

ÉDOUARD GLISSANT

Poetics of Relation



translated by Betsy Wing

Ann Arbor

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*for Michael Smith, assassinated poet
for the archipelagos laden with palpable death*

Sea is History.

DEREK WALCOTT

The unity is sub-marine.

EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE

The Open Boat

For the Africans who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas,* confronting the unknown with neither preparation nor challenge was no doubt petrifying.

The first dark shadow was cast by being wrenched from their everyday, familiar land, away from protecting gods and a tutelary community. But that is nothing yet. Exile can be borne, even when it comes as a bolt from the blue. The second dark of night fell as tortures and the deterioration of person, the result of so many incredible Gehennas. Imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying crouched. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo,

*The Slave Trade came through the cramped doorway of the slave ship, leaving a wake like that of crawling desert caravans. It might be drawn like this:  African countries to the East; the lands of America to the West. This creature is in the image of a fibril.

African languages became deterritorialized, thus contributing to creolization in the West. This is the most completely known confrontation between the powers of the written word and the impulses of orality. The only written thing on slave ships was the account book listing the exchange value of slaves. Within the ship's space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations. This confrontation still reverberates to this day.

this dizzying sky plastered to the waves. Over the course of more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people deported. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse. But that is nothing yet.

What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.

The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers*—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.

But for these shores to take shape, even before they could be contemplated, before they were yet visible, what sufferings came from the unknown! Indeed, the most petrifying face of the abyss lies far ahead of the slave ship's bow, a pale murmur; you do not know if it is a storm cloud, rain or drizzle, or

smoke from a comforting fire. The banks of the river have vanished on both sides of the boat. What kind of river, then, has no middle? Is nothing there but straight ahead? Is this boat sailing into eternity toward the edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt?

Paralleling this mass of water, the third metamorphosis of the abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except—more and more threadbare—in the blue savannas of memory or imagination.

The asceticism of crossing this way the land-sea that, unknown to you, is the planet Earth, feeling a language vanish, the word of the gods vanish, and the sealed image of even the most everyday object, of even the most familiar animal, vanish. The evanescent taste of what you ate. The hounded scent of ochre earth and savannas.

“Je te salue, vieil Océan!” You still preserve on your crests the silent boat of our births, your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories. Then you lay out these new shores, where we hook our tar-streaked wounds, our reddened mouths and stifled outcries.

Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. The populations that then formed, despite having forgotten the chasm, despite being unable to imagine the passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this sail (a veil). They did not use it to return to the Former Land

but rose up on this unexpected, dumbfounded land. They met the first inhabitants, who had also been deported by permanent havoc; or perhaps they only caught a whiff of the ravaged trail of these people. The land-beyond turned into land-in-itself. And this undreamt of sail, finally now spread, is watered by the white wind of the abyss. Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became knowledge.

Not just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole.

Just as the first uprooting was not marked by any defiance, in the same way the prescience and actual experience of Relation have nothing to do with vanity. Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies.

For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.

For us, and without exception, and no matter how much distance we may keep, the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown. Beyond its chasm we gamble on the unknown. We take sides in this game of the world. We hail a renewed Indies; we are for it. And for this Relation

made of storms and profound moments of peace in which we may honor our boats.

This is why we stay with poetry. And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer—at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.

Errantry, Exile

Roots make the commonality of errantry¹ and exile, for in both instances roots are lacking. We must begin with that.²

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.

These authors extol nomadism, which supposedly liberates Being, in contrast, perhaps, to a settled way of life, with its law based upon the intolerant root. Already Kant, at the beginning of *Critique of Pure Reason*, had seen similarities between skeptics and nomads, remarking also that, from time to time, "they break the social bond." He seems thus to establish correlations between, on the one hand, a settled way of life, truth, and society and, on the other, nomadism, skepticism, and anarchy. This parallel with Kant suggests that the rhizome concept appears interesting for its anticonformism, but one cannot infer from this that it is subversive or that rhizomatic thought has the capacity to overturn the

order of the world—because, by so doing, one reverts to ideological claims presumably challenged by this thought.³

But is the nomad not overdetermined by the conditions of his existence? Rather than the enjoyment of freedom, is nomadism not a form of obedience to contingencies that are restrictive? Take, for example, circular nomadism: each time a portion of the territory is exhausted, the group moves around. Its function is to ensure the survival of the group by means of this circularity. This is the nomadism practiced by populations that move from one part of the forest to another, by the Arawak communities who navigated from island to island in the Caribbean, by hired laborers in their pilgrimage from farm to farm, by circus people in their peregrinations from village to village, all of whom are driven by some specific need to move, in which daring or aggression play no part. Circular nomadism is a not-intolerant form of an impossible settlement.

