

Speech delivered at the Aime Cesaire symposium, NYU, December 4-6, 2003

EDOUARD GLISSANT

The poet rises, and the world rises with him. This is the duty that he has known from the start. Suffering and joy, divided within. I would like to return, in order to better follow this beginning, to the calling of the universal which iconizing commentary wants to overwhelm. Poetry is not a product of the universal, no, she is born of the upheavals that transform us.

When he replaces the word *catholic*, which in effect would signify the universal, with the word tyrannical, "You still know my tyrannical love for them", in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, a substitution that might have distressed his friend Leopold-Sedar Senghor, he means to say that he cannot lose his fondness for this flesh of the world, that he is not free to escape in the world, and that he has put before himself this enormous task of naming all of its flavors, all its heights, without exception "counting all insects, all disputes, all disasters..." Nations rush up. Let us consider how he makes this call:

"Gabon sonore de rhum bien rouge" and

"Le sucre du mot Bresil au fond du marecage," and

"Batouque de la princesse aux cuisses de Congo," and

"Tout l'eau de Kanaga chavire de la Grande-Ourse
a mes yeux," and

"Mes yeux de Saint-Pierre bravant les assassins sous
la cendre morte," and

"Le Chimborazo violent," - which recurs many
times- and

"Les bourgs bossus, Basse-Ponte, Diamant, Tartane,
et Caravalle, 'and "d'ici, je vous noues

"Benoue, Logone et Tchad;

"lies Senegal et Niger.

"Rugir, silence et nuit rugir, d'ici j'entends

" rugi le Nyaragongo" and

"Les amazons du roi de Dahomey, "then these
mountains,

"Andes crachant et Mayoumbe sacre, "and again

"Les jeunes filles du Chiriqui, "and

"En rupture de mer Morte, "and

" Lettre de Bahia-de-tous-les-Saints," and

"Borneo Sumatra Maldives Laquedives

"Si j'avais besoin d'un Timor parfume de sandals

"ou de Moluques Ternate Tidor

"ou de Celebes ou de Ceylan, "so

"Moi qui Zambeze ou frenetique ou rhombe ou
cannibale," and

"Benin Benin o Pierre d'aigris

"Ife qui fut Ouphas, " and always

"Afrique!" and

"J'ai ces mains somptueuses que l'empereur
ancien revetait a Cuzco, "and sometimes, he leaves
the South and goes back up to the boreal, - for
example, suddenly appearing in," Greenland," off
the Scandanavian archipelago, and

"Les masses compactes des icebergs pirates tendant
vers Ostende..." Etc. Etc.

Countries rush up, jostle each other. The
list, the blessed list, distributed throughout
the body of his poetry, seems inexhaustible.
But it is not of the universal. To know that it

refines no generalizing concepts from any of these places, (the universal is not in the particular, we put it where we imagine it should be,)—these kinds of lists put the finishing touches on what speech consecrates—the action—of every poet, the tormented accumulation of the Totality of the world, yes, the fragile and indelible echo of Every-Body (du “Tout-Monde”).

It is not a geographic dictionary, it is the inextricable intertwining of a primordial geology that knocks on every one of our dreams. No generalizing ideas, tumultuous burying of the misfortunes and terrible shriveling up of a people. The nations gathered here frequent swamps, capsize, brave the assassins, they are violent, humpbacked, they spit, they are frenzied, embittered. Let us admit it, they live off the underground rumblings that bite at the depths of our reality, and that the poet himself frequents. Their rhythm is that of the poem.

Rhythm!... Speaking of rhythm, we have troubled it enough with countless insipid and

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theatrical comparisons, plastered onto poetic text. This one would have, for example, the rhythm of the race, or the rhythm of a well-meditated anti-rhetoric, or the imitative rhythm of assonances born of the real, and is thus unbridled. Let us listen, rather, to what the poet says.

