were playing on the radio, and the radio announcer was speaking in what I was reliably informed was a fake Jamaican accent. At the hotel I ate Jamaican jerk chicken cooked by a Dominican chef; and when I took a stroll I discovered that the security guards at the gate were Jamaican, so I knew I was secure!

The words of Fabian Badejo, a Nigerian writer who has made St Maarten his home:
“…. The whole of the Caribbean meets in this 37 square miles of undulating hills, mirror-faced ponds, and turquoise waters of the Caribbean Sea. From Guyanese and Surinamese to Puerto Ricans and Cubans; from Venezuelans and Colombians to Guadeloupians and St. Lucians, from Arubans and Curacaoleneans to Haitians and Dominicanos and from Trinidadians to Jamaicans... all live and work together on St. Martin in peace and harmony...

‘What is beyond doubt is that every migrant group has contributed to this building project called St. Martin and consequently has every right to claim it as his home. If we look at the wider Caribbean, we would observe a similar phenomenon from Trinidad to Cuba and from Panama to the Dominican Republic: there is hardly any island that can deny the significant input of migrant labour particularly from the rest of the region – and most certainly beyond also.”

The Trinidadian calypsonian, The Black Stalin, has a calypso called “Caribbean Man”. In it he says that our people have discovered some of the secrets of integration that our governments have not.

There is great insight in this observation. Our history shows us that integration from above in the Caribbean has had a very mixed record. There have been some successes, but also notable failures.
There is a long history to these initiatives, in both the English and Dutch speaking Caribbean. They have been motivated mainly by the wish to overcome the limitations imposed of small size. Integration has been promoted as a means of sharing common services and of securing the benefits of economies of scale.

In colonial times, territories were grouped together because it was cheaper to administer several of them as a single unit. In the British territories at one time or another we had federations of the Leeward Islands and Windward Islands, in the Dutch the federation of the Netherlands Antilles. For the most part, none of these colonial federations lasted.

The West Indies Federation of 1958 to 1962 was a hybrid—a colonial federation on a path to decolonisation. It grouped together 10 British islands, from Jamaica in the North to Trinidad and Tobago in the South. Nationalist politicians believed that the only way independence could be achieved was through a federal state, because each island was too small to do so by itself. This suited the interests of the British, who wanted to relieve themselves of financial responsibility for the islands.
The federation broke up after its two largest members\textsuperscript{3} decided to withdraw and go to independence on their own. There had been a lot of quarrelling among the leaders about things like representation in the Federal Parliament, how much power the central government should have, taxation and freedom of movement. And when Britain offered the option of separate independence, the territories, one by one, took it.

There are obvious parallels with the break-up of the federation of the Netherlands Antilles.

Today, the 31\textsuperscript{st} of May 2012, is the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the dissolution of the West Indies Federation. Had the federation endured, it would have been the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the birth of the new West Indian nation; for May 31, 1962 had been set as the date for the Federation to become an independent state.

Yet it is significant thing is that since that time the very same territories have been engaged in schemes of economic integration and cooperation. Recognising the constraints of small size, they have been trying to take advantage of the benefits of integration in the absence of political union.

\textsuperscript{3} Jamaica, followed by Trinidad and Tobago, both in 1961.
We have had the proposal to create a Caribbean Economic Community of the different language zones (1963); we have established the Caribbean Free Trade Association (1965, expanded in 1968), the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM, 1973); and the Caribbean Community and CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CARICOM—CSME; 2002).

In a sense we have come a long way. CARICOM’s 15 members now include three countries that were not in the West Indies Federation\(^4\) and two non-Anglophone countries\(^5\). Five British Overseas Territories are also Associate Members of CARICOM.

Its four pillars re economic integration, functional cooperation, foreign policy coordination, and security.

In 1975 there was established the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (1975), to fosters dialogue and cooperation among all the independent states and non-independent territories of the Caribbean region\(^6\).

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\(^4\) Guyana, Belize and the Bahamas  
\(^5\) Suriname and Haiti  
\(^6\) The archipelagic Caribbean, Belize, Guyana, Suriname and French Guyana.
We have the Association of Caribbean States (1995), with 25 member states from the Greater Caribbean region; the Dutch and French territories as Associate Members. The ACS fosters cooperation in trade, transport, sustainable tourism and the management of natural disasters.

