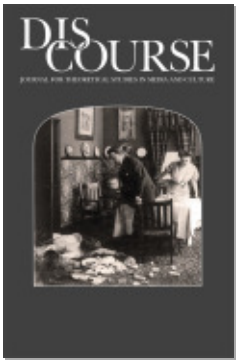
Awakening to the World: Relation, Totality, and Writing from Below



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Turning and turning in the widening
gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.
. . . . . .
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and
everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
. . . . . .
Surely some revelation is at hand.
—William Butler Yeats, "The Second
Coming"

This study commemorates the work of scholar, poet, theorist, novelist and traveler Édouard Glissant, taking up an invitation in his writing to think the world anew. In the pages that follow, we will focus on the influence and implications of Glissant's reflections on the poetic, theoretical, and geographic dimensions of the African diaspora that have advanced through the specific inscriptions of black thought in the development of the modern world. We will examine a broad range of Glissant's work in order to highlight how

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his reflections on African heritage and expression unfold across the various genres of his writing. Above all, we will seek to demonstrate how these reflections expand the theory, pedagogy, and practice of what we will refer to here as black writing. Glissant's work highlights the specificity and diversity of the forms, contexts, and meanings of the graphic performances that proliferate in the Afrodiaspora, defining black writing not merely as a modality of alphabetic script but as an ensemble of life practices. In the context of the Afrodiaspora, as within the milieu of "the black radical tradition,"[1] black writing thus emerges as a practice irreducible to the "particular context of its genesis."[2] Our study stems from this critical point of intersection between writing and practice, tracing modes of diasporic communication and performance—ones connecting Africa to Brazil, Haiti, and the United States—that are implicated in Glissant's notion of Relation.

Recasting the idea of Africa from "dark continent" to archipelago, Glissant writes in *Caribbean Discourse* that "We realize that peoples who are 'manifestly' composite have minimized the idea of Genesis."[3] Conceiving Africa not as a monolithic origin but as a birthplace of multiplicity, he views the geographic layout of the Caribbean as a generative ensemble of origins, a cradle of multiple diasporas that figures the African past itself as a set of diasporic practices:[4] "There was an African diaspora millions of years ago, which gave birth to the various humanities," he claims, "And there have been other diasporas—for example, the forced diaspora brought about by slavery and [those] caused by poverty and destitution, emigrants and emigrations."[5] In Glissant's reflections on the idea of Africa and the philosophy of its history, the idea and meaning of blackness as disseminated by black people is opposed to ideas about race that underlie essentialist understandings of human attribute and origin. "Caribbeanness" is therefore "an intellectual dream, lived at the same time in an unconscious way by our peoples [that] tears us free from the intolerable alternative of the need for nationalism and introduces us to the cross-cultural process that modifies but does not undermine the latter."[6] Through the cross-cultural "poetics of Relation" expressed in the everyday life of the Caribbean and in Glissantian thought, we come to glimpse the contours of black writing as an expression of the life practices that take shape within the complex totality that we call the Afrodiaspora.

As Glissant states in an interview with Manthia Diawara, "the truth that is increasingly coming to light about black reality in the New World is the truth of multiplicity, the truth of the step toward the other. . . . Relation is the moment where we realize that

there is a definite quantity of all the differences in the world."[7] It is in the spirit of elaborating a Glissantian reading of the ongoing relational practice of diaspora itself that we turn our attention to divergent geographical expressions of reading and writing in order to conceptualize black writing as a graphic encounter with differences. To read such differences in epistemology, geography, ontology, and cosmology from which Afrodiasporic displacements and fugitive New World constructions erupt reveals blackness as something both ontological and transitive: here and beyond here, in the break, "present and unmade in presence."[8] As a practice of cross-cultural relation, blackness can be thought not through facile notions of origin (those of parentage, ethnicity, skin color, racial phenotype) but as a figure of performed relations within and radically outside of the place of memory.

For Glissant, Caribbean life is an "explosion of cultures . . . the violent sign of [whose] consensual, not imposed sharing"[9] serves as the pivotal foundation for the concept of relation in his writings. The Caribbean forms a geographical dialectic through a "shifting play of archipelagos."[10] Echoing the textual geography through which Relation emerges as a way to think the world anew, Antonio Benítez-Rojo has written that "the Caribbean is not a common archipelago, but a meta-archipelago . . . , and as a meta-archipelago, it has the virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center."[11] Neither writing nor geography are reducible to their ostensibly distinct textual or respective topographic forms. The Glissantian thesis of the archipelagic field and diasporic flow of the Afro-Antillean region glimpses the deterritorializing movements of black life and writing beyond the ostensible horizon of the Caribbean.

