Scarlet Ibises and the Poetics of Relation: Perse, Walcott and Glissant

Kathleen M. Gyssels
Scarlet Ibises and the Poetics of Relation: Perse, Walcott and Glissant

Focusing on Derek Walcott’s “The Season of Phantasmal Peace,” this paper argues that Walcott’s obsession with birds closely connects him to Edouard Glissant—and Saint-John Perse. Resurgent images (of birds) and ideas bind these major Caribbean poets, proving the very “Caribbeanness” that Glissant theorized as early as his first seminal essay, *Le discours antillais* (1981).

In an interview published in *Le Monde diplomatique*, entitled “The Cultural Creolization of the World,” Thirthankar Chanda asks Edouard Glissant what he means by “chaos world.” The latter answers:

> When I say that our world is a chaos world, I am not saying that it is an apocalyptic world […]. The entanglements at work have made the world complex. […] [O]ur identity is going to change profoundly in contact with the Other as he will on contact with us, without either of them losing their essential nature or being diluted in a multicultural magma. (Chandra [online])

The idea of exchanging identities, of contacts between cultures and people, preoccupied Glissant in his earlier essays, in particular *Caribbean Discourse*, in which he speaks about a “point of entanglement” to describe Caribbean identity (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* 26). Glissant borrows the metaphor of the rhizome from Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* to express the complex and hybrid change that Caribbean identity, and by extension, all identities, undergo, through a process of multiple contacts and exchanges. Starting from the image of the rhizome, I would like to disentangle some of the complex relationships between two major tenants of Caribbean literature. Not only do Derek Walcott and Edouard Glissant both pay tribute to two French-speaking Caribbean poets, Aimé Césaire and Saint-John Perse, but they also use the bird imagery to point out their “double bind” regarding up / rooting, dis / location, dis / semination, and even life and death.

A first entanglement between the two poets is the affinity with Aimé Césaire, the poet and co-founder with L.G. Damas and L.S. Senghor of the *Négritude* movement, as well as with Saint-John Perse, the Guadeloupean-born poet who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1960. While such affinities are

---

stressed by both writers, they themselves sometimes keep at bay what links them in their respective and impressive poetic work. While Glissant recognizes himself in the writings of Alejo Carpentier, Kamau Brathwaite, Lezama Lima, William Faulkner, and Walcott, recent work seems indicative of a distancing. Reciprocally, while Walcott must inevitably be familiar with Glissant’s verse, he never mentions him after receiving the Nobel Prize, when asked in interviews about the poetry from the region or the world poetry that left an imprint on his work and vision. In spite of what Glissant defined as a “Poetics of Relation,” by which he claims and defends a commonality and a dialogue among authors from the Caribbean, the Martinican and the Saint-Lucian bards undermine the very idea of “Caribbeanness.” The fact that critics do not deal with such discrepancies is easy to explain: one can always hide behind a “language shield” and pretend to stick to one literary tradition or linguistic region of the Caribbean. This, it seems to me, does not favor what a lot of the Caribbean authors and critics aim at: to make visible the communal Caribbean issues of identity.

Derek Walcott and Edouard Glissant, both poets and playwrights, allow us to see a Poetics of Relation at work, proving that the Caribbean is, to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase, the place of a “trans-national” imagination, despite the fragmentation and the variety of tongues in which that communal literature comes to express itself. Although the authors are comparable, belonging to the same post-Négritude generation, Walcott and Glissant are too rarely compared (Hambuch 2000, Bonnet 2003, Gyssels 2004). An explanation of this “balkanisation” is obviously offered by the “sound colonial education” (to paraphrase Walcott) of both writers, as underlined by Glissant who is fully aware of this main obstacle to Caribbeanness:

We know what threatens Caribbeanness: the historical balkanization of the islands, the inculcation of different and often “opposed” major languages (the quarrel between French and Anglo-American English), the umbilical cords that maintain, in a rigid or flexible way, many of the islands [...] This isolation postpones in each island the awareness of a Caribbean identity, and at the same time it separates each community from its own true identity. (CD 222)

