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Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity: English Translation of Édouard Glissant's Introduction à une poétique du divers

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Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity:
English Translation of Édouard Glissant's *Introduction à une poétique*
du divers

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Dr. Jeff Humphries

Department of French

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the Upper Division Honors Program.

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Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Translator's Introduction

My earliest experiences with Edouard Glissant's previously un-translated *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity* included a borrowed copy of the text, a notebook filled with hasty scribbling, and a serious doubt as to whether this collection of recorded speeches would ever see its realization in English, at least by my hand. Two years and one hundred and seven pages later, it is with great pleasure that I present to you a translation of what could perhaps be considered an introduction to Glissant's entire poetic, spanning his thoughts on Creolization's presence in our world and the subsequent implications of Relation in cultural exchange and meeting.

Throughout my attempts to understand and accurately relay Glissant's diligent study, a myriad of new perspectives have opened before me. The process of translation, the very practice described by Glissant as "an honest operation of Creolization," has graciously allowed me to participate in the ever-growing expanse of Diversity and its wandering search for the *Tout-monde*. Surpassing both its philosophical and literary aims, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity* touches at the very heart of our current situation in the world and has provided me with the opportunity to explore my own relationship with language, culture, and *being* in the face of the whole-world.

This work owes much to the unending patience and careful scrutiny of Dr. Jeff Humphries, without whom it would have been impossible to undertake even the most primitive study of the elusive art of translation.

- Julee LaPorte, April 2007

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Author's Preface

I've chosen the generic title for these four lectures in honor of Victor Segalen. Undoubtedly the text suffers from an excess of theory wherever it has been necessary to approach what I call The Diverse and the entanglements of the *Tout-monde*¹ in the descriptions of landscapes and situations in the resounding interplay of harmonies and disharmonies which are intended to account for our common "being-in-the-world," but I have tried to say as much as possible in a limited time, to go directly to what is most clear if not to what is most pertinent.

So this is a work built out of compromise in which the spoken language almost always has priority over the reserves of writing and in which the "I" (first person, narrator) predominates all the more because the interviews that follow these lectures necessarily raise the stakes of engagement and argument. I hope that in the reading there will be the sense of a search, perhaps an anxious or wandering search, and not of a system closing upon itself.

I would like to thank Jean-Claude Casteliain, Joël Desroisiers, Lise Gauvin, Jean-Claude Gémard, Robert Melançon, Gaston Miron, and Pierre Nepveu, among the others who have accompanied me on this path, as well as Martin Robitaille who insured the transcription of all the text.

¹ Tout-monde: literally, "all-world" or "entire-world." This term was kept in the French so as to avoid confusion with another term employed by Glissant, "whole-world" (*totalité-monde*). While Glissant develops this theme of the *Tout-monde* throughout the course of these lectures, a more comprehensive study of the subject can be found in his book, *Traité du Tout-monde* (Paris, Gallimard, 1997).

Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity

Creolizations in the Caribbean and the Americas

The object of these four lectures may appear complex and erratic. It is probable that during these presentations I will skip back and forth between themes that are intertwined and inform one another; this is my *modus operandi*.

The first approach that I took of what one could call the Americas, the first experience that I had there, even before I became aware of the collective or personal human drama that was gathered therein, was of the landscape. The American countries – and here I am speaking of all the countries on the American continent – always seemed to me very unusual in comparison to what I knew of those in Europe. The European countries seemed to be a very regimented ensemble, united in harmony with a sort of ritualized rhythm of the seasons. Every time that I go back to the Americas, when I am on an island like Martinique, when it is the land where I was born, or when I am on the American continent itself, I am struck by the openness of that landscape. I call this an "unruptured" landscape – a term that I evidently made up. There is certainly some irruption and some breakage, some eruption maybe, much that is real and much that is unreal. And when I am in the heights of Sainte-Marie on Bezaudin Mountain, the site of my birth, and I see the espalier plants almost vertical in these heights of Bezaudin or perhaps of another mountain called Pérou, I get the same sensation as in viewing a much larger landscape, much more vast than that of Chavin in Peru. Chavin is the cradle of pre-Incan agriculture where I saw the same espaliered plants. And it makes you wonder how the peasant working these heights keeps his footing on a strip of Earth only 30

centimeters wide.

In these spaces, the eye does not try to tame the shrewd tricks which perspective lends; one's gaze carries a single outburst to the vertical flats and to a gnarled hodgepodge of reality.

Found both on a small island and on the continent itself, this American landscape always seemed "unbroken." And it is from there that I have gathered this feeling of unified-diversity – one part Caribbean island and another of the countries of the American mainland. In this sense, the Caribbean always seemed to preface the American continent. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Caribbean Sea was called the Peruvian Sea, even though Peru is on the other side of the continent and has absolutely no relation to the Caribbean. It is there that a type of introduction to the continent could be found, a type of relationship between what must be left as it is and what we have to try and come to know.

The Caribbean was the site of the first landing place of the enslaved Africans, after which they were sent to North America, Brazil and other various islands in the region. While significant within the American universe, the Caribbean islands have never been considered exemplary, but I am also wary of examples in general. And yet, these islands have been mostly ignored for a long time with the exception of Haiti, the first black republic in the history of the world, and Cuba with its revolution. Today I am interested in not only singing the praises of the Caribbean but also in studying the phenomenon of fits and starts that the islands share with the American mainland.

I will begin by defining what, along with a few others, I believe to be the primary characteristic of the Americas. According to researchers like Darcy Ribeiro of Brazil, Emmanuel Bonfil Batalla of Mexico, and Rex Nettleford of Jamaica, this underlying

principle of the Americas centers on the relationship between three different types of America that can be defined as follows. There is the America of those who bore witness, of those who were already there. We can call this Meso-America. There is the Euro-America of those who came from Europe and preserved the usage of customs and traditions from their European origins. This includes Quebec, Canada, the United States, and some cultural aspects of Chili and Argentina. Neo-America, creolized America, includes the Caribbean, northeastern Brazil, the Guianas and Curacao, the southern United States, the Caribbean shores of Venezuela and Columbia, and a large part of Central America and Mexico.

These definitions are not mutually exclusive. There are some overlapping aspects of the three Americas. Meso-America is present in Quebec and Canada as well as the United States. Countries like Venezuela and Columbia might be said to be part Caribbean and part Andean, in other words, part Neo-American and part Meso-American. Among these regional islands, there have been multiple collisions and conflicts between the three types of America. But what characterizes relations between these three Americas is that while the America of Creolization, Neo-America, borrows from Meso- and Euro-America, it still has a tendency to influence them. And what is interesting about all of this in the phenomenon of Creolization, the phenomenon that influenced Neo-America, is that the population of this Neo-America is very special. It is here that Africa prevails.

One could say that there were generally three types of populations in the Americas. The “armed immigrant” landed the Mayflower and sailed up the Saint Lawrence River. He came with his boats, his guns, *etc.*, and he is the “immigrant founder.” Following him, there is the domesticated “immigrant family-man” who came

with his canteen, his oven, his cooking pots, and pictures of his family; he ultimately populated a large part of North and South America. Finally, there is he whom I shall call the “naked immigrant,” he who was brought by force onto the continent and who constitutes the basis of the fundamentally circular race of the Caribbean. The term “circular” cannot be omitted here because it implies a sort of spiraling radiance that is already far from the bull’s eye that marks all colonization.

I have always said that the Caribbean is different from the Mediterranean in that it is an open sea that diffracts while the Mediterranean concentrates and confines. If great civilizations and major monotheistic religions were born around the Mediterranean basin, it is because of the potential of that sea to sway men to war and conflict and to thoughts of solitary man rather than thoughts of Man and Unity. The Caribbean, however, diffracts and brings about a diverse commotion of cultures. Not only a sea of transit and passage, it is also a sea of meetings and implications. That which happened in the Caribbean during the past three centuries is literally this: a meeting of cultural elements coming from completely different horizons to the point of Creolization where so much has been exchanged and combined as to come up with something completely new and unforeseeable, which is in essence the reality of Creole. Neo-America – found in Brazil, on the shores of the Caribbean, on the islands, and in the southern United States – gives a very real experience of Creolization through slavery, oppression and dispossession by the many systems of slavery. Its abolition was stretched over a long period of time (a little before 1830 just until 1868), and through these dispossessions, oppressions and crimes a true conversion of “being” was realized.

I would like to study this change of the self with you, this conversion of being, over the course of these four lectures. The thesis that I will defend is the following: the

type of Creolization that takes place in Neo-America is the same that occurs in the other Americas and in the rest of the world. The thesis that I will defend before you is that the world creolizes itself; the cultures of the world come into contact with each other in a very violent yet ultimately conscious way. They transform themselves through exchange, fatal collisions and pitiless wars but also through advances of consciousness and hope which allow me to say that humanity today abandons only with great difficulty something it has worked at for a long time. This applies mainly to the idea that the identity of a being is not valid and recognizable if it is not exclusive to the identity of all other possible beings. And it is this painful mutation in human thought that I would like to track down with you.

What is Creolization? I have proposed three different types of peoples in the Americas and that, among the three, the African population has withstood more suffering and misfortune than any other – not counting the extermination of the Native Americans in both the North and the South, and that must surely be counted. There exists today a fourth type of internal population, composed of the Haitian and Cuban *boat people*. It is a population critical to the formation of American societies. But if one examines the first three historic forms of population mentioned earlier, one notices that the cultures of the European immigrants like the Scottish, Irish, Italian, German, French, *etc.*, all came with their songs, their family traditions, their tools, their images of God, *etc.* However, the Africans came without anything, without any possibilities, without even their language. The inside of an African slave boat is both the place and moment where African languages disappeared. Slaves who spoke the same language were never put together in

the same boat, just like on the plantations. One was found robbed of all the common elements of everyday life, especially one's own language.

What happened to this immigrant? He recomposed through its traces a language and an art that one could say is for all. For example, in an ethnic community on the American continent, one retains the memory of songs for funerals, marriages, baptisms, joy, and sadness, all from the old country. One sings these songs for a hundred years and maybe even more in the diverse occasions of family-life. The deported African had no chance of maintaining these types of time-honored traditions, but he did create something unforeseeable from his lone powers of memory, from the singular thought of the trace that stayed with him: he composed on the one hand the Creole languages and on another one of the art-forms validated by all in the Americas. He had a hand in jazz music which was reconstituted with the help of adopted instruments but remained largely composed of fundamentally African rhythms. Because this Neo-American did not sing African songs for two or three centuries, he re-instated those forms of art which he put forth as valuable to all in the Caribbean, in Brazil and in North America by thinking of the trace. The thought of the trace seems to be introducing a new dimension of what we must combat in the very real situation of the world which I have named the thoughts of a system or the systems of thought. These two were prodigiously fertile, prodigiously conquering and prodigiously deadly. The thought of the trace is that which today most validly opposes the false universality of systematic thought.

Creolization's phenomena are important because they allow us to practice a new approach to the spiritual dimension of the humanities, an approach that passes through a re-composition of the mental landscape of today's humanities. For Creolization assumes that all the cultural elements put in place must have the "same value" in order for them to

be truly effectual. If in these cultural elements there are some deemed inferior by comparison to others, then Creolization does not truly take place. It would still happen but only in a very bastardly, unjust way. In creolized areas like the Caribbean or Brazil, the cultural elements were put in place by way of the people, namely the African slave trade. There the black and African cultural components were commonly seen as inferior. All the same, Creolization is practiced in these conditions but has left behind a violent, uncontrollable stain. Throughout almost all of Neo-America, the balance between those elements put in place must be restored. This must be done primarily through a reevaluation of African heritage, such as Haitian indigence, the Harlem Renaissance, the poetry of negritude by men such as Damas and Césaire, and the theory of negritude by Senghor. The act of Creolization in the belly of the plantation – the plantation being the most unjust and sinister of all places – was present all the same, but it left man and his “being” like a bird beating with a single wing because the self was destabilized by its inherent diminution, which in turn caused it to consider itself as such, a diminution that is similar to its proper African value. This also happened in the West Indies and in other parts of the Caribbean. After 1848, the Caribbean was populated in part by Hindu immigrants who found work there and primarily held the same status as slaves. Those values coming from India were often discredited, and it took a long time before we came to the understanding that we have today, namely that the descendents of this Hindu population are an important part of the phenomenon of Creolization in the Caribbean. In Trinidad, the Hindu and the African descendants each comprise nearly half of the population of the island.

Creolization requires that the heterogeneous elements put in place valorize each other, meaning that there is no degrading or lessening of being, of the interior or the

exterior, in this contact. Then why Creolization and not *métissage*², a simple mixing of races? It is because the effects of Creolization are unforeseeable, whereas the results of *métissage* can be calculated. It is possible to calculate the interbreeding of plants by cutting and the interbreeding of animals by crossings. One can know by grafts what a red pea and a white pea will produce from one generation to the next, but Creolization is like crossbreeding with an added element that defies all efforts to predict it. It is as equally difficult to predict the effects of Creolization as it was to predict how the journey to America inclined its people to create an entirely original language and system of arts. Creolization governs the unpredictable in relation to *métissage*. This kind of Creolization created cultural and linguistic micro-climates in America that were absolutely unexpected. Creolization is the site where the outcome of languages and cultures, abruptly placed one on top of the other, can be seen. In Louisiana, for example, the creation of zydeco music is an application of traditional Cajun music with the rhythms and power of jazz and rock-n-roll. There too we find the *Black Indians*, a tribe born from a mixture of black slaves and Native Americans. I attended a march held by the Black Indians in New Orleans, and there was something absolutely unpredictable there that surpassed the simple fact of mixed races. These cultural and linguistic micro-climates which helped to create Creolization in the Americas are decisive because they are signs of things that really and actually happen in the world. And there are truly cultural and linguistic micro/macro-climates in the world. And when this mutual penetration of cultural and linguistic elements is very strong, the old demons of purity and non-Creolization resist and light the infernal points that we see burning on the surface of the

² *métissage* : literally blending, mixing. The French was kept in this instance (and throughout the text) to preserve the distinction made by Glissant between Creolization, the interaction of different cultures and the unpredictable results of their encounter, and what we could consider hybrid breeding or mixing, as seen in plant and most animal species

Earth today.

How does this definition of Creolization apply to the shocks, harmonies, recoilments, repulsions and attractions found within cultural elements? I have already explained why Creolization excludes the idea of miscegenation. The very word ‘Creolization’ is very close to the idea of Creole and the reality of the Creole languages. It is a composite language, born of encounters between fundamentally heterogeneous linguistic elements. The francophone Creoles of the Caribbean came into being as a result of their encounters with speakers from Brittany and Normandy in the seventeenth century. Despite a syntax that is hard to identify, their language was a type of synthesis of linguistic syntaxes from sub-Saharan West Africa. In other words, the lexicon, the vocabulary and the Normand-speaker himself have nothing to do with the syntax of this new language. The syntax, which is quite possibly a synthesis of different syntaxes, came from African languages. The fusion of these two, whatever may be said to the contrary, began as a kind of “black dialect” which emerged from the work situation in the islands. It was absolutely impossible to foresee that in two centuries a subjugated, enslaved people could produce a language from heterogeneous elements. I say that the Creole language is a language in which its constituting elements are different from one another. However, I would not label the superb language of the dub-poets from Jamaica as Creole. Some say that the language of poets such as Michael Smith and Linton Kewsi Johnson or (more recently) Edward Kamau Braithwaite is a Creole-Jamaican – maybe I must invent a new word for this – but I do not call it Creole because it relates to the genial and aggressive deformation of one language – the English language – by its subversive practitioners. I do not claim that there is a hierarchy in this matter. Is it a pidgin? But “pidgin” is so extremely negative and derogatory that I am not able to apply

it to a single language. My Jamaican friends have told me that it would be impossible for their language to be considered as a pidgin because it is Creole. I personally do not believe that it is a Creole language, but we must find another word for it. Creole is at the very least divided, that is to say that it has at least two constituting elements. This extends to the *criolo* of Cape Verde, the *crio* of Senegal, the *papiamentu* of Curacao and the Creole of Martinique, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. The voluntary and decided way that the Jamaican poets use the English language is not a Creole, neither a pidgin, nor a dialect. It is something new, and we must be aware of that. However, we must also realize that upon further study we would find that most languages have Creole origins.

