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# RHYTHMS, HISTORY, AND MEMORY IN EDOUARD GLISSANT'S *LE QUATRIÈME SIÈCLE*

> *The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present.*
>
> (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 63)

> *Tell me the past, Papa Longoué! What is the past?*
>
> (Glissant, *Le Quatrième siècle* 15)

Does history have a rhythm? Can the movements and processes of memory be understood in terms of rhythms, repetitions, and cycles? How does one write of a horrific history of uprooting, violence, and slavery, such as that of the Caribbean? In his work, the great Martinican poet Aimé Césaire addresses this history and uses rhythm as a palliative force, a means of catharsis, and as a dynamic way of sounding history and lost memory. Césaire uses rhythm in his attempt to recover from the depths of time the lost African-ness, the lack of which is in his view the fundamental cause of his (and his people's) neuroses. Rhythm in this sense was used by Césaire in ways that free rhythm from the essentialist limitations that he and others have tended to impose on it as a natural and innate marker of black cultural and existential specificity. Rhythm appears in Césaire's work as a very real force for black disalienation, and for effecting the psychological and mnemonic transformations that are the primary objectives of his entire poetic project.

Edouard Glissant, Césaire's no-less-great compatriot and key interlocutor, is similarly preoccupied with the workings of Caribbean memory and with the possibilities of using rhythm as a means of accessing that memory and of understanding and recuperating the history of Martinique. Rhythm and repetition, moreover, feature in the narrative structure of many works of Caribbean fiction, creating circles and waves of narrative rather than linear, progressive movements. In Joseph Zobel's classic novel, *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (1950), for example, as the narrator José concludes the novel, he also in a sense starts it, or starts it again, by indicating that the novel the reader has just read is the one he intends to begin writing.[1] In this way, Zobel casts his

1. As Jacques André says, the conclusion is also a kind of preface, "the hero promising himself to tell a story, the one that we have just read" (55).

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novel in the kind of circular pattern that typifies oral narrative. He inscribes repetitive rhythmicity into the very structure of his work in a way that prefigures similar structures in the French Caribbean fiction that was to follow his seminal work.[2] Zobel's tentative inclination toward repetitive, rhythmic narrative structure is taken up and developed in all its complexity in Glissant's fiction, which is notoriously and willfully nonlinear in its structure and in its presentation of time and history. The fundamental aim of this essay is to engage with Glissant's use of rhythm in his novel *Le Quatrième siècle* (1964) as both a means of sounding and recovering lost history and of structuring the narrative of this mnemonic process. Initial cross-references to Zobel's novel will situate Glissant's work within the context of contemporary Francophone Caribbean fiction, while the subsequent close analysis of Glissant's novel will ultimately consider what is original and idiosyncratic about *Le Quatrième siècle* and how it reworks the trope of rhythm as a fundamental aspect of Caribbean poetics.[3]

*Le Quatrième siècle* is a classic of Caribbean fiction that has the historical sweep of epic narrative in that it traverses more than one hundred and fifty years of Martinican history, from 1788 to 1946, through the retelling of the story of the Longoué and the Béluse families, who are descended from two Africans, one a maroon, the other a plantation slave, both of whom arrived in Martinique on the same ship in 1788. Glissant's narrative is however far removed from conventional historical fiction in that its interest lies less in reordering time and events than in the mechanics of the telling of the history, in recording a Martinican notion and experience of history, and in showing how for him time is a slippery, elusive concept that contracts and expands, losing itself at certain points in the swirling, rhythmic historical movements around which the book is shaped.[4]

Much like Zobel does with the characters Médouze and José, Glissant juxtaposes a *griot* storyteller figure, Papa Longoué, with a young boy, Mathieu Béluse, and structures his historical and existential investigation around their

2. Ralph Ludwig asserts that today's French Caribbean author "no longer presents the reality of his archipelago as a tropical encyclopedia would," but now brings the reader into contact with the "circular rhythm of narration" that comes from oral culture (19).

