

# REPRESENTATIONS OF MEMORY IN ÉDOUARD GLISSANT'S *LA CASE DU COMMANDEUR*

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C'est en connaissant son passé que,  
dans nos pays, on échappe à l'ambigu  
traumatique des refus et des rejets  
inconscients.

Édouard Glissant

Man can be considered a collective being by excellence. Pragmatically, he depends on the capacity of collective organization to tame his surroundings and to accomplish the series of tasks that are indispensable to his survival and to the well being of a number of people. However, what holds the group together is not only these actual actions but a subjective capacity of settling a series of moral codes that regulate the very structure of the collectivity. This subjectivity is inscribed in the very basis of a nation or society, and takes all its force from past experiences that make a body of persons choose to react one way instead of another. This subjectivity is the nourishment of what one may concretely call culture, and is responsible not only for ways of acting, but more importantly for ways of seeing the world around. The group's ability to perceive things depends on this subjectivity that one might call the sense of collective memory, an existential topography of the common past from which each and every person cannot dissociate himself. In other words, culture is mostly built on collective memory.

When Édouard Glissant writes "la mémoire collective est notre urgence: manque, besoin," (*L'intention poétique* 187) he insists once more on the retrieval on the part of Martiniquan people of their memory, aiming, through this restoration, for the construction of a sense of community, of collectivity. His assertion identifies a lack and a necessity, and mainly supposes the existence of this memory. However, if a Martiniquan collective memory exists somewhere, why is it so difficult to find it? Where is it hidden? The writings of Glissant often refer back to this question. Is it suppressed by the prominence of official history -- the same history that preached in schools to a majority of black students that their ancestors were the Gauls,<sup>1</sup> that, for the sake of historical dignity, erased or tried to erase important details of black people's everyday life from Martinique's past?<sup>2</sup> Or, is it hidden in folk tales, religious practices, songs and proverbs carefully preserved by the elders of the community? In his literary writings, Glissant never provides an answer, he only displays a need for rediscovery and recuperation of hidden memories, mainly

by revealing the symptoms of a longing for memory and the results provoked by its lack.

Memory, in Glissant's books, appears always as a crossing between official history and the popular historical knowledge, from the most public to the most private. From this combination he derives a probable collective memory that gives birth to very original chronicles that reflect on the individual in relation to himself and to his community. This collective memory is probable but not necessarily true, for the memory of the dominated, the colonized is in a high degree dissimilar to the apologetic and authorized memory of the peoples of history. Depending sometimes on the oral tradition or "la suite capricieuse des paroles," (*Le quatrième siècle* 14) the memory of those who rose on the margin of history may create an indefinite number of impasses on its very process, since nothing in it is certain, reliable or fixed. Collective memory for the marginal peoples is mainly based on uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

So, in order to supply a support, a foundation to their memory, the community tends to create, in the collective imagery, a succession of symbols that will reflect the unknown passages of the past, of the hidden or of the lost collective memories. Édouard Glissant will access this symbology to explain the problematics of memory in Martiniquan society. Voids, gaps and blanks are some of the symbols that Glissant will select to attempt to redefine the notion of history and collective memory in his country.

A typical example of Glissant's quest for collective memory and his use of the already mentioned symbols is *La case du commandeur* (1981). The novel is completely built on the idea of memory. First, the title itself is sufficient to allude to the notion of memory. The word "commandeur", the overseer, transports the reader to an earlier time in Martinique's past that belongs to the realm of memory. However, associated to the word *case* -- cabin, hut, house, home --, it receives a much stronger semantic complexity, for the *case* is the privileged center of all memories of the individual. The *case* is the geometrical center of a person's world. The neighborhood, the city, the region, the country and its nation built in the individual's mind according to the limits established by the house. For instance, in his analysis of the phenomenology of the house, Gaston Bachelard builds part of his discourse on the idea of the house as a memory keeper. "La maison," he writes, "est une des plus grandes puissances d'intégration pour les pensées, les souvenirs et les rêves de l'homme" (Bachelard 26)<sup>4</sup>. The overseer's cabin was the center in which all slave's lives converged, where all their memories became one, where the so desired collective memory could be found. Thus, "la case du commandeur" is a place of collection of all the memories of a family or families who referred to this place.

