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# 'A definite quantity of all the differences in the world'

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## Glissant, Spinoza, and the Abyss as True Cause

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In a conversation with Manthia Diawara aboard the Queen Mary II in 2009, Édouard Glissant elaborated his definition of Relation, a concept that he formally presented in his book *Poétique de la relation* in 1990, but that emerged out of years of writing about creolization and cultural action in the Caribbean. Sitting at the ship's window, with the Atlantic Ocean crashing around him, Glissant explains that "the truth that is increasingly coming to light about Black reality in the New World is the truth of multiplicity, the truth of the step towards the Other."<sup>1</sup> Diawara prompts Glissant to expand on this multiplicity in terms of Relation and Glissant replies:

I believe that Relation is the moment when we realise that *there is a definite quantity of all the differences in the world*. Just as scientists say that the universe consists of a finite quantity of atoms, and that it doesn't change – well, I say that Relation is made up of all the differences in the world and that *we shouldn't forget a single one of them, even the smallest*. If you forget the tiniest difference in the world, well, Relation is no longer Relation.

Now, what do we do when we believe this? We call into question, in a formal manner, the idea of the universal. The universal is a sublimation, an abstraction that enables us to forget small differences, and Relation is wonderful because it doesn't allow us to do that. There is no such thing as a Relation made up of big differences. Relation is total otherwise it's not Relation. So that's why I prefer the notion of Relation to the notion of the universal. (emphases mine)<sup>2</sup>

The call to remember all the differences in the world is, for Glissant, a pivot away from the romantic (often nostalgic) abstractions of universal thinking and towards a totality made up of finite and, perhaps more importantly, *knowable* relations. Relation is the moment when we realize the undeniability

of totality, based on our knowledge of the interactions between—the weaving-together of—many small differences. It is therefore, I will argue, a positive dialectic of the kind that Pierre Macherey locates in the writings of Benedictus de Spinoza. This positive dialectic, applied to the specificities of Glissant's terms—including Relation, opacity, creolization, and the abyss—reveals both the political and epistemological potential of *Poétique de la relation*, and, in turn, the decolonial potential of Spinoza's philosophical system. I reach for Spinoza, via Macherey, in order to frame Glissant's Relation as a poetic form of materialist analysis.<sup>3</sup> Glissant's materialism, because it centers and emerges from the Caribbean, is a powerful tool for considering what we—scholars, artists, activists, workers—can *do* with the notion of difference in the afterlives and aftershocks of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and universalizing (thus oppressive) modernisms.<sup>4</sup>

## Positive Dialectics and the Opacity of Relation

Macherey argues in *Hegel or Spinoza* that Hegel, in attempting to forge a linear history of Western philosophy, misreads (or symptomatically reads) Spinoza, pointing specifically to the “negation of the negation.” According to Macherey, Hegel takes Spinoza's phrase *omnis determinatio est negatio* to mean that “in all negation there is also something positive.”<sup>5</sup> However, Spinoza thinks determination and the relation between positive and negative very differently. Positive and negative are in two separate and irreconcilable orders in Spinoza's system. The absolute, or Substance, for Spinoza, is only positive, while the negative, cast outside of Substance, appears only in the finite, determined relations between things. “For Spinoza,” Macherey writes, “[...] the determined is that which cannot grasp itself except through a shortcoming, according to its own shortcoming, a lack of being, the negativity that determines it.”<sup>6</sup>

Hegel, by reading an irreconcilability of positive and negative into Spinoza's thought, suggests a weakness in Spinoza's process of reasoning: a weakness that, of course, Hegel claims his own dialectics can solve. In Hegelian dialectics, the contradiction “is not a fixed relation between distinct and antagonistic terms but the irresistible movement that discovers in each of these elements the truth of the other.”<sup>7</sup> This is not the case for Spinoza, for whom separate bodies or attributes can only be limits, and therefore cannot contain either total unity or the entirety of one another's truth.<sup>8</sup> Their unity exists outside of their existence, in the essence that is Substance. In Macherey's words:

to determine a being, no matter what it is, would be to determine it in a finite manner: the determination is reflected by intellect only as a limit, that is to say, as we have seen, as a relationship of exteriority. This is why a being is always determined by another being, whose negation it constitutes. Thus, thought as attribute—that is, determination of

substance—is posed as an ‘op-position’ [*un op-posé*] in the limitation that separates it from another attribute, extension. These two terms do not contain the conditions of their unity within themselves, which must therefore be reflected outside them, in substance where they are indistinct, indifferent. Thus, from the absolute to its determinations, and from these determinations to the absolute itself, no rational progression can be established at all, because it is *a question of irreducible terms, which unite exclusively negative relations*. (emphasis mine)<sup>9</sup>

