

Antoinette Tidjani Alou
Antoinette Tidjani Alou teaches
French Literature, Comparative
Literature and Literary Criticism in
the Department of Modern Literature,
Abdou Moumouni University,
Niamey, Niger.
E-mail: tidjanialoua@yahoo.fr

Myths of a New World in Édouard Glissant's novels *La Lézarde* and *Le Quatrième siècle*

Myths of a New World in Édouard Glissant's novels *La Lézarde* and *Le Quatrième siècle*

(Post-)Modern human experience as represented in contemporary literature seems to be, in many respects, a traumatizing affair, marked by many losses linked to identity. These include: foundation narratives, ancestral religion, bonds of kinship and lineage, and a progressive loss of the sense of anchorage and belonging. Seen from the Caribbean and from the vision of its writers, these are some of the characteristics of a complex "New World" whose multiple-layered identities and lived experiences official historical narratives fail to render or even deliberately silence and erase. This is where, from a literary perspective, "words with power", such as Édouard Glissant's, are called into the work-play (Frye 1990) of resistance and opposition, reconstructing history in "another way" (Benítez-Rojo 1996), articulating meaningful cross-road connections between history, memory, identity, myth and writing. This exploration of Glissant's novels *La Lézarde* (Seuil, 1958; Prix Renaudot, 1958) and *Le Quatrième siècle* (Seuil, 1964; Prix Veillon, 1964) serves as a point of entry into a preliminary attempt at reconsidering the concept of "New World" identity from a slightly different angle, first in the Americas, then beyond. In fact, no pretext is needed to link the creative thinking of writers like Glissant, Alejo Carpentier or Wilson Harris, for example, to Caribbean perspectives on the "New World" of the other Americas, and beyond. This essay ultimately raises questions and suggests perspectives of scholarly approaches to broader positive conceptualizations of the New World, out of the Caribbean. **Key words:** Édouard Glissant, globalization, myth/symbolism, New World identity.

"To be born into the world. But the world *was it not* yesterday in those and for those who are now 'born'? Everyone elects his own country as the universe when the universe is unknown or misconceived." (Glissant 1969: 20)¹

(Post-)Modern human experience as represented in contemporary literature appears to be, in many respects, a traumatizing affair. It seems to be marked, in particular, by the stripping away of orthodox or socially sanctioned and collectively rooted religious belief, by an erosion of mythical and ritual integration, and by a progressive loss of the sense of anchorage and belonging. Various deconstructionisms and the theory of chaos, borrowed from physics, have been used by academics and writers as creative ways of taking stock of and engaging with the novelties, complexities and ambiguities that we all navigate and negotiate (to some degree or another) without

the aid of an illusion of progress. Even worse is the realization that, if the current momentum of the world is taken as an irrefutable given, so much, *too much* lies beyond the control of most of the globe's populations, individually and collectively.

Indeed, peoples everywhere seem to find themselves in a "new world" marked by complex, multiple-layered identities and lived experiences which official historical narratives fail to render at certain levels, or even deliberately silence and erase. This is where, from a literary perspective, "words with power" are called into the work-play (Frye²) of resistance and opposition, reconstructing history in "another way";³ articulating meaningful cross-road connections between history, memory, identity, myth and writing. Understanding world transformations over time, quotidian experiences and the psychic and social trauma resulting from historically bound collective experiences seem to concern writers and academics alike. Both are often challenged to resort to a creative non-fictional exploration of new and complex identities and realities.

But – it must be emphasized and taken into account in critical theory and analysis – they are related to more global, historically and economically-bound meanings. In the case of the Caribbean, in many instances, the psychic trauma, social and cultural ruptures and dysfunctions born of slavery, and the loss of memory, genealogies and foundation myths it incurred, have inclined narratives, and in particular Édouard Glissant's novels, in the direction of a rewriting of history in liveable and meaningful terms⁴ in which "identity" is an open, moving *métissage*. As Glissant points out in his essay *The Poetic Intention*, this term, once rehabilitated, transcends "scandal" and "shame" to define a "composite" potential of fertile "relation". This term as well as others like "créolisation", "totalité", "co-naissance" (a Claudelian legacy) or *opacité* refer to identity not as stable, monolithic by-product of the post-Colombian machine, as Benítez-Rojo (1996: 5–10) would put it, but rather as a novel, dynamic, regional and cross-continental process rife with chaos, contradictions, intensity, beauty and pain.

On newness

But what is the character of the "newness" that seems to attach itself to the Caribbean, the Other Americas, the Third World (the South, developing, underdeveloped, least advanced countries), not only to indicate their degree of economic (non)viability, but also to define their histories, their state building and politics, their cultures, their contribution to "world" culture? Are they only just being born into the world is the rhetorical question Glissant asks in *The Poetic Intention*. Doesn't the epithet of "newness" deny and negate the contribution already made to a world in fact their contemporary in practical terms, to which dominant discourses admit them only as marginal, on the verge of entering history at the best (Hegel)? Isn't this the chauvinistic centrism of the individual and of the society who, knowing the world little or not at

all (and dangerously complacent in this ignorance), elect their own nation and realities as absolute models, as *the* universe?

Glissant suggests in this essay that the refusal to consider the world as diverse and history as lived and shared experience grants the West the (apparent) "immunity" of seeing the world (and living off it) without "living it". It also denies the "other" agency in world history through a decree of perpetual minority. This is, of course, a well-known ideological strategy for legitimizing and maintaining dominance.

Looking at the Caribbean situation reflected in the works of writers like Derek Walcott and V. S. Naipaul, Barbara Webb (1992) notes that this strategy often succeeds in producing an obsession with history, negatively perceived as a "a legacy of dispossession, exploitation and betrayal", breeding alienation; as a nightmare to which the writer often prefers the "solace" of myth. Worse, it elicits in some disbelief in the creative potential of the Caribbean past.

However other, more positive, interpretations of "newness" are also evidenced in Caribbean and in Alter-American writing. Glissant, Wilson Harris and Alejo Carpentier, among others, recognize the creative potential of the oral cultures of the Americas, seen as subterranean reservoirs of the "unconscious", veiling "latent omens of capacity". This "philosophy of history" fuels Glissant's "poetics of divination".

Glissant proposes, moreover, a positive reinterpretation of "newness"; one which transforms the handicap of being "born abruptly" into modernity and being summoned to instantly produce (states, literatures, knowledge) what other civilizations had centuries or millennia to do. In *The Poetic Intention*, "newness" is associated with an abrupt encounter with the bewildering, chaotic, disparate oppositions of the modern world. It also evokes the economic and psychic dimensions of "unspeakable suffering" and tenacious hope, as well as the combativeness of "the half of the world emerging from the night" of "non-history" and "separation". The "poetic intention" (the "deliberate" literary project) made manifest in creative writing is, Glissant suggests, instrumental to this unveiling of the "other Americas". Its corollary is wilfully conquering (*arracher*) the walls of isolation and "immunity" which allow the western elite to view history as a "totalitarian abstraction", concealing lived experiences behind the "mask" of dates.

This essay repeatedly explores the idea of "birth" before ultimately rejecting it. Birth, initially considered, is not a synonym of fragility. It is delivery without time for transition through the three classic "ages of man". To be "born" in the chaos of modernity is to come into the world violently, fully grown and armed to the teeth with the arms available even to the dominated: the capacity to resist (isolation, separation, fetishizing difference, monolithic universalisms and totalitarisms of all kinds...). "Newness" is not viewed as an excuse for enduring, but as the "necessity to spring unto the scene of the world", to spurn waiting, to renege "beautiful meditations", "slow maturation". It is the imperative of naming, measuring, surveying, weighing, experienc-

ing history as participation, and other peoples as “the other of ourselves” (*l'autre de nous*).

