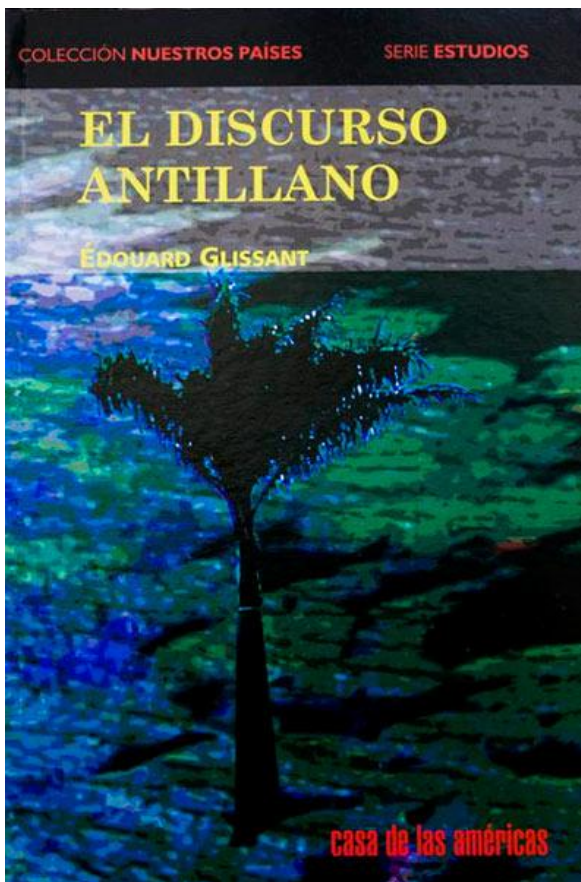


# 'Martinique is not a Polynesian Island': J. Michael Dash on Edouard Glissant

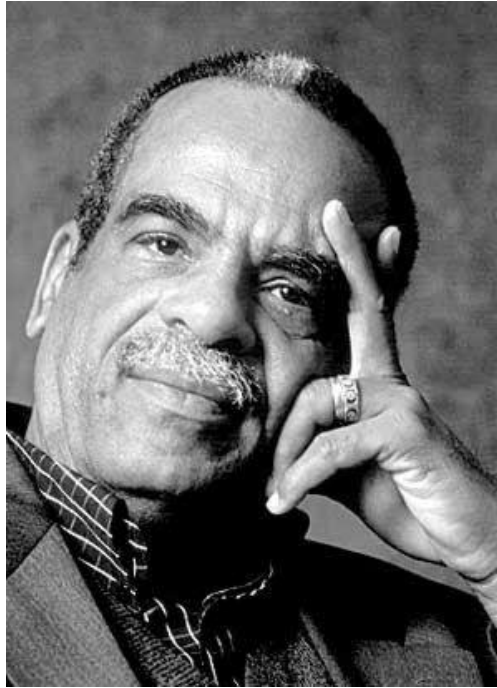
*Introduction to **El Discurso Antillano**, Havana: Casa de las Americas, 2010*

---



Edouard Glissant opens his monumental 1981 book of essays Le discours antillais with the bold declaration “Martinique is not a Polynesian island”. In so doing he insists on the importance of Martinique’s specificity in the face of cultural extinction that Departmentalization threatened. He was equally aware that Aime

Cesaire had earlier in his Cahier d'un retour au pays natal construed Martinique's place in the Caribbean in terms of an agony-stricken Polynesia.



**Edouard Glissant 1928-2011**

Cesaire's Polynesian reference made it impossible to grasp the geographical and historic complexity of Caribbean reality ("le reel antillais") for Glissant since the Polynesian metaphor essentialized the Caribbean in terms of another archipelago. Cesaire's reference to the Caribbean as a "Polynesia" may well be related to the Surrealists' passion for the Pacific as a zone of magic and the irrational. It should not be forgotten that Andre Breton elevated the status of Oceanic art above all others in his construction of the exotic other. Oceanic material was felt by Breton to provide proof of the universality of the transgressive, surreal unconscious. Breton never got to his dream Polynesia but may have found his primitivist utopia in Martinique as he

fled Vichy France for exile in the U.S. in 1941. The Tropics made a perfect substitute for his romanticized Oceania. Aime Cesaire and his Tropiques group seemed to agree with this view that tropical landscape corresponded to the imaginary flora of Surrealist fantasy. They would claim in the pages of Tropiques in 1941 that "It is not as a tourist that Breton regarded Martinique" ("Ce n'est pas en touriste qu'André Breton a vu la Martinique").

