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## On the Fecundity of Small Places

JOHN E. DRABINSKI

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

—Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

Patrick Chamoiseau's *Chemin-d'école* (*School Days*) tells a long story about the persistence of colonial models of education in the postcolonial state, a story told with the kind of charm and anarchy you get with a child as protagonist. His depiction of Caribbean childhood is its own matter, but what always strikes me about *Chemin-d'école* is how the playfulness of the boy and his antagonist-compatriot Big BellyButton is interrupted at the beginning of the novel with an evocation of deepest violence. The boy learns French, which means he learns to speak and write French but, more importantly, to conceive his *name* in French. A name is a special thing. Our names attach to our singularity, denoting the substance of our bodies and ephemera of the intellect with a unique marker that also inflates the sign with existential, memorial, and historical meaning. To inherit a family name, to create a name, to embed a name in cultural history—naming introduces us to a world while also carving out a space that is ours and ours alone.

So when the boy learns his name in French, which means he renames himself *out of* Creole and *into* French, he learns something about the condition of his own nameability. And therefore, the necessity of writing his Creole name. Everything is at stake in the intersection of writing and the name. "He saw himself there, captured whole within a chalk mark," Chamoiseau writes. The boy "began to copy out his first name a thousand times, in order to proliferate and avoid genocide. . . . Discovery: he held the chalk with his entire hand (either one), *like a dagger*."<sup>1</sup> Everything is at stake in writing,

everything is at stake in the name. It is the condition of fecundity. In fecundity, there may be reproduction of hegemony. Or there may be its reversal in revolutionary action. But there is also fecundity as the alleviation of hegemony *as such*. This fecundity, I argue below, comprises a movement to small places and away from the spectral power of the world as *the whole world*, movement toward and toward again *this world of ours*. The small place shines. The small place needs writing. Writing like a dagger—an instrument of carving deep signs, as well as an instrument of defense.

One of the more provocative aspects of Frantz Fanon's work comes in the early pages of the opening chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* in which he theorizes the interlacing of language, thought, and colonial power.<sup>2</sup> In terms of its life in the political sphere, but also in scholarship on his work, Fanon's legacy has largely been tied to his descriptions and prescriptions in *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>3</sup> We can think here of the links drawn in that text between violence, pathology, liberation, nation making and unmaking and the future as a "new humanism" and how Fanon's notion resonated across the rapidly decolonizing global south (and still does). But the opening pages of *Black Skin, White Masks* take on a different philosophical task. Fanon there articulates the problem of language in ways that seem irrevocably pessimistic. To speak, he argues, is to adopt the colonizer's language, and to adopt that language is, further, to adopt an entire world. Language is thought, thought is self. To colonize subjugated subjects, the colonizer installs the colonial language in thinking, being, and knowing. A total project. This is Fanon's enduringly profound insight into the intimacy of colonial, racialized violence.

Now, on the one hand, Fanon is merely picking up on trends in mid-century European thought—namely, Martin Heidegger and the horizon of existential hermeneutics he puts into motion—and with some modifications of register and repurposing that trend to illuminate a sense of anti-colonial situatedness. Language and world are inseparable, and this has profound consequences for the oppressed and the colonized. On the other hand, Fanon is completely rewriting that hermeneutics of language and world under the rubric of what has come to be called Afropessimism, except that, rather than speculations about libidinal economies of race and vague gestures toward ontology, he routes desire, embodiment, being, and knowing through the inextricable link between word and thought. An entire ontology, epistemology, and aesthetics flow from this simple claim concerning the intimacy of language and thought to colonial domination, but it also remains the unanswered question at the heart of Fanon's work: How does one write against colonialism inside the language of the colonizer? That is,

how does Fanon answer himself? The suffocating character of Fanon's epistemology and ontology, which also informs his early aesthetics and cultural theory, makes it hard to breathe as a thinker. That lack of breath is the condition of revolutionary consciousness and praxis in *The Wretched of the Earth*. But it is also the condition of his apocalyptic thinking. Is there a robust and legitimate form of life at work *in the midst* of colonial domination? And where does that life find voice and perform the labor of self-expression and collective expression? For surely the dominated live. Social death is never total. Or is it?

There is no real answer in Fanon's early texts. But that is not my point here. Rather, I begin with this Fanonian motif because it underscores an important theme that emerges out of the post-Fanon black Atlantic intellectual tradition: how writing is an act against genocide, how we can see negotiations over vernacular culture and language, precolonial practices, and transformative approaches to a broken world confront Fanon's problematic and chart a path (or paths) out. The total project of colonial domination—siting that domination in language, thought, and its possibilities—poses the terms of liberation, and therefore a robust and vibrant site for the study of Black life, in ways Fanon never could have expected. His aversion and outright hostility to vernacular forms of life and culture conceal intensive kinds of being in the very same location as kinds of social death and other fatal anti-Black practices.