“Not artificially imposed from the outside, but springing from the depths. Night of blood leaping up to meet the day and imposing itself...Not the music of captured

words, but my deepest internal vibrations...”

I hold that these depths, this blood, these vibrations are of the world. The blood springing up from the world. The truths of certain peoples, of certain men come from what they experience while in communion with this movement, and the text of the poem tells this to us in a stunning way. Other men, other peoples dream of the world, some try to control and exploit it, others try to abstract it, and many try to go beyond it.

Gauging further, we could suppose that race distinguishes itself first off by a way of moving about in the world, and that there might be thousands of these ways. There are thousands of races, in this way they could meet a multiplicity of races in one single era, and their tangling would be infinite. Rhythms are the abyssal motors of Diversity.

A swell that rises from the depths, the trembling and the passion of the world, where the poet is not afraid to sink and from where he confides in us, he suddenly appears, to frequent the shapeless forward jerk of existence: “I come back to haunt the sinister depths of things.” Depths do not know rhythm.

The image is the poet’s tool. The Surrealists hung the image on lanterns of the strange and fantastic, and Pierre Reverdy had shown that the power of the image is as radiant as are distant the elements of which it is composed, or in real life, opposed. We became accustomed to pondering “la rosee a tete de chat” and “le cadavre exquis a bu le vin nouveau.”

The poet consents to such approaches, but the image he forges exceeds these rules. It extends in accordance with an irrepressible

logic to which it is summoned, taking it at times to the unbearable limits of the baroque, by dint of continuing in this infra-necessity. Thus he inserts this stanza at the start of *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* in 1943 (circumstantially, written during the Vychiste occupation of Martinique, perhaps intended to radicalize or politicize the beginning of the poem) that he finished thusly, after already having written eight full lines:

"...and heard rise, from the other side of the disaster, a river of turtledoves and savanna clover which I carry forever in my depths, height-deep as the twentieth floor of the most arrogant houses and as a guard against the putrefying force of crepuscular surroundings, surveyed night and day by a cursed veneral sun"

One must know how to bear such accumulation, and it may perhaps be that we lack the breath to do so.

The poet commits himself to an urgent task, a task that cannot be put off on account of exquisite fluidity or the suave nuances that modern poet-ics often demonstrate. The poet must reach the most lightning blaze, he must make an inventory of his forests, his volcanoes, the geological strata that constitute them, the seas that have carried him off, the dense foliage of his lamentations, his continents in delirium and its steaming archipelagos. He must calculate and sing all of this. He raises the image and joins it to travel across the length and breadth of these lands, and he takes the image the shortest way he knows. This is why these images are often of a binary nature,

and of an impeccable and implacable logic.

Each image draws its own geography, its own particular claim, its concerned or offhand way of not coming to an end. For example: "le petit bruit renverse de la mer dans les hublots tres beaux du naufrage/ the little upside down sounds of the sea in the beautiful portholes of the shipwreck," or, "le bruit de larmes qui tatonne vers l'aile immense des paupieres/ the sound of tears which grope towards the immense wing of the eyelid"

Some of us will recall the beginning of the poem *Avis de tirs*, which appeared in the publication *Tropiques* in 1943.

"The mule of my eyelid sliding on the heavy cobblestone of my foreground"

"At the edge of the world I wait for the-travelers- who- will- not-come..."

We recognize each other in the mule. It was at Lamentin, when at harvest time the streets stretched ahead, soon to be overrun with mules pack-saddled with cane, some of

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which we mounted, and who fed the surrounding distilleries and factories spread out around the town like corolla of the smoking vezou. Surrounding the public Gardens there were even two pretty laneways packed with cobblestone that led down to the canal.

We recognize each other as well in the farmer's market town, penned in the corner of the 1940's, isolated separated from the rest of

the world, in *travelers who will not come*. The war mixed people up far away, and the tourists would come charging down later on.

