

Interview With Poet Edouard Glissant From Martinique

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Poet, novelist and philosopher, the writer, Edouard Glissant, a native of Martinique, reflects on the future of our complex world. Eulogist of "creolization" and cultural interbreeding, he sees in today's, often violent, encounter of peoples and cultures, the condition of a new way of being in the world, of an identity both rooted in a land and enriched by all the lands now related. The keystone of his thinking on the modern world, "relation" is the opposite of the cultural and political domination of the Other or of a multiculturalism which reduces diversity. Interview.

Label France: You have just published a new work, with the title *Sartorius. The story of the Batoutos*. Who are the Batoutos ?

Edouard Glissant: The story of the Batoutos is a modern fable of non-domination. Although I took care to place this people in a fairly precise time (500 BC) and space (in a region in central Africa), the Batoutos are above all a mythical people. But this is a myth that the world needs, since the Batoutos personify a people who have no pretensions to setting themselves up as models and who go into the world not to take possession of it but to live with others. We need a people of this kind who do not want to be a conquering people, nor an imperialist people and who, as a result, protect us against the temptation of making ourselves too visible by imposing our values, our ways of being, on other peoples. This is a myth necessary to the expanding imagination of the end of the millennium, when so many cultures are meeting and changing. The function of writing, as I conceive it and practice it, is to express this cross fertilisation, with all its joys, and all its derelictions, its massacres, its genocides, its contradictions and too, its ironing out of individual differences.

Your novels are driven by an idea of diversity, that you have expounded as a theory under various labels: "relation", "creolization", "One world". Are these terms equivalents?

These are complementary concepts. "One world", is the world as it is at present in all its diversity and chaos. For me, chaos is not only disorder, but also the impossibility of predicting and governing the world. Relation means a transversal relationship and not that of causes to effects. Thus the Batoutos try to establish a fraternal relationship with the world.

"We should get accustomed to the idea that our identity is going to change on contact with the Other"

Lastly, I am totally opposed to the term "creolism" although the writers on creolism claim me as their spiritual father. I believe that the idea of creolization more accurately reflects the world's situation. This is the idea of a continuous process capable of producing the identical and the different. It seems to me that creolism raises multilingualism or multiethnicity to a dogma or a model. Since I am against models, I prefer the overt term "creolization" to this sort of essence or condition to which the term "creolism" refers.

You use the term "chaos-world", in a positive sense. Aren't you worried that chaos may lead to an inability to communicate, a kind of tower of Babel?

When I say that our world is a chaos-world, I am not saying that it is an apocalyptic world, but rather a world that one can no longer predict or plan in advance. The "entanglements" at work have made the world complex. We now have to get used to the idea that we can live in the world without having the ambition to predict it or dictate to it. We should also get accustomed to the idea that our identity is going to change profoundly on contact with the Other as his will on contact with us, without either of them losing their essential nature or being diluted in a multicultural magma. These are difficult notions to conceive and even more difficult to put into practice. This gives the measure of what I call the chaos-world.

You have often written that the Caribbean is the place where current modes of relation are being developed. Is the Caribbean the exemplary model of interbreeding?

There is, in the Caribbean, an extraordinary strength of diversity and of unity at the same time. Take the example of West Indian music in which new rhythms are being born of the interaction with Africa and the United States. Similar phenomena are at work in the field of literature, the visual arts, film, commerce and sport. We are at the present time witnessing the "archipelagoization" of the Caribbean, which is exemplary and is moving in the direction of creolization. But the entire world is being creolized today. Europe is being "archipelagoized" in its turn and is splitting into regions. Florida is in the process of changing completely in response to its Cuban and Caribbean populations. It seems to me that these new dimensions of existence escape national realities which are trying to resist the forces of archipelagoization.

The novelty, in my opinion, will come from small countries with no colonial past or national traditions, who are therefore less frightened of disintegration or losing their "status". We must accustom our minds to these new world structures, in which the relationship between the centre and the periphery will be completely different. Everything will be central and everything will be peripheral. This is what I call the policy of universality, which of course has its negative side: globalization. Globalization is universality achieved through the lowest common denominator, through homogenization, through standardisation. It is the screen behind which new oppressions and dominations hide*.

Your cultural background is both French and Martinican. Your work falls into the same tradition as Camus, Segalen, Saint-John Perse and Césaire who you describe as frontier-writers. Which contemporary writers do you feel close to today?

I feel close to most of the Caribbean writers because in a general way we all have the same approach to literature, regardless of the language we use: English, Spanish or French. An Alejo Carpentier (Cuba), who writes in Spanish, a Wilson Harris (Guyana), who writes in English, an Aimé Césaire (Martinique) or myself, who write in French, have a common language which comes from a trust in words, in the power of language, in the techniques of writing that we have primarily borrowed from Faulkner: accumulation, lists, redundancies, densely packing information, deferred revelations. All this constitutes a language, a way of appropriating the languages we all have in common. This constitutes a specific literary convention, or, if you prefer, an aesthetic of relation!

Interview conducted by

Tirthankar Chanda
University academic and journalist