

*Edouard Glissant's and
Edward Braithwaite's Ap-
propriations of Colonial
Languages*

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Introduction

Edouard Glissant, from Martinique, and Edward Kamau Braithwaite, from Barbados, were contemporary Caribbean writers who were proficient both in creative writing (Glissant was primarily a novelist, and Braithwaite is chiefly known for his poetry) as well as in philosophical essays, particularly in regard to language. Both followed the common career path of the most successful and renowned Caribbean writers of beginning in the Caribbean but moving on to Europe and the United States for further exposure. Glissant grew up in Martinique and went on to study philosophy in France,

and later worked as a professor in the United States and later as the director of a French government-sponsored cultural center in Paris until his death. Braithwaite was born in Barbados and went on to study in England and is now a professor of literature in the United States. Though they were almost exact contemporaries – Glissant, who died in 2011, was born in 1928 just two years before Braithwaite, who just died in 2016 – Glissant has generally been considered the first of the two to theorize about Caribbean history and language. At least in regard to their key theoretical concepts related to language, Glissant came up with his term *poétiqueforcée* before Braithwaite developed his idea of *nation language* at the end of the 1970s, relating it explicitly to Glissant's theory. Simon Gikandi actually refers to Glissant as Braithwaite's "mentor" (Gikandi 1991, 728) – although, as we will see, Braithwaite mentions Glissant but does not develop a theory that is truly dependent on Glissant. One of Glissant's key works of philosophy is his essay collection *Le Discours antillais* (1981), and though some critics see a fundamental discontinuity in his work in *Le Discours antillais* and later publications in the 1990s and on, at least in regard to language it is not a misrepresentation of his thought to focus on essays from this one book earlier in his career. As for Braithwaite, his essay "History of the Voice" is a foundational postcolonial essay for the Anglophone Caribbean. Considering these two writers together, particularly in regard to language, makes sense because they come from different linguis-

tic contexts within the Caribbean and at the same time theorize language in those contexts in similar ways. As Celia Britton points out, “Braithwaite’s concept of ‘nation-language’ [...] has much in common with Glissant’s attempts to theorize and to forge in practice a new language use that will be both specific and adequate to the social realities of the Caribbean” (Britton 1999, 2).

The relationship between these two writers and their thought is well documented in the critical literature, but comparative study of their theoretical work has been neglected – perhaps because postcolonialism in studies of Caribbean literatures tends to break down according to linguistic categories. In regard to this compartmentalizing of Caribbean literatures, Christopher Winks writes:

Linguistic divisions have contributed to the fragmentation of the Caribbean and Caribbean studies, as is evident in the deployment of the “postcolonial” rubric upon the Anglophone Caribbean, “Francophone Studies” upon the American *Départements d’Outre-Mer* and (bitter historical irony) Haiti, and “Latin American Studies” upon the Hispanophone Caribbean. (Winks n.d. , 246-247)

Without ignoring cultural – and linguistic – differences, comparative literary study can be productive in the Caribbean context, and should be more common. After all, if critics insist too strenuously on differences, then they must answer the question of what micro-level of

cultural differences no longer prevents comparative study (within one geographical and linguistic context, for example). By comparing Glissant and Braithwaite on the issue of language, this article argues for common ground between them and meaningful contribution on the issue of language both in their postcolonial Caribbean context as well as to others and to universal questions of language and identity. It is particularly in regard to their views of history, their postures vis-à-vis the nation, and their appropriations of linguistic categories and impositions that their theories coincide significantly and demonstrate presuppositions common to many Caribbean writers.

