

# Opacity

LI CHI-SHE

**ABSTRACT:** This essay explicates Édouard Glissant's aesthetics of opacity in terms of its formation and significance. This theory comes into form in the historical condition of colonial alterity. In *The Poetics of Relation* (originally published in French in 1990), Glissant extrapolates opacity as the fundamental of aesthetics from such linguistic activities as creole languages and improvised stories found in the Caribbean islands. More than a postcolonial defense of identity alterity, opacity denotes the linguistic expression of material alterity. It means an involuntary flourishing of linguistically enhanced dynamic of exchange, connection, and making in the landscapes of compelling affordances. Such languages cannot be reduced to texts because they are derived from the inevitably alien ground called "the other of Thought," or a recognition and practice of radical difference. The significance of the aesthetics of opacity lies in that, Glissant asserts, humans can linguistically express the engagement with material ecologies while avoiding the authoritative domination of reason.

**KEY WORDS:** Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, opacity, creolization, baroque, materialist aesthetics, radical difference, ontological speculation, thing theory, Ian Bogost

**A** new materialist ontology necessarily calls for an aesthetics to throw light on the condition of cohabitation, constellation, con-figuration, and confabulation between persons and things, rather than rupture, incommensurability, and division between subjects and objects. Bruno Latour asks, "There has been an aesthetic of matters-of-fact, of objects, of *Gegenstände*. Can we devise an aesthetic of matters-of-concern, of Things?"<sup>1</sup> *Poetics of Relation* by the Martinican writer/thinker Édouard Glissant, I will show later, seriously addresses this question of materialist aesthetics prior to Latour's raising of it. As Glissant writes about Caribbean aesthetics, a fundamental question is inevitably enfolded: how is aesthetics possible at all, in the face of dwelling (in the Heideggerian sense)? In other words, in reading Glissant, one would be obliged

to ask—in addition to the question of how Glissant affirms traces of the exilic presence of Africa in the midst of colonial oppression and involuntary flows of people—how he affirms the generative and creative presence of peoples in the Caribbean archipelago. By way of delving into the co-presence of the Caribbean landscape and peoples, indeed an exemplary case of the heterogeneous coexistence of things and persons, Glissant also further ventures an aesthetic of things whose ontological significance, anchored in an innovative notion of aesthetic opacity, eventually goes far beyond the archipelago per se.

Glissant's French edition of *Poetics of Relation* (*POR* subsequently) was published in 1990, prior to the major publications of thing theory in the early 2010s, but the materialist dimension of the book is rarely appreciated. Glissant shares a genealogical affinity with today's new materialists such as Jane Bennett or Graham Harman. Primarily, they evolve around a DNA close to Quentin Meillassoux's critique of Immanuel Kant. As known, Meillassoux seeks to radically disambiguate Kant's transcendental idealism regarding its recognition of ontology. Kant still harbors ontology but places it beyond reason, but Meillassoux sees in Kant a legacy that also allows for a fundamental distortion of ontology. If a priori principles in humans dictate the truth-value in epistemology, one may judge the existence of the world by what is in the mind, and, consequently, the distortion could dominate by what he calls correlationism; that is, existence is only insofar as it is a correlation to the mind. Glissant has ventured, it is to be demonstrated, a thinking that practices a critique of correlationism in actuality, although not in its current name, through postcolonial resistance. In addition to the similar critique against correlationism, Glissant is also committed to realist ontology. In this aspect, he stands out from some other postcolonial theorists well known to English readers, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha. Glissant does not find structuralism convincing, especially the binary of the self versus the other, but, unlike those such as Spivak and Bhabha, who resist the cultural hegemony enabled by Kant's transcendental idealism by resorting to poststructuralism, he does not resonate with the postcolonial thought informed by poststructuralism. Instead, he firmly holds that poetics can approach or imagine the reality of historical experiences. Given these two conditions, the resistance against Kant's universalism and a staunch belief in the human embeddedness in reality, Glissant in his *POR* theorizes a new materialism.<sup>2</sup> By placing *POR* in the context of new materialism, I argue, Glissant's poetics can be properly appreciated. Toward the end, this essay will also seek to construct a small dialogue to demonstrate that Glissant can also constructively contribute to complicating the notions of correlationism and anticorrelation.