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Are the socially dead devoid of life? Or, what is the social of social death?

Let me restart my reflections here with three moments in the Black intellectual tradition. First, an early essay by W.E.B. Du Bois titled "The Conservation of Races"; second, the closing remark to Aimé Césaire's essay "Culture and Colonization"; and third, the closing moment and logic of Fanon's final work *The Wretched of the Earth*. These three moments underscore the key role played by what I call, following Césaire, the world stage and its cultural and political significance in thinking Black liberation. Further, too, this notion of the world stage is crucial for conceiving the inspirations, aspirations, and imperatives of the study of Black life—that is, of theorizing theory in Africana theory.

Du Bois's 1897 essay "The Conservation of Races" is an important precursor to his more familiar works. Written barely three decades after emancipation and just a handful of years before *Souls of Black Folk*,<sup>4</sup> Du Bois's essay holds two key questions in view: what is meant by "race" and what ought "the Negro race" imagine as a future? These are of course questions that dominate Du Bois's work across his long career, but "The Conservation

of Races” is particularly direct, programmatic, and declarative, proceeding from the simple observation that slavery and colonialism have stunted racial cultural growth and political progress. But neither cultural growth nor political progress are instantly restored at the moment of emancipation, and the task of growth and progress lies not in the inversion of white consciousness but in the expansion of Black cultural production and effort. This is also not a matter of community or diasporic concern alone. Rather, Du Bois claims, one needs to configure the future of the race in relation to the progress and achievements of companion racial groups. He writes that “some of the great races of today—particularly the Negro race—have not as yet given to civilization the full spiritual message which they are capable of giving” and that “the fact remains that the full, complete Negro message of the whole Negro race has not as yet been given to the world.”<sup>5</sup> History’s trajectory has built this deficiency into the Black work, on Du Bois’s account, and his argument turns in part on a late nineteenth-century conception of race that is at once biological and cultural. The *cultural* element of racial formation is what drives Du Bois’s argument with real urgency. Black people suffer not just the law and the lash but also, and perhaps foremost, stunted cultural growth. Black people, he argues, must “rise above the pressing, but smaller questions of separate schools and cars, wage-discrimination and lynch law, to survey the whole question of race in human philosophy and to lay, on a basis of broad knowledge and careful insight, those large lines of policy and higher ideals.”<sup>6</sup> Black humanity is restored and expanded through cultural labor. And so,

we cannot reverse history; we are subject to the same natural laws as other races, and if the Negro is ever to be a factor in the world’s history—if among the gaily-colored banners that deck the broad ramparts of civilization is to hang one uncompromising black, then it must be placed there by black hands, fashioned by black heads and hallowed by the travail of 200,000,000 black hearts beating in one glad song of jubilee.<sup>7</sup>

Du Bois’s characteristically flowery language indicates something of the grandeur of the question. The world stage, the “broad ramparts of civilization,” *lacks* Black presence, which simultaneously demeans Black people and demeans the stage itself. The early language of diaspora here, in the evocation of two hundred million Black hearts, is crucial, not simply because it draws on a long-debunked and deeply problematic essentialism about race but because, more importantly here, it stages the question of the world stage so precisely. If the world is composed of races, the stage of culture is racially coded and linked. Du Bois’s proposal for the American

Negro Academy is therefore the American contribution to an Atlantic world racial project. The Academy “aims at once to be the epitome and expression of the intellect of the black-blooded people of America” and “the exponent of the race ideals of one of the world’s great races.”<sup>8</sup> Diasporic labor restores racial content, expands it, and places it alongside extant forms of cultural expression across the world. The small place is surmounted by a concern for wider racial consciousness and meaning, in the interest of comparative intellectual space and common measure. The *stage* of the world stage.