This study focuses on the contraband movements and fugitive modes occasioned by collective black life within the transatlantic milieu, focusing on specific techniques and possibilities associated with passage and flight in black writing. Disforming conventions and canons,[12] black writing evidences the ongoing conditions for a grammatology of African diasporic writing avant la lettre. The sacred performance of texts and literatures that issues from black writing unfolds from the systematic interdiction against myth and ritual, ancestral history, and forms of belief that are presumed to develop outside Western conceptions of inscription. Glissant's philosophy of diaspora as archipelago serves to transform hegemonic colonial cartographies of the black world by choreographing new relations between the Caribbean and the New World centered in the widening gyre of the black diaspora. For if the Caribbean is posited as an exceptional geopolitical example, this exception proves the rule of the diaspora itself as a nonunitary expression

of archipelagic sociality. Glissant's theory of Relation compels just such a reordering of colonial cartographies of the New World from continental centers to archipelagos of difference.

We will begin by examining the biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, who was born in Benin, sold to European slave owners, and transported to Brazil in the 1850s. His *Biography*, considered the only existing Brazilian slave narrative, is a significant document for Afro-Brazilian literary studies, as noted by Eduardo de Assis Duarte.[13] Baquaqua's account of his travels and his "commentaries on his experiences" from captivity in Africa, flight across the Atlantic, and marronage in the Americas illuminates a "richly textured view of the world of slavery and resistance."[14] Furthermore, the transhistorical and transpersonal "spirit of determination and courage" that the editors identify in Baquaqua's narrative reflects aspects of the experience of "all Africans and their descendants who refused to accept the status of 'slave.'"[15] Baquaqua's oral and graphic recitation of these travels brings together significant social and cultural geographies that include ancestral heritages and spiritual cosmologies reflective of the forms that black writing takes in the diaspora. We will argue that Baquaqua's transatlantic crossing and subsequent recital of his journeys assembles evidence of negritude, marronage, creolization, and black resistance that links disparate temporal and spatial locations and bridges the linguistic and cultural heritages of seemingly divergent social groups.

Orí,[16] another work that will be considered here, is a film written and narrated by Maria Beatriz Nascimento and directed by Rachel Gerber at the height of Brazil's Black Movement of the 1970s. *Orí* emphasizes Afro-Brazilian cultural history and knowledge associated with "negritude" as well as with African cosmologies implicated in the Yoruba word *orí*, meaning "soul," "head," "person," or "destiny."[17] The film's rich imagery, poetic structure, and scholarly discourse focus on evidence of Dogon and Bambara, Congo and Yoruba cultural, spiritual, and technological heritage in various stages of convergence in Brazil. Documenting and theorizing the formation of a deep and resilient black consciousness, from the history of fugitive slave communities, or *quilombos*,[18] to the spectacular reverie of carnival samba schools, Nascimento shows the ways in which African traditional religious practices and Pan-African modes of thought connect Brazil spiritually, economically, and culturally to the experiences and challenges of diaspora. *Orí* provides a remarkable visualization of the transatlantic Middle Passage as a poetic work of resistance connecting the world through the movements of black social consciousness.

Glissant's poetics enable us to approach the ensemble of experiential forces, forms, and reflections that constitute the black literary tradition as a worldview with general and particular resonances throughout the African diaspora. Drawing from *Poetics of Relation*, *Caribbean Discourse*, and his interview with Diawara as well as a number of crucial essays, we will acknowledge the "spirit of Édouard Glissant" by reading the arc of his thought on forced diaspora, vocational return, and the critical consciousness of black writing. After exploring the unspoken resonances between the errantry and displacement of Mahommah Baquaqua, the figure of the *quilombo* and the poiesis of creolization as the expressive conditions for black life and black writing, our reflections will conclude with a consideration of the poetic dimensions of the writing of the abyss: the history of the submerged text of black life. Our study of writing in the diaspora as a "multiple series of relationships"[19] culminates not in an "absolute"[20] knowledge of universal truth but instead in an awareness of the infinite totality of our one world in Relation.

Auto/Graphic Flight: Booking Ancestral Passages

> & so my orishas / with the double throat
> of a billion ethers / flying across runic
> withdrawal / flying as obscured pariahs /
> alive / as if / sulfuric bi-theism were shattered / with its laws / with its manacles /
> with its phantoms.
>
> —Will Alexander, "On the Forming Substance of Orishas," *Callaloo*, 1999

The life story of Mahommah Baquaqua constitutes a nineteenth-century instance of poetic recitation, a description and performance of black writing that extends from precolonial Africa to the archipelago of the Afro-Caribbean. *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* narrates the saga of his "passage from slavery to freedom in Africa and America."[21] The work spans Baquaqua's concatenated flight from slavery in Brazil to marronage in New York and then to a brief interval in Boston followed by a counter-intuitively southward journey via the Underground Railroad to the black republic of Haiti, where he stayed for two years. In recounting his escape from the vessel the *Lembrança*,[22] which had docked in New York City, Baquaqua introduces imbricated dimensions of translation, fugitivity, and the poiesis of prophetic speech:

