



## Ellipses, of Derrida and Glissant

---

*Xinyu H. Zhang*

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXXIII, No 1/2 (2025) pp 78-101.

Vol XXXIII, No 1/2 (2025)  
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)  
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)  
DOI 10.5195/jffp/2025.1106  
<http://www.jffp.org>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

**Pitt** | **Open  
Library  
Publishing**

This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](http://www.pitt.edu/openlibrarypublishing).

# Ellipses, of Derrida and Glissant

---

Xinyu H. Zhang

Cornell University

[D&G: the acronym of endearment for a philosophical couple, not Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995) and Félix Guattari (1930–1992) this time, but Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and Édouard Glissant (1928–2011).]

How to contain, to simultaneously host and hold (*con-tinere*) two thinkers—two irreducible figures of thought—with their two unexchangeable physical bodies? What will emerge out of it, and what will have *already* emerged out of it, by virtue of this sheer juxtaposition of the two, a parataxis itself initiated by a certain historical contingency, namely their contemporality or contemporariness, their having-found-themselves-together as mortal beings within discretely concrete time and space that is nevertheless structurally, experientially, and therefore *differently* shared, in which their paths overlay, intersect, reflect, emulate, traverse, subtend each other, sometimes confessedly so, yet more often unacknowledged:<sup>1</sup> The “Long Twentieth Century,” the *longue durée* of colonialism, capitalism, and geopolitics; Algeria, Martinique, France, a concurrent Africa(n past) of which they were both dispossessed; an ever-globalizing earth, an unprecedentedly planetarized world? But, moreover, how do we think their contemporaneity—biographical, factual—when each of them is so remarkably a thinker of discontinuity and dis-location, of anachrony and dis-placement, of the impossibility as well as undesirability of “identity,” of being self-identical?

Would we harness and obtain a certain *binocular* vision, whereby the two I-s / “eyes” synergically focalize upon a sole “object” and dialectically bring into relief a more stereoscopic world-reality, the synthesized unity of which is unachievable through the mere accumulation of monocular perceptions, which amounts, in this case, to the reading of only one thinker? Or does the very fact that there are two thinkers, two oeuvres and perspectives, induce a *parallax* view—not so much non-dialecticizable as irreducibly non-metabolizable—a “constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible”? For, as Slavoj Žižek writes, “The parallax is not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives on the same X: there is an irreducible asymmetry between the

two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective."<sup>2</sup> Instead of each complementing the other, each *is* the truth of the other precisely by dint of each exceeding and eluding the other. The differentiability between the two perspectives, therefore, is not to be ascribed to any conciliatory relativism, but an absolute rift (or, as Žižek calls it throughout, a “shift,” which perhaps has a somewhat witty connotation as in “work shift,” a certain philosophical opportunism [today *this* thinker, tomorrow *another*], yet drawing attention to an *interregnum* in-between the “shift”) within the very “object” thus observed; more importantly, a rift (“void”) within each perspective itself that remains incomplete in its own singularity: a dazzling “blind spot” at the heart of each, which each over-turns into the other’s blinding brilliance.

The vector, or spatial directionality, of the parallax reading, then, is necessarily that of “twisting,” or obliqueness, and it is precisely due to the irreducibility—the spatial duality and temporal simultaneity—of the two foci that they cannot be “held together” in whatsoever straight-forward, head-on, or directly confrontational manner. Therefore, to justly and philosophically couple D&G, and to indicate the *relation* between the two “incommensurable” parallax perspectives, I would like to propose a third figure, a figure of irreducible duality: *l’ellipse*, both a geometrical ellipse and a rhetorical ellipsis. Of course, this is already a “Derridean” figure,<sup>3</sup> and it may seem that Glissant has been cast into the shadow of Derrida from the very start and thus given lie to the initial insistence on their irreducible duality; for, as Derrida often reminds us, an ellipse/ellipsis can indeed morph into an eclipse. Yet to couple Derrida and Glissant through the figure of ellipse does not simply mean that we distribute and delegate Derrida and Glissant, symmetrically, to the two foci of a single ellipse, but also that there are, indeed, already *two* distinct ellipses (Derrida’s and Glissant’s respective non-identity and differentiability that constitutes them-selves) that cannot be telescoped into the selfsame one, as a third ellipse will always have manifested itself: the *relation*, as ellipsis between ellipses, between D&G.

To uphold the shape of thinking in this way, as well as the philosophical and figural relevance and vitality of the concept of duality—irreducible to that of dualism or binarism—is also to insist upon the irreducible dual sources of *experience*, which Derrida has designated as “artificiality,” “actuvirtuality” and “virtuactuality,”<sup>4</sup> or, what may be parallelly termed *systempircity*: the very simultaneity of systematicity and empiricity, commonality and singularity—perhaps yet another elliptical parallax. Somewhat counterintuitively, what is meant by “system” does *not* need to designate an engulfing mesh that paralyzes the volatility of empirical foison, but can name an intuited “coordinate plane” of totality always already imminently called into being by the very *complex* existence of actualities and empiricities. The repudiation of the conceptuality of system may as well attest to a phobia

about the always already effervescent interrelations, the celebrated Glissantian notion of *Relation*: in his words, “It’s not the system that needs to be criticized: it’s the fact that the system is systematic. That is what needs to be criticized. One can have non-systematic systems. [...] So it is not the notion of system that needs to be criticized, it’s the idea that the system forces you to move along a single route, to progress along a single route, forces you into linearities that no longer correspond to the present situation of the world and its chaotic organization.”<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the empiricities and actualities, “however singular, irreducible, stubborn, painful, or tragic [they] may be,”<sup>6</sup> are not spontaneously or autonomously self-realized as such; there remains a degree to which they are *made* empirical, as “empirical” is itself a name for a modality of appearance, a form of coherence. To realize this is to undo not only the alleged “passivity” of the empirical as something docilely dictated by the transcendental, but its apparent positivist “autonomy” in the name of which it often assumes the onto-ideological role of an intractable resistance against systematization. In Jean-Luc Nancy’s terms, the “irrepressible empiricity” of experience (“Here’s what happened, it’s happened to us”) is neither pure, self-contained, nor self-identical; rather, it is historically contaminated, for a *sense* of “History,” however shattered, persists: “Instead it is a question here of putting together what befalls us, in the non-purity of the event and the accident, the historical passage in which all sense of History is changed: wars and genocides, collapses of representation, the erosion of politics by global technology, the drifting of ‘unchained peninsulas’.”<sup>7</sup> The “will to system,” then, subsists *not* in the mechanistic concatenation of discrete singularities, but in the will to touch the *limits* of experience and its possibilities, the immediacy of which is mediated through a relation to itself which also fractures it: “The limit of what, in order to be itself and to be present to itself, does not come back to itself. The circle which at once doses itself off and fails to do so: an ellipsis” (“ES” 95). In a more figurative language, let us say that the systematicity of systemplicity does not coordinate singularities by pinning them down or mapping them out as if on a grid; rather, it indexes the *trembling* contour of the empirical, its historicity as a kind of “aura”: the ellipsis opened up at the very heart of everyday experience, the *espacement* or the opening of a space that is *proto*-collective and therefore cannot be purely privatized.

