

Edouard Glissant : de la pensée archipélique au Tout-Monde

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**Cultural interactions: the case of France and its
Caribbean “peripheral”: a question of timing.**

For a few years, the French have been celebrating the writings of “our” fellow French citizens blessed with living in the French Caribbean. They have acclaimed a new breed of French Caribbean writers, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant in particular. These writers are more ambiguous than their predecessors, posturing less, but bent on making names for themselves in the French literary

establishment, and, because of that, less obviously threatening than Edouard Glissant. They are not poets, such as Césaire, but novelists therefore multilingual, impure, traitorous, like post-oppressed people, like the “Syrians,” the merchants of the Caribbean, sharply but affectionately described in Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Antan d’enfance*. They are very skillfully distributing candies and slaps to Mother France. They have not “cannibalized” the French language as Césaire did, they have “enriched” it in the eyes of critics eager to return to “our” Oldest Colonies against the continuous threats of the American language. Some of them, such as Confiant, have tried to write uniquely in Creole and have “gone back” to writing in French, in “their” French but in French nevertheless and the exsanguine French lexicon is getting a needed transfusion, a little life, a little color, a little indecency. For the French intelligentsia, the “Creolists” do not, as they claim, descend from the “conteur,” (story teller) docile during the day, maroon at night. They are trying to lift the oppressive lid of French classicism. For the French *litterati*, Confiant and Chamoiseau are doing what they, themselves, do not dare to do, place “a red bonnet on the dictionary,” as Victor Hugo provocatively put it. And they have been rewarded: Chamoiseau obtained, to the acclamations of a unanimous press,¹ the prix Goncourt in 1992 with a ponderous yet also “doudouïste” (“exotic,” sentimental) novel about the resistance of le “petit peuple” to the “betonization” of

Martinique, *Texaco*. Thirty four years before Edouard Glissant, now 69, was being honored by a respectable but relatively modest Prix Renaudot for his first novel *La Lézarde*. The paper *Jeune Nation* thus commented on the literary prizes' attributions for that year: "Prix Femina: a Belgian writer. Laureate of the Prix Goncourt: a Belgian writer. Laureate of the Prix Renaudot: a Negro." (Baudot 364)² . At the time, France was still suffering from the effect of the second World War, its defeat, its miraculous recovery. Even after forty years, despite such critically acclaimed novels as the *Le Quatrième siècle* and *Tout-Monde*, Glissant has yet to secure another important French literary prize and to be recognized in France as Chamoiseau and Confiant have been.

However, the love story between the "Creole" writers and the French intelligentsia is not always sugar and spice: it has been shaken up by a book published by Confiant on Aimé Césaire, *Aimé Césaire, une traversée paradoxale du siècle* in 1993, the year of Césaire's eightieth birthday. Confiant, very creatively, refuses to separate the poet from the politician as Césaire himself has cleverly done. Césaire is shown here as a Machiavellian politician but without a clear goal for his "nation" as he himself reminds us that he is the first to have talked about a "nation" when referring to Martinique. For Confiant, if Martinique is part of the European community, it is because Césaire celebrated Africa in his

poems and France at the Assembly. He used carrots with the French and carrots and sticks with the Martinicans. He has been, not a parâtre (a bad father) but a marâtre (a bad mother) to his fellow countrymen. “Here is a country,” writes Confiant, “where the standard of living is by far superior to any Third world country but where the production of riches is practically non-existent, or rather symbolic” (25). Césaire, according to Confiant has acted psychoanalytically and not politically. He has been the type of mother who has acceded to all of her child “demandes,” but not to his “desire” which is desire to be loved unconditionally: ” Why have you not said that we are beautiful?” asks Confiant (46), “we,” the despised, the forgotten, the hybrids. Martinique is dying of ideological anorexia.

