On Slavery, Césaire, and Relating to the World: An Interview with Patrick Chamoiseau

Maeve McCusker

This interview took place on 10 May 2008, at the Maison Française, Oxford University, on the occasion of the “Semaine de la Martinique.”

Maeve McCusker: Today is May 10th, the day that commemorates the abolition of slavery [in all French colonies] in 1848. How far do you think we’ve come in the attempt to recognize and to come to terms with slavery 160 years later?

Patrick Chamoiseau: Insofar as France is concerned, there has been considerable progress: slavery has been declared a crime against humanity, even if the law was watered down in parts, particularly the section dealing with reparations. We still need to evaluate the introduction of the subject of slavery into the education system. I know that there are texts being written as we speak, and that some have already been published, so the subject is gradually being streamed into the school system. What is certain is that nationally in France, today—May 10th—is officially recognized, and events are taking place all over France and in Martinique. In Martinique of course we also have our own particular dates. So I think we’re on the right track. What we now need is an international day of commemoration, in which all memories of genocide, crimes and attacks against humanity, might find symbolic recognition. So there is work to be done on both a European and an international front. But this first step, in terms of France, is already significant.
**MM:** How do you view the participation of the French political establishment? It was [Jacques] Chirac who agreed that this date should be established. Do you think that Nicolas Sarkozy is as engaged in this project?

**PC:** [laughs] No, it’s not the same thing. But certainly there is a broader awareness. We’re no longer at the stage of a colonial consciousness, even if colonialist mentalities remain, narrow-minded people who haven’t understood that we are demanding neither repentance, nor flagellation, nor accusation. We are attempting to translate the crime into experience. It’s a question, first, of understanding what happened, and then of trying to ritualize the memory of that experience so that it becomes inscribed on the collective imagination, thereby enabling each memory of a crime to become an opening onto memories of other crimes. We want to draw all these memories together. And in this respect, I believe that a lot of progress has been made. [Edouard] Glissant recently brought out a text proposing that that every day in May should become a celebration in memory of slavery,¹ which would encourage vigilance and a deeper awareness of all the major phenomena taking place in the world today. So he suggests that memorial days connected to slavery might also be an occasion to consider, for example, the issue of famine in the world. The relationship may not be obvious, but it does exist.

**MM:** You must be very proud of this new sense of awareness, having been so actively involved in the campaign?

**PC:** Yes, indeed. I can’t remember the year exactly, but well before the Taubira law, Glissant and I produced a text demanding that slavery be considered a crime against humanity. We also circulated a petition, signed by ourselves and Wole Soyinka. At the same time, though, this strikes me as something so elementary and obvious: these are really the small archaic battles that need to be fought but that don’t really get to the heart of the problem.

**MM:** I wanted to talk with you about the recent death of [Aimé] Césaire. Something which struck me in the presentation of this event was the emphasis placed on French agency, to the detriment of an appreciation of the importance of Césaire as a poet and politician: the focus continually came back to the state funeral, to the attempt to “pantheonize” Césaire, and even to the changing of the airport’s name at the instigation of Sarkozy.² How was all of this presented in the Antilles? Was there a different approach?

**PC:** Oh, no, in Martinique it’s just the same [laughs]. Generally speaking the people of Martinique want local recognition but are even more desperate for national recognition. When a Martinican is famous in France, all Martinicans feel proud. So there was immense pride that the “father of the nation” should be considered important on a national level. This recognition echoed well, indeed, the political life of Aimé Césaire, who always situated himself within the

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² In January 2007, Martinique’s only airport was renamed the *Aéroport International Martinique Aimé Césaire*. 
French Republic in spite of his discourse of autonomy. But from there, to try to send him to the Pantheon [laughs], well, that goes against the thinking of Césaire who, while very much attached to the French Republic—he had a great love for France, for Paris—always organized his life, his ideas, his center of reflection, first around Martinique and then around Africa.

For me, even the state funeral was a moment of fairly blatant political assimilation. I think it’s true that Césaire belongs to the history of France, but to a history that has cast off the shackles of colonialism, that is open to the rest of the world and ready to enter into this famous exchange of memories and experiences. To this extent, Césaire belongs to Africa, he belongs to France, and he belongs to Martinique. It seems obvious to me that we have to confront this complexity. The Pantheon is an interesting concept, but the only worthy pantheon today would be a world pantheon of great figures. In such a scenario we’d no longer have these problems of placing so and so, without overlooking certain elements of his or her thinking, commitments, or struggles.

