What Is Trauma to the Future?
*On Glissant’s Poetics*

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How then to do things with tears?—Deliver us Zion, from the mist. Kill us in the light.

*Allen Grossman, “How to do things with tears”*

In “The Formation of Intellectuals,” Antonio Gramsci writes:

> It can be seen that the “organic” intellectuals which each new class creates with itself and elaborates in its own progressive development are for the most part “specializations” of partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type which the new class has brought to light.¹

The question of individual and collective identity is at stake in these remarks. Intellectual work, on Gramsci’s account, is both self-articulation and collective transformation. That is to say, the function of the intellectual is both to articulate the un(der)articulated inner-life of a class and to begin with nearly nothing. The intellectual, at least potentially, both transforms and creates the relation of subaltern classes to history—that is, to their muted history. This relation is always something new and so is a characteristic that differentiates the transformative creator, the “organic intellectual,” from the bourgeois institution of “the thinker.” Whereas the insti-
tution of the intellectual (professor, politician, labor organizer) re-
ifies the given ideology of the ruling corporative class—buttressing
what Althusser will later call ideological state apparatuses—the or-
ganic intellectual begins with another, perhaps “counter,” promise:
the future.

This function of the organic intellectual turns, at least in part,
on the bearing of an intelligible core upon the collective. The in-
tellectual brings that bearing to language. As the gathering point
of that bearing, language clusters the myriad forces of social and
economic class—the works and labors of those without an artic-
ulated history—to an emergent identity with a new or renewed
sense of collectivity. Indeed, this is why Gramsci, in “The Modern
Prince,” demarcates the difference between corporative and hege-
monic class in terms of the entrenchment of the former in history
and the “moral and intellectual” transformation of the latter into
the future.

In the following remarks, I would like to stage a confrontation
between this account of the intellectual and the consequences of
trauma for theory and theorizing. For trauma fundamentally alters
the terms of the intellectual’s work, and so the conditions under
which Gramsci’s organic intellectual labors must be reconceived.
Only then can it be enacted in response to that wake within which
shattered words are first born: living after catastrophe. Whose
trauma and what wake? As we shall see in what follows, the ques-
tion of specificity must be central to any account of trauma and its
relation to time. My concern here will be with the trauma of the
Middle Passage and the wake that goes by the name Caribbean,
engaging both in the work of Édouard Glissant. His work begins
with the Présence Africaine collective, which put him in close con-
tact with the Negritude movement and its early detractors, includ-
ing Frantz Fanon. As a poet, novelist, and essayist, Glissant is near
singularly dedicated to excavating the long shadow of the Middle
Passage in contemporary Caribbean poetics, politics, and matters
of New World identity. How is it that an identity can be—or even
could have been—formed out of such a painful, traumatic past?
What does the cultural work of the intellectual, rooted in the geog-
raphy of thinking (for Glissant, of course, Martinique and the West
Indies more broadly), produce in terms of a collective’s concern for a future? How is that future folded into the past?

With these questions, Glissant’s labors are situated precisely between these two forces: intellectual work as the formation of identity and the enigmatic situation of thinking after, and in the wake of, catastrophic trauma. And so we shall see how important it is to think the specificity of trauma in the transformation of wounds into a future.

I.

The question of trauma has been central to various cultural, literary, and philosophical projects over the past decade-plus. Much, if not most, of that conversation is guided by two threads: the experience(s) of the Holocaust and the relation of trauma to the past. Thus, the problematics developed in this conversation typically concern issues gathered around the question of the representation of traumatic experiences in and of the Holocaust. Representation as memory, of course, concerns the relation of the present to the past—namely, how pastness can be and is made present. The experience of catastrophe introduces enigmas to representation—perhaps determining its failure—that have been well treated in both the memoir format and theoretical reflection. What does it mean to relate to the unrepresentable? To the extent that this problem has registered in philosophy—typically under the rubric of mourning—the emphasis has almost exclusively been on the relation of trauma to the past, that is, to the function and dysfunction of memory in relation to an immemorial.

For good reason. Trauma marks a wound in time. The wound to time is the consequence of catastrophic trauma’s destruction of the intelligible core that lies at or in the originary event of memory. I qualify the term trauma here with catastrophic to underscore the important difference between the putative traumatic birth of subjectivity in, for example, Emmanuel Levinas’s and Jean-Luc Marion’s work and the historically decisive (non)event of catastrophic loss. The impressional moment of catastrophe is rendered as a blow to the singular and collective psyche, rupturing whatever lived as
the border between memory and historiography, thereby marking with ashes, not words, the irreducible difference that remains between disaster and its memorialization.