Since André Breton has deemed Césaire “universal” like himself in his Postface to the *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, Césaire has indeed tried to live up to that ideal but, according to Confiant, at the expenses of Martinique, not only in his politics but also in his poetics. For Confiant, Césaire’s paradoxes can be summarized with the image of the father of Negritude presenting in 1946 to the French Assembly the “assimilation law” which made of Martinique and Guadeloupe French departments. This indeed throws a suspicion on Césaire’s poetical *oeuvre* posterior to the *Cahier*. But is this really a paradox, as Confiant seems to believe, or rather the illustration of the “Frenchification” of Césaire who,

just like Caliban, can only reproach his master for having taught him his language too well?³ Negritude is French up to a certain point. Or rather it can become “French.” It is assimilable, “dialectisable,” as Sartre had recommended in his *Orphée noir*. According to Confiant, Césaire’s type of “revolution” led to abjection (15). Yet without him, recognizes Confiant, there would be no Fanon, no Glissant, no Chamoiseau, no me. Yes, you can be “A jamais fils de Césaire,” as the Creolists proclaimed in *Eloge de la créolité*, and still kill him in *Une traversée paradoxale*. In fact the term “traversée” should not just be taken temporally but also spatially. Césaire has “traversed” the Atlantic, which is not black for him. He is a victim of the fascination for Paris and its intellectuals.

Annie Le Brun, a Surrealist writer and critic, in a pamphlet *Pour Aimé Césaire* and an article “Aimé Césaire, liberté du langage, langage de la liberté,” reproaches Confiant and Chamoiseau for having heralded Césaire as a “ante-créole” in *Eloge* and denigrated him as a “anti-créole” in *Une traversée* (“Aimé Césaire” 20). She says that they are very stereotypically obeying their occidental unconscious by murdering the father with very poor arguments. According to her, Confiant reproaches “papa” Césaire for not being “creolly correct” ! (26). She accuses Confiant and Chamoiseau of “national creolism!” (26). She claims that the young Antillean writers and intellectual are but epigones of the creators of

European values such as Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes (28). She also finds fault with Julia Kristeva and Michel Serres, accusing them of Parisian “chic,” and under the cover of promoting “diversity,” trying to standardize the world (27). For Le Brun, Césaire, on the contrary, never ceased to denounce “occidental values,” taking for models other really “subversive” writers and thinkers such as Rimbaud, Breton, Victor Schoelcher, Michel Leiris and the count de Lautréamont, all French (28). In fact, for her, Confiant’s real crime is this: by studying Césaire in his totality, politics and poetry, Confiant has indeed “deliberately degraded” the one who was commended by the great André Breton in 1947, for writing “le plus grand monument lyrique de notre temps” (the greatest lyrical monument of our time 18). For the French, politics and poetry, belong, as they do for Césaire, to two different realms and cannot be compared. Confiant has committed an error in intellectual taste.

These younger Creolists have gone too far and their whole oeuvre is being reevaluated according to their attitude toward Césaire. According to Daniel-Henri Pageaux, in an article in *Portulan* in February 96, entitled *Raphaël Confiant ou La traversée paradoxale d’une décennie*, Confiant writes under the influence of San Antonio, a popular French writer of spy fiction, and inventor of spicy neologisms whom Pageaux deems “a clown of language” (“un pître de la langue” 46) of the

French language, despite Confiant's alleged allegiance to Caribbean "oraliture." In fact, he reproaches the Creolists for not being "Creole" enough and for being indebted to others than just the *parole of the conteur créole*. He chastises them for borrowing the expression "maître de la parole" from the Guinean writer Camara Laye, a composite expression like "Pleurer-rire" (literally: "cry-laugh") from the Congolese writer Henri Lopes (47) although the Creolophones often turn infinitives into nouns and create composite expressions, and for borrowing from Rabelais his numerical and hyperbolic fantasies, which are, one could object to Pageaux, also an integral part of the Caribbean tale. He accuses them of incoherence when they try to create a new literary language to account for the Caribbean experience and to practice mediocre and mechanical games with the colonizer's language.

These attacks are symptomatic of the ambivalence of a certain Parisian elite toward their "brothers of color" who do not cease to question an obsolete type of French universalism. What Pageaux denounces in Confiant is not his *Creoleness* but rather that he proposes to replace uni-versality (after all in "universality" there is "unus") by "di-versality"; that, instead of imitating the French classics, he makes use of the carnivalesque characteristics of language (57-58). Writers would be burned for such excesses. But the "new" Sorbonne is more cunning and

sophisticated: Pageaux sees Confiant's novels as "a version among others of post-modern fiction" without any link to a true traditional Caribbean culture or to orality, denying them any originality (50). The pained reproaches Pageaux addresses to the Creolists because they attach so much importance to the body or to the materiality of language, do not seem to me to characterize French post-modern fiction which tends toward silence without ever truly attaining it as Blanchot has expressed so exquisitely. In fact, according to Pageaux, Creoleness just as Negritude in Sartre's analysis is but the moment of negation which has to be transcended so that a true Caribbean culture can at least be born.

