

# From a New-World Poetics to a New-World Vision: African America in the Works of Edouard Glissant and Caryl Phillips

Francophone and anglophone Caribbean literatures were long regarded as separate fields of research, clearly divided by linguistic barriers, but also sealed from each other by mental ramparts erected on the diverging colonial histories of the two areas and forgetful of glaring commonalities stemming from a shared experience of exile and bondage. There have been notable exceptions to this traditional partitioning, among them the criticism of J. Michael Dash, the translator of Edouard Glissant into English, or the work of Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson who published a collection of texts by women from various Caribbean territories.<sup>1</sup> Yet, however commendable, these attempts to bring together the literatures from French and English-speaking Caribbean territories have most often remained peripheral. That it is only now, at the end of the 1990s, that a critical consensus seems to emerge on the need for a cross-Caribbean approach is surely no coincidence, for ours is a time when ancient polarizations, that of centre v. periphery, among others, are being consistently questioned, not to say made obsolete while old colonial bonds are losing some of their supremacy in favour of a new distribution of forms of power that goes hand in hand with a growing awareness of common cultural roots.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Dash, 'In Search of the Lost Body: Redefining the Subject in Caribbean Literature,' *Kunapipi* 11.1 (1989), pp. 17-26; Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson, *Her True-True Name*, Heinemann (Oxford, 1989).

By bringing together Alejo Carpentier, Wilson Harris and Edouard Glissant, Barbara J. Webb has achieved something similar for hispanophone, anglophone and francophone Caribbean literatures. See her *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction*, The University of Massachusetts Press (Amherst, 1992). See also Antonio Benitez-Rojo who brings together Wilson Harris and Alejo Carpentier in *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. by James Maraniss, Duke University Press (Durham and London, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> In 1998 Faber and Faber released a new Caribbean series, edited by Caryl Phillips. According to the blurb, its aim is 'to publish the finest work being produced in the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora, in the four major languages of the region: English, French, Spanish and Dutch.... It also aims to give anglophone readers in particular a broader and more profound sense of the literary culture that has evolved in the area over five hundred years of history.' The first six titles are: Frank Martinus

Though still in its infancy, such cross-Caribbean criticism nonetheless promises to open onto challenging vistas. Not only does it appropriately promote a form of critical *marronnage*, since it allows the critic to leave the Great House of traditional literary practice and examine Caribbean literatures beyond the restrictive orbit of former local imperial powers, whether England, France, Spain or the Netherlands. But it also helps to place these literatures in the wider context of today's composite societies. What I propose to do in this paper is to make a modest contribution to this field of research by commenting briefly on three novels by Caryl Phillips — *Higher Ground* (1989), *Cambridge* (1991) and *Crossing the River* (1993)<sup>1</sup> — in the light of *Le discours antillais* (1981), *Poétique de la relation* (1990), *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (1996) and *Traité du Tout-Monde* (1997),<sup>2</sup> four essays by Edouard Glissant.

Phillips and Glissant are from different areas of the Caribbean: francophone Glissant is from Martinique; anglophone Phillips was born in St Kitts but is now based in the United States and England (which, according to the Guyanese writer David Dabydeen, is the third largest West Indian island after Jamaica and Trinidad).<sup>3</sup> They also belong to different generations. In spite of these distinctions, both writers evince, as we shall see, strikingly similar views of history, cultural identity and human relations which I would tentatively ascribe to their shared *Antillanité* or Caribbeanness.<sup>4</sup> This notion cannot be a narrowly nationalistic label since, as the Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff reminds us, 'the Caribbean doesn't exist as an entity; it exists all over the world. It started in

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Arion, *Double Play*; Robert Antoni, *Blessed is the Fruit*; Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *A View from the Mangrove*; Maryse Condé, *Windward Heights*; Gabriel García Márquez and Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, *The Fragrance of Guava*; Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock*.

<sup>1</sup> Caryl Phillips, *Higher Ground*, Penguin (London, 1990); *Cambridge*, Pan (London, 1992); *Crossing the River*, Picador (London, 1994). Page references to these editions are given in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais*, Seuil (Paris, 1981); *Poétique de la relation*, Gallimard (Paris, 1990); *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Gallimard (Paris, 1996); *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Gallimard (Paris, 1997). Page references to these editions are given in the text. All translations are mine except when I quote from Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, translated and with an introduction by J. Michael Dash, University Press of Virginia (Charlottesville, 1996). The French originals are given in the footnotes.

