

Citing and Siting the Postmodern: Lyotard and the Black Atlantic

In a recent personal conversation, Carlos Amador remarked that Jean-François Lyotard is one of the most misread and under-valued philosophers. I found this an interesting and, at a certain level, perplexing remark. For those of us doing doctoral work in the early-1990s, Lyotard was at the center of poststructuralist theory, working in the same vein as folks like Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, and others to dismantle pretensions of identity, identification, and the avalanche of hegemony that comes with such pretensions.

What is Lyotard's legacy today? Philosophy and critical theory, like all of intellectual life, moves in and out of trends. Generations shift and emerging interests supplant, often without critical engagement or re-engagement, previous theoretical habits and languages. But I am not interested, here, in re-theorizing the importance of Lyotard for contemporary European philosophy or contemporary trends in critical theory. That is a matter for different kinds of specialists. Instead, I am interested in how we might see in Lyotard's work having a complex relationship to what I want to term *the afropostmodern*, a post-Fanonian model of thinking in the afro-Caribbean tradition that conceptually converges with so many of the motifs in Lyotard's work, in particular, his sustained critique of narrative and defense of the irreducibility of the differend - the signature pieces of Lyotard's work as postmodern.

In making this argument, however, I am not interested in using Lyotard's critical vocabulary for the sake of enhancing or elevating afro-Caribbean discourse. It is an intellectual tradition comprised of its own vocabulary and conceptual innovations, so needs no such enhancement or elevation. Indeed, central to the tradition is an argument for the importance of its own vocabulary. Rather, as a comparativist in this essay, I am interested in two aspects of *engaging with* Lyotard from the perspective of the afropostmodern. First, I want to explore how Lyotard's critical vocabulary broadens the resonance of the postmodern *in* the afropostmodern, helping us distinguish what is *afro* about the afropostmodern as well as what is problematic about the notion of *the* postmodern. In other words, the engagement between Lyotard and the afropostmodern helps us see the distinctiveness of the afro- in afropostmodern *and* turns us back to *the* in "the postmodern" with a critical eye, now with a view toward the racialization of the European experience, then conceptualization, of postmodernity. A quiet, yet persistent racial metanarrative sits in the definite article of the phrase "the postmodern." Second, and this is the endgame, so to speak, of my reflections here, understanding the afropostmodern in relation to the European postmodern helps us understand how to *date* or periodize the postmodern, to understand how the afropostmodern is born in the very same moment as European modernity. Understanding this dating of the postmodern underscores the global resonance of the term and its link to the Atlantic world's most enduring violence: the Middle Passage and how it is formed and deformed both the black Americas and white Europe.

So, to begin: how can we situate the afropostmodern?

The history of ideas in the afro-Caribbean tradition moves quickly. This is no doubt in part due to the accelerated sense of cultural production begun in the middle of the twentieth century. The mid-century moment was a moment like no other: independence, anti-colonial struggle, and decolonization. Intellectual, cultural, and political life was explosive, responding to not only a long history and shadow of subjugation, but also revitalized by the ecstatic experience of liberation. What was liberated? How does liberation transform thinking? This is a

matter of theorizing the energy of decolonial thought. And it could not be weightier or more urgent. The sheer enormity of the task of decolonization - the movement toward and articulation of a sense of cultural roots and political independence after centuries of enslavement and colonial domination - introduces a cluster of ideas, principles, and ethico-political debates that are increasingly attuned to the specificity of afro-Caribbean experience, while also negotiating the complex nuances of European, African, Middle Eastern, and indigenous influences on language and thinking. This is profoundly de-centering work, displacing the idea of a single-root and uniform cultural content - a colonial project of uniformity and assimilation - in the name of another logic of intellectual production. What that other logic looks like, what memories and histories it draws upon for orientation and content, is the substance of the tradition and its disputes. And it is important, especially for comparative work, that afro-Caribbean thinkers emerged as decolonial theorists at the very same moment that so much European philosophy was moving toward deep critiques of the thought of the Same, of hegemony, of epistemological and political authoritarianism, and related stuff. Rooted in different experiences, yet similarly oriented as anti-authoritarian, counter-hegemonic or hegemony-neutralizing modes of thought and praxis. In this intersection of *sensibilities* lies interesting points of contact and clarifying difference.