More simply put, for Spinoza, there is no dualism. Nor even is there parallelism, really, since, as Macherey notes, parallelism maintains the illusion that thought and extension are two separate things. In his own time, Spinoza was offering a counterargument to Descartes’ separation of mind and body. He reasoned that thought and extension are the only two attributes, among many, under which we are able to grasp one irreducible substance (which Spinoza names Nature or God). Macherey argues that Hegel’s negative dialectics, via his misreading of Spinoza, reinstates dualism *and* assumes that thought and extension are the only two attributes, rather than the only ones that we are able to grasp. It is this, the issue of the graspable, the knowable, or even the countable *vis-à-vis* totality (i.e., Spinoza’s substance) that Glissant’s Relation takes up centuries later, as Glissant grapples with how the intersection of ostensibly separate parts (differences) reveals the inevitability and—to use Spinoza’s language again—the *necessity* of a totality that, because we experience it as limits in thought and experience, is opaque to us.

The distinction between Hegel’s negative and Spinoza’s positive dialectics runs throughout Glissant’s *Poétique de la relation*, though in different (and at times more specific) terms. In his chapter “For Opacity,” for instance, Glissant writes that “the opaque [...] is that which cannot be reduced.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike the common interpretations of myth or tragedy, in which obscurity leads to exclusion and “transparency” is about the attempt to “grasp” (i.e., incorporate, assimilate, reduce) the Other, Glissant’s opacity requires “the gesture of giving-on-and-with”—a gesture that leads towards actual totality, precisely because it moves us away from the Western *idea* of totality, which is static and perpetuates a false sense of unity.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Glissant’s totality is not an eternal unity that emerges from the adding-together of separate parts; it is the sum of Relations between opaque parts—opaque because they do not claim to create absolute truth out of their contradictions.<sup>12</sup>

Just as Spinoza provides an alternative to Hegel’s use of the contradiction to “affirm...a unity of opposites,” Glissant’s opacity, and its role in Relation, allows for a dynamic totality without negation. And, providing an archipelagic illustration of Spinoza’s Substance, which is made perceivable through finite attributes, Glissant’s totality is an abyss—the real abyss of the sea, and the horrors of the Middle Passage in particular. By revealing rootlessness as the material foundation of the abyss and its Relations, Glissant

eschews the negation that occurs when we cling to origin stories (which often imply that something preexists or is the opposite of Substance). Glissant's abyssal sea causes itself, always *becoming* via the ceaseless movement of uprooted, finite bodies, who, through this continual motion, create themselves as subjects-in-Relation. Relation is also, for Glissant, "the knowledge in motion of beings."<sup>13</sup>

### Colonialism as Imaginary Thinking, or, a New Scholium on Empire

The Middle Passage is not only a real, historical manifestation of Glissant's abyss. The Middle Passage *is* the abyss. It is totality under the attribute of extension rather than thought. Yet, because its violence is unthinkable—because it is a totality that is also the deep, tangible Atlantic, that is also the brutal interior of the slave ship, that is also the intergenerational trauma that follows in its wake—the Middle Passage is deemed unknowable. John Drabinski, in *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss*, focuses specifically on how this unthinkability is taken up in Glissant's writing and, in turn, considers the consequences of the Middle Passage on philosophy itself, offering detailed analyses of what exactly loss, fear, and genocide do to philosophers' stances on (what I'll generalize as) the knowable and the thinkable.