But the economy of this irreducible difference, in the case of most literature on Holocaust trauma, has remained inextricably tied to history. The Holocaust, then, becomes that rupture in “history” (as such? or European?) that cannot be rendered or retrieved within conventional modes of narrative and didactic representation. What sense are we to make of this aesthetic crisis? Surely it is not only a question of rethinking aesthetic strategies (though it is certainly that). Gramsci’s work is instructive here, read alongside Adorno’s remark that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz: what demands are placed on the intellectual after Auschwitz, after the catastrophic trauma that manifests the barbarism of culture and erased history’s moment for its victims and survivors? The intellectual is charged with so much: thinking in the ashes, thinking out of the ashes, thinking after the ashes. But it is always a thinking that attempts to render, even just as a failure of rendering, what has been and how it makes what preceded it impossible to think again. This, I believe, is the fullest sense of Adorno’s new categorical imperative, and one cannot separate intellectual work from life after the catastrophe, lived (in some sense) within that imperative.

Trauma, on this account, is as much about the living as it is about the dead. Indeed, it is about thinking the living and the dead at once, thinking within that mute space of intersection that we call both disaster and survival. He survives. She survives. They survive. We survive. In Celan’s disastrous turn of phrase, “the world is gone, I must carry you.” Catastrophic trauma folds victim, survivor, witness, and witness to the witness into one and the same imperative: never the same poetry, never the same culture, never the same metaphysics, never the same theodicy, never this catastrophe, never any catastrophe, never again. And all of these gods must be transformed as we begin again. Trauma is about the dead, surely, but it is also for the living as a relation to the dead, as obligated to the dead with unbearable imperatives, and so always charged with the duties of beginning again with a new, renewed history.
II.

Precisely because the question of trauma has, for the most part, been dominated by the European context, the primary concern has been with the relation of trauma to the past—the past as manifest in memory, and so the past’s problematic relation to the present. A partial exception to this trend, to use just one example, is Peter Novick’s work, culminating in his *The Holocaust in American Life*, which treats questions of trauma and memory through Maurice Halbwachs’s notion of collective memory. But this still leaves futurity as futurity untreated; indeed, it is the mixture of the past with the concerns of the present (and so toward the future) that marks memory for Novick as an essentially political event. The sense of the future, on Novick’s rendering, is always one looped through the past and present, never beginning *new* in the wake of trauma as a devastation of memory. Rather, the future is always a strategic concern for Novick, a site within which struggles over the meaning of the past are negotiated, but never a question of *creating* after catastrophe. Negotiation and creation are not the same. Indeed, the meaning of catastrophe, of what it even means to remember disastrous loss, is the very thing Novick *entwines* with strategies concerning present issues and future tasks.

The Caribbean context alters the terms of this kind of relation to the past and future. To wit: discourse surrounding the Holocaust always marks the transformation of “our” relation to history. Thus Adorno articulates the “new categorical imperative,” that one ought to “arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself.”3 Benjamin’s reading of Klee’s angel of history in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” marks that same kind of transformation of a history, where one no longer sees the march of progress in “a chain of events,” but only “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.”4 But where does the Caribbean face, and what faces him or her in that facing? Where is the wreckage of the Middle Passage? This question breaks the Caribbean question of trauma from that of the Holocaust, for *piles of wreckage are still history, even if an impossible history*. Where are the bodies of the
Middle Passage—the memorial sites of loss, however ruined—in that wreckage? These bodies are not mere figures; they are the very condition of memory and the possibility of folding memory into the future. *The Middle Passage*, no passage for the drowned. Drowning is not ashes, water is not earth, and bodies disappear differently. These are two different materialities, and therefore two different figures of loss, which in turn marks an important difference in the senses of loss between Europe and the Americas. This difference alters what we mean by futurity, as well as the terms in which one might object to fantasies of the future. For Glissant, the Caribbean *is* futurity precisely because of the abyssal effect and affect of loss. Impossible history is not the loss of what was. It is, rather, what it means to begin without even the memory of having once possessed. The Middle Passage is just this much violence, and yet life goes on. At the shoreline, then on the plantation (which Glissant calls “one of the wombs of the world” in *Poetics of Relation*), the future is a kind of facticity, not a project. The name *Caribbean* is itself inseparable from the openness of what is to come. The future, insofar as it can be taken up, offers *less than nothing* as wreckage within which a movement to the future can take root. This is the Caribbean context. “Roots,” Glissant writes, “make the commonality of errantry and exile, for in both instances roots are lacking. We must begin with that.” 5 How roots are lacked and precisely what figures *this* sense of the loss of rootedness are decisive in thinking trauma, memory, and the future in the Caribbean context.