Glissant's subsequent essay, *Le Discours antillais* (*Caribbean Discourse*), pointedly affirms the “advantage” of “newness” for the writer who thereby escapes artificial refinement and is thus empowered to claim aesthetically the violence of American reality. The violent entry into history is summed up in the statement: “We were not born. We were transshipped.” *Homo americanus* is, in Glissant's opinion, the “new man capable of living the relative after having suffered the absolute”; capable of living cultural relativity – and of consecrating it – within and beyond the Americas. Ultimately the vocation of these “new worlds” is to “encounter the axes of “ripened” modernity in other zones of culture and thought”. Glissant's novels explore symbolically the phases that prepare for the exercise of this vocation.

Consequently, *La Lézarde* (Seuil, 1958; Prix Renaudot, 1958) – *The Ripening* – and *Le Quatrième siècle* (Seuil, 1964; Prix Veillon, 1964) – *The Fourth Century* – will serve as a pretext or, better yet, as a starting point for a preliminary attempt at reconsidering the concept of “New World” identity from a slightly different angle, first in the Americas, then beyond. In fact, using Glissant as a point of entry into this discussion is not an original strategy, as he himself has used this *à partir de* approach in the “introductions” to his *Caribbean Discourse*. Moreover, no pretext is needed to link the creative thinking of writers like Glissant, Carpentier or Harris, for example, to Caribbean perspectives on the “new world” of the other Americas, and beyond.

About the novels

La Lézarde and *Le Quatrième siècle* take their place among the six novels, seven books of poetry and four essays of this “major writer and theorist of the Caribbean”. They can be read as two stages of Glissant's artistic exploration and aesthetic project of naming Martinican reality “within the hemispheric context of the Americas”. These literary “rites of passage” revolve around the axis of words like history and myth. They propose modes of coming to consciousness and of *co-naissance*, (ideally and at the levels that are theirs), paving the way for responsible (re)entry into the region and the world.

Many of the characters of *La Lézarde* take the journey into the past evoked in *Le Quatrième siècle*. Their experiences and interrelations explore space and time: the homeland, the region and the world, on one hand, and history both as documentary archives and (especially) as lived experiences, on the other. Both novels were written and published after the decree of *départementalization* (1946), and the consequent disappointment for the partisans of self-government. The novels address the peculiar French Antillean situation of the “quest for identity” in a people who, after having suffered fundamental dissociations, ruptures and psychic trauma due to slavery, plan-

tation society and its sequels, then had to face a future of trying to recover the self and the community in what some felt was an ambivalent or even alienating political, economic and cultural context.

It is true that the situation of overseas extensions of France like Martinique and Guadeloupe share a common experience with rest of the Caribbean and indeed with the African Diaspora (as explored by authors like Alice Walker, Lalita Tademy and others). Hence, some aspects of the “diagnosis” of the Caribbean situation can also be relevantly applied to the situation of African Americans. However, French West Indians have the very unique experience of belonging to the French *départments* or overseas provinces of the French *métropole*, whether they live there or not; and of being both French and West Indian or neither French nor West Indian, depending on a variety of factors (who is defining them; how they define themselves; for whom they are defining themselves; discourse adaptation in keeping with audience; individual or group militancy; ambivalence and so on).⁵

“Diagnosing” the Caribbean situation

Before looking at the novels, it might be useful to review briefly the root problems they explore, the questions of history and identity with which they engage at mythical or, if we prefer, at symbolic levels.

Caribbean writers and scholars on the Caribbean are unanimous in defining the situation of West Indians:

- They have a quarrel with “official” history (as evidenced in Eric Williams, Walter Rodney’s and other Caribbean re-writings of history) insofar as history hardly provides a clue as to the identities of the vast majority of people in the Caribbean.
- They are faced with a gaping question about identity, expressed poetically in Aimé Césaire’s iconic work, *Le Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*): *Qui et quels nous sommes?*, “Who and what are we?”
- They are usually forced to answer: “We are people without a yesterday” (*Jadis*), “branches without roots” (Glissant), birds that pass leaving no trace (Simone Schwarz-Bart), people lost in the night of amnesia, with no hold on time and no genealogy (Maryse Condé).
- This Caribbean situation is not conducive to mental health, to social cohesion, to the construction of individual and collective identities.

For Maryse Condé (1978: 7–8) it is important to note: “[...] there is no memory in the Caribbean [...]. No foundation myth, no genealogy of heroes or semi-legendary kings.” According to Jack Corzani (1970: 16–42) “[...] the majority of Africans transplanted in the West Indies were doubtlessly victims of a regrettable “civilizational” isolation as

well [...].”⁶ In a paper on “History and Black Consciousness”, the Burkinabè historian, Joseph Ki-Zerbo (1957: 53) underscores the importance of memory and the role of memory keepers to the normal functioning of the human mind and of the community.⁷ Speaking of the “problem” Martinicans have with history, Glissant (1971: 34) comments on their lack of hold on time, on the collective erasure of history: “Martinican time is not internalized by the community. The subconscious and poignant need for self-knowledge is drowned in the lack of a sense of the historical dimension. History was not only collectively endured, it was, moreover, ‘deleted.’”

From prince to frog: A litany of degradation and deficiencies?

The validity of some of these opinions is debatable (see also *Quel avenir pour les D.O.M. Gaudeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, Reunion*, 1978)⁸. They echo a recurrent litany of loss, dissociation, degradation and deficiency that seems almost rhetorical: no foundation myth, no genealogy, no hero, no gods of the fathers retrieved from the past, no homogenous base for the formation of a collective identity, no homeland, no history, while legends of the past, possessed by other peoples, are replaced, in the Caribbean, by the misery of the present (see also *Quel avenir pour les D.O.M. Gaudeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, Reunion*, 1978).

This depressing scenario is combined with what appears to be an original version of the Frog Prince story in which the monstrous metamorphosis is not magically rectified. The banished prince (a new world extension of patriarchy) does not regain his lost (high) status; the mandatory voiding of traditions is irreparable; artificial substitutes, divorced from life and from the wisdom of the ancestors, still enjoy official legitimacy. Yet this scenario is not viable. “No history” ultimately means “no future”, or no confidence in the future, hence no place in the construction of the world...

Beyond noting the over-compensatory nature of assumptions that the past was characterized by antithetical experiences and circumstances to those imposed by slavery and post-slavery (noble statuses, tight bonds of kinship, lived and assumed histories, foundation stories, heroes, gods, and a collective identity) there is the need both to confront the poignancy of the crises evoked, and to engage in a penetrative exploration of the same. Anecdotic narrative or doleful poetic (or prosaic) evocation seems unequal to such a task of self-apprehension, which is, no doubt, the foundation stone of a social entity and the base on which it can build its relationships with the rest of the world. Considerations of this type seem to motivate the myth-making impulse of Caribbean writers.

The Caribbean writer as prophet and shaman?

Many Caribbean writers seem to be mythically engaged at several levels. At least, this appears to be true in the case of many of the earlier writers, and it is certainly true of Glissant. But what do we mean by this? Writers seem to believe that they have a God-given or self-appointed duty to do something about the Caribbean situation evoked above. They seem to set themselves the task of rediscovering origin, exploring chthonic realms, of reconstructing the deleted past, inventing foundation myths and ancestors. Self-appointed questors or elected intermediaries, they invent meaningful symbols meant to heal the traumatized, to revive enthusiasm, to lead the lost home, to repair ruptured relationships, to “know and to teach”, to open the universe, to erect monuments of landscape, to bring into the world. They seem to cast themselves as redeemers, elects, prophet or shamanic types, if we take their “manifests” or “intentions” at face value. (It is true that in Glissant’s essays there is a deliberate, affirmed, conceptual distance from such aesthetic temptations, but the reader is not necessarily convinced that he is completely successful in his efforts to resist. Nor is it clear that the situation of the writer in the Caribbean allows such a possibility.) But how does this socially visionary literature propose to stand in the breach, to build the bridge into beyond? By what means? Within what limits?