The necessity of such a concept (systemplicity) becomes evident in a discussion such as ours, for here we are not simply addressing the underdocumented empirical interactions between two thinkers (which is itself a formidable biographical, or intellectual historical, task), but also, synecdochically or rather elliptically, larger issues pressingly inscribed in the works of D&G, such as the sense of “common” (as much a question of being and ethics as of organization), the historical and contemporary conditions and possibilities of knowledge and philosophizing, the practice of writing, reading, and their socio-political *exigency*, as well as the finitude, if not mortality, of thinking and thinker. In other words, as will be seen, we will be

focusing on a moment of theoretical correspondence, if not appropriation (that is, Derrida's citation or application of Glissant). What happens when one thinker glimpses in another something that echoes their own, *more or less* the "same," ex-propriating the latter towards somewhere beyond its determinate locality? Is this a moment of universalization or specification, systematization or singularization, a *shared* origin or dissemination? Indeed, we have already been formulating some surreptitious Kantian questions, precisely around the unclosable ellipsis between the transcendental and empirical deduction, asking how the sense of *knowing* is to be transformed when there is no guaranteed "proofs from experience," or when, in the stead of a correlative origin, we discern rather an "ellipsis or eclipse of the origin," which makes "the condition of possibility of the origin itself" nevertheless thinkable ("ES" 91):

Among the many concepts [...] that constitute the very mixed fabric of human cognition, there are some that are also destined for pure use *a priori* (completely independently of all experience), and these always require a deduction of their entitlement, since proofs from experience are not sufficient for the lawfulness of such a use, and yet one must know how these concepts can be related to objects that they do not derive from any experience. I therefore call the explanation of the way in which concepts can relate to objects *a priori* their **transcendental deduction**, and distinguish this from the **empirical deduction**, which shows how a concept is acquired through experience and reflection on it, and therefore concerns not the lawfulness but the fact from which the possession has arisen.<sup>8</sup>

Let us then turn directly to an episode in Kant that treats such duality as a *problem*, an episode, interestingly, in which Kant introduces the conception of ellipse as one example, which allegorically stages the *tension* between the literal/empirical irregularity and its "solution" (which is figural/systemic, as we will see). This will help us address the knowledge-inducing confrontation between the couple of Derrida and Glissant, who form an elliptical relation precisely in relation to the question of *empiricity*—something amorphous, still quivering like an enigma.

In *Critique of Pure Reason*, having established the sequentiality from "senses" to "understanding" to "reason," "beyond which there is nothing higher to be found in us to work on the matter of intuition and bring it under the highest unity of thinking" (CPR 387), Kant reverse-engineers the working of reason, whose systematizing functionality will have facilitated the understanding of *what cannot be directly or empirically experienced* as such through the operation of "regulative principles," "through which reason, as far as it can, extends systematic unity over all experience" (CPR 611). I am referring to the "Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic," in which Kant discusses the "hypothetical" use of reason, which, unlike its "apodictic" use, is not *constitutive*, that is, not based upon an already-certain "universal";

instead, it pre-supposes the universal-to-come as a *guiding problem*, like a signpost that directs both toward and beyond the (mere) empirical probings and verifications, towards a certain principality, or “maxims of reason”: “I call all subjective principles that are taken not from the constitution of the object but from the interest of reason in regard to a certain possible perfection of the cognition of this object, **maxims** of reason” (CPR 603, emphasis original). It is therefore “regulative, bringing unity into particular cognitions as far as possible and thereby, **approximating** the rule to universality” (CPR 592, emphasis original). The “rule” thus approximated is not guaranteed, though; *it might not exist at all*: “One asserts not that [it] must in fact be found, but rather that one must seek it for the benefit of reason, namely for setting up certain principles for the many rules with which experience may furnish us, and that where it can be done, one must in such a way bring systematic unity into cognition” (CPR 594).

What is at stakes for Kant is, as usual, the possibility of knowledge, which must abide by the “benefit” or the “interest” of reason, whose working always *pre-supposes* a systemic unity. Yet Kant is acutely aware of the tension between the one and the many, simplicity and extension, the necessity and illusionality of positing such a unity of the manifold. He insists that even though this presupposition appears retroactive, metalectic, economic, and self-justifying, it issues from objectivity and conformity with nature: “such a selfish aim [the former] can easily be distinguished from the idea, in accordance with which everyone presupposes that this unity of reason conforms to nature itself; and here reason does not beg but commands, though without being able to determine the bounds of this unity” (CPR 595). It is not that “sameness” is the *telos* of knowledge, but that it is a necessary and transcendental condition, a “field” (without being a completely “solid” ground) for the possibility of knowledge and experience, whose manifoldness and differences are prepared by the *idea* rather than *factuality* of “sameness”: “sameness of kind is necessarily presupposed in the manifold of a possible experience (even though we cannot determine its degree *a priori*), because without it no empirical concepts [with which the understanding deals] and hence no experience would be possible” (CPR 596); “Reason thus prepares the *field* for the understanding [...]” (CPR 598, emphasis XZ).

We have already sensed how Kant proceeds not dogmatically but *figuratively*. The regulative use of reason, which allows us to “go much further than experience can reach” with the help of an “idea” (CPR 601), is operative not so much through deduction as figural “imagination,” insofar as it is not grounded in literality, but in a certain animating suspension or groundlessness. Kant proffers a mini-example of this: how the *figure* of ellipse (a literal ellipse, though) is necessitated and inaugurated to understand how the deviant movement of a celestial body, whose *empirically* irreducible differentiability (testifying to the “manifoldness” of experiential materials) from a “circle,” is nonetheless systematizable:

Hence if, e.g., the course of the planets is given to us as circular through a (still not fully corrected) experience, and we find variations, then we *suppose* these variations to consist in an orbit that can deviate from the circle through each of an infinity of intermediate degrees [*Zwischengrade*, in-between degrees] according to constant laws; i.e., we suppose that the movements of the planets that are not a circle will *more or less approximate* to its properties, and then we come upon the ellipse. (CPR 600–601, emphasis XZ)<sup>9</sup>

This example of the simultaneous deviation and derivation of an ellipse from a circle (and later, of parabola from ellipse, of hyperbola from parabola, etc.) seems to suggest that knowledge of things not empirically *present* (as directly given in intuition) yet empirically *manifested* (“we find,” *finden*)—things with a kind of *weak facticity*—is possible and attainable. The methodical cognition of such things consists in an accruing concatenation of figures and figurations rather than mere reduction, abstraction, or transgression. Thus, reason supplements the irregularity of experience with a systematicity that *prolongs* the task of understanding by introducing a kind of continual plasticity. Empirical variations and differences are grasped not through an arbitrary leap or a simple claim of discontinuity, but through a modulated, gradual chain of figural deformations (circle→ellipse→hyperbola→parabola).

What is interesting here is how the ellipse, while indeed literal, becomes figural in the “business of the understanding.” This is important because we tend to think of Kantian reason as subsumptive (continuity in a bad sense, engulfing differences). Indeed, this recursive and accumulative deduction of one figure out of another, making use of regulative principles that *suspend* each’s singularity by assuming them “under a [*single*] principle of unity,” is also named by Kant as a series of “conquests” [*Eroberungen*], a word with obvious politico-military connotations. The rhythmical cognition of celestial figures successively following each other is suddenly aggravated into *space warfare*: “from there we extend our conquests, seeking to explain all variations and apparent deviations from those rules on the basis of the same principle; finally we even add on more than experience can ever confirm [...], [uniting] in their course the most remote parts of a world system, which for us is unbounded yet connected through one and the same moving force” (CPR 601). Here, we discern an irony in Kant’s text: there seems to be a certain coloniality *inherent* in reasoning, which would open experientiality up to infinite speculative projections *ad absurdum*, a process in which the very singularity of the empirical is worn away. Thus, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s compact mention of the ellipse-episode, reason is unable to access singularity: “It is more like grasping the narrative lineaments of the figure—in this case describing stage practice—and seeing its instantiation in work as theater. [...] Circle after circle, perhaps the origin of geometry, ellipses, parabolas, asymptotes, this last giving a model of reason always operating by

approximation. And never access to a singularity. [...] Such a reading of a figure will not yield the singularity of the event.”<sup>10</sup>

