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Errant Grounds: Eco-epic Textures in Contemporary Caribbean Literature

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Errant Grounds: Eco-epic Textures in Contemporary Caribbean Literature

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Abstract

Errant Grounds: Eco-epic Textures in Contemporary Caribbean Literature
By Anna Kowalik

“Errant Grounds: Eco-epic Textures in Contemporary Caribbean Literature” argues that Caribbean poets and artists engage the epic to envision diasporic belonging that emerges through a relation to nature. While in the continental tradition human history and politics have been conceptualized in opposition to nature, the authors selected for this study—Derek Walcott, Romare Bearden, Grace Nichols, and Édouard Glissant—call on the epic to envision historical continuity, political community, and diasporic futures as inseparable from and creatively transformed by the Caribbean natural world. The Introduction examines colonial appropriations of nature in the Caribbean, and shows that Afro-diasporic authors turn to the epic in order to affirm the archipelago as a space of life, resilience, complexity, and creativity. These poetic reclamations in turn reveal that nature operates as a creative agent within articulations of community and belonging, and cannot be dissociated from history. Subsequent chapters analyze entanglements of history and nature in articulations of Caribbean origins in selected poetry and art by elaborating a notion of an “eco-epic texture”—a mode of figuration that draws attention to creative relations between history, nature, and literariness in practices of postcolonial life-making. Chapter one considers works of Derek Walcott and Romare Bearden as they engaged the Caribbean Sea for a productively destabilizing inscription of diasporic cultural inheritance and political belonging. Chapter two analyzes the poetry of Grace Nichols as it rewrites Caribbean origins as an insurgent natural-feminine ground to open up alternative futures within the colonial past. Chapter three traces notions of epic and earth in Édouard Glissant. It argues that these categories are deployed to envision Caribbean cultural and political life within a relational rather than sovereign paradigm. Ultimately, in analyzing the centrality of nature in Caribbean theoretical and imaginary practice, “Errant Grounds” argues that poetic entanglements of nature and history in articulations of Caribbean origins highlight the complexity of Caribbean beginnings where nature works to disentangle historical and political imaginaries from colonial determinism, transforming spaces of constraint into sites of regained humanity.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Małgorzata Kowalik.

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Introduction

Ecological Epic in the Caribbean

> In the society which has been shot through by diverse inter-racial features and inter-continental thresholds, we need a philosophy of history which is original to us and yet capable of universal application. Caribbean man is involved in a civilisation-making process (whether he likes it or not) and until this creative authority becomes intimate to his perspectives, he will continue to find himself embalmed in his deprivations—embalmed as a derivative tool-making, fence-making animal. As such his dialectic will remain a frozen round of protest.
>
> Wilson Harris "Continuity and Discontinuity"

Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris articulates in his essay "Continuity and Discontinuity" an urgent need for revitalizing Caribbean historical consciousness by countering "historical convention" with "arts of the imagination" (176)—Caribbean creative resources by way of which a unique philosophy of history of the region could be articulated. Such a creative philosophy of history is lacking, Harris argues, because Caribbean historical consciousness remains dominated by conventional thinking about

historical temporality as linear, chronological, and organized by colonial stories of the discovery that pitch the colonizer against the colonized, the master against the slave, the conqueror against the conquered. Dominated by such an understanding of history, Harris writes, Caribbean narratives "will remain a frozen round of protest" (180), will be "little more than an adjunct of imperialism" (176), and will risk presenting human beings in the Caribbean as continuously "embalmed in [their] deprivations" (180). Further, Harris notes that such a creative vision of history would in fact be true to the human accomplishment in the Caribbean insofar as surviving the brutality of slavery and colonialism in the Americas required unimaginable resilience and creativity of the human spirit:

> One must remember that *breath* is all the black man may have possessed at a certain stage in the Americas. . . . [H]e possessed nothing but the calamitous air of broken ties in the New World. Historical convention has no criteria for this inner subtle storm of reality. . .—the yoke of imagination in the trickster theatre of the Caribbean 'as a breath-body' or field of metamorphosis beyond the *de facto* embalmed posture of the slave in every catalogue of injustice. (179; original emphasis)

The transition in this passage from an emphasis on the human breath to the image of the Caribbean as a metamorphic 'breath-body' points to Harris's interest in Caribbean and South American nature and geography as original archives that could nourish the creative philosophy of history he attempts to articulate. Indeed, he sees these natural resources as an unexplored terrain of creativity: "One area I have neglected is to deepen our perception of the fauna and flora of a landscape of time which indicate the kind of

room or space or material vision of time in which whole societies conscripted themselves" (182). Through his entire literary oeuvre, then, Harris will continue to imagine that to step into the Guyanese tropics means to step into a whole universe of multiple temporal pockets where stones, trees, bushes, birds, or rivers thicken time and open up new links between the past, present, and future that disavow historical determinism.

Harris's account of the necessity of developing a creative Caribbean philosophy of history as well as his suggestion that New World's nature is an indispensable agent in this process frame the argument I will develop in "Errant Grounds: Eco-epic Textures in Contemporary Caribbean Literatures." The three poets and an artist whose works I analyze in this dissertation, Romare Bearden, Derek Walcott, Grace Nichols, and Édouard Glissant, all engage nature as a creative element in an articulation of Caribbean historical, cultural, and political belonging. Further, in claiming the elements of the epic tradition for this articulation of Caribbean collective identity, these artists and writers revise the relationship between nature and history, and show that Caribbean origins are marked by the inextricable entanglement of nature and history. "Errant Grounds: Eco-epic Textures in Contemporary Caribbean Literatures" argues that these epic articulations of collective belonging that emerge through a relation to nature radically transform how we understand historical continuity, political community, and diasporic futures. The entanglement of history and nature in articulations of Caribbean origins highlights the complexity of diasporic beginnings where nature paradoxically thwarts the logic of essentialism and works to disentangle historical and political imaginaries from colonial determinism. What is at stake in tracing how nature interacts with history in diasporic

stories of collective belonging is, first, a different understanding of cultural specificity that thrives upon and sustains (rather than overcomes) difference, and, second, a reassessment of how we might read literary depictions of the entanglements between nature and history.

Nature in the New World

"Since the days when the sword and the cross made their way into the Americas," Uruguayan intellectual Eduardo Galeano writes in "We Must Stop Playing Deaf to Nature," "the European conquest punished the adoration of nature, which was seen as the sin of idolatry, with the punishments of whipping, hanging, and burning. The communion between nature and people, a pagan custom, was abolished in the name of God and later in the name of civilization. Throughout the Americas, and the world, we are paying the consequences of this divorce" (3). Galeano points out the tortured and broken lived experience of nature in the New World as the relationship with land in the Americas transformed in the wake of the colonial encounter. To think about nature in the Americas from this perspective, then, is to consider nature as always already riven with displacements, fractures, and losses, as saturated with the memories of dispossession.

The scope of ecological dispossession the New World suffered in the wake of the colonial encounter is magnified when we consider how the discovery of the flora, fauna, and human beings in the Americas was constitutive of the development of Western scientific reason. Science scholar Londa Schiebinger has compellingly explored the links between colonialism and European scientific advancement, suggesting that "early modern

botany intimately supported and profited from European expansion" ("Introduction" 3-4). "Colonial botany," she writes,

> —the study, naming, cultivation, and marketing of plants in colonial contexts—was born of and supported European voyages, conquests, global trade, and scientific exploration. The expanding science of plants depended on access to ever farther-flung regions of the globe; at the same time, colonial profits depended largely on natural historical exploration and the precise identification and effective cultivation of profitable plants. (2)

But what enabled a more detailed understanding of the natural world and what facilitated the development of new scientific paradigms in Europe, signaled a tear in the fabric of being for the peoples of the Americas:

> European naturalists collected specimens . . . but not world views, cosmologies, or alternative ways of understanding the world. They stockpiled specimens in cabinets, put them behind glass in museums, accumulated them in botanical gardens and princely menageries. They collected the bounty of the natural world, but a bounty divested of traditional names [and] cultural meanings. . . . Botanists increasingly engaged in the distinctively European project of classifying plants and animals based on their particular understanding of anatomy and physiology. (*Nature's Body* 208-209)[1]

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[1] Postcolonial ecocritics have likewise commented on how colonization was constitutive of the development of natural sciences. See for instance Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey's essay "Against Authenticity: Global Knowledges and Postcolonial Ecocriticism" or Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*. The effects of colonialism on the New World environments have also been studied by environmental historians such as Alfred W. Crosby in *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* and in *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900—1900*; and by Richard Grove in *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History, 1400—1940*.

Schiebinger's studies of ecological plunder in the European colonies reveal a lack of ontological resistance of humans and nature in the New World in the eyes of European colonizers. The region became a scientific laboratory where the body of the world was examined, named, categorized, and displaced to European museums and glasshouses, a process of dispossession which complemented forced transplantation and uprooting of people in the Americas, and the geo-political parceling of the Caribbean into distinct spheres of colonial influence.

Caribbean reclamations of the environment, therefore, will inevitably be a process of working with and through these interlocking experiences of dislocation so much so that the transformation of the material locations of the archipelago into lived environments will not permit to disavow originary ruptures formative to the region. But while it is certainly true that, as Rob Nixon suggests in his seminal essay "Environmentalism and Postcolonialism," "the [Caribbean] soil constitutes the historic ground of . . . alienation" (241), the poets and artists studied in this dissertation simultaneously engage in a reevaluation of the very notion of the ground, seeking in the Caribbean soil (Glissant) and sea (Bearden, Walcott, and Nichols) alternative, errant, foundations for the affirmation of Caribbean identity and belonging.

The notion of errancy I work with in this dissertation emerges in Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation* where the term is used to describe a movement beyond the certitudes of rootedness and territory into sites where "identity" emerges there where it is thrown into question. He writes, "l'errance [est] considérée comme . . . désir de contrevenir à la racine" (27), and points out that Western epics, while attempting to assert the legitimacy of a community in its place, in fact turn out to be epics of errancy: "Livres

de la naissance à la conscience collective, ils introduisent ainsi à la part de malaise et de suspens qui permet à l'individu de s'y trouver, chaque fois qu'il devient à lui-même problème" (28). After Glissant, I have termed the grounds reimagined by Bearden, Walcott, Nichols, and Glissant himself errant to highlight the fact that the notion of foundations that emerges out of their creative engagements with Caribbean nature fails to ground legitimacy by land entitlement and filiation, and thus allows a vision of identity and belonging that upsets claims to unproblematic national self-definition and a self-enclosed community.

Paradoxically, then, Caribbean attempts to reclaim nature for articulations of belonging give onto a questioning of the ontologically grounding relationship to place. This aporetic relationship to the archipelago is powerfully depicted in Jamaica Kincaid's essay "In History." The essay is framed by a series of questions that lead Kincaid to interrogate the ontological effects of 1492:

> What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me? Should I call it history? And if so, what should history mean to someone who looks like me? Should it be an idea; should it be an open wound, each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again, over and over, or is it a long moment that begins anew each day since 1492? (166)

Kincaid's questions remain unanswered because of a lack of epistemic foothold out of which she could launch the sense-making process. She and the people who look like her appear on "their" land after it has been emptied out of indigenous populations who had endowed this land with meaning (159). This dispossession is an effect not only of the indigenous genocide in the Americas, but also of clearing nature of its common names in

a taxonomic project that echoes the one described earlier by Schiebinger: "the botanists . . . emptied worlds of their names; they emptied the worlds of things animal, vegetable, and mineral of their names and replaced these names with names pleasing to them; these names are pleasing to them because they are reasonable; reason is a pleasure to them" (Kincaid 160). For Kincaid, this taxonomic upending of the Caribbean constitutes an originary epistemic crisis for, as she writes, "if one does not know the names, one's knowledge of things is useless" (165). It accounts for her inability to stand as a knowing, detached subject capable of objectively looking at history and explaining to herself her own place in it. And thus to pose the question of history opens up the unspeakable wound of the past that marks a Caribbean being as wounded at its very core, as experiencing 1492 not as a point in a series of chronological events, but as a never-ending (re)beginning of Caribbean life.

In another way, however, the questions Kincaid asks at the end of her essay return us to my discussion of Harris at the beginning of this chapter and prefigure some of the concerns the problem of the Caribbean epic will pose. For if the possibility of the objective, knowing approach to history in the Caribbean is irrevocably shattered, then what other kinds of knowing might appear in this fractured site? How to think about this strange continuity that links 1492 with the present, a continuity punctured with the pace of breathing that entangles death with life? Finally, what to make of the context and the site where these questions are posed? As Kincaid notes, she began thinking about all this "standing in [her] garden . . . in a place called Vermont. . . . From the point of view of growing things—that is, from the gardener's point of view—Vermont is vastly different from that other place [she is] native to, Antigua" (157-158). How to think of this "point

of view of growing things" which, in spite of the better judgment of the gardener who for a moment tries to maintain a sense of distinctness between the two vastly different sites of New England and the Caribbean, nevertheless threads one location with another and collapses the sense of spatial and temporal separation?

Eco-Epic in the Caribbean

The recurring interest in the epic in Caribbean literature is a result of this originary ontological crisis that compels a question about the nature of collective identity in the archipelago.[2] Further, a Caribbean epic becomes imperative as evidence of human resilience and survival, and as an assertion of dignity in the face of humiliation. For Édouard Glissant, to allow the epic genre to die would be to risk "a death much colder and harder than even death itself" precisely because it would mean to fail to honor the multiplicity of strategies of resistance that allow the Afro-American communities in the plantation spaces to live on in the wake of dispossession (*Faulkner, Mississippi* 100).[3] The Caribbean is an especially fitting site to pose the question of collective identity and of futurity in the wake of catastrophic loss because, as John Drabinski notes, "the Caribbean *is* futurity precisely because of the abyssal effect and affect of loss. . . . The name Caribbean is itself inseparable from the openness of what is to come" (296; added

[2] In addition to the writers and artists studied in this dissertation, Caribbean writers who have engaged in various ways categories of epic literature include for instance Aimé Césaire, Saint-John Perse, Kamau Brathwaite, Dionne Brand, Pauline Melville, Wilson Harris, Reinaldo Arenas, Rosario Ferré, Maryse Condé, or Patrick Chamoiseau. Even though there exists a rich archive of epic writing in the Caribbean, there is a relative paucity of comparative studies of the genre from a Caribbean or hemispheric American perspective. Delphine Rumeau's *Chants du Nouveau Monde. Épopée et Modernité (Whitman, Neruda, Glissant)* is a notable exception. Other studies of the epic in the Americas include Robert D. Hamner's *Epic of the Dispossessed: Derek Walcott's Omeros* and Gregory E. Rutledge's *The Epic Trickster in American Literature from Sunjata to So(u)l*. Wai Chee Dimock considers the epic in the American context in "Epic Relays: C. L. R. James, Herman Melville, Frank Stella" and in "Recycling the Epic: Gilgamesh on Three Continents."

[3] I analyze the stakes of this claim in more detail in chapter three.

emphasis). The Caribbean is futurity because the archipelago marks the site of diasporic arrival, a fractured, impossible survival of the Middle Passage. It is futurity also because of the irreparable rupture within the fabric of being that captive Africans suffered, so much so that the Caribbean poses the very question of futurity as a problem of "*creating* after catastrophe" (295), a problematic of continuity and discontinuity I return to later in this section.

In many ways, then, the epic passion in Caribbean literature might be interpreted as a collective expression mustered to counter the claim of British historian James Anthony Froude's that "there are no people there [in West Indies] in the true sense of the word" (qtd. in Walcott "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" 67-68), a proposition reflecting the colonial perspective on the Caribbean as a site lacking history and cultural achievement.

Froude's statement is challenged by Walcott in his 1992 Nobel speech "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory," where the poet looks at the Trinidadian society as an example of a unique Caribbean people that creatively rearticulates its historical and cultural origins. In that lecture too, recalling the performance the Indian epic *Ramleela* in Trinidad, Walcott re-envisions the role of nature within collective articulations of identity and belonging. Critical commentaries on this essay rarely observe that the performance of *Ramleela*, the preparations for which trigger Walcott's reflection on Caribbean resilience and creativity, is not in fact the performance the poet witnesses that evening. "We had to leave before the play began," Walcott recalls, "to go through the creeks of the Caroni Swamp, to catch the scarlet ibises coming home at dusk. In a performance as natural as those of the actors of the *Ramleela*, we watched the flocks come in as bright as the scarlet

of the boy archers, as the red flags, and cover an islet until it turned into a flowering tree, an anchored immortelle" (68). Although the scene I invoke here is overshadowed in Walcott's lecture by the arche-image of the shattered vase, the figure that concretizes for Walcott the nature of Antillean art, the routine flight of the red ibis is integral, both literally and figuratively, to the entire conceptual architectonics of this essay as it yields the birth of figuration itself. Here, a metaphor is conceived somewhere on the swampy terrain where the poetic mind is entangled with the material world as the islet comes to be written over, covered the material scribbling of the birds only to appear as a tree, in a performance whose adumbrations uncannily feed Walcott's poetic reflections. The islet turns into a red evergreen by way of a spectacular incitation of the material world thus dislocating the place of the author across the human and non-human entities partaking in this scene.

The presence of this scene in the midst of Walcott's reflection on the epic in the Caribbean suggests a notion of an epic that does not merely recover lost cultural continuities, but actively interacts with Caribbean environments to produce an account of history, creativity, and relation to geography that transforms traditional understanding of the function of place within the collective imaginary. In tracing how the works of Bearden, Walcott, Nichols, and Glissant engage the natural world of the Caribbean, this dissertation takes up Glissant's invitation in *Le Discours antillais* that in order to understand the function of landscape for Antillean historicity, it is not enough to describe it. Rather, Glissant points out, "[l]'individu, la communauté, le pays sont indissociables dans l'épisode constitutif de leur histoire. Le paysage est un personnage de cette histoire. Il faut le comprendre dans ses profondeurs" (343). All authors examined in this

dissertation take Caribbean landscapes as capable of actively rewriting the script of history, consequently opening questions of the relation between the past, the present, and the future, as well as problematizing the relationship between nature and history, and nature and politics, which throughout a large part of continental tradition have been understood as separate, if not oppositional.

In this context, what is implicit in Caribbean engagements with the epic tradition is a re-examination of the stability of cultural and political foundations. This conceptual intervention is likewise foreshadowed in the excerpt from Walcott's lecture in how a destabilization of the discourse of national and cultural foundations is inscribed within the very structure of national identity. The purposeful trajectory linking the scene of departure (the play) with the scene of arrival (the Caroni Swamp)—the two limits securing the consistency of the foundational allegory—forks with a subtle intervention of the comma: "We had to leave before the play began to go through the creeks of the Caroni Swamp, to catch the scarlet ibises coming home at dusk." Here, the route itself, the passage through the murky waterways of the mangrove swamp, seems to be as much the intention behind the departure as the spectacular roosting of the ibises. In this meditation, Walcott captures the basic perplexity attending efforts of articulating Caribbean beginnings as well as the region's cultural and political belonging: the disconcerting inextricability of arrival and wandering—affirmation and dispersal. This perspective celebrates survival, belonging, and creativity that results from the coming together of different cultures in the Caribbean, while simultaneously pointing to the inherent movement and (possibly) non-arrival at the site of beginnings, suggesting that

Caribbean epics engender original complexity through which cultural sameness, self-enclosure, and completeness are questioned.

Therefore, the texts studied in this dissertation demonstrate what Gayatri Spivak termed "the deconstructive predicament of the postcolonial" (64)—a paradoxical position where one is simultaneously engaged in the questioning of Western hierarchies subtending colonial ideologies (the epic could be understood as one of such Western notions) and the paradoxical claiming of categories such as world, or nature, or human, or community, categories which "one cannot not want to inhabit" (64), so as to envision the possibilities of living on.

In the following pages, I demonstrate how notions of community, history, cultural identity, and belonging undergo radical revisions in the works of selected authors. These notions are rendered strange by the process of creation in the wake of catastrophe Drabinski pointed to in his discussion of the Caribbean as futurity. This idea that community, identity, and belonging are to be created in the diaspora results from the understanding of the Middle Passage as an ontologically disruptive event. Thinking in the wake of the Middle Passage has led a number of diasporic intellectuals to formulate a paradoxical notion of continuity that reflects diaspora's aporetic origins. Thus, for instance, Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" develops a notion of American beginnings "as a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation" (68), Harris in "Continuity and Discontinuity" re-envisions Atlantic continuities-discontinuities as "a discontinuous or dotted line" (177), and Glissant depicts the slave ship in *Poétique de la Relation* as "le gouffre-matrice" (18), a womb-abyss, to mark the abyssal beginnings of the Caribbean emerging out of death, out of undoing of

community, lineage, language, and collective memory. In *Faulkner, Mississippi* and in *Traité du Tout-Monde* Glissant uses the term "digenèse," digenesis, to describe these abyssal beginnings that explain the emergence of Caribbean societies not through laws of filiation, for these links have been irrevocably severed, but through unexpected, creative genealogies, sexual and non-sexual as the biological usage of the term implies, through which collective atavisms and essentialisms are shattered.[4]

These discussions by Afro-diasporic scholars foreground that the creativity that characterizes diasporic cultural and intellectual production occurs not despite of the dislocation of the Middle Passage, but rather because of it. This is not to deny the terror and brutality suffered by the slaves. But the necessity to think creatively within these spaces of historic hurt and violence is vital if, to cite Harris again, diasporic literature, arts, and theory are to offer a vision of life in the diaspora beyond "a frozen round of protest" (180) and beyond a notion of diasporic humans "embalmed in [their] deprivations" (180).

Given this context of Afro-diasporic dislocations and discontinuities, the persistent interest in the epic in the Caribbean might strike us as surprising. After all, the received understanding of the epic is that it is a big, bulky genre that depends on fixed historical origins, and that feeds on and perpetuates cultural continuity. In *The Dialogic Imagination* Mikhail Bakhtin writes that the epic is a genre "handed down . . . solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct." "[I]t is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in [the epic world]," he continues, "[i]t is completed, conclusive, and immutable" (15-16). In turn, Hegel in *Lectures on Aesthetics* ties the epic with the

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[4] For critical discussions of this term in Glissant see Véronique Bragard's *Transoceanic Dialogues: Coolitude in Caribbean and Indian Ocean Literatures* (69-70), and Valérie Loichot's *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* (41).

national being of a community: "the epic work is the Saga, the Book, the Bible of a people, and every great and important people has such absolutely earliest books which express for it its own original spirit. To this extent these memorials are nothing less than the proper foundations of a national consciousness" (1045). In the following chapters, I contrast the notion of the epic by Bakhtin and Hegel with the art and poetry of Bearden, Walcott, Nichols, and Glissant to show how Afro-diasporic and Afro-feminist claims on the epic counter this received understanding of the epic and open up the genre to alternative articulations of community, culture, and tradition. In this introduction, I would like to make some general observations on this notion of the epic by turning to the work of classics scholar, Gregory Nagy.

In "Epic" Nagy examines the etymology of Aristotelian vocabulary in *Poetics* in order to trace how the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* achieved their special status as models of the genre:

> The term that Aristotle uses to designate the craft of making epic, *epopoiia* 'making of *epos*', indicates that the concept of making epic was equated with the most general concept of making poetry, since the word used to designate 'epic,' *epē* . . . is simply the general word used to designate any kind of poetry produced by way of *poiēsis*, that is, by way of 'making' poetry. For example, in a comedy dating back to the fifth century BCE, the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, *epē* refers to the recited 'verses' of his comedy . . .
>
> This usage, dating back to the classical period of comedy in the fifth century BCE, is most significant. We have already seen that the act of *making poetry*, *poiēsis*, was considered to be a most basic kind of *making*. Now we see that the

> act of *making epic poetry*, *epopoiia*, was considered to be a most basic kind of making *poetry itself*, since *epē* can refer to any kind of poetic verse that is recited. . . . In other words, to say *epē* is the most general way of referring to the 'verses' of poetry. The linguistic prehistory of *epē* helps explain its ultimate meaning: etymologically, this word means simply 'words' or 'wording'. It is cognate with Latin *vox*, the meaning of which is parallel: that word refers to whatever sounds are made by the human voice. (21-22)

When Nagy talks about the making of poetry as "a most basic kind of *making,*" he refers to the word *poieîn* "which means 'compose' or simply 'make', [it] can refer to the making of any artifact, not only an artifact that happens to be a poem" (21).[5] The epic, thus, would seem to lose the sense of extraordinariness routinely ascribed to it—most basically, the word refers to human articulation in general, including the stuff of everyday utterance. Nagy explains that the unique status ascribed to epic poetry in ancient Greece—and here, the works that enjoyed this special status are only the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* while the authorship of the oral and less heroic Epic Cycle was decoupled from Homer—was due to the fact that the rhapsodes, skilled performers of epic poetry and "surrogates for Homer" (27) who performed at the most important Athenian religious festival Panathenaia, restricted their repertoire only to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. And such performances, in turn, *coupled* Homer himself with Athens as his ultimate destiny because, Nagy shows, Homer never in fact arrived in Athens to perform his two epics

[5] This meaning of poetry as a making is especially explicit for Glissant. In chapter three, I discuss his notion of poetry as "poétrie," a neologism he coins to convey his understanding of poetry as a material making, "pétrir" (Fr. "kneading").

there and the texts themselves were composed in Chios (24-25).[6] In Nagy's interpretation, Homer was brought over to Athens by the rhapsodes who spoke in his place, *as if* they were Homer and *as if* they had a natural claim to Homēridai, Homeric line of descent ("The Earliest Phases in the Reception of the *Homeric Hymns*" 288).

There are two important consequences of Nagy's analysis for the argument I develop in this dissertation. Firstly, the importance of the epic as genre is constituted by its performance, occasion, and function—its significance is ascribed to it by a socio-cultural practice and depends on historical circumstances; it is not an organic feature of these works against which all other texts claiming the name *epic* must be hierarchically measured. Secondly, the consolidation of Greek identity occurred with the rhapsodes snatching *Homer* as a way of supplementing his non-arrival into Athens, a supplement—understood here in Derridean terms both as an addition and a replacement of absence[7]—that not only covers up the original dispersal of Greece, but also complicates the Athenocentrism (the word is Nagy's) of Western philosophical tradition. It is only when appropriated through a forgetting of absence at the site of origins that the epic landlocks a conceptual apparatus that guards the logic of unified, integral, and plentiful origins and occludes originary indebtedness to an elsewhere.

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[6] Nagy writes: "Evidence for the linkage [of Homer with the performances of his two epics in Athens] comes from myths preserved . . . in the *Herodotean Life of Homer* (Vita 1) and in the *Certamen* or *Contest of Homer and Hesiod* (Vita 2). According to the *Certamen*, the people of the island state of Chios claimed that Homer was the ancestor of a *genos* 'lineage' from Chios who called themselves the *Homēridai* (Vita 2.13-15). According to the *Herodotean Life of Homer*, Homer composed both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in the city of Chios (Vita 1.346-398) and planned to perform both epics in Athens (1.483-484), but he died before he reached his destination (1.484-509)" (24-25).

[7] Derrida describes the supplement in the following way: "The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the *fullest measure* of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence. . . . But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; it fills it is as if one fills a void. . . . As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (*Of Grammatology* 144-145).

Afro-diasporic art and poetry examined in this dissertation turn to the epic in this original sense as a *poietic* making, and reshape the genre in the cultural, historical, and political context of the Caribbean. This turn to the epic as a making is significant not only because it opens the meaning of the epic to multiple iterations that abolish the hierarchical understanding of the genre, but also because it opens up the possibility of considering how nature partakes in the process of the making of the epic. Borrowing from Monique Allewaert's study of ecological personhood and agency in the early Americas, I want to suggest that the role of nature in this process of epic composition must be understood beyond the idea of the influence of nature on human bodies (or in my case on poetic processes or on historical consciousness) in colonial spaces (2). Instead, nature in the tropics becomes a principle of dis- and re-organization of bodies, agencies, and political communities.[8] Building on this understanding of the Americas as a site of corporeal transformation, I look at how Caribbean natural environments (specifically the sea in Bearden, Walcott, and Nichols, and the earth in Glissant)[9] entangle with historical

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[8] Allewaert shows how in the Americas, the climate, botanical transplantations, and biological processes interacted with human and animal bodies. Importantly, this undoing of bodily integrity is a real material process of the entwining of life: "This same heat and humidity that seemed to slow animal life and stupefy reason increased the generation and decay of plants, which developed, spread, and moved faster in the tropics and subtropics. This not only allowed long, sometimes multiple, growing seasons for cash crops but also caused human habitations left untended to vanish into the spread of vegetable life. The insects that also proliferated in tropical humidity found their way into animal bodies, from which they consumed and then, unwittingly, gave over to the diseases they sometimes carried, especially yellow fever. The insects also found ways into plant bodies, some of which would consume the insects in turn, such as Venus flytraps" (5).

[9] My readings of Bearden's art and of Walcott's, Nichols's, and Glissant's poetry will show a different understanding of nature than Timothy Morton's influential theories of nature and materiality organized around his idiom "ecology without nature," or "ecology without a world" (in *The Ecological Thought* and in "Coexistence and Coexistents: Ecology without a World"). Morton argues against the idea of nature underlying environmental thought and activism as a stable entity "over there" to be protected, preserved, and sustained. His idiom, however, leaves this assumption unquestioned in that his argument implies that flux, difference, and becoming can only be thought after ecological thought has been evacuated of the stuff of the world. In contrast, the notion of nature and material stuff that emerges from the texts I analyze is closer to feminist new materialist understandings of nature that show that nature is a site of profound complexity and difference. Specifically, in chapter three, I engage Vicki Kirby's notion of nature as textual. For more on the new materialist understandings of nature and materiality see Diana Coole and Samantha

memory and poetic creativity to spin a vision of community, belonging, and temporality where these notions are no longer projected through ideas of self-sameness (community), a possessive, rooted, and static relationship to the land (belonging), and linear chronology that establishes a causal relationship between the past, present, and future (temporality).

Texture

In the following chapters, the notion of "texture" helps me foreground both the process of poetic making and the literary entanglements of the natural and the historical. I borrow this term from John Crowe Ransom, one of the practitioners and proponents of New Criticism. In his essay "Wanted: An Ontological Critic," Ransom juxtaposes texture of a poem, its local detail, with the poem's structure. "The structure proper," Ransom writes,

> is the prose of the poem, being a logical discourse of almost any kind, and dealing with almost any content suited to a logical discourse. The texture, likewise, seems to be of any real content that may be come upon, provided it is so free, unrestricted, and large that it cannot properly get into structure. One guesses that it is an order of content, rather than a kind of content, that distinguishes texture from structure, and poetry from prose. (280-281)

The distinction between texture and structure in relation to content is that while one could paraphrase structure into the language of prose, texture cannot be detached from poeticity in the same way. For instance, we could describe the rhyme pattern of a poem as *abba* or *abab*, or we could describe the poem's meter as pentameter or hexameter. But rhymes (or meters), Ransom maintains, can also be rough or smooth, more or less refined (324), and

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Frost's edited collection *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, and Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's edited volume *Material Feminisms*.

to convey this textural sense, they cannot be reduced to patterns of the scientific language of literary criticism. Texture, then, makes the reader (or the critic) adhere to the poetic palpability of the poem without the possibility of abstraction.

