

Édouard Glissant's Worldmentality: An Introduction to *One World in Relation*

By Manthia Diawara

I find it quite pleasant to pass from one atmosphere to another through crossing a border. We need to put an end to the idea of a border that defends and prevents. Borders must be permeable; they must not be weapons against migration or immigration processes.
—Édouard Glissant in *One World in Relation*¹

Édouard Glissant's seminal treatise *Philosophie de la Relation* (Philosophy of Relation) was published in 2008,² at a time when the so-called *nouveaux philosophes* were taking sides in the debate about the clash of civilizations and then-president of France Nicolas Sarkozy was looking for scapegoats in his polemics on the "decay of national identity." I remember attending a conference that year in Paris at the Maison de l'Amérique Latine, on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, titled *Politiques du Tout-Monde* (The Politics of the One-World). The philosopher François Noudelmann, the convener, described the event as a response to "walls going up everywhere to stop the free movement of people, nations withdrawing into themselves, and people returning to identities predetermined by absolutistic genealogies."

The focus of the Paris conference was on Glissant's key concepts of relation, opacity, creolization, and disaffiliation. The Martinique-born writer and thinker was, of course, the first philosopher of post-filiation, by which I refer not only to his rebellious thesis of disaffiliation, in the sense of breaking with a genealogy and tradition of Western and non-Western philosophies concerned with binary opposition and contradiction, but also to him as a self-engendered philosopher. By this I mean that he re-created himself in order to surpass a pathological inextricability, which he associated with our contemporary human condition. Indeed, to say that Glissant is a post-filiation philosopher is mostly to recognize his role as a theorizer of the concept of relation, which moves beyond the oppositional discourse of the same and the other, operating instead with a new vision of difference as an assembler of the "dissimilars." His idea recognizes and enables a relation between different people and places, animate and inanimate objects, visible and invisible forces, the air, the water, the fire, the vegetation, animals and humans.

Born in Sainte-Marie, Martinique, in 1928, Glissant studied at the Lycée Victor Schoelcher in the Martinique capital, Fort-de-France. Frantz Fanon was a student there as well; Aimé Césaire was a teacher. In the 1945 French parliamentary elections, Césaire ran on the communist platform, and Glissant worked on his campaign. After moving to Paris to study ethnology and philosophy, Glissant became a poet and a novelist, publishing his first books of poetry as well as the essay collection *Soleil de la conscience* (*The Sun of Consciousness*, 1956), and began to work for the anti-colonization movement. He eventually returned to Martinique, where he founded the *Acoma* journal and the Institut Martiniquais d'Études, before settling in both the United States and Paris. He taught for decades, published his remarkable *Poétique de la relation*

Manthia Diawara, *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*, K'a Yéléma Productions, 2009, 48 min., film still

(*Poetics of Relation*, 1990), among many other books, and was nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1992.

In sum, Glissant the poet became a philosopher to reveal the fluidity of relation beyond the closed doors of systems of discrimination, segregation, and rejection, and to insist that difference is more constructive when viewed as a by-product of solidarity and conciliation between two or more elements of the *Tout-Monde*. In the Glissantian “worldmentality,” relation and difference link entities that need each other’s energy to exist in beauty and freedom. Convinced that Western philosophy was unable to extricate itself from the privilege of filiation and legitimation—and to maintain a humane and equal relation with the other, which accounts for more than three-fourths of the population of the earth, as well as with the environment—Glissant had to create himself as an “orphan philosopher to speak for a new condition of the world.” I term this a “worldmentality,” as opposed to the state of affairs produced by globalization and neoliberal forms of accumulating capital. Some of Glissant’s precursors and peers included Dubois, Marx, Deleuze, as well as Césaire and Fanon. Nevertheless, these were all oppositional and dialectical thinkers in their various ways, with perhaps the exception of Césaire, who—like Glissant—often relied on poetry and intuition to make sense of his world.

I became a close friend of Édouard and Sylvie Glissant in the early 1990s, soon after he began teaching at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). I had always been an admirer of Glissant’s work, which I considered an antidote to the pathological excesses of the multiculturalist movements of absolutist identity politics in the 1980s and ’90s. But it wasn’t until 2008 that Glissant granted me his permission to make a film about his ideas. Naturally, then, I came with my camera to the “Politics of the One-World” conference in Paris, hoping that it would provide me with some ideas about the film I was then preparing on Glissant and his work.