We will now attempt to review some aspects of the actual creative process as seen in Glissant’s novels, *La Lézarde* and *Le Quatrième siècle*. Fully assuming the position of a reader, we will look at some aspects of the process of mythologization seen, in retrospect, as what the writer *does*, in relation to his artistic project, over and beyond his artistic intention... What we mean is not just is how the writer *writes* of origin, but how the writer apparently attempts to *write/right* origin through literarily produced rites of passage. We will consider this from the standpoint of initiatory itineraries in *La Lézarde* and from that of history, foundation kinship and lineage in *Le Quatrième siècle*.

Itineraries of initiation in *La Lézarde*

“Only the road knows the secret” (Glissant 1958)⁹

La Lézarde was published as a novel. We should therefore be able to say what the “story is about”. However, as we will recall, Glissant’s artistic project (and his literary productions) that concern us here correspond to the category of the symbolic. Hence, the anecdotic content takes second place behind less immediately attainable (symbolic) realities, related to “an effort to free society of historical or other superstitions” (Soyinka 1976: 66) or forms of bondage. Consequently, it is not easy to say what the story is about, because this work is not simply about telling a story, although it does

relate multiple fragments of biographies, follows individual, group and other collective itineraries, and also accords great importance to “legends” and storytelling.

The “storyline”

If obliged, nonetheless, to tell “what the story is about”, it might be possible to overcome discomfort and even embarrassment (at being so trite) and try for a more or less ineffectual summary of this kind, as formulated by the publisher on the back cover of the French edition:

In a tropical country, (which happens to be a Caribbean island) some young revolutionaries decide to liquidate the man in charge of repressing popular uprising. Their first act of volition as free men is a murder. And all along the Lézarde, the river that links the secret mountains to the fiery sea, Thaël (the executor), Valerie and Mycéa, along with their friends, experience the dramatic phases that result in lucidity. And they discover, at last, that only the land can decide, only the people united as one, only the Lézarde River: which, by linking the land to the sea, shows the pathway into the world.¹⁰

This summary might not be faithful to several details of the plot (the young characters are not “revolutionaries” and not even affiliated to the popular left-wing party; Thaël never becomes an executor; there is no act of murder, Garin, the traitor is taken to task for depriving peasants of the land for his own profit, the country, called Lambrienne in the novel, is clearly identified as a Caribbean island seeking autonomy from the métropole, and awaiting the referendum of 1945 (*La Lézarde* 189). But it is not a bad summary. In fact, if we delete the “revolutionaries” and remember from close reading that Garin, who was in fact to be murdered, was swallowed by the sea, what is left of the story? Exactly this: “[Thaël, Mathieu, Mycéa, Gilles, Pablo, Myrta, Tigamba, Valérie] and their friends experience the dramatic phases that result in lucidity. And they discover, at last, that only the land can decide, only the people united as one, only the Lézarde River, which, by linking the land to the sea, shows the pathway into the world”.

But what kind of a story is that? It is a symbolic narrative: a particular way of telling a story, in which anecdote is combined with and often surpassed by synchronic structures whose meanings exist on the level of connotation, one in which convergent symbolic networks pull narrative into the depths of dense, multi-layered reaches, connected to the ancestors, their rituals, beliefs and conceptions.

In *La Lézarde*, the inner journey (into the self) and the hinterland journey (into the homeland and its symbolic realms) are proposed implicitly as ways of knowing and claiming the country and the world. The itineraries of the characters are varied, but the majority seek to move from a similar place of impasse, instability and rootlessness to the greatest attainable degree of self-knowledge. To use the terms of the novel, from

being on “the branch without roots” (*la branche sans racine*) to attainment of “the truest quality of the self” (*la plus exacte qualité de [soi] meme*).

Dawn and journey into consciousness

These journeys inside the country and inside the self occur in the historic context of “the long isolation” imposed by the Allied troops’ blockade of Martinique during the Second World War. This balkanization was to be the island’s only experience of self-government. It led to multiple degrees of novelty: a new awakening, a new maturity, a new interest in politics, a new sense of identity, a new consciousness, a renewed taste for knowledge, for justice and for life, a recovery of the right to dream and to act:

The long isolation imposed by the war – which had been accompanied by a secret, irresistible and persistent reflection on their destiny and which the brilliant birth of a new era had followed, bringing with it the almost physical sensation of an air-pocket and a soaring upwards – had caused these young people to mature. Politics was the new arena in the battle for self-respect. In an inevitable, inexorable way, this whole generation had abandoned the credulous and naïve attitudes of their elders and removed the mask of a false appearance in order to affirm that the man from this land was made in his own image. In their mouths words had a new taste: in them there was sunlight, unbridled dreaming, a passion for knowledge and the rage of those who know against those who oppress. (*The Ripening* 23)¹¹

This dawning of a new era is not related so much to history as anecdote and event as it is to the attainment of consciousness; the leaving behind (*dépassement*) of the naivety of the elders, caught up in the illusions of *assimilation*. The newness here is positive; the claiming of a unique identity, similar to no other, the fruit of knowledge, gained from exploring the land and its symbols. Much of the action (*accomplissement*) is political involvement if not party affiliation, but it is also involves a certain “secular spirituality”, terms which are not antithetical in the universe of the novel.

In fact, *La Lézarde* depicts an incessant crossing and re-crossing of the land by the characters who also cross each others’ lives (in duos, in couples, as a group encountering the community, in dialogue between elders and youth, between inhabitants of the town and the country, of the mountains and of the plains, etc.), tying knots of relationship. Their journeys have much in common with initiation insofar as they are pathways into knowledge and ascension to the *source* – the “source” of the river which Garin has misappropriated, but also the “source” as origin. Characters also journey to the past and back, in a cyclic process opening into cosmic dimensions, often symbolized by the wind.

The mythical aspects of these rites of passage are established from the very outset of the novel when Thaël, the mountaineer of the group and a descendant of the heroic maroons, makes his way down to the plains and into town. It is the morning,

the dawn of a new day; before him extends the red earth of the path, the vegetal torch of the flame tree (*flamboyant*), described as the meeting place of dreams; the muddy road; more trees: the hog plum tree (*prunier moubin*) and its deadly shade, the silk cotton tree (*fromager*), abode of the spirits, the long aisle of the road to town where Mathieu, a young man from town, his alter ego as it turns out, is waiting for him.

Mycéa, one of the young women of the group of militants, takes the opposite journey, walking alone, all through the night, “among the terrifying shadows” (*La Lézarde* 58), in the “cathedral of night”; she goes up to the mountains, to the place of legends, to the “altar of morning”, to the novelty – and misery – of rural life, experienced with Alcide Lomé and his family. But she has also come to seek solitude, to find herself, and importantly, to encounter the centenary silk cotton tree (to face fear), the other, and the suffering of the land. She is surprised to find that Alcide Lomé, who is supposed to be some kind of sorcerer, seems to be an ordinary man with wife and children, living “misery and joy, arid misery and the inexplicable joy of each day!” (*La Lézarde* 61); surprised to discover that here, in mountains associated with the maroons, legends, “which reflect like mirrors a man’s search” are neither questioned nor tapped for hidden wisdom; “accepted”, “familiar”, but neither “promoted nor denied”, “they are at the same time strong, significant and yet doomed to decay”.

Mycéa’s journey is described in terms evoking a pilgrimage and an initiation: She was a courageous girl. She walked all night through the terrifying shadows [...]. The mighty cathedrals of the night¹² and the land loom before the young girl, groping in the dark; she enters the nave of mysteries, between massive mango trees, the profusion of vines overhanging arches, the roaring wind (a subtler kind of architecture) all the way to the altar of dawn. She becomes part of the volcanic rock, and perhaps because she did not feel (nor suffer), because she walked vacantly and mechanically, for the sole purpose of advancing in the realm of fatigue, perhaps she begins to share the fate of the rock, of the sandy soil, yes, perhaps finally like this earth and this rock she exposes herself to the destructive passion of the sea, to the appeal of the two seas (one fury, the other pleasure) which tug from either side, which tempt the land [...]. (*The Ripening* 50–51)¹³

In this extract, time-space becomes sanctuary or shrine: sovereign cathedral, altar, shrouded in the mystery of night, of the wind. The language evokes mythical situations such as “election”, quest and ordeal, the “blindness” of the initiate prior to enlightenment. Her experience leads to an “openness” (thrice evoked in this extract) that prepares for the infilling, not of a spiritual essence, but a receptiveness of the land, threaded through the novel as a carnal metaphor of taking root, of anchorage and belonging.