> The first words [*sic*] of English that my two companions and myself ever learned was F-r-e-e . . . and oh! how many times did I repeat it, over and over again. . . . [I learned] how the colored people in New York were all free, and it made me feel very happy, and I longed for the day to come when I should be there.[23]

But Baquaqua's journey did not end there. Following his period in Haiti, he returned to the United States, where he attended university and participated in the abolitionist movement, subsequently writing his biography in Canada, after which he made passage for England with the eventual hope of returning to his native land. The geographical and spiritual movements of his narrative and life thus evoke quintessential concepts of "errantry" and "detour"[24] that are characteristic of Glissant's reflections on the Afro-Caribbean.

Baquaqua's pamphlet, which was published in 1854, consists of two primary components: a personal narrative and a cultural and geographical study as announced in the title of the first edition, *Interesting Narrative: Biography, of Mahommah G. Baquaqua, A Native of Zoogoo, in the Interior of Africa (A Convert to Christianity), and a Description of That Part of the World; including the Manners and Customs of the Inhabitants.* Both narrative and description here possess a twofold significance. On the one hand, the narrative promises nineteenth-century Anglophone readers an exotic, "native" discourse from "the interior of Africa," a narrative of Christian conversion and deliverance (from slavery) that appeals to prevailing abolitionist concerns. On the other hand, the text itself provides something both less and more than the individual journey implied in the conflation of slave narrative with autobiography and its generic conventions.

The auto/biography, published in Baquaqua's name, is described in its first printing as having been "revised and prepared for publication" by Samuel Moore, an Irish immigrant and abolitionist based in Michigan and the self-described "compiler" of Baquaqua's dictated text.[25] However, the vast majority of the work, which is devoted to the description of native African lands, refers to Baquaqua in the third person. This presentation of Baquaqua, the credited author of the biography, disrupts the conventional deictic relationship between ("you") the reader addressed by the ("I" of the) writer, relegating Baquaqua to the place of the Other through the distancing of reported speech. Such equivocation in the narrative voice appropriately provokes editors Law and Lovejoy to ask, "Whose voice are we in fact hearing?" We argue, however, that the work's coauthorship, rather than prompting one to ask "to what extent . . . it [is] a biography or an autobiography,"[26] instead turns

attention to the ways in which black texts displace the conventions of genre and interrogate the norms implied by such forms of narrative representation.

Moore's collaboration functions not as an "authenticating letter" but as a translative support for Baquaqua's writing. The glossolalia of Baquaqua's many broken tongues both cuts through and augments the ostensibly monolingual "voice" prepared by Moore's revisions. The number of languages and writing systems that Baquaqua drew from (including Dendi, Arabic, Portuguese, English, Spanish, and Haitian Creole) far exceeded those at the command of the vast majority of his abolitionist audiences.[27] We argue that the breadth of Baquaqua's translative literacies does not characterize him as an exceptional example but instead underscores the general diversity of cultural origins accompanying the experiences of Africans enslaved in the Americas.

Taking as a point of departure the critical study of the slave narrative genre as introduced in the scholarship of Henry Louis Gates Jr., we agree with the notion of the slave narrative as ancestor to all black literature but suggest that this scholarship erroneously emphasizes writing as a tool for self-advocacy, self-preservation, and self-identity. In numerous studies, Gates has argued that the slave narrative "enjoy[s] [the] unique status as textual evidence of the self-consciousness of the ex-slave and as the formal basis upon which an entire narrative tradition has been constructed."[28] Both invoking and diverging from Gates, we recognize that in the context of the historical production of linguistic hegemonies, the alleged illiteracy of black people is a product of white imagination resulting from the systematic disavowal and erasure of black life and personhood.

Baquaqua's auto/biography, however jointly composed, is an archipelagic text that declares the characteristic polyvocality of black texts conceived not as a multiplicity reducible to a plurality of voices but rather as a totality of relations figured within the text. *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* demonstrates the convergence of black literacies and black writing by way of its negation, erasure, and refusal of a transparent liberal self. Such a negation is effected in other narratives of black lives, thus constituting a deconstructive arc of black writing. Working within the tradition inaugurated by Gates, Gilbert Osofsky praises the generic integrity of the slave narrative in his introduction to *Puttin' On Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup:*

> Because the best [slave] narratives reflect the imaginative minds of the most gifted and rebellious slaves, their value as reliable sources for the

> study of slavery has been questioned. To doubt the relevancy of autobiographies written by exceptional slaves, however, is a specious argument in its inception. The great slave narrative, like all great autobiography, is the work of the especially perceptive viewer and writer.[29]

Rather than reading Baquaqua's narrative within the evaluative rubric proposed by Gates and Osofsky, we argue that this work, which by no means claims for itself the sovereign exceptionalism ascribed to the "best narratives," recuperates a more rigorous and humanistic understanding of the personhood and literacy of peoples stolen into slavery.

