

One World in Relation

ÉDOUARD GLISSANT

in Conversation with

Manthia Diawara

Summarizing a conversation he had had with Gilles Deleuze, Édouard Glissant described his work as “[tying] the knot between philosophy and poetry at their deepest and purest level.” In 2009 Manthia Diawara, with his camera, followed Glissant aboard the *Queen Mary II* in a cross-Atlantic journey from Southampton (United Kingdom) to Brooklyn (New York). Their extraordinary conversations resulted in the film *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation* (2010), directed by Diawara, in which Glissant elaborates on his theory of relation. Stressing diversity within an anti-imperialist, anti-essentialist, and open-ended scope, for Glissant this theory is at once a reality for the Caribbean and a global ideal. Diawara divides the breathtaking film into sections that shed new light on themes in Glissant’s work, such as “Opacity and the History of Unintelligibility”; “Diversity in the Black Night”; “Chaos, Creolization, Metissage and Post-race”; “Roots and Imaginary Offshoots”; “Ecstatic Difference”; and “De-capitalization and the Way of the World.” The following conversation is excerpted from the film.

Before going to press, we learned that Édouard Glissant had passed away peacefully on February 3, 2011, in Paris. This sad news adds to the rich texture of his conversation with Diawara and makes it even more touching.

Édouard Glissant: Ever since I started having heart trouble, I've been unable to take long-distance flights. And since it's eight and a half hours from Paris to Fort-de-France, I'm obliged to take the boat, and this one is pretty much the only one that makes regular trips. It's all quite ambiguous, because you'd think that a boat is a sign of comfort and ease, but in my opinion it's quite the opposite. It's a sign of [it's a sign of catching up the time lost; the time that you cannot let slip away or run away] the times that you become caught up in things — you can't flee or run anywhere. It seems to me that on any kind of boat you can be closer to yourself, while in a plane you're really detached from yourself — you're not yourself, you're something else. And I'm saying this jokingly — and I'm not alone in this — it's not normal for a person to be suspended in the air even if man's always dreamed of being a bird. Accordingly, I take this boat regularly when I have to go to Martinique or New York.

Manthia Diawara: This boat is also the Atlantic crossing.

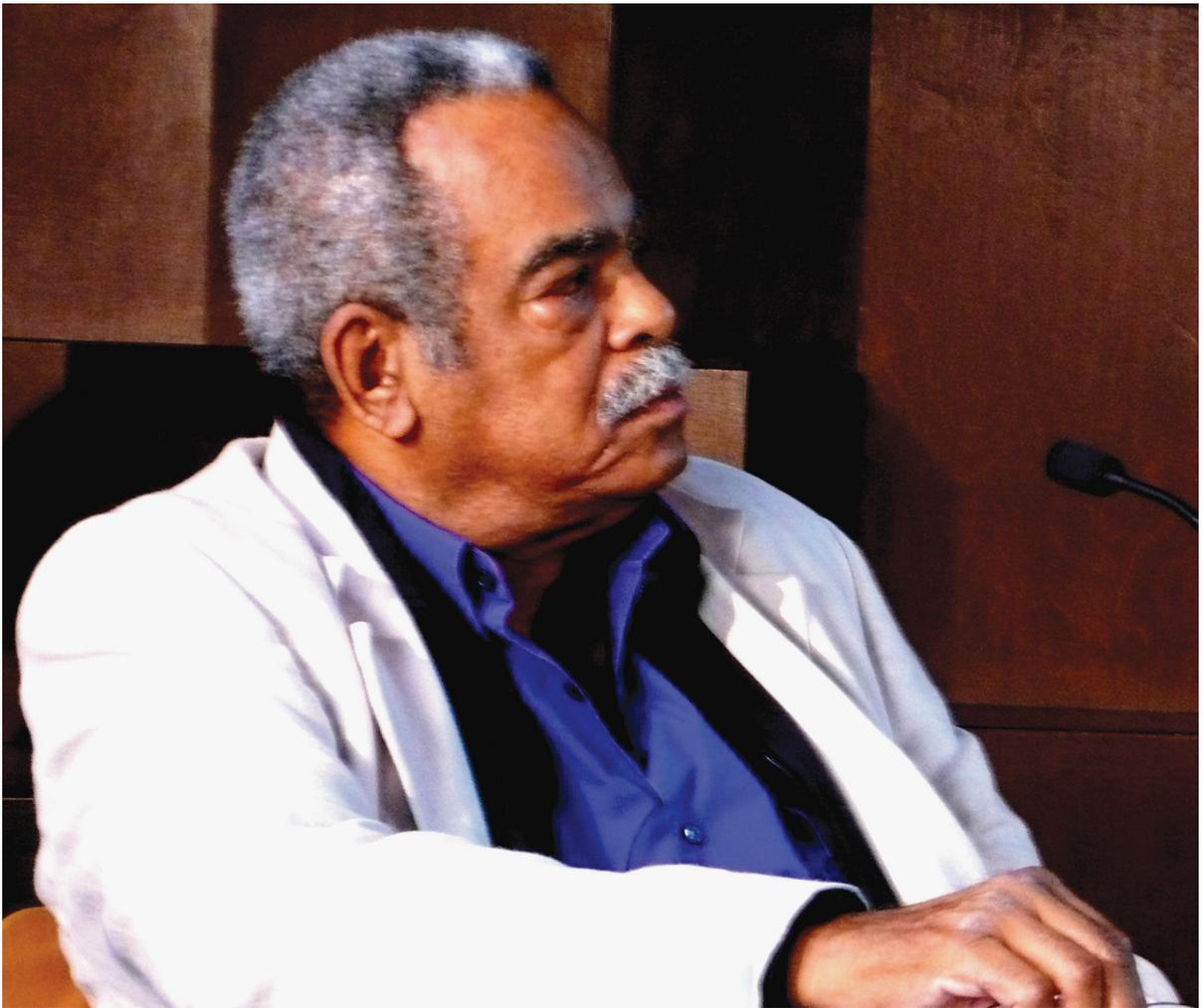
ÉG: That's another matter. It's also a paradox, because this is an ultra-comfortable, super-luxurious ship . . . and when you lean over the ship's railing, you can't stop thinking about the Africans at the bottom of the sea. It's not the same route — this one is further north, while the caravels followed a more southerly route. So it's not the same thing, but you think about it just the same. It seems to me that it's another way of meditating on what's happened in the world. Just by chance, I saw for the second time a film that French television had made in 1957, I think, about one of my first books, and I can't resist the pleasure of quoting the end of that broadcast, where I said that Christopher Columbus had left for what was called the New World and I'm the one who returned from it [*laughter*]. And being on this boat — well, it's not exactly revenge, which would be the stupidest thing to say — but it's amusing to know that my ancestors had left for the New World in terrible conditions very much unlike these. Accordingly, I believe that one of these days, if I had the means, I would begin a campaign promoting the development of shipboard travel. I think humans have to go back to that. We need to start surveying the oceans instead of hurling ourselves into dizzying altitudes.

MD: A boat is a departure and an arrival — in this context, it is a departure for the Africans who are captured for the first time and pushed onto a boat. What does departure mean to you?