Note the “Anglo-American English,” indicative of a certain oppression felt by the hegemony of this important world language, and the fact that neither Spanish nor Dutch is mentioned here. Only in Glissant’s latest works are Dutch and the Dutch-speaking regions occasionally mentioned, and though it is true that this literature is less visible, less translated, it is nevertheless part of the postcolonial heritage. The same ranking of the four Caribbean literatures is done by Walcott in interviews and comments during lecture tours. While in Amsterdam in May 2008, he certainly mentioned the abundance of languages, but glossed over the “minor” Caribbean literatures, for the obvious reason that Dutch-speaking Caribbean authors and critics remain largely unknown. Consequently, if both Glissant and Walcott are entangled in a huge intertextual network, and both
refer to and even rewrite the same classics (for example Homer), two different literary traditions, due to the imposed imperial languages, respectively English and French, have imprinted their marks upon them. For Glissant, Claudel and Segalen are extremely influential, while Conrad and T.S. Eliot, to name but two, left their imprint on Walcott’s mind and counter-master narratives. While to some degree their intertextual borrowing, aesthetical and ethical claims match each other, their common response to Saint-John Perse reveals the “Poetics of Relation” at work in their writings. By “Poetics of Relation,” Glissant understands this communal body of images, metaphors (space and landscape, fauna and flora), by which the Caribbean experience translates itself—the best example being the “submarine unity of the Caribbean” Glissant borrowed from Kamau Brathwaite and which he constantly refers to himself through the image of “la barque ouverte” (Glissant, Poétique de la Relation 18-19).

Nobel Lecture: Homage to the French-Caribbean bards

On several occasions in his Nobel Prize Lecture, Walcott points out how Perse’s *Anabase*, translated in 1938 by T.S. Eliot, fascinates him. Both Glissant and Walcott admire Perse’s “mythic tale of exploration, conquest and empire building,” for which Perse drew on many sources (such as Xenophon, Virgil, Marco Polo, and the Christian Gospel). Both Walcott and Glissant are inspired by the epic dimension of Perse’s poetry. The latter’s childhood memories (*Éloges*, 1910) become an important part in Walcott’s rewrite:

> […] Hints of an epochal happiness  
> As ordered and infinite to the child  
> As the great house road to the Great House  
> Down a perspective of casuarinas plunging green manes  
> In time to the horses

The intertextual play is definitely stressed when the poet recalls the:

> orderly life  
> Reduced by lorgnettes day and night, […]  
> Nannies diminished to dolls […]

And in response to Perse, Walcott remembers the mute and subaltern crew of coloured people:

> […] off at its edges, innocently excluded  
> stood the groom, the cattle boy, the housemaid, the gardeners,

---

2. Glissant mentions in the same line the Christian vein of the modern epic in the work of Eliot or Claudel (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 55), but has been more influenced by Claudel than by Eliot.

the tenants, the good Negroes down in the village,
their mouths in the locked jaw of a silent scream. (Walcott, “The Star-Apple
Kingdom,” Collected Poems 384)

The lines above clearly echo “Ecrit sur la porte,” the opening poem of Eloges,
and express Walcott’s postcolonial comment and critic upon Perse’s worldview
and, despite himself, his secretive approval of that colonial order back in the old
plantation times. Even segregation between Whites and Blacks on the Caribbean
“habitation” (plantation) is valorized. In his “Chant IV” of “Pour fêter une
enfance” (“To Celebrate a Childhood”), in Eloges again, Perse wrote:

… how beautiful your mother was, how pale,
when so tall and so languid, stooping,
she straightened your heavy hat of straw or of sun lined with a double siguine
leaf,
and when,
piercing a dream to shadows consecrated, the dazzle of muslin
inundated your sleep (Perse, Selected Poems 9)