A curiosity: for those trained in the white European intellectual tradition, Frantz Fanon has emerged as a foundational figure of difference and diversification in thinking, theorizing, and understanding the margins of that tradition. It seems to me, in fact, that Caribbean thought, when routed through trends and tendencies in the European tradition, all but begins and ends with Fanon's thought in philosophical circles. Aimé Césaire, and perhaps also Léopold Senghor and Albert Memmi, regularly appear in such taxonomies of European thought and its critical horizons, but, more often than not, those thinkers (and perhaps a few others) function as foils for Fanon's revolutionary thinking and transformation of phenomenology, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. That says something important about the power of Fanon's thinking, that no matter how short his life, his intellectual production remains so utterly transformative that his short life and modest output (if we compare to thinkers with longer lives lived) is massively outsized by his impact and legacy.

But, of course, that is nothing like a proper picture of the Caribbean tradition. Fanon was a global event as a thinker - especially in his afterlife as an icon and foundation piece for postcolonial theory and practice. Even in his moment, however, Fanon was a controversial, disputed figure in an emerging Caribbean tradition; it is always worth noting that he left the Caribbean in the 1950s and, after *Black Skin, White Masks*, moved away from theorizing blackness and toward a more generalized notion of "the colonized." Fanon became a *global*, not *Caribbean*, event. This move is important, because it stands in contrast to, for example, Césaire's commitment to a Caribbean iteration of Négritude, a movement dedicated to the articulation of an African thread across the Black diaspora that dominated the immediate postwar period in Caribbean and black Atlantic theory. Césaire's approach was straightforward: Africa functions as a spirit animating the cultural life of the diaspora, threading cultural difference together with a single vital force and urge.¹ (Négritude's debt to French vitalism and life philosophy is significant.) Alongside that, René Ménil's transformation of French surrealism, attuning it to Caribbean senses of embodiment and landscape, argued for another paradigm, one rooted in the immediacy of experience and a vibrant sense of presence to the particularities of place and world. Against these trends, Fanon, showing the profound and enduring influence of Sartrean existentialism, embraces the capacity of subjectivity to disentangle from the past (via

revolutionary violence at every level) in pursuit of the new - new identities, new senses of the human, and so a new humanism, as the closing pages of *The Wretched of the Earth* puts it. These disputes are in some ways a crystallization of the mid-century moment and its conflicts. In defense of, then repudiation of, and then proposals of radical alternatives to essentialist thinking, the mid-century debate between Césaire, Ménéil, and Fanon take on questions of the body and its relationship with history, time, and the thickness of embodied presence to the world.

Whatever these differences, such positions share a sense of temporality - namely, the compulsion and drive to repudiate the past and redeem the present with a conceptual-existential story about the past. The present is always abject; this is the consequence of centuries of slavery and colonialism, a total project that burrowed the violence of disidentification and dismantling of the self into the deepest recesses of singular and collective subjectivity. This total project was dedicated to the abjection of Black life in the Americas at every level of lived experience and communal, social, and political life. And so antiblackness comes to function as a base structure that informs the very foundations of social, political and cultural being such that no sense of the future can be built on the terms generated in that space. However dissident, however interstitial the formations of community and life, what Négritude, surrealism, and existentialism in the Caribbean agree upon is that there is no foundation for meaning in what we know as the world and the person. Metanarratives, in the sense of ancestral origins (Négritude's atavistic race theory) or a metaphysics of embodied life (afro-Surrealism's sense of landscape) or apocalyptic violence and its temporality (revolutionary existentialism's vision of a pure break), adhere to the mid-century moment precisely because the time of the present has no stories to tell. No stories of redemption. No stories of world-making and meaning. The story of stories, the insertion of a Caribbean sense of history into History, hopes to redeem the past and supplant the present. Revolutionary. Radical. Pulling time up by its roots. All in the work of one metanarrative or another.

