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Open Boat Blues

Glissant and Caribbean Diaspora

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where s the pin / t pot of ale sin / g for me an aria

M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

How does the musical genre of the blues complicate diaspora narratives that inadvertently privilege Eurocentric aesthetic models of diasporic experience? How might we find formal evidence of the blues in Martinican poet-philosopher Edouard Glissant's work on migration? And in what ways does Glissant lend a Caribbean inflection to this blues-based diasporic thinking? In what follows, I attempt to "creolize" diaspora theory by reading Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* through the lens of blues music. Reframing Glissant as a blues thinker is not evidence that he is teaching readers a "blues lesson," the term Daniel Barlow uses to describe literary moments when characters explicitly connect the blues to their own diasporic experience.[1] Nor do I intend to link Glissant to one specific blues artist. Rather, this essay suggests that Glissant gives us a literary rendering of blues aesthetics, by which the experience of diasporic movement to and from the Caribbean can become recognizable, legible, and finally, *listenable*.

Scholars in diaspora studies have acknowledged the need to expand their theoretical approaches to account for cultural differences in the experience of migration. Since William Safran's now-classic work on homeland and return, concepts such as voluntary dispersal,[2] convivial culture,[3] transnational diaspora,[4] and diaspora space[5] have enlarged how scholars conceive of the relationship between migration and culture. However, while diasporic theory emphasizes multiplicity, its unconscious reliance on Eurocentric aesthetic models presents a problem when analyzing literary representations of postcolonial diaspora. This limitation shapes how diasporic experiences of arrival, return, "settling" in a host country, and forced displacement can be understood. This issue is particularly acute in representations of Caribbean migration, given its well-documented historical, cultural, and aesthetic hybridity.

If the Middle Passage marks Caribbean experience by difference and loss, it also gives rise to an allusive, anti-essentialist ontology in which experience is by definition indirect. Instead, this abyssal experience "emerges not as a clean break between past and present but as a spatial continuum between Africa and the Americas, the ship's deck and the hold, the Great House and the slave quarters, the town and the outlying regions."[6] As liminal event and space, it has compelled responses from Caribbean writers across different generations:

> Essentialism—the Middle Passage as defined by British imperial historians and writers like Naipaul ("nothing was created in the West Indies"), digging a chasm between Africa and the Americas; the racial essentialism of negritudinists such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sedar Senghor; the construction of a monolithic Africa outside of history by Afrocentrists from Marcus Garvey to Molefi Kete Asante—must defer to hybrid theoretical perspectives. Edouard Glissant sets his dynamic notion of antillanite, a system of multiple interrelated cultures, against the sterility of negritude; Paul Gilroy examines the discourse of the Atlantic world, touching the Americas, Great Britain, and Africa, thus challenging the one-sidedness of Afrocentric discourse.[7]

Visibility, attachment, contiguity, intersection, distance: all gain new valences in the Caribbean, where the archipelagic geography itself puts the referential idioms of diaspora studies under erasure. In other words, a series of Caribbean nations, some separated by bodies of water, others sharing land mass on a given island expanse, might be in a position to trouble the conceptual integrity of the intersection, on the one hand, and the visibility of measuring diasporic experience, on the other. This troubling of monolithic geography, culture, and experience compels us to attend to Caribbean diaspora in its specificity.

Avtar Brah correctly takes issue with the field's tendency to place undue emphasis on mobility, leading to the view "that roots are foregrounded at the expense of roots."[8] Brah's riposte, that "diasporas are simultaneously about 'space' and 'place,'" that juxtaposes "genealogies of dispersal with those of 'staying put,'"[9] which underscore difference as a key component of diaspora space. For Brah, diasporic difference emerges along four axes: social relations, emphasizing structural forms of oppression; subjectivity, which takes a linguistic and deconstructionist approach to experience as "fragmented and continuously in process"; identity, which like subjectivity is "always in process"; and experience, which Brah frames as a "cultural construction [as well as] the site of subject formation."[10] These axes, far from being discrete categories, draw our attention to what she refers to as "modalities of asymmetrical power,"[11] which share similar features with intersectionality and which likewise must be articulated as such, one through the other. "What are the pains and pleasures of a specific cluster of diasporicity?" Brah asks, "What type of social and cultural life does a diasporic group create within the

historical circumstances it faces?"[12] Under what conditions do the "intimacies of everyday life — kinship bonds, friendships, relations of conviviality, neighbourliness, collegiality, inter-connections of love" take shape within "homes" that are frequently marked by a lack of safety?[13] Brah's thought relies on a fundamentally Foucauldian notion of power relations in diaspora, wherein the "dispersal of bodies, cultures, imaginaries — is inscribed by the multiple modalities of power constituted in the play of different markers of communication."[14]

Disposing of the sum of Brah's excellent framework, though, still leaves a remainder, something uncaught by a quantifiable and empirical focus on social relations, subjectivity, identity, and experience. Culture might be folded into social relation, or as identity, but leaves a "submarine" trace[15] of something uncaught in historical and empirical frames of reference. Diaspora studies, we might thus say, tends to privilege the visible, relying on positivist markers of experience when theorizing the experiences of migration and movement. Against this tendency, I read Glissant's recourse to diversion, in part through the interpretive work of John E. Drabinski, as evidence of his preoccupation with thresholds as a form of experience that transcends and complicates the visible. Subsequently, I establish a conceptual linkage between diversion and detour, in Glissant's terms, and the blues technique of worrying the line — lyrical repetition with frequently subtle and incremental difference — in the larger cultural frame of blues-oriented aesthetics, drawing on the work of Amiri Baraka and Daniel Barlow. Finally, I offer a reading of Glissant's "destructuring" impulse as evidence of what I call his "open boat blues," a sustained aesthetic commitment to repetition and indirection that surfaces in his thought on errantry and rerouted movement as a blue "cry." To conceptualize Glissant as a blues thinker is to extend the blues beyond essentialist cultural categories, demonstrating its potency as a narrative frame for migration and movement. In so doing, I position Glissant's open boat blues as a uniquely Caribbean inflection of what it means to move in and through diasporic spaces.