The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics explains the difference between structure and texture in Ransom through recourse to an architectural metaphor, which I find compelling for it helps understand more precisely my use of the term "texture" in relation to the epic: "poetic structure corresponds to the walls, beams, and supports of a house, texture to the paint, wallpaper, and surface decoration" (1222).[10] Texture, as deployed in the context of the readings in this dissertation, modulates the ontological structure of the epic, the frequent emphasis on the formal aspects of the genre. In other words, texture would be less concerned with the structural strength and complexity of the house (or whether the habitation we are talking about can even be properly termed "a house") and more with how habitation, or home, is established, how this space is rendered livable.

Further, given the ecocritical orientation of my literary analyses in this dissertation, this poetic meaning of texture also calls for an assiduous reading of how nature figures in literary texts. In my dissertation, the emphasis on close reading broadens the scope of ecocritical engagements with nature, offering an alternative to a method proposed by Rob Nixon in his influential *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, where he proposes a reading of environmental literature that focuses on problems

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[10] *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* further explains texture: "At one level texture involves the familiar poetic techniques of assonance and alliteration; at another level it assumes the form of sensory intensities and tactile associations. It is to these surface qualities that texture corresponds and is made more complex by metrical patterns" (1277). And further: "texture is intended to correct the exaggerations of 'logic' in poetry that cause the colorful local details to disappear into the grayness of systematized abstraction. Thus, in [Ransom's] formulation, poetic texture is characterized by its 'sensuous richness', by its 'fullness of presentation', by its 'immediacy', and by its 'concreteness'" (1278).

of social change rather than aesthetics. Nixon foregrounds a nonliterary reading in order to think about what representational strategies can be mobilized to make visible environmental threats and to facilitate more effectively environmental activism and political intervention (2-3, 31-32). In contrast, I turn to the methodology of close reading (associated with formalist methods that Nixon criticizes) in order to approach nature and the environment in literature in non-instrumentalizing ways that complicate facile referentialism frequently assumed by environmental writing.[11] This idea of "easy reference" will return in my discussion of Walcott's poetry in chapter one, where the phrase is used to designate a failure of (in this case) St. Lucian poetry to honor and engage with the complexities of Caribbean reality. The emphasis on closely *reading* nature is meant to help curb the push for epistemic objectivism and dominance over the natural world—for knowing, grasping, possessing nature—towards an engagement that is more at ease with complexities, contradictions, ambiguities, and equivocality that nature engenders.

In the close readings offered in this dissertation, texture allows me to grapple with literary passages where the Caribbean environment produces textual effects. This is for instance the case in Grace Nichols's rewriting of Caribbean grounds through a material notion of femininity (discussed in chapter two), whose ontologically destabilizing entanglements with the Caribbean Sea are articulated in the line "I thinking all the same" where the dropping of the verb "to be" highlights both Caribbean specificity and the fluidity of aqueous foundations. Texture keeps the material and the literary together, invoking the idea of texturing as a way of thinking about how the reference to

[11] See also Dana Phillips's "Ecocriticism's Hard Problems (Its ironies, Too)" for a critique of ecocritical mimeticism.

specific material content (such as the Atlantic, or the Caribbean Sea) produces distinct poetic formulations and affects our strategies of reading the environment as it makes meaning by interacting with poetics.

Apart from the usage of the term "texture" in poetics, what makes "texture" so rich a term for my project is that it foregrounds the entanglement of temporality and matter. Things achieve texture in the process of other things or forces acting upon them. Texture is an effect of making, shaping, weaving, kneading, of creative as much as destructive processes. This texture can either be literal, things can be smooth or rough, or metaphoric, as Renu Bora suggests in his essay "Outing Texture," where metaphoric texture refers to the general ambiance, the mood and tone, of the interactions between characters in Henry James's fiction, which, Bora shows, in James have a sexual tone.

This metaphoric meaning of texture lingers over the horrific spectacle of corals in Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*," over the tenuous stitches on the surface of the sea in Nichols's *Startling the Flying Fish*, and over the image of bruised earth in Glissant's *Un Champ d'îles*, suggesting the inextricability of materiality and historicity in these texts. In this way, the idea of nature that emerges in Caribbean writing eschews the essentialist, metaphysical understanding that posits nature as an atemporal realm of plenitude. To the contrary, eco-epic textures in these texts counter the idea of a fixed ontological ground and upset the presupposition of a timeless ontological essence while enabling an affirmative articulation of a relational, tenuous, fluctuating "ontology."

Finally, texture is a compelling term for thinking about entanglements, inter- and intra-actions, between and within history, nature, and poetry. In calling these entwinements "eco-epic textures" I aim to highlight entangled practices of diasporic

world-(re)making, practices that lose their provenance within the interlacing of the natural, the historical, and the poetic. It is not that the origin of diaspora's worlds can be traced to some specific historical moment, to natural origins, or to the sovereignty of poetic imagination. Instead, texture renders origins internally differentiated, temporal, and difficult to locate and pin down. In this way, it locates change and futurity somewhere within the world where they remain unpredictable, different, and non-appropriable by specific political programs.

Organization of the Chapters

The chapters in this dissertation are organized thematically rather than chronologically by date of publication of the works I consider. I find this approach more suitable for foregrounding material links between texts and political concerns they register.

Chapter one focuses on Romare Bearden's collage *The Sea Nymph* (1977) and two poems from Derek Walcott's 1979 collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, "The Schooner *Flight*" and "The Star-Apple Kingdom." I engage these works as an illustration of Bearden's idea of a touch of Caribbean Sea as a touch of creativity and of Walcott's notion of "islands not written about but writing themselves" ("The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory"). The central problem considered in this chapter concerns the effects of this material writing of the archipelago on diasporic cultural representation, historical identity, and political belonging. Analyzing Bearden's visual interpretation of a scene from Homer's the *Odyssey* and Walcott's own reading of this scene, I show how his environmental approach to problems of continuity and rupture of the Middle Passage

through a canonical Western texts destabilizes the structure of inheritance, the notion of cultural authenticity and derivation, and literary genealogy.

In turn, Walcott's engagement with the Odyssean motif of home-leaving in "The Schooner *Flight*" provides an occasion for a reflection on how diasporic historical turbulences affect political belonging in the Caribbean. I focus on how natural-historical matters in which Shabine (the protagonist of that poem) is enmeshed disturb rather than consolidate political community in the post-independence Caribbean. My reading of "The Star-Apple Kingdom" in turn demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining the productive tensions and displacements engendered by natural-historical environments given the real political urgency of developing socio-political institutions, taking Jamaica (the first Anglophone-Caribbean country to gain independence from England) as a model.

Chapter two, likewise focused on the oceanic environment of the Caribbean, centers on the poetry of Grace Nichols; specifically on her first published collection *I Is a Long-Memoried Woman* (1983) and a later long poem *Startling the Flying Fish* (2005). In both texts, the feminine engenders both continuity and difference in the diaspora, and operates as what Spillers has called the diaspora's "insurgent ground" (80). I demonstrate that in order to explore transformative aspects of diasporic femininity, Nichols envisions the feminine as entangled with the materiality of Caribbean geography and turns to feminine erotics to disentangle diasporic histories and environments from the Western colonial imaginary. In turn, this sensuous engagement of geography launches a relational, non-essentialist vision of both femininity and place.

The third and final chapter traces notions of the epic and earth in poetic and theoretical works of Édouard Glissant. First, I discuss the importance of the epic

throughout Glissant's oeuvre and contrast his understanding of the epic with that of Hegel. Glissant approaches the epic as emerging out of the context of New World dispossession, and thus as failing to bolster the ontological being of a community. In contrast, he envisions an epic of Relation that articulates cultures as intertwined both in creative and in brutal ways. In the second part of the chapter, I analyze Glissant's notion of earth as an errant ground of this relational epic. Shifting focus from the Caribbean Sea (in the two preceding chapters) to Antillean earth, I demonstrate that Glissant engages the material space of the Caribbean to stage an intervention into Western ontological and territorial thinking. My analysis of Glissant's epic as his sustained interest in the form of Antillean community and of his notion of earth as an errant ground of non-essentialist, non-territorial affirmation offers a way of responding to Glissant critics, Nick Nesbitt and Peter Hallward, who read Glissant's notion of Relation as developed in Glissant's later works as an abdication of an early, supposedly nationalist, commitments.

Finally, in the conclusion I foreground the idea of the natural-historical-poetic texture as a way of countervailing what postcolonial critic Bill Ashcroft referred to as "ocularcentrism" of Western colonial ideology (125). Returning to Wilson Harris's essay "Continuity and Discontinuity," I propose that a textual understanding of Caribbean reality, as opposed to an ethnographic notion of reality, becomes crucial for appreciating how entanglements of poetry, nature, and history transform diaspora's dehumanizing and dehumanized environments into spaces of survival, creativity, and the future.

Ultimately, "Errant Grounds: Eco-epic Textures in Contemporary Caribbean Literature" illuminates how Caribbean articulations of belonging in relation to nature challenge colonial ontological, epistemic, and political appropriations of the region. At

the same time these collective narratives, in affirming the centrality of nature for Caribbean theoretical and imaginary practice, envision Caribbean pasts, present, and futures, as unpredictably transformed by poetic-material entanglements.

Chapter One

"Islands writing themselves": Ecological Inscriptions of Historicity in Romare Bearden and Derek Walcott

> Art will go where the energy is.
> I expect a convincing outpouring of creative energy
> from lands touched by the Caribbean Sea.
> Romare Bearden "Magic Mountains, Clouds in the Living Room"
> ***
> At last, islands not written about but writing themselves.
> Derek Walcott "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory"

Derek Walcott's enthusiastic reception of Romare Bearden's *The Sea Nymph* [fig. 1]—a collage from the 1977 Black Odysseus series and cover art of Walcott's *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (1979)—evokes the poet's own commitment to an epic articulation of Caribbean cultural identity. "[T]he grandeur of some of those 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' cutouts!" Walcott marvels,

> Because the *brilliance* of making black silhouettes, right? which come out of Greek vase silhouettes, but are black … and to make that silhouette alive in terms of the Caribbean. … Because that Odysseus figure going down …

> that's a *Caribbean* guy diving, you know? … The breadth of it is staggering, because the color of that green is *exactly* what you get when you go down. I was there [diving in the sea] this morning. (in Price & Price 95; original ellipsis, emphasis, and commentary)

In his reading of the collage, Walcott not only points to the ways in which Bearden's work displaces Western literary imaginary from its origins in the Mediterranean; he also foregrounds the interpenetration of Caribbean environment and art, the crossing of the literal and the figurative. Diving *there* in the Caribbean Sea upsets the representational relationship this activity at first appears to establish between the blue sea in the painting and the blue sea in the world. In fact, for a moment it is unclear precisely where the poet found himself immersed that morning. And while the deictic *there* in Walcott's commentary is corralled by the interviewers' editorial intervention hooking the word to its material location, the ambiguity of the word persists, as the adverb cannot entirely disavow that moment of crossing between the green of Bearden's collage and the green of the Caribbean Sea, which equivocally entangles aesthetics and materiality.

Walcott's elated response to *The Sea Nymph* reflects the poet's own approach to the Caribbean environment in aesthetic terms. In fact, a poetic engagement with the natural world of the archipelago lies at the heart of Walcott's own philosophy of poetry. Critic John Thieme recalls that "[Walcott] and Dunstan St. Omer [St. Lucian painter and Walcott's friend] took a vow that they would not leave St. Lucia until they had 'put down' its neglected natural history 'in paint, in words' and, in a 1989 interview, Walcott spoke about his attempt to recapture the particular 'tactile' quality of specific St. Lucian trees and plants on the printed page" (8). This commitment to give the natural world

space in poetry and art illuminates why Walcott would take to Bearden's work with such exhilaration: for him, *The Sea Nymph* must have captured something of the Caribbean Sea's tactile quality, vividly evoking a simultaneously corporeal and aesthetic experience. But if the mimetic relationship traditionally organizing depictions of the natural environment in literature and art assumes the object and the act of representation to be separate, what are we to make of the impossibility of satisfactorily disentangling the material from the figural, as subtly suggested by the ambiguity of the adverb *there*?

Fig. 1 *The Sea Nymph*
Art © Romare Bearden Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

This problem of exactly how to understand the relationship between the act of aesthetic representation and the object being represented is further probed in an interview recorded in 1979, two years after Bearden finished *The Sea Nymph* and around the time of the publication of *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. Registering his impatience with the

paltriness of what he calls “postcard poetry” of early St. Lucian writing, Walcott suggests that what he is after is a kind of writing that disturbs the traditional economy of representation:

> There were so many *easy references* to bright blue seas, so many colorful depictions of peasant life. … West Indian verse seemed to have more of the flavor of a library than the most metropolitan verse not at all related to the Caribbean experience; and naturally I went in the direction in which the language was most vigorous and alive. I had to impose on myself the severe discipline of making sure that what I was doing was difficult; it was not willful obscurity. (283; added emphasis)

In contrast to “easy references” evoking simple realism that takes the environment as a knowable object, Walcott wants to mobilize poetic expression not merely to convey difficulty for difficulty’s sake, but to grasp something of a difficulty inhering in the Caribbean experience itself. And what is crucial about Walcott’s understanding of the relationship between poetic language and this experience (involving culture as much as the environment) is his intuition that it is poetic language that can convey the Caribbean’s complexity, or perhaps that this difficult archipelago elicits a poetic, and not, for instance, ethnographic, articulation. For him, it is the entanglement of the poetic and the material that generates cultural and historical meanings of the archipelago.

This juxtaposition of Walcott’s reading of *The Sea Nymph* with the poet’s own reflections about the relationship between poetry and the natural environment frames the central question of this chapter: What difference does a touch of the Caribbean Sea make for diasporic cultural representation, historical identity, and political belonging? Of

course, scholars of the Black Atlantic, of which the Caribbean Sea is one site, have extensively theorized the philosophical, political, and aesthetic repercussions of the Middle Passage. For Paul Gilroy, the Black Atlantic deconstructs the inherited habits of dualistic thinking: it functions as a "non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, an asymmetrical cultural ensemble that cannot be apprehended through the Manichean logic of binary coding" (198). Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley retrieves from the Atlantic abyss a queer archive "where elements or currents of historical, conceptual, and embodied maritime experience come together to transform racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized selves … reflect[ing] the materiality of black queer experience while refusing its transparency" (192-193). Elizabeth DeLoughrey foregrounds traumatic burdens of the Middle Passage to reflect on "how Atlantic inscriptions rupture the naturalizing flow of history, foregrounding a now-time that registers violence against the wasted lives of modernity in the past and the present" ("Heavy Waters" 704). My chapter likewise insists on the necessity of thinking through the opaque, equivocal, decentered as much as decentering, stalling currents of the Black Atlantic. But taking cue from the epigraphs anchoring this chapter, I want to argue that the ecological materiality of the Caribbean Sea likewise transforms our understanding of aesthetic, cultural, and political representation. The grammatical shift in Walcott's comment on the textual activity of the archipelago—islands writing themselves—seems slight, but its consequences are substantial. For if the natural environment of the Caribbean is envisioned as a text actively engaging in its own representation—writing itself rather than being written about—then what is at stake is nothing else than the relationship between nature and culture, and the whole problematic of ontology and historical change that follows from it.

Romare Bearden's *The Sea Nymph* and Derek Walcott's *The Star-Apple Kingdom* highlight the textual activity of the Caribbean Sea while rewriting the Odyssean motif of home-leaving and home-coming. In situating their own reflections on the problem of Afro-diasporic collective identity in relation to the epic—this most ambitious and most revered genre of Western literary tradition—these works compel a question about the constitutive function of the natural environment in the founding inscriptions of Afro-diasporic lives. How do Bearden's and Walcott's eco-poetic inscriptions of Caribbean-Atlantic historicity alter our understanding of nature, history, and belonging?

A Black Atlantic Odyssey

Walcott's appreciation for *The Sea Nymph* as a Caribbean collage reflects the significance of the Caribbean as Bearden's central inspiration in the 70s and 80s. Critics have pointed out that in the last two decades of his life, Bearden's work is marked by a shift in technique, subject, and color. Art critic and curator Lowery Sims observes that "Bearden's work began to take on a particularly lush quality. He used sumptuous shades of blue and green to present the dense vegetation of the Caribbean. Now Bearden's work was literally awash with the turquoise blues and lapis tones of the Caribbean" (qtd. in Price & Price 92). Other characteristics of Bearden's work in the 70s and 80s include his increased use of watercolor, and manifest interest in exploring the meaning of seascapes in Afro-diasporic cultural and historical imaginary.[12]

[12] Bearden makes a few brief trips to the Caribbean in 1960s. In the 70s and 80s, he spends a couple of months each year in his home in St. Maarten. On the significance of the Caribbean for Bearden, see Sally Price's and Richard Price's comprehensive study *Romare Bearden: The Caribbean Dimension*. In this pioneering work, the authors demonstrate the scope of Bearden's engagement with the Caribbean and how the region shapes his late work. Their study also includes extensive interviews with Walcott about Bearden's work and their friendship.

This artistic preoccupation with the Caribbean indicates that the archipelago's tropical settings become as crucial for an articulation of Black identity as the urban scenes of Bearden's Harlem collages or the southern spaces in the Mecklenburg series. Beyond this centrality of the Caribbean for Afro-diasporic artistic expression, however, *The Sea Nymph* compels a radical rethinking of cultural foundations. In approaching the Atlantic abyss as a stage for a performance of a foundational historical memory, Bearden places the Caribbean at the center of a reflection about Afro-diasporic ontology; and his rewriting of a Western epic as a diasporic narrative unsettles a binary, oppositional alignment of cultural difference, drastically changing the ways in which diasporic and European identities have been conceptualized.

In the Black Odysseus series, Bearden claims the *Odyssey* as a universal narrative of human ingenuity, resilience, and survival to reflect on the continuities and discontinuities of Black Atlantic historical formations. One of the twenty collages comprising his visual revision of Homer, *The Sea Nymph* renders a scene in Book V where a drowning Odysseus is saved by goddess Ino, who pulls him out of the ocean depths with her veil of immortality. Situated in the Black Atlantic historical imaginary, this scene in particular engenders the Afro-diasporic collective memory of death and endurance, "a theft of the [black] body" (Spillers 67) and its startling "will to survive" (75). For a number of critics, then, Bearden's Black Odysseus is significant both in hemispheric American terms, as a narrative of life in the wake of colonial dispossession characterizing the "New World," and as a dramatization of Afro-American experience in the U.S.—an invocation of the 20th century Great Migration from the South, or a visual representation of jazz composition, a style characteristic of Bearden's collages in

general.[13] The significance of Bearden's accomplishment in the Black Odysseus series was best captured by Ralph Ellison who argued that the triumph of Bearden's art in general lies in the artist's ability "to express the tragic predicament of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world" (227).

But in concretizing diasporic human drama, *The Sea Nymph* likewise draws attention to the activity of underwater life. With the two black silhouettes aligned off-center, the right-hand side of the collage is occupied by the tumultuous waves of the sea, tangled sea plants, and high wave crests, whose supple shapes echo the weave of Ino's veil. While in the Greek version, Ino's life-sustaining veil acts against the raging sea, in Bearden's retelling the waves beat against the vessel and abet the transmutation of death into life. In this way, both the veil and the sea plants enwrap Odysseus—in the collage he is holding onto seaweed as he is extending his other hand toward Ino who is holding the veil in her hand—forming around him umbilical lifelines and delivering him into the future. This scene, then, is much more than a story of surviving the storm, of living through the Middle Passage; rather, it narrates a new kind of cultural beginning that disrupts the received notions of cultural continuity. This is a distinctly Black Atlantic narrative structured according to an "American grammar"—writing that "begins at the 'beginning', which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation"—as Hortense Spillers described U.S. American writing in the wake of the

[13] For more information about the Black Odysseus series see the film accompanying Bearden's exhibit at the Smithsonian, "Romare Bearden: A Black Odyssey" (available at http://www.sites.si.edu/romarebearden/video/index.html)

Middle Passage (68), but which I would say characterizes Afro-diasporic literary and intellectual traditions more broadly.

Following Spillers's suggestion that what we refer to as cultural continuity in the Black Atlantic must be submitted to a radical questioning, I want to extend her notion of an "American grammar" to include as well the writing of the Black Atlantic continuity performed by the natural world. How to think about this peculiar continuance that flows from Ino's hand through her veil that wraps itself around Odysseus and moves through his hand onto the sea plant? Here, the environment is not merely a background, a frame, against which this continuance unfolds; it is, rather, an active, transformative element that shapes diasporic historical and cultural imaginary. In the ruptured beginning figured in *The Sea Nymph*, the constitutive indissociability of humans and the environment is vividly envisioned as a stitching—a texture—of the cultural (insofar as the veil through which Ino extends the future to Odysseus is an artifact) and the natural. Figured as a chain of human body, textile, and seaweed, diasporic continuance emerges here as a peculiar foundational fabric—dispersed and differentiated—but nevertheless unfolding a narrative of ingenuity and endurance. Highlighting a transformation of the negativity of the Middle Passage into fragile conditions of possibility for the emergence of new futures, this texture centers a process of underwater *poiēsis*. But whereas we might be accustomed to the meaning of *poiēsis* as "the capacity of human beings to alter radically the forms and structures they inherit" (Gourgouris xvii), what is so crucial about the kind of *poiēsis* at work in *The Sea Nymph* is that the transformation of the annihilating inheritance of the Middle Passage into forms of life is a conjoined activity of the natural-cultural making. In this ecological American grammar inscribed from the abysses of the

Black Atlantic, nature is threaded with culture as a process of re-creation, laboring against the dehumanizing effects of colonialism that stifle creativity.

Such an intervention into our thinking about foundations is significant both at the philosophical and political level. Bearden takes the chaos and disorder of Afro-diasporic historical experience as a deconstruction of the nature/culture binary that has structured much of Western philosophical tradition. Feminist critics Val Plumwood and Nancy Hartsock have argued that "[t]he structure of reason/nature dualism and its variants is the perspective of power … [structuring] 'a way of looking at the world characteristic of the dominant, white, male Eurocentric ruling class, a way of dividing up the world that puts an omnipotent subject at the centre and constructs marginal Others as sets of negative qualities'" (Plumwood 44). In this context, then, the sea texture in *The Sea Nymph*, insofar as it de-structures this sovereign, exclusionary way of looking, enables a radically new alignment of difference. Envisioned as interdependence rather than opposition, the relationship between nature and culture (and its variants such as reason, history, mastery, etc.), opens up the possibility of a likewise interdependent relationship between "identity" and "difference," where neither of these positions can be stabilized within an already familiar social, cultural, and historical landscape. The political stakes follow from the philosophical ones and involve a thorough revision of political myths based on traditional notions of filiation and legitimacy. The image of the drowning Odysseus grabbing onto the veil and the seaweed as the two available lifelines evinces a foundational texture—rather than a firm ontological ground—that upsets the presupposition of a timeless ontological essence. An eco-epic texture, thus, does not support an absolute political vision, nor does it inscribe in teleological terms the social

formations it patterns. Instead, an ecological epic that comes out of Afro-diasporic textured beginnings is a social event that simultaneously—and this is the intellectual challenge *The Sea Nymph* confronts us with—affirms Afro-diasporic lives in their multiplicity and dispersal, and deconstructs those socio-political arrangements which perpetuate dispossession of and deny livelihood to all humans negatively constructed as absolute "Other."

Such a double articulation emerges in Walcott's ecological reading of *The Sea Nymph* where the Caribbean becomes key for the transmission of the epic:

> Besides its veracity, there is the color … which is absolutely, perfectly the color of coral water, while the figure could simply be a coral diver or a shell diver going down to pick up shells from the bottom of the sea. So this combination of images—the black diving figure and the green water—immediately strikes me not as Aegean but as completely Caribbean. And as it is for Romare, it is perfectly valid for me to think of an archipelago in which there are boats and pigs and men, … to think of the *Odyssey* in terms of the Caribbean. … I think you can't live in the archipelago—and Bearden *lived* in the Caribbean—without that great poem in the back of your head of the time. And it's not sort of *adapting* it to the Caribbean—it's direct. … If you're living in the archipelago, the light is there, the rituals—the primal Greek rituals, the pantheism of Greek culture, it's still there in the Caribbean. (in Price and Price 96, 94; original emphasis)

In this feat of cultural translation, Walcott's reading discerns in the Caribbean landscape epic exuberance not derivative of the genre's Greek articulations but embedded within

the region itself, yielding a radically different engendering of cultural origins. The sense of the simultaneous immediacy and latency of the Greek within the Caribbean—that it is all *still there*—bespeaks the constitutive multiplicity of the archipelago that complicates the understanding of a culture—any culture—and its material environments as present, determinate, and synchronized. To follow the logic of Walcott's reading, the emergence of the *Odyssey* within the Caribbean, while inextricable from "the artist's head," is not an effect of a singular artistic design to fit the Caribbean within the inherited form. And although the word *direct* is not an entirely fortuitous choice as it does not capture the entire complexity of the situation where the poem is both on the artist's mind and "still there" in the Caribbean, *directness* nevertheless foregrounds the materialization of the epic out of the lived world of the archipelago—materialization textured as an entanglement of nature, historical and cultural specificity, and artistic creativity. Such a *direct* emergence of the poem in the Caribbean simultaneously diffracts the epic's familiar proper place in the Mediterranean. And the peculiar naturalization of the *Odyssey* within the archipelago in fact denaturalizes the notion of a grounding location as such. To pull a canonical Western text through its other origins in the Caribbean means to challenge the mono-cultural trajectories of influence and filial transmission the epic is so often taken to inscribe. Thus, the significance of Walcott's ecological reading is that he discerns in Bearden's gesture not simply an application of an inherited universal narrative to Black experience (or a translation of the Black experience as fitting with the universal narrative), but rather a destabilization of the very structure that organizes the patterns of inheritance, the notion of cultural authenticity and derivation, and literary genealogy.

I emphasize this point because existing studies of Afro-diasporic revisions of the *Odyssey* often focus on the reappropriation of the hegemonic form initially deployed to oppress black and indigenous populations in the Americas (McConnell 2). In contrast to such interpretations, the point of my argument is that it is not enough to register the postcolonial appropriation of form, for such an account leaves intact the ideological presuppositions that ground the very form that is being appropriated. Rather, if Afro-diasporic interventions into the literary history of the epic are to reflect de-colonial political commitments, then we must think about how these appropriations deconstruct colonial grounds, and alter the ways in which societies are instituted, in the very gesture of claiming the epic for an articulation of diasporic lives.

My intention in unfolding this argument largely through a reading of a reading—through an analysis of Walcott's appraisal of Bearden—is to offer a performative reflection on Édouard Glissant's ethical injunction that rather than describe the environment, "one must (*il faut*) understand it in all its complexity" (*Le Discours antillais* 343). What is so pertinent about Walcott's engagement with Bearden's work is precisely this appreciation for the complexity of the environment—not mere description, but a reading that dwells on the nuance of the natural. Such a reading is vital for the affirmative articulations of Caribbean lives aiming to resituate the environment in positive terms, as a space of flourishing rather than a resource for appropriation, an attitude long characteristic of colonial and neocolonial approaches to the region. Londa Schiebinger notes, for instance, that "[in the eighteenth century,] nature …was there for the taking. … [U]nspoken notions concerning a global commons applied only to nature and its resources outside Europe: European trading companies and states claimed

exclusive rights to the natural resources of the territories they could hold militarily" (*Plants and Empire* 45). In contrast to the acquisitive approaches of colonial bioprospectors, the natural environment envisioned in Bearden's collage—insofar as it eludes stable and stabilizing empirical description—allows differential inscriptions of historical continuity unhinged from the determinism of colonial deprivation. It is for this reason that Walcott's charge of "an easy reference" is not directed at the magnetic blue of *The Sea Nymph*. In eliciting a *reading* of diaspora's natural environment, Bearden's collage never simply refers to—never just points to, or sends away to—the Caribbean Sea as if it stood outside the figural play of art. To the contrary, the Atlantic textile is inextricable from the process of cultural life-making in the Afro-diaspora—an intractable unit of American grammar—which invites an alternative understanding of socio-political reality and reframes nature as an ethico-political category.

Ralph Ellison observed that Bearden's art, in its modern engagement with the specificities of Black lives in the U.S., brings about such an alternative understanding of reality: it "brings a new visual order into the world, . . . [insisting] that we *see* and that we see in depth and by the fresh light of the creative vision" (229, 234; original emphasis). To engage with Bearden's work, he writes, is to be offered a lesson in the appreciation of "the creative possibilities of cultural diversity" beyond "the distortions of newsprint and the false continuity imposed upon our conception of Negro life by television and much documentary photography" (228, 234). And in revealing this inherent creativity of Black lives, Bearden's art reflects less the "prose" of Black life, and more its poetry—"poetry compounded of vitality and powerlessness, destructive impulse, and the all-pervading and enduring faith in [the Black] style of American humanity. . . . A harsh poetry this, but

poetry nevertheless" (237, 235). In other words, the poeticity of Bearden's work lies in how it attests to the fact that race is not "an ontological given" (McDowell 234) and that black bodies produce numerous "representational potentialities" (Spillers 80). Reading through the complexities of the Atlantic's underwater life, my goal in this section was to demonstrate that Bearden's vision responds also to the poeticity of Afro-diaspora's natural environments. The complexity of the natural world that Bearden captures in relation to Black history suggests that this poetics of the natural is not a purely aesthetic commitment, but first and foremost a political one—in unhinging reductive representations of a culture's materiality, Bearden's Atlantic epic challenges the ways in which the socio-historical realities of the diaspora have been configured, and opens up new and unknown ways of inhabiting its terrains.

A Song from the Depths of the Sea

Derek Walcott's choice of *The Sea Nymph* as cover art for his landmark collection *The Star-Apple Kingdom* reveals the centrality of Bearden's Black Atlantic vision of *The Odyssey* for the poet's own reflection on Caribbean collective identity in the charged political context of West Indian independence movements in the 70s.[14] In this section, I focus on how "The Schooner *Flight*," the inaugural poem of this collection, elaborates the Atlantic texture figured in *The Sea Nymph*, and inquire about the political positionalities and diasporic continuities the eco-epic texture underwrites.

In her account of the socio-political context of "The Schooner *Flight*," Patricia Ismond puts her finger on the political interest of this poem:

[14] 1979, when *The Star-Apple Kingdom* was published, marks the year of St. Lucian independence.

