Early Glissant: From the Destitution of the Political to Antillean Ultra-Leftism

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EARLY GLISSANT
From the Destitution of the Political to Antillean Ultra-Leftism

by Nick Nesbitt

Like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant combined a passionate commitment to the politics of decolonization with a concern to analyze the modes and structures of French colonialism, from its origins to its singular perpetuation in the form it has taken since 1946 as the so-called "Departmentalization" of the former "colony" of Martinique (as well as Guadeloupe and French Guiana). In this article, I wish to focus on a number of Glissant's earlier, more overtly "political" texts, in the sense of openly calling for the decolonization or autonomy of a Martinican "nation." These include his 1958 first novel *La Lézarde*, which tells the story of a group of young Martinican anticolonial militants circa 1946, the little-known 1961 *Les Antilles et la Guyane à l'heure de la decolonisation*, which constitutes by some stretch Glissant's most radically and affirmatively anticolonial and Fanonian text, and his masterpiece of Caribbean critical theory, the 1981 *Le Discours antillais*.

La Lézarde, Glissant's first novel, established the young author as a prominent voice in Antillean letters when it won the French *Prix Renaudot* in 1958. Though frequently seen as a militantly anticolonial text, the novel in fact describes not so much the awakening of a Martinican national consciousness that would lead teleologically from alienation and exploitation to the birth of a decolonized nation, as the aporetic critique of such political triumphalism in the face of the eternal, inevitable resurgence of the mythic violence of the colonial order and plantation slavery itself. *La Lézarde* describes the decision of a group of young Martinican militants in the fictional city of Lambrianne to assassinate a political operative of the colonialist opposition. A sort of Antillean version of Sartre's *Les mains sales*, the novel is set in the time of the momentous 1945 elections that brought Aimé Césaire to power as the Communist mayor of Fort-de-France and deputy to the French Assembly, and turns around the debates over the demands and ethics of left-wing political militancy in the postwar period. Though the young peasant, Thaël, whom they engage in their plot, ultimately "succeeds" in his assassination attempt, the novel stages this political violence as not so much the triumph of Martinican national consciousness as the resurgence of the atavistic, mythic violence of colonialism and plantation slavery itself.

Against a more prominent triumphalist reading of the novel, H. Adlai Murdoch has argued in his study *Creole Identity in the French Caribbean Novel* that *La Lézarde* might be read as register of the antagonistic contradictions undermining any possible deployment of an Antillean general will. *La Lézarde* is for Murdoch not an ode to postcolonial progress so much as a narration of regression, one that "will eventually doom" its protagonists "to an ending that is anything but a point of resolution" (25).[1] Murdoch's reading of Glissant is decidedly dystopian; furthermore, read within the arc of Glissant's trajectory, it shows

to quite original effect how Glissant's later rejection of a radical Fanonian politics of the Martinican nation is *already* inscribed in this, his earliest work. Glissant, in this reading, is already in 1958, at the height of the decolonization movement and Césaire's and Fanon's calls for national independence, pessimistic about the viability of this triumphalist vision, and committed instead to a postcolonial aestheticism that values "certainty and beauty" rather than the emancipation and justice at the heart of Fanon's struggle (25). *La Lézarde* substitutes in 1958, at the height of the Algerian war and the drive toward the African independences, a universalist *poétique* for militant *politics*, a line of argument that will, however, only become over-determinant in his thought after the publication in 1990 of *Poétique de la Relation* (*La Lézarde* 76).

In contrast to Fanon's assertion of the "absolute" necessity of violence in Algeria, the novel's adolescent activists (Glissant's protagonists range in age, the narrator tells us, from eighteen to twenty-one) turn to violence as much through their search for self-identity as due to the objective demands of their situation. "All is vague and diffuse," says Thaël early on in the text, "as long as the world hasn't been defined and weighed by man. I don't want to describe things, I don't want to suffer, I want to know and to teach" (*La Lézarde* 29).

For all its economic underdevelopment and political subjection, Martinique in 1945 was no Algeria; it would suffer no large-scale French massacres like Sétif, no torture, no OAS terrorism. The young militants' will to assassinate Garin is drawn from nothing, the pure spontaneity of an ultra-leftist "act" that will ultimately prove to be a mere senseless acting out that does nothing to lessen the injustice and inequality of postwar Martinique (*La Lézarde* 85). Like Godard's famous exchange in *La chinoise* between the naïve will-to-terrorism of Anne Wiazemsky and the Sartrian humanism of the pro-Algerian militant Francis Jeanson, Glissant's activists are utterly disconnected from their society. Not only do the militants possess no manifest solidarity with the Martinican population, they demonstrate the ultimate bad faith in convincing themselves that it would be inopportune for one of their group to commit this political murder, and instead search out the peasant Thaël to do the deed, all the while maintaining the convenient fiction of a collective act—"And who kills this dog?" asks Mycéa rhetorically, the answer already at hand: "We do, all of us!" (*La Lézarde* 46).

The narrative polyphony of *La Lézarde* nonetheless contains many moments asserting the nascent formation of a Martinican national consciousness. The River Lézarde itself is compared to "a people rising up," while the narrator describes in Fanonian terms "a people slowly returning to their kingdom," a people who "raise their heads and count themselves . . . to discover in this every taste and every freedom" (30, 51). Indeed, *La Lézarde* celebrates, in its closing section, the election results that brought Césaire and the Communist party to power in Martinique, heralding the end of colonial status in the forthcoming legal act of Departmentalization: "Exiting the black hole of the war, which had grafted a terrible appendix onto so many years of shadow and denial, the [Martinican] people were as though drunk to affirm their birth" (189). Numerous passages evoke in critical terms the economic and existential "misery" of Martinican existence (50, 60, 80, 133).[2]

Ultimately, if Thaël attains a growing clarity and conviction that the political is "no longer a hollow game of those who would defend their miserable privileges" but now the expression of "the strength of this people," the properly *tragic* ending of *La Lézarde* nonetheless undermines this conceit, reaffirming the unsurpassability not, as Sartre and

Césaire himself claimed, of Communism, but of mythic violence itself.[3] The horrifying death by mauling of Valérie, the figure of a pure, militant nationalism in *La Lézarde*, signals a veritable return of the repressed, of myth (in the form of Thaël's dogs named Actaeon and Artemis), and above all of the mythic violence of plantation slavery itself that Glissant would go on to narrate so compellingly in his future novels. Revealingly, if Thaël first thinks to kill his dogs for their crime by "dousing them with gasoline" and setting them afire, he quickly revises that choice to decide in the novel's closing lines that the proper punishment would be none other than "attaching them solidly, with honey spread over their bodies, and calling the ants" to devour them. Such a torture, of course, is evocative of the most horrific punishments Antillean slave owners had long before devised to punish their rebellious slaves.[4] Mythic violence thus displaces the futility of politics, and Glissant opens the way in these pages to a life-long critique of Antillean subjection to violence and alienation, as well as a countervailing celebration of the aesthetic. Before pursuing this aesthetic turn in coming decades, however, Glissant would participate in his most militant anticolonial work, a long-suppressed text that has yet to be examined by Glissant scholars in detail.