MM: I can’t really see Césaire in the fifth arrondissement for eternity . . .
PC: Although, it was suggested that they could forgo his remains and simply put up a plaque; and after all, he wouldn’t be in very good company in the Pantheon. Schœlcher is all well and good, but, say, in the case of someone like Félix Eboué, it’s another thing entirely. Eboué was a colonial administrator, and Césaire never had any sympathy for such people.

MM: Last night, during an extremely rich reading, you spoke of mondialité. Does mondialité represent a stage beyond créolité?
PC: No it’s a progression that evolves from our own particular experience of multiplicity. First of all there was a reappropriation of Africa by way of négritude because Africa had been completely repudiated. Once this had been achieved, however, this movement degenerated into négrisme, or a perverse négritude, which fetishized the notion of an African essence in the Americas. Antillanité, on the other hand, conceded that, yes, Africa is structural and fundamental, but what has happened to this Africa in the American and Antillean context? And from this premise, Fanon and Glissant were the authors who began to scratch the surface a little to discover what had become of Africa. The anthropology of the 1950s was trying to determine what remained of Africa after these multiple processes of cultural emergence. And when you looked closely, it became clear that Africa had drifted into a number of other presences, so the term creolization was invented to describe this process. The emergence of the Creole language, which was a cultural emergence, proved that a complex alchemical and anthropological process had taken place, and that something entirely new had been produced. We are the product of a process of creolization that affected all of the Americas. But this creolization process didn’t produce uniformities; it produced singular emergences, or events. Therefore we are dealing with créolités in the plural: a Martinican créolité, a Cuban créolité, a créolité of
the Southern United States, and so on. Because of its sheer complexity and unpredictability, a true understanding of the phenomenon of creolization can only be achieved through a collective study of all créolités. It is the analysis of all créolités that enables us to understand and to determine the invariables without, however, grasping the phenomenon in its entirety. Therefore it is through créolité that we gain access to creolization. But once we have understood the phenomenon of creolization as a process, we see that this process has spread throughout the globe. Each time there is a large-scale, brutal, and accelerated meeting of several cultures, of several imaginaries, of several conceptions of the world, we find ourselves in a space of creolization. But these are unique creolizations, meaning that they won’t always give rise to a creole language, for example, and that not everyone will become creole; it simply means that more and more, due to the interaction of cultures, we are entering into new complexities in terms of diversity, in terms of social structures, and in terms of values, too. And this concept of creolization leads to the idea of “Relation,” which is at once a fact—the entire work of human anthropology is a way of entering into “relation” with the world—but also a project. Today we have to manage the relating of all these cultures in such a way, firstly, that we don’t lose them—in other words, that we don’t get sucked into processes of standardization—and secondly, that we learn how we can better live with diversity. Relation allows us to envisage the formation of a global imagination, a world poetics. If we understand this process, we can see that the determining factor today is this relationship with the general movement of the world. We can understand nothing, economically, socially, in education and language, nor even in aesthetic absolutes, if we don’t understand that the frame of reference for any individual is global, and that in order to make any sense in terms of effectiveness, efficiency, or relevance all things must be located within, and set in relation to, a global dynamic, and this is what leads us to the concept of mondialité.

The most active motor of globalization up to now has been the capitalist system, which creates a very particular kind of globalization based on poverty, suffering, rupture, as well as standardization and uniformity through consumerism. Islam is the last remaining force of resistance, not only to the homogenizing influence of the West but also, to a certain extent, to economic globalization. But this resistance is muted in the world today. To speak of mondialité is to say, hold on: these elements of contact and relation have always been part of the progression of cultures and humanities, they have become more pronounced, and we are now destined to envisage our individual and collective fulfillment through an imaginary that inhabits the wider world. We cannot fight globalization without the world. So the idea of mondialité allows us to accept the idea of living in this way, without subscribing to all these liberal economic and financial precepts. We saw this already in the antiglobalization movement. And yet by refusing to exist in the world we condemn ourselves to asphyxiation. Therefore we need to be in the world while at the same time organizing our resistance. This is what makes the concept of mondialité absolutely essential.
MM: You have just spoken of créolités, in the plural. How do you perceive the links between the French Antilles and the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean? Do you feel an affinity with a writer like Derek Walcott, for example?

