



Reclaiming the Past: Voicing Memory in Édouard Glissant's *The Fourth Century*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to bring forth the fissures of history where the memory of a nation accumulates perspectives of the marginalized groups in ways that their representations in national histories are either ignored or suffer from a similar tendency. The collective and individual experiences of such groups have traditionally been disavowed in favor of a much more inaccurate often distorted version of historical narrative that does not verify the actual past but reciprocates a hegemonic manipulation of memory. By evaluating the negation of history as it occurs in the context of colonialism through memory, I analyze the transmission of collective memory in the context of the Caribbean. The phenomenon that the memory is results from the fact that its dynamism struggles to trace a communal interpretation of a remedied awareness of the past. In the light of these arguments, the paper aims to understand the interplay between the present and the past—reimagining the presentness of the past and the pastness of the present and thus using memory to study the focal point of *The Fourth Century*.

Keywords: Caribbean, Slavery, Maroon, Collective Memory, Martinique

The neurotic, and at times, symbiotic relationship that the past establishes within the tropes of cultural trauma brings into play the question of identity. That is to say, the problematics around the mere mention of the past in turn determines its consequential crisis when practices of colonial indifferences inscribe the sense of national and personal identity into histories of erasure. Indeed, the history of Third World, in particular, the Caribbean is a history of marginalization—of versions and encounters that foreclose the otherness.

The Francophone Martiniquan author Édouard Glissant's *The Fourth Century* (1964) couples the subversive representation of the past to an obliterated inaccuracy persistent in the history of Martinique—and thus legitimizing the referentiality of knowledge different from the appropriated discourse. By incorporating the contradictory elements of Martiniquan history, Glissant's cultural politics is in opposition to other Martiniquan theorists such as Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. In a departure from the idea that all black people have uniform past, Glissant perceives Caribbean culture as more diverse and complex than African culture. Glissant conceptualizes the need for Caribbean people to embrace *Antillanité* (Caribbeanness) in his 1981 book *Le discours antillais* (Caribbean Discourse). For that reason, Glissant's writings on the history of Martinique are informed by a “creative approach” to situate the past since he is of the view that history as a discipline suffers from a “serious epistemological deficiency” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 61). Its application to the Caribbean would therefore result in “worsening the problem” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 61). To work around this, Glissant relies on *Créolité* or the plurality of creole culture as opposed to Aimé Césaire's notion of *Négritude* that exalts a single black identity. As a result, Glissant does not “begin with the imperative to remember and retrieve a lost tradition” whereas “Négritude . . . wants to remember the Africanness of origins and retrieve the animating aesthetic and ontological force of that origin” (Parham and Drabinski 3). What is more, unlike his predecessor Fanon's emphasis on psychopathological state of being a Negro or recognition of blackness, Glissant identifies multiplying relations so when “we speak of creolized cultures (like Caribbean culture, for example) it is not to define a

category that will by its very nature be opposed to other categories ('pure' cultures), but in order to assert that today infinite varieties of creolization are open to human conception, both on the level of awareness and on that of intention: in theory and in reality" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 140).

The novel's engagement with a creole understanding of history is informed by a refusal to accept an imaginatively recovered past in as much as the "search for the nature of history has led us to deny ambiguity and either to demarcate precisely and at all times the dividing line between historical process and historical knowledge or to conflate at all times historical process and historical narrative" (Trouillot 25). What makes the history of Martinique an amalgamation of paradoxical affinities and foregrounded ambiguities is undoubtedly reclamation of dissenting cultural identities. It should therefore be not surprising that Glissant's works commemorate "the official silence in departmentalised Martinique about the past, and the self-inflicted amnesia among the Martiniquan people, [by] propos[ing] new and disturbing insights into the perception of space and the importance of memory in that community" (Dash 54-55). Interestingly, the crisis of representation that Glissant's stories put forth consists of "Caribbean identities [that] are not only collective, political, or social but, like most other identities, also highly individual" (Praeger 5).