While the lexicon is that of mystical bonds and spiritual election (it’s her “destiny”), the “belonging” in question is not merely a rigid or exclusive statement of local identity. Though at one with the “volcanic rock” of her island, Mycéa is also “called”

by the two seas; by the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, which wash the shores of Martinique, pulling the island into the world. Consequently, Mycéa's ascension into the mountains and into the life of a rural family goes beyond the prosaic banality of "meeting the people" or of "rural slumming": it is an encounter with reality, with "quasi mythological" dimensions, binding the individual "and his environment into a complementary existence" (Soyinka 1976: 123) which, however, extends far beyond the scope of the local community.

Thaël's pursuit of Garin, from the source of the Lézarde River to the sea differs in some respects from the type of itinerary just mentioned: the type linking town to country, mountain to plains, high to low, while creating human relations and associations between the inhabitants and the land. For one, Thaël is the only member of the group of young independent militants who has a pragmatic task to accomplish. Empowered after his vigils among the sombre vegetation (*La Lézarde* 88, 90); he must stop Garin, the traitor, willing to sell the land to the highest bidder. To get hold of Garin, Thaël must ascend to the source of the river, appropriated by the "renegade", who has built his house over it and sealed it under a marble (tomb) stone: "[...] Thaël, guided by the noise, arrives at the spring from which the water is flowing. The imprisoned source of the Lézarde, guarded by thick walls, surrounded by marble tiles, like an idol bedecked with ornaments." (*The Ripening* 73–74)¹⁴

Garin wants neither to know nor to work the land; he simply wants to possess it. A tree planted in the middle of the spring, he attempts to "usurp all the fertility of the river, or at least to soil something, the river, the fields, the people." (*La Lézarde* 96) At noon, hour of symbolic importance, in the just as symbolic middle of the river, Thaël meets and challenges Garin to a fair contest: they will descent to the sea and, there, Thaël warns, he will try to kill Garin (*La Lézarde* 101–102). As it turns out, it is they who follow and the river that leads them to their "destiny" (*La Lézarde* 111): while renewing both the renegade and the prospective executor: "The big man seems to have acquired a new dignity, as if his past crimes, his betrayals, his ignorance have been washed away, cleansed by the flowing water." (*The Ripening* 86)¹⁵

The river is therefore a lustral source, water of purification that sparkles by day and by night (*La Lézarde* 113). However, it is also the *way*, knowledgeable in the secret of creating links, of tying knots, of creating a comprehensive whole:

[...] the river traces a wide curve. It gathers all the land around the town, understanding that both land and town are nourished in the same way, and it makes a curve in order to carry both the land and town away to the sea. Because the sea is the future, isn't it? The sea is always open, it allows you to come and go. And the town is fixed, always in the same place, not so? All the meanness of the town calls out to something beyond the horizon, not so? And the river is what prevents the town from being a town and gives it the chance to be something else, in the heart of the night. That's beauty. (*The Ripening* 100)¹⁶

The images of openness and of unification are reworked in different terms but to the same ends. Explicitly developed in the novel is the idea that the river has a language of its own and that the people of the land must learn it. This language speaks of unity and openness (of town and country, of the island with what lies beyond the island) and of some of the practical means to that end as well: "That the land belongs to those who work it!" (*The Ripening* 100). These images are tinged with a critical appreciation of "home" and with a somewhat pessimist reference to the deterministic impact of the sea on Caribbean history, both past and contemporary (from the slave trade to migration). They contain a foretaste of the notion of *errance* (roaming) and its pragmatic economic causes, notwithstanding the more positive hue Glissant's poetic conceptualizing was later to bring to this notion. But in the meantime, the river is a symbol of inclusion, of global openness, and the characters are made to follow its path and to imitate its methods, in order to tie "knots of relationships": linking the past to the present, lovers and friends to each other, the land to the sea.

The image of knots of relationship is reinforced by the implied reference to the crossroads (a space of mythical significance) formed by the characters' journeys and sharing:

Four journeys. Four directions.

To the east, Thaël and Garin going down the river, but they are in search of the sea.

To the north, Valérie, drawn to the mountains; Pablo is keeping an eye on her (he is not sure why).

To the south, Margarita and Gilles question each other.

Four furrows in the surrounding confusion. [...] The four points of the compass, bristling with energy, suddenly exploding into life. Four separate movements, but unleashed from a single subterranean source [...]" (*The Ripening* 104)¹⁷

We could suspend here our reflections on *La Lézarde* then proceed to take a brief look at how Glissant's aesthetic of quarrying (*fouille*) develops many similar "mythemes" in *Le Quatrième siècle*, but we would not be "telling the whole story". *La Lézarde* is not a "story" of harmony and reconciliation. The dream of return to the primordial place of heroic resistance, to the mountains, to the shade and splendour of the flame tree, is violently arrested when Valerie is killed by Thaël's dogs. The land, which is not free, claims sacrificial blood; it breaks facile dreams of the mythical resolution of contradictions. Hence Thaël faces a new ordeal of ascent to the source where a new sacrifice will take place.

The book is a river of words, words weighted with mud, words which get bogged down in the delta of experience before reaching the sea and its "precise reality". This precise reality includes lack of political independence, the economic bondage of landless peasants, and migration which sends the characters, once bonded, their separate ways. But these words never say die. They support their burden of pain and hope

which the river bears endlessly towards the sea (*La Lézarde* 231). Similarly, *Le Quatrième siècle* is a striking example of the encounter of vision, lucidity and hope. It continues the dogged confrontation with challenging complexities which cannot be written away into a sky of wishful fancy. Mythopoesis explores that which is hoped for and believed, in a context in which, “we do not have absolute knowledge or total power over how and when: we oblige ourselves to unravel the fabric in which the world catches us.” The “consciousness that we are conscious” of the meaning of lived experiences motivates literary exploration and define them as significant (Glissant 1969: 43).

Foundation, kinship and lineage in *Le Quatrième siècle*

“But who is it that returns to the cleft of the hill and digs? There, in front of the hut, is an old man who knows nothing about ‘poetry’, but I have seen his eyes, his bewildered eyes, search the space of the world.” (Glissant 1969: 8)¹⁸

The author and the editor classify *Le Quatrième siècle* as a novel (*roman*). Predictably, it obeys the same structural rules as *La Lézarde*, and adheres to the same artistic project of exploring and reclaiming the past in order to stand up and be counted in the present and in the world. Narrative is an important part of its structure. The sessions of storytelling that unite the teenaged Mathieu and the elder, Longoué, a descendant of the heroic maroons, who is over a hundred and ten years old, are, in all respects, phases of “a rite of passage”, from past to present, from one generation to another, from isolation to relationship with the world. Moreover, the cosmic dimension is more pronounced than it is in *La Lézarde* (also concerned with questions of more secular immediacy). Indeed, *Le Quatrième siècle* ties a series of interrelated biographies and itineraries to the cosmos and to infinity through various elementary symbols (and in particular the wind).

The narration, influenced by the stream of consciousness techniques of the French “new novel”, is not straightforward. But the main narrative, whose final details are revealed only at the end of the book, concerns Mathieu Béluse, also the main character of *La Lézarde*, the elect of the new generation, and his encounters with Longoué. The latter is a seer and healer (*quimboiseur*), a man of the mountains. Mathieu, at age nine, first meets Longoué, fortuitously he thinks, at the barber shop. The old man recognizes that Mathieu has the “eyes” of the visionary. The meeting leaves Mathieu with a feeling of fear and wonder, but he never wants to see Longoué again.