Contrast this with invading nomadism, that of the Huns, for example, or the Conquistadors, whose goal was to conquer lands by exterminating their occupants. Neither prudent nor circular nomadism, it spares no effort. It is an absolute forward projection: an arrowlike nomadism. But the descendants of the Huns, Vandals, or Visigoths, as indeed those of the Conquistadors, who established their clans, settled down bit by bit, melting into their conquests. Arrowlike nomadism is a devastating desire for settlement.*

Neither in arrowlike nomadism nor in circular nomadism are roots valid. Before it is won through conquest, what “holds” the invader is what lies ahead; moreover, one could almost say that being compelled to lead a settled way of life

* The idea that this devastation can turn history around in a positive manner (in relation to the decline of the Roman Empire, for example) and beget some fertile negative element does not concern us here. Generally speaking, what is meant is that arrowlike nomadism gives birth to new eras, whereas circular nomadism would be endogenous and without a future. This is a pure and simple legitimation of the act of conquest.

would constitute the real uprooting of a circular nomad. There is, furthermore, no pain of exile bearing down, nor is there the wanderlust of errantry growing keener. Relation to the earth is too immediate or too plundering to be linked with any preoccupation with identity—this claim to or consciousness of a lineage inscribed in a territory. Identity will be achieved when communities attempt to legitimate their right to possession of a territory through myth or the revealed word. Such an assertion can predate its actual accomplishment by quite some time. Thus, an often and long contested legitimacy will have multiple forms that later will delineate the afflicted or soothing dimensions of exile or errantry.

In Western antiquity a man in exile does not feel he is helpless or inferior, because he does not feel burdened with deprivation—of a nation that for him does not yet exist. It even seems, if one is to believe the biographies of numerous Greek thinkers including Plato and Aristotle, that some experience of voyaging and exile is considered necessary for a being's complete fulfillment. Plato was the first to attempt to base legitimacy not on community within territory (as it was before and would be later) but on the City in the rationality of its laws. This at a time when his city, Athens, was already threatened by a “final” deregulation.*

In this period identification is with a culture (conceived of as civilization), not yet with a nation.** The pre-Christian West along with pre-Columbian America, Africa of the time of the great conquerors, and the Asian kingdoms all shared this mode of seeing and feeling. The relay of actions exerted

*Platonic Dialogues take over the function of the Myth. The latter establishes the legitimacy of the possession of a territory based usually on the uninterrupted rigors of filiation. The Dialogue establishes the City's justice based on the revelation of a superior reason organizing rigorous successions of a political order.

**Through the entirely Western notion of civilization the experience of a society is summed up, in order to project it immediately into an evolution, most often an expansion as well. When one says civilization, the immediate implication is a will to civilize. This idea is linked to the passion to impose civilization on the Other.

by arrowlike nomadism and the settled way of life were first directed against generalization (the drive for an identifying universal as practiced by the Roman Empire). Thus, the particular resists a generalizing universal and soon begets specific and local senses of identity, in concentric circles (provinces then nations). The idea of civilization, bit by bit, helps hold together opposites, whose only former identity existed in their opposition to the Other.

During this period of invading nomads the passion for self-definition first appears in the guise of personal adventure. Along the route of their voyages conquerors established empires that collapsed at their death. Their capitals went where they went. "Rome is no longer in Rome, it is wherever I am." The root is not important. Movement is. The idea of errantry, still inhibited in the face of this mad reality, this too-functional nomadism, whose ends it could not know, does not yet make an appearance. Center and periphery are equivalent. Conquerors are the moving, transient root of their people.

The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. This fixing, this declaration, this expansion, all require that the idea of the root gradually take on the intolerant sense that Deleuze and Guattari, no doubt, meant to challenge. The reason for our return to this episode in Western history is that it spread throughout the world. The model came in handy. Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power—the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root—rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other. Culture's self-conception was dualistic, pitting citizen against barbarian. Nothing has ever more solidly opposed the thought of errantry than this period in human history when Western nations were established and then made their impact on the world.

At first this thought of errantry, bucking the current of nationalist expansion, was disguised "within" very personal-

ized adventures—just as the appearance of Western nations had been preceded by the ventures of empire builders. The errantry of a troubadour or that of Rimbaud is not yet a thorough, thick (opaque) experience of the world, but it is already an arrant, passionate desire to go against a root. The reality of exile during this period is felt as a (temporary) lack that primarily concerns, interestingly enough, language. Western nations were established on the basis of linguistic intransigence, and the exile readily admits that he suffers most from the impossibility of communicating in his language. The root is monolingual. For the troubadour and for Rimbaud errantry is a vocation only told via detour. The call of Relation is heard, but it is not yet a fully present experience.