Likewise, the memory of silent servants, their faces “insonores, couleur de
papaye et d’ennui, qui s’arrêtaient derrière nos chaises comme des astres morts”
(Perse, “Ecrit sur la porte,” Oeuvres intégrales 35) is offensive for a Caribbean
author who is conscious of being a descendant of slaves. Since it is his people that
has been domesticated, dominated, and deprived of its dignity during decades
of slavery and British colonialism, Walcott criticizing the silencing of the “local”
voices, the proper alienation of the indigenous minds. In The Star-Apple Kingdom,
Walcott dismantles Perse’s Edenic universe and Adamic time, and his praise of
the order of the Plantation. This “Plantation Universe,” illustrative of a well-
managed farm life, is a recurrent motif in all of Walcott’s later work, particularly
Omeros (1990). Nevertheless, Walcott praises Perse, a first contradiction that
characterizes the Caribbean writer. Glissant too writes back to Perse with his
first collection of poetry, entitled Les Indes (1955): he appreciates the trans-
Atlantic embrace, which he calls “antillanité” before moving on to the concept
of rhizomatic identity. To Glissant, Perse, whom he calls “the last herald of a
systematic universe” (CD 226), belongs to an atavistic society, to the conquerors
of an arrowlike conquest, while Martinicans and Caribbeans alike are deprived of
a Genesis, what Glissant’s calls “digenèse” (see Gyssels). Parallel to this “digenèse”
is Walcott’s explicit strife for the epic of the dispossessed. So both poets share the
ambition to offer an epic to a people who have been doubly dispossessed—“le
migrant nu” (“the stripped migrant”), as Glissant calls the Caribbean populations
(CD 50; see Hammer 1997). What drives the Caribbean-born poets is to excavate
the forgotten, deformed, and yet haunting history which is opposed to History.
In doing so, both write for a community deprived of “origins” and certainties.
Glissant wants his work to be placed in a series of great books:
Scarlet Ibises and the Poetics of Relation

[The] great founding books of communities, the Old Testament, the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Chansons de Geste, the Islandic Sagas, the Aeneid, or the African epics, were all books about exile and errantry. This epic literature is amazingly prophetic. It tells of the community, but through relating the community’s apparent failure or in any case its being surpassed, it tells of errantry as a temptation (the desire to go against the root) […] (Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* 15)

In his masterpiece *Omeros* (1990), Walcott cures himself of the wound which Césaire claims to inhabit, the very verses chosen for his tombstone from *Moi, laminaire*: “I inhabit a sacred wound / i inhabit imaginary ancestors / i inhabit an obscure will / i inhabit a long silence” (Césaire 83). But for Walcott, this agony is to be overcome, and the mission of the New World poet is to heal this wound. In *The Muse of History*, commenting upon Césaire, and paraphrasing George Lamming’s “Luxury of Despair” (Silva), Walcott defines the mission of the Caribbean poet as follows: to make deprivation and despair one’s own “luxury.” Césaire indeed remains *Le Nègre inconsolé*, as Roger Tounson and Simonne Henri-Valmore entitled their portrait of the co-founder of *Négritude*. In Walcott’s opinion, Caribbean poets should aspire to overcome desperation and desolation, but Walcott himself, and many others, are prey to the same resurgence that characterizes Césaire and his heirs. One might well defend and praise the “créolité,” and sing optimistically the opportunities of exile and uprooting, but beneath this lies very often a pessimistic, inconsolable grief. However, even though Walcott and Glissant openly praise the hybridity of the Caribbean individual and community, its rhizomatic nature manifests itself in slightly different ways: instead of the fixation on the past and the lost African mother-continent (as Kamau Brathwaite has been recommending), both Walcott and Glissant conceive of a new way of looking at the Caribbean world. Here lies their generational divide with the founders of the *Négritude*-movement. Both “distillate” from this insular place and history universal meaning for a global society. Moreover, by simply watching, witnessing ordinary events such as street life, the Ramleela-parade in Trinidad or wildlife in Africa, both unravel complex connections and interactions between phenomena (human and historical, natural and cultural…) to claim an identity which is entangled in terms of nationalities, ethnicities, languages.

