



John E. Drabinski. *Glissant and the Middle Passage: Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss.* University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 272 pages. \$27.00 paperback. ISBN 978-1-5179-0598-9

John Drabinski's *Glissant and the Middle Passage* is an engaging, creative, and rigorous philosophical work on Caribbean thinker Édouard Glissant. Though the book should appeal to a cross-disciplinary audience, it sets itself apart by taking Glissant seriously as a philosopher. The claim to read Glissant as a *philosopher* forms a cornerstone of Drabinski's writing, both in form and content. For Drabinski, Glissant has a unique philosophical project: to ceaselessly interrogate how life emerges and persists in the "abyssal beginning" of the Middle Passage. Glissant's abyssal beginning opens questions for Drabinski that organize his study: How do those who live in the wake of this epochal violence relate to a past that haunts them? How can one begin to express a violence that is bent on destroying expression? How can creativity and relation emerge from world-shattering violence and trauma? How can something emerge from nothing, impossible life from brutal death? The questions require a new philosophy that emerges from the violent encounters of the Caribbean.

Creolization names this novel encounter that is at once known and unknown, violently destructive *and* creative, philosophical *and* poetic. It puts into motion a vocabulary of anticolonial struggle that is based on a right to opacity (13–21). Drabinski's wonderful and close reading of Glissant's concept of opacity unfolds the multiple meanings of the incessant demand. Drabinski combines a right to shield oneself from the colonial gaze with an assertion that opacity can be generative of affective expression, below the register of written or spoken meaning. Through opacity Glissant affirms the multiple becomings of diversification against the violence of the Same. Here Drabinski insists on a philosophical reading of Glissant that is also political. This is partly because he shifts the geography of reason from Europe to the Caribbean and places slavery and colonialism at the center of philosophy. But it is also an account of how, through the very process of that shift between Europe and the Americas, in the violent movement of the Middle Passage, new forms of relation are forged.

One of the most productive aspects of Drabinski's endeavor is that he performs Glissant's poetic-philosophical creativity through engagements with canonical and non-canonical thinkers. Drabinski draws Glissant into a conversation that is critical and creolizing. The first two chapters enrich the concept of abyssal beginning through ruminations on Carthage and the meaning of ruins for memory, life, and death. Drabinski productively marshals Walter Ben-

jamin and Martin Heidegger to show the limits of the “continental” tendency to return ruins to coherent narratives. Drabinski also extends and creatively reinterprets their insights through Derek Walcott and Glissant to show a Caribbean method of memorializing. In the material traces of Caribbean memory, roots and a stable return to coherent meaning are replaced by the image of the shoreline, the mangrove, the salt of the sea, and the ball and chain. The ball and chain, gone green in the depths of the sea, expresses the nonworld of the Middle Passage and the impossibility of return to a pure African past (75). Memory is traumatic, fractured, and illegible in the depths of this death. But this violence also carries within it the “persistence of life after catastrophe” (64). In the shoreline and the mangrove new forms of life are given: perpetually generative ways of surviving and creating amid ruins.

In the later chapters, Drabinski constructs powerful dialogues among Aimé Césaire, George Lamming, filmmaker Raoul Peck, Frantz Fanon, and Glissant on race, aesthetics, and the intellectual. Glissant’s aesthetics and intellectual itinerancy circumscribe the totalizing and universalizing tendencies of Césaire, Lamming, and Fanon (158). Glissant places the fractured, archipelagic experience of the Caribbean against the civilizational poetics of Césaire, the universal-existential writer in Lamming, and the universal humanism of Fanon. Drabinski writes: “this sense of fragmentation, fragmentation from the abyss, anti- and ante-atavistic through and through, can never render an origin or a unity without betraying the originary character of difference” (160). But the real effectiveness of Drabinski’s theoretical work shines through in the way that he shows Glissant to be fulfilling, not betraying, their aesthetic commitments. Glissant’s archipelagic thought effectively captures the psychic torture of the Caribbean (Césaire), the exile and errantry of the writer (Lamming), and the creative role of the intellectual (Fanon). Drabinski beautifully performs an appositional reading that follows Glissant’s spirit in creatively moving thought, rather than an oppositional reading that works solely through negation and critique.

In his appositional readings, Drabinski also does a wonderful job of foregrounding the importance of geography to Glissant’s thought. For Drabinski, the salt, the mangrove, the rhizome, and the archipelago are material traces of memory and historical experience that engender a Caribbean cosmology. There is here, however, also a tension. This is a tension that Drabinski should not be faulted for because it runs through Glissant as well. Nonetheless this tension poses several questions that get to the heart of Glissant’s philosophy and Drabinski’s work. For through the specific geography of the Caribbean, we see a tendency for the appositional to slide into the oppositional: Caribbean

histories against European History, the specificity of Caribbean geographies becoming *against* European Being.

In his reading of nomad subjectivity, for example, Drabinski criticizes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari for their inability to think outside of Europe. Their project is inherently limited from the start. They can only provide a critique of the totalizing tendencies of empire from within, whereas Glissant's Caribbean geography allows him to do so from both *within* and *without* (131). Likewise, in his critiques of Césaire, Lamming, and Fanon, he misses a potentially productive restaging of universalism for an emphasis on difference that keeps totalization at bay. No doubt insofar as these oppositional moves challenge colonial structures of power/knowledge they will always be an essential element of appositional practice. And, undoubtedly, Drabinski works against the grain of mere opposition through his conversations across continental and Caribbean philosophy. But I wonder if there is something more to Glissant's engagement with the universal than a project of negation or difference-from. Is there another universalism in Glissant's thought?

Glissant writes in *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 2010): "Our boats are open, and we sail them for *everyone*" (9). This is not the civilizational, existential, or humanist universalism of Césaire, Lamming, or Fanon, to be sure. Nonetheless, I think that Glissant does move toward a different universalism that is open to anyone willing to participate in the (decolonial) process of Relation. The specific geography of the Caribbean is not displaced, but it is supplemented, by Glissant's philosophical naturalism. Here we are haunted by the material trace of Glissant's tombstone: "Nothing is True, Everything is Living." In the text the epigraph is taken from, Glissant argues that the living, which encompasses volcanoes, rivers, winds, trees, and mountains, expresses itself as a (dis)continuous spiral that engenders life even with death. This is not Césaire's romantic vitalism, with its tendencies toward the restoration of natural unity. It is instead a radical empiricism that affirms the creative (dis)continuity and openness of all life, beyond the Caribbean, and beyond the human, that all share and participate in. Drabinski occasionally hints toward this dimension of Glissant's thought: "The world itself is creolizing. Creolization in a global context . . . comes about at the *end of the world*" (Drabinski 169). I wonder what would have happened if Drabinski had pursued this thought further. Might we see a different side of Glissant? A different inflection of nature and the universal?

This is not meant to take away from Drabinski's magisterial project. Through Glissant, Drabinski produces an active postcolonial philosophy, materially, affectively, and historically. In this he follows Glissant: "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" (*Poetics of Relation*, 1). One would be hard-pressed to find a better book on Glissant that lives up to this image of thought.

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