However, and this is an immense paradox, 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 often about 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) and, frequently, actually experienced. Within the collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim. When the very idea of territory becomes relative, nuances appear in the legitimacy of territorial possession. These are books about the birth of collective consciousness, but they also introduce the unrest and suspense that allow the individual to discover himself there, whenever he himself becomes the issue. The Greek victory in the *Iliad* depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his *Odyssey* and is recognized only by his dog; the Old Testament David bears the stain of adultery and murder; the *Chanson de Roland* is the chronicle of a defeat; the characters in the *Sagas* are branded by an unstemmable fate, and so forth. These books are the begin-

ning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they will be put). These are books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history.

Some of these books are devoted entirely to the supreme errantry, as in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The very book whose function is to consecrate an intransigent community is already a compromise, qualifying its triumph with revelatory wanderings.*

In both *L'Intention poétique (Poetic Intention)* and *Le Discours antillais (Caribbean Discourse)*—of which the present work is a reconstituted echo or a spiral retelling—I approached this dimension of epic literature. I began wondering if we did not still need such founding works today, ones that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting,⁴ asserting, for example, political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community's reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, all in all, a Poetics of Relation.**

This movement, therefore (one among others, equally important, in other parts of the world), has led from a primordial nomadism to the settled way of life of Western nations then to Discovery and Conquest, which achieved a final, almost mystical perfection in the Voyage.

In the course of this journey identity, at least as far as the Western peoples who made up the great majority of voyagers, discoverers, and conquerors were concerned, consolidates

*Hegel, in book 3 of his *Aesthetics*, shows how the founding works of communities appear spontaneously at the moment in which a still naive collective consciousness reassures itself about its own legitimacy, or, not to mince words: about its right to possess a land. In this sense Epic thought is close to that of Myth.

**The necessary surpassing of mythic and epic thought took place in the political reason organizing the City. Epic expression is obscure and unfathomable, one of the conditions of naïveté. Political discourse is obvious. Surpassing can be contradiction.

itself implicitly at first (“my root is the strongest”) and then is explicitly exported as a value (“a person’s worth is determined by his root”).* The conquered or visited peoples are thus forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror. A tragic variation of a search for identity. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an “opposite,”** for colonized peoples identity will be primarily “opposed to”—that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.

The duality of self-perception (one is citizen or foreigner) has repercussions on one’s idea of the Other (one is visitor or visited; one goes or stays; one conquers or is conquered). Thought of the Other cannot escape its own dualism until the time when differences become acknowledged. From that point on thought of the Other “comprehends”⁵ multiplicity, but mechanically and still taking the subtle hierarchies of a generalizing universal as its basis. Acknowledging differences does not compel one to be involved in the dialectics of their totality. One could get away with: “I can acknowledge your difference and continue to think it is harmful to you. I can think that my strength lies in the Voyage (I am making History) and that your difference is motionless and silent.” Another step remains to be taken before one really enters the dialectic of totality. And, contrary to the mechanics of the Voyage, this dialectic turns out to be driven by the thought of errantry.

*That is, as we have said, essentially by his language.

**If the idea of civilization holds opposites together, a generalizing universal will be the principle of their action in the world, the principle that will allow them to realize conflicts of interest in a finalist conception of History. The first colonist, Christopher Columbus, did not voyage in the name of a country but of an idea.

Let us suppose that the quest for totality, starting from a nonuniversal context of histories of the West, has passed through the following stages:

- the thinking of territory and self (ontological, dual)
- the thinking of voyage and other (mechanical, multiple)
- the thinking of errantry and totality (relational, dialectical).

We will agree that this thinking of errantry, this errant thought, silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us.

In this context uprooting can work toward identity, and exile can be seen as beneficial, when these are experienced as a search for the Other (through circular nomadism) rather than as an expansion of territory (an arrowlike nomadism). Totality's imaginary allows the detours that lead away from anything totalitarian.

Errantry, therefore, does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deteriorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment. Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself. Contemporary history provides several striking examples of this, among them Frantz Fanon, whose path led from Martinique to Algeria. That is very much the image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation. Because the thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative, the thing relayed as well as the thing related. The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation.

In contrast to arrowlike nomadism (discovery or conquest), in contrast to the situation of exile, errantry gives-on-and-with the negation of every pole and every metropolis, whether connected or not to a conqueror's voyaging act. We have repeatedly mentioned that the first thing exported by the conqueror was his language. Moreover, the great Western languages were supposedly vehicular languages, which often took the place of an actual metropolis. Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually. Going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, Relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent.