What does it mean, then to write the futurity—that is, living to nourish the experiences, obligations, and remembrances in order to survive "a history characterized by ruptures . . . that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade" (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 61)? *The Fourth Century* answers this as it situates the past's relation to the present and in turn anticipates a rethinking

of the history of slavery by focusing on the “[c]ultural turn [that] proposes that history, as another form of narration, does not have any particular claim to truth. Its interest in imaginative representations of the past restores the significance of memories for historical inquiry and legitimizes methodological pluralism” (Misztal 107). What prompts Glissant’s undertaking of futurity in this regard is the rendering of the colonial experience into a framework that would question the veracity of national history. In *The Fourth Century*, the past is accessed through the exploration of history and memory that allows us to engage in a continuity of experience—attempting to clarify the certainty of a contested space between the two that would otherwise remain unexplored if studied in isolation. It is for this reason that the novel “is not historical fiction in the conventional sense nor is it a family saga about dynasties, descendants and patriarchs” since Glissant tirelessly “tries to avoid a simple polarisation of Martiniquan history” (Dash 72).

The novel rather than rereading the official history of Martinique as it is taught in the schools dismantles it by introducing a narrative that builds on circumlocution and reflects the one-sidedness of the approved histories of slavery¹. The story follows the lives of two characters: Papa Longoué, a quimboiseur² and Mathieu Béluse, a schoolboy. It is here that Glissant juxtaposes the questions of history and memory as characters begin interacting—the boy asking about the history of the country and the old man narrating the knowledge he possesses by relying on his memory. The first pages of the novel set the tone in a forthright manner as Mathieu asks the question: “The past. Tell me about the past, Papa Longoué! Just what is it?” (*Fourth Century* 7). The past in question is, of course, not part of the official history of the country and therefore

cannot be found in the books or official accounts. In this way Glissant reinforces the idea that “[t]he negative effect of this nonhistory is therefore the erasing of the collective memory” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 62). Awareness of this past, at least in the context of the novel, highlights the perplexing necessity to excavate the multiplicity of the Caribbean pasts in a head-on manner:

The open-endedness of Glissant’s fiction makes any fixed definitive view of the past, any vision of a clear, linear and unambiguous line of descent, impossible. For Glissant, the Caribbean past is not one of epic accumulation but rather of ‘negative plenitude’. In *The Fourth Century*, Mathieu Beluse, this time more archivist than activist, must recognise the opaque, ironic and bewildering nature of the past. Mathieu in this novel is the incarnation of the Caribbean’s desperate longing for a clear genealogy, an idealized notion of history. In the novel he must recognise the problematic nature of the past and the extent to which his wishful vision of filiation simplifies New World history. (Dash 73-74)

It is indeed the lessons in history of Martinique by Papa Longoué that provides impetus to the story and becomes a focal point in Béluse’s understanding of his country’s actual past. It would not be wrong to argue, as a result, that there is making and unmaking of history in process once both characters interact with one another. Glissant’s choice of doing so in the novel could be attributed to the notion that “[t]he passion for or the preoccupation with history does not manifest itself in the writer as a need for a reserve of information to which he has easy access, not as a reassuring framework, but rather as the obsession with finding the primordial source toward which one struggles through revelations that have the

peculiarity (like myth in the past) of obscuring as well as disclosing” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 79).

In a sense, the novel is as much about the ambiguity of a ruptured past as it is about its retrieval—through political struggles and manifestations crushed in politico-cultural expressions marred by “the collective memory” that is “too often wiped out” and so “the Caribbean writer must ‘dig deep’ into this memory, following the latent signs that he has picked up in the everyday world” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 64). Given the history of Martinique’s problematic past³, the meditative quality with which Glissant implicates his characters’ sufferings, their gains and losses against the reimagined timeline that coincides with the “Caribbean discourse”, it is only natural that he complacently creates new environs of transculturation. Glissant’s interest as a writer lies in acknowledging the unacknowledged since he simply,

puts all the pain and significance of history on this shoreline. The alluvium ensures that the abyss remains inside, just as the suffering and redemption of the land takes account of the meaning of survival and all that it creates: the new, the unexpected, Caribbeanness. Experience is therefore outside the abyss insofar as beginning begins, but it is also always inside the abyss. Memory, however impossible, is part of the womb of individual and collective life” (Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage* 65).