Glissant came of age in colonial and departmentalized conditions.<sup>3</sup> Born in Martinique, he went to the *Lycée Schoelcher* in Fort-de-France in 1939, where Aimé Césaire came to teach in the same year. He was not taught directly by Césaire, but

Franz Fanon, four years senior to him, was.<sup>4</sup> Here he received education in French, and later went to Paris to study ethnography in 1953 and 1954 in *Le Musée de l'Homme* under the Martinique specialist Michel Leiris. Politically, Glissant entertained a fundamental distance from the ideology of *négritude* and the French departmentalization of Martinique, both of which Césaire endorsed. Specifically, both his training in ethnography and the departmentalization of Martinique made him all the more aware that the centralizing hegemony of France prescribed the position of “the other” for him and other fellow Caribbeans. In *POR* he considers seriously what alterity could mean in terms of the specificity of the island experience in Martinique, which has been historically composed of unique island landscape and hybrid cultures.

A mode of poeticized theorization encourages Glissant to explore, since the fifties to the new millennium, the abiding concern of how to properly recognize Caribbean peoples and those elsewhere. Importantly, Glissant's thoughts on the interaction between linguistic articulation and the material environment of cultures and nature on the island of Martinique evolve around the key term: opacity. There are two stages in how Glissant comprehends this term. The dividing moment occurs right after *Caribbean Discourse* (*CD* subsequently), rather late in the long career of Glissant's creative writing and theorization. In the first stage, so to speak, Glissant already appreciates opacity as a term to register the West's experience of encountering the Caribbeans. In the second stage, starting in the eighties, after the publication of *CD*, this term receives an overhaul. In *POR*, a collection of thoughts in the preceding decade, he advances a thesis that forcefully maintains that opacity—it cannot be overemphasized—is a resolutely ontological rendition of cultures, peoples, and things.

In *Poetic Intention* (*PI* subsequently), one finds opacity mainly in his analysis of the literary fictions by American writer William Faulkner. Here opacity has three nuanced meanings. Opacity in the first meaning refers to the landscape to emphasize its density, impenetrability, weighty mass, and imposition on human drama. The second and the third meanings of opacity signify both ends of a duality. On the one end, opacity refers to the viewpoint of an American white author writing about Blacks from the outside so that American blacks are not rendered legible to Faulkner, and thus become “opaque.” The other end of the duality is what Glissant calls “vertigo,” an epiphany of Blacks but at the same time denied to be understood: “the vertigo of the veiled struggle with its unveiling.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense, opacity points to the implicit but unsettling disturbance in response to the unveiling of American blacks. Here the language still follows the viewpoint of William Faulkner even though a contrary desire is manifest, that is, the desire to identify the other with the landscape, the forest, in this particular case. In this sense, opacity is the still-perpetuated notion of Blacks being a subject matter written about, rather than subjects asserting themselves with the landscape.

In *CD* opacity becomes a postcolonial strategy proper. “*Opacité* is a strategic, poetic response to particular traumatic or oppressive experiences in the Caribbean.”<sup>6</sup> Clevis Headley also draws heavily on the postcolonial discourse of *CD*, in spite of her focus on Glissant’s ontology, and comes to define opacity “as a form of ontological self-defense.”<sup>7</sup>