> "The Schooner *Flight*" deals with the case of Trinidad, whose materialistic spree threatens to destroy the very fabric of the society. … Walcott responds to [a representative case] of social and political collapse in the Caribbean of the late 70s, to extend against these, his definitions of a viable Caribbean selfhood and path towards self-development. (228-229)

What is crucial to note is that Walcott extends these definitions by way of a departure from the concrete location in which the socio-political crisis unfolds: the title of the first section of "The Schooner *Flight*" reads "Adios, Carenage."[15] Further, this reflection is articulated by Shabine, Walcott's captivating sailor-poet, whose frequently cited autobiographical confession—"I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me, / and either I'm nobody or I'm a nation" (4)—has become a motto of postcolonial hybridity and statelessness. While the political community to which Shabine's unequivocal identity might belong is referred to as "a nation," his claim to this political organization appears enigmatic because the kind of nation summoned here answers neither to the demand of common ethnic origins or cultural ties, nor to the demand for a shared historical memory. Therefore, if this claim to a national political community is to mean that "this very condition of not belonging to any exclusivist, absolutist ideology may be the basis of a different, other identity with its own access of freedom and possibility" (Ismond 232), then we must necessarily reflect on what it means to make a claim for this kind of political community from the midst of the Caribbean Sea. What is crucial about Shabine's claim is that this declaration of political belonging (or perhaps un-belonging) is made on the brink of leaving the island as a geo-political unity where such a community might begin to cohere. Departing from Ismond's reading of this fragment,

[15] Carenage is a bay in Trinidad.

then, what I am suggesting here is that we must not only ponder the possibilities of "a different, other *identity*," but also, and perhaps more importantly, envision a different, other *basis* of political identities.

Given his composite pedigree, Shabine is an especially fitting protagonist of the quest for Caribbean alternative foundations. Initially a derogatory word for lower-class people of African and European ancestry, "shabine" reflects "the most problematical category of colour and ethnicity in the region. … [T]he *chabin* is an impossible human being, neither black nor white" (Arnold 45; see also Ismond 230).[16] For Walcott, "Shabine" simultaneously gives a vernacular name to the class of people who embody the contradictions of colonialism, and names the poem's Odyssean protagonist who strives to give "voice to one people's grief" (19)—to its complex history of ruptures and re-beginnings. Shabine himself, then, is an epic poet whose unending voyage is to find an articulation of a community that evinces this community's aporetic genealogy and envisions its future.

While Shabine witnesses on his journey various historical events that chart the region's harrowing history—including the Middle Passage and Carib suicide—the moment that especially interests me is a texture of underwater witnessing in the second part of the poem, "Raptures of the Deep":

> I start salvage diving with a crazy Mick,
>
> name O'Shaugnessy, and a limey named Head;
>
> but this Caribbean so choke with the dead
>
> that when I would melt in emerald water,
>
> whose ceiling rippled like a silk tent,

[16] Nowadays, the word is used primarily to refer to light skin women in the Caribbean.

I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans,

dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men.

I saw the powdery sand was their bones

ground white from Senegal to San Salvador (7; added emphasis)

Echoing the Atlantic abysses of *The Sea Nymph*, Shabine's descent into the emerald green of the Caribbean Sea reveals the submerged burial ground of the Black Atlantic. What begins as a witnessing pledge—"I saw them corals"—marks in fact an undoing of the witnessing subject as a result of his very inability to tell coral from the human remains that the coral symbolizes. Following the witnessing pledge, the colon—rather than establish a legible equivalence between what follows and what precedes it—in fact confuses the distinction between the object of representation and the traumatic history it represents. Indeed, what is striking about this texture is that the punctuation mark functions as a transformative aperture through which multiple meanings of coral proliferate. Words that allow us to dwell on this scene as a foundational scene of agony—brain, fire, sea fans (also called sea whips), and dead-men's-fingers—sprout after the colon, engendering a horrific memory entangled with the spectacular eco-system of corals. This narration—which at no point can be ascribed solely to Shabine—testifies at one and the same time to the complex historical *poiēsis* taking place at the bottom of the sea *and* to the dissolution of the distinction between nature and history—the literal from the figurative—as the very distinction that regulates a unified and legible representation of historical being.

The complexity of this scene is compounded by the fact that while the witnessing subject is in crisis as a result of the confusion between the material and the figural, the

historical circumstances of the Black Atlantic do indeed find a fairly accurate articulation in these lines. While living corals might *resemble* human body parts, they quite conceivably adhere to them in material ways as well. Although coral reef skeletons are generally self-produced by coral polyps, corals can also grow upon artificial substrate, such as sunken ships, tires, concrete blocks, or human bones.[17] Thus, the Atlantic slave trade—with sunken slave ships and slaves who were thrown overboard or jumped into the sea as an ultimate act of defiance—contributed its own peculiar skeleton for marine life. In this context, the coral ecosystem likely engenders human bodies at the material as much as symbolic level and—interwoven with Shabine's historical sensibility—creatively sustains historical memory.

While in the first two highlighted lines ("I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans, / dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men") historical memory is created in part through a transformative activity of coral, thus exploring the textures of the Black Atlantic memory through a specifically Caribbean environment, the next two lines ("I saw the powdery sand was their bones / ground white from Senegal to San Salvador") rearticulate the conditions of possibility for inscribing historicity by retracing the routes of the Middle Passage back to Africa. Unlike the former lines that evoke material exuberance, the closing verses are permeated by the images of dispersal—powdery sand and bones ground white. Thus, while Shabine's dive into the emerald waters of the Caribbean Sea brings to mind an epic descent into the underworld, where the hero

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[17] See Steven Harrigan's "Artificial Reefs." DFIX (Design, Fabrication, Innovation for Xtreme Affordability)—an organization designing sustainable solutions—developed a Reef In Peace (RIP) initiative which assists with funeral expenses in exchange for human bone material as a substrate for artificial reef construction (http://www.dfix2012.com/rip/). Jason deCaires Taylor's underwater sculptures constitute another reef restoration project designed to foster coral accretion and growth (http://www.underwatersculpture.com/).

typically becomes reacquainted with his origins and gains a sense of direction in his journey, Shabine's descent into the underworld of his ancestors is anything but an ontological confirmation. This ground is literally *ground*, pulverized into bone dust and sea sand the whiteness of which recalls the bleaching of history, the objectification of black bodies and, consequently, the denial of their status as subjects capable of producing their own culture and history. For Shabine, this descent cannot reaffirm filiation, and neither can it offer a teleological vision of an anticipated arrival. For what is scattered at the bottom of the ocean are two Black Atlantic genealogies that cannot be reconciled, or recuperated, or redeemed in the service of filiative continuity.

Walcott famously captures this genealogical aporia in the closing paragraph of his essay "The Muse of History" (1974):

> I say to the ancestor who sold me, and to the ancestor who bought me, I have no father, I want no such father, although I can understand you, black ghost, white ghost, when you both whisper "history," for if I attempt to forgive you both I am falling into your idea of history which justifies and explains and expiates, and it is not mine to forgive, my memory cannot summon any filial love, since your features are anonymous and erased and I have no wish and no power to pardon. (64)

This essay ends with a "strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds" (64). The "soldering" of Africa and Europe is a very different image than the powdery sand indistinguishable from ground bones. Rather than as an incongruity, however, I propose to read this passage and the verses from "The Schooner *Flight*" as staging a necessary contestation within Caribbean

historical consciousness, an inexorable tension between a sense of possibility arising from the violent and chaotic encounter of multiple histories, and a persisting sense of loss and privation. Thus what Walcott rejects is not so much the idea of Caribbean historicity, but rather a certain "idea of history"—a concept of temporal continuity—whereby the past becomes integrated within a historical narrative of a given society as a factor determining or orienting this society's present and future. For Walcott, this is both a philosophical and an ethical question, for to accept either a European or an African genealogy would inevitably involve conceding to one's own dehumanization as much as justifying and explaining—that is, explaining away—the history of the Middle Passage. Instead, the philosophy of history that unravels in "The Schooner *Flight*" resonates more with Spillers's notion of Black Atlantic beginnings as marked by a rupture and a new kind of continuation: according to the American grammar of the poem, history becomes an interruptive event, an event that disrupts rather than grounds, an event in the wake of which the future—unhinged from the past—is imagined as a potentiality, as is the case in "The Muse of History," or as a question, as it emerges in "The Schooner *Flight*."

A sense of this paradoxical historical continuity emerges likewise in the eco-epic texture I have been interpreting. While the bedrock of history appears constitutively shattered—the route from Senegal to San Salvador is traced by powdery sand and ground bones—a peculiar historical continuance is patterned poetically, through a recurrent use of the sibilant "s," both a poetic sound pattern and an onomatopoeic sound suggestive of its elemental origin in the sea and wind. The winding, sinuous S tenuously ties the African point of departure with the American point of arrival as a poetic and material rather than subjective continuity. Rather than conceding to the determining reification of

historical injury or reinforcing subjective knowledge of real historical conditions, Walcott traces at the site void of controlling ancestry a poetic-material involvement that calls for a persistent reading of history and nature which weave origins in and out of shape.

Reflecting on the variegated patterning of Caribbean beginnings, Valérie Loichot helpfully glosses such practices as "patterns escap[ing] the agency of a central authority, whether a father or the author of a text," suggesting that the severing of filiative lines in the Black Atlantic in fact led to practices of creative restitution of family lines not essentially along bloodlines (1). While such "an orphan narrative" (Loichot's term) captures well the notion of history that follows from Walcott's repudiation of African and European genealogy, I find the term "eco-epic texture" more fitting when considering the poetic-material-historical entanglements in "The Schooner *Flight*." One reason why this concept of texture is so central is because it helps us read literary passages where the natural environment emerges differently than a frame, a context, or a background. In the first texture, coral is integral—symbolically and materially—to the metaphoric transaction between corals and brains. This complex poetic texturing of the material and the figural displaces the human as a sole transformative agent of his or her historical environment. In foregrounding the impossibility of determining whether the source of transformation is Shabine's creative mind or whether it originates in the coral, texture enables us to read in those spaces where the ontological separation between nature and history collapses, and where the formal and logical operations of the human mind cannot be taken as the sole structuring representation of the world. In textural readings we dwell on intricate, poetic patterns of mind and matter that give space to the contingency of nature as a shaping (rather than shaped) element of representation. What is important

about this co-implication of mind and matter is that in their entanglement, their relationship is *not* one of a reversed hierarchy where the material is re-privileged over mind. Rather, creativity, imagination, innovativeness, and capacity for transformation, are dispersed across the larger ecological body, making political and historical change a much more nebulous but an infinitely livelier affair.

Another reason why I find it helpful to think about foundational figurations in Bearden and Walcott as textures is that texture holds poetic, natural, and historical transformations as inseparable. It centers the "voluminous and indefinite" skills of *poiein*—poetic practice (Gourgouris 7). Stathis Gourgouris approaches *poiein* simultaneously as an artistic and historical transformation, material more than abstract, that eludes the grasp of conventional historical knowledge and alters the relationship between form and matter:

> *poiein* as history in the making … does not really have a precise temporality; hence traditional methods of historiography cannot grasp it. Its working is a perpetual reworking, a thorough reworking, that would not spare even itself as an object of that work. (The clichéd notion of a poem always being at work on itself, on making itself into a poem, should be understood here as an elemental force of *poiein*.) The energy of *poiein* is dramatic: Literally, to form is to make form happen, to change form (including one's own). … The political substance of *poiein* is thus not signified just by its constitutively transformative power, but by the fact that in its ancient meaning, it pertains to humanity's immanent (even if perpetually self-altering) encounter with the world. (10-11)

The Atlantic textures in the works of Bearden and Walcott evince this idea of a poetic remaking of history through an ecological involvement of humans and the world. This remaking is poetic not only because it becomes legible through art and poetry—figurative spaces that do not answer to experiential verifiability—but also because the transformative power of *poiein* refers to a socio-cultural imaginary and thus bears a poetic rather than analytical relation to knowledge (Gourgouris 9). Lastly, with the emphasis on the ecological character of these transformations, texture decenters the human as a custodian of transformation, sustaining the site of change as continually open and contingent, and thus in a sense ultimately indifferent to and non-appropriable by specific socio-political interests and political projects. Therefore, thinking about the eco-epic as modulated by texture does not mean substituting the natural for historical origins but rather holding them in a productive tension where the epic recalibrates the ways in which history is written.

Taking the eco-epic texture as such an open, self-transformative space of beginnings involves then a thorough revision of inherited definitions of the epic. Notice how differently the relationship between the past and the present is figured in *The Sea Nymph* and in "The Schooner *Flight*" when juxtaposed with the absolute distinction between "the presentness of the present and the pastness of the past" (14) that characterizes the epic in Bakhtin's account:

> "beginning," "first," "founder," "ancestor," "that which occurred earlier" … are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories. … Epic discourse is a discourse handed down … solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious

> attitude toward itself. … [I]t is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in [the epic world]. It is completed, conclusive, and immutable. … [W]ithin this [epic] time, completed and locked, all points are equidistant from the real, dynamic time of the present; insofar as this time is whole, it is not localized in an actual historical sequence; it is not relative to the present or to the future; it contains within itself, as it were, the entire fullness of time. (15-19; original emphasis)

Certainly, the notion of temporality subtending this characterization is structured by the oppositional descriptions of the novel and the epic in *The Dialogic Imagination*, where it is the former genre that strictly belongs to the present. But, more generally, Bakhtin's definition of the epic also reflects a traditional metaphysical thinking about temporality that posits—in a circuitous, repetitive, and policing manner—an unspoiled, ideal, and plentiful origin sheltered from any change or difference. In securing a particular cultural and political heritage, this metaphysical origin assumes a controlling and normative function; it determines the interpretation of present political events according to whether they lead towards a future state already prescribed by the imagined, idealized origins. Thus, according to this logic, change is not really change for any truly new occurrence would signal an aberration, a tear, in the socio-political fabric of the community threatening both the stability of its being and the epistemic organization of its world. In the classical epic, such a totalizing teleological ideology is emphasized for instance in Virgil's *Aeneid* where the quest for the fatherland is driven by the nostalgic obsession with the lost Troy and the promised land in Italy, and where "the setting, action, imagery, and even the hyperbolic rhetoric … are patterned through the epic's focus on Rome as

omphalos, the cosmic center that both orders the horizontal space around it and establishes a vertical *axis mundi* as a hierarchical index of being and value" (Cook 117).

In contrast, Bearden's and Walcott's Black Atlantic epics de-valorize originary categories to open the epic time to diasporic human and natural multiplicities. These epics—threaded from sea, wind, words, color, and coral—weave fragile homes out of diverse and often destabilizing elements, precarious but sustaining multiplicity, which I see as offering some traction for challenging inherited colonial patterns of thought. I therefore want to suggest that the sea in *The Sea Nymph* and in "The Schooner *Flight*" functions simultaneously as a fluid ground of historical affirmation and a critical space, offering

> an alternative to the rigid ethnic genealogies of colonialism and nationalism. In other words, the ocean's perpetual movement is radically decentering; it resists attempts to fix a locus of history. Focusing on seascape rather than landscape as the fluid space of historical production allows us to complicate the nation-state, which encodes a rigid hierarchy of race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity for its representative subjects. (DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots* 21)

This fluid ground allows us then to consider a different "basis of a different, other identity" Ismond evoked in her reading (232). What possibilities of political articulation and continuity follow from such aquatic foundations?

The sense of political belonging Shabine develops on his journey is as perplexing as the ground that underwrites it. In part nine of the poem, Shabine looks back at the petty politicking he has left behind and issues a warning to government officials:

> All you fate in my hand,
>
> ministers, businessmen, Shabine have you, friend,
>
> I shall scatter your lives like a handful of sand,
>
> I who have no weapon but poetry and
>
> the lances of palms and the sea's shining shield! (16)

Although hardly a constructive political stance, the political valence of Shabine's threat to scatter the existing vision of the region's future lies precisely in his resolve to unsettle political projects in order to give space to the multiplicities and contradictions of Caribbean experience. Derived from the marine environment and from his poetic skill, Shabine's capacity to unsettle can be read as a peculiar form of agency drawn from the textured eco-epic beginnings. While the locus of agency at first rests with Shabine, as suggested by the sovereign articulation "I shall," the concluding lines of this passage suggest a slightly different distribution of agency. Indeed, poetry, palms, and sea enwrap Shabine in a peculiar material-poetic armor as if the region's very culture and geography rebelled against Caribbean post-independence political institutions and practices.

I read this ecological form of political agency as underwritten by the eco-epic texture because the historical, the natural, and the literary entangled in the eco-epic texture are here co-involved, engendering a radically new field of political possibility. What is striking about the image of Shabine armed with poetry, palms, and the sea is that all these entities have been either excluded from political participation, or considered as threatening to political activity, or thought of as existing outside of politics. Shabine cannot find place in the political space marked out by specific colonial and anti-colonial positionalities: "After the white man, the niggers didn't want me / when the power swing

to their side" (8); poetry, for Plato, has detrimental effects on politics insofar as it speaks to the changeable and unprincipled aspects of the soul thus threatening the faculty of philosophical and political judgment;[18] and nature has been traditionally assumed to exist outside of politics as something to be overcome on the path towards progress and development. The texture of history, nature, and poeticity that marks Caribbean beginnings, then, underlies this peculiar form of identity—a radicalized version of what Gourgouris in the passage cited above described as "humanity's immanent encounter with the world"—the political valence of which lies in its ability to de-form recognized political institutions. Indeed, to mark this nexus of history and politics as indelibly poetic and ecological in character suggests that for Walcott multiplicity, indeterminacy, and difference—rather than the stable, intelligible meanings of political categories—constitute the warp and woof of the political. This is a valued register of political contestation because this style of articulation thrives on and nourishes equivocality, honoring the inherent complexity (i.e. non-objectivity and non-appropriability) of diasporic communities and the worlds they inhabit.

To reiterate, the political valence of Shabine's claim on the present political configuration lies, first, in the gesture that attempts to make space for what has been excluded from the political terrain—for the hybrid identities that do not square with the binary alignment of political positionalities, for a poetic, equivocal articulation that confuses political register, and for nature's radical otherness that reopens political beginnings and demands a different configuration of the community.

However, the textured socio-political formation engendered by Shabine yields "a new horizon of [political] possibility" (Scott 3) in a more fundamental way as well.

[18] Socrates discusses his view on poetry in books III and X of *The Republic*.

Situated at a junction between history and politics, Shabine's gesture also compels a question about the place of the past within a community's present. For historian and anthropologist David Scott, a thorough rethinking of this relation is crucial for marking out a space for a more radical political critique:

> I wish to take issue with a prevalent way of conceiving this relation between community and history, one that makes the shape of the former dependent upon the story the latter tells about the past. … How we make a (political) determination about community today, so it is widely believed, ought to be derived from our knowledge of the nature of the pasts of such communities. The shape of the past ought to guarantee the shape of the present. (93)

I find Scott's use of the word "shape" to refer to the conventional relationship between the past and the present, a relationship he seeks to complicate, highly evocative in the context of Shabine's threat to scatter political bureaucracy. For to scatter means precisely to de-form, to un-shape, to split open the community through, in our case, this community's past. And so, when Shabine is forced out of the present alignment of political identities—black or white—what is at stake is not only a search for an alternative space of belonging for his equivocal identity, but also a thorough reassessment of how history matters for politics. It appears that for Walcott, the political valence of Afro-diasporic history is precisely *not* to shape political identities into fixed, reactive positions of guilt and blame, but to decouple politics from historical determinism through a historical "rupture and a different kind of continuation" (Spillers 68). This disruptive persistence of the past in the present derives from the open time-space of the

eco-epic texture, radically unlike the "completed, conclusive, and immutable" epic past in Bakhtin's account. The temporality of the natural, while entangled with the time of history, weaves into the eco-epic texture a thread of radical temporal difference and continuity indifferent to human interests. As a result of this syncretic temporal conjunction, the historical time does not remain locked and completed, but rather overflows the present, indicating "that the political task … is to refuse to be governed by the *questions* of one's adversaries [in our context, by colonial ideologies], that the task in fact is to … risk *changing the problematic* in which those questions have appeared to us natural, legitimate, or even imperative" (Scott 103, original emphasis). I want to suggest here that perhaps what lies behind Walcott's desire to capture the tactile quality of the environment on the page, Glissant's idea that the environment is a character in Antillean history, and Wilson Harris's interest in articulating "a material vision of time in which whole societies conscripted themselves" ("Continuity and Discontinuity" 182) is this intuition that nature can radically alter historical trajectories and open up visions of life, community, and historical continuity not over-determined by colonial representations of African and Afro-diasporic humans.

While such "a material vision of time" reconfigures political possibilities, it also impinges upon the way in which the future unfolds. "The Schooner *Flight*" invites an inquiry into what this material continuity might mean in the concluding lines of the poem. While the narrative ends with Shabine's likely perishing in the churning currents of the Caribbean Sea, the closing line is ambiguous insofar as it appears to escape the poem's ending:

> My first friend was the **sea**. Now, is my last.

> I stop talking now. I work, then I **read**,
>
> cotching under a lantern hooked to the mast.
>
> I try to forget what happiness was,
>
> and when that don’t work, I study the stars.
>
> Sometimes is just **me**, and the soft-scissored foam
>
> as the deck turn white and the moon open
>
> a cloud like a door, and the light over **me**
>
> is a road in white moonlight taking **me** home.
>
> Shabine sang to you from the depths of the **sea**. (20; my highlighting)

In his reading of this ending Edward Baugh also commented on its ambiguity: “The poem ends with [Shabine] sailing on, to no definite destination, although it may end more ambiguously, with the last line indicating that the voice of Shabine is the voice of a drowned sailor” (312). The uncertainty I would like to focus on has less to do with whether Shabine survives or drowns, and more on the vague location from which that last verse is articulated. The emphasized words of the passage highlight the poetic repetition of two vowel sounds that tie the sea with the person of the narrator—both his activities (“r**ea**d”) and the trajectory of his journey (“road,” “home”). The very last line is thus an inextricable part of the narrative as it forms the closing arm of the friendly embrace anticipated in the first line of this fragment, in which Shabine takes the sea as his first and last friend. And yet, with the shift in the narrative voice from the first to the third person, this line simultaneously escapes the narrative in that this last sentence seems to be spoken from an elsewhere, the precise location of which is unsettled by the undecidable origins of the voice. Following from my reading of the eco-epic texture in the section “Raptures

of the Deep," which has shown that Caribbean beginnings are figured as a writing of history as much as of nature, I propose to read this concluding ambiguity as an effect precisely of this conjoined articulation. Lingering in excess of the narrative spun in the poem, this last verse turns us back towards the entanglement of matter, poetry, and history as it reminds us of the oceanic depths where Shabine's song originates. The very last word of the poem—sea—suggests that this last verse lingers as the narrative's own material surplus that warrants a future, but a radically unpredictable one as continuance depends here on the structure of address and inheritance (as marked by the second-person pronoun "you")—and thus on a certain indeterminacy of how inheritance is claimed and spent. In this way, the aqueous matter entangled in the articulation of this poem exists as simultaneously inextricable and non-appropriable, entangling historical and future trajectories.

In its non-appropriability, this lingering verse appears as scatter (but this time beyond human agency), driving off and rerouting the trajectory of the future in relation to the present. As scatter, the sea thus appears to hold little in place. Walcott himself is interested in the sea as a space that cannot be appropriated for human projects: "Nothing can be put down in the sea. You can't plan on it, you can't live on it; you can't walk on it. … The sea does not have anything on it that is a memento of man" (*Conversations* 158-159). If my reading of the fluidity of the sea as scatter might strike as an incongruity, it is to suggest that material scatter be understood not as a breakdown of solid entities into smaller, discrete particles, but rather as a non-appropriability of matter in general. As Geoffrey Bennington suggests, *scatter* names this paradoxical ability of matter to linger over epistemic, ontological, and political categories as alterity impossible to assimilate:

> 2.1.1.4. Scatter *remains* (as scattered remains). Scatter is (what) remains. …
>
> 5.1. Scatter rhymes with (and entails) matter (this really is a kind of 'materialism'). …
>
> 5.1.3. 'Matter' in the [ancient materialist] tradition is *essentially* scatter.
>
> 5.1.3.1. Or rather, scatter is why matter has no essence, is 'essentially' nothing. ("Scatter" 7, 13; original emphasis)

Scatter, thus, remains other, disuniting identities more than solidifying their contours. It is something that resists formal enclosures and lingers as an excess that cannot be fully incorporated into the shape of historical and political identities. We could translate Bennington's statement that matter has no essence as meaning that it is in the very essence of matter to escape, to scatter, to go into any direction without purpose or intention, thus escaping the predicative constraints that hook material bodies to their essential, reifying property traits.[19]

What such a material non-essentialism means in the context of a Caribbean eco-epic is that the moments of gathering eco-epic textures enable—such as the one when Shabine makes his political claim—allow for an evaluation and critique of specific political activities and projects. Such moments, however, do not themselves become

[19] Further, the idea that "matter is 'essentially' nothing," which Bennington turns into critique of ontology and metaphysics of presence, provocatively chimes in with a passage from Walcott's essay "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" in which the poet engages with Naipaul's lament that "nothing has ever been created in the West Indies, and nothing will ever be created." In his retort, rather than enumerating Caribbean achievements, Walcott zooms in on this idea of nothingness (as loss and dispossession) at the heart of Caribbean experience: "Precisely, precisely. . . . Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for quite long time, because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before" (9). In this swift move from the reality of socio-economic dispossession in the West Indies to the never before witnessed cultural possibility, Walcott encourages us to think creatively about the historical reality of the archipelago. I examine such "creativity of the nothing" in the third chapter of this dissertation, devoted to the work of Édouard Glissant, where I bring together the notion of materialism as a critique of ontological fullness and the very material reality of dispossession in the Caribbean in order to probe simultaneously the philosophical and political implications of seeking affirmation of the Caribbean through the history of the region's deprivation.

reified into new prescriptive political goals, goals that would over-write future insurgent and de-forming political claims. Linking the earlier passage where scatter de-forms political organization with the sea scatter of the closing verse, we can see that scatter is not simply a destructive activity, but also one which sustains futures not determined by the present. Or, put differently, scatter is this possibility that history offers to open up the present to the futures it cannot foresee.

I proposed earlier to think of eco-epic textures as involving practices of *poiēsis*—historical, material, and poetic—whose "working is a perpetual reworking, a thorough reworking, that would not spare even itself as an object of that work" (Gourgouris 10). This foundational motility textures a complex mode of diasporic belonging, and a complex relationship between identity and place. The movement I have been tracing through "The Schooner *Flight*"—from the underwater eco-epic texture that figures historical memory through a transformative involvement of nature, history, and poetry, through the emergence of a political positionality this texture underlies, to a textured future that sustains the eco-epic's transformative movements—resituates the Caribbean as a space involved in an ongoing process of making, unmaking, and remaking the cultural, political, and historical ties that bind the region's communities. In this way, "The Schooner *Flight*" offers a compelling counter-trope to the structuring image of the Black Atlantic—Gilroy's "ship in motion." Rather than moving "*between* Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean" (4, added emphasis)—an emphasis on transnational movement that inadvertently inscribes a subtle opposition between place and motion—Shabine's schooner never leaves the Caribbean, probing in this way the textures of Caribbean internal multiplicity. Staying within the Caribbean, Walcott envisions new

modes of historical and political being energized by the Caribbean environment rather than by a departure from it.

Nature, History, and Political Urgency in "The Star-Apple Kingdom"

"The Schooner *Flight*" describes a sense of being adrift and out of place induced by the Manichean organization of politics and history unable to support the genealogical perplexities Shabine's body engenders. Read as a commentary on "politics and society in the postindependence Caribbean scene" (Ismond 225), the poem illustrates an acute lack of a socio-political vision rooted in the cultural and historical specificities of the region. The Caribbean, the poem appears to say, is independent only nominally, failing to offer a sense of belonging to its people. This persistent experience of exile is demonstrated in Shabine's yearning for home, for a structure that would organize his world:

> Where is my harbor?
>
> Where is the pillow I will not have to pay for,
>
> and the window I can look from that frames my life? (8)

The conundrum of the socio-political organization re-emerges also in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* in the title poem bookending the collection. Ismond points out that

> "The Schooner *Flight*" and "The Star-Apple Kingdom" . . . comprise a full statement of Walcott's engagement with the crises of Caribbean self-development, and with the possibilities of a positive social and political direction for the region. . . . "The Star-Apple Kingdom" [deals] with the case of Jamaica, where Michael Manley's experiment in democratic socialism (1972-80) has met with total failure, plunging the country into acute economic hardship and political

> crisis. . . . "The Schooner *Flight*" gives vent to [Walcott's] anger and disgust with the self-betraying ills of Caribbean society; in "The Star-Apple Kingdom," the Jamaican ordeal, as an example of a failed effort, becomes his point of departure for exploring an alternative ideal of social and political intelligence in the region. (228-229)

The poems, however, complement each other not only in thematizing the challenges of Caribbean development, but also through a reversal of their organizing perspective. In "The Star-Apple Kingdom," the narrative follows a protagonist whose perspective on his country is situated *within* its historical structures and political institutions: "he looked out from the Great House windows on / clouds that still held the fragrance of fire" (48). This tension between a lack of an organizing frame in "The Schooner *Flight*" and specific historical and political framing in "The Star-Apple Kingdom" (the Great House refers to the colonial plantation estate and to the Prime Minister's residence) stresses the central role of historical consciousness in Walcott's poetic commentary on the social and political issues in the West Indies. Indeed, the position of each protagonist vis-à-vis history crucially informs the political orientation of both poems. Shabine's disorganizing effect on politics has to do with his illegibility for history: "I met History once, but he ain't recognize me" (8). In contrast, entrusted with the socio-political organization of his post-colonial country, the protagonist of "The Star-Apple Kingdom" cannot shake off the specter of Caribbean history, personified as the muse of revolution, "the darker, older America" (51), demanding militant justice for the wrongs of colonialism.

In the most extensive commentary on the poem, Ismond followed in great detail the socio-political arch of the poem, shedding light on Jamaica's factual realities such as

Manley's impoverished electorate, the introduction of austerity measures in response to the economic crisis in the country, the country's increasing dependence on global capital, and the introduction of martial law in Jamaica in 1976 (249-280). Walcott himself, however, wants the narrative to retain a certain generality. The protagonist, the poet explains,

> isn't [Michael Manley] entirely. . . . The *persona* is a leader who is in Jamaica, but his background is not Manley's background. . . . I wanted to catch the poise of anguish that comes from wishing for a kind of order that can only perhaps be imposed by a kind of discipline. . . . The poem is poised at that point and I've been criticised by radicals who say 'It doesn't get you anywhere, it's the usual middle-of-the-road balance thing'. But that's the poise of the poem. My private opinion about what should or should not happen has nothing to do with it. I have always been very careful—that's the balance of the poet—not to move into propaganda, on either side. (*Conversations* 66-67)

The stakes of these two interpretations—which respectively take the poem as a dramatization of a real moment in Jamaican socio-political history and as a more philosophical reflection on the urgencies of political organization—will become sharper later, in my discussion of the concluding lines of "The Star-Apple Kingdom." My own interest in this poem aligns more with Walcott's concerns and follows from the analysis of the poetic entanglements of nature and history in the previous section. What happens to the multiplicity, indeterminacy, and difference, inscribed into the notion of the political through the intricacies of nature and history, in the context of real political urgencies?

What is the political valence of material scatter and excess in the more bounded landscape of political institutionalization?