Glissant’s highlighting of a dislocated and ruptured past in the context of the Caribbean originates from what he terms as reversion and diversion. He is of the view that the transplanted populations should not fixate on reversion, that is, “the obsession with a single origin” and so “one

must not alter the absolute state of being” since “[t]o revert is to consecrate permanence, to negate contact” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 16). It is at this point he introduces diversion “as the ultimate resort of a population whose domination by an Other is concealed: it then must search elsewhere for the principle of domination” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 20). In other words, it is by the inclusion of these two notions in his creative endeavors that Glissant systematically challenges the “Caribbean discourse” as he writes, “Diversion is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 26). How might this translate into a strategic consolidation of Caribbean identities? By interrogating the rooted identities and assumed hierarchies, Glissant in *The Fourth Century* proposes a narrative that will undertake a reading of four centuries of oppression in the Caribbean. At the heart of this text is the institution of slavery, its varied subjects’ experiences, and an inaccessibility to remember that which is the past. The dialogic sequence between Mathieu Béluse and Papa Longoué, at least, to an extent directs the reader toward the past—an intimate temporality of space that neither negates nor refutes that which is lost in time. Shalini Puri argues that “the nation or the state is [not] the only agent shaping collective identities or projects; instead, they permit the possibility of addressing precisely the gaps between those cognitive frames recognized by the state and those that are not” (11). In this context, the nation or the state becomes a site for the interplay between history and memory—desisting and at times enabling the identities to react to the lived

experience, including the forms of political exploitation, which is what Glissant seems to be interested in.

The Fourth Century's preoccupation with search for an attainable past extends the meaning of questions that Mathieu puts before Papa. In his repeated attempts to understand the present by returning to the beginning so as to know "what happened in that country back there across the ocean" Mathieu becomes dissatisfied with Papa's knowledge of the past since it does not answer his questions in a chronological manner (*Fourth Century* 39). It is so because the novel,

avoids being either an epic of maroon resistance or a nightmarish account of plantation slavery. It places great emphasis on the figure of the storyteller and attempts to reanimate the process by which memories and experiences are passed down through this figure who was neither maroon nor slave and who within the plantation could maintain some measure of imaginative and psychological independence" (Dash 78).

Part of Mathieu's dissatisfaction stems from his inability to understand the fact that the past as a whole can never be excavated or understood by simply tracing down through time and it for this very reason the storyteller in the novel is assigned,

[a] speech [that] is digressive, ambiguous and carries within it the complexities of the group's lived experience. Outside of the town, the world of official, written culture, far from the metropolitan centre and its estranging view of the island, the *conteur* Papa Longoué offers his memories of the past to the young Mathieu who seeks a version of the past that is a clear, linear chronicle of events.

However, Mathieu's desire for clarity comes up against a vision of the past that can only be described as a symbolic forest, an inextricable tangle of lives and events where the unexplained and the explainable intersect. (Dash 78-79)

It is self-evident that the novel does not aim to merely read the histories of displacement, diasporic traditions, trauma or continuation of colonialist affiliations in postcolonial societies, but endeavors to study the collective resistance to hegemony that usually suffers from an erasure of histories of difference and division. Focusing attention on the historical embeddedness in memory, the novel examines the implications of remembrance (including selective remembering and forgetting) in the process of decolonization—bringing forth the struggles of representation and articulations for recognition in the respective histories of the Caribbean. Suffice it to say that the novel presupposes such significant questions as: Whose history are we living? Whose memory are we memorizing? Is it a selected, negotiated recollection of the past? Are memories always politically loaded? Is there a truly apolitical connection between history and memory? Glissant here does not simply focus on analyzing the domestic and local histories in order to ascertain the colonial discourse; rather his interest specifically lies in probing the transmission of traumatic memory across generations by amplifying the nexus between history and memory and reading it beyond nation-based interpretations.

