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Santiago Torres, Frances J.  
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## IN MEMORIAM ÉDOUARD GLISSANT (1928-2011)

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*Frances J. Santiago Torres*

Poet, novelist, essayist, playwright and thinker of the *créolisation* concept, ÉDOUARD GLISSANT was born on September 21, 1928 at Sainte-Marie, Martinique. He died in Paris on February 3, 2011, at the age of 82, leaving a monumental volume of work.<sup>1</sup> During his infancy, Édouard Glissant had his mother's name, Godard. Although his father will acknowledge him, and give him his name, this will not happen before he successfully passes an entry exam that allows him to be admitted to the prestigious Lycée Schoelcher at Fort-de-France. Le Lycée Schoelcher was well known for receiving the best students of Martinique and for promoting an excellent education in order to provide an outstanding academic preparation for the children of the elites of that country. The colonial discipline of the Lycée is tied to very high standards. The young Glissant is very conscious of the colonial identity and starts to develop, during those crucial years, his critical thought. He is very concerned with the development of a Caribbean thought. At that age, Glissant will also be very impressed by the arrival at the Lycée of a young philosophy professor in 1940, Aimé Césaire. The young Césaire, who will have written his *Cahier du retour au pays*



Édouard Glissant, before the Anse Cafard 'Cap 110 memorial', Martinique.

Photo source: *Mediapart*, France <<http://www.mediapart.fr/>>.

*natal* in 1939, will be an undeniable influence in the minds of the young martinican students of the Lycée during those formative years. The student's enthusiasm sparked by meeting this professor, who will come teach then about surrealism, and the Négritude movement that made Paris flourish towards the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, is evident and strong. Their philosophy professor is not just a teacher; he is also a poet, a committed communist very involved in the political life of Martinique during the 1940s. This awakening to the consciousness of "being black in the world", as the Paris editors of the *Revue du Monde Noir* had stated in 1930, will add to Glissant's preoccupation of thinking the Caribbean, and the people that compose this complex and mixed archipelago. The encounter with Aimé Césaire, will definitely mark Glissant's thought and writings the rest of his life.

As all young martinicans willing to pursue college studies, it was necessary to leave the island for the Metropole. In 1946, Glissant leaves his native island to continue his higher education at the Université de la Sorbonne in Paris. He obtains a degree in philosophy, and then studies ethnology at the Musée de l'Homme. The encounters in 1946 with young Franz Fanon, as well as the Haitian poet René Depestre, will be fundamental for his pursuit of a Caribbean archipelagic thought that expresses more and more his own perspective and his own lived experiences. Glissant writes continuously. He introduces himself into the literary and intellectual life of Paris during those early years and establishes strong ties with other intellectuals such as: Yves Bonnefoy and Kateb Yacine. His literary creation is steadily marked by his militant reflexions. Opposing the rejection of the Other, Glissant makes an effort to set forth a unique and consistent thought. After his collaboration and intense written and critical work for the review *Les Lettres nouvelles*, his first poems are published in the *Anthologie de la poésie nouvelle* by Jean Paris. Glissant's life changes in 1958, after the publication of his first novel *La Lézarde*. At age thirty, Glissant receives the *Renaudot Award*, for this narration that tells the story and trajectory of a group of young anticolonialist martinicans. The poetic style of the narration, as well as the text's narrative modernity, makes way for this award. The readers find in this novel the essential debates in terms of the decolonization struggles in Martinique; one can also find a literary figure that reveals himself to the literary world. In *La Lézarde* we can see the importance of belonging to a particular place, in this case, the island; we can also read the typical political commitment of the period. Glissant renews the novelistic form, as he introduces a very charged political subject into the thread of the novel. According to Jacques Chessez: "For the last three or four years, Édouard Glissant has revealed himself as one of the most essential voices of the new French poetry. (...) *La Lézarde* is not just

a beautiful book. By publishing it, Édouard Glissant, the poet, places himself among a small number of writers who for a few years now have transformed the novel, questioning its forms, its profound structures and the very notion of the novel (...) Glissant has made a beautiful epic of *La Lézarde*, a poem, that is at the same time a very precise and methodic narration, and a solar song.” (*La Gazette de Lausanne*, 19-30 nov. 1958.)