This is the tradition's flirtation with the excesses of modernity, without a doubt, but with ecstasy instead of bureaucratic reason - with no small bit of unintended irony. The moment certainly shares a modernist impulse, telling a grand story, a metanarrative in the deepest sense, of how difference and pain is overcome by narratives of race, the senses, and/or revolutionary, anti-colonial messianism. Lyotard's note resonates here in important ways: "the metanarrative of a subject ... guarantees their legitimacy."² What would make Caribbean life legitimate? Worth of living as a form of life? If the past and present are abject and that abjection is total, then only a "metanarrative of a subject" can overcome history and memory for the sake of a legitimated mode of being.

And this is met immediately with a counter-movement.

We can think here of three thinkers in particular - Édouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite - who, by chance, belong to the same generation as Fanon, all having been born within a few years of one another. (Yet another example of how prolific the young Fanon was, and how short his life.) Generations, though, aren't really about numbers, are they? Fanon's indulgence of the metanarrative structure of revolutionary violence, seeing it as telling the biggest and grandest story of History's inversion and sudden, unprecedented form of liberation, turns on a flattening of the cultural and political space of the present. His *pessimism* (inflected though the lens of antiblack racism), as well as his optimism (expressed in messianic visions of

the new, the future), work from one and the same premise: the Caribbean (and perhaps the black Atlantic world more broadly) is too saturated with antiblackness to find liberatory structures in the world formed over the previous five centuries. *What is the Caribbean?* and *Who is a Caribbean?* - these questions animate the tradition from the outset. And those issues are rooted in one of philosophy's most enigmatic questions: What does it mean to begin?

What it means to begin is in many ways the broad Atlantic world's mid-century crisis, whether in the north or south Atlantic world. The legacy of two world wars initiate the same sorts of queries in what becomes the European postmodern, especially the strains of that postmodernism that grow out of Heidegger's reckoning with technology, estrangement from place, and dissociation from language. But legacy of those two wars tell a different story in the colonies. In the colonies, specifically in the Caribbean, Fanon notes³ that the rapid defeat of the French by the German army in June 1940 revealed something crucial about Europe to colonized people: their vulnerability to defeat. Germany's subsequent isolation of French Caribbean islands during the war only furthered this revelation's capacity to debunk racial myths about colonizing power. Witnessing the defeat of France and its submission emboldened anti-colonial movements precisely because of perceived vulnerabilities, and this is felt immediately in the intellectual production coming out of Martinique - in particular with the publication of Césaire's poem *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Césaire's conception of beginning is the poem itself, a response to the torpor and despair of colonial domination. *Notebook* opens with descriptions and evocations of colonial devastation lived on the body. Bodies asleep, bodies unable to move, bodies in despair. Beginning in that despair, out of devastation, drives the tradition's varied approaches to the problem of beginning. The repair model, which commences in the production of metanarratives of race, body, and violence, proceeds from just that: the presupposition that the past bequeaths to the world of the present only, or at least predominately, brokenness. *Notebook* sets the diagnostic stage for Fanon's conception of beginning and the new, Ménélik's turn to the senses and body as sites of radical renewal and revitalization. Things are broken. Liberation is construction and configuration of the new.

But a sense of beginning out of brokenness on the model of repair, a sense of inherent and determinate deficiency, is what produces the modernist (however one processes that term) compulsion to create and embrace metanarratives of atavism, intensification of the senses, or messianic futures that put what is broken back together again. Or for the first time. Reconciliation or conciliation of self to self, self to others, and self to world. And yet, the post-Fanonian shift to the afropostmodern paradigm proposes a very different approach, one that eschews metanarrative and refuses adjudication of the irreconcilable affects, laws, epistemological elements that comprise what we might call the Caribbean *differend*. I have in mind here the opening pages of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, which stand as one of the most profound sustained meditations on the Middle Passage and memory. Glissant outlines three senses of the abyss manifest in forced migration. First, there is the abyss produced in/by the forced departure of from western Africa; boarding the slave ship is the abyss of first loss, the loss of root and knowledge and communicability. Second, there is the abyss of the ocean in the belly of the slave ship, which Glissant evokes in such painful detail: the disorientation of darkness, the endless horizon of the sea, the foul pain of human waste and death in the belly, and of course the countless, nameless victims thrown overboard at the bottom of the Atlantic. Here, Glissant recalls Walcott's stunning poem "The Sea Is History," a sparse but devastating archaeology of the black Americas by way of a topology of the ocean's floor. Third, there is the arrival, the thought of the shoreline on which the abyss of the future opens up, bookended by the passage and its

abyssal pain. The Middle Passage is the first breaking, the first sense of brokenness that is repeated and reproduced in plantation slavery and colonial domination.