ÉG: It's the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity. I think that's what's important in all the movements of the world, and we, the descendants, who have arrived from the other shore would be wrong to cling fiercely to this singularity which had accepted to go out into the world. Let us not forget that Africa has been the source of all kinds of diasporas — not only the forced diaspora imposed by the West through the slave trade, but also of millions of all types of diasporas before — that have populated the world. One of Africa's vocations is to be a kind of foundational Unity which develops and transforms itself into a Diversity. And it seems to me that, if we don't think about that properly, we won't be able to understand what we ourselves can do, as participants in this African diaspora, to help the world to realize its true self, in other words its multiplicity, and to respect itself as such.

MD: But the middle of the Atlantic . . . in every history, before the moment of arrival, there is a midpoint. What is that midpoint for you?

ÉG: First, we must think about the following. When the caravels arrived on the African coasts, the Africans had never seen a covered boat. They didn't understand this boat that wasn't open. Their politics was a politics of the open boat, not the closed one. And furthermore, when they were transported across the ocean, they didn't understand this river without a shore on both sides, so the Middle Passage was truly the unknown: no shore to their right, no shore to their left. And nothing in front of them — the complete unknown. The first chapter of my book *Poetics of Relation* describes this situation, saying that what characterizes the Africans' situation in this adventure is the abyss, the abyss of the unknown, the abyss of the ocean floor, of course, but also the two nonexistent shores, the unknown that lies before, the unknown country at which they will arrive, nobody knew what was awaiting these people who were already slaves. The Africans in the New World — African Americans, but also the Antilleans, Brazilians, etc. — escaped the abyss and carry within them the abyss's dimension. And I think the abyss's dimension is not, contrary to what one might believe, the dimension of Unity, but rather the dimension of Multiplicity. And we have to bring all that together, explore it so that we can see where we're going.



Édouard Glissant at the Serpentine Gallery, London, 2007. Photo: Caecilia Tripp

MD: Where we're going? Are we arriving somewhere? Still, a story has a point of arrival. So what is that arrival?

ÉG: For me, the arrival is the moment where all the components of humanity — not just the African ones — consent to the idea that it is possible to be one and multiple at the same time; that you can be yourself and the other; that you can be the same and the different. When that battle — because it is a battle, not a military but a spiritual one — when that battle is won, a great many accidents in human history will have ended, will be abolished.

MD: In the Anglophone world, thinkers like Paul Gilroy have been using the concept of the Black Atlantic to attempt to give similar explanations of the condition of the diaspora. Could you discuss the theory of the Black Atlantic?

ÉG: I respect the work of these thinkers, African American thinkers. I think that deep down, in the idea of the Black Atlantic there is more of a persistence of that kind of Unity than they would have us believe. I think that part of the African genius — not the black race's — is multiplicity. The diaspora is exploding forth everywhere; it is not concentrated in a single area. So for me the Atlantic is a continent, not an archipelago. And we are inhabitants of an archipelago. When Africa was attacked by the colonizers, it wasn't a continent, but an archipelago. Consider that NATO stands for North Atlantic Treaty Organization. I believe the arrival of the Africans within the phenomenon of slavery is not about the Atlantic, but the Caribbean. That's where they arrived — in Louisiana, the islands, Cuba, Jamaica, Martinique — and it spread from there across the new continent. And the Caribbean is the source, the origin of the plantation system that

began to contain and signify the existence of the blacks. So I'm not an Atlanticist, nor am I continental. I think that the "archipelagization" of the deportation of the Africans is a reality, a precious one. That is why, for all the esteem I have for the theoreticians of the Black Atlantic, I don't agree with their thesis.

MD: Do you address the same critique of Unity to Négritude?

ÉG: Yes, but bear in mind that historically, Négritude was an absolutely necessary movement. When Négritude intervened in the history of black people, above all in the history of black people in the New World, it did so to restore balance to our souls and our spirituality, something that appeared quite improbable to us, because we held ourselves in contempt, we had no consideration for ourselves, and we knew nothing of African civilizations and cultures. In other words, Négritude was utterly necessary. **I have always been hesitant to subscribe to Négritude completely, because I thought that it was nonetheless a kind of general idea. Blacks are not all the same. A black from Brazil and a black from the United States are not the same. So we have to establish nuances, we have to bring out the specific richness of each. There's African American richness, Brazilian richness, Martinican richness, Cuban richness, etc., and we shouldn't try to bring everything under the same uniform model.**

Paradoxically, I think that in its beginnings at least, the theory of Négritude was greatly inspired by the French mind, because that mind is generalizing, given to generality, whereas the British, Anglophone mind is empiricist and not very interested in general ideas. That's why from the start Anglophone Africans were not at all partisans of Négritude. Wole Soyinka said the most unbelievable things about Négritude when he spoke of "tigritude" — the tiger lives his tigritude and doesn't need to proclaim it, etc. All this because even as Anglophone Africa was fighting for the rights of black people, there wasn't a felt need for a theory of Négritude as a generalizing unity that would encompass everyone. I figure that wasn't Césaire's idea — I don't know if it was Senghor's or not, but it certainly wasn't Césaire's. But that's how it's been interpreted. One day, a commander of a liberation army told me: "Wherever black people are suffering, Négritude is completely necessary. But whenever they pick up a rifle, they no longer need it." In other words, it's a general idea that can be conceived within suffering, but when you particularize yourself by affirming the multiplicity of your being, you no longer need this general theory.

MD: Was the Créolité movement an answer to the paradoxes of Négritude, or is it just another form of Atlanticism?

ÉG: I don't think it's an answer, no. I believe that the Créolité movement is like Négritude: it has some real justifications, namely, that a large number of the African population, in particular the Brazilians, Antilleans, Caribbeans, was formed on the basis of a mixed reality, or a will toward that reality. You can't say that the Caribbean is not mestizo. What's important is that Caribbean *mestizaje* is African.

Like Négritude, Créolité has a dual aspect. It's necessary because you can't deny that the Caribbean's mestizo. But you can't say that it's a Chinese or white *mestizaje*, **because Africa and Africans have a vocation for diaspora and *mestizaje*. But when they mix, they don't stop being themselves. That's what nobody wants to admit. For some people, you're either black or you're mixed, that is, not black. Now that's not true. In Africa, there is a need for diaspora and multiplicity. Anyway, in Africa itself the nations and tribes mix with each other.** Today there's no such thing as a unified Peul or Senegalese people. For example, there's very intense *mestizaje* between Senegal and Mali. So this aspect of Créolité is valuable.

The other aspect, which is not valuable, is this: when you say "Créolité," you fix its definition of being once and for all in time and place. Now I think that **being is in a state of perpetual change. And what I call creolization is the very sign of that change. In creolization, you can change, you can be with the other, you can change with the other while being yourself, you are not one, you are multiple, and you are yourself. You are not lost, because you are multiple. You are not broken apart, because you are multiple. Créolité is unaware of this. It becomes another unity like Frenchness, Latinity, etc., etc. That is why for a long time now I have developed the idea of creolization, which is a permanent process that supersedes historical avatars.** It's difficult to admit this because we're afraid of losing ourselves. We tell ourselves, If I change, then I'll lose myself. If I take something from the other, then my own self will disappear. We absolutely must abandon this error.