Let us unravel the night under the windows of the town's petit petit bourgeois, the near-whites rigged out with noble handles to their names, and mulattoes who, pressured

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by the Petanist national authorities, struggled against the poet's words. We also note that we prefer the first poems that appeared in *Tropiques*, the roughs of the world, to the text of the Notebook itself. We jerk them forward in halting steps, with rotations of brief and provocative song and abrupt silences, in the same way that we strain in our throats Creole rackets without ranting, but with a cold impertinence.

This was the area when one delivered oneself to the insurrections of the spirit and of the soul (that is to say, the spirit of the world past and present), believed in the omnipotence of these words that soon after the poet would reclaim as *Miraculous Weapons*. One brandishes the image, rigidly, without making any concessions or taking precautions, by example of the mule of the eyelids who skidded obstinately on the heavy cobbles of the eyes. One also regrets that that stanza was later deleted from the 1994 definitive edition. It was one of our passwords.

For Césaire the image hits and does not retreat. The poem has, to use one of his formulations, a "lightening geometry of the

trigonocephalous" He bluntly tears up what surrounds him. Poetry is cannibalistic, it gorges and feeds on poetry. Césaire proclaims with other poets: "We take our happiness from wherever we want." He's left our shyness of passive imitators, dressed to the minutiae he strips the troubles of those who feared confessing their loans, he boldly gathers and rakes his surroundings. Sumptuous harvest, fraternal spoils. *The Beautiful like the astonished face of an english lady*, etc of the *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* is the impassive replica of the *Beautiful like the meeting of an umbrella*, etc. of Lautreamont in *Les Chants de Maldoror* The poet proclaims his complicities.

Rimbaud rang the alarm bell, the Whites are coming, *the Whites are coming!* Meaning, the ...Césaire takes up this cry, for he has experienced the slave boat. He knows disembarkments.

Again he catches the *The Beheaded Sun* (Soleil cou coupe) that Appollinaire had planted among his fetishes at the end of the poem *Zone*, and he makes a firebrand of the whole book.

Let us contemplate the moments where he meets St. John Perse in the upheavals of Caribbean countries, solemn, haunted by an eternal Legend, which invites the real to an unflagging Ceremony:

"and standing at the bursting edge of day, at the threshold of a great nation more chaste than death.

"the girls urinated by drawing up the painted cloth of their dresses" —This is in *Anabase*.

But hooked on the ineffaceable miseries of this same real, Césaire does not hem and haw

before the scene, he evokes right away the roughness of the country, which he then reattaches to "the sudden grave animality of a peasant, urinating standing, her legs parted, stiff" This is in *Notebook*. He takes the *whinnying thoroughbreds* the same way. I can't remember if it is in Charles Cros or in Laforgue, but he harnesses them to the sun, "The thoroughbreds whinny to the sun", in the 1941 poem *The Thoroughbreds*.

He exacerbates what he takes, he exasperates it. It is clear, he is consumed with poetry the way he is consumed in the maroon forest, in the nascent milk of the swamps, in the bitter velvet of lavas. He well and truly plunders the world, rummaging through what he finds there and letting the seeds fall where they may.

This provocative way of borrowing from other poets, or at least from poetry in general, in any case from that in which he recognizes his own, is a way that punctuates in other respects to better mark down his choice, the accents, the cries, the onomatopoeias that he collected in what he calls his "prodigious ascendance,": *rooh on...*, *bele belele...*, *likouala likouala...*, *poto-poto...* this way deliberately underlines that in reality he has nothing to prove to anybody, that he is not imitating anyone, that the time of debilitated mimicry skated on its nothingness and has fainted: Caribbean literature is broadening.

Those who contributed before him look to this moment to confirm their work. The poet is the moved and sarcastic pilferer of all beauty in poetry. That is the poet's liberty, that is to

say, his right to keep watch. Countries, the image, rhythm, the depths of the world, brotherhood in poetry, seeing these it is evident that we have not exhausted the body of work. But it is above all else Aime Cesaire I am talking about here, the poet yes, but more essential and inextricable of all of the Aime Cesaïres that are possible, the ones he has made

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for himself and the ones we fabricated for him.