This last sense of the abyss, the abyss of arrival, prompts Glissant to theorize the uncomfortable, yet also ecstatic sense of inheritance at the shoreline. The shoreline represents a certain kind of closure of time, clipping, however roughly, the present of island life from the immediate, then ancestral, continental past. It is in that sense a truly radical sense of loss.⁴ And yet, life goes on. Life begins again after catastrophe. What does it mean to begin from and with loss? And what would it mean to begin from and with loss *without* configuring that loss as brokenness? To begin with *fecundity*, thinking with both productivity and melancholic loss, means embracing the paradox of history and memory, the contradiction of social death with vernacular culture and its expressive life, the differend of having been rendered subhuman and creating sublime human worlds. To see the unknowable pain of history as a condition of life itself, of the archipelago that is at once a geographical site and a figure for thinking. Glissant writes:

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 machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another...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.⁵

Further, evoking the slave ship and the gorgeous spectacle of the shimmering sea under sailboats racing just off the shoreline, he adds, with a poet's touch:

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. 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.⁶

We see the work of memory on identity in these passages, crucial work precisely because it puts *honor* at the center of reckoning with the pain of the past and present. It says *yes* to the West Indies as West Indies, which, when set in this broader Caribbean intellectual tradition of reckoning with pain, stands out as a transformation of the tradition because it refuses abjection. Glissant, and the afropostmodern movement of which he is a part, turns toward the story of *this place*, the West Indies, without recursion to metanarratives that might hope to redeem abject space. Such a turn does not deny what Césaire, Ménélik, and Fanon documented as abject space, but instead interrogates the differential and deferring structure of life buried in, yet also at the forefront of, that exact same space. Life goes on *as life*, but without the purity one might want to imagine such a life composes and extends.

How, then, do we begin thinking in this space without recursion to metanarratives and their commitment to redemption stories? Stories of loss invite reconstructive narratives. The afropostmodern turn, however, articulates an orphan narrative that, in a peculiar twist, orphans narrative itself. Consider how Walcott closes his 1974 essay "The Muse of History" with a provocative refusal. He 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.⁷

History, the discursive strategy that would want a narrative of contextualization-as-redemption, inserting a racial story about identity, is rejected by Walcott in the name of *his* story, the story of the archipelago as a form of thinking and geographic site, an orphaned identity and mode of knowing and being. An archipelago, here, that says yes to fragments *against* history and its commitment to stories of legitimation and adjudication. An archipelago in which life is forged in and by pain, but which is also a *gift* - a gesture both gratuitous and excessive generated from the most austere and melancholic history. Walcott continues:

I give the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift.

The wonder of another. Therein lies a relation to alterity, in Walcott and the afropostmodern, that does not reconcile, equivocate, or adjudicate, but instead works from a relation of wonder, of astonishment at life itself, how it persists with obstinacy and fecundity. Wonder is not pleasure alone, however, or even foremost. Walcott's image of pieces of fruit seamed together is important here because the seam is bitterness - accounting for the pain of the embrace of violent origins - and also because it makes a sense of meaning out of contradiction. Violent contradiction made violent because it leaves the differend of what origin asks as differend.