At this point we seem to be far removed from the sufferings and preoccupations of those who must bear the world's injustice. Their errantry is, in effect, immobile. They have never experienced the melancholy and extroverted luxury of uprooting. They do not travel. But one of the constants of our world is that a knowledge of roots will be conveyed to them from within intuitions of Relation from now on. Traveling is no longer the locus of power but, rather, a pleasurable, if privileged, time. The ontological obsession with knowledge gives way here to the enjoyment of a relation; in its elementary and often caricatural form this is tourism. Those who stay behind thrill to this passion for the world shared by all. Or, indeed, they may suffer the torments of internal exile.

I would not describe the physical situation of those who suffer the oppression of an Other within their own country, such as the blacks in South Africa, as internal exile. Because the solution here is visible and the outcome determined; force alone can oppose this. Internal exile strikes individuals living where solutions concerning the relationship of a community to its surroundings are not, or at least not yet, consented to by this community as a whole. These solutions, precariously outlined as decisions, are still the prerogative of only a few, who, as a result, are marginalized. Internal exile is the voyage out of this enclosure. It is a motionless and exac-

erbat introduction to the thought of errantry. Most often it is diverted into partial, pleasurable compensations in which the individual is consumed. Internal exile tends toward material comfort, which cannot really distract from anguish.

Whereas exile may erode one's sense of identity, the thought of errantry—the thought of that which relates—usually reinforces this sense of identity. It seems possible, at least to one observer, that the persecuted errantry, the wandering of the Jews, may have reinforced their sense of identity far more than their present settling in the land of Palestine. Being exiled Jews turned into a vocation of errantry, their point of reference an ideal land whose power may, in fact, have been undermined by concrete land (a territory), chosen and conquered. This, however, is mere conjecture. Because, while one can communicate through errantry's imaginary vision, the experiences of exiles are incommunicable.

The thought of errantry is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity, which is, after all, nothing other than the search for a freedom within particular surroundings. If it is at variance with territorial intolerance, or the predatory effects of the unique root (which makes processes of identification so difficult today), this is because, in the poetics of Relation, one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.

Errant, he challenges and discards the universal—this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny. He plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by

exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it.

The founding books have taught us that the sacred dimension consists always of going deeper into the mystery of the root, shaded with variations of errantry. In reality errant thinking is the postulation of an unyielding and unfading sacred. We remember that Plato, who understood the power of Myth, had hoped to banish the poets, those who force obscurity, far from the Republic. He distrusted the fathomless word. Are we not returning here, in the unforeseeable meanders of Relation, to this abyssal word? Nowhere is it stated that now, in this thought of errantry, humanity will not succeed in transmuting Myth's opacities (which were formerly the occasion for setting roots) and the diffracted insights of political philosophy, thereby reconciling Homer and Plato, Hegel and the African griot.

But we need to figure out whether or not there are other succulencies of Relation in other parts of the world (and already at work in an underground manner) that will suddenly open up other avenues and soon help to correct whatever simplifying, ethnocentric exclusions may have arisen from such a perspective.

*

As far as literature is concerned (without my having to establish a pantheon, an isolation these works would refuse), there are two contemporary bodies of work, it seems to me, in which errantry and Relation are at play.

Faulkner's work, somehow theological. This writing is about digging up roots in the South—an obvious place to do so in the United States. But the root begins to act like a rhizome; there is no basis for certainty; the relation is tragic. Because of this dispute over source, the sacred—but henceforth unspeakable—enigma of the root's location, Faulkner's

world represents one of the thrilling moments in the modern poetics of Relation. At one time I regretted that such a world had not gone farther, spreading its vision into the Caribbean and Latin America. But, perhaps, this was a reaction of unconscious frustration on the part of one who felt excluded.

And Saint-John Perse's erratic work, in search of that which moves, of that which goes—in the absolute sense.⁶ A work leading to totality—to the out-and-out exaltation of a universal that becomes exhausted from being said too much.

Poetics

In the nineteenth century, after the Spanish language had expanded into South America and the Portuguese language into Brazil, the French and English languages successfully accompanied the widespread expansion of their own respective cultures around the world. Other Western languages, German, Italian, or Russian, for example, despite some limited attempts at colonization, were not driven by this propensity for self-exportation that nearly always generates a sort of vocation for the universal. As for non-Western languages, Quechua, Swahili, Hindi, or Chinese, they remain endogenous and nonproliferating; their poetics do not yet hint at involvement in the evolution of world histories.

Our aim here is to advance the notion that, within the limited framework of one language—French—competing to discover the world and dominate it, literary production is partly determined by this discovery, which also transforms numerous aspects of its poetics; but that there persists, at least as far as French is concerned, a stubborn resistance to any attempt at clarifying the matter. Everything just goes along as if, at the moment it entered into the poetics of worldwide Relation, ready to replace the former hegemony, collective thought working within the language chose to cover up its expressive relationship with the other, rather than admit any participation that would not be one of preeminence.

