

**COUNTER-MEMORY AND THE RESHAPING OF CARIBBEAN
DISCOURSE IN THE WORKS OF AIMÉ CÉSAIRE AND EDOUARD
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Abstract

Memory represents the faculty by which the mind retains information or past events, whereas history involves the science that studies events that have occurred in the past. Memory and history share a common point that relates the record of past events. Yet, memory and history are usually in conflict. Edouard Glissant and Aimé Césaire, both Martinican writers, have produced discourses which represent the conflicting relations between memory and history. Focusing on Glissant's Caribbean Discourse and Césaire's Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, this study explores such a conflict through the analysis of the painful rapport between the Caribbean subject and history as the authors attempt to restore the consciousness and identity of the latter. It is important to emphasize here that, in the respective works of Glissant and Césaire, memory suffers from erasure and history characterizes fragmentation, situations which foster a psychological trauma on the Antillean subject. I argue that, the erasure of memory and the disintegration of Caribbean history prompt the duty of remembrance in both Glissant's and Césaire's texts and shape their various discourses on identity reconstruction. For Glissant, the revival of collective memory contributes to the creation of new histories and a rejection of the History. As for Césaire, it stands for a reclamation of the dignity and freedom of the black race, an assertion of a universal humanism. Based sociological, historiographical and postcolonial theories, this analysis emphasizes two main points: firstly, the fragmentation of collective consciousness, and lastly, remembrance and Caribbean Counter-Discourse.

Keywords: counter-memory, discourse, Césaire, Glissant, identity, negritude, creoleness

**CONTRE-MÉMOIRE ET REMODELAGE DU DISCOURS CARAÏBIEN
DANS LES ŒUVRES D'AIMÉ CÉSAIRE ET EDOUARD GLISSANT**

Résumé

La mémoire représente la faculté par laquelle l'esprit humain retient les événements révolus, tandis que l'histoire est la science qui étudie les événements passés. En effet, la mémoire et l'histoire ont toutes les deux un rapport avec le passé. Pourtant, la mémoire et l'histoire sont souvent en conflit. Edouard Glissant et Aimé Césaire, deux écrivains martiniquais, ont produit des discours qui représentent les relations conflictuelles entre la mémoire et l'histoire. En se focalisant sur Caribbean Discourse de Glissant et Notebook of a Return to the Native Land de Césaire, cette étude explore un tel conflit à travers l'examen du rapport douloureux entre le sujet antillais et l'histoire. Il faut rappeler que, dans les œuvres respectives de Glissant et de Césaire, la mémoire souffre d'effacement et l'histoire se caractérise par une

fragmentation, des situations qui favorisent une crise identitaire chez l'antillais. Je soutiens que l'effacement de la mémoire et la désintégration de l'histoire caribéenne incitent au devoir de mémoire dans les textes de Glissant et de Césaire et façonnent leurs discours variés. Pour Glissant, le recouvrement de la mémoire collective contribue à la création de nouvelles histoires et au rejet de l'Histoire. Pour Césaire, il s'agit d'une revendication de la dignité et de la liberté de la race noire, d'une affirmation d'un humanisme universel. S'appuyant sur des théories sociologiques, historiographiques et postcoloniales, cette analyse s'articule autour de deux axes : d'une part, la fragmentation de la conscience collective et, d'autre part, la mémoire et le contre-discours caribéen.

Mots clés : contre-mémoire, discours, Césaire, Glissant, identité, négritude, créolité

Introduction

Edouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*, an essay, and Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, a poem, both illustrate an intricate elaboration of memory and history. Memory represents the faculty by which the mind retains information or past events, whereas history stands for the science that studies events that have occurred in the past. Memory and history share a common point that relates the record of past events. Yet, in Glissant's and Césaire's works, memory and history are usually in conflict, enacted through the painful rapport between the Antillean or Caribbean subject and history, which embodies the erasure of collective or social memory. Scholars have conceived of that erasure as result of the silencing of historical events in colonial narratives and chronicles. This argument resonates in the works of historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) as well as Derek Walcott (1998b) and Kamau Brathwaite (1990), both poets and postcolonial critics. Other sociological studies have emphasized tensions, differences, disputes, mnemonic fracture lines, and identity cleavages in order to account for the rupture of collective consciousness. Among these, one can cite the works of Andreas Glaeser (2000), Konrad Jarausch (1997), Michael Minkenberg (1993), Gebhard Ludwig Schweigier (1975), and Jeremy B. Straughn (2005), etc.