This bitterness of the seam, then, gives affective texture to what we might call the historical-memorial differend - an absolutely critical notion for theorizing the Middle Passage and its transformation of time and space. The European and the African are, in historical memory, contradictions that suspend judgment, not out of mercy or forgiveness, but because the violence of the Middle Passage - initiated in the violence of sale, the violence of purchase - offers no legitimate rule of judgment. Reconciliation *might* be facilitated by either a supervening notion of the human or subordination of one "father" to another. But Walcott (and here is his afropostmodern ontology) rejects a universal, isolating instead the specificity and particularity of the Caribbean as an archipelagic geography of thinking. Fragments without reconciliation or reassembly of the original. "This gathering of broken pieces is the care and pain of the Antilles," Walcott writes,

and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture, those icons and sacred vessels taken for granted in their ancestral places. Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.⁸

This figure of thinking intervenes, methodologically, in the question of paternity when Walcott refuses the verticality of relation; to choose the white father would be to choose colonial memory, to choose the African father would be to choose racial essentialism along the lines of Négritude. Walcott, in the afropostmodern gesture, restores with what he calls “love”⁹ and always without reference to the original, only and always with reference to the bricolage and eclecticism of making life out of fragments.

What, then, can be told as a story - that is, how to tell it - without constant reference to History, without metanarrative? It means beginning work without structures of legitimation, without regimes of measure and correction that, in their coercive and curative work, (want to) redeem spaces of fragmentation.

The afropostmodern is oriented by and comprised of fragment work and fragment workers, an aesthetics and epistemology that reflects the work of the *djobber* in the Caribbean context. Glissant summarizes *djob* as “a method of cartage or transport and, in the wider sense, an ‘odd job’ that is free form and created afresh each day,”¹⁰ a life and vernacular culture built up around the figure documented in Patrick Chamoiseau’s compelling text *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*. If the *djobber* works odd jobs, is multi-skilled and capable of shifting and moving from demand to demand, responsive with creative and technical knowledge to changing modes of labor, then the work of the afropostmodern enact precisely that logic in the work of memory and history. Walcott theorizes this refusal of paternity in terms of fragmentation. Fragments, on the model of something like Négritude and its critics, including Fanon, are signs of loss and fracture, which in turns leads to the compulsion to repair. What is repair in this context? This question shifts and determines so much of afro-Caribbean thought.

For Négritude, especially Césaire’s iteration of it, the restorative power of Africa as a civilizational *spirit* - a conceptual move indebted to French vitalism and life philosophy - is critical for overcoming the estrangement from self and world rooted in pain, fragmentation, and the melancholy of centuries of subjugation. This imperative to think *against* fragments informs Fanon’s derisive comments on vernacular speech (pidgin, creole) and culture (jazz, blues), comments that draw on a conception of pessimism as fundamental ontology and reflect a hostility toward everyday life *as life*. Rather than seeing vernacular culture and expressive life as signs of an alternative mode of being, one in the interstices of colonial abjection, Césaire and Fanon see only brokenness and construct metanarratives of redemption from past or future. Whatever the differences, both thinkers imagine apocalypse and messianic forces as preconditions of any sense of repaired life.¹¹

But there is another way of telling stories.

We locate story in the formation of identity, giving texture and contour and place. If we think with fragments, prioritizing the *djobber*’s sense of becoming rather than the calcification of being or reassembly of brokenness, then we have to conceive story on a different model. Indeed, one of the central arguments of Glissant’s work in the 1990s is that the work of epic and myth has traditionally been anti-fragment labor, making difference subsume itself under identity. Reassembly or assembly that negates difference and differentiation. The way *Aeneid* tells a story that unites Rome under a myth of beginning, rendering Mediterranean difference secondary to Romanness as such or, better, an outright illusion. Africa played this role in Négritude, as we have seen, putting Caribbean difference under the rubric of a broader

civilization and diasporic identity. In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant casts epic and myth as arguments for *filiation*, a sense of link between singularities or diffuse and differentiated cultural groups and a broader identity, often a metaphorical or literal blood identity, erasing forms of alterity and post-dialectical remainder in the name of the Father, of irreducible relationship. This is how “the West,” a project not a place, establishes its identity through an epic tale of ancient Greek origins, democracy, and then ultimately an ethno-religious region we’ve come to call “the continent.” But that is a projection. Epics and myths *project*, and in that projection legitimate regimes of knowledge and identification. Glissant writes:

In the Western world the hidden cause (the consequence) of both Myth and Epic is filiation, its work setting out upon the fixed linearity of time, always toward a projection, a project.¹²