Baquaqua's auto/biography refuses those appraisals of personhood and subjectivity that culminate in wonder at the very possibility of a slave who writes and has a story. Gates's literary analysis routes the contents of black writing through a larger tradition of Anglo-American writing, exclaiming that "African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belletristic tradition."[30] He continues:

> To say that they did so against the greatest odds does not begin to suggest the heroic proportions that the task of registering a black voice in printed letters entailed. In a very real sense, the Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write.[31]

Glissant, on the other hand, has claimed that other literacies exist beyond the horizon of Western inscription and the "belletristic tradition," arguing that "the placid, traditional belief in the superiority of written languages over oral languages has long since begun to be challenged. Writing no longer is, nor does it appear to be, any guarantee of transcendence."[32] The most luminous example of the multiplicity of writing systems and literacies of African peoples emerges in the African practice of "Islamic divination." Making "signs and figures . . . in the sand," Baquaqua's brother, described in *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* as a kind of "fortune teller"[33] and adviser on all matters of statecraft for the king, performs a mode of writing that brings together what should henceforth and retrospectively remain in tandem, as perpetual valences of all black writing: performance, literature, and the sacred.

Black writing, in the example of the slave narrative and Baquaqua's general exemplification of its complex registers, thus demonstrates the ways in which black writing proceeds toward

liberation through fugitivity rather than transparency and mastery. Hortense Spillers has asserted that "black writers, whatever their location . . . , retool the languages they inherit," opening the way to a "logological refashioning"[34] of writing. In observing Baquaqua's multiple literacies, there is a grammatology of black writing that is called into being that unmasters the conventions of writing for the sake of tradition.

The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua is a text that surpasses the conditions of its own documentary evidence: the fullness and fragmentary incompleteness of origins held forth even in the biographer's own name, Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, seem to suggest a trespassing of the injunctions and prohibitions of nomenclature. Baquaqua's text is of "a life" irreducible to the converging ideas and exigencies that shape the slave narrative as abolitionist text. Its narrative precedes and extends beyond the horizon of any singular readership. The narrative is of "a life" in the sense of Gilles Deleuze's formulation of "pure immanence" as "a life and nothing else."[35] If, as Frantz Fanon argues, "Black consciousness is immanent in its own eyes,"[36] Baquaqua's writing is a life/writing that reflects this immanent fold of black consciousness.

Baquaqua's biography opens a sacred geometry of black life that gathers Islam, Christianity, and other African faith practices into the fold of his diasporic life, producing a vertiginous subtext, a submerged textuality or invisible ink that flows through all black letters. The traces, trails, bereavements, and victories woven together in the recitations, annotations, recollected letters, and disparate tellings of Baquaqua's auto/biography conjure the ontological complexity that Wole Soyinka describes in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* as the "fourth stage": "the no man's land of transition between . . . the ancestor's [past], the present [of] the living, and the future of the unborn" with the invisible forces, divinities, or "orishas."[37] Together, these modes of experience form the totality of cosmic life reflected in black consciousness. This cosmic totality in the Yoruba worldview is reflective of larger patterns of African thought and belief throughout the archipelago, wherein social life consists of a dynamic cosmic environment that comprises the "total spiritual community of living and dead."[38] The immanent gesture of black writing glimpses the spiritual totality that obtains between ancestors, texts, and black writers and extends through a distribution and sharing of sacred resources among poets, philosophers, and fugitives.

In this view, *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua* is a constellation of more than just a life, as it constellates a set of

cartographic, poetic, and historiographical resources that have grounded and extended the fugitive passage of black letters through underground networks, railroads, and communities. To echo Jacques Derrida, within the communities gathered by black writing, we "[learn] to live . . . in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce, of ghosts, [spirits, and ancestors]. . . . And this being-with specters would also be . . . a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."[39] Black writing emerges from this cosmic milieu as an ecological signature of a people formed from the refusal of structured limitations—a people given forth from the ocean to the geographic path, way, or movement of archipelago in a sociality beyond the ken of social life.