With generally good results literary theoreticians have been content to define the poetics deemed responsible for

place in function of a final underlying transparency in the tragic struggle. This same transparency, in Western History, predicts that a common truth of Mankind exists and maintains that what approaches it most closely is action that projects, whereby the world is realized at the same time that it is caught in the act of its foundation.

Against this reductive transparency, a force of opacity is at work. No longer the opacity that enveloped and reactivated the mystery of filiation but another, considerate of all the threatened and delicious things joining one another (without conjoining, that is, without merging) in the expanse of Relation.

Thus, that which protects the Diverse we call opacity. And henceforth we shall call Relation's imaginary a transparency, one that for ages (ever since the Pre-Socratics? or the Mayans? in Timbuktu already? ever since the pre-Islamic poets and the Indian storytellers?) has had premonitions of its unforeseeable whirl.

For centuries "generalization," as operated by the West, brought different community tempos into an equivalency in which it attempted to give a hierarchical order to the times they flowered. Now that the panorama has been determined and equidistances described, is it not, perhaps, time to return to a no less necessary "degeneralization"? Not to a replenished outrageous excess of specificities but to a total (dreamed-of) freedom of the connections among them, cleared out of the very chaos of their confrontations.

Closed Place, Open Word

1

The Plantation system spread, following the same structural principles, throughout the southern United States, the Caribbean islands, the Caribbean coast of Latin America, and the northeastern portion of Brazil. It extended throughout the countries (including those in the Indian Ocean), constituting what Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant call the territory of *créolité* [creoleness].¹ There are grounds for understanding why, despite very different linguistic areas engaged in very divergent political dynamics, the same organization would create a rhythm of economic production and form the basis for a style of life. That takes care of the spatial aspect.

Regarding time, or, if you will, our grasp of the histories that converged in these spaces, two other questions need to be addressed. The first concerns the system's evolution: Why was there no continuation of it anywhere—no social structure organically derived from it, with coherent or contradictory repercussions, inscribed in any enduring aspect? The Plantation system collapsed everywhere, brutally or progressively, without generating its own ways of superseding itself. The second question is even more amazing: How did a system that was so fragile give rise, paradoxically, to what are

seen as the modern vectors of civilization, in the not intolerant sense that this word henceforth holds for us?

Let us sum up in a few connected phrases what we know of the Plantation. It is an organization formed in a social pyramid, confined within an enclosure, functioning apparently as an autarky but actually dependent, and with a technical mode of production that cannot evolve because it is based on a slave structure.

A pyramid organization: everywhere after 1848 the origin of the mass of slaves, then workers, was African—or Hindu in the Caribbean; the middle level, managers, administrators, and overseers, were hired men of European origin, a small number of whom were replaced early in this century by people of color—once again in the Caribbean; at the top of the pyramid were the planters, colonists, or *békés*, as they were called in the Antilles, who strove to constitute a white pseudoaristocracy. I say pseudo because almost nowhere were these attempts at putting down roots within a tradition sanctioned by the stamp of time nor by any legitimacy of absolute filiation. Plantations, despite secreting manners and customs, from which cultures ensued, never established any tradition of great impact.

An enclosed place: each Plantation was defined by boundaries whose crossing was strictly forbidden; impossible to leave without written permission or unless authorized by some ritual exception, such as Carnival time. Chapel or church, stockrooms for distributing supplies or later the grocery store, infirmary or hospital: everything was taken care of within a closed circle. Now the following is what we need to understand: How could a series of autarkies, from one end to the other of the areas involved, from Louisiana to Martinique to Réunion, be capable of kinship? If each Plantation is considered as a closed entity, what is the principle inclining them to function in a similar manner?

Finally, the reality of slavery. It was decisive, of course, in the stagnation of production techniques. An insurmountable tendency toward technical irresponsibility resulted from it, especially among slaveholders. And when technical innovations, mechanization, and industrialization occurred, as they did, for example, in the southern United States, it was already too late. Social dynamics had taken other routes than cane traces, sugarcane alleys, or avenues of magnolias. As for the slaves or their close descendants, who had absolutely no interest in the Plantation's yield, they would be an exception to this technical irresponsibility because of their own need to guarantee daily survival on the edges of the system. This resulted in the widespread development of small occupations, or what is referred to in the Antilles as *djobs*, a habitual economy of bits and scraps. Technical irresponsibility on the one hand and a breakdown into individual operations on the other: immobility and fragmentation lay at the heart of the system eating away at it.

Let us, nonetheless, consult these ruins with their uncertain evidence, their extremely fragile monuments, their frequently incomplete, obliterated, or ambiguous archives. You can guess already what we are to discover: that the Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation. Within this universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization, forms of humanity stubbornly persisted. In this outmoded spot, on the margins of every dynamic, the tendencies of our modernity begin to be detectable. Our first attempt must be to locate just such contradictions.

