



## UNPACKING CARIBBEAN CITIZENSHIP(S) : Rights, Participation and Belonging

### Conceptual Statement

The 37<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Caribbean Studies association will be held in Guadeloupe. The theme of the Conference is “Unpacking Caribbean Citizenship (s): Rights Participation and Belonging.”

Among the questions that the conference will seek to answer are: What are the nature, scope and dynamics of Citizenship(s) in the Caribbean? Why the need to unpack what is usually defined as the “right to have rights”.

Since its inception as the cradle of slave-based plantation societies, the Caribbean region has been characterized by stratification; with differentiated social structures comprised of different social groups bestowed with unequal power and privileges. During the post-emancipation period, the adoption of new policies would reproduce limited franchise or prevent the free movement of people. The Agrarian policies of Toussaint Louverture and the Rural Code of Boyer in Haiti or the Apprenticeship system in the British West Indies illustrated continuity in the patterns of exclusion. More recently, enduring practices of defining and naming certain groups as “moun andeyo” meaning the uncivilized outsiders (Haiti); the stateless predicaments of many immigrant groups [Dominican-Haitians]; the treatment of certain national “marginalized groups” in the Tivoli incursion ( Jamaica); the violence unleashed on University students at the University of Puerto-Rico in Rio Piedras; the limited access to resources and rights for most women and girls in all Caribbean societies or the more recent inhumane treatment of a large numbers of displaced people following the 2010 catastrophic earthquake in Haiti are indicative of the limits of Citizenship [s] in the region.

In contestation to these conditions and processes, the region has also witnessed differing and innovative claims for more inclusion such as, the 1970 May movement in Curacao, in the growing rap and hip-hop youth group movement in Cuba and their instrumentality in breaking practices of silencing; and lastly in the workers strikes in Guadeloupe and Martinique. All these processes and practices point to the need to look at the state and configurations of Citizenship (s) in Caribbean societies.

### Genealogy of the concept:

Citizenship as a social category or concept became part of the public space with the French Revolution. The Declaration of the Rights of Man (Declaration des droits de l’homme) would codify these rights. Normatively and institutionally, citizenship was thus defined as a bundle of rights bestowed on individuals. Although these rights were conceived in relationship to three main institutions, the state, the market and civil society; originally emphasis was particularly on access and exercise of political rights. As the concept of citizenship evolved, Citizens were free persons with agency allowing them to take autonomous decisions regarding important aspects of their lives.

Paradoxically, although the “rights to have rights” were in principle universal and ontological, such universality could only be expressed within the confines of the sovereign nation-state. Likewise, conceiving citizenship only in terms of rights has always been too constricted to account for the complexity of the many levels of differentiation in the enactment, exercising and claims of citizenship. Indeed, in slave-based and colonial Caribbean societies, the majority of the population was considered and treated as “commodity” thus could not have the right to have rights. Moreover, patterns of domination in slave societies were total, denying the ‘slave’ space for a private life. The sphere of private life for slaves emerged outside of the boundaries and the tenets of the dominant culture. Non-white populations in Caribbean societies were also stratified around race, class and gender. While some categories of people with mixed ancestry did have access to some and at time most [depending of their economic status and lineage] of what could be defined as “rights to have rights”. These patterns of differentiated access to “citizenship” prevailed in post-emancipation as well as the post-colonial phases in the development of Caribbean societies.

The reality of the making of Citizenship in the Caribbean has been from the inception a very complex story displaying diverse arrangements, different patterns of exclusion, and different modes of making claims, multiple ways of asserting and being citizens. In that vein, citizenship is more than a package of political rights and obligations. It is and has always been the product and result of relations and practices of negotiation, contestation, opposition and compromises.

The aim of the 2012 conference is to throw light on the concept, its development, evolution and dynamics in particular in its three dimensions: Rights, Participation and Belonging. We want to explore the ways in which citizens in the Caribbean conceive and participate in decisions that affect their lives, their cultures and their environment.

How do we gauge citizenship in present Caribbean societies, where large segments of their population still live in conditions of limited access to political and social membership in the larger community? What are the processes and practices that define individuals or groups as capable and legitimate citizens? How do we reconcile the lofty tenets of universal and unconditional human rights with the existing conditions created by the enduring structures of inequalities that define/shape lives of Caribbean citizens?

What are the parameters in the construction of inclusion? Is inclusion only political? Does it only comprise the relationship of members of society to the state or to the political process? Does effective full citizenship require the existence of a social contract that guaranties that all the people in a society are entitled to rights? Should that contract be in a continuous process of evolution? How do we define Belonging? Does it presume “le droit d’habiter” meaning the right to live in a decent environment? Is there an implication of different forms of owning, of narrating, of giving meanings to space, time, experiences and relationships?

A key dimension of Citizenship is Participation. What constitutes meaningful and effective civic participation? What is the impact of social networks, the practice of participation into a variety of non-political civic and social organizations and activities, on citizenship? Can we have inclusion with autonomy? How different is political participation from democratic participation? Does the use of violence constitute a form of citizenship participation? How do categories of gender, sexuality, race, and age, religious and cultural affiliations mediate different levels or degrees of citizenship?

Citizens organize movements to claim membership and rights in all spheres of life. But claims in the cultural realm are often ignored or discarded. How do cultural practices reflect ways and understanding of being citizen? Is there a cultural narrative (s) of citizenship?

We live in a world of connectedness, of immediate interaction, what is globalization's impact on the concept and understanding of citizenship? How do we reconcile these rights of citizenship with the continuing erosion of sovereignty and the more expansion of transnational spaces? What is the meaning of Caribbean citizenship when Caribbean states are minor players in the geo-political stage, whose political destinies are shaped in Washington, D.C., Paris and London more often than in Kingston, Port-Au-Prince, or Santo Domingo? Does transnational migration and in particular the roles of remittances or the use of social networks through the internet change the meanings and relevance of citizenship? May Citizenship in the region actually transcend the nation-state?

Guadeloupe the conference venue is a French department d'outre-mer, a non-national state, as its neighbor Martinique; the island of Puerto Rico and San Marten are respectively a commonwealth of the United States and the Netherlands. How do the residents of Martinique, Guadeloupe, San Marten and Puerto Rico, Aruba and Curacao negotiate being cultural citizens of the Caribbean, but political citizens of France, Holland and the United States? What are the privileges and dilemmas of being citizens of Western powers versus that in independent sovereign nation-states of the Caribbean? What are the specificities of the historical process of construction of citizenship in these non-state territories? In particular how does citizenship articulate with process of identity formation? Is Caribbean citizenship constructed exclusively from above, through lofty Constitutions that fail to speak to the real world dilemmas of a large majority of the populations of these societies? Citizenship also entails commitment to certain obligations and duties. How do citizens balance rights, duties and obligations?

These challenging questions and others related to the issues of unpacking Citizenship [s] are parts of the queries that the 2012 Annual Conference will pose to Caribbeanist scholars, artists and activists and that they will be discussing throughout the days of the conference.

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