I always did relate, against all likelihood, against all necessity, with Cesaire in such evocations. It was for me a new dream of a fusion of complicit poetries. The search starts from the point where ritual raises suffering, and Myth is adorned with the nappy-headed beauty of dawn. But perhaps this was above all because I feel in the poetry of Aime Cesaire, looked at closely, (as with his being, seen from afar) a great painful gentleness at the same time that I feel people's exploratory furies. A gentleness that is just as cosmic, telluric, and that is worth being left to its solitude, which we all share.

The poet rises, and the world rises with him. What we have known of oppression, disasters, wars, denials, massacres, but just as well of the intimate tenderness of deserts, the secret principles of threatened forests, the beating of mad volcanoes, and in the distance the stumbling of prowling Cities towards who knows what, all of this has found itself in power and in trembles, all that sprouts is here, in this tremendous Annunciation.

University. Her general research and teaching interests focus on the themes of race and slavery, and nationalism and revolution in the nineteenth-century Caribbean and Atlantic World and her current research centers on the intellectual, political, and social impact of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1803) in Cuba and the Atlantic World. Her first book, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution 1868-1898*, was awarded the Berkshire Book Prize for the best first book by a woman historian in the field of history.

Edouard Glissant is one of the foundational figures of francophone literature. As an accomplished Martinican novelist and poet, and an influential theorist in Caribbean studies and post-colonial literature he has written more than twenty works of fiction, poetry and literary criticism. Excerpted in this issue of *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* is a speech Mr. Glissant delivered at the Aime Césaire symposium, NYU, December 4-6, 2003.

Tyehimba Jess has received fellowships from the Cave Canem and Callaloo workshops as well as the Ragdale Foundation. He won the 2001 Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Poetry Award, an Illinois Arts Council Artist Fellowship in Poetry for 2000 - 2001, and the 2001 Chicago Sun-Times Poetry Award. He was on the 2000 and 2001 Chicago Green Mill Slam teams. His first non-fiction book, *African American Pride: Celebrating Our Achievements, Contributions, and Enduring Legacy* was published in December of 2003.

Robin Kelley is a Professor of Anthropology and African-American Studies at Columbia University. Hailed as one of the premier historians and cultural theorist of his generation. Professor Kelley's works include *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical*

Imagination; Yo' Mama's DisFunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America (1997), *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (1990); *Race Rebels: Culture Politics and the Black Working Class* (1994); *Into the Fire: African Americans Since 1970* (1996); co-editor (with Sidney J. Lemelle) of *Imagining Home: Class, Culture, and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (1994); co-editor (with Earl Lewis). He is currently completing a book entitled *Misterioso: The Art of Thelonious Monk*.

George Lewis is a musical visionary and has recorded and released numerous albums. A trombonist and electronic music composer he has been a professor at the University of California, San Diego. In 2002 Mr. Lewis was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant Fellowship. Beginning in the fall of 2004 Lewis will join the Columbia university faculty as Edwin H. Case professor of music. His book which is excerpted here "Power Stronger Than Itself" on the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) a comprehensive account of the groundbreaking AACM, will be published next year by the University of Chicago Press.

Al Loving was born in Detroit, MI. His first major one-man show occurred at the Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC. Other museum exhibitions followed including, The Detroit Institute of Art, MI, The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC, and the prestigious National Academy of Arts and Sciences, Wash., D.C.. Mr. Loving has exhibited his artworks in the U.S., Cuba, Argentina, France and England. In the mid 1980s, Loving changed his style from painting geometric shapes to creating collages. For the last 20 years, Loving has been cutting spirals, which, in a 1995 interview with the Flint Journal, he called "a symbol for life and continued growth ... more invention and intelligence than skill."