However his cousin is dying, and doctors cannot do anything to help. Mathieu is forced to go up to the mountains to seek the aid of the seer and healer. The contact is re-established, and Mathieu, now a teenager, spends the next three years between high school and the mountains, in weekly sessions of silence, broken by fragments of

evocations of the itineraries and relationships of the past, and more importantly, by deep symbolic exploration of all that has gone to make up the complex historical, racial and economic aspects of Martinican life.

The objective of these storytelling sessions is to promote nostalgia, but rather a coming to terms with life in society and in the world. Ultimately, the symbolic narrative of *Le Quatrième siècle* takes us slightly further than that of *La Lézarde*. At the end of the novel, Mathieu is still delirious from his discoveries and his adventures of the soul. He and Mycéa are united as a couple; the country and the world are there with their pressing issues: it is 1946, the “Fourth century” after the island’s great Slave Uprising. Longoué, last survivor of the lineage of maroons, has died. Martinican peasants, now citizens of France, still do not own the land. Mathieu’s experiences leave him delirious, his feverish brain seeks solutions. The first step in this direction has been rebirth: the first phase of a cyclic tale which has neither beginning nor end, because it is still in the writing, because human life is a part of cosmic infinity. Is this hope or the romanticizing of impasse?

Glissant’s *Quatrième siècle* places the emphasis on retrieving time in the same way that *La Lézarde* stresses the importance of the inner journey into self-apprehension and appropriation of the land as the first step towards local if not national identity. Of course, in both novels, it is impossible and even irrelevant to attempt to distinguish clear lines of separation between space and time. However, the historical context is quite clear; we are invited to look back from the vantage point of the fourth century after 1788, presented as a sort of “Day One” or origin. In this final section, we will consider, briefly, two approaches to history proposed in the novel and some of the implications for literary mythography.

Dates, documents and history lessons

Healing the traumatic results of the loss of history is, as we will recall, an aspect of the self-appointed vocation of Caribbean and other Diaspora writers. *Le Quatrième siècle* suggests that recourse to dates, documents and history lessons constitute an obvious and logical manner of going about this. Dates, in particular, are potentially important milestones of this proposed journey into identity. The historical time of the novel is contained between 1515 and 1946, with 1788 underscored as a date of primordial significance. Other dates coming between the two represent tenuous threads of memory spanning the abyss of absence and amnesia: 1848, abolition of slavery; 1939, the war; 1900, the turn of the last century; tattered “traces” of what archives propose as “knowledge”, the stuff of the “registers and big notebooks they open in front of you in the municipal bureau, to impress you” (*Le Quatrième siècle* 170, 256, 189, 213).

These archival evidences are revealed to be ineffectual substitutes for the lost gallery of faces, for the broken chain of lineage (why are a Béluse, descendant of plantation slaves of the worst kind and a Longoué, heroes of the hills, related?), for

erased memory of origin (of the first day, of the beginning, of the source), for the broken chain of belonging dating “back to the first day”. Papa Longoué’s vision of history is therefore embodied. As he puts it, “Everything in my body was born in order not to forget the ones who left too quickly, the things done well-done, the land you turn over so you can dig out knowledge”. He affirms this destiny despite the elusive nature of this type knowledge that slips through “your fingers like a river”. (*The Fourth Century* 240)

But history is not merely a recitation of dates. Indeed, in a truncated, disembodied perspective, it becomes a dismal “litany” of irrelevant facts of other people’s framing, or of futility: “1635 Martinique becomes attached to France, 1935. Tercentenary of the attachment”; “Discovery, Pioneers, Fight against the English, Good-natured natives, the Mother or Great Fatherland”; or, in a more dismal register, “Arrival, sugarcane, death” (*Venir, la canne, mourir*). This is the implied antithesis of Caesar’s cry of victory) (*Le Quatrième siècle* 219). Not written into the banality of dates and manuals are the mutilated bodies and dissociated psyches of the deported peoples of Martinique (*Le Quatrième siècle* 173–174).

The unspecified day in July 1788, however, has a completely different status. It is, in a way, “the first day”, distinguishing a special time, the “year of the great uprising”, in which 3000 slaves revolted in the south and as many in the mountains” (*Le Quatrième siècle* 48). In Papa Longoué’s opinion, “whosoever knows 1788 it is for him for me the first day, the first cry, the first moon and the country’s first century”: “Hundreds and hundreds of boats came [...]. Do you understand? Why would they have seen that particular boat slip into the fog of their memory with it [...] That particular one. That came into the harbour one July morning while the rain beat down like mad?” (*The Fourth Century* 12)¹⁹

The answer to the riddle reposes on the symbol of voluntary foundation and constructed ties of kinship. The importance of that boat is derived from its relation to the elected ancestor, the first Longoué. He is not the “absolute first”, but the counterpoint to the mass of those who endured, “the Beluses” of the island. Both are important to this rewriting of history. But, one of them, Longoué, was the pioneer, the vanguard, the discoverer of the new land (*The Fourth Century* 16).

The maroon, a founding hero?

If we take certain aspects of Glissant’s discourse in his essays at face value (denegation of false patriarchs of all sorts, whether Columbus, the pink-and-white white man, the pink-and-white God, Schoelcher, Césaire or France as *la mere patrie*, the writer as demiurge, western universalist canons...) we might presume that the answer to this question would be a clear and automatic “by no means”. This is particularly likely if our reading is fragmentary or hasty. However, it may be wiser to consider what the novelist *does* rather than to make assumptions based on the retrospective conceptual position of the essayist.

Clearly, 1788 is an iconic date. For, following the massive slave revolt, the just as massive killing of insurgents and the deportation of the survivors, the new cargo brought from Guinea is “cursed” with numerous free spirits who escape to the woods. The novel follows the itinerary of the first maroon, Longoué, the first free black man of the new arrivants, the first to found a family, to give himself a name, to establish a genealogy, to understand the new country, to gain the respect of the slave master. He frees himself, escaping with his “strength” intact, inviolate, having escaped “from the first hour” (*Le Quatrième siècle* 46, 47) with his memory of the old country, its rituals and symbols. Unconquered, he instinctively finds his way into the forested, virgin hills, and into the high esteem of those “down below on the plantations.”

Notwithstanding the heroism and prestige of the first Longoué, regardless of the importance of the knowledge, born of a heritage of dignity, the last of the Longoués transmits to Mathieu, the ancestor is not represented as the untainted descendant of a pure lineage. Nor is he presented as a role model. Slavery has tainted the elder, and many of his descendants have suffered from blemishes (*Le Quatrième siècle* 149), all except Melchior, the product of *créolisation*. Besides, antagonistic relationships from the old country are shown to have been imported along with the slaves.

As Barbara Webb (1992: 6, 9, 48) points out, Caribbean writers like Glissant, Harris and Carpentier resort to myth in their imaginative reconstruction and exploration of history, fuelled by a “future-oriented vision”, meant to explore rupture and dismemberment and to bridge the gap between experience and meaning through a “creative transformation of consciousness”. The figure of the maroon is a prominent aspect of this literary project. But the mythic figure of the ancestor is not really about “genealogical ties of kinship”. Nor does it make the claim of sacred origins; Glissant, like Carpentier, employs the maroon “as a cultural symbol of rebellion and possibility in Caribbean history”, in order to propose another “way of knowing”, another possibility of dialogue “between past and present”.

So, is this work about heroism or a warning against mythical idealisation of the maroon? Is there, in the final analysis, an affirmation of the value of myth, of foundation stories? Or is there a call for a lucid resistance of lineage, founding fathers or mothers, a call to assume the situation of “peoples without myth”, that is of “peoples without a retrievable origin”? These questions require more in-depth thought than can be allowed here. Nonetheless, we could suggest a few sketchy points for future reflection, based on certain details of both novels and of their interpretation.

