Hybridity, in recent postcolonial discourse from all language backgrounds, gestures toward the impossibility of purity as both a theoretical category and especially as a cultural phenomenon. While the concept of hybridity is readily linked to culture (particularly through the notion of “ethnicity”), the ambiguous relationship between culture and race becomes implicated, either explicitly or implicitly, in any discussion of hybridity. The proliferation of theoretical writing on this subject in the last few decades is an indication of the importance of the concept to postcolonial studies. We can also clearly recognize it to be a result of the opportune translation of various theoretical writings into English (e.g., Benítez-Rojo or Glissant). Significantly, in the movement from French to English, it has also been accompanied by the “arrival” of major critics on the U.S./U.K. academic scene: François Lionnet and Françoise Vergès, who employ the French term métissage while writing in English. These intellectuals have served as crucial conduits for the movement of notions of hybridity (through their interest in métissage) between francophone postcolonial theory and the larger field of English language-based postcolonial studies. However, it is to the critic Homi K. Bhabha that, in postcolonial studies, the term hybridity inevitably leads.

Specifically here, we wish to present an approach to culture and difference in the spirit of Glissant’s more radical notion of the other of thought that this chapter seeks to validate. Considering Bhabha, one of the many fine points made by him regarding hybridity is its positing as a discursive space whence there arises a possibility to figure difference. For him, hybridity is located at the limit of authoritative discourses, thus questioning both their coherence and their internal difference. On the question of difference, Bhabha states: “If cultural diversity is a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology, cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity” (Bhabha 34). It is the hybridity arising from difference, rather than from diversity, as defined above by Bhabha that becomes pertinent to our theoretical pursuit. It is through difference that there is an active processual quality to the generation of hybridity, while diversity allows the coexistence of fixed categories. In much the same way, Glissant qualifies “thought of the other” as stemming from a “moral generosity,” while the “other of thought” implies the kind of alteration that requires an ethics of action (Poetics 154–55). For us, this kind of qualified difference and alteration constitutes a move toward the larger project of postcolonializing to which we subscribe.

Salient readers of Glissant who first put him on the map from the francophone to the anglophone context were his translator J. Michael Dash and
François Lionnet. More recently, of course, reference to Glissant in writing in English has increased (see Bongie, Murdoch, Britton, for example only). Lionnet’s first major work and Dash’s translation of Le Discours antillais came out the same year. This was a decisive moment for Glissantian thought entering postcolonial theory for a wide audience in a significant way. It was also a significant moment for the coming together of Bhabha and Glissant. In the following pages, we will discuss some specific aspects of this movement from French to English in relation to hybridity.

The signifying power of race in any conception of hybridity is not always evident in reading Bhabha. Robert Young’s introduction to his book Colonial Desire is an important reminder of this entanglement. He sifts through some of the terminology relating to hybridity, including Bakhtin’s linguistic hybridity as a subversive strategy, Bhabha’s interest in hybridity in the colonial and postcolonial framework, and some important historical points regarding the uses of the terms hybridity in English and métissage in French, and their contexts. Françoise Lionnet reminds us that the slippage between race and culture is perhaps easier in English than it is in French. In the introduction to Lionnet’s Autobiographical Voices, she relies on the then-forthcoming translation of Discours antillais by J. Michael Dash as Caribbean Discourse. In a note she explains that while Dash translates the French métissage from Glissant as “creolization,” she herself will retain the French métissage, as creolization is not really suggestive of the racial undertones of the term (4). Upon close examination of Dash’s translation, one notes that he frequently translates the term Relation as creolization. Celia Britton, in her recent Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory, notes that Dash translates Relation by using creolization, cultural contact, and cross-cultural relationships (“A Note on Translation”). Our purpose here, however, is not to question the accuracy or the adequacy of specific translations of Glissant’s work. We want, instead, to distinguish Glissant’s use of métissage, créolisation, and Relation in a succinct manner that we believe illustrates the importance of their alterity and their difference in the weighted significance we have given these latter terms following Glissant and Bhabha, respectively. For this purpose, we work from Glissant’s more recent Poétique de la Relation. Following this, we will unearth the differences in the single term métissage taken up by Lionnet and reappearing in Vergès.