Linearity is crucial here because the arrow of time, when it flies straight, sets boundaries and lines of descent that are filial in origin and intent. The stuff of fantasy. The stuff of the most catastrophic violence. Glissant writes, further:

As Mediterranean myths tell us, thinking about One is not thinking about All. These myths express communities, each one innocently transparent for self and threateningly opaque for the other...Either the other is assimilated, or else it is annihilated. That is the whole principle of generalization and its entire process.¹³

Glissant’s evocation of annihilation is intentional and ought to evoke the genocidal impulse of political cultures rooted in epic stories. Indeed, in his *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, published just a handful of years after *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant will link the metanarrative function of myth and epic and its capacity to adjudicate the differend of social and political life, linked to the fantasy of single-rootedness, to the genocidal impulse and reality, citing both the Shoah and the Rwandan genocide as examples. What replaces these stories is fragment work, partial stories, stories of becoming, stories that dis-assemble rather than reassemble. Glissant’s poetry often does exactly this, returning again and again to the Caribbean shoreline to contemplate the convergence of the sublimity of its beauty with the negative sublime of its painful memory. This is a site of honor, but an honor that is solemn and ecstatic at the same time; neither affect overcomes the other, no third affect or triumphal narrative intervenes to re-tell and re-tool the contradictions of pain and beauty.

Afropostmodern because, attuned to the specificity of black experience in the Americas, it takes on the fragments without mythic and epic reassembly of fragments.

Afropostmodern because, attuned to the specificity of black experience in the Americas, it tells multiple stories without anxiety about difference and becoming.

Afropostmodern because, attuned to the specificity of black experience in the Americas, it refuses metanarrative in the name of a vertical proliferation of expressive life.

Orphan narratives have no recursion to parentage. Orphan narratives indulge the differend of affective life *after* loss and *after* the setting of roots, always plural, always proliferating, always becoming and never being.

The Middle Passage as beginning and the site of the afropostmodern.

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Whence, then, the postmodern?

I think there is a persistent and not altogether inaccurate story of the postmodern that dates it simultaneously to Heidegger's attack on humanism and May 1968 in France. This dating makes sense. Heidegger critique of humanism came at a time of generalized crisis in Europe following two wars in which so many millions of people were killed and the category European Jew was reduced to a trace, at most, of its former meaning. Mass killing and genocide change the way a place thinks of itself. Always. Or it should. And the near dismantling of the bureaucratic, capitalist state in May 1968 signaled an emerging dismantling of identity and authority - at least in terms of values and aspirations - that fundamentally contested modernist notions of subject and state. That is, the postmodern emerges in Europe as a response to a mid-century crisis. A whole cluster of post-war thinkers reckon with Europe's internal violence, its terrifying reproduction of anonymity, sameness, and casual embrace of both spectacular and everyday violence, offering critiques that take alterity and its disruptive, sometimes ethical, force seriously.

The postmodern, in this account, emerges as a break with modernity and its pretenses, as well as the values and aspirations of modernity itself. If Adorno and Horkheimer were right in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, then European modernity, for all its humanist promises, was elemental in the production of machineries of death. The war machine. The capitalist machine. The machine of genocide. So much death, and the ethical impulses of the postmodern are at least in part, if not near wholly, dedicated to contesting the machinery of death. This is no small bit of what animates Lyotard's *Heidegger and 'the Jews,'* a text dedicated to the critical function of the social-political-cultural other in establishing modernity's dream of fulfillment and development - always without boundaries, without being subjected to time. Mid-century Europe's reckoning with the violence of modernity, how the bureaucratic state is excessive and the mechanization of death and destruction are centerpieces rather than after-effects of modernity, generates the crisis to which the postmodern is a counter-position and from which it was generated as an ethical-political imperative.

But from where did modernity come? And what is that origin to the afropostmodern?