In the context of the West Indies (the Caribbean), one can agree that the silencing of the past can have contributed to the fracture of collective memory. However, and more importantly, the fragmented history of the Caribbean remains the foundation of the erasure of social memory. Thus, using the above sociological, historiographical and postcolonial works, this study examines the origins and the underlying factors of the fragmentation of collective consciousness in Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* and Césaire's *Notebook*. This analysis additionally looks at the Martinican authors' literary and ideological responses to the issues of identity construction in the colonial and postcolonial West Indies. It is therefore important here to emphasize that, in the respective works of Glissant and Césaire, memory erasure stems from the fragmented and negative aspects of Caribbean history, a reality which engenders an identity crisis facing the Antillean subject. I further posit that the fracture of collective consciousness prompts a counter-memory through remembrance linked with literary imagination and creation in both Glissant's and Césaire's discourses despite their different perspectives. For Glissant, counter-

memory entails the creation of new histories and a rejection of History through uncanonical mediums. As for Césaire, it stands for a reclamation of the dignity and freedom of the black race, an assertion of a Negritude, embodying universal humanism. This paper therefore focuses on two main points: firstly, ‘Non-History’ and the Fragmentation of Collective Consciousness; and last but not the least, Counter-memory: Remembrance, Discourse, and the Reconstruction of Caribbean Identity.

1. ‘Non-History’ and the Fragmentation of Collective Memory.

Historians, sociologists and literary critics have had different understanding of the inherent factors, underpinning the malfunction of collective memory¹. For sociologists, social issues, when unsettled, are likely to cause collective memory dislocation. According to J. B. Straughn (2007, p. 106), “historical events that engender conflicts over the very constitution and contours of an imagined community, if left unresolved, can seriously jeopardize the future prospects of collective memory and national identity”. He additionally argues that the “variegated recollections of events do not always coalesce into nationalized identities and collectivized memories (J. B. Straughn, 2007, p. 106). In the same vein, for Howard Schuman and Jacqueline Scott (1989, p. 375), the effect of past conflictual occurrences such as “wars” and “assassinations” could damage the “consciousness” of people according to the age groups. Concerning K. Manheim (1952, p. 304), he believes that these historical events “may further disaggregate individuals within generations into opposing political factions or “units”. Such events “can also cultivate fragmented mnemonic legacies (K. Manheim, 1952, p. 304). The above sociologists locate the foundation of the dislocation of social memory within the shock between a painful past and the individuals or community. According to them, this reality is likely to split or oppose social “units” or groups throughout generations as a legacy.

Unlike the afore-mentioned sociologists, for some historians and postcolonial critics, the silencing of past events in history shapes the rupture of collective consciousness, especially in the particular context of the West Indies². For instance, in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Haitian historian M. Trouillot (1995, p. 27) emphasizes two various types of silences: on the one hand, “[s]ilences [that] are inherent to history,” which involve events that enter history, while losing some of their constituting components. On the other hand, he highlights a type of hegemonic silencing engendered by an “uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives” with the example of the Western historiographical dismissal of the Haitian Revolution (M. Trouillot, 1995, p. 27). As for, the Saint-Lucian poet, playwright, and literary critic, D. Walcott, he characterizes the fragments of memory through the metaphor of the vase broken into pieces to suggest silenced and unrecorded histories of the West Indies. As he says, “Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent” (D. Walcott, 1998b, p. 69). Walcott highlights here the discontinuity marking

¹In this study, collective memory equates collective consciousness and social memory.

²The West Indies and the Caribbean mean the same in this study.

