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Edouard Glissant and the African Roots of Creolization

Sanyu Ruth Mulira

Abstract

This paper examines Edouard Glissant's Creolization theory as it pertains to the African roots of Antillean culture. Although the discussion of Glissant's creolization theory may not be particularly innovative, this paper attempts to employ the notion of the cultural rhizome to place Glissant's theories within the trajectory of Antillean intellectual history. This paper also makes use of Glissant's poetry, which is greatly informed by his theoretical oeuvre.

KEYWORDS: Glissant, Les Antilles, creolization, rhizome, négritude, diaspora.

In his theoretical works, Edouard Glissant, attempts to create an epistemology with which to understand the complex nature of African diasporic culture. In the majority of his writings, Glissant uses his own island of Martinique and its sister island of Guadeloupe as case studies for Creolized cultures. Although it is his aim to aid in the comprehension of diasporic cultural complexities, he retains a distinct devotion to his home. Of this choice he has said: "The Caribbean, as far as I am concerned, may be held up as one of the places in the world where Relation (his own theory of historical culture collision) presents itself most visibly."¹ Although the concept of Africa is ubiquitous in the oeuvre of Glissant, it is his ultimate motivation to place the Caribbean at the center of its own discourse. Thus, he uses imagery of Africa with a precise intention. In his theoretical work, Glissant fights against notions of identity that are essentialist and reductionist in nature. In their place, he proposes ways to understand cultural formation that promote plurality. While advocating for the unity of Black people in the Caribbean under the shared experience of slavery, he simultaneously fights for recognition of the cultural multiplicity of their

origins. In this paper I will discuss Glissant's imagery of Africa as expressed in *Poetics of Relation*² and the notion of unity as expressed in *Caribbean Discourse*.³ By making use of his poetry I also hope to show that for Glissant, Africa is indeed "a source and a mirage"⁴ of Creole culture—a dream land that has shaped their reality. Caribbean people must reconcile their complex yet intimate relationship with Africa to demythify the dream and understand their reality.

In the first section of *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant places his reader inside the slave ship, the incubator of Caribbean culture. Impregnated on the shores of West Africa, the ship acted as the womb that housed the initial transformation of its inhabitants.⁵ The ocean was a liminal space in which the enslaved were faced with the reality that their lives would never be the same. In reference to this incubation, Glissant calls for his readers to:

Imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying crouched. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo, this dizzying sky plastered to the waves. Over the course of more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people deported. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse. But that is nothing.⁶

Once docked in the new world, these people had to find a way to survive in what Glissant calls the abyss, the unknown. All they could do was try to survive despite the unknown future. We now know what was ahead of them—slavery, oppression, and cultural domination. Glissant affirms that Caribbean culture emerged unconsciously because it was produced in an environment where survival was the only goal.⁷ Hailing from different ethnic backgrounds and realities, enslaved Africans found ways to weave the fragmented pieces of their past into a cultural fabric that could support their lives in a foreign land. Over time, this fabric became Creole culture as we know it today.⁸

To explicate how Caribbean culture grew out of the experience of slavery, Glissant employs the concept of a *rhizome*, which was made famous by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The

rhizome is an enmeshed root system, whose plant product appears self-contained and singular above ground. However, underneath the soil it is comprised of a network of roots so intertwined that one could never be freed from the other. Caribbean culture is comprised of many root elements from various African ethnic groups, as well as European and Native American ethnic groups.⁹ Together, the various roots create a multicultural unit. The African elements for Glissant are unique in the sense that they are from the source, the proverbial motherland. French roots became a part of the rhizome through force and brutality.¹⁰ After incubation upon the ship, the many African roots were planted together in the soil of a new land. Here, they wove themselves together, and overtime they became one. It is Glissant's suggestion that all diasporic cultures are the product of a rhizome.