The Fo(u)rth Fold: Staging the Abyss

In the section of *Poetics of Relation* titled "The Open Boat," Glissant evokes the epic horror of the Middle Passage in an account of the phenomenological experience of those who have been relinquished to the abyss. For Glissant, the dark, impossibly cramped, inhospitable slave ship hold becomes a place where those bound together in absolute negation bring into the world a knowledge that travels with them in their descent.[40] From this "debasement more eternal than apocalypse,"[41] from the unfigured ground of "naked flesh,"[42] an impossible story unfolds.

In Glissant's historical reimagining of three distinct phases of the abyssal Middle Passage, first the "dark shadow" of forced migration is "cast [upon those] wrenched from . . . familiar land, . . . from protecting gods and a tutelary community."[43] Geographical dislocation and loss then yields to yet a second ontological bereavement as the enslaved are precipitated "into a nonworld"[44] of utter darkness and immobility, "dissolve[d]" in the "belly" of the slave ship's hold. But this voracious abyss "is nothing yet," for the third phase of the void awaits "ahead of the slave ship's bow"[45] in the unknowable future of foreign lands as well as at all sides, as the very medium of the ship's passage.

This third phase of the abyss opens to swallow those too sick to endure the nihilation on board; it beckons those thrown into the sea like so much cargo or those who flee into the depths dressed only in chains. "Paralleling this mass of water," Glissant writes, "the third metamorphosis of the abyss . . . projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations

except . . . in . . . memory or imagination."[46] Yet even at "these lowest depths," a conversion and shift in direction takes place: a "collapse . . . into the pleasures of sand"[47] in the crossing over into the unknown. The "unconscious memory of the abyss," carried forward in diaspora through the abstract and material internalizations of those who passed before, furnishes the generalized schema of Glissant's philosophy drawn from the brilliant abyss of thought.

From the point of having been thrown into the abyss, another horizon for language and for writing can be glimpsed. According to Hortense Spillers, the experience of the abyss "originates in the historical moment when language ceases to speak."[48] Derrida intuited this difficulty when he wrote of the scene of "redoubled writing . . . that is in and of itself multiple,"[49] that proceeds under the aegis of a double gesture. Writing that enacts a glance backward as it moves forward, that doubles itself along consciousness's outermost edge, is produced in the moment of a (re)awakening to a certain division that Derrida describes as "active division." "In this place of jealousy, in this place that is divided between vengeance and resentment [*ressentiment*], in this body fascinated by its own 'division,' before any other memory, writing destines itself, as if acting on its own, to anamnesia."[50] A "bifurcated writing"[51] emerges from this experience, a writing lodged "between the world it finds on both its sides, the Caribbean, the Atlantic with its reeking freight, the archipelago's bridge. On one side is the healing of Time measured in ruins, the empire of Europe, . . . but on the other side of the wind is what exile altered and banishment made dim."[52] Such writing, that "cries for all the beauty beyond the Atlantic,"[53] illuminates and occasions the edge of empire just as it retreats to an alternative shoreline. Black life/writing is writing whose conditions of inscription reveal the limits of geography and of text.

To think the Caribbean along with Glissant, then, is to recognize the play of the specific dialectic that animates this life/writing, a dialectic that is to be found in the sea, in the Atlantic, precisely in the interval that Maria Beatriz Nascimento alludes to in her film *Orí*, between the "poetic departure" from and the "poetic encounter" (itself something quite different from the 'first contact') with a new shoreline. There is something held in the Atlantic fold that occasions a writing deeply attuned to middle passage but which seeks to revisit and revise it as "graphic and emblematic primal scene."[54] *Orí* opens with a poetic figuration of the sea whose depth and vastness serve as a mnemonic aid, a prompt to the performance of the writing and feeling of transatlanticity. Nascimento's exclamation "I am Atlantic" encompasses the imaginary and yet very real affective,

archipelagic, and oceanogeographic sweep of black consciousness reflected in black writing:

> How could they leave here bound for an unknown world? So I cried with love for the seafarers, my parents, I cried for having hated them, I cried again with grief for this story. But above all I cried for the poetic encounter of the Tagus and the Atlantic, the poetic departure for conquest. They also did it through fear, and they might have cried for all the beauty beyond the Atlantic. . . . I am Atlantic.[55]

Placing Nascimento's poetic formulation in proximity with Glissant's theorization of the allusive, allegorical, and historical dimensions of an Atlantic oceanic consciousness, we begin to see the transitive significance not simply of the sea but also of what the experience and dimensions of the abyss make possible for Afrodiasporic consciousness.