Caribbean histories, equated with the people's broken languages and the severed and dispersed small islands. E. K. Brathwaite (1990, p. 29) similarly inscribes the rupture of collective memory in the Caribbean in the psychological tension borne from the abrupt severance from the African mother continent.

The above sociologists, historians and postcolonial critics have provided seemingly different perceptions of the foundation of collective memory dislocation due to the different contexts they refer to: post-war Germany and the post-colonial Caribbean. Yet, their views are connected in so far as they relate to the past. Whether it is conflictual past events (wars, assassinations, etc.) in Germany or silencing of a glorious past in narratives and painful past events (slavery, colonization, indenture, etc.) in the Caribbean, there is an intersection in their arguments as they bring back the origin of memory fragmentation to the tensions between the subject or community and either a sorrowful or an unknown (silenced) past. This argument informs E. Glissant's and A. Césaire's perspectives on the underlying basis of collective memory disruption.

In E. Glissant's and A. Césaire's works under study, the erasure of memory mainly occurs as an effect of "Nonhistory", that is to say, the absence of history, as well as a painful legacy of the past. In *Caribbean Discourse*, E. Glissant conceives of memory erasure, as resulting from the fragmented Caribbean history, which dates back to the early history of the archipelago, with the advent of the unprecedented violent triangular commerce. He states that the Caribbean is "the site of a history characterized by ruptures and which began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade" (E. Glissant, 1999, p. 61). The fragmentation of the history of Caribbean people gets emphasized by colonization and the existence of a dominant history that rejects Afro-Caribbean people's contribution to its evolution. Therefore, the past that is represented by the mainstream history does not represent the heroic histories of the latter. This reality sheds light to the factors of "the dislocation of the continuum" and the incapacity of Caribbean people to access collective consciousness, a phenomenon that is characteristic of what E. Glissant names "nonhistory". For him this "nonhistory" remains an essential factor of the rupture of collective memory in the Caribbean (E. Glissant 1999, p. 62). 'Non-history', as a result of colonial endeavor of suppressing the contribution of the former enslaved and colonized people to the making of History, further worsens the split between Caribbean people and their space and, thus, their own selves.

The inscription of 'non-history' in Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* also showcases the irresponsibility and alienation of the Martinican elite. Firstly, this elite simply conceives of history as pleasure. E. Glissant (1999, p. 73) views that "the Martinican elite can see "power" only in the shape of the female thigh. Empress, queen, courtesan: History is for them nothing but a submission to pleasure, where the male is dominant; the female is the Other. This notion of history as pleasure is about making oneself available". Glissant's argument partly explains why the Martinican elite live on consumption of foreign products. It is an elite that only cares about their representation in the French parliament. Lastly, the Martinican intellectual elite articulate a discourse disconnected from any notion of community. The discourse they produce appears to be void of any dynamic of collectivity, reflecting a "delirious" character, which, according to Glissant, results from the sterility of the traditional oral discourse. This broken discourse, suffers from

diaglossia, forklorism, and the absence of control over material production. Henceforth, the fragmentation of Martinican history characterizes the alienation and sterile discourse of the Martinican elite.

In Césaire's work, the fractured memory takes on aspects of a memory in pain, a suffering memory. *Notebook* introduces a poet who, on the verge of returning home, lives moments of remembrance. Yet, his memories do not present happy images. They encompass the violent slave trade, disastrous effects of natural catastrophes i.e., volcano explosions, and people's misery (A. Césaire, p. 1-3). These memories haunt the poet and even make him hesitate as to going back home. As he says, "To go away. My heart was pounding with emphatic generousities. To go away...I would arrive sleek and young in this land of mine and I would say to this land whose loam is part of my flesh: I have wandered for a long time and I am coming back to the deserted hideousness of your sores" (A. Césaire, 2001, p. 13-14). The use of the conditional form here indicates the hesitation of the poet who not only seeks self-definition, but also intends to stand for his people. At his sudden arrival, the poet sees a society that is characteristic of moral and material desolation (A. Césaire, 2001, p. 14). The evocation of the grievances that embody the past of the West Indians is a statement of the poet's awareness of a collective trauma; a consciousness of a wretched people under colonization and shameless exploitation by handful westerners.

