

# Somesuch Stories

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## In Which We May Honour Our Boats

by Ana Cecilia Alvarez

Édouard Glissant opens *Poetics of Relation* in the belly of the boat. In its horrors. 'For the Africans who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas,' he begins, 'confronting the unknown with neither preparation nor challenge was no doubt petrifying.' Glissant asks us to imagine the enslaved, the deported, ruptured from their familiar winds and gods, chained in darkness, dying next to the dead. Imagine, 'if you can', encountering the unknown of the ship's bowels, the unknown of the ocean's depths, the unknown of the unimaginable shore. This unknown does not forsake knowing. It is the void from which knowledge emerges. 'This boat is your womb,' Glissant writes, and you are about to be born.

I let Glissant's words wash over me, underlining this phrase as if gasping for air. He will elide, repeat, interject his own streams, tracing the rhizomatic fibrils of his thought. It frustrates and enlivens. In this way, his writing embodies his philosophy: one of relation and opacity. To write of and from within Glissant's feverish project requires resistance to the tempting reduction of transparency, for an errantry of thinking that 'wanders without becoming lost'. Or that moves around an idea like one floats on water, toying with buoyancy, under threat of submersion, rolling at the waves' pace.

We are floating in the Atlantic, approaching the shores of the Caribbean, now washing up on the sands of Martinique, where Glissant was born and now rests. He studied at the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France, Martinique's capital, where Frantz Fanon was a fellow student and Aimé Césaire, at the time, a teacher. Glissant left the island for Paris in 1946 to study ethnography and philosophy at the Sorbonne. There, he began to publish his writings—poetry, novels, plays, and essays, completing no fewer than 40 volumes in his lifetime—while working for the anti-colonization movement. In 1965, he returned to the Caribbean and later settled between New York and Paris, teaching and writing. *Poetics of Relation* was published in 1990 and two years later he was nominated for the Nobel Prize. When filmmaker and scholar Manthia Diawara proposed directing a documentary on the life of his close friend, Glissant, as Diawara recalls, suggested that, 'if he were I, he'd wait until we were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and point the camera at the mass of water, its abyssal expanse. That would be the whole film in one shot, for him.'

The ocean flows beneath Glissant's thinking. His writings sail across ideas of departure and arrival, the closed boat of slavery and the open boat of migration—that condition of colonialism, which simultaneously romanticizes the voyager and displaces the migrant. In 2015, *Poetics of Relation* was the namesake and theoretical foundation for an exhibition curated in the Pérez Art Museum Miami, a nod to Glissant's growing influence within contemporary art discourse (curator Hans Ulrich Obrist is said to read his work for 15 minutes every morning). In one of the artworks featured in the exhibition *Superunknown (Alive In The)* (2010), American conceptualist Xaviera Simmons grouped 40 found photographs of open boats mid sail. Each boat carried people in search, people who, by setting forth upon the liminal open ocean, became migrants, became a 'political issue,' became enmeshed — not in relation, but in a 'global crisis'.

Simmons collated the photographs from newspapers, travel magazines, and human rights websites. '... for me, migration is the state of being an American,' she offers, in an interview. While her concerns are centrally formal, about photography and appropriation, I can't help but consider these images under the auspices of a Glissantian consideration of relation and migration as the handwriting on the border's wall. 'We need to put an end to the idea of a border that defends and prevents,' Glissant tells Diawara. 'Borders must be permeable.'

Diawara, perhaps inspired by Glissant's prior remark, documented the pair's time aboard the *Queen Mary II*, crossing the Atlantic from Southampton to New York City. 'When you lean over the ship's railing,' Glissant tells Diawara, 'you can't stop thinking about the Africans at the bottom of the sea.' Given the luxurious atmosphere of the cruise liner, he notes, almost relishes noting, 'that [his] ancestors had left for the New World in terrible conditions very much unlike these.' And now *he* returns, re-emerges from that abyss, embodying a new kind of knowing. 'Those who were forced to leave as slaves do not return as slaves,' he says, 'but as something else: a free entity, not only free but a being who has gained something in comparison to the mass of humanity. And what has this being gained? Multiplicity.'

