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The passion for origins in the epic poems of Édouard Glissant

Peter Poiana *University of Adelaide*

Résumé/Abstract

Entre l'idée, avancée par Lorna Burns, selon laquelle la créolisation est essentiellement un processus positif de devenir-antillais, *et l'insistance, chez John Drabinski, sur l'expérience traumatisante qui le précède historiquement et ontologiquement, s'ouvre un espace où la poésie de Glissant s'affirme comme un mode de constitution de la conscience antillaise. Car la poésie, bien plus que les essais et les romans qui occupent la part belle de la littérature antillaise, dévoile le cadre affectif où l'histoire improbable d'une survie peut se déployer pleinement. En effet, la poésie de Glissant crée les conditions discursives sous lesquelles la souffrance des premières sociétés esclavagistes, loin de se dialectiser ou de se hypostasier, se révèle dans sa nécessité paradoxale. L'obsession du poète qui s'obstine à reprendre le cri primitif est largement admise. Chez Glissant, elle apparaît sous la guise d'une folie ou d'une passion de l'origine, terme que nous empruntons à Jacques Derrida en nous inspirant de son traitement de la notion de* trace. *Cette étude tente d'approfondir ces questions en examinant de près trois poèmes épiques de Glissant:* Le Sel noir, Les Indes *et* Pays rêvé, pays réel, *en relevant notamment trois motifs qui leur sont communs: le poème comme séparation, le poème comme trace, et le poème comme souffrance./ Between Lorna Burns's description of Glissant's creolization as a positive process of 'becoming-Caribbean' and John Drabinski's foregrounding of the trauma that precedes it historically and ontologically, a space opens up in which Glissant's poetry establishes itself as a mode of construction of Caribbean consciousness. For poetry, more than the essays and novels that proliferate in Caribbean literature, lays bare the emotional framework of the implausible story of survival. Indeed, Glissant's poetry creates the discursive conditions in which the suffering of the first slave communities is not dialecticized or hypostasized, but made to reveal itself in its paradoxical necessity. The poet's obsession to repeat the original cry is a familiar one. In Glissant's poetry, it takes the form of a folly or passion for origins, understood here in terms of Jacques Derrida's treatment of the notion of the* trace. *This study attempts to further our understanding of this passion by examining three epic poems by Glissant,* Le Sel noir, Les Indes *and* Pays rêvé, pays réel, *focusing in particular on three common motifs: the poem as separation, the poem as trace, and the poem as suffering.*

Keywords

Glissant
poetry
caribbean
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trauma

The overshadowing of Édouard Glissant's poetry by the plethora of novels and essays for which he is more generally known may well be considered natural for those pragmatic readers who prefer to access directly his political and aesthetic ideas. For other readers, the tendency to by-pass Glissant's poetry, which the writer himself explains in terms of difficulty of access

(Dash and Troupe 2006: 50), is an indication rather of the privileged position that poetry should occupy in Glissant's substantial literary production. This latter view finds support among critics such as Mary Gallagher, who presents several arguments in defence of Glissant's poetry. Gallagher notes that, in poetry, Glissant brings together the dense structures, the intertextual weaving and the historic-geographical references that enable him to 'articulate a collective [Caribbean] consciousness or identity' (2004: 452). Gallagher highlights in particular Glissant's choice of the epic mode, which following the example of Aimé Césaire's poetry retraces the stages of emergence of a community that has endured multiple dislocations in time and space. From this mythico-historical vantage point, the challenge that presents itself here is to show how, in its very inaccessibility, poetry functions to put forward a collective vision that founds a community. This study will undertake this task by connecting Glissant's dense poetic structures to the account of multiple displacements that informs Caribbean subjectivity insofar as it maps out the passage from past trauma to future community, keeping in mind that this community, as Drabinski (2010) points out, is constructed around a collective rootlessness, a nomadism that persists in the mode of survival.

It is well known that Glissant's view of Caribbeaness (*antillanité*) carries an overwhelmingly positive message of a community in constant mutation. In *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant describes this community as 'latente, ouverte, multilingue d'intention, en prise avec tout le possible' (1990: 44). This is a 'non-atavistic' people that does not legitimize its existence via an account of its attachment to a homeland, but is founded rather upon its rootlessness and therefore its exposure to all forms of historical accidents and inter-cultural crossings (1997: 195, 196). Against the backdrop of the notion of Relation, which is the principle of un-programmed, unpredictable interactions between cultures, and which Glissant opposes to the highly regulated power structures of European societies, Glissant's literary works generally portray individuals, families and peoples who attempt to reconstitute their life stories amid a flurry of displacement and confusion. His works aim to capture the atmosphere of a 'déboussolement du monde' (1997: 16) through which there emerges a rich, changing language (creole) and a social model based upon cultural cross-fertilization (creolization).