The poem begins with a disarticulation of a seemingly idyllic colonial order by a scream of those standing on the margins—“the groom, the cattle boy, the housemaid, the gardeners, / the tenants, the good Negroes down in the village” (47)—and whose dispossession is a condition of possibility for colonial prosperity. This scream immediately distends into a natural-historical force,

> a scorching wind of a scream
>
> that began to extinguish the fireflies,
>
> that dried the water mill creaking to a stop
>
> as it was about to pronounce Parish Trelawny
>
> all over, in the ancient pastoral voice (47)

This outburst of hatred that now brings to a halt colonial operations captures the revolutionary menace of decolonization as “an agenda for total disorder” (Fanon 2), and, paradoxically, suggests hesitation regarding decolonization’s political efficacy. The blowing of the scream/wind does not in fact bend anything, “neither the leaves of the album nor the lime groves” (47), which poses here a question about the ability of decolonial practices—taken in the Fanonian sense as “the substitution of one ‘species’ of mankind by another” (1) and as “the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation” (2)—to alter in any radical way the conditions of possibility for a political inscription of a post-colonial society. The scene is finally brought to a standstill, as if a replacement of a colonial order with a decolonial one merely reordered the

constitutive figures of the colonial landscape, issuing no fundamental epistemic and ontological change. The scream, the historical validity of which is undeniable, risks congealing into a mere reactive blow without the possibility of opening up new directions for formal change.

It is into this political landscape that the protagonist of the poem is placed, as he confronts the task of rebuilding and reorganizing the country's socio-political institutions. The central preoccupation of "The Star-Apple Kingdom" will thus be the role of history for political consciousness: in the landscape of immediate political needs, can history be construed in a way that permits a non-reactive articulation of political space and collective selfhood?

The political horizon of the poem is drawn through a tension between, on the one hand, historical consciousness that seeks to escape the burden of memory and, on the other, the specter of history that puts the onus onto the protagonist for righting the wrongs of the past. The man "wanted a revolution without any bloodshed, / he wanted a history without any memory, / streets without statues, / and a geography without myth" (51). In response to this stance, the feminine figure of "the darker, older America," driven by a destructive desire for revenge, eventually abandons him "because he could not kill; / she shrank to a bat that hung day and night / in the back of his brain" (52). This revolutionary engendering of American history is among Walcott's most striking poetic images:

> She was as beautiful as a stone in the sunrise,
> her voice had the gutturals of machine guns
> across khaki deserts where the cactus flower
> detonates like grenades, her sex was the slit throat

> of an Indian, her hair had the blue-black sheen of the crow.
>
> She was a black umbrella blown inside out
>
> by the wind of revolution, La Madre Dolorosa,
>
> a black rose of sorrow, a black mine of silence,
>
> raped wife, empty mother, Aztec virgin
>
> transfixed by arrows from a thousand guitars,
>
> a stone full of silence, which, if it gave tongue
>
> to the tortures done in the name of Father,
>
> would curdle the blood of the marauding wolf,
>
> the fountain of generals, poets, and cripples
>
> who danced without moving over their graves
>
> with each revolution (51)

Through this depiction, Walcott configures a reverse presentation of history to that of "a parchment Creole," who spits in response to Shabine's demand for recognition. The energies animating this portrayal in "The Star-Apple Kingdom" derive from the figure's oppositional alignment within the conceptual order that frames the articulation of history in the archipelago. The woman's body is overburdened by everything that the masculine figure of history cannot hold. If the latter is described as expunging—spitting out—the offspring of Caribbean history, the feminine becomes the burial ground upon which the pillage of history is accumulated. This depiction layers epithets upon this figure, without allowing her body to re-articulate, re-write, any of the meanings that transfix her. Indeed, her ability to speak is already lost in the silence that foreshadows what her "giving tongue" might do were it given space to inscribe historical memory in a different voice.

She is simultaneously menacing and immobilized as both of her organs of articulation—her tongue and her sex—are over-determined by the history she suffers.

Critics such as Baugh and Ismond have praised Walcott for his "strong recognition of agency in . . . the black underprivileged Caribbean woman . . . in respect of black resistance to oppression" (Baugh 117) and for being "deeply sensitive and responsive to the feminist cause in this text" (Ismond 263). Walcott indeed renders the category of the feminine central to the architectonics of the historical and political community this poem imagines, an interest that perhaps has to do with his criticism of a paternal understanding of genealogical lineage and historical indebtedness. I am less certain, however, that it is this conjoined portrayal of femininity and history that anchors a liberatory representation of the feminine. The layering of the historical experience of the Americas as engendered by the muse of revolution is nevertheless "a filial impulse" ("The Muse of History" 36) for it is governed by a linear, causal understanding of historical time. "In the New World," Walcott continues, "servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters. Because this literature serves historical truth, it yellows into polemic or evaporates into pathos" (37). Aligning literature with the powers of the imaginative vision rather than holding fast onto the historical fact, Walcott mobilizes the poetic voice for rearticulating the conditions of possibility for "accept[ing] this archipelago of the Americas" (64). And within this imaginary the function and place of the feminine must also be revised so that it is not simply summoned as the Manichean opposite of the patriarchal inscription of historical ontology.

Commenting on the imaginative strategies deployed by Walcott to ascribe a positive new valence to the Caribbean as a site of belonging, literary critic Paula Burnett explains that as a "strategy to counter the emphasis on lost origins, Walcott at times projects a metaphor of the female body onto the island, recuperating the idea of dispossession from a remote ancestral motherland to a local, immediately available alter/native. . . . The notion of 'motherland' associated in colonial discourse with Europe, and in counterdiscourses such as negritude with Africa or Asia, is by metaphorization of this kind indelibly imprinted on the local environment" (44). I examine in detail both the challenges and the potential of inscribing the Caribbean as motherland through the metaphorics of the feminine in the following chapter, which focuses on the poetry of Grace Nichols. For now, let me only signal that in the Afro-diasporic context this problem demands a much more careful consideration than a knee-jerk suspicion of a naturalizing, essentialist description of femininity and space. As feminist scholar Katherine McKittrick reminds us in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, "the category of black woman is intimately connected with past and present spatial organization and . . . black femininity and black women's humanness are bound up in an ongoing geographic struggle" (McKittrick xviii). In the context of "The Star-Apple Kingdom," I want to trace the concentration of the figures of the feminine entangled with the physical space of the archipelago as the poem moves towards an inscription of a political space, and ask about textual effects of the category of the feminine within it.

In the poem, the bond between Caribbean femininity and space is inscribed through a juxtaposition of two temporal orders, the future and the present, which also open on different ways of reclaiming the Caribbean:

> Tomorrow the sea would gleam like nails
> under a zinc sky where the barren frangipani
> was hammered, a horizon without liners;
> . . .
> and at dawn
> would come the noise of a government groaning uphill.
> But now she held him, as she holds us all,
> her history-orphaned islands, she to whom
> we came late as our muse, our mother,
> who suckled the islands, who, when she grows old
> with her breasts wrinkled like eggplants
> is the head-tie mother, the bleached-sheets-on-the-river-rocks
> *mother*,
> the gospel mother, the t'ank-you-parson mother
> who turns into mahogany, the lignum-vitae mother,
> her sons like thorns,
> her daughters dry gullies that give birth to stones,
> who was, in our childhood, the housemaid and the cook,
> the young grand' who polished the plaster figure
> of Clio, muse of history, in her seashell grotto

> in the Great House parlor, Anadyomene washed
>
> in the deep Atlantic heave of her housemaid's hymn. (54-55; added emphasis)

This passages hinges on the word "mother," both through its repetition of the noun and by turning the word into a poetic verse around which ripple other verses that embed "mother" into different social, historical, spatial, and material meanings. At first, the word seems to linger in the poem as a seemingly self-evident state. But motherhood in these lines is in fact framed by the context of human captivity that underscores the non-naturalness, non-self-evidence, and often an impossibility of mothering in a place the complex legacy of which involves attempted erasure of human practices. The epithets that describe this archipelagic mother—head-tie, bleached-sheets-on-the-river-rocks, gospel, t'ank-you-parson, lignum-vitae[20]—highlight a notion of space through which the archipelago is emerges not as an unmarked, pre-historical space, but rather as a site created by different embodied practices that negotiate the condition of being out of place and turn the archipelago into a lived environment, "identify[ing] a different way of knowing and writing the social world and . . . expand[ing] how the production of space is achieved across terrains of domination" (McKittrick xiv).

Importantly, too, this excerpt juxtaposes two temporal modes through which reclamation of space is envisioned. One, characterized by a desire for a horizon cleared of historical meanings, projects an erection of a political institution—the government—through which political reorganization typically occurs. Another, marked by a continuous carving of livable space without a perceptible point of origins, is characterized by a kind

[20] *Lignum Vitae* ("the wood of life") is a tree indigenous to the Caribbean and South America. It is a national symbol of Jamaica.

of belatedness, suggesting that the reclamation of the Caribbean as a site of life has already happened, as if under the radar of the political desire invested in a national dream. Because this reclamation takes place through a feminine figure, this passage encourages us to approach the relationship between history and politics differently than in the case of the muse of revolution that presses upon political consciousness a destructive desire for revenge. Here, a black female act of labor (polishing a Greek figurine) morphs initially into a mythic care about the transmission of memory (stubbornly non-authentic) and subsequently into an equally mythic Atlantic utterance that entangles a species of algae (*Anadyomene*) with classical sensuousness (Aphrodite depicted as Venus Anadyomene). The word "Anadyomene" emerges here as an instance of an eco-epic texture in which Greek mythology is woven with the Caribbean material environment, the meaning of which is legible only in the poetic mode which encourages unequivocality across different semantic registers. The Black Anadyomene lingering in the last verses of the cited fragment is an internally differentiated entity that crosses over into multiple historical, species, and temporal archives; she is radically non-autochthonous though inextricably embedded within the archipelago. Such an irreducible weave of the Greek, the Caribbean, and the material can be understood as an attempt to offer a vision of historicity disentangled from dualist accounts that categorize human histories either as conquering or conquered, as colonizing or colonized, as victorious or victimized—stories that prevent a relational understanding of cultural identities.

Further, the insistence on the material as the inexorable textile of the Caribbean foundational weave compels a question about the political being of the archipelago because it throws into crisis the customary understanding of the socio-political as

separate from the natural. The problem of the political is staged through the focus, in the opening lines of the cited fragment, on a political institution (the government) that regulates in a legal manner socio-political practices. The future effort at erecting the government is interrupted when the man finds himself being held by the black Caribbean mother. Ismond in her reading of the poem suggested that this embrace is a nurturing one, that it nourishes the man's political vision, and eventually fortifies his political resolve: "It is with the reality embodied in the image of the Caribbean woman-mother as the human face of nurturing landscape that the Manley protagonist reconnects for the creative bonding that will renew his purpose to face the chaos of his political dream turned nightmare" (273). For Ismond, this moment in the poem's narrative functions as a pivot in the protagonist's political journey. It is crucial, but its significance is subsumed under the ultimately more important political achievement towards which the poem is headed and which, in Ismond's reading, is successfully completed in the concluding lines of the poem. But the verb 'to hold' can also mean 'to detain', 'to restrain from action', a meaning supported by the growing complexity and density of the poem's metaphoricity. On this reading, the man could equally be enveloped, engulfed by a composite time—lateral and non-chronological—that demands that we linger within this complexity that makes the precise relation between *tomorrow* and *now* undecidable. It is unclear from the cited fragment, whether the *now* chronologically supports *tomorrow*, and whether the hold in which the man finds himself unequivocally facilitates the erection of the government. In other words, the ambiguous linking of the two temporal sections of this fragment—transpiring only through the conjunction of contrast and opposition 'but'—renders the image of "the Caribbean woman-mother" non-appropriable by the immediate

political urgency of the poem. The mundane, secret, moist, and material site of life and remembrance remains strangely alien to political formalism driving the process of institutionalization. And so, even if the man finds some relief in the embrace of the woman, in the meantime, the entanglement of the historical, the poetic, and the material re-orients the question of being together in the world towards less perceptible and more fragile (and thus less determining and prescriptive) relations of embeddedness within historical and material environments.

My suggestion here is that the feminine categories which proliferate towards the end of "The Star-Apple Kingdom" and which texture Caribbean material and historical worlds offer a different vision of Caribbean political environment than an institutional organization of the political. Neither harmoniously unified nor broken beyond repair, the weathered and weathering material-feminine ground inscribes the tenuous possibility of memory and continuance through corporeal practices entangling human resilience with ecological world-making.

The reading I am offering certainly does not annul Ismond's commentary on the poem, which is driven by the urgencies of political reality in Jamaica. What I want to suggest, however, is that if we take in all seriousness the Caribbean Sea as a receptacle of energy and the islands as "writing themselves," then this ecological approach to the literature, art, and thought of the archipelago must significantly bear on how Caribbean politics and history are envisioned. The eco-epic textures I have been tracing in "The Schooner *Flight*" and in "The Star-Apple-Kingdom" do not unfold into grand narratives which would ground new political projects. To the contrary, the claim they make on the political imaginary has little to do with political programs and nation building. Instead,

these textures reveal fissures in some of the most cherished ideas of what politics is and where it ought to lead; and such crevices motivate an interest in how the material conditions of history and politics could help us devise strategies of being in the world which would not be governed by the dualisms, exclusions, and hierarchies, strategies which would not appropriate the future for our present political needs and commitments.

The final section of "The Star-Apple Kingdom" and the interpretations it has produced show how difficult it is to sustain this material vision of the political, given the pressure of the narrative towards a political (re)solution. The denouement of the man's political journey is presented as follows:

> On the knee hollowed steps
> of the crusted cathedral, there was a woman in black,
> the black of moonless nights, within whose eyes
> shone seas in starlight like the glint of knives
> (the one who had whispered to the keyhole of his ear),
> washing the steps, and she heard it first.
> . . .
> she heard as a dog hears, as all the underdogs
> of the world hear, the pitched shriek of silence.
> Star-apples rained to the ground in that silence,
> the silence was the green of cities undersea,
> and the silence lasted for half an hour
> in that single second, a seashell silence, resounding

with silence, and the men with barbed-wire beards[21] saw
in that creak of light that was made between
the noises of the world that was equally divided
between rich and poor, between North and South,
between white and black, between two Americas,
the fields of silent Zion in Parish Trelawny,
in Parish St. David, in Parish St. Andrew,[22]
leaves dancing like children without any sound,
in the valley of Tryall, and the white, silent roar
of the old water wheel in the star-apple kingdom;
and the woman's face, had a smile been decipherable
in that map of parchment so rivered with wrinkles,
would have worn the same smile with which he now
cracked the day open and began his egg. (57-58)

A sense of poise and harmony seems to be drawn among the figures of the woman, the Rastafarians, and the man as the collective space comes into shape more and more clearly. This gathering occurs through an ambiguous creak repeated throughout this scene in different guises; it is first drawn by the woman when she receives the shriek of silence, then it is read by the bearded men as light—a figure of synesthesia which confounds hearing with seeing—and, finally, it is performed by the man himself as a cracking of an egg. Before I offer my own thoughts on the implications of how this scene if threaded, let

[21] The possible reference here is to Jamaican Rastafarians, one of Manley's major groups of supporters (Ismond 278).
[22] Administrative units in Jamaica.

me bring together two commentaries on the ending of the poem so as to draw out some of the difficulties it poses for reading.

Baugh elaborates on the ambiguities these lines are shot through with in the following way:

> The poem ends . . . with an enigmatic smile . . . [that] suggests a congruence, at last, between [the protagonist] and the Black Muse of Revolution. . . .
> Does the smile in the sub-text of the woman's face mean that she has seen the light and abandoned her call for revolution? If so, the poem has not shown the motive for this change. Or does the congruence of their smiles mean that they are meeting each other halfway? If so, what kind of action is likely to result from this mutual accommodation? (116-117)

Baugh's reading captures the reluctance of the poem to resolve decidedly the political conundrum it has set up. In turn, Ismond reads the smile on the man's face as "signal of the rekindling of his spirit and purpose . . . subtly reflected in the features of the muse figure. The hints of the play of that smile in her time- and pain-worn features," she continues,

> signify a humanizing change—an easing of the bitterness, and the dread of the terrifying, unfeeling visage she has worn until now. In the spirit of this deeply internalized smile, with its modulations of a residual elegiac wisdom, that a now truly mature and ripened Manley renews his commitment to his difficult task and its ongoing struggle as he faces another day. (280)

Taken together, these two commentaries show how the focus on real political urgencies and on the need for political solutions as a line of literary interpretation

produces a reading that fails to pay attention to the textual nuance through which the poem brings a people together. Both Baugh and Ismond follow the stated narrative of the poem, that is the journey of a politician who wants to arrive at a political vision that would bring his community together. In that sense, the ending of the poem should tie everything together, and it seems to have done so for the man proceeds to his daily activities with a self-congratulatory smile on his face. And while Baugh is more cautious than Ismond to applaud this ending as a successful compromise of competing interests, neither critic questions the ultimate coherence of this scene. But how coherent is this scene if we carefully trace the stitches that hold it together?

First, the conjunction “and” which ties this scene by bringing together the barbed-wire men and the woman’s face indeed aligns these figures, but does so without disclosing the precise spatio-temporal relations that bind them. “And” can bring together as well as keep distinct by aligning elements or actions occurring in the same space or at the same time, but which need not affect one another in terms of cause and effect. Thus, while “and” puts side by side the woman receiving the cry, the men’s interpretation of the scene which she brings into being, and the woman’s implied reaction to this interpretation, this conjunction does not, in and of itself, articulate an inherent, organic link between these movements, a link that would inscribe any necessary causality between what transpires. By way of this conjunction alone, it is quite possible that everyone could go about their own business, engage in conflicting activities, and articulate political commitments that might not be congruent at all.

Therefore a more determining knot is tied by an intradiegetic interpretation of “the shriek of silence,” the silent scream of the marginalized which the poem begins with

and which the woman receives at the end. This cry is intimately tied with the materiality of the archipelago: while it comes from the heart of Caribbean history, the cry takes the reader into the submarine abysses of the archipelago. It is a cry of the sea as history, to evoke the title of Walcott's famous poem "The Sea Is History" also included in this collection. This reading is supported not only by the verse of the poem that reads "the silence was the green of cities undersea," but also by the pattern of consonance in these lines that repeats the sibilant "s" in a few verses of the poem, a poetic strategy we have also observed in "The Schooner *Flight*."[23] This aquatic silence reveals its own temporality that confounds the customary understanding of time ("the silence lasted for half an hour / in that second"), suggesting that its time exceeds human experience. Strikingly, this scene is read by the barbed-wire men as a "creak of light," an interpretation which seizes the shriek and inscribes it in the terrestrial time and space of the Rasta men. The figure of synesthesia that facilitates this translation insinuates the metaphors of light and sight into a scene that works through auditory channels and murky colors. Indeed, both the woman and the underwater space emanate opacity and weathering; the colors in which this scene is drawn appear grey and impenetrable black, green, and blue (rather than the oppositional economy of black and white seen by the men), and the silence echoing throughout its marine locations seems incongruous with the localized roar of the mill. Thus, the tie between the underwater and the terrestrial scene is contingent upon an imposition of meaning, upon what the bearded mean see it to be, or need it to be. Notice how the "s" sound pattern is interrupted when the barbed-wire men see the scream as the creak of light, an intervention that prevents the singular

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[23] I have argued in the previous section of this chapter that this sound brings to mind the sound of the wind and of the sea. For more on the sinuous, meandering, S-like patterns of water, see Theodor Schwenk's study *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air*.

meanings of the underwater scene from unfolding. The link is forged (or perhaps forced) rather than naturally given, and the grounding of Jamaica this tie subtends is in fact more haphazard than pre-ordained, its legitimacy fashioned according to the immediate socio-political needs rather than naturally and authentically rooted in the soil.

But perhaps the most striking interpretative imposition is performed by a reading of the smile on the woman's undecipherable face. Such an interpretation is initiated by the winding grammar of the conditional sentence that embroiders meaning at the site out of which no clear meaning in fact arises: there is no smile to be seen in the woman's face, but had it been possible to see it, she would have been smiling with the same smile seen on the man's face. It is of course crucial that the woman smile for it is this very smile that signs and warrants this scene as the founding moment—it is this smile that supports the interpretation that aqueous and terrestrial locations are in fact congruent—and the conditional grammar that projects this hypothetical meaning is demanded by the very logic of this passage, which works towards foundational closure. We really do not know whether the woman is smiling at all, but we must know that she is in order to figure and read this scene as that of grounding, as the foundations that will stabilize and regulate subsequent political interpretations and actions.

Baugh's and Ismond's commentaries latch onto this make-believe tone of the conditional sentence that covers the fact that the precise political meaning inscribed here is undecidable. These readings are propelled by the determining political logic that demands legibility and knowledge in order to put forward, stabilize, and legitimate socio-political actions guaranteeing the continuity of the community. In his seminars *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida explains that such making-known is an inescapable

operation of political discourse oriented towards action, affirmation, and the endurance of the political order:

> [I]n the prevalent or the hegemonic tradition of the political, a political discourse, and above all a political action, should in no case come under the category of the fabular." What makes fable-like speech a threat to political discourse and political action is that a fable pretends to be knowledge. *Fabula* is "a fiction supposed to *make known* [*faire savoir*] . . . [in a sense of] 'making like' knowledge ["*faire*" *savoir*], i.e. giving the impression of knowing, giving the effect of knowledge, resembling knowing where there isn't necessarily any knowing: in the latter case of *faire savoir*, *giving the effect of knowing*. (34-35)

And yet, as Derrida continues to explain and as the closing lines of "The Star-Apple Kingdom" reveal, political discourse cannot extricate itself from such pretend knowledge. While it is necessary that politics— the politics of institutions, political order, and political solutions—forgets its origins in the fabular and unfolds on the basis of such an *as if* (as if the woman's smile arrived at the scene of founding), the contingency of political foundations lingers and throws into question the legitimacy, the justness, and the duty to uphold any political order.

Discussing the performance of Homeric songs in Athens by the rhapsodes in the introduction, I suggested that the epic itself strives to forget the absence at the site of its own origins, securing in this way a conceptual apparatus that guards the logic of unified and plentiful origins and occluding an originary indebtedness to an elsewhere. We have seen this logic also in Bakhtin's description of the epic past as "completed, conclusive, and immutable." The closing lines of "The Star-Apple Kingdom" strive, on the one hand,

to encircle and close up such a foundational, epic space, and, on the other, cannot ultimately cover up foundational ploy. In this context, then, to linger on the unreadability of the woman's face would mean to turn away from the prevalent notions of what politics means and stay with the complexities and silences submerged in the Caribbean Sea. Foregrounding the material textures of the epic and how they fissure the notion of reified historical temporality signals a refusal to let the textural origins recede and to lose in such a receding the generative excess that escapes the enclosing grasp of unified historical, cultural, and political meanings; it highlights the refusal to forfeit the possibility of a radically new, unforeseen future. In this way, eco-epic textures do not signify the abdication of politics, but rather advocate, to borrow from Elizabeth Grosz, "a politics of surprise, a politics that cannot be mapped out in advance, a politics linked to invention, directed more at experimentation in ways of living than in policy and step-by-step directed change, a politics invested more in its processes than in its results" (*Time Travels* 2). To be sure, the ecological epic remains vitally concerned with the affirmative articulation of a cultural being. Yet, a sustained attention to the ways in which the Caribbean Sea touches the political and historical lands of the Americas allows a notion of culture imbued with natural energies, radically expanding our understanding of cultural becomings and transformations, and their implications for human engagement with their worlds.

Chapter Two

Caribbean Lipshores: Sexual Difference, Materiality, and Place in the Poetry of Grace Nichols

As implied in the previous chapter, both Romare Bearden and Derek Walcott intimate that the feminine is a category through which continuity, memory, life, and political belonging in the diaspora are manipulated. Guyanese poet Grace Nichols extends and radicalizes this reflection. In her poetic oeuvre from the early 1980s to the present—in collections such as *I Is a Long-Memoried Woman* (1983), *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984), *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), *Startling the Flying Fish* (2005), or *Picasso, I Want My Face Back* (2009)—Nichols has devised a powerful Black female protagonist who observes, comments on, and creatively rearticulates the diasporic experience. To that end, in acknowledgments to *Startling the Flying Fish*, Nichols writes herself into the long tradition of Caribbean critical and poetic writing—most pertinent to my reflection in this chapter is her salute towards Walcott "for his epic evocations of the Sea ('the sea is history')."[24] The poem, then, claims Caribbean archipelagic thought, but its opening lines suggest likewise that this tradition is to be subjected to a feminist revision:

> And I Cariwoma
>
> watch my children
>
> take off like

[24] This reference to Walcott is included in the acknowledgments to *Startling the Flying Fish*.

migrating spider-birds

carrying the silver threads

of their linkages

making of me new

triangular across Atlantic (3)

Opening *in medias res* through a paratactic coordinating conjunction 'and', Nichols's long poem effects an opening within Caribbean literary and historical lineage so as to reflect on the function of the feminine as a way both of continuity and difference in the diaspora. As already explained in my reading of the concluding lines of "The Star-Apple Kingdom," 'and' is an ambiguous conjunction that possibly links and disconnects at the same time. In that sense, Nichols's opening lines evoke a mode of engagement with tradition that Cheryl A. Wall described as "worrying the line." Originating in the blues, "worrying the line may be used for purposes of emphasis, clarification, or subversion," Wall writes. "A worried line is not a straight line. Writing in and across diverse genres, contemporary black women writers revise and subvert the conventions of the genres they appropriate" (8, 13).

Accordingly, then, to worry the line means to twist as much as to extend it. This chapter examines how diasporic femininity advances a different way of knowing history and imagining the world by tracing entanglements of sexual difference, ecology, and history from Nichols's early poetry to the portmanteau word "lipshores" that sensuously links flesh and geography in the more recent collection *Startling the Flying Fish*. If the conjunction 'and' offers a non-hierarchical and not over-determined way of staging continuity and change, then Nichols's intervention into Caribbean literary and intellectual

genealogy appears to sketch a non-reactive, appreciative as much as critical, engagement with Afro-diasporic cultural traditions. It deploys difference, more specifically sexual difference, as the very condition of possibility for cultural transmission, as if diasporic continuity were stubbornly suppurating with possibilities of new beginnings. Consequently, giving in this way voice to the feminine, Nichols invites us to re-consider received meanings of community, memory, and culture in the diaspora.

One final aspect of *Startling the Flying Fish*'s opening warrants attention before I begin to examine Nichols's poetry in more detail. I suggested in my reading of "The Schooner *Flight*" in the previous chapter that the very last word of that poem—"sea"—evokes material excess of the narrative and juts out into an unpredictable future. Given Nichols's appreciation of Walcott's poetic achievement in articulating the epic qualities of the Caribbean Sea, the opening lines of her own poem might be read as conceived somewhere in the churning lines of Walcott's own poetry, as in "Shabine sang to you from the depths of the sea" "And I Cariwoma / watch my children / take off." In this way, Nichols seizes the idea of the Caribbean Sea as a non-appropriable conduit of memory and difference. Nichols, however, enters this conversation with a wholly new perspective, in that *Startling the Flying Fish*, as will become clearer in a moment, reads as if the poem in its entirety was an utterance of Caribbean material environment. Through the figure of Cariwoma, I want to suggest, Nichols devises a protagonist who powerfully illustrates Glissant's claim that the landscape is a character in Antillean history. And by giving this ecological approach to Caribbean historicity a decidedly feminist orientation, Nichols takes both nature and femininity as active and transformative forces, and thus interrupts the philosophical transmission of these notions, whereby nature and femininity have been

assumed as passive, unchanging, and consistently in place. It is this creative conjunction of the feminine and the natural that drives my analysis of how diasporic entanglements of body and geography allow us to imagine within colonial pasts and post-colonial futures what Emanuela Bianchi has recently called "possibilities of otherwiseness" (240)—unexpected figurations of difference, desire, and time that challenge normalizing representations of femininity, nature, and place.

The reflection on the significance of sexual difference for our understanding of diasporic historicity permeates Nichols's entire oeuvre, contextualizing her contribution to West Indian literary tradition. In an interview with Kwame Dawes, Nichols recalls the difficulties surrounding the publication of her first book of poetry *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*: "Oxford University Press, who saw the manuscript . . . when I had finished it, said that Brathwaite had done that journey already; so even though they liked the poems a lot, they didn't publish it. So it was published by Karnac House, which is a small Caribbean publishing house based in London" (142). The poet has in mind the torturous journey of African slaves to the Caribbean as narrated in Kamau Brathwaite's trilogy *The Arrivants*. Indeed, Brathwaite registers in these poems the haunting memories of brutality, the interruption of history and of communal life in Africa, and the disjunctive continuity of life in the Americas. And yet, as Nichols points out, the narratives of the African passage into the New World often remain silent about the "female experience" of the Middle Passage. To say that "Brathwaite had already done it," then, indicates not only tokenism but also marginalization of female voices in the canon of Anglophone Caribbean poetry and, more broadly, in transnational literary networks. It also highlights the constrained circulation, even illegibility, of sexual difference in accounts of Afro-

diasporic history. In contrast, Nichols's oeuvre is a sustained reflection on how the feminine perspective on diasporic space and time rearticulates the norms through which diasporic realities have been perceived. *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* magnifies the embodied experience of the Atlantic passage and American slavery through the persona of the long memoried woman who concretizes the actual black woman's memory of despair and brutality, her acts of embodied resistance such as abortion and infanticide, her longings and desires, and revolutionary undertakings. The poem, though, also pushes this feminist reflection further, beyond women's identities and subjectivities, and considers sexual difference as a structuring element of diasporic historicity. The other poem under consideration in this chapter, *Startling the Flying Fish*, presents Cariwoma's long account of Afro-diasporic history, myths, and rituals, and envisions the entanglement of femininity and geography in an attempt to offer a livelier and more open definition of home.

Literary critic Isabel Hoving points out that what is at stake in black women's intervention into diasporic literary canons is not only a corrective to a masculinist vision of historical experience, but also a more fundamental rethinking of the relationship between exile and belonging. Discourses of displacement, Hoving observes, "bear upon gender. Often, men are cast in the role of travelers; women are deemed to be passive residents by nature" (41). The masculinist character of travel can be discerned for instance in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus' relationship to his homeland is drawn through his ten-year long adventure at sea while Penelope's task is to keep the space of home intact and ready for her husband's return. It is Odysseus' journey that supports the play of identity, whereas home functions in the epic as "a horizon of identity" (Ashcroft 125), a

site where the truth of Odysseus' identity as a king, husband, and father is kept. My reference to the *Odyssey* is not accidental for in *Startling the Flying Fish*, Nichols suggests that it is precisely such a gendered understanding of home/place on the one hand and displacement/motion on the other that motivates the poet's intervention into discourses of home and exile in the diaspora. Witnessing ongoing departures and arrivals across the Atlantic, Cariwoma muses: the ships kept "rolling / with new arrivals / across Atlantic / Their songs of exile / their drums of loss / all caught in a weaving odyssey / of no return. / No waiting Penelope / unpicking all her work" (13-14). In a diasporic odyssey of no return, home is no longer imagined as an unchanging anchoring point, and neither is the feminine posited as a keeper of that space. In bringing together Penelope's activity of weaving as home-making and Odyssean hardships and adventures in one phrase—"a weaving odyssey"—Nichols envisions an irreducible entanglement of home and exile, of belonging and displacement, such that they no longer function through a dichotomy of place and motion. Rather, "a weaving odyssey" would appear to fold home and space into a diasporic experience of placelessness, so that a sense of exile and displacement (odyssey) is modulated through itinerant home-making (weaving). Conditions of diasporic lives become redefined through, in Hoving's words, "instances of anxious, ambivalent, often subverting homemaking" (15).