Concerning the Creole French-speakers of the Caribbean and Indian Oceans, my hypotheses are as follows:

- The French speakers from Brittany and Normandy were already “derivative” enough to allow the Creole phenomenon (linguistic Creolization) to occur, whereas the English and the Spanish, already very “organic” and well-constituted, generally resisted this sort of Creolization.
- It is probable that linguistic Creolization functions better in tiny, well-defined places such as islands, which may or may not be organized into archipelagos (the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, or the islands of Cape Verde for example). One could call these the laboratories of Creolization. These hypotheses do not give credit to the French for the appearance of Creolization like they would

have us believe.

It is for these reasons that I think that the term Creolization is applicable to the current situation of the world, meaning to that situation where a “whole Earth,” finally realized, allows that at the nucleus of this totality (where there is no longer any trace of organic authority and where all is archipelagic) the most far off and most heterogeneous cultural elements can be put together. It is this that produces unforeseeable results.

This perception of what happens in the world today rests on the obligatory definition found between two generic forms of culture. The first form I will call atavistic, and under its reign Creolization has been in effect for a long time. The other I will call composite, and under it Creolization occurs practically before our very eyes. The Caribbean countries and the countries of this ruptured circularity which I have just described all partake in composite culture. We notice that these composite cultures tend to become atavistic, as they tend to lay claim to a sort of longevity or timelessness that seems essential to all cultures, in order to be sure of their place in the world and to have the boldness to assert themselves upon it. These atavistic cultures tend to creolize themselves, and in doing so they defend, in an oftentimes dramatic manner, the statutes of their identity like a singular root. Take for example Yugoslavia and Lebanon. This conception of identity comes from the Europeans and Westerners who say that the whole of their identity comes from a single source and is exclusive of all others. This view of identity is opposed to what we are presently witnessing in composite cultures around the world: that identity is a factor and a result of Creolization. Identity is like a "rhizome" in that it is less like a singular root and more like a web of roots that interconnect. As soon as this thought is formulated, a plethora of troubling problems present themselves

because when we speak of single-rooted identity meeting other identities, we have the impression that a threat of dilution approaches. We still follow the old model where I continue to tell myself that if I have contact with the other then I am no longer myself, and if I am no longer myself then I am completely and utterly lost! In the grand scheme of the world, a very important question is formulating: how to be oneself without shutting out the other and how to open up to the other without losing oneself? This is the situation of composite cultures in the Americas. Where is the tangential point between these composite cultures that tend to atavism and these atavistic cultures that tend to creolize themselves?

It is absolutely necessary to discuss this question by way of a detour in order to escape those bloody and mortal oppositions that at this time animate and agitate the disorder of the world. We must ask ourselves the following question: is it necessary to renounce the spirituality, the mentality, and the imaginary moved by the conception of single-rooted identity, which kills everything outside of itself, in order to enter into the difficult complexities of an identity that relates, that is open to the other, without danger of dilution? If we do not ask ourselves these kinds of questions, it seems that we are not being symbiotic, not relating to the real situation of the world. And it appears that it is only a poetic art of Relation that will allow us to “understand” these phases and implications of a people's real situation in the world today and that will authorize us to try and leave the enclosures to which we are reduced. It seems that there are places in the world today with this type of impossible defiance, places such as South Africa. Of course one of the main objectives of the A.N.C. and Nelson Mandela is to regulate those

issues concerning the economic survival of the entire portion of the population that was held back in the misery of slavery and apartheid. But it seems that there is more at stake for us in regard to the twenty-first century: if the A.N.C. and Nelson Mandela do not succeed in bringing the Zoulous, the Blacks, the Mulattoes, the Indians, and the Whites together within the context of a united South Africa, there is something of our twenty-first century, of our future, that will be threatened and eventually lost. At the end of his autobiography, Nelson Mandela asks the following question, more or less in these terms: “All of the paths that I've taken up to this point (1912-1994), all of my battles, are nothing compared to what remains to be done. Because what we have left to do is our most important task – to have all of the people live together.” I believe that it is here that we depart from the idea of single-rooted identity and enter into the truth of Creolization in the world. I believe that we must draw nearer to the thought of the trace, to a non-system of thought that will be neither dominating, nor systematic, nor imposing. Rather, it will be an anti-system of intuitive, fragile and ambiguous thought that will come closest to the extraordinary complexity and multiple dimensions of the world in which we live. Crossed and elevated by the trace, the landscape ceases to be a suitable decor and becomes a part of the drama of Relation. Is it no longer the passive outer layer of the omnipotent Narrative but the changing and unnecessary dimension of all change and exchange. This idea of the trace becomes inseparable from anyone who lives a poetics of Relation.

The Diverse extends outward from every unexpected appearance in the form of minorities which were unknown until the recent past, crushed beneath the weight of

monolithic thought, fractal manifestations of a sensibility which is constantly reforming and regrouping itself in unexpected ways.

All of these possibilities and contradictions are written into the diversity of the world. In Martinique for example, one cannot help becoming aware of a sort of participation with the liveliness of the Caribbean, in a nascent Caribbean energy which brings together Spanish, English, French, and other creolized linguistic elements that brings the country together with a native vivacity. And at the same time in the very same place, we become aware of a break with tradition in music, food, and the art of clothes as the people of Martinique are passively subsumed in the flux of the moment without any inhibition of doubt, because the phenomenon is not subject to critical scrutiny.

Questions

Robert Melançon- I shall I start with a small question of detail: I have noticed in passing the definition that you have given to Creolization, and I shall try to quote it exactly so as to avoid betraying you: “That which occurs when the most diverse heterogeneous elements are put together and result in something unforeseeable.” It seems that this definition irresistibly evokes the definition of the poetic image offered by Breton and Reverdy. This concept, too, brings together two elements that differ, and it is with this distance and some shock that brings life to something unforeseeable that is called the image. This is my first question: do you accept this reconciliation?

Édouard Glissant – Absolutely. That explanation confirms that the act of poetry is a part of knowing what is real in the world.

R.M – My second question is much larger in scope. You have described in a very convincing manner a process of world Creolization that is currently in progress, and you have evoked quickly, but sufficiently enough for us to understand it, the idea of historic Creolization as seen for example by the impact of Christianity on the ancient world and of those new peoples we called “barbarians.” And so, can we redefine Creolization as a state of disturbances within established systems, and would we not be justified in expecting that at the end of this long period of disturbance, a final stasis will occur? You yourself have said that all languages are Creole in origin if we go back far enough. Creolization in the world today happens at a time when the Earth is finally one. Therefore will it end up in a state of homogeneity that completely arrests all movement because there are no longer exterior, foreign elements?

É.G- Regarding your first remark, I agree entirely with the definition of the poetic image, especially with Reverdy. I believe that, more so than Breton, he went straight to

the heart of the matter.

As far as modern Creolization, its most important aspects are its stunning character and its ability to remain self-conscious. Cultural contacts have always taken place, but they were overshadowed by temporal shores of which they could not be aware. For instance, the Roman Gaul of the thirteenth century – he was there before that time as well – was not aware that there had been a “combining” of Gaul and Rome. He thought he had always been a Roman citizen. He was not conscious of his own cultural fusion because he was not going beyond himself intellectually. The fantastic thing about modern Creolization is its violent entry into consciousness. When I see on television that an earthquake has occurred in a far away country, I am not only acutely aware of the physical devastation but I am also impregnated by the language of the people involved, of their way of life which has been lost, etc. I think immediately of the earthquake *that has yet to take place* in my own country. I am filled with all of this which is why I often say that the contemporary writer, the modern writer, is not monolingual even if he only knows one language. He writes before all languages of the world. Right now, does this process – because we all know that Creolization is a process – envision its own end in a state, in a final phase? I do not think so because it is consciousness that reactivates the process, and it is a non-consciousness, a non-science, a non-knowledge that stabilized it as a definite identity. I believe that we have arrived at a certain point in the evolution of humanity where the human being has started to accept that he himself is perpetually in progress, that he is not a singular being but is *being*. And like all that is being, he changes. And I think that this is one of the major intellectual, spiritual, and mental permutations of our era which is frightening to all. We are afraid of the idea that one day we are going to admit that we are not an absolute entity but a changing being. And I

believe that this notion of consciousness and violent rapidity means that from now on we will not arrive at a new state, at a new fixed phase. At least in the whole Earth there would be some recognition of our opposition to an absolute other. For example, what if aliens were to be discovered? That means that there would be an absolute, definite other in opposition to the identity of those inhabiting Earth. And at this time, the process risks fixing itself to a new unique-earth-identity that will be opposed to an absolute other, something absolutely foreign. But aside from this instance, I do not believe that Creolization can be arrested or reach a point of stasis.

Q. – For me, it seems that Creole languages are a rather “local” phenomenon, and even if its processes are identical to the global process that you described earlier, I do not think that you can move from the particular situation of Creole to the actual situation of the world today.

É.G. – I cannot say that I completely agree with you. We can effectively assert that Creole languages are today's local languages, but as I have said, I believe that nearly every language has its origins in a Creole language. However, once they become aware of this, the speakers of any given language wish that their language was no longer a Creole but was instead specific to their identity. All of humanity dreams that their language was dictated to them by God, that their language is the language of exclusive identity. I have talked about the time in Strasbourg where two Japanese novelists approached me and said, “There is a great debate, a great wager in Japan. The Fascists claim that the Japanese language is pure, dictated by the gods. And we, we claim that it is a Creole language borrowed from the languages of others (they mentioned Basque, as well as the languages of Indonesia and Korea).” There is a lot at stake here. One of the writers from the same group who passed away two years ago had written a book, no

longer available in French, called *Créolismes*. In other words, the phenomenon that I described has nothing to do with being “local.” It is a much more generalized play. And if I use the term Creolization, it is not in reference to my church spire, or the West Indies, or the Caribbean, *etc.* It is because nothing offers a better image of what happens in the world than the unpredictable which results from heterogeneous elements.

This is the question being asked all over the world at this very hour because *it is* the situation of the world. When I say “Creolization,” it is not entirely in reference to the Creole language but also to the phenomenon that is expressed in the Creole language. They are not the same thing.

Q- Do you see any “danger” in this process of Creolization, where perhaps the idea of Creolization could bring along with it a certain relativism of natal land?

É.G. - The relationship between the necessity and inevitable reality of Creolization and the necessity and inevitable reality of place, meaning that place where man voices human speech, is intense. We do not let speech out into the air where it will be diffused. The place where we give voice to songs, texts and cries is immense, but we can close off this space and lock ourselves inside. The area where we emit these cries, where we build walls of spiritual and ideological obstacles, could be constituted as territory. In that instance, it ceases to be an “area.” What is important today is to know precisely how to discuss the art of Relation without taking down or diluting the space where it rests. Do we have the means to do it? Is it feasible for man, for the human race, for the human being? Or must we consider once and for all that in order to preserve this space, we must preserve it exclusively? I will not deny that there is a question there. But if we do not ask this question, we blindly perpetuate closings and close-minded thought, which will give rise to situations such as those seen in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, *etc.* No

political, economic, military, or sociological solution will resolve these problems as long as the spirituality, mentality, and intellect of the human being do not tip the scales in favor of asking this very real question. And we will continue to perpetuate impossible wars, useless death, and generalized massacres if not. I am not denying that there is a problem there, but I say that this problem must be addressed.

Q- Can you tell us what you mean by “Relation” and the art of “Relation”?

É.G.- In western cultures, it is said that the absolute is the absolute of being and that being cannot *be* without understanding itself as absolute. Yet even within Pre-Socratic thought, the idea that being is in relation prevailed, that being is not an absolute entity but rather is in relation to the other, to the world, and to the cosmos. We tend to return to this Pre-Socratic notion today. To give a much more common example, what do ecologists say when they argue with their peers? They say: “If you kill the river, you will kill the tree, the sky, the Earth, and man.” In other words, they establish a network of relationships between human beings and their environment. And what I am trying to say is that the idea of a being, of an absolute being, is tied to the idea of identity as an exclusive “single-root.” If one believes in a rhizome-like form of identity, a rooted-identity that meets other roots under the surface of the Earth, then the absolute claim of each root is no longer important. What *is* important is the method and the manner by which each root connects with the others: the Relation. An art of Relation seems to me much more evident and “captivating” today than an art of static being.

Q- How did Martinique survive Creolization?

É.G. Creolization should not be confused with the idea of “mixed-blood”: that would be a very literal point of view, one taken after only a quick glance at the situation. We have experienced two forms of Creolization: one under the negative appearance of

slavery and servitude in the past and another today under the burden of French cultural assimilation. There is a very fierce effort being made to assimilate Martinique and Guadalupe into mainstream French culture. But when Creolization is practiced in a negative manner, it continues to advance in the same way. And “on the inside” of Creolization, there lie many effective means by which to escape this negativity. If you remember, it is because of this that the people of the West Indies who are living through Creolization have always been drawn to other parts of the world: Marcus Garvey, towards the Blacks in the United States; Fananon towards Algeria; the writings of Césaire towards all of black Africa; Padmore, the adviser to Nkrumah in Africa, was from Trinidad as well, *etc.* There is always a sort of dilatation. As if, unable to solve their problems at home, the people of the Caribbean are driven to help others, in an elsewhere that is always here. That is the positive, a painful way to live through Creolization, but a very real way. It perhaps prefigures future solidarity.

Having been developed in a time when the notion of identity was based on the concept of the single-root, the Creole societies of the Caribbean, and especially in the French-speaking West Indies where the processes of assimilation were in operation with an oppressive visibility, there Creole societies could appear somehow vapid, as a suspension of being lacking all signs of intensity. This is how it appeared to two errant workers in search of an essence, a primordial truth, who landed in Martinique at the beginning of the century: Lafcadio Hearn and Paul Gauguin. The extreme pleasure and suffering of their quasi-alchemical mutations, Hearn in Japanese, Gauguin in Polynesian, even if they knew that they were only dallying at the peripheries of an alterity that they wished to convince, accommodate, adopt. Their search for such an essence was the very system of what they would never experience or accept, the pleasure and pain of

Creolization which to them appeared to generate pretense, decay, loss of essence. That is perhaps why Hearn and Gauguin went to the most difficult places, inside the oldest traditions, in search of a source, in search of permanence. This same idea also created the Rastas who, without ever leaving the Caribbean islands, found power in the mystical Rastafari from Ethiopia. Only the most generous and lucid souls in the West Indies searched for something like this in their time, like Frantz Fanon searched for the absolute in the Third-World revolt and Aimé Césaire searched for the essential meaning of negritude. The time had not yet come to openly weigh “that which changes to that which we exchange.”

Tongues and Languages

I would like to place this meditation in your company under two auspices. Let me start out by saying that I believe repetition to be a form of knowledge in our world and that we may repeat a few things herein. Through repetition we start to see the small conclusions of whatever new thing appears. Consideration should also be given to the idea of a commonplace, a *lieu commun*³, although for me commonplaces are never truly perceived. They are literally the places where one thought present in the world meets another. The time is now for us to write, articulate or meditate upon an idea that we could find in an Italian daily or a Brazilian newspaper, in another form, placed in a different context by someone we have never seen. These are the commonplaces – the places where one thought of the world confirms another.

The highest aim of literature that comes to mind is that which I call “chaos-world,” and we will see how this truth is articulated, at least for me. It is altogether certain that in exploiting or exploring the most secret recesses of the human spirit and in consequently neglecting a relationship with the world, literature has nevertheless always held tightly to a conception of the world. Beneath even the most apprehensible poem, a vision of the world softly beats. Poets have always claimed this relationship with the “whole-world,” which alone authorizes their purest inflections. But it is only now with the whole-world materially realized that this vision of the world – previously understood in literature as “prophetic” – can deploy and wield itself, taking as its true object that which before had only been its goal. In saying this I do not intend to relocate all literature

³ *lieu commun*- literally a “commonplace” definition of the French phrase or “common ground;” used to express a place (not necessarily physical) where thoughts and ideas meet

to the realm of abstract generalization. To arrive at a poetics of the whole-world would be a matter of establishing absolvable connections between the place from which a poetics of literature is adumbrated and the whole world and vice versa. In other words, literature does not take place in isolation, suspended in mid-air. The literary work comes from an ineludible location, but today it is even more bound up with the place that it establishes as a relation between its unavoidable locus of origin and the whole-world.