It is as much as anything else a reaction against Cesaire's poetic collusion with Surrealist primitivism that provokes the opening line of Caribbean Discourse. In Glissant's view, Breton in his search for absolute otherness in Martinique was indeed a kind of intellectual tourist in the manner of Paul Guguin in Tahiti or Lafcadio Hearn in Japan. The Parisian surrealist was misguided because neither the Caribbean nor Oceania could be conceived as an exotic elsewhere since the scope of radical and absolute alterity had been severely reduced by the globalizing spread of the West. Glissant's entire oeuvre can be read as an attempt to retrieve Antillean specificity from absolute otherness whether generated by a reductive colonialist or an essentialist anti-colonialist discourse. Caribbean Discourse is indeed an attempt to conceive of a discourse peculiar to the French Antilles which allows them to define themselves in terms of their regional and hemispheric contexts. Neither French, nor African nor Polynesian, they are islands within archipelagic, New World space, not isolated but part of an archipelago which is a geographically grounded, fluid system of multiple relations. Caribbean Discourse is, then, a thoroughgoing effort to explore and not systematize a Caribbean specificity, whose opacity both resists erosion and comprehension. The quotation from Fanon which is one of the opening epigraphs is very telling in this regard. "An enormous task, to make an inventory of the real. We amass facts, we make our comments, but in every written line, in

every proposition offered, we have an impression of incompleteness” (“Une tache colossale que l’inventaire du réel. Nous amassons des faits, nous les commentons, mais à chaque ligne écrite, à chaque proposition énoncée, nous ressentons une impression d’inachèvement”). This sense of incompleteness is inevitable because Caribbean reality is not static but constituted of a network of ever-increasing relays. Glissant’s project of accounting for the real in the Caribbean is, therefore, destined from the start to be incomplete. It is indeed incompleteness that he aims for as he is as suspicious of nationalist ideologies that simplify and territorialize the heterogeneity of Caribbean space as he is wary of a naïve reproduction of primitivist stereotypes.

Instead, he insists place is uncircumventable (‘incontournable’), in terms of grounding the subject, as it is inexhaustible, as its contours could not be ever explained. His earliest travel writing focused on the possibilities of an open insularity, of projecting archipelagic space into global common places. It was precisely the inability to restore historical continuities and absent origins that represented for Glissant the Caribbean’s potential to establish new transversal connections and envisage the rich possibilities of archipelagic space. The conception of the Caribbean as ambivalently oppositional space in Le discours antillais is foreshadowed decades earlier by the 1955 travel-journal Sun of Consciousness *Soleil de la conscience*, in which the ambiguities and tensions of individual identity are dramatized in terms of a finite world where there is nothing left to explore in the conventional sense. Voyages of discovery are no longer possible since there are no elsewhere left, because as he presciently observed in 1955, “we are all gathered on one and only shore” (nous sommes, tous, réunis sur un seul rivage”). The sun of consciousness of the title sheds light on the impossibility of absolute difference which cannot exist in a world where

encounters between self and other take place in archipelagic places marked by unceasing contact. Soleil de la conscience is about deconstructing a certain global orderliness imposed by the West. Europe with its checkerboard plains, spatial symmetry and seasonal order is rethought in terms of a hybridized world of transcultural relations in which islands have an advantage over continents as they are always in the process of being transformed into something other than what they were. In challenging the notion of unitary identity, Glissant was less interested in the island as sacred, exclusive territory. The concept of "antillanite" that would be introduced later in Le discours antillais, is based on freeing insular space from a claustrophobic particularity and opening it up to the cross-cultural process of creolization.