And that's why it seems to me that the history of Africans in the New World is exemplary. It's a history that takes into account the history of the world, because in this very moment the **whole world is creolizing itself, and there are no longer nations or races that are untouched by others.** And what racists fear most of all is mixing. They don't allow for it. And that, I think, is the battle we need to wage, despite everything happening in the world, all those fundamentalisms of all shapes and sizes. I believe we are on the way to winning that battle.

MD: I'm interested in what you said earlier: that Chinese *mestizaje* is different from African *mestizaje*.

ÉG: What I mean is — historically, Africa has had a vocation of *mestizaje*. For example, historically China has not exploded onto the world. I don't know if it will. There have always been Chinese in the world, but that's been an individual phenomenon. They've been merchants and traders; in every country of the Antilles, there is a Chinese shopkeeper, just as in France today there's the Arab store that remains open until 11 p.m. and people are happy with that. But there hasn't been a fundamental Chinese diaspora. **There was an African diaspora millions of years ago which gave birth to the various humanities, because Africa is the cradle of humankind. And there have been other diasporas — for example, the forced diaspora brought about by slavery — and today there is also a forced diaspora caused by poverty and destitution, emigrants and emigrations. Consequently, we can say that in the African condition there is a kind of vocation to go elsewhere. And when there is a mixture of Africa and something else — well, it's Africa that's dominant, because of that vocation, not for racial or historical reasons.** You can have a mixture with a Chinese man or woman and the Chinese side wouldn't necessarily be the dominant one. It will be apparent but it won't necessarily predominate, while it's the African side that's dominant in mixtures. In other words, the African mestizo is first and foremost an African, and we need to know that, and Africans have to accept that because that's their condition. And I think that's what's happening with Obama: at first, the African Americans weren't very keen on him, because they thought he wasn't black — while he is black, but not only that, he's also mixed. And that's the new condition. But will he continue being black and mestizo? That we don't know.

MD: Very nice. Returning to our departure-midpoint-arrival schema: is there a return?

ÉG: The return's right here [*laughter*]. There is a return, because right from the start, the whole setup — Africa, middle of the ocean, arrival — is an enslaving, colonialist setup: it's the moment where the African diaspora became a forced diaspora. And the return occurs when slavery and domination disappear. That's why I said that Christopher Columbus leaves, but I'm the one who returns. I don't mean myself, Édouard Glissant. What I mean is that those who were forced to leave as slaves return not as slaves but as something else, a free entity, not only free but a being who has gained something in comparison to the mass of humanity. And what has this being gained? Multiplicity. In relation to the unity of the enslaving will, we have the multiplicity of the antislavery will. That is what we've gained, and that is the true return.

MD: Because in Judaism, there is a literal return, but with you, I think there's an imaginary return.

ÉG: In Judaism, the question of return — and I have to be blunt here — is not, to my mind, a true return, because there have been a Hebraic diaspora and errantry that I consider marvelous, because of the numerous sufferings as well as spiritual conquests that these have entailed. But there hadn't been a vocation of return. This vocation was constructed following a certain moment: the beginning of the twentieth century. At this time the Hebrews, the Jews, conceived the idea of a state of their own, but not before then. Before, the Jews of Spain were — you could even say they were Spaniards. So this is really a different question, not the same question at all. Now it appears that this Hebraic return has created a new form of unity, not of multiplicity.

MD: The word *diaspora* was borrowed from the Jews. African Americans have been very much inspired by the Jewish experience, be it the literal return of Jews to Israel today or the history of the Old Testament. So what are the similarities and differences?

ÉG: Outside of the similarity of suffering, I don't think they resemble each other very much. It seems to me that in Jewish errantry, there has been an extraordinary suffering that may be found in the displacement of Africans toward the New World. All kinds of comparisons can be made on this point . . . but that doesn't interest us, though it's certainly the case. Beyond that, there's no similarity. When the Jews made their diaspora in the world, they always preserved their cultural instruments: the Torah, the Talmud, etc. **The Africans had lost everything; they had nothing, not even a song. In jazz, black Americans had to recompose, through memory and through extraordinary suffering, the echo of what Africa had for them. Jazz came about not through a book but through a flight of memory. That's why jazz is valid for everybody, because it's a reconstruction within a distraught memory of something that had disappeared and had now been regained. It required a terrifying effort. That's why jazz at the beginning was so tragic. If you look at the faces of the great jazz musicians, they are very tragic, and that's something everyone can see. The same goes for Bob Marley and reggae: it's valid for everyone, while the religious songs of Jewish ceremonies are not. It's valuable to the Jews, which is fine, but in the end what we have here is a fundamental difference, and we need to be aware of that.**

MD: That's the answer I was looking for. Wonderful. Could you talk more about that distinction you established — namely, that blacks in the diaspora have reconstructed their past through memory and not books?

ÉG: It's true that I believe in the virtues of repetition; I believe that if you repeat things, you're better able to perceive and conceive them. But what I wanted to say is that the arts created by the blacks of the diaspora, contrary to what's believed, are not indigenous to them; they are arts of mixture, of adjustment to situations. For instance, music from, let's say, Tyrol, to take a well-known example, is linked in the ancestral order to the use of a musical instrument from that place. What's fantastic about jazz is that there's an African music that expresses itself through the piano, which is an instrument that Beethoven uses, and as a result there's an incredible beat, and if you think about it, the same thing applies to most of the other areas.

Let's think now about what we can call the complexity, the multiplicity of the world. There are relations between nations that were once clear but now are in complete obscurity. Nobody knows the nature of the relations between this and that nation, between nations that share a border and yet don't appear to be living in the same time period. Let's take religion — we don't know the nature of the relations between religions, it's become incredibly complex. Let's take the arts — well, there the mixture is pretty well complete: even though there are instruments that could make us believe that everything's being brought together . . . instruments such as techniques, cameras, audiovisual equipment . . . what's happening is that music is becoming more and more diverse. Why? Because, like jazz, different types of music are becoming increasingly valid for everyone. We're now beginning to understand that European liturgies, Arab music, Indian music, Japanese music are valid for everyone. But only now are they like this, because there's this amazing mixture, this incredible complexity. And because of that, it's of fundamental importance in today's world to say that everything is happening in a rhizome world, that is, roots that intertwine, mix, and mutually assist each other. And I think that somewhere in all this is the drama of New World blacks, whether in Brazil to the south, in the Caribbean at the center, or in the Americas of the north, which has begun to make this multiplicity of the world comprehensible. That's why it's so important, and that's why I believe that the truth that is increasingly coming to light about black reality in the New World is the truth of multiplicity, the truth of the step toward the other. Well, it's all quite simple to summarize things in formulas. But I myself like the idea that I can change through exchanging with the other without

losing or distorting myself. It's only recently that it's been possible to believe this, and I think it's one of the truths of the present world.

MD: You've touched on two ideas: one, things tend to become autonomous; and two, things multiply. And you prefer multiplication.