Since all black people in the Americas are descended from Africans to some degree, all of their cultures share Africa as a continental source. Their rhizomes are composed of the same roots. However, these roots have produced different cultural growths. The soil in which they have been planted shaped them in different and unique ways. The historical events that have taken place upon American soil are not the same events that have taken place on the soil of Martinique or Guadeloupe. The historical climate of a country affects the cultural foundation of its people in different ways. The unique shape of each rhizome is equally as important as the common origin of the roots; it proves that there is no single black or diasporic experience.¹¹ As there are many varied historical landscapes in which African descendants have survived, there are varied Creole cultures.¹² The history that shapes the form of cultural growth is marked by moments that Glissant calls *relations*.¹³ The results of these moments are the poetics. Moments of relation are times when cultures collide and the impact changes their course forever or creates new cultures entirely. Poetics appear when the dust settles from cultural collision and the products of the impact begin to take shape. Poetics, in this case, can be likened to culture.¹⁴ The ways in which people adapt to the changes that relational moments create become the beginnings of culture. Relation and poetics do not always occur consciously because culture is an unconscious creation. The events of history and the way in which they form the future take place while people are simply trying to survive.

The fact that French culture was considered a single root system can be seen as part of its allure when placed in opposition with the Caribbean. A culture that grows from a single root has been considered to be the essence of a cohesive (and European) nation. Their perceived strength is from their shared historical experience and singular culture. No matter where these roots are replanted, the growth will always be the same. Its product is always unaffected. Although, this notion of the singular root may be fallacious, it is what Glissant identifies as the foundation for a dangerous sort of nationalism that feeds on colonization to prove its power.¹⁵ Thus, it is very important for Glissant to insist on the plurality of Creole culture. The strength of Creole culture stems from the multiplicity of its roots and its ability to endure centuries of adverse environments. No matter how hard Europeans attempted to make African culture seem less than that of their own, these roots sustained their plants and their cultural growths. The ability to sustain and grow out of the abyss is the glue that binds together Africans of the diaspora.

Glissant's insistence on the plural nature of Creole culture comes as a direct attack on Eurocentric models of cultural hegemony. A fundamental tenet of French colonialism as experienced in the French Caribbean is the ideal of cultural assimilation. Assimilation requires that there be a single culture better than the rest, a culture that all should strive to gain acceptance into. To become an assimilated French Caribbean person, one must deny the Caribbean and African plurality of their nature and live within the confines of the singular French culture. In the social complex of assimilation, some Caribbeans have become ashamed of their African origins. Africanness brings the mark of blackness. Blackness, as defined by the French in the colonial era, is a state of laziness, indolence, and idleness—none of these qualities would allow one to become successful in the French milieu.¹⁶ The desire to disassociate with these fallacious black and African qualities leads one to attempt to disassociate completely with one's African past. The wounds of displacement and rupture from the homeland are never allowed to heal when the cultural retentions from that homeland complicate your present situation.¹⁷ Because of assimilation and slavery that preceded it, the people of the "French West Indies were destined to be always in an unstable relationship with

their own reality”;¹⁸ they were always attempting to deny who the French said they were rather than to discover their true selves.