Where to begin?

Beginning is nothing other than orientation toward the future, though the grounds or nongrounds of that orientation are of ultimate significance. Intellectual work toward the future—this work is always some form of historiography. The act of creation in the Caribbean context is marked by history, no doubt, but in a different manner. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant writes that

The language of the Caribbean artist does not originate in the obsession with celebrating his inner self; this inner self is inseparable from the future evolution of his community.

But what the artist expresses, reveals, and argues in his work, the people have not ceased to live in reality. The problem is that
this collective life has been constrained by the process of consciousness. . . . That is why he is his own ethnologist, historian, linguist, painter of frescoes, architect.6

The Caribbean organic intellectual is his own—everything. His or her specialty is not a specialty at all; in contrast to Gramsci, Glissant’s intellectual does not attend to the specificity of social class but rather to the entire crashing of impossible history on the shores of the New World. What does that make of beginnings? What kind of subjectivity begins at the shores of arrival, in the wake of a specific kind of less than loss that drowns, rather than burns, history?

A first clue. Glissant affirms (with all due caveats) the Deleuzian notion of nomadic subjectivity in the opening pages of Poetics of Relation (1990)—an affirmation continued across the 1990s in Introduction à une poétique du divers (1996) and up through Philosophie de la relation (2009)—precisely because of this Caribbean context. This is to say, nomadic is not the qualifier of subjectivity as the result of a critique of metaphysics, nor does it respond to various epistemological paradoxes. Glissant’s nomad has another materiality and therefore another genesis. Caribbean subjectivity is nomadic because of the very conditions in which Glissant finds Africans in the Americas, because of the work that needs to be done in the wake of this trauma, and so for reasons of where he begins as a thinker in the fullest, organic sense.

I want to get at this sense of the nomadic in Glissant by tracking his thought through three conceptual and figurative movements: birth, roots, and death. These three movements work across what Glissant calls, in his introduction to the “Riveted Blood” poems, a “tortured geography.”7 This tortured geography writes Glissant as much as he writes about it; in conceiving births and roots, one writes as the living without the place of the dead, in the geos of whatever remains, or, in this case, cannot remain of their bodies. One is written by one’s birth, moved to word by one’s roots, not just out of respect for the dead (though that is enough). Trauma is as much for the living as for the dead. Trauma is only trauma for those who survive and live from out of and within the disaster. In Caribbean Discourse, Glissant writes:
The spoken narrative is not concerned with the dead. We stand our mouths open under the sun like bagasse, silenced from elsewhere. We encumber our moons with ceremonies that lack fire. . . . Purify the breath until it reveals the harsh taste of the land: bring breath to the death of rocks and landscape. (CD, 237)

_Under the sun like bagasse, the fibrous remains of sugar cane drained of their juices, left in the sun without the resources of replenishment:_ Again, this is a different kind of loss. This is the traumatic arrival of “us,” Glissant’s “us,” the Caribbean context. To write trauma, then, is to be written by it—thus, we are “us,” a collective in the accusative—and to return always to what remains after the draining and drowning, always with only a wholly gratuitous gesture of creation, silenced from elsewhere first by the harsh taste of the land. Geos that does not nourish roots but underpins the bagasse and sets it in the sun without nourishment from the water, for water is first just as bitter as the land: death without the body as wreckage or remainder. For Glissant, then, trauma is to be written beginning with the tortured a-geography (what cannot be mapped but is still landscape and place) of the ocean, from the absent rocks of departure and bitter sands of arrival, and with the salt in the earth, the water, the wound. Silenced from elsewhere. Breath brought to death.

The nomadic subject, this rhizome, writes as a response to tortured geography. From the rhizomatic subject we can begin to understand how futurity is created in a posttopological logic captured in Glissant’s notions of the Imaginary and Relation. Here Glissant works in the confrontational space between Gramsci’s organic intellectual and the demands of writing after disaster.

**BIRTHABYSS**

There can be no birth out of trauma without abyss. What does it mean to be born a subject, to be born into a collective-which-is-not-one in the wake of the catastrophe that is the Middle Passage? Glissant’s account takes us back to the boat and the ocean, linked as they are to the conditions of this birth and saturated as they are with abyssal depths. From this, in this, and always with this, birth is terrifying. In _Poetics of Relation_, Glissant writes:
What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the boat... the belly of the boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a non-world from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss... This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under sentence of death.