At the start of the book, Drabinski frames twentieth century European theory as a discourse around loss. He points out that the writings of Levinas and Derrida, for example, are haunted by genocide (that of the Holocaust) and by a fear around loss of memory and, in turn, loss of continuity with the past. Drabinski writes that

Theory under this specter [of genocide] is called to reckon with the constant presence of death and massive disaster in Europe – a presence, as [Aimé] Césaire noted long ago, that was always already present in the colonies, though it never provoked serious discourse or crisis – as a broken connection or disconnection with the past.<sup>14</sup>

The anxieties of twentieth-century European philosophy, based in what Drabinski calls Kant's "concession [...] to the finitude of knowing," emerge from a loss of faith in totality and a fear of untraceable origins.<sup>15</sup> Caribbean discourse moves beyond, or at least retools, this anxiety, because the untraceable origin is a given, thus allowing for totality to be understood as dynamic, nonlinear, and made up of a "definite quantity" of Relations. In Glissant's work, Drabinski writes, we witness the "the aporetic fold of the sadness and the pleasures of life that *goes on*, creates itself, and so makes language, world, and history out of abysses and traces of the traumatic past."<sup>16</sup>

Though Glissant's work has been read as an aesthetic and depoliticizing project (a move away from the decolonial projects of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire), I believe that *Poétique de la relation* provides a real—and urgent—

means through which to apply Spinoza's aims to the subject-destroying and subject-creating forces of colonialism and slavery. If, as Drabinski argues, Glissant reveals pathways on which being might continue on after trauma and loss, then perhaps Spinoza's system can show us *how* those pathways might be accessed not only as thought but also as extension, since both are attributes under which the abyss becomes knowable.

To experiment with this, I will treat parts of *Poétique de la relation* as contemporary scholia to Spinoza's *Ethics* (and relate these later to his "Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect"), proposing (1) that Spinoza's call to think from true causes should be read as a fundamentally decolonial project, and (2) that Glissant's poetics provide an example of how humans can think from true causes despite our inability to know everything about totality, the abyss, or Substance all at once.

Writing in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, Spinoza certainly would have witnessed the societal changes and accumulation of wealth made possible by global trade, slavery, and continued colonial expansion. And, when we consider the seventeenth-century port city as a site of contact between peoples and goods, it is no surprise that Glissant's notion of Relation resonates with Spinoza's thorough analyses of the ways that bodies and emotions alter one another. Spinoza's writing about God and affect reveals an attunement to the ways in which difference intensifies the human intellect's tendency toward what Spinoza calls imaginary thinking: thinking that is not based in reality and which tends to manifest as explanations of phenomena based on effects or potential effects rather than on observable and/or intuitively known causes. I choose to focus on imaginary thinking here because its effects play out so violently and destructively in European powers' invention of race and racial hierarchies and the ensuing oppression of Black and brown peoples that such inventions have been used to justify.

Take this passage from the appendix to Book I, "De Deo," of the *Ethics* for example:

When men became convinced that everything that is created is created on their behalf, they were bound to consider as the most important quality in every individual thing that which was most useful to them, and to regard as of the highest excellence all those things by which they were the most benefitted. Hence they came to form these abstract notions to explain the natures of things: Good, Bad, Order, Confusion, Hot, Cold, Beauty, Ugliness; and since they believed that they are free, the following abstract notions came into being: Praise, Blame, Right, Wrong.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Spinoza illustrates how humans have come to form an abstract and inadequate notion of God by assuming that God exists *for them*. When we assume a thing, such as God, exists for us, we begin a chain of imaginary thinking through which we ascribe certain qualities to a thing based on our

desired results or preconceived (abstract) notions. Therefore, if we want God's effect in our lives to involve some specific divine intervention or granted entry into paradise, we will assume that God's real (and perhaps only) qualities are those that reflect our abstract understanding of the divine, paradise, and goodness. This way of thinking, for Spinoza, impedes real knowledge. If we define God, goodness, beauty, and other things only according to how we imagine they might benefit or harm us, then our understanding of those things will always be inadequate. And furthermore, when people "believe that they are free"—i.e., that the world exists for them—they allow their value judgements to snowball into "abstract notions" that end up having widespread implications at a societal level. For example, one person might be deemed Evil because their actions do not appear to benefit mainstream society, and another deemed Good because their actions lead to prosperity or the expansion of imperial power.