These views are indicative of a caricatured reading of the work and of the declarations of Chamoiseau and Confiant whose Creoleness is much more inclusive than the French critics imply. They also bear evidence of a depreciatory perspective on the intellectual French sphere which is not as provincial as Annie Le Brun and Daniel-Henri Pageaux seem to believe. Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Michel Serres and Umberto Eco while respectively being homosexual, Bulgarian, a professor at Stanford University and Italian are, in different ways, as subversive as Rimbaud and Lautréamont. Julia Kristeva and Tzvetan Todorov have introduced Michael Bakhtin to the French intelligentsia and his notion of "dialogism" has a great effect on the way we read Rabelais and Dostoevsky and novels in general but

dialogism is also the domain of what is called “post-colonial” studies, at least in the United States, which no doubt aggravates the anger of the contemporary defenders of “French values.”

We are strangers to ourselves, Chamoiseau and Confiant, due to their “non history” know that better than anyone; the Caribbeans have known it much longer than the Hexagonal French. It is therefore incongruous to “accuse” them of postmodernism, as Professor Pageaux does in such a cavalier way while, in fact, post-modernism, among others, indebted to the Caribbeans.

Chamoiseau and Confiant are welcome in “France” under certain conditions: they should not attempt to touch France’s sacred cows, even if they happen to be of Caribbean origin.

It is not far fetched to say that Glissant has never been truly accepted by the French literary establishment. He is not so eager to compromise as his younger fellow writers, being more rigid, with his finger-pointing at the Metropole. He has for twenty years been following the same path of solitude and misunderstandings. His theoretical writings are often opaque, surprising, poetical. His most accessible novels such as *Le Quatrième siècle*, keep coming back to the time of the “habitations” and slavery, a time better left forgotten for most people. His novels are difficult as Glissant’s sentences and paragraphs and pages can sometimes be as

thick and multilayered as Faulkner's on whom he has recently written a book. Painstakingly, painfully, prophetically, poetically, he has tried to probe and reveal the soul of his fellow-contrymen, his soul as he truly thinks and feels collectively, unlike Chamoiseau and Confiant's whose highly individualistic and optimistic characters, more often than not, seem to come out of a *bildungs-roman*. It is Glissant's apparent impersonal rhetoric (which here holds no negative connotations) which allows him to write a collective being. It makes him even more threatening to the Metropolitans as less susceptible of being "caught" in *flagrum delictum* of ingratitude or platitude. It gives him the freedom to truly challenge the superiority of the French over other Francophone cultures. By plunging into the soul of the French Caribbean and resurfacing, he repeats, but this time in "freedom," the movement of black bodies being thrown into the Atlantic. He claims, following the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, that the "unity is submarine," not volcanic as Césaire had claimed (*Discours* 134). It is at the bottom of the Ocean that the French Caribbeans and the Metropolitan French have to meet, in order to understand, acknowledge, forgive the harm done by Europeans to others. It is obvious that most Metropolitans and even many Caribbeans are not willing or prepared to undertake such an ordeal except under the aegis of Club Med'. Glissant says that he writes "for the readers to come."

Glissant is not just advocating a return to the “submarine.” He is interested in languages and particularly languages in writing. How to write about an illiterate Martinican character obsessed by King Béhanzin’s exile in Martinique? How to write about a woman who becomes, after multiple personal tragedies, mad and can only stare at French television programs? (*La Case du Commandeur*). What interests Glissant is not so much what vocabulary they use, French or Creole, but rather the “rhythm” which governs their way of speech and being. How to express in French the “rhythm” of his characters? Not by trying to tamper with their rhythm but rather with the rhythm of the French language, that is its unassailable syntax. *Malemort* (1975) is, in this respect, exemplary.

