



Social Sciences

**The Overseer's Cabin**

Édouard Glissant

Betsy Wing, translator

University of Nebraska Press

978-0-8032-3479-6

(April 30, 2011)

Édouard Glissant once wrote that Faulkner's "work stands up before you...as though erected by an architect who constructed a monument around a secret to be known, pointing it out and hiding it all the time." The same might be said of Glissant's own work. The contents of *The Overseer's Cabin* lift out of a flat page and become a life-world that moves the reader. Without forcing, the book reveals an uncomplicated representation of humanity.

Originally published in French in 1981, *The Overseer's Cabin* follows from Glissant's *The Fourth Century* (published in English in 2001). This sequel again features the Celat family as, over the course of five decades, their lives echo one another. Their relations are characterized by ambivalence, complication, and interconnectedness. "[T]he selves would knot together like strings," Glissant writes, "tied just as badly as the ones binding the last canes at the end of the day."

The book is set in Martinique, Glissant's birthplace. It's an environment richly brought to textual life and features of the landscape take an active role in this work. Indeed, the characters' lives grow out of a vibrant landscape: "the weight of heaved up land, of heavy cotton drill beaten on river stone, of stacks of cane bunched together in the sun." Each narrative moment seems involved in the land. Memory, too, is tied to the earth—the field of briars covering up an "impossible memory."

Glissant portrays a relational and fragmented world, one of constant creation that moves rapidly and in an ungoverned way. That is, this book eschews expectations for a linear plot line. This is not a mainstream novel; its pleasures are of a different kind. *The Overseer's Cabin* provides the mechanisms for new thinking as it lyrically explores questions of madness and genealogy and produces something immeasurable in the reader, something that is both palpable and thought provoking.

Glissant is the author of many literary and theoretical texts, some of which have been released in English (including *Caribbean Discourse* and *Poetics of Relation*). Glissant's oeuvre is now finite, as the author died on February 3 of this year, yet his reputation continues to grow in the US. One hopes that his works will continue to be made accessible in many languages. He said that he wrote "in the presence of all the languages of the world," and his writing certainly deserves a worldwide presence.

*Janelle Adsit*