Singularity, not approximated but really “captured” -- and yet Kant has said that the emphasis on singularity and differences may have already been motivated by the systematizing work of reason: “That there are absorbent earths of different species (chalky earths and muriatic earths) needed for its discovery a foregoing rule of reason that made it a task for the understanding to seek for varieties, by presupposing nature to be so abundant that it presumes them” (CPR 598). This, again, brings us to the figural use of reason as preparing a ground on which something can *appear*; the question that troubles the critical mind is: is such an appearance and visibility a ruse or a reality? In Kant, the differentiation of one figure from another is as much a *real* deviation (diversions and variations [*Verschiedenheiten*] do exist) as a work of “guessing” (*raten*, as Kant writes<sup>11</sup>) and co-implication (CPR 601):

this continuity of forms is a mere idea, for which a corresponding object can by no means be displayed in experience, **not only** because the species in nature are really partitioned [...] and if the graduated progress in their affinity were continuous, they would also have to contain a true infinity of intermediate members between any two given species, which is impossible; **but also** because we could make no determinate empirical use at all of this law, since through it there is indicated not the least mark of that affinity, or how and how far we are to seek the degrees of its variety; rather, we are given nothing more than a general indication that we are to seek for it. (CPR 600)

All in all, what is given is nothing but a feeble trace, an *allgemeine Anzeige*-- an *indication* not only of the impossibility (and absurdity) of any self-contained system, but also that the knower and the to-be-known, shorn of the assurance of the *real existence* of any “systematic unity,” are nevertheless joined, or held in common (*allgemeine*), somewhere still-to-be-found, directed towards it by no pre-determined direction, inviting us to re-examine and re-imagine the notions of systematicity and empiricity altogether.

I am suggesting that we read Kant’s mention of the ellipse miniaturely, in its trembling duality between the statuses of reality and hypothesis, distinguished here by “nothing” (the literal *is* already figural: the ellipse *is* an ellipse, yet already not one, thus being rhetorically elliptical): what if the ellipse does not merely defer singularity, but in fact structures its irruption as a generative (dis)figuration? That is, what if the ellipse manifests a kind of singularity not as a given moment, but as a relational event, as spacing, deviation, trembling? Kant’s own gesture, i.e. deriving the ellipse not from the manifold of sense, but from the *figural exigency* of systematizing experience in order to initiate the possibility of knowing, suggests as much. The ellipse becomes less a failure of singularity and more a condition of appearance. The ellipse here, as in one of Derrida’s earliest iterations of the

figure, originates in an initiatory or primal scene of suppositional differentiation, the ellipse being a figure of originary dispersion and differentiability—not an origin, but what redoubles it, “takes its place”: “Once the center or the origin have begun by repeating themselves, by redoubling themselves, the double did not only add itself to the simple. It divided it and supplemented it. There was immediately a double origin plus its repetition. Three is the first figure of repetition. The last too, for the abyss of representation always remains dominated by its rhythm, infinitely.”<sup>12</sup>

Proof and “guess-work,” the two incommensurable foci of reasoning, bifurcating there where the unknown undeniably marks itself at the heart of the known, in which the empiricity of the “ellipse,” manifestable by inference rather than reference, cannot be called merely speculative because it has already *indicated* an alteration of the spatio-structural imagination of the circle, which, as Kant reminds us, is itself unexamined (“still not fully corrected”). Thus, the ellipse mutates into a figure whose empiricity is ever-absent and always to come, as a figure of the ever-absenting yet ever-presenting *empiricity-to-come*.

We detour here back to D&G, availing ourselves of the (literal) figure of ellipse—which we retraced as *indicating* a structure of empiricity-to-come or system-empiricity—to name the relation between the two thinkers: a relation remaining elliptical, oblique, non-frontal, speculative, yet-to-be-fleshed-out and yet-to-come, with no proof, syncopated by many ellipses, both rhetorical and experiential, both virtual and actual, both systematic and empirical—a relation of the “internally differential errance from circular perfection that remains obscure to classical perspective, recessed from view, as a result.”<sup>13</sup> We will heed the system-empiricity (neither purely empirico-biographical nor system-conceptual) thus obliquely “recessed from view” yet already complicating Derrida and Glissant *somewhere*, however unacknowledged and inappreciable. That is, the system-empiricity of their dual *bodies*, constituting the dual foci around which we will revolve: their individual physical bodies, each singular and finite, each a mortal among other mortals; their bodies of work, the oeuvres and archives, both originating in French, yet circulating through all the languages of the world. Along the way, we will also be attentive to the very act of reading and writing, for we do not simply read the figure of ellipse/ellipsis, but ask how that figure complicates the sense in which an event is readable/unreadable, the division between which always inscribes a rhetorico-political exigency—or rather, anxiety.

An excerpt from Édouard Glissant’s 1981 thesis *Le Discours antillais* opens Jacques Derrida’s 1996 book *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre* as its first epigraph. The passage is taken from the section “Langage et identité,” which belongs to the recurring series “Repères,” rhythmically interspersed between chapters as “stenographic” notes to be elaborated upon, while providing a contextual reality-check for the surrounding analysis. “Langage et identité” addresses specifically the problematic of language acquisition in the colonial

educational system: “Il est des vérités qu’il faut élucider quand on examine les problèmes de langage chez les jeunes Martiniquais scolarisés”; after this sentence, Derrida begins to quote Glissant’s endemic “vérités”:

Le « manque » n’est pas dans la méconnaissance d’une langue (le français), mais dans la non-maîtrise d’un langage approprié (en créole ou en français). L’intervention autoritaire et prestigieuse de la langue française ne fait que renforcer les processus du manque.

La revendication de ce langage approprié passe donc par une révision critique de la langue française [...]

Cette révision pourrait participer de ce qu’on appellerait un anti-humanisme, dans la mesure où le domesticage par la langue française s’exerce à travers une mécanique de l’« humanisme ».<sup>14</sup>

A series of silent excision, marked and unmarked, has taken place here in the epigraph, the unpagged beginning, *the beginning of the beginning* (that of Derrida’s text, which began as a talk he delivered in 1992 at a colloquium hosted by Glissant at the Louisiana State University, probably their first encounter worthy of the name), beginning or “origin” redoubled. Let us note, then, the ellipsis in the middle passage:

| <i>Glissant</i>   | <i>Glissant quoted by Derrida</i>   |
|---|---|
| <p>La revendication de ce langage approprié passe donc par une révision critique de <i>l’emploi</i> de la langue française <i>en Martinique</i></p> | <p>La revendication de ce langage approprié passe donc par une révision critique de la langue française [...]</p> |

With an ellipsis, Derrida removes “*en Martinique*” (in Martinique); without any ellipsis, he elides altogether “*l’emploi*” (the “employment and use” of the French language, but also the “job and work” of it in Martinique: a forced appropriation, a language around which is the double genitive of “revendication”—an enforcement assuming and appropriating us, taking us towards itself and asserting *its* ownership of us, but also *to* which *we*, too, stake a claim and air our demands of appropriation). Not only *an* ellipsis, but a *doubled* ellipsis, *an ellipsis of the ellipsis*, is structuring this rare moment of frontal encounter between Derrida and Glissant—the elision revolving precisely around the empiricity of that which articulates (joins and joints) them systematically: not only the French language and the general structure of language as such, but a *colonially* controlled calculation and appropriation of that language and that structure: Derrida’s Algeria, Glissant’s Martinique.<sup>15</sup>

How to read and regard this *mise-en-abîme* ellipsis between the two foci of the ellipse, of D&G? Why does Derrida “dis-possess” Glissant’s text of all its empirical determinations? One can tender here only several permissible

(and, why not, impermissible) readings, shuttling between *guess-work and proof*.

(1) One can read the ellipsis from the perspective of the rhetorico-spatio-temporal economy of publishing, writing, and argumentation (Kant has already mentioned the “economic” “interest” of reason). In order to make a *point*, Derrida has to prune the *lines* from Glissant, so as to re-concentrate them in alignment with a *new focus*, to simultaneously de-focalize and re-focalize, therefore redoubling the focus, necessitated by the expropriation and prosthetic grafting taking place here. It is, then, a play or dramaturgy of presence, or rather *presenting*: “dividing presence, eliding it and making it plural” (“ES” 94); an apparatus of appearance (making something present) in which the spatial logic *is* also a temporal logic.