Second, the two epigraphs of the work set forth the search for something that grows like a "yam's root." Something "qu'il faut fouiller longtemps... loin au fond de la terre" (7). Something that can not be perceived on the surface of a society, like official history for instance, but as something that is kept out of sight. Even in his critical essays, Glissant tends to use this very image: "Parce que la mémoire historique fut trop souvent raturée, l'écrivain antillais doit "fouiller" cette mémoire, à partir des traces latentes qu'il a repérées dans le réel." (*Le discours antillais* 132)

Moreover, the choice of this tuberous root as representation of collective memory seems extremely appropriate, for, in order to grow, this plant needs to be fed not by one single root but by many extensions of its main body. Like the yam, collective memory is nourished by several memories that more or less independently create together the memories of a society.<sup>5</sup> Also, the yam is not easily extracted, one needs to explore each of its small extensional roots to be able to pull it out of the soil. Through this comparison, the epigraphs announce the structure of the book as a difficult process of knowledge and self-knowledge through the roots of history, the hidden collective memory. This memory belongs as much to the individual as to the community and depends on the voice of the one contrasted with the voice of the collective. But, above all, as Carla Fratta states, it confirms that: "il problema dell'identità della comunità martinicana è prospettato da Glissant come un problema che affonda le sue radici nella storia" (Fratta 449).

Consequently, the idea of memory can be detected in the very structure of the book. It is composed of three chapters fenced by two extracts of newspapers. It is interesting to see that to surround the chapters by news has in itself a memory related meaning. The news is the representation of official history, which is a polished memory invented to create, through the historical detail, a mirage of the past. The recourse of newspaper language describes the craziness of Mycéa, one of the main characters, and depicts how shallow the official discourse can be to comprehend a people's reality. In order to find a people's real memory and the origin of its problems, one needs to go further, deeper, or inside the official discourse. Cilas Kemedjio seems to support such a hypothesis when she writes: "the residents testimony supported by the reporter and the authorities, functions as a discourse of truth" (Kemedjio 73). In this manner, the structure of the book indicates a necessity of knowledge beyond the official information, and, concomitantly, proposes a conduct of action against "institutional conformism" (Kemedjio 74).

Memory in Glissant's works could be divided into two categories: memory as a means to action and memory as mere revival of times past. The first category analyses history as a trial, a project, or a desire, but also as something

project or desire. All events that seemed to fail, interrupt or mislead the logical historical processes, and all occurrences that turned into a contradiction are refaced by memory as a conjectural or existential lack of solution and, then, packed to serve as food for thought. Memory can be digested and, thus, inspire new perspectives and new possible behaviors. Memory is, in this case, based on objectivity, building a barrier between the individual and the facts, and consequentially, helps and protects him.

In Glissant's *La lézarde* (1958), one of the main characters, Mathieu, is obsessed with the necessity of collective memory. A young historian like Mycéa herself, he quickly becomes aware of the implausibility of the official discourse. He observes in it too many blanks, numerous omissions. However, instead of letting himself be trapped by the voids of memory, he decides to disregard official history and starts to recollect traces of the collective memory with the aid of an old healer and storyteller who had the power to see "une forêt immense, dans un pays lointain" (196). In his *L'intention poétique* (1969), Glissant explains this positive conduct: "la stérilité est repoussée par le flux d'une histoire hier méconnue et qui, à mesure qu'elle est dévoilée, fertilise l'être d'un flot de possibles insoupçonnés, d'espoirs neufs" (*L'intention poétique* 187).

The second category of memory is not a solution or, at least, an evasion. It is a trap. It causes the strong presence of the past in the individual's present. It creates an imbalance. In other words, memory becomes an obsession that prevents the normal course of the present with his fascination of the past. The individual sees without seeing. His visions are nothing but memory. Everything around him is a mirage from which he can not escape. Memory, as such, is totally subjective. It exists only within the experiencer's mind. Moreover, its subjectivity generates a system in which the individual who is persecuted by memory becomes the center of all the profound influences suffered by him and by his group. This instability affects the notion of future.

The present ceases to see existence as a heterogenic process followed by infinite possibilities of outcomes. On the contrary, memory gives to the present the idea of immobility, of a homogeneous view of linear time. It combines past, present and future into an infinitival moment.<sup>6</sup> This moment is existence frozen, life paralyzed, as a result of unknown and unresolved past events that affect the flow of an individual's life.<sup>7</sup> The same process may happen to a whole society and is commonly called "collective trauma" (Le Goff 146).

