# De la Negritude a la Creolite: Edouard Glissant, Maryse Conde et la Malediction de la Theorie (review)


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What is theory with regard to non-Eurocentric texts? Can Western theory be applied universally to all literatures? How does it operate in African and Caribbean literature? In asking these questions, Cilas Kemedjio is concerned less with reading and critiquing Western theory itself than with investigating the possibility of African and Caribbean discourses by exploring the epistemological foundations for new theoretical practices conceived within the Caribbean and African contexts. The aim of Kemedjio's study is threefold. First, he wants to bring to light various constraints and obstacles impinging on the emergence of African and Caribbean literary and critical discourses. These constraints range from political censure to the control of the means of production and the dominance of Western theories within the Francophone literary field. This first part of the book provides a dense account of the strategies elaborated by writers such as V.Y. Mudimbe and Mongo Béti, as they expose and come to terms with these constraints. This project leads

them to address the emergence of writing within African and Caribbean cultures, and thus, the central position of writing within structures of domination. Another question implicitly addressed here is whether the practice of writing in these areas, be it fictional or theoretical, should still be viewed as a mere extension of the hegemonic model.

Second, Kemedjio examines Western theory and criticism concerned with the body of literary works known as "Caribbean and African literature in French." In tracing how these so-called "Africanist discourses" operate, he emphasiszes their dominant tendencies in the range of approaches adopted. Through a study of Anne-Marie Jeay's anthropological reading of Maryse Condé's novel, *Segu*, Kemedjio investigates the criteria Jeay uses to deligitimize Condé's representation and fictional discourse on Africa. Kemedjio shows these criteria to be those of a "colonist," which leads him to voice concerns articulated by many African and Caribbean writers: that African and Caribbean literature must be "decolonized," not only in the sense of discouraging its study by European critics, but also in terms of establishing an endogenous critical discourse that assists the process of reading, understanding and interpreting a non-French text. The major question raised is that of the validity of European theoretical devices applied to the African and Caribbean literary field.

Third, Kemedjio examines the dialectic between literature and criticism as well as the perspectives by which African and French-Antillean writers widen the critical debate by positing different methods and purposes. The emergence from conditions of being out of touch with history, with space, with language, and the rise of critical discourses in these areas—especially in the Caribbean—owes as much to the theories of indigenism and the Harlem Renaissance as it does to the emblematic and problematic figure of Aimé Césaire and the discourse of Négritude, now questioned by many Caribbean writers. For while Aimé Césaire is considered the initiator of a new literary tradition, French-Antillean writers also feel the urge to revise and critique him for having led them on the wrong path, and for having denied his Creole language by choosing to express himself in a language incomprehensible toAntillean readers. The counter-poetics of Creolization elaborated by Patrick Chamoiseau, Rafaël Confiant and Jean Bernabé rises from the failure of Césairean politics and poetics, as well as from the threat of cultural anonymity through French assimilation. The theory of Creolité thus aims to account for the composite and heterogeneous nature of Martinican society by attempting to promote a literature that defines itself henceforth as Creole. Alongside the Creolists' counter-poetics, Kemedjio

discusses how Glissant's pioneering concept of "Antillanité" (Caribbeanness) and the Poetics of Relation remain fundamentally important to Francophone critical debate, because they are articulated from within the diverse contexts from which Caribbean literary texts are born. These contexts are geographical, historical, sociological and linguistic. For Kemedjio, Glissant's interest in the problematic link between the literary text and the reality of lived experience, his preoccupation with the modernist challenge to language as transparent communication, his concern with cross-cultural models and the intercultural process, as well as his sharp departure from the rigid notions of belonging and identity, serve as an enabling context for post-Negritude writing and theorizing.

By emphasizing the importance of socio-political factors as well as institutional constraints in understanding the background of African and Caribbean literary and critical productions, Kemedjio shows how discourses emerge as a politics of resistance to automatic constraints, a resistance inscribed at the core of the intellectual projects developed by all writers studied. The production of discourses of resistance or distance as practiced by these writers challenges the norms and practices imposed by Western academia. Beyond the issue of interpretive authority, the operative question in Kemedjio's study concerns how African or Caribbean theory can be positioned apart from Western discourses and interpreters. Implicit in the notion of "African or Caribbean discourse" is not only the question of Western influences in the field of literary criticism, but the question of how the massive presence of Eurocentric discourses and conceptual systems limits contemporary readings of African and Caribbean texts. In other words, the non-Western world has to face and bypass yet another form of imperialism: that of literary theory. Moreover, in articulating what Kemedjio terms "alternative literary discourses," these writers also strive to inscribe their textual productions in a literary tradition whose condition of existence would no longer depend on European validation. Thus, in addition to providing an insight into the specificity of Caribbean literary experiences, Kemedjio's book attempts to define a cultural and literary identity for African and French-Antillean productions. What are the role and status of this emerging field on the international scene? How did it step out of merely descriptive or prescriptive roles and identify ideals that would inform a better understanding of African and Caribbean cultural and literary traditions ? What kind of vocabulary should be used to talk about the latter?

Henry Louis Gates has asked similar questions with regard to the adoption of Western theoretical vocabularies for reading African-American

literature/writings. Unlike Gates, who concludes that these vocabularies are not responsive to the ethical, political and aesthetic needs of African-Americans, Kemedjio questions the adequacy of Western theory in non-Western contexts less to discard it altogether than to focus on the development of a solid literary tradition informed by new strategies of language and theoretical insights. To this end, he explores the relationship between Western critical theories and Caribbean texts in terms of domination and validity. But it seems that the question yet to be asked is how much of it oppresses Caribbean and African discourses and how much of it nourishes it.

At the same time, Kemedjio makes no mention of the increasingly influential postcolonial theories that can fit his definition of "alternative discourses" or "decolonized theory." Many of Glissant's theoretical concerns overlap with those of other postcolonial theorists. Major postcolonial themes such as the reappropriation of history, writing and orality, and hybridity are indeed central in his work. But why are the Caribbean theories, and especially Glissant's, cut off from this new corpus? One might indeed wonder about the exclusionary boundaries that Kemedjio draws around the Caribbean. On the other hand, his work fails to account for debate surrounding conflicts of gender within the Caribbean and African context. Why are gender conflicts within the African and Caribbean traditions ignored or at least silenced? Furthermore, the only female writer who receives attention in his study is Maryse Condé. Yet , ongoing debate between the latter and the Creolists is nowhere mentioned. As a result, Kemedjio fails to articulate richer dynamics at work in the maturation of the literary and critical tradition that he sets out to explore.

*De la Négritude à la Créolité* does an excellent job of representing the history of critical writings by Africans and Caribbeans. Kemedjio effectively weaves together the voices of writers and critics while providing close readings of important texts and an impressive concatenation of arguments. The introduction and conclusion clearly expose the issues at stake. Yet what the book gains in richness of readings sometimes becomes an obstacle to the unity of the whole project, especially when some chapters stray far from the stated theme of the book. But this is a minor critique. Kemedjio's book, in addition to providing a challenging read through a provocatively innovative point of view, will prove valuable to readers new to Caribbean literary productions, as well as to those already familiar with this richly diverse field.

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