Against the Direct Statement

Circumspection connotes secrecy, the need to preserve something through indirect means, which frequently requires *diversion*, sleight of hand, a turning of the eye toward what is more obviously "in view." But the act of diversion, Glissant reminds us, is impossible "when a nation is already formed": that is, when "internal or class conflicts" have reached some kind of resolution, however imperfect, in both national structure and public life. To divert, in a specifically Martinican context, is neither "self-inflicted blindness nor a conscious strategy of flight in the face of reality."[16] It is rather, he suggests, a strategy of resistance:

> Diversion is the ultimate resort of a population whose domination by an Other is concealed: it must then search *elsewhere* for the principle of domination, which is not evident in the country itself: because the system of domination (which is not only exploitation, which is not only misery, which is not only underdevelopment, but actually the complete eradication of an economic entity) is not directly tangible. Diversion is the parallel displacement of this strategy.[17]

Witness the double reproduction of diasporic melancholia: an *elsewhere* in both geography and lived experience, infused with the elsewhere of power dispersal, something not "directly tangible," which thus demands a similarly indirect response, a "parallel displacement." Oppression and its response refuse clear visibility. This refusal spills over into language, directing our attention to its subversive origins in the experience of the enslaved subject, who turns reduction "to a childish babble" into something "systematic" to confound the enslaver. Creole, here, contains and reproduces "the derisive nature of its formation."[18] In a framework of visibility, Creole syntax appears to be naive but is not, Glissant argues, since the diversion of its apparently simplistic syntax is analogous to African American responses to enslavement and later segregation, "lisping, slurring, jibberish": in other words, camouflage.[19] And of course, the very point of camouflage is to blend in, conceal oneself as a threat, and get around the demands of a hostile environment in which "speech was forbidden" and the enslaved were forced to disguise "the word under the provocative intensity of the scream."[20] More broadly, the archipelago refutes clear visibility; distances are not easily measurable at ground level; and the water itself is an indelible reminder of the dangers of movement, of enslavement and forced migration, all of which "draws upon the interconnected topographies and colonial geographies of the Caribbean, in which the islands are not viewed in isolation but are understood as physical and cultural spaces that are inherently interactive and responsive to one another."[21]

Reading Glissant's *La Cohée du Lamentin,* John E. Drabinski observes a similar refutation of the visible in the triple movement from shoreline to Plantation to City, a movement marked by betweenness, and irregularity, ending in what Glissant calls "urban diffraction."[22] Drabinski modulates Glissant's phrase into a diffraction of light, "which modifies light in contact with the borders and surfaces (not interiors) of opaque bodies," then uses it to describe creolization as a mode of passage that defies "conventional models of transition." This is a modulation worth dwelling on. It alerts us to the surface orientation of Glissant's intellectual thought, an orientation that is of course not superficial but profoundly immersed in a radical critique of the surface-depth paradigms that dominate so much western thought. Anxiety over what lies "beneath the surface" is a colonial anxiety, no doubt, and one Glissant rehearses precisely in order to foreground the epistemology, the western thought that makes every object a thing of depth to be broken down,

surveyed, assessed, and ultimately controlled. Surface impressions in colonial discourse are skin deep, are therefore not to be trusted. If the very word, transition, "*promises* (even if it cannot realize) the realization of what is prior in what is later," its successor or replacement, creolization, encapsulate "the logic of thinking the past and present, the ruin, really, in an interval to the future."[23]

Glissant's "resistance to visibility" puts the Caribbean at the centre of experience, "keeps creolization and Relation in motion."[24] It becomes uniquely Caribbean when considering *la pensée archipelagique* that shapes Glissant's articulation of movement and migration, most notably in opacity, the gathering together, Drabinski suggests, of "ethics, epistemology, [and] ontology in one and the same event." For Drabinski, opacity obtains in four ways. First, in what he consistently refers to as shoreline thinking, or "an original opacity that gives the future after arrival and out of catastrophic loss." Second, in an anticolonial and "revolutionary" mode "outside the limits of the colonial gaze."[25] Third, in the creolization of language. And fourth, as the "constituting condition" of Relation, Glissant's master concept of continuous transformation. In this fourth valence, opacity resists "the close of knowledge," generates "a new imaginary space," and with it a corresponding "surprise of interruption."[26] Drabinski rightly sees opacity as a guard against the possible reduction of knowledge, both the index and the mode of a different type of knowing that holds the Other in continuous non-understanding.

One is struck by the parallels between Drabinski's elucidation of Glissantian opacity and Brah's articulation of diasporic axes of power. In this parallel, we can sense a common concern with dispersed experience, the basic condition of migration, or what Brah refers to as diaspora space, "the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes."[27] Brah argues that various forms of apparently competing theory, such as border theory, postcolonial theory, and diaspora theory, actually comprise "a point of confluence and intersectionality where insights emerging from these fields inhere in the production of analytic frames capable of addressing multiple, intersecting axes of differentiation."[28] Drabinski, in his turn, challenges readers "to think outside the binary of the legible and illegible — to think, perhaps, of meaning as simultaneously declarative and precarious."[29] In this vein, he characterizes both Glissant and Fanon as "*threshold* thinkers" — that is, figures who think "both *of* and *at* the interval of the movement of memory and history into the future."[30]

These thresholds, surely, are also the analytic and experiential fabric of migration. One finds the abyssal past alive in the moment of movement, even as one simultaneously thinks through what it would mean to incorporate that past into a concrete and lived future, to lift memory out of "the privacy of life's pleasures and pains."[31] In this move, opacity is retained. The visible is

refused, again and always, in favor of what Seanna Sumalee Oakley refers to as "the syntax of iteration."[32] The "vernacular cultural forms" must be continually re-imagined and re-interpreted, producing the "shadows, concealments, and resistance" that give rise to "the life of the rhizomatic subject and abyssal aesthetics."[33] The Caribbean thinker, post-Glissant, becomes entangled "in vernacular space," creolized space, contiguous with the "thinking in fragments" that constitutes *la pensée archipelagique*.[34] This thinking takes the ambiguity of the shoreline as its base metaphor and structuring aesthetic, which is also the ambiguity of migrant movement. What is a shoreline but a threshold in concrete form?