If both poets have acknowledged publicly on several occasions how important Césaire and Perse are for their own writing, a link that is found in the intertextual echoes that have been previously analyzed, the bird image is probably the most evident connexion of both “poetics” to later work by Perse—namely his 1962 collection *Oiseaux*.

**Scarlet Ibises**

In his Nobel speech, Walcott brings to life a graceful image which leaves upon his mind the fascinating power of an epiphany:
Through the creeks of the Caroni Swamp, to catch the scarlet ibises coming home at dusk. In a performance as natural as those of the actors of the Ramleela, we watched the flocks (group of sheep, birds or goats) come in as bright as the scarlet of the boy archers, as the red flags, and cover an islet until it turned into a flowering tree, an anchored immortelle. The sigh of History meant nothing here. (Nobel Lecture [online])

This spectacular image of groups of ibises flying over the landscape is a “floating flag over the island,” a magnificent moment of supreme beauty, of “photogenic poverty, postcard sadnesses” (Nobel Lecture) that evokes a feeling of belonging to this specific place, replacing the real flag. If Walcott frequently refers to birds, one particular poem, “The Season of Phantasmal Peace,” confronts us in a spectacular way with the issue of Caribbean migration and exile, and the fragmentation of language and being. This last poem of The Fortunate Traveller (1982) is reminiscent of Perse's Oiseaux. Like Perse, the Caribbean poet has a “sound knowledge” of all birds found in the Caribbean, which he considers as divine because of their silent, apparently blind navigation in the firmament:

The bird, most ardent for life of all of our blood kin, lives out a singular destiny on the frontier of day. As a migrant whom the sun's inflation haunts, he journeys by night because the days are too short for him. [...] On the cross-beam of his wing is the vast balancing of a double season, and under the curve of his flight the very curvature of the earth. (Perse, Selected Poems 127)

Representing the nomadic condition of Caribbeans worldwide, Walcott seems to use birds as travellers without maps, who were deported to the “colonies,” and whose “sounds” remain undecipherable to humans. From the beginning, birds have been like Africans in the New World, encaged and enslaved, domesticated and dominated:

Then all the nations of birds lifted together
the huge net of the shadows of this earth
in multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues,
stitching and crossing it. (“SPP” 464)

After a titanic series of anaphoras (“They lifted up/ the shadows of long pines
down trackless slopes,/ the shadows of glass-faced towers down evening streets;/ the shadow of a frail plant on a city sill”), “The Season of Phantasmal Peace” evokes the image of a net:

the net rising soundless at night, the birds' cries soundless, until

---

4. A tree with orange flowers; a shade tree for the cocoa plants in Grenada, Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean.
5. Elsewhere Walcott is impressed by “[A] white dust of ibises whose cries / Have wheeled since civilization's dawn” (Walcott, “A Far Cry from Africa,” Collected Poems 17).
there was no longer dusk, or season, decline, or weather, 
only this passage of phantasmal light 
that not the narrowest shadow dared to sever. ("SPP" 464)

This poem, often read during Christmas masses, offers two readings. It first challenges the notion of Eden and Paradise for the migrant (bird or human) who came to the first World, for the West Indians who flew to the cold North. European nations colonized warm countries. For Walcott, who calls European (and Russian) literature a “literature of winter” that alienates him, cold climates and cold countries are “serious” (“seriousness comes only out of a culture with four seasons” [Nobel Lecture]). He wants to write a “literature of eternal Summer.” His long and lonely winters in Boston and New York are also remembered in Omeros, where the cold temperature stands for seriousness and contempt for the “stranger” coming from Beyond, from the West Indies and Africa.