Oftentimes, Glissant’s scholarship is placed in opposition to that of the Négritude movement. Négritude was a literary movement founded by the first President of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire of Martinique, and Léon Damas of French Guiana. As the story goes, each of these men reached the apex of the French colonial educational system and attended university in Paris. In the 1930s these men befriended each other in the Latin Quarter while completing their studies. Uniting over the realization that no matter how assimilated they were, they would always be black and not white, they decided to celebrate their blackness and rediscover their Africanity and Africanness.¹⁹ Glissant’s scholarship is not placed in opposition to Négritude solely because of its bourgeois beginnings, but because Négritude exalted a single black identity. If all black people share the origin of Africa, it is through identifying with a common root that we can reassert our power to the world. But, this approach mimics the single root ideology that has been used against black people by Europeans for centuries. This uniform past is also only seen in opposition to European culture; it remains comparative in nature.²⁰ Rather than combating a homogenous and hegemonic idea with a mirrored ideology, it is better to find solace in a complex and woven reality. Reducing all people in the diaspora to a single root origin denies both the beauty and multiplicity of both diasporic and African culture. All black culture is not the same and all African culture is not the same.²¹ Caribbean culture is not African culture, but it exists, as I previously mentioned, because Africa exists. The more complex and diverse African cultures are, the more diverse and beautiful their descended mixtures will be in the Caribbean.²² The failures of Négritude can be attributed to the fact that it was asked to do too much. For example, it was asked to revolutionize black literature, cure black alienation, and bring about political reform. Even though Négritude instilled a sense of pride within many black people, it failed to transform the cultural and political climate that they lived in.²³ For example, as a political figure in Martinique, on literary grounds alone, Aimé Césaire was not able to gain independence over departmentalization for his people. The failure of Négritude was its inability to transcend from a literary movement to a political movement.²⁴

Instead of writing in opposition to the Négritude movement, I suggest that Glissant wrote to finish what those before him had attempted to start. Négritude was an evolutionary moment in the quest and demand for dignity.²⁵ But it was not a strong enough antidote to the impending possibility of cultural annihilation in the assimilationist complex.²⁶ In fact, the ideas that called for finding pride in one's Africanness, and most importantly in Caribbeanness, needed to be more fully articulated to have longevity. As Jean-Paul Sartre stated: "Négritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is transition and not result, a mean and not an ultimate goal."²⁷ Glissant took the call to action and advanced the discourse working towards a goal. He did not take issue with looking towards Africa; he took issue with looking towards a monolithic Africa of the past.²⁸ The foundation of self-empowerment should be built upon the beautiful plurality that composes the Caribbean of the present. To this day Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guyana are still under the dominion of mainland France. And, in many ways are still subjected to French cultural domination even without the formal complex of assimilation.²⁹ With each passing year, the people of the French Caribbean are more and more removed from their African origins. What they need is a way to celebrate their present culture while acknowledging their past. The impulse to identify with a singular Africa stems from a place that Glissant calls *diversion*, the desire to look outside of one's own country for home. Glissant states that "to be unable therefore to manage to live in one's country, that is where the hurt is deepest."³⁰ Négritude as it stood, kept Caribbean people looking outside themselves to assert their humanity.

The reductionist essentialism of Négritude literature motivated Glissant to explicate his notion of Caribbeanness without falling into traps of generalization. In generalizations we lose the nuances and specificities that allow for multiplicity to flourish. Although for Glissant the process of how Creole culture was created (the relational history) is of the utmost importance, the contents should not be lost in abstractions. *Métissage*, another way of looking at the formation of Creole culture, is the braiding of different cultures into a new cultural cloth. Unlike the rhizome, in the *métissage* one can still see the single thread (roots) that comprise this cloth.³¹ However, when speaking of generalizations versus specificities the metaphor of *métissage* is especially useful

because the fabric is stronger than one of its composing threads. In the same vein, the rhizomatic base of a tree is stronger than one of a single root. No matter the metaphor used to explain Caribbean Creole culture, it is clear that Glissant sees its birth in the most terrible of circumstances to be at the heart of its existence. Through slavery and cultural annihilation, Caribbean people have had to remain strong; they have had to remain adaptable. If the first enslaved Africans had not been able to adapt and endure, Caribbean people of today would not be alive. For these facets of their culture, Caribbean peoples are forever indebted to those first Africans.