Following this logic, it is easy to read the entire colonial project as one of rampant imaginary thinking, wherein European powers, because they saw that they could benefit from resources elsewhere, vehemently defined that elsewhere according to potential benefits alone. By framing the New World as a bountiful paradise available for the benefit of the Spanish Crown and Europeans in general, the early colonizers perfectly illustrate the issue that Spinoza points out in man's understanding of God. This thinking pervades the letters and journals of those who first invaded the Antilles, wherein the material goods and picturesque views of the islands are described for the first time as inherently *for* European consumption. A letter to Seville from Dr. Chanca, physician of Columbus' fleet in his second voyage to the West Indies, exemplifies this tendency well:

We approached [the island of Guadeloupe] under the side of a great mountain, that seemed almost to reach the skies, in the middle of which rose a peak higher than all the rest of the mountain, whence many streams diverged into different channels [...] The captain put into land in a boat, and seeing some houses, leapt on shore and went up to them, the inhabitants fleeing at sight of our men; he then went into the houses and there found various household articles that had been left unremoved, from which he took two parrots...

[...] He found a great quantity of cotton, both spun and prepared for spinning, and articles of food, of all of which he brought away a portion; besides these, he also brought away four or five bones of human arms and legs. On seeing these we suspected that we were amongst the Caribee islands, whose inhabitants eat human flesh...<sup>18</sup>

If we read this letter alongside Spinoza and Glissant, we see that *taking* from the Other leads to an inherently distorted definition of place and people. But we also see the way that emotion—awe at the landscape, greed for exotic

animals and objects, and fear of cannibalism—drives the doctor's (and, in turn, the Spanish readers') understanding of reality.

In Book III of the *Ethics*, "De Affectibus," Spinoza provides fifty-nine propositions on the ways that emotions distort humans' ability to think from causes, propelling us instead into action and thought based on imaginary, and therefore inadequate, thinking. Proposition 46 is especially relevant to the growth of empire, and the rampant dehumanization that makes it possible:

If anyone is affected with pleasure or pain by someone of a class or nation different from his own and the pleasure or pain is accompanied by the idea of that person as its cause, under the general category of that class or nation, he will love or hate not only him but all of that same class or nation.<sup>19</sup>

Then, in the proof for Proposition 46, Spinoza tells the reader to refer back to Proposition 16, which reads: "From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have something similar to an object that is wont to affect the mind with pleasure or pain, we shall love it or hate it, although the point of similarity is not the efficient cause of these emotions."<sup>20</sup>

The point of similarity here functions similarly to the "grasp" that Glissant explains in the context of encountering the Other. Perceiving a similarity, we cling to it and believe it to be the cause of pleasure or pain, despite having no real evidence of the source of the pleasure or pain coming from the apparently similar people or objects. Analogously, the colonizer takes things from the homes of the inhabitants of Guadeloupe that he recognizes as valuable (according to abstract notions arising from common affectations of the Spanish elite)—colorful birds, textiles, food—and quickly concludes that the presence of human bones means that these people are the cannibals described by the people of other islands. Dr. Chanca's letter therefore reveals an intricate network of affects-in-relation that forms the basis of empire and oppression. Instead of following Spinoza's call to consider the *causes* of pleasure and pain (and of awe, fear, etc.) or Glissant's insistence on the right to opacity (both texts coming long after 1492, of course), Dr. Chanca and the other Europeans in the Antilles use their own affective responses as justification for colonial expansion and subjugation of the Other. Versions of this justification can be seen in the neo-colonial, capitalist world of today: proof that world powers such as the United States have not done away with the affect-driven definitions and imaginary thinking of Columbus and his fleets.

The relations that Spinoza maps out in Book III are ones in which the affects consume and control one another without any rational reorientation of the intellect toward true causes. We might say they are affects without opacity; affects that, because they are in negative dialectical relation rather than positive, lead people and nations to consume and control out of fear,

hatred, and one-sided pleasure. But Glissant's opacity offers a way to retool affects-in-relation, even once empire has wreaked so much havoc already.