As Glissant's contemporary maroons become more "bourgeois" such as Beautemps who has been living "on the run" for seven years and who has gotten fat as he does not work and eats too much (*Malemort*, 57), Glissant's writing becomes more adventurous, marooning from the canons of French aesthetics which request clarity, linearity, progression; it *dances*, just like the coffin-carriers at the beginning of *Malemort*. Here, not only is the French lexicon "subverted" or enriched as in Chamoiseau and Confiant's ulterior novels but the French syntax is subjected to a centripetal force which makes it writhe, propels it, not forward in a linear way but backwards, sideways, in spirals. The force of this writing which pushes the

"characters" in seemingly disorderly ways is, in fact, shaped, not just by the "real dance" of the carriers (of the sentence), but by a dreamed dance which does not favor the "head" over the tail: the famed "proposition principale" (principal clause) that French and Caribbean students have learnt to identify during endless "analyses logiques" of sentences and paragraphs has disappeared, engulfed or dethroned by "propositions subordonnées" (subordinate clauses):

Le frémissement continu de terre sans faille au vertige de descente, sans préciser la feuille ni le fruit, sans agiter ces instructions de mots ou ces classements de fonctions qui séparent, qui sont la marque de l'esprit latéral, qui fouillent sans trouver, - la longue saoulerie de pas sans tenir aucun nom dans la tête, (17).

The continual quivering of earth without a fault to the vertigo of descent, without specifying the leaf or the fruit, without shaking these instructions about words or these classifications of functions which separate, which are the marks of the lateral mind, which search without finding, - the long drunkenness without keeping any names in your head,

Glissant is aiming here at the heart of Caribbean culture and also of French "civilization." The lateral mind is thinking here and in very different ways than the central mind, the former "searches without finding" while the latter finds without searching as in the example of Columbus "discovering" the Caribbean islands. The lexicon of the above lines is undeniably "French," the syntax, the rhythm of the sentence is not. The French language, just like the corpse in *Malemort*, is asking to be carried away by Dlan and the other porters and it is submitted to a "change of pace," a change of carriers, to a transformation of itself:

(comprenant peut-être dans l'avenir qu'il fallait entendre *changez le mot* et sans tremblement ni césure entreprendre le neuf langage -quel? - et à peine et sueur et douleur et en ivresse de descente balancer sa syntaxe dans les herbes des deux côtés): (17).

(understanding perhaps that in the future one had to *change the word* and without quivering or a caesura undertake the new language -which?- and with sorrow and sweat and pain and in drunkenness of descent throw off one's syntax in the grass on either side):

The French "langue" is carried through a "parole" that is neither French nor Creole but an attempt to cut through these two universes in order to express the search of the Caribbean man for his own physical, social and linguistic environment. Caribbean men adhere to their environment permeated by French values, not by obeying rules dictated from above but rather as a caterpillar, lifting its abdomen to avoid an obstacle or sliding down a seemingly smooth run, by "unstoppable instinct" ("par une manière d'instinct chenilleux et imparable" 15), changing rhythms according to the accidents of the terrain,

la traverse à flanc de morne, la marche quand la pente est trop raide, *la cadence* quand le terrain est bon, et aux endroits où vraiment il n'y a rien à redire, le délice du *pas corbeau* (16).

crossing on the side of the hill, *walking* when the incline is too steep, *cadencing* when the ground feels good, and in places where there is nothing to complain about, the delight of the *raven pace*

The cortege, in *Malemort*, as a collective body is improvising as it goes along with its own rhythm, its own language with the sureness and creativity of a seasoned

performer: dance and language are interchangeable in the body and mind of Dlan:

et chaque pas est un mot le mot te déporte tu tombes *mais comment parler, tout ce parler qu'il faut* Dlan voulait dire marcher le pas danser le pas (17).

and every footstep is a word the word deports you fall *but how to talk, all that talk that is needed*, Dlan meant to walk the pace to dance the pace . .

With *Malemort*, Glissant puts into practice the poetics of Detour he enunciated in *Le discours antillais* (32-36, 278) as masterfully as Dlan, the coffin-carrier dances up, down and sideways on the "mornes," on the "normes" in *Malemort*.

Creolization is not linear; it does not progress although it may spread laterally, with irruptions of despair:

et vraiment où, où chercher où trouver le temps c'est-à-dire l'occasion la manière la plus légère nécessité (sans être aussitôt attiré sot mais alors sot qui est sotte avec accent aigu) de se demander pourquoi les acajous et les ravines et les ombrages tristes des manguiers ne lèvent pas dans le coeur le plus petit courant d'air qui pût être nommé amour ou tendresse ou passion ou simplement vision du paysage ou disons de ce qui est là dans l'entour (60).

and really where, where to look, where to find the time that is the opportunity the way the lightest necessity (without being called immediately an idiot which is a female idiot with an acute accent) to ask why the mahogany trees and the ravines and the sad shades of the mango trees do not create the slightest draft in one's heart which could be called love or tenderness or passion or simply a vision of the countryside or lets say of what is there around

Sometimes Creolization eludes the Caribbean being (see *La Vierge du Grand*

Retour): sometimes there are no words to grasp Creole reality when on the 23rd of March, the post-office lady greets the writer with a "Happy Spring, monsieur Glissant !" (*Discours* 214). The dancers sometimes gyrate as zombies do.