Working through the gaps, displacements, and violence of the Black Atlantic in order to fashion a diasporic home is an endeavor undertaken by the female protagonist of Nichols's first collection, the long memoried woman. In "One Continent / To Another," the first poem of the collection, the relation between the old and the new world—between home and the Caribbean point of arrival—is inscribed with a slash, an equivocal

punctuation mark that, with one stroke of the pen, signals both connection and break. The mark suggests also a visceral connection between the two sites as the semantic chain of the word 'slash' involves meanings of cutting, wounding, or whipping, and of bodily lacerations. The title of this poem, then, invites the reader to read the disruptive passage from one continent to another as irreducibly material through the entanglement of flesh, poetry, and history. Crucially, for Nichols this site of a ruptured beginning is indelibly marked by sexual difference, by Black Atlantic femininity, which, in registering the violent rupture of the Middle Passage, also marks a nodal point within diasporic experience from where life and futurity can be imagined:

> From the darkness within her
> from the dimness of previous
> incarnations
>   the Congo surfaced
> so did Sierra Leone   and the
> Gold Coast which she used to tread
> searching the horizons for lost
> moons
> her jigida guarding the crevice
> the soft wet forest
>   between her thighs
> Like the yesterday of creation morning
> she had imagined this new world to be —
> bereft of fecundity

> No she wasn't prepared
>
> for the sea that lashed
>
> fire that seared
>
> solid earth that delivered
>
> her up
>
> birds that flew
>
> not wanting to see the utter
>
> rawness of life everywhere (7-8)

This representation of black femininity as bodying forth a sense of place tenuously tying the lost continent with the new world is haunted by the fragmentation caused both by African uprooting and by the shock of the new lands. The first stanza while recalling a familiar geography through a series of proper names and a cultural artifact,[25] is unsettled by gaps, indentations, and enjambments, inscribing the old continent in irreducibly diasporic terms. In turn, although the second stanza depicts the new world in a less disorderly form, it lists (rather than connects) the elements—water, fire, earth, and air—that are yet to constellate into a world that could sustain diasporic lives. The dis-membering of the New World is figured here through an intimate experience of brutality, suggesting consequently that the re-making of this space will likewise occur on intimate, corporeal terms.

The feminine operates in these lines as a hinge between the old and the new, her corporeality facilitating the imaginative transformation of geography. Such links between bodies, places, and histories are drawn poetically, by way of metaphorical relays. These

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[25] 'Jigida' is a string of beads worn around the waist by Nigerian women. The beads are believed to have healing powers, and to offer protection from negative energy.

are most notable in the image of the lashing sea where the verb brings together both the idea of the sea crashing against the shore and of the whip lacerating the bodies of the enslaved Africans, and also in the image of the forest mapped onto the female genital area—an image that operates here as an alternative way of imagining relations of body, space, and matter. Indeed, it is the image of the black triangle—as a simultaneous inscription of feminine corporeality and diasporic geography—that is among the most evocative (and most consistent) figures in Nichols's poetry, deployed with the purpose of revising the relationship between body and geography. Analyzing this figure in Nichols's work, Hoving notes that "the Black triangle marks the body's threshold. As such it is part of the body only to a certain extent; as a go-between between world and body/'I', it does not completely belong to either. The Black triangle is a commuter. Seizing, releasing, and flowing, it communicates with its outside. This nodal element of body space, then, is active, mobile, and oriented toward the exterior. It breaks down the image of the body as a unity of spatial passivity" (58).

In addition, even as a transactional site *between* body and geography, the black triangle itself does not operate for Nichols as a stable category. As the opening lines of *Startling the Flying Fish* suggest, this historical-feminine matrix of Afro-diaspora transformatively responds to cross-Atlantic movements: Cariwoma recalls watching her children "making of [her] new / triangular across Atlantic." The reader is thus invited to entertain a somewhat outlandish idea of a mother persistently born anew out of diasporic displacements, a mother whose entanglement with and within the worlds she bodies forth infinitely opens the maternal source to constant transformation. Undoubtedly, diasporic futures are still envisioned on the shape of the Atlantic triangle that evokes the passage of

the slave ships from Africa to England and then to the Americas. But such an active understanding of place of origins demands a rethinking of cultural and historical identity of the Caribbean, and of the status of sexual difference within those formulations. Feminist critic Vicki Kirby reflects on the notion of the maternal in a context different than mine, but her reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty illuminates for us the significance of Nichols's rethinking of the Caribbean in maternal and material terms: "Merleau-Ponty's attempt to read the maternal as the world's 'intertwining', or (re)conceiving (of) itself, represents a complete dislocation of the temporal and spatial coordinates through which maternity is *properly* identified" (*Quantum Anthropologies* 118). That is, if the mother has been traditionally thought of in natural, essentialist terms, as an unchanging source, and as "ground[ing] a specifically human separation between nature and culture" (Marder 2), Nichols challenges these representations by figuring the mother as an alterable entanglement of the natural and historical. And such a feminine-material inscription of the archipelago importantly bears on how Caribbean identity is envisioned. By inscribing diasporic self-(re)conception as persistently iterative, extending into the future that strangely alters the (not so past) conditions of its own emergence, the Caribbean is depicted as a body in an unceasing process of figuring itself out.

This malleability of Caribbean origins is vital in two respects. First, the constant process of re-articulation of origins keeps Caribbean identity open to an ongoing experience of displacement characteristic of the region. While the understanding of the Caribbean through movement and displacement is modeled on Middle Passage, on the dislocation of Africans from their homeland, *Startling the Flying Fish* nevertheless envisions a kind of differential collectivity attentive to the diverse forms and experiences

of cultural fragmentation. In addition to Columbus's ships, and to the ships transporting slaves, the region has been shaped and reshaped by multiple and ongoing arrivals and departures: "there were other ships," Cariwoma muses, "From the fields / of Bengal / and Uttar Pradesh, / From Kowloon / and Canton. / From Madeira / and Ireland— / Their indentured mud- / stained feet, soon embroidered / like the slave's instep to the fields" (13). Evoking the practice of indentureship that replaced slave labor in the colonies, the poem redraws the contours of Caribbean cultural community. This community does not consolidate around a common language, or national identity, or ethnic provenance. Rather, Nichols abandons essentialist ideas of community-building, suggesting that the Caribbean be understood around a shared experience of dispossession and displacement, around a joint practice of tenuous home-making in the wake of irreparable loss of one's homeland. Importantly, given the susceptibility of the Caribbean grounds to ongoing transformation, this diasporic home does not ensure a complete, self-enclosed identity, but remains open to accommodate a multiplicity of diverse experiences. As indicated by a six-page glossary of cultural and mythological references woven into the poem—references including Greek, African, Hindu, Aztec mythology, indigenous and Creole names for plants, foods, and geographical locations, as well as Central, South American, and Caribbean historical and folkloric personalities—the motivating desire of *Startling the Flying Fish* is to articulate a collective space hospitable to different forms of cultural difference that textures the Caribbean.

Secondly, Nichols's notion of Caribbean grounds as alterable bears also on our understanding of the feminine in relation to the material world of the Caribbean. Initially, the alignment of the feminine with place might seem like a risky representational gesture

given that the feminine has habitually been conceived as passive and unmovable, whereas time, change, and difference have been associated with masculinity. As Hoving notes, “if femininity is traditionally associated with place, masculinity is related to time, especially in Western discussions of time, history, origin, and genealogy” (15), an association frequently criticized on the grounds of essentialism, as a conservative, reifying definition of the feminine. Nichols challenges this vision of femininity and place as coherent signs not through an insistence that the feminine too is a historical category, but by exposing as fallacious the idea that the nature and history, place and time, can be separated at all, and that the former is prescriptive and immutable, while the latter operates as the locus of transformation and change. In contrast to the essentialist view, where “the natural provides the raw material and determinative starting point for the practices and laws of the social” (Fuss 3), Nichols approaches the involvement of the feminine and the natural as a complex, differentiated, and irreducibly relational affair.

The conjunction of femininity and geography—which I understand, following Katherine McKittrick, as “space, place, and location, in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations” (x)—is devised by Nichols in the persona of Cariwoma, whose name marks a creative entanglement of geography (Caribbean) and personhood (woman), while the dropping of the final consonant opens this ecological formation to further interpenetration and interrogation. This openness suggests, too, the refusal to enclose, to conclude, the Caribbean, which is envisioned instead as a region that resists a stable delineation, whether historical, cultural, or national. Nichols’s presentation of the Caribbean, then, runs against traditional understanding of place. “Geography’s discursive attachment to stasis and physicality,” McKittrick explains, “the idea that space ‘just is’,

and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which 'just is' not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are" (xi). McKittrick shows, however, that the geographies of the diaspora are far from "secure and unwavering" (xi). Traversed with colonial divisions, manifold displacements, containment, and embodied practices through which constraining spaces are fissured and repossessed, diasporic geographies "push up against the seemingly natural spaces of subjugation, disclosing, sometimes radically, how geography is . . . an available site through which various forms of blackness can be understood and asserted" (xviii-xix).

Repossessed geographies of diaspora thus become a powerful resource, material and imaginative, for re-organizing the lived experience of the Caribbean. But whereas McKittrick's analysis centers on the black experience in the diaspora—on the black feminine cultural, imaginative, and conceptual efforts advancing a new articulation of diasporic geography—Nichols's commitment to exploding an understanding of the Caribbean as a site of ethnic or national particularism leads her to engage nature (an entity stubbornly indifferent to human interests) as a way of manipulating place. It is this commitment to a new vision of place, I'd like to suggest, that motivates the alignment in Nichols of femininity and nature. In *Startling the Flying Fish,* Cariwoma concretizes this relation in the many ways she becomes enmeshed with Caribbean environment:

> I Cariwoma / have always / carried deep / these islands, / this piece / of Atlantic coastland / inside me (9)
>
> Is just so I hold / these islands / to my coral bones (9)
>
> Through the artifacts of my shells / I whisper to the living (10)

Cariwoma cannot be consistently pinned to one particular site: she occupies the green intersection of the Caribbean and Amazon, and, at the same time, confesses to a special relationship to Caribbean coastal spaces: “As if I’d made a covenant,” she says, “something keeps me to these shores — / Here where trade winds breathe islands” (86).

The creative possibilities of this entanglement of the natural and the feminine become perhaps most striking in the section of the poem that narrates the moment of the colonial encounter:

> Yes, I Cariwoma watched history happen
> like a two-headed Janus,
> however far apart heads can be.
>
> The first head rose up
> from the hammock’s languorous belly
> and turned towards the winged ships
> of Columbus’s faith,
> his bright dreams which soon turned
> for us into nightmares.
>
> The other head rose up
> from the misery ship, that other hammock,
> and swivelled back, locking
> as in the deformity of a duenne’s[26] foot.

[26] Duenne, Nichols explains in the glossary, is a “spirit of unbaptized child that wanders the forest goblin-like with feet turned backwards” (92).

Face as faceless as a duenne,

those bewildered little souls

gazing back in limbo

at the shards of broken pots,

the waves of palmwine betrayal

Only the eyes of the sea-almonds

kept on beckoning –

A cautious welcome across new shores. (11-12)

Cariwoma's aqueous body caves under the weight of the ships, but the imprint of colonial history does not absolutely determine the sense of place in the Caribbean. Certainly, the two heads anticipate and witness the horrors of history, but the yielding to their weight is not total. The pliable geographic-feminine body simultaneously escapes the weight of the ships in that it reformulates the familiar temporality of the colonial encounter (the first head antecedes Columbus), and in that it projects the future of the diaspora (a cautious welcome), laboring against the annihilating effects of the slave ship. The entanglement of the feminine and the natural, then, intimates a generative remaking of the geographic body that articulates a new sense of time and space. This creative performance of space-time might be read as an effort to render the environments of the New World habitable, to work through the shock of the new (as evoked in the poem "From One Continent / To Another" cited earlier) towards livable diasporic futures. In Hoving's interpretation, "Nichols takes up the old imagery of woman as place by qualifying her body as 'geography', but represents the place as multiple. The place consists, first of the

'geographic' body, which not only is space but also holds 'probabilities', that is a future. The spatialized body is itself placed within time and is subject to change" (58).

In the passage cited above, Cariwoma's liquid body is envisioned as texturing the space-time of diasporic history in ways that challenge traditional understanding of continuity and discontinuity. The rupturing quality of the Middle Passage is reflected in the image of broken pots, perhaps a reference to the figure of the broken vase in Walcott's Noble Prize lecture, a vase whose reassembled cracks represent diasporic resilience and creativity. Nichols, however, seems less interested in how disrupted socio-cultural practices re-emerge as a sign of interrupted continuity; rather, she thinks at the level of ontology, of how time and space, and our understanding thereof, are structured. It is for this reason that in *The Flying Fish* she is so concerned with nature/femininity as a subordinated term upon which the socio-cultural machine is erected, and envisions change at this ontological level, an intervention that could possibly effect a more radical transformation in how we know our history and our place in the world. Thus, departing from Walcott's notion of the sea as history, Nichols sees in the Caribbean Sea a potentiality for radically altering cultural and historical structuration. This is evinced in the excerpt above where the activity of re-shaping, re-claiming, re-writing history is vested more in the natural/feminine term and less in the cultural one, a shift which will allow Nichols to question the hierarchical separation of both categories.

That geography works on the fabric of history is suggested in how the sea bears and circumvents the weight of the ship. Such a texturing is expressly thematized in the section of the poem in which Cariwoma challenges the mythic structures of the diaspora. This intervention is staged as an encounter with the spider-trickster Anansi, a West

African mythological trickster employed by Anglophone-Caribbean writers (most famously by Kamau Brathwaite) as a link between Caribbean and African ritual practices. Anansi is a witty creature "who unsettles established boundaries but simultaneously affirms social cohesion through laughter and remembrance" (Darroch 96). Anansi's mythic import notwithstanding, Cariwoma confesses that "[her] second-thoughts shift / about the propriety of [their] tryst," to which Anansi responds:

> 'Woman shouldn't think you know,
> Woman should just act.
>
> Too much thinking-thinking
> can lead to dry river valley,
>
> Woman is nature and nature is power.
> Eh! Eh! When nature shrug we run fuh cover.
>
> No, thinking does not lead
> to peak-experience ecstasy.' (65)

This passage reveals that despite Anansi's rebellious feats what is also consolidated in this transmission of cultural memory is a conservative confluence of the feminine and the natural as devoid of the capacity for thought which has typically been considered a male province. Cariwoma's doubt about the propriety of their relationship, sexual in nature, leads to Anansi's long monologue about the proper place and behavior of the feminine, whose disobedience threatens the order and functioning of the world. Hélène Cixous

explains the functioning of this order and the stakes of feminist intervention in the following way:

> [I]t has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallocentrism—bringing to light the fate dealt to woman, her burial—to threaten the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural, by conjuring up from femininity the reflections and hypotheses that are necessarily ruinous for the stronghold still in possession. What would happen to logocentrism, to the great philosophical systems, to the order of the world in general if the rock upon which they founded this church should crumble?
>
> If some fine day it suddenly came out that the logocentric plan had always, inadmissibly, been to create a foundation for (to found and fund) phallocentrism, to guarantee the masculine order a rationale equal to history itself. (65)

Nichols points to the complicity between logocentrism (which bolsters the hierarchy of thought/reason and feeling), and phallocentrism through Anansi's policing of the province of thought and reason. On the side of the irrational, in turn, one finds the unpredictability of nature, whose power, on this account, is not the power of thought, of poised reflection, but rather impulsive acting out that threatens the very being of the world.

What is crucial about this interaction between Cariwoma and Anansi is that the problem of ontology is opened through sexuality, through Cariwoma's evocation of an intimate relationship between herself and the trickster. Sexual difference thus becomes here a method of philosophical questioning of rupturing the habits of thought, of reflecting on the propriety—the proper, ontological, arrangement—between thought and

matter, between male and female, between space and time. In continuing her transgression into the space of intellectual motility, then, Cariwoma goes on to disturb masculinist ontology:

> Hmmm . . .
> I thinking all the same
>
> How I can use weave of words
> To bend web of laws,
>
> How I can submit papers,
> inserting clause –
>
> In other words, how I can make
> full claim on cyclone, storm, hurricane –
>
> And every eddy eddying forth
> from my warm unstable edges.
>
> Yes, how I can keep clear conscience
> while easing the low pressures
>
> Rising natural-natural
> from my interfrontal zone. (65-66)

What is significant about this passage is that the intervention into the phallogocentric order does not occur simply by way of the feminine stepping into the position heretofore reserved solely for men, nor is the primacy of natural unequivocally asserted over reason. The challenge to "bend the web of laws," laws that govern the ontological relationship between male and female, refers rather to a more radical endeavor of rearticulating differently both nature and femininity. This intervention occurs through the semantic richness of the line "I thinking all the same," which can mean "I (woman/nature) am thinking nevertheless, in spite of the injunction not to do so," or "I (woman/nature) and thinking are all the same, indistinguishable and inseparable." Further, the equivocal character of this sentence is effected through the ellipsis of the verb "to be"—a hallmark of creole and patois languages in the Caribbean—a linguistic performance which suggests that such feminine and feminist strategies of repossessing space are, in Hoving's words, "not just 'outside' and 'elsewhere'. They often refer to or create some specific *inside* space as well" (48; original emphasis). This is crucial, for in mobilizing the creative strategies of place, these practices reveal the fundamental instability, we might even say *natural* instability, of patriarchal socio-political formations. The elision of the verb "to be" is vital in that it dissolves the firm ontological articulation "woman is nature and nature is power," thus troubling the rigid, ontologically hooked, formulation of woman and nature. Given the entanglement of Cariwoma with Caribbean waterways, we might interpret the elision of "to be" as the verb's engulfment by the sea which dissolves firm ontological anchors in favor of the currents of becoming.

This textural reading—where the environment produces textual effects—is supported by the ambiguous temporality in which the line "I thinking all the same

signifies." That is, while it articulates the desire to figure out ways of bending web of laws, suggesting that such an intervention is yet to transpire, the sentence all the same performs such a bending prior to any ability of the speaking "I" to seize the disruptive powers of "cyclone, storm, hurricane." This is the meaning carried by the second interpretative possibility "I (woman/nature) and thinking are all the same." It is as if the stormy havoc has always already been wreaked, severing in this way the "I" from the position of undivided agency. In other words, the oceanic instability characterizing Cariwoma's edges operates here as a mechanism of internal lag and differentiation, of internal fluidity, whereby the "I" cannot keep up with itself, whereby it cannot exactly harness its own destructive mechanisms, and whereby even before the "I" states the need to figure out ways of bending laws, ways of rewriting its script, the law has already been bent, the words rewoven into a disjunctive pattern of diasporic nature/femininity.

The creative resources of geographical and cultural place include, then, linguistic practices as much as environmental phenomena. The disruptive climatological processes Cariwoma wants to lay claim to, "cyclone, storm, hurricane," characterize the environment of the Caribbean and bear on the socio-political formations of the region. In his ecological study of Caribbean history and politics, historian Staurt B. Schwartz writes that hurricanes in the Caribbean have been one of the most common environmental challenges affecting cultural, governmental, and societal processes and decisions (xvii).[27] While Schwartz's environmental history focuses mostly on how the challenges posed by violent storms have been overcome, Nichols envisions her protagonist as attempting to

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[27] These include for instance architectural layout and crop selection in the colonies, increased frequency of slave rebellions following violent storms, transfer of knowledge between the colonizers and the indigenous peoples about how to cope with natural disasters, mounting abolitionist sentiment after a storm would reveal the disastrous conditions of the slaves (see Stuart B. Schwartz *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina*).

harness her own internal disruptiveness into an affirmative articulation that ascribes transformative valence to disjuncture. In a way similar to Walcott in "The Schooner *Flight*," then, Nichols demonstrates the political valence of materiality as a disruptive force that aims at a more fundamental re-structuring of political worlds. Feminist critic Elizabeth Grosz likewise finds in such disruption a radical political possibility: "Matter, force, and difference remain elided in most forms of contemporary political discourse and theoretical analysis; they remain too destabilizing, too difficult to direct into concerted political pathways to provide the basis of a new politics" (171-172). Instead, their political potentiality lies in how identity is disarticulated as a result of material intervention, and with identity all the social, political, cultural, and historical hierarchies through which we have come to inhabit our worlds.

The phallogocentric structure is thus troubled by Cariwoma's claim to the mechanisms of thinking not because it is now woman/nature that does the thinking but because this feminine/natural reasoning troubles intelligibility and collapses presumed hierarchies between nature and history/politics. The equivocal character of Cariwoma's utterance, the loosening of ontological stitches that keep woman/nature in place, and the insistence on the political valence of materiality fracture the rock upon which philosophical systems erected the phallogocentric edifice, to use Cixous's formulation. Importantly, the crevices opened within these foundations are intrinsically textual, in that the bending of laws occurs through the grammar of writing ("weave of words," "inserting a clause"). These textual operations are subsequently translated ("in other words") into the unruly activity of nature ("cyclone, storm, hurricane"), finally revealing nature as inhabited by repetition ("natural-natural"). This translation is internal, occurring within

the foundational body, suggesting that change, difference, and transformation are irreducibly *written into* the very origins of the Caribbean, but also more broadly into the grounds of identity as such. Phallogocentric edifice crumbles because the ground it assumed as ordered and stable (as grounding) is in fact errant, disordered, and failing to keep the stability of socio-political hierarchies in place. It is indelibly textual, a texture, an obstreperous intrication of matter, writing, and history that disrupts the continuity of space-time organized not only through racial but also through sexual domination.

However, while Nichols's critique of phallogocentrism in this excerpt productively chimes in with the feminist deconstructive notion of *écriture féminine*, she nevertheless modulates textual play in an interest of exploring the links between textuality and reality as a postcolonial commitment to articulating also a formative relationship with space. This is illustrated in the very moment of translation ("in other words") where the textual intervention gives onto the spatial claim that prefigures the need of re-claiming the space of the archipelago and of envisioning new forms of reality.

Nichols's intervention into the genealogy of the epic genre becomes clearer in the context of this reflection on the fissured grounds of phallogocentrism. What is at stake is not a replacing of a Western story with an African one (or Caribbean, or indigenous), or amending the male perspective through an insistence on a female-based experience. To deploy sexual difference for reading through diasporic history means to read that history through "a constitutive difference, a difference that preexists the entities that it produces" (Grosz 174). The epic "world of fathers and of founders of families" (Bakhtin 15) crumbles not because it is now replaced by the world of mothers, a kind of exaltation and reification of the feminine experience, but because the diasporic mother Nichols

envisions irreducibly engenders untidy and ambiguous difference that cannot be appropriated into a construction of ontology that produces self-identical, complete identities.

The former notion of the epic is complicit with logocentrism, as made clear by Hegel in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, where he reminds us that the meaning of epic [*ἔπος*] is 'word' (1041), taking the epic as an aesthetic bolstering of the ontology of Spirit. But as I have demonstrated through my analysis of the interaction between Cariwoma and Anansi, and as Jacques Derrida showed in his deconstruction of Hegel (calling him in *Of Grammatology* "the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing" (26)), the Word as a mark of divine, fatherly power does not hold. The word, the book, cannot enclose itself against textuality; history/culture cannot secure itself against nature. Thus, what I am referring to in this dissertation as eco-epic textures, foregrounds the irreducible interpenetration of history and nature as a way of envisioning a porous, material ontology, "an ontology, world, being which can no longer be understood as self-identical but must be conceptualized as bifurcated, composed of difference and engaged in becoming" (Grosz 176-177).

Such an intervention entails significant conceptual stakes, but it likewise urgently bears on diasporic lives. Nichols's insistence in *Startling the Flying Fish* on rethinking the Black Atlantic history through Caribbean feminine environment suggests the necessity to inscribe diasporic life-worlds otherwise than as what McKittrick describes as a geography of domination, as "boundaries, color-lines, 'proper' places, fixed and settled infrastructures and streets, oceanic containers" (xi). Understanding space and place as motile, is vital, McKittrick suggests because "[i]f space and place *appear* to be safely

secure and unwavering, then what space and place make possible, outside and beyond tangible stabilities, and from the perspective of struggle, can potentially fade away" (xi; original emphasis). Cariwoma's enfleshed rewriting of diasporic history through Caribbean environment is one way of holding onto transformative potentialities of space and place. In this way, the eco-epic, because it works with "a material vision of time" (Harris 179), articulates a non-conventional philosophy of history and place, which draws on the heterogeneous material resources of the Caribbean to work through the foundational moment of dislocation and open an alternative vision of life and historicity. Within a feminine, material vision of time, the original structures of the Black Atlantic, such as for instance the black triangle discussed at the beginning of this chapter, become malleable, allowing ongoing re-articulations of identity and history rather than their fixed geographical configuration; and as a consequence of such a material rewriting, "the Caribbean [begins to figure] 'as a breath-body' or field of metamorphosis beyond the *de facto* embalmed posture of the slave in every catalogue of injustice" (Harris 179).

Devising this new geographic imaginary occupies Nichols from *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* to *Startling the Flying Fish*. While in the former collection, the encounter with the New World is presented as a sense of shock and unpreparedness for the task of environmental re-making ("No she wasn't prepared / for the sea that lashed"), the latter poem envisages a different, more amorous, relationship with the landscape:

> Sea right here on your lipshore
> is where I Cariwoma must come
> to reacquaint with all of me.
> Right here on your shifting sands

is where I must face up

to life's cosmic exclamations.

So come Sea, make we catch up

on all the labrish since you last see me –

Let me hear once more your mouthwash

echoes in my own voicespeak. (87)

In contrast to the lashing sea in the other poem, here the fluidity and flow of the sea paint a different relationship with the body and with place. The repetition of the deictic "right here" reveals the entanglement of the Caribbean shore with the space of the poem, a relation forged through the first word "sea," the homophonous invocation of which (sea / see) takes apart the difference between sea and seeing, as if the very invocation of the marine environment of the Caribbean undid our ability to see the difference between the material, the poetic, and the feminine. The imbrications of flesh and geography are further sustained through the word "lipshores," which figures here along with 'shifting sands' as frail foundations of material Caribbean being. Taken together, the metaphoricity, the sense of material instability, and vague legibility of these sites resist a firm ontological grounding, invoking in this way a peculiar sense of metaphorical reality—fluid and indeterminate, and yet tying together Caribbean geography, poetic imaginary, and feminine corporeality. "Lipshore" in particular is deployed by Nichols to designate Caribbean littoral environment as irreducibly feminine—sensuous, open, and moist. The trope of moisture, frequently recurring in Nichols's oeuvre, "is presented as an active counterdiscourse, opposed to dry patriarchal discourses of history" (Hoving 59). Thus, evoking moisture as a signification of femininity, sexuality, Caribbean

environment (both the sea and tropical humidity of the region), and articulation, "lipshore" concretizes, albeit in a poetic, ambiguous way, what Katherine McKittrick has called "the sayability of geography," by which she means creative "acts of expressing and saying place" (xxiii). Such practices expose alternative geographic imaginaries that envision diasporic places outside of racial and sexual domination.

But "lipshore" likewise suggests "the sayability of geography" otherwise than as a possibility to say geography differently. More radically, it allows a possibility of envisioning geography itself as articulate, as capable of saying history and place otherwise. This second meaning brings Nichols's formulation into conversation with Luce Irigaray's notion of the lips that speak together, a figure for the constitutive multiplicity and openness of the of the feminine corporeal utterance. We might recall that Irigaray remarks at the beginning of her essay "When Our Lips Speak Together" how "speaking sameness" reproduces "the same history"; how "if we keep on speaking the same language together, we're going to . . . begin the same old stories all over again" (205). The notion of the feminine as capable of cacophonous, differential, desirous articulation that would in turn allow a different, multiple, and fluid articulation of history is one that Nichols shares. But in meshing the word *lips* with the spatial designation *shores* Nichols moves beyond the specifically anthropomorphic understanding of the term and opens Irigaray's reflection to eco-material difference. Overflowing the human form, 'lipshores' figures here as what Vicki Kirby has called a "generalized scene of corporeal inquiry" (*Quantum Anthropologies* 120), a figuration that allows Nichols to retain the sense of diasporic femininity as fostering a sense of place and cultural belonging, while decoupling it from the notion of woman as a preferred socio-political

identity. Reflecting the sense of place and belonging through the peculiar internal conversation where one utterance echoes the materiality of another (mouthwash echoing in voicespeak), Nichols allows us to imagine cultural and historical transmission as a specific poetic, material, and creole chattiness.[28] What is significant in this gesture towards a notion of the natural environment as chatty, as textual, as internally differentiated and without self-coincidence, is that it allows a vision of time and space not governed by a human understanding of spatiality and temporality. Such an alternative vision of Caribbean time-space emerges in the closing stanzas of the poem:

> Today I sing of Sea self
> a glittering breathing
> in a turquoise dress
>
> Constantly stitched and re-stitched
> by the bright seamstresses of flying-fish
> adding a thousand sapphire touches
>
> With no boat or ship to darken
> the hem of her horizon
> no shadows cast
>
> Just the straight rising sun
> Sea memory is as clear
> as a desert island

[28] "Labrish" means "gossip" in Jamaican Creole.

> And I am on the edge
>
> of this new world
>
> awaiting the footprints of my arrival (88)[29]

Even though no vessel taints the horizon, this moment of anticipation is not an erasure of history, but rather a disruption of the logic of linearity, chronology, and causality, through which we have come to understand historical processes. The disruptive effects of history are subtly pre-figured in the material suture left behind by the "seamstresses of flying-fish," an image that compellingly evokes the figure of Penelope and her practice of weaving as perennial home-making. Here, however, the Caribbean Sea itself—fluid, changeable, destructive, and caressing—becomes a Caribbean home where worldly, material beings engender the patterns of creative transformation.

The reference to the flying fish, as well as the earlier comparison of diasporic humans to "migrating spider-birds" (3), are especially provocative in this context. Both evoke strange creatures at home in different elements (earth, water, air), but while a spider-bird is an imaginary creature, the flying fish concretizes in very real ways nature's creativity. Especially striking here is the fish's remarkable ability to move above the surface of the sea developed as a survival tactic, and the striking zigzag pattern it leaves behind as it launches into the air [fig. 2]. In our poetic context, the pattern evokes the sinuous shape on the bottom of the sea linking the African past with the New World in Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight,*" a mark of tenuous continuity and momentary linkage.