For Glissant, if métissage is the initial choc [shock] or rencontre [encounter] that anticipates a synthèse [synthesis], creolization is the more active (altering, differentiating) process that diffraç[diffractions] (Poétique 46/Poétics 34). From this understanding, métissage refers to a relatively simple, though essential, point. It is the encounter that serves as a cognitive shock that can then allow us to track difference; it is also a moment in a process in

reality that opens up the possibility of creolization. However, métissage does not necessarily lead to the complex process that Glissant describes and admires. Métissage could lead toward a process that privileges synthesis by the erasure, or at least the recuperation, of difference. Creolization, though, is a dynamic process in which difference continues to function and proliferate as a constitutive reality and as a basis for thought and action.

For Glissant, creolization is the earthly approximation of his idea of total Relation (of everything to everything else, simultaneously and equally): “What took place in the Caribbean, which could be summed up in the word creolization, approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible” (Poetics 34). A fuller appreciation of the complexity that Glissant wants to preserve emerges upon close examination of his description of Relation itself: “[W]hen we speak of a poetics of Relation, we no longer need to add: relation between what and what? This is why the French word Relation, which functions somewhat like an intransitive verb, could not correspond, for example, to the English term relationship” (Poetics 27). The impossibility of even considering Relation outside itself is where we can identify the radical nature of Glissant’s proposition. It is clear, though, that Relation cannot be conceived of without reference to the “real” world. It is the instance of Caribbean creolization with which Glissant is most familiar that allows him to conceive of Relation in totality. Still, it is also evident that as a theoretical paradigm for understanding and transforming reality, this instance has to be reworked into the larger framework of an all-encompassing Relation (that he sometimes calls a chaos-monde). He suggests the impossibility of grasping Relation in terms of anything but itself. “We must . . . abandon this apposition of Being and beings: renounce the fruitful maxim whereby Being is relation, to consider that Relation alone is relation” (Poetics 170). Clearly, then, particular instances of being do not somehow all together simply become Being; likewise, in order to understand Relation, it is not enough to figure various instances of particular relations. Therefore, while examining Relation always implies the relation of all possible things and their interrelations, it is impossible to name that totality, capture it, or descry, once and for all, its boundaries. This impossibility of fixedness and definitive circumscription in Relation will become evident as we further examine this concept.

It is, perhaps, this doggedness about relation (not to anything, but relation as an absolute, as a totality) that makes Glissant’s work seem removed from reality and that has haunted him in many critical evaluations of his work, the most significant of which comes from his Martinican compatriot créolité critics, especially following their earlier collaborative work. Even the reader’s thought process must, if at times in desperation, follow this resolute relationality as process. When, finally, some semblance of a definition is provided, it
is done with the ruse of the most cunning conductor of the orchestra of Relation: “But Relation is not to be confused with the cultures we are discussing nor with the economy of their internal relationships nor even the intelligible results of the intricate involvement of all internal relationships with all possible external relationships. Nor is it to be confused with some marvelous accident that might suddenly occur apart from any relationship, the known unknown, in which chance would be the magnet. Relation is all these things at once” (Poetics 170–71).

In fact, it would probably be more apt to refer to Glissant as the poet of Relation that he is. Quite clearly, there are several aspects of Relation that Glissant specifies: it has to do with the real world and the identifiable cultures within it; it includes the relationships within them as well as the results of these relationships and the connections of these results; it encompasses what are seen as relationships within particular cultures to the elements and their interrelations external to them; it includes unforeseen and unforeseeable events that spring up seemingly out of unidentifiable processes; however, the most important point we come away with is that the conception of Relation has to include all these aspects at the same time. In the passage quoted, the reader is forced to keep in mind, in the space (breath?) of one paragraph the negation of all that Relation is not. There appears an incremental repetition in which no single element can stand on its own, nor be privileged. The differences within the repetition of the idea of relation in this definition are at times subtle in form but, like in poetry, radical in meaning. Like the accumulative meaning in the repetition of a refrain in a ballad, the residue is sometimes marginal and can be missed.