In *Malemort* the "story" is shattered in front of the very eyes of the "French-from-France," the "symphony of democracy" (90) is being replayed in a farcical way just as History is. It has marooned, but so powerful is Glissant's writing, that the emblematic vocation to be a maroon, just as democracy and Occidental musicology, is also replayed in a farcical mode. Never has a writer, with the exception of Joyce, been so close to losing himself in his own culture, in his own writing.

Everywhere in *Malemort*, the "apocalyptic" birth of "democracy" is being reenacted in a carnivalesque way in order to reinforce the status quo: "Mayors surer of their own succession than sons of kings..."(87), "Listen, mister Mathieu, nothing changes, nothing changes" (94), the infernal counter equation: "Oreste loves Hermione who loves Pyrrhus who loves Andromaque. The Negro hates the Beke who loathes the white man from France" (85) "Really," claims a voice: "we were born in an urn. Our highest office: to fill it up" (88). This is carnival beyond Bakhtin's, it is "colonial hybridity" according to Homi Bahba, that is "a problematic of colonial representation and individuation" (175); it certainly is not Creoleness

(*créolité* as Chamoiseau and Confiant see it) not even "métissage."

This is the stuff of writing:

Cette souffrance cette incertitude des mots eux-mêmes, de leur signification, mais aussi de leur usage, qui poussent le langage jusqu'aux limites de la dérision mais par bonheur ou compensation lui donnent son sens particulier, inaperçu, incompréhensible pour tout autre que celui qui a tourné en boule dans ce creux de terre froissée des hauts du nord et de sels du sud (93).

This suffering this uncertainty of words themselves, of their meaning, but also of their use which push the language to its limits of derision but happily or to compensate give it its particular meaning, unnoticed, incomprehensible for who has not turned as a ball in this hollow piece of wrinkled earth from the heights of the north to the salts of the south.

Caribbean writing cannot but be esoteric to the outsider. How to write in a

language that does not fulfill its grave function of "meaning" something to someone?

In Glissant's *Malemort*, even poetry becomes dialogic while filling its functions of

expressing the "individual" and accommodates better than prose, the clash of

identities found in the "interior-exterior dialog" of a Caribbean person, which goes

from the "official" and distinctive "je" and "vous," to a universal "tu,"

simultaneously enunciator and enunciatee :

Tu penses oui oui à côté il y /a qu'est-ce que c'est qu'il y a prés/ à côté de toi assis sur une fesse/comme un *mantou* tu penses/ Il y a monsieur Lesprit qu'est-ce/que tu fais là monsieur (100)

You are thinking yes yes next to you there/ is what is there near/ next to you sitting on one buttock like a *mantou* you are thinking/There is monsieur Lesprit what are you doing there monsieur

Malemort makes rather obvious that democracy cannot be handed down by

the descendants of slave owners to the descendants of slaves. This type of "democracy" is but a continuation of slavery draped in the language of equality. The narrator for this purpose creates three mythical black men, three maroons who are "massacred" "without a word" by the plantation police (116-117). "They fell infinitely, they died infinitely" (118). And they do get up to find themselves dragged in the coffee fields, "We keep falling in the night" (119). They are ordered to stop by what is probably the voice of the "mulatto" overseer: "a plantation is not a prison any more (. . .) there are no more free men of color and African slaves today you can plant your own root" to which a desperate and muted voice answers, the voice of the black "worker": "it is better to be dead than to find oneself in a sugar cane plantation" (119) and when the three escape to the woods, they are surrounded by hilarious "gendarmes" who tell them that they are "going to go back to Africa." They are shot after a desperate attempt at using their "coutelas" (120). They get up as "mummies," they rush into town:

ils ne voulaient plus travailler si c'était travailler à la distillerie de Messieurs les frères du plan (...) ils ne voulaient plus (...) ils criaient ni bekés ni mulâtres, ils ne savaient pas que dès cet instant ils avaient réalisé contre eux l'harmonie de l'ordre (122)

they did not want to work anymore if it was to work at the distillery of Messieurs the brothers of the plan [one of de Gaulle's grand economical Plans] . . . they did not want to anymore (. . .) They were shouting neither bekés nor mulattos, they did not know that from that moment they had sealed the harmony of order against themselves