Glissant on Relativizing Language

Glissant's essay "Langue, multilinguisme" is number 61 in his collection titled *Le Discours antillais*. It opens the section of the book called "Langues, langage," and it actually comes from a presentation he gave almost a decade before the essay was published in *Le Discours antillais* in 1981. He gave the presentation at a conference in Quebec in 1972 under the auspices of the AUPELF (*Association des universités partiellement ou entièrement de langue française*) that also published it in the conference proceedings (Glissant 1981, 503). Given the nature of the AUPELF, Glissant faced an initial public that was highly attuned to the situation of the French language in the world, particularly the academic world, and that to

a great extent worked for the promotion of the French language. At least in the geographical context of Quebec, Glissant certainly found himself in a situation that he distinguishes from his Martinican situation in regard to the status of the French language. He points out that it is generally claimed (*revendiquée*) as the natural language of Quebec, whereas in the Caribbean where he is from it was imposed (*imposée*). The different peoples' relationship to the language and the way that people feel about it in the two areas are thus different (Glissant 1981, 321). In this context, and more importantly in the context of a conference of an organization like AUPELF, Glissant was concerned with explaining that sense of linguistic imposition that people, and especially writers such as himself, could feel. The primary purpose of his essay is thus to show the problematic relationship people can have with a colonial language like French – a relationship that is inescapable and must therefore be negotiated creatively. Glissant attempts his negotiation by way of relativizing the French language. He demonstrates how to do this by examining two linguistic distinctions and ultimately trying to collapse both of them.

The first pair of distinctions is written language versus spoken language. As for many post-structuralist¹ theorists, particularly Jacques Derrida, this seemingly technical linguistic preoccupation has significant social and historical import for Glissant. He indicates that he is primarily focused on written language, which comes

straight out of history – “l’histoire (subie) des peuples qui se sont hier affirmés au monde” – and results in new literatures which, in his native Martinique, are nonetheless in something of a crisis (Glissant 1981, 316-317). He says that the lack of new literature since the *négritude* movement is easily explained by the facts that French is an imposed language and that Martinican authors therefore struggle to use it as their own: “Si un peuple n’exprime pas, c’est qu’il n’est pas libre de le faire” (Glissant 1981, 317). If a lack of liberty is the answer to what Glissant perceives to be a lack of literary production in Martinique, then that lack has to be explained. He sees the chief explanation being the complicated multilingualism of his country. He gives what he calls a brief history of multilingualism, discussing the England of the Middle Ages and then modern-day Switzerland and Belgium, and arrives at an important, and unwelcome, conclusion about multilingualism: “Le dernier avatar historique du multilinguisme tient à l’oppression ressentie, vécue par des ressortissants de certains pays multilingues, quant à l’usage et au sort de leur langue traditionnelle” (Glissant 1981, 320). Whatever and however many the languages are in a multilingual context, Glissant sees history as proving, over and over again, that one language always wins, resulting in oppression. He also believes that this oppression extends to a blockage either in the capacity or in the will to create literature, to use the written language. This blockage comes from a failure to relativize “tout idiome trop densément fonctionnel, toute grande

langue de communication” (Glissant 1981, 320). Such a failure to relativize is related to “l’étude contrastée de la langue et du langage,” an idea that leads to the second linguistic distinction that Glissant takes up in his essay.

This second linguistic distinction, *langue* and *langage*, is a creative reworking of classical structuralist terminology. The structuralist or Saussurean definitions of these terms relate to the human capacity to use language and the actual manifestations of that capacity in the form of distinct languages. *Langue*, or language as a concrete system of communication, refers to whatever languages linguists have identified as distinct idioms, whereas *langage* refers to that innate human capacity to communicate through language. Glissant takes up this distinction and reworks it in what he acknowledges is an unusual interpretation – “de manière peut-être induite” (Glissant 1981, 321). *Langue* for him still refers to specific languages (and thus the plural in the title of this section of *Le Discours antillais*, “Langues, langage”), but he redefines *langage* in order to highlight the problematic relationship that people can have with specific languages when these are imposed on them and their capacity for language. Though most humans have the capacity for language, a trait that sets them apart as a species, they cannot always relate freely to the language of their choice. *Langage* for Glissant is “une série structurée et consciente d’attitudes face à (de relations ou de complicités avec, de réactions à l’encontre de) la langue qu’une collectivité pratique,