3. All translations are mine.

4. Glissant's extensive writings on history are directed and informed by the need he feels for a "creative approach" to retelling the past, removed from and different than the classical Western approach, which can be a "paralyzing handicap" when it is applied to the Caribbean. If these methodologies are "passively assimilated," he says, "far from reinforcing a global consciousness or permitting the historical process to be established beyond the ruptures experienced, [they] will simply contribute to worsening the problem" (61). See also *Caribbean Discourse* 61–96.

exchanges.[5] In both cases, the boys have been to French colonial schools; but while *La Rue Cases-Nègres* largely follows the movement of a classical *Bildungsroman*, Glissant's Mathieu refuses to finish secondary school (260) and can only recall from his time in school sparse fragments that come back to him intermittently (257). In both novels, the storyteller figures are virtually destitute: Médouze is "the oldest, the poorest, the most abandoned" person on the whole plantation (41), while Papa Longoué, in his ragged trousers and dirty vest, resembles a "black mummy half stripped of his clothes" (13–14). Both are resolutely men of the hinterland: Médouze lives and dies around the plantation, while Papa Longoué never goes to town (256), which he sees as "the unnamable thing." With its "spluttering," discordant music, town is not only arrhythmic but also ahistoric, "the closed vase where the history of the land and the knowledge of the past gets stuck down and loses itself" (221). Papa Longoué, like Médouze, is presented as the last in the line of storytellers, a fading "not very good" *quimboiseur* whose knowledge is incomplete and failing (17). In both cases, the juxtaposition of the old man and the young boy stresses the fundamental questions of history and memory: the boy places himself before the man, demands to know more about history, and implicitly asks in what ways the old man's knowledge is relevant to him; the old man sounds out history, which comes back to him in irregular movements and fragments that confuse and frustrate almost as much as they clarify and respond to the child's need to know. In both novels, these exchanges are characterized by pauses, interruptions, and discontinuities. Glissant's Mathieu often comes to see Papa Longoué early in the morning, but at irregular intervals that make unclear his intentions. On each visit, he stays until night, waiting with a "savage indifference" for the rare moments when the old man will finally continue with his story of the ancestors (13). The *griot*'s storytelling style is marked by diversions and detours, circular repetitive movements that do not advance the story as such, but turn it around and cast it into different shapes. The point of the story is not so much to reveal the past—Papa Longoué says Mathieu wants "to know a story that [he] knows already" (13)—as to ponder the nature of the past, and to reflect on the possibility of truly knowing the past.[6] "How can this little boy know the end and the beginning," Papa Longoué wonders, when nobody remembers yesterday, and when yesterday is "defunct" (13).

5. Both Mathieu Béluse and Papa Longoué had already featured in Glissant's first novel *La Lézarde* (1958) and, in common with other characters, were to reappear in Glissant's subsequent fictional works.

6. Bongie argues that Glissant's novel is "as much about the dialogic process through which [. . .] Mathieu and Papa Longoué vertiginously narrate their respective pasts and affirm their places of origin as [it is] about that which is being sought after through [the act] of narration" (190).

Like Papa Longoué, Mathieu is aware of the oblivion in which the Martinican people live, and moreover of the alienating effects of this ignorance of the past, which leads them to reach out to Europe (and Africa), to the "manners of an other, whose voice and ways they would never be able to imitate" (31).[7] Even before meeting Papa Longoué, Mathieu is gripped by the realization that there is "another past," which is described as a land of "extinguished or forbidden truths" (261).[8] In a sense, Mathieu does not live or grow in the present; rather, he is a "young plant" who "grows in yesterday," whose trajectory points toward the past, to the impenetrable shadows of the night, even as the old man paradoxically looks toward the future and the imminence of his death (13). Indeed, Papa Longoué's status as a storyteller or *quimboiseur* indicates that he is the "master" of the future (14). It is out of this complexity of temporal imperatives—the young man who only wants to know about history, the old man who possesses in a sense the future but who, feeling time constricting around him, is compelled to speak of the past—that history is conjured up in the novel.

In comparison to Zobel's Médouze, who fades away quickly, unable to truly dredge up the past, Papa Longoué persists, and relentlessly digs into, chips away at, and sounds the depths of the past. Significantly, José only ever sees a tiny slit of Médouze's eyes, which remain almost shut (42), while Papa Longoué's eyes are in contrast wide open and alive, difficult to look into for any time, as they have seen all at once the "subterfuges of the present and the heavy mysteries of the past" (14). Papa Longoué's relative effectiveness as a *griot* lies in part in this ability to see the sweep of time, in relating the obscure depths of the past to the deceptions of the present. His art is not however simply a question of seeing; it is rather a complex system of remembrance that involves his other senses, notably hearing, his skill for listening to and gauging the "weight of the silence, this accumulation of lightning flashes, this mass of heat piled up in the heat itself by the slow power of the two men, by their motionless patient confrontation" (14). Later in the novel, he says he can smell the odor of vomit, blood, and death from the slave ship the *Rose-Marie*; his mother Stéfanise, he says, taught it to him (23). History, much like the monotonous present, is largely characterized by repetitions and returns: at one point, in an image that recalls José's fairground scene in *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, the recurrent slave revolts are almost rendered banal, described as a fact of the "*merry-go-round* of suffering," the constant, recurring movement of history