The point about all this is that political elites who have secured ‘independence’ soon come to understand that, in today’s world, small countries like ours simply have no choice but to integrate, or at least cooperate.

But it would be foolish to pretend that all is well with these initiatives. Because time is limited, I will focus on the Caribbean Community—CARICOM.

I quote from a recent report prepared by a high-level team of consultants.

“CARICOM is in crisis. This is so for three reasons:

1. Long-standing frustrations with the slow progress have continued to mount.
2. A serious weakening in its structure and operations over the years
3. Continuing economic retrenchment since the financial crisis of 2008 and the risk of further deterioration.
The crisis is sufficiently serious as to put the very existence of CARICOM in question.”

Similar diagnoses of the state of Caricom have appeared regularly over the past 20 years.

The root of the problem is that governments are not willing to surrender any of their sovereign decision-making powers to the Community, where their sovereignty may be exercised collectively.

So the implementation deficit continues. The Caricom Single Market and Economy is virtually at a standstill.

Frankly speaking, the existence of Caricom has not made a significant difference to the economic development of its members. We have had some success with the movement of people—graduates of tertiary institutions, media workers, artistes, teachers and nurses and so on. But far more people move on their own, or by securing work permits, than those who move as a result of Caricom certification. Caribbean people are seeking out opportunities wherever they are; and in doing so they are filling needs in countries that are short of labour in all kinds of service occupations—just as happens in St Maarten.

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Trade within the Caricom is just about 15 per cent of the total foreign trade of its members. In the EU, it is over 60 per cent. 80 per cent of this trade consists of exports from Trinidad and Tobago. Naturally, the other members feel that the benefits of Caricom are unevenly distributed.

In the same way, the amount of investment that takes place from one country to another is small, and is mostly come from Trinidad and Tobago. Most of this consists of investments by financial firms, acquiring banks and insurance companies in other Caricom countries.

On the other hand, Caricom has registered many successes in functional cooperation in areas such as education, health, disaster management and security. And it also plays an essential role as an interlocutor with extra-regional powers through its foreign policy coordination.

Someone is going to ask me if I think that St Martin, Aruba and Curacao should join CARICOM. My answer would be a qualified “Yes”. There may be some technical and constitutional issues, but they can be resolved.
For instance it is possible to be a member—full or Associate—of Caricom without undertaking the obligations of the Caricom Single Market and Economy. That is the situation of the Bahamas, of Montserrat and of the Associate Members.

Your constitutional status may prevent you from being part of Caricom’s foreign policy coordination. But one can envisage a legal arrangement with Caricom that exempts you from this obligation. Alternatively, you could simply opt for Associate Membership rather than full membership.

There are two kinds of reasons why I think you should be part of Caricom; one practical; the other psychological.

The practical reasons are the ability to engage in functional cooperation; cooperation that is based on common interests as small island states located in the Caribbean; interests that are not necessarily the same as those of Holland.

Caricom presently has no less than 12 areas of functional cooperation; ranging from education and health to the environment and climate change, Caribbean Sea, disaster preparedness, labour, culture, youth, sport, gender, drugs, and ICTs, tourism, and fisheries. Undoubtedly, some work better than others; but that does not contradict the importance of such cooperation.
By participating in some of these—and it can selective—you stand to benefit from the accumulated knowledge and experience of years of cooperation. You could also access certain services at lower cost than if you attempt to provide them on your own.

The other reason for joining Caricom is psychological. The population of these countries is overwhelmingly of Caribbean origin. Like every other Caribbean society, without exception; there is a peculiar expression of a kind of unresolved dual identity—the tension between the imposed and assimilated colonial identity on the one hand, and on the other hand the Creole identities derived from the African heritage and from the myriad other influences to which we have all been subject.

Joining Caricom would be a tangible symbol of your recognition of a Caribbean identity; your acceptance of yourselves as a Caribbean people. Caricom, whatever its shortcomings, is a Community, a family, bound by a sense of shared identity.

And this brings me to my central message. There is an important lesson, it seems to me, in the fact that top-down integration initiatives have a mixed record, while our people are busy doing their own thing.
I firmly believe that true integration can never be purely or even primarily a matter of economics; one that is driven by the calculus of costs and benefits.