que cette langue soit maternelle [...], ou menacée, ou partagée, ou optative, ou imposée” (Glissant 1981, 321). This *langage* is different from Ferdinand de Saussure’s in that it is an active cognitive process rather than a passive cognitive capacity. In reality, Glissant is engaging in sociolinguistics, one of many fields in linguistics that sought to build on, expand, problematize, and nuance what the father of modern linguistics first introduced with the basic categories of structural linguistics. Sociolinguistics has been one of many fruitful avenues of research into understanding further how language works. Glissant, by moving beyond the obvious capacity that humans have for linguistic communication, emphasizes the complicated social and psychological relationship that people have with their languages. Some people identify their language as their “mother tongue,” while others regard their language more specifically as endangered, as chosen, or as imposed – and of course Glissant deliberately ends his sentence that defines *langage* with the word *imposée* in order to remind his audience of the Martinican linguistic situation and his view of Martinicans’ attitude towards French. If languages that people speak are anything more than a first or second language, then the issue becomes not the capacity to use language (and learn new languages) but rather why certain languages are used and how speakers relate to that language, all the more so if they feel constrained to use it.

It would seem that this distinction, *langue-langage*, is a clear

one with no room for overlap, just as how in the original structuralist definitions the two terms designate two distinct concepts. Yet Glissant makes a theoretical move that seems contradictory but that creatively collapses the distinction. He speaks of a *langue* actually becoming a person's *langage*: "Pour qu'une langue devienne langage, il importe qu'elle soit ressentie, vécue par la collectivité comme sa langue, non plus celle d'un autre, si fraternal puisse-t-il être" (Glissant 1981, 321). Glissant appears to contradict himself, or at least to change his definition of *langage*, which he defined as the attitudes that one has vis-à-vis a given language. Surely something more than terminological slippage is happening here (and certainly Glissant could explain himself more clearly). He appears to be saying, specifically in regard to the French language in Martinique, that whatever attitudes one has in regard to an imposed language, relating that language to one's other languages in a non-hierarchical way and creatively using that language can result in a full acceptance of it as part of one's *langage*, or a shift from problematic attitudes and relation to the language to positive, productive ones. The problem for Martinicans is that French is not really *their* language, because "l'utilisation du français leur laisse à la gorge un goût de nécessité non accomplie" (Glissant 1981, 321). How does he propose getting beyond this visceral reaction to the use of French? People have to arrive at a liberty to use the language as their own, "la pratique libre et consciente des langues par les peuples, c'est-à-dire pour eux la juxtaposition 'essen-

tielle' de la langue et du langage" – and this will happen only by tearing down the hierarchical relationships that went up when French was imposed, by dynamiting "la fixitétyrannique" of one dominant language, and by forcing French to enter into equal relationship with other languages of the world, such as Martinican creole (Glissant 1981, 322).

In relation to this collapsing of the distinction between *langue* and *langage*, Glissant is also able to achieve the collapse of the distinction between written and spoken language. As one of his conclusions, he writes:

L'opposition hiérarchisée entre langage parlé et langue écrite n'a pas ici – pour moi – plus de sens ; car la langue créole qui m'est naturelle vient à tout moment irriguer ma pratique écrite du français, et mon langage provient de cette symbiose, sans doute étrangère aux ruses du panachage, mais voulue et dirigée par moi. (Glissant 1981, 322)

This leveling of the playing field relates back to Glissant's program of relativizing French, here by revalorizing his "natural" creole. This move to put written and spoken language in symbiosis rather than hierarchy also directly contradicts Peter Hallward's misreading of Glissant. In *Absolutely Postcolonial*, Hallward calls Glissant "dismissive" of creole, believing that Glissant is primarily concerned with some national consciousness. According to

Hallward, “The specificity [Glissant] celebrates is never ‘popular’ or ‘lived’ but always filtered through a written, mastered relation to the particular” (Hallward 2001, 71). Glissant is doing just the opposite. He is celebrating both the written and spoken word, both the “popular” or “lived” and the elite or created.