Once this mental exercise on not-Relation is performed, the last sentence of the paragraph instructs you, now that you are holding them all in your head, to figure them simultaneously in order to attempt Relation. Of course, this would have been impossible as an instruction at the beginning of the paragraph. This definition of Relation approximates, to the closest degree, the enactment of a mental Relation that strives to deny sequence and hierarchy.

Creolization, in this active form for Glissant, is opposed quite specifically to creoleness, whose principles “regress toward nigritudes, ideas of Frenchness, of Latinness, all generalizing concepts—more or less innocently” (Poetics 89). Writing thus quite explicitly contra the créolité critics’ Éloge de la créolité, Glissant once again stresses the centrality of diffraacting alterity that opposes the kind of generalization that a synthesis could provide—what we have found close to Bhabha’s notion of difference (as opposed to diversity). It might, therefore, be useful to preserve the distinction that Glissant establishes in his use of the terms métissage, creolization, and Relation. At the very least, this distinction needs to be properly recorded as we move from French to English if we are serious about engaging with his work for a more subtle analysis that can account for the processes of contact and relation we are concerned with in much of postcolonial theoretical work.

The practice of translation and the movement between spaces are crucial to the forms of postcolonializing that the notion of hybridity, in its various guises in postcolonial theory, has been employed to examine and/or promote. Given the importance of the process of translation to Glissant’s thought (see the quotation mentioned above regarding the inadequacy of the English term relationship to Glissant’s project of relation), we pause at an emblematic consideration of the more prosaic, but daunting, task of translating Glissant from French to English.

Betsy Wing’s careful and sensitive translation of Glissant’s Poétique de la Relation as Poetics of Relation gives us some clues regarding just how difficult it is to conceptually hold (which suggests a form of stasis) this idea of process. “Observons qu’il y a métissage là où auparavant s’opposaient des catégories, qui distinguaient leur essence. Plus métissage se réalise, plus la notion s’en efface” (Poétique 106). The translation reads: “Note that métissage exists in places where categories making their essences distinct were formerly in opposition. The more métissage became realized, the more the idea of it faded” (Poetics 92). The movement in the French version from the past tense (s’opposaient, distinguiaient) in the second part of the first sentence to the present tense of the second sentence (se réalise) that goes back to the established present (il y a métissage) is not insignificant. For along with this shorter and somewhat more dramatic second sentence that pronounces the paradox of métissage in the present of the reader’s reality, the nominal use of the verb se réalise places métissage closer to an idea of an execution or a performance than to a completed action in the past that the English translation became realized suggests. From these remarks, the choice of the verb to exist (métissage exists) as a translation of il y a, which in itself is perfectly reasonable here can be reexamined. Métissage, whose shock can engender creolization rather than a synthesis, as we have seen, in Glissantian thinking, does not “exist.” This would place it closer to the idea of creoleness as a constituted form. Wing herself is aware of this as she carefully discusses Glissant’s quarrel with the Martinican critics in their conception of creoleness as a state versus his more active creolization as process. Therefore, his use of “il y a métissage” would correspond more closely to something such as “métissage occurs” (rather than “métissage exists”).

What emerges from these sentences further illuminates this idea of métissage only as possibility of creolization, and its retroactive calling up of difference. It also points to the fact that the importance of métissage resides less in
validate perspectives from "small places" (the Mauritian-born Marie-Thérèse Humbert and the Guadeloupean Maryse Condé, for example), alongside canonical autobiographies. Drawing from Bhabha as much as from Glissant, Lionnet constructs a method she terms métissage that can account for surprising dichotomies and clears a space for a feminist perspective on St. Augustine and Nietzsche. In a later formulation, Lionnet develops her idea of logiques métisses (the term is derived from the title of Jean-Loup Amselle’s book) that can understand how “[t]he global mongrelization or métissage of cultural forms creates complex identities and interrelated, if not overlapping, spaces” (“Logiques” 7). A firm believer in the impossibility and inadequacy of assimilation, Lionnet proposes, in this work, “a theoretical argument about postcolonial culture” (7) by pursuing, through women writers, subject-agents in the construction of hybrid identities. We also believe, with Lionnet, that “[w]hat is needed, then, is a new vocabulary for describing patterns of influence that are never unidirectional” (“Logiques” 11). Suzette Henke remarks, in her review of Lionnet’s Autobiographical Voices, that “the term métissage itself is so multi-faceted and polyvalent, so all-consuming and potentially subversive, that it sometimes skids on protean linguistic practices” (110). Glissant’s work provides a subtle theoretical distinction of métissage from creolization, in his elaboration of a poetics of Relation. Following Lionnet, it is, to our minds, also crucial to build a shared and sufficiently differentiated vocabulary that can track some of these movements in the myriad spaces of postcoloniality.