There is the European story of its own modern origins, tracing modernity back to certain innovations in philosophy - disputes between rationalists and empiricists that generate new models of reasoning and Enlightenment visions of the human person - and any cluster of scientific, political, and aesthetic revolutions that displace the enchanted world with a calculable universe. The mathematization of everyday life. The destiny promised by Euclid, fulfilled in Newtonian physics and all of its companion processes and modes of thought: bureaucracy, calculative reason, formalization of the material world. And yet there is another story to be told, one reconstructed from the colonies by Enrique Dussel, in which modernity is born, not in a self-affecting intellectual movement in Europe, but in a bureaucratic crisis.¹⁴ That crisis is begun when Bartolomé de Las Casas convinces the Spanish powers to free enslaved indigenous people in the Americas, a demand made because slaves had converted to Christianity in greater and greater numbers. Whatever its theological significance and political impact on indigenous life and its fate, it creates, for European powers, a managerial crisis: how can profit

be maximized in the colonies if labor must be contracted for some sort of compensation? How can the labor force be organized and set to work with maximum profit as the outcome. A bureaucratic crisis.

The response is the origin of the Atlantic slave trade as we know it. If indigenous people could not be enslaved, then Africans would take their place. From this, genocide of indigenous Caribbean people and resettlement of the archipelago through forced migration follows in full force, a project fully realized. The Caribbean as the locus of the black Americas becomes a historical reality and, with that reality, comes the cluster of memories that make the hemisphere. Indeed, the very term "Americas" is a synonym for conquest and slavery. Modernity, Dussel argues, comes out of this transformation of the hemisphere because the combination of shocking greed with a diminished free labor source demands of reason just what reason becomes in modernity: calculating, bureaucratic, anonymous. Alongside that birth of modernity in a bureaucratic crisis is the origins of the black Americas: the Middle Passage. The two are inseparable in time, transformative of space, and specters of one another in each place - Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the Atlantic as sea, passage, death, memory. A graveyard of goodness. The birth of two paradigms of thought.

What I think this story from the colonies tells us is that the afropostmodern is simultaneous with the birth of European modernity. That is, when Europe responds to the emancipation of indigenous slaves with an intensification of transport of enslaved Africans to the Americas under a new rubric. At the opening of the sixteenth century, Iberian enslaving was bound by a simple condition: the enslaved, if they were to be taken to the Americas, must have been born under the domain of Christianity - converted, brought into the world, but under Christian dominion. But Charles V changes everything with a document in 1518 declaring that enslaved Africans may be taken from Sao Tomé and the Cape Verde Islands to the New World *without* the restraints of Christian dominion, birth, and re-birth. This changes everything because it initiates, in the fullest sense that we know it, the Middle Passage: the transport of millions of Africans from the coast of Africa to the archipelago, beginning with Hispanola and then of course to all of the islands and so many sites on the continent. If the afropostmodern is defined by fragment work, reckoning with the differend of beauty and pain, and an engagement with radical becoming without recursion to Being, then 1518 marks the inception of the conditions of that work - something intensified when the bureaucratic crisis initiated by Las Casas comes to its peak in 1542. Charles V prepared the terms for mass forced migration, the emancipation of indigenous slaves intensified and actualized that migration and the afropostmodern emerges in the very same moment as European modernity.

And if we return to Lyotard, this site of modernity/postmodernity offers a twist on the story of the postmodern and the differend, shifting from the consequences of Lyotard's conceptions, in which anti-state and anti-imperial agitation works against the violence of modernity in our moment, and toward a notion of the afropostmodern as an originary interruption, disruption, and contestation of modernity's violence *in the very moment of its inception*. The question, then, is not simply how postmodern strategies mitigate and disrupt conventional forms of violence, but also how dating or periodizing the postmodern in the moment of modernity's emergence reveals an alternative mode of thought in the shadows of Europe's worst excess. Further, when we see this sort of emergence-at-origin, we catch sight of something utterly compelling and revolutionary: the creation of worlds-becoming that work *with* fragments, work *without* strategies of legitimation, and therefore work without what Lyotard

calls the fantasied “universal genre of discourse” that regulates difference. I am thinking here of the opening pages of *The Differend* in which Lyotard sets out the problem:

Given 1) the impossibility of avoiding conflicts (the impossibility of indifference) and 2) the absence of a universal genre of discourse to regulate them (or, if you prefer, the inevitable partiality of the judge): to find, if not what can legitimate judgement (the ‘good’ linkage), then at least how to save the honor of thinking.¹⁵

Thinking becomes, in the afropostmodern, a thinking of becoming - but always a becoming without reference to a possible being that stabilizes. Glissant, for that reason, characterizes Relation, his term for afropostmodern thinking, as rhizomatic and (on the model of theoretical physics) chaotic. Nomadic without the desire to set up a final or single root. A Deleuzian term, but one adopted in response to the demands of thinking in the wake of the failure of metanarratives of race, origin, or political principles to negotiate and neutralize contradiction, paradox - the threats to the modern order and its authoritarian impulses.