ÉG: No . . . multiplicity or multiplication doesn't assume the loss of autonomy. Not at all, because multiplication isn't a soup. For example, when I speak of creolization, within creolization each element remains itself while changing and not changing. The multiplicity of the Balkans is not the multiplicity of the Caribbean, and the multiplicity of the Caribbean is not the multiplicity of Indonesia. As a result, the problem is not to say that all this amounts to nothing. The problem is to say that all this mixes together without blending into some indescribable soup.

MD: And that's where your theory of Relation comes in.

ÉG: Yes, because within Relation . . . now I'm going to try to say something that I hold dear on this terrain. I believe that Relation is the moment where we realize that there is a definite quantity of all the differences in the world. Just as scientists say that the universe consists of a finite quantity of atoms, and that it doesn't change — well, I say that Relation is made up of all the differences in the world and that we shouldn't forget a single one of them, even the smallest. If you forget the tiniest difference in the world, well, Relation is no longer Relation. Now, what do we do when we believe this? We call into question, in a formal manner, the idea of the universal. The universal is a sublimation, an abstraction that enables us to forget small differences; we drift upon the universal and forget these small differences, and Relation is wonderful because it doesn't allow us to do that. There is no such thing as a Relation made up of big differences. Relation is total; otherwise it's not Relation. So that's why I prefer the notion of Relation to the notion of the universal.

MD: Just today [August 21, 2009] I received a letter asking me to attend a conference on the big ideas of the world. Are there small ideas and big ideas?

ÉG: [laughter] Hmm. There are no big ideas and small ideas. What there are, essentially, are meeting points some of which are more multiple than others. For example, I believe in the future of small countries. I believe that the economic upheavals will be more devastating in the big countries than

in the small ones, because small countries have indigenous resources that the big ones lack. And that's why I think we have to bring everything together: truths, possibilities, powers. Today the great powers are no longer certain of their ability to maintain domination of the world. Empires are collapsing. And empires aren't eternal. Small entities that can subsist on their own, on the strength of their own indigenous resources, likely have more of a future in the complexity of the world than big ideas do. We are still living under the idea of power and force, but maybe that's been superseded without our being aware of it. Maybe power alone no longer suffices to settle problems.

MD: Let's take Martinique, for example. Just think of the efflorescence of ideas there — you've got Césaire, Fanon, Édouard Glissant, and then all those young people. But Martinique is still a small country, and it's still quite surprising. Négritude, Fanon's Marxism, Créolité — what is it with those small countries? [*laughter*]

ÉG: Somebody very famous, whom I don't want to mention out of modesty but who was an admirer of Fanon, told me, "You people in the Lesser Antilles have very sharp minds, because you are the ones who are most threatened." He meant, not physically threatened, but spiritually, intellectually, culturally. And it's true: a cultural threat can extinguish a community, but it can also activate its possibilities. An intellectual threat extinguishes collectivities that don't have a concrete way out. I know of collectivities in the world — which, alas, I won't name — that have been brought down by this fundamental cultural threat. For example, as far as the Lesser Antilles are concerned, it's true that we're facing a major threat, because the absence of physical power and economic strength can give the impression that it's all up with us. But I think that there was a fundamental truth in what that great person said: that the more we are threatened intellectually, the sharper our minds become and the more quickly we are able to react. And I think that's what happened with Césaire and Fanon and everyone who came after. What does this mean? That the complexity we spoke of occurs initially in small countries before resonating in the big ones — from the archipelagoes to the continents.

Previously, the continents dominated the world. They used to say there were five continents and four races, and now we know that's not true. There aren't just five continents; there are the archipelagoes and all the oceans, which are sources of life. There aren't just four races, but hundreds. Therefore multiplicity comes from those somewhat secret, somewhat unknown places that overturn in themselves what's being created in the world, the world's passage, and

which resonate unbeknownst to those who inhabit the great continental land masses of power and force.

MD: Today people confronting Muslim or Christian fundamentalism think that the solution will be found either in democracy or in cosmopolitanism. What do you think of that? You haven't mentioned cosmopolitanism at all.

ÉG: I don't believe that the theory of Relation as I define it can be confused with cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is a sort of upheaval that lacks direction. Relation is a direction which is not the direction toward unity but which remains a direction in any case. Where direction is concerned, I think that democracy is one of the most fully realized forms that Western culture has undertaken, but I'm not sure it's the only possibility of contact and opening in the world, because of democracy's history. Centuries ago the idea of democracy was born in England with habeas corpus, and then it developed with the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, etc. Democracy was formalized and fixed during this history. And there is a frequent tendency to take the appearance of democracy for its reality. So it's been no surprise that democratic countries have been able to undertake colonial aggressions, which is a contradiction in terms. A democratic country should not be able to be a colonialist country. Now the democratic nations of Europe, England and France, were among the biggest colonizers ever. As a result, there is still something to think about with respect to the distortions that might occur between the reality and the appearance of a democratic system. And this is complicated by the fact that in their struggle for independence, the formerly colonized countries were practically forced to demand democracy in order to get out of their situation. But it's not certain that there aren't other, equally valid systems that can enable progress. This isn't the case now, but we cannot say that democracy is the absolute point of the search for freedom in the world.

MD: There has also been an emphasis on secularism as a response to fundamentalisms in the world.

ÉG: What do you mean by secularism? I'm not clear . . . what is it?

MD: Secularism in the sense of creating a political space outside the church.

ÉG: Well, that's been going on for some time in European countries. Three-fourths of European nations practice the



Édouard Glissant, Montagne Pelée, Martinique, 2002. Photo by and © Jean-Luc de Laguarigue

separation of church and state, maybe not Great Britain, maybe not Italy, but in countries like France and the small countries of central Europe, the separation of church and state is an accomplished fact. Because there are a lot of them, the churches still have power to intervene in these states. But in principle, that's something that's been gained. I think it's regressive not to be aware of that. And I believe that the churches would be liberated if they stopped having that relationship to the state. And incidentally, I also believe that the relationship to the state is at the root of fundamentalism. Whenever a religion is a state religion, intolerances necessarily appear that lead to fundamentalism. When you learn that a very upright man has killed a doctor because that doctor performed an abortion, you realize that there's something that's not working. Religious belief must become a personal adventure, separate from the complexity of countries and societies. Only the rhizome of our present-day societies causes what's good to work completely well, but what's not so good works well, too. In other words, the same fundamentalism strikes religious minorities in all regions of the world. Very few religions are immune to fundamentalism — maybe Buddhism and a few Asian religions. But beyond that, religions are always at fundamentalism's mercy. And that can only be fought by the idea that a religion loses nothing by enriching itself with the spiritual values of another faith.

MD: Yes, this is what's happening in the United States and especially in Great Britain. In the last ten years intellectuals like Cornel West and a European Marxist like Terry Eagleton in England are finding that philosophy and abstraction cannot solve the world's problems. Thus rationalism came along to supersede religion, but religion has caught up with rationalism, so you might as well become religious. Is this the choice to make? I'm not sure.

ÉG: Perhaps it's true that the question hasn't been posed well. But I think that what has to change today is neither reason nor rationality, neither religion nor spiritualism, but rather the imaginary. What is the imaginary? It's a precious thing. Of course, you can't change the imagination by only a degree. I can't say I'm going to change your imagination. It's a precious thing that cannot be touched. But we have a collective imaginary. What is it? It's the world's imaginary, the way we see and feel the world. There are countries unaware of the world just as there are individuals unaware of the world, and yet their imagination is touched by it. If you know nothing of, and are unable to feel, the grace and elegance of a Chinese person's culture, well, obviously you would be lost if you tried to relate to an entity called China.