As a matter of fact, *Notebook* emerges as a statement of grievances against injustice, with the implication of an imperious demand for redress and justice. This denunciation of injustice remains a prelude to the claims for democracy as a way to restore racial justice, as proposed by Pierre Cot. According to him, "in the former colonies, which will fall under a new regime and whose evolution towards democracy will become an international issue, democracy will have to put an end not only to the exploitation of colored people but to the social and political 'racism' of the white man" (Qtd. in A. Breton, 2001, p. xvi-xvii). Indeed, Césaire's revelation of devaluing images of the West Indies through the voice of the persona stands for a criticism of colonization and its effects on the psychological status of the West Indian subject, while underscoring a claim for restoration of social memory as democratization of the West Indian space.

Both E. Glissant's and A. Césaire's works characterize the foundation of the dislocation of Caribbean memory, highlighting Western historical interventions on the Caribbean space and, its people through Atlantic slavery, colonization, as well as the production of a Colonial hegemonic historical narrative. While Césaire mainly indicts the Occident of the Caribbean subject's psychological ills, E. Glissant additionally accuses the Caribbean elite of their historical irresponsibility. Henceforth, the motives of memory erasure in the Caribbean involve both exogenous and endogenous influences. How then do E. Glissant and A. Césaire envision addressing the rupture of individual and collective memory in the West Indies?

2. Counter-Memory: Remembrance and Caribbean Counter-Discourse

G. Lipsitz (1990, p. 213) defines counter-memory as "a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal". Inspiring himself from Michel Foucault's understanding of the concept, G. Lipsitz (1990, p. 213) demonstrates how counter-memory "looks to the past for the hidden histories

excluded from dominant narratives” and it “forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past”. This definition resonates with José Colmeiro’s conception of “collective memory.” For him, the term refers to “an alternative to official national historiographies, potentially giving voice to the subjects traditionally excluded from representation, minority and subaltern groups, on the basis of cultural contingencies such as ethnicity, language, class, gender and sexuality, among others” (J. Colmeiro, 2011, p.20). Addressing the wounds suffered by collective consciousness therefore amounts to establishing a counter-memory through the work of remembrance, associated with cultural reconnections, literary creations, and orality.

French philosopher P. Ricoeur (2004, p. 89-90) theorized the “work of remembrance” in response to Primo Levi’s advocacy of the “duty of remembrance.” For P. Ricoeur, in the duty of remembrance, the individual is subjected to remembrance, whereas, in the work of remembrance, he or she can remember, but can also forget as part of a therapy or national reconciliation process. According to C. S. Diatta (2015, p. 195), P. Ricoeur “agrees with the idea that excessive memory leads to acting and not true remembrance, with the risk of undermining the reconciliation between present and past”. As a matter of fact, P. Ricoeur’s notion of “work of remembrance” is corroborated by other different scholars. E. Renan (1995) suggests that “the persistence of a cohesive national identity will...depend on the willingness of each new generation to “remember” – and “forget” – the same events of the past and to imagine a common future together” (Qtd. In Straughn, 2007, p. 103). He further claims that it is necessary that historical events be “emplotted as part of ‘national’ memory, systematic selection and omission” (Qtd. In Straughn, 2007, p. 103). For D. Walcott, access to memories of slavery is a source of self-torment. So, he claims that “[t]he children of slaves must sear their memory with a torch” (D. Walcott, 1998a, p. 5). This argument underscores amnesia as a cure for historical trauma. In D. Walcott’s conception, amnesia or forgetfulness involves a therapeutic process. In the light of the above theories, it is important here to analyze the ways in which A. Césaire and E. Glissant approach remembrance as counter-memory.