The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands... the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green. (PR, 6)

This construction “womb abyss” is crucial for understanding the origins of the rhizomatic subject in the Caribbean context. It is worth recalling that Glissant calls the plantation, that first site of creolization, “a belly of the world” (PR, 75). But here Glissant is naming the birthplace of the shoreline, that immediate arrival after the Middle Passage. At this shoreline, at the threshold of this womb-space, there is no sense of arrival in-world. Nonworld is not death. Therein lies both the trauma and the necessity. Terror marks this birth as traumatic with the vanishing of the intelligible—“linked to the unknown.” The fact that birth comes with as many dead as living marks this birth with loss before the subject is capable of possession, so we cannot call it a birth as loss. We are already absent the terms necessary for loss to occur. Here, again, the distance between Europe and the Americas is opened. The European story of loss begins with possession and then undergoes the cindering of memory, whereas for Glissant arrival is first philosophy. Nothing precedes the shoreline. This is the first threshold: from the boat’s belly to the shore. And then the plantation.

The womb of the boat’s belly gives way to the new time of birth in the New World, and so to the Caribbean proper. This new time and birth is the end of the sea at the sand, an end of the terror and the beginning of trauma for the living. The dead mark the time of
this birth, of the living and their sense of what it means to go on, but as a peculiar and utterly devastating absence: the balls and chains gone green. To repeat, water and fire leave different senses of nothingness. For the Caribbean context, this is all the more less than loss, for the body does not remain as a haunting image, nor does it remain as a trace of itself in ashes. The ball and chain gone green. The metal that decays—*this* sense of ruin—is only the remainder of what held bodies to the terrifying. Birth is marked with this time as an absence more absent than loss and its traces.

**ROOTSABYSS**

Birth sets the human person. *Sets* in the sense of putting on a surface that, however shifty, might sustain one’s weight. But the abyssal conditions of birth in *this* trauma cannot sustain. Indeed, the very conditions that define survival in Holocaust literatures split history into before and after disaster, devastating memory and rootedness in the black hole that is trauma. Glissant starts from another place. What remains is not a split in history, nor a black hole that stands between what was and what lives as ruins. The ruins of the Middle Passage are figured by Glissant as the deterioration of the ball and chain at the bottom of the ocean. But this is not a vessel, however fractured and ruined, of birth. Rather, and decisively, it is the ruined remains of what held a body—figuring, then, as millions of bodies—captive in the belly of the vessel and sank them into the sea’s abyss. A birth vessel that could never be one.

Bodies do not mark this traumatic birth, as they do for Benjamin in “Theses on the Philosophy of History”; there are not bodies—decaying or ashen—in the shackles. Only the shackles—gone green—remain. Drown at the sea’s bottom. Lost. Salt, as treated in the *Black Salt* cycle, sits in the wound of those who survive, but it is also what destroys what cannot remain, what cannot even be conceived as loss: the body of the slave thrown overboard. Roots set and fail to take up in what is less than the remainder. There are not even the privileges of loss, namely, the object of mourning. Indeed, loss itself is stolen in the Middle Passage. So roots do not cling even to traces. In the poem “Gorée,” a reflection on the island off the coast of Senegal where slaves awaited vessels to the “New”
World, Glissant attempts to think back to this origin, but finds this movement strangled by absence.

He inhabited his cry treefull: his roots spilled into ravines shouting out.

He knotted into time’s gorge rawness from the deeps, and stayed many a wind-bare sail with his gaze.

He had no room to call upon surpassing, once steered between coast and bluff shore, in the harbor island where yesterday’s dreams garrotte dreams of tomorrow to their death. (*BS*, 117)

Strangulation of dreams, strangled by the iron clasp of transport—this generates the specific absence of the Caribbean context. Further, from Caribbean Discourse:

Off the coast of Senegal, Gorée, the island before the open sea, the first step towards madness.

Then the sea, never seen from the depths of the ship’s hold, punctuated by drowned bodies that sowed in its depths explosive seeds of absence. (*CD*, 9)

Memory of Gorée seals abyssal beginning by locating the movement, not from Africa to the Americas, but from *having already lost* Africa and being conceived as a people in the boat’s belly. The seed of New World identity and identities. “Seeds of absence”—the very phrase fails to make sense except as the failure of memory, not as a failure to recall, but a failure of any relation of recollection. In this failure, the peculiar sense of root is glimpsed. Roots that emerge toward (not from) the absence of the depths of the sea, depths that, as we saw above, do not even bear the remainder. So, the rhizomatic subject must be born unrooted in order to maintain any hope of creating on and in a tortured geography.

