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## Utopia and Its Ruses : Post-Colonial Utopia in the Thinking of Edouard Glissant

### Introduction

This article attempts to uncover, among the pessimistic tendencies of his book *The Caribbean Discourse*, a conception of utopia in the thinking of Edouard Glissant. To do this, I start with an exploration of the definition and some illustrative examples of utopia. Next I try to highlight the direct and the indirect evocations of utopia in Glissant's work, especially as it relates to his theory of alienation. I look first at political utopia, then aesthetic utopia, then their synthesis. Finally, and based on these findings, I try to characterize the role of utopia in Glissant's post-colonial situation.

### Defining Utopia

The word « utopia », as we use it today, was created by Thomas More in 1516 with his work *Utopia*. Despite the fact that his imaginary society was not without flaws, the word has come to mean : 1.) a place of ideal perfection especially in laws, government, and social conditions 2.) an impractical scheme for social improvement<sup>1</sup>. If we consider the word's origins, we see that the word comes from the Greek « ou topos »,

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<sup>1</sup> Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Retrieved April 1, 2011.  
(<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utopia>)

which means « no place » or nowhere<sup>2</sup>. The word's epistemology suggests, as is explicitly stated in the dictionary definition, that a utopia is necessarily impossible to realize, because it is a society that exists « no place ». Plato, at the end of Book IX, says of his *Republic* : « I think that it cannot be found anywhere on Earth ». More echoes this sentiment in the conclusion of *Utopia* : « But I readily admit that there are very many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realized. » Auguste Comte, the author of positivism, always refers to his imaginary society as a « positive polity » or a « sociocracy ». He never calls it a utopia, precisely to insist on its possibility of one day being realized.

If the epistemological origins, the examples of Plato, More and Comte, and common usage of the word all paint a utopia as too ideal to be possible, there are nevertheless other ways of seeing the term. Herbert Marcuse, in *Eros and Civilization*, valorizes the power of the imagination, of dreams, and of fantasy. He sees in the Surrealist movement an effort to connect art and the imagination with reality. It is, after all, the Surrealists who said : « La seule imagination me rend compte de ce qui *peut être* »<sup>3</sup>, and it is also they who asked : « Le rêve ne peut-il être appliqué, lui aussi, à la résolution des questions fondamentales de la vie? »<sup>4</sup> Thus Marcuse, taking inspiration

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<sup>2</sup> “Place in No Place: Examples of the Ordered Society in Literature,” E.D.S. Sullivan; in *The Utopian Vision* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1983), p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> “ Only the imagination makes me realize what *could be* ». André Breton, *Les Manifestes du Surrealisme* (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1946), p. 15. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

NOTE: All translations of original citations from the French are mine.

<sup>4</sup> « Cannot the dream also be applied to the resolution of life's fundamental

from the Surrealists, conceives of a vision of utopia, not as an alternative that will be permanently relegated to exist « no place », but rather as a solution which *does not yet have a place*. In this way, the « no place » of the word's origin becomes a challenge, changeable. For Marcuse, utopia is the possible.

### Examples of Utopia and Counter-Examples of Dystopia

The most celebrated examples of utopian literature describe an ideal society. They construct a vision of the societal good and try to determine the steps necessary to attain it. For Plato, and for More who was inspired by him, the ideal republic will have only what it needs to ensure the happiness of its citizens and nothing more. The societal good is thus well-being and self-sufficiency<sup>5</sup>. Next Plato and More elaborate on the steps necessary to achieve this, which includes placing an inherent value on work, especially agricultural work ; scrupulously regulating who does what kind of work for how long ; and abandoning private property to achieve absolute equality between citizens<sup>6</sup>. Comte also figures in this tradition of articulating the societal good, then designing a path to achieve it. He wants a society in which every exchange, every action, is motivated by altruism. He thus develops a complex system of integral roles : the scientist-priests who make decisions ; the capitalist-knights who put them into action ; the women whose job is to teach the philosophy of altruism to the children. The point of so rudimentarily summarizing the utopias of Plato, More, and Comte is to understand the tradition of

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questions ? ». *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> John C. Olin, ed., *Interpreting Thomas More's Utopia* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), p. 19.

utopian literature, which is the following : to describe, from grand principle down to small detail, an ideal society, thus to provide the readers with an alternative to that which currently has a place in the existing society.