For the Listenable

Consider the blues at this shoreline, what it teaches about how to reckon with migration as a threshold experience. Writing of Caryl Phillips's relationship to the work of James Baldwin, Gerald David Naughton observes the author's turn toward "Baldwin's cityscapes," which offered for Phillips the "locus of cultural relevance ... during the racially contested 1970s and '80s in Britain."[35] Phillips, a Kittian-British writer, found more resonance in the "urban experience" narrativized by Black American authors such as Baldwin and Angela Davis than in Caribbean writers of his generation. Naughton provides a conceptual linkage between the Caribbean and the U.S., discussing Amiri Baraka's thoughts on jazz in *Blues People*: specifically, the "deeply and wildly exciting" freedom Baraka identifies that allowed Black jazz musicians to access artistic experiences that would otherwise be obscured by "overused Western musical concepts."[36] This freedom is made possible by blues aesthetics:

> Thus, repetition itself becomes an art form—one which enables movement between and beyond registers ("stress and pitch"), sequence ("word order"), and language ("wordless blues cries"). It becomes an art form within an art form. It can take place within genre ("blues"), within the song, within performance, even within the repeated line itself. Moreover, as Baldwin's idea of literature's "rootedness" in music suggests, tropes, refrains, and influences are frequently transmitted between artistic modes.[37]

Naughton directs us to consider nested art forms: repetition within the blues but also on its own terms. This is an illuminating method of thinking about and through literature's relationship to blues. Changes to words, lines, and meanings are performed at the micro-level without adding up to an orderly, rational picture. Transmission happens "between" modes, suggesting a type of interaction that exceeds western narrative and artistic registers. It is, Naughton avers, evidence of "[t]he process of tropological revision" so central to understanding Black art, where "motifs of repetition and revision or refrain, far from [reinforcing] author, authority, or canon ... actually form the

basis for fluidity and creativity."[38] As Barlow notes, "repetition with difference—known vernacularly as 'worrying the line' [generates] resolution in the often-rhymed third line," an integral aspect of blues form that "allows the singer to express a problem or sentiment, restate it with variations of emotion in a different formulation, and finally develop, explain, extend, or resolve the original problem or sentiment."[39] In other words, while blues repetition occasions a dynamic sense of experience, not a static one, accessing this experiences requires looking beyond its apparent formal simplicity.

The blues begin, Amiri Baraka observes, as songs sung by enslaved peoples on plantations in the U.S. and the Caribbean: lyrics sung in snatches and bursts, "shouts" and "field hollers [that] were little more than highly rhythmical lyrics." The aesthetic and musical contours of the blues, for Baraka, constitute "the closest imitation of the human voice of any music."[40] Blues originates in experiences of extreme collective trauma, of course: the Middle Passage and enslavement afterward, antebellum Jim Crow racism, and the unofficial plantation economy that persisted well after the "formal" end of enslavement. Enslaved people, Glissant reminds us, made music in and around the conditions of their enslavement, shaping timbre, pitch, and lyric to a strategic awareness of the possible. These are moves configured as instances "of survival" in a situation where "discontinuously organized" speech was "the only form possible for slaves."[41] Glissant sees this development in part as an "obligation to get around the rule of silence," to speak indirectly, at angles, trailing off, leaving parts of sentences unfinished, proceeding to apparently disparate topics or narrative strands. There is no fixed synthesis, only a series of necessary "forgettings" that, in the topos of the Caribbean, never appear "linguistically as an edict or a relay, on the basis of which some literary progression might be detected, with another text coming along to perfect the former."[42] This lack of a fixed linguistic origin provides the fulcrum for the apparent simplicity and hidden depth of blues as a musical genre, a cultural touchstone, and a vehicle for Black lived experience.

However, an over-reverence for strict genre convention risks obscuring how blues aesthetics appear in less traditional surroundings. As Barlow points out, "conventions such as the twelve bar pattern, the I-IV-V chord progression, and the AAB lyrical formula provide less a strict set of limitations, but instead a working basis for creative expression."[43] Arguing that these conventions serve as the bedrock for both songwriting and improvised live playing, Barlow mentions techniques such as worrying the line and vamping, "the use of an introductory phrase that can be repeated indefinitely until a soloist enters."[44] These and other blues techniques add up to what Barlow refers to as "participatory musicality: the work of a narrative's diegetic or narratorial devices to involve and implicate the listener (i.e. the reader)."[45] Implication only happens when we use the form to trouble the content, forcing us to consider what types of experience we are best suited to

listen to. Barlow draws our attention to the narrative valence of blues lyrics within the larger "project of recovering African and African-derived discursive practices." Through the framework of Black feminism, Angela Davis trenchantly suggests that artists such as Bessie Smith and Zora Neale Hurston "were probing the heart of the problem of forging an African-American aesthetic."[46] Circumlocution is a defining characteristic of blues operating in an African narrative tradition, which refuses "linearity" and "conformity to culturally established refinement"[47] as well as "socially conditioned notions of discursive 'exactitude.'"[48] Fundamentally, we must understand blues as much through performance and aesthetics as through genre.

