Edouard Glissant: A Poetics of Shorelines

François Paré

Edouard Glissant's 1997 collection of essays, *Le discours antillais*, explores in great detail the implications in the postmodern context of the "creoleness" of the Caribbean cultural sphere. This concept, based on the proposed heterogeneity of the Caribbean heritage, sought to overcome the limitations of a cultural development, too closely associated with the former colonial powers and too dialectical in nature. Creoleness could be presented as the Caribbean peoples' original contribution to the deconstruction of old systems of thought. Against all odds, insular cultures such as the ones that developed in Martinique and Guadeloupe seemed to elicit specific conditions of extra-territoriality and openness to diversity. In his monograph on Glissant, J. Michael Dash situates creoleness in the narrower framework of the terse relationship between the French Caribbean *départements* and metropolitan France: "In his rewriting and recreation of Martiniquan history, Glissant is attempting to assert a creolised collective presence in defiance of the amnesia and repression produced by departmentalisation" (Dash 5). Although, in order to establish a distance with the Creole language revival movement, Glissant later opted for the word *métissage* to describe the Caribbean cultural experience, the definitions he proposed in his *Discours antillais* remain at the core of Martinican theories of cultural hybridity. In any case, in his meticulous study of Glissant's theory, Dash does not alert us to important differences between the two terms:

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"Glissant advanced the theory of composite, hybrid cultures, the process of *métissage* as a notion which would replace the ideal of cultural authenticity or the obsession with origins or pure beginnings" (Dash 97).

Similarly, in a 1998 lecture, Raphaël Confiant called for the creation in the Caribbean of "non atavistic societies," that is, societies devoid of myths of origins and of founding discourses. In the Caribbean, he warned, the foundation of modernity could only be found in written culture, for unlike Africans, Martinicans and Guadeloupeans did not preserve a live memory of oral practices: "*L'écriture* […] *est la naissance même de la société créole*" (Confiant 82, underlined in the text). Both Glissant and Confiant are careful to describe creoleness as an ever-evolving process, made of constant shiftings and interruptions. Glissant often prefers the word "créolisation," to express the mobility of the concept. What characterizes Caribbean cultures is precisely their linguistic and intellectual transience. In that, as Françoise Vergès has shown, modern French Caribbean theorists attempt to move away from negative definitions of interracial contacts, earlier produced by the French colonists. Associated with the devil, "half-bred" and metis people were long considered the by-products of a degenerate society (Vergès 76–77). In reacting to such stigmas, contemporary writers like Glissant and Confiant seek to propose a diverging conception of multicultural societies. In his *Théories Caraïbes*, Joël Des Rosiers suggests that present-day French Caribbean theories precisely aim to transcend the opposition between communitarianism and individualism (143–44). There is no need to choose between the two models, Des Rosiers claims, since island cultures have come to bridge the dichotomy.

The intent of this short paper is to explore the validity of this particular theoretical context in the reading of Edouard Glissant's poetic works. I will be considering the various metaphors of hybridity in several books of poetry, including *Pays rêvé, pays réel* (1985), *Fastes* (1991), and *Les grands chaos* (1993). Because Glissant has given dozens of interviews and offered an abundance of critical essays, it is tempting to use the framework he has consistently provided his readers to interpret the poetic texts. In a famous lecture to members of the International Parliament of Writers in March 1997, Glissant invites his critical reader to consider his books as participating in the ideals of "open and tolerant cultural identities" (Glissant 1997b: 1). There is no doubt that Glissant's poetic work

constitutes an attempt to decenter the notions of linguistic purity and cultural homogeneity. The insular space, with its overemphasized shorelines and its conflicting relationship with the sea, lends itself to an imaginary of convergence and inclusion.

At the same time, it is important to note that Edouard Glissant's poetry suggests a darker side to creoleness, in that no ideal of diversity is conceivable outside underlying representations of a default and fractured colonial identity. The crafting of a new Caribbean cultural subject, free of ontological premises, should not obscure the deprivation and suffering which made this fundamental transformation possible. Edouard Glissant's poetry reminds us that cultural "amnesia" can only be positively constructed within the postmodern context as the result of the painful *liquidation* of the oppressive past through public discussion and writing. For "amnesia" is not the same as voicelessness; without voice, there would be no moral ground for the unredeemed loss of collective memory. As Moroccan writer Abdellatif Laâbi reminds us, writing does not aim at creating a "total harmony," cut off from the demands and the disruptions of the real world, but rather it aims at developing a coherent interconnectedness, based on constant reinterpretations of the past (Laäbi 15). Erected on the "silent universe of the Plantation," modern Caribbean consciousness has an "internal obligation" to constitute itself upon the "forgettings" provided by past migrations: "The place was closed, but the word derived from it remains open" (Glissant 1997c: 75).

