



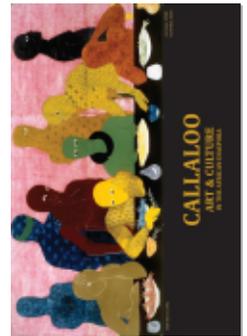
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Crossroads Poetics: Glissant and Ethnography

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Callaloo, Volume 36, Number 4, Fall 2013, pp. 968-982 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/cal.2013.0193](https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2013.0193)



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CROSSROADS POETICS Glissant and Ethnography

by Christina Kullberg

Édouard Glissant's work seems to actualize the metaphor used by French ethnographer and writer Michel Leiris to capture the Caribbean: it is a poetics of the crossroads between several discourses and forms of expression. But the intersection between history, sociology, philosophy, poetry, and other areas often occurs without the author fully explaining the mechanisms behind his appropriations of discourses that usually lie outside the realm of literature. Ethnography, for example, appears with such inconsistency in his writings that it is even difficult to speak of it in terms of one single discourse.¹ In the same book he condemns ethnography only to dream of a "Caribbean ethnography" to come a few pages later. Ethnography is sometimes treated as a science and sometimes characterized as part of literature's "movement towards the other." Clearly, not only does Glissant's appropriation of other discourses remain unarticulated; it is often also highly ambiguous.

In *Poétique de la Relation* Glissant claims that ethnography stems from the need to understand foreign cultures but that this understanding may be reductive (*Poetics* 26). According to Glissant, ethnography belongs to the colonial powers, providing them with a discursive structure to map Caribbean reality and its people for a foreign (European) audience. The problem is that Caribbeans internalize this external vision and see themselves not as subjects but as objects of knowledge. Thereby Glissant saw ethnography as contributing to the distortion of the Caribbean peoples' visions of themselves and their reality, thus contributing to alienating Caribbeans from themselves and the world they inhabit. At one point in *L'Intention poétique* he writes, "We hate ethnography: whenever, executing itself elsewhere, it does not fertilize the dramatic vow of relation" (*Poetic Intention* 122). The statement is a general critique of "traditional" ethnography for not contributing to an exchange between cultures, one shared by many postcolonial writers. The ethnography Glissant loathes is always distanced in regard to the "drama" of cultural interconnectedness. Nevertheless, the vocabulary he uses is inflected with his own concepts, notably the notion of relation. In saying that the negative ethnography does not add to relation, via a sort of negative dialectics, he hints at the possibility of another kind of ethnography that could add to the process of relation.

Significantly, when Glissant underscores the similarities between ethnography and literature, the negative connotations of ethnography, seen as a colonial discourse reducing others to objects of knowledge, fade into the background. He writes in an article on Leiris that these two discourses represent a "striking unity in a method that covers two domains: the expression and the voyage, the self and the Other. Literature and ethnography will follow the same stream, the first contributing to the latter and reciprocally" ("Leiris eth-

nographe" 611). Both ethnography and literature are here understood in broad terms as approaches to the real, and the difference between the two is localized in their respective expressions. Glissant places the idea of *démarche*, method, at the forefront. The underlying method behind both ethnography and (some forms of) literature implies a double movement: writing and travelling, the self reaching towards the other. They must both operate simultaneously on several levels. Ethnography is always connected to something else, whether it is the peoples that are studied, the travel necessary for fieldwork, or the art of writing needed to convey the acquired knowledge to the reader. But aside from these general rapprochements between literature and ethnography based on a broad, common, initial desire, Glissant stresses that "ethnography is not literature"; they belong to different "sectors" in a general search for the world and ethnography must not be "intermixed with the 'literary'" (*Poetic Intention* 118). What can we make of this? First of all, if ethnography is problematic, why then not simply do away with it? What is the appeal of ethnography? Second, to what kind of ethnography is he referring? How is the notion of ethnography transformed and distorted in his writings?

Roumauld Fonkoua has already shown in "Édouard Glissant: Naissance d'une anthropologie au siècle de l'assimilation" that Glissant was inspired by ethnography as a framework to articulate a particular form of Caribbean knowledge, an idea that would lay the foundation for his groundbreaking *Le Discours antillais* (797). This conclusion is drawn from studying Glissant's direct and indirect engagement with the work of Michel Leiris in *Soleil de la conscience* and *L'Intention poétique*. In an article on Leiris and the French Antilles, Celia Britton sheds light on the French ethnographer's work by referring to Glissant's readings. She shows that Leirisian ethnography of contacts "clearly resonates with the concept of 'Relation' that is central to his own work" (42). Also, following the Leirisian influence on Glissant, J. Michael Dash sees in the former Surrealist Leiris a possible link connecting Glissant's writing to his Martinican predecessors in the Negritude movement. They both use objective chance, but for Glissant the idea of encounters between disparate elements offers the basis of a poetics of radical otherness and relation ("Caraïbe fantôme" 97; "Le je de l'autre" 92-93). The different trajectories that these studies undertake confirm that ethnography is indeed a multifaceted reference with a deep impact on Glissant's work. However, as these studies mainly focus on the Leirisian influence, they do not fully assess Glissant's strong criticism of ethnography and the fact that Glissant refers to ethnography differently depending on whether he takes the position of a critic of ethnography or a poet incorporating it into his work. These very tensions are at the center of attention in this essay as it explores how Glissant first creates his own vision of ethnography before appropriating it into his own writings.