This attention to indirection as a blues aesthetic is, I would argue, evidence of a wider cross-cultural and perhaps Black Atlantic focus in Glissant's work. In *Caribbean Discourse*, he notes that African drums are orchestral, in contrast to the "tiny voice" of Caribbean drumming.[49] We can discern a type of melancholia in this description of Caribbean rhythm cut off from a larger unity, one "structured around trace and archipelago," formed irrevocably from an "abyssal beginning" in which experience is fundamentally understood as "composite" and transitional. The collapse of the Plantation economy nonetheless makes a haunted beginning, fashioned "out of the pain of history and the vicissitudes of survival."[50] It is aporetic in the sense that seeking to "flatten time," to make out of the conditions of enslavement a "here without relation to an elsewhere," gives us a permanent sense of having emerged into an "ecstatic, looping, and fractal" form of time[51] from "one of the bellies of the world."[52]

Looping brings us back to the blues. The return to the belly of the Plantation is simultaneously impossible and yet signed by the wreckage of Caribbean origin, a return to the cries and shouts of enslaved people, coming back to what escapes positivist transcription. Glissant reminds us that "meaning and pitch went together for the uprooted individual, in the unrelenting silence of the world of slavery."[53] Pitch, here, can signal general tone but also the pitch of a voice or an instrument. The migrant, generations removed from the enslaved, nonetheless still emerges to this fractal sense of Caribbean time: blues time, time of melancholic pain, which we find stylized in Glissant's fractal return to the archipelagic sense of loss and complicated beginnings. How can we reckon with the weight of history in words, when the separation of oral and written forms of communication is one of the hallmarks of plantation violence? Glissant unearths a paradox here:

> The written requires nonmovement: the body does not move with the flow of what is said. The body must remain still; therefore the hand wielding the pen (or using the typewriter) does not reflect the movement of the body, but is linked to (an appendage of) the page.[54]

Stylizing blues in writing: a paradox that asks "nonmovement" of the writer. At an embodied level, the body's motion is not replicated in acts of writing, making the hand merely an "appendage" of the page, much like "the Caribbean is the outgrowth of America ... [t]he part that breaks free of the continent and yet is linked to the whole."[55] We can understand this hand-page relationship as a vector of the Caribbean's relationship to America, but also as a productive lacuna, the crucible out of which Glissant, I suggest, aestheticizes the early blues in his writing: fundamentally vexed motion, reflective of the "composite beginning"[56] of the Plantation. The move to written culture involves the surrender of bodily autonomy to the "immobility where writing takes shape," a task he sees as fraught or even impossible for "[t]he creature deprived of his body." One must "possess" one's own body to write, which amounts to an echo or replay of the violence of enslavement: "He keeps moving; it can only scream. In this silent world, voice and body pursue desperately an impossible fulfilment."[57]

Open Boat Blues

For Drabinski, Glissant's subject is an "abyssal" subject, defined aesthetically by a break in both "narration and unification at its root."[58] Beginnings are haunted, because fundamentally broken; to begin is to double back on the concept of beginning, producing an ontological aporia. The subject is not broken, but emerging from beginnings that are split. This abyssal subject defies any "regulative idea of transparency," leading to an aesthetics that mounts "a defense of the elusive utterance, its opacity and murky depth, and thus a return to the life of contradiction."[59]

The elusive quality here is a phenomenological relay to blues experience, to blues aesthetics. Glissant begins with a fractured beginning, not just one that splits, but that assimilates the cry of the early blues, its tension against both the conditions of suffering that produce its pathos and its willingness to sit against the supple edge of that pain in aesthetic registers. Tensions, in a literary sense, offer contradictory forms of movement in various registers, but without resolution. This unresolved tension is the substance of blues cries, so apposite to Glissant's analysis of the origins of the speech of enslaved people. Oakley suggests that Glissant's "rhetorical commonplaces are radically implicated by the material world, and vice versa, and we must learn how to think them together," suggesting that "le cri du monde ('the cry of the world')" evokes both spirituals and blues cries in African-American cultural context.[60] Drabinski argues that Glissant uses "the term *common place*" to widen "the space of aesthetic production," noting that Glissant's "aesthetic object is a common place in which contradiction does not dissolve the notion of commun, but rather constitutes it as *lieu*."[61] Common place is common to all in community, held in the seams of contradiction, which for Drabinski makes possible a certain type of "aesthetic production." Drabinski is careful

to distinguish this production from ontology, arguing that "the structure of an aesthetics is indispensable for the life of Relation."[62] This type of production, within a creolized space, gives us Caribbean experience as blues experience, partaking of blues as "an art, a philosophy, and a way of life – a complex music which defies academic or artistic analysis, but at the same time demands attention."[63]

Relation, I suggest, can be read as indirect repetition so characteristic of the blues aesthetic, particularly in its dedication to repetitions and tensions with "resolution" that leave the fundamental property of poignancy unresolved. One does not stop singing the blues, having sung it. In Muddy Waters's "How Long Can A Fool Go Wrong," the speaker asks: "How long can a bell ring? / Just as long as it knows its tone."[64] Playfulness mixes with pain here, since blues struggle will continue as long as a bell "knows its tone," which is to say, indefinitely. In "No Escape From The Blues," the speaker situates his blues cry within the structural frame of poverty: "You know I had to go downtown / And pawn my last suit / You know I was born to lose / For me there ain't no escape from the blues."[65] The sparse lyric of Waters's "Bus Driver" allows the song's musical structure to vamp at different points, providing the listening space for instrumental solos that riff on the playful theme of fraught movement:

> My baby run off with a bus driver / And you know that don't seem right / My baby run off with a bus driver / And you know that don't seem right / He used to give her rides in the daytime / Now she gives him rides at night.[66]

"Bus Driver" plays in 12/8, a combination time signature in which three eighth-note beats occur for every one beat over four bars, a swinging, simmering rhythm that makes the song's tempo (100 bpm) seem slower than it actually is. Over this time signature, Waters and his band "ride" through the changes, which follow a standard I-IV-V blues progression in E7 that moves between the fourth degree of the E scale (A7) and the root, jumping up to the fifth degree (B7) for the resolution back to the "home" chord of E7; it then repeats this movement in miniature for the blues "turnaround" that ends each section. Return to "home" is both present (in the resolution) and deferred (in the apparent circularity of the progression), both concepts productively blurred by repetition. The emphasis on the verb *run off* evokes Nathaniel Mackey's call to recuperate the verb as an indication of Black creativity against the noun, which by contrast "means, on the aesthetic level, a less dynamic, less improvisatory, less blues-inflected music and, on the political level, a containment of black mobility, a containment of the economic and social advances that might accrue to black artistic innovation."[67]