Like Derek Walcott's poem "The Sea Is History," Nascimento's film foregrounds the sea not only as a site of memory but also as a poetic document of crossing, fugitivity, and flight. The sea's Atlantic trajectory offers us impossible glimpses of ancestral histories and homecomings. Through Walcott's and Nascimento's respective invocations of an Atlantic trajectory of survival and flight, it becomes possible to recognize the sea as an opening to the scene of black writing. The sea, which figures for Walcott as "that grey vault" of "tribal memory," with its "mosaic" of coral, bones, and "plucked wires," inscribes and bears the inscription of the time of ancestral passage, as writing's absolute limit. In Walcott's poem, the sea is figured both as the beyond of the book and as the book's constitutive fold: "the ocean kept turning blank pages looking for History."[56] Can there even be something like a history of the book when faced with such a query? What is the history of the book—in the writing of the disaster? If, alternatively, the book is opened up by the event of nonhistory, what then can be the history of the book in light of the confrontation with the inexhaustible landscape of the Atlantic and its enfolded secrets?

The various texts, documents, artworks, and films that circulate within the Afrodiaspora constantly negotiate the immanent expanse of the Atlantic, which continues to figure as both a rupture and a junction, as an object of passage and an impossibly full, material vanishing point for a passing through and beyond. M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* is exemplary of this circulation of the black book. It abides nowhere but in an/other where, a where else, an elsewhere of black writing reordered by the sea. *Zong!* dares on

language's perilous edge to unconceal a song, which "long ago" occasioned the anxiety of the world's opening:

> ——————song long————ago a tale was
> ————told with no——————begin or end where[57]

This im/possible zong, this lost song, traces everywhere before it the interstices of memory, language, and history. Songs lead where words don't go. Nascimento's declaration "I am Atlantic" lays claim to the errant histories of passage secreted by the sea, which themselves become the condition of possibility for certain redoubled expressions in black poetics, such that what is opened by Walcott's lament is secured through Nascimento's call to her ancestors.

The figure of this errantry in the Atlantic inheritance reflected by the imperative to "go elsewhere" appears in the work of contemporary American poet, playwright, and essayist Jay Wright, whose poetics shine in the break of multiple African diasporas. The first poem of his most recent book, *Disorientations: Groundings*, culminates in the antagonistic embrace between leaving and arrival, a movement between love and relinquishment:

> You will remember the discretion
> Orion has taught its little suns;
> that leads
> to a tuned ambivalence in every pulsing star.
> All this dancing
> becomes a measured probability,
> a postulate of love's insistent
> imaginings.
> Go away.[58]

This passage from Wright marks a scene of compelling abandon, both forced and liberated in diaspora. Black writing bears the mark or trace of the redoubled passages of those we have left behind but who are still held and called forth by the sea. Wright's poetics take up this leaving behind as well as the anticipatory imaginings of a loved reencounter.

This ambivalent patterning of departure and return is embodied in black writing as an insistent life practice. It becomes a kind of signature, reproduced around the circumference of Africa and the islands of the Caribbean, collectively driven toward an elsewhere and destined by the sea. The "errantry" repeated and produced through black poetics rehearses the African "vocation to go

elsewhere" and might itself be regarded as an autograph of a "multiplicity of the antislavery will."[59] We encounter this will in black writing through figures of return and renewed departure, as the transcendence of a given mark in historicity. Black life/writing—the writing of passage itself, the passage of writing—emerges precisely within what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the "rift" or "breach" of the Atlantic, so that it becomes all the more necessary to traverse the "vexed" "question of before": for Hartman, "there was no collective or Pan-African identity that preexisted the disaster of the slave trade."[60] But with Glissant, it becomes possible to think with the sea, not simply to think with/in the rift or the breach but to be held there, holding forth. It would be to embark again, but taking up a different trajectory, not one of conquest or captivity but one of love—to approach blackness/black history, "the ensemble of objects"[61] given in the practice of black life and black writing.

This ensemble stretches across, and has been forced out from, the difficult interval between empire and the (post)colony, between settler territory and nonsettler land, between the New World and the Caribbean basin. Black life/writing, forced out from a "previous regime,"[62] extends toward a shoreline from which the demand for the "irruptive emergence of a new 'concept'"[63] of black life/writing becomes not simply possible but necessary. The task, as Chandler tells us, is to recognize the endless spiral of this dialectic and always practice the interval, to "creolize philosophy,"[64] to bring thought to the scene of the abyss.