It was no doubt ethnography's focus on otherness that appealed to Glissant. First, the study of otherness resonates with his concept of a relational identity, which takes shape by reaching out towards others (*Poetics* 11). Second, as far as ethnography draws its conclusions from real encounters with others, Glissant sees it as a counterforce to the fictional power of literature; it represents a way to deal with the "real country" (*pays réel*) alongside the "dreamt country" (*pays rêvé*). This means that, on the one hand, he treats ethnography as a discourse of knowledge, and, on the other, he sees it as an approach to the world. Moreover, ethnography is not per se seen as a negative discourse reducing others or a positive discourse enabling contacts with others. Rather it depends on how the relationship with otherness is conceived.

As a critic commenting on twentieth-century French ethnography, Glissant is mainly commenting on structuralism and Leirisian ethnography. In these readings Glissant constructs ethnography as a two-faced discourse of knowledge of others. The aim of this essay is to show that from these discursive constructions of ethnography, Glissant the writer will find a way to appropriate ethnography as an approach to the world in his own poetics. In other words, Glissant's reading of ethnography as a discourse is determined by his aesthetic concerns in developing a poetics of relation. Glissant does not reject ethnography; he finds a way to enter into a relationship with ethnography and, from there, create something new. Significantly, the reference to ethnography appears in books that mark a shift within Glissant's writing and thinking. The notion first appears in *Soleil de la conscience* from 1956, his first book written in prose which inaugurated his long series of "poetics." The same year Glissant wrote an article called "Michel Leiris, l'ethnographe" that he was to rewrite for his second poetics, *L'Intention poétique* from 1969. After this publication, ethnography seems to fade into the background and did not reappear until 1997 in *Traité du Tout-Monde*. This book is the first theoretical work explicitly committed to poetics in the global interconnectedness, which will dominate the later phase of his work. Ethnography is among those discourses that draw his writing and thinking towards something else, infusing a degree of becoming into his entire oeuvre. Tracing the appropriation of ethnography in his writings reveals how Glissantian poetics of relation, accumulation, and rewriting operates.

Distanced Ethnography

Glissant studied ethnography at *Le Musée de l'homme* between 1953 and 1954 with Leiris as a teacher. This experience will shape his own particular take on ethnography. As opposed to many other postcolonial writers, regarding ethnography Glissant is not first and foremost reacting to a particular situation in his native society the way he did when commenting on and using history, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and sociology. Significantly, when Glissant evokes the gaze of the other (*le regard de l'Autre*) in *Le Discours antillais*, he names Lafcadio Hearn, an Irish traveler and amateur ethnographer, Maud Mannoni, a psychotherapist, and Jack Corzani, a literary historian, but not one single trained ethnographer (522). This is not a coincidence or a sign that Glissant wants to shut out ethnographers. The fact is that, with the radical exception of Michel Leiris, ethnographers were scarcely interested in the French Antilles after the indigenous peoples had been wiped off the islands. Even black peasants from the Caribbean were rarely classified as "primitive" enough to interest (traditional) ethnography to the same extent as their African peers, for example, because they came from transplantation and cultural crossings.² Tellingly, the ethnographers to whom René Ménil, Aimé and Suzanne Césaire refer in *Tropiques* are precisely Africanist ethnographers, such as Leo Frobenius. In Martinique, the gaze of the ethnographer had been replaced with that of the tourist.

In other words, when Glissant writes that, "The distrust we feel towards [ethnography] comes not from the displeasure at being watched, but from the resentment at not watching in return" (*Poetic Intention* 122), his critique of ethnography as a colonial discourse reduc-

ing others comes not from being a subject of ethnographic investigations, as was the case in Africa (and in Haiti and Cuba). Rather, as a student of ethnography he is interested in the general question of knowledge of others implied in the ethnographic gaze. To Glissant the problem is not being watched; the gaze in itself is, rather, positive since it implies a movement towards the other. Ethnography is negative only as far as it does not give the object for observation the chance to look back and return the gaze. In this setting there can be no exchange. Knowledge drawn from such refusal to acknowledge the other's subjectivity is not objective but partial in that it excludes the living component of a possible exchange with the other as agent.