7. As Colette Maximin says, the act of "diving into the past is a prodigious falling into an abyss" (158).

8. As Gallagher argues, although Glissant often values discontinuity positively, he also "writes primarily out of the desire to reconnect with lived time," a desire that is embodied in Mathieu's "analgesic" search for history (56).

(101).[9] Appropriately, then, rhythm plays an important part in Papa Longoué's sensual evocation of the past: Mathieu's patience is finally, inevitably rewarded with a rhythmic flow of words from the *quimboiseur* "in that imperceptible language, full of mannerisms and repetitions, which nevertheless led surely towards a knowledge that existed beyond words, that only Papa Longoué could fathom" (14). The repetitions and returns are indeed the single key element in these evocations, as Papa Longoué has no pre-fixed idea of what he will say, but is guided by the "capricious flow of words; yes, by that way of speaking that was so well attuned to the density of the day, to the weight of the heat, to the slow memory" (14). Thus it is the "way of speaking," the rhythm, the repetition that is primary, preceding revelation and knowledge, which are implicitly not relics of the past, but living and dynamic, ready to be reformed and re-understood according to the flow of the words.

While he emphasizes the rhythmic aspects of memory and history, Glissant seems to neglect or abandon the drum as a more straightforward repository and producer of collective rhythmicity. In *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, the two wakes—first for Médouze, then for M'man Tine—are carried out to the rhythms of the drums and the traditional songs in a way that to some extent reconnects the Martinican present to the African past. In Glissant's novel, there is also a wake with rhythmic beating of drums, but it is a quite different occasion, with quite different connotations. First, there is no actual death in Glissant's wake: the father of Papa Longoué's lover Edmée, embittered by her departure five years previously, decides to hold a wake for her. The father insists on following the rituals of the wake to the last detail, lighting candles, procuring holy water, and preparing food and drink for the mourners. Monsieur Pamphile plays his tom-tom, and the heavy beating hangs around the surrounding hills, above the trees, and along the barely traced paths. The rhythm is however imperfect, as the drumming occasionally "sputters," missing a beat (216). Indeed the whole event seems out of step, and is paradoxically more deathly and somber than a conventional wake:

> This tom-tom flowed gloomily over the Touffaille district, where all that gives light and movement to a wake (the thick-voiced storytellers, the lewd dancers, the trembling children, the food, and the familiarity with the deceased) was that night as absent as the presumed dead person. (216)

9. Britton reads this nondescription of the slave revolts as a sign of their unrepresentable nature: "Insurrection, in other words, which is the only form of political action open to the slaves, cannot be made intelligible within the boundaries of conventional realist fictional discourse, and this 'silence' is another indication of the irretrievability of subaltern consciousness" (64).

The imperfect, gloomy rhythms of the tom-tom complement the deathly atmosphere. Its beats "die in the black hole of the room where the lamp gave less light than a candle" (216). The sound of the tom-toms moreover "came from too far away," which perhaps suggests that the temporal and spatial distance between Martinique and the drums' origins in Africa distorts and weakens their sound, and consequently their ability to bring life and a sense of continuity to a dying place. Indeed, as the wake progresses, the true object of mourning becomes the Touffaille district of Martinique itself: the father, forgetting Edmée, lays out the spirit of the Touffaille on the death bed, the sons respond ritually to the father's chants, while the daughters bring to the lifeless litany the "weight of their silence" and are gradually enveloped in the "long hymn of abandon," a silent lament for the ills of their district (217). The drums themselves die as the deathly parody marks the death of the Touffaille, an inevitable demise that is apparently signaled in the very name of the district, which seems a corruption of "Tout faillit" or "everything fails."

