

## Precarious Pasts: Reading Errant Memories in Édouard Glissant's *The Overseer's Cabin*

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### Abstract

Our sense of memory has challenged and at the same time dismissed the claims that the past is only provincial and at best limited to remembering and forgetting. Paul Ricoeur opines that “Do we not speak of what we remember, even of memory as an image we have of the past?” The historical knowledge that the past possesses is now being conceived as a catalogue of reimagined association—an interplay between a pluralistic history and multifaceted undertaking of memory. This transition is symbolic of a continuous significance of memory in arguing that history alone does not have any particular claim to truth. Reading Édouard Glissant's *The Overseer's Cabin* against the human struggle to remember, the paper focuses on how the State becomes a site for interplay between history and memory—desisting and at times enabling the identities to react to the lived experience, including the forms of political exploitation.

**Keywords:** Caribbean; Collective memory; Counternarrative; Remembrance; Slavery.

The preservation of Caribbean history is a concern entrenched with the writing of the past. A potential understanding in this regard would be to resolve the normativity of the past—since the material that forms the past against the injustices of history is rather peripheral in nature—its recorded versions, memory traces, physical representations—that can speak to the perspective of history's victims. These perspectives that are much neglected and often overlooked in understanding the past's assertion to reify its political affiliations mediate between the individuals and the world. What we need, then, is not only the reliability of the past but a remembering community. It is because “[w]hilst distinct national and local renderings of the past remain visible, the concept of cultures as discrete and hermetic entities tends to arise from a rather reductive and nostalgic institutional-

isation of national, ethnic, or religious identity, often informed by deeply ideological agendas" (*Transcultural Turn* 19). Without a doubt "diverse individuals or groups may, at different times, identify with particular histories, the way in which events are represented and remembered is strongly influenced by the memorialisation of other pasts – as commemorative tropes and techniques are transferred between events often distanced in time and/or space" (*Transcultural Turn*19).

In *The Overseer's Cabin* (1981), Glissant's genuine interest in historicizing the Martinican past is more than simply nostalgic and definitely does not concede to the notion of idealization of cultural practices. But, this should not in any case be considered as the fundamental struggle in the novel for Glissant goes beyond the concerns of historicity by consciously asseverating that the past has been misappropriated. Yet the focus is on the retellings of the primeval past that clashes with the question of autonomy. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Glissant's premise rests upon the erasure of differences that are not in tune with the narratives of nation. By challenging the official history through tropes of memory, the novel forsakes a linear narration of the past and instead corrects and then expands upon an unofficial version. In *Hope and Memory*, Tzvetan Todorov points out the similarities between appropriation of the past and distinction between history and memory, as he writes that "In working with the past, construction of meaning has to follow the establishment of the facts.

Facts, once known, have to be interpreted – they have to be fitted together, strung out along the line of cause and effect, compared with each other, distinguished from each other, and set against each other . . . But the criteria by which we judge the writing of history are different . . . (122). In order to have a thorough understanding of how the past can be reinterpreted "a different kind of distinction is needed to separate good historians from bad ones, outstanding witnesses from mediocre ones" (122). It is difficult for this very reason to gainsay Glissant's knowledge of the past in the novel since he acknowledges the fact that "remembering is not the opposite of forgetting" (127). Retrieval of the past is not only cumbersome but a complex process as "it is impossible to recover all of the past" and so in order to overcome this "[m]emory has to be a selection; only some features of an event are preserved, and others are dropped and forgotten, either straightway or little by little" (127). By its nature, memory echoes the chosen fragment of the past and explores the impediments to recovering it. But this constitutes another problem that at times results in "a criticism of testimony, that is, a test of its veracity, a search for imposture, whether it be misleading information about an author or a date (misinformation in

the juridical sense) or more fundamental deception (plagiarism, sheer invention, reshuffling the facts, or the hawking of prejudices and rumors)" (*Time and Narrative* 100). While the novel dedicates a significant space to the Martinican past, it contextualizes history through a combination of sources: testimony, familial genealogy, origins of the past.