The end of the 1950s is a period of political and ideological commitment for many intellectuals and writers, Glissant is not the exception. He will react actively within the *International Circle of Revolutionary Intellectuals*. He will find himself in the ranks with Aimé Césaire, Breton, Leiris and Memmi. But it is anticolonialism that constitutes Glissant’s most pressing commitment. He remains very mindful, and participates in literary and cultural debates within the *Fédération des étudiants noirs* and the *Société africaine de Culture*, he also collaborates actively with the review *Présence africaine*. It is important to point out that the subject that this author held dearest to his heart, was the decolonization of that French Antilles and in particular the historic, linguistic and cultural specificities of the Antilles.

In 1961 Glissant publishes a play, *Monsieur Toussaint*. In 1964, he rewrites his novel *Le Quatrième Siècle*. In 1965 he returns to Martinique and creates the *Institut Martiniquais d’études*, as well as the human sciences review *Acoma*. His novels *Malemort* and *La case du commandeur* are published in 1975 and 1981 respectively. We must also point out Glissant’s three mayor essays: *L’Intention poétique* 1969, *Le Discours antillais* 1981, and *Poétique de la relation* 1990. Between 1982 and 1988 Glissant is director of the *Courier de l’Unesco*; he leaves that office to become Distinguished Professor at Louisiana State University. At LSU he is in charge of the *Centre des études françaises et francophones*. In 1995 he becomes Distinguished Professor at the City University of New York - Graduate Center (CUNY).

Glissant was also concerned with certain themes from his very first writings. Readers can observe a special interest on behalf of the writer for subjects such as: the re-appropriation of history, orality and writing, problematic conceptions of identity, hybridity, and the construction of the Other through colonial discourse, and the analysis of the problem of language in his critical, theoretical and creative writings (poems, novels, short stories, essays). Glissant uses the term *identité-rhizome* to talk about Caribbean identity; he borrows this philosophical concept from Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical text *Les Mille plateaux*. This theory contends that Caribbean identity is not a single rooted identity; it is rather a crossing and mixing of many roots—as seen in the Caribbean mangroves. This multiplicity is representative of the *métissage* and *créolisation* of the Caribbean.

According to Celia Britton, who studies Glissant's work using the postcolonial perspective in her book, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory. Strategies of Language and Resistance*: "Glissant attempts to theorize and to forge in practice a new language use that will be both specific and adequate to the social realities of the Caribbean" (Britton, 2). The concept of *Antillanité*, that Glissant introduced in his essay *Le Discours antillais*, "...stands for the solidarity of a multiethnic and multilingual region in which different Créoles coexist with English, French, Dutch, and Spanish..." (Britton, 2).<sup>2</sup>

In *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant states that *Relation* is a dynamic, an attitude that does not aim at finding results, but at discovering processes, the dynamics and rhythms that manifest within the marginal, the regional, the incoherent and the heterogeneous. We find in his analysis clear resonances of the critical analysis put forth by Antonio Benítez Rojo in his essay, *La isla que se repite. El Caribe y la perspectiva posmoderna*. The Caribbean is an example of a phenomenon that is, for Glissant, representative of the global condition, in terms of the profound changes that the peripheries are introducing into the metropolitan centers, inverting the usual situation lived in the colonial period, where the metropolitan centers changed profoundly and beyond repair the peripheries (Britton, 140).

*Hybridity* is a concept that is related to *créolisation* in Glissant's work; this is in the sense that *hybridity* is the result of a dynamic of multiplicity that characterizes what Glissant called the *chaos-monde*. In an interview with Frederic Joignot in 2005, for *Monde 2*, Glissant defined *créolisation* as follows:

It is a way of transforming in a continuous manner without losing oneself. It is a space where dispersion allows us to come together, where cultural shocks, disharmony, disorder, and interference become creators. It is the creation of an open and inextricable culture that scrambles uniformization by the big media and artistic centrals. It happens in all domains, music, the arts, literature, cinema, culinary arts, at an accelerated speed...<sup>3</sup>

In Paris, Glissant created the *Institut du Tout-monde* in 2007, destined to promote activities, studies and research that allow the dissemination of "the extraordinary diversity of the people" from the entire world. His activities hardly stopped until 2010, in 2009 he published *Philosophie de la relation*. Until the end of his days, Édouard Glissant was the fervent bard of métissage and exchange.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There are several excellent sites on Glissant's life and work. See: <<http://www.edouardglissant.fr>> and <<http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ile.en.ile/paroles/glissant.html>>.
- <sup>2</sup> Celia Britton. *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory. Strategies of Language and Resistance*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> For Glissant, the créolisation of the world is irreversible. Frédéric Joignot. Février 2011. <<http://www.lemonde.fr>>.