Glissant situates all of his theory in contemporary Martinican society and broader Caribbean history, much of which remains very similar well into the twenty-first century to when he started theorizing several decades ago. It is important to see how “the specificity that he celebrates” is both contemporary but also the product of historical processes. The major non-linguistic theme tied to history that he takes up in “Langue, multilinguisme” is that of the nation. He actually begins the essay with a discussion of nation and nationalism, before specifically addressing historical and linguistic issues. He finds himself in a world that requires peoples, and writers, to identify themselves with a nation in order even to possess an identity:

Il n'est pas de peuple qui au monde moderne ne soit sommé d'exister en nation, à faute de disparaître comme collectivité. L'obligation contemporaine de se connaître et d'assumer la conscience de soi précipite chaque communauté dans une telle « nationalité ». Il ne peut plus se former aujourd'hui de nation « de fait », c'est-à-dire qui développerait en lenteur et harmonie, selon un rythme pratiquement inaperçu,

une existence collective implicite et très progressivement signifiante. Le monde la sommerait aussitôt de se nommer, ou de s'éteindre. (Glissant 1981, 316)

Glissant is describing here what Benedict Anderson would later call *imagined communities* in his book with that term as its title. The nation as an imagined community has become an assumed part of one's identity, for as Glissant points out, a person or a community of persons must identify itself with or as a nation, or else face extinction as a collectivity. Nationalism is woven into the very fiber of modern identity. Rather than comparing nationalism to "self-consciously held political ideologies," Anderson explains it in terms of other "large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which – as well as against which – it came into being." The two large cultural systems he compares it to are religious community and dynastic realm, both of which, he asserts, "were taken-for-granted frames of reference, very much as nationality is today" (Anderson 2006, 12).

The problem with nationalism for a writer like Glissant is not just the imagined aspect of it. The problem is primarily that the nation results in an imposition of the nation's language – and thus his discussion in the bulk of the essay is about written language vs. spoken language and *langue* vs. *langage*. With the advent of nation-states and nationalism as a "taken-for-granted frame of reference" came also language politics. One of the major

forces in developing and promoting nationalism was what Anderson calls print capitalism. Rather than having, as in the dynastic realms before the advent of nation-states, major languages for trade or diplomacy but little imposition or standardization of people's other languages, "Print-capitalism gave a new fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation" (Anderson 2006, 44). Written language, that is, provided an aura of legitimacy and historical permanence to the newly imagined communities. This point is important because language does not have to be "an instrument of exclusion," as Anderson points out: "Print-language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se. The only question-mark standing over languages like Portuguese in Mozambique and English in India is whether the administrative and educational systems, particularly the latter, can generate a politically sufficient diffusion of bilingualism" (Anderson 2006, 134).

Glissant understands this relationship between nation and (imposed) language, particularly in a colonial relationship to nation. Because of this problematic relationship, he is able to theorize to the point of suggesting the necessity to "relativiser la langue française." The problem of the nation also relates to his concepts of *poétique-naturelle* and *poétiqueforcée*, not mentioned in "Langue, multilinguisme" but directly related to what he is saying about recovering one's *langage* by breaking language free

from its national constraints. In essay 44 of *Le Discours antillais*, titled “Poétique naturelle, poétique forcée,” he defines the latter concept – which he obviously considers to be the necessary poetics of a country like Martinique – as “toute tension collective vers une expression qui, se posant, s’oppose du même coup le manque par quoi elle devient impossible, non en tant que tension, toujours présente, mais en tant qu’expression, jamais accomplie” (Glissant 1981, 236). If at first forced poetics is a poetics that seems impossible because of one’s relationship to the imposed language, it results in a counter-poetics for Glissant, as seen also in his collapse of the distinction between *langue* and *langage*. Nation must be resisted, and the dominant poetics must also be resisted. As Britton explains, “This is the strategy that comes into play when a harmonious practice of the *langue* is impossible: that is, an attempt to build a *langage* on the basis of an antagonistic or subversive relationship to the *langue*, which the subject nevertheless has to use” (Britton 1999, 30). As Glissant explains it in his essay on language and multilingualism, this strategy is challenging but eminently possible.