Caribbean discourse nevertheless is not a blind celebration of Creole culture in the Caribbean. After many years of living in Martinique since his return from France in 1965, Glissant was painfully aware of the danger that assimilation posed to Martinique's Creole identity. The experience of centuries of almost unbroken assimilation locks Martinique in an unequal neo-colonial relationship with metropolitan France and separates it from its archipelagic context, the Caribbean. Martinique is therefore denied both its right to difference as well as its ability to enter into the field of islands that is its true place. As he laments in the essay "Dispossession", « We are among the few (in Martinique) who reckon there perhaps does not exist in the world a community as alienated as ours, as threatened by a diluted identity. The mimetic impulse is perhaps the the most extreme violence that one can inflict on a people » ( «Nous sommes quelques-uns qui supputons (en Martinique) qu'il ne trouve peut-être pas au monde une communauté aussi aliénée que la notre, aussi menacée de dilution. La pulsion mimétique est peut-être la violence la plus extrême qu'on

puisse imposer au peuple.»). The essays collected here contain disturbing examples of the ways in which the French Overseas departments' continuing attachment to the metropole leads to cultural stagnation and economic dependency. A number of telling details of everyday life in Martinique reveal disturbing levels of psychological alienation resulting from a "mimetic impulse". The use of seasons to advertise events in a Caribbean island; the funny incident where a white tramp turning up at a school is taken for the school inspector; that of the man who did not wish to donate blood for his wife in labour because he thought blood was supplied by the French government are all examples of a chronic reliance on a paternalist French state. The essays also end with the Dogme de Cham religious sect whose delirious language indicates the pathetic result of economic impotence. Suffrin's tracts "are a pathetic and uncontrolled response to economic erasure. Everyday verbal delirium is a substitute for the negation of economic power » (« sont une réponse pathétique et incontrôlable a une éradication économique. Le délire verbal coutumier est substitutif du pouvoir économique néantisé. »)

Economic stagnation and the lack of a local productivity have created a general conversion to economic tertiarization making Martinique into a "consumer colony" *colonie de consommation*. Martinique has consequently acquired the consumer habits of Europe in a context in a non-productive plantation society which has been rendered passive by the prolonged experience of colonial domination. The consequences of this "unilateral relationship with a Metropole" are visible in the divorce between collectivity and language. As Glissant points out, Creole, which is out of place in the world of shopping malls and rampant consumerism, has lost its dynamism. He demonstrates this degradation of Creole with the example of the Martinican fisherman whose Creole has become a patois of French. "the

Martinican fisherman says *Man acehete an amson* because he no longer controls the techniques of his craft. » « Amson » has replaced the traditional Creole word « zin' » (« le pêcheur martiniquais dit: *Man acheté an amson* parce qu'il ne contrôle plus rien des techniques de son métier »). The practice of French, the official language, is hardly better than the verbal delirium of Suffrin. "The official language, French, is not the language of the people. That's why, we the elite speak it so correctly ».(« La langue officielle, le français, n'est pas la langue du peuple. C'est pourquoi nous, les élites, la parlons si correctement. »)

There are, nonetheless, some exceptions to the lack of creativity that Glissant sees in language use. He detects an instinctive strategy of counter-poetics in the acceleration, cacophony or tactics of ruse in everyday speech as well as in the derisive thrust of the Creole folktale. Linguistic subversion is also potentially apparent in the mocking rearrangement of the bumper sticker "NE ROULEZ PAS TROP PRES" (Don't Tailgate) by Martinique's motorists. Glissant also reminds his readers that there was a time when Martinicans were productive and self-sufficient. They successfully survived being blockaded during World War II because of their resourcefulness and their own capacity for improvisation. Cut off from the metropole, which was occupied by Germany at the time, their creativity was liberated temporarily because they were on their own: "the Martinican people resisted and experienced a sense of solidarity which it has no doubt lost" ("le peuple martiniquais résista et connut à l'époque une unanimité qu'il a sans doute perdue"). Departmentalization in 1946 slowly stifled this creative impulse in the Martinican people.

While demonstrating that Césaire's 1946 initiative to transform the French West Indies into Overseas Departments was a failure, Glissant is, however, not arguing for a national sovereignty nor making the case for liberation through revolution in Caribbean Discourse. In this regard, he puts distance between himself and Frantz Fanon's idea of revolutionary nationalism. Although he does not directly address this issue in these essays, he may be suggesting an alternative process of decolonization in the emancipatory possibilities of the Caribbean dimension of Martinican identity. Martinique has, in his view, no identity outside of its Caribbean context. "If the Martinican senses an ambiguity in his relationship with French and in his relationship with Creole... it is perhaps because he has the shadowy premonition that what is missing in his experience of time and space is a crucial dimension, that is the Caribbean connection »

Alienation from one's space and time is as disturbing as linguistic and cultural alienation for Glissant. The traumatized Martinican psyche can never abandon its fantasized European identity and achieve complete self-awareness unless it is reinserted in its Caribbean context. Glissant describes the French West Indian condition in terms of "a widespread morbidity", as paralyzed by a repressed identity. These declarations say it all: "The Martinican is an American but ill at ease with it ». « The Martinican is an unlikely but self-satisfied European ». Caught in a treacherous situation where they have pursued a series of mirages like citizenship, republicanism, departmentalization, French West Indians end up complacently living with the threat of oblivion, which Glissant describes as situation of "terror without terror".