We see this same sort of logic deployed over a half century later in Césaire’s essay “Culture and Colonization.” Written on the occasion of the 1956 Paris Congress of Black Writers and Artists, a gathering of black Atlantic thinkers, most of whom argued for forms of unity in the diaspora at a key moment in global decolonization, the essay’s leading distinction between culture (local formations) and civilization (animating spirits that bind culture differences in a single identity) structures Césaire’s inquiry. The distinction allows Césaire to walk a difficult fault line between cultural difference and racial unity, which translates my language here of the small place and the world stage. It is important that Césaire is not trying to Africanize the black Americas. He, instead, is working toward a theory of how the small places in the diaspora *appear* to be different but in reality, at the level of civilization as a creative spirit, are the same. The scattering of seeds, after all, presupposes a common tree and root. That common tree, the civilizational spirit of Africa, orders the chaos of small places spread across the Atlantic world. And so Césaire closes his essay with an argument for diasporic identity and the kind of voice it brings to the “stage of history.” He writes:

Today we are in cultural chaos. Our role is to say: free the demiurge that alone can organize this chaos into a new synthesis, a synthesis that will deserve the name of culture, a synthesis that will be the reconciliation and surpassing of old and new. We are here to say and to demand: Let the peoples speak. Let the black peoples come onto the great stage of history.<sup>9</sup>

Césaire’s argument for the unity of diaspora aims at this very conclusion, a conclusion that depends on the legitimacy of the language of civilization and spirit—remnants of French vitalist life philosophy, to which so much of Césaire’s (as well as Léopold Senghor’s) theoretical work turns for justification.<sup>10</sup> It is also the endgame of Négritude—namely, to energize anti-colonial agitation with a view toward cultural and existential transformation. Existential transformation through art and ideas is crucial for decolonization, and this atavistic and essentialist work is committed to the cultivation of

Black civilizational and cultural expression. Expressive life is cultural transformation at the level of the individual and the collective, which in turn inserts the life of Black peoples into the story of History. Excessive and aspirational Black modernism, perhaps. The small place is the illness. The cure is identification, then expansion, of the elevated spirit of what *appears* as small. Redemption, cure. This is the work of Négritude and the curative function of the world stage of history, culture, and racial self-expression and collective expression.

Fanon's work, however, charts a very different path with regard to race and racial identification. For Fanon, Blackness is a construct of the white gaze and, per his formulation in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, racial categories of "white" and "black" lock consciousness down and stunt creativity itself. So, between Du Bois or Césaire and Fanon, these initially seem to be disconnected moments. Indeed, Fanon in no way appears influenced by Du Bois (theoretical convergences around notions of double consciousness notwithstanding), and the latter's adherence to conventional, largely biological notions of race in the "Conservation of Races" stands in stark contrast to the former's repudiation of notions of race altogether. Du Bois's essentialism stands as a theoretical counterpoint to Fanon's existential phenomenology and its commitment to description and critical account of the relationship between ontology and social dynamics of power. Fanon's critique of Négritude (and thus Césaire) is well known, following the same logic: without a robust conception of race, there is nothing legitimate to anchor talk of collective identity outside shared political struggle. But, at the same time, all three are deeply committed to notions of the global and the world stage, reflecting the influence of Hegel's philosophy of history, to be sure, but also a sense of what the liberation of Black folk looks like. Liberation work is intellectual labor that transforms the place of Black people or the colonized—the damned and the wretched—in a world context, rebuilding what that context, that stage, looks like, how it functions, and therefore what it means for long-standing anti-Black violence and domination.

The movement toward liberation as entry onto the world stage might proceed differently in terms of race, but Fanon shares with Du Bois and Césaire a certain contempt for the present landscape. The present, informed by the past of enslavement and colonialism, is a landscape of social death. Nothing that comes *from* that landscape, that cultural and political space, can articulate or promise liberation. Du Bois phrases this in terms of the deficiency of Black cultural life, Césaire in terms of the torpor of colonized places. For Fanon, it is the same question and answer: if colonized, anti-Black space and landscape generates expression, that is an expression tied to death, to the white gaze, and therefore to the impossibility of cultural



production as world making. This is particularly clear when Fanon reflects on blues music in his “Racism and Culture” essay from 1956, tying the expressive life of African American vernacular culture to the oppressor’s gaze. Fanon writes:

Thus the blues—“the black slave lament”—was offered up for the admiration of the oppressors. This modicum of stylized oppression is the exploiter’s and the racist’s rightful due. Without oppression and without racism you have no blues. The end of racism would sound the knell of great Negro music.<sup>11</sup>

This is an important passage for understanding the prerogative of Fanonian thinking. That is, rather than a problematic or limited understanding of musical culture in the United States, this passage links Fanon’s Afropessimism—a claim that anti-Blackness (colonialism) is a total project that leaves no aspect of life untouched—to cultural formation under enslavement and segregation. *Everything produced under an anti-Black regime is an expression of anti-Blackness*. And so the blues, rather than an expression of life, is an expression of spiritual death, something “offered up” to the oppressors because, Fanon believes, the oppressed have no sense of life and its complexity outside that gaze.