My biggest surprise there was this: Glissant waited until the end of the event to take me aside, into one of the small rooms on the second floor, where he said he wanted to introduce me to a man from Mali. Glissant told me that the man wanted to meet me because he had heard that I was from Mali and that I taught at a university in the United States. Glissant said that he and his circle of French intellectuals and activists had worked hard in the summer of 2007 to stop the French government from deporting this man and his family, along with several hundred other Malians, back to their country.

Glissant also said that meeting me would give the Malian man hope, because we were both from the same region of the world, the “South,” and that I had succeeded in the “West.” I was surprised to hear such language from a poet and philosopher of relation and identities acquired through errantry. Nevertheless, I was also curious about Glissant’s role as an activist on behalf of the *sans-papiers*, the so-called illegal immigrants in France. So I, too, became eager to meet this man, and I wondered how I might include him in my film on the Glissantian *Tout-Monde*. Indeed, everybody at the conference was talking, in one way or the other, about art and politics, and about how Glissant’s vision of the world was helping us to change our mentalities toward the other, and how to approach our own identities as constantly “creolized” for the benefit of living cultures. The place was packed with poets, musicians, philosophers, doctors, politicians, radical journalists, fashion designers, and students who had no problem understanding the “world-mentality”—a new world with a new mentality—that Glissant had written about in *Philosophie de la Relation*. To that end, I wondered how a former illegal immigrant would fit in, and how he would speak for himself. Perhaps, I thought, I could use him as a talking head in my film.



Manthia Diawara, Édouard Glissant: *One World in Relation*, K'a Yéléma Productions, 2009, 48 min., film still

But Glissant, who was always suspicious of conventional forms of realism and the ideas of discovery and possession, quickly warned me against such a documentary style, which he said was full of conceit, and therefore banal and artistically insignificant. He told me that he had once attended the Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC), the prestigious film school in Paris, but that he did not pursue filmmaking because of the medium's traditional desire for transparency and making sense. I asked him about his favorite films. He said that they included Jean Rouch's *Les Maîtres Fous* (*The Mad Masters*, 1955), for the long takes, and the Italian neorealist films, which were more poetic, and therefore more opaque, he said, than the genre presumed.

I was now more than anxious to meet our man from Mali, while at the same time hoping that he and I would not disappoint Glissant by exhibiting an exclusive ethnic identity (our Negritude), or by being too exotic (authentic-indigenous people according to anthropology). After greetings and introductions, Glissant left the Malian man and me in the room, as if to give us our privacy. The man was about fifty years old, dressed in a traditional blue long-sleeved gown, with gold embroidery around the neck. His name was Mamadou Soumare, and he told me that he had insisted on meeting me for only one reason, which was to thank Glissant for all that he had done for him and his family, and, most of all, for including him in his "world," as if he, Mamadou, was as learned and important as all the people who were there in the seminar room. He said to tell Glissant that even though he, Mamadou, spoke only elementary French, he understood what everybody was saying in the conference. He repeated that all he wanted from me was to thank Glissant on his behalf; he didn't want anything else.

Mamadou and I said good-bye in Soninke, our mother tongue, and he ended the ritual by praying to God to bring us more peace for the rest of the evening. I can still see him, in his blue gown, mixing in the crowd on the Boulevard Saint-Germain, and disappearing into the Métro at the Rue du Bac. As I said, I was at first anxious about meeting Mamadou Soumare because I was not sure what would be expected of me, both from him and from Glissant. I did not want to disappoint the one or the other. Now I realized that they both wanted me to relay a message to the other, that they were using me as yet another pathway, not a cleared road, but the trace of one, for their relation. I had become another layer in their opaque manner of relating while communicating. What I first thought was a chance meeting between two people from Mali, attending a conference in Paris, had been completely orchestrated. I can see now that Glissant had magisterially simplified the illustration of his concept of intuitive relation, which he wrote about in a very poetic, complex style in *Philosophie de la Relation*. He wanted me to take back to the United States something that could not be taught in a textbook.