In 1959, Glissant was a founding member with Albert Béville and Daniel Boukman of the separatist Front Antillo-Guyanais pour l'Autonomie, and because of his political activity, was barred from leaving metropolitan France by the Overseas Departments from 1961–1965 (Calmont 95). The text that resulted from the three-day conference held to discuss and define the program of this political initiative for the decolonization of the DOM, *Les Antilles et la Guyane à l'heure de la décolonisation*, is extremely rare, having been banned immediately upon its printing, and has to my knowledge never been closely analyzed in the half-century since its publication.[5] And yet, its collection of speeches and letters of support from around the francophone world constitute, with the contemporary writings of Fanon and the French Anarchist Daniel Guerin, the most radical and uncompromising statement of anticolonial Caribbean critique of the period. More than six hundred people attended the conference over three days in Paris, and statements of support came from figures including Fanon, Michel Leiris, the editor of *Présence Africaine* Alioune Diop, and Aimé Césaire. The longest texts in the volume are a series of critical analyses of the economic, cultural, and political situation in the DOM, the conclusions of which are summarized in the introduction as the two points that will constitute the basic program of the Front: 1. To have done with the current legal status of the DOM, and, correspondingly, 2. to implement a "Legislative Assembly" and an "Executive Power" that would be responsible to the former (*Les Antilles* 11). While it is not always possible to determine Glissant's precise contribution to these jointly drafted texts (only two brief interventions appear in his name), it is clear that he, as "President" of the conference and founding member of the Front, played a fundamental role in drafting and formulating every common statement. Other speakers included Albert Béville (a.k.a. Paul Niger), who presented the primary document of the new Front, its economic and political "rapport," Marcel Manville (who would go on to found the Martinican pro-independence PKLS party in 1984), Léonard Sainville (a collaborator in the famous 1930s journal *L'etudiant noir* with Césaire and Senghor), representatives from the Martinican and Guadeloupean Communist Parties including Rosan Girard (a Communist deputy alongside Césaire in the French Assembly from 1946–1958), and delegates from the Martinican, Guyanese, and Guadeloupean Student Associations.

The goals of the Front are spelled out in a closing report ("On the Creation of the Front") that emphasizes the non-aligned status of the organization, outside of any political party or ideological affiliation. Instead, the goal of the Front is defined in the document as "to struggle for the radical transformation of the political structures in our countries, in order to obtain their autonomy." The primary challenge in such a process, it further specifies, is to avoid falling into a neo-colonial relationship under the mere name of autonomy: "The fundamental principal of the Front . . . is that autonomy must not lead to a disguised perpetuation of colonialism, nor to the establishment of a new system of exploitation in our countries" (*Les Antilles* 139).

The economic and political *rapport* Béville presented to begin the Congress is an extremely rich and complex analysis of the Antillean situation in 1961. I summarize its main points here because, though presented by Béville, it constitutes a jointly-conceived primary statement of this organization Glissant co-founded, and because Béville himself stands as a little-known yet important figure in the history of Caribbean critique. The speech begins with a neo-Leninist critique of colonialism as a "manifestation" of economic imperialism; capitalism, that is to say, as it expands into foreign sites both in search of raw materials and new markets for its products (*Les Antilles* 18). Following a brief summary of the key role of the French imperialist trade regulation known as the *Exclusif* in assuring the availability of these colonial markets to France, the text makes the key claim that the 1946 Departmentalization initiative paradoxically reaffirmed this "tax-belt" (*cordon douanier*), "isolating" the DOMs from the rest of the economic world, rendering them "unable to protect themselves" economically (19). This assertion leads in turn to the conclusion, like so many others from this little-known event, to be reiterated twenty years later in Glissant's *Le Discours antillais*, namely, that Departmentalization (as "assimilation") is the highest form of a successful colonialism due to the extreme degree of "domination" it allows for, in the form of cultural alienation and political powerlessness in the face of total centralization (20–21). The result is a systematic "under-development" of the DOM, a "backwardness," and "dependency" upon the Metropolis, all due to an enforced monoculture of production and instability before historical and economic developments on the global level (22). The document offers in turn as a solution to this situation a single proposition, the content of which will be developed and debated in the discussions that make up the bulk of the conference itself: *autonomy* (23).

In its second section, entitled "Our Political Options: Autonomy and Federalism," this statement of the Front's political platform proceeds to articulate these two inter-related demands. Denouncing the half-measures and broken promises of the French government's Antillean policy since 1945, the text asserts the primacy of political self-determination, the imperative to take political decisions "internally," the basic condition of which is political "autonomy" (*Les Antilles* 24). The precise form of such autonomy must, it argues, address three demands: that of determining the degree and form of decolonization Martinique should pursue, the proper structure of internal social relations, and the nature of an autonomous Martinican foreign policy, or, as the text states more circumspectly, its "place in the world today." Such an autonomy would above all be measured by its practicality: it should "allow us to resolve our own problems," including above all the systematic structural under-development described in its previous section. No matter whether relations with the French Metropolis would take the form of a Federation, a Commonwealth, or a

Community, the primary demands of the text remain practical, those of "reciprocity and equality" of any relation. The precise nature and juridical arrangements of such reforms, the report is careful to point out, must necessarily remain indeterminate until such time as a representative body could articulate them, and would ultimately be of secondary importance before the measure of practical efficacy. Nonetheless, the document affirms, such an imperative ineluctably implies two institutions: The creation of "a legislative assembly and an Executive responsible to it." This demand is then subsequently formalized in the resolutions of the Congress as "the demand for immediate autonomy with its two fundamental bodies: for each of the countries, a legislative assembly and an executive responsible to it" (*Les Antilles* 164).

