

John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019)

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Glissant and the Middle Passage is a unique book. With the exception of Sam Coombes's recent book *Edouard Glissant: A Poetics of Resistance* (2018), which focuses mostly on Glissant's latter philosophical thought, the majority of the monographs in English that have theorized Glissant's politics and aesthetics have focused on his fiction, with only brief mentions of his collections of essays, manifestos, and theoretical works (cf. Britton 1999; Bongie 1998, 2008; Dash 1995; and Wiedorn 2017). These books constitute important and influential bodies of work, and they undoubtedly present Glissant's thought as philosophically relevant, but there is a marked absence in Glissant studies of readings that address his more theoretical works philosophically.¹ John Drabinski locates his book precisely at the heart of this gap by dealing with what is, in my opinion, the source of this critical absence: a reluctance to put Glissant's thought in conversation with philosophers, philosophical approaches, and a tradition of language and concepts, but also a reluctance on the part of the philosophical discipline to take seriously Glissant's thought. *Glissant and the Middle Passage* is an example of this much-needed conversation, offered with a profoundness, acuteness, and sensibility attuned to Glissant's careful but painful reflections on the memory and history of the transatlantic slave trade and the constitutions of the creole and Afro-diasporic populations in the Americas. Drabinski's book is a unique approach to Caribbean thought that deserves to be widely read, discussed, and celebrated.

Glissant and the Middle Passage is also a great achievement in another sense. Drabinski could have taken the route of offering an introduction to Glissant's philosophy to English-speaking audiences, taking a sort of first step towards addressing the scholarly gap mentioned above. The book, however, does not do this. It neither gives us an overarching or introductory approach to themes in Glissant's philosophy, nor to his theoretical texts. It decides instead to engage some of them as already taking place within a *particular* tradition of philosophical thought.

Drabinski's book provides a beautiful, compelling account not merely of Glissant's philosophy, or of Glissant as a philosopher, but particularly, of how his thought intervenes in philosophical thinking when the latter is challenged by the concrete, Caribbean demands of memory, history, and identity related to the Middle Passage. As such, this book already enacts what Glissant's philosophy calls for, namely, a shift in the geography and biography of reason and knowledge (following the formulation of Walter D. Mignolo and others [Mignolo 2005: 119, 130]). "The notion of a geography of reason," writes Drabinski, "posits the necessity of specificity in any account of thinking, rooting, as it were, the meaning of intellectual work and reflection in a specific place. Place, that is, in the sense of the weave of space and time infused with historical experience—historical experience thought, not as such, but always by these people, in this site, with this sense of language and in this element of transmission" (11–12).

One of these shifts enacted in the book, perhaps the most important, has to do with the notion of *beginning*, and how the Middle Passage (as beginning) transforms this very notion. The Caribbean specifically demands a form of beginning located at an arrival. "What does it mean to have survived drown memory and, after that drowning, after that trauma, to have met the obstinacy of the future? That is, what does it mean to have arrived at the shoreline, then said yes to life on the Plantation?" (73). Glissant's image of the abyss, as presented in the opening pages of *Poetics of Relation*, dislocates any sense of beginning. Even though Glissant's explicit treatment of the abyss is short and remains mostly an evocation, Drabinski convincingly weaves the most important motives of his book, indeed those of Glissant's meditation on history, memory, and identity, around a careful interpretation of this image. The beginning of chapter 2 offers a brief summary of this interpretation: "Nothing is the same after the Middle Passage. It has no precedent. It only precedes. . . . Glissant's account of the past insists on irretrievable loss, and that sense of loss fundamentally alters the language of beginning. The abyss of the past is absolute. . . . The drowning of memory is absolute: the sea is history, and what unifies is what is sub-marine" (62).

I will come back to this notion of the abyss as absolute, as only preceding. For now, it is important to note that Drabinski's interpretation of the abyss as absolute does not entail a conception of Caribbean thinking as isolated, that is, as torn apart from other regions of the world. The greatest insight of the book, to my mind, is precisely how to conceive the specific spatial and temporal locations of Glissant's thought *between* Europe and the Americas. The "abyssal beginning," in this account, multiplies and explodes relations, traces, and connections, and expands thought to the whole-world.² As such, the Caribbean is not shown as a third or fourth space, added to Europe, America, and Africa, but as a mode of thought and transformation of reality: creolization is precisely this *between* opened by a new approach to beginnings.