One of these contradictions contrasts the tidy composition of such a universe—in which social hierarchy corresponds in maniacal, minute detail to a mercilessly maintained racial hierarchy—with the ambiguous complexities otherwise proceeding from it.

Airtight seals were apparently the rule of the Plantation. Not simply the tight social barrier but also an irremediable

break between forms of sensibility, despite each one's effects upon the other. Saint-John Perse and Faulkner, two authors born in Plantation regions and to whom I constantly turn, not surprisingly, with my questions, provide us with a chance to assess this split. We recall the famous description, if it is a description, in *Éloges*:

*but I shall still long remember
mute faces, the colour of papaya and of boredom that
paused like burnt-out stars behind our chairs . . .*²

That papaya and that boredom—seeing people as things—do not so much emphasize the poet's distance as they reveal the radical separation (that impossible apartheid) presiding over the life of the emotions in the Plantation. I have also noted that Faulkner, who spoke so frequently of blacks, never sets out to write one of the interior monologues, of which he is such a master, for one of these characters; whereas he dares do so for some of the mulattoes in his work and even, in a tour de force now classic, for the idiot Benjy at the beginning of his novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Thus Lucas, the black character who is the principal hero of *Intruder in the Dust*, is never interiorized by Faulkner; he is described entirely through postures and gestures, a silhouette filled in against a horizon. *Intruder in the Dust* is not a novel concerning an essence but, rather, an attempt at a phenomenological approach. In the same novel Faulkner, moreover, is explicit about his narrator's understanding—or lack thereof—of the southern black: "Because he knew Lucas Beauchamp too—as well that is as any white person knew him. Better than any maybe."³ As if the novelist, rejected by members of his class and misunderstood by the black Americans who have had access to his work, had premonitions of an impossibility brought to a head by history. The break exerts itself here.

But the break did not form delimited territories, in which the various levels of population were sectioned off. The claim

that they were reciprocally extraneous did not prevent contaminations, inevitable within the enclosure of the Plantation. Despite the insistent, cold ferocity of Father Labat's writing, for example, beneath the words of this seventeenth-century chronicler of the Antilles one can feel a curiosity, riveted, anxious, and obsessive, whenever he broaches the subject of these slaves that he struggles so hard to keep calm. Fear, fantasies, and perhaps a barely willing flicker of complicity form the undercurrent of the revolts and repressions. The long list of martyrdoms is also a long *métissage*, whether involuntary or intentional.

A second contradiction contrasts the Plantation's will to autarky with its dependence, in reality, in relation to the external world. The transactions it fostered with this world took place in the elementary form of the exchange of goods, usually at a loss. Payment was in kind, or as an equivalent exchange value, which led to accumulation neither of experience nor of capital. Nowhere did the Planters manage to set up organisms that were sufficiently solid and autonomous to allow them to have access to the control of a market, means of international transportation, an independent system of money, or an efficient and specific representation in foreign markets. The Plantations, entities turned in upon themselves, paradoxically, have all the symptoms of extroversion. They are dependent, by nature, on someplace elsewhere. In their practice of importing and exporting, the established politics is not decided from within. One could say, in fact, that, socially, the Plantation is not the product of a politics but the emanation of a fantasy.

And, if we come even closer to this enclosed place, this Locus Solus, trying to imagine what its inner ramifications may be, auscultating the memory or guts inside it, then the contradictions become madness. I shall not attempt any description here. This current year would not suffice. And we are familiar enough with the countless novels and films inspired by this universe to know already that, from north to south and from west to east, the same conditions of life

repeat themselves. Rather, I shall turn to another synthesizing aspect, in this case both oral and written expression—literature—stemming either directly or indirectly from the Plantation.

2

No matter which region we contemplate from among those covered by the system, we find the same trajectory and almost the same forms of expression. We could mark out three moments: literary production—first as an act of survival, then as a dead end or a delusion, finally as an effort or passion of memory.

An act of survival. In the silent universe of the Plantation, oral expression, the only form possible for the slaves, was discontinuously organized. As tales, proverbs, sayings, songs appeared—as much in the Creole-speaking world as elsewhere—they bore the stamp of this discontinuity. The texts seem to neglect the essentials of something that Western realism, from the beginning, had been able to cover so well: the situation of landscapes, the lesson of scenery, the reading of customs, the description of the motives of characters. Almost never does one find in them any concrete relating of daily facts and deeds; what one does find, on the other hand, is a symbolic evocation of situations. As if these texts were striving for disguise beneath the symbol, working to say without saying. This is what I have referred to elsewhere as *detour*,⁴ and this is where discontinuity struggles; the same discontinuity the Maroons created through that other detour called *marronnage*.