The ethnography that he "distrusted" took on several masks in Glissant's view. First of all, he implicitly attacks traditional colonial ethnography as we have seen. But regarding this branch of ethnography he is never specific at all since he avoids talking about any individual ethnographers, particular periods, or ethnographic schools. Colonial ethnography seems to refer vaguely to any description of people and society during the colonial period. The second target of his negative assessment of ethnography is more interesting: reacting to ethnography as a discourse of knowledge, he was indirectly turning against structuralist anthropology that was on the rise in France during the 1950s and finally took over French academia after Claude Lévi-Strauss was appointed to the chair in anthropology at the Collège de France in 1959.³

Glissant's critique of structuralism is implied in several books. For instance, without explicitly mentioning structuralism Glissant describes in *Traité du Tout-Monde* the scientific norms of "dominant" ethnography in the 1950s and 1960s:

It was the time when a concept of "pure" ethnology was established: an attempt to reveal, after a model based on societies that were also supposed to be "pure" or in any case less complex (which was already a strange prejudice), the elementary structures or dynamics of every given society. The claims of this dominant ethnology were once again based on objectivity, but in terms of a will or a belief that one may grasp the essential of a social or cultural development within the network of a description, using distance to be able to guarantee objectivity and definitions that imply a full comprehension of the observed phenomenon, as well as its exemplarity. (130–31)⁴

Evoking the "elementary structures" makes it clear that Glissant is speaking of Lévi-Strauss, the author of *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*. There are several problems with this "pure" ethnographic orientation, Glissant suggests. First, he takes issue with the idea of isolating societies as objects of science. According to Glissant, structuralism approaches the other without mutual exchange, and the selection of scientific objects is already based on premises that are not scientific. Instead, it relies on the prejudice that these societies are simpler than Western society and can therefore reveal the underlying structure for all human society. Second, "pure" ethnography is universalizing, reducing every human manifestation to general laws and structures. Glissant's third critique concerns method: general laws and structures, induced from observation and description, suggest that writing could capture society in all its complexity, and most importantly in its perpetual transformation.

A similar attack is already present in *Le Discours antillais*, in the section entitled “Le Vécu antillais.” Here, the study of contemporary Martinican society implicitly undermines structuralist analysis by preferring the term structuration over structure. A society is always implied in different processes of structuration, which depend on several factors. As if to defy structuralism, the historical approach takes over in this particular section. Glissant discusses how society is shaped and transformed in time, and in this setting looking for elementary structures is incoherent and illusionary. Structures that are in place in a society are never “elementary” but always historically determined and eligible for change, particularly in Martinique where structures are inherent to the act of colonization and transplantation. But Glissant is not overtly criticizing Lévi-Strauss. The section’s title suggests that he is also indirectly referring to Frantz Fanon’s chapter from *Peau noire, masques blancs*, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” (“L’expérience vécue du Noir”). Fanon is not mentioned here, any more than Lévi-Strauss, but as opposed to the structuralist Fanon appears elsewhere in *Le Discours antillais*.⁵ Glissant opens the book with a quote from this particular chapter in Fanon’s book where he urges the Martinican thinker to make an “inventory of the real” in order to understand the operations of the imaginary. “The Lived Caribbean Experience” (“Le Vécu antillais”) offers such an inventory, and it is precisely by carefully considering Caribbean reality that the relevance of structuration as opposed to elementary structures is sustained. The Fanon reference thus suggests that Glissant seeks in ethnography a link to the real. And this particular link will contribute to eroding the fundamentals of structuralism. For when confronted with the complexity of the Caribbean world, structuralist schemas and models crack.

Since structuralism was by far the most important theoretical direction for French ethnography (as well as linguistics, where Glissant does not mention structuralism either), the majority of French readers will understand Glissant’s target. Then why does he not directly refer to or even mention structuralism? It could be explained as a sign of modesty: Glissant does not want to point fingers and is more interested in general movements of thought than directing specific critique at a particular school. On the other hand, it could be a way to delegitimize the gaze of the other, a refusal to acknowledge the importance that has been assigned to structuralism. In any case, through sweeping assessments Glissant avoids addressing both concrete and abstract dimensions of structuralist anthropology. He simply takes what he wants without anchoring his critique in “proofs.” Clearly, the “pure ethnography” he discusses is a discursive construction, resembling structuralism.

At first glance it is tempting to conclude that the function of this construction is to create a counter-discourse through which postcolonial writers, the former “objects” of ethnographic research, could define themselves in their own terms. But as the Fanon reference shows, for Glissant the problem is not primarily the discourse of knowledge. Rather, it is the way the world is approached and expressed. Structuralist models reduce reality because society is not a set of fixed structures; rather, it is organic and changing. Significantly, on this point Glissant glides into a similar criticism addressed to European realistic writing, which he defines quite simplistically as the “theory and technique for ‘literal’ or total representation” (*Caribbean Discourse* 105). Realistic descriptions are all-encompassing and determined by an omniscient subject who pretends to grasp the entire world, including the darkest corners of the human psyche. Likewise, structuralism claims to grasp the essential dimensions of a society when its models are applied. The claim to

all-encompassing description, exhausting every corner of reality, turns ethnography into an inhumane science says Glissant, because its expression relies on distance and fixes the object once and for all. This corresponds to a construction of the real, not an inventory. It distorts the real so that it can fit into the knowledge frame imposed upon it.