The Front's second demand is for the creation of a Fédération Antilles-Guyane. It is not only in the interest of small states to unite when confronted with much larger powers in the international arena, but, furthermore, such a federation can, the text argues, help to overcome internal discord and might ultimately result in increased economic efficiencies (*Les Antilles* 28). Like the juridical forms an eventual autonomy might take, the document refuses to specify the exact structure of such a federation, preferring to assert its absolute necessity as a formal political imperative.

Finally, the Front asserted the commonality of interests such a federation would have with its Caribbean neighbors, an economic-political formulation of what would become for Glissant the more cultural concept of a Caribbean "subterranean unity" by the time of *Le Discours antillais*, while a second vector of political unity would embrace the newly-independent African states in their common struggle to achieve a truly decolonized and autonomous status in the post/colonial context of 1961.

Béville's statement is followed by a series of much briefer interventions, the majority of which reaffirm the primary demands of the Front. Notable among these is Rosan Girard's restatement of the position of the Guadeloupean Communist Party, remarkable mainly for its Leninist assertion of the continued centrality of the Party itself in leading the "front for the emancipation of the [Guadeloupean] country," standing in marked contrast to the unaligned political status of the Front and Béville and Glissant in particular (*Les Antilles* 34).

In Glissant's first attributed intervention on the second day of the proceedings, he denies that the Front wishes to "set itself up as a Revolutionary Committee that wishes to direct from Paris an Antillean revolution" (*Les Antilles* 74). Speaking in the first person plural, he reaffirms that the political platform read by Béville (described above) should constitute the basis for all discussion in the forum, presumably seeking to cut short the personality and party conflicts that the reader senses creeping into various interventions throughout the congress. Glissant refuses in particular to proscribe violent forms of action, preferring to maintain a stance of neutrality in the face of the demands of future events: "We are not the ones who should decide on the [necessary] forms of struggle, because, once again, we are not prophets; we are stating a position on ideas and theoretical questions that we are attempting to put into practice. We are not trying to predict the future" (74). Such a quasi-Fanonian stance, which in essence claims that certain situations *may* necessarily demand recourse to violence, is particularly interesting in light of Glissant's arguably more pessimistic assessment on the place of violence in *La Lézarde* described above.

Finally, in Glissant's brief closing remarks to the congress, he asserts the necessity of *cultural* autonomy in the politics of such a Front, or more precisely, the view that an

autonomous culture will necessarily result from a more general political, economic, and existential autonomy of the Martinican community.

> From the point of view of culture, [Glissant concludes in an early statement of what will become his philosophy of Relation,] we witness the development of a potential enrichment of humanity. Why? Because today the world is constituted by the contact of cultures, because today there are no values of any one country that are not touched by the values of another. The world is shrinking, remaking itself, and the Antilles are in an ideal situation to promote the contact of cultures. They must develop the true values of their people. . . . And I say to you that if the Antilles are autonomous, if Antilleans and Guyanese are free to organize their societies and their aspirations, they will testify to this contact of cultures in a World dominated by complex cultures. They will be able to realize for the first time values freely-chosen and determined by themselves. In this way, they will be able to contribute as a people to the enrichment of humanity. (*Les Antilles* 157)

In the end, it is difficult to determine Glissant's precise degree of commitment to the political project of the Front. On the one hand, in the published text of the conference, he explicitly reaffirms his support of the platform Béville read that weekend, and it seems fair to presume he participated directly in its drafting. At the same time, his published remarks are less a ringing affirmation of a Fanonian absolute necessity of anticolonial violence than a guarded refusal absolutely to rule out some form of violence in the struggle for Antillean autonomy. The final comments cited above, moreover, announce already the turn from anticolonial political struggle to an autonomy of cultural production that Glissant would subsequently develop into a "poetics of Relation." Finally, given the pessimism already registered in *La Lézarde*, it seems fair to conclude that on the one hand, Glissant played a central and enthusiastic role in conceiving and promoting the Front in its brief existence, all the while harboring a strong degree of suspicion and even pessimism over the viability of its political project for Antillean autonomy.

Le Discours antillais and the Negotiation of Cultural/Politics

This somewhat conflicted nationalist, pro-independence political engagement continued to second Glissant's literary and theoretical work throughout the 1960s and 1970s, culminating in the publication in 1981 of *Le Discours antillais*. The work undoubtedly stands today, beside Césaire's *Discours sur le colonialisme* and Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs*, as the outstanding critique of post-1848 French colonialism in the Caribbean, its five-hundred pages constituting the most incisive, original, and developed single work in the entire tradition of Caribbean Critique.

Le Discours antillais articulates a critical intervention at the point of suture of politico-economic critique and culture. Whether its "cultural politics" might constitute an essential intervention, as Celia Britton and Charles Forsdick among others have argued, or instead

take a crucial step toward the abandonment of the political project of decolonization, as Peter Hallward and Chris Bongie have each argued, must remain, I think, an open question. Like political sequences themselves, the struggle for "identity" of any individual or community cannot be subject to any abstract, external norm or moralizing judgment. As the formation of an invariant, as that which remains self-same in the face of time and finitude, identity can organize and motivate a militant struggle for justice, such as that of Dessaline's black Jacobin Haiti, Césaire's Negritude, or Fanon's neo-Jacobin conception of an Algerian national identity, even when that struggle, as in these examples, calls for and, to an important degree, even concretely leads to the historical transcendence and irrelevancy (rather than erasure or destruction) of particular, racial, linguistic, or cultural differences. The problem of identity in the tradition of Caribbean critique points not to the abstract irrelevancy or falsity of any identity or even of "identity politics." Rather, it demands the analysis of the specific modalities in which that tradition has consistently and repeatedly conceived and mobilized, forged and deployed novel identities under the imperative not of furthering a divisive localism or racial or colonial hierarchy, but of strategically advancing the struggle for a politics of principle, the transcendental horizon of which has remained the pursuit of justice as equality.[6]

A properly political reading of Glissant might begin by focusing on the concept of the *nation* in his work, conceived precisely as the expression of the conscious, general will of the people, a people subtracted from all race, class, and gender-based specification. This neo-Jacobin Martinican nation, like the Haiti of 1804 and Fanon's Algeria that is its model, would be "made up of all those who, whatever their cultural origin or 'way of being,' collectively *decide* to assert (or re-assert) the right of self-determination" (Hallward 127). Beyond the model of the French Revolution, both the Haitian revolution's implementation of a post-racial nation-state and Fanon's idealization of the coming Algerian nation in *L'an V de la revolution algérienne* can be taken as the canonical postcolonial models of a universalist despecification from all identity-based politics in the field of Glissant's concern. What remains to be described, however, are those rare moments when a radically subtractive poetics *inhabits* and seconds a political plane of universal emancipation.