The answer to this pessimism, which *Black Skin, White Masks* for the most part leaves as utterly dispiriting, is the apocalyptic vision of cultural and political transformation in *The Wretched of the Earth*. It is interesting how that book details so many pathologies, forms of backwardness and colonial hangover, and related matters in largely institutional terms but is bookended by emphatic and bombastic ontological claims about violence and the new. Violence, the theme of the most famous chapter, the first, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, is redeemed by the emergence—always promised, always in a wholly open future—of a new humanism, an unprecedented sense of relation to self and other. Violence destroys, the future begins again, wholly anew. This binary shift—it is *either* recurrence of the same *or* a complete break with history and memory—reinscribes Fanon’s work on the mythic world stage: *after* the apocalypse, there is the new messiah of humanism and the world it creates. For everyone. Political violence aims at global, not just local, transformation. Fanon, hero of the global south. Fanon, transformer of the entire world. A new stage that hosts a new world stage.

Whatever their differences, Du Bois, Césaire, and Fanon share this demand that Black liberation be tied to an entrance into global cultural and political life. Interracial, always, even if that interracial functions only as formal comparative space. Small places, the local and the vernacular, gain

meaning only in the moment the small names itself as part of a whole—culture subsumed under civilization. And that whole is that cultural formation that makes the stage a stage for the world, rather than the vernacular left to itself, which risks, inevitably, condemnation as opaque and illegitimate. The specter of measure.

In this sense, the notion of a world stage and the imperatives it implies or gathers to it is a quiet remnant of the very colonialism that critical Africana theory putatively seeks to displace or upend. Very much like humanism, the notion of the world stage performs two fundamentally incompatible functions: to clear the space for comparative work and creation *and* to establish a set of measures of communicability that serve to exclude, demean, and further the work of domination. The question for the world stage is very much the question Césaire posed in *Discourse on Colonialism*: should we remake and rewrite the stage “to the measure of the world,” paralleling what Césaire wanted to do with humanism?<sup>12</sup> Or is it better to imagine a new model of cultural production, meaning, and significance?

This problematic is brought into particularly clear focus when we consider the place of the vernacular in cultural production and meaning and the sorts of fecundity borne by that mode of production and meaning making. At the intersection of theorizing the world stage and the apocalyptic vision of Black futures lies a strange and estranged sense of fecundity. The orientation toward a future that elevates, or creates for the first time, Black cultural production in relation to a global measure turns on a vision of the past and present in which the landscape of Black life is characterized by torpor, loss, and melancholy. Afropessimism, in a word. Fecundity is always something to come, something postponed, but in no way related to the melancholic, pessimistic space of loss and violence. In other words, a sense of futurity without deconstructive interruption. A pure future. An invented future. A future without the present and its past.

And yet, in that melancholic space of loss and torpor, there is also the obstinacy of life. Senses of the interstitial that lie outside the construction of anti-Black sociality, culture, and politics. What kind of fecundity emerges in that space? What kind of fecundity works in small places rather than world stages and their demands? Or, what becomes of the margin without center?

## II

Édouard Glissant’s work as a poet, novelist, and critical theorist spans a fascinating time period in Caribbean thought. He was Aimé Césaire’s student, attended the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists, and labored initially in the horizon of Négritude, Caribbean surrealism, and Fanon’s

rewriting of existentialism in a black Atlantic register. But he was never to be that kind of thinker and poet. Glissant's early poetry and exploratory essays take up a very different sense of relation to place—that intersection of space or landscape and the time of historical memory—in the Caribbean, then later globalized and globalizing, context.

For Glissant, the Middle Passage and the Plantation mark a massive shift in paradigm for thinking about identity, culture, world making, and intellectual production—the very terms of Africana theory. The Middle Passage, he argues, comprises three intertwined notions of the abyss: the abyss of forced departure from the continent, the abyss of the belly of the slave ship, and the abyss of arrival on the shoreline. *Poetics of Relation* opens with evocation of each sense toward a single end: the unicity of beginning for Africans in the New World.<sup>13</sup> The threefold abyss severs roots to the continent; beginning in the New World means beginning with fragments that do not reassemble into originals. *The Afropostmodern in the birth of European modernity*. Beginning without atavism and its fantasies means reassembly with difference, differentiation, and chaotic mixture, or what Glissant calls creolization. Creolized production—cultural, social, political—is a phenomenon derived from the Plantation. Plantation functions as a historical place but, more, as a critical concept in Glissant's work, describing the conditions for the possibility of life without atavism and in the swirl of difference that comes from mixtures of Africa's cultural variety, European incursion and violence, and remnants of indigeneity that survived conquest and genocide. Enslavers wanted the Plantation to eliminate life, to produce radical and irrevocable social death through strict borders and control. But plantation life was not only resilient but porous, producing mixture and opening unexpected, unprecedented horizons of language, thought, and world in the very same space that produced immeasurable pain and death. In other words, the plantation produces Relation and, in Relation, the plantation becomes the critical concept Plantation. Glissant writes:

The Plantation is one of the focal points for the development of present-day modes of Relation. Within this universe of domination and oppression, of silent or professed dehumanization, forms of humanity stubbornly persisted.<sup>14</sup>

Affirmation of the humanity of the enslaved, and therefore the kinds of cultural and political habitus, or everydayness, that persists after emancipation, is both a simple and a complex conceptual move. It is simple because life goes on. The future is obstinate. Life asserts itself. Radical dehumanization has limits. But this is a complex claim precisely because the cultural and political work done by the enslaved, working with fragments in the

sense Glissant describes as *djobbers* of the New World, does not reconcile itself with larger narratives about Blackness or Africa or even strong senses of diaspora. Rather, the *djobber* works inside the small place for the sake of *that* life, not a wider sense of racial life and its spirit or a pan-African vision of restored identity. Contra Césaire, Glissant's teacher and great poet predecessor, the *djobber's* indulgence of vernacular life reflects the everydayness of the people in *this place* without reference to other places, ancestral elsewhere, or sites and citations of domination.

Across his poetics, Glissant develops this sensibility and its link to vernaculars of the small place as a form of cultural or poetic *marronage*. Flight, here, is not from the plantation to the remote mountainside as a historical act but instead a demand that creation reinvent the norms of cultural production in the word and world of the small place. Glissant has plenty critical to say about their deeper commitments, but this is one moment in which he praises the work of Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, and Jean Bernabé in *Éloge de la créolité*—the stubborn refusal to move away from the opacity of small places and instead lean into the fact that Creole (language, culture, sociality) has words for all the parts of the world.<sup>15</sup> Not translatable words, and so not words ready-made for the world stage, but instead words specific to the entire world of the small place. Kamau Brathwaite calls this simply, and with a mix of appropriate irony and grandeur, “nation language.” Brathwaite writes:

Language does really have a role to play here, certainly in the Caribbean. But it is an English that is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people. It is what I call, as I say, *nation language*. I use the term in contrast to *dialect*. . . . Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. . . . Nation language, on the other hand, is the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues.<sup>16</sup>

Like the blues, like Africa in the Caribbean—the language of the *djobber* now becomes the linguist and the grammarian. If small places distinguish themselves in language and language is thought and being—Fanon's insight, put to work as a form of Afropessimism—and small places reserve the right to name themselves whole unto themselves, then Brathwaite's phrase

is entirely appropriate. Vernacularity is world making, world sustains a people, a people make a nation in language. Small places are fecund.

We see this in a number of other thinkers and emerging critical black Atlantic debates and dissents, including figures like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Albert Murray. I am thinking in particular of the argument in Ngũgĩ's *Decolonizing the Mind* for Kikuyu language theater written for and performed in particular places: the village, evoking its life, sounded in its vernacular, without prioritizing or foregrounding the possibility of translation.<sup>17</sup> Or Hurston's peculiar blend of anthropology and fiction writing that draws on her aesthetic theory in the 1934 "Characteristics of Negro Expression," an essay that documents the sounds and rhythms of African American life for the sake of articulating a world, rather than eliding the opacity of those sounds and rhythms.<sup>18</sup> The blues aesthetic that structures a novel like *Invisible Man* and gives life to the lower frequencies or that informs the cultural politics of Murray, Baldwin, and even aspects of Richard Wright's work. Each in their own way moves into opaque worlds without the imperative of translation and translatability, opting instead for the world *as it already functions as a space of life*. That movement speaks against the command to make general, to make a part of a global stage and its standards for comparison. These sorts of debates and emerging critical responses to large-picture inquiries, imperatives, and aspirations return us to the motif I noted at the outset, Chamoiseau's notion of writing to avoid genocide. What is at stake in that writing? What form does genocide take? And what or how can writing be undertaken that says yes to life, that makes life fecund *without* appeal to the world stage and its cognates?