Like many Martinican and Guadeloupan writers, Glissant is profoundly influenced by Aimé Césaire (1913–2008), notably in his view of poetry as a weapon against the perfidious effects of colonial thought and as a means of outlining a collective aspiration specific to the Black experience of deportation, slavery and emancipation (Césaire 1983). If Glissant, like his contemporaries, no longer adheres to Césaire's notion of black superiority or *negritude*, he retains none the less a fascination with his mentor's show of political daring insofar as it draws its power, at least in part, from his commitment to poetic innovation. In particular, Glissant upholds the noble poetic mission of creating a dense, obscure and indeed harsh language: 'qu'il aille le monde par *la sente ardue* entre tous langages' (1969: 34, emphasis added), the aim being to put in place a set of disciplines (a poetics) that enables Caribbean peoples to break with the cycle of humiliation: 'Mais je crie que nous avons autre destin' (1969: 42). The poet/prophet's language is specific in its tonality and content to the

Caribbean experience in the sense that it relates the violence of dispossession that gave rise to the plantation societies, but it also expresses, in its rhythmic patterns and imaginative structures, a more general sense of interconnectedness that encompasses the whole of the universe.[1] Poetry alone, says Glissant, taps into this environment that bristles with 'le frémissement du monde' (Dash and Troupe 2006: 50–51). The question that this study will attempt to tackle is how the peculiar combination of historical specificities and utopian models of human coexistence manifests itself in Glissant's poems, particularly his epic poems *Le Sel noir* (first written in 1960), *Les Indes* (1965) and *Pays rêvé, pays réel* (1985).[2] The discussion will show how these poems recount the history of Caribbean societies insofar as it entails a series of disturbing and enigmatic events. In doing so, it posits that the three poems engage with the experience of memory not from a simple desire to return to pure beginnings, but from a deeper need to satisfy an undying, foolhardy *passion* for origins.

It is important to establish how Glissant conceives the notion of epic in relation to his own poetic practice. He explains, in *L'Intention poétique*, that the subjective consciousness it conveys is necessarily a collective one:

> L'épique est en chacun de nous [...] L'épique sourd de nous, pour ceci que nous sommes, chacun à part, ce tout menacé. C'est le monde qui noue ses parités. C'est la mer et la terre qui s'arrachent d'elles-mêmes, vers d'autres astres. C'est la mêlée des peuples, portant déjà sur toutes têtes l'étoile nouvelle qu'il faut découvrir. L'épique naît de nous, parce qu'il nous faudra de partout dépasser.
>
> (1969: 207)

Epic poetry, for Glissant, is not a précis of the historical events by virtue of which a society acquires its distinctive traits, but the story of a collective experience that continues to question its connection to the losses and wounds of the past ('ce tout menacé'). It puts into place, in this way, a vision that creates a sense of identity through shared experience, while foregrounding the uniqueness of a society as an 'étoile nouvelle'. Furthermore, if epic recounts the heroic resistance that emerged during the sordid and equivocal events that gave rise to Caribbean societies, it does so not out of triumphalism, but in order to keep alive the sense of astonishment that permeates the community of survivors. Thus the 'dépassement' Glissant refers to in the above account of epic is the on-going sense of participation in an adventure that never achieves a state of quiet wisdom, for it constantly seeks to transform itself, exposing itself to 'la brutalité du surgissement, la nécessité de l'irruption sur la scène du monde' (1969: 208).

Following Jacques Derrida, I shall use term 'passion for origins'[3] to refer to all that is difficult, opaque and unpredictable in such an enterprise of collective self-discovery. Inasmuch as they respond to a passion for origins, Glissant's epic poems represent a foray into the emotional underpinnings of Caribbean peoples, offering both a narrative of beginnings and a set of intoxicating rhythms. *Le Sel noir*, *Les Indes* and *Pays réel, pays rêvé* all relate an adventure of becoming that also constitutes a form of resistance, a manner of stiffening against the trauma of displacement.

1. Lorna Burns suggests that it is precisely within the double perspective of the historical specificity of Caribbean peoples and the universal principle of Relation that informs it that one can understand the notion of a 'becoming-Caribbean' – never a static society but one that is constantly re-defining itself (2009: 101).

2. *Le Sel noir* ([1960] 1983); 'Les Indes', in *Poèmes* (1965); *Pays rêvé, pays réel* (1985). We shall refer henceforth to these texts using the abbreviations *SN*, *I* and *PR*, respectively.

3. I borrow the expression *passion de l'origine* from Jacques Derrida's text 'Ellipse', in which he approaches the question of origins in terms of a necessary illusion, a folly that makes writing possible. Writing, then, is an 'écriture d'origine, écriture retraçant l'origine, traquant les signes de sa disparition, écriture éperdue d'origine: "*Écrire, c'est avoir la passion de l'origine*"' (1967: 430). Because the origin is already inscribed in a structure of repetition, it is never identical to itself; it positions itself anxiously in an in-between. It is, Derrida claims, essentially *elliptical*.

How did a group of men and women crossing the Atlantic huddled in the narrow, hollow space of the ship's hold manage to survive? Within these confines, the regularity of the grunts and heaving movements of the bodies accorded with the creaking and swaying of the ship to mark a ritual space in which a community and a language emerged. Glissant's epic poems recount the brutal socialization of time and space, firstly in the confines of the ship's hold, then within the tropical island landscape whose physical boundaries and sun-scorched surface recall those of the passenger-carrying vessel lost in the ocean's vastness. On the island, the resistance of the fragile community facing the infinite empty expanse now finds the ground upon which the rhythmic pulse takes root and establishes the conditions for an emergent sociality.