For this reason, the novel transcends a sequential understanding of the events and narration by deliberately "induc[ing] a parallel sort of abstraction in the consciousness of those who were obliged to function within its limits" (Richard Terdiman 37). This validates the claim that the novel elucidates a reconstruction of the past by emphasizing the tension between memory and history through its characters. The novel opens and closes with two excerpts from the newspaper *Quotidien des Antilles*, dated September 4, 1978 and September 13, 1978, which includes eyewitness accounts that describe behavior of a supposedly mad woman named Marie Celat or Mycée and an inquiry into the conditions of psychiatric care on the island, respectively. A reading of the novel, furthermore, highlights the role of Mycée as it is through her the narrative attempts to classify the relations between the families Béluse, Targin, Longoué, Celat. J.

Michael Dash is of the view that "What makes [*The Overseer's Cabin*] different from Glissant's earlier work is the figure of Mycée, who is very different from any of the major protagonists encountered before in his works. Hers is a split personality. Caught between *ceci* and *cela*, day and night, the *autocensure* of the present and the irresistible power of the past . . . She is an exemplary 'tete en feu' ('head on fire') who transcends . . . a psychic territory extended through space towards the hole of time in the past (128-29). The novel does not sum up the personal narrative of Mycée fully as the reader has to rely on the family histories of other characters to understand the past experiences of her. Given the perplexing narrative of the novel that goes back and forth in time, it is important to keep track of things such as "how this or that had been lost; how a population had been created . . . how, because of all the insults suffered, it was weakening itself by forgetting. Together, Marie Celat and Mathieu Béluse, though without letting on to each other, were descending together into the depths of this forgetting" (*Overseer's Cabin* 161-62).

Born in 1928 and released from asylum in 1978, Mycée "cannot shut out the past" (Dash 129). Unlike others in the novel, she is able to retain the traces of the Martinican past that are long lost in the official versions of the island. This extends the ambit of her memory's malleability and at the same time complicates the notion of remembering against the collective

experiences of events within the historical narrative in the novel. What supports this predicament is Mycéa's supposed madness that is "repugnant to the majority of people" (*Overseer's Cabin* 2). While it is easy to recognize Mycéa as a recalcitrant character, the novel is by no means "a feminist work nor is it a celebration of resistance" (Dash 132). Yet the madness in the case of Mycéa assumes a symbolic significance that endeavors to localize the relation between the present and the process of remembrance. This is self-evident as "Mycéa, consequently, can be seen as descending from a line of women who appear to embody the complexities, the anguish and a kind of spiritual resistance which are necessary to combat the assimilationist reality of the present" (Dash 132). But wouldn't that hinder the present to materialize or transform into something it wasn't?

The resonance of the past that is no longer active is created by memory and stored by history. Memory thus reflects absences, silences by explicitly emplacing the ruptures between the past-present continuities that provide stability and meaning to cultures over time. National discourses that make use of collective memory to alter history according to their narrative are skeptical for this reason when disavowing the images of the past. In a sense, the past recuperates as it is transferred and accepted across generations because "presentism assumes that memory and images of the past are produced in the present for present purposes and hence are indices not of anything that happened in the past and its effect on the present but of the structure of interests and needs of the present" (*Politics of Regret* 8). Critical to this understanding is an acute awareness that to conceptualize memory, a perspective complementing the collective existence of a generation is essential to reproduce its identity.

However, it should be noted that the dimension of identity "involves the recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, with the closure of solidarity and allegiance this implies, then adopting the more discursive, historically specific approach suggested by 'identification' might enable us to see identity as, once again, a construction involving memory, hence a process never completed" (*Post-colonial Nostalgias* 34). Identity as an imagined link between a generation's past and memory is based upon the supposition that succeeding generations are more likely to negotiate the dominant narrative and discourse adopted by nations when the issue of the historical veracity is at play. In excommunicating the Martinican history that has repressed the memory of its subjects, the interconnection between Mycéa's past and the narrative of Martinique should be juxtaposed in order to impartially verify the alternate histories. It is here that Glissant's hypothesis extends meaning to

the fact that “linear, progressive view of history is a dangerous longing in the New World. Both those who venerate the past and those who violently reject it inevitably perpetuate it” (Dash 152). The same logic explains why the novel can be read as a case history of “cette obscurité difficile du nous” (this difficult darkness of us) (Dash 134).