In *POR*, Glissant launches a philosophical vision in which opacity is the imagination trying to catch the real. Since his training as an ethnographer, he has continued the belief that ethnography is meant to study the real.<sup>8</sup> His appreciation of his own cultural ecologies confirms that being is embedded in the real. Now in *POR* he comes to the ontologizing of the real, buttressed by two strands of thought, i.e. complexity theory and Deleuze’s philosophy, to reach a theory of relation ontology. This is a decisive turn because it allows him to theorize not just Martinicans, or Caribbeans, but the whole world. Even though he does not present a neat and tidy model of complexity or chaos, he maintains that every event participates equally in causation, and the interconnectivity of events can be affirmed but is hardly traceable all the time.<sup>9</sup> As if this embrace of chaos theory were not sufficient, Glissant also substantiates the account of historical complexity with his rendition of Gilles Deleuze’s ontology of immanence. It has been well documented that Glissant draws significantly on Deleuze,<sup>10</sup> but it is not a matter of application; rather, this process is similar to a mutual illumination between Deleuze’s philosophy and the historical experiences of the Caribbean. As said above, Glissant, in both *PI* and *CD*, has been engaged in a long process of attempting to articulate specific historical experiences in a language that could do justice to their specificity. Now he orients *POR* to historicize the Caribbean cultures. The strange, unpredictable, and anomalous courses of history in a land not celebrated by the sacred connectedness of the aboriginals all point to the inapplicability of idealist philosophy, and he “comes to terms,” so to speak, with Deleuzian vocabulary—the convergence and exodus of different races in the Archipelago, and the complex routes of cohabitation of the sea, forests, and peoples allow him to invoke “nomadism” and the “rhizome,” which in turn pins down the extrapolative significance of the Caribbean experiences beyond themselves.

Based on these two strands, complexity theory and Deleuze’s anti-root philosophy, he elaborates on what he calls Relation. As Glissant says, Relation does not mean what its English counterpart—a relationship—would suggest, since relationship assumes two individual entities and something extra would have to be added to bond them. Relation is better understood in the French meaning, which is an action, not a settled state of a given property. In French, relation is “an intransitive verb.”<sup>11</sup> Relation is first of all what bonds, what merges, what conjoins, what comes together, and by the same meaning it carries the overlapping capacities of knowing and making.<sup>12</sup> So it is aesthetic and ontological at the same time. To make this unconventional concept of Glissant understood, perhaps one may find

its close kin in Jane Bennett's use of Deleuze's assemblage in *Vibrant Matter*. By borrowing Deleuze's assemblage, Bennett registers both the distributed nonhuman agents and the fortuitous networking of them. Relation as a concept wishes to articulate a similar ontological vision of vitalism.<sup>13</sup>

After a materialist ontology of relation, on top of it, Glissant builds an aesthetic by going to the linguistic phenomena of the Caribbean and working through these ethnographical activities to reach a higher level of abstraction. By doing so, more than a reevaluation of colonial hegemony, he builds new ontological anchors. The two major activities discussed are creoles and heterogeneous storytelling, which he theorizes respectively as creolization and baroque speech. In these two he further makes two passes at theorizing opacity, which are respectively the connective figuration of the heterogeneous and the imagined connections of radical differences.

To begin with, an example *par excellence* is Glissant's famous theorization of creolization. The Creole in Martinique is a result of using elements from French, Carib, African languages, and languages of other colonial powers such as English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Herein creoles in general render weak the staying potency of the elite French cultural authorities and allow users the language to maintain the creative linguistic power appropriately in its ecological environment. Glissant maintains forcefully that in creoles one finds the strong evidence of imagination in its generative action, which he terms creolization. As Glissant remarks, "[creolization] is not merely an encounter, a shock . . . , a *métissage*, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony."<sup>14</sup> More than a simple mixing of cultures, Glissant explains the productive dwelling ("rooted and open") that zooms in on the interaction ("an encounter," "a shock," and being "lost" and "free" among the elements) between agents, human or nonhuman (humans, the sea, the mountains, etc.).

