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Poetics of Relation



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IMAGINARY



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

Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity.

Thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop it to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never not retain, nor ever, in standing still, boast about.

I


APPROACHES

One way ashore, a thousand channels

The Open Boat

For the Africans who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas,* confronting the unknown with neither preparation nor challenge was no doubt petrifying.

The first dark shadow was cast by being wrenched from their everyday, familiar land, away from protecting gods and a tutelary community. But that is nothing yet. Exile can be borne, even when it comes as a bolt from the blue. The second dark of night fell as tortures and the deterioration of person, the result of so many incredible Gehennas. 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,

*The Slave Trade came through the cramped doorway of the slave ship, leaving a wake like that of crawling desert caravans. It might be drawn like this:  African countries to the East; the lands of America to the West. This creature is in the image of a fibril.

African languages became deterritorialized, thus contributing to creolization in the West. This is the most completely known confrontation between the powers of the written word and the impulses of orality. The only written thing on slave ships was the account book listing the exchange value of slaves. Within the ship's space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations. This confrontation still reverberates to this day.

this dizzying sky plastered to the waves. Over the course of more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people departed. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse. But that is nothing yet.

What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clamor of your protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.

The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands. Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of *yoles* and *gommiers*—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.

But for these shores to take shape, even before they could be contemplated, before they were yet visible, what sufferings came from the unknown! Indeed, the most petrifying face of the abyss lies far ahead of the slave ship's bow, a pale murmur; you do not know if it is a storm cloud, rain or drizzle, or

smoke from a comforting fire. The banks of the river have vanished on both sides of the boat. What kind of river, then, has no middle? Is nothing there but straight ahead? Is this boat sailing into eternity toward the edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt?

Paralleling this mass of water, the third metamorphosis of the abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except—more and more threadbare—in the blue savannas of memory or imagination.

The asceticism of crossing this way the land-sea that, unknown to you, is the planet Earth, feeling a language vanish, the word of the gods vanish, and the sealed image of even the most everyday object, of even the most familiar animal, vanish. The evanescent taste of what you ate. The hounded scent of ochre earth and savannas.

"Je te salue, *vieil Océan!*" You still preserve on your crests the silent boat of our births, your chasms are our own unconscious, furrowed with fugitive memories. Then you lay out these new shores, where we hook our tar-streaked wounds, our reddened mouths and stifled outcries.

Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing: the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses. The populations that then formed, despite having forgotten the chasm, despite being unable to imagine the passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this sail (a veil). They did not use it to return to the Former Land

but rose up on this unexpected, dumbfounded land. They met the first inhabitants, who had also been deported by permanent havoc; or perhaps they only caught a whiff of the ravaged trail of these people. The land beyond turned into land-in-itself. And this undreamt of sail, finally now spread, is watered by the white wind of the abyss. Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became knowledge. *where knowledge came from*

Not just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole.

Just as the first uprooting was not marked by any defiance, in the same way the prescience and actual experience of Relation have nothing to do with vanity. Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies.

For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.

For us, and without exception, and no matter how much distance we may keep, the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown. Beyond its chasm we gamble on the unknown. We take sides in this game of the world. We hail a renewed Indies; we are for it. And for this Relation

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*relation is a shared abyss
or its base*

made of storms and profound moments of peace in which we may honor our boats.

This is why we stay with poetry. And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer—at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke, We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.

*Asia
unknown
boat and poetry*

The Burning Beach

The sand sparkled. Some subterranean (submarine) force repressed what northern volcanoes supplied. The beach is now without cover, without surprises, like a prisoner. Strolling tourists spread their towels on it. Not very many because this is an out-of-the-way spot. Not a single big wave to distract you from the pleasure of lethargy. Order and comfort have timidly returned.

Beneath the conventional image, the kind one sees developed—or summarized—in publicity films in the United States or Japan, the luxuriously fatal image for selling a country (“The Antilles cheap”),* beneath this insipid facade, we rediscover the ardor of a land. I see the mockery of the image, and I do not see it. I catch the quivering of this beach by surprise, this beach where visitors exclaim how beautiful how typical and I see that it is burning.

For its background, it has the *mornes*, whose silence can be frightening, the same hills that stand ragged above the *Cohée*, the bay of Lamentin and the devastated mangrove there. They are trying to fill in this mangrove swamp, zoning it for industry or for major centers of consumption. Yet still the swamp resists. My friends took me there, drifting along, looking for hot spots, those redwater muds that gurgle and burn

*The Europeans, in anticipation of the *Acte unique* of 1993, are buying land here without leaving home: they put in their orders and delegate power of attorney.

here and there in the mangrove.* The words of the volcano rolling in these mouths come back to me, more meaningful now than when I roamed the place as a child. The same words that used to adorn the sand in dark, penitential vestments, then, bit by bit pulling back, uncovered its luminosity.

This tie between beach and island, which allows us to take off like *marrons*, far from the permanent tourist spots, is thus tied into the dis-appearance—a dis-appearing—in which the depths of the volcano circulate.

I have always imagined that these depths navigate a path beneath the sea in the west and the ocean in the east and that, though we are separated, each in our own Plantation, the now green balls and chains have rolled beneath from one island to the next, weaving shared rivers that we shall open up when it is our time and where we shall take our boats. From where I stand I see Saint Lucia on the horizon. Thus, step by step, calling up the expanse, I am able to realize this seabow.

