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Glissant and Diaspora Studies

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Abstract:

Although an increasingly influential figure in the field of postcolonial studies, Edouard Glissant is not commonly associated with discussions of diaspora-related issues. This article seeks to identify areas of overlap between Glissantian thought and the diaspora studies field. Modern-day Caribbean citizens may not be diasporans in the strict sense of the term, but the legacy of the forced diasporization of Africans via the slave trade is such that the diasporic as a prism lies at the heart of the social history of the Caribbean, and this focus underpinned the work of Glissant throughout his career. In this article areas of reciprocity are also charted between later Glissantian concepts and a number of key concepts which have been elaborated by diaspora studies theorists since the 1990s.

Keywords Edouard Glissant; diaspora; minorities cultures; language; opacity; globalization

The work of Edouard Glissant (1928-2011) has been garnering increasing amounts of attention in critical circles in recent years and arguably more so since his death than during his lifetime. Theorist, poet, novelist and playwright, the Martinican Frenchman had a long career as a publishing author spanning over 50 years and he is known as one of the francophone postcolonial world's most eminent thinkers and writers, if not its most eminent outside the French mainland context. A longstanding critic of neocolonialism in the French overseas countries, his work was long known principally in the francophone world alongside that of more celebrated compatriots such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire prior to coming to greater prominence in its own right from the 1980s onwards, to some extent in association with the highly publicised "creoleness" movement initially spearheaded by Prix Goncourt winner and self-confessed disciple of Glissant, Patrick Chamoiseau. Glissant's magisterial study of Martinican and Antillean history and culture, translated as *Caribbean Discourse* (Glissant [1989] 1993), in many ways formed the pillar of his theoretical vision, but his output took a new turn followingthe appearance of *Poetics of Relation* (Glissant [1990] 1997). From this

point on, Glissant's philosophical world-view broadened out from the Caribbean context to encompass the phenomenon which only a few years earlier had come to be designated in common anglophone parlance as "globalization". A significant body of theoretical work appeared in print in the twenty years following the publication of *Poetics of Relation* which was to provide at one and the same time a reading and a counternarrative to this contemporary instantiation of globalization characterized in particular by its mooring to the neoliberal economic policies introduced and implemented by the Reagan-Thatcher governments of the 1980s. Glissant saw in globalization thus conceived a descendent of the colonial domination under which he and his compatriots, like many other nations around the world, had suffered for centuries. The economic dominance of the USA particular, he believed, threatened the cultural integrity and specificities of local cultures around the globe as individual languages and customs would be subjected to the homogenising tendencies of a dominant English-language and accompanying Anglo-American mindset and practices, as instantiated notably in the realm of commercial interactions and information technologies. Counterstrategies were required, Glissant believed, .to resist these uniformising tendencies and help the diverse communities, languages and cultures of the world preserve their right to their own specificities and individuality.

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To take a step backwards chronologically, Glissant's work was for many years associated with the staunchly oppositional stance which he, like Fanon before him, took with respect to French colonialism. He was an independentist who founded and taught at the Institut Martiniquais d'Etudes (Martinican Studies Institute) from 1967. Yet the vantage point from which he viewed French colonialism, as in the case of his more celebrated predecessor Aimé Césaire, was inevitably an ambivalent one, a fact which I believe is essential to bear in mind when approaching Glissant's thought from the perspective of diaspora studies. One of the

particularities of Martinique, along with fellow Caribbean island Guadeloupe, Reunion island in the Indian Ocean, and also Guyana on the northern coast of South America, is that they remain "départements", or counties, of France even today. Formerly French colonies and part of the slave triangle prior to 1848, they obtained "département" status following a request made by Césaire who had in 1945 been elected Mayor of Fort-de-France and subsequently became "député" (MP) for Martinique. Césaire was nevertheless to remain a vociferous opponent of colonialism throughout the 1950s. Whatever the advantages to the overseas counties afforded by "départementalisation", Glissant like many other independentists felt that this political and economic status amounted in practice to a form of neo-colonialism, a phenomenon which he went on to analyze in detail in *Caribbean Discourse*. Insofar as the French kept a hold on the levers of power of the Martinican economy, Glissant argued, they ultimately kept the island, along with the other overseas counties, in a position of subordinacy. In this regard it is worth noting that in his later life, Glissant was sceptical of the label "postcolonial" as a categorization of his own work on the grounds that Martinique in his view still exhibited the characteristics of a colony rather than a postcolonial nation. Whereas postcoloniality in former colonies commonly suggests a condition which came into being after independence had been won, Martinique, so Glissant believed, had not yet reached that stage in its political and economic evolution. Martinicans, then, and hence Glissant himself, were both French and yet felt themselves to be different from the mainland French culturally and in terms of economic well-being. They were no longer colonized and yet the island's departmental status was both a blessing and a curse, they were francophone and yet also spoke creole, and their writers and intellectuals most commonly published in the French language with Paris-based publishers.[ii]