Here we have a form of literature striving to express some-

thing it is forbidden to refer to and finding risky retorts to this organic censorship every time. The oral literature of the Plantations is consequently akin to other subsistence—survival—techniques set in place by the slaves and their immediate descendants. Everywhere that the obligation to get around the rule of silence existed a literature was created that has no “natural” continuity, if one may put it that way, but, rather, bursts forth in snatches and fragments. The storyteller is a handyman, the *djobbeur* of the collective soul.

Though this phenomenon is widespread throughout the system, nonetheless, it is within the Creole-speaking realm that it stands out most conspicuously. That is because, in addition to this obligation to get around something, the Creole language has another, internal obligation: to renew itself in every instance on the basis of a series of forgettings. Forgetting, that is, integration, of what it starts from: the multiplicity of African languages on the one hand and European ones on the other, the nostalgia, finally, for the Caribbean remains of these.* The linguistic movement of creolization proceeded through very rapid, interrupted, successive settlements of these contributions; the synthesis resulting from this process never became fixed in its terms, despite having asserted from the beginning the durability of its structures. In other words, the Creole text is never presented linguistically as an edict or a relay, on the basis of which some literary progression might be detected, with another text coming along to perfect the former, and so on. I do not know if this diffraction (through which multilingualism is, perhaps, really at work, in an underground way, for one of the first known times in the history of humanities) is indicative of all languages in formation—here, for example, we would have to study the European Middle Ages—or if it is entirely attribut-

*It is the problem of “forgetting” that has made the various Creole dialects so fragile—in comparison to the languages composing them, especially French wherever it is in authority, as in Guadeloupe and Martinique.

able to the particular situation of the Plantation in the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean.

Then delusion. Unlike this oral and popular literature, though equally discontinuous, another, written and elitist literature developed. The colonists and the Planters, as well as the travelers who visited them, were possessed of a real need to justify the system. To fantasize legitimacy. And, of course, this is why, unlike what happened in the oral texts, the description of reality would turn out to be indispensable to them—and irrefutable in their terms. Reality was fantasized here as well, its image the product of a disguised apology rather than that of an austere realism. One condition of the process was that conventional landscape be pushed to extremes—the gentleness and beauty of it—particularly in the islands of the Caribbean. There is something of an involuntary Parnassus in the novels and pamphlets written by colonists of Santo Domingo and Martinique: the same propensity to blot out the shudders of life, that is, the turbulent realities of the Plantation, beneath the conventional splendor of scenery.

Another convention provided the occasion for a specific category of writing. The supposedly receptive lasciviousness of the slaves, mulatto women and men who were of mixed blood, and the animal savagery with which the Africans were credited, produced an abundant supply for the erotic literature flourishing in the islands from the seventeenth to the end of the nineteenth century. In this manner, from one blind spot to the next, a literature of illusion came into being, one moreover that, every now and then, was not lacking charm or an old-fashioned grace. Lafcadio Hearn, an international reporter and a writer as well, came from Louisiana to the Antilles at the turn of the century, sending us a much embellished report.

Memory. After the System collapsed the literatures that had asserted themselves within its space developed, for the most

part, from the general traits so sketchily indicated here, either consenting to them or taking an opposite course. Thus, Caribbean literatures, whether in English, Spanish, or French, tended to introduce obscurities and breaks—like so many detours—into the material they dealt with; putting into practice, like the Plantation tales, processes of intensification, breathlessness, digression, and immersion of individual psychology within the drama of a common destiny. The symbolism of situations prevailed over the refinement of realisms, by encompassing, transcending, and shedding light upon it. This, of course, is equally true of a writer of Creole such as the Haitian Franketienne as of a novelist from the United States such as Toni Morrison.

So, too, the works that appeared in these countries went against the convention of a falsely legitimizing landscape scenery and conceived of landscape as basically implicated in a story, in which it too was a vivid character.

So, finally, historical *marronage* intensified over time to exert a creative *marronage*, whose numerous forms of expression began to form the basis for a continuity. Which made it no longer possible to consider these literatures as exotic appendages of a French, Spanish, or English literary corpus; rather, they entered suddenly, with the force of a tradition that they built themselves, into the relation of cultures.

But the truth is that their concern, its driving force and hidden design, is the derangement of the memory, which determines, along with imagination, our only way to tame time.

Just how were our memory and our time buffeted by the Plantation? Within the space apart that it comprised, the always multilingual and frequently multiracial tangle created inextricable knots within the web of filiations, thereby breaking the clear, linear order to which Western thought had imparted such brilliance. So Alejo Carpentier and Faulkner are of the same mind, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Lezama Lima go together, I recognize myself in Derek Wal-

cott, we take delight in the coils of time in García Márquez's century of solitude. The ruins of the Plantation have affected American cultures all around.