Thus, the *rhythm* or speed of writing and analysis, specified by the singular occasion, is also decisive. At least two possibilities emerge here: *on one hand*, the preterition may be strategic on Derrida’s part with regard to an economy and calculation of intention, attention, and memory, so that what has been elided and excluded *returns* with greater force when *re-introduced*. *On the other*, what is dis-regarded and eclipsed here is something to which Derrida does *not* have the time and space to return, the lack of which is attributable either to his intentionality, or the innate difficulty, immensity and irreducible singularity of that which is being evoked; in other words, it must be glided over and deferred for now. (This is a gesture Derrida tends to make in his talks, interviews, and writings, ever-increasingly publicized, attuned to new *rhythms* of techno-tele-communication: “Permit me an ellipsis here since I do not have much more time or space.” “I gave up answering such an enormous question a while ago, but I’ll try an elliptic answer, because it’s impossible for me to say something short and clear.”<sup>16</sup>) Derrida, thus deprived of the time and space *for* specification, deprives Glissant of Martinique’s ineffable presence, specificity and locality. But “deprivation” falls short in describing what takes place here; if an ellipsis marks an alteration, it alters as much as it is altered: it not only cuts and deprives, but also prolongs and pluralizes. In Derrida’s act of truncating and vacating, he can thus also *capitalize* [*capitaliser*] (one of his favorite words) on lack and loss, as another (surplus) time and space is simultaneously generated, and the blank or lack is seminal and generative: an emptied blank, a structural clearing for the empiricity-to-come, to be later filled with *his own* irreducible empirical specificity, his being the “most Franco-Maghrebian in the world,” the singularity of which constitutes an exemplarity attesting just as well as Glissant’s Martinique to the structuration of language and culture, namely the originary non-appropriation, shared, *however unevenly and asymmetrically*, by *both* the colonized *and* colonizer, the black *and* white:

On the part of one who speaks or writes the aforementioned language, this experience of monolingual solipsism is never one of belonging, property, power of mastery, pure “ipseity” (hospitality or hostility) of

whichever kind. Though the “non-mastery ... of an appropriated language” of which Glissant speaks qualifies, above all [*en premier lieu*], more literally and more sensitively, some situations [*des situations*] of “colonial” alienation or historical servitude, this definition, so long as it is imprinted with the requisite inflections, also carries well beyond these determinate conditions. It also holds for what would be called the language of the master, the *hospes*, or the colonist.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Derrida leaps “beyond ... determinate conditions” imposed by the a priori asymmetrical framing of “colonization” (note the quotation marks around “colonial”), moving towards *the other colonization* that cannot be silenced or bracketed, coupling “colonization” and colonization with the dual occurrences of “also.” The locality from which Glissant speaks is undoubtedly a *premier lieu*, primary and primarily exemplary, marked by brutal and poignant embodiment and literalization of the structural impossibility of auto-appropriation, perversely manifested and enacted by the system of colonial violence, both in Martinique, Algeria, and the metropolis of France.<sup>18</sup> Derrida concedes *adverbially*, in other words attitudinally and principally, the specificity of *this* colonial violence when he writes Glissant’s analysis of Martinique “qualifies, above all, *more literally and more sensitively*” the case of linguistic-*qua*-existential “non-mastery.” Yet, the partitive article in the plural *des* he employs (to bring back the elision of *l’emploi*) here to speak of *the* situation in Martinique folds it again back into the generalizability immanent to *each* self-contained example.

The very indefiniteness associated with *des* may thus divulge (1) a tautological bad faith or the commonplace of “bad” history (colonialism is colonialism insofar as it is colonialism, operative everywhere the *same way*), (2) the double bind of theorization and aporia of exemplarity (not that the Martinique situation is *not* singular, but its singularity is not an end-in-itself, for it is already structured by an iterability and generalizability, already inscribed into a systematicity overdetermined “elsewhere”), and (3) the possibility that the singularity of Martinique is kept intact in its entirety, in all aspects and all manners impracticable to enumerate and tabulate *here and now*; it is therefore foreshadowed and compressed to such a degree that only a climactic future unveiling will match its intensity; but this would then present a formidable task for *another* work altogether. The vacated Martinique can thus further figure, to use Rei Terada’s terms (which have been elliptically guiding our reading of ellipse here), “the far end of the ellipse, where we cannot tell what happens” (“SoF” 244), as the act/virtuality of what is deferred to, and constitutive of, *the other focus* remains indeterminate. As Nancy suggests, ellipsis may indeed inscribe not only a loss, but an irreversible *loss of loss* yielding no longer any plenitude correlative of loss-*qua*-opening: “It indicates that something else is subject to ellipsis, something we cannot and must not know. It lets us know that we are really and truly missing something” (“ES” 105).

A pair of parallaxic or antinomic reading can be gleaned from here: Ellipsis is absolutely irresponsible and deprives the elided of its return. -- Ellipsis is the only responsible way in which one can do justice to that which is impossible to appear *here*, where its singularity, in being eclipsed, is resolutely *affirmed*. In his own (often elliptical, one is tempted to say even un-systematic, only to release the already-implied systempircity) references to the figure of ellipse/ellipsis in other's texts, Derrida shows full awareness of this rhetorical economy.<sup>19</sup> However, this rhetorical economy of writing is gauged only within an economy of *reading*: the undecidability about ellipsis' being (ir)responsible is encased in a "criterion" (a system) up against which ellipsis is to be read and valorized as a *response* to some exigency of reading, or in other words, to a certain *pre-established* and already *preferred* reading, which only feigns the legitimacy of a "zero-degree" reason in and of itself.

Here I would like to detour once more, this time through Jacques Rancière's reading of Louis Althusser's ellipses, so as to return, as promised, to the rhetorico-political exigency/anxiety inhering in the division and decision between readability and unreadability, responsibility and irresponsibility--informing perhaps as much Derrida's reading of Glissant as my own of Derrida. So far we have been suggesting that ellipsis figures the modulation of the readability and unreadability of the given, a *valve* of appearance or appearing as it were (its being here or there, implicit or overt, invisible or visible etc.). The eclipsed question for Rancière, however, is no longer, as for Nancy, how a text is legible (makes "sense") only insofar as it has already read or repeated itself, withdrawing from, in order to return to, itself: "in order to be itself and to be present to itself," it "does not come back to itself" but rather moves circularly in which the circle "at once closes itself off and fails to do so," forming an ellipsis "like a mouth around its paired foci" from which a laughter bursts out: a laughter over the enjoyment of the self-differential body ("ES" 95, 96). Rancière discerns--"to discern, strictly, means to see between [to glimpse, *entrevoir*], it is barely to see, or to guess, in an ellipsis of the eye" ("ES" 107)--another eclipsed question, shifting the presence or coming-into-presence of a text into the other *socius*, no longer the single contingency of self-relation but the *double* contingency of reading: what is the relation (the [dis]continuity) between what *is* in the text and what *appears* from the text, between the text and the reading of it? In other words, what makes a text a priori legible or illegible, a foundational anxiety also tackled in the Kantian episode we read above?