It is partly this ambivalent character of Martinican identity, as indeed in the cases of all four of the French overseas "départements", which complicates the charting of a relationship

between Glissant's thought and the paradigms which have come to be associated with the field of diaspora studies since this latter's inception in the early 1990s. It is perhaps of little surprise that Glissant is consequently almost never discussed in theoretical discussions relating to the concept or realities of diaspora. Diasporans have often been typically thought of as communities of people displaced from their homelands, living as cultural and sometimes also ethnic minorities in foreign host countries and constantly hankering after an ultimate return, in the absence of which they live in a state of both nostalgia and anticipation. Martinicans conversely have been predominantly a settled majoritarian community for numerous centuries and are sufficiently distant in chronological terms from their African origins as neither to hark back to a distant African past nor to long for a return to Africa one day. Even francophone Caribbean communities living within mainland France would not qualify easily for being in the diasporic category as they have been French since birth, whether they were born in the islands or in mainland France itself.

Despite the fact that the identification of the French Caribbean populations with the diaspora paradigm is hence not a straightforward one, I have nevertheless always been of the view that Glissant's thought did and still does have a lot to offer diaspora studies. So many of Glissant's paradigms and preoccupations, as I shall explain, appear not only to derive from a diaspora-based experience but also to mirror and closely relate to the central preoccupations of the diaspora studies field, a field moreover which is not only a fairly recent development but also remains a somewhat marginal one within postcolonial studies as a whole. My project in this article will hence be to explore and chart where possible the relationship between Glissant's thought and diaspora theory, identifying areas of reciprocity in the hope that both diaspora studies and Glissant studies will be enriched in the process.

Diasporic communities, an un-Glissantian preoccupation?

A landmark early text in the development of what has come to be known as "diaspora studies" is William Safran's article 'Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return' (Safran 1991). Safran:

> focus[es] his definition of a diaspora around the concept of "return to the homeland". His expanded definition enumerates a number of features: dispersal from and original centre; a collective memory, vision or myth about the homeland; a sense of not being fully accepted by the host society; a desire to return to an original homeland; commitment to the maintenance or restoration of that homeland; and a continued personal or vicarious relation to that homeland. (Stierstorfer and Wilson 2018, 3)

A key aspect of this reading is that the designation of collective memory implies that diasporans are almost by definition members of communities. The precision with which Safran charts the specificity of diasporic identity is undoubtedly valuable in guarding against vague, catch-all uses of the concept, but it carries secondary implications. It clearly suggests ,for instance, a distinction between diaspora-related issues and postcoloniality more broadly conceived; on Safran's definition the two fields only overlap in certain areas. The south Asian community in Britain for example is both postcolonial and diasporic: they its members are descendants of formerly colonised nations, display all the characteristics of postcoloniality, and they commonly also meet the criteria given by Safran as summarised above. The Polish community, by contrast, is diasporic without being postcolonial. In no obvious sense do Poles settled in Britain have to negotiate postcolonial issues in relation to the host nation, and yet they do commonly hanker after a return to the homeland nevertheless. As regards Glissant's Caribbean focus, then, the first objection to the attempt to chart a relationship with diaspora studies is that

whilst there clearly are postcolonial issues to be taken into account, be it with respect to Caribbeans resident in mainland France or in their homelands, a connection with issues surrounding the diasporic experience is far from self-evident.

