

The Middle Passage as Philosophical Event

I want to begin my remarks with a passage from Édouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse*. Written as a contribution to the 1976 Carifesta colloquium in Kingston, Jamaica, Glissant's essay opens with a short engagement with Edward Baugh's famous essay "The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History." Baugh's essay is an incredibly important response to a mid-century trend in Caribbean thought, including Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and V.S. Naipaul, which worked from the position that the history of the non-white West Indies was a history of abjection, a space of having been *created* rather than *creating* and *making*. Glissant begins his reflections with his own characterization of afro-Caribbean history. "The French Caribbean," he writes

is the site of a history characterized by ruptures and that began with a brutal dislocation, the slave trade. Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those peoples who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory.¹

This is a remarkable passage. In it, Glissant lays out the paradoxes at the heart of thinking through the Middle Passage as transformative event. That event, as I want to explore it here, is no simple matter. It begins with brutal dislocation and painful negation. It also begins with another kind of historical consciousness and explosive forces. The two are simultaneous, registering the double signification of pain in memory and history. Dislocation and historical consciousness comprise what Glissant calls, in the *Black Salt* poems, the "tortured geography" of the Caribbean.

What is this tortured geography? How is it formed, deformed, then reformed by the memory and history of the Middle Passage? What do the slave ship, the shoreline, and the Plantation take from the possibilities of thinking, and what is given to the same? That is, how is the Middle Passage a philosophical event?

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Derek Walcott's "The Muse of History" (1974) is a stunning piece of writing. Written in the wake of the first wave of independence in the anglophone Caribbean and in the midst of another wave, including his own St. Lucia just a half decade later, the essay formulates the most difficult and complex of questions: what does it mean to begin? The problem of beginning is firstly a problem of reckoning with history, its pain, and the horizon of broken pieces of meaning, culture, and humanity left in the wake of that history.

What does it mean to begin?

Across “The Muse of History,” Walcott poses this as the problem of thinking history as History, or what Jean-François Lyotard would later call modernity as the age of metanarrative. Walcott the postmodernist, perhaps. What happens when we think historically and engage the work of memory inside small places, rather than on and across a global stage (which is always just white Europe’s stage) that folds – dialectically or in one sweep of intellectual hegemony – all difference into History’s identity? Walcott writes inside this query. But the close of his essay shifts from a broader historiographic focus toward questions of identity in the archipelago. This shift takes place under the rubric of paternity and the passage of the surname across time and generation. Reminiscent of James Baldwin’s memory-piece in *The Fire Next Time*, in which he remembers the hustler’s question “Whose child are you?,” Walcott theorizes himself as a child, but one whose position is that of judge – or, more precisely, one who judges oneself into or toward a position outside judgement, negotiation, and expiation. The key passage is in the closing of “The Muse of History” and worth quoting in full. Walcott writes:

I accept this archipelago of the Americas. I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper ‘history,’ for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon.²

Walcott’s repudiation of history marks what I call the afropostmodern, a response and responsiveness to the painful history of life under white European modernity, working with fragments and without atavism and its mournful posture toward the past. What comes after, for Walcott, is “the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds,” figured as two pieces of fruit, seamed by its own “bitter juices.” Life *in* and *as* those seams is the originary and transformative work of the afropostmodern. Life in the wake of the Middle Passage. Black life in the black Americas *after* the New World, *inside* the New World. The time and space of another beginning.

This is such a compelling moment in the history of Caribbean thought. Walcott and Glissant write in a moment of independence struggle – some struggles successful, some fated to departmentalization and its vicissitudes – and, in the moment of writing the future, return to the past. The turn to the past is critical for any thinking of the future. This is especially critical when thinking through the significance of a geographic, political, and cultural space formed at the crossroads of conquest, genocide, mass death, and enslavement. Those crossroads mark an important fracture in the continuum, as Glissant puts it, but there is also the obstinacy of the future. *Life goes on*. What comes after? What is the future in the wake of rupture, dislocation, shock, and incomprehension?

