

I have taken some thoughts from my ongoing work with my one year master thesis in philosophy here at Södertörn (tutored by Nicholas Smith) on the notion of difference in Glissant's philosophy – or "philopoetry" using Manuel Norvat's idea of Glissant as a philopoète – and put them in relation to place as I interpret it one theme of this workshop.

The place is here – On Glissant's notion of difference

The place for Glissant is **here**. Being is local, situated in language, landscape, geography and time. The place is here and the time is now, going on to the future.

But time is also a place. "L'espace d'une journée" it says in the beginning of *Une nouvelle région du monde*. It doesn't say "au cours d'une journée", during a day. So, a day is a place.

This here, the location of the place, is though defined in relation to a surrounding. Glissant is thinking in and from an island. And the surrounding is also a force and a background, it is around and behind. There is a there, sharply defined by a then.

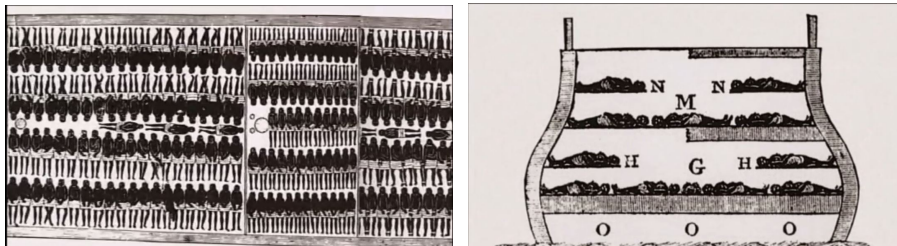
The history, for Glissant, is a place that is closed, shattered, demolished and robbed. The limit towards a there, is also the limit towards a then, the life that was stolen and obliterated by colonialism. The life before the violent displacement. The history is in a time that did not get to go on, that was brutally ended. History is not.

In *The Open Boat*, the opening chapter of *Poetics of Relation (Poétique de la Relation)* translated by Betsy Wing), Glissant makes it clear that there is an abyss, a sharp geographical border, between the colonising and the colonised world.

The abyss, which goes along the route for the transatlantic slave trade, the so called Middle passage, that where in use for over four decades, is also a grave.

It is a grave marked by the signposts made of the iron balls and chains that dead or living slaves had on them when hurled into sea whenever the slave ship needed to gain speed escaping pirates or other pursuers.

Glissant paints this picture describing the signposts on the bottom of the ocean like a path, drawing a line where the slave ships sailed back and forth across the Atlantic, carrying millions of people, literally packed like sardines.



These images of 'Brookes' slave ship are from The British Library. The Brookes was a British slave ship of the 18th century that became infamous after prints of her were published in 1788 by the Plymouth chapter of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The images showing the conditions on board the Brookes has become iconic images of the inhumanity of the slave trade.

Sharp lines

The sharp lines make the world placed relative to – in relation. Whoever is in relation has a place, inhabits a place, constitutes a place. The spatial relationship is the most profound form of being for Glissant. Being is relation. It is a relationship, both socially but also in the sense of co-existence, as with coordinates, a being in space in relation to someone else. Being is taking up space in relation to. Being is primarily spatial.

Glissant's philosophy of relation is one of placings and movements. However, these movements are not limitless. The world is one. And the necessary and meaningful way of moving around in it is by errantry. The arrow like movements of the colonial mind along a straight line forward presupposes more than one world, like Columbus set out to look for the "New World", because if you follow a straight line, conquering and leaving devastation behind, this world will end and another must take its place for this kind of movement to go on. A movement like this reveals a thinking that takes from the future and puts it behind him in a consuming travelling. The movements and placings suggested, as necessary, by Glissant are circular, a being here and now, leaving and picking up traces while taking part in the unpredictable.

These placings and movements are defined by a multitude of beings but also sharp lines, coordinates making the relation also be about something, something that can be known in itself, not just relative to. One of those sharp lines that places us in relation, is the abyss in the Atlantic Ocean. Some of us, the us that is usually named they, the Other, has travelled across the abyss.

This experience, also inherited, is both a physical geographical break as well as a break in time. The abyss in Glissant's thinking is a reminder of this – the break. I am calling it a break, even though it may seem way to mild – the Swedish word brott is more distinct and means both crime and break –, (but I call it a break) because it is both the breaking of human life, history and culture, but in Glissant's thinking also an entrance into understanding the philosophy of relation. It is a founding experience, made by some, but when explained by Glissant, possible to understand by anyone. The logic it makes is clear. The root-identity – the colonising western ambition to own – is not a way for the future, on the contrary it is what creates the abyss. The way for the future is creolisation, mixing and difference.

Glissant is thus not the postmodernist "all-is-relative"-thinker some readers and commentators of him have argued (like for instance Chris Bongie and Peter Hallward as Celia Britton points out).

There are important distinctions made in Glissant's perspective on the world, and these distinctions are sharp lines, because...

...the violent displacements leave traces

What makes the movement between places are fateful forces. The double bind between colony and colonial state – in culture, language, education etc. – is strong evidence of the forces operating on all levels. Glissant and his peers (like Fanon and Césaire) are educated in

Paris. They experience the departmental period, the compromise, which Glissant writes about in *Discours Antillais*.

A reaction to this is the placement of value, that Glissant makes, in the here and now, by pointing out its directness and uniqueness as an experience, which though is not excluding, hence the glossary (which I will comment on in just a moment). The here and now are available to everyone. And everyone's here and now are equally unique.

