

ÉDOUARD GLISSANT

# Poetics of Relation



*translated by Betsy Wing*

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## Glossary

**“Glossary:** for readers *from elsewhere*, who don’t deal very well with unknown words or who want to understand everything. But, perhaps to establish for ourselves, ourselves as well, the long list of words within us whose sense escapes or, taking this farther, to fix the syntax of this language we are babbling. The readers *of here* are future.”

—Édouard Glissant, *Malemort*, 231

(Words discussed in the introduction or notes are not included here.)

**antillanité:** “A method and not a state of being,” according to Glissant. Contrast this with his idea of what *creolité* (creoleness) is about. *Antillanité* is grounded concretely in affirmation of a place, the Antilles, and would link cultures across language barriers. Dash translates this as “Caribbeanness” in *Caribbean Discourse*.

**békés:** Creole word used originally to designate the white planters but now also any of their (white) descendants in Martinique.

**carême:** The dry season. Martinique has only two seasons: the rainy season, *hivernage*, and the dry, *carême*.

**djobs, djobeurs:** Odd jobs and those who do them. These words, derived from the English word *job*, designate the widespread, marginal economy dependent on the scraps

and bits (of work and material) that no one in the more affluent sector wants.

**Gehenna:** A hell, a place of fiery torment.

**gommier:** Traditional sailboat still raced along the coast of Martinique.

**imaginary:** Glissant's sense differs from the commonsense English usage of a conception that is a conscious mental image. Furthermore, the now widely accepted Lacanian sense in which the Imaginary, the order of perception and hallucination, is contrasted with the Symbolic (the order of discursive and symbolic action) and the Real (not just "reality" but what is absolutely unrepresentable) does not apply. For Glissant the imaginary is all the ways a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world. Hence, every human culture will have its own particular imaginary.

**laghia:** A traditional dance that takes the form of a battle.

**Lamentin:** An industrial city in whose mangrove swamps Glissant and his friends played as children. The Lézarde River flowed, now trickles through, and the backfilled swamps are now developed into the airport of Martinique.

**mabi:** A drink made from *bois magi* (*Collubrina elliptica*) and the peel of mandarines.

**madou:** A sweet drink made with limes.

**manchineel:** A plant found growing side by side with the sea-olive on the beaches of Martinique. When touched, the fruit of the manchineel inflicts painful burns that the leaf of the sea-olive can heal.

**marronage, marrons:** The *marrons*, "Maroons," are the fugitive slaves, and *marronage*, originally the political act of these slaves who escaped into the forested hills of Martinique, now designates a form of cultural opposition to European-American culture. This resistance takes its strength from a combination of geographical connectedness (essential to survival in the jungle and absent in the descendants of slaves—alienated from the land that could never be theirs), memory (retained in oral forms and

vodou ritual), and all the canny detours, diversions, and ruses required to deflect the repeated attempts to recuperate this cultural subversion.

**mornes:** The hills rising abruptly behind the Caribbean beaches in Martinique. Deeply forested in places still, they are the savage and life-preserving land in which the Maroons took refuge.

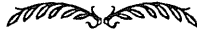
**Pitons:** The high, jagged, volcanic mountains.

**Quechua:** Amerindians of South America known for their obstinate silence.

**yole:** Traditional skiff used by Martinican fishermen.

**zouc:** Martinican dance music.

## IMAGINARY



*Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized.*

*Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity.*

*Thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop it to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never not retain, nor ever, in standing still, boast about.*

I


APPROACHES

*One way ashore, a thousand channels*

## 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.