In fact, *Le Discours antillais* repeatedly holds out the promise of a theory of the dialectical relay of culture and politics. The chapter "Action culturelle" in particular asks the precise question, "Why at any given moment should one privilege the practice of cultural production? When should it be replaced or relayed by political practice?" (209).[7] While the precise answer *Le Discours antillais* might offer to this question is never clearly formulated by Glissant, a series of propositions clearly articulate the quasi-aporetic dilemma of the Martinican situation. The alienation of Martinican society is a structural fact, its social classes themselves the creation of French colonialism meant to service its domination. This fact itself tends in *Le Discours antillais* constantly to reframe the problem of any political intervention as being always already recuperated or vitiated by this all-encompassing system. A revolutionary event is clearly the horizon that points beyond this despondent situation, but it is a horizon that only ever appears in *Le Discours antillais* as a merely analytic (when not simply utopian) potentiality: "Only a readjustment of the status of the social groups relative to their [actual] function in the system of production, that is to say, in the end only an overthrow [*bouleversement*] of the system (or non-system) of production could potentially overcome the structural disorder of Martinican society" (210). After a series of

further discussions recapitulating elements of this critique of Martinican alienation, Glissant ultimately seems to base the priority of cultural critique over political intervention as a voluntary choice, an axiomatic decision, an *il faut*: "it is necessary [*il faut*] to *show here* that alienation *has a history*—our history to which we have passively submitted" (219).[8]

The concept of the event (*événement*) is not only central to the logic and development of Glissant's *Le Discours antillais*, but undoubtedly unites the majority of post-Heideggerian French thinkers, as François Zourabichvili has observed: "The theme of the event sits today at the center of philosophical preoccupations, it animates the most daring and original attempts" (qtd. in Bosteels 177). This fact alone, however, offers a merely superficial commonality, as Zourabichvili warns us ("But the spirit of a time does not in and of itself produce a philosophy and it should not mask irreconcilable differences"). While *Le Discours antillais* is thus eminently thorough in offering readers a *postcolonial* theory of the event, it is above all essential to underline the particularity of this thought rather than its commonality.

The concept of the event is central to *Le Discours antillais*. While a number of key sections of this immensely disparate book are actually entitled "Evénement," section 22 of book 1, part 2 ("Le vécu antillais" 'Lived Antillean Experience') offers a useful introduction to the concept as Glissant understands it.[9] For Glissant, the event is "a fact that is produced [*qui s'est produit*] elsewhere" (100). This single sentence holds the key to the various transformations of the concept throughout the book. For if an event in its strongest sense can be said to initiate the fundamental transformation of a world at the level of its most basic coordinates (say, in the passage from a slave-based society to a republic of citizens in Haiti after 1804, or from colonial abjection to independent citizenship in Algeria after 1962), in Martinique, Glissant tells us events are both foreign (they happen elsewhere, in the Métropole), and not really events at all, in this strong sense, but mere *facts*, modifications, one might say, in the relations of beings, modifications that nonetheless change nothing in the basic structure of existence (who counts as a subject, say, or whether a society is organized around the principle of hierarchy and entitlement or a presupposition of equality).

"For us," in the situation of late colonialism that is Glissant's Martinique, "there are no Events" (*Le Discours antillais* 100). *Le Discours antillais* is indeed Glissant's most sustained political anticolonial intervention, a critique from start to finish of late French colonialism in Martinique in its every dimension (of Martinican political economy, psychology, culture, language, politics, class structure, etc.), but it engages this critique in the mode of *lamentation* and *mourning*. *Le Discours antillais* shares with Deleuze an understanding of the event as wound precisely insofar as its five-hundred pages undertake the burial of the anticolonial politics of the nation that Glissant inherited from Louverture (*Monsieur Toussaint*) and Fanon, a politics that had found sustained, if contradictory, attention in *La Lézarde*, and which Glissant joined his Antillean and Guyanese colleagues in affirming explicitly as an autonomist militancy in the 1961 Front.

The Burial of the Event

Taken as a whole, *Le Discours antillais* can be said to organize the despondent spectacle of the event (as postcolonial *nation*) staged as the dissolution of a dream. Though *Le Discours antillais* never clearly *names* the positive, historical images of the event as nation to which it continues to gesture, it seems clear to me, judging from the totality of his thought as well as the *Discours* specifically, that two such events are primordial for Glissant: the founding of the Haitian nation in 1804 (which Glissant describes, nostalgically, in the dreamlike images of his 1962 play *Monsieur Toussaint*), and Glissant's formative experiences in 1950s Paris during the Algerian war, when Fanon's experience as an alienated Antillean who becomes Algerian, a subject of anticolonial freedom and neo-Jacobin, universal equality open to any human being, marked the younger Martinican indelibly.

The liminal epigraph of *Le Discours antillais* names the book's project via a citation from Fanon himself, as the "colossal task of the inventory of the real" (7). In the absence of any envisageable event, Glissant will in this manner undertake such an "inventory of the real," a critique of Antillean existence without event. The situation he will describe must thus begin, as the book's first words assert, "From a blocked situation." This *à partir de*, however, is fundamentally ambiguous: certainly, it asserts the author's determination to explore without detours the contorted alienations and contradictions of the Antillean situation, to begin from the situation in which he finds himself in 1970s Martinique and its late, even "successful" colonialism that forms a "web of nothingness in which [Antilleans] find themselves stuck today" (*Le Discours antillais* 11). At the same time, *à partir de* holds the promise of a break, invoking Césaire's caesura in the *Cahier*, the celebratory "*Partir!*" that initiates that poem's final ascent toward the liberatory subjectivity of Negritude in its "*immobile verrition*." The following lines of Glissant's opening section evoke the suffering of the world, of "fearless genocides" and the "liquidation" of the "resistance of peoples." In the face of this suffering, of this unending wound, the hope *Le Discours antillais* holds out to its reader in these first pages takes the form of a formally empty, unmotivated utopian promise, the assurance "that one day men will perhaps stop, overwhelmed by the unsuspected insight into Relation that will exist within them—and then they will salute these stammering intuitions" (13).