A comparison will allow me to better approach this new dimension of literature. I often reflect upon the destiny of the great literary works that marked the beginning of most human communities. At the outset of these communities there is undoubtedly the irresistible call of poetry. I would like to speak of those communities that formed millennia ago and that, for the sake of convenience, I will call atavistic communities. I believe that we have used this term before, identifying atavistic communities as those founded upon the idea of a Genesis, world creation, heredity and a continual relationship between the present community and its ancestors. The old communities of Asia, black Africa, Europe, and pre-colonial North America come to mind when I think of atavistic communities. By comparison, the composite cultures born of Creolization have no native belief in a Genesis unless it was imported, adopted or imposed. The true Genesis for the people of the Caribbean is the belly of the slave boat and the Plantation's unquiet yard.

All of these atavistic communities began with the poetic impulse: the Old Testament, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Song of Roland*, the *Nibelungen*, the Finnish *Kalevala*, the sacred books of India, the Island Sagas, the *Popol Vuh* and the *Chilam Balam* of the Native Americans. In the third chapter of his *Aesthetic*, Hegel characterizes this epic literature as a literature conscious of the community, albeit a naïve consciousness that is not yet political, formed at a time when the community had become

unsure of its order and needed reassurance (whether it is in the *Iliad*, the *Song of Roland*, or the Old Testament). This burgeoning poetic impulse of consciousness is also exclusive. The traditional epic brings together all that constitutes the community and excludes all that is not of the community. Such is even more appropriate for the more imperial versions of the epic, as the case may be in the *Aeneid* for the Roman Empire, or the *Divine Comedy* for the Catholic Universe, or more furtively poignant as the *Tragedies* of Agrippa d'Aubigné were to the Protestant conscience. These early communities first shaped and then projected a poetic impulse that brought together the foyer, the locale, and the nature of their community and in so doing excluded everything that was not of the community. Starting from this "community-poetics," the different forms of literature were established: lyric, philosophy, theatre, novel, *etc.* All of these variations come from a similar poetic impulse, forming the material for a threatened community. And I may have already mentioned this, but I believe that the epic came into being when the community, no longer sure of its identity, traditionally needed this mode of literary expression to reaffirm itself in the face of outside threats. The epic has always been thought of as the exultation of victory, but I believe that the epic is the redeeming chant of defeat or ambiguous victory. It is altogether certain that Roncevaux was one of Charlemagne's defeats and that following this defeat the community reformed the event in order to exorcise it. Each time one reflects on the epics, we see this need for reassurance. For example, the victory of the Greeks in the *Iliad* is not a triumph; it rests on a ruse. If not for the cunning of Ulysses, there would still be walls around Troy today. It was not a victory; it was a shrewd trick. And the *Odyssey* is a bitter epic. When Ulysses returned to his home, no one recognized him but his dog. And in the Island Sagas, there is an extraordinary lamentation of the misfortune that weighs upon the

heroes.

I believe that this form of literature, which is doubtless the most highly evolved form of literature known to man, despite subsequent developments in style and theory, summarizes what is still to take place in the literary domain. From that point on, all literature was considered by the community as dictated by the language (of God) of the community. It was not the language of the god or the gods of other communities, and literarily speaking, language acquired an absolute and sacrilegious function of which we can still see the consequences today. And what is it that we are seeing today? The difficult birth of another type of community which comprises the “realized-whole” of all the communities of the world, realized in conflict, exclusion, massacre and intolerance but realized all the same. We no longer dream of a whole-world because we are already there. What was once a dream of unity or universality among traditional poets is now for us a difficult plunge into chaos-world.

Once again with regard to the notion of chaos, that is when I say “chaos-world,” I shall repeat what I specified in regard to Creolization: the chaotic world exists because of that which is unforeseeable. The notion of unpredictability in global relations creates and determines this idea of chaos-world. In this the difficult birth of another type of communal participation which takes place in an impossible ancient city that we have chosen to call the earth village (but all villages still give the impression of a hegemonic Center), we witness a consciousness that is no longer naive as in the early founding texts of the world because politics has moved beyond it; however we cannot pretend that the political did not go through this earlier stage. Our consciousness is no longer naive, but anguished. Why this anguish in the face of the reality of chaos-world? Because we clearly see that this totality's *non-naive* consciousness can no *longer* be exclusive, can no

longer content itself with the security procured in the *Iliad* or the Old Testament, by the certainty of a chosen community establishing itself on chosen ground that consequently becomes its territory. The non-naïve consciousness of this new and complete community poses this question: how to be oneself without shutting out the other and how to consent to the other, to all others, without renouncing oneself? This is the question that agitates the poet, and it is the same question he has to address when he is in phase with *his* community, the community that he must most often support because it is a threatened community in today's world. But he must no longer defend his community with the dream of a whole-world that is still to be universally realized (as in the time when this whole-world was still in the domain of dreams). He must defend his community in the reality of a chaos-world that no longer consents to a generalizing universal.

This anguish is present in the relation of the self to the other, and therein lies another question, another anguish: can we not see that in the burgeoning panorama of all the languages of the world today, at the very moment when we stumble into another transition that is no longer from the oral to the written but from the written to the oral, can we not see that we can no longer assure any definite uniqueness in language but rather that we are now forced to invent multiple forms whose baroque necessity frightens us all? It is in this way that these two questions are related. Writing, the dictation of God, is tied to transcendence. It is tied to the immobility of the body, and it is tied to a sort of consecutive tradition that could be called linear thought. In the oral tradition, the movements of the body are given to the rhythm, the redundancy, the mastery of the rhythm, the revival of assonances, and all that moves away from the idea of transcendence, the security that transcendence brings, and the sectarian excess that it

naturally releases.

At this point in our reflection, in our meditation, in our daydream, we cannot help but see that the transition from the written to the oral is important, even crucial, as it poses the question of transcendence, of the absolute and of Relation, and of relativism in opposition to the absolute. We are also fond of noting that technology is leading us back to oral tradition (we are always saying that books will disappear, become obsolete, *etc.*), but we also notice how these oral cultures, the oral civilizations of yesterday, now relegated to the hidden side of the world, climb onto “the grand stage of the world.” And we cannot help but see in today's scrutiny of the written and of the oral that there are in fact two types of orality⁴. There is the sense of oral communication as expressed in the media, the orality of standardization and banality. But there is also another type of orality, this one shivering and creative that comes from those cultures that are today appearing on the “grand stage of the world.” These cultures do not preferentially borrow the methods or the tools of writing, but rather those of cinema, plastic creation, *etc.* – which are no less examples of oral culture and manifestations of orality. For example, I believe that the rural Haitian painting, which we unjustly label as naive, is the painting of the Creole language and that there is a relationship between it and Creole-Haitian orality. And this question of the written and the oral is an occasion for invigorating anguish in today's writers and poets. They must sort out these two related problematics: the first is the expression of their community in relation to the whole-world, and the second is the expression of their community in search of what is at the same time absolute and non-absolute, written and oral. The poet must synthesize all of this, and I believe it to be a very stimulating and complex task in the real panorama of world literature and language.

⁴ The notion of orality as presented by Glissant should not be confused with Freud's psychoanalytic definition of the term. Here Glissant is referring to the oral expression of literature as opposed to the

This creative anguish is directly opposed to “metaphysical” pessimism or despair born from the thought of “being.”

I speak and most assuredly write in the presence of all languages of the world. Many languages are dying in the world today – for example in black Africa, languages disappear because their speakers are absorbed into a much larger national community, or because the language is no longer a language of rural production or of any production at all and the language is thus eroded, or it could simply be that the speakers of the language physically disappear from the country –, but we still know that we write before all languages of the world, even if we only know our own. I am filled, poetically impregnated, by this necessity even though I experience great difficulty in speaking a language other than what I use (Creole and French). But writing in the presence of all languages does not mean that I know them all. When placed in the current context of world literature and when seen through the relationship between poetry and chaos-world, this means that I can no longer write in a monolingual manner. More precisely, I do not overturn my own language through its synthesis with other languages but rather through those linguistic openings which allow me to understand the relationships between the different languages of today’s world – relationships of domination, connivance, absorption, oppression, erosion, tangency, *etc* –, as in an endless drama, an endless tragedy from which my own language is neither exempt nor apart. And consequently I can no longer use my language in a monolingual fashion; I write my language in the face of this tragedy, in the face of this drama. We will not save one language of the world by leaving the others to die. In the current state of dramatic interactions between languages

and just as I can no longer write in a monolingual fashion, I can no longer defend my language monolingually. I must defend it by being aware that it is not alone in being threatened by the world (and even if the Creole language is what interests me the most – we can reserve for later discussion the question that you are bound to ask: why do you not write in Creole if it is your mother tongue?).

A new perspective is opening for the West Indian in me, as I belong to a country where French is the dominant language and Creole is the dominated language; under this new perspective, French and Creole are finally interdependent in the world-wide tragedy of languages. While one still dominates the other, we must consider that this very real domination is only secondary, or even of the third-degree, in the global tragedy of languages. We have arrived at a moment in history where we see that the imaginary⁵ of man needs all languages of the world and that, consequently, in the indubitable place where the literary work is put forth, the imaginary of the West Indian needs both Creole *and* French. And this is moreover why I could never accept the sort of vague rallying taken up by French-speaking nations. This unavoidable dimension of language must be written into the practice and the learning of all languages. I repeat that multilingualism does not assure the coexistence of languages or the knowledge of more than one but rather the presence of all languages of the world through the practice of one's own; this is how I define multilingualism.

Hence we find it necessary to distinguish between the language that we use and the idea of language, the relationship of words, as constructed in literature and poetry⁶. I

⁵ Glissant borrows his notion of “the imaginary” from Lacan. “The imaginary is the realm of the ego, a pre-linguistic realm of sense perception, identification and an illusory sense of unity (Homer, Sean. Jacques Lacan: Routledge Critical Thinkers. New York. Taylor & Francis Routledge, 2005. Page 31.)

⁶ Two different words are used in French to express what we commonly refer to in English as “language.” *Langue* is an abstract term used to define the language we speak

could summarize this by saying that the defense of language is incontestable because it is through its defense that we oppose standardization; a form of standardization which, for example, could stem from a universalization of the basic Anglo-American language. If this standardization was ever established in the world, the French, Italian, and Creole languages would be threatened but not before English. The English language would cease to be a language with its obscurities, its weaknesses, its triumphs, its outbursts, and its enthusiastic displays, along with its recoils and diversities. It would cease to be a rural language, the language of both the writer and the fisherman, *etc.* All of this would disappear, and English would cease to be a living language. It would become a part of an international code, an Esperanto. If English were my language, I would be shaken by its standardization and universalization.

The defense of language is unavoidable, and it is through its defense that we oppose standardization. And it is also through this defense that we oppose dilution. To undertake again what was underlined in our last meditation, the art of Relation is not a poetics of magma, indifference or neutrality. In order for Relation to take place, there must be two or more independent identities or entities that are willing to change through the process of flux. And let us repeat this second consideration: language's defense happens through the defense of all the languages in the world. But the construction of a working language within the language that we speak [e.g. French, English –transl] allows it to be directed towards chaos-world because it is this working, fluid language which establishes relationships among all possible languages of the world. I shall speak of the West Indies by way of example. In the West Indies, a working language is the

(i.e. English, German, Chinese), while *langage* describes the system of words spoken together, their function of expression, or the linguistic signs that together form a language. For clarity, *langue* has been translated as “language,” and *langage* has been translated as “working language” unless otherwise noted.

manifestation of our relationship with the spoken word, of our attitude in relation to the world, whether it be an attitude of confidence or reservation, of profusion or silence, of an opening of the world or of its closure, of organizing the techniques of orality, or of the strengthening of the secular demands of writing, or maybe just a symbiosis of it all. Weaving through the English, French, Spanish, and Creole elements present in the Caribbean universe and perhaps in South America as well, a working language thus appeared in the Caribbean. Alejo Carpentier told me in a conversation a little before his death, “We Caribbeans write in four or five different languages, but we speak the same one.⁷” The art of Creole storytelling consists of derivatives as well as accumulations, its baroque phrasing and distortions of discourse in which what was inserted functions as a natural breath, the circularity of the story and the tireless repetition of motif. All of this comes together in a working language which runs through the English, Creole, Spanish, and French of the Caribbean, and through Carpentier, Walcott or the other French writers of Martinique, Guadelupe and Haiti. And the marvelous thing is that this exploration of a working language by and beyond various languages perverts none but adds to each. All are summoned to a focal point, a place of mystery or magic where in meeting they finally “understand” each other.

At the time of those founding books which I spoke of earlier and of all the literature that preceded it, the thought – which I call systematic thought – studied, organized and projected these slow and insensible repercussions between languages. This systematic thought foresaw and put into ideological perspective the world movement that it legitimately ordained. Today this systematic thought, which I gladly call “continental thought,” has failed to take into account the generalized non-system of

⁷ “Nous autres Caraibeens nous ecrivons en quatre ou cinq *langues* differentes mais nous avons le meme *langage*.” [Transl. emphasis]

world cultures. Another form of thought has developed, more intuitive, more fragile and threatened, but all the same inclined towards chaos-world and its accidents. It developed under and perhaps braced itself for conquests in the name of the human and social sciences, but it was diverted in a poetic vision, in the imaginary of the world. I call this “archipelagic” thought, meaning a non-systematic, inductive thought that explores the unforeseen in the whole-world and attributes the written to the oral and vice versa. Today I see the continents “archipelize” themselves, at least from the outside. The Americas are archipelizing in representing themselves by region rather than by way of national frontiers. And I think that is a term that must be re-established under its former dignity — the term *region*. Europe is undergoing the archipelization process as linguistic regions, those cultural regions which exist above and beyond national borders, are forming islands, open islands which provide their primary condition for survival – openness. Systematic thought, continental thought, and ancient ideological anticipatory thought highly regarded those non-vehicular languages – which we could call regional if we decided to give a new, exhaustive term to the word “region” –, those languages of closure, withdrawal, folklorisation and non-apparent particularism. This development immediately mandates a tremendous task with the following conclusion: all languages must come together within this given space. They must listen to one another; they must understand one another; and they must consent to one another. To listen to the other, to all others, is to enlarge the spiritual dimension of a language, to put it into relation. To understand the other, all others, is to accept that the outside truth applies itself to the truth within. And to consent to the other is to accept communal strategies in favor of each regional or national language in addition to those strategies already developed. It appears

to me that in the actual panorama of the world, it is the sole mission of the poet, the writer and the intellectual to reflect upon and to suggest a solution for all of the correlatives, relations and interlacements involved in the question of language.

I would like to conclude with a few brief considerations on what I believe to be one of the most important of the future arts: the art of translation. That which all translation henceforth suggests in principle, by the very passage made from one language to another, is the sovereignty of all the languages of the world. And for the very same reason, translation is the sign and the proof that we have to conceive in the imaginary of the world the whole of language. Just as the writer realizes this totality through the practice of *his own* language of expression, the translator manifests this totality through the passage of *one* language to another, and he is confronted therein by the uniqueness of each language. We will not save a single language of the world in letting the others perish, and likewise the translator will not establish relation between two unique systems, between two unique languages, if they are not in the presence of all the others, violently pushing forward in his imaginary, even if he does not speak these other languages. The translator invents a necessary, working language to transport himself between the source text and the target text, much like the poet invents a working language derived from his own tongue. The translator forms this necessary working language, a common language between the two original languages, but this necessary language remains in some way unpredictable in regard to the original languages. The working language of the translator operates in the same way that Creolization and Relation operate in the world, meaning that this working language produces something unforeseeable. As an art of the imaginary, translation is an honest operation of Creolization, henceforth a new and

unstoppable practice of precious cultural *métissage*. As an art of crossings that aspires to a whole-world, as an art of vertigo and dizziness and salutary wandering, translation thus applies itself more and more to the multiplicity of our world. Translation is consequently among the most important types of this new archipelagic thought. It is an art of flight from one language to another, without which the first is erased and the second is renounced in its introduction because each of today's translations accompanies the network of all possible translations from all languages to all languages.