The epistemic problem identified within ethnography is thus clearly linked to an issue of writing. Glissant ultimately sees structuralism as being incapable of finding an expression able to follow the transformations in society. Interestingly, this is also somehow reflected in the evolution of academic ethnography: structuralism pushed ethnography away from observation and real encounters in the field towards abstract theoretical construction. When induction replaces observation, the movement towards the other is no longer as crucial; distance has replaced “the inventories of the real” that Glissant following Fanon saw as necessary for engaging with Caribbean reality. With ethnography taking shape in scientific laboratories, even its expression is closed off from poetic concerns. Tellingly, when Glissant studied at *Le Musée de l’homme* by the beginning of the 1950s, this institution was no longer the center for the discipline, and the exchanges between ethnography and the literary avant-garde, which had dominated since the 1930s, had now ceased.⁶ If he was faithful to the institution where he studied, he was most likely deploring the fact that ethnography had cut its ties to literature. So while Glissant’s discursive construct of negative ethnography is surely an epistemic critique, it is also the sign of frustration with a branch of ethnography that does not fit in with his vision of ethnography and literature as taking part in a similar movement (*démarche*).

Self-Reflexive Ethnography

Unsatisfied with the methodological model offered by structuralism but still attracted to the main problem debated within the discipline, Glissant seems to seek a third path. He finds this third path in the writings of his professor of ethnography at *Le Musée de l’homme*, Michel Leiris. Contrary to Lévi-Strauss, Leiris “does not subscribe to this general universalizing temptation,” says Glissant (*Poetic Intention* 119). Many critics have illustrated that Leiris and Lévi-Strauss represent two opposite sides of French ethnography: “The rigorous scientist and champion of Cartesian objectivity vs. the poetic surrealist who bathed in reflexive subjectivity,” as anthropologist Sally Price puts it in an article about Leiris and the French Antilles (2). Similarly, James Clifford opposes the two in *Predicament of Culture*, making Leiris the hero of a radical “surrealist ethnography” and paving the way for Clifford’s own postmodern dialogic and rhetorical form of ethnography, while Lévi-Strauss is the front figure of an ethnography of “entropy and loss” (14). Using a Glissantian vocabulary, the difference between the two can be conceptualized by two geographical “images of thought”: continental and archipelagic thinking. Lévi-Strauss incarnates continental thinking that condenses by seeking structures, general rules, and laws. Leiris, on the other hand, deploys an archipelagic kind of thinking, open-ended and processual. How then can Leiris “save” ethnography? How can this discourse, heavily embedded in colonial politics, become archipelagic and, more precisely, serve Glissantian poetics?

Glissant accepts Leiris only in so far as he is not following the rules set up by the discipline: "Leiris resists a certain number of conventions of the ethnographic genre: he will swing from the necessary and partial examination of 'primitive' civilizations to the complex study of relations between civilizations such as they are currently practiced in various regions of the world" (*Poetic Intention* 119). The notion of primitive is replaced by "contemporary" (*actuel*) here; the idea of partial study is replaced by complex relationships. Glissant mainly refers to Leiris's ethnographic journal *L'Afrique fantôme* and not to his scientific ethnographic studies. This journal that Leiris held before he was a trained ethnographer during an expedition from Dakar to Djibouti in 1930–1932 includes important self-reflexive passages, both admitting and denouncing everything from dirty dreams to plain exoticism and looting of sacred objects.⁷ Glissant stresses the importance of Leiris becoming aware that his position as an observer influenced the ethnographic study. This led him to be interested in the idea of an ethnography of contacts between cultures. "Leiris's effort," Glissant explains, "will consist henceforth in leaning ethnographic practice in the direction of this study of real contacts; in this perspective he reconciles the search for the self with the search for the other" (*Poetic Intention* 120). Using this approach, ethnography must also engage with culture as it evolves, its object being processual rather than static. In the very contact the ethnographic object is happening, takes shape, and, thereby, ethnographic knowledge becomes the result of a process.⁸

Once ethnography is seen as a processual form of knowledge, as opposed to Lévi-Strauss's fixed elementary structures, it can also offer a framework for analyzing Caribbean society, Glissant concludes.⁹ Leiris's two studies on the French Caribbean, *Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe* (1955) and "Martinique-Guadeloupe-Haïti" published in *Les Temps modernes* (1954) are read as logical results of Leiris's initial interest in contacts. However, Leiris's analysis of Caribbean society itself does not seem to be that important to Glissant. Leiris is, for instance, not mentioned in the section from *Le Discours antillais* where Glissant analyzes Martinican society in terms of structuration, discussed previously in regard to structuralism. This absence suggests that, instead of being used as models for interpreting Martinique's reality, Leirisian "real contacts" inform Glissant on a poetic level. Moreover, Glissant refrains from evoking Leiris's direct Martinican contact, Aimé Césaire, as if he wanted to stress, indirectly, that his reading of Leiris is personal and has not been mediated by his Martinican predecessor.

