

**FARMING BONES AND WRITING ROCKS:
RETHINKING A CARIBBEAN POETICS OF (DIS)LOCATION ***

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PLACE. It cannot be circumvented. But if you wish to benefit from this place, which has been given to you, consider that henceforth all the places of the world are converging, even the spaces of the stars. . . . Then you will come to this, which is the most profound knowledge: that the place widens out from its irreducible center, as much as from its incalculable outer frontiers.
Edouard Glissant Tout-Monde

The frontier is like a constantly shifting sand, but one which, far from submerging the conflicts it has forced to surface or happened upon in its surroundings, spreads them out, exposes them, explodes them to the ultimate extreme of its convulsion
Edouard Glissant Faulkner, Mississippi

Christopher Miller in his recent collection of essays, Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature, laments the fact that 'hybridity and nomadology' have become a new orthodoxy in the study of Francophone Literature in the United States. While accepting that ideologies of difference and binarist thought are forms of exclusionary identity politics that have been tainted by colonialist and ethnocentric projects and justly deserve to be criticized, he wonders whether a triumphalist hybridity has created a new prescriptiveness that now threatens to be as limiting as earlier essentialist formulations of race, nation and culture. This new euphoric appropriation of an ideology that promises a way of transcending the limitations of nativist thought is directly related, in Miller's view, to the unfortunate influence of Deleuzian philosophy as relayed through the work of Edouard Glissant:

The influence of Deleuzian 'nomad thought' - along with the persistence of what I would call 'prescriptive deconstruction' - has put me at odds with some of my friends and colleagues in Francophone studies. Through the influence of Deleuze on Edouard Glissant and thinkers like him, the ideas of deterritorialization and nomadology have, so to speak, taken root and become almost a dogma. Most work in Francophone studies is framed by some reference to a critique of 'l'Un' and a valorization of 'la Relation,' to use Glissant's terms. Much important and valid work has followed these lines. But this body of thought that abhors borders and limitations can itself be limiting. (Miller 5)

There is, on the face of it, much to justify Miller's anti-Deleuzian and anti-Glissantian 'cri de coeur'. While he fixes the problem in terms of the rampant spread of nomad thought, induced by Deleuzian ideas and disseminated through the works of Edouard Glissant, the issue is older and more specifically related to the field of postcolonial studies in whose founding text, The Empire Writes Back (1989), neither Glissant nor Deleuze is mentioned. Prescriptive pluralism that transcends all manifestations of binarist thought is the main thrust of this well-known work by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin. It is unlikely, however, they envisaged the triumph of deterritorialization that Miller claims is afflicting current critical approaches to francophone literature. Postcolonial studies may well have become the victim of its own success, as it does seem that all roads lead with an inexorable inevitability to the glorification of a happy hybridity. We seem to be told with numbing frequency that the ideal for postcolonial cultures in general is a uniform experience of nomadism and displacement. This new orthodoxy of borderless identities risks turning the once liberating ideas of cross-culturality and creolization into the essentialism that would end all essentialisms. There is, on the face of it, perhaps good reason to share Miller's fear of this new orthodoxy of a hegemonic hybridity that divides critics into progressive nomads on one hand and retarded nationalists on the other.

The fact is that if the idea of cultural specificity and difference is lost then everything collapses

into a universal sameness. A sense of place, as Glissant asserts in the opening epigraph, is indeed uncircumventable. Yet we all realize that it is too late for us to revert to an unproblematic positing of nation, roots and home in a desperate effort to ward off cultural anonymity. Since it is pointless to revert to an affirmative territorialization or invent a bogus authenticity in order to counter this drift towards global homogenization, I would suggest that we reexamine the poetics of location and dislocation as they have been worked out in the Caribbean whose writing has been dominated by anxieties of place and belonging. I would like to think that there are two models for locating place in the Caribbean imagination: one that totalizes by homogenizing difference in the name of an ahistorical wholeness and the other that totalizes by including difference in the name of the particularity of place.

With this in mind, I propose that we read French Caribbean literature and, to some extent, Caribbean literature as a whole, in terms of the two major poetic projects of Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant. The former symbolizes the affirmation island space as home, as an unambiguous foundation for the assertion of difference in the face of a deterritorializing incorporation into the colonial system or the transcendent values of the West. The latter can be seen as a vision of opacity and indeterminacy whose totalizing project emphasizes both consciousness of the Caribbean's 'irruption into modernity' and the irreducible specificity of place.