Unlike the interventionist procedures of figures such as Louverture, Césaire, and Fanon, each of whom sought to effect a radical break in the colonial world, the methodology of *Le Discours antillais* is critically "accumulative," the analytical, critical description rather than concrete call for transformation of the vast world of Martinique. "Accumulation is the most appropriate method to reveal a refractory reality" (13). And so *Le Discours antillais* begins its critical, infinite labor upon the untruths and blockages of the Antillean situation, describing a world in which the promise of any event has finally disappeared beneath the blinding reality of successful colonization. To evoke the event in such a context, as Glissant repeatedly does, can only mean the reopening of a "gaping cut [and] a painful break": the Middle Passage, slavery, and subjection to an overwhelming and all-determining French colonialism (*Le Discours antillais* 18). Amid this interminable critique of the Antillean Real, the Fanonian ideal repeatedly reappears, but as mere utopian promise, unavailable to Antilleans in the here and now: "But all peoples are born one day," the opening pages tell us, via the "arduous self-definition of peoples who are born into their freedom in solidarity" (*Le Discours antillais* 20).

In the face of this muted promise, Glissant discovers in Antillean actuality not the traces of events, but rather the constancy of the Detour, the delusional acting out of the Antillean's own "burial within assumed negativities." In past situations of militant, violent, and ultimately successful decolonization (Haiti in 1804? Algeria in 1961?), Glissant asserts, "Detour is impossible where the nation was possible . . . when the community confronted an enemy known as such." Instead, Detour names for Glissant the mode of existence of a community whose domination and alienation remains unknown (*occultée*) (*Le Discours antillais* 32). While the forms of such Detour can include Creole, Vodun, Negritude, or emigration to the Métropole, they all have in common that they "lead nowhere," that they open onto no possibility of (self-) overcoming (*dépassement*).

While Césaire's Negritude held a degree of "sublimity" that took it beyond mere folklore, it is Fanon's experience, Glissant asserts, that nonetheless remains the most "significant" example of the Detour, haunting *Le Discours antillais* with the image of the lost, tragic promise of a truly decolonized, postcolonial nation (35). Fanon's becoming-Algerian, it would seem, is for Glissant the only true event in Antillean history (other pseudo-events, such as Delgrès's 1802 revolt and the 1848 emancipation stand instead as the sustained objects of Glissant's melancholic critique). It is Fanon who has been for Glissant the only Antillean to truly take action (*passer à l'acte*) and to accomplish an event in the strongest sense of the word—"not only to struggle, to deploy a contestatory speech, but to fully assume *the radical* break" (36). Yet Fanon's *passion algérienne* remains tragically unavailable to the Martinicans, *Le Discours antillais* immediately concludes in this opening gesture, the reasons for which unavailability constitute the bulk of the critical analysis that is the true object of Glissant's investigation.

The first section of *Le Discours antillais* thus abandons or at least postpones anticolonial politics for a preliminary critique of Martinican political economy: the "dispossession" of Antillean subjects from means and even entire modes of production (economic, cultural, linguistic, historical), an analysis of alienated work and pseudo-labor (the *djob*). Amid this despondent catalogue of colonial alienation, the only events that regularly capture the imagination are not human endeavors, but the catastrophic Caribbean punctuations of routine by sublime, natural terror: the cyclone, the earthquake, and the attendant disruptions to the supply of provisions from the Metropolis they incur (39).

French colonialism in Martinique, Glissant shows in painstaking detail, has successfully constructed by 1981 not only a system, but an entire mental habitus of "non-production." This *néantisation* is perhaps the key to Glissant's despondent conclusion that the creation of a Martinican nation is in fact impossible, in contrast to the independent states and cultural communities of Haiti or Algeria: Martinique in 1981 bears witness in this view to "the impossibility of constituting labor conflicts as a mode of resolution with a national dimension." In other words, the conflicts and contradictions of capitalism that in Marx's classic analysis had impelled societies toward socialist revolutions of the proletariat are fundamentally inoperative in Martinique *because there is no "real" labor or production actually undertaken in the colony*. There exists only what Glissant calls an "activity in suspension," in which the importation of all goods and, following the final collapse of the sugar industry after 1946, a pseudo-economy of superficial services (tourism and the servicing of colonialism by a peripheral bureaucracy beholden to Paris for its very existence) (*Le Discours antillais* 42). In the face of this overwhelming late colonial under-development and dys-

function, Glissant here again can only hold out the utopian promise of a leap beyond this world, the voluntarist, quasi-miraculous "radical mutation of the mentality of assistance, the taking hold of a globally conceived economy, creative initiative, audacity" (44). Even the author himself finds it impossible by 1981 to hold any longer to this vision with any conviction, and immediately concludes that "We will not escape from this dilemma" (44).

In Search of the Event: Delgrès, Matouba, and the Hysterics of Truth

Insofar as *Le Discours antillais* offers a theory of the postcolonial event, the two primary instances that the volume proposes as such are undoubtedly the 1848 Martinican uprising of May 22 in advance of the promulgation of the French abolition decree, and Louis Delgrès's 1802 revolt against Napoleon's invasion to reinstate slavery in Guadeloupe, led by General Richepanse. The 1848 emancipation constitutes for *Le Discours antillais* the archetype of a pseudo-event, the mere ideological promise of change that ultimately constituted no more than the passage from the slave-based mode of capitalism to that of wage-labor (44–47). Glissant analyzes in painstaking detail the obsequiously paternalist proclamation of the French delegate to Martinique read to slave and planters on March 31, 1848. This text, under Glissant's discerning eye, reveals virtually the entire range of the modes of alienation that would come to constitute Antillean subjectivity after 1848. Glissant's list of these outrages, ranging from the steadfast assertion that all authority resides—and all true change comes from—elsewhere, to the racist clichés of happy black subjects grateful to the white liberators, is voluminous (46–47). And while it is true that the slaves who heard this text read to them (in both French and a ridiculous pseudo-Creole that Glissant brutally dissects in a later section of *Le Discours antillais*) refused this paternalism, even this gesture, in Glissant's view, failed to "open onto radical liberation" (47). In the final pages of *Le Discours antillais*, Glissant then reaffirms that the slave revolt of May 22, in anticipation of the French emancipation decree, was, like its contemporary celebration, a "collective phantasm," a revolt that, "as in all other cases," would fail to initiate any "feeling [*sentiment*] of the nation" and would instead merely initiate the alienated cult of French domination (via the figure of Schoelcher) (463). [10]