In *Pays rêvé, pays réel*, first published in 1985, Glissant assembles a series of short poems, attributed to pseudo-mythological characters by the names of Ata-Eli, Ichneumon, Mycea, Thaël, and Laoka. These recurrent characters, with their strangely persistent echoes, and yet elliptic voices, recall Shakesperian ghosts, fostering a critical distance between the poet and his language. These figures, drawing from the various Caribbean migrant cultures, seek to re-appropriate the power of the myth to make sense of the diverse origins and to offer a permanent interpretation of the community's coming to the open word. Contrary to what one would expect, Ichneumon, for instance, Glissant's storytelling figure, is not the most important of these characters, for the more intense passages of *Pays rêvé, pays réel* rather relate to the ambiguous character Mycea, for whom the "dreamed country" is "a zone of calculated ambiguity" (Dash: 159). Mycea is indeed in search of an

emerging modernity out of the forced migrations of the past; her presence in this book, just before the section entitled "Pays," prefigures the Egyptian divinities of the Nile, whose interventions will see the birth of alluvial islands and, with them, of a new configuration of the interconnectedness of the world.

Central to Glissant's poetry is the need to structure the poetic text as a succession of enigmatic riddles, capable of producing in the reader a strong sense of instability and unintelligibility. These riddles, which are part of funeral and other ritual practices in the Caribbean (Pestre de Almeida 71), draw our attention to the implicit metaphor of the wake with its wrought narratives and its fragmented evocations of the past. Mycea and other ghostly characters, created by Glissant, displace the location of the poetic voice, as the poet speaks from a disembodied otherness that can only be the sign of his return to decentred origins. If this fragmentation is a fundamental characteristics of present-day North American poetry, according to Pierre Ouellet's recent study (172–74), it must be viewed in our interpretation of Glissant's poetry as a sign of the overwhelming unthinkability of the past as a cohesive and meaningful location.

Although *Pays rêvé, pays réel* borrow explicitly from earlier Martinican poets such as Aimé Césaire and especially Saint-John Perse, the poems largely rest on Glissant's theoretical vision of Afro-Caribbean past history. Memory is depicted as a cracked surface, and its regenerating capacities can therefore be affirmed. Work on the past is the result of a collective effort to overthrow silence and oppression. The metaphor of the *lézarde* (a crack in the wall) seem to underlie the entire first part of the book. Seen as a prophetic element, the fractured surface of memory announces the "end of the native land" and the recaptured origins in the heterogeneity of the successive migrations. The pronoun "We," so rigidly present in Glissant's work, is no longer conceivable as a symptom of oneness and even sameness: "Nous dessouchons l'ouvert et empiétons sur tout Unique" (13). Words evocating the fragmentation of the past colonial culture recur on almost every page of Glissant's book: "fente," fêlure," "lézarde prophétique," "déchirure," "pli," "éventré," "clairière," and "éclaircie" are among many such words. Emerging out of the fractured past, "désassemblés " (13), the members of the community are now apt at reinventing themselves as fraternal others.

It is important to note that the poems of *Pays rêvé, pays réel* concentrate, not so much on the creoleness of the modern Caribbean consciousness, but rather on the necessity of destructuring the coherence of the "pays d'avant." The very fragmentation of the poetic language and most importantly its allusiveness contribute to the community's effort to break away from the earlier "filiation." Glissant's position is frought with tensions and ambiguities. Although expressed in clear language, the riddles offered by the inequitable past are only marginally intelligible. To understand, one needs pause, a brief return to silence. While the essayist may attempt to theorize the contradictions of the Trade and of the colonial past, the poet is condemned to a tautological discourse, a metaphor of suffering, in which repetition is the key to transformation: "Je t'ai nommée, Terre blessée, dont la fêlure n'est gouvernable, et t'ai vêtue de mélopées dessouchées des recoins d'hier" (56). Glissant's imagery is strongly gendered in this particular book. The virginal woman ("la première Epouse") being ultimately the symbol of the nascent identity, her body, at once foreclosed and open, exemplifies the fault at the center of the migrating culture itself.

But the question remains throughout this book: how can poetry, an "ontological" language, even hope to convey the "errance" of the modern Caribbean cultural subject? The answer to this question is rather blunt: poetry cannot resolve the contradictions of the past, nor does it want to. Rather, what is at the core of the poetic work is precisely its capacity to express inconclusiveness and incoherence. Throughout his intellectual career, Glissant remained fascinated by the fragmental character of the poem, allowing for the possible emergence, "désaccordés du premier voeu" (51), of new cultural subjects out of the debris of the past systems of oppression. In *Pays rêvé, pays réel*, prosopopaeic characters such as *L'Aveugle* represent the poet's inability to decipher collective memory and at the same time the opportunity to "dream up" the native land and to re-create *ex nihilo* its mission.