In this analysis of creolization, creoles' deregulation, creative expansion, and dwelling, Glissant further maintains that they also reveal aesthetics in its actuality. Creolization as a concept not only extends its scope to other ethnic groups but also attempts to pin down aesthetics as ontologically defined, or "an attempt to get at being," as he puts it.<sup>15</sup> This aesthetics first of all results from rethinking Kantian aesthetics. Kant contends that the judgment of taste "must be grounded in some sort of a priori principle . . . which one can never arrive at by scouting about among empirical laws of the alterations of the mind."<sup>16</sup> A canonical idealist aesthetics informed by this Kantian principle is in Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Schiller assumes the behavioral model of a human, composed of reason, imagination, and sense perception, and in particular, imagination appeals to the unifying power of Kantian reason for organizing heterogeneous sense perception. Even though Schiller upholds a balance between reason and sense, by doing so, he also exaggerates the necessity of reintegrating sense experiences in the name

of reason. As Juliet Sychrava comments on Schiller, “as the objective principle of beauty on which he relies never fully emerges from the Kantian subjectivity, so it can be argued that Schiller’s conception of sensuous man never fully escapes from Schiller’s fundamental Kantian understanding of man.”<sup>17</sup> According to Schiller, sense experiences cannot be left alone since they are fragmentary. If any sense experience would have to be counterbalanced by reason to qualify as beauty, the Kantian a priori reason thus allows itself to intervene in any sense.

Implicitly but decisively, Glissant wrests the understanding of aesthetics out of the hold of the kind of idealist aesthetics exemplified by Schiller. Glissant would fault this idealist aesthetics on two accounts. First, reason weighs in too much. *POR* historicizes the emergence of Kantian reason as a byproduct of imperialism. Glissant is not against reason in aesthetics, but reason does not have the final say in a given aesthetic experience. Forms are necessary but not authoritative. The second criticism Glissant would launch against idealist aesthetics is that Schiller entertains an illusory fiction of a totality out of the immediate context of sense experience. Glissant would abandon this kind of totality altogether, and trace instead the heterogeneity of various experiences. Here form can be glossed as style, rather than as cognitive grids. To this idealist modeling of aesthetics, Glissant responds that situations, not reason, guide the imagination. Glissant’s innovation is to pit the situational against the idealistic in the concept of opacity versus transparency. By transparency, he means the aesthetic activities that have fallen under the controlling authority of reason, and that privilege thought over things, and thought over peoples. By transparency here Kantian idealist aesthetics is demystified, no longer serving as the supreme value judging acts of imagination, and it is discovered to be a version of imperial ideology. In contrast, opacity is defined against the idealist balance and means open styles that seek to organize and recognize the ontological status of alien lands, peoples, and cultures. Opacity is connective figuration, without the intrusive assertion of reason, of the heterogeneous.

If creolization, by its endless variation from idiomatic usage and pronunciation, and by its vivacious appropriation of alien linguistic elements, exhibits a fundamental impossibility of assimilation in aesthetics, the storytelling in creoles, on the other hand, is paradigmatic of the aesthetics’ opening to material ecologies. In Caribbean oral tales, form does not dominate to absorb heterogeneous details, and reality enters aggressively, resulting in rich, elaborate, uncontrollable patterns—thus baroque. “Caribbean literatures . . . tended to introduce obscurities and breaks—like so many detours . . . processes of intensification, breathlessness, digression.”<sup>18</sup> The narrative “relentlessly” brings “together the most heterogeneous elements of reality.”<sup>19</sup> More than embodying the grass-root culture, the Caribbean stories instantiate what Glissant terms “baroque speech,”<sup>20</sup> which is the outward form of cultures globally. Through baroque speech he takes another pass at explaining opacity.