Most of the titles and subtitles of the three chapters that constitute *La case du commandeur* evoke to the reader the notion of collective memory. Some will bring to the reader's mind the concept of the economy of the past, an arrangement of parts of memories, for such is the function of inventories,

registers, acts, bestiaries, and as an extension even processions. All these words suppose a detailed, itemized list of things or persons. They also imply the accountancy, from beginning to end, of a closed amount, and, thus, consequentially relate to additions and subtractions that have already come to an end. They represent a final sum that, necessarily, belongs to the past. This situation of endless count and recount of events of a previous time is what was referred before as "frozen moment," the trap that keeps "la tête en feu," looking for traces, vestiges, marks, forgotten ways that could lead to a reconstruction of memory. The trapped individual lives in a center of time, "le mitan du temps". Past is his eternal present and his future depends on his capacity of escaping from the perpetual circle that involves him. Glissant reiterates this necessity of understanding memory and of being unable to become liberated from it through the image of the "oroboros," "la bête longue qui tourne dans la tête," (233) "le serpent originel" (30).<sup>8</sup> At the end of the book, Chérubin, the madman who inhabits an old and abandoned<sup>9</sup> sugar factory, tries to explain to Mycéa what she cannot understand: "Vous avez perdu vos enfants et la bête tourne dans ta tête. Chérubin sait. Écoute, il faut monter le temps comme un vaillant cavalier si tu ne veux pas que le temps te monte comme un zébu" (233).

Among the many characters, Marie Celat, already mentioned as Mycéa, and Pythagore Celat, her father, are the best examples of the representations of memory in *La case du commandeur*. In effect, the very organization and genesis of the argument of the book rely on their obsession of the past, their necessity of knowing, and their lack of a linear collective memory that could lead them to the explanation of the present. Both are defined through symbolic references to the untouchable memory they long for. One of Glissant's privileged images, the rock, figures prominently in the description of Mycéa, but its role has been appropriately transformed. From a symbol for endurance or foundation, the rock has been transformed into a symbol of immobility and opacity. Mycéa is an educated and cultivated person, but her formal knowledge becomes a barrier to the development of her subjective notions of what collective memory is. Memory is to her something through which she cannot see and, at the same time, that she cannot remove from her mind. The association of Mycéa with rocks become visible all through out the novel. She is born the day the volcano explodes in Martinique (23). Since her birth, she embodies the nature of the rocks, and that is why she will always be referred to as the "empierré," (22) the "immobile" (34) or the "statufiée" (44). Furthermore, she is the main character in the chapter entitled "roche de l'opacité" and, thus, the most suitable representation of a solid knowledge of the past that cannot extrapolate the boundaries of the individual.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, Pythagore a simple and uneducated man, who stayed illiterate until an advanced age. The urge for memory comes to him naturally. He has questions and cannot find answers. He is the representation of something that must be filled in order to exist. He knows that he holds within himself an empty space, but he does not know to put in it. He could be described as the literary symbol of the "gouffres", the three chasms that, according to Glissant in his *L'intention poétique*, prevent Martiniquan people from retrieving their collective memory. He is the typical product of the unrooting perpetrated by the slave trade and its consequent psychological troubles in the individual. Glissant explains: "L'arrachement à la matrice, voilà donc où commence à suppurer l'oubli, non, la mémoire déracinée (...) Mer à traverser, entre le réel et le souvenir" (*L'intention poétique* 188). Papa Longoué, the sage of *Le quatrième siècle* (1964), will also refer to the disastrous moment in black history when unrooting determined a very difficult relationship of Martiniquans with their collective memory: "Et aucun de nous ne connaît ce qui s'est passé dans le pays là-bas au delà des eaux, la mer a roulé sur nous tous..." (59)

So, Pythagore, the representation of the memory as a void, serves also as a metaphor for the unspeakable. He is always trying to "éclairer la part de nuit qui bougeait en lui" (39). Memory in him is something that despite its existence cannot be put in words, cannot be said, cannot be translated into human reasoning. Therefore, through Pythagore, memory is often related to the night, attempting to transmit a sense of unachievable memory, difficult to be seen, shadowed, and lacking details -- in other words, "l'histoire raturée" of Glissant's scientific writings.

Mycéa and Pythagore's natures create the immobility and imprisonment of, her sons, Patrice and Donou. While Pythagore and Mycéa are representations of a generation who was unable to solve the problem of the Martiniquan quest for collective memory, Patrice and Donou will be the portrait of the new generation that inherits the social obsession for collective memory, but that is unable to understand its necessity.