<sup>3</sup> David Dabydeen, 'On Not Being Milton: Nigger Talk in England Today,' in *Tibisiri: Caribbean Writers and Critics*, ed. by Maggie Butcher, Dangaroo Press (Coventry, 1989), p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> It should be emphasised, however, that Glissant's fiction differs from Phillips's on some points. Unlike Phillips, Glissant does not include documents like logbooks or planters' journals in his novels, nor does he focus on white women characters. The two novelists also have diverging approaches to polyphony. In addition, while Phillips's novels span various continents, the focal point of Glissant's fiction remains Martinique. I am indebted to Dr Kathleen Gijssels from UFSIA (University of Antwerp) for pointing out these differences to me.

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diaspora and it continues in diaspora.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it a pre-existing ethnocentric absolute like Aimé Césaire's *négritude* or, to some extent, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant's *créolité*.<sup>2</sup> If Caribbeanness eschews ideological fixity and therefore resists facile formulation, it is because it emphasises process rather than result, is more methodological than ontological and comes closer to being a vision in action than a potentially static theory.<sup>3</sup> Rooted in the actual Caribbean experience of displacement and dispossession, it refers to a fluctuating and subterranean identity that does not constrict but rather diffracts into an 'intricate, unceasing branching of cultures'<sup>4</sup> and, in web-like fashion, proliferates simultaneously in various directions. Far from being a claim to a fossilized essence, then, Caribbeanness thus understood sees the Caribbean area as a microcosm of the contemporary archipelized and creolized world, 'as an intense and sustained version of a larger phenomenon.'<sup>5</sup> However, as Glissant also points out, the balkanization of the Caribbean region can prevent its peoples from being aware of the international vocation of their civilization.<sup>6</sup>

The openness and cross-culturality inherent in Caribbeanness is manifest in the impressive intertexts of the three novels and the four essays at the heart of this paper. Glissant's recurrent references to Saint-John Perse, Victor Segalen or William Faulkner are suggestive of a wide-ranging cultural plurality. So are Phillips's indirect allusions to Joseph Conrad, Malcolm X or Jean Rhys in *Higher Ground*<sup>7</sup> and his pastiche of colonial women's travel writing in *Cambridge* and of slave narratives in both *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*. But the two corpuses of texts also share another major feature: an undeniable accretive dimension which could similarly partake of the two writers' Caribbean or New World poetics in so far as it implies an ongoing process of revision whose open-endedness clashes with the notion of ideal absolute and completion that used to be championed by the West. Each corpus is therefore best understood if read as an organic (yet always incomplete) whole, providing a

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<sup>1</sup> 'An Interview with Michelle Cliff' conducted by Meryl F. Schwartz, *Contemporary Literature* 34.4 (1993), pp. 595-619 (p. 597).

<sup>2</sup> See Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Eloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*. Bilingual edition with the English translation by M.B. Taleb-Khyar, Gallimard (Paris, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> 'L'antillanité, qui est de méthode et non pas d'être, ne s'accomplit pas, ne se dépasse pas pour nous' (*Poétique de la relation*, p. 212). 'Antillanité. Plus qu'une théorie, une vision' (*Le Discours antillais*, p. 495).

<sup>4</sup> J. Michael Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1995), p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Binder, 'Poétique antillaise, poétique de la relation — interview avec Edouard Glissant,' *Komparatistische Hefte* 9/10 (1984), pp. 83-100 (pp. 89-90).

<sup>7</sup> Bénédicte Ledent, 'Is Counter-Discursive Criticism Obsolete?: Intertextuality in Caryl Phillips's *Higher Ground*,' in *A Talent(ed) Digger: Creations, Cameos, and Essays in honour of Anna Rutherford*, ed. by Hena Maes-Jelinek, Gordon Collier and Geoffrey V. Davis (Amsterdam/Atlanta, 1996), pp. 301-308.

mapping of African America but also articulating a coherently developing discourse on the human condition.