If it is true that with each language that has disappeared, a part of the human imaginary disappears with it, then with all languages that are translated, the imaginary is enriched in a way that is both errant and fixed. Translation is a fugitive art, a beautiful renunciation. Perhaps the most overwhelming conjecture made in translation can be found in the beauty of this abandon. It is true that a poem, translated into another language, allowed to escape its rhythm and its assonance, is by chance at once the accident and the permanence of literature. But maybe here we must consent to this renunciation, because I can say that, in the context of the whole-world, this renunciation is the part of the self that we abandon in all poetics to the other. When supported by reason and sufficient invention and when it leads to the common nature of working language that I talked about, this abandon, this delicately palpable archipelagic thought, is used to reconstruct the landscape of the world. It is the thought that, against all systematic thought, teaches us about the unknown and the threatened, as well as the poetic intuition whereby we advance henceforth. Translation, the art of delicate contingencies and virtual contact, is the practical experience of the trace. Against the absolute limitation of the self, the art of translation works to amass the expanse of all being and of everything that exists in the world. To deal in language is to deal in the

unforeseeable elements of our future common condition.

Questions

Pierre Nepveu. – I would like to ask you a question about this presence of other languages. You say, “I write in the presence of all languages of the world, even if I do not know them.” How would you define that presence? What is this presence about? How does it manifest itself? In what way?

Édouard Glissant. – It is obviously not manifested linguistically. In the literary tradition of the world, be it oral or written, the more or less visible function of the poet has always been to affirm the preclusive unity of the community or of that which could be considered as part of the community in relation to all other possible communities. On the other hand, it is altogether clear that nearly all literatures of the world have rested on the premise that the language of the community is a chosen language. In the West, particularly in Europe, the literary function is unconsciously perceived as God-given. We call it inspiration, or we may call it what we will, but it insinuates that language is dictated by a god, the God of the community, that language is transcendent, and that the writing of that language is transcendence itself. In the name of this transcendence we have scorned, dominated, oppressed and relegated to obscurity the whole of oral literature, and it was also in the name of this transcendence that we concluded that all oral culture is inferior to that of the written word. Writing is the sign of uniqueness and the divine. The poet wrote monolingually under this pretext until the nineteenth century. Remember that Voltaire considered Shakespeare “savage” and that men of such intelligence as the English writers of the same period said that Racine was a pansy. All of this took place because it was impossible to conceive of Shakespeare under the poetics of the French language, and likewise it was impossible for an Englishman to understand Racine. They were treading on the path of monolingualism. Today, the problem has

changed. The problem today involves the forced establishment of certain communities because communities everywhere have been dominated by the act of colonization. It is also an issue of Relation. We see this in all domains: political, economic, *etc.* When a butterfly beats its wings in Tokyo's stock market, there are "ecological" catastrophes on the London stock exchange or that of Paris. We can well see that there are relations, but we do not see Relation in regard to the cultural expression of the community.

Nevertheless, Relation is there; it *exists*. Whether I want it or not, whether I accept it or not – there are those who accept it and those who do not –, I am determined by a certain number of relations in the world. Each time that I happen to go to California, I am overcome by a fear of earthquakes. But when there is an earthquake in my own country and I am in my country, I am not afraid. But when I am in California, I am afraid of earthquakes because I have seen them on television, and I have never seen *my* country's earthquakes on television. When I am in Martinique, I *never* think of earthquakes. And when the earthquakes do take place, I do not panic; I try to go outdoors; I get out from under beams; I know more or less what must happen and what I must do. Just as we know how to brace ourselves for a cyclone, for an entire night if necessary, we know what we must do. But when I am in a hotel in California, and I feel the rumblings of an earthquake, I panic because there is that problem of Relation in one's sensibility, the problem of Relation in culture. It is no longer a political, economical, or military relation, but there is this thing that happens, that fills me whether I want it to or not. And it is altogether certain that if I write a text in California, it will be different from a text that I would write in Martinique. It would be in abeyance to the earthquake. It would have a different connotation; I no longer write monolingually. I write with this knot of relations, and I repeat, it is not a question of understanding other languages and practicing

them. The language that I take the most pleasure in speaking is Italian because when I speak Italian, I am not worried about making mistakes. I am not concerned with making mistakes in Italian because there is a certain joy in speaking the language, and it is all the same to me whether or not I am making mistakes. But when I speak English, I say to myself “oh! oh!” I may have made a mistake there. There is something that suddenly traps me. That is the problem of Relation (perhaps along with this preventative burden that guides me), and it has nothing to do with speaking or not speaking a language, knowing or not knowing a language, being obliged or not being obliged to speak a language, but it is the current situation of the world, the current situation of cultural relation in the world, the relation of sensibility and aesthetics (and languages) in the real world. And it is because of this that I say that I write in the presence of all languages of the world. Once in Strasbourg, during a session of the International Parliament of Writers, we had a very beautiful lecture on poetry, and I read from a French translation of Beidao, a Chinese poet, and Adonis translated one of my texts into Arabic and read it, and I read one of my own texts in French, either *Les Indes* or *Sel Noir*, I no longer remember which one. And Adonis read his texts in Arabic, and someone else read a French translation of his works. There were also two poets, one French and the other Hebrew, André Velter and Nathan Zach respectively, who exchanged their texts and translations with the others. It all took place in a church, and it was incredible. There was a kind of silence there, and everyone understood each other; of course we had to translate in order to reach that point. But we heard the words, and we understood without understanding. There arose something new on the world stage that day, something which must be taken into account when we reflect upon the current poetic.

Q. – *You have spoken of Creolization, and you have also spoken of the baroque. Are these two notions coexistent for you, or do you make a distinction between the two? For my part, I think that there is a certain specificity to Creolization, a specificity that would come first and foremost from the natures of the cultures that meet, with the physical context of their union and the force of their meeting being of a secondary and third importance. In other words, concerning the West Indian poetic for example, there is the violence of colonization that gives this poetic its specificity. There is violence everywhere, in every form of meeting, but I think that the violence which implemented this encounter in the West Indies gave a particular character to the West Indian poetic. Am I deceiving myself?*

É.G. – Those two assertions are true. The connection may not be. Creolization is always a manifestation of the baroque because it opposes classicism. What is classicism, in any literature or in any culture? It is the moment where a certain culture or literature presents its particular values as universal values. The baroque is anti-classicism; baroque thought says that there are no universal values, that all value is a particular value put in relation with another particular value, and that consequently it is not possible for any particular value to legitimately consider itself, present itself or impose itself as a universal value. It can impose itself as a universal value by force, but it cannot legitimately claim to be a universal value. This is the essence of baroque thought and in this sense all of Creolization is a form of the baroque at work and in the act. Moreover the baroque, which began as a reaction to the Counter-Reform in Europe, has now naturalized itself throughout the world. When the baroque crossed the oceans and arrived in Latin America, the angels and the virgins became black and Jesus Christ was an Indian, thusly destroying the processes of legitimacy. The baroque spread. Creolization is still

baroque. Creolization can occur violently, but it is not restricted to violence. I am not sure if there is a sort of right to violence in Creolization or not. I doubt it. Creolization understands violence in the total sense of the verb “to understand” in that it incorporates violence. Violence in the plantation system did not hinder Creolization but to the contrary. And on this point I agree with you. But does that substantiate a privilege? While it is true that this sort of violence delineates a characteristic, I do not believe that this characteristic is a privilege. It seems to me that there could be Creolization without violence. However, I have long searched for examples and have yet to find any!

Q. – I would like to go back to the choice that you made between French and Creole in writing your works, and I would also like to know if any of your works have been translated into Creole?

É.G. – Yes, certain poems have been translated by Creole poets. I will respond to the other part of your question with an anecdote, and I may follow it with a few considerations. For example, in Guadeloupe several modern-day Creole poets have approached me and said, “If you, along with the others, had not jostled, perturbed, and nearly dismantled the French language in your works, we may not have even dared to write in Creole because we would have always been struck dumb by the idea of ‘disrespecting,’ as they say back home, the French language.” In other words, the “Creolization” of the French language accompanies the liberation of the Creole language.

Now, in Martinique and Guadeloupe – maybe less so in Haiti –, I think that we are actually a bilingual society, meaning that there is truly a presence of the Creole language spoken by 100% of the population and a presence of the French language that is spoken by 95% of the population. This has caused Creole to become tangential to French (as we saw in our earlier meditation when the vocabulary of the seventeenth-

century sailors from Breton and Normandy allowed for a syntax with which it no longer resembled, probably a synthesis of syntaxes from the west coast of black Africa), and this tangency of Creole to French constitutes the originality of French-speaking West Indian cultures: we must opacify Creole in relation to French, or we must dismantle the structure of French in relation to Creole so that we might master the two, so that we can leave behind the *petit nègre*⁸. Therefore it is very important that we firmly establish the originality of Creole in relation to French and vice versa (Creolization is not a mish-mash). This is what I try to do in my literary work. Now it has become a question of generation: maybe if I were twenty years old I would start writing in Creole, but a large part of the literary works that I have produced were written to practice this poetic of “detangence” in both Creole and French.

Q. – In terms of the accord between the written and the oral, and as a continuation of our conversation on Creole, does this same pathos present itself in the works of Confiant and Chamoiseau? Like Texaco, etc.

É.G. – Probably, but I cannot say for certain. Your question necessitates a very long discussion. I’m reading *Eloges* by Saint-John Perse, and I see how the text is partially creolizing, but the modes of Creolization are hidden. The poet practices Creolization but hides it. For example, regarding a spectacle of the sea, he says: “*Ces cayes, nos maisons.*” A *caye* is an outcrop of rocks on the surface of the sea or the foam against the outcrop. Fishermen go there because fish encircle these rocks, which are found almost a kilometer from the beach. “*Ces cayes, nos maisons.*” Everyone overlooks this definition because *caye* in the Creole of Martinique means “hut” or “house.” And no one notices that he says “*ces cayes, nos maisons*”⁹, and the text goes on. He proposes

⁸ Literally, “the little negro.”

⁹ As *maison* is French for “house,” Perse is suggesting that these *cayes* [“huts” or “outcrops of

Creolization, but he camouflages it! It is an apposition, and you can accept it if you wish or you can reject it, you can see it if you wish or you can choose to ignore it. There are dozens of similar examples in Saint-John Perse. There are also obvious creolizations: when he says “*pour moi, j'ai retiré mes pieds*¹⁰” which is the literal translation of the Creole expression “*man tiré pyé moin.*” It is all very obvious. But there are other Creolizations. For example, when he says “*Ces filles, là...*” and he goes on. “*Tifitala*” in Creole and the French “*là*” are put together as a Creolization in the text but camouflaged. The type Creolization as seen in texts of Chamoiseau and Confiant is more proclaimed. It is an altogether different operation: it is proclaimed and consequently circulates as an evident system and a manifest intention. I believe that I prefer the poetic of Saint-John Perse, of camouflaging Creolization, to this practice of proclaiming the Creolization of a “text,” but it must also be noted that the overture of Creolization is endless. The writers you speak of are prolifically unpredictable, and we have not yet begun to truly appreciate the merits of their practices.

P.N. – You say that all is “Relation” and that there is a linguistic imbalance that difficulty experiences the Creole-French relation, the French-English relation, etc., and there you have chosen to cite Shakespeare. I wonder if it would be possible to cite more popular craftsmen in your description of this linguistic-artistic creation, like the creators of “rap” for example. Do we not find there a phenomenon very similar to that of Creolization through its insistence on endurance and the creation of linguistic cannibalism? Yes, we have killed the language, but... I love you, I eat you, and I understand you.

É.G. – Yes, except that in the working language of rap, as in the working

rocks”] are their homes.

¹⁰ Literal translation, “As for me, I’ve drawn back my feet.”

language of Jamaican dub poets like Michael Smith or Linton Kwesi Johnson, and in other forms of working language that appear in cultural and linguistic micro-climates like Miami for example, there is a voluntary and aggressive distortion of the spoken language from its very core. Michael Smith (who has sent me some magnificent poems) or Linton Kwesi Johnson or Edward Kamau Braithwaite (the Jamaican poet) practice something in this language that is... how could we describe it? I would say a pidgin, but I am very quick to renounce that term because when I once used it in Jamaica at a colloquium, my Jamaican friends strongly protested. And they told me that it was impossible, that we cannot call this language a pidgin. And in fact, we cannot call this language a pidgin, but it is still an aggressive, cultural, militant, voluntary distortion of the interior of *one* language, and it questions the prescriptive uniqueness of this particular language, practiced by a group of people that we know, therefore we know when they started this practice, and we could perhaps know when they will finish it. Creolization, however, intervenes when there are two or more heterogeneous linguistic areas that are put together with unforeseeable results. No one knows who applies the art of Creolization to language at large, as opposed to its application in a merely textual sense; we do not know when the Creole language was born, neither by who nor how. As for the devastating (in the best sense of the word) phenomenon that is found in rap or dub poetry and other similar forms of expression, I wonder if we could not find a connection between it and the “joul” that is spoken aggressively, culturally and politically, in Quebec. Whether it is rap or dub poetry or joul, what is at work here is the same phenomena of calling into question the uniqueness of a given language. Each of these practices ultimately concludes in a doubling, in felicitous duplicities of the Creole languages.

Gastron Miron – The poet cannot be the only one capable of saving a language.

Concretely, what can we do? I recently read in Le Devoir that nearly 12,000 languages are spoken in the world, but that in thirty to fifty years there will be no more than 6,000. The majority of these languages will disappear, and this is certain. What can we do to prevent this frightening impoverishment of the imaginary!

É.G. – I believe that there are two types of issues at hand here. There are those struggles that we could call everyday struggles, like when we are in a given place and we must adapt our everyday life to the conditions of that place. And if everyday life fights for this or for that, if the daily life of the Quebecois is to fight for the maintenance of the Quebecois language, and if the everyday life for someone in Martinique is to fight daily for the maintenance of the Creole language, then it could happen in all sorts of cultural, political, and military enterprises, *etc.* But I also think that the cultural or political struggles that we have had and will continue to have will insert themselves into such a global context that it will become necessary to overturn the poetic engine, contribute to a change in the mentality of the humanities which will allow us to abandon the “if you're not like me then you are my enemy, if you're not like me then I am allowed to fight you”-mentality. It seems to me to be a function of the poet, and not only the poet but the artist as well, to contribute to the overturning of the order of things. To no longer rely solely on humanism, goodness or tolerance, all of which are fleeting, but to enter into the decisive mutations of the consented plurality as such. This will take a lot of time, but in the context of today's global relation, it is one of the more conspicuous tasks of literature, poetry and all the arts to contribute little by little, to admit “unconsciously” to the humanities that the other is not the enemy, that that which is different will not take anything away from myself, and that if I am changed by contact with the other that does not mean that I am diluted by it, *etc.* That seems to me a different form of struggle from

the everyday struggle, and for this type of struggle, the artist is well positioned; I believe in this. Because the artist is he who approaches the imagination of the world, and as the ideologies of the world, the visions, the predictions, and the plans on this comet begin to fail, we must start to raise this imagination. We no longer dream the world, we enter therein.

Culture and Identity

We must now return to that which I introduced in the first lecture, particularly to those problems concerning identity. When I first addressed this question, I began with the distinction put forth by Deleuze and Guattari between the “single-root” and the “rhizome.” In a chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus* (first published in a small volume called *Rhizomes*), Deleuze and Guattari underline this difference by establishing the function of each concept: the single-root is that which kills everything outside of itself while the rhizome extends to meet other roots. While I believe that we may have spoken of this during our last talk (and perhaps during the one before that as well), I would like to point out that I have applied this image to the principle of identity using my own “categorization of cultures,” thusly dividing all culture into atavistic and composite. The idea of “single-rooted” identity, which was not always a deadly notion, for at one time it produced magnificent works in history and the humanities, is linked to the very nature of that which I call atavistic culture. And I have already explained that, for me, atavistic culture is that which begins with the idea of a Genesis and the principles of filiation, all the while intending to establish legitimacy on some land that will henceforth be considered as territory. Allow me to form the equation: “chosen ground = territory.” And we all know of the ethnic devastation caused by this bloody and commanding conception. In much the same way, I have tied the principle of “rhizome” identity to the existence of composite cultures, meaning those cultures in which Creolization is practiced. But very often in these cultures we find ourselves in the presence of an opposition between the atavistic and the composite. I have observed this, for example, in the composition and population of the Americas. If we look to a country like Mexico, we

immediately notice the atavistic culture there, the culture of the American Indians, the Chiapas, as well as the composite culture of the general Mexican population. And we can moreover see that the two are in some way opposed to each other.