Glissant seems similarly ambivalent about the practice of rhythmic, call-and-response chanting and the figure of the cantor, the chorus leader. In Glissant's version of Martinican history, the cantor figure appeared not so much at a certain time, but rather in the space, the clearing that opened up between the wild humus and the domestic compost, therefore out of decomposition and decay. The singers came out of the nothingness, "born from their own beatitude" to praise beauty, and in a country where to sing is to "become free," the coming of the singers was inevitable. Glissant's ambivalence toward the singers is first suggested in the quotation of one of their songs that depicts a harmonious, rhythmic life on the plantation:

> "How fine it was, in ordered lines, to the rhythm of the tom–tom, and in the joyful assurance of work, to cut the cane: while far away the trade winds caressed the softness of the flowers, the fruits, the leaves, and the branches." (222)

Rhythm has a palliative function in this instance, but it also entrances, lulls, and finally deadens the senses, distorting reality. Thus in lauding the fragile beauty of the place and of plantation work, the singers are unaware of the "robe of death" that envelops this beauty (222). The rhythmic singing is in this way an amnesiac act, a way of forgetting the everyday horrors of the plantation. The singer pretends, feigns voluptuous pleasure, and pursues sources of joy without knowing that they will finally fall away from his outstretched hand. But he will not be able to fully forget the "obscure lack" that will stay with him and that will be a permanent reminder of "the man who stirs in the forgotten depths of his soul" (222). There will remain therefore an ineradicable memory of the singer's situation, a core of truth that his delusive rhythms will not be able to penetrate.

The singer figure is also implicated in the amnesia that develops between the field workers and the white masters and that perpetuates the entire plantation system. Glissant suggests this rather obliquely in a passage where he first presents Mathieu Béluse (the young boy's father) in a kind of temporal impasse, stuck in an unending past, with no present and a future that is only attainable by crossing a precipice in which the "emasculated singers, men of refinement and good will" dance their elegant dance, stamping beneath their feet the discolored bones that sometimes jut out of the earth, on the terrain where the anonymous heroes of the past cry out still (224). These heroes—maroons and other rebels—will never be resuscitated, will never be raised up from the earth, as they will remain buried by the popular conception that their struggle was in vain, as the post-emancipation period had leveled the differences between the maroons and the slaves, between resistance and compliance. Instead of digging up these heroes and reinstating them in the popular memory, the people in this period turn to the sea and to Africa, try to "dry up the ocean," not in order to return to Africa but to "run across the miry sea bottom," entangled in the past and still separated from the land. At the same time, they enter into a complicit amnesia with the master Lapointe, helping him draw up his latest report, which seems to take the place of collective memory and to be a metaphor for the official recording and transmission of events on the plantation. And because this report will tell stories that are difficult to bear, the words will be light and flowery, with honeyed turns of phrase that will suppress in language the "incongruous horror" of the account (225). Crucially, it is this tacitly agreed amnesia, wrapped in the sugary phrases of the Creole language—a "language of complicity"—that creates what Glissant calls the "mania for languid folklore" that creates in turn a kind of false commonality between the whites and the blacks (225).

These examples—the wake without a corpse, the joyful yet joyless singer complicit in perpetuating the plantation system—indicate that Glissant does not see an easy connection or continuity between African tradition and Caribbean experience.[10] In the first case, the distorted, at times arrhythmic drums of the wake seem powerless to bring back life to a dying community and instead act as apposite accompaniments to a disjointed, out of step existence. In the second instance, the rhythmic call-and-response singing creates only a superficial, delusory sense of bliss that is ultimately incapable of eradicating the miserable and brutal truth of plantation life and that moreover is easily co-opted by the white planter to perpetuate the system. Glissant thus has no nostalgic vision of Africa as an eternally enriching motherland. The slave ship—as in some of Césaire's poetry—is a kind of matrix for Glissant's characters: the first

10. As Bongie says, in *Le Quatrième siècle*, "a veil is cast over Africa [. . .] the continent functions as an absent origin to which the reader is given no access" (147).

of the Longoués does not forget Africa, but the sea journey, the whippings, and the other man (Béluse) he shared the journey with, "had already made him a Longoué," that is, something new, unforeseen and idiosyncratic (46). For Papa Longoué, the day of his ancestor's arrival in Martinique in July 1788 is the beginning, "the first day, the first cry, the sun and the first moon and the first century of the country" (74). The country does not therefore precede the first of the Longoués; rather, the day of his arrival marks the beginning of the country, which is itself transformed or born anew at the moment of arrival. Personal history thus takes precedence over and instigates collective historical experience. Also, Glissant's emphasis on the personal and the intimate marks a radical shift from Negritude's attempts to evoke the past: for Césaire, the key to individual identity lay in the collective identity; while for Glissant, it is conversely in the individual and idiosyncratic that any investigation of wider group identity must begin.[11] And to make a final distinction with Zobel's Médouze, who sought out to some extent an order, a teleology of the past (who was born after whom and so on), Glissant's storyteller lays his trust in sounding the rhythms and pulses of the past, in letting them invade his sensibility and feeling them come to him in their own movements and their own time, a process that confounds the notion of an easily understandable historical teleology.[12]