Patrice and Donou represent some of the possible results of the lack of memory in *La case du commandeur*. Patrice Celat is the extreme case. He is referred to as a volcano without a bottom -- "un volcan dont on ne voyait pas la fin du tumulte" (204) --, and as such he keeps in him the representation of both his mother and his grandfather - he has the nature of the rocks but also possesses a void. Since it is impossible to conceive a volcano without a bottom, Patrice holds a basic contradiction within himself that prevents him to live reality. He must evade from reality. Hence, he is "driven by demonic addiction to speed," (Dash 127) which enables him to lose the notion of stability. The world becomes nothing but an indistinguishable movement. He

does not need to take the time to observe, to see, and to collect memory. There is a violence in Patrice, a senseless violence, derived from his own incapacity to cope with the necessity of collective memory (204). Glissant explains: "L'expression "violence sans cause" rend compte du processus, étudié par Fanon déjà, par quoi l'homme colonisé retourne contre lui-même l'outil devenu arme qu'il ne peut utiliser contre l'opresseur" (*Le discours antillais* 311).<sup>11</sup> His only evasion is his death, the ultimate violence against himself.<sup>12</sup>

Donou's fate is not very different from his brother's. However, his escape from the need for memory is not based on speed but on the search of a world outside our world's reality. The sea is his kingdom, the place where he can dream -- "il se plaisait dans la mer pour y rêver" (219). But even the sea is full of nightmares, full of unresolved memories, and Donou starts to look for these at the bottom the sea -- "dans le bleu de la mer il multipliait le temps et le descendait à l'envers pour rejoindre son frère ou quelque connaissance inoubliée" (222). He dies finally one day when he reaches the unmentioned. He finally returns to the place where thousands of sons of the Diaspora rest. "La mer," says Glissant, is "ponctuée de noyés qui semèrent dans ses fonds les boulets de l'invisibl." (*Le discours antillais* 18). He reestablishes his historical link to the beginning of all memories.<sup>13</sup> The abysses of the sea, explains Glissant in his *Poétique de la relation* (1990), "sont notre inconscient même, labourés de fugitives mémoires" (19).

In order to conclude, Jean-Pierre Jardel's claim that in *Le discours antillais* (1981): "E. Glissant s'est efforcé de mettre en évidence tous les indices qui témoignent de la dépossession du temps et de l'histoire, et la perte de la mémoire collective," (122) offers us the opportunity to say that the same happens in *La case du commandeur*.<sup>14</sup> The few examples in this paper try to demonstrate the considerable range of effects that Édouard Glissant is able to achieve through symbolical representations of memory in his work. Frequently, certain words, as demonstrated, become associated with a particular fact or character, achieving the status of a recurrent element in the text. However, the reader may need to go further in order to disclose a meaning to certain figurative contexts. The author offers, to the critical analysis, the same raw materials from which he retrieved the incomplete historical pieces that compose his discourse. Thus, the theme of memory in *La case du commandeur* extrapolates the book itself. It is perhaps due to this capacity of writing beyond the written pages that places Glissant not only among the finest writers in the Caribbean, but certainly among the greatest of the francophone world.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon in his *Peau noire, masques blancs* comments on this characteristic of the old educational system in Martinique to explain how black man's psycho pathology in the island develops from a very few number of daily sentences that elaborate his vision of the world. But, still, he stresses the historical hiding function of this sentence when he says: "Aux Antilles, le jeune Noir, qui à l'école ne cesse de répéter "nos pères, les Gaulois", s'identifie à l'explorateur, au Blanc qui apporte la vérité aux sauvages, une vérité toute blanche." (120; emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Le Goff in his *History and Memory* shows how this depuration of history tends to happen inside Western history itself. See pages 127 to 152, "The historical mentality: men and the past."

<sup>3</sup> The following passage from Carla Fratta's "Storia, identità e coscienza collettiva ne "La case du commandeur" di Édouard Glissant" summarizes and illustrates this idea: "Alla mancanza di una memoria scritta e di una storia come ricostruzione ordinata di eventi collegati da una linea unitaria di sviluppo, corrisponde la sconnessione della storia narrata, fatta di frammenti, di vuoti, di bruschi passaggi da un'epoca ad un'altra e di reliquie di accadimenti spiccioli, il che dà sensibilmente l'impressione di voler riprodurre a livello narrativo le modalità di una storia orale, fatta di racconti, cronache, leggende e fatti sparsi, ma anche di amnesie, assenze e salti nel buio" (450).