It is well known to diaspora studies specialists today, however, that Safran's seminal definition of the diasporic experience has been challenged at a number of levels since it was formulated in the early 1990s. It has come in for criticism in particular for its excessive narrowing down of the criteria which need to be met to qualify as "diasporic" specifically. It is also clear that the dynamics of diasporic trajectoral movements have changed considerably in recent years. In the first decades of neoliberal globalization—in the late 1980s and 1990s—diasporans were being heralded as harbingers of a new type of fluid, postmodern social condition ushering in prospective new norms in a globalizing world. Since the new millenium, however, we have witnessed both an increase in migration flows and numbers of displaced persons on the one hand, and at the same time a nationalist reflex reaction in many western nations which is profoundly mistrustful of transnational movements of peoples (not so much of transnational capital flows, unfortunately, however). The historically brief postmodern celebration of the essentially middle-class migrant figure has been followed by a return of the more traditional figure of the economically dispossessed working-class migrant whose subjective experience is fraught with difficulties at all levels: professional, financial, educational, linguistic and cultural. Perhaps ironically, just as 1990s middle-class immigrants into western nations could be thought of as paradigmatic of that era as a whole in the west, the poverty-stricken migrants flooding into Europe from the middle east and Africa of recent years *also* in some sense point to the collective future of our societies. As evidence of ever-growing and increasingly chronic economic inequalities has in western nations become so blatant as to be undeniable, notably since the 2000s,[iii] the new norm is increasingly the impoverished worker or job-seeker as had

been the case before the landmark welfare state reforms of the 1940s and the protracted period of economic growth in the west from the late 1940s through to the 1970s.[iv] As Mike Davis argues in *Planet of Slums* (Davis 2006), globalized capitalism is leading towards the economic dereliction not just of those on the fringes of western hegemonic opulence as had long been the case, but also of the long-silent majority living within western nations. The replacing of social democracy's delicate balancing of political liberalism, labour and capital by a harder-nosed brand of neoliberal downgrading of labour in favour of profit, in parallel with the exponential growth of information technologies, has been creating a new brand of urban poor—at once disenfranchised, technologically savvy, and tuned into transnational information networks—whose central defining characteristics increasingly resemble those of the immigrants they are urged to repel.

The context, then, has changed, as have the types of immigrants that are the focus for diasporic studies as a field. The postmodern celebration of western opulence as the end-point of human history[v] has given way to a protracted era of western capitalist economic and political crisis and an increasingly 19th-century relationship between capital and the urban poor who are themselves, minus the cheap new technologies they possess, coming to resemble the incoming migrants arriving from poor or war-torn nations. A new configuration of this type requires an evolution of our existing theoretical models and clearly the immense value of early taxonomies of the diasporic condition of the sort presented by Safran needs to be offset against more recent considerations. It is the need for new perspectives, and especially in today's world where western nations and globalization itself are so evidently in a state of profound mutation, which in my view brings Glissant's thought into sharp focus as one possibility amongst others for offering constructive re-configuring of diaspora studies. The later Glissantian world-view opens up singular new possibilities for a better understanding of transnational connections and interrelationships as well as a vision for these not only becoming a leading paradigm today but

also a model for a new emancipatory internationalism which is inclusive, but not reductive, of local cultural specificities.

Antecedents to diaspora theory in Glissant's thought

At first brush, it would seem a little counterintuitive to imagine that Caribbean thought might not bear much relation to reflections about diasporic communities and the diasporic condition. The term *diaspeirein* was originally used to refer to the dispersion of the Jews and "[i]t also refers to dissemination and scattering, with implications of communities dislocated from their place of origin through migration or exile, and relocated in one or more states, nations or territories" (Stierstorfer and Wilson, 2018, xix) Clearly the African diaspora, for centuries forcibly transplanted from Africa by the slave trade, is a prime example of such dislocation, exile and relocation. Indeed, in parallel with the reality of Jewish migration and dispersion it surely constitutes a if not *the* paradigmatic example of such an experience. Glissant's work is imbued with the legacy of the forced diasporization of his African ancestors. The theme of the Middle Passage and the traumatic legacy of relocation and slavery remained implicit in many of his texts of a philosophical or literary nature for many years. It is nevertheless central to the Antillean cultural mindset which permeates all of his work and was ultimately to be addressed explicitly in his work *Mémoires des esclavages* (Remembrances of Slavery, 2007). In this work, which foregrounds the importance of studying and commemorating the history of slavery, it becomes clear how central this issue is to a lifelong engagement on Glissant's part with the complex history of his home region, the Caribbean. Prior to this, his magisterial work *Caribbean Discourse* had analysed and commemorated the legacy in a myriad of ways; it had focused in particular on the phenomenon of the neocolonial subordination of the Caribbean "départements" to France. Glissant's commitment to the legacy was confirmed when he was

asked by French President Jacques Chirac to preside over the setting up of a new "National Centre for the Commemoration of Slavery and its Abolition" ("Centre national consacré à la traite, à l'esclavage et à leurs abolitions") in 2005, an event which itself was the outcome of many years of campaigning the French government to acknowledge officially that slavery had been a crime against humanity.[vi]