In nearly all of his creative works, Glissant explores themes of collective history and identity. In his novels and poems “he desires to rewrite the history of his people to correct commonly accepted inaccuracies and to establish a legitimate basis for them to feel pride in their Caribbean culture.”³² This desire is similar to that of *Négritude* but keeps the Caribbean in the center rather than on the periphery. The majority of his characters are embroiled in a constant search for their origins. Aligned with Glissant’s ideological position as writing from the rupture, these characters are not necessarily looking back towards the continent of Africa. They are looking back to the first group of enslaved Africans who reached their shores, the founders of their Creole reality.³³ Glissant has an obsession to repeat the original cry, the original cry emitted in the womb of the slave ship when Africans realized they would never see their home again.³⁴ The original cry is the beginning of it all—slavery, cultural domination, economic dependence, and the denial of reality. Glissant believes that “the French Caribbean is the site of a history characterized by ruptures that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade.”³⁵ Although the slave ships that stopped in the Caribbean largely departed from the shores of West Africa, the trauma of the voyage abstracted the history and culture that the enslaved people brought with them. All they had were their bodies and their minds.³⁶ Thus, the true origin is the slave ship and not the shores of West Africa. All that was left of Africa when these people reached the new world were traces, fragmented roots. These roots had to enmesh themselves together in the soil to survive in the new world. The fragmented traces of Africa keep it as a living entity in the collective unconscious of the Caribbean people.³⁷

In his book of poetry, *Pays rêve, pays réel*, Glissant effectively utilizes his tropes of the original cry and traces of culture. In the words of J. Michael Dash: “*Pays rêve, pays réel* deals with one of the thematic commonplaces in the region’s literature, Africa and the Caribbean, the dream country and the real one.”³⁸ Since all Caribbeans have traces of Africa, it can only be a dream. Each poem has a dreamlike and fantastical quality, but evokes the pain, desperation, and brutality that define the relationship between the *pays rêve* and the *pays réel*—between Africa and the Caribbean. In addition, the middle sections of the text are named after characters that appear in other texts by Glissant. In *Pays rêve, pays réel*, each of these characters represents a trace of Africanisms that have evolved in the Caribbean. Below are two excerpts from this poetry book, both stanzas come from the first section entitled “Pays”:

Nous râions à vos soutes le vent peuplait
 Vos hautes lisses à compter
 Nous épelions du vent la harde de nos cris
 Vous qui savez lire l’entour des mots ou nous errons
 Dessables de nous qui vous crions nos sangs
 Et sur ce pont hélez la trace de nos pieds³⁹

Tel qui patiente dans la fiente et encombre nos songeries
 Remonte en sang de mer mêle aux rouilles des boulets
 Nous félons le pays d’avant dans l’entrave du pays-ci
 Nous l’amarrons à cette mangle qui feint mémoire. . .⁴⁰

(We groaned below deck the wind filled
 Your heights smooth for counting
 We spelt the shreds of our screams in the wind
 You who can read the expanse of words in which we wander
 We broke up screaming our blood to you⁴¹
 And on this bridge hails the traces of our steps

Such which waits in the droppings and encumbers our reveries
 Go up in the sea of mixed blood with balls of rust⁴²
 We shatter the former country in the fetters of this one
 We tie to this mangrove which feigns memory⁴³)

Both of these excerpts speak to the origin of the slave ship and the initial blends that created Caribbeanness. These enslaved Africans, the first Caribbeans, screamed their blood in the bowels of the ship. From this scream, the original cry, they were forced to

shatter their memories of their own country and work together to create a bricolage community for survival. It is here that we see Glissant's theory in action. He not only has created an epistemology with which to conceptualize Caribbean origins and culture, but he applies this framework to his creative writings. In doing so, he emotionally connects with his audience.