They die. They get up “grinded by manioc,” they are “the union delegates.” A strike is on (123). The “gendarmes” arrive in their jeep to guarantee “freedom of work.” As the narrator gets close to our contemporary period, time becomes more precise: Christmas 1959 when riots took place in Martinique after a racist incident and three young Martinicans were killed. Whether as maroons, or on sugar plantations, or as workers in a rum factory, or as banana-or pineapple cutters the three men fall and get up. What is the meaning of democracy in the French Caribbean?

Antonio Benítez-Rojo, in *The Repeating Island*, urges us to reread Caribbean texts in order for them to reveal to us their own textuality. To describe what he calls the “meta-archipelago” of the Antilles (as it has neither a boundary nor a center), bridging North and South America he thus elaborates:

This geographical accident gives the entire area, including its continental foci, the character of an archipelago, that is, a discontinuous conjunction (of what?): unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools, clumps of bubbles, frayed seaweed, sunken galleons, crashing breakers, flying fish, seagulls squawks, downpours, nighttime phosphorescences, eddies and pools, uncertain voyages of signification; in short, a field of observation quite in tune with the objectives of Chaos” (2).

This *chaos* is not synonymous with disorder but is rather reflective of “dynamic states of regularities that repeat themselves globally” (2). This, Benítez-Rojo

induces, leads us into “a new way of reading the concept of chance and necessity, of particularity and universality” (2-3). The Caribbean “rhythm” can be found outside of the Caribbean: it is the rhythm of the de-centered, the peripheral which contributes to the formation of a different type of “universality.” The Caribbean islands, as Rojo’s sees it, is the product of a non stopping series of encounters, occurrences of objective chance, “a meeting or confluence of marine flowings that connect the Niger with the Mississippi, the China Sea with the Orinoco, the Parthenon with a fried food stand in an alley in Paramaribo” (16). The “people of the Sea,” as Benítez-Rojo calls the Caribbeans, sublimate violence by expressing it in a “paradoxical space ...[where] there is no desire other than that of maintaining oneself within the limits of this zone for the longest possible time, in free orbit, beyond imprisonment or liberty” and which can only be approached through “the poetic” (17). This particular occupation of space and time is what characterizes the “rhythm” of the Caribbean which “can be arrived at through any system of signs, whether it be dance, music, language, text or body language etc” (18). According to Benítez-Rojo, the Caribbean text’s most perceptible movement is “a metonymic displacement toward scenic, ritual, and mythological forms” (25). In Glissant’s *Malemort* the French Republican electoral urn has been displaced, in the Martinican space, from the realm of positivist history to the realm of mythological history. It is

an open wound which begs to be fed, a Caribbean Medusa. A “first” reading of *Malemort* allows the reader to perceive these displacements. A “second” reading of *Malemort* can let us perceive some of its rhythms which are not “white,” binary, “the rhythm of steps marching or running, of territorializing (...) Of technical knowledge (...)” (*The Repeating Island* 26). *Malemort*’s rhythms appear as “turbulent and erratic,” “without a past or better, rhythms whose past is in the present” like the rhythms that belong to the “People of the Sea” (*The Repeating Island* 26). The Caribbean texts crosses

At all points the network of binary dynamics extended by the West. The result is a text that speaks of a critical coexistence of rhythms, a polyrhythmic ensemble whose central binary system is decentered when the performer (writer/reader) and the text try to escape “in a certain type of way” (28).