In his recent *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* John Drabinski (2019)) argues that the Middle Passage can be viewed as a vital new philosophical moment, a new paradigm in the history of thought. Drabinski hereby pushes to its logical conclusion a thesis which is strongly suggested in Paul Gilroy's (1993) seminal work *The Black Atlantic* in which Gilroy argues that the African diasporic cultures in the Atlantic region constitute a counternarrative of western modernity. The moment of the crystalisation of the counternarrative is also the moment at which a new paradigm was born, a new mode of thought, that of the New World but an alternative vision of the New World, one which was not grounded in exploitation and profit-seeking but in a desire for emancipation and enlightenment.

Gilroy's Black Atlantic paradigm has often been discussed in the field of diasporic studies by contrast with Glissant's thought which has tended to be taken to belong only in the postcolonial category. The fact of the diasporisation of African peoples and cultures is at the core of Gilroy's argument as is developing the W.E.B. DuBois thesis that black people in the west experience a kind of "double consciousness" whereby they have one foot psychologically in western modernity and one foot outside it; they are both western and non-western at the same time. It is important to note, however, that Gilroy was influenced by Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* when his work was in gestation and he quotes from this work in the epigraph to the first chapter of *The Black Atlantic*. One key preoccupation which runs through both works is the idea that

there is a kind of collective unconscious of the African diaspora which underpins and serves as a counterpart to western thinking. The black atlantic mindset is ultimately about a shared legacy for Gilroy more than it is about some determinate "black" identity in the atlantic region, and it is that legacy which creates the double consciousness phenomenon. In *Caribbean Discourse* there had similarly been the strong suggestion throughout much of the work that Antillean cultures are grounded in a collective and often non-rational awareness of the legacy of displacement, relocation and colonial subordination. There is hence a perceptible conceptual homology between the two authors' theories.

Hence when we examine the history and genealogy of both diaspora studies and the legacy of the Middle Passage, it becomes clear that they are intimately connected and also that Glissant's thought can be productively understood as being of great value to both. Glissant's thought is in my view an important missing link in diaspora studies, an important plank which has thus far been largely overlooked because the now settled communities of the Caribbean do not invite reflection on immigration and migrancy. The diasporic dimension is veiled by a new social reality which began to take shape after the abolition of slavery in 1848 and then was fully confirmed and institutionalized by the "departementalisation" of the islands in 1946. Yet it is absolutely at the heart of Glissant's thought, both of his understanding and analyses of the culture of his homeland, of the world-view which underpins all of his theoretical claims, and of the vision for the present and future of globalization which he articulated in ever more engaging detail in the last twenty years of his active writing career.

Later Glissantian thought and diaspora studies theories

There have, of course, been many developments in diaspora studies since the publication of William Safran's seminal article, "Diasporas in modern societies: myths of homeland and return". Safran's stipulations proved in many ways to be a starting point for a burgeoning field whose scope, themes, and objects of study have not ceased to broaden in extent and number. Glissant's theoretical vision similarly widened considerably and became more conceptually complex with the appearance of each of the many works which he published subsequent to *Poetics of Relation* (1990). In this section we will explore some potential areas of overlap and reciprocity between these two now quite considerable fields and outputs. I should stress at the outset that what is to follow makes no claim to being an exhaustive account of the relationship between later Glissantian thought and diaspora studies; it is a speculative exploration of both of these fields which seeks to augment each by bringing one into contact with the other.

A landmark moment in the development of diaspora studies as a field was Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), a work which brought the concepts of hybridity, in-betweenness, the Third space, and interstitiality centre-stage in the discipline There is certainly no need for me to reiterate what is implied by these concepts here as they are well-known. Bhabha's take on diaspora[vii] was such a significant contribution as to have constituted a new theoretical paradigm of sorts in the mid 1990s, a paradigm which came in for some criticism at the time from commentators who felt that it mirrored the postmodern fantasy of a frictionless transnational globalization.[viii] For all that, I feel sympathetic to this critical take on the illusions propounded by the neoliberal and subsequently neoconservative Anglo-American orthodoxy in the 1990s and early 2000s,(Eagleton, 1996) I think it is fair to say with the benefit of hindsight that Bhabha's theories were perhaps judged a little harshly in this regard. It is true that his penchant for high theory could understandably be reproached for being very largely removed from the often challenging political and social realities encountered by diasporans.