In the same way that we speak of “colonies of birds” who settle elsewhere, who migrate under some instinctive impulsion, flying to the same destination, “the wingless ones” (“SPP” 464), or humans here, seem to have settled in cities that now resemble cages of glass from which they cannot escape. Everywhere in the Caribbean archipelago, Latin-America and Africa, local populations have been deprived of their languages and their dialects, and forbidden to speak their native tongues by the colonizers. The vernaculars born during slavery are raised to the level of respected language, through the writing of the Caribbean poet. No longer a “gazouillis,” ”petit nègre” or “patois,” Creole is a praised communal language and the variety of tongues, “multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues,” testifies to the cultural richness of the Caribbean.

Yet, Walcott asserts that this “season of light” was merely “phantasmal”—in other words temporary. At the same time, given the second meaning of the word phantasmal—that is to say spectral, haunting—the season of light is also shadowing (above) the poet who is conscious of his “dislocation” and “displacement.” The European idea of “settling” is an illusion, and likewise colonialism seems a delusion. Consequently the poet would like to return to that pristine moment of communion and communication: “all the nations of birds lifted together / the huge net of the shadows of this earth” (“SPP” 464). The birds (geese, ospreys, starlings…) are all European species, of old and cold countries, except the “killdeer” or “plover”—Perse’s pluvier. Like colonizers, migratory birds nest in colonies. Like colonists, birds travel many miles to enjoy the abundance of natural resources in warmer climates. Addressing the temporary nature of the

---

7. In the New Testament, Luke calls birds “a great company of the heavenly host,” whereas Walcott names them “phantasmal,” which is a word referring to a mental image, or an awe-inspiring, almost terrifying vision. He uses the angel-like creatures with wings to identify deep and profound human longing for peace, and to involve something theophanous, an intersecting of heaven and earth. Birds incarnate something fabulous, fantastic, far beyond the realm of the real.
The poet mourns the disruption of native culture, the destruction of vernacular languages. This “season lasted one moment” (“SPP” 465), but seems to have had “eternal” effects on the victims of the British presence (but also French, Spanish, and Dutch) in the Caribbean. While a “short time” in modern history, it has forever “balkanized” the Caribbeans, separated the sons and daughters born in the African diaspora, unable to speak the same language. The variety of languages is consequently a fortune and a burden: Walcott prizes it and at the same time considers it as the reason for the neglect of Caribbean literature. Maria Cristina Fumagalli’s 2001 insightful essay entitled The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante demonstrates how Walcott creatively and intensively explores the interfaces of languages, both European and Caribbean, the “classic” languages intermingling with the “patois” of Saint-Lucia. Imperialism and European colonization imposed a foreign language, and language is a web that imprisons the Caribbeans, creating the gap between Franco- and Anglo-, but also Dutch- and Spanish-speaking authors and critics alike.

A second effect of the European colonizers is that, far from being disentangled, languages, as well as the vernaculars and pidgin variations of English, form a web around the Caribbean archipelago and the Guyanas. Lack of communication, even incomprehension of other Caribbean literatures are responsible for lifting a “net rising soundless as night / the birds’ cries soundless” (“SPP” 464). The adjective “soundless” may refer to the fact that the speech and discourse of the colonized are incomprehensible to the colonizer. Second, the native population’s language is written, which endangers their existence even further, as the créolisés now openly admit after having published their Créolité manifesto twenty years ago (see Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant).

In the second stanza of “The Season of Phantasmal Peace,” the verb “fluttering to sleep” (“SPP” 464) inscribes on the readers’ minds the very moment of sliding into the unconsciousness of sleep, of flying away in a dream to a better, warmer place. To be lifted up by the wings of sleep is also beautifully expressed by Perse. In Walcott’s poem, the image of fading away is associated with images of death: “evening,” “yellow October” and the “ember-circling chough” (“SPP” 464) suggest the end of something once great, decay and decline, but also the poet’s own measure of time, the “arrow” of time gliding over him. In addition, the image of “a mother drawing / the trembling gauze over the trembling eyes / of

8. I refer to Dash’s defence of Glissant writing back to Walcott in the enigmatic title Ormerod (2003), displaying the name of Beverly Ormerod, but also referring to Omeros by the phonetic aspect of the title alone (Dash, “Perdu dans la montagne”).
9. The different Creoles in Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe and the Guyanas, as well as the Seychelles and the island of Réunion may have a system of transcription, but they are mutually incomprehensible.
a child fluttering to sleep” (“SPP” 464) may represent the suppression and near extinction of traditional beliefs and practices of fledging civilizations.