That is, what does it mean, then, to call the Middle Passage a philosophical event?

Let me begin with a short reflection on the eventfulness of the event, a sense I borrow from Martin Heidegger's late period and his interrogation of the term *Ereignis*. This term has a complicated place in Heidegger studies, and is in many ways its own philosophical problem, but let me here borrow and re-form the term for my own purposes. Heidegger locates "the event" in the intertwining of subjectivity and Being. The possibilities of thinking are in that intertwining, and so the event is a moment (or epoch) that structures knowing, being, and creating. The event makes our thoughtfulness and what follows from it possible, both in terms of liberating certain forms of thought and constraining the same; modernity is largely, for Heidegger, a story of constraint. He writes that

In the event of appropriation (*Ereignis*) the possibility arises that it may overcome the mere dominance of the frame to turn it into a more original appropriating. Such a transformation of the frame into the event of appropriation, by virtue of that event, would bring the appropriate recovery...of the world of technology from its dominance back to servitude in the realm by which man reaches more truly into the event of appropriation.³

This claim has enormous significance. For Heidegger, it marks the interruption, then eruption, of Enframing into modernity – or, perhaps, as the foundation of modernity. Calculative reason (the world of technology) emerges for Heidegger as an event rather than a new method or contrary set of values, a characterization that allows him to register the full significance of *Ereignis* for thinking about technology and its mode of thought. It is also a characterization that returns thinking to the event of appropriation itself, a kind of submersion that, on Heidegger's speculative rendering, makes alternative forms of thought possible. The event, then, has two movements: toward the limits of the frame of thinking (calculative reason, technology as paradigm) and back toward, negotiated by way of traces, alternative forms of thought. New possibilities in the liminal space of the event. A sort of deconstruction.

But that takes us into the particularities of Heidegger's work. For now, let us sit with the notion of the event. We can say this much: the event names the intertwining of interruption, irruption, and appropriation. That is, the event names an interruption of the flow of history and memory; forms of life preceding the event are transformed, if not outright eliminated, in the eventfulness of the event. In that sense, the event is a name for catastrophe *if* we imagine what precedes the event to be a root for life and kinds of being in the world, but it is just as much, more neutrally put, a question of fracture, fissure, and beginning again. This last bit, beginning again, marks the event with irruption. Something new emerges, posits itself, in-sists on being, and so the condition of interruption shades the affect of new beginning – melancholia, mourning, celebration, ecstasy, and all the mixtures one might imagine.

The moment of appropriation bears within it the most complicated elements of beginning. If the event inserts a fissure in history and memory, then the *aftermath*, the fact that *life goes on*, presents thinking with the enigma of refashioning the conditions of knowing, being, and creating. The event appropriates thought, drawing out the contingency of thinking in every turn. Without a continuity of history and being, thinking is conditioned by interruption and recasts of the terms of being and knowing. In a sense, this is just a basic insight of any historical thinking that takes revolutions in thought seriously. But for Heidegger, the insight into the event and its appropriation of the terms of thinking circles back to the tension between calculative reason – the enframing of thought in the epoch of technology – and the possibilities and impossibilities of the retrieval (his task) of a more originary encounter with Being. This initiates Heidegger’s deeply fetishistic rendering of the ancient Greeks, in particular the pre-Socratic philosophers. Without a doubt, this is a manifestation of Europe’s racial chauvinism and narcissism, both of which are not only forms of racial nationalism, but entwined with a murderous history. That much needs to be said, again and again. And yet I think Heidegger’s theorization of the event is important for the very reason that he explores, with great rigor and intensity, how forms of thinking – both actual and possible – are constrained (perhaps, one might argue, also liberated) by the historical-cultural framing initiated in massive fissures, fractures, breaks, and ruptures in history.