The first nominal case of an "event" that *Le Discours antillais* investigates immediately follows this critique of 1848, referring to the protests of 1971 in Martinique that had led to the death of a local student. While this contestatory sequence might well have initiated a *prise de conscience*, once again, what Glissant calls an "event" ultimately amounted to no more than a *fait divers*: "A military truck passes by, young people on the sidewalk, the sound of a detonation, smoke, and then nothing." A brutal death, certainly, even a "murder," but ultimately one that remains banal, *dérisoire* (54). The "event" is here no more than a news flash, truly no more than another meagre, derisory fact, one that is admittedly tragic, yet ultimately banal, empty, and above all void of consequences. Similarly, the text's final example of an "event" is even less substantial, "a few strikes" in which no one died and there was no protest as in 1802, 1848, or even 1971, a mere "collective phantasm" that swept the country in 1980. It is this phantasm that remains for *Le Discours antillais* in its final pages the true culmination of the Martinican pseudo-event, "the phantasm of opinion, unmotivated by anything in the real" (452).

In the face of the banality of such pseudo-events, *Le Discours antillais* offers a substantial critique of Martinican political economy. While one of Glissant's main themes in the book is the inapplicability to Martinique of conventional Marxist categories—proletariat, infra- and superstructure, and even the category of labor itself—given the specificity of Martinican late colonialism as a functioning system of non-production, this denial will in turn be met with the generation of a series of novel critical categories. These include Glissant's description of the artificiality of production (which takes place elsewhere—France) and of social classes themselves, given the fact of this absence of all productive labor, whether exploitative or egalitarian; the absence of all economic investment other than to support alienated dependency; the absence of accumulation (of capital, of technical means, of progressive investment and projects) and a corresponding fear of accumulation; and, finally, a general habitus of non-productivity. The result is a colonial system of "dispossession," in which all social groups exist in insurmountable antagonism, the outcome of which in turn is the correlative impossibility of any systematic resistance to this system (and thus the impossibility of any Martinican *nation*), and an existential, psychological situation of universal "morbidity, ambiguity, confusion" (57, 60, 171).

In the face of this systematic and successful vitiation of a society, Glissant ultimately denies that any political solution might be forthcoming, explicitly casting this refusal as a rejection of Aimé Césaire's 1948 vision of an Antillean radical postcoloniality in the latter's original speech celebrating the centennial of the 1848 abolition and the figure of Schoelcher: "It is difficult today to subscribe to such assertions [as Césaire's]. Because we know that political freedom was here a constant diversion [*leurre*]. That [in the wake of the 1946 Departmentalization] the Martinican is neither a total citizen (he has no City) nor a true proletarian (but a 'dispersed' proletarian)" (*Le Discours antillais* 66).

The historical phenomenon of the maroon slave, which might potentially have served as a figure of resistance, merely amounts in Glissant's critique to one more example of the futility of all resistance in a topography with no hinterland that might support a culture of resistance (especially so when compared to the very different maroon traditions and experiences of countries such as Jamaica, Surinam, or Brazil) (*Le Discours antillais* 69). Given these overwhelming factors, all momentary flashes of resistance have universally failed to sustain "the growth of the nation" (71). This "nation" indeed remains throughout *Le Discours antillais* its only category of truth, the name for what would be, or has been elsewhere (Haiti, Algeria), for others (Dessalines, Fanon), an event, but one that is impossible, unattainable, for Martinicans. What would constitute this nation can only be stated by Glissant in the utopian tense of the conditional: "The national project should take into account these impossibilities, explain them, define the original status of this country, find relations that would resolve these 'impossibilities,' open onto solutions within the greater Caribbean, put to work a strategy that would be both radical and patient, continuous and sudden" (73).

In the face of this historical "sterility," of the absence of any true event that would initiate the construction of a decolonized nation on the model of a Haiti or Algeria, Martinicans have only one historical event of comparable distinction to refer to. Following the arrival in Guadeloupe of Napoleon's General Richepanse in May 1802, the Martinican Colonel Louis Delgrès refused to allow his troops to join the French delegation, correctly judging that the latter had come to Guadeloupe with the sole intention of restoring plantation

slavery to the colony.[11] The insurgent soldiers split off; one group remaining under the command of the black leader Ignace retreated to the center of the island, while Delgrès led a group of insurgents first to the Fort de Basse-Terre (today Fort Delgrès) and then to the Matouba plantation in the hills above Basse-Terre at the foot of Mount Soufrière, where he and his 300 revolutionaries blew themselves up along with many of their Napoleonic adversaries on May 28, 1802.[12]

Delgrès' revolt became, after 1945, the topos of a struggle to recover popular memory of an indigenous resistance to slavery and colonization in the French Caribbean. In a brief though nonetheless essential section of *Le Discours antillais*, Glissant offers a compelling critique of this erasure (*raturage*) of collective memory, arguing that

> when Colonel Delgrès blew himself up on Mount Matouba in Guadeloupe (1802), to avoid capture by six thousand French soldiers encircling their camp, the noise of this explosion did not immediately resound in the consciousness of Martinicans and Guadeloupeans. Delgrès was vanquished a second time by the ruses of the dominant ideology, which succeeded for a time in denaturing the meaning of his heroic *act* and erasing it from popular memory. (*Le Discours antillais* 131)

While I have analyzed elsewhere the dynamics of Glissant's critique of Antillean history, memory, and subjectivity, here I want only to interrogate the status of 1802 as *event*, what Glissant quite accurately calls a mere *act*. In other words, if Delgrès or Matouba is the proper name in *Le Discours antillais* of the prototypical Antillean event, this is not merely because the history of Martinique has known no political sequences of the order of the Haitian or Algerian Revolutions. Delgrès and 1802 can designate the exemplary Glissantian event above all because the author of *Le Discours antillais* has a theory of the event, as I have argued above, but not of a constitutive truth that could be derived from any singular event. If the Fanonian "nation" names the only transcendental category of truth in *Le Discours antillais*, it is a truth under erasure, a vanishing truth, one the book itself puts to rest as the ultimately futile, unattainable dream of decolonization. Delgrès, in the face of this absence or mortification of truth, figures for Glissant's thought the speculative cry of an Antillean ultra-leftism, a radical, apocalyptic explosion that seeks in an infinite desire for emancipation to "split the world in two" in the flash of a moment, to adopt Nietzsche's famous phrase, within an unsurpassable situation of the tragic unavailability of the means to pursue the realization of this desire.[13] Delgrès, in this view, names for Glissant this tragic struggle of ends without means, the only outcome of which is death.