Braithwaite on Reclaiming Language

Braithwaite’s essay “History of the Voice” was first a talk he gave at a conference, like Glissant’s “Langue, multilinguisme.” The public, oral nature of the text is evident because Braithwaite, much more than Glissant,

directly addresses his original audience throughout the essay. In his discussion of certain poets, he even mentions playing recordings of poetry readings for his audience, an effect that the reader cannot benefit from. The most obvious substantive difference between Glissant's and Braithwaite's essays is that the former discusses how to negotiate the language politics of French whereas Braithwaite is concerned with English. In regard to the historical situation of the Anglophone Caribbean (Braithwaite is from Barbados), he develops the idea of *nation language*, a concept that he relates directly to Glissant's *poétiqueforcée*. Glissant's essay "Poétiquenaturelle, poétiqueforcée," came out of a talk he gave in 1975 in Milwaukee². An English translation of the presentation appeared in the journal *Alcheringa* in 1976 (before its inclusion in *Le Discours antillais*), and it is to this article that Braithwaite refers in "History of the Voice":

In [Glissant's article], for the first time I feel an effort to describe what nation language really means. For the author of the article it is the language of the enslaved persons. For him, nation language is a strategy: the slave is forced to use a certain kind of language in order to disguise himself, to disguise his personality, and to retain his culture. And he defines that language as "forced poetics" because it is a kind of prison language, if you want to call it that. (Braithwaite 1993, 270)

Glissant did not, of course, actually use the phrase "na-

tion language” in his essay, but Braithwaite is reading his term into Glissant’s forced poetics. The first point of clear contact between the two ideas, and between both men’s projects, is the specific colonial history of the Caribbean. Indeed, apart from a brief introduction, Braithwaite’s essay begins with several pages of history to help the audience understand the linguistic situation of the Caribbean. Braithwaite’s understanding of his historical situation is almost identical to Glissant’s. They both reference colonialism and slavery, and in relation to those historical facts they also point out the lack of a cultural heritage or history for contemporary Caribbean societies. As Braithwaite says, “The Amerindians are a destroyed people, and their languages were practically destroyed” (Braithwaite 1993, 260). Thus whatever languages there are in the Caribbean, they come from the colonizers (Europeans), the imported-colonized (mainly Africans), and the mixing of the languages that those people brought, along with remnants of indigenous Caribbean languages. For Braithwaite, this means that he has to try to find his culture and poetics within different traces of different cultures – thereby resisting the dominant colonial language and culture. He focuses primarily on how African languages, especially Ashanti from Nigeria, have influenced the English of the Caribbean. He is not as exclusively African in his outlook as, for example, the francophone *négritude* writers; he also mentions Hindi and Chinese influences. Nevertheless, his development of *nation language* as a poetics is most dependent

on what he considers to be African sensibilities. Two of the major characteristics that he ascribes to *nation language* are a dependence on oral tradition (Braithwaite 1993, 271) – primarily African oral tradition as he understands it – and also seeing his poetics as part of a “*total expression*” (Braithwaite 1993, 273), a total cultural expression. “Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression,” he explains. “The oral tradition, on the other hand, makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the poet makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him” (Braithwaite 1993, 273).

The second and third points of contact between *nation language* and *poétiqueforcée*, after the deliberate historical grounding of both Glissant’s and Braithwaite’s poetics, are the nation (as imagined community, and what that entails for postcolonial societies) and language, or more specifically, the attempt to use a language for the development of a poetics. In regard to nation, Braithwaite’s use of the term *nation language* as a theory of language in the Caribbean context might not be the best choice for at least a couple of reasons. First, without knowing what Braithwaite actually means by the term, one could be forgiven for thinking that it sounds like an oppressive, colonial politics of language –the language of the nation, as it were. This is exactly not what Braithwaite means; it is what he is fighting against. The term is supposed to refer to the opposite of the colonial languages

of the Caribbean – Dutch, English, French, and Spanish; it is supposed to refer to the natural development (not the artificial imposition) of those languages, along with other languages, mainly African, in the Caribbean context.