**DEATHABYSS**

Trauma is as much for the living as for the dead, thinking both at once. Let us maintain our context: the living live by the seeds of their birth, an absence before loss, for the time of trauma is marked always by death. Death is here not the death of those who
suffer but of those whose voice is absented by both the terror of the unintelligible and the bodyless nonremainder of the ball and chain gone green. In a word, a voice absented by abyss. Abyss encases birth and replaces the soil that roots might seek or from which they might spring forth. The abyss of this death, then, is at once birth and root. And in this death-abyss, that which makes futurity possible emerges. From “Wounds” in *Black Salt*:

Lands. Roots gone silent. Africa and far from its name, islands Abandoned in death agony, banished from the world, naked With blood clogged by nights’ burden Polynesia dying dark he sights you And denies you come with burden and means you be fruitless The way we see a rooster in the gold of old corn die A bitter glittering death. (*BS*, 98)

This last line is crucial for understanding what, for Glissant, the trauma of the Middle Passage means to futurity. DeathAbyss is bitter death, yes. But also a glittering death.

What does it mean that death glitters? Glissant, in a passage from *Caribbean Discourse* cited above, figured the subjectivity born of this trauma as the bagasse, the fibrous remains of sugar cane wrung dry—that is, living in the nonworld wake of an abyssal death. But death is also glittering. Mouths open to the sun, wrung dry of all that might nourish, yet still capable of reflecting that sun, sparkling, decorating. This opens the time of catastrophic trauma back onto a possible future. DeathAbyss with a decorative sparkle. Historians falter; poets remain and have the future (Glissant’s nuanced reorientation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*). Glissant writes, again from *Black Salt*:

It was the salt in time’s bowl. Nothing was left but an obscure urn of words. Is there a morning? The darkness of course bodes well—when words are shining on the steps up to the house. In this realm of our hands. (*BS*, 107)

Salt in time’s bowl. The peculiar temporality of this trauma lies in the figure of salt in time’s bowl, the salt in the wound that makes
time catastrophic time. This figure recalls Primo Levi’s account of the temporality of the camps in *Survival in Auschwitz*. In that work Levi describes the temporality of the camps as the loss of any fold in time, any sense of sequentiality; in death-camp time, each moment lies distinct without relation to past or future. This is in no small part what prompts Levi to ask in that work: “is this a man?” Does the human remain without this fold of time? But that is time in the camp; the time of survival is altogether different. Sequentiality re-emerges in survival, however fractured. This is what it means for trauma to work for the living as much as the dead. What, then, are the folds in time for Glissant? Survival born of and unrooted in DeathAbyss folds differently, as it is without the distant shores of a burned history. There is instead this drowned history. There is no fold into the past, then, except to arrive at the depths of the sea where only rotting shackles lie as absence of memory. The beginning is where the ball and chain go green, but that undergoing does not fold over into an economy of visibility. At the sea’s bottom, memory is drowned, and the problem of making a future commences without even the terms of loss being rendered visible. Again, *the distance between Europe and the Americas*. So there is beginning, and so time folded into a future, but without the same fold—however ruptured—into the past. Glissant’s survivor—the Caribbean itself, the tortured geos of sand and sea, the death-arrival-birth—is not Levi’s survivor for the very reason that the sequentiality of time does not suffer a suspension and fracture. There is loss of loss, pure annihilation. And so it begins there, where the ball and chain go green, birthing to the shores where the DeathAbyss unroots, yet glitters still in its bitterness.

III.

The rhizome is generated by these conditions: the intersection and clinging of abyss to birth, root and the death that brings birth back to its glittering bitterness. The bitterness glitters; there is, in one sense or another, light. A glitter to and after what is drowned? How can this make sense? Simply put: life goes on, however marked it may be by the abyssal absence of birth and root and death. Life
goes on, so trauma is a beginning as much as it is an end. For the Caribbean situation, this beginning is the unrooted subject, the rhizome, the nomad.

