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# EUROPE'S BECOMING ARCHIPELAGO

THE TRAIN OF HISTORY IS NEVER ON TIME, but at moments we do experience a feeling of timeliness. Something happens at an auspicious time and then comes to epitomize the present. Or something from the past returns and is summoned to our memory in a new light as it comes to resonate with current events. As the chronological time of teleological history unfolds, events, facts, and artifacts tend to realign themselves, and new constellations emerge. Our present interpretation of the past constantly evolves. By singling out this timeliness, writers expose the paradoxes of the actual experience of time.

That is how Édouard Glissant proceeded throughout his career. He resorted to anachronism in order to challenge European cultural history, performing or singling out timeliness. Timeliness is indeed related to anachronism since what comes on time often happens out of time. In particular, his alternative conception of history leads him to compare, beyond or outside of any chronology, European medieval and contemporary creole cultures. He used Caribbean culture as a point of reference to challenge Western conceptions of history. This enabled him to reimagine a utopian future for Europe in which diversity could thrive: Europe would become an archipelago and learn from the creole experience. This could be termed his anachronical legacy, as in so doing he actually anticipated our present times.

In his seminal 1976 essay "The Quarrel with History," Glissant relates such an alternative history that bends and loops chronology in order to adjust it to the Caribbean "experience broken in time":

> Our history comes to life with a stunning unexpectedness. The emergence of this common experience broken in time (of this concealed parallel in histories) that shapes the Caribbean at this time surprises us before we have even thought about this parallel. . . . The past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us,

> is, however, obsessively present. The duty of the writer is to explore this obsession, to show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present.

The past, erased and suppressed through the Middle Passage and slavery, has to be conjured up in the face of the present and projected onto the future. It is the task of the writer to reanimate it by webbing a text (just as with a piece of fabric, the etymological root of the word "text") with the warp and weft of time itself. Hence, writers reshuffle history and recompose the relations between events of the past, present, and future. He calls this work of both tearing down the present in order to retrieve its unconscious past and tie it back to the weft of time "a prophetic vision of the past."

In line with his claims for the present-day relevance of Caribbean culture and of the creolization of world cultures and languages, Glissant goes on to insist that such a painful realization originating from creole culture should be generalized to European and world history. He writes that in a twist, "History [with a capital H] ends where the histories of those peoples once reputed to be without history come together." Those who were not acknowledged by Eurocentric "History" summon it for its trial and alter it in such a definitive way that it ends and subsists only in the form of plural and diverse histories.

Glissant puts into practice his alternative conception of history by using the Middle Ages, before the formation of nations and the emergence and triumph of what he calls "rationalizing thought," as a privileged site from which to rethink the present evolution of Europe. Glissant started discussing the Middle Ages' relevance for contemporary times and in particular for European cultures in the 1990s with the medieval scholar Alexandre Leupin, at the time his colleague at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, and this exchange was later published under the title *The Baton Rouge Interviews* (2020). Most notably, Glissant stresses the analogy between medieval Romance and creole languages, given that Romance languages were still in a process of formation at that time. Consequently, at an early state, they could be viewed as Latin dialects or, according to Glissant, who projects Caribbean geography onto the medieval European space, as varieties of creole languages. Similar to Caribbean creole languages, they stem from several languages that underwent the cultural and political domination of other languages. Medieval cultures cannot be traced to a singular origin and

are intrinsically other(ed), just as creole culture later was. Rethinking this period by going beyond its devaluation during the Renaissance and Classical epochs as a time of division, destruction, and obfuscation of European culture enables us to reimagine Europe beyond the concept of nation defined during modernity. It would almost be a Europe without Europe, as the concept of Europe did not exist at the time, even though the word existed in a geographical sense. Through this exploration of its history, Glissant anticipates the future of Europe and thus invokes "a prophetic vision of the past" that performs a productive rereading or misreading of the past in order to reimagine the future.

Indeed, by looking back at the Middle Ages' profusion of patois and territories, Glissant invites readers to pay more attention to the present-day cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe below or beyond national thresholds. One does not need to go as far as the Middle Ages to realize how diverse Europe is and how much an unacknowledged homogenization happening at the national, continental, and global scales has impacted local cultures and languages.