I am doing the same thing in the way I say *we*—organizing this work around it. Is this some community *we* rhizomed into fragile connection to a place? Or a total *we* involved in the activity of the planet? Or an ideal *we* drawn in the swirls of a poetics?

Who is this intervening *they*? *They* that is Other? or *they* the neighbors? or *they* whom I imagine when I try to speak?

These *wes* and *theys* are an evolving. They find their full-sense, here, in my excessive use of the words *totality* and *Relation*. This excess is repetition that signifies.

They find full-sense in the extension of discourse, in which peremptory abstract notions gain force only through force of

*Bakeries, ironically, are also called "hot spots," *points chauds*, when their bread is delivered by air from France, already shaped into *baguettes*, ready-made *croissants* and *pains au chocolat*, a greenish-gray frozen dough. All the bakery has to do is put them in the microwave . . . to our great delight.

accumulation, since they cannot burn in the body's charcoal fire. The word mass burns, from its amassing.

They find full-sense in the echo of the land, where *morne* meets beach, where the motifs are intertwined in a single vegetation, like words off the page.

Red-earth-red, blacker underneath than the black chalk of our dreams. The clouds of the *Pitons* entangled in enormous ferns, the passionately gray sand where so many volcanoes joined in, the flat stretch of banana trees' dirty lumps of curl, the yam ravines where you can stand up, traces marked along the crests like stubborn sulphur, the light-giving shade of verandas where old and jagged bamboo stirs.

So what comes over us then is neither flash nor revelation but piling up and a vague endlessly repeated impatience.

Suddenly, there is something about the *morne*. A moving on the surface of chaos that changes chaos by its movement. This is not a neutral point; it is not the starting point of a blueprint; it too sends rhizomes into the earth.

(So now, finally, they hint that I have already said all or most of what is said here in *Soleil de la conscience*, that little book published more than thirty years ago. And I agree. We travel on the surface, in the expanse, weaving our imaginary structures and not filling up the voids of a science, but rather, as we go along, removing boxes that are too full so that in the end we can imagine infinite volumes. Volumes like the space sieves invented by the technicians of Chaos that seem filled simply with their own echo.)

(And now here comes the clan of little goats too, leaping morning and evening, to stop off inside the garden wall, invading its grounds and foraging among the sweet bread-fruit and the rotting *prunes de cythère*. Their keeper is right behind them, chasing them toward the dirt road that runs along the beach. The goats' stampeding toward this ritual meal, the shouts of the young goatherd, the circular, disjointed movement, from their hungry storming of the gar-

den to their panicked departure, never changes. And I could never imagine closing the garden gate or banning the animals' detour.)

This shadow on the *morne* all by itself is a school of little goats, rioting in its own noise.

The man who walks (because that's who it is) has soon come down from the hills; once again he is making sense of the beach. His energy is boundless, his withdrawal absolute.

Distant reader, as you recreate these imperceptible details on the horizon, you who can imagine—who can indulge the time and wealth for imagining—so many open and closed places in the world, look at him. Imagine him, falling irreversibly into prostration or suddenly waking up and starting to scream or else gradually succumbing to his family's attentions or all at once going back to his daily route, without further explanation. He signs to you with this bare outline of a movement that precedes all languages. There is so much of the world to be uncovered that you are able to leave this one person alone in his outlook. But he will not leave you. The shadow he throws from a distance is cast close by you.

As for those of us who follow him, if we can put it that way (but we do know the rhythm of his passages; we are able to anticipate them), we are beginning to accept the fact that he is more resistant than we and more lasting than our endless palaver. No one could be content with this enclosed errantry, this circular nomadism—but one with no goal or end or recommencing. The absent man who walks exhausts no territory; he sets roots only in the sacred of the air and evanescence, in a pure refusal that changes nothing in the world. We are not following him in reality, because we always want to change something. But we know in the end that his traveling, which is not nomadism, is also not rambling. It traces repeated figures here on the earth, whose pattern we would catch if we had the means to discover it. This man who walks is an *écho-monde* who is consumed within himself, who represents chaos without realizing it.

The place re-creates its own Plantation, and from it this voiceless voice cries out. Plantations of the world, lonely places of isolation, unnatural enclosures, that you, nonetheless are touching. Mangos, bayous, lagoons, muskegs, ice floes. Ghettos, suburbs, Volga beaches, barrios, crossroads, hamlets, sand trails, river bights. Villages being abandoned, ploughed fields given over to roads, houses shut up against their surroundings, seers bellowing inside their heads.

I leave you now, you who at no point leave the celebration you provide us. Going to acknowledge myself in the unclear and so particular effervescence, of another sort, one with no accumulation of forgetting, and unending because always changing.

The horizon seaweed is interwoven in variations of gray tinged blue with black, where space increases. Their fern makes a rain that does not peel away from the heat of the sky. With the dove gray of thought you touch a touse of vegetation, a cry of *morne* and red earth. Glowing fires scarcely sparked by dizziness. Rainshower motionless. Dwindling echoes. A tree trunk slivers against the rim of the sun, stubbornness, stiff but melting. Call the keepers of silence with their feet in the river. Call the river that used to spill over the rocks. —As for myself, I have listened to the pulse of these hot spots. I have bathed there beside friends, attentive to the volcano's drums. We have stood bent against the wind without falling. One lone bay; whatever name it had evaporated. Also endeavouring to point out this blue tinge to everything . . . —Its sun strolls by, in the savanna's silver shuddering and the ocre smell of the hounded earth.