We have approached black writing as the writing of the abyss. The philosophical and existential presence of the abyss in Glissantian thought thus registers the transatlantic hist*ori*city that bears relevance to Heidegger's meditation on the desolation of modernity. Black writing traces the spiritual, skeletal registers of those who, in the time of the world's night, in a desolate age, reach into the abyss, confronted by the loss of ground, Abgrund. Probing Holderlin's characterization of "the abyss" as "all-perceiving,"[65] Heidegger conceives the poet as one who risks the perception of nothing: "He among mortals who must, sooner than other mortals and otherwise than they, reach into the abyss, comes to know the marks that the abyss remarks. For the poets these are the traces of the fugitive gods."[66] Poets brush up against an oblique desire: to commune with the "fugitive gods," to no longer be able to sleep, to constantly dream of another place, to rub one's eyes to no avail.[67]

Those writers who find in black life and writing the ghostly matters of a cultural heritage traverse the edges of consciousness and are always approaching, moving toward and preparing for an encounter with the abyss: "They are the saying ones who are saying

more: for this one breath by which they risk more is not just saying in general; rather, the one breath is an other breath, . . . it is a breath for nothing."[68] The collective experience of the abyss that Philip's poetic inquiry illuminates as the passion of diaspora marks the beginning of a radically different knowledge. Here is a poetics of spirit writing that moves in advance of, and that circumscribes, ideas of ancestrality, fugitivity, and literacy as part and parcel of collective identity formations.

"After Glissant": A Reflection on the Creolization of World

Fully absorbed in this emanating cry of the sea, caught and reanimated by Nascimento's call to parents, ancestors, and poets, this cry, sounded across the sea of Baquaqua's quondam flight, is "shot through with chips of [ancestral] time,"[69] the irreducible time below the ocean floor. In considering, after Glissant, with Heidegger and Holderlin, Baquaqua, Nascimento, Philip, Walcott, and Wright, "why we stay with poetry,"[70] we have come to view poetics of relation as a gathering of black life and writing wherein is found another communion (a together-in-nothingness) in openness and multiplicity. Black writing enables us to trace another history of the submerged through other languages, other forms of writing, expression, and performance, attuned to the experience of the abyss that has materially transcribed the history of their arrivals and departures. We maintain that "knowledge of Relation,"[71] founded on a collective experience of the abyss, is lived, practiced, and shared within black writing and that its larger praxis is this being given to the world, "from below"[72] experience.

Black writing, having been drawn against the very current of consciousness, memory, and aesthetics, manages to repair, produce, and reproduce a figure of body/image/spirit, a figure of diaspora that comes to be theorized as a form of knowledge across the diaspora by radically different peoples and communities. We recognize this knowledge as a form of sense that renews our understanding of the world as totality, as "one world in relation."[73] The Glissantian notion of diaspora is explicitly linked to a thought of an ancient calling to totality inspired by what the great contemporary poet, editor, and critic Nathaniel Mackey phrased as "an insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion."[74] From this anticipatory precipice of ancestral breath and black making in the world, we maintain that black writing presages the opening onto the world in an immanent relation as one.

There is, in this project, an affective and affectionate start, an embarkation upon a different mode of study, one structured by relation and collaboration and propelled by an inspirited, ongoing reflection into the conditions of possibility for our own distinct but attuned diasporic consciousnesses. Our mutual yearning for a world beyond and in advance of this one is perhaps announced and further magnified here by our approach to the milieu of black social life as inextricably linked to the mythic trajectory of writing that moves by way of a spiritual encounter with the world. What that encounter, or reencounter, makes possible and has made possible for us is a reawakening to a world of reading, writing, and thought. The writing of the Afrodiaspora occasions an opening to another world, structured by Glissant's poetic imperative to think the world anew. It is this spiritual and mythic reencounter that we hope to illuminate through the calls and responses of ancestors.

In this essay, we have worked to think through and provoke reflection on how to think black writing and African diaspora after Glissant. Returning to the call inaugurating these reflections after the "February 2011 passing" of Édouard Glissant encourages us to embrace the full sense of what it means to "consent not to be a single being."[75] Thus involved in a collective heritage opened by Glissant's poetics, we recognize a process by which all local and global cultures touch one another. In that process, we find with Glissant that "the whole world is creolizing itself, and there are no longer nations or races that are untouched by others."[76] The work of black writing is a creolization of America, a writing of all our Americas. A creolization of Europe ensues from the relation of Europe to Africa and the New World, and a creolization of Africa continues in the Caribbean Americas.

Notes

[1.] Fred Moten, *In the Break: Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 24.

[2.] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Totowa, NJ: Zed, 1983), 73.

[3.] Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 141.

[4.] Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and The Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[5.] Manthia Diawara, "One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2011, no. 28 (2011): 8.

[6.] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 139.

[7.] Diawara, "One World in Relation," 9.

[8.] Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 743.

[9.] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 34.

[10.] Édouard Glissant, "The Thinking of the Opacity of the World," chapter 11 in *Philosophie de la relation: Poésie en étendue* (Philosophy of the Relation: Poetry in extension [2009]), translated by Franck Loric, reprinted in *Frieze d/e* 7 (Winter 2012): 77.