The three poems, considered in tandem, offer three panoramic tableaux in which the temporal and spatial coordinates of a collective gestation are put in place. Temporally, the poems express a tension that corresponds to a particular manner of inhabiting the present. Spatially, they reinforce the idea of a boundedness that derives paradoxically from an obsession with what lies beyond. From *Le Sel noir* and *Les Indes* to *Pays réel, Pays rêvé*, the poems gradually narrow their historical scope while sharpening their emotional focus. While the first two poems enact multiple crossings (East–West, reality – imagination) according to identifiable historical schema, the latter poem produces a multi-layered store of utterances attributed to mythical, historical and literary figures. Thus, in *Pays rêvé, pays réel*, the enunciative centre shifts away from the grand narrative that spans successive epochs while weaving itself around European, African and American compass points, and moves rather towards an alternative space–time complex in which an imaginatively stirred people attempts to come to grips with its implausible existence. The three poems thus enact the transition that Glissant had already foreseen in *L'Intention poétique*: 'nous aurons quitté l'inique *d'une* Histoire, pour entrer dans la nation, la poétique, les histoires, commuées, labyrinthes, vives' (1969: 217).

Overall, Glissant's epic poetry recounts the miraculous birth of a society within the very net that history had created for its obliteration. This is why its poetic unfolding is presided by a fever, a passion for origins that seeks to return to this inaugural moment. The epic poet aims, essentially, to relive the moment of the first cry of revolt emanating from the community, indeed, from the universe at the instant of its genesis: 'Le Poète se lève, il soulève avec lui le monde' (2005: 108). To understand the passion for origins in its fullest extent, the following pages will examine its different discursive formations, focusing particularly on three key motifs – the poem as separation (division and fragmentation), the poem as trace (appearing and concealing), and finally the poem as suffering (enduring and protesting).

Separation

The idea of separation is crucial to the epic account of a deportation in which millions of people were taken from their families and homelands. The movement of the slave ship across the sea, the trail of foam it leaves in its wake, the action of the oars as they cut through the water, the surging movement of the vessel are all graphic markers of the event of a definitive separation. The poem *Les Indes* locates the trigger for this momentous

event further back in history, at a time when the idea of exploration and expansion intoxicated those who held power. The poem opens with a reference to the folly of those imagined expeditions that were designed to replace the present world of misery and tedium with a universe of order and delight. This extravagant project brought with it a spatio-temporal configuration that privileged the far, the unusual and the beautiful. At the beginning of Chapter 4 of *Les Indes*, the folly appears in the form of the sun. Like all burning ambitions, it devastates that which is close while showing in all its splendour that which is far:

> Seigneur du chant où l'Ombre régnera, Soleil! Tu pleures la splendeur d'ici, quand tu embrases l'autre visage de ta puissance [...] Tu dévastes l'ici du cri de joie de ton épouse; puis tu enfantes par là-bas le matin, l'hirondelle de la lumière.
>
> (*I* 1965: 137)

The lexical pattern that contrasts *pleures* with *embrases*, and *dévastes* with *enfantes*, not only suggests a trajectory fuelled by a sense of loss, but reflects also the colonial pioneers' quandary as they are caught between conflicting urges. The desire to discover unknown territories is undermined by the absence of a true destination. Hence the overwhelming sense of vulnerability among the ranks of the explorers, and later, of the slave merchants. In *Les Indes*, one witnesses the onset of subjective dereliction in the form of the cutting movement of the oar's blade through the water as it marks out the shifting line separating tomorrow from yesterday: 'Toute la nuit, par le hublot, il voit passer la lame. Elle conduit le jour d'après dans la ronce du jour d'avant' (*I* 1965: 141). The collapse of a clear geographical and chronological order and the onset of the ambivalence proper to the ritual suspension of reality is precisely the predicament in which the first explorers found themselves when, in their enthusiasm, they believed that to reach the East they had to begin by travelling West: 'Or sur la mer, l'homme recule [...] Ce sont les Indes, pour aujourd'hui, de déraison' (*I* 1965: 138).

Later in the same poem, the lines of separation are redrawn within the context of the newly established colonial lands, forming a landscape of emotional and physical contrasts: the destructive rays of the sun and its illuminating power, the cultural desert and the luxuriant vegetation, the moral misery and the rich agricultural production. The final lines of Chapter 4 set out the symbolic framework of the new chapter of history that is *settlement*:

> Nous avons fait un pas de terre dure, chacun s'efforce maintenant de distinguer de ce Levant son pur Couchant; il n'est question depuis toujours que de ce cours; ô Soleil, et toi Mer, nous connaîtrons votre métrique et votre sens! [...] Et que se ferme, sur ce rêve où vous voilà enclos, avec les siècles et les morts, que se ferme le Chant de mort où l'Ombre aura régné.
>
> (*I* 1965: 146)

A ritual line of demarcation is drawn around the island setting. The fragile coastline separates and encloses its world, cutting it off from the imaginative

excesses of the colonial adventurers and the excessive suffering endured on the slave ship. At this stage of the epic account, the line that separates the present and the past, the here and the there, produces a new set of forms and colours to which the new community can cling, as a manner of taking root as it were, on the edge of the abyss.