For Glissant, the Delgrèsian event remains a pure acting out, the aesthetic of an expressive intensity devoid of political consequences (the explosion on Matouba that ended Delgrès's still-born revolution would on the contrary open the way for the reimposition of slavery from 1802 to 1848). By this measure, if the 1848 protests in Martinique were impressive but devoid of consequences, Matouba counts all the more as the ultimate degree of an Antillean sublime, of a Martinican explosive acting out. Neither of these events (1802, 1848), however, can be said to have been consequential, in the sense of uniting a militant, national community struggling to realize the consequences of an initial uprising (as an incipient nation), and Delgrès's proclamation itself retains a properly hysterical character

of futility that inflates the assertion of its truth in the proto-Romantic *Sturm und Drang* of a mere poetics of revolt.[14]

Delgrès's proclamation is the aesthetic cry of a universal insubordination against slavery and racial hierarchy, addressed to "the entire universe!" Delgrès's resistance on Mount Matouba names in turn the struggle to efface the objectivity of slavery, to initiate a revolutionary subjectivization, an Antillean, emancipated nation, one that nonetheless can do no more than echo beyond 1802 as the mere aesthetic sublime of the explosion and the axiomatic decision of an incipient subject not to submit to the Napoleonic order. It is not only Delgrès, the subject of 1802, who is split, divided between an allegiance to revolutionary France and the imperatives of 1789 and the 1794 abolition that Napoleon had long before betrayed. The communal figure of the One, the unity of this Antillean group-in-rebellion and nation-in-potential literally divides into two, as the mixed-race Martinican Delgrès and the black, Guadeloupean former slave Ignace separate their troops in the midst of the revolution. Delgrès's cry is the last desperate attempt to prevent not only the reimposition of slavery, but the triumph of the Napoleonic, imperial meta-order of French slavery that would persist another half-century.

If Delgrès names the refusal to neatly suture the falsity of the Napoleonic ideological order, the limitation of 1802 within the order of Martinican history is perhaps its status as a mere moment of the explosive, hysterical acting out of insubordination in an objectively blocked situation devoid of all other alternatives (unlike the contemporary dynamics of revolution in neighboring Saint-Domingue). Delgrès and the revolt his name covers failed to place a measure on the infinite excess of the Napoleonic state order, to measure and contain that order within the limits of universal rights, and in this fashion he stands in precise and notable contrast to other leading figures of Caribbean critique from Louverture to Césaire. Louverture, in his 1801 constitution following upon the 1791 revolt in Saint-Domingue, Victor Schoelcher in the 1848 abolition law following the French revolution of that year, Césaire in the 1946 departmentalization law in the wake of the doctrine of Negritude, even Aristide in the struggle for an egalitarian political structure in Haiti after 1986—each was able to carry forward to some important degree the struggle to unfold the consequences of an ephemeral, explosive event, to articulate within a political sphere the various implications of the singular events to which they were each, respectively, subject. The tragedy of Martinican colonialism that Glissant critiques so insightfully in *Le Discours antillais* is precisely its repeated and, he ultimately concludes, untranscendable inability to put a measure to the forces of colonial alienation and non-production and development.

In this sense, one could say that the French-Martinican soldier Delgrès, though a subject faithful to the truth of 1789 like his colleague Louverture, was nonetheless an objectively obscurantist subject. While explicitly affirming the truth of universal emancipation from slavery and racial hierarchy, the objectively blocked situation to which he remained tied and limited—and this is ultimately Glissant's point in his critique of 1802 in the central section of *Le Discours antillais* entitled *Histoire, histoires* that I am interpreting here—effectively obscured the truth of an Antillean militant subjectivity for generations to come. The event of 1802 is ultimately the mere algebraic of an aesthetic intensity devoid of any truth (as nation), and it is for this reason, I would argue, that it ultimately comes to stand in *Le Discours antillais* as the prototype of the Martinican event. The Antillean world that Glissant describes is a monotonous universe of alienation and subjection to French hege-

mony on every level—discursive, linguistic, cultural, political, economic—one that is no doubt occasionally punctuated by rare, explosive events (1802, 1848, 1971) that hold out the empty promise to shatter the world in two, but the potential of which is quickly and seemingly inevitably reabsorbed as their echo disperses into the Antillean hills and forests.

As Glissant, ever the disciple of Fanon, clearly recognizes, every singular truth requires a forceful, subjective affirmation on the part of its subjects to unfold its consequences in the world it reveals in untruth. The tragedy of Delgrès is that this forcing could carry no further than the hills of Guadeloupe's Basse-Terre and for no longer than a single month in 1802, to bear no more fruit than the suffering of its subjects who would conclude their plea as an address to "posterity! Shed a tear for our sorrows, and we will die satisfied" (qtd. in Dubois 392). Delgrès's 1802 self-immolating revolt shows in this reading why the theory of non-violence is so dysfunctional and even suicidal in the face of unrestrained imperial violence such as that of Napoleon or Fanon's Algerian colonialism ("We are resolved to defend ourselves," Delgrès writes, "but we will not become aggressors"). Because they were not so much unwilling as unable (due to their small number) to effectively resist the reimposition of slavery, those African Americans of Guadeloupe and Martinique who fought Richepanse's troops were slaughtered, while the remaining Antillean community found itself subject to forty-six more years of plantation slavery in all its violence and misery. Such is the pathos of the Glissantian event, the pure counter-example to C. L. R. James's black Jacobinism and to Fanon and Sartre's affirmation of the absolute necessity of anticolonial violence in Algeria in *Les damnés de la terre*.