In this manner, *The Overseer's Cabin* rejects a markedly delineated narrative for an overly inverted inscription of memory that grounds a permanence of experience by “refer[ring] to the longing in the Caribbean for an ideal past which history cannot provide” (Dash 136). In a more direct sense, the prevailing ambivalence regarding a disruption or caesura in memory intensifies the reflective processes that are but preoccupied with the tenacious perceptions of the pasts because “we have a tangle of interrelations that need to be deciphered. But we ought not to expect from this a resurrection of the lived experience of social agents, as if history were to stop being history and link up again with the phenomenology of collective memory” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 214). Indeed, the novel persists throughout to show that “history has to present itself as an enlightened, corrected memory” (405) and it does so by invoking emergent contexts that traces deracinated historical consciousness, especially in the case of the familial histories extended across several generations:

Liberté [Longoué] offered to come back to this spot to create their descendants. Anatolie [Celat] whispered that everybody had forgotten, everybody had forgotten. Liberté said women didn't forget. That they were hardly ever seen coming into this world, and that, in any case, you never saw them die, you really didn't know what they died of, as if their death was uttered into a nice round time hung like a calabash where the trail branched—but that they did not forget. And in the end the two of them climbed out of the pasthole (where they would be together at least one more time), stunned by the sun on the gravely rocks. Out of this uncorked hole the tangle of crowding memories and things forgotten surged onto us; we struggle beneath them to put back together who knows what piecemeal history produced bit by bit. (*Overseer's Cabin* 104)

The meaning found in a particular cultural narrative might seem at first like a tendentious progression of the past—but is not always related to the social character of memory. What is obvious is that “humans construct a multiplicity of narratives of different types appropriate to different contexts and this very multiplicity ensures that their knowledge is not bound-

ed by the narrative characteristics of any one of them. Narratives talk in different ways about what is known. They are not knowledge itself" (Bloch 110). As is the case, the novel contrapuntally allows memory of the characters to be portrayed as a testimony to the otherwise historically inaccurate transmission of knowledge of the past:

[w]e began to notice that Mycéa was almost invisibly slipping away. One after the other we began remembering how she had told us about her first visits to Papa Longoué . . . One day Mycéa, left pretty much to her own devices, ended up on the heights. Papa Longoué greeted her with an exhortation: "The Black Women's Marie. I knew the mother who was found, I am meeting the girl who is lost." Mycéa was troubled by this allusion to Mam Chiméne. Longoué reassured her, explaining that in this country the mother's knowledge did not go to the daughter; that only worry and suffering were transmitted, but that you couldn't define worry in your head any more than you could get to the bottom of suffering. (*Overseer's Cabin* 148)

How the past correlates memory, history, and testimony has much to do with its quality – the way in which it has been retrieved. Yet, the effectiveness with which the past asserts its place in history clearly involves a sort of indeterminacy that solidifies a replication of meaningful interaction with its own image. The idea that the past exists even when challenged by the discourses of authority, including those that have arguably left an indelible imprint upon the histories of our times is but a phenomena. More importantly, how the past forges memory and its aftermath bears a stamp of an overlapping historicity that is not only unsettling but in conflict with its own self. This is especially true since the premise of the investigation to understand this idea is based on the fact that:

There is a persistence to the memory of difficult pasts. The dissonance around memory work in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is testament to the long history of this memory . . . However, part of this persistence also encompasses the ways in which this past has been used for various ends from history to memory . . . In addition, the dissonance of this history and its memory also persists through its knowing deployment as a contentious subject, used within public debates over seemingly unrelated issues, drawn on for its power to upset, to provoke, to persuade. Present-day memory work must contend with this long and persistent history of use and abuse in different contexts, be that in

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charity appeals and campaigns, industrial disputes, or propaganda. (Moody 259-60)