Césaire's epic poem Cahier d'un retour au pays natal (to which his entire oeuvre has been reduced) illustrates the militant poetics of a situated literature. As is well known the 'retour' of the title refers to the poet's return to his island home after a prolonged state of spiritual exile. The poet's dream of crossing the estranging, alienating sea is expressed in terms of the pain of rebirth, a fetal consciousness forcing itself into existence:

I am breaking through the vitelline membrane that separates me from myself

I am breaking through the great waters that gird me with blood. (56)

The disalienation of the poetic persona is expressed in terms of a wrenching process of willed rebirth. The vitelline membrane is the egg's transparent covering which must be ruptured for recovery of the lost self to be possible. This transparent covering is all that stands between estranged poet and the truth of his lost native land and authentic people. This symbolic rebirth generates in Césaire's poem a kind of affirmative territorialization as the native land depicted as an island/ body encased in a membrane, which is invariably represented in the poem by the noxious sands that surround the island:

Another wretched sight, this beach, with its heaps of garbage rotting away,
furtive rumps relieving themselves, and the sand is so black, so lugubrious, no
one has ever seen a sand so black, and the foam yelps as it glides over it, and
the sea beats it with great big buffets, or rather the sea is a big dog which licks
and bites the shins of the beach, and bite after bite, it will eventually devour it.

. . . (39)

The final scene of reintegration in the poem is enacted in terms of a tiny canoe, which must struggle to make its way across these putrid, infertile sands to ultimately attain the ideal situatedness that the poet seeks in the island's volcanic interior. The 'pirogue' thus makes a landing by forcing its way across the black, noxious threshold of the sand. The poem then closes with the rush of a mighty wind as in a prolonged moment of apocalyptic celebration self and native land are reunited: "And now we are standing, my country and I, hair in the wind, my hand small now in its enormous fist."

If Césaire's Cahier is one of the founding documents of anticolonial poetics, it is because it sets out so graphically the emergence of the militantly conscious postcolonial subject and the dream of this newly centered subject's voice embedded in its authentic ground. It is a wonderfully

beguiling vision of grounding difference and territorial empowerment. As Césaire makes clear in his only theoretical essay, "Poesie et Connaissance," the poetic word must be seen as a rupestral sign and the native land as the bedrock on which the sign is inscribed:

More and more, the word is likely to appear as an algebraic notation which makes the world intelligible . . . the poetic word, primal word: rupestral pattern in sonorous matter. The poetic utterance, primal utterance; the world acted out and mimed. (120)

Césaire's Cahier brings triumphant closure to the anguish of dislocation. In a moment of sensory plenitude as the grounded subject is fully integrated into a homeland, which becomes in turn the pupil of the eye and an integrating omphalos.

The Césairean romance of lost origins, which enacts the dynamics of journey and return, exile and reunion represents one model of totalizing aesthetics, which overrides the displacements of history in the name of cultural wholeness. Place is represented in terms of a mystical antithesis of European materialism, a longing for "going back home, back to the beginning, to the green beginning of this world," to the heartland of the 'morne'. Césaire's anxieties are profoundly Caribbean and arguably American and even modernist, in the widest sense of the world, as he is haunted by the need for new beginnings, for discovering a space outside of history where he can make his primal, rupestral inscription. It is to the credit of those who have interrogated this romance of foundational space, in particular Frantz Fanon, that we can now read critically and ironically Césaire's flawed poetic project. Fanon's theorizing of radical deracinement does not, however, answer adequately the anxieties of Césaire's crisis of identity. I, therefore, would like to look at an alternative poetics of location that projects island space as an open yet opaque insularity, a zone of encounter that both acquiesces to yet resists the pressures of global interaction.