Take a hypothetical example that works for Spinoza's time as well as our own: A Dutch aristocrat sees an orange for the first time, smells it, tastes it, has it painted in a still life with his pearls, silver, and wine. Another aristocrat sees the painting and experiences joy, as well as jealousy. He wants to become similar to the man who owns the things in the painting, and so he buys an orange, thinking this fruit is the similarity, the thing-to-grasp, that will make him equal in joy and status with the other man. Following Spinoza, to desire the orange is to be guided by imaginary thinking emerging from affect. In order to act on the plane of reason, the jealous aristocrat would have to realize that the orange has no real link to joy or prestige. He would have to see the orange, as well as the other aristocrat, as opaque things that he can relate to without possessing them or placing them into his own hierarchies of value.

Would the implications of this acting-on-the-plane-of-reason stop the growth of empire? Though Spinoza acknowledges the inevitability (and the necessity) of imaginary thinking—and of humans' constant oscillation between reason and affect—he encourages an emendation of the intellect, a concerted effort to work and think from true and necessary causes rather than from imaginary effects and (often affective) abstractions. In the "Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect," published posthumously in 1677, Spinoza provides various examples of what this effort might entail. He considers how to deal with fictitious ideas, providing rational steps that echo the method of geometrical proofs:

First [...] if the idea is of a thing completely simple, it can only be clear and distinct. For such a thing would have to be known not in part, but either wholly or not at all. Secondly, it follows that if a thing comprised of many constituents is divided in thought into all its simplest parts, and attention is given to each part separately, then all confusion will disappear. Thirdly, it follows that a fictitious idea cannot be simple, but is formed by the blending of various confused ideas of various things and actions existing in Nature; or, as better expressed, fiction results from attending at the same time, without assent, to various ideas of this kind.<sup>21</sup>

Instead of perpetuating a fictitious idea by claiming an inability to disprove it, Spinoza recommends that we start with simple ideas that we know to be true. Then, we divide the fictitious idea down into its simplest parts and attend to each part as a distinct, knowable idea. Subsequently, the blending-together that leads to fiction will fall away and we will be able to think the separate simple ideas anew, building from them true ideas rather than false, confusing ones.

Paradoxically, Glissant's use of the term "imagination" provides another way to emend the intellect, precisely because Glissant's version of imagination is a form of creation that emerges from the Relation of opacities. The dangers of defining places, God, and peoples using abstract/fictitious notions of Good, Bad, Evil, etc. are mitigated when we acknowledge that a separate body is not completely knowable to us when it is set within a blend-of-ideas. A separate body cannot be united with us, even though (and precisely *because*) it is an element of a positive totality, a dynamic abyss, that we know intuitively to exist.

For Glissant, the imaginary is the "varied poetics" of peoples, "where the risk of thought is realized," while "culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought, but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, we can think of the Glissantian imaginary as something like Spinoza's reasoning from true causes and Glissant's understanding of culture as akin to Spinoza's imaginary thinking, in that it relies on a false order that avoids the complexities of Relation—a "chaos" made up of simple truths. As for the "risk of thought," Glissant seems to recognize that to abandon mainstream (that is, colonial) culture would mean to threaten the false idea of order according to which empires continue to grow and oppress.

Glissant addresses such issues more explicitly, too. In a footnote to a passage about the ways that European science and philosophy have imposed false conceptions of "non-Western" cultures, he claims that "positivism and humanism [...] both end up imposing the reality of an 'ideal object' that they have initially defined as value."<sup>23</sup> Value is an abstract notion, even a fictitious idea in the sense that Spinoza explains above. And to say that this value is an ideal object is to attempt to reorient thought and action towards a false universality emerging from affects—namely, the fear of limits. Considering the radical potential of Albert Einstein's United Field Theory as a scientific poetics of Relation, Glissant laments the scientific community's return to "the comfortable empiricism that provides immense technological power."<sup>24</sup> This empiricism, according to Glissant, is "a science of conquerors who fear limits; a science of conquest."<sup>25</sup> Columbus and Hegel, each in their own ways, attest to this fear of limits. Rather than recognize opacity within a positive totality, they inadvertently set limits on knowledge by pretending that truth or the ideal object emerges from a progressive blending-together. Glissant and Spinoza recognize that truth (as well as the perfection of totality and Substance or Nature) *already exists*. When one pretends that they are building towards an ideal object, especially when that ideal object is as abstract as "value," they are perpetuating fictitious ideas.