In *Le Sel noir*, the epic viewpoint is constituted less by historically marked events than by a collection of thematically ordered episodes, as suggested by the chapter titles that name cities (Carthage), continents (Africa), economic realities (Gabelles) and ritual forms (Acclamation). The connecting thread is the image of black salt, whose natural properties and symbolic potentialities are combined with a host of psychic virtues (bitterness, purification, stimulation). By way of these multiple associations, the motif of black salt becomes the essence of the world in gestation, the grain of salt being the sediment that eventually becomes the island emerging from the sea: 'J'ai vu mon île sur son autan. Le sel du poème à la fin dépose dans la terre, qui s'alentit' (*SN* [1960] 1983: 129). As well as a new physical landscape, one discovers a new aural landscape in which the cries echoing in the ship's hull mark their return in the form of chant, speech and poetry. The differentiated system of sights and sounds rises above the clamour of the sea, creating a distinct zone of contemplation encompassing the beauty of the tropical island: 'Quelle, cette splendeur?' (*SN* [1960] 1983: 135). The poet's word orders the landscape by dividing it, separating it into distinct forms, each having its specific shape and character: 'D'un bord à l'autre de la parole établissant ses paysages?' (*SN* [1960] 1983: 135).

The title *Pays rêvé, pays réel* presents a line of division that superimposes itself on that of the two previous texts. It divides the poetic universe into the imagined and the real, and secondarily between the past and present: 'Nous fêlons le pays d'avant dans l'entrave du pays-ci' (*PR* 1985: 17), just as it divides space between familiar inhabitable areas and unknown lands beyond: 'Or la terre se fend. De chaque côté l'Inconnu' (*PR* 1985: 49). However, these physical configurations are infused with the dream-like suggestions of myths. The use of the *imparfait* in the first lines: 'Nous râlions à vos soutes le vent peuplait / Vos hautes lisses à compter / Nous épelions du vent la harde de nos cris' (*PR* 1985: 11) is suggestive of the process of distanciation and aestheticization that epic story telling obviously entails. This is the province of the 'pays rêvé', where the raw violence of the historical account of the 'pays réel' is emotionally re-figured within the 'entour des mots' (*PR* 1985: 11). Yet the passion for origins that drives the epic poet ensures that this can never be a straightforward act of ordering of experience, for his words themselves are 'désassemblés' (*PR* 1985: 11), such that the 'lézardes prophétiques' (*PR* 1985: 12) remain largely intact. The appositive structure of the title suggests that *Pays rêvé, pays reel* is essentially directed towards the inaugural rupture without which no birth could occur.

The three epic poems recount the emergence of Caribbean societies by re-enacting the series of fractures, separations and extractions that made them possible, beginning with the foolhardy desire of Renaissance men to colonize the unknown. The epic story relates how this folly migrates to the fierce slave economy with its multiple departures and displacements of African and European populations, following a complex trajectory that is

minutely captured in the trail of foam and the thrust of the ship's bow in the ocean. The folly reappears in the miraculous extraction from the ocean of grains of salt, then sand, then rocks and islands, followed by the extraction of the word from the sounds emanating from the ship's hull and its mutation into a language as a prelude to the emergence, in *Pays rêvé, pays réel*, of an island culture. Glissant's epic poems not only show how the ageless passion for departure is nourished by contact with the natural elements, but demand also that we pay heed, in every detail of the island setting that harbours this folly, to the fractures that informed its history.

Trace

The passion for origins does not focus on the heroic acts that seal once and for all the destiny of a people, but rather on the continual churning of the accidents, the about turns and the anxieties that have marked its history. The absence of direction and the continual transformations mark Glissant's poetry as a poetry of the trace. Glissant defines the trace in *Introduction à une poétique du divers* as 'une manière opaque d'apprendre la branche et le vent, être soi dérivé à l'autre, le sable en vrai désordre de l'utopie, l'insondé, l'obscur du courant dans la rivière dételée' (1996: 70). The lexical series *opaque*, *dérivé*, *désordre*, *insondé* et *obscur* points to the residual values left behind once the pre-established mental schema of exploration, discovery and colonization has been exhausted. They refer, more precisely, to the manner in which one apprehends the surrounding world once it becomes clear that it escapes all intelligibility, and indeed foreshadows a readiness to embrace all that is inassimilable. As we have noted, the trace represents not a mode of conceptualization but a mode of participation that Glissant elsewhere names the Relation and whose openness is opposed to the world of self-interest parading as eternal truths as claimed by western thought.

In contrast with the rule of separation that, as we saw earlier, carves up the universe according to the relative positions of explorers, slave ships and old and new lands, the trace is concerned with that which, at each of these positions, necessarily escapes from view. Ontologically, the trace is neither pure presence nor pure absence, but a property of presence that causes it to mark out the place of a concealment. Indeed, as will become apparent, each of the poems proceeds from the trace as if from a chronic misdirection, for the return to the past does not clarify anything – it is a fall into darkness that inevitably repeats itself.