Franoise Vergès’s work on métissage in La Réunion, Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage, explores this term in its full colonial significance: specifically as signaling a taboo that indicated the colonial obsession with the purity of race as well as its attraction to the (racial) other. Métissage in La Réunion is, no doubt, inscribed as a temptation within “the reactive strategies of discipline and control developed by the French state and its representatives on the island” (Monsters 2). Vergès notes her discomfort with the currency of hybridity: “the social organization of slavery and colonialism produced métissage, that is, an intermixing of groups, new cultural forms, new languages, and an identity that remained indecisive. Now global capitalism has adopted métissage as a new cultural commodity” (10). It is important to indicate a rather obvious point: métissage exists as a word in standard French. It refers to the mixing of different “races” and, in a more “figurative” meaning, refers to the mixing of cultures. In the context of zoology or botany, such mixed entities are termed hybrids. To a layperson, something or someone with a mixed identity (métis or métisse) is made of two halves, which can be traced to two distinct and different wholes. Contrarily, even if deriving from this, the use of the term métis-
we find, though, that it is precisely this radical potential of hybridity that is lost as a result of a formulation such as that of her section title, "Diaspora, Hybridity, Creolization." It is unclear if they all mean the same thing; if they are arranged in a particular sequence indicating a hierarchical significance or one that has theoretical consequences; or if it is indeed the lack of distinction in recent theory that Vergès wants to critique through an ironic presentation that mimics this dubiousness. She notes that "[t]hough distinctions have been made between them, their consequences can be compared: the process of displacement and flexible identities, the position of in-betweeness and impurity, and the experience of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism" (356). Even though Vergès is skeptical of the idea that "a good humanity could perhaps be imagined métisse, hybrid, and diasporic" (357)—once again the ways in which these different adjectives are linked and/or differentiated remain unclear—this fusion and the suggested interchangeability of the terms accomplished in her short piece are a disservice to the very trend that she is deeply committed to correcting.

The radical possibilities for an idea of hybridity and its accomplishment as a form of postcolonializing lies, in our view, in never losing from sight (or thought) the absoluteness of Relation proposed by Glissant and in the important distinctions he makes when considering the approximations of it upon which he draws. We believe, in sympathy with Vergès's position regarding the primacy of material history, that, proceeding from Glissant's métissage, there is a theoretical space to be cleared, which can encompass the historical processes that Vergès studies as well as the type of analysis that Lionnet employs.

We propose, as a first step toward a more effective form of postcolonializing in the context of hybridity, to attend to Glissant's idea (or ideal) of absolute Relation as a principle that provides the direction of movement. In proceeding, we also suggest that to describe concepts and realities that bear upon hybridity and its theorization in postcolonial studies, we work toward a more rigorous and collaboratively established distinction of terms—rather than different inventions and uses that do not dialogue with one another. Métissage might be considered by some as residing in the object of analysis itself. To others, it might mean a political practice of interpretation. To some, it might build upon destabilizing ambiguities as conceived by Bhabha. From our reading, we wish to suggest that métissage and its radical "potential" for creolization, so clearly recognized by Glissant, retain its connection, as a theoretical term, to Relation as an engagement with totality. Reaching (for) the idea of Relation itself is always an attempt at putting into play a process that incrementally dissolves hierarchies even while registering the moments and residues of such hierarchies. Clearly, this short intervention can only begin the dialogue we propose in forging "an aesthetics of turbulence, " as
Glissant suggests, without providing, in advance, the “corresponding ethics” (Poetics 154–55).

Works Cited