Furthermore, the field of postcolonial studies was justly berated a few years later for having very largely lost the political edge which had once characterized it.(Eagleton, 2003) Postcolonial studies, so the criticism ran, had become consensual and more concerned with identity- than class-based politics, and in an era that was in any case inhospitable to the latter because a triumphant neoliberalism had won out not only over communism in the East but also organized labour at home. In some ways, the high theoretical abstraction of Bhabha's approach did imply a consensuality by default, by dint of the absence of political *friction* which a closer, more explicit and direct, engagement with social realities involves. Nevertheless, Bhabha's work specifically remained sufficiently rooted not just in the paradigms of the French poststructuralists but also Frantz Fanon, not to mention Frederic Jameson and Stuart Hall, for it to remain of a broadly politically progressive stripe.

There are perhaps further-reaching genealogies and reciprocities which also make Bhabha's diasporic theory useful to a newly renewed historicised and politicised postcolonial, diaspora-focused and indeed alter-globalization critical discourse today. Although easy assimilations should be resisted, it would seem hard to refute the claim that Bhabha's notion of the "in-betweener", the idea of the diasporic citizen who is between two cultures, bears the traces conceptually of DuBois's idea of a "double consciousness" which Gilroy made central to his black atlantic thesis. Interstitiality as Bhabha conceives of it may seem less binaristic, but what is central to his theory as to DuBois's is the idea of a complex subjective positioning, one which defies traditionally essentialist categorizations, owing to the composite nature of the diasporized citizen's cultural and perhaps also linguistic moorings. For the Gilroy of *The Black Atlantic* the black subject even in the era of advanced capitalism in the west is two things at once, both western and non-western, and hence neither the one nor the other entirely or exclusively. She is both inside and outside at the same time. This is also the case on Glissant's view of the postcolonial subject and it is valuable to ponder the conceptual reciprocity between

Bhabha's notions of interstitiality and hybridity on the one hand and the Glissantian idea of creolized peoples on the other.

In his later work Glissant extrapolates from the creolized cultures of the Caribbean to suggest that the globalizing world is bearing the hallmarks of a similar process of cultural intermixing. As he put it in 1996**,** "[t]he world is creolizing" ["le monde se créolise"(Glissant, 2006, 15)]. Glissant presents this as in its essence simply a fact rather than positive or negative. Globalization in its current form -- i.e. as a set of transnational trading relationships accompanied by the free circulation of capital and (sometimes) peoples-- integrally involves this creolising process: as products, assets and citizens cross frontiers, new configurations result. For Glissant, this process is either of a laudable or negative character depending on the way in which it is oriented in individual instances as regards political, economic and cultural domination. To give an example, whilst Glissant applauds cross-fertilizations of languages and cultures as people migrate to other countries and new forms of intercultural communication take place, the imposition of anglophone standardising norms by American computer software monopolies such as Microsoft and Apple, howeverhand, he sees as a neocolonial, alienating trend. The former is emancipatory and enlightening—offering a multitude of what Glissant terms "echo-worlds" ("échos-monde")—whereas the latter only serves to distance the individual subject from her real self, that's to say from her rootedness in her own culture, a culture which, however minoritarian it may be, she has every right to, argues Glissant. In both cases, the individual subject is drawn in at least two cultural directions, with all the complex psychological implications that such bi-culturalism inevitably carries, and yet in the former instance the outcome for the subject is positive whereas in the latter negative.

There is, then, an ethical orientation which is posited at the heart of later Glissantian theory, even if very discreetly, perhaps even somewhat deceptively.[ix] There may not be such an ethical dichotomy as such implicit in Bhabha's account of interstitiality or the Third space

but his theory is by no means incompatible with such moral and political considerations. Hence one could certainly envisage, for example, laudable forms of hybridity just as alienating types could also be identified. I have argued at length that Glissant's later thought offers numerous blueprints for diverse models of alter-globalization strategy(Coombes, 2018, chapters 7&8). I am of the view that his theory of creolisation and the "Whole-World" ("Tout-monde"), this latter being conceived of by Glissant as creolisation of an intrinsically politically progressive character, would benefit from a conceptual cross-fertilization with Bhabha's concept of interstitiality. Many of the creolising cultures which Glissant identified as increasingly characterizing globalization involve hybridized subjects.