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[29] The opening of this poem echoes the first lines of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" (188). In Nichols. however, this first line already introduces the idea of self as a material entanglement, and thus modulating the "I" of the speaker. This intertextual link confirms the epic aspiration of Nichols's poem. Yet, epic monumentalism is deflated in Nichols through a departure from the idea of an all-encompassing self towards a fluid, open, other-than-human idea of self.

Given this, the flying fish's stitches texturing the surface of the sea are imagined by Nichols as a fragile web of diaspora, as simultaneously material and metaphoric threads that are paradoxically binding and transitory all at once. These lines signify place and thus tie diasporic humans to specific locations and histories, but in their constant susceptibility to change and erasure, they likewise allow for multiple, creative identifications, not prescribed by over-determining shapes of history.

Fig. 2 "Flying Fish Shortly after Take-off"[30]

In addition to offering a creative vision of a Caribbean home, the concluding lines likewise offer a startling vision of time and history. "On the edge / of this new world / awaiting the footprints of [her] arrival," Cariwoma brings forward a vision of the past as mutable. Again, this is not to say that the past can be erased, that it can unhappen. But in the diasporic history said through the sea, the dynamic, performative character of geography gives onto a temporal non-coincidence within the movement of arrival. This understanding of Caribbean temporality resonates with Kamau Brathwaite's notion of island time developed through his theory of tidalectics that focuses on "the movement of

[30] Unnamed author, "Flying Fish Shortly after Take-off." January 15, 2015 via Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons Attribution (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pink-wing_flying_fish.jpg).

the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic . . . motion rather than linear (44). In Nichols, the interest in alternative imaginaries of temporality appears to be compelled by the need to rethink the relationship between the present (as suggested by the present continuous verb form "awaiting") and the past, to find creative ways of receiving the past into the present so as to sever the binds of historical determinism. In the metaphorical reality of the archipelago, the past becomes a material text—footprints—yet to arrive into the present moment where these fragile and haunting reminders/remainders of history remain to be read, deciphered, responded to.

Reading carefully within these material/feminine/poetic/historical spaces, we note that in the absence of familiar geo-historical designations (such as the ship), historicity is inscribed through images recalcitrant to political or historical representation. To imagine the past through the figure of footprints, traces that demand reading, means to open the past to multiple readings of historical time, and thus, to borrow from Wilson Harris, allow for "different apprehension of reality, the language of reality, a different *reading* of texts of reality" (183). Figuring Caribbean beginnings as open, relational, and mutable, Nichols un-shapes and re-shapes ("stitches and re-stitches") the relationship between the present and the past in order to allow for a possibility of a radically new future of the diaspora, new horizon, not over-determined by the controlling figures of the past. Lingering on the edge of the new, awaiting one's own historical imprint, the materially inscribed femininity constitutes an opening that imagines a possibility of living on and through the histories of dispossession, and that pays attention to the creativity generated in the space of displacement.

I began this chapter by placing Nichols's poetry within Afro-diasporic literary tradition. I would like to conclude by situating her work within the tradition of black feminist critique energized by the multiple positions the black feminine inhabits in the discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In her seminal essay "Speaking in Tongues," Mae G. Henderson formulates a reading hermeneutic that recognizes "not only a [black woman's] relationship with the 'other(s)', but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity" (18). It is this inherent multiplicity of the black feminine discourse that allows a black woman to oscillate between discourses of solidarity and affirmation on the one hand, and contestation on the other, a discursive practice which Henderson describes as "speaking in tongues." Important in the context of my reflection here is Henderson's suggestion that black feminine "self-inscription . . . requires disruption, rereading and rewriting [of] the conventional and canonical stories, as well as revising the conventional generic forms that convey these stories. . . . Disruption – the initial response to hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse—and revision (rewriting or rereading) together suggest a model for reading black and female literary expression" (30). In other words, black women's intervention is not only critique, but also an articulation of alternative discursive forms and different stories, other visions of life, of being in the world, of relating to difference. In light of Henderson's essay, then, the desire "to use weave of words / To bend web of laws" marks the diasporic feminine utterance in *Startling the Flying Fish* as a conjoined articulation of discursive disruption and rewriting that formulates a new cultural script of the diaspora.

What Nichols has so compellingly shown us, however, is that epistemic intervention must be accompanied by an ontological reflection; that, to borrow from Elizabeth Grosz, “a transformation of ontology, our conception of what is, entails a transformation in our conceptions of epistemology, how we know, in the ways in which we understand space and time, which in turn transform our conceptions of matter, subjectivity, and politics” (173). The ecological orientation of *Startling the Flying Fish* invites an ontological reflection of this kind. The poem provokes an inquiry into the simultaneously disruptive and re-creative capacity of flesh, in this way directing attention to the stuff of human and non-human matter rather than to subjectivity. Such a shift from social to ecological environments, from social to material interactions, permits Nichols to take up diasporic material femininity as a foundational body of culture and life while letting this body release some of its productive instabilities and tensions which in turn enable radically new conceptualizations “of other ways of knowing, other ontologies and epistemologies that enable the subject’s relation to the world, to space and to time” (173). In this way, Nichols extends the tradition of black feminist ontological critique emphatically formulated in Hortense Spillers’s essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Spillers concludes this essay invoking “the insurgent ground” of a new female social subject inspired by the paradoxical figure of diasporic femininity as the only category “stand[ing] in the flesh, both mother and mother-dispossessed” (80). Spillers claims this paradox as a possibility of “a radically different text for a female empowerment, . . . [far beyond] joining the ranks of gendered femaleness” (80).

In claiming the epic as such a radically different text through my focus on sexual difference and materiality in Nichols’s poetry, my goal in this chapter was to probe the

question of what engagements with the world are allowed by entanglements of diasporic femininity and materiality. In addition to envisioning the Caribbean as freed from immutable, essential meanings, as a region whose the specificity exists through Antillean "exceptions, ambiguities, and indeterminate boundaries" (Hames-García 314), Nichols also tells us that belonging to place and to history is never a simple affair, but rather an ongoing encounter—poetic and relational—with the world. This encounter importantly involves a new understanding of time as a vital resource for radical politics, feminist, diasporic, and ecological. I turn to Elizabeth Grosz for a provocative account of this radical temporality:

> [W]e need an account of time that enables us to have at least partial or mediated access to the resources of the past, those resources consecrated as history and retaining their traces and tracks in the present, which do not tie us to the past in any definitive way or with any particular orientation and which provide for us the very resources by which to supersede the past and the present. . . . The future of radical politics . . . remains directed at how to envisage and engender a future unlike the present, without being able to specify in advance what such a future entails. (181-182)

Grace Nichols offers such a visionary account of temporality by probing diasporic archives for what cultural critic Peter Hitchcock described as "varied modes of pastness" (44). Her story disarticulates overdetermining forms of Western temporality that enclose diasporic history in the trope of colonial "discovery." Instead, Nichols draws an account of time that, without compromising the unpredictability of the future, allows us to imagine distinct ways of "being" in history, within the world, producing forms of

diasporic identity not overburdened by rather creatively enabled by history's discontinuities.

Chapter Three

"Leaving the Dissolute Dispersed": Earth and Epic in Relation

> Il y aurait une sorte de littérature épique dont on ne concevrait pas la 'résolution': Qui laisserait épars le dissolu. Qui conduirait à travers les grands Bois vers des humanités erratiques, dont la valeur serait d'abord d'errer. Un chemin, qui serait trace incertaine et non pas route damée. Une ouverture insoupçonnable, imprévisible, qui ne serait en rien système. Qui serait fragile, ambiguë, éphémère, mais brillerait des tous les éclats contradictoires du monde. Il faut qu'il en soit ainsi, sinon le tarissement de l'épique traditionnel aurait produit une mort plus froide et plus dure encore que la mort même.
>
> Édouard Glissant *Faulkner, Mississippi*

Édouard Glissant consistently envisions an epic that emerges out of the poetics of Relation, rather than from the unifying force of History. This chapter examines what is at stake, philosophically and politically, in an invocation of an epic that abandons the notion of a cohesive community firmly anchored within and delimited by territorial boundaries. What forms of collective life are conjured up by an epic that instead embraces the

precarious and erratic ways of habitation, such as those characterizing plantation and post-plantation societies?

In contrast to the authors examined in the previous chapters, who explore the possibilities of a Black Atlantic epic through a rewriting of the Odyssean motif of home-leaving and home-coming, Glissant inquires about an altogether new epic, a genre modulated by the politics and poetics of Relation. Such "founding works," Glissant writes in *Poetics of Relation*, might "[assert] political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and [base] every community's reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, all in all, a Poetics of Relation" (16).[31] Throughout Glissant's oeuvre, Relation remains a restless concept, resisting stabilizing definitions. In their analyses, Glissant's critics generally foreground how Relation unfolds the complexities and fragmentation of cultural identity in the increasingly interconnected world, frequently pointing to Relation's ethical valence. Thus, Celia Britton writes that "'Relation' is . . . a relation of equality with and respect for the Other as different from oneself. . . . It is nonhierarchical and nonreductive" (*Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory* 11). J. Michael Dash characterizes Relation as "cross-cultural relating, intra-cultural relating and relating through narrative or storytelling . . . Within this vision of widespread cultural encounter, whole cultures become fragmented into archipelagos of cultural units" (*Edouard Glissant* 175, 179). Finally, Jacques Coursil describes Glissant's concept as "a tool that poetics proposes to the sciences of history, a tool which mediates the passage from the simplicity of the

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[31] "Je me demand[ais] si de telles œuvres fondatrices ne nous seraient pas, aujourd'hui encore, nécessaires, qui s'appuieraient sur une pareille dialectique du détournement: affirmant par example la rigueur politique, mais à même le rhizome du rapport multiple à l'Autre, et fondant les raisons de vivre de toute communauté dans une forme moderne du sacré, qui serait en somme une poétique de la Relation" (*Poétique de la Relation* 28-29).

world understood as a unicity to the complexity of the world as totality without falling into the hybrid amalgamations of relativism" (100).[32]

Without downplaying these aspects of Relation, deployed most often for analyzing the complexity of cultural contact, the dimension of Relation I want to foreground here has to do with the historical circumstances through which Relation becomes legible in Glissant's theoretical and literary works. As evoked in "Barque ouverte," the opening chapter of *Poétique de la Relation*, Relation is carried within the abysses of the slave ship and unfolds in the proximity of the disruptive and expropriating event of colonialism. The haunting image of the open boat most vividly typifies the simultaneity of shattering and re-beginning (as Glissant reads the Middle Passage). Yet the irreducibility of dispossession to Relation is articulated already in *L'Intention poétique* (1969), an early collection of essays inaugurating the ideas Glissant will continue to develop throughout his intellectual life. "La terre a cessé d'être essence, elle devient relation," Glissant writes, "L'essence fut ravagée par l'acte des transbordeurs, mais la relation est enfouie au souffrir des transbordés" (96). Here, Glissant turns to the Middle Passage to mark a difference between a metaphysical understanding of the ground [*terre*] in terms of essentialism—an unchanging, absolute, and irreducible ontological foundation—and relationality (Relation), which in this context refers not only to contingent ontology, to becoming rather than being, but also (and more crucially) to the undoing of being, to the ungrounding and fundamental dispossession to which the African slaves were subjected during the Middle Passage.

There is thus a certain paradox in the statement "la terre devient relation" for relation would be the very undoing of the earth, understood as ontological ground,

[32] Qtd. in Natalie Melas *All the Difference in the World* (244 fn. 26).

beneath one's feet. And yet, this philosophical notion of the earth appears crucial for Glissant given his choice of the word "enfouir" to express the sense of relation carried in the abysses of the slave ship. Drawing on earth metaphors (which in Western philosophical tradition evoke ontological thinking) to refer to the Atlantic passage of the slaves, Glissant takes the historical experience of the diaspora as an intervention into occidental ontology. In holding together the ground and ungrounding, Glissant implies that Relation is not an antithesis of ontological foundations, a dialectical destruction of Being, even though it labors against the behaviors, attitudes, and ideological presuppositions of Western colonialism. Anchored within Black suffering and dispossession, Relation for Glissant offers a possibility for a re-beginning of sociality and belonging, of re-imagining the ground, in terms of new connections with the earth upon which Antilleans live. Given this Black Atlantic genealogy of Relation, an epic based on the Poetics of Relation strives to avow those socio-cultural binds, those forms of collective life, that disarticulate (colonial) fantasies of sovereignty, autonomy, and mastery—fantasies differentially exposing human beings to displacement, alienation, or violence.

In the remaining part of this introduction, I focus on this chapter's epigraph in order to sketch the significance of the trope of the earth for Glissant's vision of the new epic of Relation.[33] The paradoxical articulation of Relation and its epic—paradoxical because it seeks an affirmation of a community there where the conditions of possibility for a communal life (such as tradition, continuity of memory, mythic relationship to land) have been shattered—helps understand the urgency behind Glissant's call for this new

[33] In this way, this work extends recent analyses of the notion of the earth in Glissant's œuvre in Valérie Loichot's "Édouard Glissant's Graves" and in Brigit Mara Kaiser's "*Poésie en étendue*. Deleuze, Glissant, and a Post-postcolonial Aesthetics of the Earth."

epic in *Faulkner, Mississippi*. In insisting on the necessity of the epic of the errant, dispossessed people, Glissant issues an ethical injunction to envision the community through diasporic dispersals rather than through an atavistic grounding of a community in a specific territory. In this context, to argue that the failure to conceptualize this new mode of collective life involves "une mort plus froide et plus dure encore que la mort même," implies the obliteration of those Afro-Americans who carved out, against the dehumanizing plantation regime, fragile spaces for living, caring, and remembering. Such an epistemic failure would absolutely consolidate the alienation characterizing plantation slaves, a predicament that Orlando Patterson described as "social death"—the conditions in which the slave was "formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, [and] also culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors" (5). In this context, the urgency of the epic involves the fragile remaking of the community, resilience in the face of slavery's annihilating regime.

However, the failure to envision this new epic involves likewise philosophical consequences. It would mean that we forswear the very possibility of thinking differently, of imagining alternatives to Western notions of the community not predicated on the proprietary relationship to the land and to human others. In other words, we foreswear alternative political imaginaries that might foster new ways of living in the world, new ways of being with and among others, which unfold through a collapse of national sovereignty, an undoing of communal continuity, and a violated relationship to the land and the environment. To that end, in his reading of Faulkner, Glissant turns to the wandering people [*des humanités erratiques*] in the plantation and post-plantation spaces as a possible engendering of a new humanity—humanity that emerges out of an

experience of displacement and colonial domination, and that challenges collective projects anchored in a territorial, possessive notion of identity. Thus, Glissant's reading of the diasporic experience in the Americas, while attentive to its historical specificities, does not theorize this experience through a focus on Black victimhood as a matrix for the discourse of condemnation and a reactive polemic against the colonial violence of the West. Rather, Glissant reads the experience of dispossession, as suffered by Afro-Americans and the indigenous peoples in the Americas, as generative of another form of thinking about socio-cultural ties and political formations.

In the passage excerpted from *Faulkner, Mississippi* the errant origins of the relational epic is linked to "une trace incertaine"—a passageway on the surface of the earth which, contrasted with "une route damée," a more easily travelable and traversable road, suggests a different way of inhabiting the circumstances of history and geography. In French, words "trace" and "route" signify very different pathways. While "une route" connotes established lines of traffic or communication, and may also mean a destiny in life, "une trace" invokes a more tentative and perishable path, such as a track through the woods or in the snow. Secondly, "une trace" also means 'a trace' or 'a scar', suggesting that the pathways cleared by wandering peoples (the peculiar ground they bring into being) are contingent, impermanent, and historically marked. And finally, the word overlays the geography of the U.S. South with the tropics of Martinique insofar as la Trace is a scenic route in northern Martinique that takes the traveler into the dense and humid heart of the island toward Morne Rouge (*Martinique* 248). Although nowadays less uncertain and only in part pedestrian, for Martinican writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau la Trace evokes the chaos of nature ["le bankoulélé (manière créole de

nommer l'anarchie) des lianes"] and an uncanny town ["On semble traverser une ville étrangère qui n'aurait rien d'une ville, mais qui fonctionnerait comme."] (qtd. in *Martinique* 249). "[U]ne fois plongé dans les bois de la Trace," Chamoiseau continues,

> on comprend qu'il y a là un au-delà du naturel. On avance sur une frontière incertaine entre la veille et le rêve, entre l'ombre et la lumière, entre la mort et la vie. L'humus sous le pied n'offre aucune certitude, rien qu'une dérobade spongieuse, une succion. On est vite trempé, comme si chaque feuille, sur votre peau, devenait toute liquide. (249)

In Chamoiseau's depiction, Martinican tropical nature becomes denatured; its sticky, humid immanence pulls the traveller simultaneously into and beyond itself (between wakefulness and dream, shadow and light, etc.), undercutting in this way the very meaning of immanence as absolute, irreducible presence. The ground, instead of grounding, sucks the human traveler in and dissolves the clear difference (and legibility) between the human and the world, as vividly evoked in the cited passage in the image of leaves melting in the sweat of the skin.

I bring up Chamoiseau's depiction of the spongy (un)grounding humus on Martinique's la Trace as a material basis for grasping the paradox at the heart of Glissant's notion of the epic of Relation. Anchored in the materiality of Faulkner's South—a South strangely Caribbean and polyvocal, and thus inherently other than itself—and evocative of the scars and specters of history, the epic of Relation remains open, contingent, and non-foundational, even though it gestures toward the necessity of affirming Antillean belonging. While we might typically think of the epic as a genre that gathers a community in(to) its proper space, Glissant envisions the epic that embraces

scatter, "qui laisserait épars le dissolu"—a statement that compels us to inquire about the meaning of both *community* and the *space* of its belonging. In this way, what seems like a contradiction—errant ground, epic that keeps the scatter scattered—is in fact a compelling conceptual invitation. According to Dash, "Glissant's enormous importance to francophone literature as a whole and to Caribbean thought in particular is related to his retrieval of the concept of location and ground from a reductive colonialist discourse without resorting to the nativist essentialism that dominated cultural politics in earlier Caribbean theories" ("Martinique/Mississippi" 94). I would add to this claim that the originality of Glissant's concept of ground lies likewise in how it entangles philosophy and materiality; that is, in how it draws on histories of suffering and dispossession to get at the possibility of re-thinking how humans relate to their worlds, a possibility that resides in the midst of historical experience.

This chapter takes up this invitation to think philosophically and politically within history by examining the new meanings of epic and earth (ground) in Relation. Part I first explains "the urgency of the epic" for Glissant and looks at Glissant's long poem *Un Champ d'îles* (1953) as an early articulation of an epic of Relation. Part II examines *Un Champ d'îles* alongside Glissant's discussion of earth (*terre*) as opposed to a territory (*territoire*). This step back from "the later Glissant" of *Faulkner, Mississippi* (1996) to the first published collection of "the early Glissant" is a deliberate move on my part in order to respond to critics such as Nick Nesbitt and Peter Hallward who see in "the late Glissant" a compromise of his early straightforward nationalist commitments. In contrast, I show that Glissant's early work likewise demonstrates a critique of national ontology and engenders possibilities of politics not based on territorial possession.

The Exigency of the Epic

"[O]ral literature, tales, epics, and popular songs . . . begin to change," writes Frantz Fanon in the essay "On National Culture,"

> The storytellers who recited inert episodes revive them and introduce increasingly fundamental changes. . . . Close attention should be paid to the emergence of the imagination and the inventiveness of songs and folk tales in a colonized country. The storyteller responds to the expectations of the people by trial and error and searches for new models, national models, apparently on his own, but in fact with the support of his audience. (*The Wretched of the Earth* 174-175)

In Fanon's anti-colonial philosophy, literary arts vitally contribute to the national struggle and to the awakening of national consciousness. The epic re-emerges as a culturally-binding, militant genre that bolsters the national project. National literature, Fanon argues, "is combat literature . . . in the sense that it calls upon a whole people to join in the struggle for the existence of the nation. Combat literature, because it informs the national consciousness, gives it *shape* and *contours*, and opens up new, unlimited horizons" (173; added emphasis).[34] For colonized peoples, such a national epic is desperately needed for it asserts collective pride, dignity, and resilience against cultural obliteration and destruction perpetuated under colonialism. As an articulation of national consciousness of the colonized, the epic has a formative function not only in that it gives national consciousness its form, but also in that it works to revive the 'rigid', 'congealed', and 'petrified' culture of the colonized, the adjectives Fanon uses to describe the stifling effects of colonialism on cultural expression (172). On the colonial stage, then, the epic

[34] A number of critics have explored the idea of a nation as a narrative construct. See for instance Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Myth Interrupted," and a collection of essays *Nation and Narration* edited by Homi K. Bhabha.

assumes an eventual function in that it forms and articulates a liberating national ontology, a being of the colonized in opposition to the colonizer, that provides for the restructuring of the colonial world. "We believe," Fanon continues, "[that] the conscious, organized struggle undertaken by a colonized people in order to restore national sovereignty constitutes the greatest cultural manifestation that exists" (178).

Fanon inherits the idea of epic literature as the absolute expression of the national spirit from Hegel, for whom the epic marks the highest accomplishment of a people. In volume II of his *Lectures on Aesthetics* Hegel writes that

> the content and form of epic proper is the entire world-outlook and objective manifestation of a national spirit presented in its self-objectifying shape as an actual event. . . . As such an original whole the epic work is the Saga, the Book, the Bible of a people, and every great and important people has such absolutely earliest books which express for it its own original spirit. To this extent these memorials are nothing less than the proper foundations of a national consciousness. (1044-1045)

Hegel's analysis of epic literature (with special attention paid to Homer's *Iliad* as the only work worthy of the name "epic proper" where the spirit of the Greeks is actualized in the event of the Trojan War) ties the literary genre with strong ontological parameters. The definition of the epic as the manifestation of the national spirit is complemented with Hegel's claim that the epic "[has] *what is* as its topic" (1044; original emphasis). And later in the text Hegel identifies the properly epic moment in the life of a people:

> the epic must belong to an early period in a people's history and yet have not to describe its earliest period. Almost every people in its earliest beginnings has

> under its eyes a more or less foreign culture, a religious worship from abroad, and it lets these impose themselves on it; for it is precisely in this that the bondage, superstition, and barbarity of the spirit consists, namely not to have the Supreme Being as something indigenous, but to know it only as something alien not produced from its own national and individual consciousness. (1048)

On this account, the proper epic can only emerge once a people can clearly define and identify itself against other cultures, and it is this national, cultural, and spiritual self-sameness and boundedness vis-à-vis the other that the ontological "*what is*" of the epic refers to. This dialectical organization of national consciousness reverberates in Fanon's Manichean vision of decolonization expressed so powerfully in his essay "On Violence": "Decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation" (*The Wretched of the Earth* 2).

While the tone of Glissant's writings on the function of national literature is much less militant than Fanon's, he is likewise convinced of the exigency of a national literary expression in the life of a people. In a section of *Le Discours antillais* (1997) titled "Littératures nationales" Glissant defines national literature as "cette urgence pour chacun à se nommer au monde, c'est-à-dire cette nécessité de ne pas disparaître de la scène du monde et de courir au contraire à son élargissement" (329). Given Glissant's interest in this section in literatures of "peuples qui hier encore peuplaient la face cache de la terre" (327), such acts of self-assertion in fact enrich the world, as they speak against, or complicate, the universal humanist values of the West. Indeed, Glissant begins this section of *Le Discours antillais* with more general reflections on Sameness, *le Même,*

and its complicity with "la rapacité occidentale" (327), colonial greed. In turn, "le Divers s'est fait jour à travers la violence politique et armée des peuples" (327). Here, the description of the reaction of the colonized as "la violence politique et armée des peuples" implies that Glissant recognizes anti-colonial violence à la Fanon insofar as it channels a violent irruption of Diversity against the violence of the Same. But where Glissant departs from Fanon, while continuing to insist on the urgency of a national literature, is in his emphasis on the simultaneously affirmative and deconstructive function of national literature:

> Une littérature nationale . . . doit signifier la nomination des peuples nouveaux, ce qu'on appelle leur enracinement, et qui est aujourd'hui leur lutte. . . . Elle doit signifier—et si elle ne le fait pas . . . elle reste régionaliste, c'est-à-dire folklorisante et caduque—le rapport d'un peuple à l'autre dans le Divers, ce qu'il apporte à la totalisation. *C'est sa fonction analytique et politique, laquelle ne va pas sans remise en question de soi-même*. (332; added emphasis)

A national literature, an epic, has a world-making function; it articulates a legitimate existence of a people on their land and it asserts its historicity. But for Glissant, such collective literary expressions are vehicles of Relation, catalysts of a cross-cultural process understood not as a relationship between discrete and stable cultural identities, but rather as a calling into question of one cultural community in the presence of another. That is, a calling into question of ontological groundedness of a community, its rootedness and its form. Glissant's concept of the nation is thus relational and not dialectical.

This idea germinates already in *L'Intention poétique,* which gathers essays written between 1953 and 1961: "La nation est l'expression, désormais groupée et maturée, de cette relation [au monde]. . . . Quand la nation . . . tyrannise l'autre, domine la terre, méconnaît le monde comme relation consentie, elle se dénature" (72) and "[l]a conscience de la nation est ainsi conscience de la relation" (207). This focus on the nation as a vehicle of relationality is crucial for understanding that, for Glissant, Relation is not an effect of free-floating global or transnational cultural exchange. Rather, Relation signals cultural contact as an entanglement resulting from specificities of history and particularities of location, where cultures clash with, permeate, and undo each other, and where such undoings provide new grounds for cultural and national formations that bear witness both to the violence and to the possibility inscribed in cultural contact.

The interest in the epic will thus run through Glissant's entire oeuvre—theoretically, from *L'intention poétique* through *Le Discours antillais* and *Faulkner, Mississippi* to *Poétique de la Relation*, and poetically through his novels and poetry—as an expression of cultural affirmation and undoing, as a possibility of articulating the lived effects of Relation. Undoubtedly, Glissant, like Walt Whitman and Pablo Neruda, contributes to the revival of the epic tradition in the Americas. As Delphine Rumeau observes, "[c]es épopées sont écrites par des Américaines, dans une intention fondatrice, dans une revendication identitaire et politique" (26). But for Glissant, the epic is not merely a way of claiming literary and political identity; it is also, and I would say more importantly, a mode of critical engagement with discourses of identity, nationalism, and history, as well as an intervention into the Western genealogy of the genre and the notion of a community's proper place of belonging that the epic typically articulates.

It is with regard to the ontological fortification the epic has been taken to typify that Glissant's intervention into the Hegelian theory of the epic becomes most explicit. First, unlike Hegel, Glissant is much more interested in that moment in the life of a community when it "has under its eyes a more or less foreign culture." This has been prefigured in the epigraph to this chapter where Glissant imagines an epic that "leaves the dissolute dispersed" (99).[35] If, for Hegel, in this early time of impurity the Supreme Being cannot emerge as something indigenous to a people and thus this time must be left behind if the epic proper is to emerge, for Glissant this early moment would be one akin to a scene of relational undoing, a moment when a community's rootedness and shape is called into question. Therefore, an epic based on the poetics of Relation would be one attempting to capture, without gathering, precisely this stage when the community fails as unanimous and unified. This is one way in which the communal ontology expressed in the epic is opened up to relational becomings.

Further, Glissant is likewise critical of the imperial notion of history that the Hegelian epic perpetuates. In *L'Intention poétique*, he points out that in Hegel, "voyons que le livre *total* (où la matière exprimée ne semble pas souffrir *l'absence* que j'ai dite) est à tout coup livre *commun* (à un peuple:nouant ce peuple dans sa première unanimité). . . . Exaspérante isi l'ignorace, qui confine à ces schemas occidentaux" (37; original emphasis). Here, Glissant is especially critical of the confinement, by Hegel, of Africa as unhistorical, which signals the exclusive, bracketed understanding of Western history that subsequently allows for an imposition of its own civilization on those areas of the world

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[35] I am referring here to the English translation of *Faulkner, Mississippi* by Barbara Lewis and Thomas C. Spear.

it deems un- or less civilized. Theoretical formulations bear for Glissant real life consequences:

> la relégation conceptuelle de l'Afrique loin de "l'histoire universelle" sera accompagnée et suivie d'une réelle mise entre parenthèses de l'histoire africaine; le non-développement constaté sera systématisé en sous-développement profitable; et le Nègre, considéré par Hegel comme être de l'innocence, sera fait . . . par le colon être de l'indolence. (38)

This is to say, first, that the Occidental Man lives an impoverished life in an impoverished, narrowly conceived world through "l'inconscient refus de se partager, de vivre le monde et la pensée du monde avec l'autre" (29). And, second, this self-assured and self-enclosed existence unfolds through the real dispossession of those others relegated to the infancy of history or non-history altogether. Thus, by linking Hegel's theory of the epic to his philosophy of history and to ideologies of colonialism and neo-colonialism, Glissant formulates a deft critique of Western being: those common books (epics proper) manifesting the national spirit of a people, "proper foundations of a national consciousness" (Hegel 1048), are predicated on an idea of history that fails to take into account the full dimension of human experience and that legitimates colonial ideology and usurpation. The Western being articulated in such an epic is thus founded on the unacknowledged dispossession of the non-Western other, where the other is dispossessed of history, of humanity, of land, of mobility (in the case of plantation slavery), of social bonds, etc.

As already noted, Glissant is less critical of the epic—of the literary genre in which this ontology finds its form—than of the philosophical presumptions that

underwrite it. His commitment to pushing against the strictures of the genre is a commitment to opening History to those histories that bear witness to the fact that sometimes history brings us loss. This commitment finds a memorable articulation in *L'Intention poétique*:

> nous avons autre destin, autre fonction au monde: et . . . il faut, dépassant ce vœu lui-même, ce cri lui-même, cette passion, établir avec rigueur et minutie le détail de notre avoir dépossédé, préparer avec poids le moment de la sagacité libérér dans notre terre (enfine commune).
>
> Et si j'écoute la voix de l'Occident, le plus grands politiques, les plus profonds dogmatiques, le plus justes créateurs, *j'entends* le silence chaque fois qu'il s'agit de ce futur où partager les différentes abîmes de l'homme. . . . Et je n'oublie pas les énormes démentis tout au long de cette histoire d"occident opposés, comme par prévention (: prévenir, soupçonner, refuser), à la relation (42).

In other words, the function of an Antillean epic would be not so much a triumphant assertion of its collective being, but rather an affirmation of a community through the history of its dispossession. And, as seems to be Glissant's hope, this epic of the dispossessed, a witness to the history of plantation slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialism, would open up "the human" to a more nuanced understanding of human vulnerability. Glissant's call to "share the different abysses of man" (*Poetic Intention* 36) through a confrontation with the lived history of dispossession prefigures a more recent reflection by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou on the challenges of "understand[ing] the difference between precarity as an existential category that is presumed to be equally shared [i.e. to be human is to be vulnerable], and precarity as a condition of induced

inequality and destitution" (20). The epic seems to be a fitting means of undertaking this challenge precisely because it makes a claim on the universal through its engagement with the specific.