When I was an undergraduate student in the literature program at the Sorbonne, I took a course on Romance languages and linguistics. One of our assignments during the winter break was to investigate vernaculars typical of our home region. I took the opportunity at the New Year's family lunch at my paternal grandparents' home to ask my grandfather whether he could tell me about such linguistic oddities. Instead of providing specimens or definitions, he started to speak a whole new language that I had never heard before, had of course never learned, and had no idea that he could even speak. This made me realize what French philosopher Henri Bergson meant, probably referring to Yiddish (another phantomatic linguistic presence in Europe), when he epitomized the experience of involuntary memory (later so central to his cousin Marcel Proust's writings) through the remembrance of "these languages that we have no memory of learning." This was also what my grandfather was experiencing and what I was vicariously experiencing.

I later realized that my maternal grandfather, who was born Italian to a migrant family from the French-Italian border, not only spoke Italian, as I thought he did, but also had a certain knowledge of Piedmontese and Occitan. I only knew that my maternal grandfather had taken night classes and worked hard not only to learn French but to completely lose his Italian

accent. He had even translated his first name into French. What got lost in translation was the actual nuances of Italian or rather the specific strains of Romance languages that he spoke. Amongst the particularly representative stories that my paternal grandfather told me in the variety of Franco-Provençal that he spoke (a dialect group that also includes certain dialects from Northwestern Italy) was one about a young farmer who had just been drafted and was confronted for the first time with "standard" French in the person of his colonel. My grandfather resorted initially to this anecdote in order to help me fathom how people who came from two villages separated by more than 10 kilometres were speaking dialects that were so distinct that they were not mutually intelligible. What was striking to me was the fact that neither of my grandfathers ever spoke or had even mentioned these languages in front of me before. It seemed to have vanished from their existences altogether, and it seemed to disappear a second time when they passed away.

As Glissant warns in another interview about Europe that he gave to the journal *Mots Pluriels* in 1998: "Languages are mortal. And if the Creole language becomes an exotic, folkloric or self-indulgent language, it will also certainly disappear. One must fight the disappearance of languages as, with each and every language that dies out, it is a part of the world's imaginary which also disappears." Or, as Simon Gikandi points out in his essay "The Fragility of Languages" (2015), these language narratives convey a unique way of experiencing the world, and thus such "stories [about the loss of a language] are also a reminder of the loss of a person, a culture, and perhaps a way of life."

Like all creole writers, Glissant went through a similar questioning regarding his mother tongue. Throughout his career, he was constantly asked why he did not write in creole. Part of the response has always been that, like many Antillean writers of his generation, he studied in France, was trained in philology at the Sorbonne, and started dialoguing with the writers and intellectuals of the past and of his time with French as a lingua franca.

In Maryse Condé's fictional biography *Victoire: My Mother's Mother* (2006), in which she tries to piece together the few fragments about the life of her grandmother that she was able to retrieve, she describes how her grandmother abruptly left her family and her island of Marie-Galante for one of the main islands of Guadeloupe, Grande-Terre. Condé's mother repeated this original gesture, barely mentioning her own mother to Condé, to

say nothing of their shared origins. Condé's mother then became a teacher and, in turn, a head teacher—a position she owed to her mother's migration and sacrifices. Condé's mother represents, for her, a certain ideal of education, in particular through the practice and knowledge of the metropolitan French language and culture, while Marie-Galante, the island of her grandmother, represents "a mythical island, a paradise to reconquer." Hence, I find this passage emblematic of the cultural and linguistic loss resulting from education, which tends to uproot, obliterate origins, and erase maternal, familial languages. The island of Marie-Galante, forgotten family stories, and lost languages: these are the abandoned islands in the archipelago of our (un)consciousness.

It reminds me of the guilt that my grandfathers must have felt about "these languages that they once spoke." As one of my professors, a specialist in Occitan, recounted to me, children in her school would be beaten by their teachers if they were caught speaking Occitan not only in the classroom but on the school playground. I understood through these kinds of anecdotes that because of the punishment they endured and the desire to both integrate and progress socially that they retained, my grandfathers, as many others must have, discarded their "maternal" languages. There were also many incentives for my grandfathers to master the official version of French, since it would help them to advance their careers and to speak with their colleagues, customers, or coworkers. Such mastery would also, of course, make it easier to communicate with their wives, who were both speaking a different dialect. What I found striking was that I could measure the pace of linguistic centralization and uniformization through the course of three generations; the advent of national broadcasting on the radio and then on the TV had most likely played a big part. The linguistic diversity that can seem to us as belonging to a distant past (such as the Middle Ages evoked by Glissant) was still accessible to us through the voice and memory of our grandparents. While it was certainly useful and necessary to learn a lingua franca, was the resulting movement of standardization, uniformization, obsolescence, and erasure necessary or unavoidable? During the period of the French Revolution, dialects and patois seemed to be connected to religion, monarchy, reactionary tendencies, ignorance, and obscurantism. Republicans thus saw these languages as a threat to the establishment of the new state, to the centralization of power, and to the dissemination of Republican values and scientific knowledge. But French unity or stability was no lon-

ger at stake by the beginning of the twentieth century. Glissant's emphasis on margins and diversity, which points to the diversity of creole languages competing with culturally or politically dominant tongues, evokes a utopic outcome, in which all variations could persist.