Glissant's meditation on the problematic histories of the Caribbean is by no means obfuscation. As a writer, Glissant returns to the site of slavery in order to examine what is missing from the history and the accounts of slavery. He foregrounds the difficulties with the memory

of slavery and highlights the importance of counter-memory by demonstrating that the lives of his characters represent a need to memorialize slavery and invariably challenge the official histories of the Caribbean. It should be noted that Mathieu first comes to Papa Longoué in the year 1935 which marks three centuries of French dominance over the island. Interestingly, Mathieu understands the past until that point as something that is linear. It is only when Papa Longoué offers a different version that the past begins to unfold before Mathieu in its entirety. Papa's story begins in 1788, a year before the French Revolution and extends all the way to 1946, encompassing wars, colonial violence, emancipation, births, deaths and is markedly different from the official history of the country. Simply put, the novel offers the reader that "the past is a collectively shaped, if not collectively experienced, temporal reference point that is formative of a collective and serves to orient those individuals within it. The past becomes present through symbolic interactions, through narrative and discourse, with memory itself being a product of both" (Eyerman 26).

The novel, as a result, reads slavery as a conflict against the European colonialism that inherently marked a new chapter in the history of Martinique by disavowal—and simply reduced its original history to "the little green book, about sixteen pages long, that reported its version of the history of the country: The Discovery, The Pioneers, The French Jurisdiction, The War with the English, The Natural Goodness of the Natives, The Mother — or Great — Country" (*Fourth Century* 259). Indeed, the history of Martinique as it turns out later is not limited to the school textbook that contains sixteen pages and as Papa Longoué in his incoherent yet true account begins to narrate to Mathieu, this notion solidifies into a fact. Papa Longoué

starts the dialogue in the eighteenth century with the arrival of a slave boat that brings Longoué and Béluse, his and Mathieu's ancestors to Martinique. While Béluse is taken to the Senglis plantation, Longoué successfully runs off into the hills and is believed to be the island's first maroon. Papa Longoué furthers the story as he tells Mathieu that a fight between the first sons of Longoué and Béluse eventually results in the killing of Liberté Longoué by Anne Béluse. The Martiniquan reality for this reason does not correspond to the official history and consequently cannot be understood or explained in a linear manner. To that end, by reading the family histories of Longoué and Béluse against the backdrop of the history of Martinique, Glissant turns the attention on the relationship between maroon and slave and limits the space given to the aspect of master and slave in the text. In so doing he not only attempts to recount that which has been forgotten in the writing of history but at the same time lends a voice to the struggles of those who could not acquire that which was theirs: the freedom to exist.

Papa Longoué's vision of the past does not follow a logical sequence of what happened; rather he connects and relates everything by focusing on the importance of intersecting memories—a conscious repertoire of experience. In his inability to acknowledge such an understanding of the past, Mathieu remains perturbed by the old man's ramblings:

“But you are going too fast!” said Mathieu. “Can’t you announce the dates one after the other and quit spinning around back and forth? Swirling like the dust at Fonds-Brulé, ho?”

So! You hope there's a ledger, one of those big notebooks they open up at the town hall right under

your nose to impress you, that can tell you why a Béluse followed a Longoué that way, or why Louise had obeyed the gesture he made when she already considered herself related to La Roche, or even how it happens that all those African languages flew out of their heads like a flock of finches? Open your ledgers, fine, you spell out dates; but as for myself the only thing I am able to read is the sun blowing down on my head like a big wind. And the first days, they are up there, a single cloud, almost blue, marking time, you try to climb into the throbbing but those are days heavier and deeper than the underside of the earth, they are hardly moving in the midst of the sky's brilliance, you can hardly see them start off in your direction, then bit by bit it turns into rain, it all gushes down, the day before yesterday is a sigh, yesterday is a flash of lightning, today is so bright in your eyes that you do not see it. Because the past is up there all tightly clustered about itself and so far away; but provoke it and it takes off like a herd of bulls, soon it is falling on your head faster than a cayali hit by a slingshot. (*Fourth Century* 215-16)