Myth and anti-myth

This brief overview will use the term “origin” as a point of focus, for this is ultimately the alpha and the omega of myth, the obsession with origin, the fear of annihilation. We will also bear in mind the extent to which, in the “new world” myth and history

are inextricability intertwined. Hence origin is also historical, and the fear of death also the trauma that results from having been written out of history. Finally, literature, as “another way” of writing origin, through the entire prism that goes from history to myth, also attempts an original “in-between” allying lucidity and vision in an accretion we could call “history-myth”. Like many other types of *métissage*, it is not as obvious as *café au lait* (which, though popular, has a reputation of being hard on the liver). The mix is not homogenous and the ambiguities of this alliance are interesting.

There is, on one hand, so much in these novels that can be chalked up in the column of myth, as homage to the dynamism of “newness”. On the other hand, so much that has to do with the obsession of belonging to a country and to the world in concrete terms. We could take one example of this which might serve, at the same time, as an opening for a more general discussion of the practice of comparatism in emerging new world studies.

Both novels seem to engage in a process that seems ultimately to value “inhabiting the land” over retrieving time and inventing founders and lineages, over reinvesting dates. This is obviously a short cut, but what does it signify? On one hand, there seems to be a move to assume the impossibility of return. On the other, there is apparently an effort to incarnate history in more or less illustrious founders. But where does this take us? The land does not belong to the peasants, the hills refuse to house contemporary dreams, and the young people go to the métropole to get on with their lives. That’s for *La Lézarde* in a nutshell. The line of the founders is tarnished and ultimately erased. There is of course Melchior who inhabits the present, the only viable offspring. The end of *Le Quatrième siècle* takes us right up to that symbolic shoreline of poetic divination: the line of the Longoués has symbolically been reclaimed by all; the world beckons, heralded by the word, both attain a certain degree of infinity, both “without beginning or end”. Hence, we step beyond history into a time-space of the unpredictable and of the desired. At any rate, working with the idea of founders brings us right back to the obsession with the past, with the heroic gesture which founds resistance (which Glissant celebrates in his essays in which he pays homage to Aimé Césaire).²⁰ Myth or “poetic divination of the future”, if we prefer, is inescapable. The “new world” somehow remains a fiction infused with longing and projection into the future. The Atlas that bears it aloft is a complex of words. Are these really words with power: evoking and provoking resistance, hope, possibility...?

Dreams and constructs

In a sense, the “other American ideal” seems to be in part an intangible sharing of realities, life-worlds and worldviews. It is sensed and observable, real but not provable, desired but not yet there in the way it is desired. It also takes shape in a global political power system that is hostile to such poetic divinations, supersyncretisms,

culture basins, sea peoples, migrations...²¹ This is a political system that provokes migrations and intermingling without assuming their consequence. It separates prime materials and work from people. It wants bauxite without the stench of acids, and leaves the waste behind. It wants rumba and salsa without the sounds of Spanish in the prompts of United States' communications network, in schools and on the streets of the United States. Those of its elites who are artistically inclined crave a *supplément d'ame*. But many desire artistic encounters with "the inspired other" as a spectacle or as consumer items, not as a call to openness, to sharing and to proclaimed and practically assumed interdependence.

Those who do have no way of holding people in power accountable or of making people count, at home or broad. The respect for the individual artist does not necessarily lead to more collective mutual respect. In short, this is a power system that wants to create a new world without being a part of it.

From the vantage point of the Caribbean, consciousness of this situation does not kill dreams, but it tints them with the vulnerability of doubt: Caribbean dreams are not sweet. Whether this is a regional variant of Afro-pessimism is up for debate, but it seems clear that this pessimism reaches beyond Africana.

Some examples

The new world is often seen as a fiction or as being or "in-between" a number of fictions, those of European writers and scholars and that of Alter-American writers and scholars, with Europe as model or counter model. This, ultimately, does not question the paradigmatic understanding of Europe and of Eurocentric definition of the "other". This "other" is free to write back and to talk back, but new world counter discourses do not, by themselves, annul the fact that, as in the case of Sartre in his well-intentioned "Black Orpheus" discourse about *dépassement*, the West is still a confident schoolmaster, admitting candidates, bestowing or refusing symbolic and other awards.

To dream in such a context is heroic. The new world writer is often a hero of sorts, and is usually aware of the fact. The new world academic is not without merit either, in the role of relayer and interpreter of hopes, those of the powerful imagination of unity not yet lived, in J. Michael Dash's (1998: 16) terms (also expressed in similar terms elsewhere).²²

However, historical rupture, economic dependence of various forms, political domination cast shadows over the peoples of the sea (Benítez-Rojo) and disturbs their dreaming. Fanon, Roumain, Glissant himself, and many others could not and cannot mythologize in all tranquillity, declaring the autonomy of literature and its insubordination to historical contingency, financial constraints, cultural power and strategies, psychology and the other social sciences (see Frye 1990: xxii and 27–28 in particular). History and politics are inexpugnable (see the political involvement of Alexis, Roumain, Fanon, Glissant, even Césaire). They involve the feeling of being tossed

abruptly into the world without preparation and without adequate resources, under the weight of formidable constraints and dictates. They are lived as the imperative of creating almost instantaneously states, cultures and literatures, without economic and political power and control, even over local resources.

The chaos theory and sincere transcultural generosity do not appear to dissipate the brooding of the “small countries” (*les petits pays*) so dear to Glissant. The idea of global culture as a sum of myriad co-existing cultural microcosms with multiple centres, that of Pan-Caribbean cultures inhabiting Western metropolises, bringing their marine tropisms into the heart of New York, for example, seem unable to disperse the impression that the “not yet realized” base of cultural exchange is nowhere on the horizon or on the agenda of the world economic order and its political imperatives (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 24). These have little to do with humane ideals of fraternity, and rights to freedom and the pursuit of happiness for all individuals and all peoples.

Hence, the sense of insufficiency, the impression of a “lack of something”, experienced by writers and scholars alike, and evoked by Benítez-Rojo. This is not merely an existential crisis, nor simply a vague universal commonality of human experience. The “principal need” (of the type food, sex, drink, right to property) Frye (1990) sees behind the mythologizing impulse, despite the interest of much that he has to say about myth (also drawing on the chaos theory) and its relationship to history (including the underhand strategies of official histories that do not put all the cards on the table) seems too de-contextualized and too de-historicized to function, that is, to foster a comprehensive understanding of mythography/mythologizing, seen *in context*. In fact, the main problem is that Frye’s context is Europe, his poetic founder Homer, his mythic medium writing.

However, writing myth/history in context is not a panacea either. In fact, mythography sometimes leaves the Caribbean writer, reader and scholar with the foreboding that while contradictions and chaos are realities of life with fertile possibilities, the world we live in leaves us with only symbols to hold, symbols in every colour except dollar-green (leaf-green is in). Where does that put us? Doesn’t that throw us back into the net of the world that Glissant evokes in his *Poetic Intention*?

Reconsidering the New World

“To be born into the world is to conceive (live) the world as relation: as a composed necessity, as a willing poetic (as opposed to moral) reaction of alterity. As the unfinished drama of this necessity.” (Glissant 1969: 20)²³

I propose to insert these reflections on new world mythologizing by applying and broadening some of the concepts of positive Alter-American definition into the more

global dimensions that seem imperative. To put matters simply, but I hope not too simplistically, I propose to look at the world that that we all live in as a new world for all of the globe's populations; not just the Americas, but also *La Vieille Europe* and Africa, the cradle of humanity and Asia, notwithstanding ancient cultures.

In the Caribbean, we (some of us) have moved from the unattainable there-ness of Africa to the "here-ness" of *el reino de este mundo*, to our very particular kingdom of the Americas, to our kingdom, as it is. From detour to return (from *détour* to *retour*), as Glissant puts it. Ideally, we are now able to claim all of our heritages, including our European heritage, not just that of Africa, America and Asia. Our Pan-Caribbean concepts, theories and ideals are no longer so new. Our migrations ideally take them into the world as we name our various abodes and, in particular, that abode ("home") the heart's metronome beats out insistently, to paraphrase the Jamaican poet Dennis Scott. But we also inhabit the meta-archipelago of here-there, which makes us restless migrants living "in-between", because there is no contradiction in liking or needing various palettes of green. But the world to which our migrations take us is the North/West, usually. Hence the way our thinking proceeds when it overcomes national obsessions: we think Pan-African, then Pan-Caribbean, then Pan-American. Doing so, we have progressed beyond insularity.