Published in 1991, *Fastes* further demonstrates the richness and diversity of the Caribbean identity, according to Glissant. Comprised of sixty-three short stanzas, the book forms a cultural and autobiographical diary. Subjective history and cultural heritage are intertwined, for ancient sites and local streets and villages reproduce the composite space in which Caribbean identity can be projected. Like the island itself,

Martinican culture is rooted in excentricity, a patchwork of apparently discordant references. Each quatrain bears the name of a geographical or cultural site. Martinican localities alternate with a variety of "exotic" places from the Inuit town of Igloolik to the Egyptian city of Assouan.

In one of *Fastes*'s quatrains, entitled "Longitudes," the poem becomes the nexus through which the migrant memory can claim its share of space and time.

> J'enseignai, nul n'en dit, à naviguer au Lusitain
> Venant fous de Malmö, de Fez et de Valladolid.
> Notre idiome, c'est castillan prononcé par un Dène roux.
> Je suis irlandais et berbère, comme on accore ses genoux. (82)

Through the interconnectedness of ancient navigating routes, the old and the new world converge and manage to shape an unlikely discursive idiom and a hybrid chronology of self-identity. The poet, an exemplary voice for Glissant, is attuned to the world's cultural memories: his is a plural worldview. In "Longitudes," the use of the lower case in words such as "irlandais" and "berbère" illustrates the symbiotic character of the hybrid subject, capable of transforming substantive identities into adjectival characteristics.

Fastes, however, does not conceal the uneasiness of the excentric subject. In one of the last stanzas of the book, Prometheus lies wounded under the banyan tree and his story-telling act will never be witnessed again. As in Glissant's earlier works, the poetic ellipsis relates to the underlying cultural dispossession at the center of Caribbean culture itself. Quite clearly, the matrix of the colonial past is slowly dissolving, as the cultural subject reconvenes in a new idiom the dislocated parts of his heritage, but the shadow of disintegration continues to haunt each attempt to recreate a viable cultural identity out of the dispossessed past. Both positive and negative threads are part of Glissant's poetics: "Poetics? Precisely this double thrust, being a theory that tries to conclude, a presence that concludes (presumes) nothing. Never one without the other. That is how the instant and duration comfort us" (Glissant, 1997c: 183). Because of its exiguity, the postcolonial society is fundamentally bipolar, as Mourad Ali-Khodja reminds us of all marginalized societies**:** its historicity and spatiality constitute determining references, while any deployment amidst the world cultures is often seen as "epistemologically suspicious" (Ali-Khodja 15).

It is in the magnificent poems of *Les grands chaos*, undoubtedly Glissant's most complex book of poetry, that the question of migrating identities receive its fullest attention. In his introductory statement ("Présentation"), Glissant formulates the overriding metaphor of the shoreline, which for centuries has defined the complex and difficult relationship between Caribbean island culture and the world. In that liminal space between land and sea, the entire history of humanity seems to converge, incessantly washed ashore by the rhythmic pounding of the waves and the idiom of the shifting sand. In *Les grands chaos*, the poem reproduces the immateriality of the shorelines. "Tout se fond en cette mer et cette terre: Mythologies, la nuit africaine, le Vésuve imaginé, les caribous du Nord. L'écho-monde parle indistinctement" (119). The internalization of these primordial images facilitates the emergence of a liminal culture. The insular place has become devoid of its original inhabitants; in fact, it is symbolically uninhabitable now, and is defined by a kind of systolic hybridity that founds the migrating subject's paradoxical presence to the world. Glissant's island is in fact an archipelago, and a poetics of insularity must be seen as a "parole archipélique": "Un chant désarticulé en roches raides, sur la trace qui mène du conte au poème" (119). Again, in *Les grands chaos*, the uprootedness of the cultural subject leads to a reinforcement of the notions of frontiers, shores and other landscape determinations.