Papa Longoué's rhythmic sounding of the past is not a search for lucidity; as Mathieu realizes, in contrast to his own desire to "advance the story, put the events in order" (30), the *quimboiseur* is repelled by logic and clarity (14). The two however share a fear of words (and implicitly the way words tend to fix meaning) and only advance with care *in* (not toward) knowledge, which is itself a concept that relates more to feeling and sensing the nature of the impenetrable and the unknowable than to grasping with any kind of certainty what is not known or lost. Mathieu's apparently innocent request and question—"Tell me the past, Papa Longoué! What is the past?" (15)—indicate in fact the most fundamental interests of the book: the need to tell the past, whatever the difficulties involved in such a narration and the equally pressing need to know the nature of the past, to know whether it is over or comes back in cycles, and whether indeed it is knowable in any real sense. As Papa Longoué realizes, the "childlike" form of the question is deceptive in that it raises some of the most basic, yet difficult issues of memory, history, and narrative, issues that, he recognizes, are to "completely engage him" in the ten years over which his exchanges with Mathieu develop (15). Typically,

11. On the relationship between individual and collective narrative voice in *Le Quatrième siècle* see Bongie 174 and Corzani 236.

12. Biondi and Pessini describe Glissant's storyteller figure as "the key character, the story's beacon [who] masters narrative, guiding its rhythms" (53).

too, the response to Mathieu's question does not come immediately, but is deferred and comes quite unpredictably in a dense narrative passage in the middle of the novel. Speaking specifically about the violence between Anne and Liberté, the scions of the original patriarchs, Papa Longoué's deferred reply reveals much about his notion of the past and how it conflicts with the more rational view of Mathieu, who regularly interrupts the narrative, doubting the veracity of certain events and questioning the *quimboiseur*'s ability to tell the past. "When you say: 'the past,'" Papa Longoué replies, "how can you expect to know if there even is a past, when you do not see the violence without cause planted in [Anne's] heart like a cursed fig tree?" (146). The key aspect of this initial response is that the fact of the past—Anne's violence—is "without cause," in other words, there is no reason for it, and thus there is no basis for the kind of rational, cause-and-effect explanation that Mathieu often requests. Consequently, the past is not always made up of explicable events and acts; certain episodes occur for obscure reasons or for no reason at all, and Papa Longoué insists that his retelling of the past must take these aspects into account: "Because the past is not in what you know with certainty, it is also in all that passes like the wind and which nobody grasps within their closed hands" (146). Moreover, Papa Longoué insists, Mathieu's desire for closed certainties excludes the unknown and the never-known, which are parts of the past that the rational, "scientific" historical narrative does not incorporate.[13] Science, Papa Longoué says, does not "give the thing," because, as he observes, Mathieu sits shaking feverishly before him, "without even having a cutlass in sight" (147). Nor, Papa Longoué says, can the literate Mathieu understand that which is not found in books (40). Mathieu reads, Papa Longoué says, in order to forget the small details, the odors and facts of everyday life that are crucial to a full explanation. His young companion will never know, the *quimboiseur* says, how much he has lost in reading his books, in "spelling them out from a to z" (121). The past, Papa Longoué says, is not like a palm kernel straight and smooth with the tuft at the bottom, but begins with the first root, which then spreads, sprouting endlessly to the clouds (147). Crucially, then, the past is not the seed of the present; there is no kernel or irreducible core to be conceived of and held in one's hand. Rather, it has unseen, subterranean beginnings that then grow in unpredictable, unsystematic ways, endlessly, vertically through space itself.[14]

13. Glissant's reworking of the historical novel owes a lot to the influence of William Faulkner, who has been a constant point of reference in Glissant's fictional and theoretical works. See Dash 74–79.

14. Glissant takes up similar issues in *L'Intention poétique*, and argues that "the meticulous reporting of dates and facts masks from us the continuous movement [. . .] of our past" (187).