In *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Glissant describes his own critical thought as 'complex and erratic,' made up of intertwining redundancies,<sup>1</sup> whereby the written word concurs with the circularity of the spoken language. For him, repetition is not a meaningless waste of time, but an uncanny mode of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that Phillips's triptych of novels, composed of layers upon layers of dislocated lives, proceeds from a similar piling-up which Glissant regards as 'the most suitable technique for exposing a reality that is itself being scattered'.<sup>3</sup> Phillips's fiction almost obsessively addresses the exilic condition and, like Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*, may be said to rely on 'the repetition of a few obsessions that *take root*, tied to realities that *keep slipping away*'.<sup>4</sup> His three novels repeatedly map an original topography of a Black Atlantic culture shuttling between Africa, Europe and the Americas. All three also feature strangely similar characters — either objectionable black males or enigmatic white women outcasts — caught in critical situations that cause terrible distress but also give them an opportunity to grow, however modestly, and to achieve what Glissant has called a 'painful mutation,'<sup>5</sup> through their encounter with other cultures. This typically happens to Emily, the Englishwoman in *Cambridge*, whose meeting with the Caribbean leads to madness but also to the realization of her own plurality. At the end of the novel, both physically and mentally defeated by the violence of plantation society, she gives up her dichotomous and systemic thought to enter a new, multifaceted dimension: 'her vision had begun to pulsate with a new and magical life, her mind had become a frieze of sharp stabbing colours' (p. 182). Though Phillips's novels always steer clear of redemptive endings, they nonetheless seem to suggest that there is 'an annealing force' coming 'out of fracture,'<sup>6</sup> a message perhaps most forcefully expressed in the last pages of *Crossing the River* where 'the hardships of the far bank' (p. 235) survived by the main protagonists open onto a sense of belonging to a collectivity.

The accumulative logic at work in both Glissant's essays and Phillips's novels could well be compared to the compulsive working of memory, or, more evocatively perhaps, to the ebb and flow of the sea, a metaphor all the more significant in the Caribbean context because the ocean is the burial place of so

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<sup>1</sup> 'L'objet de ces quatre conférences apparaîtra complexe et erratique, et il est probable qu'au cours des exposés je reviendrai sur des thèmes qui s'entrelaceront, qui se reprendront: c'est ma manière de travailler' (*Introduction à une poétique du divers*, p. 11).

<sup>2</sup> *Poétique de la relation*, p. 57; *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Caribbean Discourse*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> 'mutation douloureuse' (*Introduction à une poétique du divers*, p. 16).

<sup>6</sup> Caryl Phillips, 'Crossing the River: Caryl Phillips Talks to Maya Jaggi,' *Wasafiri* 20 (Autumn 1994), p. 28.

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many African victims of the slave-trade.<sup>1</sup> Associated with the atrocities of the Middle Passage, but also with the openness of the area, 'The sea is our unconscious, that which is deep within us,'<sup>2</sup> Glissant argues, echoing both Derek Walcott's formula that 'the sea is history' but also Edward Brathwaite's conclusion that 'the unity is submarine,' two quotations which he, Glissant, uses as epigraphs to his *Poétique de la Relation*.

Yet Glissant's and Phillips's poetics also correspond on more specific features, thereby confirming what the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier once said to Edouard Glissant, that 'Caribbean writers write in four or five different tongues but [...] have the same language.'<sup>3</sup>

Phillips's mapping of African America rests, like Glissant's, on a revisionary conception of history. His polyphonic and temporally disruptive novels challenge a one-sided and linear History by juxtaposing myriads of histories seen from the point of view of those eclipsed from official historiographies whom he rescues from an age-long 'limbo of anonymity',<sup>4</sup> or, in Glissant's terms, from the 'non-history' which was imposed on Caribbean people and led to the 'erasing of the collective memory'.<sup>5</sup> Phillips can thus be said to offer what Glissant has described as a 'prophetic vision of the past'; 'neither a schematic chronology nor [...] a nostalgic lament,' it explores the eclipsed past and projects it 'forward into the future',<sup>6</sup> thus modifying our perception of the present reality. As Phillips himself puts it,

The larger historical question regarding memory has to do with our own collective memory of history as a community, as a society. So my way of subverting received history is to use historical documents, use first-person voices, digest what they're saying, and somehow rework them. It's a reworking that can get us to understand, for instance, the rather troubled relationship between captured slaves on the west coast of Africa and those who stayed behind. That's what I want to do.<sup>7</sup>

A similar effect is achieved by the love-hate relationship that binds the ex-slave Nash to his master-father-lover Edward in *Crossing the River*; it exposes the complexity of New World societies that, not so long ago, were still seen as dual and rigid systems based on an overdetermined Master-Slave relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Fred D'Aguiar, *Feeding the Ghosts*, Chatto & Windus (London, 1997) in which the sea is almost a character in its own right.