Edouard Glissant, less than twenty years after Césaire's epic poem, revisits critically this idea of the island space as a refuge for a buried authenticity in his 1956 book of essays, Soleil de la conscience. In his (re)vision of return, Glissant returns to Césaire's black sand beach but abandons the logic of total integration into an authentic hinterland for relocating himself in this very indeterminate, sombre milieu, on the intermediate space of the sand between island and sea:

Now, I cross the Atlantic once again. Either this steamer named after a land, which seems virgin, the Colombie, takes me away; or, without leaving the grey stone, I rediscover a voice and begin the dialogue across Paris. Now, I do not go to the Mountain – wait, wait, the Sea is rising through me. I end up writing close to the Sea, in my burning house, on the volcanic sand. (43)

Glissant's journey back to a burning house on the black sand beach is undertaken on a steamer named after Columbus in an ironic reference to an earlier voyage that changed the native land irrevocably. The journey of discovery in the new world is fraught with the history of other attempts to found a new world's singularity. Glissant may even be suggesting that the actual journey may never physically take place, suggesting a project of (self)discovery that is essentially discursive, a textual grappling with an anxiety for origins. Thus from the late fifties Glissant gives short shrift to any nostalgia for the counter-modern, for the evocation of a prelapsarian plenitude. Consequently, from the outset, it seems evident that Glissant's poetics were not about idealizing difference in the face of the transcendent will of the West, the reductive force of the Same, since he was both "other" and "same." He set out rather to theorize a "totalizing rootedness", that is a coming to consciousness of the world in a particular locale. The book of essays that follows in 1969, L'intention poetique, is no less insistent on the vision of matter as only having meaning within an all-inclusive totality:

Matter, meaning, depth and totality are interrelated. The meaning of matter, yes

it is its reality: not only its innate, structured depth, but furthermore its considered spreading outwards. Depth: the possibly hidden meaning, but also the law of the interrelatedness of all matter. There is henceforth no depth to be explored .. outside of the totality. What is once more, and as a consequence, the totality if not the relation of each part of matter to all others? (17-18)

A crucial aspect of Glissant's early assertion of a totalizing vision is the density and tension of locale that underpins this relational model. "For the poetics of relatedness supposes that each one must face the density (opacity) of the other. The more the other resists in his thickness or fluidity (without being confined to this), the more expressive his reality, and the more fruitful the interrelating" (24).

Glissant is, therefore, acutely aware from the outset of the double threat of a placeless totalisation on one hand and a blind romanticizing of difference, on the other. While he clearly breaks with the idea of a nativist territorialisation as proposed by Césaire, he invests place with an opacity that would ensure a totality that that was a non-centrist web of relations, not totalizingly homogeneous but fraught with the tensions and asymmetries of diversity:

The anchoring of the unique, particular, burning principle of each community in the patience of its relations (soon to be revealed) with the Other. (48)

How one retains (anchors) an element of the territorial within this relational poetics is a constant concern in his ideas, which from the beginning privileged the ideal of diversity as a kind of dialectical situatedness. A model which made the fate of Martinique tragic precisely because Martinique was faced with the choice of opacity denied in the colonial system or the promise of the essentializing ethnocentrism of negritude, neither of which constituted Glissant's ideal of an open specificity, so necessary for his relational model. Glissant's poetic agenda is, therefore, not territorial but forever in a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Much hinges on his understanding of place and the materiality of place to the situated consciousness. I would argue that even at his most 'Deleuzian' Glissant does not yield to a radical poetics of deterritorialisation but hangs on to the specifics (opacité, densité) of locale. As he warns at the end of *Soleil de la conscience*, "we must listen carefully to the (world's) growing flux; but just as soon attach ourselves to some square of earth, to everyday concerns, to only what can be measured with our eyes" (70).

In Glissant's model of relational rootedness, the loci of Caribbean culture are numerous, widespread, eccentric, its meanings can never be exhausted by any one voice. In this regard, it is well worth our while to pay attention to the emergence of the island trope in Glissant's earliest writing. The island is a floating symbol for that zone of anxiety where individual consciousness enters history, a secretive marker within an undecipherable sea of global change. "Island, that is secret, finding its fulfillment in its radiance. Diamond of contradictions" (42). The 'diamond of contradictions' referred to here is not just a poetic image but refers to that modest monolith Diamond Rock off the south coast of Martinique. It is the logic of a poetics of (dis)location that leads Glissant to an increased fascination with the dark monolith which is both marine and volcanic, scintillating in association yet opaque in reality. Glissant's Diamond Rock is not like Walcott's Rampanalgas with its idealized historylessness but, on the contrary, saturated with history in the futile efforts of European nations to establish territory there. Diamant is dense with the tensions of Glissant's relational model. It both preserves the past of Martinique and negates it, allowing it to be more fully integrated into the archepelic space of the Caribbean Sea and the crushing force of the Atlantic.