Consequently, it's not so much a matter of rationality. . . . I still believe in a form of spirituality, the spirituality of the sacred, not religion but the sacred. What is the spirituality of the sacred? The intuition of a relationship to the world, and Césaire said it in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*:

Those who invented neither powder nor compass
those who could harness neither steam nor electricity
.....
truly the eldest sons of the world
porous to all the breathing of the world
.....
drainless channel for all the water of the world
spark of the sacred fire of the world.

All right, then, that's the imaginary, and the less of it a people has, the more likely it is to be aggressive toward others in the world. As a result, it's that imaginary that's at the heart of the matter, not reason in the form it reached us from the West, or religion in the form it reached us in large part from that same West.

MD: Wonderful. Do you feel yourself close to Césaire or Fanon? Both, or neither?

ÉG: I feel close to Césaire to the extent that he has a vocation to refusal. I feel close to Fanon to the extent that he has a vocation to action. And I feel distant from Césaire to the extent that Négritude appears to me as a general idea that ignores the specificities of black peoples, and I feel distant from Fanon to the extent that his thought is ideological, although he said some stunning things about human nature in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Amazing, isn't it? To think that Fanon's been called a sectarian! All you have to do is read the conclusion of *Black Skin, White Masks*, right? But it's true that his thought was ideologically quite thoroughgoing, and perhaps that hindered the movement of the imaginary. . . . Fanon had a great movement toward the world, but it was an ideological one. Césaire had a great movement toward the world, and I pointed that out in one of the articles I wrote about him, but his movement toward the world was too often a poetical rhetoric. The imaginary of the world is something else. It's the intuition of everything that can be touched in the world, everything that's the same and everything that's different. Above all, everything that's different. What's different in the world constitutes our strength. I always say that the fabric of the living and the canvas of cultures are not created on the basis of the similar, but the different. It is the alliance of differences that creates the fabric of the living and the canvas of cultures.

MD: I have a question regarding the failure to transmit the Négritude heritage.

ÉG: In my opinion there's not been a failure of Négritude or Fanon's generalizing thought in the world. I get a lot of letters from the younger generations of Africans — and not just Africans, but also Balkans, Indonesians, etc. — about this matter. What characterizes the new generations is that they've understood that all this upheaval has reached a fundamental complexity, and everything's mixed, harmonized, become mestizo, working together. And that's why young people aren't unconditional supporters of Négritude even as they support it, aren't unconditional advocates of Fanon's thought even though they defend that thought to the utmost. What's lacking is the concrete whirlwind of what's going on in the world today. Besides, in all those rap songs, those poetry slams, the fundamental theme is "We're together, and we're mixing it up." It's not about saying, I'm black, or I'm this or that. And it's really a good thing because I still remember when young blacks and young Arabs, young Afro-Americans and young Caribbeans, young Puerto Ricans against New York blacks, all fought each other. Today that hasn't stopped, but now people get surprised when they discover that they share things, rhythms, certainties, and uncertainties, and all this has contributed to the new generations' no longer having the fixed aspect of Négritude or the fixed aspect of Fanon's thought. The new generations are simply adding something else to these ideas, and I'm convinced that that "something else" is creolization. They are figuring out that amid the complexity of the world, our complexity is no longer a weakness and can in fact be a strength.

MD: Thinking about what you've just said — the strength of Fanon and Césaire's thought, but also certain limitations of their thought — can we apply the same analysis to specifically French thought today: structuralism and post-structuralism? What are the limits and weaknesses of that thought? Who are your contemporaries and forebears who have enriched your thought?

ÉG: From a French perspective?

MD: Yes.

ÉG: I often say — and I've said it in this conversation — that the French genius is a generalizing genius; it's not empirical, unlike the British genius, and it's an assimilative genius as well. In other words, French thought always wants to turn you into a Frenchman, and if you don't think like them, you're shunted aside and ignored. Likewise with the British

genius. If you bring up general ideas in England, nobody understands you. Everybody tells you, But what's all this, you've got this precise point, this other precise point, and outside of that, a general idea looks like a weakness. But there have been exceptions in French thought. For example, a man like Michel Leiris didn't practice ethnography or ethnology like Lévi-Strauss, leading to general theories opening up into structuralism, etc. He didn't work in an English style, but meticulously, and not on a large scale.

MD: Microscopically.

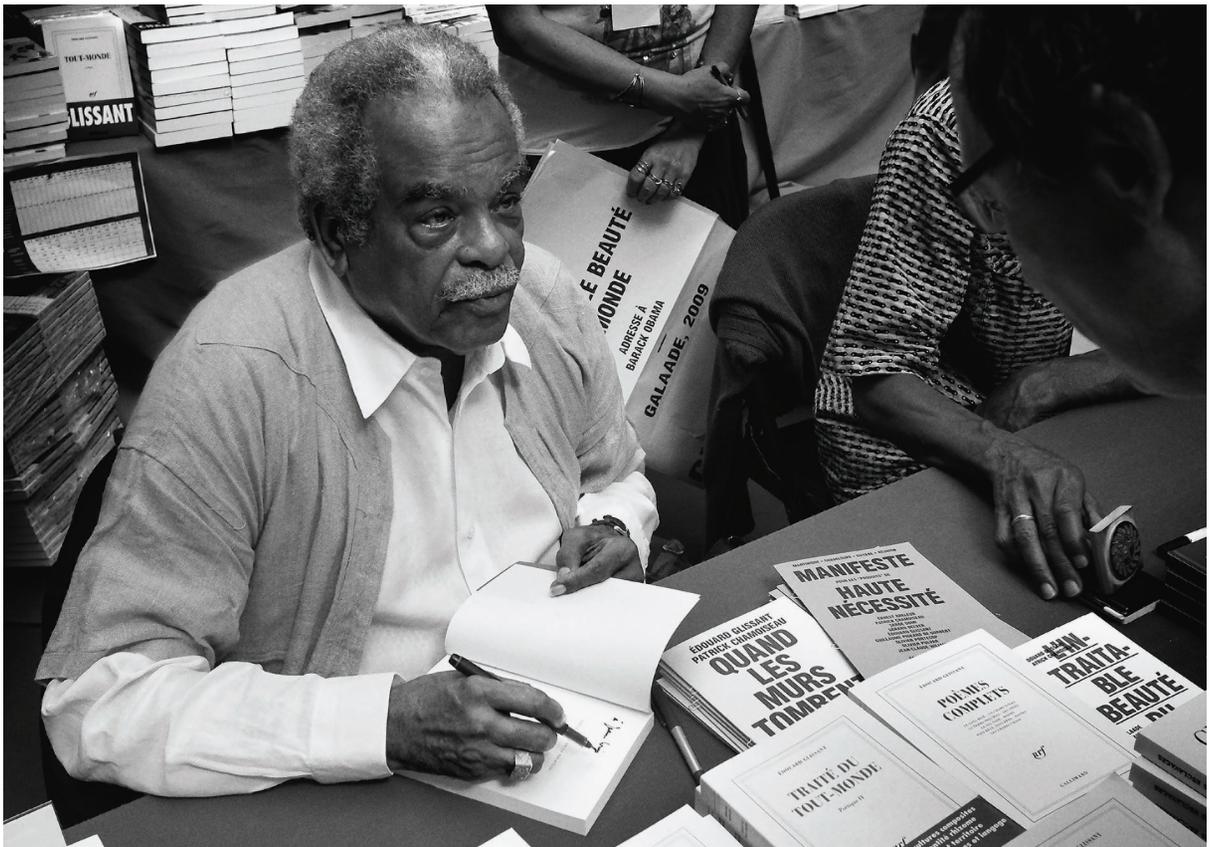
ÉG: Exactly. And that's something that's been very useful to me. On the other hand, I've probably been contaminated by general ideas like everyone else who's been in touch with French thought. I like general ideas a lot. But there are those whom I also like, such as Michel Leiris in ethnography or Jean Rouch in documentary filmmaking or André Dhotel, a novelist from Rimbaud's area. These are people who are building their rhizome, that is, points of contact, instead of a generalized space. But I've never practiced structuralism or any of those theories that proclaim European rationality, which went out to meet the world and quite often messed up the world.