What does it mean, then, to think as nomad working from the bitter glittering death that is birth and root? Glissant’s “answer” is simple: the persistence of the Imaginary. By Imaginary, Glissant here means the ability to imagine, conceive, and know the world otherwise. This imaginary is organic in the sense of a connectedness to land and body, but this is always a sense of organicity read against itself; there is always the tortured geography and the salt in the wound. The Caribbean context—Caribbeanness (Antillanité)—is therefore a method for Glissant, not a state of being. The formation of the Imaginary, creativity and its actualization in creation, works with the tools of BirthAbyss, RootAbyss, and DeathAbyss (my terms), but not in order to overcome them. Rather, they provide the posttopological map—indeed, a “map” rendering topology impossible—deployed in response to that tortured geography that renders the world opaque. And always rich in its opaqueness, giving a bitter-yet-nourishing salt to the rhizome. This is organic intellectual work without the privileges of loss. It is, rather, intellectual work of repetition without resolution, sustained contradiction without neutralizing the right to obscurity. Glissant writes:

An “intellectual” effort, with its repetitive thrusts (repetition has a rhythm), its contradictory moments, its necessary imperfections, its demands for formulation (even a schematic one), very often obscured by its very purpose. For the attempt to approach a reality so often hidden from view cannot be organized in terms of a series of clarifications. We demand the right to obscurity. Through which our anxiety to have a full existence becomes part of the universal drama of cultural transformation: the creativity of marginalized peoples who today confront the ideal of transparent universality. (CD, 2)

Transparency confronted with a different kind of intellectual, engaged with a very different sense of depth and soil than what engages Gramsci’s organic intellectual. Gramsci’s intellectual understands the hidden intelligibility, a certain kind of transparency
(at least as a regulative ideal), of his social class. Glissant’s nomad, beginning with the abyss, has depth as sea, soil as salted and tortured. Thinking after trauma, toward the future, must confront transparency and universality, not because it is a remnant of an Old World order, hopelessly square or even quaint, but because of the conditions of thinking in the Caribbean context. There is no history or memory lost. That would be a privilege enabling recollection with all of its regulative ideals—the way universality is so often smuggled in against obscurity. If there is rhizome, and its abysses are method, not a state of being to be clarified or overcome, then the future must be mapped and unmapped across a *geos* that puts salt in wounds. The future does not return to its losses to mourn. Rather, the future is created with gratuitous gestures affirming opacity.

Glissant calls this affirmation of opacity *Relation*. The term is, of course, to be read against itself, for relation traditionally signifies either correlation or dialectic, both of which clarify, resolve, and fix. But nomadic subjectivity works relation against itself, so Glissant will define relation as detour, exile, and errantry. Relation, in other words, rejects filiation in the aporetic name of “chaotic network.” What would filiation mean, filiation with a landscape initiated by genocide, then enslavement? Without filiation, there is only the moment of creation, a creation whose encroachments are not of a gasping light—unlike, say, Celan—but of an abyss whose death shadow glitters. Returns are always detours, for Glissant, and so it is with the condition of the specific postcoloniality of the Caribbean, both as a state of arrival and a method.

A last word. Let us turn to the question of place. A tortured geography puts the nomad out of place with an act of violence to roots. So where is connection? How does place become something other than abandonment and a MemorialAbyss to impossible suffering? Postnatural, abyssally born, place is nonfilial and nomadically traversed, which is not to say it ceases to or cannot be. Rather, there is always the defining fragility. Thus, Glissant moves the rhizome from noun to verb: “Is this some community we rhizomed into fragile connection to a place?” (*PR*, 206). The rhizome rhizomes—herein lies the simplicity of Glissant’s intellectual and
the fiat, ex nihilo character of creativity after trauma, toward the future. The rhizome’s rhizome is both an act of self-movement—an abyss cannot propel—and that moment wherein the collective is at stake. The organic intellectual rhizomes after trauma, and that intellectual’s organicity always moves with abyssal shadows, unrooted.

It is worth noting here, in close, how profoundly significant intellectual work is for Glissant, as he rejects political action or violence as the decisive moment of identity formation (pace Fanon, of course). Indeed, this is why the political murder plotted by the eight Martinican protagonists in his novel The Ripening can barely be said to begin the formation of collective identity. Intellectual work is this beginning, as it forges fragile connections—nomads in collectivity—that construct a “we” in poetry, architecture, painting—a new history in the nominative. And all of these (as well as other aesthetic adventures) are defined by their (at least possible) nonfilial, rhizomatic character, as well as a finitude that is never a loss, but always only another detour. This is surely not without anxieties. How then to do things with tears? Deliverance from the mist. Deliverance rhizomes. That is, nomads, for Glissant, become within a death moved from a bitter glittering to an abyssal glow with its own ghosts, its own ambivalent salt, its own, in a word, future.

Notes

4. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Illumina-