This is what makes Glissant’s most “Caribbean” texts allegedly inaccessible: they require many readings, a decentering for the “Occidental” reader, a willingness to lose one’s bearings and they require being enjoyed at the same time. The “inner” rhythm of the Caribbean people can be heard and seen in music, dance, religion, plastic arts, cuisine and can only be conveyed in literature through a different type of syntax than the linear, “logical” one of French classical texts. Glissant’s writing can be characterized as “baroque,” polyrhythmic, reaching out rhizomatically and then curling back in interwoven arabesques, to stretch out again like a caterpillar going down a hill, forward, backward, crosswise. This is not the rhythm of the

“African” as discussed by Senhor: this particular relationship the African holds with the world he lives in and which is not for him an object of study or conquer but a way of participation with it (22-38). It is the rhythm of the African plus the particular rhythms the deported Africans have acquired on the slave boats and on the American “continent.” Nothing is less “natural” than rhythm, nothing is more corporally historical. Emile Benveniste, reconstructing in his article, the notion of rhythm, the slow and historic elaboration of the term, shows that nothing is less natural than this notion and that “it is not by contemplating the movement of the waves that the archaic Hellene discovered ‘rhythm’; on the contrary we use a metaphor today when we speak of the waves’ rhythm. There had to be a long reflection about the structure of things, then a theory of measure applied to the figures of dance and the inflections of chant to recognize and name the principle of cadenced movement” (335). Henri Meschonnic, after Benveniste opened the way, noticed that a theory of rhythm is a “theory of the subject in language” and that “language is an element of the subject, the most subjective of its elements , of which the most subjective is rhythm” (71). “Rhythm shows us that discourse,” writes Meschonnic, “is not just made of signs. That the theory of language extends beyond the theory of communication. Because language includes communication, signs, but also actions, creations, the relationships between the bodies, the hidden unveiling of

the unconscious which are events that do not happen to the sign....” (72). Glissant’s writings are here to testify that “intellectual” memory may elude the Caribbeans but that their body memory has kept and transformed the rhythms to which they were submitted, which make them neither Africans, nor Europeans, nor Asians, to paraphrase Confiant and Chamoiseau, and one could add nor Amerindians.

In *La Case du Commandeur* (1981) the collective narrative voice thus ends a chapter: “*Nous pilons en poudre la roche du temps*” (*We are grinding to powder the rock of time*) and starts the next chapter with “*La poussière de roche dans quoi nous dérivons*” (*The powder of rock in which we are drifting*) (144-45). For the Caribbean people space is time which can be acknowledged through rhythm, timing which, in sports, is “the control of the speed of a stroke, blow, etc in order than it may reach its maximum at the proper moment.” It is impossible to remind the population of African descent about their history in a chronological way:

“Les habitants de ce pays furent transportés d’Afrique dans ce qu’on appelait le Nouveau Monde sur des bateaux négriers où ils mouraient en tas. On n’ose estimer à près de cinquante millions le nombre d’hommes de femmes et d’enfants qui furent ainsi arrachés à la Matrice et coulèrent au fond de l’Océan ou furent échoués comme écume au long des côtes américaines. Le sud-ouest de l’actuelle Guinée pourrait avoir donné le principal de notre peuple”. Ce calme énoncé supposerait que toutes choses depuis ce jour du transbord se sont émues du même puissant et paisible souffle où la mémoire de tous se serait renforcée; que les années se suivirent et s’entassèrent tranquilles dans le morne à secrets où chaque peuple garde la trace de sa route. Mais l’amas de nuit pèse et nous couvre. Nous disons que c’est folie (18).

“The inhabitants of this country were transported from Africa to what was called the New World in slave boats where they died by the thousands. One does not dare estimate at almost fifty millions the number of men, women and children who were torn away from the Womb and sank at the bottom of the Ocean or were stranded like foam on the American coasts. The south-west of present day Guinea could have been at the origin of our peoples.” This calm statement would suppose that all things since the day of the shipment have been moved by the same powerful and peaceful breath where the memory of all would have been strengthened; that years passed and accumulated quietly in the hill full of secrets where each people keeps trace of its journey. But the heap of the night weighs on us and covers us. We say that it is madness.

A new way of relating history to the Caribbeans, a lateral historiography, is being

created by a Caribbean writer but Edouard Glissant’s timing is yet to be accepted by

the French establishment. Chamoiseau’s and Confiant’s writing, perhaps because it

seems less threatening to the “French from France”’s idea of what “their”

Caribbeans should produce, is right on time!

Notes

1. See in particular Josyane Savigneau’s article in *Le Monde*, September 4, 1992 and Milan Kundera’s essay in Philippe Sollers’ *L’Infini*, no. 24, Summer 1991.

2. All translations from the French are mine.

3. See Breton’s laudatory “Et c’est un Noir qui manie la langue française comme il n’est pas aujourd’hui un Blanc pour la manier” (Postface to *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, 80).