In privileging Diamond Rock, a historically contested and uninhabited islet projected outside of the island of Martinique, Glissant is suggesting a new relation between subject and object, between island space and anxious subject. Here, Glissant may be influenced by the Surrealist

procedure of 'le hasard objectif,' or objective chance, which is arguably the movement's greatest legacy to postcolonial Caribbean thought. With the idea of 'Objective Chance,' the Surrealists are drawing heavily on the Hegelian notion of the problematic relationship between subject and object. The object's existence depends on the existence of a perceiving subject as does the subject's consciousness on what is being perceived. In revisiting Hegel's conundrum of the precarious interdependence of subject and object, the Surrealists were putting great emphasis on the inscrutability of the object and its emergence as a freed subject, with an autonomy that puts it beyond the will or the mastery of the transcendental subject. We should not forget that André Breton visited Martinique in 1941 and in his largely undervalued travel book, Martinique, charmeuse de serpents, actually singled out Diamond Rock as an inscrutable monolith that reacts against the exotic picturesqueness of the island's interior. What is relevant here to Glissant's poetics of Caribbean space is that this process of objectivation has a capacity to defamiliarise the world, to confer opacity on freed objects.

The openness of ground to a play of detour, ruse and ambiguity beyond fixed and ordinary meanings is fundamental to understanding Glissant's exploration of the relation between consciousness and location, opacity and transparency. One early example will suffice. In Soleil de la Conscience, which functions as an ironic take on the travel book, we witness the use of 'le hasard objectif' to render the familiar strange and to configure the metropole of Paris in terms of a decentered opacity. Glissant provocatively associates Paris with Diamond rock, projecting the French metropole outside of Europe, as a site of obscure, explosive relationality:

So Paris, in the heart of this our time, receives, uproots, obscures and then clarifies and reassures. I suddenly know its secret: Paris is an island, which draws in from all sides and diffracts at the same time. (68)

This practice of what one might call a Surrealist ethnography invariably manifests itself in the evocation of place in Glissant's fiction. Anyone familiar with Glissant's novels is sensitive to the resistance of concrete things to abstract manipulation in his works. The sand bar in his first novel La Lezarde (The Ripening) is the tortured creation of the river, an inscrutable submarine fermentation that, like the mass of Diamond Rock, surges out the sea. It tempts all the characters in the novel that try in one way or another to master it. It has the effect on the characters of an explosive diffracting presence. In one memorable instance, the impatient, ideologically-driven character Mycea wrestles with the meaning of the dark mass on the horizon. In a burst of emotion she gives up the struggle and we are told, "Her eyes filled with sparkling tears, through which the sun broke into fragments and the sand bar began to look like a burst of frightened stars" (155). Through the character of Mycea, forever haunted by rocks, Glissant pursues the exploration of the unstable consciousness wedded to a material space it can never master nor exhaust.

The littoral with its associations of indeterminacy and exposure stands in sharp contrast to the traditional organicist nostalgia for the island interior or the heartland of the maroon. This zone acquires a primal significance in Glissant's later works, especially Poétique de la relation, as he contemplates the poetics of this fragile where land mutely confronts the explosive forces of the sea. The ever-present question of landscape and consciousness is raised again at this peculiar site where the island opens out to the sea, the particular to the universal and the writer wonders:

I then tried to establish a parallel, in this circularity that I haunt, between the backwash of the beach into the explosive emptiness of beyond and the to and fro of the man who had reduced himself to a simple driving force. To relate them, I myself, to this cadence of the world with which we go along without the slightest ability to measure or control its headlong rush. (136)

Increasingly, Glissant's works have become travel books, as the revealingly entitled Tout-Monde

attests, or are sited in a constant to and fro from the beach at Diamant, the island rock of Martinique, and "the explosive emptiness of beyond". It is as if the challenge of the beach of Diamond Rock invites greater and greater exploration of frontier zones of rock and sea. In these travel narratives, the journeys now move along frontier littorals, inwards and outwards as much autobiographical as anthropological, fulfilling the ideal of a rooted errancy. The diffracting and concentrating cadences, which are earlier associated with the unstable black sand beach at Diamant, now become a more generalized poetics of interaction between self and other, imagination and matter, global and local.