For Althusser, per Rancière, the self-differentiability of the text *produces* (etymologically "*pro-ducere*, to lead forward, to make obvious what is latent"): it generates a response to one question, yet, in answering that question, it produces the answer to an-other question heterogenous to the initial field of legibility, visibility, or *responsibility*: "It cannot see this answer since it answers a question that it did not ask [a question "it did not know it was answering"], that the very structure of the field forbids it from posing to

itself.”<sup>20</sup> Althusser’s typographical figure for these already-answered yet still-missing questions is “two parentheses enclosing a blank,” and later, “dotted lines” or “ellipses” (“A” 133). For Rancière, the ellipsis constitutes now a site of knowledge production condensing a social *drama*, a structure of address, a pedagogical practice, as well as a “dramaturgy unique to the philosophical text”: reading, a seemingly mute act, is seen to be structured as a dialogue, a complex relation between questions and answers, as “the relationship of the *seen* and of the *not-seen* must be specified as the relationship of an *answer* to a *non-question* [...]”<sup>21</sup> (“A” 141, 133, emphasis original). The blanks opened by the ellipsis, wherein visibility is suspended, demarcate the place of the invisibles only *too visibly*; ellipsis summons their absence into a state of presence, demanding the formulation of “right” questions and answers. The distinctions between “absence” and “presence” thus lose their conceptual force, as we consistently confront nothing “but inclusion,” perpetually creating and presupposing *community*. What is presumed, then, is an *omni*-presence that allows each text to be recognized as “a structure of knowledge,” whereas knowledge is guaranteed by “the textual continuum, composed of answers and questions that are not matched, are still waiting to be matched” (“A” 136, 135).

In Rancière’s reading, ellipsis feigns a non-relation, the presenting of which *as non-relation* has already marked it *as a relation*; better yet, by carving out a blank space, ellipsis precisely feigns a *relation*: “Always it poses relation as including non-relation and excluding the void” (“A” 142). The responsibility of *productive* reading—to restore the “right” questions (still missing) to the “right” answers (already found and offered)—is to induce a performative act, wherein one claims the restoration of an allegedly inherent legibility to the initial text, which is, in fact, *founded* by the new reading itself. In other words, it establishes its own legibility by purportedly discovering it within another text; its act of founding pretends to be an act of rediscovery, masking a claim of continuity in the guise of discontinuity. What is at stake is a peculiar readability-*qua*-reversibility, which doubles as a psycho-rhetorical mechanism of projective identification, whereby self-differentiability becomes indiscernible except as relational differentiability. Relationality or sociality veils an overwhelming solitude, if not sovereignty, and the pluralization of focus functions as both an acknowledgement of differentiability and a repudiation of it, since pluralization can indeed mask a form of polarization, akin to a psychotic split, all in an effort to conjure up “the proof, by evasion itself, that the exit is indeed at the end” (“A” 143). In the field of reading, Derrida has also discerned “a juridicosymbolic violence, a performative violence at the very heart of interpretative reading,” inciting “temptations of deconstruction” vis-à-vis sociopolitical exigencies:

Only the “to-come” [*avenir*] will produce the intelligibility or the interpretability of this law [*loi*]. [...] the order of intelligibility depends in its turn on the established order which it serves to interpret. This

readability will then be as little neutral as it is nonviolent. A “successful” revolution, the “successful” foundation of a state (in somewhat the same sense that one speaks of a “felicitous performative speech act”) will produce after the fact [*après coup*] what it was destined *in advance* to produce, namely, proper interpretative models to read in return, to give sense, necessity and above all legitimacy to the violence that has produced, among others, the interpretative model in question, that is, the discourse of its self-legitimation.<sup>22</sup>

What would a reading of ellipsis, an elliptical reading, be, when each act of reading or interpretation necessarily proceeds elliptically, (at)tempting to legitimate itself by differing from and deferring itself to a “to-come”? What leap was Derrida making when he eclipsed “Martinique,” jumping from “colonization” to colonization, as though Glissant held the “right” answer to the “wrong” question, thus necessitating a re-marking of the latter’s text? Was the ellipsis, as well as the quotation marks, delineating the place in which something is “suspended and at the same time placed in the space of its knowledge: a common space, even exemplarily common,” a place of “an answer without a question, awaiting the identification of its question” (“A” 144), the *right* question that Derrida, driven by a particular *passion* for writing and reading, will ask and demand in its absence? And what if, as we have been suggesting, ellipsis is “as little neutral as it is nonviolent”?

(2) Yet the rhetorical economy of ellipsis also eclipses and shrouds the other economy, bordering on, indeed, *the other of economy*. As Terada reminds us, Derrida often links the rhetorical ellipsis to the necessity of an autoimmune silence and reticence: “something, for Derrida, is preserved or kept safe autoimmunely by this objective reticence of terms he wants to call ‘irreducible.’ [...] The language of irreducibility promotes preservation, even to the end of time: its tropes are figures of residue, excess, and rebound, on one hand, and ellipsis, elusion, and secret, on the other. [...] reticence, secrecy, and denegation respond to the fear of reduction” (“SoF” 244, 243). This is what Terada calls, after Derrida himself, his irreducible “scruples.” Once more, Derrida is not unaware of the ambivalence of this rhetorical economy *and* its other, for he has avowed himself precisely (but this punctuating cadence of “precisely” is precisely the mark of calculation?) with a figure of *alteration* (a self-divided and -dividing ellipsis): “the economy *or* the discretion of the ellipse with which one credits a writing.”<sup>23</sup> Economy, *or* discretion, *or* scruples, is what prompts Derrida to employ (always strategically, therefore economically, against *another* economy) the ellipsis in the epigraph, concerning the singularity and specificity of Martinique and the employment/employing of the French language *there*, on the other shore, at the far end, of which he will speak only obliquely, of which he avoids speaking, which he prefers to let be, which also means that he, abiding by the “non-mastery” of the language of the other, refuses to reduce it to knowability, transparency, and “mastery” (all in all, so much can and has

been said, especially in Glissant's works, about *this* that Derrida remains respectful and *therefore* reticent).<sup>24</sup> But obliqueness still remains in *relation* to a certain economy: "a strategy that is still crude, obliged to ward off what is most urgent, a geometric calculus for diverting as quickly as possible both the frontal approach and the straight line: presumed to be the shortest path from one point to another."<sup>25</sup>

Here is yet another parallax: ellipse is the figure of obliqueness and deceleration, but it traces also the "shortest path" and a subtending, accelerating movement of traversal, oriented towards the *other end*, *the end of the Other* (the double genitive once again at work); it is *both* the preservation and guardianship of singularity and its imminence, *and* the reservation and capitalization of the latter's availability and activatability, always kept on the edge—at the *risk* of falling off the edge, the edge marking not simply a limit but a beginning, catastrophic: "the reserve of what is thus held in reserve, with difficulty [*à peine*; hardly, to pain], and with great difficulty, contained by the floodgate, a precarious floodgate that allows one to apprehend the catastrophe. The worst can happen at every turn" (M 47–48/80). Thus, ellipse conveys both a promise and a threat, inscribed by and inscribing the "horizontality" of horizon, that which is itself not a finite horizon yet, but that possibilizes the latter. Indeed, ellipse is constitutively a horizontal yet rhizomatic figure, elongating itself *before* acquiring depth—though not into an abyssal void:

As soon as I speak, before even formulating a promise, an expectation, or a desire *as such*, and when I still do not know what will happen to me or what awaits me at the end of a sentence, neither *who* nor *what* awaits whom or what, I am within this promise or this threat [*menace*]—which, from then on [*dès lors*], gathers [*rassemble*] the language [*la langue*] together [...] thus gathered together in its very dissemination. (M 21–22/42–43, emphasis original)

At the far end of the ellipse, where the language is assembled and reassembled, from and towards which the language rebounds, there exists not yet a determinate horizon. Language *re*-bounds (on itself, on us); it is the experience of limits, the passion of limits: "To appeal to the limit is not to set out to conquer a territory. It is not to lay claim to boundaries or borders [...] to demand the limit as such is to demand what cannot be appropriated. It is to demand nothing, an infinite exposition which takes place at the limit, the abandonment to this space without space that is the limit itself" ("ES" 95). The retreating and disseminating traces of this horizonless horizon, spaceless space, limitless limit, *from then on*, *from there*, vector and orient me, employing the double revendication of which we spoke earlier.