PC: Of course. I feel that we share the same civilizational space, a space of creolization, what I call the historic creolization of the Americas, and this is our conceptual starting point. Within this American creolization there are major structural bridges: the genocide of the American Indians, the slave trade, the process of colonization forged in the matrix of the plantation. Of course there were the great American plantations, but also the smaller “habitations” of the islands. So with these three structural elements—there are others, too—we already have the basic configuration of an imaginary that we encounter in all writing from the Americas. If you take any text at all, whether in Spanish, English, Creole, French, or another language, you’ll discover this same structural relationship to reality. The geographical approach generates a belief in one single Caribbean, a territorial cradle within which we live and work. Of course, from a geographical perspective the old colonial divisions still exist, so that the barriers between the English-speaking region, the French-speaking region, the Creole-, the Spanish-, or the Portuguese-speaking region, remain in tact. This is a relic of colonial compartmentalization, because paradoxically, before the arrival of the colonists, the Amerindians lived in this space in a very free and mobile manner. The current insular attitude can be mitigated by common preoccupations in economics and in culture.

But it becomes complicated when you consider that the territorial approach is no longer the only viable one. We are now increasingly concerned with metanations. The most extraordinary metanation is Haiti—poor, suffering Haiti. When you look closely, however, you see that there are almost 2 million Haitians living all over the world, who send back more than [US]$3 billion to Haiti each year. So we can see that it is a nation, but one that has exploded across the globe. It’s the same for us Martinicans, who have obvious solidarities with Africa, France, and even India, to a certain extent. Therefore, by scratching the surface a little you can see that there is a metanational process at work that we need to visualize in terms of rhizomes and networks, which naturally open us up to the totalité-monde. Without any contradiction, then, while we live within this Caribbean or American space we can construct more complex spaces that bring together Africa, India, France, according to the modalities of diaspora or metaspora, or indeed the modalities of the imaginary. Thus the structure of a country cannot be considered uniquely in a territorial sense; it will simultaneously consist of metasporic links—as distinct from diasporic ones—as well as the structures of the imagination.

MM: So, the fact that the Amerindians were a migrant people, who moved from one island to another, facilitated contact or “Relation” between the islands.

PC: Yes, insularity is a Western concept. If you were to say to an Amerindian that he was an insular being, he wouldn’t understand. For the Amerindian the sea was viewed as an opening, not a limitation. The Amerindians circulated in an incredible way. And even later, as
the colonialists began to divide things up according to languages and flags, the activity of a port like Saint-Pierre showed that there were frequent comings and goings between the islands. The number of boats that came from all over and arrived at the port of Saint-Pierre was astounding; curiously, the first to arrive after the Mount Pelée eruption were carrying the St. Lucians and the Dominicans. People circulated in little boats; they had retained the Amerindian principle. The first colonizers to settle on the islands imitated and drew from the Amerindian imaginary, which was an imaginary of movement. It’s really the colonialists who invented insularity.

**MM:** I have the impression from what you said last night that you feel increasingly close to Glissant.

**PC:** Yes, more and more so; the *Eloge de la créolité* was a tribute to Glissant. Even today Glissant is hardly known among Martinicans, they don’t read him, or when they do, they don’t understand him. They don’t even have the right questions to be able to unlock his writing. I wanted to acknowledge Glissant, because for me he was a liberator. For a long time I had been writing in a Césairian fashion. I am a son of Césaire, but I took the wrong thing from him: his relationship with the French language, which was perhaps a personalized relationship, but which was not, fundamentally, a revolutionary one. Césaire didn’t revolutionize the language any more than Mallarmé or Apollinaire. It’s true that there is a rhythm that echoes the tambour, but in a structural sense Césaire didn’t engage with the complexity of Creole. And so the complexity of créolité, of creolization and of Relation, was passed on to me by Glissant. This has liberated my imagination since *Chronique des sept misères*, and I’ve not stopped writing novels since.