That, of course, must play its part. But the bedrock of integration must be a sense of common identity, of mutual self-discovery of ourselves as a people with a very special history, engaged in a constant process of creation.

At the Havana International Book Fair recently, I was asked, what is it that unites us, as a Caribbean people?

My answer was that what unites us is a common frame of reference of our historical experience; but more than that. What also unites us is a process what my old friend and colleague Rex Nettleford called “smaddification”. This is a Jamaican creole word; a loose translation might be “to become somebody” or, the affirmation of personhood.

All the labor that was brought here was brought here in a condition of exploitation of one way or another; and the process of creating a Caribbean identity out of those conditions is a process of resistance, of struggle and of affirmation of self, of the dignity of the human person and of the right to autonomy of our societies. It takes different forms, each springing from the same
need; and each responding to an existential reality shaped by our common historical experience.

Caribbean peoples have created languages, have created music, have created great works of art, of literature, of poetry, of drama, have accomplished great feats in the world of sport and have also made great revolutions, each one responding to the specificities of the local experience and each enriching the collective Caribbean experience.

But our people, by and large, are deprived of this knowledge, of this consciousness, of this sense of who we are, of where we are coming from, of what we have accomplished; separately and collectively. And so they are being deprived of that most precious resource of all—the self-knowledge that instills self-respect, respect for one other, a sense of certainty, of the necessity and capacity to chart our own future.

It is a resource that the ordinary American, or European, or Chinese or Indian—simply takes for granted. It is something they begin to acquire from infancy; becoming part of their deeply embedded consciousness of self.
This sense of Caribbean self is in a process of creation, of construction; struggling with the legacy of our colonial inheritance and with the false promises of globalization.

It would be presumptuous of me, in this gathering, to draw attention to the many luminary writers who have contributed to this; names like Lamming, Walcott, Glissant, Ortiz, Carpentier, CLR James, Eric Williams and so many others.

I can only say that my own personal debt them, in my self-discovery as a Caribbean person, is beyond measure.

“I do not think there has been anything in human history quite like the meeting of Africa, Asia, and Europe in this American archipelago we call the Caribbean. But it is so recent since we assumed responsibility for our own destiny, that the antagonistic weight of the past is felt as an inhibiting menace. And that is the most urgent task and the greatest intellectual challenge: How to control the burden of this history and incorporate it into our collective sense of the future...”

The words of course, of George Lamming; from his book Coming, Coming, Coming Home, published by the House of Nehesi.
The House of Nehesi has blazed a trail of its own. A trail of publishing in several of the regional languages; sometimes in the same publication; books which are key texts in exploring our condition as Caribbean people. The recent publication, Haiti and the Trans-Caribbean Literary Identity, is a beautiful example of what can be done.

I want to suggest that this effort can and should be expanded. That perhaps House of Nehesi can collaborate with one or more other publishers to bring out more of these.

Similar initiatives have been taken in Cuba, by Casa de Las Americas and other publishing houses. We now have Cuban editions of books by C.L.R. James, Lloyd Best and Kari Polanyi Levitt, Eric Williams, with more to follow by Arthur Lewis, the Nobel Laureate in Economics from St. Lucia.

*Something is stirring in the Caribbean.* Literary festivals like this one are now a regular feature of the cultural landscape. Just last weekend one like this was held in Jamaica—the Calabash festival. Last month there was one in Trinidad and Tobago—the Bocas LitFest. In February there was the Havana Book Fair, a massive event, this year it was dedicated to the Caribbean.
The Caribbean Festival in Santiago de Cuba last July was dedicated to Trinidad and Tobago. This year it is dedicated to Guadeloupe. In July in Trinidad there will be the annual meeting of the Caribbean Philosophical Association, discussing the theme of globalization and the re-shaping of ethnic identities in the Caribbean.

Political fragmentation there may be. Economic deterioration there may be. Social problems of various kinds abound.

But everywhere there are signs of cultural intercourse and cultural creativity across the barriers of language and polity.

Dare we speak of a Caribbean renaissance? Why not? I say yes! Do you doubt that we are capable it?

And when the record of these times is reckoned, I have no doubt that House of Nehesi, Conscious Lyrics and their collaborators in the St. Martin Book Fair will be counted among its pioneers.