The counternarrative of modernity that Gilroy identified as one of the African diaspora's contributions to the west finds a modern-day expression in what he terms the "planetary mentality" or "planetary humanism" which is to say a form of internationalist cosmopolitanism facilitating integrally multicultural and multiracial societies. The Glissantian counterpart to the "planetary mentality" is the concept of "worldliness" (mondialité). In both cases, processes of creolisation and hybridisation are central.

Other areas of potential reciprocity or overlap can be identified between later Glissantian thought and diaspora studies. The phenomenon of transnationalism has become a mainstay of diaspora studies since the 1990s. This is a form of transversal internationalism involving the interpenetration of migratory flows across national borders and the frontiers between continents, and which charts the relationship between the local and the global in the age not just of multinational corporations but also of the internet. In Glissant's later thought, the local and the global interact constantly with each other dialectically. Marshall McLuhan presciently spoke of the "global village"(McLuhan, 1964) but for the Martinican Glissant, culturally conditioned by the legacy of slavery, colonialism and island culture, the outside world was constantly at the heart of local culture. Antillean cultures for Glissant were from the

outset composite, impure entities, a feature which he then went on to laud as setting an example for other nations in the world in our present era. “I write in the presence of all the languages of the world, even if I don’t know them” (“J’écris en présence de toutes les langues du monde, même si je ne les connais pas”),(Glissant, 1997, 47) he remarked, the Relation for him involving the interrelating of all the phenomena of the world, including linguistic concepts and their often interconnecting genealogies and etymologies. One could gain a sense of “worldliness”, he argued, without physically travelling anywhere, worldliness for Glissant being an attitude of mind founded on an awareness of the multiple interconnections of diverse phenomena in the open totality that it is the Relation (Glissant 1997, 35). In a sense the connectivity and rapid circulation of information which the internet has afforded us, but also imposes, in recent years is a prime facilitator of this type of worldliness; we have the impression of the world being at our fingertips whilst only looking at our computer screens. However it is not enough in and of itself, for the internet can be either a means to enlightenment and emancipation or a weapon of surveillance and psychological enslavement. The matter of which dimension wins out is often ambivalent and complex but in its negative dimension political authoritarianism, monopoly capitalism and their various derivatives are rarely far from the source.

The later Glissant, like Stuart Hall (1990, 222) before him, views identity as being constantly in process, fluid, mobile, subject to change when coming into contact with other cultural and linguistic inputs. Diversity is the norm, not the exception, as is multiplicity in contrast to unicity. The contemporary subject for Glissant, as in discourses on diaspora, is a locus where a whole range of diverse influences meet, interrelate and intersect. The subject’s experience can be one of jarring dislocation, of friction and tension (in the “chaos-world”), just as it can also offer the possibility for infinite personal enrichment and relations of ever-greater reciprocity and mutual understanding with the cultural other. The Glissantian subject,[x]

like the diasporic subject (Davis, 2006), has a more acute awareness of the existential uncertainties of his existence. With possibilities come choices and indeterminacies which, again, can be either potentially destabilizing or potentially enriching.

In terms of the various fields which have been explored by scholars working in diaspora studies, Glissant's later thought carries clear implications for questions of citizenship, nationalism versus internationalism, intersectionality and for our ongoing negotiation of the place we accord to virtual realities and online networks. The ideal Glissantian citizen is a citizen of the world, but one who is still firmly implanted in his/her local culture. Glissant feared subsumption in the ideological web of what Hardt and Negri referred to as *Empire* (2000), referring to US hegemony in the globalized economy. It is for this reason that his thought very usefully succeeds in defending *both* transnationalism *and* a respect for individual nations. He was accused of having dispensed with the idea of the nation in favour of globalization,[xi] a criticism which he subsequently roundly rejected in *Philosophie de la Relation* (A Philosophy of Relation, 2009) where he refutes the accusation that his vision involves a repudiation of the idea of the nation: "Nobody is claiming […] that the notion of the nation has been become obsolete. The way it discreetly brings things together is necessary to human groups in order that they can frequent the places they live and the landscapes they create on a daily basis, and in order that connections be established between these and other places and landscapes". ("Nul n'entend [...] que la dimension de la nation est hors jeu: sa secrète corrélation [...] est nécessaire aux collectivités humaines pour fréquenter les lieux qu'elles habitent et les paysages qu'elles suscitent jour après jour, et pour les relier aux autres lieux et aux autres paysages" (Glissant 2009, 41)). Indeed, in our era of resurgent reactionary nationalisms in many western countries, Glissant's vision would seem to offer an antidote to the dichotomy of nationalist isolationism and the transnational flow of peoples which that nationalism rejects. As such, it is in my view not just valuable in its own right but also a vital weapon in the armoury of diaspora studies,