In the same 1998 interview, which is titled "Europe and the Antilles," Glissant indicates how he discerns a future for Europe's diversity:

> What is good now is that Europe is becoming an archipelago. That is to say that beyond the barrier of nations, we see islands emerging in relation to one to another. . . . Thus, it seems to me like uniting Europe means developing these islands, to the detriment maybe of the notion of nation and therefore of national borders.

By declaring that "Europe is becoming an archipelago," Glissant is reacting to the evolution of the European space after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the establishment of the European Union. In particular, he singles out two main features in the European construction: the erasure of borders and the regionalization of Europe. Glissant was especially interested in what has been termed the regionalization of Europe. On the one hand, such regionalization stems from democratic aspirations and the concomitant expressions of linguistic and cultural differences. On the other hand, regionalization also results from the construction of the EU itself, as foreseen by its governance structures and the variety of countries that have acceded to membership. As a matter of fact, "the (dis)integration of Europe" brings about a possible reconfiguration of the European space. The European community could be an archipelago composed of "islands" connected to each other in multiple and complex ways. Such islands go beyond the dialectics between an outside and an inside and between the two distinct entities implied respectively in the words "border" and "frontier," which have historically informed the definition of European nations. Glissant does not simply describe an erasure of borders, a dissolution of nation-states, and a formation of alternative entities that straddle those national entities and would be based on former nations or on linguistic or ethnic communities, such as the Basque country, Catalonia, or Savoy. He views this European evolution in a positive light and calls for a strategic use of this "differentiation" of the EU and beyond.

Glissant underscores in the same interview the necessity of a change in the European imaginary, as far as identity constructions are concerned, so

that Europe would be able to reflect both its own and the world's diversity. He contrasts (both in this 1998 interview and at greater length in his 1990 book *Poetics of Relation*) what he calls "atavistic cultures" and "composite cultures."

Atavistic cultures, to which European nations belong, define themselves through a history of filiation that traces them to a single root and corresponds to an "excluding identity conception," which Glissant condemns. On the contrary, his characterization of Europe strategically resorts to the notion of the archipelago and its connotation of connected islands, which opposes the traditional imagery of the isolated island. It corresponds to a transplantation of European culture onto the territories of the Caribbean seas, which is inseparable from the consequences of colonialism and its resulting displacement of languages, cultures, and values. Glissant thus characterizes the figure of the secluded island as atavistic, and he yields maximum power from the geographical analogy, since it offers a fundamental challenge to the European traditions of both nationalism and philosophy.

Composite cultures, on the other hand, are a result of a complex history and have been engendered through the colonialist expansion of the atavistic European nations. Such cultures cannot define themselves as issued from a single root but rather emerge from a multiplicity of sources. Creole culture is both an example of and a model for such composite cultures. As a result, the identity of these cultures always integrates an otherness that cannot be distinguished and plays a fundamental and definitional role in the emergence of these cultures. Through Glissant's reshuffling of European history, composite cultures, instead of seeming to be some sort of derivative or unintended consequence, come to epitomize European culture and its future.

Ten years have already passed since Glissant's death, and it seems that his pronouncements about the future of Europe and its disintegration or archipelagization were prophecies. Indeed, the cases of Scotland and Catalonia perfectly illustrate the trend that Glissant identified in the 1990s. Scotland has tried to emancipate itself from the United Kingdom not merely because a nationalistic consciousness has developed there but also in order to dissociate itself from isolationistic and nationalistic Brexit policies adopted by the English-dominated conservative government—policies that seemed aimed at seceding from the European community. Scottish nationalists, and especially the Scottish National Party, have invoked the autonomy of Scotland in order to preserve its participation in an increasingly decentralized

EU and to better represent its political views: more liberal, social, and open to the outside world than England has historically been. Similarly, Catalan officials and NGO leaders have asked the EU to arbitrate its dispute with the Spanish government (in both right-wing and socialist iterations) and thus recognize its autonomy. These two cases embody a reversal or a complexification of the relationship between language, culture, and identity. Europe no longer symbolizes a blending, overarching, and universal antidote to nationalism; rather, it appears to many outside observers as a site of diversity along with cultural and linguistic differences, all of which have, historically, been seen by reactionary actors as a threat to unity and a source of division, quarrel, and ultimately war. The most popular embodiment of this fear remains the Balkans, which inspired the concept of "balkanization"—the sword of Damocles allegedly hanging over Europe since the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact, many European reactionaries (including those in England and Spain) have been quick to brandish that sword at any claim for greater diversity and representation.