But there are still, as always, more steps to make, namely in the direction of going all-out global:

- Not riding on the global village metaphor, built on an ideal of flattening out of specificities and diversity through westernizing, Islamizing, Christianizing or any other totalizing system or ideology such as "progress" or even "democracy" seen in a certain way;
- Not in terms of dependency and subordination to the West/North and to its political, economic and cultural dictates and paradigms of knowledge and relating.
- A more productive way, seen from our disciplines of comparatists, involves, putting Africa back into Africana (as it seems to be progressively written out by our concern of affirming, correctly, that "we too are America");
- putting Africana back into the world, and ultimately contributing to the recognition and claiming of the "new world" experience as shared by all for better, for worse, not just "our America" and its native, African, European and Asian heritages;
- recognizing that the United States are also in the new world, also the products (not just the producers) of this new world violence that can backfire, leaving no-one invulnerable to its explosion, as recent history has underscored;
- making, through new world studies, regardless of our probable discomfort with the term, a contribution to discussions about recognizing global experiences of interdependence legally, politically, culturally, academically, that is to a truly global reading of the world.

At the level of comparative literature, this implies looking at the ways in which (and at the motivations that explain why) we are all writing “myths of a new world”, as we try to come to terms with certain unprecedented experiences, new connections and conflicts, many of which spring from a refusal of the other, and especially from reducing the world to a gigantic market for the profit of a few whose self-ordained vocation is to be masters of the game not just a responsible and respectful part of the world. This reading seems to require reaching beyond the neo-Euclidian space of critical theory that still goes down as being very advanced.

In fact, it seems reassuring to affirm with George Lang (as cited by Dash 1995: 3) on the subject of cultural centrality and marginality that “[...] each point of cultural creativity constructs its own center and projects its own truth. Since there is no single center, we are all marginal”. The new world can then be seen as a “provisional center”. But how does an idea such as this relate to political and economic realities? How is centrality articulated for the politically disempowered and the economically disenfranchised? How do these theories and the literary writing they address communicate with the oral cultures of the people of the Caribbean, who are largely unable to communicate in the theoretical media of academia or of literature? Where are these de-centred centres centred? And why do these cultural spaces have to be symbolically circular? Is there a hint of a foetal quest for security? Is this the dead-end of concepts of the individual and of individualistic relativism applied to the literary text, conceived as an autonomous entity? Are collective projects in literature (the creative evocation/provocation of new worlds) doomed to pessimism? What about criticism and interpretation? Are broad-based comparatist approaches to new world studies fated to dependence on the paradigms of the “Other”, reduced to demonstrating masterful applications of concepts and perspectives developed with “other” realities in mind? Answers to the last question depend on the choices scholars make. As far as creative writing is concerned, Glissant’s novels and essays seem to answer “no”.

Viewing the New World positively

It is interesting to note that Glissant’s “no” to pessimism is not enunciated in absolute terms nor without extensive, repeated, in-depth explorations. His novels and essays offer hundreds of pages of probing for and construction of meanings. This task is carried out with vision, hope, determination and unswerving lucidity. It is true that horizons not yet attained seem to evoke the “infinite”, suggesting that symbolic exploration of reality is an ideal limbo with no way out, no path leading into the lived experience of change. But this “infinity” Glissant evokes is not a metaphysical paradise. It is the “not yet”, “who knows when” of tenacious hope, of a sense of purpose and conviction concerning the significance of creative writing and its place in reflecting on the world we live in. Glissant’s marvellous realism avows loss, violence, poverty and the unspeakable suffering of the world’s people, but yields neither to

pessimism nor to illusions of the heroic and the primordial. Nor does he flee into an ideal world of the symbolic or of the subconscious that deems writing the only space of options and of freedom. In fact, the relevance of writing in the Caribbean context of overriding orality is questioned. But, here again, the answer is a hopeful projection into the future, seen as writing for a future home public. Ultimately, “voluntary writing” and repetitive exploration are seen as aspects of the power of the word to resist totalitarian projects of globalization. On a more positive note, this creative prospecting is viewed as a contribution to “opening the closed doors of the literary work unto world perspectives”, to the end of fostering relations based on totality (*totalité*), as opposed to totalitarianism. This sum of attitudes and aspirations seems to open unto interesting perspectives and insights that new world studies can glean from Glissant’s creative writing and concepts.

Notes

1. “Naître au monde. Mais le monde n’était-il pas hier, en ceux et pour ceux qui maintenant ‘naissent’? Chacun élit sa terre en univers quand l’univers est inconnu ou méconnu.” (Glissant 1969: 20) The epigraph and all references here concern the original French version. All translations from the original French, unless stated otherwise, are mine.
2. We need to note that Frye’s reference to the “work-play of creative writing” that we are borrowing here does not really conceive of literature in relation to society and politics. Resistance and opposition are therefore not likely to be categories of mythical motivation he would validate.
3. Benítez-Rojo (1996: 23) evokes the Caribbean postmodern experience, viewed from the aesthetic standpoints of creative writing and reading, as an intense mutual seduction when the dynamic proceeds “in a certain kind of way”. This process is evoked more than it is described as “a secondary reading”, where the text’s concern with desire goes beyond realms of the personal. This is related to the order of the “the teleological, ritual, nocturnal, sphinx-like monstrosity [...] the void of impossible origin, and the dreams that incorporate this, or is incorporated by it”.
4. For scholars reflecting on myth like Caillois (1938) and Durand (1992) the ascendancy of myth on the human sensibilities has to do with its historical, social and psychological determinations and functions. For Caillois (1938: 29, 26) myth provides an “ideal resolution” of historically generated conflicts or, at any rate, a certain heroic “compensation”, elevating the human soul above humiliating experiences. It makes for a de-dramatization of historically motivated conflicts necessitating redefinitions of identity. Moreover, this narrative function is, purportedly, a response to another fundamental (?) social law: the law of *exaltation* or of enthusiasm. For Durand, myth, like memory, telescopes time, past and present, subverts and suspends the flow of time, gives depth and texture to the “dismal and fatal flow of becoming (*devenir*), and ensures, within a fluctuating destiny, the survival and perpetuity of a substance [...] memory allows us to revisit the past and authorizes, in part, a reparation of the offences of time.” (Durand 1992: 468)
5. See John Edgar Weideman’s comment on this in his book *The Island Martinique*, dedicated to Frantz Fanon; see Weideman (2003: 5–8ff) on ironies of the definition of the Caribbean island.
6. For a more in-depth discussion, see Corzani’s *La Littérature des Antilles-Guyane Françaises* (1978).
7. In addition to general, classic psychological literature, see Fanon (1952). Of course, many of these problems of memory, identity and new mythologies also have peculiar developments in the South African context see, for instance Andersson (2003).
8. Maryse Condé’s (1978) arguments concerning the reasons behind cultural and kinship loss, for example, do not hold in the face of survival rituals of African origin in the heterogeneous lands of transplantation. See Bastide (1967), Montilus (1988) and their various references to survivals of this kind. There was also some amount of oral traditions, some cases of ethnic continuity or of the subordination of some transplanted ethnic groups to the culture of others under slavery. Exceptional cases of continuity lead to the famous Alex Haley *Roots* story (despite some probable filling

in by the imagination). Moreover, there is a certain degree of romanticizing in some of these statements on loss, springing both from the difficulty of exploring complexity in a few phrases and from solidarity, empathy or identification with the traumatic situation being evoked.