offering conclusive evidence of the acute relevance of diaspora studies to our understanding of the contemporary world.

Glissant's conception of identity is often referred to as "rhizomatic" which is a reference to the Deleuzian influence on his later thought. Like the rhizome, identity extends outwards horizontally rather than being supposed to have one fixed point of origin. Identity is productively unstable and constantly subject to fluctuation, it "trembles" as Glissant puts it, this metaphor being intended to designate its existential uncertainty. Horizontal extension as opposed to verticality for Glissant implies a fundamentally anti-hierarchical mode of thought, and this is another characteristic of his later philosophy which ensures its compatibility with alter-globalization movements. His rhizomatic emphasis lends his thought particularly well also though to thinking about online social networks and to a world in which genuine political *resistance* can only be organized by autonomous groups via the internet. More generally, the compatibility of his thought with accounting for online social networks gives it value also in the context of contemporary diasporas because of the ways in which "Internet use is shaping public-sphere activity in diaspora communities"(Angle Adams Parham, 2005, 349)

The vexed question of the relationship between race and culture, and hence also issues surrounding intersectionality, are all central to Glissant's work as they are to certain debates within contemporary diaspora studies. For Glissant, who was working principally in the francophone context in which assimilation of the cultural and racial other is the norm, the matter of racial difference was given voice via a powerful affirmation of the right to difference. Yet his background in the long years of the francophone "négritude" movement should not be forgotten as this movement constituted an important precedent for his defence of the "opacity" of each specific group in relation to the hegemony of principally majoritarian white western society. In one sense, this idea that each group has a right to preserve its opacity, or unreadability, to the cultural other closely coheres with diaspora-related concerns. There has

been much talk in the field of diasporic communities of feeling nostalgic and longing for a return to homelands and places of origin. What is implicit in this interpretation of the diasporic condition is the idea that immigrants never fully assimilate into the host community and culture: there always remains a part of them which feels foreign and which is in some sense impervious to the influence exerted on them by their new, foreign surroundings. This imperviousness or impenetrability equates with the opacity which Glissant speaks of and the term "opacity" could in my view be introduced into diasporic theory as a valuable addition to the existing terminology that is currently in use.

Last but by no means least, Glissant was a literary author as well as an essayist and philosopher. He produced a sizeable body of literary work in the fields of poetry, novels and plays. Moreover, as his latter-day *Esthétique* series and belief in the necessity of the aesthetic sphere to awakening alienated subjects to the beauty of political possibilities in a world free of domination illustrates, Glissant placed both literary, and perhaps in particular poetic, expression and the quest for beauty at the very heart of his political project for humanity. I believe there are possibilities for fascinating cross-fertilizations of Glissant's fiction and literary representations with diaspora-related preoccupations.

The later Glissant and future perspectives in diaspora studies

Since the inception of the field of diaspora studies in the early 1990s, there has been a tendency to engage in rather technical debates about definitions, notably concerning what did and did not constitute a specifically diasporic condition and experience. Important those these debates certainly have been, they have unfolded in parallel with an identity- as opposed to political- or socially-based interest, quite frequently in conjunction with a traditional literary focus in the approach to diaspora-related topics. Identity politics have carried many important social

movements of the last 50 years and have without doubt constituted a vital accompaniment to the unfolding of whatever broadly progressive political outlooks and agendas have been pursued over these years. The drawback with an identity-based focus however is that it tends to fracture any attempt at a coherent global political vision for the collective future for humanity. One of the things Glissant's over-arching alter-globalization vision can offer diaspora studies is strategies for incorporating and including the diverse discourses commonly associated with the politics of identity into a broader world-view which speaks to all groups: dispossessed immigrants, citizens of all races and cultures, feminists, green activists, LGBT activists, and perhaps even the disgruntled western white nationalists who will undoubtedly come to understand in a few years time that globalization cannot be reversed or jettisoned as such and that it will be once again necessary to envision a collective future for humanity.