Transposed into natural elements such as wind, sand, river and forest, the trace appears as a divided presence, a presence that marks a disappearance. The poet's eye never grasps the thing in itself, but the contours of the place that it evacuates, such that its obliteration becomes indistinguishable from its presence. In *Les Indes*, the slave ship proceeds by way of a gradual obliteration of the past: '[Le voyageur] pleure à douce larme sa jeunesse et ses parents, il aime à boire / Au verre de l'oubli le fiel, soudain, des douces choses familières' (*I* 1965: 105). The monotony of the ocean swallows up memories, cutting ties with a world once familiar. Like the sky that dissipates the blue smoke released from the funnels, the sea absorbs the ship and its contents into its immensity: 'Mais où meurent, où meurent les voiles, lassées du vent? / Les cheminées ouvertes à l'azur sans

voix / Délaissent de crier leur fumée bleue' (*I* 1965: 166). The fact of being on the verge of disappearance ensures that all the participants in the mission, from the slaves to the deck hands to the officers, and all the objects that support the voyage, from the ship to the unwanted items thrown in the hold, acquire equal status as signs of a doomed history, for there can be no outcome other than their disappearance. *Les Indes* associates the idea of imminent disappearance with the position of the ship in the path of the setting sun. After bathing in the light of glorious departures, the West bound mission enters 'un océan de choses étroites, sombres' (*I* 1965: 137), as if in anticipation of the moment when it will plunge into the sun's dark centre. Addressing the sun, the poet announces that the expedition follows the sun's trajectory only in order to obliterate itself within it: 'pour y mourir en toi, recéleur' (*I* 1965: 137).

The embers, ashes or scars of the consumed passions of the expedition are repeatedly conjured by the voyager-poet of *Le Sel noir*. As trace, they are not simple reminders of loss and death, but evidence of that which precisely cannot be retrieved from death. They are a measure of the impossibility of retrieval. Such is the significance in this poem of the black salt, the dissolved portion of sea water that on contact with land turns into solid crystals. The black salt does not encapsulate the sea, but in its dryness and blackness speaks of its disappearance. It both denies the sea and recalls its presence negatively in its bitter dry taste. For the epic poet, the salt marks, as trace, the entire story of the voyage from sea to land. It is no wonder, then, that he delights in its presence: 'Et vous voici sel du royaume de mes mains' (*SN* [1960] 1983: 80). However, if the salt prefigures the land mass emerging from the sea, it is chiefly because of its association with all the people, objects, hopes and thoughts that were previously swallowed up by the same sea during the crossing. The 'cadavres' and the 'prurits' that compose the 'charnier' (*SN* [1960] 1983: 89) left behind by the vessels follow in their volatilized form the surviving vessels to their landing place, along with the foam-drenched chant of the sea-farers that, transposed on the island, injects this sense of absence into the physiognomy of the new land.

Pays rêvé, pays réel takes the notion of the trace further by tracking the movements of the escaping slaves (*les marrons*) into the depths of the island forest and by reiterating the desperate, jubilant and erratic path they follow in unknown territory. 'Nous courons dans la foule avons crié aux chiens ... la nuit / Nous coule au flanc les cris / Roulent dans la ravine des morts' (*PR* 1985: 24). The words *foule*, *coule*, *roulent* associate the movement of the fugitives with the sway of the ship that decades or centuries earlier found itself precariously placed above the bottomless depths. Here, the trail through the forest exposes them to a similar danger of falling, either to the guns of the pursuers or to the natural traps such as the 'ravine des morts'. The proximity of death now accompanies every breath, causing the fugitives to assume a form of existence that is dark, hollow and ghostly. They signal their presence through their anonymous voices and nocturnal cries, calling to mind 'l'enterré vif qui navigue à la rivière nombrable' (*PR* 1985: 47).

The logic of the trace infuses both kinds of expedition, on sea or land, with the paradoxical structure of appearance and disappearance. The very

fact of surviving the ordeal of displacement signifies the obliteration of certain defining traits of the past: 'D'un seul volcan la riviere la mer / Nous donnent vie nous ôtent mémoire' (*PR* 1985: 70). Forgetting, then, is a language that is learned. It is a life that, considered as a mode of enduring, imprints itself in all points of the landscape:

> Parce que *nous sommes insus*
> Nous *coulons* dans cette rivière
> Des graviers marquent l'an aux sables
> Une bête-longue file aux bambous.
>
> (*PR* 1985: 72, emphasis added)

The trace signals a kind of emergence that is predicated upon a loss. As such, it makes accessible the shapes, forms and colours of a new landscape, just as it delivers a new language in the form of the obscure vociferations of the poet. Like animal tracks, the trace is a negative inscription insofar as it marks the place of a disappearance. We have seen that black salt marks the conspicuous retreat of sea water, and that the island displays in its visible shoreline the recoil of the ocean. Similarly, the epic poem is a story of origins that passionately marks the retreat of origins and confirms their essential irretrievability. All that remains is an inscription whose forms are constantly re-drawn and whose values are constantly re-adjusted in accordance with the obscure law that produces them. But it is this inscription that also authorizes the Caribbean poetics that Glissant wishes to establish in all his writings. This is the law of opacity whose discursive power pits itself against established European politico-philosophical thought systems: 'La pensée de la trace permet d'aller au loin des étrangements de système. Elle réfute par là tout comble de possession. Elle fête l'absolu du temps' (1997b: 20).