What attracts Glissant is the self-reflexive approach, which allows for establishing contacts with others. This is, as we shall see further on, what will determine his discursive construction of Leirisian ethnography. As opposed to the distanced structuralist, we are now dealing with an observer who implicates himself. In the first place Glissant borrows from the introspective dimension of Leiris's two writing careers. In *Soleil de la conscience*, where Glissant tells about his encounter with Paris as a student from the French Caribbean, he calls himself a self-ethnographer. In short passages that suggest poetry in prose, he relates in a non-linear way how he slowly explores and gradually comes to know the new "old" continent. This exploration runs parallel with an inner exploration: while facing the familiar yet strange world of his mother country, France, the Martinican also discovers his own singularity and difference. Here, ethnography is temporarily used as a posture:

But in the Antilles where I come from one can say that a people is being positively constructed. Born in a melting pot, in this laboratory where each table is an island, here is a synthesis of races, customs, knowledge, which strives towards its own unity. This is in fact the question: can this synthesis succeed in achieving unity? Will one be able to observe, now that human science is interested in these problems, in life the work of being, creating itself, and being born out of its own will (clay that assigns to itself, without any demiurge, its breath)? . . . This is the question posed to me by my existence; and, in so far as I am already answering it, one can say that it posits me as being: thus I am the ethnologist of myself. (*Soleil de la conscience* 21–22)

Since the book was written during the period when Glissant was studying ethnography and had already written an article on Leiris the year before, the Leirisian influence cannot be denied. However it is difficult to establish to which part of Leiris's career he is referring. This passage could either refer to Leiris's conviction that subjectivity is a crucial factor in ethnographic research, or to Leiris the author and his autobiographical project, *Le Journal* and *La Règle du jeu*. In fact, to use the term "self-ethnography" to connect Leiris's project with that of Glissant is somewhat misleading. In an interview with Jean Jamin and Sally Price, Leiris rejects the self-ethnographic label that has been placed onto his work (*C'est-à-dire* 49). The term, Leiris underscores, does not do justice to his literary or ethnographic writings since he never applied ethnographic methods on his own life. So while contemporary critics from James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture* to Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* have embraced the term and used it to characterize different types of junctions between literature and discourses of knowledge, Leiris himself was always careful to distinguish between his two careers. Likewise, Glissant, while employing the term self-ethnography when speaking of his own project in *Soleil de la conscience*, never mentions self-ethnology in his readings of Leiris. For Leiris being self-reflexive and including oneself in the ethnographic study is not the same as doing self-ethnography. From this perspective, the self-ethnographer is only interested in mapping the self, not in the encounters that are crucial in the notion of self-reflexivity.

However, by taking on the posture of a self-ethnographer Glissant discovers that his perspective as a Caribbean in France is similar to that of a Leirisian self-reflexive ethnographer that is implied in the ethnographic investigation. In Paris, the narrator concludes that to understand the European environment, he must simultaneously explore his Caribbean reality. The fragmented narrative in *Soleil de la conscience* presents a movement back and forth between Europe and Martinique, and the narrator's process of subjectivation takes place in these continuous passages over the Atlantic. In the paragraph where the narrator identifies himself as a self-ethnographer he realizes that his Caribbean heritage places him at the crossroads of languages and cultures.

But when Glissant incorporates self-reflexivity in his own writings, he does not follow Leiris. In *Soleil de la conscience* the self is only evoked *after* culture. First, the narrator elaborates on the cultural context from which he navigates. The emergence of composite cultures comes out as the crucial issue for this self-ethnographer. To Glissant, the self is only interesting as a reflection of this cultural dilemma. The reason why personal and cultural are placed on the same level is that it was only through his personal experience of coming

to France as a student from the former colonies that Glissant realized the singularity of his Caribbean heritage. Hence, Glissant's procedure moves in the opposite direction of Leiris's project, which returned obsessively to the self despite the importance of encounters with otherness. Contrary to what we see in Leiris's progression, context and culture come first, whereas self comes second. The self is a passage through which the Glissantian narrator has to go in order reach the surrounding world; his ultimate interest is thus *not* the self but the world. Glissant's auto-ethnography is a form of detour, an introspection that looks beyond the borders of the self. The questions he asks when identifying himself as a self-ethnologist do not concern him personally but instead concern Caribbean culture. What seems to compel Glissant to turn to ethnography is thus not the subject *en soi* but the idea that the subject cannot be isolated from context. And the Martinican in Paris will always be a borderline subject, at once "a son and a stranger" (*Soleil de la conscience* 14).