If, with the ellipsis, Derrida veils Glissant's Martinique (appearing at the *end* of the sentence) and immerses its singularity (*ce langage approprié*) in the irreducibility and indivisibility of *the* French language itself (*la langue*

*française*), has he not also de-specified French, in emphasizing its being-language-ness, its being *one* language—even though there is no such thing, if only because it has always been self-divided into *langage* and *langue*<sup>26</sup>—amongst all the languages in the world, here (where? US? France? Algeria?) as well as there (Martinique?), *everywhere*? For the reticence about Martinique *here*, in the epigraph exemplifying “une révision critique de la langue française,” also subtly obscures the reticence about *all the other languages in the world* that Derrida nevertheless addresses: the second epigraph from Abdelkebir Khatibi, juxtaposed with Glissant, is about language as such: “Là, une naissance à la *langue* [...].” What gathers Derrida’s language here, *from then on*, that is to say from the pluralized beginnings of beginning (the epigraphs), is the ellipsis at the heart of the empirical as its systempircity—each beginning a “random” point of *entrée*, resulting precisely from, or constituting, a decision that can never self-justify: “the randomness of place and moment, the simple facticity of discerning. The *incipit* gives the origin and the principle of the system in the register of the empirical” (“ES” 108, emphasis original).<sup>27</sup> Thus, between here and there, between *langage* and *langue*, between Martinique and the world, between French and language-as-such, is this irreducible and undecidable—therefore infinitely complex, inextricable, unsimplifiable, and *generative*—duality, this infinite nearness or distance that must be preserved and reserved, for “justice” rather than justification.

Perhaps this is the reason why Derrida proffers ellipse/ellipsis as the figure for the experience of democracy at the opening of *Voyous*. “Between the ‘minus one’ and the ‘more than one,’ democracy perhaps has an essential affinity with this turn or trope that we call the ellipsis. The elliptical sending would arrive by e-mail, and we would read: ‘The democracy to come: it is necessary that it give the time there is not.’”<sup>28</sup> Here—because we find ourselves *here* empirically “in the mortality of a day, in the undeniable finitude of the ephemeral” (ibid.)—is bound to the traces of what is *not* here yet surrounding here, the “lack” of “minus-one,” minus-here; but precisely because of that, “more than one” focus (the focus “there is not”) is given, transcribing the singular self-relation of *here* as the duality between *here* and *not-there*: “ici et non là, là et non ici” (M 47/80). Ellipse: a spacing, then, infinitely generating and creating more spaces and *turns*, rendering the empirical reality *hospitable*, carving room for unsolicited and uninvited guests-to-come, who will host us.

*Ici et non là, là et non ici*. Will we have thus folded what is *there* back into its not-being-here, and consequently, into being-here? Yet the there, insofar as it is this horizontality without horizon, directionality without direction, parallel to that rigorous, severe, and desert-like [*désertique sévérité*] messianicity “shorn of everything” prior to all messianisms (M 68/128), is not just *there*; it is contaminated and effectuated by another reversibility (*dès lors*), no longer the one guaranteeing self-relation and self-legibility, but a

*transformability*. As Julia Ng writes, each act of meaning-making relies on a certain reversibility: the ability to circularly relate to itself. However, by thus claiming self-identity as the source of meaning, it simultaneously disrupts the spatiotemporal hierarchy between the “original” and the “secondary,” the initiatory party seeking for relating and “the related.” This reversibility-*qualibility* introduces then “a structural indeterminacy of the text, an ‘undecidability’ that haunts all forms of founding and conserving meaning” (“UR” 12). Reversibility therefore needs to appear *as* irreversibility in order to regulate the hierarchy of appearance in favor of a sovereignty before oneself: a reversal of reversal, then, which entails the reinforcing of “presence *as* presence—lending the sort of reversibility found within it [...] a peculiar quality of conservation, of irreversibility” (“UR” 29, emphasis original), paradoxically tying the possibility of self-identity to that of self-differentiability while sustaining the semblance of reversibility between the two. However, another reversibility is also at play, in which one party and its counterpart, initially engaged in a mutually incongruent or heterogenous relation on one register, suddenly becomes coupled in a reversibility; this connection has already been established and realized *elsewhere*, on another register, in another place, even though the perceptibility and experientiality of this “elsewhere” are deemed illegible by the former register, which is alleged to be the sole parameter of and for reality. “At minimum,” then, the establishment of a different order of reality or totality by separating it into two regions—two foci, namely, the legible and illegible—also “renders an illegibility newly legible *as* an illegible source” (“UR” 33, emphasis original).<sup>29</sup>

The ellipsis of D&G around “Martinique,” therefore, also marks the effect of this *other* reversibility, whereby the there—deemed somehow illegible, distant, phantasmatic, barely perceptible according to the “context” onto which it is grafted here—is inscribed and initiated into another sense of a *duality* of there and here, one no longer based upon the calculus of presence and absence, nearness and distance, part and whole, means and ends, even particularity and universality, *even though that language remains*; it inhabits instead the “tasteless” if not “unthinkable” site of the nonuniversal, “the nonparticular and the antisingular,” which *cannot* maintain its purity and *cannot not* become appropriated by “the universal”<sup>30</sup>:

- [...] We are there [*Nous y sommes*].
- Do you mean we belong among them [*Nous en sommes*]?
- Who, upon reading and understanding us properly, here [*ici*] ...
- Here?
- ... or there [*ou là*], will dare to have someone believe the opposite? Who would dare claim to prove it? Being here [*Que nous soyons ici*: That we are here] in an element of which the spectral phantasmaticity *cannot, under any circumstances, be reduced* does not imply that political and

historical terror is alleviated on that account, quite the contrary. For there are situations, experiences, and subjects who are, precisely, in a *situation* (but what does *situating* mean in this case?) to testify exemplarily to them. *This exemplarity is no longer reducible to that of an example in a series.* Rather, it would be the exemplarity—remarkable and remarking—that allows one to read in a more dazzling, intense, or even *traumatic* manner the truth of a universal necessity. [...] It is reality itself [...]. (M 25–26/48–49, emphasis on “[ir]reducibilities” mine, otherwise original)

Yes, yes. The politico-historico-colonial terror or trauma is *not* one example among many; its singularity—the singularities of life—resists mere substitution, which would be a poignant and *literal* mistake: traffic(k)ing humans as text within the general economics of metaphorics, abstracting and reducing the existential to *nothing but* the symbolic. Yet, the very appearance of irreversibility and irreplaceability projected by these various forms of institutionalized violence is *also* the means through which they justify, legitimize, and consecrate themselves, closing off the transformability and plasticity inhering in each reversal-*qua*-traversal in the name of a spatiotemporal irreversibility that asserts historicity as an unilinear catastrophe: by adopting the violence that seemingly destroys and violates laws and claiming, in turn, the irrefutable exigency for restoration, they mimetically duplicate the “law-positing violence in respect to violence that asserts and conserves itself in the guise of law” (“UR” 31), passing violence off—legitimizing its own historicity as the only source of historicity—as the sole parameters of and for justice. Indeed, it is through bringing out this “universal,” paradigmatic, originary relation between the unfounded foundation of law and violence, that Derrida arrives at *an-other* undecidability, totally other to the horizon of law, namely: justice, impossible. *From then on*, one begins to ask, “at minimum”: whence “the reliance of conservatism on violence that asserts and perpetuates itself in the moral sphere and in the guise of law,” “the inseparability of the conservation of legal violence from its appearance as irreplaceable and irreversible”? (“UR” 33)