I offer this brief excursus into Heidegger’s thinking of *Ereignis* in order to mark the form of thinking I find in Glissant’s work, work that sits between memory and history in order to reckon with the specificity of afro-Caribbean experience. Glissant’s work operates in two key intertwined sites: the legacy of the Plantation, a critical concept across his work, and the peculiar futurity of what he comes to call *tout-monde*, an aesthetics and ethics of globalized contact, Relation, and transformation – creolization, in a word. But the antechamber to these two intertwined sites is the event of the Middle Passage. The Middle Passage is an event in the fullest sense of Heidegger’s notion of *Ereignis*: a fissure in the movement of time, an appropriation of thought and being, and an enframing of possibility.

The key, for Glissant, lies in how the appropriation of thought and being, and so the enframing of possibility, transforms the traumatic fissure in time into fecundity, rather than marking loss, truncation, and the leveling of thought. Possibility and possibilities at the limits of limit-experience. Heidegger’s critical juxtaposition of originary thought to the epoch of calculative reason draws on these latter characteristics, insofar as thinking Being, for him, is a matter of wresting free of the work of technology on the possibilities for thinking. And the reckoning with traumatic effect and affect in post-Holocaust theory follows this same logic, rewriting, from the position of loss, the meaning of thinking after catastrophe. We can think here of Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz – or at least nothing of the same poetry. In this sense, *Ereignis* as event draws on the etymology of the term: bringing things into view. After loss – the thought-ful catastrophe of the epoch of technology, the human disaster of genocidal violence against European Jews – what comes into view is *not* plenitude and

multiplicity, but instead the impossibility of the fullness of being, Being, and knowing.

What, then, of the catastrophe of the Middle Passage?

This is the enigma of Glissant's thinking.

The opening pages of *Poetics of Relation* articulate Glissant's transformation of the event, moving from the traumatic character of death and unnamable suffering to the possibilities of thinking and being in the New World context. I am thinking here of the moving descriptions of the abyss, in particular how both the belly of the slave ship and the leaky, cruel boundaries of the Plantation are figured by Glissant as wombs. Painful history gives birth to something. That is the paradox. Through mass death, unspeakable suffering, and the miracle of survival, something is born in the archipelago. "We know ourselves as part and as crowd," Glissant writes, "in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry."⁴ Those pages extend Glissant's prior meditations on Gorée and the sea in *Caribbean Discourse*, an origin story in which he writes:

Off the coast of Senegal, Gorée, the island before the open sea, the first step towards madness.

Then the sea, never seen from the depths of the ship's hold, punctuated by drowned bodies that sowed in its depths explosive seeds of absence.⁵

We see in this passage the complexity of Glissant's thinking about the Middle Passage. The sea is an opening unto madness. Forced migration is catastrophic; the millions dead, the millions who live on in the New World comprise a passage of absolute loss, figured here as the drowned bodies. Walcott's poem "The Sea is History," a title and motif that serves as an epigraph to *Poetics of Relation*, is an archaeology and memory of these drown bodies – "bone soldered by coral to bone, / mosaics / mantled by the benediction of the shark's shadow."⁶ And this loss is total for Glissant, just as Walcott declared at the close of "The Muse of History." Against the paternal name, in the name of the womb abyss of the ship, the shoreline, and the Plantation. That is, the event as total loss, shifting historical and memorial time away from continental origins and toward the shifting wombs that give birth to Caribbeanness as an ontology, epistemology, and aesthetics.

The Middle Passage as fissure, then, is a fissure precisely because it opens thought to the possibilities of a non-atavistic future. In the Caribbean context, this is an important innovation. Glissant's predecessors Césaire and Fanon wrestled with the allure of the past, resolved in Césaire's critical work in terms of the spiritual function of African civilization in diasporic cultural production and in Fanon's work as the future as unprecedented and new. Césaire's embrace of atavistic thinking, his turn toward Africa as a civilizational force, makes space for cultural difference – his 1956 essay "Culture and Colonization" makes the distinction clear – at the very moment the specificity or unicity of cultural difference is subsumed under a general rubric of blackness: Négritude. This pushes Fanon in the opposite direction; while he