Leiris, on the other hand, may travel to different places and experience foreign cultures, but his identity remains rather homogeneous. At several moments in his ethnographic career Leiris was rather seeking to transcend the in-between position of the ethnographer and "go native." In a critical and much cited preface from 1950 to the second edition of his unconventional ethnographic journal *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris explains that he vainly desired to escape his bourgeois self by immersing himself in the life of Africans, but disappointingly only found that it is impossible. He often felt captured within his own self, and, at the same time, this very feeling of self-enclosure was often subject to his self-criticism. Leiris's self-criticism is surely admirable, but the main issue remains: he is trapped within the self even when showing self-awareness. Britton convincingly shows how Leiris tried to replace the desire for immersion with solidarity with the other in the 1950s. In the preface to the second edition of *L'Afrique fantôme*, Britton argues, Leiris reveals that "the dichotomy between neutral science and fantasized identification with the other turns out to be false; and he has been able to surmount it through his *political* commitment to the decolonization movements" (Britton 43). Solidarity means a form of contact without identification, but as Britton argues there are more links between immersion and solidarity than what both Leiris and Glissant want to admit.

With Britton's words we can say that Glissant follows Leiris's own "sublimation" of his original "desire for identification and participation" into political commitment (45). By a word-play that links solidarity (*solidaire*) to solitary (*solitaire*), Glissant sublimates Leirisian contacts and downplays the distinction between immersion and solidarity. In Glissant's depiction, Leiris's self-reflexivity rescues him from the negative aspects of ethnographic practice that were associated with structuralism. In this sense, Leirisian ethnography is also a discursive construct made by Glissant, but it is a positive one as opposed to the negative and reductive structuralist stance. But there is a crucial difference: structuralist distance is not useful while Leirisian contacts are. Using Leiris as poetic inspiration rather than applying his theories, Glissant's relational strategy is to pave a third path between his two discursive constructions of ethnography. Glissant appropriates Leiris in order to enter into relation with ethnography.

Towards a Glissantian Poetics of Ethnography

Glissant seems to incorporate Leiris to the point where it is difficult to know whether he is speaking of Leiris or of his own vision of a poetic approach to the world: "All ethnography of the Antilles ceases to be strictly recapitulative, engages the future in the present, forces a consideration of collisions between cultures, and (despite the racism that holds sway in these countries) confirms that it is not utopic to conceive of the advent one day of a truly composite civilization" (*Poetic Intention* 121). Leiris's ethnographic method is here called an "ethnography of the Antilles," and it will later be called an "ethnography of Relation" in *Traité du Tout-Monde*. Glissant has not yet fully conceptualized creolization or Mondiality, but these concepts echo in the quote. The Martinican takes over Leiris and integrates his thinking into his own work. In the Glissantian poetic setting, ethnography, which was for Leiris a strict empirical science, has prophetic qualities. It might foresee the dawning of mixed societies, but, moreover, it participates in the process of relation. But when Leiris has been processed in Glissant's conceptual mixer as in the above quote, we have left the discursive construct of Leirisian ethnography. Here Glissant tends towards his own use of Leiris, which is not to copy his models but to do as he suggests in the quote: not summarize the real but engage in the present or "weave" the text with reality's threads through poetic operations.

Clearly, while Glissant may create discursive constructions of Leiris's and Lévi-Strauss's respective ethnographies as opposing discourses of knowledge on others, the problem that captures his interest is that of ethnography as an approach offering "real contacts." Whether based on immersion or solidarity, Leirisian contacts mean a form of engagement with the real that he did not find in structuralism. The notion of engagement could work as the joint, linking identification and solidarity.¹⁰ Moreover, it covers simultaneously the focus on approach and the transition from approach of the real to poetics.

When Glissant revisits Leiris some forty years after *Soleil de la conscience* in *Traité du Tout-Monde*, the connection with the real is conceptualized mainly through the notion of observation.¹¹ Glissant characterizes Leiris as a meticulous and rigorous observer who shows "the same relentless demand for truth (for veracity) in the detail that is imposed here (regarding his confessions) and there (regarding the ethnographic practice)" (*Traité du Tout-Monde* 133). Both the ethnographer and the autobiographer strictly follow and report what the eye sees. Observation becomes the term for the mediation between self, world, and others. In *Poétique de la Relation* Glissant touches upon this form of engaged approach through empirical observation, which he contrasts with abstract construction (implicitly structuralism):

it is an experimental mediation (a follow-through) of the process of relation, at work in reality, among the elements (whether primary or not) that weave its combinations. A science of inquiry. This "orientation" then leads to following through whatever is dynamic, the relational, the chaotic—anything fluid and various and moreover uncertain (that is ungraspable) yet fundamental in every instance and quite likely full of instances of invariance. (*Poetics* 137)

The real is at the center of attention here. Science (like literature) is defined by the way in which it enters into relation with the real “at work.” This requires participation and a form of expression that is able to do justice to the continuous transformations in the real. Glissant identifies this engaged process in itself as knowledge. As opposed to abstract knowledge constructed by structuralist schemas, knowledge as a process is governed by the real, “because here observation is focused on contacts, syntheses, clashes and harmonies between cultural elements of very different origins” (“Leiris ethnographe” 619). More specifically, Glissant speaks here of what kind of study is necessary for analyzing the Antilles, but the general conclusion is that if engaged with a complex reality, knowledge would no longer be a discourse; it is a practice seeking its expression.