Tzvetan Todorov offers an interesting take on this by focusing on three different aspects of the past: testimony, history, and commemoration. Each of this aspect attends to the traces of memory that further implicates representation of a real past. Even though our encounter with the past is fragmentary at best, it reconstructs all routes to a forgotten absence that seeds the remembrance as “testimony is the type of discourse that arises when we summon up memories and, by shaping them, give meaning to our life and construct our identity. Each of us is the witness of our own life, and we build our picture of it by suppressing some of its events, by retaining others, and reshaping or adjusting yet more. Such memory-work may make use of documents (material traces), but by definition it is solitary work – we owe no account for the picture we have of ourselves” (129). The logic of such an argument is perceptible in the case of Mycéa since her disinterestedness in history of Martinique and investment in her own past supersedes the question of her ancestry. To her the past is intimately connected with the reality of the present – an association that emphasizes the relationship between the obscure beginnings and the longings for the past:

No, there’s not a soul here who remembers the longtimeago, the local school has just one teacher, you have to go down to Lamentin to get your benefits, how can you live without those? No, the distillery has been closed since who knows when . . . By then overseers and supervisors had vanished from the countryside. You could still see a few of them, zombified. Official figures counted a factory-and-a-half in the country: one that worked for the entire harvest, the other for half the season. Nobody believed in the old stories, and hardly anywhere at all did they sing on Christmas Eve . . . They didn’t believe the old stories, which meant they didn’t believe it was appropriate to tell them, any more than they believed in whatever unimportant thing they said. Monsieur Chanteur Alfonsine, who was the supervisor from a plantation progress had forgotten, claimed that his grandfather’s father had been in command of some gangs, had organized the insurrection, and had extracted the proclamation of abolition in 1848 . . . He clung to the past by means of his only passion: cockfighting . . . Monsieur Chanteur couldn’t bear to hear any talk of change, demands, misery, or the miserable . . . This was a well-known fact, since the beginning of time, and he called on Marie Celat as a witness . . . She baptized him “true remnant of forgotten ages.” (*Overseer’s Cabin* 172-74)

The contention that the sum total of the past can be constituted, bearing in mind the complexities that might understate our own understanding of the past in question, in fact, points at the national narratives aimed at disintegrating the individual narratives. Together this lends voice to those who have been silenced or not given space in national history. It is for this very reason the novel highlights that “[t]he Antillean people are thus dispossessed of the making of their own history” (Praeger 39). More importantly, Glissant’s assertion holds against the claims made by a collective search for identity as portrayed throughout the novel as it questions the cohesion of narrative.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant anticipates that “Cultures develop in a single planetary space but to different “times.” It would be impossible to determine either a real chronological order or an unquestionable hierarchical order for these times” (162). A close reading of the text would introduce the reader to the past actions of history to suggest that “One of the results of current cultural processes is a widespread anxiety magnifying worries about the future we must contemplate together; this is everywhere translated into a need for futurologies” (162). As a result, this search for identity is grounded in the history of slavery that further associates itself with genealogy marred by the “violence of filiation” (143). The narrative highlights the idea of filiation to depict the obsession of characters with their past. To underscore this, Glissant predicates that “When identity is determined by a root, the emigrant is condemned (especially in the second generation) to being split and flattened. Usually an outcast in the place he has newly set anchor, he is forced into impossible attempts to reconcile his former and his present belonging” (143).

In his attempt to further delineate this experience of peoples of Caribbean, Glissant introduces the idea of “root identity and “relation identity” as he explains that root identity “is founded in the distant past in a vision” (143). On the other hand, Relation identity “is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures” and “is produced in the chaotic network of Relation” (144). More than any other character, Mycéa resists attempting to trace her familial origins and instead believes that “past must precede the construction of an independent cultural identity in the present” (Murdoch 10). Her usage of Creole when in fact most books at school are in French is a testament to the fact that “The appropriation and valorization of archipelagic logic and cultural pluralism into a new Caribbean textual poetics of resistance forms the essence of Glissant’s literary and discursive undertaking” (Murdoch 12). It is true that Mycéa extends the “context of interrelation .