Furthermore, Longoué's understanding of the past can be placed within the framework of what Pierre Nora calls 'lieux de mémoire'. For Nora "there are lieux de memoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de memoire, real environments of memory" (7). In a sense, sites of memory only appear in the absence of real environments of memory or in other words when the memory is already lost. However, memory constantly evokes the past by channelizing the forgetfulness of that which is in flux. The pastness of the past therefore in a way results from the fragmentation of national consciousness when exposed to a surfeit of memories that are but silences

now assuming voices to the politics of both history and memory. Maurice Halbwachs points out that it “is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (38). However, it is important to understand that forms of collective memory have agendas that may not always be limited to remembrance conforming to nationalist discourse⁴. Problematic, as it may seem, the distortion of memory not only populates the spaces created by erasure and misplacement of such discourses but also reconstructs a past that is no longer present through the inventiveness of memory—in order to rework the historical narratives or truths from which it originates. For Halbwachs, the link between collective memory and society is important since it “help[s] us conserve and retrieve remembrances” (77). This is especially true in the case of representations of fragmented silences entangled in the gaps between generations when the past in question conflicts and varies while being scrutinized. Nora writes, “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting . . . vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer” (8). This openness to remembering and forgetting makes memory not only susceptible to distortion but also omits the certainty to authenticate its source. Bernard Stiegler argues that it is impossible to oppose “living memory to externalized, dead memory (hypomnematon) since externalized memory, as a supplement, constitutes living memory as knowable” (69). In fact, the exteriorization of memory has resulted in a loss of memory and of knowledge as “the present experience of

exteriorization as memory loss renders the question of hypomnesia a political one” (Stiegler 69). But above all, “One memorizes only by forgetting, by effacing, by selecting what deserves to be retained from all that could have been retained” (Stiegler 80). It is safe to assume, as a result, that memory is inspired even formed through association with the present and within the realms of society. On the other hand, history largely remains a recreated viewpoint of an emerging present that is embedded in consequential actions.

It should be noted that “despite the fact that the tricentenary of attachment to the metropole is being officially celebrated the lived history of the ‘pays reel’ (‘the real country’) is not determined by dates and events. As the title states, it is really the fourth century for the people who have come to Martinique after the establishment of plantation slavery” (Dash 80-81). Papa Longoué stresses that his awareness of the past is not the officially recorded version but a collection of memories passed down from one generation to another. Far from being a succession of simultaneity that consecrates to the awareness of the past, the collective memories reproduce the irreproducible by going beyond the avenues of remembrances and nostalgia:

It is the collective memory that orients a group, providing the temporal and cognitive map... Collective memory unifies the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it, and which, because it can be represented as narrative and as text, attains mobility. The narrative can travel, as individuals travel, and it can be embodied, written down, painted, represented, communicated, and received in

distant places by isolated individuals who can thereby be united culturally, if not physically, with the collective. This process links collective memory to the formation of collective identity and brings it close to myth and to ideology. (Eyerman 25)

In addition to the vagueness and ambiguity that seem to be a salient feature in the novel, the fragmented certainty with which Papa Longoué is able to include the past in his narrative universalizes the continuity of an existing past in the present. Certainly, the ability to produce alternative knowledge engages the reader in a sort of a discovery that has in its grasp an immanent history. It would not be wrong to say that the novel links the individual trauma to the suffering of the collectivity—affirming to the Caribbean reality with no end or beginning:

And indeed the infinite country back there beyond the ocean was no longer that marvelous place those who were deported had dreamed of, but the irrefutable evidence of the old days, the source of a revived past, the repudiated portion that would in turn repudiate the new land, its population and its work. The Longoués who had run dry were buried in everyone. In a Béluse whose exhilaration and impatience took knowledge right to the edge of the road where soon it was shared with everyone” (*Fourth Century* 293-94).

