When the Walls Fall

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Small Axe, Volume 22, Number 1, March 2018 (No. 55), pp. 86-88 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

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Was the world ready for *Éloge de la créolité* when it appeared in 1989? The broader world, of course, paid little attention to a manifesto written by three French Caribbean intellectuals—Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant—and published in Paris, however much its influence rippled through academic circles, somewhat in the wake of the rising visibility and influence of Édouard Glissant's work. That the *Éloge* was before its time is suggested in the well-known statement by the authors: "Caribbean literature does not yet exist. We are still in a state of pre-literature: that of a written production without a home audience, ignorant of the authors/readers interaction which is the primary condition of the development of a literature."[1] This idea was an echo of a statement Glissant made in a 1984 interview: "I do not think that an Antillean literature exists yet, in the sense that a literature supposes a movement of action and reaction between a public and the works produced. . . . A literature supposes a common project, which I would say does not yet exist in the Antilles."[2]

The essays published in this special section of *Small Axe*—and in part 1, which appeared in March 2017—have largely taken critical stances with regard to the *Éloge* and its legacies. The text was at once utopian and conservative in the way it seemed to limit creoleness to a fixed set of preoccupations: Creole language, the legacies of the plantation, and a form of

1 Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* / *In Praise of Creoleness*, trans. M. B. Taleb-Khyar, bilingual ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 76.

2 "Je ne crois pas qu'il existe encore une littérature antillaise au sens où une littérature suppose un mouvement d'action entre un public et des œuvres produites. Une littérature suppose un projet commun dont je pense pouvoir dire qu'il n'existe pas encore aux Antilles"; Édouard Glissant, quoted in Priska Degras and Bernard Magnier, "Édouard Glissant, préfacier d'une littérature future: Entretien avec Édouard Glissant," *Notre Librairie*, no. 74 (1984): 15 (translation mine). Cited and analyzed in Mireille Rosello, *Littérature et identité créole aux Antilles* (Paris: Karthala, 1992), 31.

small axe 55 • March 2018 • DOI 10.1215/07990537-4378948

cultural insularity that lessened its potential political impact. In the introduction to part 1, Celia Britton and I wondered about the future of *créolité* and whether and how it might renew itself.[3] We referred to David Scott's notion of a "stalled time" in Caribbean writing and suggested that the French Caribbean, like the broader region, seems to lack the cultural and political conditions in which any future-oriented political and cultural movement may be conceived.[4] The time of the *Éloge* had apparently passed.

The rapid and disquieting changes in global cultures—increasing xenophobia, the scapegoating of immigrants, the new visibility of a never-dead racism in the United States and elsewhere—seem to be at once new and familiar, a resurgence of the past into the present. Walls, real and metaphorical, are appearing, as the fear of the foreigner creates a perceived need for barriers, separation, and enclosure. Quickly, too, the ideas of the *Éloge* and the whole *créolité* movement seem relevant again: in a dystopian world, utopian ideals paradoxically become more real, more urgent, and more necessary. Maybe the time for the *Éloge* is now, maybe the readership is finally there for the sort of work that takes creolization and openness not as mere cultural concepts but as necessary foundations for contemporary societies and for relations between cultures and people. The prophetic aspects of the *Éloge*, the ways it wrote to a future that had not yet come, seem to find a sort of negative confirmation in the way the world appears to be retreating behind barriers and walls of various kinds. One wonders today, what time is the *Éloge*?

The prescient qualities of this strand of Martinican thought are further evident in a pamphlet published in 2007 by Glissant and Chamoiseau, titled *Quand les murs tombent* (*When the Walls Fall*). The text reads like a prophecy: the wall is used as a metaphor for closed, fixed identities, the temptation of which persists, the authors say, as a comforting if deadening counter to the kind of exchanges they see as necessary: "The very notion of identity has long served as a kind of wall: take account of what belongs to oneself, distinguish it from what belongs to the other, who is then set up as an unknowable danger, steeped in barbarism."[5] The "identitary wall" has given the world "the eternal confrontations between peoples, empires, colonial expansions, the slave trade, the atrocities of American slavery, the unthinkable horrors of the Shoah, and all the known and unknown genocides."[6] It is in the West, they say, that walls of identity have been the most devastating, their effects amplified by science and technology. The wall can be reassuring, but again, with almost prophetic prescience, they insist it can also serve "a racist, xenophobic, or populist politics to the point of consternation. . . . It no

3 See Martin Munro and Celia Britton, "Eulogizing Creoleness? *Éloge de la créolité* and Caribbean Identity, Culture, and Politics," *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): 164–68.

4 See David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 5.

5 "La notion même d'identité a longtemps servi de muraille: faire le compte de ce qui est à soi, le distinguer de ce qui tient de l'autre, qu'on érige alors en menace illisible, empreinte de barbarie"; Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, *Quand les murs tombent: L'identité nationale hors-la-loi?* (Paris: Galaade, 2007), 8.

6 "Le mur identitaire a donné les éternelles confrontations de peuples, les empires, les expansions coloniales, la traite des nègres, les atrocités de l'esclavage américain, les horreurs impensables de la Shoah, et tous les génocides connus et inconnus"; ibid.

longer protects, opens up to nothing but . . . the insidious asphyxiation of the mind, the loss of oneself."[7] Identity is lost, and not found, behind walls and barriers. And yet, they argue, another set of relations has also developed, another means of exchanging with the other: "The world has nevertheless made *Tout-monde*. Languages and cultures, civilizations, and peoples have nevertheless met, crashed into each other, mutually embellished and enriched each other, often without knowing or showing it."[8] It is these equal and unpredictable exchanges that the authors insist on as the antidote to the wall, the means to a new and also old set of relations between individuals and societies. To change by exchanging—*changer en échangeant*—becomes a kind of mantra: "[It] comes down to enriching oneself in the most elevated sense of the term and not to losing oneself. This is true for the individual and for the nation."[9]

How fresh and urgent these ideas now seem, and their development and propagation appear as vital as ever. At a moment when there is talk of reactivating Negritude, and when some of francophone Africa's leading intellectuals are reengaging with notions of Pan-Africanism, perhaps it is time now for the Caribbean to reenergize itself, rediscover the flame that drove its remarkable intellectual and cultural achievements, and bring down the walls again. Perhaps the time for creoleness is now.[10]

7 "Il peut alors servir à une politique raciste, xénophobe ou populiste jusqu'à consternation. . . . Il ne protège plus, n'ouvre à rien sauf . . . l'asphyxie insidieuse de l'esprit, à la perte de soi"; ibid., 11.

8 "Le monde a quand même fait Tout-monde. Les langues et les cultures, les civilisations, les peuples, se sont quand même rencontrés, fracassés, mutuellement embellis et fécondés"; ibid., 9.

9 "Changer en échangeant revient à s'enrichir au haut sens du terme et non à se perdre. Il en est ainsi pour un individu comme pour une nation"; ibid., 19.

10 See, for example, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude*, trans. Chike Jeffers (London: Seagull, 2012). The group Les ateliers de la pensée brings together many of francophone Africa's prominent intellectuals, and to date has met twice, in Senegal, to promote "des regards croisés qui éclairent d'un jour nouveau les enjeux d'une Afrique en pleine mutation, ouverte à l'univers de la pluralité et des larges" ("diverse perspectives that shed new light on the stakes of an Africa in full mutation, open to the world of plurality and expanses"). Les Ateliers de la pensée, "Edition," www.lesateliersdelapensee.com/edition (accessed 30 October 2017).