In Tout-monde, his 1993 travelogue of various countries, which links the East with the West Indies, the North and the South, Glissant experiences a form of resurgence: while travelling to Egypt, he is caught by a process of remembering, of entangled memories. In the section entitled “Assouan,” one memory gets entangled with another one, the here with the there, the now with the then:

The white birds—ibises [...] remind me of those clouds of blue and black birds which at set times descend on the pool of Restinga in the island of Margarita near Venezuela. To underline these links, which refine memory, does not mean to bring down all the things in the world to the same egocentric uniformity that you decide on yourself. It means instead to enrich diversity with a crazy equivalence—which enables you to better appreciate things. (Glissant, Tout-monde 527, my translation)

Glissant’s philosophical wanderings redefine a specific kind of resurgence: in the same way as he calls himself a “descendant of those who survived,” he concludes from the fact that this species of birds lives in Africa as well as the tropical parts of the New World, that this “crazy equivalence” illustrates the Relation. Not surprisingly, Glissant mentions the “Egyptian book of the Dead” as an example of

The very book whose function it is to consecrate an intransigent community [...], qualifying its triumph with revelatory Wanderings. In both L’intention poétique and Le Discours antillais [...] I approached this dimension of epic literature.

(Glissant, Poetics of Relation 16)

Considering the “mystical perfection in the Voyage,” his force being the Voyage (Glissant, Poetics of Relation 17), Glissant conceives a similar pattern to make us understand the multiple relationship with the Other. Walcott, likewise, renders the ideal of a coherence and a collectivity through the epiphany of a multitude of colourful birds flying all in the same direction. In other words, both demonstrate the Poetics of Relation as understood by Glissant: “basing every community’s reason for existence on a modern form of the sacred” (Glissant, Poetics of Relation 16). In La Cohée du Lamentin (2006), Glissant evokes the white clouds of birds which symbolize the flight of time, the consciousness of aging and the eventuality of the disappearance of the small Caribbean volcanic islands:

10. “Assouan. – Les oiseaux blancs, – des ibis, – traçant leurs gammes sur les branches des arbres, me rappellent ces nuées d’oiseaux bleus et noirs qui s’abattent à heure fixe sur les bords de l’étang de La Restinga, dans l’île de la Margarita près du Vénézuela. Signaler de tels rapports, qui affinent le souvenir, ce n’est pas ramener toutes choses du monde à l’égocentrique uniformité que vous décidez en vous-même. C’est enrichir la diversité d’une folle équivalence, qui permet de mieux estimer.” (Italics in original)
Within forty years, Martinique will disappear in an unforgiving earthquake. We cannot stop toying with this idea, that is to say to die from it ahead of time. One thing is certain, 40,000 coffins have already been stocked, “that’s in case…”. [...] Will we leave at least the memory of some miniature Atlantis, without any mysterious civilization, a Black Atlantis—and I acknowledge that here I am referring to and changing the title of an essay by Mr Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic? In the meantime, dozens of thousands die all over the world, taken away at regular intervals with a mechanical fatality by floods and earthquakes, we are accustomed to this, but now, when it comes to the ultimate disaster, (...). (Glissant, La Cohée 14-15, my translation)\(^\text{11}\)