<sup>2</sup> 'Interview,' by Michael Dash, *Caribbean Review of Books* 5 (August 1992), pp. 17-19 (p. 18).

<sup>3</sup> 'Alejo Carpentier me disait dans une conversation quelque temps avant sa mort: 'Nous autres Caraïbéens nous écrivons en quatre ou cinq langues différentes mais nous avons le même langage' (*Introduction à une poétique du divers*, p. 43).

<sup>4</sup> Jan Carew, *Fulcrums of Change*, Africa World Press (Trenton, 1988), p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Caribbean Discourse*, p. 62.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> Jenny Sharpe, 'Of this Time, of that Place: A Conversation with Caryl Phillips,' *Transition* 5.4 (Autumn 1995), pp. 154-161 (pp. 157-158).

The slave trade, the separation from Africa, the crossing of the Atlantic and Plantation life constitute the primordial traces of the New World societies and are at once an abyss and a womb, that is the cause of immense suffering but also the source of new creolized communities. *Higher Ground*, *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River* directly address these founding episodes of African America. Yet, unlike the myths of filiation of the Western tradition, whose sense of continuity strives for a 'firmly-rooted and conquering legitimacy,'<sup>1</sup> often at the expense of the excluded or dominated Other, Phillips's exploration of the origins of his native culture is rooted in disruption and ubiquitous errancy that paradoxically but significantly promotes relation and affiliation. To the exclusive Genesis of 'atavistic societies,' Phillips may be said to oppose what Glissant calls the 'digenesis' of 'composite societies,' that is a revised version of the myth of origin which takes its multiple sources in the dark womb of the slave-ship.<sup>2</sup> This results in *Crossing the River* in an unpredictable 'genealogical maze'<sup>3</sup> featuring, among the 'haunting voices' (p. 236) of the African Diaspora, that of Joyce, the white Englishwoman, adopted by the African father as one of his own children.

Clearly, then, to the claim to an illusory transparency and to one-sided universality, which underlies the Western conquistadorial desires and characterizes its unitarian epistemology, Phillips's novels oppose the opaqueness of the multiple, the ambiguous, the discontinuous and the unsaid. That such a counter-poetics is a more efficient response to oppression than a sterile retaliative anti-colonial stance is illustrated in *Cambridge* through the character of Christiania. Though hardly heard or seen in the novel, this slave woman can be read as embodying the only fruitful resistance to colonial oppression while also representing its most extreme victim. If the unquestioning conversion to Christianity of her husband, Cambridge, somehow neutralizes his anti-slavery positions and makes him an easy prey to Emily's taxonomical impulses, Christiania's magical Obeah, thus opaqueness, succeeds not only in arousing Emily's fear but also in eluding her comprehension, an attitude implying, as Glissant points out, the action of 'taking,' appropriating or submitting to one's own transparency.<sup>4</sup>

What Glissant and Phillips suggest through their revision of Western history and epistemology is nothing less than a new world-vision, one which foregrounds genuine diversity, away from a totalizing and thus potentially barbaric, universalizing humanism. In Glissant's terms,

Diversity, which is neither chaos nor sterility, means the human spirit's striving for a cross-cultural relationship, without universalist transcendence. Diversity needs

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<sup>1</sup> 'la légitimité enracinante et conquérante' (*Poétique de la relation*, p. 68).

<sup>2</sup> 'La Genèse des sociétés créoles des Amériques se fond à une autre obscurité, celle du ventre du bateau négrier. C'est ce que j'appelle une digenèse' (*Traité du Tout-Monde*, p. 36).

<sup>3</sup> Dash, *Edouard Glissant*, p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> Edouard Glissant, 'Le chaos-monde, l'oral et l'écrit' in *Ecrire la 'parole de nuit': La nouvelle littérature antillaise*, ed. by Ralph Ludwig, Gallimard (Paris, 1994), p. 126.