. . . where collective intersections of cultures and subjectivities give rise to a succession of self/other scenarios on a massive scale” (Murdoch 17-18). As a result, it would be correct to say that her Creole obnoxiously challenges and in turn disrupts the systematic persistence of French:

It’s true that when she spoke it was always in Creole—except, of course, at school. (That is, in the classroom—when she would answer the teachers’ questions accurately but in a very unpleasant voice. They tried not to hate her but with no success.) . . . She savagely reviled the boys who were jealous of her success and who couldn’t figure out how she could knock you down in Creole and yet produce that abrasively accurate French. And the dedicated school principal claimed bluntly that they never should have taught creatures with so little respect for limits—meaning children so ill prepared to accept in a grateful and genteel manner the knowledge that an indulgent will saw fit to distribute not to everyone but to those most deserving. That accomplished fellow . . . considered that crude manners should be polished away just as much as crude language, and at the same time. (*Overseer’s Cabin* 33-34)

It is therefore, not surprising that Mycéa is least interested in “the question” (*Overseer’s Cabin* 150) and does not want answers to the question regarding her ancestry. Unlike her other family members she refuses to accept history of the island as systematic and linear that the Western hierarchal model has to offer as she is wary of another dominating discourse underpinning the history of slavery instead. It is significant to note here that more than her father, Pythagore Celat and mother, Cinna Chiméne, Mycéa understands that “everything since the day they were shipped over had been stirred by the same powerful and peaceful breath reinforcing everyone’s memory” (*Overseer’s Cabin* 8). At one point in the novel, during her visit to Papa Longoué, the *quimboiseur*, when asked what particular question is that she has come to ask, she responds that she isn’t seeking any answers. To her “It isn’t, of course, the past laid out clearly; there are no places, or dates, or filiations in a neat, visible order the way you’d check off lined-up sacks of guano” (*Overseer’s Cabin* 7). This reaffirms that the “wide-split herd of memories” (*Overseer’s Cabin* 9) is “[w]hat Glissant seeks to inscribe . . . a praxis of national/territorial liberation grounded in the principle of opacité, which recognizes and actively draws on both the density and the diversity of the Other” (Murdoch 19). It is so because in its simplest form, history functions as a record of selected events putatively affirming to an accepted reading of a selected past. In other words,

attesting to what occurred with references to certain documents, dates, or artifacts, history in many ways attempts to verify its authenticity. Glissant understands this more than any other Caribbean writer for he is of the view that:

To persist in categorizing Martinican history according to the French historical model (centuries, wars, reigns, crises, etc.) is to align the first so closely with the second that in fact by this means you ultimately camouflage the main feature of such a history of Martinique: its overdetermination. The overemphasis on links with periods of French history is a trap created by an assimilationist way of thinking, spread through Martinican “historians,” who do not bother to dig any deeper. They deny the very thing they are giving an account of, since the more natural its depiction, the more one avoids the basic deformation that it assumes . . . It is a matter of something on which no one has seriously reflected: the French colonizer, because he is fully aware of the fact that he has managed to put into effect . . . his particular brand of assimilation; the colonized Martinican because he is upset to see himself look so good in this mirror. It is a case of what I call successful colonization. (*Caribbean Discourse* 88-89)

It seems fair to conclude that Glissant specifically allows Mycéa to bear the responsibility for representing the Martinican reality during the course of the novel. The narrative underscores Mycéa’s point of view as it pinpoints the misrepresentation of the past in the context of slavery. Glissant offers the ambivalence of cultural differences by rejecting a generic view of the past and directs his attention on accentuating history’s indifferences. In the case of *The Overseer’s Cabin*, the narrative assumes determinism to remonstrate against the exclusion of the experiences of the slave past in postmodern discourses. Given the context of the novel, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that “[f]or Glissant, contemporary Martinique is a colonized world, the apex and summation of French colonization, a world from which all events have been obliterated” (Nesbitt 144). The narrative, as a result, studies the individual memories alongside the legacy of colonialism which in turn implies an engagement with the erasure of the colonized subject’s identity—stratifying a continuance of complexity articulating a tangible yet understated cultural past.

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