The opposite of utopia, called dystopia, is a negative vision of a sordid, terrible society. This vision also engages the imagination, but to conceive of the worst of possibilities. Dystopic literature, like Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *1984*, often describes a futurist situation, with a repressive and totalitarian government, which terrorizes its citizens under the guise of utopian ideals. Often conformity is pushed to extremes, or technology plays a tyrannical role, as in *Brave New World*, where the scientific engineering of embryos produces a genetically uniform population. Beneath the terror and the sordid nature of these societies, there lies an implicit warning. If utopia contains hope for a better world, dystopia contains by definition a warning against what could result from our current principles and practices. If we continue like this, the dystopic narrative suggests, we could end up like the society in the story. Passing by two different sides of the question, the role of both utopia and dystopia is to comment on our current society, and to engage the imagination in order to explore the shadowy depths of the possible.

#### Glissant : Antillean Alienation

In his *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant paints a pessimistic portrait of the Antillean reality as he sees it. Because Martinicans import everything and produce nothing, because the « mimetic impulse » drives them to valorize everything that is French (the

language, the food, the values, the way of thinking about history) and to forget everything that is specifically theirs, because the government cultivates a class of opportunistic functionaries who support metropole France's domination, and for still other reasons that Glissant enumerates, Martinique is condemned to live in « la misère morale et mentale »<sup>7</sup>. Martinican society is alienated from itself and « menacé de dilution »<sup>8</sup>. Glissant explains this menace : « Il faut supposer que la colonisation française en Martinique risque bientôt de parvenir au « state suprême » de toute colonisation, qui est de dépersonnaliser complètement une communauté, de l'« absorber » dans un corps extérieur »<sup>9</sup>. Here we see the explicit warning, in the same spirit as the implicit warnings of dystopic literature, which denounces the present society in which the author lives.

Glissant fills most of his pages with a pessimistic and critical vision of Martinican reality. But among all this pessimism, and precisely through the presence of this dystopic warning, Glissant leaves us traces, however vague, of his conception of post-colonial utopia.

#### Post-Colonial Utopia : The Political Dimension

Glissant, without a doubt, puts more energy into condemning reality as he sees it than he does into the creation of a utopian vision. When he writes of a « projet national » [a national project], however, we can start to see traces of his political utopia. Glissant

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<sup>7</sup> “moral and mental misery ». Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 190.

<sup>8</sup> “menaced with dilution ». *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>9</sup> “One must suppose that the French colonization in Martinique risks to soon achieve the « ultimate stage » of any colonization, which is to completely depersonalize a community, to « absorb » it into an exterior body. » *Ibid.*, p. 188-189.

writes that the national project is « rendu impératif par les insuffisances des solutions » proposed by the complacent bourgeoisie<sup>10</sup>. Glissant assumes that he is unquestionably not a part of this group, and that he can give us real solutions. The national project has as its objectives : to « définir le statut original de ce pays, trouver des relations résolutoires entre ces « impossibles », ouvrir les solutions à l'entour caraïbe, mettre en oeuvre une stratégie à la fois radicale et patiente, continue et soudaine »<sup>11</sup>. Before looking at Glissant's propositions for achieving these objectives, it is worth doing a close reading of their articulation.

With the phrase « to define the original status of this land, » we see the importance of collective identity in all its variations. By « original status, » we could understand the legal status of Martinique, which, as a department of France (like a state in the U.S.), theoretically possesses all the same political rights as the departments in the metropole, but which as a former colony and Caribbean island, in practice has a fundamentally different status than the departments on the other side of the Atlantic. But beyond the idea of legal status, « the original status of this land » could also refer to a more subjective identity : the personal conception of the Self. Glissant often repeats the idea that Martinique is wrong to search for herself either in Africa (which he calls the « la pulsion de retour » [the impulse to return]) or in France (« la pulsion mimétique » [the mimetic impulse]). Glissant insists that the true Martinican identity cannot be found

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<sup>10</sup> « rendered imperative by the inadequacy of the solutions. » *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> “define the original status of this land, find solutions to the impossible questions, extend these solutions to surrounding Caribbean societies, put into action a strategy at once radical and patient, continuous and sudden. » *Ibid.*, p. 125.

outside the island, but only through « l'enracinement déterminé dans la terre nouvelle »<sup>12</sup>.