This problem sheds light on the cultural 'event' in Glissant's writings. As Nick Nesbitt writes in *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant*, for Glissant, "culture is the realm of the anti-event, of depoliticization, of neo-colonial 'departmentalization'. This is a culture of

consumption, underwritten and served up by (French) subsidy.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, to strive toward a cultural event in Martinique, for example, would be to perpetuate a fictitious idea, a French ‘ideal object’ of cultural value. “In this late colonial world,” Nesbitt continues, “culture is first of all the ‘cultivation [culture] of sugar cane’, and a ‘cultural’ event would precisely be the ‘reformation and reform of the structures of exclusion and alienation therein.’”<sup>27</sup> In a more recent text, Nesbitt sees an Althusserian critique of capitalism in Glissant’s writing, noting the importance of *dispossession* in Martinique, where people are often completely alienated from production and all goods come from off of the island. The Martinican is the “sujet-support du colonialisme réussit.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, for Glissant, it is precisely this dispossession that gives Relation its destructive (and, I would add, creative) power.<sup>29</sup> Dispossession is the machinery of Relation. In other words, rootlessness—made oceanic abyss by the slave trade, but also fundamental to all human subjects—gives the dispossessed more direct access to knowledge based on differences-in-Relation rather than on the imaginary thinking that fuels origin-obsessed colonialism.

## A Creolization of the Intellect, or, the Abyss as True Cause

As Drabinski puts it, the Caribbean is “literally and figurately the interval through which the Americas as New World were imagined.”<sup>30</sup> However, Glissant’s poetics of Relation take this imagination out of the hands of the colonizers, who use it to build an empire of imaginary thinking, and gives it to Antillean subjects, who, because they more often see (and experience) their origins as an ever-shifting abyss, can more naturally create from causes without falsely defining origins, and create from contact without falsely defining others. In *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant emphasizes that creolization is about processes, not about content. It allows us to think identities “by their relation to everything possible” and to “bring into Relation but not to universalize.”<sup>31</sup> Creolization thus reorients thought towards the possible. And the possible is something we come to know by thinking real, specific bodies and objects in relation, not by projecting imaginary ideas into the past and future. We can therefore read *Poétique de la relation* as a guide for the creolization of the intellect, a process that echoes Spinoza’s emendation in several ways.

To conclude, I present three instances in which Glissant’s terminology offers something like an Antillean response to Spinoza’s system. These of course are not parallels. Rather, I aim to suggest that Glissant’s poetics provide a means through which to abandon “mainstream culture” and creolize the intellect in thought and in action (extension).

## 1. Sea as Substance

In linking Glissant's oceanic abyss to Walter Benjamin's writing on history and memory, Drabinski contrasts the Middle Passage with the ancient city of Carthage, which was burned to the ground, leaving a trace of itself in the form of ashes and salt. Drabinski calls Carthage a "negative sublime," in which the positive or legible aspects of memory can be read through the visibility of an absence.<sup>32</sup> But then, he asks, "Where is the wreckage of the Middle Passage?"<sup>33</sup> and the answer is of course, at the bottom of the ocean. The ruins of the Middle Passage are human beings thrown overboard, left to disappear into the sea: that "one vast beginning," Glissant writes, "whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green."<sup>34</sup> The sea in *Poétique de la relation* is the site of a *positive* sublime. Its totality, even if inaccessible, is a given—the Substance within and against which Caribbean subjects construct self, world, and language.

Macherey, in his in-depth analysis of Spinoza's conception of Substance and attributes in Book I of the *Ethics*, writes:

En constituant la substance à partir de toutes les formes de l'être, et il doit y en avoir une infinité, qu'elle rassemble dans son ordre unique, Spinoza du même coup soustrait la connaissance de cet ordre au présupposé d'une uniformité abstraite, qui serait elle-même en rapport avec la représentation d'une *entité vide de tout contenu*, donc complètement indéterminée.