Just the day before, Glissant and I had been talking about my film project at dinner with Agnès B., the French fashion designer who was an admirer of his work. During our meal, Glissant had criticized what he called the transparency of the cinematic image, and the systematic and dogmatic stitching together of shots to make meaning. For him, what was left out of the frame was as important as what was revealed. Good films for him were those that self-consciously played with showing as a form of disguising, those that reveal by deferring meaning, as if to show that by giving an identity, they were deliberately hiding its otherness.

I had taken advantage of that discussion on cinema to ask Glissant if there were ways to simplify his ideas for a wider presentation in American universities, and if my film might be one of the means of that effort. He answered that his ideas were already simple; what was needed most for the Americans, and many French people, was to change their

Manthia Diawara, *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*, K'a Yéléma Productions, 2009, 48 min., film still

frame of mind from one of globalization to *mondialité*, or worldliness. He suggested that we needed to enter into a state of world and mind that was less prone to discovery and conquest, and to espouse a philosophy of relation that looked at our differences not as that which divide us, but which link us individually and collectively in the *Tout-Monde*, where the communication between our intuitions knew no frontiers of language, territory, or power. As for my film, Glissant said, looking at me and smiling, if he were I, he'd wait until we were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and point the camera at the mass of water, its abyssal expanse. That would be the whole film in one shot, for him.

Ironically, the next day, Mamadou Soumare would tell me to relay to Glissant that, even though his French was rudimentary, he understood what the philosophers and poets at the conference were saying. Could that be what Glissant meant by entering into worldliness, by attempting to understand the *Tout-Monde* by approaching it as an opacity instead of as a transparency? Could that acuteness of Mamadou Soumare's intuition be as eloquent and as sharp as our mastery of the French language? As Glissant notes in *Philosophie de la Relation*:

The greatness stems from the intuitive equilibrium (individual or collective) of the relations with the Other, when it is a question of one country with another, and elsewhere from the acuity of a perception of a world esthetics, the protector of views of balance or breach [in the harmony of these relations], when said esthetics moves between one culture of the humanities to another: equilibrium and acuity, intuition and perception, all sustained within equal ratios.³

My brief meeting with Mamadou Soumare was the moment of my repositioning myself in regards to Glissant's texts. Prior to that, I had been reading him, not unlike most readers, as a theorist of postcolonial, Black Atlantic, minoritarian, and oppositional studies. As such, I considered his collection of essays *Caribbean Discourse* (1989)⁴, for example, as a treatise of post-Négritude criticism. Seen by many as the launch pad of the Créolité movement, this book also introduced the Black studies field in the United States to rhizomatic thinking, African diaspora studies, and *métissage*. Now I felt, however, that continuing to read Glissant simply in the lineage of postcolonial theory was to position him as an oppositional theorist instead of one of relation. For example, if we were trained to look at the concept of difference in oppositional criticism as being against a meaning or an epistemological construction of the other, a rereading of Glissant would compel us to approach the concept differently, as that which assembled and related the diverse elements of the *Tout-Monde*, including those that are invisible to the sight.

Now, with Glissant's new insights, we have to take for granted that every "truth" and every "reality" did not just come to us as the regimes of scientific deduction and transparency would like us to believe, but that some of their manifestations come to us *intuitively*, like a sparkle of light in the dark. By asking us to look at difference differently, Glissant wants us to realize its essential role in the construction of the *Tout-Monde*. To paraphrase Glissant, we must not surrender to the partitioning of the world, nor to irreconcilable differences, binary divisions, opposition of species, and genres. We must fight the desire to divide ourselves into threatening diversities, which remove any sense of poetry and imaginary from our differences. The sparkle of truth and reality must not be isolated from the darkness and opacity out of which they emerge. Glissant was in no doubt that postcolonial discourse, like the master narrative of Eurocentrism that it opposes, has equally evaded this opacity, in order to reach easy conclusions. He felt this discourse took the side of reason against poetry, transparency over complexity, and

thus contributed as much to the destruction of lives and the environment (nationalism, for example, leading to violence and immigration), as did their former colonizers and now economic and cultural oppressors. Thus does Glissant keep reminding us:

Let us never forget: that the poem was entombed in a collapse of the earth. By habit, rather than commodity, the singularity and multiplicity of things were presented as divided couples and dualities, before the genres and species were discovered. This cadence allowed for a better distinction between things (we still think and react in this dual manner, and often take a surprising pleasure from it). But we're also waiting for the renewed perception of differences to reveal themselves as such, and for the poem to reemerge once more.⁵

Philosophie de la Relation is a book about how intuition, nature, and poetry, which entertain the darkness of opacity, were taken out of communication, and how our humanities were left only in the hands of systems of linear and discriminating monolinguisms. Everything that did not reflect the one and the same was cleared out. In fact, the book opens with the death of the poem, coinciding with the birth of philosophy. Glissant, the octogenarian, laments the fact that he was no longer able to hear the sound of the cascading river water coming down from the mountain of Bezaudin, his native village in Martinique. Nature, too, was destroyed by the rise of technologies of mass production. So the poem, our humanity, was lost in the abyss, like those captured Africans who were pushed into the Atlantic Ocean, with no one to mourn them. The Atlantic had been their mausoleum, just as it is now a large cemetery for Africans and other people from the South attempting to cross over to America or Europe.

One of the lessons that my meeting with Mamadou Soumare taught me was that for my film, like for everything else concerning Glissant, the forms of communication among and between people and their environment were intuitive and opaque. And any attempt to reduce or evacuate these complex means of communication for the sake of clarity could be disastrous with regards to the humanities and to the environment. Mamadou Soumare understood Glissant and his work because he knew that his poems, songs, and myths were about those lost in the opacity of the sea. Mamadou Soumare could relate and retell the poems and songs of Glissant and his colleagues, even though he could not speak their language, because he could share their feelings. Glissant, too, understood Mamadou Soumare because he shared with him his suffering, which he relayed to the rest of us through his own poems of the Atlantic as the mausoleum of captured Africans and through his philosophy of relation, whereby we often find ourselves by identifying with the problems of others.

At that Paris conference in 2008, Glissant and Mamadou Soumare were inviting me to join them in sharing our intuitions of the new humanities, our wounds in getting here, and our celebrations of it, without triumphalism and without regard to who suffered most or came first, or who was entitled to special legitimizing hierarchies set up by the logocentrist systems that ruled the old world of master and slave, neoliberal and xenophobic nationalisms. There, I suddenly understood that whatever film I was going to make on Glissant would have to include the Atlantic and the natural vegetation of Martinique, to bring those two places into relation, and to make them echo beyond the inextricable divisions of race, gender and class. It would have to open our imaginations to the possibilities of disaffiliation, racial contamination, creolization, and fluid frontiers.

My film, I decided, was going to borrow from Glissant's and Mamadou Soumare's strong belief that intuition is a

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“science” that is shared individually and collectively, one that gives us the confidence to speak in our different accents in front of all the languages of one world in relation. I came to the conclusion, there, that my film would evolve around three themes: departure (the death of the poem and the beginning of discovery and conquest and nation building); the middle (to coincide with what Glissant alternatively calls the middle passage, the abyss, or opacity); and the return (where free people are striving to recover the poem, to accept difference positively as that which united us, not in conquest, but in solidarity). And the eventual film stayed close to these initial ideas, as it chronicles my travels with Glissant on the *Queen Mary II* across the Atlantic from South Hampton, UK, to Brooklyn, New York, as well as my stay with him in his native Martinique in the Caribbean, where we spoke about his work and early life. I hoped then, and continue to hope now, that such a moving-image work would have the potential to provoke the intuitions of spectators in different locations of the world and to reveal the traces of the Glissantian poem. As Glissant, the technician of disaffiliation and conjurer of the poem, notes in our film, “On the slave ship we lost our languages, our gods, all familiar objects, songs, everything. We lost everything. All we had left was traces. That’s why I believe that our literature is a literature of traces.”⁶

1 *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*, dir. Manthia Diawara, French with English subtitles, 48 minutes (K’a Yéléma Productions, 2009).

2 Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

3 *Ibid.*, p. 29. Translated by the author.

4 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (University Press of Virginia, 1989).

5 Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation*, p. 15. Translated by the author.

6 *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*.