If Caribbean discourse sounds a cautionary note warning of the dangers faced by Martinicans because of their smug attachment to metropolitan France, it also sounds a note of hope as Glissant declares on more than one occasion "I believe in the future of small countries". Martinique is not merely a speck of dust in the ocean, as De Gaulle was reputed to have said, but an integral part of the rich diversity of the Caribbean. Consequently, these essays also explore Martinique's "lieu incontournable", the Caribbean. "The first recourse in resisting an all-encompassing universality is the inflexible will not to budge from one's place. But place, as far as we are concerned, is not only the land to which our people were deported, it is also the history we have shared (living it as a non-history) with other communities, whose convergence is apparent today. Our place is the Caribbean. » What is immediately apparent in Caribbean space for Glissant is the way in which it scrambles binaries like same and other, native and foreign, insider and outsider. These rigid polarities are replaced by an inclusive, interculturating process that makes rigid models of identity obsolete. "What is the Caribbean really ? A multi-relating space. » The repressed collective unconscious of Martinicans is located in this zone of shared histories. Being Martinican is therefore not a question of anchoring a single, exclusive root in sovereign territory but of a submarine convergence of branching roots, ("sub-marine roots: that is drifting, not fixed like one single pole in one single primordial clay"). If Antillean identity is grounded it is on the ever-shifting, unpredictable shoreline, constantly being acted on by heartland and horizon, by opaque interiors and centrifugal relationality.

Glissant's view of Caribbean history is deeply influenced by this image of submarine convergence. History is not the linear providential myth of a transcendental single history. Rather history is nothing but contact, more synchronic than diachronic. Glissant advocates a view of

history that is fissured, multiple: "History is fissured by histories". Indeed, it is the artist's duty to make such a perspective available to the Caribbean as a whole. If Caribbean history is lived as trauma, latent repressed meaning can be awakened by current experiences and the past seen prophetically. For instance, he suggests that Fidel Castro's assault on Moncada can restore the forgotten memory of Matouba where Louis Delgres and his men committed mass suicide instead of being captured by the French in 1802. In his experience of Carifesta in Jamaica in 1976 he envisages for a while what it might be like for a Martinican to be located in Caribbean space and to remember that the victories of Toussaint and Marti were not restricted to their individual territories but were regional and hemispheric in impact. He posits Haiti as the new Caribbean "motherland" and Toussaint, Marti, Bolivar, Juarez, and Garvey as the region's heroes. This is a vision of antillanite fleetingly come to life. "That day in the stadium in Kingston, thousands of West Indians coming from every corner acclaimed the names I cited ... these men who made the real history of the Caribbean, were born there once and for all in the collective consciousness. »

Ultimately, Caribbean Discourse makes a forceful and persuasive case for seeing the Caribbean as the Other America. In the same way that you can never grasp Martinican identity without its Caribbean context, you cannot understand Caribbean identity without its hemispheric context. Glissant cites approvingly the three Americas identified by theorists like Darcy Ribeiro and Rex Nettleford: Euro-America, Meso-America and Plantation-America. The Caribbean is situated in Plantation America and is the force field of creolization in the Americas. It is not an American lake but the estuary of the Americas, the area in which the richest potential in the Americas is deposited. In this regard, these essays explore the poetics of the new

World imaginary, as much in literature as in music, sculpture and painting. The ways of representing American landscape is central to his examination of the works of writers of the Americas Jacques Roumain, Alejo Carpentier, William Faulkner and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In all of these novelists Glissant identifies a poetics of American space in which landscape is not simply décor and these writers do not merely describe the external world realistically. Instead, they use the real metaphorically as a means of exploring the specificities of American time and space.