There is, however, a certain sense of priority, both temporal and logical, involved in Drabinski's approach to this "between." In the two opening sentences of his Introduction Drabinski writes: "In the pages that follow I pursue a single question: What does the work of Édouard Glissant tell us about the relationship between philosophical thinking and the history and memory of the Middle Passage? That is, how does the historical experience of the New World alter conceptions of knowing, being, creating, and acting?" (1). I am interested in the sense of the word "alter" in this quote; it implies, and presupposes, the existence of a thought that precedes the "historical experience" of the Middle Passage. Three pages later, this same idea of altering is echoed: "The archipelago, in Glissant's hands, . . . transfigures so much of *how we think* about history, memory, and beginning" (4; my emphasis). Who is this "we" that Glissant's philosophy would transform? Is it not perhaps rather than a "we," read in general, a particular tradition of thinking? How is the thought of *between* approached in the book? Decisively, Drabinski's *between* is not neutral, it could not be, as if the irruption of Caribbean history challenged the whole world equally, at the same time, at the same speed, or in all directions. The direction of transformation according to the book, what seems to be mostly altered, is a particular, European tradition of twentieth-century thought that does not precede the historical experience of the New World but that, perhaps, has not been able to listen to it yet.³

The path of thought for the first three chapters of *Glissant and the Middle Passage* attest to this directionality of the altering. Drabinski approaches Glissant through questions elaborated mostly in discussion with Walter Benjamin's thoughts on history and with French poststructuralism. With the important exception of Derek Walcott, the first half of the book does not engage in a detailed discussion of the Caribbean theoretical and literary frameworks within which Glissant writes and thinks. *Négritude*, for example, rather than being analyzed in detail in the book, is assumed as a counterpart to Glissant's thought, acknowledging the crucial role of this idea in the development of creolization (21, 46, 58). On the other hand, Benjamin's 1939 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is carefully examined, presented in the context of Theodor Adorno's challenge to write after (and around) Auschwitz and Paul Celan's imperative to continue after the world's end. The book's disposition to address a particular tradition of European thought begins in the Introduction, where Glissant's thought is shown as relevant within a tradition of thought presented mostly around Martin Heidegger's philosophy of history.

To be sure, Drabinski's analysis points to an already transgressive thought in the European tradition, one that challenges many of the assumptions of modern philosophy, and does so in a convincing and original way. Also, the kind of conception of history challenged and altered by the Middle Passage would be one that, in a way, goes beyond Glissant himself, in challenging a linear, univocal, progressive

development of reason—indeed, one of the direct targets of Glissant’s philosophy of history. Furthermore, Drabinski’s interpretation of Benjamin’s “Theses” shows a remarkable novelty and creativity in analyzing a text around which so much has been said already. Yet, the decision to begin with a twentieth-century European tradition deserves discussion. According to the formulation of the Introduction, it seems that the “how we think,” what would be “altered by” the Middle Passage, is exclusively identified with Benjamin, Heidegger, and Poststructuralism. But why begin here? Would it be possible to begin from, and with, a different canon, a different set of philosophical figures, from a different region of the world?

Chapter 5 suggests a way to respond to these questions. It thus offers a key, I believe, to how this book should be read: it is necessary to begin with a European thinking in order to show the historical and geographical limitations of the European thought and thus the necessity to begin otherwise—in this case, from the Middle Passage. The main example of this necessity in the development of the chapter is Heidegger’s account of *Poiesis* and how it is not, and cannot be, a thought on creolization. Responding to the traditional criticism of Heidegger’s philosophy as Eurocentric, Drabinski writes: “At the crossroads of history and memory, Eurocentrism then becomes something quite different from mere ideological critique. Rather, and alternatively, Eurocentrism’s positivity directs us back to the geography of reason, locating historical experience in a place, which means that the intellectual functions as a diagnostic or even productive response to crisis and loss in *this* landscape” (189). The crisis and loss that Heidegger responds to is not, can never be, abyssal: it is a loss of something that has been, and that now is not. The abyssal beginning, on the other hand, is not an absence; it does not respond to the withdrawal of something, nor to the disruption of a continuum.

Understood then not as critique, but as locating the task in a particular place and showing what thinking from a particular place means (its beginning, its limitations, its untranslatable characteristics), Eurocentrism is presented by Drabinski as operating at the same level of another centrism, another remembering, another beginning: Antillanity, or Caribbeanness. And this is how I read the movement at the heart of *Glissant and the Middle Passage*. A move from Eurocentrism to Caribbeanness would be thus performed in chapters 4 and 5, where the demands of a Caribbean geography of reason are considered not in their irruption into a certain European philosophical tradition, but in the midst of a different tradition of thought (Aimé Césaire, George Lamming, Frantz Fanon, among others) and, more importantly, as a different source for it.

While I appreciate this shift in the development of the book, one that I read as enacting a shift in the geography of reason, I would question the sense of priority that transpires in the book considered as a whole. If we follow the opening sentences of the book, and the development of its first half, there is an assumption of the preexistence of a tradition that the Middle Passage (in the hands of

Glissant) would force us to reconsider. Moreover, it suggests that the scope of the book, its potential readers, participate of a “we” that is identified with this tradition. This is the conscious beginning of this project. I wonder, however, if we can think of a different beginning, and particularly, if we can think of the move from Eurocentrism to Caribbeanness as the most promissory when reading Glissant.