When Glissant describes *Contacts de civilisations* in *Traité du Tout-Monde*, the expressive aspect returns. Leiris’s book “leaves the real as it is, as it is approached, content to weave in its material” (131). There is no attempt at summarizing reality: Leiris picks up threads from the world that are woven into his writing. Engaged, Leirisian observation does not confirm “a fragmented vision of the world, but leads to a heap of details (or episodes) that in the end constitute the weave” (128). Leiris does not isolate fragments of reality; he weaves together the real in his writing and creates a differentiated whole. This appreciation of Leiris’s kind of observation with its attention to details is curiously close to the way Glissant describes his own writing in terms of “accumulation” and “weaving” (*trame*), and his later concepts of *Mondiality* and *Tout-monde* are conceived as a totality. Conversely, the problem with ethnography in its “pure” structuralist form is that as a practice, “it offends and destroys (at least when it is practiced this way) the richness in all relations, in this relation: the world finally living, suffering, shared” (*Traité du Tout-Monde* 128–29). Glissant’s own vision of the world emerges in this passage as the reversed mirror of that which traditional ethnography does not see: the world as a suffering, living, and shared space. Distanced observation does not only refuse to see society as an organic being, but it disconnects from it and destroys the richness of intercultural exchanges. It does not *share* (*partage*) the world with others or contribute to its creation; it is not *poetic* enough. The key is in the idea of sharing, which for Glissant is fundamentally poetic, as we shall see.

Glissant’s Leiris is, in fact, less and less ethnographic and more and more poetic. In *Traité du Tout-Monde* Leiris’s ethnographic approach is even characterized as a form of “lived poetics”: “‘The attentive observer’ that is (or was) the ethnographer must *inscribe himself in the drama of the world*: beyond his analysis—in principle, ‘solitary’—he must live a poetics (sharing). Thus Leiris” (122). Here Glissant describes a series of steps in approaching the world: observation, engagement, and living a poetics. The last step, the act of living a poetics, is creative. The French word *partage* means that something is shared, but it is also a partition, a distribution or division, an active organization of the world in which we live. In *Le Discours antillais* poetics is defined in similar terms as being inscribed in community and thereby also in history and society. It is a “collective yearning for expression” (*Caribbean Discourse* 120). Glissant adds the idea of movement (in French Glissant uses the preposition *vers*, towards) and localized it in the common (*collective*). To Glissant poetics corresponds to a collective organization of the world as a shared space. This concept resonates in his appreciation of ethnography as a movement towards elsewhere. He writes: “Concerning ethnography, it is about denouncing with integrity to better establish relationships, to better found the exchange” (*Traité du Tout-Monde* 132).

Leiris's fascination for other cultures first took him elsewhere, but, as Glissant observes, the dissident surrealist soon discovered that his desire for personal deliverance through otherness brought him back home. Elsewhere and home are thus, in Leiris's experience, situated on the same level, and they share the same grounds.

On this level Glissant reconnects the ethnographic practice with the literary: engaged observation constructs a shared space in linking here and elsewhere. Participating in a shared space and entering in contact with others via observation contains the germ of what Glissant will later develop as "common-places" (*lieux-communs*), referring to shared ideas and visions. The Leirisian influence can help us see that the notion of the common-place is not solely conceptual. Glissantian interconnectedness does not only imply human relations, but it also includes localities that correspond with one another. The spatial interconnectedness creates a platform on which human contacts and interrelations can take shape. Relation is conceived as a "poetics of extension" (*une poétique de l'étendue*); elsewhere is within our reach and people as well as cultures are entering into relation: "Relation exists in being realized, that is, in being completed in a common place" (*Poetics* 203). Like ethnography, which "has displaced the motives of our sensibility" (*Soleil de la conscience* 83), relation works by making connections with other entities, whether spatial, geographical, or human. Through this interconnectedness relation is drawn into that dynamic process of becoming. Leirisian contact thus resonates in Glissant's poetics of Relation not only in terms of reaching out to otherness but also in the horizontal articulation of this poetics. Again, the poet Glissant draws Leirisian ethnography towards the imaginary: in order to contribute to global interconnectedness the observer reveals hidden connections between places and people. This is a poetic art of suggestion and associations rather than strict observation.

The aim of this essay was to explore Glissant's ambivalent appropriation of ethnography. We have seen that the pattern is clear: Glissant constructs ethnography as a divided discourse of knowledge, and in the divide between the two sides of ethnography, he manages to carve a third, poetic path. Taking this path, Glissant transforms the idea of engaged observation from being a means for approaching, understanding, and describing the world to becoming a poetic means for connecting places, experiences, and realities.