MD: What about the nouveaux philosophes?

ÉG: Let's not talk about them. That doesn't interest me at all.

MD: Then I'll ask the next question straight out: what about Africa? We've talked about Martinique, the Antilles, and France. So what about Africa?

ÉG: As far as I'm concerned, outside of the Antilles, there are two fundamental realities. The first is African reality, for the reasons I've already cited. Africa has the fundamental vocation of diaspora. I don't know if it's because it's been placed in an inferior position, or what. . . . Africans have been one of the few peoples [*sic*] to have accepted creolization and *mestizaje* immediately — in Brazil and the Caribbean, for example, but not in the United States. Not because they refused it but because the whites in the United States were Puritan Protestants who didn't accept mixture. As a result, the blacks didn't accept mixture either. I think Obama's an example. Probably his mother wasn't a Protestant Puritan and his father was African, not African American. That's why the mixture, the unimaginable mixture, was immediately possible. So for me, Africa is about that, first and foremost, but it's also the inescapable reality that we all come from there, all of us in the New World.



Édouard Glissant, St. Malo Etonnants Voyageur, 2008. Photo by and © Jean-Luc de Laguarigue

But today Africa also poses a question. Despite its wealth, it's the most devastated continent on earth. The question of Africa has still not been seriously posed as it should be. So it's a point of suspension, of uncertainty. And there is a question that needs to be posed for the entire world.

The second question that seems fundamental to me involves Haiti, because in the Caribbean region Haiti has to some extent undergone Africa's fate in the world. Haiti has been utterly ravaged. And that's a huge question mark, given that Haiti has been and still is one of the fundamental sources of Antillean culture. In any case, it's shattering to see a people massacred to this degree and still producing great painting, fantastic Caribbean music, and a literature. I think there's a question mark there as well. What's happening there? And can a people be purely and simply annihilated in this way? Consequently, these two realities are the most important ones for me.

MD: Definitely. Now, another question — why is it that nowadays architects, museum curators, and young musicians are so interested in Édouard Glissant's work?

ÉG: I can try to tell you why, and it's out of modesty, not vanity, that I say this. It's because reality has caught up to and imposed what I've been saying for twenty or thirty years now amid general incomprehension. Forty years ago in Mexico, in a conference with Octavio Paz at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, I demanded the right to opacity. There's a basic injustice in the worldwide spread of the transparency and projection of Western thought. Why must we evaluate people on the scale of transparency of the ideas proposed by the West? I understand this, I understand that and the other — rationality. I said that as far as I'm concerned, a person has the right to be opaque. That doesn't stop me from liking that person, it doesn't stop me from working with him, hanging out with him, etc. A racist is someone who refuses what he doesn't understand. I can accept what I don't understand. Opacity is a right we must have. And the audience said, But what kind of barbarism is this? We have to understand, and if we don't, etc., etc. And I can assure you that twenty or thirty years later in the same auditorium, in the same city, there was a meeting, and quite pleasantly I reminded them of what I had said twenty or thirty years before, and everyone in the room said,

We have to demand the right to opacity at the UN. Why? Because people came to understand that what was barbaric was imposing one's own transparency on the other. I always tell psychoanalysts, "If I don't accept my own opacity for myself, I've essentially defeated myself, but I can accept my own opacity and say, I don't know why. I don't know why, but I detest this person or like this other person." I can like this person not for any particular quality or reason, but just because I do. Does anyone know why he dislikes cauliflower or that other green vegetable —

MD: Broccoli?

ÉG: Everyone likes broccoli, but I hate it. But do I know why? Not at all. I accept my opacity on that level. Why wouldn't I accept it on other levels? Why wouldn't I accept the other's opacity? Why must I absolutely understand the other to live next to him and work with him? That's one of the laws of Relation. In Relation, elements don't blend just like that, don't lose themselves just like that. Each element can keep its, I won't just say its autonomy but also its essential quality, even as it accustoms itself to the essential qualities and differences of others. After thirty years people understood that, but before, they never stopped saying how stupid it was. Then, at a certain moment, the very movement of the world enables us to understand, because after seeing on TV the Aborigines of Australia, Japanese, Parisians from the 'hood, Inuits from Alaska, we've understood that we can't understand everything and that there are things that remain within themselves. As a result, the world catches up to this sort of reflection on its complexity, on mixture, etc., and people end up accepting the idea.

MD: That's really great, and it makes me think. My question is, why then should we move from the poetics of Relation to the philosophy of Relation?

ÉG: Hold on, not so fast, or else there won't be anything left to say. **The poetics of Relation is the moment of awakening the world's imaginary in each of us. In other words, the moment in which we touch the world's reality.** We touch what we haven't initially seen in the world. That's the poetics of Relation. For example, we understand that a desert in Peru and a desert in Africa have things in common and differences as well through which it's exciting to establish a Relation between these commonalities and differences. That's the poetics of Relation.

The philosophy of Relation is the moment when we conceive how we move from one human condition into another, and consequently when we grasp what evolves in these

various poetics of Relation, in these intuitions of the world, because our intuition of the world isn't the same now as it was twenty years ago. Today we have more of a world imagination than we did twenty years ago — we have more imagination, period. **Now, the philosophy of Relation is the voyage, not the concept — it's the voyage in which, from intuition of the world to intuition of the world, we try to see how humanities transform themselves — I say "humanities," never "humanity." So there's Relation, which is the moment of contact, and there's the moment of evolution and transformation, which is philosophy.**

MD: In the philosophy of Relation, how do you conceive of borders? Walls and borders?