[In showing substance to be constituted by all forms of being, and there must be an infinite number, each of which resembles substance in its unique order, Spinoza subtracts knowledge of this order from the presupposition of an abstract uniformity, that would therefore be, with respect to the representation of an *empty entity of total content*, completely indeterminate.]<sup>35</sup>

Glissant's sea is a real manifestation of the empty void, filled with all content. In other words, Substance is the sea, and the sea is the abyss. And, just as the indeterminacy of Substance, of the whole, does not prevent knowledge of its parts (the attributes), the Middle Passage uproots and deterritorializes, yet becomes an alternative, indeterminate, *true* ground from which the Antillean subject can grasp being (in parts) without the fantasy of a progression towards absolute unity.

## 2. Archipelago as Attributes

Spinoza repeatedly explains Substance by analyzing the relations between attributes. According to Macherey, he must do this (reiterate the tension between Substance and attribute) precisely in order to reach an understanding of "unity and diversity, without conflating them or separating

them."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, right at the start of *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant writes that Relation is "the overstepping that grounds" the "unity-diversity" of "evolving cultures."<sup>37</sup>

Spinoza also emphasizes the inevitable restrictions of the attributes. "As soon as one reflects substance in an attribute," Macherey clarifies, a restriction appears.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, "one single form is not sufficient to represent the absolute."<sup>39</sup> Rather, we must embark on an "indefinite quest for new determinations, which oppose each other"—indefinite because the search for completeness within a single form is always in vain—and "seek in vain to recuperate its completeness."<sup>40</sup>

We can imagine the archipelago— islands emerging from the oceanic abyss—as a set of perceivable attributes, with many others hidden beneath the ocean's surface. Each island is a limited manifestation of a number of complex and ever-multiplying Relations, yet the parallel quest, in Glissant's terms, would be to seriously pay attention to every Relation that one encounters, so that humanity might come closer to an understanding of totality that is divorced from the false idealism and colonial implications of universality.

Glissant was formulating versions of this quest from the early days of his career. In his closing statement at the 1st Congress of the Front Antillo-Guyanais in 1959 for example, he said: "Today there are no values of any one country that are not touched by the values of another. The world is shrinking, remaking itself, and the Antilles are in an ideal situation to promote the contact of cultures."<sup>41</sup> This notion of contact, which matured into Glissant's promotion of Relation, is one that thinks islands (as well as cultures and languages) as distinct attributes reflecting a total Substance. The archipelago is a "unity-diversity," too, which, if we were to extend its poetics of Relation to the world at large, might emend, or creolize, all human thought.

### 3. Abyss as True Cause

The second chapter of *Poétique de la relation*, "Errantry, Exile," begins with a discussion of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of the rhizome.<sup>42</sup> Linking Relation to rhizomatic thinking—anti-arboreal and nonlinear—Glissant writes that "the root is not important. Movement is."<sup>43</sup> "One who is errant," he continues later on, "plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. [...] The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it."<sup>44</sup>

In errantry and exile, one must succumb to the undeniable truth of Substance and the oceanic abyss. One must strive to get at this truth, even though one knows they never will.<sup>45</sup> Like Spinoza's God, Substance, or Nature, the abyss is dynamic. It is always becoming, and, in so doing, it is always reiterating the true cause. With Glissant, we strive towards an intangible root

by learning the tangible Relations that it continuously brings into being. And with Spinoza, we strive for the true cause by first acknowledging that it exists a priori, even though we cannot perceive it as a whole. To think from true causes, to emend the intellect, is to think from Glissant's abyss.

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<sup>1</sup> Édouard Glissant in Manthia Diawara, "Conversation with Édouard Glissant Aboard the Queen Mary II (August 2009)," *Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> A big thanks to Nick Nesbitt for his feedback on the paper from which this article grew, and for his own work on Spinoza and Macherey, which I first had the pleasure of hearing about as a student in his graduate seminar on Spinoza in the Department of French and Italian at Princeton University. I thank the other students in that seminar, too, as their brilliant thoughts on and enthusiasm around a Spinozist reading of Glissant (and vice versa) pushed me to give it a try.