And so I wanted to make this known, to say to the young people of Martinique, “Go and delve into Glissant and perhaps you’ll find what you need to spark your creativity.” In the Antilles, creativity is not only absent from political logic and nonexistent in the economic sphere, but in artistic and literary terms it has always been the sole preserve of great tutelary figures. Césaire, like Glissant in turn, was out on his own for a long time, and then there was a whole host of epigones who never seemed to stretch the limits of their work. So I wanted to write this *éloge* to Glissant, and I was soon joined by Raphaël Confiant, with whom I was working at *Antilla*. Confiant was approaching the question of creolization via a defense of the Creole language. In a way he and his colleagues were reformulating the ancient struggle against colonialism by looking for a language and a culture to oppose those of the colonizer. Thus they were dealing with Creole language and literature in quite essentialist terms. But in trying to save the Creole language they were also getting closer to the realities of their country. All the while those who were saying *négritude* were distancing themselves from their country and constituting a kind of *réalité nègre* that was not rooted in the complexities of their own land.

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So when I talked about the complexities proffered by Glissant, and how he was already part of the Creole world, you can see how the impulse was quite a natural one. And it was Glissant himself who suggested that rather than “Eloge à Edouard Glissant,” the essay should be called *Eloge de la créolité*.

**MM:** You have since coauthored a pamphlet with Glissant entitled *Quand les murs tombent.*

**PC:** Yes, this is a confrontational text that we wrote after the French government established a department for “immigration and identity.” The conjoining of these two terms seemed to infer that immigration represents a threat to national identity. This was completely unacceptable to us, and so we wanted to intervene.

**MM:** And I know that you took the opportunity to go into local schools together, to try to open up the debate with young people.

**PC:** Yes, yes, we met many people; we were insulted and attacked. We realize now that there is a Martinican reality that wasn’t really addressed in this little manifesto, which described a French reality, the reality of rich countries confronted by the famines and immigrations of those arriving from poor countries. It’s also true that in *Quand les murs tombent* we overlooked those whom I would call armed migrants, who arrive with technical and economic power and can be found in almost every country of the world. There always seem to be technical ghettos. And of course in small countries of one thousand square kilometers, like Martinique, we have immigrants from France who to a certain extent threaten the territorial heritage and the cultural balance. Now of course we cannot reject the principle of Relation; it’s a question of knowing how to safeguard small threatened spaces, like these fragile cultural ecosystems. The cultural ecosystem of Martinique must be defended, not only by the people of Martinique but by everyone. Today, the best means at our disposal to combat what Césaire called the risk of “genocide by substitution” is to guarantee the *lieu*, a place where memory is organized, culture is valorized, shadows are lifted. Those who come would adapt to and defend the *lieu*; just as Martinicans who settle in China would defend whatever Chinese issues concern them, so the Chinese in their turn would come to Martinique and discover, by way of the Creole language, economic and cultural realities.

Today we are engaged in Relation, meaning that we defend everything that should be protected by relational systems. Martinique must be protected by all who choose to live there, just as every anthropological and cultural reality in the world should be preserved, fought for, and valorized by whoever identifies with it. We are leaving behind territorial logic, and entering into the logic of the *lieu* and of Relation, where we choose our homeland, our sphere of existence, our place, our language, our god, our battles.

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MM: As you evoke this principle of Relation, I’m just wondering whether this aesthetic and political principle has a practical corollary. You seem to enjoy collaborative work, for example.

PC: In a way, yes. I’ve always had lots of interests: I wanted to be a musician or an artist, I was very interested in photography and sculpture, I love cinema. I could have wandered off in almost any direction. Life is an art, and as we can’t do everything, it’s wiser to accompany those more talented than ourselves in other disciplines. More to the point, I was careful never to elevate literature to a sacred position. Glissant, for example, holds literature as highly sacred; he would be reluctant to take a risk with cinema, or to put his writing at the service of another art. That would be a waste of time for him. I’m prepared to create texts of every kind, songs, film scripts . . .

MM: The diversity of your output is really impressive.

PC: Yes, I can do everything—more in a spirit of irreverence than because of any innate talent [laughs].