Césaire’s introduction of counter-memory entails the restoration of collective memory through cultural reconnections, enacting a psychological journey back to African ancestral values. Indeed, considering that Caribbean history is not always represented in positive images and that Afro-Caribbeans’ dignity relentlessly faces colonial undermining, Césaire makes a detour towards ancestral roots as a self-recovery process. This shows the poet’s inner belief in, and acceptance of, the morbidity of Caribbean past in *Notebook*. Toussaint Louverture, the hero of the Haitian Revolution, is even dramatically represented: “A lone man imprisoned in whiteness / a man alone in the sterile sea of white sand / Death traces a shining circle above this man” (A. Césaire, 2001, p. 16). A. Césaire (2001, p. 28) later confesses that “we were at all times pretty mediocre dishwashers, shoeblacks without ambition, at best conscientious sorcerers and the only unquestionable record that broke was that of endurance under the chicote...”. This fragmented and dislocated image of Caribbean history is a source of psychological dissonance, tormenting the Antillean subject, which urges Césaire to reorient his gaze towards Africa for self-awareness. However, since Africa is remote, his reconnection with the continent of origin

epitomizes a yearning or a quest for his ancestral roots, as seen in the poet's evocation of its valorizing images in *Notebook*: the "king of Dahomey," the "princess of Ghana with eight hundred camels," the "wise men in Timbuktu under Askia the Great," the "architects of Djenné," "Madhis," and African "warriors" (A. Césaire, 2001, p. 27-28).

Indeed, Césaire's celebration of Africa enacts his acceptance of Negritude, as counter-memory, standing for an affirmation of the pride and dignity of the Black race, undermined by western civilization for centuries. E. Glissant (1999, p. 24) corroborates this idea as he contends: "the historical need for the creolized peoples of the small islands of the French Caribbean to lay claim to the "African element" of their past, which was for so long scorned, repressed, denied by the prevalent ideology, is sufficient in itself to justify the negritude movement in the Caribbean." In this passage, E. Glissant validates Negritude as a punctual and circumstantial response to the overarching colonial ideological hegemony in the West Indies. Additionally, Césaire's Negritude, as counter-memory, rejects petrifying images of the African continent, while rebutting symbols of western hegemony. As the poet tells us in *Notebook*:

My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against
the clamor of the day
my negritude is not a leukemia of dead liquid over the earth's
dead eye
my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky
it breaks through opaque prostration with its upright patience. (A. Césaire, 2001, p. 35)

Here, Negritude not only claims for a fulfilling African heritage, but it also underscores a refutation of Western scientific and technological culture, epitomized by the "tower" and the "cathedral". However, Césaire's Negritude does not fall into racial essentialism. Though it calls for the liberation of the black race, it speaks to a universal ideal. As the poet says:

my heart, preserve me from all hatred
do not make me into that man of hatred for whom I feel only hatred
for entrenched as I am in this unique race
you still know my tyrannical love
you know that it is not from hatred of other races
that I demand of myself to become a hoer for this unique race
that what I want
is for universal hunger
for universal thirst
to summon it to generate,
free at last, from its intimate closeness
the succulence of fruit [freedom]. (A. Césaire (2001, p. 38-39)

In the above lines, Negritude underscores a universal humanism, which Césaire, like Senegalese poet L. S. Senghor, promotes. If with Césaire, remembrance, as counter-memory, involves cultural reconnections, with E. Glissant, it implicates recalling historical events, which favor Caribbean

people's fulfilling re-appropriation of their past as a way to access collective consciousness. Here, counter-memory alludes to the control of historical time, an antidote to the psychological disequilibrium of the Antillean subject. For E. Glissant, this endeavor should not be carried out by historians only, but also by literary scholars. Literary creation thus becomes a necessity in the face of the erasure of the collective memory. Literature can fill the gap where history as a science is deficient. As E. Glissant (1999, p. 61) argues,

[When a people faces issues of collective memory], history as far it is a discipline and claims to clarify the reality lived by this people, will suffer from a serious epistemological deficiency: it will not know how to make the link. The problem faced by the collective consciousness makes a creative approach necessary, in the rigid demands made by the historical approach can constitute, if they are not restrained, a paralyzing handicap.

