

CONVERSATION WITH ÉDOUARD GLISSANT ABOARD THE QUEEN MARY II (AUGUST 2009)

MANTHIA DIAWARA

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We're travelling aboard the Queen Mary II, on our way to New York from Southampton. Why a ship, when it would have been easier and faster to travel on a plane?

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 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.

MD I gather that crossing the Atlantic in a ship also gives you time to think about the past, the present and the future. It recalls for me not only the slave ships, but also the New World and an important landmark for the creation of the African [diaspora](#).

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, 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. 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 a turn of events to know that my ancestors had left for the New World in terrible conditions very much unlike these. There is a return, because right from the start, the whole set-up – Africa/middle of the ocean/arrival – is an enslaving, colonialist set-up: it's the moment when 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 do not return 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 anti-slavery will. That is what we've gained, and that is the true return.

MD A boat connotes a departure from point A and an arrival at point B – 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 realise its true self, in other words its multiplicity, and to respect itself as such.

MD The middle of the Atlantic, just like the middle in every narrative, represents a moment of uncertainty before the moment of arrival or change, or rupture. What is the midpoint of the Atlantic 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 characterises 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 non-existent 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.

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

ÉG For me, the arrival is the moment when 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, scholars and artists, following Paul Gilroy, have been using the concept of the [Black Atlantic](#) to attempt to give similar explanations of the condition of the people of the African [diaspora](#). What do you think of the theory of the [Black Atlantic](#)?

ÉG I respect the work of these thinkers who are African-Americans for the most part. 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 colonisers, 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 'archipelagisation' 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 civilisations 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 French intellect, because that intellect is generalising, given to generality, whereas the British, Anglophone intellect 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 generalising unity that would encompass everyone. 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 particularise 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, were formed on the basis of a mixed reality, or a will towards 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, i.e., 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 [creolisation](#) is the very sign of that change. In [creolisation](#), 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 [creolisation](#), 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 creolising 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 am fascinated by your definition of [creolisation](#) as a continuous process. Do you think that we can talk about the African [diaspora](#) in the same sense?

ÉG 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](#) out of Africa: for example, the forced [diaspora](#) brought about by slavery; and today there is also a coerced [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.

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 towards the New World. All kinds of comparisons can be made on this point. 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, but in the end what we have here is a fundamental difference, and we need to be aware of 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 example, 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 with an incredible beat through the piano, which is an instrument played by Beethoven and Bach. And if you think about it, the same thing applies to most of the other areas.

What's happening is that music is becoming more and more diverse. 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 centre, 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 towards the Other. Well, it's all quite simple to summarise 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 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 when we realise 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 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 with and imposed what I've been saying for twenty or thirty years now amidst 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 in order 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 with this sort of reflection on its complexity, on mixture, etc., and people end up accepting the idea.

MD Beautiful. I'm thinking about a concept that's 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*. The Other has become the minority – the Black, the homosexual, the Chicano, the woman, etc. What do you think of that notion of the Other?

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 over 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 towards that which is contrary. The dialectic is a total [rhizome](#) of what's different.

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