The second problem with the term is Braithwaite's own difficulty in actually explaining it. It morphs as the essay continues. A sampling of "definitions" that Braithwaite provides for the term includes "the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean" (Braithwaite 1993, 260), "the language that is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage" (Braithwaite 1993, 265), "the submerged area of that [English] dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean" (Braithwaite 1993, 266), or an even vaguer, more poetic description such as "an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave" (Braithwaite 1993, 266). He even asserts that "it is also like the blues" and that "sometimes it is English and African at the same time" (Braithwaite 1993, 266). It is not immediately clear how any of this is an improvement on a concept like *poétiqueforcée*, but Braithwaite generally seems to be using *nation language* to designate languages such as English that have been wrested out of colonial hands and influenced by other linguistic forces such as the African languages of the slaves. His vision is somewhat more optimistic

than Glissant's, because he believes that a poetics has already developed around *nation language*, and the bulk of his essay is preoccupied with demonstrating how poets from Barbados to Jamaica to Harlem have creatively written and performed in their English as a *nation language*. From before the midway point of the essay to the end (approximately 30 pages), Braithwaite extensively quotes (and played, for his original listening audience) both well-known poets such as Derek Walcott and lesser-known poets from all over the Anglophone Americas. Thus, in regard to nation, Braithwaite assumes, with much less discussion of nationalism than Glissant, an essentially transnational posture in regard to Caribbean English. In this sense, *nation language* is as radically divorced from the nation (in the case of Barbados, that would be Great Britain) as possible.

In regard to language then, as a distinct point from the nation for Braithwaite (as it is for Glissant), nation language refers to a non-standardization and a productive openness vis-à-vis English (or Dutch, French, or Spanish). In one of his myriad examples of *nation language*, Braithwaite cites his own poetry in *Rights of Passage* as contributing to a literary-historical moment in which "it was demonstrated, for perhaps the first time (at last), that a *nation language* poem could be serious and employ not only semantic but sound elements" (Braithwaite 1993, 289). This reference to sound is just one of many elements of what Braithwaite is trying to define as na-

tion language that transgress the boundaries of the colonial languages and their associated poetics. As already indicated, this breaking out of colonial restraints (both linguistic and literary) could at times manifest itself as “a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind” (Braithwaite 1993, n.p.). By giving that and the other definitions of *nation language* in their full context, towards the beginning of “History of the Voice,” it is possible to see how Braithwaite, in distinguishing *nation language* from dialect, manages his own collapsing of a distinction between language and literature:

I use the term [nation language] in contrast to *dialect*. The word dialect has been bandied about for a long time, and it carries very pejorative overtones. Dialect is thought of as “bad” English. Dialect is “inferior” English. Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people’s dignity was distorted through their languages and the descriptions that the dialect gave to them. Nation language, on the other hand, is the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time. (Braithwaite 1993, 266)

Ultimately, whether it is a matter of how Caribbean people speak English or how Caribbean writers like Braithwaite use their English for creative production, *nation language* boils down to reclaiming English as their own language, in its specific forms and idioms as developed in a specific sociohistorical context – and this process implies “shunning imperial language” (Waters and Fleming 1994, 391).