In a marginal aside to *Le Discours antillais*, Glissant even gives the appearance of subscribing to precisely such a Fanonian concept of the necessity of anticolonial violence, when he observes that "the collective unconscious of Martinicans . . . is the negative result of non-consummated communal experiences," among which he lists the absence of any "constructive [*résolutoire*] collective violence," the models for which, I would argue, are (implicitly) Dessaline's Haiti and Fanon's celebration of the creation of a decolonized Algerian subject (36).

While *Le Discours antillais* offers no general theory of anticolonial violence on the order of James, Fanon, or even Césaire, it does offer a complex typology of the singular forms of violence operative in the Martinican situation in the section entitled "Violence, Identity, and Political Practice," ranging from the hidden forms of violence of the system itself, to economic exploitation, self-directed violence as alienated acting-out, the "compulsional" violence of the political system, and the neurotic violence of a refused reality that culminates in the willfully chosen "psychotic violence" of the radical choice of "insanity" (*folie*) (292).

The problem of the political is undoubtedly central to any conception of postcolonial studies, and the concerted critiques of multiculturalism and identity politics mounted in recent years by figures such as Deleuze, Žižek, Badiou, and Peter Hallward mean that any conceivable articulation of the field must now address the issues of universalism and relational specificity their work defends. To consider the complex status of a politics of the event in the work of Édouard Glissant offers a concentrated opportunity to grapple with the problem of decolonization as that of a politics of principle, and an opening onto a renewed notion of the *post*colonial that would no longer be the mere mockery of the victims of colonialism. Instead, one witnesses Glissant sustaining the promise of decolonization

as that of tragic loss, attending to its promises and failures, as the intellectual and political inheritance of Caribbean critique itself.

NOTES

1. Other incisive readings that judge *La Lézarde* to be a more politically optimistic text include those of Bongie and Dash.
2. Glissant has evoked this period of his life in a 2007 interview with Celia Britton. There he describes his participation in the group of young Martinican militants who adopted the name "Franc-jeu" during Césaire's election campaign:

> We founded this group in Lamentin, and I was the youngest, as I always was at that time. It was a group of poetico-political militants [*un groupe d'agitation poético-politique*]. I was between fifteen and seventeen—I didn't have the right to enter a voting booth, for example—but I directed electoral campaigns, choosing speakers, for example, for certain neighborhoods, etc. We helped Césaire, it was his first electoral campaign, and he signed up with the communist party on that occasion. (Britton 102)

3. *La Lézarde* thus offers a precocious document of the turn from the militant politics of decolonization to a mournful sense of tragic inevitability articulated in David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity*. Sartre famously asserted the "unsurpassable" nature of communism as a political orientation in *Questions de methode* (1960).
4. C. L. R. James famously describes these and other historical forms of plantation torture in *Black Jacobins* (12–13).
5. I was able to consult a copy of the book at the Institut des hautes etudes de l'Amérique Latine in Paris in July 2012, the single other copy in French libraries (at the BNF) still designated *hors d'usage*.
6. Though the book's focus avoids the problem of post/colonial politics to focus on the cultural, H. Adlai Murdoch's rich and fascinating *Creolizing the Metropole* describes many of the complexities of such a notion of identity conceived not as essence, but as "forever incomplete and constantly in process" (26).
7. All citations are taken from the unabridged French edition of *Le Discours antillais*. Translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.
8. A further defense of cultural critique in the Antillean context occurs in the section "Poétique et inconscient" when Glissant writes,

   If we propose that the axis of collective, mute deaths must be extricated from the economic system, if we affirm that their only resolution can be a political one, it appears as well that poetics, the implicit or explicit science of language, is at the same time the only memorial recourse against such destruction and the only true site in which to illuminate them, at once within a consciousness of our planetary species and a meditation on the necessary and non-alienated relation to the other. To name oneself is to write the world. (284)
9. I offer a more extended analysis of this section of *Le Discours antillais* in "Deleuze, Glissant, and the Production of Postcolonial Concepts."
10. Compare Glissant's pessimistic reading to Aimé Césaire's roughly contemporary, explicit endorsement of a Leninist and Fanonian model of revolutionary anticolonial insurgency in the little-known 1972 conclusion to Césaire's original 1948 Sorbonne speech celebrating the centenary of the 1848 abolition. In this difficult to find text, Césaire judges the uprising of May 22 to have been a veritable "victory for violence: the illustration in advance of the views of Lenin and Fanon—in a story in which there is place, despite the wishes of all pure hearts, neither for idylls nor pious sentiments" (18). Rather than simply judging Glissant to have produced the more "objective" and "realistic" assessment of the hopes for revolution in Martinique, might it not be possible to revisit Césaire's radical anticolonial vision and sustained fidelity to a generic, non-aligned form of global communism? In this view, against the now-familiar disparagement of Césaire by Raphaël Confiant, it would be Césaire the elder statesman who by the 1970s had become the most visible Antillean *inheritor* of Fanonian radicalism, the figure who remained faithful to the promise of decolonization, never knowing when the proper moment for a revolutionary event might arise, and whether in fact it might not arise (as it did not) in his lifetime, all the while continuing to assert publicly in speeches and interviews not what seemed "realistic" to hope for, but what is *right*?

11. For historiographic discussion of Delgrès' revolt, see Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens* chapters 14–15; Saint-Ruf; and Adélaïde-Merlande. I discuss the relation of this event to cultural memory in Guadeloupe in *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature*, chapter 1. The text of Delgrès's decree, a printed copy of which has not survived in the archives, was originally reproduced in Auguste Lacours's 1855 *Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, and can be consulted in Dubois and Garrigus's *Slave Revolution* (171–72).
12. Both André Schwarz-Bart and Daniel Maximin have offered compelling fictional narratives on this event that draw heavily from the existing historical documentation of the revolt.
13. Ultra-leftism classically refers to a militant revolutionary desire for the total destruction of an unjust world and its replacement by a more egalitarian one, an anarchist struggle more specifically undertaken in the absence of or subtraction from any direct engagement with the structures of the actually-existing state and state of affairs.
14. Auguste Lacour, who first published the text, asserts that it was in fact drafted by "Monnereau, a Creole *adjudant* [warrant officer] from Martinique" (253). As Deborah Jenson has argued for Toussaint Louverture's relation to his secretaries, one should similarly presume that Delgrès took an active role in the final drafting of this immensely important document issued in his name alone.

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