<sup>4</sup> I invoke Saidiya Hartman's "afterlives of slavery" and Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón's "aftershocks of disaster" in one breath here, seeing a power in placing their critical contributions in proximity, but recognizing that their analyses and subject matter are distinct and not to be conflated. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), Hartman offers a framework for thinking about slavery, diaspora, and systemic racism that shows how affect in the specific, individual, and/or familial narrative can radically reshape how history breathes and is told in the present. Then, in *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm* (Haymarket Books, 2019), edited by Bonilla and LeBrón, we are presented with a poignant and galvanizing collection of essays, poetry, and art concerned with the lasting effects of Hurricane Maria in and beyond Puerto Rico, positing the aftershock as both destructive and creative. Simply put, the traumas of slavery and the traumas of environmental crisis are incommensurable. Yet, environmental crisis, especially in the Caribbean, does make inequity along the lines of race and class impossible to deny. The afterlives of slavery are laid bare in the aftershocks of disaster.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 115.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 115-16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>8</sup> "Spinoza does not rule out all possibility of grasping or understanding the elements of nature all at once, in their intensive infinity, because it is this possibility on the contrary that expresses the point of view of eternity, or the third type [*genre*] of knowledge. What he rules out is that this knowledge can be created through a combination, in a law of convergent series, that totalizes the finite through a sort of internal logic of its progression [...] To say that nature is always the same does not signify, then, that it is organized by a formal principle that constitutes it as a totality, but that it expresses itself completely through the sequence of its own determinations, to the exclusion of all external interventions, which would reintroduce the bias of finality." (Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 159)

- <sup>9</sup> Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 121.
- <sup>10</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 191.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-2.
- <sup>12</sup> This is perhaps an apt place to mention and recommend Natalie Melas' fabulous book *All the difference in the world: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford University Press, 2007). The book came across my desk only after I had written the first version of this essay and I was excited to see that Melas had undertaken, in the chapter titled "Empire's Loose Ends," a finetuned analysis of Glissant's writing on "all the differences in the world," the Differential and the Same (in *Le discours antillais*), and Relation, which she explains as having anti-hegemonic, postcolonial aspirations while being complicit within totalizing notions of globalization. In the book as a whole, Melas puts pressure on the totalizing impulse of what we might call the Academy, specifically within the discipline of comparative literature. She traces the comparative method to the nineteenth century, explaining in her preface that it "replaced the directionlessness of a merely taxonomic comparison with a positivist evolutionary teleology." Per Melas, "when comparative literature abandoned the objective of studying all the literature in the world, its adjectival appendage gradually fell into amnesia" (xi); and, she argues, it is postcolonial literature that catalyzed this shift.
- <sup>13</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 187.
- <sup>14</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 9.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza: Complete Works*. ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002), 241-2.
- <sup>18</sup> Taylor & Francis Group, *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus with Other Original Documents Relating to This Four Voyages to the New World*. (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 24-5.
- <sup>19</sup> Spinoza, 302.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.
- <sup>22</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 9.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.
- <sup>26</sup> Nick Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique: Antillean Critical Theory from Toussaint to Glissant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 145.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-6.
- <sup>28</sup> Nick Nesbitt, "Critique de l'économie politique antillaise: Sur Glissant, Marx, et Althusser," *Archipels Glissant* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2020), 79-89.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Drabinski, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 89.

<sup>32</sup> Drabinski, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>34</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Macherey, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza: La première partie: La nature des choses* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1999), 93. Translation mine.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Translation mine. Original: "C'est précisément pour parvenir à comprendre ensemble unite et diversité, sans les confondre ni les séparer."

<sup>37</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Glissant, quoted in Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique*, 139-40.

<sup>42</sup> If, like Hegel, one were tempted to draw some kind of filial connection between Spinoza and Glissant, Deleuze would be the most direct link. Deleuze's dissertations, written concurrently in the 1960s, were "Spinoza et le problème de l'expression" (1969) and "Différence et répétition" (1968). The latter, in which Deleuze applies and reworks aspects of his reading of Spinoza, has impacted much Caribbean theory, from Glissant to the Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo, whose book *La isla que se repite* (1998) argues that order and disorder are not opposites in nature, and that the apparent chaos of the Caribbean forms an "island" of paradoxes that repeats itself, comprising a complex sociocultural archipelago.

<sup>43</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.