Glissant makes these value-adding placings in many ways. One is in his literary references. He is, like Seanna Shumalee Oakley has pointed out well, purposely and methodically not referring by name to any western philosophers, except for a very few (which is Deleuze and Heidegger). On the other hand, he names all his, as far as I know, western literary references. He so makes a distinction, between art and the western canon of thinking. I take this as an important distinction, acknowledging art as more valuable to Glissant's thinking than the western history of philosophy. Which no doubt had an influence on him, only he won't let it define him. Because by naming philosophers he would be linked to the canon that holds the ideas of the oppressors, a force he wants to delink from. This is another sharp line drawn up by Glissant. The break with the western tradition of thinking.

Art on the other hand is open to practice. And I believe in Glissant's philosophy, art is thinking, and thinking is art. The necessary thinking about being in the world, about passion or the ontological, is an art. Glissant is thus working in a tradition from the antique Greeks such as Parmenides and Heraclitus, who wrote their philosophy as poetry.

And the art of thinking is here constituted by language. Writing is leaving traces, making it possible to retrieve a place. Language is a place, as well as it creates places. The descriptions of the port and the diamond rock are maps for the future, holding the experience of the abyss, the sharp line etched on them as well. It is a layered image.

In the place that is here and now: an otherness is turned around

The introduction to *Poetics of Relation* is followed by a glossary dedicated to the "readers of elsewhere". Glissant here turns the conventional idea of us and them around. The we of the text are those coming from here (The Antilles) and the they are you who comes from elsewhere. And here again place is connected to time. "The readers of here are future", ends the quote from *Malemort* presenting the Glossary.

It is a small but distinct revolutionary act. Glissant, speaking as the Other, is making himself the here and the now, a centre of thought. Glissant the writer (artist) is helping Glissant the thinker, as often, to make a profound statement by keeping track of prepositions.

Difference

So, what is difference in this kind of thinking? The thinking that always is aware of the dark abysses in space and time, separating one people from another, in diametrically opposed histories. Histories that cannot coexist – like Fanon made clear.

What is difference in this kind of thinking that also so intensely is looking forward, focusing on the here and the now, trying to make the futures of these two kinds of people mix in creolisation.

Difference in this kind of thinking is all there is. Difference is the foundation of being. If we can speak of a founding principle in Glissant's thinking, it is difference in relation.

So, what **makes** the difference?

In a western sense the displacement makes the difference. Fanon describes this well in the story in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*) about his first encounter with the western gaze on his black skin, as he was newly arrived in Paris. How his skin up until then not had had a colour.

What Glissant is suggesting is a turnaround, to let the difference define the place. This is what is inherent in creolisation. A way of "living with and conceptualising the inextricably interconnectedness of the world" as Glissant puts it in "In Praise of the Different and of Difference" (*Callaloo*, 36.4, 2013).

This way of relating difference is also formulated as placed, formed by a place, which is the "archipelago-like reality" of the Caribbean, "a preface to the continent" in the Caribbean Sea, the "sea that diffracts", that "does not tend to the One, but opens out onto diversity" as Glissant writes in "Creolization in the Making of the Americas" (*Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 1/2, 2008 (reprinted from *Race Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas – A New World View* edited by Vera Lawrence Hyatt and Rex Nettleford, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995)).

Glissant declares the difference between the common notion (in the history of western philosophy up until and including Deleuze) of difference and his own notion as one of passivity and activity. The western notion of difference according to Glissant is one of passivity, a dividing, separating but passive process, a basic given. Glissant claims difference is itself a substance, "living changing realities", and in fact they are several, differences, and they are active, making spectrums and nuances possible, as seen in for example variety and identity ("In Praise of the Different and of Difference", *Callaloo*, 36.4, 2013).

He is thus making a logical consequential claim. The differences (substantives plural – so several entities of substance) are more than just a relation, because of the effects we see in the movements of variety and identity, the wide range of these two concepts would simply not be possible, if difference were not active.

Glissant is here also talking about old and future differences. Differences are thus also entities placeable in time. One can imagine them set in motion, or working, in time, aging or passing. This view on difference as multiple entities, goes way beyond Deleuze's notion on difference as the founding principle of being, of which Glissant is making use, or thinking in relation to.

One essential difference between Deleuze and Glissant, as An Yountae points out in his essay “Beginning in the Middle: Deleuze, Glissant, and Colonial Difference” (in *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 2014, Vol. 55, No. 3, 286 – 30), is also one of **placings**. The middle, as the open plateau where the act of becoming happens in Deleuze and Guattari’s work (*Mille plateaux*), is a privileged place. Quoting Glissant Yountae points out that Glissant, when beginning in the middle to create the groundless ground for new becomings, does not have the grounding to start with. He has the abyss, the groundless grave.

I will end now with a quote from Glissant, also about placings:

“The world is the whole and the Whole-world the part, but the opposite is just as meaningful. We will always have the unknown world in front of us, and we will always be able to dream (of) it, alone or together, and also, we will always have the Whole-world inside and beside us, and we will share it with everyone. And the differences in their turn will arise from other differences, each one of them based not only on a variable or an identity but also on the gap which, like a bridge, leaps from this variety to all the others, and these generated differences together produce, beyond their diversities, the unpredictable continuity of the world. Relation recognizes no frontier, in either space or time, and yet we need frontiers. But Relation is the fundamental frontier, which is open passage.” (“In Praise of the Different and of Difference”, *Callaloo*, 36.4, 2013).

Here the prepositions again build up an understanding of difference and being in the world. The place for Glissant is here. The sharp lines are frontiers, both there to be contested and to make clear the placings necessary to be able to be **here**. And “the unpredictable continuity of the world” is of course creolization.

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