Conclusion

Glissant and Braithwaite share a lot in common in their theories of language in their Caribbean contexts. They anchor their thought in history – colonialism, slavery, and language politics. Both write from a profoundly historical perspective. One could not extend to them the accusation that Neil Lazarus levels against more recent postcolonial “theory” (a problematic term). In *The Postcolonial Unconscious*, Lazarus claims that recent work on postcolonial theory has tended to set aside the temporal, historical aspects of postcolonialism. Specifically in regard to Homi Bhabha, he writes that the term has at times lost its importance in regard to a before/after understanding of colonialism and decolonization. The temporal words that Bhabha does use “do not appear to relate in any discernible way to decolonization as an historical event, that is, to decolonization as a ‘cut’ or break in time, such that one could speak of a colonial ‘before’ and a postcolonial ‘after’” (Lazarus 2011, 12). Whatever

the validity of Lazarus' argument in relation to more recent theorists, Glissant and Braithwaite both understand their situations as, above all else, time-bound and thus the results of historical processes and events. This historicization of postcolonial worlds should be essential for understanding issues of identity, including language, for it is out of historical awareness (or lack thereof) that humans form their identities.

In addition to their firm historical grounding, Glissant and Braithwaite also demonstrate the ability, by claiming certain languages for their poetic expression, to take on cultures and bear the weight of civilizations, as Fanon wrote (“assumer une culture, supporter le poids d’une civilisation”). They are not uncritically accepting cultures and civilizations, however, but rather negotiating with specific, and in the case of the Caribbean, oppressive cultural and linguistic influences in order to develop their own distinct voices and relate them to the rest of the world. This negotiation is a matter of relativizing French (or English), as Glissant points out at the end of “Langues, multilinguisme.” In relativizing the French language (“relativiser la langue française”), he envisions different possibilities for relating to the language, rather than one hegemonic relation based on cultural and political oppression. A relativized acceptance of French or any other colonial language, particularly in regard to multilingual contexts like his own in Martinique, fits perfectly into what Glissant went on in the last three

decades of his life to flesh out as a poetics of relation and an open, universal, but not totalizing approach to human identity. It is, at least at first, a *poétiqueforcée* but still a poetics, and one that ultimately will enter into Relation with the world and its other languages and poetics. For Braithwaite, this process results in valorizing *nation language*, or language as it has developed and not seeking to establish one language over another. Britton calls Braithwaite's theory "comparatively optimistic" in regard to Glissant's work, which seeks simply to develop "a strategic relationship of resistance and subversion to the dominant language [...] negotiated from the inside" (Britton 1999, 3). In the end, both writers understand the historical hurdles that their languages and literatures face, and both also see creative ways to overcome those hurdles.

Comparing two writers like Glissant and Braithwaite, far from being artificial and more than simply being productive and interesting because of similarities (though not equivalences) between them, ends up respecting their own creative and theoretical projects. Comparative literature can actually contribute to their projects because such analysis resists the same totalizing categories of identity that postcolonial writers tend to resist, such as national identity. Winks expresses this resistance remarkably well: "A focus on the cultural commonalities of Caribbean South, Central, and North America would productively 'destabilize' nation-state-oriented perspec-

tives in favor of bioregional cartographies that would not reproduce imperial schemas” (Winks n.d., 247). This resistance to nation extends to a resistance to language, or imperial schemas of language, as seen in Glissant’s *poétique forcée* and Braithwaite’s *nation language*. Gikandi synthesizes and summarizes these theories well, referring specifically to Glissant but as a means to describe better what Braithwaite says: “If, on one hand, Creole literatures function as acts of refusal, it is a refusal which, on the other hand, is constructed at the point of interface, at the junction where the European language meets the African voice. What happens when these two faces meet is the key to understanding Caribbean poetics” (Gikandi 1991, 728). This key to Caribbean poetics is what Glissant and Braithwaite both theorize and live out in their own literature. By bringing them together, comparative literature respects and builds on their projects.

Notes

1. The term post-structuralist is used here in a strictly temporal sense – i.e., theorists of language who write after the main period of the development of structuralist linguistics, those theorists who write in the second half

of the 20th century. The term is not strictly (or mainly) temporal, but the philosophical implications of its common non-temporal usage are beyond the scope of this article.

2. This is just a few years after his talk in Quebec regarding “Langue, multilinguisme.”

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