Martinique has an original status of identity, different from France and different from Africa, and to achieve a political utopia, it is essential that Martinicans recognize this.

With the desire to « extend these solutions to surrounding Caribbean societies, » Glissant evokes a desire for solidarity among Caribbean islands. Glissant writes at length on this theme, lamenting the fragmentation of the Caribbean. « L'assimilation parachève la balkanisation,<sup>13</sup> » he writes, explaining that after the law making Martinique and Guadeloupe into French departments, the island societies « sont ainsi conduits à se nier en tant que collectivité,<sup>14</sup> » as part of the illusory path toward equality with the French. Glissant writes : « L'idée de l'unité antillaise est une reconquête culturelle. Elle nous réinstalle dans la vérité de notre être, elle milite pour notre émancipation. »<sup>15</sup>. Glissant's political utopia clearly involves an active solidarity among Caribbean societies.

Glissant demands a « patient » strategy. He explains that patience, in order not to be procrastination, requires that the fundamental solutions be proposed from the beginning. Here he provides yet another list. The first enumeration, cited above, explained the general objectives of the national project ; the list that follows will provide the solutions in more detail :

l'indépendance mais sans le leadorat d'une « classe » moyenne ; le contrôle populaire, mais débarrassé du macoutisme populiste qui en est le faux-semblant ; les formes socialistes du pouvoir, une fois élucidé les problèmes de l'organisation de la production et leur harmonisation avec les techniques

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<sup>12</sup> “determinedly putting down roots in the new earth. » *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>13</sup> “Assimilation accomplishes balkanization ». *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> « ...have thus been driven to deny their own existence as a collectivity » *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> “The idea of Caribbean unity is a question of cultural reconquering. It puts us back into the truth of our being, it campaigns for our emancipation. » *Ibid.*

réadaptées de survie.<sup>16</sup>

We see here the vague and negative character of the political utopia of Glissant. With the terms « independence » and « popular control », for example, Glissant make reference to an ideal, only to continue it in negative terms : this, but *not that* ; that, but *without this*.

The vast majority of his attention is consecrated to a negative vision of the current society, and even his proposed solutions sound a bit like condemnations.

In general, therefore, the real key to finding a political utopia in Glissant's thinking seems to exist outside of what he proposes explicitly, and to be found instead hidden and implied amongst his criticisms. He laments the absence of real jobs in Martinique, the « néantisation économique »<sup>17</sup>, that replaces local agricultural and artisanal trades with imported products, autonomy with dependence. He also laments the effect that this has on Martinique's language : since Martinican Creole has « cessé d'être une langue de fonction, de métier, ou de production » thus the language « se banalise » [grows banal].<sup>18</sup> Martinique does not valorize its own specificity and succumbs to French assimilation. We can only conclude, therefore, that a post-colonial utopia for Glissant would be to recreate real production and jobs on the island, thus to abandon imports for local products. (As in the ideal republics of Plato, More, and Comte, work plays a central role in the political vision of Glissant.) It is by doing all this that Martinique can recover from the traumas of economic, linguistic, and juridical alienation

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<sup>16</sup> “...independence but without the leadership of a « middle class » ; popular control, but without the popularist macoutism which is a deceptive look-a-like ; socialist forms of power, the elucidation of the organizational problems of production, and their harmonization with re-adapted techniques of survival. » *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>17</sup> “economic annihilation. » *Ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>18</sup> “ceased to be a language of function, of trade, or of production » *Ibid.*, p. 298.

from which she suffers.

We can notice here a specific problem in the idea of post-colonial utopia.

Glissant remarks on this problem in a footnote, when he writes : « Produire ou créer « contre » un système est certainement une pratique limitative et parfois frustrante »<sup>19</sup>.

We can see this idea in the context of creating a post-colonial utopia. All conceptions of utopia are in part a protest *against* the present society, but in the context of colonization and its legacy, utopia becomes a conception specifically situated *against* the traumatic colonial history, and *against* the global system that gave birth to colonization. The fact to create a utopia always in opposition to all that makes the exercise limited and frustrating. A utopia thus conceived must have, at its base, ideals such as the independence of the territory, a rudimentary valorization of its culture, its language, and its products. That is to say, a utopia conceived without the limits of being in opposition to a colonial past would probably have these things as givens, as something obvious. But the post-colonial thinker is constrained to fight simply to achieve these basics, which are, as we see in the pessimism of Glissant, far from being won.