And, whatever the value of the explanations or the publicity Alex Haley afforded us with *Roots*, we have a strong sense that the overly certain affiliation invoked there does not really suit the vivid genius of our countries. Memory in our works is not a calendar memory; our experience of time does not keep company with the rhythms of month and year alone; it is aggravated by the void, the final sentence of the Plantation; our generations are caught up within an extended family in which our root stocks have diffused and everyone had two names, an official one and an essential one—the nickname given by his community. And when in the end it all began to shift, or rather collapse, when the unstoppable evolution had emptied the enclosure of people to reassemble them in the margins of cities, what remained, what still remains, is the dark side of this impossible memory, which has a louder voice and one that carries farther than any chronicle or census.

The disintegration of the system left its marks. Almost everywhere planter castes degenerated into fixed roles, in which memory no longer functioned except as decor—as landscape had formerly done. Occasionally, they were able to switch to commerce; otherwise, they went to pieces in melancholy. Former employees here and there formed groups of so-called poor whites, who fed the ideologies of racist terror. In the Caribbean and in Latin America the burgeoning shantytowns drew masses of the destitute and transformed the rhythm of their voices. In the islands black and Hindu farmers went to war against arbitrariness and absolute poverty. In the United States southern blacks went up North, following the “underground railroad,” toward cities that were becoming violently dehumanized, where, nonetheless the Harlem writers, for example, wrote their Renaissance upon the walls of solitude. Thus, urban literature made its appearance in Bahia, New York, Jacmel, or Fort-de-France. The Plantation

region, having joined with the endless terrain of haciendas or latifundio, spread thin to end up in mazes of sheet metal and concrete in which our common future takes its chances. This second Plantation matrix, after that of the slave ship, is where we must return to track our difficult and opaque sources.

It is not just literature. When we examine how speech functions in this Plantation realm, we observe that there are several almost codified types of expression. Direct, elementary speech, articulating the rudimentary language necessary to get work done; stifled speech, corresponding to the silence of this world in which knowing how to read and write is forbidden; deferred or disguised speech, in which men and women who are gagged keep their words close. The Creole language integrated these three modes and made them jazz.

It is understandable that in this universe every cry was an event. Night in the cabins gave birth to this other enormous silence from which music, inescapable, a murmur at first, finally burst out into this long shout—a music of reserved spirituality through which the body suddenly expresses itself. Monotonous chants, syncopated, broken by prohibitions, set free by the entire thrust of bodies, produced their language from one end of this world to the other. These musical expressions born of silence: Negro spirituals and blues, persisting in towns and growing cities; jazz, *biguines*, and calypsos, bursting into barrios and shantytowns; salsas and reggaes, assembled everything blunt and direct, painfully stifled, and patiently differed into this varied speech. This was the cry of the Plantation, transfigured into the speech of the world.

For three centuries of constraint had borne down so hard that, when this speech took root, it sprouted in the very midst of the field of modernity; that is, it grew for everyone. This is the only sort of universality there is: when, from a specific enclosure, the deepest voice cries out.

4

Negative explanations for what is unique to the system are clear: the decisive impact of the African population, but with the horrors of the slave trade as its beginning; the grasping opposition to change inherent in pro-slavery assumptions; the dependent relationship with the outside world that all Plantations had in common.

But one can also see how this monstrously abortive failure, composed of so many solitary instances of sterility, had a positive effect on some portion of contemporary histories. — How? is your question. How can you claim that such an anomaly could have contributed to what you call modernity? —I believe I have answered this question or at least left clues about how it may be answered.

The Plantation, like a laboratory, displays most clearly the opposed forces of the oral and the written at work—one of the most deep-rooted topics of discussion in our contemporary landscape. It is there that multilingualism, that threatened dimension of our universe, can be observed for one of the first times, organically forming and disintegrating. It is also within the Plantation that the meeting of cultures is most clearly and directly observable, though none of the inhabitants had the slightest hint that this was really about a clash of cultures. Here we are able to discover a few of the formational laws of the cultural *métissage* that concerns us all. It is

essential that we investigate historicity—that conjunction of a passion for self-definition and an obsession with time that is also one of the ambitions of contemporary literatures—in the extensions of the Plantation, in the things to which it gave birth at the very instant it vanished as a functional unit. *Baroque speech, inspired by all possible speech*, was ardently created in these same extensions and loudly calls out to us from them. The Plantation is one of the bellies of the world, not the only one, one among so many others, but it has the advantage of being able to be studied with the utmost precision. Thus, the boundary, its structural weakness, becomes our advantage. And in the end its seclusion has been conquered. The place was closed, but the word derived from it remains open. This is one part, a limited part, of the lesson of the world.