Glissant's appeal to opacity, both as necessity and as an epistemological feature of small places, is an important critical frame. Opacity defends, as a right and as critical theory, the radical particularity and specificity of the small place, underscoring the fecundity of one's here that is always another's elsewhere. Opacity describes what is already there; it is no invention or supervening ethico-political structure. And opacity refuses the compulsion to translate, to comprehend—something that Glissant notes, playing on the French verb *comprendre*, is always linked to forms of seizing and taking as one's own (*prendre*). The small place, then, when understood as a critical site of cultural production and world making, has its own kind of double session. In the very same gesture that produces culture and world, setting roots (rhizomatic, always), there is the return of that specificity and radical singularity to the fantasies of the world stage and metanarrative of comparative space. If the metanarrative of comparative space sets particular achievements and expressive traditions in relation to a measure, then we can see the radical collective singularity of small places, asserting their rights to opacity, as a supplement and interruption of the world stage. That is, the small

place performs deconstructive work against hegemony, not as an alternative story or companion narrative, but as a story against the idea of story—a mixed place that does not resolve. A history that is not History. A story that is not a global epic. One can think here of Derek Walcott’s Nobel lecture “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory,” in which the poet argues *for* the reality of place and its idiosyncrasies—Felicity and its sigh—and against any and all ideas of History.<sup>19</sup> Such an argument affirms the opacity of New World formations, removing the very idea of measure, which in turn neutralizes the sort of melancholy that haunts the work of Césaire, Fanon, and most emphatically V. S. Naipaul (if we stay in a Caribbean register). Without melancholy, there is the pleasure and depth of *this place*, a place that refers to no other place beyond itself, not only satisfied with but ecstatic within the rhizomatic swirl of making worlds, making place, and making subjects of that world and place. As Ellison and Murray remind us, always, the blues is not mourning or supplication. The blues is music for fighting, fucking, drinking, courtship, rage, romance, laughter, and every other affect that attends to being human in the small place that makes you.

What would it mean, then, to adopt this sort of thinking about space, time, place, and world as a kind of first philosophy? First philosophy, that is, as a foundational set of ethics, politics, and aesthetics that sees, rather than explains away, the ontology and epistemology made in vernacular cultural traditions, modes of expression, Being and knowing as creolized, as becoming. Against being and Being, in the name of a radical becoming in what Glissant calls Relation, in what Walcott calls the long-drawn sigh, and in what Chamoiseau dramatizes as writing against genocide. For the world stage and its sense of measure, the comparative space it glamorizes and makes into its own kind of first philosophy, compelling the subaltern to *aspire* and *desire* participation in such a space, is a kind of genocidal threat. The threat takes the form of the demand and compulsion: *explain yourself and make yourself transparent to others*. The *prendre* in *comprendre*. Refusing that in the name of creolization, opacity, and vernacularity is survival and revolution. It is also deconstructive, supplementing empire to the end of empire’s demise, in the name of life itself, the refusal to die and the refusal of apocalypse. *We are already enough*. Thus begins an appreciation of the end of the world that has already happened. There is no pure future. Or at least we do not need it. We need, instead, the small place and its opaque epistemology and ontology without exoticism. Fecundity of the small place as the future of Black study.

### III

One of the more aggressive critiques of the institutionalization of Black studies, or what has come to be called, more commonly, Africana studies, is

that making a department, field of study, and therefore institutional academic presence neutralizes and neuters the study of Black life. Institutions are not radical. Institutions are, like the state in Louis Althusser's famous "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" essay, largely dedicated to reproducing themselves.<sup>20</sup> And in that reproduction, an emerging field, like any established field, draws on the principles and values of a given milieu of production and reproduction: neoliberal in funding, conciliatory in situating itself in relation to extant disciplines, structures, and forms of knowledge production.

I am less interested here in funding and relationships to long-time disciplines and area studies; it strikes me that there are as many stories about those relations as there are scholars in the field. What interests me is how disputes within Africana studies reproduce or interrupt the antechamber of conventional kinds of knowledge production. How does the larger stage of inquiry, whether Du Bois's modernist estimation of the future of "the Negro" or the politically radical, culturally innovative (or conservative) iterations of Pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism, and the like, reproduce a sense of what *counts* and what *ought to be valued* as the outcome of a field or mode of inquiry? That is, how are differences in content, in the end, really just varieties of one and the same form of producing legitimate knowledge—establishing, then deploying and policing such boundaries—rather than radical interventions in how we conceive knowing, being, and sociality? Something very important is at stake for Africana theory in these questions.