E. Glissant (1999, p. 65) further claims that "...history as a consciousness at work and history as lived experience are therefore not the business of historians exclusively. Literature for us will not be divided in genres but will implicate all the perspectives of all the human science". Caribbean literature therefore appears to be a participant in bridging nature and culture, thus creating history. Such an exercise is subjected to neither schematic chronology nor nostalgic lamentation, a notion which E. Glissant (1999, p. 65) terms a *prophetic vision of the past*, that is to say, an exploration that "leads to the identification of a painful notion of time and its full projection forward into the future, without the help of those plateaus in time from which the West has benefited, without the help of that collective density that is the primary value of an ancestral cultural heartland." The literary creation of histories constitutes an act of creative restoration of the historicity of a people that has been silenced in the mainstream history. Literature therefore has the potential to create new histories, an act that represents, at the same time, a repudiation of the History with capital H and a production of counter-memory, while discarding longings for ancestral roots.

Like literature, E. Glissant upholds orality as a fundamental means to access or retain the collective memory of a people. Literature supplements history, in the way the oral tradition fills the gap where writing is deficient. Firstly, E. Glissant sees this enterprise in the revival and valorization of the creole language, a language that bears the marks of orality, but remains so much altered in writing. The distortion of the linguistic markers of orality will most probably be detrimental to the communities' language and, consequently, their collective consciousness. As E. Glissant (1999, p. 12) views, "...if such an operation is conductive against a community whose oral language bears the secret, unlikely, and elusive stamp of the written one (this is the case, as we shall see, with the Creole language in Martinique), dispossession is likely to be terminal. A close scrutiny of this dispossession is one way of fighting against collective self-destruction." The restoration of the oral aspects of the Creole language remains indeed an essential step towards the recovery of collective consciousness as counter-memory. These oral linguistic characteristics enable the writer to represent Caribbean historical reality and experience with images and symbols proper to authentic Caribbean discourse. D. Walcott (1998b, p.70) similarly views that, "the caring and painful act of reassembling the fragments of memory" has the potential of "'renaming, of finding new metaphors' to articulate

experience that departs from the imposed foundations of colonial language and discourse.

Moreover, E. Glissant proposes folktale as a marker of orality that contributes to the preservation of collective memory. He believes that the tale plays a double function. On the one hand, it can fill the gaps of history, and thus keeps the writer from developing a paralyzing longing for history. On the other hand, it functions as an “antidecree and antilaw, that is to say antiwriting” (E. Glissant (1999, p. 84). By the same token, E. Glissant (1999, p. 110-113) inscribes music as a performative art type that conveys oral forms, which emerged during the plantation system. These aspects exclude any conventional discourse and esthetic social representations. In this respect, Paul Gilroy (1993, p. 75) posits that the diasporic musical patterns and musical sensibility are a medium to engage with different forms of counter-memory. As a matter of fact, music as an art form, has the ability to recapture and revive the memory of communities, while promoting a counter-hegemonic discourse.

Conclusion

E. Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse* and A. Césaire’s *Notebook* have meaningfully inscribed the work of remembrance as the pathway towards overcoming the trauma of the West Indian subject that results from the fracture of collective memory. The fragments of history have prompted the Martinican authors to envision the establishment of counter-memory to address the alienation of Caribbean people, which, beyond the work of historians, calls forth cultural reconnections, literary imagination and creation, the rival of orality in the written text, or in other terms “oraliture”³. The analysis has shown different perspectives in the way the authors envision the humanization of the West Indians. While A. Césaire makes reference to elsewhere (Africa), claiming his negritude, E. Glissant looks at the immediate space of the Caribbean, an act Patrick Chamoiseau et.al (2005) conceive of as reorientation of the gaze towards the immediate space, an embracement of antillanité or creoleness. With *Notebook* and *Caribbean Discourse*, respectively, A. Césaire and E. Glissant have immensely contributed to the emergence and evolution of the poetics of identity in Caribbean philosophical and critical theory.

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³The term refers to the blend between orality and literature.

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