We may well ask whether there was ever an opposition between the atavistic cultures in Canada and Quebec and the social and educational exigencies which, without being creolized or compound, are none the less different from those of native cultures. And each time we are obliged to consider this opposition between the remnants of atavistic culture and this new process of Creolization, either in relatively new countries or in countries where Creolization has already been enacted. Generally speaking, this problem is not present in the Caribbean because all of the natives were exterminated early on, with the exception of a very small number found on a reservation in the Dominican Islands. The residual atavism of the Caribbean presents itself by way of an unconscious trace. For the Creoles of the Caribbean, it seems that there is an unconscious trace of this native existence. But in any case, there are no ethnic conflicts in the Caribbean because the very reality of native atavism has disappeared. In one of my books, *The Caribbean Discourse*, I analyzed the case of a young man suffering from a mental illness of which he was unaware. He was obsessed with the idea that he was the descendant of a Carib chief, a great Carib chief. And I remember forty or fifty years ago when many West Indians in France, finding themselves subject to cultural pressure from their former colonizer, happily asserted that they were descendants of native Caribs in order to escape their proper African ancestry, of which they were doubtlessly ashamed. Be that as it may we notice today that in countries with predominately atavistic cultures, ethnic opposition usually leads to massacre and genocide. And we notice in the Americas that atavistic American Indian cultures have generally been destabilized by the formation of new lands

and borders, meaning their assimilation into these areas, or their Creolization. I do not know if this is the case in Quebec or Canada, but it is true of Mexico, Peru and Columbia. The Caribbean also offers an example of those atavistic populations *who were deported there*: the Hindus, employed as “voluntary” workers since 1830. They resisted culturally, but they also adapted to their new country: Creole *and* Hindu. Today, we must find a way to change the imaginary, the mentality and the intellect of humankind in such a way that ethnic conflicts cease to appear as absolutes at the heart of atavistic culture, and we must change in such a way that ethnic and nationalist conflicts cease to appear as unstoppable necessities in creolized countries.

Among the myths that have lead the way toward a consciousness of History with a capital H – and here we return to the very principles of atavistic cultures (a Genesis and a filiation), we must distinguish between what we could call the founder's myth and those other myths of elucidation, of underhand explanations, of putting together (and possibly in danger) the diverse elements of the social structure in a given culture. The principle role of the founder's myth is to consecrate the presence of a community in a territory by linking its presence to a legitimate filiation which stretches back to the beginning of Creation. The myth of the founder is upheld, albeit obscurely, by this flawless continuity of filiation which will henceforth authorize the community to unconditionally consider this land-made-territory as their own. By extension of legitimacy – as we have already noted – it happens that the myth is transformed into historic consciousness, and the community thus considers it their given right to expand the limits of their territory. This is one of the fundamental aspects of colonial expansion which appeared as closely tied to the idea of universality; that is to say tied to the notion of the general legitimacy of an absolute which was firstly established by a particular elite within the context of a

particular elite. We then understand why it is important that the myth of the founder anchor itself in a Genesis and produce its two monstrous offspring, filiation and legitimacy, which guarantee power and assure its end: universal legitimization of the community's presence. Is this not the working model of what we call History? Moreover, is it not the underlying philosophy of History?

History is therefore effectively the daughter of the founder's myth. On the path to History, the myth of the founder will be accompanied, concealed and ultimately replaced by myths of exegesis, elucidation, and *mise-en-abime* that deal in the social processes of a community, followed by those stories and tales that prefigure History, and finally by the reflective novels, poems, and texts that speak of, sing to, or meditate upon History itself. Wherever the myth of the founder appears, most notably at the heart of atavistic culture, the notion of identity will develop around the axis of filiation and legitimacy; in essence it is the notion of single-rootedness that excludes the other as participant. We can infer that a concept (for example the idea that orality leads to an ontological horizon) will herein be preserved, which will naturally culminate in this expression of the absolute as seen in the written word and in written texts. What will become of historic consciousness if not then the generalized notion of a mission to accomplish, a filiation to maintain, a legitimacy to preserve, and a territory upon which to expand? For those societies in which the founder's myth does not function other than as a sort of borrowing – and I would at this point like to speak of composite societies, creolized societies – the notion of identity realizes itself through the fabric of Relation which understands the other as inferred. These cultures begin immediately with a story that, paradoxically, is already an experience of detour. That which the story diverts is the propensity to attach itself to a Genesis, the inflexibility of the filiation of writing, the shadow cast by the founder's

legitimacy. And when the oral nature of the tale moves on to the fixed nature of writing, as is the case among Caribbean and Latin American writers today, it will maintain this glowing detour which will in turn determine another configuration of the written, from whence the ontological absolute will flee. So what will become of historic consciousness if not the chaotic impulse toward the amalgamation of all histories, in which none (and it is there one of the major qualities of chaos) can boast of an absolute legitimacy. Both atavistic and composite cultures confront the same situation, and it serves no purpose to refer one's culture to the former or to the latter when we do not intend to overcome them. Today we must reconcile the writing of the myth and the writing of the story, the memory of a Genesis and the foresight of Relation. Therein lies our most difficult task. But what other could seem more beautiful?

I would like to present you with a concrete example of this phenomenon. Known as Roma, the Romani of Europe, and often called gypsies, the Roma people are organizing a peace conference in Sarajevo to be held in the next two or three months. I speak of the Roma only because, in all of the literature that I have received from them, there appeared to me a sort of exaltation of principle that seems perfectly well-suited to illustrate the point of view I so briefly espoused moments ago. I would like to begin by reading a few passages from the declaration written by the Gypsies of Europe, a few brief but important passages. They write to the mayor of Sarajevo: "On this the thousandth day of siege, we would like to reassure you of our solidarity and hope. Because of our belief in a free, polyethnic Sarajevo, we graciously ask you to welcome the Congress for Peace initiated by the International Romani Union. Before the war, the Roma of Sarajevo enjoyed rights not available elsewhere, such as the right to their own language, along

with radio and television access.” In another passage, they define themselves, they define the Romani as, “All who fight for a polyethnic democracy.” In another passage, they write: “The Roma are invisible in this war like in all wars, even though over a million Roma were living in Yugoslavia at the outset of the war. What happened to the Roma in Yugoslavia? What international aid have they received? How have they fed themselves in times of widespread famine and rampant inflation in a war-torn country? Who thought about sending a humanitarian convoy for the Roma of Bosnia? What cultural avenues were opened for them in the West, to shelter them from continuous bipartite attacks? And what will become of them after the pacification of the former Yugoslavia? Will they still be deprived of their citizenship like the twenty-five percent of Macedonian Roma today? What kind of welcome will they receive when they seek refuge abroad? In their absence, will their homes continue to be destroyed by municipal bulldozers, like those leveled on July 15, 1994, in Zrenjanin, Vojvodina? And let us not forget how the homes of several Roma residents were burned the night of January 7-8, 1995, in the village of Bakou, twenty-three miles from Bucharest. It is important to point out that these burnings just happened to coincide with an orthodox holy day and that they were followed by a confrontation between the Romanian villagers and the sedentary Roma there. The Baku conflict is just one of over thirty similar occurrences to take place in Romania since January 1990. In many such incidents, the supercharged crowds would storm the homes of Roma families at the sound of the tocsin. These scenarios represent a contemporary metamorphosis of the pogrom, a phenomenon formerly native to Central and Eastern Europe. They prefigure the general situation of the Roma, a people who have always been the object of discrimination and who, in the present case, represent all “ethnic impurity.” If the Romani Union calls for this congress, it is not to renew the

historic distinction put in place between the Roma and everyone else, but on the contrary, only peace will offer all a polycultural citizenship through cultural diversity and equal rights. The congress for peace proposes this polycultural citizenship of tomorrow in the image of a tolerant and blended Roma culture, open to the world yet unique at the same time. To this Utopia, the Roma extend their heartiest invitations.” I would like to underline the phrases “blended,” “open to the world,” and “unique at the same time.” A final passage: “In order to prevent this congress from becoming solely comprised of Roma, or even of Yugoslavians, it is important to highlight the polyethnicity of our proposal and the future of a possible political system which would be suitable for all. Non-territorial coexistence stretching beyond the antiquated spheres of a continent in the midst of significant transformation, this Congress is resolutely dedicated to that which will affirm the presence of civilization over barbaric acts of violence, moreover a civilization of movement, art, life, tolerance, hospitality, welcome, blending and creolization: a civilization that impedes neither singularity nor identity. The Roma are a unique people in our world, parallel to none, yet they share a large portion of their culture with their hosts: religion, language, habitudes, and regional fate.”

I decided to read these passages to you because, in the course of my first exposé, questions arose as to the pertinence of the term “Creolization” in regard to the whole-world. We find this term in the solemn appeal made by the Roma of Central Europe – an appeal which was sent out the world over. I find here not only the idea of cultural meeting and blending and therefore the notion of rhizome-identity but also that of an openness to the world, and perhaps more importantly, the fact that all of this does not contradict the notion of singularity and identity. While the Roma provide a concrete example of why it is important to lend support to the socio-political struggles witnessed

on our own doorsteps, they also highlight the need to open the imaginary of each and every individual to something other than themselves. We can do nothing to change the situation of the world if we do not change the imaginary, if we do not change the belief that identity must always be single-rooted, fixed and intolerant.

In experiencing the whole-world from the vantage point in which we find ourselves, we are establishing relation and not sanctifying exclusion. Concerning this question of identity, I believe that literature is approaching a new era, an era in which a new, contemporary epic will be produced. All atavistic culture underwent an epic literary inception. From the Old Testament to the *Iliad*, from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to the Indian *Bhagavad Gita*, etc, from the Island Sagas to the *Song of Roland*, from the *Aeneid* to the *Popol Vuh* or the American Indian *Chilam Balam* or the Finnish *Kalevala*, these epic founding texts serve to reassure the community of its own destiny and consequently tend to exclude the other, perhaps not in the text itself but in its usage because those founding texts which ground a community are in fact errant texts. If we examine the Old Testament, the *Iliad*, the sagas, the *Aeneid*, we quickly notice that these texts are “complete” because in their very call to establish a community, they instantly propose a call to deviation. And it seems to me that a new and contemporary epic literature will begin to form from the moment the whole-world begins to conceive itself as a new community. But then again, we must consider that this new and contemporary epic literature, contrary to the founding texts, will be expressed in a multilingual voice from within the very language that serves as its vehicle of expression. This new epic will also expunge the need for an expiatory victim, often seen as an important figure in the founding texts. The victim and the act of atonement allow the founding community to exclude what it cannot redeem, to “universalize” in a domineering fashion. The new

epic, however, will establish relation and not exclusion.

In short, this new epic literature could surpass the notion of the self, astounding the imaginary of all possible beings in the world, of all possible worldly existences. The question of being need no longer be asked in the rewarding solitude to which universal thought has been reduced. The universal has toppled over into diversity, which caused its initial upset. The question of being no longer supposes its proper legitimacy, circuitous as it is in the corroborative assault of diversities in our world. What is meant by “rule” can no longer be seen as the ancient universal right; rather it is now an amassment of relations. We can see this well enough in today’s game of international politics where, once again, what is right is defined gradually and with difficulty, and is subsequently upheld by the pressure of monolithic armed forces, challenging the actions of subversive efforts which are little by little reduced away from diversity. The constitution of this right or these new rights is the very sign of the obsolete nature of the ancient universal right which never before had to justify its “quasi-ontological” scope. This new authority is solely institutional, and it must take into account this amassment of relations, meaning that it can no longer rely on cunning or sublimation, and it can no longer hide. All of this lies in direct contrast to what colonial oppression achieved. In any case, the question of being is therein abandoned. What is brought to light here as part of the spectacle of hegemonies is truly the dissolution of the generalizing universal which leads *a priori* to the surprising phenomenon of being and of existence which looms in direct opposition to the permanence of the self.

This discourse is supported by what I call the thought of the trace. The trace does not suppose or support a notion of the self but rather the aberration of the existing

individual. The coming of history is today barricaded by obscure recurrences and illusory renewals in which those peoples and communities who gave birth to the idea of History churn their incertitude. Not only have they confronted the other, but more arduous indeed, they have also encountered the turbulent expanse of the trace. The single root makes claims of depth, while the rhizome sprawls over and through this expanse. The empty spaces on world maps are now woven with opacity and that which forever severed the absolute from History was first planning and projection. From this point forward, History conceptually undoes itself as it dwells upon these recurrences of the forces which confer identity, whether national or fundamental, all the more sectarian as these identifying forces become defunct. In opposition to these inversions of old routes, the trace is the trembling, ever-new sprout. The trace does not discover new soil or virgin forests, the explorer's false passion. In truth, the trace does not purport to complete the whole; rather it permits the conception of the incommunicable. The ever-new is no longer what remains to be discovered in order to complete the whole or what is still unexplored in the blank spaces of a map. The ever-new is what must be weakened in order to truly scatter the whole, to carry it to the end.

The trace is to the road like revolt to a summons and jubilation to the garrote. It is not a rough draft of earth or the first mumbling of forest, but the all-organic penchant towards another way of being and understanding; and it is the form which comes from this understanding. We do not follow the trace to find ourselves on comfortable paths. The verity of the trace lies in its conviction to erupt, to divorce itself from the seductive norm. The Africans traded in the Americas carried with them the trace of their gods, their language, and their customs across the Immense Waters. Confronted with the unrelenting disorder created by the settler, they knew to harvest these traces, burdened as

they were with their collective suffering, creating in the process something more elevated than a synthesis and more akin to a causatum to which they alone held the secret. The Creole languages are the beaten and weary traces of the giant tub formed by the Caribbean and Indian Oceans. When they found refuge in the irony of the woods, the traces they followed did not imply abandon, despair, pride or self-satisfaction. The proud Longoué, characters in my novel *The Fourth Century* do not come as close to this as the tenacious Béluse. The *graine-en-bas-feuille*, a humble plant lost in the vegetation of my country, grew as well there as did the proud porcelain rose; the trace does not weigh upon the earth like an irreparable stigma. We encounter within ourselves the troubling traces of our history. This is not to avoid a hasty model of humanity that we would oppose but rather to proceed in an altogether deliberate manner, with respect to all the other masters who have been imposed upon us by force¹¹. Here is the detour that is neither flight nor renunciation but the new art of “undoing.”

The trace does not repeat the unfinished path where we stumble or the well-worn path that encloses a territory or a large domain. It is an opaque manner of learning the branch and the wind, a way of being oneself derived from the other, the sand in the true disorder of utopia, the unexplained and the hidden current of the free-flowing river. West Indian landscapes enjoin others in the distance, and each story gives its unique trace, from a stream to a river, establishing correlation; flowing, fragile and obstinate, these branches of language call to one another. Mountains and valleys turn into stories and hollow out what is inexplicable in the world. Do not overlook this new theme asserting itself, do not take offense over this insolent speech, nor the former that you cried aloud,

¹¹ “*Nous bouleversons en nous nos histoires qui sont cachées et qui ne paraissent plus sous la forme de traces; mais en faisant cela, nous ne découpons pas un nouveau modèle d’humanité, que nous opposerions à tous ces modèles qu’on s’efforce de nous imposer, un modèle que nous aurions trace de manière tout a fait conventiennelle (“toute tracée”).*” – Edouard Glissant, clarification.

covered with too many lands and too much space. They sound the improbable and the risk that we all share. In this way the thought of the trace promises an alliance far from the system, refuting possession and proclaiming to today's diffracted time that humankind is multiplying among itself through collisions and marvels.

Such is the violent departure of poetry.

I believe that these literatures, these literatures which I sense appearing in the world, will only be possible if we affirm at their arrival – in the place where we are and from where we can behold their apparition – what I believe to be and what I call, pertaining to those problems of identity, the right of each to opacity.