Let me turn to a canonical work to spell out a series of decisions one makes as a reader and how those decisions presuppose, then reproduce, specific norms of knowledge production. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* is a cornerstone of African American thought, a piece without which the tradition is all but unimaginable. Whereas for most it is a text defined by either his dispute with Booker T. Washington, spelled out across its most important pages, or the central figures of the veil, double consciousness, and the color line, I argue that the closing chapter on the Spirituals is what establishes *Souls* as a foundation piece of the *African American* intellectual tradition. This is not to dispute the profundity of Du Bois's insights; he is, after all, an utterly singular thinker in the tradition. But how we frame and theorize the text is paramount. Conventional debates about labor and intellectual life, where we ought to place our priority in thinking the conditions of social and political progress, or the role of education in narratives of uplift, or the dialectics of self-world relation—these are the standard features of *Souls* and embed the text within larger European and white American debates about selfhood, political ethics, and class relations. Du Bois is an important thinker for this reason, because of how he shifts standard European debates into the register of racial prejudice and its effects and affects. How-



ever, if we begin with the closing chapter, we reframe the trajectory of the book with the specificity of the experience of the enslaved, the particularities of their expressive life, and how that specificity and particularity has formed a sense of culture and life in and on the interstices of an anti-Black world. In other words, we can propose a reading of *Souls* as a book about small places rather than a twist on broader themes in European theory.

Such an interpretative move, a hermeneutic practice that draws from small places rather than drawing back from them, opens up dimensions of the text that create a sense of tradition. The Spirituals are the birthplace, or what Glissant called, in the Caribbean context, the “womb abyss,” of the small places that comprise African American memory and history.<sup>21</sup> Spirituals become the sound of what Baldwin calls “black English,” tracing sound, figure, and gesture to “the auction block” and the pain of living amid such violence.<sup>22</sup> And the sound of blues, that sonic testimony to place and its memories. Working from this insight and its orientation, Albert Murray writes:

What a case of the blues represents is chaos, entropy, futility, depression, defeat, contention—all of that. Now, to survive you got to have an affirmative attitude toward your possibilities rather than an attitude of defeatism and lamentation . . . the juke joint is a temple where this rite takes place.<sup>23</sup>

The character of the blues as rite, a Dionysian and fertility one through and through, underscores the fecundity of suffering not only in the hands of the musical artist but in the world that artist produces, reproduces, and participates in as a form of life. Ellison extends this insight when he writes that the blues aesthetic, in the person of Bessie Smith, is a religious principle. He writes:

There are levels of time and function involved here, and the blues which might be used in one place as entertainment (as gospel music is now being used in night clubs and on theater stages) might be put to a ritual use in another. Bessie Smith might have been a “blues queen” to the society at large, but within the tighter Negro community where the blues were part of a total way of life, and a major expression of an attitude toward life, she was a priestess, a celebrant who affirmed the values of the group and man’s ability to deal with chaos.<sup>24</sup>

The ability to deal with chaos, this closing formulation, is utterly crucial for understanding the condition of the study of Black life in the Americas, as



well as, perhaps, colonial and postcolonial Africa. But chaos takes on specific forms, and community or small-place responses to that chaos is what gives the study of Black life real substance and complexity.

African American studies, a subset of Africana theory, is itself a fragmented and varied site of theorization. From the Spirituals to the blues and on, to late twentieth- and twenty-first-century hip-hop, then, the blues aesthetic describes an arc of cultural formation and identity that is inseparable from the particularities of place: the space of the American South, the time of slavery and its long shadow, and the creation of expressive life and language that turns on a subtle yet overwhelming vernacular character. Each iteration of expressive life points to place, sometimes broad, but often to subtle small places with nuance, detail, and differing forms of opacity. The subtlety of vernacular lies, again, in the particularities of the situation of the thinker-maker, of the world making effort of art and artist and community, in the (determinative) sense in which the enslaved, then emancipated but subjugated and precarious, live alongside their oppressor. Double entendre, lower frequencies, the cracks and fissures in which life is made. The vernacular forms of life are nevertheless overwhelming, surmounting centuries of effort to erase, silence, obscure, and otherwise lock out African Americans from fully vibrant forms of life. Entropy, yes, and also chaos with the contention against depression and futility. Making life in a small place that overwhelms the possibilities of the one who subjugates and proliferates genocide. This sort of work against the putative center, life that is interstitial and yet entirely life and possibility. It needs no relation to a center. It is rather what Baldwin calls “the relation Negroes bear to one another,” a formulation he employs to describe the unicity of the African American tradition *outside the white gaze*.<sup>25</sup>