MM: In an article you wrote in response to Césaire’s death, you spoke about the “absurd university category” of the postcolonial. In France, there tends to be a certain resistance toward the postcolonial, which is often perceived as an Anglo-Saxon term or approach. I wanted to ask you about your suspicion of the term.

PC: I don’t see colonization as the determining element; it’s more important to identify the kind of relational fusion that was in play. We need to move beyond these stages—before colonization, during colonization, after colonization—that suggest that the actions of the West were responsible for constructing the world’s consciousness, which seems to me very superficial. Rather, we must try to see how the processes of interrelating began, how civilizations and cultures were constructed, how disasters, colonization, all occurred. These were ecological catastrophes, but we must look at how things restructured themselves. According to the fluidity of Relation, we can construct histories of the world, of consciousness, of literatures, which are determined more by the relational than by the structure of colonialism. I see postcolonialism as perpetuating the notion that the West was determinative in the world. Colonization was one terrible element in the engendering of relation, but the mise en relation would have taken place even without colonization.

MM: So for you the term sanctifies colonization?

PC: But of course; it’s almost an abdication before the idea that it was the West which determined the various stages of world consciousness. It’s an absurdity. I think it would be better to go back and start from the very beginning and then, from there, to seek out the connections. I regard slavery and colonization as disasters that occurred during a process that was

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in any case a relational one. Even without slavery and colonization we would have had this progressive movement toward one another.

**MM:** The postcolonial is often seen as a way of avoiding the problematic term *francophone,* which became a way of linking authors who had nothing at all in common and which often had political undertones as well.

**PC:** But it was Glissant who argued that the history of Martinique should no longer be told according to Western constructions, in other words starting with d’Esnambuc and moving through the major dates, such as departmentalization. He proposed structures quite similar to those I used in *Texaco,* in which I tried to carve up time not according to colonialist dates but using materials—there are a whole series of structures that go beyond the major Western determinants and that can draw out other truths.\(^7\) We have to recognize that the decolonization movement may have meant the end of colonial administrations, but that the colonial mindset hasn’t changed. We moved from a colonial politics to what we might call the “politics of development.” After colonization, we entered the development school of political thought, but this remained a philosophy based on colonial domination, because development was modeled on Western values. So, *colonization,* then *development,* and, today, *liberal globalization.*

**MM:** So, the terminology changes but the basis remains the same.

**PC:** The basis remains. We need to start again at the very beginning, using Relation as the point of departure, in order perhaps to identify what drives globalization. Moreover, when we say *postcolonialism,* we forget that the artist or the writer today is a solitary figure, one who is not bearing witness to a communitarian context, a little like those African writers involved in the process of decolonization. Today we are aiming toward a global Relation, but we perceive it in our own individual way. In other words we all position ourselves in a completely erratic and unpredictable way, in relation to this world-object.

**MM:** Last night you quoted Faulkner, saying that in literature, the more flagrant the failure, the more worthy the attempt. Which of your novels is, for you, the most successful failure?

**PC:** They’re all failures. But my greatest failure . . . I think it would have to be *L’esclave vieil homme.* I also like *Solibo magnifique*; it’s a first-rate failure.\(^8\) The brilliance of the failure is indeed directly proportionate to the audacity of the attempt. Faulkner said of Hemingway, What he does, he does well, but he doesn’t show great daring. One of the things that defines artistic endeavour is courage. When I write, I always try to work with the impossible, which of course, being impossible, you can never really surpass. There are always failures, but you


fall from a lesser or a greater height. If you fall from a very great height, that’s when the failure becomes a grandiose one.

**MM:** And would you see *Biblique des derniers gestes*, for example, as a grandiose failure?9

**PC:** Yes, *Biblique* was an attempt at the *roman-monde*, but I got it all wrong. It’s true that it did allow me to explore what this *roman-monde* might be, but I now think it’s a mistake to attempt this form simply by indulging in excess. It’s equally possible to envisage a *roman-monde* that would be simple, measured, even motionless. Access to the *totalité-monde* is not necessarily achieved by baroque extravagance. That’s what *Biblique* taught me: it’s not complexity or accumulation that gives us the key to the world; it’s actually restraint and sobriety.

*Translated by Rachel O’Loan and Maeve McCusker*

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