<sup>4</sup> The relationship house/memory in Glissant's *La case du commandeur* does not present the same lyrical and positive nature as the one developed by Bachelard in his *Poétique de l'espace*. Like Bachelard, Glissant identifies the house as a space of "souvenirs immobiles," (Bachelard 28) but, unlike Bachelard, Glissant's house has no link with the exterior world. It is a prison from where the individual cannot escape. Despite its positive or negative conotation, both writers would certainly agree that "la maison est un corps d'images qui donnent à l'homme des raisons ou des illusions de stabilité" (Bachelard 34). Here is where their ideas converge.

<sup>5</sup> The yam root also is a popular representation of the rhizome, a notion that Glissant takes from Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guatari to explain his poetics of the "Relation." The rizhome is not unique root, but a body that depends on the intervention of its many small extensions. Each small part of the rizhome depends on the others to its existence, as much as collective memory depends on each individual memory (*Poétique de la relation* 23).

<sup>6</sup> Glissant amplifies this statement to refer to the whole collectivity and explains this situation in the following terms: "Le temps martiniquais n'est pas intériorisé par la collectivité. L'inconscient et lancinant besoin de se connaître se perd dans l'absence du sens ou de la dimension historiques. Non seulement l'histoire fut collectivement subie, mais encore elle fut "raturée". L'absence de mémoire collective rend partiellement compte de l'étonnante discontinuité qui a caractérisé le peuple martiniquais dans ses oeuvres. Et enfin, de même qu'il n'y a ni présence (ou sens) de l'histoire, ni mémoire collective, il n'y a pas ce qui en constitue le légitime corollaire, à savoir la projection dans l'avenir" ("Structures de groupes..." 34).

<sup>7</sup> This idea could also be approached through Julia Kristeva's notion of "être étranger à soi-même." As children of the Diaspora, the Martiniquan people lost their mother, as in the definition of Kristeva's Stranger, they lost their landmark and the references of the "I" in opposition to the "not-I". So, they keep inside "une blessure secrète" that lead them to the search of something promised and invisible that they can never achieve as long as the moment of depossession is not refaced and solved.

<sup>8</sup> See also Fratta's "Il simbolo del serpente fra Africa e Antille in *Le quatrième siècle* di Édouard Glissant."

<sup>9</sup> According to J. Michael Dash, Chérubin could be understood as a representation of the past, since he "inhabits the last vestige of the past, an abandoned sugar factory" (129).

<sup>10</sup> Dash sees in Mycéa the Martiniquan intellectual "faced with the opacity of the past." The main question to him is "how to deal with these obscure blocks of historical time" (137).

<sup>11</sup> The "violence sans cause" may exist as an opposition against the residual effects left by the colonial structure in Martinique. It could be a traumatic reaction explained through the same means that characterize the verbal delirium in the island. It can also be seen as an alienation "vécue au niveau du comportement institutionnel par tentative de résolution de contradictions, jamais résolues, entre ce qu'on est et ce qu'on croit qu'on est" ("Sur le délire verbal" 51). The "violence sans cause", mainly against oneself, is one of the Martiniquan "abnormal trials" to solve individual and, consequentially, collective contradictions.

<sup>12</sup> See Jean-Louis Joubert's "De la violence dans l'oeuvre d'Édouard Glissant."

<sup>13</sup> Both Patrice and Donou are symbols to a whole social reality of young generations in Martinique. They represent individuals affected by the pathology of their society, since it is unable to cope with the psychological effects imprinted in it by the lack of collective memory. As Hector Elisabeth

stresses: "une approche sociopathologique devrait tendre à montrer que ce sont les échecs dans l'intégration et la coordination d'éléments irréductibles pour l'acteur social qui reproduisent la pathologie individuelle" (Hector 73).

<sup>14</sup> It is always interesting to notice that both works, *Le discours antillais* and *La case du commandeur*, are published in 1981. So, it is likely to believe that the same worries are expressed in different ways, through literary work and through critical analysis, in both books. J. Michael Dash supports their relation: "Both works, which are necessarily related to each other, are marked by the research into and diagnosis of Martiniquan reality that were done at IME before Glissant left for Paris as editor of the UNESCO *Courrier* in 1980" (126).

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