The central section of the book is dedicated to Paris's homeless people, "fallen from the horizon," who seek their daily subsistence near the Place Furstenberg and the Buci Market in the French capital. Their stubborn presence in the margins of Parisian society reminds Glissant of the resilience of excentric island cultures in the outskirts of colonial *Francophonie*. How can homelessness become a sign of resistance? How can it not be seen as unfruitful dependency upon the dominant, mainstream society? Here again, Glissant resists the notion of identity as a medium, as a theatrical gesture. The location of identity cannot be found solely in the artificial layers that construct a person's outward expression, in the clothing, the mannerism, and the physical appearances. Glissant's discomfort with such notions stems from his acute sense that the Trade and the subsequent colonial oppression, experienced by the peoples of the Caribbean, have shaped far more profoundly the collective and individual minds. In *Les grands chaos*, Glissant portrays homelessness as a fundamental

characteristic of marginality, although such a concept is historically determined. Invariably, any penetration of the liminal identities leads to a redefinition of poetry itself, because the poem is precisely condensed homelessness: "Ceux qu'Histoire a débattus et jetés là. Mais aussi la parole déroulée de leur errance. Ils détournent la raison suffisante de ces langages dont ils usent, et c'est par des contraintes de l'ode ou de l'harmonie: des *désodes*" (119, my italics). Later in *Les grands chaos*, the exploration of the concept of homelessness will lead to a subtle deconstruction of such comforting notions as "habitation," "présence," and "Histoire." The negative prefix "dé" (as in "désode") will come to characterize the modern Caribbean subject for whom a full inscription in the cultural space depends upon admitting that contemporary postcolonial cultures are the products of a strategic mendicity.

In the final pages of *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant concludes his reflection on insular culture with a reversal of perspectives. Here the beach on which a man can be seen "prostrated" constitutes the imagined reader's cultural horizon. The island has become a prism, or perhaps even a magnifying device, that allows us to see the liminal spaces, the shorelines, for what they are: a language of limits. Here stands the prophetic/poetic subject: "He signs to you with this bare outline of a movement that precedes all languages. There is so much of the world to be uncovered that you are able to leave this one person alone in his outlook. But he will not leave you. The shadow he throws from a distance is cast close by you" (Glissant, 1997c: 208). Glissant's gaze in *Les grands chaos* seems to echo the calling gesture of the prostrated man on the beach, at once alone and with the world, at once "unique" and "multiple."

The evocative strength of Edouard Glissant's verse relies on the suggestion that a strong, overdetermined consciousness is at work, creating its own language and phenomenological perspective. Notions of cultural plurality and hybridity must be based on an interpretive instance that, although decentered in terms of the colonial past, recreates itself as a symbiotic sign, paradoxically central to the very expression and survival of a decentered world. In *Les grands chaos*, visions of the Seine river in the early Parisian morning are replaced by the timelessness of the Egyptian Nile, floating all the debris of ancient history to the ever feminine "Delta." This triangular figure summarizes for Glissant the divine presence of connecting lines, for the Nile also imitates the trajectory of

the eye aiming for the horizon (and the woman's overarching sexual triangle).

Perhaps more than any other imaginary figures found in Glissant's poetry, the delta of the Nile illustrates the cumulative nature of the subject's identity, as the flow of the river's waters, heaving sedimental elements of the past, provokes the birth of islands and expands the shoreline: "Géographie souterraine, qui donne force à l'étendue du monde" (175). Homi Bhabha tells us that the postcolonial context engenders notions of ambivalence and disruption. Never can the split subjectivity find solace in authenticity and unity (Bhabha 142). Glissant, on the other hand, insists on the ultimately convergent nature of history and on the federating power of memory. Although it was produced by massive and catastrophic deportations, the Caribbean space is today fundamentally deltaic, that is, convergent and irruptive. The old Vesuvius and the new Morne Bezaudin of Glissant's childhood seem to overlap in the poet's imagination, concurrent figures signing the burying of past identities and the emergence of unexpected ones.

Edouard Glissant's poetic meditations on a fragmented, inequitable world allude to the possibility of reconfigured spaces. The timelessness of the river does indeed create spatial extensions into the sea, a chaotic birth resembling the myths related to us by the writers of Antiquity. In the important introduction to his anthology of short stories written by Mediterranean authors, Corsican poet Ghjacumu Thiers affirms the specificity of insular cultures. Insularity, he states, oscillates between a strong sense of tradition and "patrimonial legacy," and the acceptation of exogenous elements as one's own (Thiers 2). Significantly, Thiers evokes the movements of the sea and the exemplarity of the shorelines as symbolic of the island microcosm and macrocosm: "la mer ne trouve jamais si bien sa forme et sa substance que lorsque, devenue vague, elle vient se briser sur nos rivages et se reformer immédiatement un peu plus loin, dans un mouvement où se dissolvent les limites et le temps" (Thiers 3). Thiers's insistence on the Mediterranean as a complex cultural archipelago and his perception of the "rivages" as a seminal frontier space recall Glissant's vision of the Caribbean as a heterogeneous, and yet intensely symbiotic formation. Such is creoleness, a process of conciliation and dissociation. Glissant's poetic works never quite evacuate the muteness of collective memory. But, like the *migan* bird feeding on the seashore, described in *Pays rêvé, pays réel*, Glissant's

poetry seeks to transform the fractured past into emergent conditions of plurality.

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