ÉG: The question of borders is a very pressing modern one. Why? Because borders were considered naturally necessary and naturally impregnable during the period in which the communities of the world organized themselves into nations. And every nation had to have its borders, which they tried to broaden whenever they wanted to extend and expand. So a border meant first of all: "Thou shalt not pass." It was a tool of defense. Also, I think that paradoxically a border had the objective of preventing the people who belonged to that nation from leaving. It's always been said that the Great Wall of China was built to prevent invasions by the Mongols, etc. I don't believe that. I believe that the Great Wall was built to prevent the Chinese from leaving China. The proof is that it almost never kept invaders out. But it somewhat provided a sense of unity and the density of the Chinese community. And besides, it's true that Chinese institutions have tended more to keep people in the country than to promote expansions into the world. As a community, the Chinese have rarely been invasive. Of course, I'm not talking about individuals who were able to leave. I repeat, there have always been Chinese merchants in every country of Latin America. But the Chinese community itself didn't have the tendency of Western communities to invade elsewhere. And the wall was built for that purpose: to prevent the Chinese from spreading elsewhere. The Chinese called themselves the "Middle Kingdom," and they didn't think it necessary to go elsewhere.

Today, however, the concept of the border has changed its meaning. On the one hand, because communities are today mutually invading each other, the notion of a border is at once increasingly terrible and increasingly fragile. I myself do not think, contrary to what others might believe, that we need to put an end to the idea of a border that defends and keeps out, etc. Borders must be permeable. They must not be weapons against migration or immigration processes. But



Édouard Glissant, Martinique, 2000. Photo by and © Jean-Luc de Laguarigue

having said this, I think that borders are necessary because they enable the appreciation of the passage from the flavor of one country to the flavor of another. I myself find it quite pleasant to pass from one atmosphere to another through crossing a border. Whether you go from France to Italy, or across an invisible frontier from Martinique to Guadeloupe, you go from one reality to another, different reality, which is pleasant and has a diversity of flavors. I think that's what a border is. It should enable us to multiply and savor the different flavors of the world; it shouldn't be a wall that prevents us from entering or leaving. **Consequently, what we need today is not to abolish borders but to provide them with another meaning, that of a passage, a communication — a Relation, in other words.**

MD: In this definition of borders and flavors, you're making me think of another word that's often used: *culture*. Culture can be defined as the way in which one lives every day, or else as what a society has that's of value. In your philosophy of Relation, what is culture for you?

ÉG: Maybe we should talk about this later. Without knowing if this discussion will be valid or not, I'd like to talk about modern violence.

MD: All right.

ÉG: For the moment, today, we can't say that there's a culture of the everyday and a culture, let's say of values and the

elite. I don't believe that. We all know today that the modes of dress, eating, establishing relationships, discussing, speaking, are all linked to a way of considering much more permanent values. I don't see any difference on this point. On the other hand, I always come back to the same thing, the same dimension: I don't think that culture is either this thing or the other thing that we've just talked about. I think that culture today is the knowledge of the world. It's recognizing one's own place and the place of one's community in the world, recognizing the differences of others from oneself and of oneself from others, and that these differences do not constitute borders. That's what I think culture is. If it isn't, then it's a kind of amorphous dream, something vague, or else a daily obstinacy that doesn't make much sense.

As a result, we need to take another look at the notion of culture. In this sense, a people that has been labeled "savage" or "unevolved," "untechnological" vis-à-vis so-called modern technology, without any possibility of entering a world that's been complicated by so-called modern technology — such a people can be just as cultivated as, if not more cultivated than, a people that benefits from all the technological advantages, because they could well have a better knowledge of how to get along in the world. **That's why I say that today there are no longer evolved and unevolved peoples. There are peoples in relation with the world and others that are not, whatever their degree, according to the usual criteria, of perfecting the art of profiting from life. That's basically the formula. There are people who live and people who profit from life. But it's not at all clear that people who profit from life are in a better situation than people who live.**

MD: Wonderful! When you were talking about borders, you wanted to come back to the issue of violence.

ÉG: Yes. I don't know if we can really take a discussion on violence very far. Traditionally, in the history of humanities, whatever their so-called degree of evolution, violence was a space of sudden eruption and rupture in a field of calm and tranquillity. Thus violence shattered peace, and as a result, violence initially had something fleeting about it. The extreme density of violence was linked to its transitoriness. In the lives of people, families, etc., there were violent wars, violent revolutions, violent dramas. Violence was a rupture. What I find extraordinary today is that violence is permanent. No longer is it a break in a system of peace. It's a permanence that's linked to the differences in the world coming together and confronting each other. Men, the humanities of the world, have not yet admitted that they can be reconciled, that they can come together. And today's humanities, in their perpetual fear of the other and the oth-

er's difference, maintain a kind of eternalized extreme that causes violence no longer to be a break in a peace. Modern violence doesn't even consider the possibility of peace or the idea of peace. And this is even more serious in that humanities are living in enormous groups, for instance, big towns and cities with 20 to 30 million dwellers, with 10, 20, 30 million people in a perpetual state of violence. I'm not just talking about the violence that kills, there's that as well, but I'm talking about the extreme violence in daily interactions. And you could say that it's part of the present-day condition of humanities, because they haven't yet accepted into their imaginations the idea that the world can be different and equal, different and united, different and solidary. As long as humanities have not accepted that, as long as their imagination hasn't evolved in that direction, this violence will become permanent, not a break in the peace. And then, another related idea strikes me: that all art forms, in other words, expressive forms that go beyond today's reality, are violent ones. And the more violently an art form conceives of itself — violent in its structures, its modes of expression, but also in its objects, its subjects, its content — the more violent it becomes. This kind of violence seems childish to me, because it's the violence of truth, of the real that interests us, but the violent expression of this kind of art prevents us from considering that there is another way of imagining that can make violence into something that is no longer a permanent condition but an abscess that we can cut out.

MD: Does terrorism constitute a particular case in this definition of violence?

ÉG: What is terrorism? Permanent war. It's no longer the kind of war where you declare hostilities, win or lose, and then sign a treaty. Terrorism is a permanent condition. It's difficult to see how we can put an end to terrorism by signing a treaty with terrorists, because other terrorists will take up the slack. The only way to fight it is to change the way of imagining — but you can't change people's imagination. The imagination belongs to everyone and you can't change it. But imaginations change! Without that, we'd be in a perpetual state of violence, whether artistic, ideological, religious, philosophical, or technological — that is, whenever technology makes attack or defense its primary objective, rather than improving conditions. And economic violence as well. Because today one of the most extraordinary forms of permanent violence is the violence of capitalist liberalism in the world. I hope we can come back to that. But what interests me now in this approach to the contemporary world is artistic violence, because you always have the impression, when consuming violent art, that you're escaping violent conditions. Quite the

contrary, you're passively rejoicing and delighting in violence. And I think there's a way of thinking about that in order to get away from that. It seems that in film, music, and dance, the more violence increases, the greater impression it conveys of being close to our era, close to reality. All of the deformations of humanities are considered as acts of violence that are profitable for these same humanities.

MD: So what do you think of someone like Duchamp? Let's say from Duchamp to a film like *Terminator* and the young rappers. Let's start with Duchamp, because I think that's more important.