This new daring in Glissant's oeuvre problematizes profoundly conventional ways of categorizing Caribbean or American literature – in national or regional terms – since his recent novels do not locate a poetics of place exclusively in national terms. In making transgressive correspondences not simply between Diamant and Paris but now between Martinique and Mississippi, Diamant and the *Tout Monde*, Glissant is advocating a kind of literary transnationalism for the Caribbean, which is as much as anything else about constructing a non-territorial poetics of location. For instance, in his own 'turn in the South', *Faulkner, Mississippi*, with its exploration of the south of the South, the plantation Americas and Faulkner's New world imaginary, Glissant opens out the field of American literature to the Caribbean and Latin America, the 'Other America,' as he has termed it. The writer of his 'Other America' is a wanderer destined to cultivate gardens of opacity on the volcanic sands that inconclusively frame island space.

This new problematizing of ground in Caribbean writing seems to have emerged with particular urgency in the recent writing of Haiti. The status of inter-American wanderer has been acquired by almost all major Haitian writers today as the Haitian diaspora spreads through the hemisphere. Two of these writers in particular, Dany Laferriere, seen as much as a Quebecois as a Haitian novelist, and the Haitian-American, Edwidge Danticat have recently revisited this question of Haitian space in their works. Two novels in particular write back to earlier works that explored Haiti in terms of a territorial discourse.

In Laferriere's *Pays sans chapeau*, the native land of Haiti is not awaiting the fiery ideological inscription of the returning visionary. In this regard, the novel can be read as an indirect satire of Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* as the narrator who returns to Haiti in Laferriere's novel is no savior but simply a confused subject who cannot adjust to the changes that have taken place in the native land. The precariousness of the regarding subject is constantly stated in this fictive ethnography. He writes literally sitting at "a shaky little table under a mango tree" at the mercy of the arbitrary falling fruit, with no distance between him and the invasive, bustling density of reality. In an effort to suggest the elusiveness of reality to which he belongs, "le pays reel," he declares in the opening pages and at the end of *Pays sans chapeau* that he is a "primitive writer" (15). In so doing he both points to the well-known tradition of Haitian painting as well as raises the issue of 'pensée sauvage' that harks back to the earlier Surrealist travel writing. In so doing, he questions the territorial reality of Haiti that has been projected by a more nationalistic discourse, a reality anchored by the textual certitudes of his predecessor Jacques Roumain.

The difficulty of fixing Caribbean space in terms of absolute belonging is also a major theme in Edwidge Danticat's works. Her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is as haunted by the problems of mothering as it is by the absent space of the motherland. Her most recent novel, *The Farming of Bones*, returns to these anxieties but this time in the guise of historical fiction. This novel can be read as the rewriting of the famous novel by Jacques-Stephen Alexis, *Compere General Soleil*, which also traces the history of the massacre of Haitian cane cutters in the Dominican Republic. Instead of the apocalyptic denouement when the hero greets the rising

militant General Sun at the frontier of his 'terre natale,' Danticat's protagonist with her ambiguous ancestry, as much Dominican as Haitian is immersed in the Massacre River, a river which has witnessed the massacre of Haiti's indigenous people by the Conquistadors. The battered body of her heroine finds herself in this liquid borderland between two spaces frozen in mutual hostility because of their nationalist impulses. The site of the river is as much amniotic fluid allowing a new consciousness to be born as much as a location of nightmarish memory which projected Haiti irrevocably into a history of violent colonization.

To borrow the words Danticat's title, it is really about farming bones. Where we bury our dead is usually the surest indication of belonging and community. A triumphalist postcolonialism is reminded that happy hybridity is always haunted by the need for the individual to be buried somewhere. We should also be aware that locating and excavating the bones of the dead is not about communing with the ancestors and putting them to rest. The dead in the borderlands between Haiti and the Dominican Republic demonstrate the extent to which this zone is interamerican space cruelly configured from the dislocations of the US Occupation, the greed of the Haitian elite and Dominican racism project the ambiguities of the past into the present. Massacre River like Diamond Rock is a manifestation of totalizing enrootedness, seemingly marginal locales that are zones of historical interamerican convergence.

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