Thus, the “there” (“Martinique”) is already “here” (“Algeria”); their unstitutability is reversible on *another* register—that of “systempircity,” irreducible to the (ir)reducibility of singular empiricities. The ellipse of “there” testifies not to a post-racial, or even post-colonial reality, but “la réalité même,” reality itself: not a transcendental purity, but an *empircity-to-come*. The excess of the empirical is no longer to be projected as the *excess of the political* (both in the sense of a hindrance to constructing political unity, and the lack of necessity for political organization due to self-sufficiency of empirical succulences); the singular empiricities—abounding, unbounded—will continue to evade, elude, appropriate, and be bestowed with different names, names that seek to provide a measure, a *demand*, for totality.<sup>31</sup> “La réalité même,” then, is not somewhere abstractly outside *this* world, but definitely outside the order of coloniality and colonialism that strives to

totalize itself into the sole parameter, the sole determinate horizon, for and of reality. The lesson of deconstruction consists not, or not only, in the dazzlement of the kind of fetishistic (dis)avowal, at best neutralizing, at worst apologetic, such as “All culture is originarily colonial” (*M* 39/68),<sup>32</sup> but rather, as in many of Derrida’s later works (on monolingualism, hospitality, forgiveness, etc.), how that “universal” and paradigmatic structure already calls for, implies, and actualizes its inverted antinomy, equally phantasmatic, which means equally *real*: *No culture is originarily colonial*. What renders such a reversal possible is, therefore, neither culture, nor coloniality, but a systemirical *something* which “does not do nothing,” despite (because of) the imminence of its empiricity-to-come; there, not here, yet not fictive at all, already empirically at work in *everything* (suggesting that we may need to reconceptualize empiricity altogether).<sup>33</sup>

Is Derrida’s *desert* the figure for this somewhere else, arid, barren, unconditioned, yet a “structural opening,” an enigmatic *as-such* perhaps misleadingly termed “universal,” non-assimilable to anything yet giving rise to everything, and “reversible,” in the sense that it *can* be glimpsed from *everything*, however obliquely? (For Rancière, Althusser’s “madness” stems from the fear of the desert, “fear of speaking in the wilderness, the fear of the letter without addressee” [“A” 145]. Althusser *must* ensure an addressee in the text—and who else but the text “itself”? The ellipsis then becomes a spectral playmate, or a toy, conjured up to alleviate the solitude of writing.)

“A Judeo-Franco-Maghrebian genealogy does not clarify everything, far from it. But could I explain anything without it, ever? No, nothing, [...] of what isolates me in a kind of almost involuntary retreat, a desert that I sometimes have the illusion of ‘cultivating’ by myself, of surveying *like* a desert [...] what little taste, but also what ‘ethics,’ what ‘politics!’” (*M* 71–72/133, emphasis original)

[...]

Perhaps, to cite (Derrida’s citation of Glissant, my own citations of Kant, etc.) is to be entangled in a kind of systemiricality: not merely to resort to the legitimacy and authority of the other’s words as an “origin,” nor merely to discover oneself in the other (the inability to recognize, as we have mentioned, self-differentiality except as relational differentiality). To cite is to introduce an ellipse, elliptical, with all its ambiguity.

Nothing takes place in the ellipsis. Everything takes place in the ellipsis. In vacating and withholding Glissant’s “Martinique” *from* and *at* the far end of the ellipse/ellipsis, Derrida exerts his discretion by way of obscuring and (fore)shadowing, soliciting a careful reading that is at best vigilant, at worst trivial, if not boring (as the one practiced *here*). Which is the case, and what

takes place within the ellipsis, we cannot pre-emptively, nor even retrospectively, say. Or know. Who can speak in and for the ellipse? No one is forbidden from appropriating it. Before itself, the ellipse is already other to itself, figuring not so much sovereignty as an a priori disenfranchisement. Yet, undecidability endures; the untold, the unknown, *is* not fictive: “If it occurs at all, it happens out of sight, at the far end of the ellipse, where we can’t see and don’t know; it occurs, if at all, in the ellipsis of the sentence, something untold. [...] Only experience can answer that question, and we are not standing at the end of time—a perspective to which any claim of reducibility or *irreducibility* must leap” (“SoF” 256, 253, emphasis original).

What if one wishes to give an *account* of and a *reason* to the ellipsis, employing not only proving and analyzing of a logocentric kind, but also narrating and storytelling (*relating*), either to legitimate or denounce the ellipsis? Making the two shores of the marine ellipsis perfectly converge on a ground, a landmass, filling in the ellipse only to make it collapse, in the hope of ending the infinite speculation around what appears to be merely a textual accident—a contingency for which no reasoning will suffice, and no proof and evidence can saturate, a contingency remaining, insatiable? Yet, “Si la clôture n’est pas la fin, nous avons beau protester ou déconstruire”:<sup>34</sup> Not only “If closure is not end, we protest or deconstruct in vain,” but also: we may *as well* protest or deconstruct, we *nevertheless* protest or deconstruct, we protest or deconstruct *despite everything*, regardless of failure or success. Yes, yes. This essay has been imbued with the spirit of that simultaneous resoluteness and surrender.

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Transcriptions of two dialogues exist: “Fragments d’une discussion,” transcribed by F. Gaillard and S. Regazzoni, *Annali della Fondazione Europea del Designo (Fondation Adami)* 2 (2006): 105-112; “Dialogue entre Édouard Glissant et Jacques Derrida, Le 6 novembre 1993 à Strasbourg (Parlement international des écrivains),” [edouardglissant.world/lieux/jacques-derrida-edouard-glissant/](http://edouardglissant.world/lieux/jacques-derrida-edouard-glissant/) (accessed Dec 4, 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2006), 4, 29.
- <sup>3</sup> The figure of ellipse/ellipsis has been fleshed out in two elegiac articles from 2007, in which the authors mourn and inherit Derrida’s irreducible legacy: Rei Terada, “Scruples, or, Faith in Derrida,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (2007): 237-264; Victor Li, “Elliptical Interruptions: Or, Why Derrida Prefers *Mondialisation* to Globalization,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7, no. 2 (2007): 141-154. I also followed the elliptical map bequeathed by the late Lauren Berlant, who assembled a small archive of ellipsis (Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacques Rancière) and promised their own study of that figure, which would foreground “the internal activity of the scene of animated suspension” rather than the “circular temporalities in the relation of *x* metaphysical concept to its supplement.” See “Starved,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 443n16.
- <sup>4</sup> “The Deconstruction of Actuality,” in *Negotiations, Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 86.
- <sup>5</sup> Glissant, “Rethinking Utopian,” in *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, [1996] 2020), 111. Alexandre Leupin has illuminated the “non-systematic system” or the impulse for systematization in Glissant, see *Édouard Glissant, Philosopher: Heraclitus and Hegel in the Whole-World*, trans. Andrew Brown (Albany: SUNY Press, [2016] 2021).
- <sup>6</sup> Derrida, “The Deconstruction of Actuality,” 86.
- <sup>7</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Elliptical Sense,” trans. Jonathan Derbyshire, in *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 108. Abbreviated “ES.”
- <sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 220. Abbreviated *CPR*. Michel Foucault’s famous admonition concerning the aporetic “strange empirico-transcendental doublet” called “Man” “in the analytic of finitude” historicizes the tension between the transcendental and empirical (rewriting Kant’s “transcendental illusion” as an empirico-anthropological illusion) and may offer a powerful critique of the colonial appropriation of that tension—which no critique, however, will definitively close off. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge, [1966] 2002), 347-358.
- <sup>9</sup> For the German, see *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1956), 619-620.
- <sup>10</sup> “Learning from de Man: Looking Back,” *boundary 2*, no. 3 (2005): 22.
- <sup>11</sup> “The comets show an even greater variety in their paths, since (as far as observation reaches) they do not ever return in a circle; yet we guess at a parabolic course for them, since it is still akin to the ellipse and, if the major axis of the latter is very long, it cannot be distinguished from it in all our observations.” (*CPR* 601)
- <sup>12</sup> “Ellipsis,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 295, 299; “L’ellipse,” in *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967). Many words weaving the

poeticity that flares up in this early Derrida's text can be retrospectively and anachronistically termed "Glissantian"—yet, shouldn't this indicate, much more than something like their "intertextuality," the systemiricity of the French language shared and divided between them? "The joyous wandering [errance] of the *graphein* then became wandering without return [*sans retour*]. The opening into the text was adventure, expenditure without reserve" (294); "The labyrinth, here is an abyss [*abîme*]: we plunge into [*s'enfonce dans*] the horizontality of a pure surface, which itself represents itself from detour to detour [*de détour en détour*]." (298)

<sup>13</sup> Terada, "Scruples, or, Faith in Derrida," 247. Abbreviated "SoF."