ÉG: Not completely. What's interesting is that modern violence is willingly conservative. It is uncertain about innovations, about the audacity of change, as it were. Change isn't violent. Duchamp isn't violent. . . . Duchamp is outside the field of violence and peace. Because he's on the outside, he enters the domain of nonregulation. But nonregulation is not violence. The most violent films, Hollywood films, are the most conventional of all. Nothing's invented, and that satisfies us. Because we expect this kind of enjoyment — like children who love horror movies. It's not their fault. They love being scared. I think that's one of the conditions of humanities today — they adore what shakes them up and makes them fragile. **But Duchamp's not like that. Duchamp desacralizes artistic conventions, and that's not the same thing. Maybe his is a movement parallel to the violence I've been talking about, but it's not that same movement because violence can be banal, even quite reactionary in the way it looks at things. That's why an artist needs to consider that the innovation he's looking for has nothing to do with violence. What's violent in art, for example, is the fact that artists are considered great because their works are worth \$20 or \$30 million. That's violence, because it's the violence of conventional existence in society, particularly capitalist society. However, the goal of artistic innovation is not to use violent means. But it seems that nowadays violence is assimilated by the majority of humanities into a form of satisfaction within the domain of art. We need to think about that.**

MD: What concerns me while listening to you: . . . in Africa, people in power practically turn their populations into robots, giving orders and punishing them in the crudest manner, by killing people, putting people in prison, beating people up, laughing at the pain of others. What you're saying makes me think of that violence as well.

ÉG: Yes; in other words, government behaviors are becoming less and less concealed nowadays. Before, the same

tyrants engaged in great solemn spectacles of repression to impress people, but the rest of the time, repression was subterranean, while today it occurs on a daily basis: people are killed in the street on the slightest pretext. What's terrible is that violence works, that violence seduces people. It creates its own law of evolution, and that's why we have to think long and hard about this matter of violence.

MD: When I think, for example, of the economic violence you're referring to, I think of humanitarian groups like Doctors without Borders and all those who want to help Africans. I think there are two related issues here. On the one hand, they create an economy that impoverishes people; on the other hand, they go and help them. These kinds of violence are working together. One is economic, and the other is truly humanitarian.

ÉG: Yes, because the only way of really fighting poverty is to reshape a country's structures. Definitely. You'd have a hard time helping a country if there weren't sidewalks, water pipes, roads. . . . You can bring in millions of liters of drinking water, but if there's no standpipe for drinking water, if there's no manufacturing, if there're no roads, etc., then it's a given that violence will continue, because this lack of structures is a fundamental violence. And Africa is experiencing this violence. Colonized countries experience this violence, but Africa has been experiencing it for centuries, at the same time these innumerable natural resources are plundered. That's violence too. **The violence of the economic world, of the modern world, is the pillaging of the earth's natural resources, transforming them into consumer products, and forcing the entire planet to consume these products.** And in that sense an inhabitant of a rich country is no more privileged than an inhabitant of a poor country, except that he has more possibilities to consume than his poorer counterpart. But such a possibility to consume is as passive and useless as that of a poor country. We are living in the era of single prices, of huge surfaces. In other words, we live uselessly. I always say that we are "almost inhabitants," the "almost living," but we aren't really inhabitants, because what we consume, we don't consume in a responsible manner. We consume mechanically and in a violent manner without being aware of it. That's also a big problem of economic violence. And today many philosophers and economists are correctly saying that there is a difference between consuming and living, that consuming is not living, and that the goal of the economy should be to live well. Unfortunately, the economy's goal is accumulating money. It's not even about making things anymore. You could say that before, people built cathedrals and pyramids — it killed thousands of people but all the same, they made something: buildings,

monuments. Today the big capitalist doesn't give a damn. He lives in glass buildings that won't be around in fifty years. He no longer has a sense of permanence, of lastingness, of what leaves behind a trace, a memory. What are being built today are high-performance monuments: how high, how many rooms, etc. But they're not monuments to memory.

MD: What for you is difference in art, and in the philosophy of Relation?

ÉG: I'd say that it is in the fabric of the living, in the weave of the living, in what's alive. Until now, it was believed that like merged with like, and that the self opposed that which was different from itself. *A* could not be *A* and *not-A*. That's what they told us in philosophy, in mathematics, etc. You cannot be, and be something else. So the different was the contrary of being; it was nonbeing. And that assumed that there was a world of being, a world of likes, and that there was a world of nonbeing that was a nonworld and that either didn't exist at all or only existed with reference to being. Being exists, nonbeing does not. But I think that in the weave of the living . . .

MD: Every time you say that, the siren goes off [*laughter*].

ÉG: Well before Hegel, it was known that being and nonbeing combined. I didn't invent that notion — it's the dialectic. But I want us to bring that dialectic back into the real, not just into philosophical thought or theoretical reflection. I conceive reality as made up not of likenesses but of differences. There's no likeness and differences; **there's only differences.** And **the rhizome of these differences forms the weave of the living and the canvas of cultures. Poets — and I'm not the first to say this, it's been said since Victor Segalen — poets are best equipped to grasp differences, the infinity of differences existing between sound and silence. I think that this is the best approach to take toward the different. Differences are the living stuff of life.**

MD: Beautiful. I'm thinking about a concept that's become popular in Anglo-Saxon countries, not just in philosophy but especially in the definition of cultural identity: the notion of the other. In France, it's more nuanced; you use *alterité*. But what do you think of that notion of the other?

ÉG: Maybe I should confess my ignorance as to how this word is used in an Anglo-Saxon context.

MD: In a way they've stolen it from the French *alterité*. The other becomes the minority — the black, the Chicano, the woman, etc. — which you find in identity studies.

ÉG: Well, that doesn't interest me; it's so obviously false that I can't see why anybody would discuss it. I don't think that genuinely Anglo-Saxon thought would go that far. But we were talking about what's specific in the definition of the other. Whether in the Francophone, Anglophone, Arab, Chinese, Japanese world, what's specific in the definition of the other is that this other is not just considered different. **The other is considered as contrary. Now, in the world, there is no contrary. The dialectic of differences is something I agree with, but not the dialectic of contraries, because the dialectic of contraries assumes that there's a truth of here, and its contrary over there. Now I don't believe there is a truth . . .**

MD: Or a model . . .

ÉG: . . . or a model, yes, that's it . . . a luminous transcendence. I don't believe in that. **I say that nothing is true and everything is alive.** We've already gone over this — what that means is that nothing is absolutely true. There isn't one absolute truth, but truths. Everything is alive; everything is a Relation of differences — not contraries, but differences. Accordingly, the dialectic is not a linear approach toward that which is contrary. The dialectic is a **total rhizome of what's different.**

MD: So, Édouard, what's beauty, then?

ÉG: We'll stop here. Why do you want to talk about everything all at the same time?

Translated by Christopher Winks

Édouard Glissant (September 12, 1928–February 3, 2011) was one of the most important contemporary thinkers of our times. In the 1980s his theories of creolization, diversity, and otherness, as elaborated in the book *Le discours antillais* (1981), were regarded as seminal texts for the emerging studies of multiculturalism, identity politics, minority literature, and Black Atlanticism. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s Glissant's work moved beyond the mere consideration of meanings as posited by relating the signifier to the signified and the recognition of otherness. In his book *Philosophie de la relation* (1990), Glissant used his theory of relation to meditate on the new meanings of globalization, chaos, violence, equality, and justice.

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