Seen in these broad terms, ethnography has clearly left its mark on Glissant's literary production. Like the Caribbean ethnography developed in *Le Discours antillais* many of his novels shed light upon hidden parts of Martinican society. But in deploying a poetic dimension, this inventory of the real fueled by ethnography becomes, in his early novels that are anchored in Martinican society, such as *La Lézarde* or *Malemort*, a means for depicting society as it takes shape in connection with the outside. In his later novels, on the other hand, the ethnographic penchant works to connect the wanderings in the *Tout-monde* to locality. In this sense, ethnography offers a clue as to how poetics of relation operates. However, while Glissant draws from Leiris's notion of contacts and engagement with reality as the basis for ethnography, he takes it one step further. In the Glissantian universe, the real encounter is a vector for sensibility. Glissant ultimately turns ethnography into a matter of an aesthetic appreciation of the world as a common-place, of existing, knowing, and establishing relations through the senses. In so doing, he places himself within a singular Caribbean trajectory of poetic uses of ethnography that can be traced from the journal *Tropiques*, going via Fanon up to the publications in the 1990s of works by Ina Césaire and Patrick Chamoiseau.¹² But in this context, only Glissant develops concepts

for exploring ethnography as poetics in which the real encounter is a sensuous experience that informs the imaginaries of the world.

NOTES

1. I follow Glissant in using the term “ethnography” in general, not distinguishing it from ethnology or (cultural) anthropology since his employment of the term has little to do with the academic disciplines. “Discourse” refers to a coherent body of texts and statements. I am deeply indebted to Heidi Bojsen who took the time to read and comment on an earlier version of this essay.
2. See Haitian historian and sociologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s article “Caribbean Region.” Sally Price also underscores that the Caribbean was not at the center of attention of anthropological research because of the region’s diverse cultures.
3. J. Michael Dash suggests that *Soleil de la conscience* can be seen as an indirect critical response to Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques*, which was published in 1955, a year before Glissant’s book (“Le je de l’autre” 94). However, *Tristes Tropiques* is hardly “hard core” structuralist ethnography but rather what Vincent Debaene calls the ethnographer’s “second book” (*Adieu aux voyages* 18). The second book is a kind of appendix text published aside the pure rigorously scientific ethnographic studies, in which the ethnographer could be subjective and sentimental. Nevertheless, perhaps more than Lévi-Strauss’s scientific books, *Tristes Tropiques* shows the ethnographer’s predilection for “primitive” and untouched society. As opposed to Lévi-Strauss’s singling out of Indian tribes, Dash argues, Glissant never represents Europe or Paris as radically different. He practices a “reversed exoticism” and stages a way out of the ethnographer’s nostalgia over dying cultures and mass-tourism’s reduction of all difference into a consumable object. According to Dash, Glissant answers Lévi-Strauss via style, presenting his approach to French reality in a fragmented, non-linear narrative and using associations to link his Caribbean imaginary with the experiences in France.
4. Since Cynthia Mesh’s translation of this section from *Traité du Tout-Monde*, published in *Yale French Studies*, leaves out the crucial reference to *les structures élémentaires*, all the translations from *Traité du Tout-Monde* are mine.
5. Fanon on the other hand does refer directly to Leiris in his study. It could be argued that Fanon is also deploying a kind of self-ethnography in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, but this particular use of ethnography, if there is indeed one, must be considered in terms of an empirical subjectivity necessary to strengthen the psychoanalytical theories of the book. It would be part of Fanon’s radical re-examination of psychoanalysis, rather than a poetic exploration of subjectivation, as in Glissant’s case.
6. See *Adieux aux voyages* 420.
7. Some of these objects are exhibited today with no mention of the circumstances under which they were acquired at *Le musée du Quai Branly* that opened in Paris in 2006.
8. As Vincent Debaene has pointed out this may not have implied an epistemic shift as some postmodern scholars of ethnography have argued (“Ethnographie/Fiction/Littérature” 220). Nevertheless, it did imply a change in the relationship between ethnographer and informant.
9. For thorough discussions of Leiris in regard to the Caribbean and Glissant’s reading of his work see Britton, Fonkoua.
10. Britton stresses that the dimension of reciprocity links Leirisian ethnography to Glissant’s Relation (10).
11. It is worth noting that, insisting on observation, ethnography offers a different form of connection with otherness since Glissant generally conceptualizes the relationship with the other in linguistic terms. In one of his explanations of the idea of opacity, for instance, he states that “you speak to me in your language, I understand you in mine”; we do not necessarily have to speak the same language and intelligibly understand one another in order to “enter into relation” with each other.
12. I develop and analyze this trajectory in my book *The Poetics of Ethnography in Martinican Narratives: Exploring the Self and the Environment*.

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