I return to the problem of human dispossession in the last section of this chapter, where I examine the precarity of human communities in relation to their land in the context of climate change. In the remaining part of this section I look at a poetic articulation of the theoretical concerns I have been discussing here. How does Glissant envisage an epic that signals the gesture of communal self-assertion and simultaneously questions its own existence?

Published in 1953, *Un Champ d'îles* is a long epic meditation on the making of a poem and on the making of a community. The work consists of three sections: the first contains six prose poems, the second is composed of forty six unrhymed quatrains followed by a single verse, and the last section comprises four prose poems. The sections written in poetic prose are dense reflections on the process of poetic creation while the middle, and more graphically poetic, section takes up problems of collective identity of the island community in relation to its history and natural environment.

Commenting on Glissant's early poetry, Dash notes that "the central idea of these poems turns on the difficulty in resolving the question of organization and form" (*Edouard Glissant* 39). This formal complexity and generic indeterminacy of *Un Champ d'îles* suggests that for Glissant, the epic of Relation must intervene in our habitual understanding of the genre. Discussing traditional distinctions between prose and poetry in an interview with Lise Gauvin, Glissant advocates a practice of genre-mixing in order to account for the complexity of the real:

> Je crois que nous pouvons écrire des poèmes qui sont des essais, des essais qui sont des romans, des romans qui sont des poèmes. . . . Nous devons "cahoter" dans le sens d'un cahot sur une route, mais aussi d'un chaos, de ce qui est chaotique. Nous devons cahoter tous les genres pour pouvoir exprimer ce que nous voulons exprimer. (29-30)

Such a jolting [*cahoter*] of genres out of their conventions aptly describes the formal structure of *Un Champ d'îles*. In his elaboration of how he means "cahoter"—as "le cahot" (a bump in the road) and as submitting to chaos—Glissant foregrounds a sense of derailment, a momentary loss of the ground beneath one's feet, tying literary experimentation with ontological destabilization, especially given that in French "genre" likewise refers to gender, zoological and botanical distinctions, and, more broadly, kind, sort, type, and manner of doing things. Thus, even before engaging the ontological content of the epic, Glissant renders chaotic the genre's ontology as a genre, as an identifiable literary form, undermining the binding, shaping function of the epic.[36]

This questioning of form is rendered explicit by the deployment of the prose poem as the genre bookending *Un Champ d'îles*. A genre that self-consciously upsets generic and literary distinctions, "a genre formed in violation of genre" (Murphy 1), the prose poem that embraces the formally legible section of *Un Champ d'îles* thematizes and performs the making and unmaking of the poem and of the community it seeks to capture. Literary scholar Margueritte S. Murphy notes that the function of the prose poem

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[36] Glissant's injunction to "jolt genres" appears prescriptive insofar as at an explicit, immediate level it is an invitation towards literary experimentation. In that sense, while it certainly resonates with Jacques Derrida's reflection on genres in "The Law of Genre," it points to an active, self-aware bending and crossing of the limits of genres rather than, as is the case in Derrida's essay, to an inherent impurity and instability of genres (literary as much as biological) beyond any conscious intervention on the writer's part. This difference is partly due to the fact that Glissant is interested here in forms of literary expression that capture the effusive character of Caribbean cultures.

is not only aesthetic but also ideological in how the prose poem subverts tradition and convention: “the necessity, urgency, and intimacy of this struggle [with tradition and convention] in the case of the prose poem suggest the relevance of its history and aesthetics to questions that confront literary studies now—questions about the struggle of marginal texts, forms, and voices against the literary, social, or political status quo” (8). In deploying the prose poem for an epic expression of Antillean peoples, Glissant pulls into this attempt at self-affirmation a tradition of questioning; questioning of the distinctions between poetry and prose and between the subjects worthy of poetic or prosaic treatment, questioning akin to the debates among literary scholars about the epic canon and its opening to texts from outside of the European tradition. Further, the poetic prose that frames the middle part of *Un Champ d’îles* also suggests the rough, unruly, scattered edges of the community the poem articulates. It de-shapes, more than shapes, the contours of the community. This poetic unruliness gets a more theoretical treatment in *Le Discours antillais*, where Glissant writes: “la patine culturelle m’exaspère quand elle n’est pas fondée dans une lente coulée de temps. La ‘patine culturelle’, quand elle ne résulte pas ainsi d’une tradition ou d’un agir, devient provincialisme vide. . . . Nous n’avons pas le temps, il nous faut porter partout l’audace de la modernité” (438). Antillean cultural texture is rough rather than smooth due to its sudden irruption into modernity and this lack of polish is reflected in the chaos of poetic prose. This chaos indicates that the epic expression of this culture fails to “round it off” into an epic totality, breaking away from Hegel’s claim that epic totality is characterized by roundness (1043).

Finally, in foregrounding the impossibility of sustaining distinctions between genres, in highlighting the interpenetration between the prosaic and the poetic, the prose

poem centers on change and mobility, unsettling in this way conventional techniques of representing the world. If, at a basic level, "[t]he chief functions of prose in the modern world are the written representation and communication of information about events, processes, and facts that obtain in the external world" (*The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics* 1346), then the commonplace, straightforward prosaic articulation is undermined by poetic density and equivocality, a mode of signification that shatters the facticity and easy referentiality presumed by the prosaic utterance. Thus, emphasizing the fragility of form, the unruliness of the community, and the instability of the referential function of language, the prose poem that opens and concludes *Un Champ d'îles* gestures at a kind of epic passion aiming not so much at an objective account of history by virtue of which a people progressively acquires its distinctive identity, but rather striving to capture the density and chaos of the world, and the instability of a human community vis-à-vis the turmoil of history.

Still, even though the poem's formal indeterminacy compels us to question the assumption of the objective epic presentation as well as the claim to a direct relation to reality, *Un Champ d'îles* simultaneously affirms the urgency of the epic as a collective poem of the Antilles that would tie the historical and the material in a positive articulation of the region's specificity. While the island in which the poem unfolds remains unnamed throughout *Un Champ d'îles*, its universal, prelapsarian character is complicated in the first lines of the poem by a decisive statement that subtly points to the region's historicity: "Ce n'est point chaleur du mot qui étincelle, mais peuplades de mains sous la peau" (9). In moving away from the fervor of the word (a possible reference to the divine creation of the world in the Book of Genesis) to "peuplades de

mains," Glissant envisions the island as issuing from the region's diasporic, (neo)colonial, and (post)plantation circumstances. First, the word "peuplade" carries the meaning of "horde" or "tribe," of a multitude not yet cohering into a recognizable form of a people. Since *Un Champ d'îles* begins with an invocation "Tourmentes, feu marin, étendues sans pitié" (9)—words which embed oceanic sites and phenomena with the historical meaning of torment—the subsequent invocation of "peuplades" sustains this sense of dispossession and violent displacement through its focus on a people de-formed, undone, and not yet gathered. The word aurally evokes the titles of classical epics such as l'*Iliade* and l'*Énéide*, works concretizing epic strives and journeys of a people, but unlike those narratives, which capture spectacular human courage and heroism, "peuplades" metonymically centers on the reduction of human beings to their labor capacity, as suggested in the reference to hands.

Along with the meaning of a disorganized people carried by the word "peuplade," this reference to manual activity is another way in which the poem encodes geo-historical specificity. The trope of hands and manual labor recurs through the poem as an emphasis on the history of dispossession that underlies the "economic, social, political, and moral" making of the New World (Ellis and Ginsburg 1). In their analysis of the role of slavery in the making of North American landscapes, Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg emphasize that "we cannot fully understand the built environment of North America [and the Caribbean] without taking slavery into account. . . . If we look more closely and critically, we see the hand of the enslaved workers in transforming (literally) the land" (2). The transformation of American landscapes refers of course to the physical labor of the slaves on the plantations. But it also evokes how the slaves transformed the

humiliating circumstances of slavery into sites of life; these included for instance provision grounds and slave gardens, and "the swept yard around slave houses." "One larger lesson of the swept yard," Ellis and Ginsburg explain, "is that many enslaved communities established and maintained a sense of place" (5). In *Un Champ d'îles*, the trope of hands underscores this double sense of transformation as dispossession and forced labor, and as creative resistance to annihilation: "Le poing calé dans le bois dur / La main qui fleurit la douleur" (19).

Let me defer an analysis of the significance of this trope of making and shaping for Glissant's notion of the earth until the next section. In what follows, I'd like to discuss how the specificities of history become for Glissant a way of intervening into ontological concepts, and how *Un Champ d'îles* performs the double work of affirmation and questioning. The interlacing of the historical and the philosophical is articulated in the second part of the poem, in the line which ties the emergence of the archipelago out of plantation and post-plantation labor with the universal question of ontological foundations: "Ils [des vivants] font les terres qui les font" (20). The word *terre*, as land and as a philosophical concept, marks a center of this chiastic expression, the very site where the two clauses ("ils font les terres" and "les terres les font") cross. *Earth* also signifies another center: human foundation, originary dimension of place, ontological and metaphysical support. In overlaying this philosophical meaning of *earth* with a grammatical one, Glissant opens the center to the play of writing. This is expressed, first, in the pluralization of the center: there is no one earth, there are many earths, which counters the idea of the center, of origins, as one and indivisible. Second, articulated in the form of a chiasmus, the center emerges here as a literary figure, and thus cannot be

understand as absolutely and essentially natural. Tracing the permeability of the origins by writing, Jacques Derrida remarks that "[t]he first book, the mythic book, the eve prior to all repetition, has lived on the deception that the center was sheltered from play: irreplaceable, withdrawn from metaphor and metonymy" (*Writing and Difference* 296). Derrida shows how the Book, which refers in his essay to the metaphysical, grounding book of man, is rendered open by the inescapable textuality of writing. We have seen, via Hegel and Bakhtin, that the epic has come to function as precisely such a founding Book premised on the idea of the immutable, absolute, landlocked origin that holds a people together. In contrast, the epic that Glissant envisions does not presume a unique origin that legitimizes one way of being in the world and one predetermined cultural genealogy. Indeed, the multiple "center" envisioned in *Un Champ d'îles* cannot function as a ground of immutable cultural, historical, and ontological essence. Instead, its plurality breaks all forms of identity open and, in rendering them inconclusive, issues a new imaginary that envisions cultures in Relation, cultures constitutively exposed to foreign impositions rather than rounded off in a process of dialectical self-definition.

Glissant returns to this idea that the plurality of *earths* is a mark of Relation in *L'Intention poétique*, where he writes: "Il y a tant de terres: la totalité résulte (bien plus que de leur somme) de leur relation à venir. On ne saurait conclure" (90). This early emphasis on earth as a foundation engendering relationality signals Glissant's ongoing commitment to the notion of cultural and national identity as constitutively open and unfinished. In affirming collective identity in its inherent and unyielding vulnerability, Glissant throws the very idea of cultural self-sameness and self-definition into question. In one sense, such a relational understanding of identity (as identity and non-identity all

at once) can be read as Glissant's own formulation of the "paradoxical predicament of the postcolonial." In another sense, this simultaneity of affirmation and deconstruction allows us to appreciate the nuances of Glissant's idea of totality. In the cited fragment, the focus shifts from the additive notion of discrete differences amounting to their *total* sum to a relational understanding of difference as originary multiplicity, as multiplicity that forecloses the possibility of conclusion. In this way, Glissant offers an idea of totality that takes root in unending entanglements between peoples. In contrast to the Hegelian notion, Glissant's totality is not a teleological ideal and neither does it function as Kant's regulative ideal; it is chaotic, unpredictable, and persistently mutable. And hence the epic it issues—insofar as this epic articulates the material connections between peoples by virtue of which cultures are un-made and re-made—cannot conclude, cannot but "leave the dissolute dispersed."

In the line "Ils font les terres qui les font," then, the stability of the ground is thrown into question both by the figurative weight of the verse and by the relationality engendered by the plural "terres." Additionally, the grounding function of the ground is subverted in the circularity of the phrase whereby the ground is pulled into history: for we can translate the sentence also as "they make the ground(s) that make(s) them." The second axis of the sentence articulates the familiar function of the ground: it grounds, it provides the ontological basis of identity. The first axis, however, subverts this grounding function in that it renders the ground as mutable, as vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the material and historical world. And in grammatically preceding the second clause, in which the ground grounds, the first clause subverts this grounding function *always already* so that the ground never grounds in the strict ontological understanding of the

word. It grounds "in a certain kind of way," to borrow Antonio Benítez-Rojo's phrase that describes the uncertain, aquatic, performative, fluctuating *being* of the Caribbean (4, 10). As will become clearer in the following section, this ground, rather than ontological, is better conceived as a texture, as a fragile entanglement of the poetic, of the ecological (earth as matter), and of the historical.

So far, I have been foregrounding the theoretical underpinnings of the epic as they emerge in *Un Champ d'îles*: the way in which the formal complexity of the poem resists the idea that the community itself must be understood as locked in the rigid form, and the way in which the very idea of the ground is put into question. These philosophical moves are crucial for capturing the paradox of the epic of Relation that leaves the dissolute dispersed: in other words, the epic that makes a claim on the community and on the space of belonging while simultaneously undermining the exclusivity, territorialism, and sovereignty that typically inhere in the notions *community* and *belonging*.

In *Un Champ d'îles* these deconstructive moves co-exist with the desperate urgency of the "authentic" epic of the Antilles as a form that could hold the world together and effect a break with a cycle of humiliation:

> Elle [l'île] vit de mots dérivés
>
> Comme un halo de naufragés
>
> A la rencontre des rochers
>
>
> Elle a besoin de mots qui durent
>
> Et font le ciel et l'horizon
>
> Plus brouillés que les yeux de femmes

Plus nets que regards d'homme seul (19)

The exigency to formulate the region's identity emerges in the juxtaposition between "mots dérivés" (derived words) and "mots qui durent" (words that last). Literary critic E. Anthony Hurley explores the possibility of interpreting the lived reality of the island by reading its derivative character ("mots dérivés") in conjunction with a sense of being adrift, unmoored (dé-rivée): "the connotative richness of 'mots dérivés' associates the inscribed condition of the island as 'rive' [shore], with lack of fixity, lack or loss of direction, otherness, foreign derivation, distortion, displacement, and deviation, [and] accurately translates the cultural dilemma of both the poet and the island" (245). The need for "mots qui durent," then evinces the desire for cultural continuity and cultural trajectory; it signals the need for authentic, autonomous words that "font le ciel et l'horizon"—that is, words that make the world livable and imbue it with a sense of future.

The Antillean epic thus works through diasporic discontinuities toward establishing links between humans, the archipelago, and poetic expression. As was the case in Grace Nichols's collection *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, here too diasporic poetic imaginary is tasked with the articulation of the world in the wake of the trauma of the Middle Passage. And like Nichols, Glissant modulates the ontological thrust of this need for the livable world by tapping into the possibilities of poetry in order to express the relational, rather than firmly ontological, emergence of the Antillean world. Notice that while the second verse of the second cited stanza implies a biblical engendering of the world by the word ("mots qui font le ciel et l'horizon"), the lines that follow modulate this relationship by imbuing archipelagic beginnings with a sense of historical

temporality. The enjambment diffuses the ontological weight of the second verse and introduces an early imagining of Relation as a process of relinking, relaying, relating, which Glissant describes in *Poétique de la Relation*: “La Relation relie (relaie), relate” (187).

Echoing the line from the first section of *Un Champ d’îles*, “Ce n’est point chaleur du mot qui étincelle, mais peuplades de mains sous la peau,” which likewise complicates the idea of the divine making of the world with a sense of historicity, these verses emphasize that the links between a people and their place are formed as a poetic making, as *poiesis*, rather than as a teleological, pre-ordained giving of the land to a people common in epic literature (for instance in the *Aeneid*). It is this relational, non-organic, and forced relationship with place, one that Glissant will foreground throughout his oeuvre, which helps us conceive of the epic of Relation in non-atavistic terms. As an epic of “shipwrecked people searching for rocks” (39),[37] this is a story based in rootlessness and in vulnerability to historical injury. It is a story, further, that does away with accounts of triumphant heroism in order to focus on an achievement of resilience and survival, and in order to foreground ways of suturing the fractures of history.

The tensions and cross-fertilizations between continuity and discontinuity in the Americas, so compellingly probed by Wilson Harris, underlie the paradoxes of the epic of Relation. For Glissant, the search for continuity chimes in with a line from Paul Valéry’s “Le Cimetière Marin”: “*Il faut tâcher de vivre*” (*L’Intention poétique* 72; original emphasis). This line speaks to Glissant perhaps because it captures the exigency of transforming the annihilating experience of the Middle Passage into possibilities of living on. Later in *L’Intention poétique* he translates Valéry’s verse into specific

[37] Jeff Humphries’s translation.

historical circumstances of the Antilles: “Tenter de rétablir, par-delà nos faiblesses, cette *continuité* qui nous a tant trahis, et qui fait par son absence qu’un cri éternellement commencé à la fin se fige dans la complaisance de son écho. Savoir ce qui, en nous et autour de nous, a imposé la discontinuité paralysante” (192-193; original emphasis). In post-plantation societies, discontinuity constitutes a paralyzing inheritance because it is a reminder of genealogical sundering, of a loss of the past and of the future. As Patterson explains,

> [s]laves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor their living present in any conscious community of memory. That they reached back for the past, as they reached out for the related living, there can be no doubt. Unlike other persons, doing so mean struggling with and penetrating the iron curtain of the master, his community, his laws, his policemen or patrollers, and his heritage. (5)

It is the violence of this past, Glissant suggests, that generates the cry of outrage and despair, the cry that at the same time risks solidifying the experience of deprivation. Signifying on Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, a poem redolent with visions of a paralyzed town (“cette ville inerte”) as a site echoing with the originary cry of the dispossessed—“le seul [cri] qu’on eût voulu l’entendre crier parce qu’on le sent sien lui seul” (74)—Glissant will rather encourage a formulation of an utterance that would reach beyond the void of dispossession, into the future. “Quitter le cri, forger la

parole," he writes in the opening pages of *Le Discours antillais*; abandon the cry, forge the word (28).

This emphasis on forging a kind of expression that labors against "la discontinuité paralysante" is intimately tied in Glissant with the necessity of the collective *life* in the archipelago, so that the call "we must attempt to live" ("il faut tâcher de vivre") translates into "we must attempt to speak." And yet, while recognizing this collective desire of "cerner un project commun" (192), Glissant also warns against the metaphysical pitfalls of such an enclosed epic: "Ce people *est*, il ne parle pas. . . . Il ne vit pas" (192; original emphasis). To *be*, Glissant insists, is not to speak, not to live. Living, which Glissant places on the side of speaking, involves breaking out of the gridlock of *being* toward a consciousness of a people linked in the abyss of the slave ship, " un peuple, composite, éparpillé, mais inévitable, une culture, innervée, diffuse, mais particulière et avouable" (*L'Intention poétique* 193).

Analyzing the links between life and language in Glissant's oeuvre, Alessandro Corio suggests that for the Martinican writer this relationship is "a necessary entanglement (*intrication*)" and that, insofar as it inscribes a critique of *being*, it indicates "a distance from the metaphysical tradition of presence" (918, 921). The concept of language (*langage*), Corio continues, "is disconnected from any possible appropriation by a sovereign, individual, or community subject, which bends it to the demands of a discourse on truth and identity" (922). In other words, language (speaking) is an expression of the living in relation to the losses and discontinuities of their history, articulating neither uninterrupted continuity, nor absolute rupture. And the notion of Relation as relinking, relaying, relating names this paradoxical form of expression that

offers neither ground nor legitimacy in the strong ontological sense, but rather *relates* (to) the loss and absence at the heart of the living, at the heart of a people who has survived.

Given the etymological origins of the word *epos* as "word," then, the epic of Relation as imagined by Glissant arises from this urgency to "forge the word" of the living in the Antilles, to find words that draw the horizon as the possibility of a future. This epic would avow, rather than enclose, a people in relation to the continuities-discontinuities of its past, to the linkages and divisions in virtue of which it comes into "being."

This section has traced the theoretical support of the epic of Relation, holding off an analysis of its political stakes. While the notion of the earth avowed in this epic throws into question the concept of the immutable, essentializing ground of identity and history, how does it bear on the problems of sovereignty and territorialism characterizing discourses of belonging?

Earth Texture

Et cette terre: que signifie-t-elle alors?
Temps et Espace, mêlés.
Édouard Glissant *L'intention poétique*

As already demonstrated, earth (*terre*) is for Glissant a central concept in his theorization of Antillean community in relation to its archipelagic world, and more broadly in the context of global history. I suggested in the introduction to this chapter that his insistence on earth tropes and figures in the context of the oceanic imaginary of the Diaspora highlights the poet's commitment to revising the organizing ideas of Western

philosophy. Among those, earth holds a central place. As David Macauley notes, "in many of its manifestations, earth is posited as a creative matrix, material base, or generative mother for both human civilization and philosophical speculation" (15). He continues, "[earth] must be recognized for its centrality to notions of human perception, territory, motility, and materiality" (20). Earth, then, functions as *the* ontological concept par excellence, for instance in Martin Heidegger as a principle of ontological authority, in John Locke as the basis for property and thus for a human socio-political community, or in Carl Schmitt as a law securing the Eurocentric world order.[38] The attachment of ontological thought to earth is largely due to its imagined stability, enduring presence, and fixity. Philosopher Michel Serres explains that elements such as water or air fail to offer a similar conceptual and ontological support due to their fleeting character: "the very request for a foundation implies that one does not dig or lay a foundation in water or on the wind. . . . We are afraid of wind and waters, we are now afraid of disorder and the rarely predictable. In fact, we are afraid of multiplicities" (108). Earth, by implication, is not thought of as disorderly; in its presumed non-ambiguity, unequivocalness, and calculability, it is taken to be the very antithesis of changeability and volatility.

Glissant is after a very different notion of earth, as signaled in his affirmation that as a result of the disruptive quality of the Middle Passage, earth ceases to function as essence and becomes relation,[39] and as suggested in my reading of the line "Ils font les terres qui les font" from *Un Champ d'îles* where the solidity and immovability of the ground is thrown into question. For Glissant, this alternative understanding of earth is enabled by the lived vulnerability of the Antilles, hence the insistence in the quote

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[38] See Martin Heidegger *Poetry, Language, Thought*; John Locke *Second Treatise of Civil Government*; Carl Schmitt *The Nomos of the Earth*.

[39] "La terre a cessé d'être essence, elle devient relation" (*L'intention poétique* 96).

introducing this section on the inextricable interlacing of space and time for the understanding both of the ontological ground and of the lived environment of the Antilles.[40] This emphasis on time, on history, traversing earth (as Antillean land and ground) results from Glissant's interest in taking the geo-historical location of the Caribbean as a conceptual space that bears on fundamental philosophical questions.[41] In this section, I tease out some of the political implications of conceptualizing earth as en entanglement of time and space. Specifically, I want to focus on the distinction Glissant makes between earth (*terre*) and territory (*territoire*) in *Poétique de le Relation* and in *Traité du Tout-Monde*. In the former he writes that as a result of the enormity of dispossession suffered in the Caribbean, "la terre antillaise ne pouvait devenir territoire" (161); additionally, sustaining the earth against the territory appears to be of critical importance: "il ne s'agirait en aucun cas de transformer à nouveau une terre en territoire" (166). In *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Glissant posits Relation as crucial for this distinction: "La Poétique de la Relation permet d'approcher la différence entre une terre . . . et un territoire" (193). Understanding the stakes of this distinction, in turn, will help us make sense of Glissant's vision of politics not predicated on forms of national sovereignty.

While the notion of territory becomes more prominent in Glissant's later writing, his thinking of the earth through Relation emerges already in his first published work of poetry, *Un Champ d'îles*. The opening lines of the poem envision a becoming of earth within the turmoil of Atlantic history:

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[40] The meanings of the word "terre" in French include "earth," "dirt," "soil," "ground," "continent," "planet Earth." Throughout his œuvre, Glissant draws on all these meanings.

[41] The interpenetration of materiality and conceptuality in Glissant's oeuvre has recently been analyzed in Christina Kullberg's *The Poetics of Ethnography in Martinican Narratives* and in Valérie Loichot's *The Tropics Bite Back*.

> Tourmentes, feu marin, étendues sans pitié: . . . ce sont meutes du vent qui dévolent des mains, vers la coulpe et l'accomplissement du gravier. Ces cavaliers s'éprennent d'une liane, l'entendant croître par le ciel jusqu'aux ultimes étoiles. O de ce langage qu'est toute pierre pourvue de chair et la levant par-dessus elle, de ce langage violent et doucement obscur qu'est la racine douée de chair et la poussant par-dessous elle, voici l'épure. (9)

The elemental character of the scene—with its imagery of the sea, wind, and earth (via gravel, stone, and lianas)—is complicated by significations that evoke historical sensibility: the oceanic expanses are tormenting and pitiless, the earth bears the marks of sinfulness. Antillean space emerges here as metaphorically textured by historical time,[42] as inextricable from a sense of diasporic turbulence and disturbance.

Another sense of earth as texture (as the entanglement of textuality and materiality) is sustained in textual tropes that emerge in these lines: 'langage',[43] 'l'épure', and 'vers', a word that simultaneously signifies a poetic unit and a relational directionality. This poetic-prepositional connector operates as a relational binding agent whose world-making function is expressed by how it brings together different elements. Crucially, this world-making is poetic, that is ambiguous, equivocal, and creative, and this poetic draft is composed by and of Antillean nature itself, as suggested by another

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[42] See my discussion of Renu Bora's use of this term in the introduction. In Glissant, the metaphoric texture refers to the historical feel that his depictions of originary Antillean spaces exude.

[43] "Langage" is a term Glissant juxtaposes with "langue," and whose meaning is different than the one developed for instance by de Saussure. Glissant writes: "J'appelle langage une pratique commune, pour une collectivité donnée, de confiance ou de méfiance vis-à-vis de la langue ou des langues qu'elle utilise" (*Le discours antillais* 401). "Langage," translated into English by J. Michael Dash as "self-expression," is thus an attitude towards languages a community uses. "Langues" could be French and Créole, "langage" would be how they used (or brought into relation) in a text or in another form of cultural expression. For more on this distinction see Celia Britton's *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*.

preposition, "par-dessous," by way of which "langage" is envisioned as ingrown into the very soil of the Antilles.

Finally, the third sense of texture as an effect of labor on matter is evidenced in the image of clay that recurs in the poem:

> Voici le recommencement de cette argile au chaud du cœur, qui bouge. (10)
>
> Et cette argile qui à nouveau bouge, . . . l'avez-vous allumée, l'avez-vous? (10)
>
> Cette argile à nouveau remue! (11)
>
> [V]oici l'argile commuée, ce fruit bougé (12)

Importantly this material bears the traces of historical texturing: "L'île entière est une pitié / . . . / Dans cet amas d'argiles tuées" (18). This trope of clay brings together the recurring motif of hands and manual labor, and the notion of a poetic work as "travail" rather than "œuvre," which is how the poetic persona refers to the poem that is taking shape in *Un Champ d'îles*. This early text, then, vividly illustrates what Glissant has in mind when he refers to poetry in French as "poétrie." Poetry for Glissant "means 'making' in a material way," Valérie Loichot writes, "in the Aristotelian sense of *poiesis*. *Poétrie*, the neologism Glissant uses in French, evokes simultaneously the poem, inhabited by the English word 'poetry', and the verb *pétrir*, to kneed dough or to give shape to clay" ("Édouard Glissant's Graves" 1027). What is significant about the activity of kneading, however, is that it is in fact the very opposite of putting into form. As Gaston Bachelard explains, "[k]neading is in some sense the antithesis of modeling. It tends to destroy form. For Plato, in *Timaeus*, through kneading one ruins inner form in order to create softened matter [*pâte*] capable of being shaped externally" (71). That is to say, kneading invites a conceptual departure from, or even a destruction of, the idea that

abstract, immutable, and timelessly intelligible forms are a regulative principle of the being of the material world. Instead, Glissant consistently upholds the idea of the world as involved in an ongoing process of *poietic* becoming, of poetic making and re-making, where poetry becomes the preferred discursive means of articulating the opacity, equivocality, and human and non-human heterogeneity of the world.

Crucially, Glissant envisions this *poietic* making and re-making of the world as a performance where history ("argiles tuées"), human labor and creativity, and earth itself are inextricable and active contributors. This entanglement is evidenced especially in the trope of the hands, the context of which shifts through the poem. Whereas, as analyzed in the previous section, "hands" refers to the forced physical labor and creative resilience in plantation and post-plantation spaces, the trope also emerges in more ambiguous semantic contexts. For instance, in the opening section of the poem, two references to hands attach manual activity to the ambiguous addressee of the poem:

> Il [ce cri] établit en l'île vos mains atteintes de nuit. (9)
>
> [C]'est l'éclat de votre silence, c'est la prose tranquille de vos mains qui font lumière de ce monde, le conquièrent entre ses haies. (10)

The elusive, unspecified "you" is a feminine figure inextricably tied with the space and environment of the archipelago, but encompassing likewise a sense of the past and the future: "O vous, dans ce champ d'îles parfaissant le souvenir et l'espoir, contraires fleurs" (11). In that sense, this figure, though nameless in Glissant, is akin to the figure of Cariwoma in Nichols's *Startling the Flying Fish*, as evoked for instance in this depiction: "que cet arbre hésite au bord de vous, cherchant l'oiseau de son regard sur vous brodé, la net des arbres hauts sur la hauteur, et l'ogive tressé d'ombre pour vos ployures" (13).

And much like in Nichols, this feminine presence becomes in Glissant's work a generative matrix of the poem ["O poème qui naît de vous" (15)], not simply brute matter to be shaped and endowed with meanings by creative consciousness of the sovereign poet, but a co-writer of the work: "Et vous . . . profuse en ce langage, indifférente et soudain calme dans le fruit, *faites mystère ainsi que lui* de ce silence oùbruit la ville" (11; added emphasis).[44]

Thus if the recurrent, shifting tropes of hands and of clay evoke the process of kneading as a metaphor of poetic composition, of poetic writing, then writing, which I take here in a broader Derridean sense of "a generalized writing that might be termed a *corporeography*" (Kirby *Telling Flesh* 83), is distributed across the poet and the poetic material in a way that undoes the conventional distinction between the author and the object of representation. One implication of such a poetic strategy where nature itself is envisioned as text, a rough draft ("l'épure"), as a body that writes is aesthetic. Approaching the text of *Un Champ d'îles* as a dramatization of what such a natural poetic rough draft might look like might account for the impenetrability of the prose sections of this poem, the resistance of the chaotic space to legible, unequivocal, stabilizing representation. In the opening lines of *Un Champ d'îles*, this opacity is articulated as a series of declarative sentences ("ce sont") that in the end fail to describe the scene in a legible way; instead they point at loose semantic combinations, such as "meutes du vent" translated by Jeff Humphries as "packs of wolfwinds" (33).

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[44] The way in which Glissant engages the feminine in this poem opens up his work to a feminist reading. In *Poétique de la Relation*, Glissant includes a footnote in which he slightly disparages feminism: "Le féminisme est le luxe par lequel les femmes, en Occident, à travers leurs combats, transforment leur ancien et pseudo-contre-pouvoir spirituel en égalité réelle" (72). However, in *Un Champ d'îles,* Glissant seems to be interested with how the feminine can facilitate a re-structuring of Antillean being towards a differential, non-teleological vision of community and political belonging. In that sense, he seems interested less in the socio-political claims made from the perspective of gender and more in the ontological problematic of sexual difference.