The uncharted and polysemic nature of new world reality is expressed in the language of the landscape which is primarily that of the forest. This is not the forest of maroon escape nor an ancestral prelapsarian Eden. The forest is a zone of opacity that resists description or illumination. It is precisely this area of opaque particularity that permits island space to establish archipelagic and hemispheric relations. What is left of the particularizing opacity of Martinique after centuries of assimilation allows it resonate with other unregimented spaces of the Americas in which are secreted that element of *démésure* or excess which resists systematization. The challenge to the novel of the Americas is how to represent this *démésure*. "The space of the American novel seems to me open, exploded, rent ... That is why realism, that is the rational and logical representation of the visible, would betray here more than anywhere else the thing represented. » In Martinique the entire spatio-temporal discourse of the Americas exists in miniature. The word that emanates from Martinique's landscape is that of the language of American space. It is paradoxically only by sensing that untranslatable specificity of being Martinican that the latter will be aware of traces of similar phenomena elsewhere in the hemisphere. In this way a poetics of opacity leads to a politics of relationality.

Even more than writing, painting and sculpture manifest the poetics of the Other America. In Caribbean Discourse Wifredo Lam and Matta are seen as exemplary painters whose visual idiom is that of the teeming multiplicity of Glissant's symbolic forest space. Glissant saw the work of these artists, both of whom had strong ties to the Surrealists, as essentially poetic ever since the fifties. In these essays he repeats his admiration for the openness and inventiveness of the imagery of these painters of the Other America.

« In Wifredo Lam the poetics of American landscape (accumulation, expansiveness, weight of the past, African connection, totemic presences) is drawn ... Matta prefigures the burning conflicts which forge the psyche of today's peoples. Paintings of multiplicity ; I venture to say of multilingualism ».

Glissant devotes special attention to the sculpture of Augustin Cardenas, who had attracted his attention from the Sixties when the Cuban artist exhibited in Paris and whose work appeared on the cover of the original French edition of this book of essays. His totemic figures, which draw on the syntax of Brancusi and Arp, are for Glissant sculpted memory which link past and present, light and dark. To that extent Glissant sees Cardenas as a force which "invigorates us". Situated at the centre of these works is what Glissant calls "the rhetoric of accumulated time" not a cry of protest but a discourse of relationality. Indeed, the poetics of a Caribbean discourse manifests itself materially in Cardenas work in a more complete way than any theoretical exposition could. In the essay "Sven landscapes for the sculptures of Cardenas » Glissant recounts Cardenas' visit to Martinique and the form he sculpts from the mahogany found there. For Glissant it translates the language of the landscape as

well as any local storyteller. On a visit to the sculptor's family in Havana, Glissant finds the relational echo of the same poetics beyond the barrier of language.

Edouard Glissant has never included Caribbean Discourse in his subsequent numbering of essays in terms of *Poétiques* nor of *Esthétiques*. These essays are meant to stand alone and may be pivotal in the ultimate creation of a philosophical vision that applies to all cultures but which emanates from the laboratory of Caribbean space. It marks the eventual shift from antillanite to Tout-Monde, from the multirelational specific to a totalizing multiplicity. To that extent, Glissant is careful not to lapse into identitarian thought by turning Creole identity into a category or antillanité into an ideology, like Cesairean negritude or Fanon's national consciousness. Whatever the movement that has attempted to claim his thought, whether *Creolite* or *Litterature monde*, he has maintained a strategic distance. He remained, in his words, as much 'solitaire' and 'solidaire'. These essays, then, are not meant to be read in a systematic or linear way. From the outset, the written form is called into question in the first epigraph, "To describe is to transform". The essays themselves follow the principle of combining oral and scribal, being abstract yet concrete, specifically local yet archipelagic in design. They invite us to get lost in the meandering and digressive word of the storyteller, who has no ultimate truth to reveal. This must be why the book ends with the word "*entendu*", referring his readers as listeners. Ultimately, Glissant directly addresses those hardy travellers who had made their way through "the tangle of my approaches to the real in the Caribbean" and hopes that they have not so much read these essays as heard his voice.

*New York; April 2010*



**Bio:** Born in Trinidad, J. Michael Dash is professor of French at New York University, after being chair of Modern Languages at the University of the West Indies, Mona. He has published a number of books on Haiti including Literature and ideology in Haiti (1981), Haiti and the United States (1988) et Culture and Customs of Haiti (2001). He is also the author of a monograph on Edouard Glissant, whose works (The Ripening, Caribbean Discourse and Monsieur Toussaint) he has translated into English.