[11.] Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, translated by James Maraniss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

[12.] Ronald A. T. Judy, *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[13.] Eduardo de Assis Duarte and Maria Nazareth Soares Fonseca, eds., *Literatura e afrodescendência no Brasil: Antologia crítica* (Belo Horizonte, Brazil: UFMG, 2011).

[14.] Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua, Robin Law, and Paul E. Lovejoy, *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2007), xvi.

[15.] Ibid.

[16.] *Orí*, directed by Raquel Gerber and Maria Beatriz Nascimento (Brazil: Versátil Home Video, 2009), video recording, 1 videodisc (91 min.), DVD-7250.

[17.] Citing explanations given by Wande Abimbola, "a well-known and widely respected priest and scholar of religion," Velma E. Love writes that orí is "the Yoruba concept of destiny" referring to "the personal god that guides each individual's 'inner head.'" Velma E. Love, *Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 13.

[18.] In *Orí*, Nascimento defines *quilombo* by poetic and historical means: "Quilombo means . . . being alone, being in flight. Confronting new limits for your land, your people, and yourself. The Quilombo arises from a historical fact: escape. . . . Bantu energy infused the entire philosophy, ethos and behavior of the Quilombo." The most renowned *quilombo* of Brazilian history is certainly that of seventeenth-century maroon community Palmares, whose inhabitants totaled in the tens of thousands during its century-long resistance to Portuguese and Dutch incursion. In its roots, *quilombo* tells "a story of the power relations and ruptures of groups, of migrations in search of new lands and political alliances between disparate peoples." Kabengele Muanga, "Origem e histotico do quilombo na África," *Revista USP* 28, no. Dec.–Feb. (1995–96): 56–63.

[19.] Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 139.

[20.] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 35.

[21.] Baquaqua, Law, and Lovejoy, *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua*, 13.

[22.] Meaning "remembrance," or "memory," in Portuguese.

[23.] Baquaqua, Law, and Lovejoy, *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua*, 171.

[24.] "The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation." Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 18.

[25.] Baquaqua, Law, and Lovejoy, *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua*, 9.

[26.] Ibid., 8.

[27.] Ibid., 90.

[28.] Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds, *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xxxiv.

[29.] Gilbert Osofsky et al., *Puttin' On Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 10.

[30.] Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2004), xxvii–xxviii.

[31.] Ibid.

[32.] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 162.

[33.] Baquaqua, Law, and Lovejoy, *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua*, 31.

[34.] Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4.

[35.] Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays On A Life*, translated by Anne Boyman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 29.

[36.] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), 135.

[37.] Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 148.

[38.] Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 130.

[39.] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xvii–xviii.

[40.] Glissant stated that "It's the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity. I think that's what's important in all the movements of the world, and we, the descendants, who have arrived from the other shore would be wrong to cling fiercely to this singularity which had accepted to go out into the world." Diawara, "One World in Relation," 5.

[41.] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

[42.] Ibid., 5.

[43.] Ibid.

[44.] Ibid., 7.

[45.] Ibid., 6.

[46.] Ibid., 7.

[47.] Ibid., 6.

[48.] Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 156.

[49.] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, quoted in Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 186.

[50.] Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other: Or, the Prosthesis Of Origin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

[51.] Nahum Chandler, "Of Exorbitance," *Criticism* 50, no. 3 (2008): 12.

[52.] Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 88–89.

[53.] *Orí*, directed by Gerber and Nascimento.

[54.] Moten, *In the Break*, 2.

[55.] *Orí*, directed by Gerber and Nascimento.

[56.] Derek Walcott and Edward Baugh, *Selected Poems*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 137.

[57.] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 123.

[58.] Jay Wright, *Disorientations: Groundings* (Chicago: Flood Editions, 2013), 3.

[59.] Diawara, "One World in Relation," 8.

[60.] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, no. 26 (2008): 29.

[61.] Moten, *In the Break*, 7.

[62.] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41–42, quoted in Nahum Chandler, "Of Exorbitance," *Criticism* 50, no. 3 (2008): 346.

[63.] Ibid.

[64.] John E. Drabinski, "Shorelines: In Memory of Édouard Glissant," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 19, no. 1 (2011): 7.

[65.] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), 93.

[66.] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 1st Harper Colophon ed. (New York: Perennial Library, 1975), 93.

[67.] Maurice Blanchot, "The Writer, Daytime Insomniac," in *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 121.

[68.] Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 238.

[69.] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263.

[70.] Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 9.

[71.] Diawara, "One World in Relation," 8.

[72.] Theodor Adorno, "Dialectics Is a Challenge from Below," in *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury, 1973), 303. "The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. . . . It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived" (ibid., 5).

[73.] Diawara, "One World in Relation," 8.

[74.] Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1997), 42.

[75.] Diawara, "One World in Relation," 5.

[76.] Ibid., 7.