The idea of a culture disappearing, of a civilization devastated by new rulers is symbolized by “balans d’oiseaux” or “nuées d’oiseaux” (Glissant, Tout-monde 526), which can liberate themselves from the cage. In Egypt, scarlet and white ibises are mumified and deified, and Glissant considers the Egyptian book of the Dead the "supreme errantry" book (Glissant, Poetics of Relation 16). As worshippers of the human condition, birds are said to look from above upon the “wingless ones,” the human beings whose civilization risks becoming a relic if one clings to ideals of racial purity and cultural superiority. Both Walcott and Glissant take seriously the natural (and unnatural, tourism being a disaster in their eyes) catastrophes that endanger the beauty and resources of the Caribbean region and threaten the region’s populations and culture. Glissant fears that one day his native island will become an open-air museum, with its remnants of rain forest, volcanoes, plantations, and beaches. Haunted and obsessed by their disappearing authentic Creole culture, both writers choose the bird image to visualize an unfortunate future from which only “fortunate travellers” can escape. In Cohée, Glissant thanks “Mr Paul Gilroy” for his beautiful title Black Atlantic (1993). It is unclear whether Glissant is aware of the fact that Gilroy might have borrowed this title from Glissant’s own pages on submarine unity and transversality in Le discours antillais (Glissant, Le discours antillais 134, 422-423), which were translated in Caribbean Discourse. Selected Essays (222-223), and which reappear in Poétique de la Relation (1990) through the image of the open boat.

It becomes evident that for Glissant as for Walcott, and I might add other fellow writers such as Guyanese novelist and critic Wilson Harris,\(^\text{12}\) the Caribbean

\(^{11}\) “D’ici à quarante ans, la Martinique disparaît dans un séisme sans concession. Nous ne cessons de triturer cela, c’est-à-dire d’en mourir par avance. Sûr et certain, quarante–cinq mille cercueils sont stockés déjà, c’est pour si en cas... [...] Laisserions–nous au moins le souvenir d’une Atlantide en réduction, sans civilisation mystérieuse, un Black Atlantis—et je reconnais que je démarque là le titre, The Black Atlantic, d’un livre de monsieur Paul Gilroy ? En attendant, il y a ces dizaines de dizaines de milliers de morts partout dans ce monde emportés à intervalles réguliers et avec une fatalité mécanique par des tremblements et des inondations, nous y sommes habitués, mais là, pour le désastre final, (...).”

\(^{12}\) See the clouds of birds in Harris’s first novel, Palace of the Peacock (1960).
experience remains inseparable from migration and re-settlement, and forging a diasporic identity. The idea of the destruction and disappearance of small cultures in the face of colonialism, and today worldwide globalization, is expressed in both cases through the image of swarms of birds:

Imagine the flight of thousands of birds above some lake in Africa or in the Americas. The Tanganyika or Lake Erie or one of those lakes in the South Tropics [...]. Look at these swarms of birds. You imagine the spiral which they uncoil and on which the wind streams. (Glissant, “Comme l’oiseau innumérable,” La Cohée 11, my translation)

Like Walcott’s web of birds, Glissant speaks of myriads of birds in addressing the problem of confinement and border. Both Walcott and Glissant use the legend of the “Flying Africans,” the metaphor for the “Diasporic Consciousness” (Walters 1997), to express not so much a nostalgic call back to Africa, as the survival strategy of a dying “culture,” the Creole culture of the Caribbean. The fishnet contains and imprisons the different types of “wingless-creatures,” yet it lifts them to a higher and better place; the image is like the curvature of the earth which Perse spoke of in “Oiseaux” (Perse, Selected Poems 127): directed to the sky and not to the bottom of the sea, it means a liberation from cold and inhospitable places, a “transportation” and transfer elsewhere. De-territorialized and displaced, Glissant and Walcott both yearn for the angel-like creatures. The killdeer’s screech is the pluvier, or rain messenger, from the latin “pluvia,” in the title section of Exil: “Sur des plaintes de pluviers s’en fut l’aube plaintive, s’en fut l’hyade pluvieuse à la recherche du mot pur” (Perse, Œuvres intégrales 128). The play on “pluie” and “pluvier” attests once more to the semantic richness of Perse’s verse. The same bird appears with the same connotation in Walcott’s “The Season of Phantasmal Peace.” For Césaire, birds similarly symbolize the thoughts that the master cannot bind, the emulations of the mind and the dreams which the colonizer, in spite of his terror and violence, cannot encage:

thoughts debris of shelters
dreams-limpings
desires segments of dry stems
(a combinative that exhaust itself)
nothing of all this has the strength to go very far
winded
are our birds falling and refalling
weighed down by the excess of volcanic ash
(Césaire, “Débris” 123)

“Relinked, (relayed), related”

In Glissant’s Poetics of Relation, a section entitled “relinked, (relayed), related” examines the “resurgences” of images, impressions, and ideas. Glissant claims that “the most harmonious analysis is the one that poetically describes flying or diving” (Glissant, Poetics of Relation 174). Walcott and Glissant both consider birds as companions for the Caribbean orphan adrift at sea, for the Robinson Crusoes surviving on conversations with birds. Their graceful flight “over the highway of Felicity, over the fruit vendor’s stalls” captures Walcott’s attention and poetic imagination (Nobel Lecture). Their giving shape to some of their most preoccupying ideas about the Caribbean condition today, as well as in the past, their reflecting upon errantry and exile through the same image of dissemination of birds, illustrate the Poetics of Relation at work in their respective poetry. The place given to the “ibises” in both Walcott’s and Glissant’s poetic rendering of the future of the Caribbean, and the vulnerable and fragile birds as harbingers of a peaceful harmony and longing for the poet’s restless imagination, exactly as Césaire’s “anubis-ibis” from i, laminaria,14 lift the poet to “higher ground.”

Blending French, English and Creole vocabulary, Walcott and Glissant both write incantatory poetry which celebrates landscape and nature, Caribbean waves, and birds as one of the many “écho-mondes” heard by Glissant. The fact that Walcott does not mention Glissant a single time during his numerous interviews and talks is puzzling. The balkanisation of the Caribbean is certainly to be blamed, but it is surprising coming from a poet so respectful of diversity and so curious about the Other speaking in another language but with the same tongue. Both Glissant and Walcott are followers and critics of Perse and Césaire; both have translated, almost in similar modes and vocabularies, the Caribbean postcolonial condition with its burden of the past, its uncertain present and future, yet both have an uneven international acclaim due to the hegemony of anglophone literatures and of English as a global language in the twenty-first century. While Walcott certainly deserves the Nobel prize, it must be said that Glissant has been much more productive as a writer of novels, poetry, plays and essays in various journals and newspapers. In spite of the language being a “neutral” criterion for the attribution of the Nobel, it seems that more anglophone voices have been awarded the prestigious prize, at least in the realm of postcolonial literature. In the same way as Aimé Césaire waited in vain for this international recognition, Glissant, who celebrated his eightieth birthday in September 2008, has to reckon with the decline of one specific “nation-language,” French, despite his creative creolization of the master’s language. The convergent approaches to the same topic—exile, displacement, flight as dream and salvation, birds as messengers of the afterlife and as conservators of a threatened “small culture”—show that the

14. Césaire explores Egyptian cosmogony to address the incomprehensible messages sent by birds who witnessed the drowning of the many ancestors deported from Africa.
Poetics of Relation is at work. Despite their differences, both Glissant and Walcott express in similar ways the Caribbean condition today, and more generally the postcolonial identity. Like birds who don’t mix but live together in spite of their different “languages” and “instincts,” the rhizome, or Relation-identity, defracts itself in the non-linear dynamic of the diasporic identity that becomes the norm in the twenty-first century global world.

_Kathleen M. GYSSELS
Antwerp University_

Works cited


Walters, Wendy W. “‘One of these Days, Bright and Fair / Take my Wings and Cleave the Air’: The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness,” Melus 22.3 (Fall 1997): 3-29.