Concerning the figure of the sun, which in *Les Indes* and *Le Sel noir* fulfils the double function of illuminating and obliterating, *Pays rêvé, pays réel* highlights its function of inscription in the form of the *boucan*, the smoke pit used for drying meat. Here, the sun appears in its collapse, as a fall into the earth: 'Le soleil tombe dans le morne. Viens voir le soleil baigner dans son ombre, doucement mourir' (*PR* 1985: 43). This inhumation presents an image of the absent sun that continues to exert its power negatively, via its action of drying, of the sucking out of life. The *boucan* is the form of the buried sun whose intense reverberation causes a weakening of one's grip on diurnal realities, leaving an army of skeletal forms that roam the night and terrorize the inhabitants. The poet warns the fragile flower: 'Corolle nous te prions / N'approche pas le boucan' (*PR* 1985: 41). The drying action that produces diminished but resistant forms on land doubles the drying of the sea that leaves salt crystals on the shore. Both actions recall, via the verb *tarir* that recurs constantly in this poem, the movement of recoil of the sea and the emergence of that dry, solitary land mass in the middle of the watery expanse that was to become home to the errant voyagers. Clearly, the motifs of the falling sun and the recoiling ocean are crucial to the understanding of a society born of displacement and whose history is accessible only by way of the trace.

Suffering

Having argued first that Glissant's epic poems are founded upon the rule of separation, and second that they are organized around the figure of presence and absence that we call the trace, we must now consider more closely their affective values, notably via the notion of suffering. However much time has passed since the deportation, the trauma it caused permeates all corners of the epic poem's emotional territory. The reason for this is that the trace, as the bearer of the story of lost origins, not only marks the place of a disappearance but also signals the persistence of the memory of inordinate suffering. The trace, in other words, is the scar attesting to forgotten wounds.

Suffering is a dimension of Glissant's thought that is rarely dealt with in his essays, possibly because their discursive structures typically preclude them from connecting with the original cry. Poetry, on the other hand, does nothing but seek its traumatic origin. When Glissant declares in *Le Discours antillais* that poetic language allows him to remain faithful to the 'puissances souterraines' that inform all creole societies, his intention is also to defend the place of poetry as a literary form. Glissant foregrounds three characteristics that qualify poetry as a privileged mode of representing suffering: 'Parole non garante' in the sense that it is never entirely assured of capturing 'le sang et les os étouffés dans la terre', thus exposing the poet to the risk of failure and humiliation; 'parole menacée', for it hesitates, and even flees, as it approaches the painful truth it seeks, like 'la mangouste qui sous les cannes cherche la traverse'; and finally 'parole nécessaire', because it is fanatically driven to seek the difficult truths lurking underneath familiar intellectual constructs, which he describes as 'tant de semblants où nous nous sommes complu' (1997: 28). Poetry asserts itself in these different ways as a privileged means of embracing the equally necessary and painful return to origins.

Glissant's epic poems locate the suffering well before slavery, for the seeds of suffering are already evident in the feverish eyes of Renaissance men who were stricken by the folly of sea expeditions. They were thus blind to the misery of the peoples caught in the midst of their designs. From these first victims, the misery spread to the multitude of 'peuples taris' (*SN* [1960] 1983: 123) whose bodies were bent under the weight of their heritage.

> Il n'est bruit que du sang que la mer convoya. Il n'est tempête que de sang.
> L'amère odeur nous vient, respirez-la, mes houles. Il n'est bruit
> Que de l'obscur encens des peuples qu'on a pris au feu de notre temps
> Qui meurent à porter l'épais des mers et le relent
> De très hautes planètes.
>
> (*SN* [1960] 1983: 102)

The ambition to attain the highest spheres of knowledge by embarking on a voyage into the unknown is realized at the expense of those who must withstand the stench ('le relent') it leaves behind. The voyager-poet pays hommage to these suffering peoples: 'J'ai vu vos corps, des fruits obscurs, et les Dragons s'y sont nourris. Je vous connais être l'encens de leurs ébats; vous fûtes routes pour leurs pas!' (*SN* [1960] 1983: 99).

In *Les Indes*, the entire fourth chapter characterizes 'La Traite' as a 'monstrueuse mobilisation' (*I* 1965: 135), and in *Le Sel noir*, the chapter 'Plaies' enumerates the many ravages to which the slave community was subjected. Suffering is conveyed by a representation of the female body, for here beauty is proportional to the number of signs of violation displayed therein:

> Ses cheveux sur la nuit sonnent ce sont des chaînes
> Ses mains saignent ce sont mains de peuples taris
> Son corps porte le poids du temps, mêlé au sang
> Elle a les yeux rêveurs des morts que l'on oublie
> Les mouvements des filles déhalées dans l'incendie
> Beauté beauté le monde est là et c'est ton corps bleui.
>
> (*SN* [1960] 1983: 123)

The figure of woman as a 'vêtement de plaies' (*SN* [1960] 1983: 124) is emblematic of a community that establishes itself in the wake of an unspeakable ordeal. Here, the violent acts perpetrated against it attain their greatest visibility, such that the horror spilling over the surface of the body or land radiates intensely, creating a situation of overexposure. The poem, as trace, issues precisely from this clouding of vision. Such is its opacity that, as Glissant states in his commentary on Faulkner, the poem ultimately attempts 'non pas tant de faire parvenir [...] à une vérité, que d'entretenir une inquiétude, un vertige' (1969: 180). The trace, here, is subsumed under the 'plaie' through which one perceives the disturbing alternation of showing and concealing with respect to a traumatic past.