Memory of Papa Longoué intersects and reverberates in the persistence of the imaginary—in response to a world of opaqueness, a life of unmapped obscurity. Return to a seemingly distant past does not deter Longoué from sharing his knowledge with Mathieu. What meaning, then, does the future hold for the likes of Longoué? The answer to this would be simple: “Few people would doubt that the

middle passage must have constituted a traumatic shock at the time. But for Glissant, it is not just an individual trauma; rather, it constitutes what recent psychoanalytic literature calls transgenerational trauma. Glissant thus links individual and collective experience, psychic life and historical experience” (Fischer 137). Wrought with uncertainty and paradoxes, the novel does not offer closure in the traditional sense of the word, but rather attempts to study the past not as a site of remembrance or nostalgia but a focal point that postulates the interplay between history and memory in order to recover the silenced histories that have been either left out or distorted in favor of blasting the claims of marginalized. It is so because “[t]he marginalization of the slave heritage stands in sharp contrast to the embellishment of the white Creole colonial lifestyle and property. Although slaves and masters can hardly be dissociated in historical accounts of the past, this is systematically the case with seventeenth- to nineteenth-century vestiges. The aspects of the past that are unblemished by slavery give rise to wistful reverie while the unmistakable symbols of the slave heritage are abandoned. As a result, the slaves’ impact on the islands’ historical and cultural processes is marginalized and forgotten” (Reinhardt 137-38). Glissant’s focus, therefore, in the novel is to understand the role of history and memory in the context of colonialism since the past could only be reclaimed with the help of a framework that interprets the phenomenon of national consciousness and the tendency to resist rewriting of an actual history.

End Notes:

1. Glissant demonstrates the role of Mathieu, as the protagonist who is clearly not happy with the “ideological strait-jacket that has been placed on the past” (Dash 80). Mathieu wants to detach himself completely from the official history since it downplays “his desire to get a clear picture of the past from

- Papa Longué” (Dash 80). This is apparent as “he remembered how . . . the country was all stirred up and madly celebrating. Something called the Tricentennial, now proverbial among the schoolboys because it had been drummed into them day after day, a litany” (*Fourth Century* 258-59).
2. A *quimboiseur* is a sorcerer but in the context of the novel, Papa Longoué is depicted as “the old man of the forest, a healer, seer, and story-teller” who “knows the oral tradition and its relation to the powers of the land and the forces of nature” (*Fourth Century*).
 3. Betsy Wing highlights point of connection between “a country whose history is composed of ruptures” and “crazed history . . . as its destiny” (*Poetics of Relation* xii). By the same token, Glissant has “a shared poetics and a common spirit of critique” with William Faulkner (Wiedorn 194). Not only that, “In Faulkner’s version of modernism Glissant sees clearly that revolutionary techniques of writing are always motivated by a presupposition in the real world and are never external forms superimposed on supposedly stable historical material (such material does not exist)” (Azérad 207). Faulkner and Glissant are both formed by their troubled geographical-historical complexities. It is worth noting that Faulkner as a white Southerner and Glissant as a black descendant of slaves might seem to approach their respective problems differently but both authors’ works represent a burden of the past. These cultural and historical underpinnings assiduously make solicitous inquiries about Martinique’s problematic past. For a detailed analysis of Faulkner’s influence on Glissant’s works, see J. Michael Dash, especially chapter 3.
 4. The departmentalization of Martinique in 1946 sought to decolonize Martinique by politically homogenizing it into the French state. Marred by colonialism and a multi-ethnic populace, French assimilation overlooked all cultural distinctions and offered a Eurocentric model. This in turn gave rise to pro-independence and nationalists political parties such as *Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais* (MIM) and *Parti Progressiste Martiniquais* (PPM) that suffered from their own political attempts at economic subsidization. The very failure of these parties to create a national discourse or cultural autonomy implies that departmentalization resulted in continuation of colonial discourses.

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