Ultimately, Glissant's later philosophy is profoundly optimistic in orientation, as when he and Patrick Chamoiseau saw in the newly elected Barack Obama the possibility for their vision of a beautifully and integrally creolized world—one in which the aesthetic ideal of beauty would be the guide—to become a reality around the globe.[xii] It is not a naïve optimism but, rather as in the aesthetic of the African-American blues idiom, an optimism born of suffering and conditional upon surmounting adversity. Through throwing off the shackles of domination, be it neocolonial or of a monopoly-oriented globalization, the peoples of the world in all their diversity can accede to a life of enriched possibilities and harmoniousness (the "echos-world" of the "Whole-World"). Such a politically progressive and optimistic narrative would in my view be a positive addition to diaspora studies which has tended either to highlight victimhood and an accompanying nostalgia for a lost homeland, or the postmodern narrative discussed earlier which was complicitous with the monopolistic designs of neoliberal globalization. Glissant argued that what was needed today is "an insurrection of the imaginary"

("une insurrection de l'imaginaire" [Glissant, 2005, 56]]), which is to say a coming to awareness on the part of each individual citizen of the real possibilities for bringing about progressive change which he or she possesses. This imaginary is also that of the diasporan, if only he takes cognizance of the possibilities which his unique position in relation to hegemonic majoritarian cultures afford him. His multiperspectival, multicultural, often multilingual positioning allows him not only to be a source of inspiration but also a better understanding of the complexities of a world which is in constant evolution and whose pace of change has been accelerating exponentially for some decades.

Biodata

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Notes

[1] Glissant's account of and counternarrative to contemporary globalization is the focus of my recent monograph (Coombes 2018). .

[ii] Even the *Eloge de la créolité, In Praise of Creoleness* (Gallimard, 1988), a manifesto text for the defense of creole language and culture, was written in French. It subsequently appeared in a bilingual French-English edition but never in creole.

[iii] Former World Bank vice president turned alter-globalization sympathiser Joseph Stiglitz ([2012] 2013). jas offered one of the most theoretical accounts of this problem.

[iv] In June 2019 Pope François offered the following acute observation on the subject of the poor today: "Often considered as parasitical of society, the poor are not even forgiven their poverty itself […]. They are treated like filth." (Quoted in *Cnews.fr*, June 14, 2019. English translation my own)

[v] Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) has often been thought of as the theoretical expression of this attitude of mind in the USA in 1990s.

[vi] The Loi Taubira declaring that slavery had been a crime against humanity was passed in France in 2001, and three years earlier in 1998 Glissant had signed a declaration alongside Wole Soyinka and Chamoiseau pushing for precisely this type of public acknowledgment.

[vii] Perhaps paradoxically, for all that Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* has been widely cited in the field of diaspora studies, Bhabha himself has only very rarely employed the term "diaspora" in his major publications, his explicit focus tending to be hybridity as opposed to diaspora (s) specifically. Neverthless, there can be little doubt about the acute relevance of his theoretical postulates for reflection about the diasporic condition.

[viii] Peter Hallward (2001), for example, took issue with what he saw to be the later Glissant's complicitousness with this.

[ix] The later Glissant, who as a literary author was keen to avoid the pitfall of prosyletism, suggested that Relation was not an intrinsically ethical phenomenon as such. He states, for example, that Relation has no intrinsic moral content but that we can inscribe moral content into it (Glissant 2009, 73), a point which is belied by statements elsewhere and indeed the whole orientation of his thought, all of which suggest strongly that Relation is by its very nature not just a concept with ethical implications but also that it is only conceivable as part of a progressive political project.

[x] To be precise, however, I should indicate that it is an implied subject because later Glissantian thought, strongly under the influence of the poststructuralist philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, presents only an evacuated individual subject.

[xi] Hallward (2001) makes this claim one of the central planks of his critique of the later Glissant.

[xii] See Glissant 2009 in particular.