In the representation of the female body, the violence subsists as trace to the extent that it resists the kinds of schematization that frame and order it. As long as the violence was contained within the historical framework of the deportation, and as long as it confined itself to the space of the slave ship (see the enumeration of ways of suffering in *I* 1965: 144), one could foresee its end. At the very least, the violence was intelligible as part of a journey that had to end. But as soon as there emerged a new space-time complex that dissolved previous reference points and disqualified previous forms of appropriation, survivors had to endure new forms of disturbance, the first of which being the chilling impenetrability of the cry. The task of the epic poet is to ensure the perpetuation of violence by recounting an ordeal that never ends. He does this by setting out a poetics of the trace in which discursive patterns and rhythms are informed by a host of partial memories and obscure prophesies, all of which serves as a constant reminder of his people's position within a cycle of unending catastrophe: 'Après la traversée, la solitude, et la colère des requins, s'ouvre bientôt un champ de terres somptueuses, de misère et d'incendies, et de sang noir précipité' (*I* 1965: 146).

Pays rêvé, pays réel names the 'riviere blessée' (*PR* 1985: 29) and the '[t]erre blessée' (*PR* 1985: 83), and describes the '[y]oles blessées où les lézardes s'évertuèrent' (*PR* 1985: 95). It registers suffering not only in the physical surroundings but also in the words, images and memories they elicit. Thus the poet asks his muse: 'D'où mènes-tu ces mots que tu colores / D'un sang de terre sur l'écorce évanouie' (*PR* 1985: 86). The words are

inscribed on the flesh (*l'écorce*) using the earth's blood, but does not the flesh disappear (*évanouie*) behind the blood, and does not the blood disappear behind the words? The logic of the trace, so prominent here, dictates that the suffering of the body must recede as the words engraved on the murdered flesh bring its story to the fore. The interplay between showing and concealing that constitutes the trace thus allows the poem to stage the story of suffering in its unimaginable historical and emotional amplitude.

The trace brings together the two sides of *Pays rêvé, Pays réel* as they are described in the first and last chapters, both titled 'Pays'. The first, *Pays rêvé*, is the tale passed down through the generations by way of voices emanating from legendary figures; the second, *Pays réel*, by contrast, denounces the 'songe' (*PR* 1985: 14) that aestheticizes the cry of suffering. It dismisses the 'conte en arc' (*PR* 1985: 15) that simulates the brutality of history, preferring to impose a silence that alone is worthy of the ordeal of suffering. The two sides of Glissant's epic poem are joined by the dense, aphoristic pronouncements that appear in the intervening chapters, and whose pathos is suggestive of the poet's hesitation between the fictional word that masks and the real silence that obliterates. However, the exploration of both 'pays' and the subsequent admission of their common inadequacies before the experience of suffering infuse the entire poem with a generalized anxiety, an anticipation of a suffering to come that is the equal of all the suffering of the past.

This poem brings together the historical account of the violence endured by the people and the collective vision of a future informed by suffering. The accumulated weight of suffering authorizes the epic poem's move into the political, as the episode of the wounded animal, 'l'agouti', demonstrates. The animal appears twice. Each time, its movement is hampered: 'Sa patte droite est lacérée d'un épini' (*PR* 1985: 75). The first appearance marks the animal's frustration at not being able to quell the pain despite its stubborn resistance ('Ses yeux par mille cris ont labouré la crête' (*PR* 1985: 75)). In its second appearance however, the animal, instead of struggling, stops and licks its wounds to obtain relief: 'Il lèche la blessure et referme la nuit' (*PR* 1985: 87).[4] The effect of this action that ends a night of agony is not lost upon the animal who learns that pain can be domesticated in the same way that one can sleep on a 'brasier qu'on souche' (*PR* 1985: 87). It discovers that it is, after all, possible to seek comfort in the shadow of 'la blessure qui nous fit' (*PR* 1985: 87). Such is the power of healing that the poet ascribes to his own words. These he gathers, like feathers, into a bed for his muse Mycéa to lay upon. 'Ainsi je penche vers mes mots et les assemble/À la ventée où tu venais poser la tête' (*PR* 1985: 87). The epic poet does not turn away from the reality of suffering, but presents a manner of enduring that is faithful to the memory of trauma, even though he can access it only through its loss. At the end of *Pays rêvé, pays réel*, the motif of *le sel noir* makes its return in the form of the salt solution ('saumure') applied to the wound, in the hope that a salutary dose of pain will alleviate the agony. However, it is equally clear that the suffering is on-going, that there is no cure for a misery that has its roots in history and that consequently is almost too heavy to bear: 'Je prends ma terre pour laver les vieilles plaies/ D'un creux de saumure empêtré d'aveux / Mais si lourds à porter ô si lourds ô palétuviers' (*PR* 1985: 99).