In his article "The Passion for Origins in the Epic Poems of Edouard Glissant," Peter Pioana affirms that in the poetry of Glissant, the trace is "as scar attesting to the forgotten wounds"⁴⁴ of history. These traces are the constant reminder of the first cry and all of the pain associated with it. "Much time has passed since the deportation, [but] the trauma it caused permeates all corners of the epic poem's emotionally territory";⁴⁵ and whenever Glissant discusses these traces, he is trying to exorcise the suffering of the first cry. In a section of *Pays rêve, pays réel*, entitled "Pour Mycéa," Glissant writes:

Je t'ai nommée Terre blessée, dont la fêlure n'est gouvernable,
et t'ai vêtue de mélodies dessouchées des recoins d'hier.⁴⁶

(I have named you wounded Earth, whose crack cannot be controlled, and I have dressed you with melodies unearthed from the crannies of yesterday.⁴⁷)

The islands of the Caribbean are the wounded earth. The islands are the native home of Caribbean culture, but the dream of the original land has fractured its foundation. The memory of yesterday can never be erased, just as the crack that the rupture has caused in the foundation of the Caribbean collective subconscious can never be filled. However, the problem for Glissant is that his peers have been trying to step over the crack and have not allowed themselves to acknowledge its presence. The crack cannot be filled unless it is acknowledged, just as a wound cannot be healed that is not cared for. The crack has both a presence and an absence. The cracked earth disrupts the path to progress, and the voided space perpetuates the suffering.⁴⁸

As touched on before, the African past has bequeathed a suffering on the Caribbean people that is two-fold. Not only do they have to atone with the rupture, but the mark of blackness that is associated with their African roots has acted as a barrier to their induction into European society. In the complex

of assimilation, blackness is something that needs to be overcome, not simply a fact of one's being. Thus, Africa becomes not only a place of physical origin, but also the source of alienation.⁴⁹ In *Caribbean Discourse*, many of Glissant's essays focus upon the need for Caribbean people to make amends with their origins, to heal all the wounds that an association with Africa has inflicted upon them. Embracing the traces and healing the wounds are integral parts of *Antillanité* (Caribbeanness). The process of enslavement magnified the collective nature of African culture(s), but the process of colonization and assimilation was a divisive tool that promoted individualism. Reclaiming the African sentiment of community is very important to Glissant. The rhizome is a collective group of roots that rely upon each other for stability, much like the first enslaved Africans. Despite their cultural differences, they created a community based upon their common need for survival. For Caribbeans today, a collective consciousness of the past needs to be forged so that their community can fill the void and heal the wounds together.⁵⁰ Glissant states:

Today the French Caribbean individual does not deny the African part of himself; he does not have, a reaction to the extreme of celebrating it exclusively. He must *recognize* it. He understands that from all this history (even if we lived in a nonhistory) another reality has come about. He is no longer forced to reject strategically the European elements in his composition, although they continue to be a source of alienation. . . . He can conceive that synthesis is not a process of bastardization as he used to be told, but a productive activity through which each element is enriched. He has *become* Caribbean.⁵¹

Glissant's constant references to Africa are motivated by a similar goal as that of the Négritude movement. He constantly discusses the African origins of Caribbean people in hopes that one day this part of their history can be embraced on a collective and conscious level. The goal of discourse obsessed with the African origin is to eventually lead to its own destruction and also to its rebirth. Once Africa is accepted in its rightful place it can become a fixed entity, an entity that can be engaged in a positive manner throughout all stages of cultural development. It can be the fixed

homeland that will bleed into the present or the future. But, it has to be consciously accepted as such. In the “Introduction” section of *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant exposes the fact that in Martinique and Guadeloupe, there are many people of “African descent for whom the word African or the word Negro generally represented an insult.”⁵² He writes that these are the peers that he wants to educate. It is for them that he founded Antillanité. By accepting their collective past of suffering, he hopes that a collective future can be realized based on a true understanding of self. They are not Africans, as Africans did not suffer the rupture; they are Caribbeans. Their reality is defined by their separation from Africa. He writes that, “For through this experience made you, original victim floating towards the seas abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others.”⁵³

Notes

¹ Edouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 33.

² Edouard Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*.

³ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989)

⁴ Glissant. *Poetics of Relation*. 58.