The rhythmic aspects of history are further suggested in the way the novel relates the past and memory to the movement of the wind. The first instance of this phenomenon (in the story of the past if not in the sequence of the narrative) occurs when the fugitive slave Longoué runs to the hills and feels the wind, not around him or all over his body, but "follow[ing] likè a river the tracks of the whip" on his back, as if the wind were traveling a road on his back, which is like the land itself, scarred and bloody (44–45). This is the wind insinuating itself into the very real and raw primary scars of history: it has a presence and a timelessness that brings it (and history) back, rhythmically, as the maroon soon realizes in "wave after wave, endlessly" (45). Papa Longoué is at all times sensitive to the movement of the wind and its relationship to historical movements. Described as a solitary figure in his family lineage, having "never been able to link anything to anything, nor his father to his son, nor consequently the past to the future" (19), Papa Longoué insists there is no chain of history, with each link in its correct, ordered place. History is instead like the wind, a force that rushes about at the deepest part of the *quimboiseur*, and just as before, it has a vertical movement that begins at the bottom of the trees and rises right up to the sun (19). Papa Longoué is not truly incorporated into this historical movement, but is merely "the caressing surface of the wind" (19). This idea of history as a rhythmic wind movement is developed as Papa Longoué and Mathieu sit around the fire, and the wind rises, stoking up the embers in "rhythmic bursts" that burn out quickly, "consumed in the violence of the air" (19). The cauldron vacillates between the three black stones it sits on; the earth itself moves like "waves of clay reeling towards the shack"; and the wind, which had not yet reached the height of a man, "rose up with regularity" (19). There is something in this scene that acts as a metaphor for the rhythmic processes of history and memory: the rising, regular movements of the wind momentarily vivify the fire on which sits the pot, just as the unpredictable force of memory brings the past to life, heating up the soup or stew of historical narrative. The pot itself, the narrative, sits precariously on its stone base, while the earth, the land, moves in rhythmic waves that seem to threaten Papa Longoué's shack. The wind, Papa Longoué confirms, is the past, is what Mathieu "has been asking about" (19). At times, too, the wind, in all its upward movement, seems to mock the two men who are "run to earth by uncertainty, oblivion, by memory itself when it did not respond to hope" (38).[15]

Unwilling to accept this rhythmic, wind-like conception of history, Mathieu often interjects Papa Longoué's narrative with his demands for a more ordered

15. Dash argues that the image of the wind suggests "the elusive, inscrutable and overpowering nature of the past and memory" (82).

retelling. These demands are consistently frustrated: seeking to "sweep away the wind from his temples," he is impotent against the rising breeze, which "can never be chased" (34). Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, in terms of syntax and style, Papa Longoué's narrative is relatively well-ordered and coherent, while the most rhythmic, repetitive parts of the narrative itself relate Mathieu's own thoughts and expectations. Mathieu's rage for order is narrated in the most disordered, rhythmic, and repetitive prose in the whole novel, as in the following passage where Mathieu imagines the first Longoué coming ashore from the slave ship:

> For he would have preferred oh rowing boat me rowing boat and he me on the stomach the powder me boat and hit on the back the current and the water each foot me rope slide for and die the harbor country and so far far away and nothing me nothing nothing to end fall the salty, salty, salty water on the back and blood and fish and food oh country the country [. . .] me the end without hope and faces faces of beasts shouts holes hair but without eyes without look me the wind and leave in the whip delirium delirium delirium. (35)

These rhythms are, however, quite different in form and function from those of the wind and the wider historical and temporal movement. Mathieu's rhythms are born of his desire for irrevocable truths—"the certainty that it was all finished, unable to return" (35)—and in this sense he is out of step with the wind-like, rhythmic shape of history that Papa Longoué offers, which returns in waves, unpredictably, with a force of its own. Mathieu's mania for order leads to a breakdown of syntax and to a staccato rhythmicity that is in this instance related to his delirium. Thus, paradoxically, the need for rational, closed interpretations creates a disordered, manically repetitive narrative, while Papa Longoué's vision of rhythmic, unknowable history is narrated in relatively ordered, coherent prose, with its own rhythms and repetitions, which function more as structural features, shaping the narrative, turning it back upon itself, than as primary elements of language and syntax.[16]

Mathieu's delirium is also grounded in his reluctance to accept truths about his and his family's past. In particular, he does not want to believe "in the most obscure part of himself where reigned the intoxicating need to know" that his ancestor could have lived "stillborn" as a slave on the