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the presence of peoples, no longer as objects to be swallowed up, but with the intention of creating a new relationship.<sup>1</sup>

This emphasis on diversity and relation entails a new dynamic conception of the self for while 'sameness requires fixed Being,' Glissant writes, 'Diversity establishes Becoming'.<sup>2</sup>

The striving for cross-cultural relationships that underlies such a world-view might very well be tagged as blandly consensual if it were not for its essentially ambiguous and paradoxical nature that Phillips excels at rendering with an often subdued irony and which is epitomized in the 'shameful intercourse' (p. 1) initiated by the African father in *Crossing the River* when he sells his own children to a slave-trader. Diversity and relation in Glissant and Phillips connote neither fusion, nor confusion nor even dilution of identities, as is the case with globalization because it is not rooted anywhere.<sup>3</sup> Diversity and relation exist in a turbulent 'chaos-world' in which irreducible human groups<sup>4</sup> meet, clash, oppose or parallel each other to yield an unpredictable and ever-changing pattern as in the concluding section of *Crossing the River* which contains the 'many-tongued chorus' of all the children of the African Diaspora. Man thus conceived is both 'solidaire' and 'solitaire',<sup>5</sup> torn between Donne's proclamation that 'no man is an island entire of itself' and Conrad's stark statement that 'we live, as we dream — alone'. This tension between solidarity and solitude — typical of all Phillips's characters — is perhaps best demonstrated in *Higher Ground*, a novel in three parts. While the fractal structure clearly separating the three protagonists from each other reinforces their own solitariness, their lifestories are made to interact through a complex web of interconnections that only surface after a careful reading of the text. All three protagonists are indeed 'trying to survive a journey' (p. 218) and suffer captivity and dispossession, the commonplace predicaments of African America from which Glissant concludes that 'Everything is in everything, without perforce becoming confused'.<sup>6</sup>

One of the key notions in Glissant's thought is that of 'rhizomorphic identity,' borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,<sup>7</sup> by which identity is seen 'no longer as a single root but as a root going to meet other roots'.<sup>8</sup> He opposes this 'rhizomorphic identity' to the model of 'single-root identity' which underlay

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<sup>1</sup> *Caribbean Discourse*, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> 'La mondialisation, conçue comme non-lieu, en effet mènerait à une dilution standardisée' (*Traité du Tout-Monde*, p. 192).

<sup>4</sup> In the French text Glissant speaks of 'humanités,' a word significantly used in the plural.

<sup>5</sup> *Poétique de la relation*, p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> 'La Traite, lieu commun des peuples caribéens' (*Traité du Tout-Monde*, p. 76). 'Tout est dans tout, sans s'y confondre par force' (*Traité du Tout-Monde*, p. 23).

<sup>7</sup> *Le discours antillais*, p. 196.

<sup>8</sup> 'L'identité non plus comme racine unique mais comme racine allant à la rencontre d'autres racines' (*Introduction à une poétique du divers*, p. 23).

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conquest and liberation movements alike and is responsible for such destructive phenomena as fundamentalism, ultra-nationalism, and racism.<sup>1</sup> To view identity in terms of relating and not of mutually exclusive selves might be the last sheet anchor for our composite societies, particularly for the immigrants of the second generation who, like Phillips himself, live in societies whose so-called cultural superiority is rooted in an old tradition of illusory and mythical homogeneity.<sup>2</sup> It is Glissant's conviction that literature can help bring about the necessary imaginative and conceptual changes by showing 'that a part of the other is a part of me.'<sup>3</sup> This is exactly what Phillips's novels succeed in doing because they intimate that exile is part and parcel of the human condition everywhere and thereby make the reader aware of his/her own ineluctable foreignness not only to others but also to him- or herself. As Julia Kristeva writes, it is only when we know that the stranger is within us, that 'we are foreigners to ourselves,' that 'we can attempt to live with others.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Interview,' p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> See an anthology edited by Caryl Phillips and entitled *Extravagant Strangers: A Literature of Belonging*, Faber and Faber (London, 1997) in which the notion of Britishness is redefined in the light of the literary production written by so-called outsiders.

<sup>3</sup> 'Interview,' p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press (New York, 1991), p. 170.