The turn to small places and the fecundity of their conditions—creolism, vernacularity, the blues aesthetic, just to name a few—draws attention to the facts of Black cultural life in the Americas, emphasizing the limitations or even violence of deficiency models of analysis. The deficiency model imagines Black life under conditions of oppression and unimaginable, transgenerational violence as just that: structured entirely from the inside by the abjection projected by white violence. We see this in so much social science, as well as the anecdote-critic inclusion of Black texts and thinkers as part of the diversification of curricula and research programs. We also see this in the pessimist strain of the black Atlantic tradition, which has turned the literary nihilism of a Richard Wright and speculations of an early Fanon into thumbnail sketches of an ontology and libidinal economy under the rubric of *Afropessimism*. In these cases, though, the deficiency model is strangely colonized by notions of the common, of Being as such, and therefore iterations of what used to be called the world stage. The turn to small

places and the fecundity of their conditions upends that mode of analysis in a shift from fundamental ontology (the common, the world, the *Umwelt* of anti-Blackness) to regional ontological concerns that generate languages, beliefs, practices, and theorizations that mobilize Black life outside the white gaze—Baldwin’s phrase, “the relation Negroes bear to one another.” In that bearing are the components of world making. In a world made outside the white gaze, small places emerge as not only forms of resistance, disruption, and the unassimilable (they are surely that) but also, and most emphatically, entire worlds of meaning, significance, and *life*.

It would be enough to leave it at that. But there is a short, final bit to say.

Small places are fecund and speak back to empire and imperial notions with the assertion of *place*—the particularity and peculiarity of time, memory, and space. “The land of our forefathers’ exile had been made, by that travail, our home,” as Baldwin puts it in “Princes and Powers.”<sup>26</sup> In this quick, even offhand, yet transformative statement, Baldwin restarts a conversation about identity that effectively decenters and destructures the work of empire—even on questions of diaspora. The travail that makes home, that work and existential effort that reconfigures space across memorial and historical time, speaks back to empire by asking what sort of work empire has done to make land into home, a conventional, though always radical, insight drawn from the lordship and bondage chapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: through his work, the bondsman captures a sense of identity that the lord cannot claim.<sup>27</sup> Namely, a connection to place.

The decolonizing work here is worth noting. In theorizing the function of small places in cultural formation and the labors of identity making and world making, we move away from the long shadow of empire in languages of domination (Eurocentrism, white nationalism, white identity and politics) and languages of liberation (diaspora, remnants of racial essentialism, nationalisms of all sorts), not to establish a new center or cluster of centers—the fantasy of reversed and inverted forms of nationalism), but to contest the idea of center itself. Small places do not refer to anything other than themselves. This is the ethical and epistemological work of opacity. In that particular form of *kath auto*, as it were, every place is revealed to be a small place, and the very notion of a center or a pure culture is self-aggrandizing, chauvinistic mythmaking. We here arrive at one of Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s great insights from *The Repeating Island*—namely, that every culture is syncretic, there are no single roots, and what makes cultural production interesting is the dynamic of response to the component parts of syncretic work.<sup>28</sup> And so in the wake of the decolonizing work of decentering, uprooting the explicit and implicit work of empire, we are returned again to the question of influence. Small places are not atomistic sites or cultural entities. Rather, every site and cultural entity emerges from syncretic work in the

past that, when calibrated for identity and nation formation, becomes singular, unique, and to some extent unifying. So how do we think about the dynamics of influence and confluence in a decolonizing register? Again, Glissant: the thought of *tout-monde*. Perhaps in a twist on his phrasing, recalling Derrida's refrain *tout autre est tout autre*, we can say it: *tout monde est tout-monde*.

## NOTES

1. Patrick Chamoiseau, *School Days*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 21; my emphasis.
2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press: 2006).
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4. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997).
5. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *W.E.B Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 23.
6. Du Bois, 20.
7. Du Bois, 23.
8. Du Bois, 25.
9. Aimé Césaire, "Culture and Colonization," *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (103; June 2010): 142.
10. On life philosophy and vitalism in the Négritude movement, see Donna V. Jones's excellent work in *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
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12. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).
13. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
14. Glissant, 65.
15. Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, and Jean Bernabé, *Éloge de la créolité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).
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19. Derek Walcott. "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," in *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 65–86.
20. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 127–186.
21. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6–8.
22. James Baldwin, "Black English: A Dishonest Argument," in *The Cross of Redemption* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 125–130.

23. Albert Murray, "Interview: An All-Purpose, All-American Literary Intellectual," in *Albert Murray: Collected Essays and Memoirs* (New York: Library of America, 2016), 867.

24. Ralph Ellison, "Blues People," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 251.

25. James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," in *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 72.

26. Baldwin, "Princes and Powers," in *The Price of the Ticket*, 45.

27. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), part B, section 4.

28. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, trans. James Maraniss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

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