16. An exception to this tendency occurs when Papa Longoué narrates the moment of the abolition of slavery and the text is characterized by repetitions and disordered syntax, apparently in an attempt to communicate some of the excitement and confusion of the moment (169–71).

plantation while the first Longoué, marooned, ran away to live free in the hills (38). He feels a need to justify his ancestors' existences, and argues for the attention not to be solely on the maroon, and for his family's story to be told in more detail, for the country is as "much for the Béluses as for the Longoués" (59). Glissant's intention is not therefore to blandly glorify the heroic maroon and denigrate the subservient slave, but to incorporate all of the contradictory elements of Martinican history into a dialectical movement that synthesizes, while reaffirming their relational complexity, all of the "basic human components" that created Caribbean Creole societies (Dash 72). The emphasis is on interdependence and contact rather than on discrete racial, social, and familial categories: Marie-Nathalie, wife of the decadent white planter Senglis, is emotionally attached to Béluse, while the other white planter, La Roche, plainly admires and identifies with the maroon Longoué. Indeed, in one scene, La Roche encounters Longoué and, instead of beating him, which "was his right," recognizes how Longoué has become "precious" to him and engages with the maroon so that the two become "accomplices [. . .] of the present moment," the one the master of the plantation, the other the chief of the mountains (110–11). The passage of time only increases contact and diminishes any residual dichotomy between the "suffering slave" and the "haggard maroon" (224), between the hill and the plain, resistance and compliance.[17]

Most fundamentally, Mathieu's frustrations are grounded in his, Papa Longoué's, and the people in general's inability to know the past with any certainty: "we have all forgotten together," he says, and the one historical constant is the absence in which they all exist (57). Even Papa Longoué's knowledge of the past is to him based on a kind of amnesia: the *quimboiseur*, Mathieu says, has "forgotten without forgetting" (57). Indeed, Papa Longoué's narrative voice is often supplemented by an unidentified omniscient narrator who fills in gaps in the story and corrects inaccuracies in the old man's account.[18] The past to Mathieu is but a void, a "baseless sequence of forgetting with further and further away the flash of a nothing in our nothingness" (59). One important consequence of this collective amnesia is that it creates difficulties in bonding with the island space: because no one remembers the slave ship, Papa Longoué says, the elsewhere is a "magnet" for Martinican people (247). This experience of history as a void is related not only

17. Gallagher makes a similar point in her assessment of *Le Quatrième siècle*: "Even if the lowlands (not just the towns, but also the plantations) are constructed in the space of capitulation, compromise, and amnesia, Glissant's principal concern is to show that no space, culture, language, or time is purely this or that" (203). See also Rosello 39, and André 134.

18. See also Britton 61–62.

to the (absence of) facts of history; it is also closely related to the difficulty of representing the conditions of slavery in narrative form. Slavery is described as an infinitesimal and irreducible fact of reality that "no description, no analysis will ever manage to incorporate" (101). As such, both Mathieu and Papa Longoué attempt the impossible, to evoke a condition that is impossible to know or represent.

There is a constant struggle in the novel between the two modes of historical narration: Mathieu's ordered, sequential mode, and Papa Longoué's more disordered, rhythmic, repetitive style, which originates in his first ancestor, who "had not tried to think nor to put in order," for "order and thought are for today" (47). Papa Longoué's narrative allows for and incorporates doubt and imperfect memory, and his recollections are often preceded by "perhaps" (55), presented as hypotheses and guesswork rather than as undoubted truths, or else are pure acts of invention and imagination (72). At times, Mathieu's preference for logic and reason prevails, and Papa Longoué is forced to "follow the path of 'the most logical'" and to explain "in *that*, in *therefore*, in *after* and *before*, with knots of *why* in his head, drowned in a tempest of *because*" (47). At other points however, Mathieu's resistance to Papa Longoué's narrative weakens, and he in a sense finds the frequency, the rhythm of the *quimboiseur*'s evocations. One instance of this occurs, significantly, just as the wind rises above the shack, climbing toward the clouds, leaving below the two figures silent amid the "swift, motionless time" in a privileged situation that seems out of time and yet intimately connected to the rhythms of history (41). It is at this point that Mathieu, in a kind of epiphany, glimpses quite suddenly the slave ship and its narrow cabin, smells its odor, sees the rifles and pistols nailed to the wall, the empty rum flasks, and the box with red marbles to count the number of dead among the cargo (41). This is the first time that Mathieu finds himself completely "surrounded by the power of the *quimboiseur*, without the time to study what is true" (41). Later, too, when Papa Longoué advises Mathieu that to truly see the past he must take a sugarcane plant, watch it grow in the earth until its stem snaps in the sky, and then follow it to the Central Factory, and watch how it is turned into molasses, sugar, and rum. Then, Papa Longoué says, Mathieu will understand the "the truth of the past that for such a long time has not changed." In another moment of epiphany, Mathieu realizes that the *quimboiseur* is revealing the "real truth" of the past (220). Quite significantly, too, Papa Longoué's mnemonic process involves connecting with the rhythms of planting, harvesting, and production that shape plantation life. It is not therefore that Mathieu is unable to find or tune into the rhythm of history; it is rather that in favoring the rational and the scientific, he diminishes his chances of finding, seeing, smelling, hearing, and touching history in the way that Papa Longoué does. Nor is it that the *quimboiseur* is the exclusive defender or guardian of this history, as it is