Correspondingly, Glissant revisits the haunted site of origin, not worrying the line in strictly formal terms, but limning that experience nonetheless, modulating its registers, sometimes vamping, always with a

clear and creative purpose. The blues cry is indirect, riven by tension, the need to articulate pain in the context of plantation life, where the pain of the enslaved is subordinate to the brutal conditions of the overseer. More: it is also a cry of movement made opaque, across the Atlantic and into Brathwaite's submarine universe of experience. The open boat itself, the magisterial image in the opening chapter of *Poetics of Relation*, signs a foundational blues experience treated as such in the warp and weft of Glissant's prose. He begins by identifying "[t]he first dark shadow ... cast by being wrenched from" the homeland, but identifies it as "nothing yet" in the face of the conditions of enslavement:

> Imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying crouched. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo, this dizzying sky plastered to the waves. Over the course of more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people deported. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse. But that is nothing yet.[68]

Three *refrains* of the call to imagine appear here in the opening pages of "The Open Boat," containing anaphora that could conceivably also fit the bars of a "standard" I-IV-V blues progression: repetitions with difference that dramatize the agony of enslavement. Think of "imagine" landing each time on chords in a blues sequence, with listeners exhorted to examine their own imaginative capacity, the conditional "if you can" signalling the difficulty of the endeavour. Every evocation sutures the body to the conditions of the boat, yokes perception to the horizon of what is visible to the enslaved. This is blues intimacy. Circumscribed experience originates in pain, in collective suffering, the abyssal beginning of being wrenched away from homeland into enslavement. Passage through and under the water evokes submarine terror.

However, out of this history, Glissant constructs recognition through the second-person address (you or *tu*). *You* fell into an abyss, three times, he observes, "into the belly of the boat ... [t]he depths of the sea ... [and] a reverse image of all that had been left behind ... in the blue savannas of memory or imagination."[69] That readers enter the experience of enslavement through the "blue savannas" of memory is surely not accidental. The colour blue, in some sense, signals the inchoate dimension of blues experience. What is literally blue may be the reflection of that colour in water. But what becomes lodged in memory, as perpetually vexed movement, is the "third metamorphosis" or "reverse image" of what the enslaved are forced to abandon in the Middle Passage. "What kind of river," Glissant asks us to consider, "has no middle? Is there nothing but straight ahead? Is this boat sailing into eternity toward the edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt?"[70] We are lodged in a blues rhythm, the cries of questions coming alive, shouted aloud in song. As is characteristic of the blues form, there are no straightforward answers,

though the questions are not purely rhetorical. But it would be a mistake to assume any kind of "authentic" rawness here. These are vocal stylizations of the moment at which the subject of the blues both articulates the traumatic dimension of their experience and indicates a humanity, a subjectivity, that is excessive to that experience. The ambivalence of this moment evokes Albert Murray's characterization of Black aesthetics, in which "both agony and ecstasy are matters of stylization."[71]

Trauma circumscribes but does not define, not wholly. In fact, the very futurity of Glissant's questions-as-cries opens up the space of lyricism to orality, giving us, in blues terms, "a liberated narrative modality that allows for more affective rhetorical address, transtemporal chronologies, and generally less rigid adherence to chronological linearity." Barlow asks us to differentiate disorder from a certain type of aesthetic coherence, noting that "blues lyrics are not necessarily fragmented, but *circumlocutious*; not disjointed, but *associative*; not illogical, but *implicative*."[72] In singing the blues from the vantage-point of the enslaved, Glissant calls upon us to project our listening ears into the imaginative space of the Middle Passage, while at the same time drawing our attention to the limits of imagination.

The second-person mode, then, operates as a stylistic form of Barlow's implicative reading of blues lyricism. The "you" here constitutes a direct reader address, asking us to listen by associating these lyric images to the Caribbean experience of movement. Savanna, the land-sea, the "vieil Océan" (old Ocean) that becomes the object of a desperate greeting: in these images, we can see the unique topography of the Caribbean, archipelago's contours shaping the literal horizon, "new shores" appearing as sites at which Glissant's enslaved subjects "hook" their "tar-streaked wounds," their "reddened mouths and stifled outcries."[73] Yet Glissant renders these experiences with intimacy: the subjects are *we* and *you*, not disembodied or abstract, involving the reader in Barlow's participatory musicality. The addresses are broken up through deliberate use of space: no fewer than seven line breaks separate paragraphs in the opening three pages of *Poetics of Relation*, seven line breaks separating nine paragraphs, forming archipelagic sections out of small units of prose. Readers must skip over the horizon of text, retaining each time a modulated sense of who they / you are. Per the form of blues lyrics, the return has the appearance of circularity, returning to the chorus after worrying the line "to more effectively implore the listener; the dramatization of the singer's experience makes that experience important, noteworthy, even palpable."[74] Glissant's abyss returns to us in strategic variations, "three times linked to the unknown."[75] An abyss composed first of the terror of the boat, second the terror of the "depths of the sea," third and last in the "reverse image" of everything forcibly abandoned in the voyage[76] — each time an abyss returned to listeners slightly changed. These repetitions dramatize the blues qualities of Glissant's prose, while also foregrounding the inter-implication of Caribbean topography in the blues experience.

African-American blues are not simply transposed here without formal variation. In these three abysses, we can see movement through specific Caribbean sites, "between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands," evoking the "green splendor of the seas—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers,*"[77] movement producing melancholy and indirection.