First of all, two of the most important senses in which “Eurocentrism” is used as a form of criticism highlight how it silences and appropriates other forms of living and thinking, and how the role of colonialism and colonality in that same creative positivity (*poiesis*) is neglected and even erased. In this sense, Caribbeanness would not merely “bring *poiesis* into a different focus, placing different demands on thinking” when facing Eurocentrism, but would radically challenge the demands of this part of the world when taken itself as the whole world (190). If we accept the conclusion of decolonial thought, according to which Europe and modernity have not been constructed in isolation from the rest of the world, but rather in the process of the development of colonality (extractivism, exploitation, subjugation, confinement and their respective erasures), then Caribbeanness demands a critique of Eurocentrism. This, of course, does not mean refusing to read the European tradition, nor erasing it from the history of philosophy, but it certainly demands putting into question its temporal and logical preeminence.

Second, what if “what we think” is not necessarily transformed by the Middle Passage (the premise of the book), but is already informed and constituted by it? What if there are other beginnings that we can link to the Middle Passage, and that take perhaps the abyssal beginning as non-absolute, as not merely preceding? Drabinski’s reading of the image of the abyss is clear enough in its suggestion that all memory is drowned in the ocean, and I agree that this is a largely accurate reading of Glissant’s theoretical approach to the Middle Passage.⁴ However, Glissant’s fiction offers a very different picture when it is put in connection with the possibility of other, parallel beginnings. Both Africa and the first populations of the islands constitute beginnings, inseparable from the abyss of the Middle Passage, but not absolute. Taking some of these possibilities seriously, as Glissant does in his essays, fiction, and poetry, would put into question the Middle Passage as a disruption of “what we think,” because they already inform a Caribbean thought that begins otherwise.

One example of this thought, not disrupted by the Middle passage but informed by it, would be given by Glissant’s notion of *lantillanité* (Caribbeanness or Antillanité), which Drabinski treats in length in chapter 5. In Drabinski’s analysis, it seems that the main focus in Glissant’s work is on the role of the Caribbean intellectual. As I have shown elsewhere, however, this emphasis misses the fact that *lantillanité* is the irresolvable tension between an intellectual dream and the lived experience of the Caribbean people (Gualdrón Ramírez 2020: 147–50).⁵ Drabinski mentions this distinction between the intellectual and their community, but does

not show it as existing in tension (209–11). Ultimately, the emphasis is put on how the intellectual behaves with respect to their community in the figure of the *vernacular intellectual*. There is, however, a whole other sense of *lantillanité* that is crucial in Glissant's analysis and that is already marked, not disrupted, by the arrival as abyssal beginning, by a condition of openness toward openness lived in the archipelago: "The distant, uncertain openness [*ouverture*] of the Caribbean is nonetheless capable of carrying forward our people to self-renewal and of providing them with renewed ambition, by making them possess their world and their lived experience (wherein *lantillanité* is present) and by making them fall into step with those who also share the same space (this too is implied in *lantillanité*)" (Glissant 1999: 223–24; translation modified). This openness, I claim, is a condition for the survival of the Middle Passage, for the beginning as arrival.

This different notion of *lantillanité* posits other beginnings, and thus different "betweens" constituted by the Caribbean and the Middle Passage: between Africa and Latin America, between the US and the "other America," between Abya Yala and Aztlán, between the archipelago and the continent. With this outstanding work, *Glissant and the Middle Passage*, Drabinski has given us a *beginning* for addressing the questions around Glissant's philosophy as a *between*. I hope many more will follow.

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NOTES

1. It is worth noting that the distinction between genres is in general difficult to maintain in relation to Glissant's works. As I show in what follows, one way to answer the questions about what reading *philosophically* means is to put a thought in conversation with a philosophical tradition.
2. "Whole-world" (*Tout-monde*) is precisely one of the most important concepts in the latter part of Glissant's thought. Drabinski uses this concept as the starting point of his reflection, reading it "backward to and through [Glissant's] notion of Caribbeanness" (ix). With this move, Drabinski responds to the controversy around the supposedly apolitical character of Glissant's late thought (cf. Hallward 2002 and Bongie 2008), offering a reading of aesthetics as necessarily linked to forms of the political through the notion of opacity (21, 220). This is a novel interpretation on the part of Drabinski that demands a larger response, elsewhere.
3. For Drabinski, "Glissant's critical, creolizing, and fundamentally transformative engagement with the central motifs of European philosophy—a transformation that overturns and confounds notions of center and periphery, of influence and cultural

- contact—critically situates his work at the heart of contemporary philosophizing in Europe and the Americas” (1–2).
4. I find Drabinski’s reconstruction of Glissant’s ultimate criticism of marronage as a model of liberation very compelling, in particular its contraposition to the resistance in the ruins of the plantation as a new beginning after the abyss (chapter 2).
 5. “Antillanity, an intellectual dream, lived at the same time in a subterranean way by our peoples” (Glissant 1999: 139; translation modified).

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