#### Post-Colonial Utopia : The Aesthetic Dimension

With his call for « determinedly putting down roots in the new earth », with his imperative to reject both the impulse to « return » to Africa and the impulse to mimic France, Glissant engenders an artistic and philosophical movement against the assimilationist instincts of Frenchification and against the essentializing aspects of

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<sup>19</sup> « To produce or create « against » a system is certainly a limited and sometimes frustrating practice. » *Ibid.*, p. 174.

Négritude. He wants to concentrate on what is specific to the Caribbean, and in doing so, he notes the process of creolization in the Americas, by which heterogenous elements constantly mix and create unpredictable new forms. In the Caribbean, this process begins mainly with the African slave trade starting in the sixteenth century, and it includes also the indentured servitude of Hindus in the nineteenth century. Creole languages, jazz music, even the Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans, are all cited by Glissant as examples of creolization<sup>20</sup>. Glissant considers the history of creolization, especially in the Caribbean, and draws the conclusion that it is incorrect to accept traditional Western thought, which sees entities as having a stable and absolute identity coming from a single primordial root. Instead he conceives of what he calls a « *poétique de Relation* » [poetic of Relation] or a « *poétique du divers* » [poetic of the diverse], which valorizes the complexity of a rhizomatic identity, its perpetual change, and its always unpredictable results.

We can clearly see the importance of history in any discussion of creolization. Glissant writes that the author's job is to « *fouiller* » history.<sup>21</sup> Glissant identifies historical consciousness as something which « permet [à la collectivité] de dépasser les rejets inconscients de la structuration imposée, précisément en l'autorisant à réfléchir concrètement sur la nécessité des structures et à décider d'en susciter de nouvelles »<sup>22</sup>. Thus the « poetics of Relation » includes a temporal engagement, which connects it at once to the problems of the past and to the utopian projects of the future.

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<sup>20</sup> Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 19.

<sup>21</sup> “*Fouiller*” can mean to dig, to sift through, to search. Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 226.

<sup>22</sup> « ...allows [the collectivity] to surpass its unconscious rejection of the imposed structure, precisely by authorizing it to reflect on the necessity of structures, and to decide to create new ones. » *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Barnabé, and Raphaël Confiant, among others, were very inspired by Glissant's « poetics of Relation » and contributed to birth of the artistic movement known as « *la créolité*. » In their famous, *Eloge de la Créolité*, they proclaim that *la créolité* is « une annihilation de la fausse universalité, du monolinguisme et de la pureté »<sup>23</sup>, which are all key negative concepts in Glissant's discourse. It is important to note, however, that there are some differences between the *créolité* of these writers and the poetic utopia of Glissant. Glissant warned them that what they called « *la créolité* » risked to fashion itself into yet another Western-style essentialism, something stable and fixed. Glissant, by preferring to use the term *créolisation*, instead of *créolité*, insists on the concept's perpetual process of becoming. Also, Glissant admitted in an interview that he found the creolization of Chamoiseau and Confiant too « proclamée » [proclaimed], not subtle enough for his taste.<sup>24</sup>

Despite these differences, Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Barnabé are nevertheless integral in the application and exploration of the ideals of Glissant. The language in Chamoiseau's novels, for example, plays with French in a lively and irreverent manner. His characters are a rainbow of *couliés* (local word for Martinicans with Asian Indian heritage), *syriens* (with Middle Eastern heritage), *chabins* (local word for light-skinned blacks), *nègs* (for dark-skinned blacks), and mulattos. His historical engagement is also very active, as in the chronicle of the life of *djobbeurs* (men with wheel-barrows who made a living doing odd jobs in the market) in Fort-de-France (*La chronique des sept*

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<sup>23</sup> « an annihilation of false universalities, of monolingualism, and of purity. » Chamoiseau et al. “Eloge de la Créolité.” Retrieved November 22, 2010 (<http://www.ieeff.org/141creolite.htm>).

<sup>24</sup> Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique de divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 54.

*misères*, 1986), or in the saga which follows one family from slavery, to marronnage in the mountains, to the apocalyptic irruption of Mont Pelée in Saint-Pierre, to the urbanization of the present day (*Texaco*, 1992).