In the global meeting of cultures which we experience as a chaos, it seems that we no longer have any point of reference. Everywhere we look we see catastrophe and anguish. We despair of the chaos-world but only because we are still trying to contain it within a sovereign order which wishes to conceive of the whole-world as a reductionist unity. We must have the utopian and idealistic strength to understand that this chaos is not an apocalyptic chaos calling for the end of all worlds. Chaos is beautiful when we conceive of all the elements therein as equally necessary. In the meeting of world cultures, we must fully possess the power of our imagination in order to consider all cultures as exercising both unifying actions and liberating diversities. It is for this very reason that I reclaim for all the right to opacity. It is no longer necessary for me to “understand” the other, meaning to reduce him to the model of my own transparence, to live with this other or to build with him. Today the right to opacity would be the most evident indication of non-barbarity. And I would say that those literatures which are outlined before us will be beautified in the light and the opacity of our whole-world.

Questions

Robert Melançon. – I would like to begin with an expression that you cited in the letter of the Roma, in their beautiful appeal to the world on behalf of Sarejevo, in which they call for a “polyethnic democracy.” The word democracy leads me to extend to you an invitation to expound your own thoughts on a field which is undoubtedly not your own this evening, as it is of a legal or political nature. It seems to me that the idea of citizenship, for example the idea of citizenship as formulated by Locke and followed by what was partially realized during the French Revolution, this idea in which there is no droit de sang¹² but rather citizenship imparted by adherence and submission to a set of laws, it seems to me that this idea of citizenship is waning throughout the world, that it is being assaulted by a variety of those reflexes belonging to identity. Nearly everywhere we look we see the droit de sol¹³, which is in itself not perfect, being attacked; even in France it is beset by blood right. Can we imagine this new and open polycultural citizenship, this scattered totality evoked in the letter from the Roma, can we ascribe to it a weak judicial and political framework? That is to say, can we rediscover in a different sense what Marxist philosophy called the decay of the state? To dream of an impuissant state, of voluntary renunciations of state authority... In terms of politics, perhaps there is no other way to arrive at this scattered totality?

Édouard Glissant. – I would first like to point out what I feel is an inconsistency in your question. I believe that in order to combat the notion of citizenship derived from parental nationality, or the *droit de sang*, the idea of citizenship based on place of birth, the *droit de sol*, was ill-chosen because it was taken from the rhetoric of a community which formed itself around a confined, bordered territory. I believe that this practice is

¹² *droit de sang*: right to citizenship based on parentage, blood right.

¹³ *droit de sol*: right to citizenship based on place of birth

just as “bad” as blood right. I believe that another judicial formation would be necessary under the plan that you suggest; a common or a civil right to citizenship that must be found to replace this *droit de sol*. Paradoxically, I find the *droit de sol* to be just as restrictive as the notion of blood right.

Secondly, it seems to me that we cannot begin to answer the question of the State as you have posed it without first attempting to understand what has led to the metamorphosis of the State in the cultures of the world. For example, in the history of the Chinese or the Indian peoples, there are experiences of the State – and here I am most assuredly not referring to the monolithic Chinese Empire – and the relationship between the State and civic society that we have yet to integrate into our own political systems. And it seems to me that every time we reflect upon the relationship between the civic society and the State, we conduct our study in a Western setting with Western notions of civil, legislative, and international rights. It seems to me that we miss something in this process, that we lack diversity and openness to the idea. It is for this reason that I hesitate in my response to your question at the moment, not to mention that a lot of the proponents of closed social systems also support a weakening of the State. This happens in many countries. Firstly, what State does this concern? It would be necessary to learn elsewhere, to leave Western filiation. And moreover, would this weakening of the State be an end to itself? Could not a weakening of the State accompany a coercive society? It is very possible. I hesitate then to answer your question. I am also hesitant to define what the Roma call a polyethnic democracy. That is the attitude espoused by the Roma, but the Roma are also Westerners. They have greatly suffered, but they have also borne witness to the metamorphoses of Western History. And for them, the democracy they describe as polyethnic, blended, Creolized, *etc.*, could be – and in my opinion must be –

an ideal, an objective in the domain of European society. I am not sure if it would be useful for other societies.

Joël Desrosiers. – I would like to ask you two questions, and I will try to keep them brief. I heard you talking about William Faulkner and Saint-John Perse on the radio this morning, and I was struck by two paradigms in your thought. The first is that of the vegetal paradigm: the rhizome and the single-root. The second is the scientific paradigm: the chaos theory and the whole-world. My question follows the same fascination that Saint-John Perse had with the scientific: is science imaginary for you? When you speak of the world's imaginary, does it correspond at some basic level to the domain of the scientific imaginary? Do you find any relationship between abstract figures (chaos, invariants, etc) and this new imaginary?

É.G. – I believe that there is a general quality of “science” that is of interest to us from the standpoint of identity. Western science at its most triumphant, when it no longer questioned itself – nor its future, nor its methods – ambitiously and continuously set out, even at the price of dramatic revolutions of thought, to examine a certain truth that would be the truth of all things and that would offer one day or another an account of the entire world, of the entire universe. Such was the pretention of Western science until the day when revolutions in scientific thought showed that, from the incertitude of Heisenberg, perhaps it is impossible to reach “the depth of matter” – as Heisenberg himself noted that in order to see the particles of matter we must light them and that this lighting could perhaps change their nature, at least definitely on the level of speed and orientation. This relation of indeterminacy has become a common place for contemporary thought. There rests there an unforeseeable opacity, an impassable opacity. And it is from this moment that Western science began to carry out its own

revolution, producing the branch of science which became the science of chaos where all linear equations were renounced, meaning those ambitions of conducting an in-depth analysis of the Whole (like the single-root purports to do...) where we begin to insist that we must describe what is in this expanse, where we begin to insist on describing the indescribable. We must try to describe the subject and not attempt to reach an absolute knowledge of it. To me, this scientific evolution seems related to the conception of the being and its being. In other words, for me, a triumphant science would be accorded to the philosophy of being and a doubting science, overturning certitudes and proclaiming that we will circulate, that we will no longer carry on in a linear fashion but rather in the expanse of the whole-world, in accordance with the unannounced being. It is for this very reason that I am interested in this process as a poet. I am in no way a scientist and have no pretensions to that effect. But it seems to me that a poet can understand these things. He can understand the disruption of Western science, which is in itself Science for only in the Western world (while the Chinese for example have invented everything or close enough) has the notion of science appeared and supported itself. But you are all also aware that the science of chaos borders on esthetics. It is perfectly normal that there is a sort of attraction there – people reproach me for this elsewhere, for example an article appeared in France entitled, “Ah yes, you have heard of Glissant and his chaos theory, right?” It would have been nice had it been my own theory. We can choose to ignore this chaos-world but then we are literally inclined to reproduce disorder, and we ultimately risk the espousal of strength through the illusory behavior of outpouring. We can just as well approach the chaos-world by way of the imaginary or through an elucidation of opacity so that we may make room for a fragile yet persistent trace.

J.D. – Édouard Saïd, in his book Culture and Imperialism, argues that Western

literature and the Western canon have, through their esthetic, prefaced and permitted the exploration and the enslavement of the world. He suggests that identities do not exist but rather hold themselves as constructs of our imagination. How would you respond to this assertion in light of your own esthetic?

É.G. – I certainly share several aspects of this view, and I will elaborate upon them here. In order to conquer the world, it is true that the world had first to be dreamed. Consequently, it could be said that Western writers and poets were harbingers of colonization. We could cite them all, including Chateaubriand, Conrad, *etc.* However, due to the fact that the West is not monolithic, there were also poets in Western literature who protested against the colonization of the world. Rimbaud writes, “The Whites are coming...”, and Césaire recaptures this motif in *Et les chiens se taisaient (And the Dogs Kept Quiet)*, when he says, “The Whites have landed.” A poet like Victor Segalen, a former military doctor who worked on a dispatch boat, has produced, invented, imagined and constructed a system of thought in which exoticism combats all exoticism, as well as all colonization. It is here that we see the first signs of confusion and abstruseness, because for me, Segalen is a revolutionary poet. Honor and respect to Segalen! He was the first to question the diversity of the world, the first to combat exoticism as a term complacent to colonization; all of this and he was a military doctor.

In other words, no form of Manichaeism should present itself in our investigation. It is however true that the traditional literature of the West is a literature of being and of the absolute and that this classification could easily foreshadow a similar generalization. English and French colonization, or those forms of colonization enacted by the English and the French, who stood as the principal colonizers of the nineteenth century, are the only ones absolutely sure of their legitimacy, absolutely. No other country today which

colonizes or oppresses another is sure of its legitimacy. Imagine that today a large, global power like China, Russia, the United States or Japan were to invade another country; that power would not be sure of its legitimacy. It would require an explanation. English and French colonization throughout the nineteenth century was always sure of its legitimacy because the whole system (the thought of an elected territory) grew to global proportions. And when the world was finally obtained by the labor of colonization (the colonizers served as heralds to these times; it was they who mapped out the coasts, *etc.*), when it was all finally “realized,” all semblances of legitimacy were brought to ground because there was no where else to go. It brings to mind the story of those American pioneers who began to entertain thoughts of suicide upon reaching the Californian coast and realizing that they could travel no farther west. As a result there was a generalized sense of depression at the time. Booming expansion was no longer possible. And I believe that this is what happened to Western colonizers, most notably the British and the French. The colonizers encountered opposition from the natives, but they were also struck by a loss of legitimacy and this is the only distinction I would make in regard to the statement you made on the part of Mr. Saïd.

Gason Miron. – *At the very end of your lecture, you say: “To conceive all the culture of the world”... ”opacity”... I was unable to grasp the entire phrase. Would you mind repeating it?*

É.G. – Of course not. “In the meeting of world cultures, we must fully possess the power of our imaginary so that we might consider all cultures as exercising both unifying actions and liberating diversities.” However, we do not possess this strength of the imaginary. We need this strength. We must have it...

Pierre Nepveu. – I have a question concerning the epic genre that you mentioned

earlier. When you dream of the advent of a new literature, you are speaking of the new epic genre. I am a little surprised by this characterization, for two reasons. On one hand, can we not say that this new epic genre of which you speak is already clamoring into existence in Western literature – beginning obviously with Joyce and continuing in Latin-American literature with writers such as Fuentes, Márquez, and Guimarães Rosa in Brazil –, where we see the form of the epic taken up anew but at the same time being taken apart by linguistic Creolization or even quotidian references (parody, etc.)? On the other hand, can we not also claim that contemporary literature in effect characterizes itself by the death of the formal epic? If we look to the novel, for example to certain European authors, the rejection of the epic form is evident and is often employed to open the novel to its own musicality, to its relation with the quotidian, to its proper intimacy etc. This rejection can take many forms. I suppose my question is two-fold: what is the reason for this rather strong aversion to the epic, even under its new form?

É.G. – It is not the epic genre, rather it is the epic form, and the epic form could pass for something other than the epic genre¹⁴. In response to your questions, I offer my first objection: of course there have already been apparitions or re-appearitions of the epic form in Caribbean and Latin-American literature. In my opinion, however, these are the epic forms that remain bound to the traditional structure of the epic, meaning a community that is reassured through the production of an epic which concerns only the members of that community, even though those peoples undergoing the pangs of de-colonization (the people of the Caribbean and Latin America can be included here) compare the Western epic with their own, which is strikingly beautiful in its own right.

¹⁴ Unlike in English, the French language has two words to describe what we in English commonly refer to as an “epic.” First, there is the *épopée*, or the epic genre, used to describe particularly long texts written in verse that recount heroic, and often mythic, tales. The word *épique* is used to describe the genre of the *épopée* but is not limited to it. “Ce n’est pas de l’*épopée*, c’est de la forme *épique*; la forme *épique* peut

But for me, this is not yet the real epic because the true epic has as its aim the most threatened community in today's world, which is the world-community. And it is the relationship between my community and the world-community that can establish the epic. It seems to me that those other literatures you speak of, which rest outside of the question at hand, do not understand the world and are not interested in the world, other than to perhaps govern by way of the Tale. Therein lies their "legitimacy." It is not surprising that they renounce the epic voice, that which today announces the dispersion of the Tale, and against the power of History, the final meeting of the histories of varied peoples.

Chaos-World: For an Esthetic of Relation

Today I would like to speak to you about what I call “the poetics of chaos,” as it appears to be an appropriate way to summarize and provisionally conclude our discussions on Creolization and language. I must confess that it would be impossible to conceive the poetics of chaos in any finite or formal manner, as in a well-written lecture lacking any contradictions or recurrences. Nor can we imagine these poetics of chaos with any sort of real finitude, as a whole that forbids modifications, additions, regrets or even denials. It is for this reason that I have chosen to conduct my exposé by dreaming my subject in your presence because it is a subject upon which we are allowed to dream, construct, elaborate, conceptualize and also poeticize. I owe much of my reverie on the poetics of chaos to a popular book entitled *The Rhythms of Chaos (Des rythmes au chaos)* published by Editions Odile Jacob and written by Pierre Bergé, Yves Pomeau and Monique Dubois-Gance. It is a very accessible book, written for the general public by three scholars. In other words, the authors are not scientific popularizers; rather they are scholars who wrote a scientific book for the general public. I will spare you the long list of books which discuss chaos in strictly scientific terms because I believe them to go beyond the scope of this discussion. Moreover, the authors of *The Rhythms of Chaos* would not be pleased were we to employ chaos, in the scientific sense of the term, to just anything and subsequently form a pseudo-philosophy around it. It is an idiosyncrasy to which I am most susceptible. Fortunately for us, the authors of this text also indicate that those theories concerning chaos are actually theories on the philosophy of science, and rather ambiguous theories at that; later in our discussion we will see the importance of this ambiguity. I feel that I am fully authorized to philosophize on the science of chaos

since, from my first work of expository prose in *Soleil de la Conscience* up through my latest work in *Poétique de la Relation*, I have dealt with, for myself and for the subject at hand, the problematic of the chaos-world.

I define chaos-world – a term that I have used often throughout these conferences – as the shock, entanglement, repulsion, attraction, connivance, opposition and conflict between cultures in our contemporary whole-world. The definition, or the approach, that I propose for this notion of chaos-world is consequently very precise: it is a matter of cultural *métissage* – and not simply a melting-pot – by which the whole-world finds itself today realized. The first assessment I would like to make would be to indicate what we could call the temporal condition of culture, or the temporal condition of the relation of cultures. The most general observation we could make in this domain is that relations, or contacts between cultures – I pointed this out earlier but it must be repeated –, once perpetuated themselves along immense temporal shores. While very efficient and quite effective, these contacts were not understood as such. That is, the temporal shore was so immense that before any sort of transformation – which was most often fairly brutal and immediate – made it known as such, it was relayed by another transformation. For example, some time was needed before the inhabitants of what was to be France came to know themselves as French. There are immense temporal shores that condition and contain the varied relations of cultures, and we most assuredly study those involving the European world because they pertain to us. Sadly, we are not only ignorant but crippled of any real knowledge of those relations which take place outside of the European spectrum, of those relations in Asia or in Africa for instance. Nevertheless, we know that in these immense temporal shores, cultures imperceptibly influence one another through

dazzling transformations. Our contemporary era presents us with a new theory, namely that these temporal shores are no longer immense; rather they are immediate, along with their effects. The influence of one culture upon another is immediately felt and recognized as such. And while the effects of these cultural relations can be immediately sensed, there is at the same time an observation that cannot be overlooked, namely that these cultures which influence one another, either positively or negatively, exist in several different times. In relation to the finity in operation in our own culture, which is the historic finity manifested by the linearity of Western time before and after Jesus Christ, we can say that the cultures of our era exist in several different times but are subject to the same transformations, the same influences. This implies that there is a sort of eruption in time, a type of fracture or an active contradiction, in those cultures that exist in different times but are all the same subject to the same influences. A Chinese peasant who has for centuries based his existence on a very vast space-time continuum undergoes or experiences the Chinese Revolution, for example, in a very brutal way, and he is moreover stricken by the influence or the desire for a Coca-Cola; the same Coca-Cola that is experienced in an altogether different manner in New York or in Miami or in London. There are contradictions and fractions in this scheme which quickly introduce to us a principle element of scientific chaos, the notion of the erratic determinate system. I am completely unable to undertake any sort of scientific study with you, but the notion of the erratic determinate system, as it is central to chaos theory in physics, is also applicable to what I call chaos-world.