9. "Seule la route connaît le secret." (Glissant, *La Lézarde*, cited as an epigraph to the 1st chapter of the novel; identified as being from "an African poem").
10. Only the route knows the secret.
11. "Le long isolement imposé par la guerre – qu'avait accompagné une réflexion sourde, irrésistible et continue, sur les destins de la cité, et qu'avaient suivis l'éblouissement d'une nouvelle ère, la sensation presque physique d'un trou d'air et d'une envolée - avait mûri ces jeunes gens. La politique était le nouveau domaine de la dignité. Par un accomplissent, une nécessité inexorable, toute cette génération avait abandonné la naïve crédulité des anciens, dépouillé le vêtement de l'illusoire ressemblance, pour affirmer que l'homme d'ici n'était qu'à sa propre semblance. Les mots prenaient dans les bouches une saveur toute neuve : il y avait là du soleil, du rêve débridé, une passion de connaissance, et la rage de ceux qui savent contre ceux qui oppriment." (*La Lézarde* 17)
12. Compare to other "sovereign" aspects of nature in *La Lézarde* such as the *feu souverain* of the sun-burned plains (*La Lézarde* 24).
13. "La jeune fille avait du courage : elle marcha toute la nuit parmi les ombres affolantes [...]. Les cathédrales souveraines la nuit et de la terre s'ouvrent devant la jeune fille aveugle, elle monte par la nef des mystères, entre les lourds manguiers, la profusion des voûtes grimpanes, le hourvari du vent (qui est comme une architecture plus subtile), vers l'autel du matin. Elle se confond avec cette roche volcanique, et peut-être, à force de ne pas sentir (à force de ne pas souffrir), à force d'être vide et mécanique, marchant ainsi sans d'autre but que d'aller loin dans la fatigue, peut-être s'ouvre-t-elle purement à ce destin de la roche, de la terre ensablée, oui, peut-être enfin comme cette terre et cette roche s'ouvre-t-elle à la déchirante passion des mers, à l'appel des ces deux mers [...] qui de chaque côté tirent, qui sollicitent le pays [...]" (*La Lézarde* 58)
14. "[...] Thaël, suivant le bruit, arrive au plein milieu d'où sourd le ruisseau: la source. L'origine emprisonnée de la Lézarde, gardée par des murs épais, entourée du dallage de marbre, comme une idole accablée d'atours." (*La Lézarde* 92).
15. "Le gros homme est neuf d'une sorte de dignité; on dirait que ses crimes passés, ses trahisons, son ignorance sont lavés, acquittés, effacés par l'eau qui descend." (*La Lézarde* 111)
16. "Elle fait un large tour, la Lézarde. Elle ramasse toute la terre autour de la ville, elle comprend que cette ville et cette terre c'est la même nourriture, c'est la même vie, et elle fait sa boucle, pour porter à la mer toute la ville et toute la terre. Parce que la mer, c'est l'avenir, non? C'est toujours ouvert, on vient, on part. Et la ville est ce qui reste là, toujours présente, non? Toute cette mesquinerie appelle ce qui est au-delà de l'horizon, non? Et ainsi la Lézarde, c'est ce qui empêche la ville d'être une ville, ce qui lui donne une chance d'être quelque chose, au fond de la nuit. C'est la beauté." (*La Lézarde* 127-128)
17. "Quatre mouvements. Quatre chemins. / [...] Vers l'est, Thaël et Garin au long de la rivière, mais c'est la mer qu'ils cherchent. / Vers le nord Valérie attirée par les montagnes; Pablo la surveillance (il ne sait pourquoi). / Vers le sud enfin Margarita et Gilles s'interrogent. / Quatre sillons dans la rumeur [...] Quatre mouvents, mais une seule floraison souterraine [...]" (*La Lézarde* 142)
18. "Qui revient pourtant sur la déclive du morne, et fouille? Il y là, devant la case, un vieil homme qui ne sait rien de la 'poésie' et dont la voix seule s'oppose. [...] J'ai vu ses yeux, j'ai vu ses yeux égarés chercher l'espace du monde." (Glissant 1969: 8)
19. "Ils étaient venus des cents et des cents. Tu comprends? Pourquoi auraient-ils vu passer dans les brumes de leur souvenir [...] ce bateau-là? Celui-là précisément. Entré dans la rade un matin de juillet sous une pluie démente? (*Le Quatrième siècle* 20).
20. The most recent is probably the homage he pays to Césaire in "Césaire's Poems" (Glissant 2004). This homage starts with a reference to the poet's demiurgic destiny: "The poet rises and the world rises with him. This is the duty he has known from the start." It is a clear allusion to Césaire poetic evocation/divination of *l'homme debout* [a man on his two feet] in his *Le Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, but also to the role of the writer in the Caribbean. Moreover, numerous pages of Glissant's essays pay homage to the maroon's gesture of resistance recuperated as the reiterated answer transplanted Africans can throw back in order to reclaim their dignity.
21. These are terms Benítez-Rojo (1996) uses to evoke the new world experience of the Caribbean.
22. See also Webb (1992) about the impossibility of proving hemispheric culture. It is similar to Glissant's early position in *Caribbean Discourse* concerning Caribbean history and experience as "choc", "painful negation" and "explosion". "This discontinuity in the continuous" which pre-

vents the collective consciousness from taking stock and coming to terms with historical time. This is what Glissant refers to as “non-history”. See Glissant (1981: 131–132) cited by Webb (1992: 49).

23. “Naître au monde, c’est concevoir (vivre) le monde comme relation: comme nécessité composée, comme réaction consentie, poétique (et non morale) d’altérité. Comme drame inaccompli de cette nécessité.” (Glissant 1969: 20)

Works cited

- Andersson, Muff. 2003. Reconciled pasts, fragile futures, parallel presents: chronotypes and memory making in *Isidingo*. *African Identities* 1 (2): 151–165.
- [Anonymous]. 1978. *Quel avenir pour les D.O.M. Gaudeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, Reunion*. Paris: Harmattan.
- Bastide, Roger. 1967. *Les Ameriques noires*. Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot.
- Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. 1996. Transl. James Maraniss. *The Repeating Island. The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Durham, London: Duke University Press.
- Caillois, Roger. 1938. *Le Mythe et l’Homme*. Paris: Seuil.
- Condé, Maryse. 1978. *La Civilisation du bossale*. Paris: Edition L’Harmattan.
- Corzani, Jack. 1970. Guadeloupe et Martinique: La difficile voie de la Négritude et de l’Antillanité. *Présence Africaine* 76: 16–42.
- _____. 1978. *La Littérature des Antilles-Guyane Françaises*. Fort de France: Désormeaux.
- Dash, J. Michael. 1995. *Édouard Glissant*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. 1998. *The Other America: Caribbean Literature in a New World Context*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Durand, Gilbert. 1992 [1960]. *Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*. Paris: Dunod.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1952. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Paris: Seuil.
- Frye, Northrop. 1990. *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of “The Bible and Literature”*. New York, London: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovich Publishers.
- Glissant, Édouard. 1958. *La Lézarde*. Paris: Seuil.
- _____. 1964. *Le Quatrième siècle*. Paris: Seuil.
- _____. 1969. *L’Intention poétique*. Paris: Seuil.
- _____. 1971. Structures de groupes et tensions de groupes. *Acoma* 1 (avril): 31–43.
- _____. 1981. *Le Discours antillais*. Paris: Seuil.
- _____. 1985. Transl. J. Michael Dash. *The Ripening*. London & Kingston: Heinemann.
- _____. 1989. Transl. J. Michael Dash. *Caribbean Discourse*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- _____. 2001. Transl. Betsy Wing. *The Fourth Century*. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.
- _____. 2004. Césaire’s Poems. A paper delivered at a Conference at New York University. *Black Renaissance / Renaissance Noire* 5 (3): 167–171.
- Ki-Zerbo, Joseph. 1957. Histoire et conscience nègre. *Présence Africaine* oct-nov, 53–69.
- Montilus, Guerin. 1988. *Dieux en Diaspora*. Niamey: CELTHO.
- Soyinka, Wole. 1976. *Myth, Literature and the African World*. London, New York & Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Webb, Barbara. 1992. *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press.
- Weideman, John Edgar. 2003. *The Island Martinique*. Washington DC: National Geographic Society.