apparently accessible to others if they abandon the need to know things with certainty, which in turn may allow them to sense the fluctuating, unpredictable rhythms of the past. Papa Longoué's sensory experience of history can also be interpreted as a typical aspect of oral culture. Peoples living in close accord with nature have been shown to process the sensory in its totality, "with the result that the sense data 'possess' the observer." Thus, the wind and the odors it brings become parts of the overall, dynamic sensory experience, and space and form are not fixed, calculable entities, but "part of living mental maps" (Hoffer 33–34).

Toward the end of the novel, there is a more definite sense of Mathieu attuning himself to this sensory history and of his finding the rhythm of history. Railing against those in Martinique who claim Amerindian ancestry, even when all of the island's native people were exterminated, Mathieu identifies a general urge to forget the Middle Passage, to erase forever, and by any means, the "furrow in the sea" (268). The mania for the (European and African) other and elsewhere will only be cured, he realizes, by digging into the "contiguous land," an act that finally creates a bodily felt sensation of the past, "the shaking that passes into your eyes, which sings to you" (269). The land becomes a "reality torn from the past," but also the "past unearthed from the real," in other words, the primary site upon which this temporal, spatial, and historical reordering is effected (279). Mathieu in this way finally adopts and repeats Papa Longoué's words, teaching the old man "timeless truths," just as the *quimboiseur* reaches the end of his life (269), and as the Longoué family line finally expires (287). Papa Longoué therefore succeeds in passing on to Mathieu his understanding of the past, which is a kind of dehumanized and troubling experience of history, the "bodyless, faceless anxiety that was his lot" (273). Mathieu inherits this notion of the past as a form of knowledge that "stiffens," hardening the individual in the land and pushing the individual and the collectivity forward into tomorrow (280). But as his old collaborator and future wife Mycéa insists, this knowledge, once gained, this past, once remembered, must be forgotten, left behind if Mathieu and Martinique are to exist more concretely in the present, and contemplate more clearly the future (285).[19] For the first time, the land is "tied up with Time" (279). Mathieu grasps a sense of the future and sees that the "light is in front," that he has

19. Bongie argues that Mycéa is "primarily concerned with issues of praxis," and "acknowledges the importance of digging into the past, but also knows that the memorial concerns of Mathieu and Papa Longoué will be fruitless if not oriented toward the future and made in the name of that *acte* which motivated the revolutionary group in *La Lézarde*" (148).

found a way out of the past through his discovery of the elusive yet insistent rhythm of Martinican history (269).[20]

In terms of both style and content, Glissant's influence ripples across subsequent French Caribbean fiction, with Glissantian themes and figures recurring in the great majority of Antillean novels from the 1970s to the present. At the same time, however, there is something quite idiosyncratic and irreducibly original in Glissant's conception of Caribbean history and in his practice of sounding the past and hearing, feeling, smelling, touching, and seeing it return in waves and rhythms. Rhythm, as Glissant implicitly affirms, is a fundamental, evolving, and multifaceted aspect of Caribbean aesthetics and historical experience.

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20. As Dash says, at the end of the novel, Mathieu "represents the bridge to future action," and adopts a role that reflects in an inverted way that played by the original Longoué, in that Longoué's escape was aided by Louise, a slave woman, while Mathieu's future development will be in collaboration with Mycéa, who originates in the hills (85).

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