However, before elaborating on the major meaning of opacity, he proposes a philosophical vision of radical alterity, which cannot remain within the framework of transcendental idealism. Glissant derives his theory of othering from a self-critical version of phenomenology in the French tradition (including Gaston Bachelard and Emmanuel Levinas). Yet significantly in *POR*, he makes a fundamental break with this tradition by striking up a simple and elegant dialogue with French phenomenology. He has a serious reservation about French phenomenology regarding its mandate of the "Thought of the Other." In such a formulation, he argues, the self is still too much settled in the center, so that any care extended to those who are not of one's own kind would amount to an act of "moral generosity."<sup>21</sup> Since the self is too solidified, in spite of this well-meaning magnanimity, the other has no claim to ask the same self to change him- or herself.<sup>22</sup> In lieu of this nonreciprocal framework, Glissant advocates "the other of Thought."<sup>23</sup> This is not a deconstructive extension of the idealistic philosophy of the self; rather, it is to see the world from the multiplicity of things; by this he theorizes the ontological excess that cannot be contained by the cultural hegemony of the self, and asserts positively the productive possibility of a language not organized around the authority of the sovereign self.

Radical othering, however, cannot be glossed over by the established meaning of difference. In spite of much favorable criticism that speaks up for him in the name of difference,<sup>24</sup> Glissant is against difference as commonly understood in the framework of poststructuralism. He reasons that as long as difference is defined within an established system of the self versus the other,<sup>25</sup> it would perpetuate established hierarchies. One would have to assert radical difference, difference on its own and not defined in any framework. That is, radical difference denotes irreducible singularity: "Only by understanding that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth he would not have generated on his own."<sup>26</sup> Counterintuitively, the other of Thought is constitutive of the self. He sees that the definition of the cultural identity of the self could not be without the casting of the self by others, by the body, by the landscape, and by the presence of ontology.

Even though Glissant's vision of alterity is well received among those who celebrate postcolonial resistance, the philosophical thrust of it is not, or at least not sufficiently. The other of Thought deserves to be appreciated on its own. For what it is worth, it is an aesthetic based on materialist ontology. Aesthetics is the supreme imagination of humans. When the imagination becomes poeticized, creating relation out of alien parties, the same capacity runs for cognition, instead of withdrawing into a stupor of subjective dreaming. The creative casting of things into images is what holds the process of cognition open to alien materiality. An easy way to apprehend the otherness is to borrow a similar formulation by Bill Brown who, in *Other Things*, more than two decades after *POR*, emphasizes that modern arts retain, in addition to the references to things, the otherness of things,

the ontological quality of things beyond what objecthood can denote, and beyond what thought can process at all.<sup>27</sup> Via Brown, Glissant's 1990 argument can be made accessible. The other of Thought, schematically put, refers to the aesthetic probing of the emergence of ontological experiences. It refuses to be dictated by established rubrics, rules, or frames, and in each such probing the unfolding would be counterintuitive because the otherness of things, in its materialist rawness in an unpredictable timing, would direct the cognition of experience elsewhere.

Here lies the important sense of opacity, which means the aesthetic phenomenon of radical differences. In this sense, the de-centralized aesthetic activity is also materialist. He uses the metaphors of textuality to illustrate the irreducible composite characteristic of othering: "This-here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries."<sup>28</sup> Celia Britton, a very capable reader of Glissant, lays emphasis on the resisting power of opacity: "Opacity . . . resists and contests *understanding*."<sup>29</sup> But perhaps one should pay more attention to the contestation part. Subtly different from the common interpretation that opacity resists cognition, opacity is asserted not for the sake of exhibiting obscurantism, but for reinforcing and enriching the activities of the imagination based on ontological experiences. This could be possible because, Glissant explains, humans can come to an encounter with materiality in a manner not constrained by human reason, but in a complex way of amassing, piling up, juxtaposition, sorting, networking, etc.: "Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics."<sup>30</sup> This consequently ushers in a democracy of material beings. Glissant claims that "[t]he opaque is not the obscure . . . [and] is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence."<sup>31</sup> Momentary light could follow as a result not because one has subscribed details of perception to reason, but because one has mapped, tentatively, a complex texture of weaving in a process. He supplements: "[I]t is the opacity of the diverse animating the imagined transparency of Relation. The imaginary does not bear with it the coercive requirements of the idea. It prefigures reality, without determining it a priori."<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, he uses the figure of an open circle to emphasize that human language can incorporate (to circle in, to weave in) the real but remains open to it too: "Thus, at every moment Relation becomes complete but also is destroyed in its generality by exactly what we put into action in a particular time and place."<sup>33</sup> Language is open to perceiving the real: "Then words, no one's fiefdom, meet up with the materiality of the world. Relation is spoken."<sup>34</sup> He quotes a passage found in a magazine report of Chernobyl:

*CHERNOBYL:*

*12 villages to be evacuated,*

*The wolves are returning*

*The pines are blue*<sup>35</sup>



This short passage shows, in the vocabulary of new materialism, that the exigencies of nonhuman agents dominate, regardless of the anthropocentric disposition to describe what nature should be. This passage is also one of the Anthropocene. He follows this quote with a comment: the Chernobyl disaster “consequently fed the most passively experienced of commonplaces in the planetary consciousness, that led it also to be condensed into what seemed to be an involuntary poem, through which it happened that the world could speak to us.”<sup>36</sup> Here he appreciates well how the real emerges into language regardless of intervening mediations of language. The optimism of Glissant cannot be misconstrued as another version of anthropocentrism. Rather, he asserts the positive possibility that one could be open to material reality in spite of his limited perception.

Thus, Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* already presciently maps a new materialist aesthetics of materiality *avant la lettre*, based on what he terms “opacity.” Even though it is not spelled out as such by thing theorists, the aesthetics of opacities, arguably, is in continuity with the thing theory of Bill Brown in *Other Things* and—as I will shortly demonstrate—Ian Bogost in *Alien Phenomenology, or What It’s Like to Be a Thing*, where the aesthetics of things is at stake.<sup>37</sup>

To place Glissant in the context of new materialism is also to invite a dialogue between the aesthetics of opacity and new materialism. The constructive challenge that Glissant’s aesthetics could bring to this engagement is a complicated understanding of non-correlationism. As said, Meillassoux is one of the most outspoken critics of anthropocentrism, as humans are mired in what he calls correlationism, “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”<sup>38</sup> However, the radical critique of anthropocentrism runs the risk of oversimplifying the human. By moving radically to things, and to thing-centeredness, unexpectedly, one may still preserve the residual binary of the self versus the other. In Meillassoux’s radical ontology, the division between the self and the other remains, in spite of a relentless attempt to eradicate the function of the self in the perception of the other. A wholesale denial of human perception amounts to equating humans with the self, and by seeking to imagine an ontology without human access, anti-correlationism projects ontology as the absolute other not perceived by humans. Put differently, when humans are oversimplified into beings of reason, the risk then is to deny absolutely the possibility of human perception on behalf of things because reason as the self is absolutely alien to things as the other. In fact, Glissant’s aesthetics could help avoid the oversimplification of humans and modify the avoidance of correlationism in a subtle fashion, since the category of aesthetics necessarily complicates human perception and knowledge production. If one accepts what Glissant asserts, that humans are capable of approaching things on their behalf, albeit always tentatively, and the other of Thought is constitutive

of the human self, one may find a philosophical ground to support speculation on behalf of ontology.

For a quick illustration, I make Glissant and Bogost talk to each other. Bogost understands the importance of aesthetics in new materialism, and in *Alien Phenomenology* he envisions what kind of language practices would do justice to rendering an alien other intelligible. He starts with a question: "What is it like to be a thing?"<sup>39</sup> This question, especially the word "like" in it, would direct him beyond a simple inquiry of ontology and guide him into the inquiry of language, in spite of his object-oriented leaning. Bogost answers: one can only speculate. Here speculation is not a wild guess, but rather a plausible guess based on the effects of the interactions between the one who senses and the one who is being sensed. Speculation is used, following Harman, to specify the function of language: language cannot be assumed to be referential, but it can "capture" in a manner not fundamentally different from how a camera lens captures an image, as an alien format trying to place another alien thing into a relation.