These are open boat blues in origin, colour, and relational intensity, partially tethered to the African continent. Variations of these images appear in "The Open Boat," returning with slight differences to the site of this tripartite abyss, "furrowed with fugitive memories."[78] Fugitivity connotes enslavement, of course, the flight from enslaving chains, yet it never stops being the shore of the archipelago, where movement is checked over a series of marine horizons. But migration, worrying the line, was always submarine. And so, the multidimensional abyss is the constituent theme of the open boat, whose very contradiction — an open vehicle carrying those suffering the most extreme form of closed experience, enslavement — becomes the progression, the chord changes, the occasion for stylizing art. The sections break but do not sever. The experience of enslavement does not remain the entire story. It is a blues made by those "who have been to the abyss" and who thus "do not brag of being chosen,"[79] part of a project that extends the "critique of plantation power ... into the broader project of recuperating diasporic heritage and diasporic community consciousness."[80] At this point, form and function are irrevocably signed to listeners, as we make sense of a blues lyric in literary form.

Errantry and Blues Poetics

I turn now toward the blues in Glissant's conception of errantry. Here, Glissant reroutes precision through a different kind of exactitude, a rhetorical and poetic echo of the various forms of movement he identifies in "Errantry, Exile." The nomadism he discusses contains two figurations of movement: the circle and the arrow, the former marked by a kind of desperate and perpetual motion constrained by privation, the latter obviously violent, obsessed with conquest. Against these figurations Glissant positions errantry, which is structurally and ontologically open, neither closed circle nor linear arrow. It is, in fact, a spiral, marked in its turn by circumlocution, a return without closed borders, outward movement that refuses conquest. This "dialectics of rerouting" is, in Glissant's own words, a "reconstituted echo or spiral retelling" of the work he begins in *Poetic Intention* and *Caribbean Discourse*. Yet these seeming repetitions contain differences that become crucial to understanding the complexity of his thought on migration. Where the earlier works are focused on epic literature, *Poetics of Relation* takes contemporary experience as its focal point, in order to posit the need for "the rhizome of a

multiple relationship with the Other" that relies on "a modern form of the sacred." [81]

A rhizome of the multiple opposes a "duality of self-perception," in which one is either "citizen or foreigner" and movement operates through the same binaries Glissant is intent on challenging, where "one is either visitor or visited; one goes or stays; one conquers or is conquered." Neither is the bare recognition of difference enough to avoid these reductions in experience, since, as Glissant notes, such a recognition affords room for the subject to disavow the plenitude of that difference, to treat difference as a lesser canvas on which the travelling subject creates a type of western history.[82] Dialectics of rerouting, by contrast, are "driven by the thought of errantry," which "silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us."[83]

I suggest that such a silent destructuring partakes of the blues aesthetic in its potential for transmitting meanings that operate below the threshold of western cognition, which is based so heavily on the surface-depth ontology I earlier discussed. Silence creates the condition of errantry, or a kind of migration that "gives-on-and-with the negation of every pole and every metropolis."[84] It draws on the indirection of the speech of the enslaved, which forms the origin of the blues. Totality cannot be grasped or precisely defined. This modulation constitutes what I have been calling Glissant's open boat blues: the heightening of indirection and circumlocution to extreme degrees, a blues poetics. Hyper-secrecy, on the one hand, and hyper-indirection on the other, but each subtended by a blues notion of stylizing the expression of migration and movement. Albert Murray helps us understand this process of stylizing in Black art:

> When Ellington creates blues-extension concertos in which the solo instrument states, asserts, alleges, quests, requests, or only implies, while the trumpets in the background sometimes mock and sometimes concur as the "woodwinds" moan or groan in the agony and ecstasy of sensual ambivalence and the trombones chant concurrence or signify misgivings and even suspicions (which are as likely to be bawdy as plaintive) with the rhythm section attesting and affirming, he is quite obviously engaged in a process of transforming the raw experience of American Negroes into what Malraux calls style. He is also stylizing his sense of the actual texture of all human existence not only in the United States or even the contemporary world at large, but also in all places throughout the ages.[85]

Can the "agony and ecstasy of sensual ambivalence" find its analog on the page, as Glissant writes? My argument is that it can and does. More: that Glissant is a blues thinker in his stylizing of Caribbean experiences of errantry (movement in totality, which he sees as the basis for meaningful and ethical contemporary movement).

Examining Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, Andrew Scheiber argues that the novel repurposes "black vernacular processes, symbolized through the blues, and the capacity of 'blues people' to rediscover their own internalized rhythm of personality in the face of the distressing currents of historical change." The novel's "dialogic potentialities," he suggests, forms a crucial component of how we can read *Jazz* "both as a backward glance at African-American memory and as a projection into the future."[86] Any consideration of temporality, then, must adhere to the "black aesthetic and spiritual principles" Morrison deploys in *Jazz*. Correspondingly, Laura T. Smith suggests that the "interplay between text and performance, textuality and embodiment" constitutes the core of jazz poetics, which straddles "the fertile edge between 'orality' and 'literacy.'"[87] Attention to what Murray calls "reciprocal voicing" allows us to foreground "formal poetic strategies" that otherwise tend to be neglected.[88] In other words, reading Black literature primarily for its thematic foci risks overlooking the rich and urgently significant poetics that shape Black art in a cross-Atlantic and cross-cultural sense.