acknowledges that Césaire brought a sense of confidence and pride to being black for Caribbean people, Césaire's atavism is ultimately "the great white mirage" (to cite his concluding words to the 1958 essay "West Indians and Africans"). Rather than wander, thirsty, toward the illusory well of an African past, Fanon dreams of a new humanism that is unprecedented, something akin to what Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* called a humanism made to the measure of the world, and not just Europe. But whatever their differences, for Césaire and Fanon the present geography and its immediate past – the Caribbean as such – cannot sustain a liberatory future. This is precisely what motivates so much of Glissant's critical retrieval of the Caribbean past, folded into the present, as the explosive seeds. *Something takes root, producing roots – rhizomatic thought*. Glissant's task, then, lies in the retrieval of the dignity and fecundity of the Caribbean past in order to fold that past into the possibilities borne by, and either flourishing or percolating just below the surface (the explosive seeds), the work of creolization *inside* Caribbean history and memory. The Plantation emerges as a critical concept at precisely this juncture, as a response to Césaire's and Fanon's retreat from the Caribbean lifeworld and its complex, composite meaning.

If Glissant's work returns to the fecundity of pain, then that means turning thinking back to the event of loss and its appropriation of thought – the Middle Passage as death, but also as womb. The Middle Passage as a kind of *Ereignis*. *Poetics of Relation* is for that reason animated by a double mood, paradoxical and unresolvable. On the one hand, the text is melancholic, haunted by the trauma it documents in the opening pages as the three-fold abyss. There is the abyss of departure, of leaving behind roots and the pain of that severing. Then the abyss of arrival at the shoreline, of a present that has no connection to place. And lastly the abyss of beginning again, of the chaotic mixture or hyper-syncretism of the Plantation. On the other hand, *Poetics of Relation* is about afro-Caribbeanness as ecstatic possibility, unburdened by the seductions of atavism and engaged with the pleasures after, in the wake of, a pure break from the past. Saying *yes* to the past is a matter of saying *yes* to pain and beginning at the same time. A double mood. To begin is to rethink the event of the Middle Passage and to reckon creatively with the possibilities that disaster bequeaths to thinking. Recall here Walcott's "strange thanks" to his repudiated fathers: he wants nothing of their names, but, if we can mix "The Muse of History" with his Nobel lecture "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," Walcott wants everything of the fragments and the world-breaking cruelty from which they were produced. The love that reassembles those fragments, as he writes, is stronger than the original vase. This is post-melancholia, for sure, and also after the work of mourning.

And yet, for Glissant, this work after the event – or, perhaps better put, work that keeps the event forever in view – is dedicated to life alongside what he calls the fixity of days and tears. Mixed time, mixed space, mixed affect, mixed effect. Life goes on; the event makes new forms of thinking possible, forms that in the afro-Caribbean context engage and indulge the chaotic mixture of histories and memories. This means thinking historically in mixed affect, which in turn produces mixed

epistemologies, ontologies, and aesthetic practices. Creolization is a response and responsiveness to the event of the Middle Passage and its appropriation of thought and being. What is that appropriation, what is it to live and to think *after*? Let me end here with Glissant's words, closing his 1956 poem "The Indies":

O journey! These forests, these virgin suns, these waves
Are one and the same efflorescence! Our Indies are
Beyond all rage and acclamation, these are left behind on the shore,
Dawn, radiance sailing the wave henceforth
Its Sun, of splendor, inured mystery, O ship,
Rugged calm of the horizon amid an uproar of currents,
And the eternal fixity of days and tears.⁷

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¹ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, trs. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 9.

² Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History," in *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1998), 64.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trs. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 37.

⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trs. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 9.

⁵ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 9.

⁶ Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History," in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (New York: FSG, 1978), 25.

⁷ Édouard Glissant, "The Indies," trs. Jeff Humphries and , in *The Collected Poems of Édouard Glissant* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 100.