<sup>14</sup> Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Gallimard [1981] 1997), 575, quoted in Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1996), unpagéd.

<sup>15</sup> As Glissant's text proceeds (beyond the point at which Derrida ceases to quote), the anti-humanism (pertaining to the "L'élève martiniquais," but also "comme tout élève partout ailleurs"), which disrobes the quotation-mark of that colonially imposed "humanism," belying it, is not the scientific anti-humanism of the Althusserian moment in French intellectual history; rather, it is manifested as a Fanonian, visceral, proto-political spontaneity, whereby the Martinican student splits off from the French language, neurotically repressing and sectorizing it, deeming it irrelevant. This resistant, experiential anti-humanist non-synthesis is thus only partially revolutionary, because it cannot function except by repressing *another* anti-humanism: the constitutive *socius* between language and the human, from which the unexamined specificity (auto-affectivity) of the human is suspended (a task Derrida embarks upon in *Monolinguisme*); hence the necessity to critically *passé par*—"pass through," with all its Hegelian and dialectical implications—the French language, rather than simply circumventing it (*Ibid.*, 575-576):

L'élève martiniquais, comme tout élève partout ailleurs, pratique de manière spontanée un tel anti-humanisme, avec l'inconvénient de le subir sans l'élucider, et le désavantage irrémédiable de le greffer sur une irresponsabilité qui sectorise la connaissance (« qu'est-ce que tout cela peut bien avoir à faire avec nous ? »).

Par là le jeune Martiniquais renonce à un pouvoir de synthèse dont l'absence n'est pas compensée par une explosion de spécificités. La pensée est figée en lieux communs réducteurs et en facilités complaisantes, qui n'en laissent pas moins vive la pulsion de résistance, dès lors névrosée. Mais cette pulsion est elle-même une « tendance libératrice », marginalisée.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, [1986] 1989), 229; *Ethics, Institutions, and the Right to Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Peter Pericles Trifonas (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 22-23; *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, 44. Abbreviated *M*.

<sup>18</sup> We need yet to examine to what extent colonialism is a project of literalization, the barring of metaphoricity or displacement of actualization, germinal to the obstinate literality of the stifled cry of empirical defiance.

<sup>19</sup> E.g.: "Economy dictated by publishing exigencies" in "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone [1996]," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 76; "A marvel of elliptical simplification, not to say distressing simple-mindedness, the more so when one knows that this economy conceals enormous exegetic problems, hermeneutic debates still open despite the libraries and the institutions growing rich by them by the day" in "Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German [1989]," trans. Moshe Ron, in *Acts of Religion*, 165.

- <sup>20</sup> “Althusser, Don Quixote, and the Stage of the Text,” in *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1998] 2004), 132. Abbreviated “A.”
- <sup>21</sup> For Rancière, famously, this is the Althusserian pedagogical drama perpetuating inequality in the very name of an attainable equality, in which the dotted lines mark “the presence of the teacher in his absence” and the parentheses “appropriate the absence produced by suppressed dotted lines. [...] Their curve outlines the chalice of actual absence that gives the text its invisible quality, transforms the missing word into a missing concept, that is to say transforms, by means of lack, the word into concept.” (134)
- <sup>22</sup> Derrida, “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’ [1990, 1994],” trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, 271, 270, emphasis original. I am indebted to Julia Ng’s inspiring reading of this convoluted essay as well as the thematization of reversibility in Derrida’s oeuvre (to which I will return): “Undecidability and Reversibility,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 21, vol. 1 (2021): 11-35. Abbreviated “UR.”
- <sup>23</sup> Derrida, “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering’ [1992],” trans. David Wood, in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 11, emphasis XZ.
- <sup>24</sup> Terada, “SoF,” 259: “Although Derrida radicalizes the secret so that it is what cannot be told, it may be more important that there are things that Derrida does not wish to say.”
- <sup>25</sup> Derrida, “Passions,” 14.
- <sup>26</sup> Glissant, *Le Discours antillais*, 401: “(J’appelle langage une pratique commune, pour une collectivité donnée, de confiance ou de méfiance vis-à-vis de la langue ou des langues qu’elle utilise.)”
- <sup>27</sup> Gratitude to Grant Farred for this “point of entrée” (a vivid term of his, with all its gastronomic implications) as well as for his telepathic reading of my essay, attentive to the many ellipses here and there. I also thank Roshon S. Nandhra for his comments, and Joséphine Haillot for training me in reading the succulences of French.
- <sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [2003] 2005), 1.
- <sup>29</sup> Perhaps this offers a new reading of our watchword (in Grant Farred’s classroom) “there is no constitutive outside,” in that an outside, however illegible and impermissible, is opened up for us precisely by its exclusion and exile from our *horizon*. It is important not to confuse this “outside” (although the *risk* persists) with an intact comfort zone, often mobilized as a governing idea and idealization; instead, it persists as *an-other source* of struggle and thinking, consistently reminding us that the current order is *not* a total order and cannot be totalized into the sole source of our reality principle. What needs to be hammered home each time is that the phantasmaticity—that is, the reality—of “an-other source” is *not fictive*: “As long as this reticent moment veils the action of the two, an action that might otherwise seem to lose one in the other or each in the other, we cannot conclude that the terms of the opposition are fictive.” (Terada, “SoF” 256)
- <sup>30</sup> This triple negation affirms the fourth corner of the Greimas square, schematized by Fredric Jameson in “An American Utopia,” in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London and New York: Verso, 2016), 12.
- <sup>31</sup> Here, let me gesture towards the ongoing debates on Glissant’s *Kehre* from politics (*Le discours antillais*) to the aesthetic (*Poétique de la Relation*). I would register these as dialectics between the prescriptive and the descriptive, or more generally, between the figural and the literal (which is another concern of my essay). The contrast between Peter Hallward and Nick Nesbitt (influenced by the militancy of Alain Badiou) and John E. Drabinski (more attentive to the self-realized literality and materiality of the Caribbean, e.g. its “geography”) is exemplary. At this stage, I suggest that these debates have given rise to a valuable “third” site for political thought,

even as the contrasting parties seem to be interlocked within a dialectical impasse: the phase Glissant theorized as the resistant “non-synthesis” (Cf. n15 above). I would also suggest the necessity of supplementing Glissant with Marx, and of attending to the always-missing copula between politics and aesthetics, namely, economics, capital (as well as gender, in which regard Max Hantel has offered a powerful critique) in the tirades around Relation’s politicality. Indeed, around Marx, another ellipsis between Derrida and Glissant may be staged, at the moment when Derrida evokes Glissantian terms (transparency, opacity, relation) to analyze the spectrality of commodity and reason in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, [1993] 1994), 154.

<sup>32</sup> This sentence leads Rey Chow—who underscores how Derrida, in being *too much* attuned to the temporalization of the to-come, foregrounds what is “not yet fully knowable” and thus risks completely burying historical inequities—to wonder whether, in making such an *equalizing* move, Derrida is implying something even more unsettling if not unacceptable: that the very justice-oriented project of redressing, of “egalitarianism as such should simply be abandoned, that even if it may seem to be a form of utopianism, it is a bad form—an oppressive sameness, intrinsic to all human culture, from which we should strive to be free?” “Derrida’s Legacy of the Monolingual,” in *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Language as a Postcolonial Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 29, 32. Sympathetic to Chow’s formidable reading, I read the radical “sameness” nevertheless differently, as something reinstated *elsewhere* than in the innate coloniality of (human) culture, or to be more precise, in the *aporia* of justice. Again, one must not deem a priori that this counterintuitive, perhaps even unimaginable, *aporia* is fictive.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida, “L’ellipse,” 429; “Ellipsis,” 294.