While the interviews collected in *The Baton Rouge Interviews* took place before Glissant wrote his most important work on relation and identity, they resonated strongly with the debate in France around the notion of "national identity" stirred by the creation of a ministry dedicated to both immigration and national identity. Yoking these two concepts could only conjure dark spectres of France's fascist past. Glissant's interpretation of Europe's history, fundamentally anti-nationalistic, seemed to prevent and condemn such an association as, according to Glissant, identities and cultures stand both below and beyond the threshold of the nation-state. That's why, following the publication of *The Baton Rouge Interviews*, the collaborative news website *Rue89* asked Glissant for his opinion on the issue of "national identity." In this interview, Glissant underscored the importance of Europe's heretical movements, which were both a testimony to and a realization of its own diversity but which were not exported during colonization, contrary to what Glissant called the "thoughts of the system" (rationalism, Cartesianism, dialectics, empiricism). Glissant's remarks point to the necessity of implementing an alternative history of Europe and its (post)colonial displacements—that is to say, a history of *heresies*—and contemplate the consequences that such heresies have on the definition of "Europe." The interrelated exploration of Europe's margins and its displacements provides just such a non-Eurocentric reading of European cultures. As a result, Glis-

sant (in the same interview) characterizes the "great poets," a label that encompasses writers as diverse as Arthur Rimbaud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Antonin Artaud, as "heretics, poets of the particular, the singular and the margin." For Glissant, it is the exploration of margins that affords diversity and multiplicity, which the poet summarizes through this paradox: "the totality is in the margin."

Many of the heretical writers who interested Glissant invented their own language or transformed the dominant language in which they were writing through the coining of words or the use of rare words. These were often words from the cultures and regions of these authors' origins. Furthermore, many Romance-language writers during the twentieth century, after writing in their national language, decided to return to their regional ones. These experiences were often quite sporadic, resulting in the publication of a single opus. For instance, José Ángel Valente, who was hailed as the most prominent high modernist Spanish poet, published a collection of poems in Galician, the language of his home region. Similarly, Pier Paolo Pasolini, the famous poet, filmmaker, and writer, wrote significant poetry in Friulian, his maternal language, but soon returned to writing in Italian. Glissant never wrote in creole but instead, following the lead of the heretic writers he admired, tried to reform French from the inside by injecting creole features into his writings. These efforts illustrate his concept of creolization as an ongoing contemporary cultural process that is opposed to any fixed essence of a presupposed creole identity, which is inherent to the concept of *créolité*. Glissant used creole words, expressions, and turns of phrase in order to inhabit French in a way that might seem to be a reversal of the manner in which the creole language came into existence but that is in fact an effort to prolong its life and enlarge its scope. Glissant's practice is emblematic of the cultural and linguistic exchanges that he discerns at work in his alternative model of the world, which he calls "*le Tout-monde*" or "the Whole-World"—the world that includes all differences and possibilities instead of excluding and limiting them through a process of reduction. Both Glissant's answer to the question of whether he should work in creole and his overall writings thus provide clues on how to give a voice to these languages and give rise to the diversity he calls for. His goal is the creolization of the French language, which corresponds linguistically to his reinterpretation of European history.

If we look carefully at French, in particular at technical, regional, rural,

or rarer words still in use today, they also testify as to how it was hybridized by the languages it erased. I remember as a teenager harvesting hay with my neighbour using a "gade," a burlap in our regional dialect; women and children would do this in difficult-to-access areas or small plots in the mountainous regions of France, even after the advent of mechanization. The word encapsulates this practice and these summery days of our life, as do other words I learned from my grandfather.

As writers we can open the treasure troves of such words and tell the stories of the people and cultural practices associated with them. Beyond that kind of archaeology, we can also learn and further teach these languages and their corresponding cultures by disseminating and translating the texts that have sometimes been written about these practices and/or in these languages. What is at stake is not so much the emergence of an identity as the transmission of a complex history.