Arguably, Bogost forwards the suggestive idea of Glissant's Relation into feasible practices. Bogost's premise is close to Glissant's. That is, language seeks to express an irreducible alien other. As a matter of fact, among the three major means Bogost presents, ontography, metaphorism, and carpentry, the first in particular could help illustrate Glissant's poetics of relation. Ontography is linguistic listing that respects the non-correlational emergence. The reason it can be so is that listing can best show the ontological fortuitousness that Meillassoux also maintains. This echoes Glissant's poetics strongly. Glissant's idea of baroque speech can be facilitated well by ontography. In addition, Glissant also takes to heart the various linguistic connection possibilities of bringing things into connection. In a note of *POR*, he celebrates listing in language: "In this litany, commas (,) indicate relation, dashes (—) opposition, the colon (:) consecution."<sup>40</sup>

However, Bogost cannot situate his phenomenology philosophically. Bogost understands the necessity for humans' relating to nonhumans, but he has no vocabulary to do so. "[W]e need not," he claims, "discount human beings to adopt an object-oriented position [an anti-correlation position]. . . . But we can no longer claim that our existence is special *as existence*."<sup>41</sup> As a result, "human perception becomes just one among many ways that objects might relate."<sup>42</sup> Here he adopts the fundamental stance of Meillassoux's anti-correlationism, in which humans have to relinquish completely the possibility of cognizing ontology. On the other hand, he recognizes that humans are equal to any other thing in their partiality of perceiving ontology. So in his argument two modes are confusingly conflated together, one of which is the impossibility and the other the plausibility of object-oriented speculation by humans. The problem for Bogost is that he appeals to aesthetics while ceding no philosophical status to it. He claims, "Speculation isn't just poetic, but it's partly so, a creative act that beings conduct as they gaze

earnestly but bemusedly at one another.”<sup>43</sup> Glissant’s aesthetics of opacity in turn could productively supplement Bogost’s object-oriented project. The other of Thought, the central vision that informs Glissant’s materialism as explained above, could help complicate what has been oversimplified by Bogost. As the aesthetics of opacity is a capacity of humans and is not subject to the idea (the Kantian *a priori*), it helps effectively avoid correlationism. Admittedly, reason mobilized by humans could create a tunnel vision of ontology, and human perception in its specific configuration would not help humans to claim that one can be in touch with the real. Yet Glissant maintains that the poetics of relation is productive probing that is not limited beforehand. In *POR*, Glissant claims, “The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be. Far from concerning me within futility and inactivity, by making me sensitive to the limits of every method, it relativizes every possibility of every action within me.”<sup>44</sup> This assertion of the openness of aesthetics, and the materialist processing of the real by the aesthetics of opacity substantially contribute to establishing new materialist speculation.

*National Taiwan University*

## NOTES

1. Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik,” 13.
2. The reception of this book is often couched in the framework largely prepared by postcolonialism. Different from this postcolonial framing of Glissant, I maintain that Glissant’s poetics is both postcolonial and ontological. Recent studies have gestured toward this “conjuncture” of the postcolonial and the ontological, but are still quite quartered in the task of attributing Glissant’s poetics to the ontology of the French thinker Gilles Deleuze. Glissant’s materialist ontology has recently come to be recognized, especially in the 2010s. According to Nick Nesbitt, “Glissant’s late thought remains encapsulated within the horizon of a Caribbean *expressive corporealism*, the unsurpassable axiom of which is that there exist only bodies and languages” (Nesbitt, *Caribbean Critique*, 238). Clevis Headley “[interprets] Glissant’s project as a creolizing of being, meaning that he approaches being from the perspective of difference, relation and immanence but not transcendence” (Headley, “Glissant’s Existential Ontology,” kindle). Seanna Sumalee Oakley rightly contends that Glissant’s ontology is uniquely related to the materiality of the Caribbean: “Édouard Glissant is a philosopher conspicuously outside the Western metaphysical patrimony” (Oakley, “Commonplaces,” 1). Michael Wiedorn depicts Glissant’s ontology as a version of vitalist cosmology: “Glissant’s thought . . . answers to the vitalist agenda of demonstrating that when human reasoning faculties are turned on the world, on the living other, or on Being itself, those faculties fall short” (Wiedorn, *Think Like an Archipelago*, 54).