The scientific study of chaos says that there are some determinate dynamic systems which subsequently become erratic. In principle, a determinate system has a certain fixity, a mechanistic quality, a regularity of function; the discovery of chaos in

science leads us to think that there is an infinity of determinate dynamic systems that could possibly become erratic, and it is my interpretation that the value of these systems can fluctuate at any given moment without any apparent explanation. Those scientists who study chaos continue to experiment with this notion of the erratic determinate system and have attempted to verify it in a series of real representations – for example in the unpredictable movement of falling leaves from a wind-blown tree, or in the rain pattern during the stormy season, or in the fundamental impossibility encountered when attempting to determine the exact length of the Brittany coast. The science of chaos dictates that we cannot absolutely determine the length of the Brittany coast because we do not control the variations of its frontier where water meets soil. The tumultuous metamorphosis of the coast introduces a singularity that cannot be fixed once and for all. While I am hesitant to take this scientific theory of chaos as an absolute guide for our study, there is something in this theory that touches upon the cultures of our world today and is consequently of great interest to me. And what interests me is the unpredictable behavior found in the relationship between one culture and another, the same unpredictability found at the very core of the science of chaos. Unpredictable behavior is strongly tied to the notion of the erratic determinate system. Physicists who study chaos say that all systems which have only two degrees of liberty, meaning two variables, will never become erratic. However, when the variables multiply and time enters the equation – that is of course why we began our little exposé with a brief discussion of time –, the unpredictable nature of chaos presents itself. And I propose that existing relations between cultures in our world today are unpredictable. We have suffered much under the pressure and education of the West, under the reign of systematic thought whose most grandiose aim was that of a pretention to predictability. All systematic thought is geared

toward predictability. And we realize that in terms of cultural relation, meaning in those time-space planes that communities exude and fill with their plans for the future, their ideas and often their inhibitions, unpredictability is law. I think that here we must stop and ask ourselves an important question: if unpredictability is law in all that concerns human cultural interaction, are we not destined to fall into a state of pessimism or nihilistic despair? This is without doubt what systematic thought hoped to avoid: that the weight of unpredictability would lead humankind to unthinkable renunciations or to immanent stagnation – for if everything is unpredictable, action becomes futile. We must, and will, respond to this pressing question.

L'autre idée à laquelle je m'attacherai c'est que l'un des principes de l'erraticisme de certains systèmes déterministes provient de ce qu'il se manifeste dans ces systèmes une sensibilité aux conditions initiales.

I also agree with the idea that the erratic nature of determinate systems stems from the fact that those systems manifest a certain sensitivity to initial conditions, to the degree that this sensitivity could give rise at any given moment to an increase or decrease in value assessment, a sensitivity which could erratically and infinitely multiply at the heart of the system. For me, it is a very interesting idea because within it I have formulated another idea of my own, that of the *prophetic vision of the past*. The past must not solely be recomposed objectively (or even subjectively) by the historian, but it must also be prophetically dreamed for the people, the communities and the cultures for whom the past has been concealed. Take for example this anecdote which has always been a great source of amusement for me. I remember imagining a scene for my book *The Fourth Century* in which nameless slaves were given titles after the abolition of slavery in Martinique in 1848. I imagined two French delegates, lost in a sea of black, giving

names to men, to families, authoritatively attributing family names with books at their side, a plethora of encyclopedias and various collections of text. They were assigning names like Cicéron, Caton, César, *etc.* to some families and then Avoine, Gerblé, Alizé, Élysée, *etc.* to others. They depleted all stores of Western knowledge to give names to the newly freed. And shortly after I wrote this passage, I found in a very serious, confidential and extremely scientific publication concerning the origin of names – what do you call it... the origin of proper names... the study of onomastics, that's it – in a very specialized onomastic publication, I found a text written by a scholar that used as a reference the chapter in *The Fourth Century* which I wrote, which I completely imagined, completely invented on my own account, and this chapter became a scientific illustration. It was a prophetic vision of the past. In other words, there are concealed phenomena in human culture that can lead to basic variants which often elude analysis. If we truly wish to study the misery in Africa – not study, that would certainly be the last straw if we wished to “study” Africa’s misery – , if we truly wish to understand what is happening that is so abominable in Africa today (and taking into account that we are certainly not succumbing to any sort of “afro-pessimism”), how can we do this without a certain awareness of the initial conditions of Africa’s current situation, without recalling the horrible Holocaust that was the slave trade and the depopulation and pillaging of Africa over the course of three centuries? How could we go about it without keeping these things in mind? The erratic system which has become the African continent cannot be approached without returning to this initial sensitivity, to the initial condition of the African Holocaust and slave trade.

The current miserable state of affairs in Haiti and the gratifying ambiguity in Martinique, two completely opposite ends of the same spectrum, both reveal the same

initial condition: the slave trade and the involuntary uprooting of African populations. What I would like to share with you is my conviction that systematic thought or the thought of the system no longer provides any contact with the real, no longer supplies any understanding or estimation of what truly and actually takes place in cultural contact and conflict. Because the erratic, the erratic dimension that is the chaotic dimension of determinate systems of multiple variables, has now become the *Tout-monde*. Today's wandering no longer envisions the foundation of a territory. A territory is variable in its dimensions, but it is not erratic. There is a certain terrifying fixity to the notion of territory.

For a very long time – it must be reiterated – Western thought was circumscribed by a wandering of conquests and territorial foundations, which contributed to the realization of what we can today call the “whole-world.” But in the same place where today there are more and more internal wanderings, meaning more and more projections towards a whole-world and towards self-reflection, even though we remain immobile, not budging from our proper locales, these forms of wandering often trigger what we could call an inner exile, meaning those moments when our sensibilities, our imaginary and indeed all of our imaginative faculties are cut off from the world around us. Yes, inner exile. The erratic nature of the *Tout-monde*, the absolutely unforeseeable nature of relations between human cultures, is reflected in the mentality or the capacity of a community's reflexes, whether we realize it or not. What upholds these wanderings is a sort of generalized aggregation that occurs in any given cultural milieu, experienced as either assent or the endurance of suffering. And it is one of those concepts belonging to chaos-world that the “context” of both agreement and suffering operate as the path and

the way by which an understanding of this “context” can be reached. And that consequently the negative side of suffering is as much a constituting agent of identity as natural agreement, joyful and triumphant. We are in the presence of systems of relation which are completely and utterly erratic. The *Tout-monde* does not encourage cosmopolitanism, most certainly not cosmopolitanism, which is a negative metamorphosis of Relation. The *Tout-monde* is the very poetics of Relation which permits us to sublimate, through an understanding of the self and all, both suffering and agreement, both the negative and the positive.

These few considerations allow me to return to our earlier discussion on Creolization and *métissage*. Let us simplify these two concepts from the outset, with *métissage*, or hybridization, as determinism and Creolization, by comparison, as an architect of the unforeseeable. Creolization is always unpredictable. We can foresee or predetermine hybridization, but we cannot foresee or predetermine Creolization. The same idea of ambiguity, which specialists of the scientific notion of chaos espouse as an element central to their object of study, will from this point forward govern the imaginary of chaos-world as well as that of Relation. We can summarize this in comparing archipelagic thought with continental thought, where continental thought is the study of a system and archipelagic thought is the study of ambiguity.

At this point in our discussion, we must ask ourselves the following question: can the unpredictable nature of chaos be considered a deficiency? We all agree that the predictability of systematic thought has been neither effective nor positive in the development of mankind. But is this unpredictability a failing, or at any rate does it underline a failing of our resolve, of our intentions, of what Schopenhauer should have called the will to live? Given that simple determinate systems cannot be chaotic, with

negative effects, can this system – if we consider the world as a determinate system – can this manifestly erratic, determinate system not bring about the decay of being? My response to this question is that to understand the unpredictable is to consent to the present, with the present as it is experienced and lived, in a manner that ignores the empirical and systematic as it reaches to embrace the poetic. In France we say that poetry is dead. I believe that poetry, or in any case the exercise of the imaginary which is the prophetic vision of both the past and the future, is the only way by which we can take part in this global, unpredictable Relation.

No political, economic or military operation of global proportions is capable of even beginning to glimpse the smallest solution to the problem posed by the contradictions of the erratic system of chaos-world if the imaginary of the Relation does not resonate in the mentalities and sensibilities of various cultures in our world today, so that they might overturn the poetic vapor, meaning to understand themselves as peoples, not as People, in a new way: as a rhizome of networks and not as a single-root. I think that any type of intervention, be it in Burundi, in Rwanda, in Yugoslavia or in any other place in the world, is unable to “resolve” a given situation without having first changed man’s way of understanding this one point: that there is an unpredictable nature in both our existence and in our influence upon one another. As long as we concede to the notion of a single-rooted source of identity, there will continue to be situations like those seen in Bosnia, Rwanda and Burundi, and we will continue to find ourselves before the same impossibility. While speaking with my Tutsi friends from Rwanda, I was perfectly convinced that they were the victims of Hutu aggression, but I was equally persuaded that if there were five-hundred Tutsi and only ten Hutu, all ten Hutu would be dead. Likewise if there were five-hundred Hutu and only ten Tutsi, all ten Tutsi would be dead. In other

words, there is no solution. There is no solution under the rubric of identity put forth by systematic thought, neither in the cry for tolerance (or pity), which is one of systematic thought's many luxuries, nor in the call to arms. And when people say that the Bosnians are wrong, or that the Serbs wrong, or that the Croatian Muslims are wrong, that so and so is in the wrong, we take up the old rigidness of systematic thought; and in choosing the victims, we choose their executioners each according to their camp, and we reenact the same diversion. We must never hesitate to defend the oppressed and offended, but the problem lies in changing the very notion, the very depth of the lived experience that we have of our identity and to understand that only the imaginary of the *Tout-monde* (or the fact that I can live where I live while still maintaining relation with the whole-world), only this imaginary can aid us in surpassing these sorts of fundamental boundaries that no one wishes to surpass. The *Tout-monde* is a form of infinity, and if we do not rein in the finity of this infinity, we risk – and this is an indubitable stamp of my poetics, or of what could be called my poetics – dragging along indefinitely those archaic impossibilities that will forever lead to intolerance, massacre and genocide.

We must take into account the finity and infinity found in the prophetic vision of the past and in the imaginary of the Relation, focusing on its treatment of initial conditions and the traces of those initial conditions, with its unpredictable nature and this new network that must be formed which will no longer reflect the essence but the expanse of these relations, of our relation with others and those relations which exist between cultures. The *Tout-monde* is an infinity.

To conclude our discussion, I would like to suggest to you something that is neither a *modus operandi* nor a catalog, but I dream of a new approach to literature, a new appreciation of literature, of literature as a discovery of the world, as a discovery of

the *Tout-monde* and the whole-world. I believe that all peoples of today have an important presence to assume in the non-system of relations in the *Tout-monde* and that those people who lack the means by which they might reflect upon this function are in effect an oppressed people, a people kept in a state of infirmity. And still I dream, for my part as a writer, a new approach to literature in the infinity that is the *Tout-monde*.

(Technological advancements, which guarantee a certain global status to those countries producing them, both advance and impede diversity in the *Tout-monde*. The internet, along with other “information superhighways,” effectuates a type of multi-relation in which diversity is infinitely accessible. However, this form of progress also leads to a sort of non-reality, a “virtual reality.” This could be due in part to a human reflex whereby we tend to flee in the face of the doleful complexity seen in the *Tout-monde*. Whatever its merit, the “virtual world” is no more effective, in regard to the imaginative faculties of man, than an Esperanto in terms of language and expression.)

Think of contemporary literature. Even though we could pick any world literature, let us take French literature as our example. I shall start with what I call the finity of finity¹⁵. Why, you ask? Because the finity of finity is always a representation of classicism. The *finity* of finity, this *finity*, is of course a metered finity. Whether it is the classical finity of Latin, Greek, French or Italian, it is still a metered finity. The finity of *finity*. And this particular *finity* is the same as that of our breath, of our voices and of our capacity to speak with a single breath without suffocating. Later we will see how this is the same measure of holy verse, for example, the verse pronounced with a single breath.

¹⁵ The phrase “finity of finity” has been translated from the French *la mesure de la mesure*. While the term *mesure* has many usages in French, it is used in this context to denote the limits of literature.

Why are we discussing the finity of finity? Because classicism speaks to the entire world. And why does classicism do this? Because in this finity of finity all classicisms attempt to make the world at large adopt its particular principles as universal values. For any given culture, classicism begins when that culture is sufficiently sure of its own values and proposes to register them in this finity of finity and to present them to the world as universal values. It is from this point that I launch my discussion. Before this juncture, there are certainly all the cultural hodge-podges of a community, for example the creation of new words by Ronsard and the Pléiade, the definition of cultural relativism inspired by Montaigne, the educational system and the introduction of a process of heretic overthrow given by Rabelais. All these accumulations – and when I say accumulations I do not mean that they are “inferior,” rather they signal the function of literature as a harvesting of culture, a gathering of soil, compost, and all the materials necessary for a fertile literary oeuvre – tend toward a moment, a “coming from” this finity of finity which is essentially a classicism, proposing its particular values as universal.

We know that in all the cultures of the world, tendencies toward classicism are soon followed by periods of the baroque. And in these baroque periods, the infinity of finity develops. In Western cultures (seen in France with the libertines of the eighteenth-century, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Saint-Amant*, *etc.*), at the very moment where classical ambition brings itself to perfection, the baroque introduces this infinity, this disproportionate force which serves as opposition to classical ambition. This infinity is indeed a denial of the metered measure. In other words, the function of the baroque is to resist the pretensions of classicism. Classical pretension is well and good a measure of *depth*. If I were to propose my particular values as universal it would be because I

thought I had reached a depth of meaning. However, the baroque proposes *width*. The baroque is an expanse in which we renounce all pretensions to depth. We are well aware that baroque architecture, painting and literature are all arts of expanse, proliferation, redundancy and repetition.

This period of the baroque is followed by another which I call the finity of infinity. This finity is once again the originating breath, but this infinity is not the infinity of metered finity; rather this infinity is now the infinity of the world. And it purports to return through this authentic respiration the infinity of the world – it is Claudel, Saint-John Perse, and before them Segalen. Within this infinity lies a sort of educational acquisition, a learning process in which we accustom ourselves to the world and its infinity: a centralized apprenticeship, meaning that the originating breath comes from a center and extends into the peripheral. Hence the importance of the holy verse, which is not a meter but a mistress, the breath of man measuring the infinity of the world.

This period is in turn succeeded by what I call the infinity of infinity¹⁶, which for me appears to be the vocation of literature in today's world. Not to be confused with an anarchic infinity, this infinity no longer lays claim to pretensions of depth or the universal; its sole ambition is to diversity. The *infinity* of infinity. The former *infinity* is a complete opening to the *Tout-monde*, being the latter infinity. Literature has been lead to this juncture. And it is altogether certain that all francophone literatures find their place here, in the infinity of infinity, and that they no longer suggest a denial of finity as enacted by the baroque, nor a denial of the depth of classicism. Francophone literatures today experience the full diversity and infinity of the *Tout-monde*. If I was a savant, I would say that I have passed from the finity of finity to the infinity of finity then to the

¹⁶ The phrase “infinity of infinity” has been translated from the French *la démesure de la démesure*. Again, it is used in this sense to describe the limits (or lack thereof) in literature.

finitude of infinity and finally to the infinity of infinity, creating a chiasmus. FF, IF, FI, II.
I made a chiasmus. Not everyone can make a chiasmus, but we can form one through the literature of the *Tout-monde*¹⁷!

I wanted to paint for you this small, incomprehensible portrait of the world so that you might dream, so that you might dream of the situation and state of literature as it is truly present in our world. And like Henri Pichette said, I believe that literature is only beautiful in the bed of the world. And I believe that my identity, my problems, are only accessible to myself and others if I place them in the context of the infinity of the *Tout-monde* and of the object that this infinity henceforth proposes to literature.