However, presenting nature in terms of textuality, envisioning archipelagic mother earth as capable of working upon (its own) clay, or kneading itself into shape, likewise has broader philosophical and political implications. Vicki Kirby explains what is at stake in approaching the problems of materiality and representation through such a broadened understanding of writing (or kneading, to stay with Glissant's metaphor):

> Writing is never granted an originary or foundational status because we tend to think of it as something parasitic. We think of writing as something that originates in the writer/author; . . . as something that re-presents a distant reality. If however, whatever writing measures itself against is also a scripture—and this will include the assumed substance and solidity of nature as ultimate cause, the self-presence of the subject, intention as an originary explanation, truth as stable and unified, and so on—then the phallocentrism and ethnocentrism that is endorsed within such notions might be more effectively engaged. (*Telling Flesh* 62)

In other words, to take writing as originary, and to allow that nature itself is a text that writes opens up de-colonial possibilities in that such an approach permits an intervention into ideas of a self-enclosed, sovereign human subject, and into the overdetermining colonial representations of otherness as primitive, unhistorical, and in need of a civilizing process. If the ground itself is open to the play of writing, to ambiguity, relationality, and equivocality, then the possibility of stable, self-contained, and legible identities is foreclosed; then all the ground can "ground" is the ongoing relational chaos of the world. In the words of J. Michael Dash, this notion of the ground in Glissant reflects the writer's desire "to destabilize endlessly the temptation to grounded difference" ("Martinique/Mississippi" 95). And thinking more broadly about Glissant's poetic-

theoretical œuvre, *Un Champ d'îles* is the earliest performance of "the destabilizing of the inherent meaning of island ground . . . in favor of an idea of archipelagic space [un champ d'îles]" (97).

Glissant's rejection of enclosing the self and the other finds a compelling articulation in the final lines of *Un Champ d'îles,* which present the struggle of the poet to establish himself as a subject in the archipelago: "Faudra-t-il enfin que je revienne et nomme, connaissant qu'ile est de moi comme de l'arbre après le vent? . . . [V]ous devrai-je nommer afin que l'île vive (en vous)?" (27). Naming, assigning significations to the environment, requires subjective separation vis-à-vis the objective world. In the poem, it appears that such a subjective stance would require abdicating relationality with the world, in so far as the poet would have to forget that he is much akin to the tree tousled by the wind, a possible reference to interrupted genealogy of the archipelago. Further, naming would inevitably involve a reductive altering of the relationship with the addressee of the poem, and possibly also a termination of the poetic process itself. Given the depiction of this figure as an absent presence—"De ce travail cependant, vous êtes absente. Absente qui êtes là, comme une baie!" (12)—naming her would mean forcing her into a position that she occupies only tangentially; it would mean assigning her to some proper place when, by nature, she defies the very idea of a proper being.

Sustaining this uncertainty regarding the identity of the islands, the ending of *Un Champ d'îles* suspends the archipelago's ontology:

> Où sont les îles? Qui amoncelle des boutures? . . . Il y aura des crispations, et les chants ivres des haies. Des sourires, la main qui offre, le temps clair. Et quelle

présence encore, je le demande? Cependant je cherche, lourd et brûlant. (28; original ellipsis)

The islands appear difficult to locate, and it is unclear how and by whom they are gathered. Still, this present uncertainty does not foreclose the possibility of a future, though it appears strangely devoid of identifiable, specifically human presence; instead the future of the archipelago is envisioned as a botanical and biological life (as suggested by words 'crispations' and 'haies'). The political stakes of this conclusion become sharper when we compare the ending of *Un Champ d'îles* with that of Walcott's "The Star-Apple Kingdom" discussed in chapter one. In the latter case, the political interest of the poem forced a closure that ran against the complexity and ambiguity engendered by the figure of the woman, through which a mode of belonging different than the national one might have been envisioned. In Glissant, in turn, the proliferation of interrogative sentences, the reluctance to assert a human subject against the natural world, and the inability to pin down the legible, fixed identity of the archipelago all compound the sense of fertile instability and openness. Rather than affirming one and particular form of community that would claim this land as its proper space, that would assert on it its national being, the poem leaves the reader with the uncertain presence of archipelagic nature, more specifically it concludes with two adjectives, "lourd" and "brûlant," that affirm the earthy, rather than territorial, quality of the poem.

This earthiness inscribed in the last sentence of *Un Champ d'îles* can be illuminated intertextually, by a reference to *L'Intention poétique* and *Poétique de la Relation*. The last chapter of *L'Intention poétique*, titled "*Pays rêvé, pays réel*," likewise imagines a passionate refusal of separation from the landscape ["Passionnément vivre le

paysage" (245)], insists on the openness of the future ["Demain, découvrir le large" (244)], and deploys earth tropes ("terre" and "boue"). Indeed, the imagined future of the country is "grounded" in volatile earth: "La terre enfin, qui tremble" (245); even more, the very imaginary that sustains this future depends on the ability to surrender to the gravitational pull of the earth. "Être terreux et lourd," Glissant writes (246). The adjective "brûlant," in turn, evokes the closing section of *Poétique de la Relation* "La Plage ardente," where the trope of burning refers to the volcanic origins of the Caribbean, and specifically to Martinique's Mount Pelée and St. Lucia's Pitons. In this section, "l'ardeur d'une terre" (221) becomes a counterpoint to the commercialized appropriation of Caribbean beaches by tourism: "Je surprends le frémissement de cette plage, dont les visiteurs s'écrient qu'elle est si jolie, ou si typique, et je vois qu'elle est ardente" (221). Further, what is significant about both these depictions is that in each case, the repossession of the land and the affirmation of belonging are envisioned through images of malleable, shifting, and even destructive earth. Earth for Glissant, and this will become crucial for understanding the distinction between earth and territory, is always a trembling earth, an errant earth, a burning earth, earth that de-forms and un-shapes rather than allows the community that claims it maintain a stable, fixed form. Indeed, in both texts, the communal "we" that inhabits this earth is illegible:

> Nous sommes clandestines. (*L'Intention poétique* 244)
>
> Ces 'nous' . . . sont un devenir. (*Poétique de la Relation* 222)

Glissant stresses the idea of community as inherently susceptible to change for it is only such a vulnerable, indeterminate collectivity that can facilitate the crossings of Relation. "On ne saurait fonder une pensée ontologique," Glissant writes, "sur l'existence de tels

ensembles, dont la nature est de varier prodigieusement dans la Relation. Cette variation est au contraire le témoin de ce que pensée ontologique ne 'fonctionne' plus, ne procure plus de certitude fondatrice, ensouchée une fois pour toutes dans un territoire contraignant" (*Poétique de la Relation* 156).

What illuminates this shift from an ontologically grounding to a relational relationship with the land is the lived experience of colonial and neo-colonial dispossession in the Caribbean. Glissant reminds us that the only inhabitants who could have legitimately claimed the land in the Antilles are the indigenous populations who had been annihilated in the wake of the colonial encounter. It is precisely this disruption as well as the dispossession of the Africans (as much as of indentured laborers from China and South East Asia) that frustrates territorial impulse in the Caribbean:

> A partir de quoi [le massacre des Indiens] la terre antillaise ne pouvait devenir territoire, mais bien terre rhizomée. Oui, la terre martiniquaise n'appartient, en absolu raciné, ni aux descendants des Africains déportés, ni aux békés,[45] ni aux hindous ni aux mulâtres. Mais ce qui était une conséquence de l'expansion européenne . . . est cela même qui fonde un nouveau rapport à la terre: non pas l'absolu sacralisé d'une possession ontologique, mais la complicité relationnelle. (*Poétique de la Relation* 160-161)

Colonization opens a relational link to the land because it alters the relationship with it. Land ceases to function as a filiative link with the world of ancestors and instead engenders a memory of dispossession, of a constitutive fissuring of identity, of language, and of being, as suggestively accounted for in Jamaica Kincaid's essay "In History" discussed in the introduction. In Glissant, this loss of earth (as an ontological ground)

[45] "Békés" is a creole name for plantation owners in Martinique.

beneath one's feet leads to a relationship with the earth that allows for exploring, in the words of Peter Hitchcock, "its own forms of delinking" (37), through which a different knowledge of collectivity, of the world, and of a relationship to alterity can be glimpsed. As Dash explains, "[i]t was precisely the inability to restore historical continuities and authentic rootedness that represented for Glissant the Caribbean's potential to establish new connections and envision repeated crossings. The absence of a stabilizing center, of a pure origin meant that new and unpredictable relations could be established using unconscious and obscure pathways or traces" ("Martinique/Mississippi" 95).

This conceptual centrality of the colonial encounter is compelling for another reason as well. In focusing on the ontological consequences of colonialism in this way, Glissant exposes fissures in the geo-political logic of the Eurocentric world order articulated by Carl Schmitt in *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. Second nomos refers to the geo-political ordering of the earth instituted in the wake of the conquest of the New World and subsequently consolidated through the nation-state system. In part of his analysis, Schmitt argues that the process of land appropriation characterizing colonial encounter provided "the ontological, historical, and legal ground for any political/social ordering of human life" (Zimmer 139). This grounding is secured by the *nomos* (law) of the earth itself, which Schmitt explains as follows:

> She [the earth] contains law within herself, as a reward of labor; she manifests law upon herself, as fixed boundaries; and she sustains law above herself, as a public sign of order. Law is bound to the earth and related to the earth. . . .

> The *sea* knows no such apparent unity of space and law, of order and orientation. . . . On the sea, fields cannot be planted and firm lines cannot be engraved. (42; original emphasis)

Schmitt inscribes here a firm ontological distinction between earth and sea in order to be able to posit the earth as a firm, absolute ground of being. But what is striking about this analysis is that the implication that the earth, as opposed to the sea, would know the unity of order and orientation, that it would be naturally predisposed to sustain imprints on its surface. Certainly, the earth can be cleared and plowed, usually yielding as a result produce that sustains human life. But when Schmitt writes that "the solid ground of the earth is delineated by fences, enclosures, boundaries, walls, houses and other constructs," and that "*then*, the orders and orientations of human social life become apparent. *Then*, . . . forms of power and domination become visible" (42; added emphasis), he blurs the line between the metaphysical and the historical orders. It is as if the territorial impulse, land-appropriation, has always already been the law of the earth and not a socio-historical practice. In other words, Schmitt naturalizes historical contingencies so as to be able to offer a normative theory of land appropriation as *the* ground of the civil society and of international law, consequently foreclosing the possibility of envisioning non-possessive and non-territorial alternatives to communal life.

Glissant works against this ontological appropriation of the concept of the earth by foregrounding the disruptiveness carried in the folds of history. He looks at its underside: not at the national flags on the masts of European ships venturing into the Americas, extensions of national sphere of influence, but at the ships' bellies crowding with dispossessed Africans, and not at the rituals of sovereignty Columbus performs in

the Caribbean,[46] but at the massacred bodies of the indigenous populations whose remains texture Antillean earth, "les os étouffés dans la terre" (*Le Discours antillais* 28). Thus while for Schmitt, the colonial encounter inaugurates a new stage of geo-political organization, where the New World space is parceled up and distributed among the competing spheres of European influence and where the law of the earth is presumed to support and stabilize this organization, Glissant elaborates a notion of a non-appropriable earth, trembling, burning, malleable, and errant, which resists geo-political instrumentalization. This altered relationship to the earth is an effect of the lived experience in the Caribbean in the wake of the colonial encounter, which undoes the possibility of a symbiotic relationship with the land for the colonized as much as for the colonizers. Peter Hitchcock explains, "for the slaves, [the land] was something they were forcibly brought to and placed upon, for the owners, the békés, it was a means to an end; for the indentured servants, it was something they worked around; for no one has it been an inextricable part of their being, the very fabric of their subjectivity, their island identity" (38). Thus while Schmitt "takes as [his] premise the foundational role of the New World for the inauguration of a world order" (Byrd 122), Glissant shows how the interlocking experiences of displacement and dispossession in the New World fissure the habitual idea of foundation, of ground, as a stable ontological support of a cultural or a political being. Glissant's analysis also denaturalizes land appropriation as constitutively engendered by the earth and resituates this practice as a socio-historical attitude, contingent and subject to critique and change.

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[46] From the log-book of Columbus's first journey: "Generally it was my wish to pass no island without taking possession of it. Though having annexed one it might be said we had annexed all" (60).

It is in this geo-political context that we can appreciate Glissant's critique of territorialism. Territory, a mechanism of political power and national integrity, is "quintessentially 'state space'" (Painter 1090). Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert explain that "[t]erritory is a bounded space which there is a compulsion to defend and secure—to claim a particular kind of sovereignty—against infringements by others who are perceived to not belong" (16). Territory, then, and the nation state it underwrites, is a mechanism of exclusion that oppositionally consolidates identity and difference as belonging and non-belonging, and justifies the perpetuation of military and legal violence in the name of national security. Further, Glissant points out that territory feeds on expansion and in consequence legitimates conquest and appropriation of other land: "Le territoire est une base pour la conquête," Glissant writes, "[l]e territoire exige qu'on y plante et légitime la filiation. Le territoire se définit par ses limites, qu'il faut étendre" (*Poétique de la Relation* 166).

Against this territorial rapaciousness Glissant affirms the earth that permits to envision non-appropriative ways of relating to alterity and of inhabiting the world, and to imagine communal life otherwise than through the strictures of a nation. It is perhaps because of this different notion of the ground that Glissant's political intervention has been misunderstood by critics such as Peter Hallward and Nick Nesbitt who identify in the "early Glissant" a firm commitment to the Martinican national cause (Hallward) and to the politics of decolonization à la Fanon (Nesbitt). In contrast, according to Nesbitt, the "late Glissant" abandons his political loyalties in favor of "an increasingly abstract, politically resigned postmodernism" (*Voicing Memory* 170). Hallward in turn accuses Glissant that in his post-*Caribbean Discourse* phase the writer "moves . . . from a critique

of dispossession to its effective affirmation" (444). I present briefly both these criticisms and then suggest another reading of how Glissant engages the problem of the political.

Hallward identifies Glissant's early work (that is from *Soleil de la conscience* through *Le Discours antillais*) a staunch commitment to Martinican national specificity. In this phase, Hallward maintains, "Glissant insists upon the necessarily particular, grounded and conscious means [i.e. the nation] toward the universal End" (443). He finds support for this claim in an excerpt from *Le Discours antillais* where Glissant articulates the importance of national literature for the collective life in the Antilles. Hallward quotes in English:

> a national literature [. . .] must signify—and if it doesn't [. . .] it remains regionalist, that is folkloric and obsolete—the rapport of one people to another in the Diverse [*le Divers*], that which it brings to the totalization. (qtd. in Hallward 443)[47]

Ironically, Hallward leaves out the following, crucial to my mind, sentence—"C'est sa fonction analytique et politique, laquelle ne va pas sans remise en question de soi-même"—where Glissant specifies that the analytical and political function of national literature must simultaneously throw itself—its own specificity, boundedness, and the temptation towards self-enclosure—into question. Such self-undermining is crucial if this collective self-articulation is to partake in *le Divers*, which is unmistakably a category of Relation: "Le Divers a besoin de la présence des peuples, non plus comme objet à

[47] I have quoted this fragment in French in the previous section of this chapter: "Une littérature nationale . . . doit signifier la nomination des peuples nouveaux, ce qu'on appelle leur enracinement, et qui est aujourd'hui leur lutte. . . . Elle doit signifier—et si elle ne le fait pas . . . elle reste régionaliste, c'est-à-dire folklorisante et caduque—le rapport d'un peuple à l'autre dans le Divers, ce qu'il apporte à la totalisation. *C'est sa fonction analytique et politique, laquelle ne va pas sans remise en question de soi-même*" (332; added emphasis).

sublimer, mais comme projet à mettre en relation. Le Même requiert l'Être, le Divers établit la Relation" (*Le Discours antillais* 327). Given this wider context of the quote, Hallward's conclusions that "Glissant's early work remains compatible with what might be called the *classically* postcolonial gesture, associated with Fanon and Césaire: the conversion of a 'passively' colonized object into an actively post-colonial subject" and that "the preliminary task of the national subject is its own re-possession, the reversal of an inherited dispossession" (443; original emphasis) miss the point that Glissant, already in this "early" work, rearticulates the ground on which the collective self-articulation is to take place. Further, the "ultimate end" of this collective being, which Glissant indeed frequently refers to as national, is not a post-colonial re-possession of the land, but rather a kind of an offering of its historical and cultural specificity in Relation, where such idiosyncrasies, in the place of oppositionally delineated identities, reveal inter- and intra-cultural links, crossings, and undoings. I would suggest, then, that Hallward misreads Glissant's early work because, in holding onto Glissant's commitment to Antillean, or Martinican, specificity, he misses the fact that already in these early texts Glissant has begun his radical revision of the notion of the ground that underwrites it. Already in these early texts, Glissant thinks about the Caribbean as a site of Relation that becomes intelligible through the region's experience of dispossession: "leur analyse [de tels processus de dépossesion] éclaire de manière utile les rouages, les modes cachés de la Relation, les mises en rapport qui la fondent" (*Le Discours antillais* 105).

While Hallward criticizes Glissant for his "cultivation of displacement" and dispossession in the later work (459), Nesbitt worries about the absence from Glissant's work of the category of truth, a criticism resulting from Nesbitt's disparaging view of

Glissant's late work as "politically resigned postmodernism." In his recent analysis of Glissant, Nesbitt says that "absent from consideration is an interrogation of the judgmental criteria establishing the validity of any and all such procedures [of the relation of singular multiplicities to the totality that encompasses them] as they variously unfolded in Glissantian *Tout-monde*" (*Caribbean Critique* 240). This absence of the external normative criteria by which to judge political efficacy of relational exchanges troubles Nesbitt for we lose in this way the ability to assess whether Relation unfolds according to a desired trajectory of the decolonial project, which assumes here a prescriptive character. Therefore, Nesbitt is likewise disappointed with the developments of Glissant's later work as an abandonment of the nationalist goal of decolonization: "As a project of mere criticism rather than critique, Glissant's 'Poetics of Relation' definitively abandons the Fanonian struggle for an alternative structuration of social reality (as *nation*) that motivates to varying degrees Glissant's writings from the 1950s to *Le Discours antillais*" (*Caribbean Critique* 245; original emphasis).

In contrast, by oscillating between Glissant's early texts and his later work, I have attempted to show that there is no such significant cut in Glissant's critical trajectory that would permit us to identify an abdication of his political commitments. Certainly, works such as *Poétique de la Relation*, *Traité du Tout-monde*, or *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* highlight the planetary orientation of Glissant's thought; it is likewise true that these texts foreground the aesthetic aspects of Relation, which might in part account why Hallward and Nesbitt interpret these works as de-politicized.[48] Glissant, however, does

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[48] Nesbitt strongly condemns what he sees as an aesthetic turn in Glissant's work as "the hollow aestheticization of global experience via an evocation of culinary tourism" (*Voicing Memory* 173). However, in her compelling analysis of culinary tropes in Glissant's work (and more broadly in Francophone Caribbean literature), Loichot demonstrates that food metaphors materialize Glissant's most

not compromise his political commitments, and remains interested in “an alternative structuration of social reality,” as his unwaning interest in the epic suggests. What he does demand, though, is an ability to think against our habitual conceptual attachments to what culture, nation, identity, and community should properly be.[49]

In closing, I want to address Hallward’s charge that Glissant abandons a critique of dispossession in favor of its active celebration. Butler and Athanasiou have recently commented on the double valence of dispossession: “dispossession can be a term that marks the limits of self-sufficiency and that establishes us as relational and interdependent beings. Yet dispossession is precisely what happens when populations lose their land, their citizenship, their means of livelihood, and become subject to military and legal violence” (3). Dispossession, then, signifies in two ways. First, it highlights fracture at the heart of presumed ontological fullness and self-sufficiency, and exposes the fantasy of a sovereign subject; in that sense we are all always already dispossessed. Secondly, however, it simultaneously points to real, lived sense of injustice where “dispossession works as an authoritative . . . apparatus of controlling and appropriating the spatiality, mobility, affectivity, potentiality, and relationality of (neo-)colonized subjects.” “In such context,” the authors explain, “dispossession offers language to express experiences of uprootedness, occupation, destruction of homes and social bonds, . . . unlivability, and struggles for self-determination” (11). The conceptual challenge posed by “dispossession” is to formulate a critique of those appropriative behaviors that induce injustice and harm, and simultaneously “to continue to ask about that profound

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important concepts and foreground “the culinary as a crucial site of political expression and interaction” (*The Tropics Bite Back* 3).

[49] Other responses to Hallward and Nesbitt include Celia Britton’s “Globalization and Political Action in the Work of Edouard Glissant” and Charles Forsdick’s “Late Glissant: History, ‘World Literature’, and the Persistence of the Political.”

pull or temptation to counter the dispossession of human beings with more robust ideas of human possession" (35).

In his insistence that the earth cannot become a territory again, Glissant attempts to decouple claims to land and to self-determination (for instance in the form of food self-sufficiency, as proposed in *Poétique de la Relation*) from the sense of possessiveness and from territorial thinking. At the same time, his texts allow a critical assessment of the conditions of destitution in the Caribbean, and recognize the urgency of affirming Caribbean peoples in their geographic space. Glissant offers such an affirmation in the form of poetics because, as McKittrick wrote, "the poetic of landscape are not derived from the desire for socioeconomic possession. . . . The claim to place should not be naturally followed by material ownership and black repossession but rather by a grammar of liberation, through which ethical *human*-geographies can be recognized and expressed" (xxiii). The ethical aspect of Glissant's work involves recognition of a human entanglement with the world and with other humans that is simultaneously brutal and full of potential for the emergence of new ways of living-together. In this context, the Antillean epic based in Relation contributes to the open totality of the world a story of communal life, resilience, and creativity unfolding out of and through instabilities and violence of history. While such an ethic perhaps does not fulfill the requirements for normative, transcendent truth criteria Nesbitt finds lacking in Glissant, it nevertheless calls for accountability for a differential exposure to dispossession, and it might allow for an opening of a new scene of political contestation.

Conclusion

Reading the Texts of Reality

At one point along his epic journey through the Caribbean, Derek Walcott's Shabine addresses his audience:

> You ever look up from some lonely beach
> and see a far schooner? Well, when I write
> this poem, each phrase go be soaked in salt;
> I go draw and knot every line as tight
> as ropes in this rigging; in simple speech
> my common language go be the wind,
> my pages the sails of the schooner *Flight* (5)

The passage opens with a visual evocation of the schooner and elicits a forthrightly affirmative answer. Yet, the intelligibility of the image and the credence of perception (perceiving the schooner as schooner) is immediately questioned by a materialist depiction of the poetic craft that exposes the meaning of reality as much less determinate. If the ability to answer Shabine's question depends on an understanding of difference as operating between discrete, bounded entities and as bringing coherent elements into being (i.e. a schooner is not a poem, a sail is not a page), then Shabine's portrayal of his poetic-nautical activity renders such distinctions incoherent. His meaning-making process rearranges the pattern of difference into a complex web of poetic associations that

releases the perceived reality from soldered meanings. Most strikingly, the rigor of an idiom that signifies a making of a sharp distinction—"to draw a line"—collapses as the verses express an impossibility of holding tight to an enclosed meaning. The enjambed simile "every line as tight / as ropes in this rigging" breaks through the end of the line, confounding poetic lines with the ropes holding the ship together.

This entanglement evokes a kind of material concreteness while, paradoxically, imbuing reality—what appears to our eyes ("ship") and what is experienced corporeally ("wind")—with a textual existence sustaining the poetic character of the world. In other words, that which appears out of such an interweaving reveals its propensity towards self-variation, towards meaning in multiple ways rather than according to a pre-determined logic of proper identity. And by rearticulating the ways in which the corporeal reality of the world unfolds, by issuing a call to engage this reality through a reading— an attentiveness to the intricacies and polyvocality of the material world and a continuous derivation of new meanings from its inexhaustible text—Shabine's epic offers a song that holds together the historical circumstances of the Caribbean with a promise of multiplicity that unsettles Caribbean worlds from the evidentiary, essentializing frame upon which ethnography, as "a European discourse of knowledge about foreign cultures" (Kullberg 2), depends.

The poetic works studied in this dissertation all propel a movement into terrains of difference and ambiguity, and demand the abandoning of colonial ethnographic and geographic essentialisms. If ethnography can be understood as "an area belonging to the colonial discourses that have contributed to mapping and controlling the region [of the Caribbean]" (Kullberg 3), then Walcott's insistence on poetically confounding what is

seen, Nichols's form of metaphorical reality in which the sea and "see" are enmeshed, and Glissant's opaque, non-assimilationist aesthetics offered as a response to the appropriating colonial grasp all highlight a harnessing of literariness as a challenge to the reifying, overdetermining effects of the (neo)colonial "ocularcentrism" (Martin jay qtd. in Ashcroft 125). In their unique ways, these works articulate what Glissant has called "le droit à l'opacité" (*Poétique de la Relation* 203), the right not to be seen, that is grasped, discerned, located, and reduced within Western epistemic frameworks. "Si nous examinons le processus de la 'compréhension' des êtres et des idées dans la perspective de la pensée occidentale," Glissant continues,

> nous retrouvons à son principe l'exigence de cette transparence. Pour pouvoir te 'comprendre' et donc t'accepter, il me faut ramener ton épaisseur àce barème idéel qui me fournit motif à comparaisons et peut-être à jugements. Il me faut réduire. (*Poétique de la Relation* 204)

Claims to opacity for these poets are thus not so much aesthetic experimentation for the sake of experimentation alone, but rather assertions of ontological resistance against Western epistemic appropriation. In this way, their work articulates a distinctly poetic mode of decolonial thinking, whereby the pull towards comprehension is countered with a notion of ontology that resists certainties and distinctions upon which knowledge thrives.

This poetic decolonial vision differs from decolonial thought as conceptualized by Walter Mignolo, who counters the epistemic organization of Western modernity with the multiplicity of the localized knowledges in the Third World. Inevitably, Mignolo foregrounds "geo-historical and bio-graphical foundations of knowledge" (*The Darker*

Side of Western Modernity 94), and the urgency with which he insists on the necessity to locate knowledge in the geography and experience of the Third World forecloses the possibility of interrogating these very foundations. Hence, his vision of what such a grounded, decolonial thinking would look like predictably ascribes fixed ontological positions to Third World peoples: "Are we anthropos or humanitas, black or Indian, developed or undeveloped, Jews or Muslims, Christians or Israelites? I am not saying either that there is modern/colonial determinism, for I am talking about built-in constructions of modern epistemology. I am saying that it just is, and it is our ethical responsibility to know and understand the house of modernity/coloniality . . . we all inhabit" (94).[50] What is especially disconcerting in this account is the acquiescence to the classifying and appropriating logic of colonialism, namely that the epistemic and ontological ordering of the world it brought into being *just is* and the best "we" can do is figure "our" allocated place and stay put in the modern/colonial architecture.

In contrast, Walcott, Nichols, and Glissant all demonstrate that "what is" can surprise and unsettle, that the injurious grasp of colonialism, far-reaching and enduring as it has been, has not been absolute, and that Caribbean places and identities have continued to elude its unifying, assimilationist, and discriminating logic. Their poetics mount a critique of the sovereignty of sight as providing unquestioned and unmediated access to knowledge. It is a decolonial effort insofar as it intervenes in the ideological hegemony of the West. As postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft explains, "[t]he way in which the West has perceived vision and spatiality since classical times, . . . its habit of objectivism, the revolutionary development of modern mapping, . . . the emergence of the discipline of geography, in short, the whole gamut of European ways of constructing

[50] Ironically, the distinction between "black or Indian" could not hold in a place like Trinidad.

space and place comes into operation, including the separation of space and time and the 'disembedding' of local communities from their sense of lived place" (125).

In focusing on natural-historical-poetic textures in the poetry of Walcott, Nichols, and Glissant, my goal was to demonstrate how these poets trouble this "passion of the ocular" (Ashcroft 127) and engage the materiality of the world and how to inhabit it in ways that open up new modes of experiencing place in the diaspora. Moreover, texture appears as a key notion in this shift from seeing-as-knowing to a non-reductive relation with alterity:

> Des opacités peuvent coexister, confluer, tramant des tissus dont la véritable compréhension porterait sur *la texture de cette trame* et non pas sur la nature des composantes. Renoncer, pour un temps peut-être, à cette vieille hantise de surprendre le fond des natures. (*Poétique de la Relation* 204; added emphasis)

Glissant turns here to the idea of texture and to the metaphor of fabric because of how they foreground not the discrete, self-enclosed singularity of entities, but rather their entanglement and inextricability. The shift from the depth to the surface registered in this passage marks a departure from the "what," from the metaphysical question about the nature of things, to the "how," to the question that calls for an attention to the process, time and space, of the interweaving. Thinking through textures would require that we eventually abandon clear-cut distinctions and identities (such as master and slave, colonizer and colonized, nature and history) that exercise control over how we think about decolonial possibilities and, more broadly, about forms of political critique, and think through interdependencies and how we are entangled in the story of the other, both

in sustaining and in mutilating ways. Such an acknowledgment of interdependency might provoke as of yet unimagined forms of political figurations, alliances, and futures.

It is such an imaginative and conceptual shift that is inscribed in the eco-epic articulations of Caribbean collective life. Wilson Harris concludes his essay "Continuity and Discontinuity" with an evocation of what is at stake in the claim on the epic made from the site of marginality:

> The true capacity of marginal and disadvantaged cultures resides in their genius to tilt the field of civilization so that one may visualize boundaries of persuasion in new and unexpected light to release a different apprehension of reality, the language of reality, a different *reading* of texts of reality. (183; original emphasis)

Harris foregrounds here not only the altered perception of reality in the collective stories of the marginalized, but also a method of engaging with the texts of reality, as the italicized word *reading* suggests. If reading refers to tracing the minute operations of difference in a text, to engaging closely the complexities and tensions of a text, then the insistence that reality is likewise such a text that demands to be read implies the inherent complexity, ambiguity, and polyvocality of "what is." Reading the texts of reality would involve reading against the distinctions and boundaries that organize and solidify what exists, countering in the way the domination of sight as the habitual mode of engaging with the world.

However, given Harris's interest in the natural world of the Americas, his account of reality as a text that demands to be read explicitly bears on how we approach and engage with nature. In this dissertation, I have taken up Harris's suggestion to *read* texts of nature in Caribbean stories of belonging. In this approach, I have hoped to explore

how natural environment signifies textually in ways that depart from the frequent concern in post-colonial ecocriticism with crisis, underdevelopment, environmental injustice, or pollution. Following the textuality of nature in the work of Derek Walcott, Grace Nichols, and Édouard Glissant allows us to understand how literary, aesthetic, and theoretical articulations of Caribbean belonging transform spaces of constraint into sites of regained humanity.

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