3. In 1944, General Charles de Gaulle of France proposed the law that Martinique become a department of France overseas and this law was ratified in 1946.
4. See Dash, *Édouard Glissant*, 8.
5. Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 163.
6. Clark, "Resistant Literatures; Literatures of Resistance?," 50.
7. Headley, "Glissant's Existential Ontology."
8. In tracing Glissant's ethnographical education, Christina Kullberg maintains that "Leirisian 'real contacts' inform Glissant on a poetic level." Kullberg, "Crossroads Poetics," 974.
9. As observed by Jeannine Murray-Roman, in this aspect Glissant joins other notable Caribbeans of the time, including Antonio Benitez-Rojo and Wilson Harris, to appeal to scientific complexity to ground Caribbean experiences (Murray-Roman, "Rereading the Diminutive").
10. See, for example, Headley, "Glissant's Existential Ontology."
11. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 32.
12. Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 2.
13. In fact, Glissant precedes new materialists in appreciating that ontology cannot be reduced to entities, but instead should be grasped as forces of connection. One can see, among others, similar arguments made by Donna Haraway and Karen Barad. Glissant's idea of relation as an intransitive verb resonates well with Haraway's notion of reality "as an active verb" that renders ontology into a "bestiary of agencies, kinds of relatings, and scores of time [which] trump the imaginings of even the most baroque cosmologists" (Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 6). Relation as connection, knowledge making, and force binding in Glissant's understanding also becomes compatible with Barad's notion of "intra-action," in which things are not perceived as quantifiable entities, but forces that bind (Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 141). (I thank Iris van der Tuin for bringing my attention to the formulations by Haraway and Barad.)
14. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 34.
15. *Ibid.*, 89.
16. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 159.
17. Sychrava, *Schiller to Derrida: Idealism in Aesthetics*, 31.
18. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 71.
19. *Ibid.*, 200.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 154.
22. *Ibid.*
23. This point comes in 1988, late in the decade-long formation of his book during the eighties. Now in *POR* the section on the other of Thought appears between two moments of discussing opacity, to motivate an intensified theorization of what creolization can further lead to, that is, radical difference, difference without the framing of scales.
24. See, for example, Baucom, "Specters of the Atlantic."
25. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
26. *Ibid.*, 194.

27. Admittedly, this book is a culmination of more than a decade's inquiry of things. In an article entitled "Thing Theory," he spells out the ontic experience of things: "If thing theory sounds like an oxymoron, then, it may not be because things reside in some balmy elsewhere beyond theory but because they lie both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field, beyond a certain limit, as a recognizable yet illegible remainder or as the entifiable that is unspecifiable. Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects." Brown, "Thing Theory," 5.
28. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
29. Italics in original. Britton, "Opacity and Transparence," 310.
30. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.
31. *Ibid.*, 191.
32. *Ibid.*, 192.
33. *Ibid.*, 203.
34. *Ibid.*, 202.
35. *Ibid.*; italics in original.
36. *Ibid.*
37. What used to be rendered in a culturalist model now is conceived of as a material experience in which comprehension requires tangible probing and connection with alien elements.
38. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.
39. Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 10.
40. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 224.
41. Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, 8; italics in original.
42. *Ibid.*, 9.
43. *Ibid.*, 31.
44. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 192.

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