¹⁷ « *Tout le monde* ne peut pas faire un chiasme. Mais on peut faire un chiasme avec la littérature du *Tout-monde* ! » [Transl. emphasis]

Questions

Robert Melançon – In the beginning of your discussion, you cite two types of time, explaining that contacts made in former times relied on important temporal ranges whereas today these contacts are made in extremely weak fields of time. You also mentioned the immediate repercussions of this phenomenon. I can ask my question in two different fashions. First, even if these contacts are made within very strict temporal ranges wherein events formerly seen as spread out are compacted, it does not abolish the long-term. We do not know what awaits us in the long-term as it stretches out before us. And moreover, it seems to me that at the end of your discussion you tend to unintentionally address those problems associated with the long-term. When you brought up the unpredictability attributed to chaos-world, you compared it to systematic thought: “No intervention in Burundi or Bosnia or in any other part of the world will bring about change so long as man’s mentality remains unchanged, as long as we have not left behind this notion of systematic thought.” The mentality of humankind is subject to a very slow process of evolution, and this does not prevent the immediate repercussions of cultures upon each other in this chaos-world which is our own, nor does it change the fact that the human mindset can experience change only at the slowest of speeds.

Édouard Glissant- Yes, but the difference lies in the fact that we know it. It is an important difference. Consciousness of consciousness is irrefutable. Immense temporal ranges are not so much a matter of time as they are a matter of non-consciousness, not of unconsciousness but rather of the non-science of things. It is the non-science of the thing. No matter the difficulties, no matter the lengths, the stagnation, the fundamental differences between cultures today, what is important is that we are aware of them. There is even the notion of a certain knowledge of relations, the phenomena of relations

between cultures which produces immediacy. Perhaps it is a deformed knowledge, as seen for example in its presentation via television or radio. Perhaps it is not a veritable knowledge, perhaps it is a para- or a pseudo-knowledge, but the phenomenon of consciousness or knowledge intervenes immediately, which is not the case in those immense temporal ranges we discussed earlier, and that is the big difference. For example, the notion of unpredictability is negative only when it is not known, meaning that when we purport to prepare for the future through predictability. It is there that unpredictability is negative. But when we accord ourselves with this unpredictability, imaginarily, we escape from its own brand of non-responsibility.

R.M. – Has the revocation of these temporal ranges not lead to a flattening of cultural and linguistic variations, to a uniformization of the Tout-monde as opposed to a renewal of its diversity?

É.G. – I do not think so, because in order for there to be Creolization and relation, there must be different cultural values. Segalen himself said that there is here a type of opposition, which is advantageous, similar to the way Valéry thought that resistance to metrics in poetry refined the poet's sensibility. And it is clear that standardization cannot be a mode of the *Tout-monde*. Trivialization and standardization can never be modes of the *Tout-monde*. In order for relation to take place, each side must be on different terms. This is why in modern times we have so favored the notion of differences because were it not for differences, we would not have Relation. For example, a people assimilated into the culture of another people do not participate in global relation. In order for them to participate in global relation, they must offer resistance during this process of assimilation. But if they resist as an imprisoned people, and therein lies the tragedy, they do the same thing as their oppressors. They do not enter into this global relation. But,

in my opinion, the Diverse is not a melting-pot, a “stew”, a mish-mash, *etc.* The Diverse encompasses those differences which encounter each other, conform to each other, oppose each other, and accord with each other, thereby producing the unpredictable. Standardization is certainly a danger, but the very idea of the *Tout-monde* contributes to the fight against this danger.

Joël Desroisiers. – This is in regard to your question on Creolization. I will formulate mine as a sort of commentary: the fluidity of cultures, the blending of cultures is a primary concept, fundamental even, that first finds its base in biology, and Segalen as a doctor was aware of this (Éloge du divers). Cultural purity, or single-rooted identity, does not exist and never has existed, except in identifying passions or ideologically. Therefore it seems to me that Creolization seen here as an impurity posits purity in the same way that an antithesis would assert its thesis. Can we dream, because you have indeed made me dream, of something beyond Creolization, something beyond identity?

É.G. – We are now in a moment of the whole-world where we have begun to escape the stranglehold of single-rooted identity. We have only just begun to realize it. When we look to history and when we look to the actual state of the world, we can see it everywhere. And it is also a matter which no one wishes to press, which no one wants to talk about. Because if we press the issue, we have the impression that we are in some way mutilating or amputating our own identity; therefore we have no “desire” to partake in Creolization, for it demands that we never die. (Even if Segalen asked that we fight till the death against the loss of the Diverse, in order that we “might die with beauty.”) We cannot sacrifice ourselves for Creolization, while we can sacrifice ourselves for our identity: for our single-rooted identity, *etc.* We can be assassin, murderer and torturer for

our single-rooted identity. In starting to conceive in my imaginary the Relation as constitutive of my being, do I not begin to separate myself from my being, to decline in my identity, to dilute myself into the air? No. As long as we do not carry out this reversal in thought, the Bosnias of the world will continue. The “beyond” of Creolization would effectually be the non-identifying. But there is the Place¹⁸ which preserves us.

J.D. – I wonder if it is always easy to identify those who were the colonizers and those who were the colonized? For example, in Quebec, were the separatists¹⁹ the colonizers?

É.G. – It is up to the Quebecois to decide. I shall respond with “diplomatic” prudence because I have many friends in Quebec. In any case I can say this: I shall never interfere with the manner in which people manage to unravel the mystery of the place in which they find themselves. We cannot do this for them. But if I were Quebecois, and a fervent Quebecois nationalist, I would be a fervent nationalist for the American Indian population there. If I were a fervent Quebecois nationalist... because in the same way that we cannot save one language by allowing others to perish, we cannot save a nation or an ethnicity in letting the others fall away. And this is what I call Relation.

Gaston Miron. – Canada does not allow its citizens to be fervent nationalists for the American Indian population because that would disturb the entire strategy of the Native American nations.

É.G. – But we must topple these sorts of strategies! We must not forget that the American Indian people are atavistic. And, no matter what they would say to the

¹⁸ Glissant capitalizes the French word *Lieu* in this instance in order to distinguish his idea of “place” from his notion of “territory.”

¹⁹ Glissant here employs the term *souverainistes* to describe those who wished to form an independent state

contrary, the Quebecois are a composite people compared to the atavistic nature of the American Indian people there. It is harder for an atavistic people to accept Relation. All the more so for what they suffered. We can more easily give in to the Relation when we are Brazilian or Quebecois than if we were Quechua or a descendent of the Huron because there is the weight of atavism which opposes the disbursement of the composite. The burden of suffering and radical dispossession remains. As long as these peoples do not voluntarily consent to it, Relation will be threatened.

Moreover, the appearance of the real obliterates, from underneath, the trace of initial conditions. And we often lose this trace of initial conditions. We can look to a culture that effectively dominates another, and we can believe that it does not dominate it. We can look to a people that effectively oppresses another, and we can believe that the oppressed people are culturally dominated, and this is untrue. All possibilities are included in the Relation because it is an erratic determinate system and not a mechanic determinate system. And those who appear to be colonizers may not be and vice-versa. We must overthrow these principles!

G.M. – I get the impression that you put much of your hope in literature to create a new imaginary and eventually a new world order which will be that of Creolization. Is this not a little utopian?

É.G. - Of course it's utopian, but I think that nothing worthwhile would have come to fruition in our world without a utopian vision. I cannot think of any major literary work in the history of humanity that was conceived outside of this utopia.

G.M. – Do you think that literature has the potential to induce a new manner of being?

É.G. – Yes, I think so. Literature understood as Narration, which is the witness of History, and as the privilege of those who “make” History, is sterile. But the passion and the poetic of the whole-world can mark a new relationship with Place and is capable of flushing out, of changing, old reflexes.

G.M. – I was trying to write down something you said earlier, but I missed the last part. You said, “A people that cannot reflect upon such and such a thing is a people that...”

É.G. – A people that cannot reflect upon their function in the world are in effect an oppressed people. The true liberation of a people in the *Tout-monde* of today lies in their power to reflect upon and enact their function in the world. If not, their efforts are worthless, and they will remain dominated and oppressed.

G.M. – First of all, can you go back to what you meant by a poetic vision of the world? And secondly, can you develop for us the connection between unpredictability and the poetic vision of the world?

É.G. – I first asked this question: Does unpredictability not lead to the loss of a will to live, or a will to speak and express? Unpredictability has always frightened cultures, especially in the West, perhaps less in the rest of the world. Western cultures have always tended toward predictability as they organized and then realized social and political plans. And to get away from this is perhaps alarming. It can be frightening to renounce our ability to “change the world,” because to change the world is to give the world a future, to predict the world. And to renounce all of this is probably very frightening to our sensibility. What is the point in being and living in the world if we cannot at the very least predict that it will work? I believe that predictability has had, has known, its excess. That is to say that the expression “change the world” has slowly been

transformed into “put the world into place, make the world a system.” I say then that the poetic vision allows us to live with the idea of unpredictability not as a negative but as a positive, and it allows us to change our understanding of this issue whereas no other concept or conceptual system can accomplish this. Poetic intentions allow me to conceive my relation to the other, to all others, to the whole-world; it allows me to understand how I change through exchange but remain myself, without denying myself or diluting myself. An entire poetic is necessary to conceive all of these impossibilities. It is for this reason that I believe that poetic thought is in principle relation to the world.

G.M. – Is not the notion of the single-root in the process of disappearing in very confined places today, as a result of the growing importance of economic factors (the global economy, stock markets, production, consumerism, everyone has to wear the same brand of jeans, etc.)? I was sitting in on an international panel where there were many representatives of many different peoples, of different nations or countries if you like, I never know what to call them, and they were all enslaved to the rules of the market. And there was no longer any indication of single-rootedness, neither in their values nor in their imaginary, etc. It was complete and utter enslavement. No matter the language or the culture of the people, all was sacrificed to the whim of the market. They were saying, “But we can do nothing, that is the way the market works. We must be a part of this market so we are merging with its ideology.”

É.G. – We are experiencing a globalization of the economy, just like we are experiencing a globalization of politics, of the culinary arts and of literature. We experience this globalization because we are in face of and within the whole-world. The problem is that at the time when world literatures were geared toward classicism, meaning that they proposed their particular values as universal values, or the value of a

particular place as a universal, economic oppression was of the same variety, meaning that it was the economy of Great Britain or of France or of whatever country that dominated and oppressed the world. Today, with globalization, it is not solely the economy of the United States or of Canada that acts as an oppressor, it is multinational corporations, meaning those organizations whose spheres of influence are found everywhere but centered nowhere. In other words, if we fall back to our old reactions, to the man-nation, we will be mistaken in the manner in which we choose to respond to these multinationals because they do not care about the man-nation. In other words, we must, in every domain of our activities, occupy ourselves with the idea of globalization. We must occupy ourselves with this idea because, if not, we will rapidly become undermined by those who negatively and maliciously use globalization to their own personal advantage. We must be aware of globalization because if we are not, no one will be able to fight against these companies. We cannot physically do battle with them primarily because they are invisible. We cannot fight them. At one time we could have fought against the King of France, who was then the physical manifestation of French capitalism. We could fight against the colonizer, against the Boss, but we cannot physically do battle with multinationals. Where do you find them? No one among us here today has the slightest idea as to the actual location of even the most insignificant multinational organization. Multinationals are the negative incarnation of globalization. If we refuse to recognize globalization, we will be the dubious victims of the multinationals. We can no longer continue with our old reflexes concerning globalization. We stagnate in those outdated principles instilled in us by Western “powers,” understanding that precisely the existence of collectivity manifests itself as a power. We dream of “big” countries, whereas no one can claim ineluctable power

because even powers, in our state of unpredictability, are fragile. Economic systems are powerful and unrelenting but are also prey to the unpredictable nature of the totality.

G.M. – Do you think that there could be a certain ambivalence between the literary production of Creole, where there is a certain quest for unique identity – for example in Chamoiseau or in Confiant -, and the vision of Creole as they define it in Éloge de la créolité, where there is a certain quest for the whole-world, for the Caribbean and then the world?

É.G. – There is a difference, yes, between creative works and manifestos. But I believe that it is in literary works, and not in theoretic endeavors, that the whole-world first defines itself. With that said, as for me, I do not mark the contradiction that you have outlined. I do not think that these writers are in search of the “single-root.”

Joël Desrosiers. – No matter how we define it or how we summarize it, identity can serve as a social avenue; it has a social function, a political function. You touched upon this when you said that it is possible to die for one’s flag, for one’s identity. Identity has a political function. Black Americans today declare themselves Black African-Americans. This serves a political function. While literature, as you mentioned earlier, is on the verge of becoming post-national, a little like the multinationals we just spoke of, what will become of this identity? How will it influence the political?

É.G. – First off, I have always said that Place is uncontestable. Globalization does not come from a series of suspended dilutions because if there is dilution then there is no relation. Relation can only weave itself between persistent, empowered entities. The more I become aware of the relation between Martinique and the Caribbean and of the Caribbean to the world, as in a system, as in a non-system of relations, the more I will become a true Martinican, at least according to me. And if I were to say, “Martinique is

Martinique and all other countries are something different”... the less Martinican I would be, according to me. The true relation is not from the particular to the universal, but from a certain place to the whole-world, which is not totalitarian but rather its contrast in diversity. Place is not a territory: we agree to share a place; we conceive it and experience it through errant thought, even though we defend it against all attacks.

The African-American community in the United States naturally has a need for afro-centrism so that they might fight against their condition. We could not ask a homeless African-American in New York City to rise above his identity in the name of Creolization, just as he is in a country (like Panama, Brazil and Colombia) where negritude is operative. The relationship between these communities in the Americas and in the world is enacted however by Creolization, making it profitable to explore so that we might better understand its own richness. Ok, that is the first response I could give. The second remark I could make is that I believe we operate today under a framework in which there is an oralization of literature – on the one hand because there is a lot of collective oral poetry surfacing, and on the other hand because the techniques of writing are becoming oralized, and I do not mean the oral trivialization brought about by television or the media. Rather, I am speaking of a creative oralization. Under the rubric of these creative oralizations, I think that ideas would no longer be subject to sensational broadcast as seen in the media but would instead experience a new sort of diffusion, a true diffusion signaling a change in the imaginary. And I believe that this is important. The means of broadcast, echo, remission, multiplication and reduction are changing. And paradoxically there is a sort of neutralization taking place in the far-reaching drama of television and the media. What I mean to say is that at some point people will have had enough of this neutralization, that they will return to their old grape-vines, to word-of-

mouth transmission. Under this rubric, what you call “post-national” literature resounds in the world through diffusion and contamination, not because of ideological pressure.

J.D. – How does your thesis consider evolution in relations of domination?

É.G. – Creolization understands and surpasses all possible contradictions. It is possible therefore for the “Swiss” or the “Polynesian” to survive. Creolization understands its opposite, uniqueness, which is the founding principle of domination. But the very idea of Creolization already combats this principle. I think that Relation is not virtuous or “moral” and that a poetic of Relation does not immediately presuppose an harmonious end to domination in the world. I think that there will always be attempts at domination, but the way in which we resist will change. I think that in the context of globalization, the way we resist domination will change. And we will be obligated to change them because all other manners of resistance that we have known for the last fifty years – and God knows they were heroic, and only God knows if they were effective – have de-evolved into the unspeakable, whether in Algeria, in black Africa, in Asia or elsewhere. And we will be obligated to invent new methods of resistance because we can well see that the old ones no longer work. I have Algerian friends who cry out, “We have had a million deaths for this! We have sacrificed a million lives to arrive at this point!” And God knows that it was heroic, their way of liberating themselves, and God knows that it was stunning (well, I do not know if God knows it, but man most certainly does). But it deteriorated into the same trouble and the same determination and the same imprisonment that the colonizers proposed in the first place. We must find other ways to resist, without being idealistic. Different peoples will invent their own methods, the Algerians, the Rwandans, the Palestinians, the South Africans, like the others, like all the others. I do not wish to fall away into idealism. There are concrete resistances that we

must enforce, wherever we find ourselves.

Everything else is Relation: openness and relativity.

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