These considerations of dialogic potential, voicing, and repetition with difference find complex and generative life in Glissant's thought on diasporic movement. Beginning "Errantry, Exile," he observes that the common factor underlying errantry and exile is that in both instances roots are lacking," followed by a quiet exhortation to "begin with that." But story gives way to story, since discussing roots naturally leads Glissant to a brief, oblique examination of Deleuze and Guattari's famous concept of the rhizome. We focus on multiple forms of the past, first the far notional past of the West, indicated by errantry, and then the recent critical and academic past in which Deleuze and Guattari are located. However, this touch, as with Scheiber's conception of Morrison, must always hold the future in its projective grasp, as Glissant briefly mentions the rhizome, "an enmeshed root system," before noting that "[r]hizomatic thought is the principle behind" Relation, "in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other." Projective thinking, dialogic thinking too: Glissant works through the base concept of errantry in and against modern post-structuralist philosophy, while situating that same philosophy within a certain Kantian western tradition in order to demonstrate the indebtedness of Deleuze and Guattari to "a settled way of life," a kind of enmeshment that stops their rhizome concept from being truly subversive.[89]

In this work, Glissant guards against a certain type of overdetermination whereby preoccupation with challenging a certain world order puts one at risk of "revert[ing] to the ideological claims presumably challenged by this thought."[90] Nomadism itself, per Glissant, is not enough, since such movement historically has always been constrained by "contingencies that are restrictive":[91] exhaustion of a territory's resources, in the case of circular nomadism, and destruction of what lies in one's path, in the case of the

"arrowlike" nomadism of the Huns. Furthermore, the true violence of rooted identity, he suggests, only comes into being "when communities attempt to legitimate their right to possession of a territory through myth or the revealed word."[92] Limning this notional past, Glissant nonetheless continues to advance time forward into the present in which he writes, tying subsequent establishments of conquest and rootedness to the "empire builders" that precede the formation of western nations.

Even the work of Rimbaud, whose approach engages Glissant's thought elsewhere, "is not yet a thorough, thick (opaque) experience of the world" despite its "passionate desire to go against a root."[93] The word "yet" bears a substantial load. Glissant talks through the larval Relation he sees in Rimbaud's work as he continues to build up the edifice of Relation through indirection and example. One might say he is engaged in tracing the contours of Relation against the very hierarchical frame his concept is meant to oppose, asking us to identify the common thread of errantry and exile, a missing root, which becomes the basis for continued "improvisation," repetition with difference, throughout the chapter.[94] Errantry appears as the condition out of which we can find an idea of totality in movement that resists totalitarianism, but fitfully within conventional heuristics, as Glissant returns, again and again, to the condition of abyssal beginning that provides the haunting fulcrum for Caribbean experience. Describing circular nomadism in circular terms, he modulates both the structure and thematic content of the term into the contemporary moment, yet always calling back to the past. In blues terms, Glissant's worrying the line expands outward into worrying paragraph, page, and chapter.

Movement is blues: the uncertainty of destination, the yearning toward the past, in conditions that always some form of privation on the one in motion. Glissant begins with the missing root, touches on its relationship to the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari, then quickly moves to a consideration of the nomad's experience. First, the circular nomadism of subsistence, then the violence of conquest (the arrow), then the fixing of centre-periphery in the West.[95] But this passage is itself also a movement, not a closed composition, but open in a blues sense, amounting almost to a fragment of "stifled" speech. In discussing Rimbaud, Glissant observes that "[t] the call of Relation is heard, but it is not yet a fully present experience." A section break follows, after which he takes up the thread of errantry in the "great founding books of communities, the Old Testament, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Chansons de Geste*, the Islandic Sagas, the *Aeneid*, or the African epics," characterizing them all as "books about exile and often about errantry." We return to this notion, at once new and ancient, then, in a spiral rhetorical movement, almost in half-time feel in musical terms, wherein the apparent tempo of the composition slows by virtue of a change in rhythmic emphasis. Speed, in other words, appears to have changed but has not. Here, we witness a deconstruction of the epic, observing that these works contain "the germ of the exact opposite of what

they so loudly proclaim."[96] Narrative epic suspense, in which the community faces a threat occasioned by or at least read through errantry, actually reinforces the very "temptation" each work apparently surmounts:

> The Greek victory in the Iliad depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his Odyssey and is recognized only by his dog; the Old Testament David bears the stain of adultery and murder; the Chanson de Roland is the chronicle of a defeat; the characters in the Sagas are branded by an unstemmable fate, and so forth. These books are the beginning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they will be put). These are books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history.[97]

To this lineage, add Glissant's blues. The open boat, on its voyage of errantry, could well be the jail in Bessie Smith's "Jail-House Blues," the site of both the articulation of blues suffering, the *duende* or "trouble in the voice,"[98] on the one hand, and the joyous tension-and-release of blues aesthetics, on the other. Such an ambivalence demonstrates how the blues is capable of framing "seemingly antagonistic relationships as noncontradictory oppositions."[99] It contains the literal reality of circularity and closed spaces, recalling the structural conditions of the prison in the enslaved ship, but also bodies forth a cry that exceeds parameters of enslavement. "Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone," Glissant reminds us.[100] He does not abandon community here, in this tensive manipulation of an image that is both concrete and metaphor. The collective experience is unmistakably signed, similar to how the speaker in Smith's song directly questions the blues, movement indicated by the phrase, "Well, I just come here to have a few words with you."[101] Smith's blues cry, like Glissant's open boat, produces action, choice, and audience that the song's speaker, in solitary confinement, literally does not have. Blues circularity produces aesthetic freedom but does not veer into utopia or unearned pleasure, because pleasure was always circumscribed by structural injustice.

Vamping the Conclusion

I have argued in this essay that Glissant worries the line not as a rhetorical flourish, nor even in a mode that overtly acknowledges blues experience in thematic terms, but as a *condition* of Caribbean experience. Where African diaspora artists create "cascading stories whose historical, thematic, and geopolitical separations can be tracked and bridged by spinning music, in its literal, nominal, and discursive senses,"[102] Glissant's musicality can be found, I have suggested, in his fundamentally blues-oriented rhetorical structures, the sense in which his master-concept, Relation, circles back and plaintively repeats the "cry of poetry" that is also a blues cry, embellishing the call to respect the other's opacity: a call made in motion, to movement and through its generative possibilities, appearing through blues indirection.