4. Derrida, in 'Che cos'é la poesia?', offers a similar intuition when he associates the poem with the figure of the hedgehog. This is based, in a fashion that recalls Glissant, on poetry's natural affinity with pain as a measure of its intimate grasp of reality: 'Pas de poème sans accident, pas de poème qui ne s'ouvre comme une blessure, mais qui ne soit aussi blessant' (Derrida 1995: 296).

As the episode of the wounded agouti cat demonstrates, Glissant's epic poems derive their political significance from the account of past and future suffering in a manner that creates an organized shared experience. To demonstrate how the epic poems create this shared universe, the foregoing pages examined in detail the three motifs that most clearly highlight this process. The first was the rule of separation by which the changes in the spatio-temporal coordinates of Caribbean history were mapped out as a series of displacements from land to sea and from sea to land. From this ordering principle emerged the trace, which is the peculiar relation that discourse establishes with the invisible, unintelligible side of reality. As such, the trace is inscribed, in its obscurity, everywhere in the island landscape, in the physiognomy of the people and in the idioms they use. Lastly, the trace would have no poetic significance if it did not convey the memory of suffering collectively endured and subsequently re-lived in ritual form, for without the wounds of history there would be no basis upon which poetry could generate a sense of belonging. Through the motifs of *separation* as a condition of a new order, of *trace* as mode of inscription, and finally of shared *suffering*, Glissant's poetic universe opens itself up to 'le souffle du lieu' (1996: 140, 141), by which he means not only the emotional attachment to a particular place as a result of a series of historical accidents, but also the recognition of a particular tonality that can be heard in the living voices that attach to this specific place, as they renew their connection with the original cry.

Let us return, by way of conclusion, to the manner in which Glissant's approach constrasts with Aimé Césaire's revolutionary poetics of *negritude*. Césaire wished to sublimate the harsh reality of Black Antillean history by calling for a form of ecstatic combativeness that would ultimately defeat the prevailing colonialist view of Blacks as defective humans. In his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, poetry becomes 'une lance de nuit' (1983: 58) wielded by those who no longer accept to kneel before their masters: 'Accommodez-vous de moi. Je ne m'accommode pas de vous' (1983: 73). For Césaire, it is imperative to climb above the accumulated miseries of history and affirm Black dignity:

> Et nous sommes debout maintenant, mon pays et moi, les cheveux dans le vent, ma main petite maintenant dans son poing énorme et la force n'est pas en nous, mais au-dessus de nous, dans une voix qui vrille la nuit et l'audience comme la pénétrance d'une guêpe apocalyptique.
>
> (1983: 57)

Glissant's epic poetry is not ascensional like Césaire's, but relational, by which he means that his notion of community is not based on the erection of new ideals, but takes root in the invisible threads that connects people, objects and images in their changing present, in a way that resists artificial or predictable ordering, but nevertheless remains true to an ambivalent landscape that buries and unearths, displaces and restores. If, as Glissant suggests, 'Césaire's poetics is one of volcanoes and eruptions' (2009: 100), that of Glissant is populated by death traps, smoke pits and other buried forces that, following the logic of the trace, configure the emotional landscape around the hidden centre of the island's ritual life.

Pays rêvé, pays réel constructs its double movement around the figure of the buried sun, as if to state the impossibility or even the incongruousness of self-glorification when in reality this history comes to light only via the sense of tragic loss it entails. History's sole legacy is the wounded earth and the inhabitants whose scars enable them to be creative and prolific through poetic expression. It is in this sense that Glissant's epic poems are laden with the harrowing force of the cry. As such, they are points of anchor for the project of recreating community – a realistic venture, not a surrender either to ideals or to despair.

Like many French-Caribbean writers, Glissant is profoundly indebted to Césaire's bold use of language as a way of resisting Eurocentric thought. Glissant, who excels in all the genres, uses poetry as a means of combating the anaesthesia of prefabricated meanings. The poetic voice is pure, and its relation to reality is direct, more prone to accident, less constrained by logic. It divides, separates and fractures the universe of accepted meanings; it calls to presence in a way that acknowledges that part of reality that its presumptuousness necessarily conceals; finally, it accumulates by sedimentation the images of suffering and the emotional undercurrents of a community of which it is naively said that it has been shaped by history rather than actively shaping it. Certainly, the preoccupation to recount the past ensures that Glissant's epic poems are grounded in the specific experience of Caribbean societies and their physical setting. However, by going beyond the historical account of origins, and seeking more properly the passion for origins, poetry opens up the features of Caribbean-ness to the conditions of universal interconnectedness that Glissant names the *totalité-monde*.

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Contributor details

Peter Poiana is Senior Lecturer in the Department of French Studies at the University of Adelaide, Australia. He has published articles on Samuel Beckett's late narratives, theories of scandal and seduction and autobiography. His most recent publications are "Dangerous Identifications: An Exchange between Jacques Derrida and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe', published in *Angelaki* (2013), and 'The Traumatic Origins of Representation', in *Continental Philosophy Review* (2013). Current research interests include the exploration of the philosophical and poetic articulation of origins.

Contact: School of Humanities – French, The University of Adelaide, North Terrace, Adelaide SA 5005, Australia.

E-mail: peter.poiana@adelaide.edu.auu