A final note.

Where does this all leave us? No small question. Indeed, this is always the question asked back to the postmodern, whether the European postmodern or the afropostmodern, precisely because the delegitimation of knowledge through the dismantling of metanarrative leaves conventional, habitual forms of knowing, being, and doing without real weight. But those forms of knowing, being, and doing were always constructs in service of a particular vision of political order and cultural hegemony. The emergence of the European postmodern had exactly this in view when the deconstructive work of alterity did its work in readings of foundational texts from the tradition, as well as direct interventions against calcified traditions and exercises of power. The afropostmodern has a different temporality, however, dating itself back to the origins of European modernity and emerging as a consequence of forced migration and enslavement, rather than as a refusal of a given social order. Yet, and this is key, the afropostmodern was also a source of great anxiety for mid-century black Atlantic thinkers; vernacular culture and expressive life - creole, pidgin, other forms of everyday life - were not deemed abject because of an inherent character, but because what the mid-century moment inherited from European (and perhaps also African) traditions was a compulsion to tell a story of history in order to insert that story into History. The afropostmodern corrects course and sees, as Walcott put it, the *gift* that accompanied unspeakable pain and suffering. Whereas the European postmodern is generated as a critique and intervention of a given order, the afropostmodern turns to the everydayness of resistance and world making and away from aspirations to mimic the cultural excesses of modernity.

But what makes both moves so provocative, however different their orientation and intellectual origins, is a shared commitment to contest and refuse authoritarianism even at the level of everyday life. These forms of micro-resistance and dissent are no small matters. While they do not have the grandeur of revolutionary and messianic rhetoric, micro-resistance, especially when it permeates the entirety of world-making and its pleasures, reminds us of the ecstasy of everyday life, of community and solitude, and so the work of unsettled life on thinking, embodiment, language, and cultural production. Heidegger was right: ours is an epoch of Enframing in which everything is flattened for the sake of forms of uniformity, sameness, and susceptibility to calculation. What it means to live under those conditions, to resist but also

thrive - survival is never enough - is something opened by the European postmodern. And in that opening, when we see it in relation to the afropostmodern, we are reminded that fragments, chaos, and becoming might bequeath something more than remnants of life. In fact, they bequeath possibility itself. Open, unprecedented, unresolved. We should honor what that gives to thinking

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¹ See, Aimé Césaire, "Culture and Colonization," trs. Brent Edwards, *Social Text* 103, vol. 28, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 127-144.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trs. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 19), 35.

³ See Fanon's recounting of this dynamic in "West Indians and Africans," in *Toward the African Revolution*, trs. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 17-28.

⁴ Documenting Glissant's sense of loss is the focus of the first two chapters of my *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trs. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 9.

⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 8-9.

⁷ Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History," in *What the Twilight Says* (New York: FSG, 1999), 64.

⁸ Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says*, op. cit., 69.

⁹ See, Walcott, "The Antilles," where he famously writes: "Break a vase and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than the love that took its symmetry for granted when it was whole...the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars." (69)

¹⁰ Édouard Glissant, "Foreword" to Patrick Chamoiseau, *Chronicle of the Seven Sorrows*, trs. Linda Coverdale (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2003), vii.

¹¹ I elaborate this sense of apocalypse in "Césaire's Apocalyptic Word," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115, no. 3 (2016): 567-584.

¹² Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 47.

¹³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 49.

¹⁴ Enrique Dussel, "The 'World-System': Europe as 'Center' and Its 'Periphery' Beyond Eurocentrism," ed. Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 53-83.

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trs. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), xii.