The attempts of writers like Chamoiseau to explore questions of local creolization and local history has led certain literary critics to write about « national Martinican literature », citing Chamoiseau, Barnabe, and Confiant<sup>25</sup>. This designation of « national literature » is reminiscent of Glissant's political utopia, which he calls « the national project ». The similarity of these two terms denounces the illusion of a clear division between the political and poetic domains, because the two are always overlapping. In fact, Glissant and others believe that the blossoming of their poetic utopia will guide and encourage the birth of their political utopia (which today remains in gestation, not a « no place » but a « not yet »). The moment that the surrealists, cited by Marcuse, ask if the values of their artistic movement cannot also be applied to « the fundamental questions of life », reveals the fact that all aesthetic utopias are also concerned by political questions, and vice versa. Patrick Chamoiseau, in an interview about neo-liberal domination, said : « Pour s'opposer à cette nouvelle domination, nous devons créer ce que j'appelle le nouveau guerrier. En produisant un nouvel imaginaire, on peut d'ici 10 ans créer de nouveaux militants, de nouveaux économistes (...) Mon rôle est de fournir à l'imaginaire politique des amplifications »<sup>26</sup>. This vigorous commentary

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example: Luciano C. Picano, *Vers un concept de littérature nationale martiniquaise: évolution de la littérature martiniquaise au XXème siècle* (New York: P. Lang, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> « To fight against this new domination, we must create what I call the new warrior. By producing a new imaginary, we can in ten years from now create new

is in agreement with Glissant's ideas on the active role of literature in arming the collectivity with a repossession of history, and by encouraging the conception of new structures.

Poetic utopia, like political utopia, perhaps ultimately comes back to the comprehensive problem of work. It is the absence of work, of production, of real function in Martinique which empties Martinicans of self-esteem and which pushes them toward the dilution of Frenchification, toward the uncritical adoption of Western ways of thinking. Glissant often writes that the time of plantations was the last instance of significant production in Martinique. Creole culture blossomed during this period, including dances, song, stories, proverbs. Glissant clearly explains that : « Au fur et à mesure que le system des plantations se décompose, la culture populaire se délite »<sup>27</sup>. This is because « le système des Plantations ne donne pas suite à un nouveau système de production mais s'effrite et se dilue dans une non-production »<sup>28</sup>. Since the end of slavery, Martinique has largely stopped producing, exporting, or consuming locally made products. A true Caribbean poetic utopia, which plunges into the complexities of history and finds there implications for the future, which valorizes the rhizomatic roots of the Americas and the constantly changing relationship among these, can only emerge with strength in a political and economic situation of self-sufficiency, and thus, necessarily, of

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activists, new economists. (...) My role is to provide to the political imaginary some amplifications. » Patrick Chamoiseau, “La guerre doit etre mene sur le terrain de l’imaginaire.” Disponible en ligne:

[http://www.lesperipheriques.org/article.php3?id\\_article=353](http://www.lesperipheriques.org/article.php3?id_article=353).

<sup>27</sup> “As the plantation system fell apart, popular culture crumbled. » Glissant, *Le discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 311.

<sup>28</sup> « the plantation system was not followed by a new system of production, but dissolves and dilutes itself into a state of non-production. » *Ibid.*, p. 312.

production. The political utopias of Plato and More, which insist on the importance of work, reappear in the poetic concerns of Glissant, demonstrating the inextricable overlap of the poetic and political domains.

### Conclusion

The question of utopia is critical in the quest to understand the post-colonial situation of Martinique and the Caribbean in general. In the very vagueness of Glissant's « national project », we see the difficulties of conceiving an ideal in the face of political realities such as dependance, neo-liberalism, and consumerism. Despite these difficulties, we see in Glissant the courage to hope for a utopia, which would include widespread Caribbean unity, a repossession of history and of Martinican uniqueness, and economic self-sufficiency. The artistic side of this same utopia, which manifests itself in the « poetics of Relation » and in depictions of history and of creolization, constitutes an indirect path, an imaginative path, toward achieving these same objectives. Political hopes and artistic explorations are thus two different ruses by which Glissant tries to encourage the birth of new structures, to find a place for the « no place » that is utopia.