⁵ Stanka Radovic. “The Birthplace of Relation: Edouard Glissant’s ‘Poétique de la Relation: For Ranko,’” *Callaloo* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 376.

⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. 5-6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ Radovic, “The Birthplace of Relation,” 477.

⁹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.

¹⁰ Edouard Glissant, *Mémoires des Esclavages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007): 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101-104.

¹² While the concept of *errantry* is outside the scope of this paper, it warrants a brief mention here. When *errantry* is defined as sacred and motivated movement it could add a special dimension to the discussion of the movement and transformation of cultural roots in the Middle Passage. But to remain acutely focused on the imagery of Africa I will omit the deeper discussion of *errantry* at this time. More can be read about *errantry* in the first section of Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, in the chapter titled “*Errantry, Exile*.”

¹³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 27. Glissant states that relation should be conceptualized in its true French form rather than in its English translation of

relationship. Relation is more than a relationship: it implies that something is transformed in being relative to something else. There is a change that takes place when two entities enter that relationship.

¹⁴ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 33.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁶ Paschal Kyiiripuo Kyoore, *The African and Caribbean Historical Novel in French: A Quest for Identity* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 12.

¹⁷ Glissant, *Mémoires des Esclavage*, 54.

¹⁸ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 5.

¹⁹ Gerald Moore. *Twelve African Writers*. (London: Hutchinson University Library for Africa; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 23.

²⁰ Beverly Ormerod & Edouard Glissant, "Beyond 'Négritude': Some Aspects of the Work of Edouard Glissant," *Contemporary Literature* 15, no. 3 (Summer 1974): 368.

²¹ Kyoore, *The African and Caribbean Historical Novel in French*, 5.

²² Elaine Fido. "Africa and the Caribbean- The Literary Case" in *The African-Caribbean Connection: Historical and Cultural Perspectives*. Ed. Alan Gregor Coble & Alvin O. Thompson (Jamaica: Montrose Printery Ltd. 1990), 125.

²³ Ormerod & Glissant, "Beyond Négritude," 360

²⁴ J. Michael Dash, *Edouard Glissant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 92.

²⁵ Ormerod & Glissant, "Beyond Négritude," 361

²⁶ Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, 92.

²⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 112.

²⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 135.

²⁹ Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, 93-94.

³⁰ Glissant, *Caribbean Discours*, 21-24.

³¹ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34. According to Glissant, the argument of métissage was developed by Françoise Lionnet.

³² Kyoore, *The African and Caribbean Historical Novel in French*, 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁴ Peter Poiana, "The Passion for Origins in the Epic Poems of Edouard Glissant," *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 16, no. 1 (2013): 151.

³⁵ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 61.

³⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7.

³⁷ Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, 158.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁹ Edouard Glissant. *Pays rêve, pays réel : Poème* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1985), 11.

⁴⁰ Glissant, *Pays rêve, pays réel: Poème*, 17.

⁴¹ Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, 159.

⁴² Translated from original, Glissant. 1985 p.11-17, by Sanyu Mulira and Alexandre Elhamshary.

- ⁴³ Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, 160.
- ⁴⁴ Pioana, "The Passion for Origins," 160.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.
- ⁴⁶ Glissant, *Pays rêve, pays réel: Poème*, 83. J. Michael Dash (1995, p. 162) refers to this section as the 'penultimate' section of the poem in reference to its treatment of the character of Mycée who appears in other creative works by Glissant. This excerpt is part of a praise song to the land that Mycée symbolizes. However, there are stanzas in this section that conjure up imagery of the ruptured reality that is the Pays Réel.
- ⁴⁷ Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, 162.
- ⁴⁸ Pioana, "The Passion for Origins," 159.
- ⁴⁹ Madorossian, "From Fanon to Glissant: A Martinican Genealogy," *Small Axe* 30, no. 3 (November 2009): 17-18.
- ⁵⁰ Pioana, "The Passion for Origins," 152-153.
- ⁵¹ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 8.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.
- ⁵³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 8.

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