Reading Glissant through the blues gives us the complexity of Caribbean diasporic movement that is textural and musical as well as experiential, a necessary corrective to diaspora studies, where blues scholarship is still generally limited to cultural accounts of blues artists interacting with literary figures and presumed to have little if any impact on regions outside the African-American South. But to engage in this tacit segregation of Black aesthetics is also to ignore the long, rich history of blues cross-pollination in the Caribbean, its common lineage with African American experience in the American South. This lineage takes specific shape in Glissant's work through indirection, detour, and diversion, within which lie a rich aesthetic for considering migration of all kinds: forced, halted, or voluntary. The blues, in other words, thinks movement within structures of meaning that forever seek to limit its range of movement. It is at once a musical genre, a historical and cultural phenomenon, and a literary aesthetic that should be more widely applied to Caribbean literatures of diaspora. Doing this work would move us closer to an aesthetics of Caribbean blues, a poetics of migration built on "realizing what any raw material of any experience must undergo in order to become art."[103]

[1] Daniel Barlow, "Blues Narrative Form, African American Fiction, and the African Diaspora," *Narrative* 24, no. 2 (2016), 147.

[2] Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

[3] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Psychology Press, 2004).

[4] Bill Ashcroft, "Globalization, Transnation and Utopia," in *Locating Transnational Ideals*, ed. Walter Goebel, and Saskia Schabio (Routledge, 2010).

[5] Avtar Brah, "Multiple Axes of Power: Articulations of Diaspora and Intersectionality," in *The Routledge Diaspora Studies Reader*, ed. Kalus Stierstorfer, and Janet Wilson (Routledge, 2018).

[6] Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Carl Pedersen, "The Middle Passage Between History and Fiction," in *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, ed. Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Carl Pedersen (Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

[7] Ibid., 9.

[8] Brah, "Axes," 164.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 167-168.

[11] Ibid., 170.

[12] Ibid., 172.

[13] Ibid., 164.

[14] Ibid., 171.

[15] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 66 (2021), 90.

[16] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (University of Virginia Press, 1999), 19.

[17] Ibid., 20.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 21.

[20] Ibid., 123-124.

[21] Alexandra Campbell, "Atlantic Exchanges: The Poetics of Dispersal and Disposal in Scottish and Caribbean Seas," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 55, no. 2 (2019), 197.

[22] qtd. in John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 82.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 13.

[25] Ibid., 16.

[26] Ibid., 17.

[27] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (Psychology Press, 1996), 178.

[28] Ibid., 206.

[29] Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage,* 20.

[30] Ibid., 207-208.

[31] Ibid., 208.

[32] Seanna Sumalee Oakley, *Common Places: The Poetics of African Atlantic Postromantics* (Rodopi, 2011), 43.

[33] Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage,* 208.

[34] Ibid., 209-210.

[35] Gerald David Naughton, "'The Whole Root is Somewhere in the Music': Jazz, Soul, and Literary Influence in James Baldwin and Caryl Phillips," *ariel: a review of international english literature* 44, no. 2-3 (2013), 116.

[36] qtd. In Ibid., 121.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid., 120.

[39] Barlow, 137.

[40] Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (William Morrow & Company, 1963), 35.

[41] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 68.

[42] Ibid., 69.

[43] Barlow, 137.

[44] Ibid., 144.

[45] Ibid., 146.

[46] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holliday* (Vintage, 1999), 155. Davis's work, of course, has had a tremendous and salutary critical impact, though her focus, by her own admission, is largely on social issues, rather than on blues music itself, which is a substantially different direction from the one I am pursuing here.

[47] Barlow, 140.

[48] Borneman, qtd. in Baraka, *Blues People,* 31.

[49] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse,* 112-113.

[50] Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage,* 91.

[51] Ibid., 91-92.

[52] Glissant qtd. in Ibid., 92.

[53] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse,* 123.

[54] Ibid., 122.

[55] Ibid., 117.

[56] Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage,* 93.

[57] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse,* 123.

[58] Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage*, 139.

[59] Ibid., 139-140.

[60] Oakley, *Common Places,* 45.

[61] Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage,* 140.

[62] Ibid., 141.

[63] Ruth Banes, "Relentlessly Writing the Weary Song: Blues Legacies in Literature," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 21, no. 1 (1990), 59-60.

[64] Muddy Waters, Johnny Winter, and James Cotton, "How Long Can a Fool Go Wrong," (2007), 1-2.

[65] Muddy Waters, "No Escape From the Blues," (2002), 3-6.

[66] Muddy Waters, "Bus Driver," (1977), 1-6.

[67] Nathaniel Mackey, "Other: From Noun to Verb," *Representations* 39, no. Summer (1992), 52.

[68] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 7.

[69] Ibid., 6-7.

[70] Ibid., 7.

[71] Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 6.

[72] Barlow, 139.

[73] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 7.

[74] Barlow, 143.

[75] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 6.

[76] Ibid., 6-7.

[77] Ibid., 6.

[78] Ibid., 7.

[79] Ibid., 8.

[80] Barlow, 147.

[81] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 16.

[82] Ibid., 17.

[83] Ibid., 17-18.

[84] Ibid., 19.

[85] Murray, *The Hero and the Blues*, 7.

[86] Andrew Joseph Scheiber, "Jazz and the Future Blues: Toni Morrison's Urban Folk Zone," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 2 (2006), 492.

[87] Edwards qtd. in Laura T Smith, "Textuality in a Jazz Aesthetic: Textual Rituals for Transformation in Sharon Bridgforth's Love Conjure/blues," *MELUS* 46, no. 2 (2021), 174.

[88] qtd. in Ibid., 174.

[89] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 11.

[90] Ibid., 11-12.

[91] Ibid., 12.

[92] Ibid., 13.

[93] Ibid., 15.

[94] Ibid., 11.

[95] Ibid., 14.

[96] Ibid., 15.

[97] Ibid., 15-16.

[98] Nathaniel Mackey, *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews (Contemporary North American Poetry)* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 3.

[99] Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xv.

[100] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* 9.

[101] Bessie Smith, "Jail-House Blues," (1991), 13.

[102] Christopher N Okonkwo, "Migration Blues in Jazz Styling: Spinning Them Overlooked Jazz and Blues Numbers in Brian Chikwava's Fiction," *Research in African Literatures* 47, no. 4 (2016), 155.

[103] Murray, *The Hero and the Blues,* 8.