In his first non-fiction collection, a 'self-ethnography' gloriously titled *The Sun of Consciousness*, Glissant, as if to tease the philosophical project that he would dedicate his work to undoing, asks, 'Who has not dreamt of the poem that explains everything, of the philosophy whose ultimate word illuminates the universe, of the novel that organizes all truths . . .?' His imagining aborts that seductive dream of universal coherence to reckon with the definite and ineluctable specificity of difference in relation. 'There isn't one absolute truth, but truths,' Glissant tells Diawara. 'I say that nothing is true and everything is alive.'

Relation, in Glissant's work, appears capitalized, as if to underscore its impenetrability. In my notes, I write sentences that thud with blunt inscrutability, such as: 'Relation is total,' or 'Relation cannot be defined, only imagined'. By his own admission, in *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant circles around his theory, amassing instances that intimate Relation without ever submitting to the fixity of definability. There is, however, one image he offers for Relation's condition. He writes, 'Relation contaminates, sweetens, as a principle or as flower dust.' Flower dust: sticky pollen that affixes, roves, rubs, pollinates, bears fruit. When honeybees return to their hives covered in pollen and stuffed with nectar, they spit the sweet liquid

into the body next to them, who swaps spit with the body next to them, who again swaps spit with the body next to them, thickening the soup until they regurgitate honey. This is Relation, too.

‘Working with different languages,’ Simmons says, ‘is like trying to get the most succulent nectar out of each word. That’s the best way I can describe it.’ Her other installation for Poetics of Relation fills a 16 by 60 foot wall with hand-painted words in white against a black wooden backdrop, in English, Spanish, and Creole; phrases pulled from films, conversations, literature, magazines—all evoking the feeling of ocean and blue, of borders, of the moon, of its connection to flow, and onto land. Titled *In the Lushness* (2015), the work manifests a theatre of symbol and sound that ‘engages with the space and the breathe in the front and the back of you’, a multilingual surround that disintegrates each language while upholding the tonality of each word. Betsy Wing, in her translator’s introduction to Poetics of Relation writes that Glissant’s charged ‘new word complexes,’ impossible as they are to translate, ‘provide a sudden contact with an unforeseen relation in language, not unlike the collisions between cultures that he sees as productive of Relation.’

Diawara dons Glissant, a ‘philosopher of post-filiation’, a thinker who tears at the ‘totalitarian roots’ of legitimacy, instead anchoring his poetics in the entanglement and enmeshment of the rhizome. In botany, rhizomes are plant stems that grow horizontally beneath the dirt, extending roots from their nodes. Picture a ginger root, an open palm spreading its bulbous junctions, jutting new nubs. Deleuze and Guattari proposed the rhizome as a creative and intellectual approach that seeks the non-hierarchical and the non-linear. The rhizome cuts across arboreal conceptions of knowledge stemming from the centrality of the trunk or verticality of a branch’s reach. Glissant, too, rejected the arborescent backbone that shapes how we structure genealogy, organizations or evolutionary history. In *Poetic Intention*, his second collection of essays, he writes that in Caribbean thought the tree is ‘the upward thrust, the Whole, a density in ferment. When I try clumsily to draw a tree: I will end up with a wall of vegetation, whose indeterminate growth only the skyline of the page can cut off. The unique gets lost in the Whole.’ The finely trimmed tree, echoing the manicured gardens of colonial Europe, gives way to a forest aesthetic bent on chaos and totality.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant conjures two ‘varieties of identity’, but I sense them rather as orientations. The first, ‘root identity,’ conceives of a self founded in mythological time, in distant pasts, sanctified by lineage, ratified by a legitimate claim to territory. The other, ‘relational identity,’ is ‘linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures’. This is why contamination is key to understanding Relation, and to understanding Glissant—his thinking is suspicious of, if not outright opposed to, purity, especially the purity of lineage, the purity of self-similars. ‘What racists fear most of all is mixing,’ he reminds. Rather than posing difference as oppositional to sameness—the binary backbone of Structuralism, *The Self and The Other*—Glissant imagines an assemblage of dissimilars in relation rather than in opposition. ‘His idea,’ Diawara writes, ‘recognizes and enables a relation between different people and places, animate and inanimate objects, visible and invisible forces, the air, the water, the fire, the vegetation, animals and humans.’

Here, where Relation decenters the human as the sole locus for ecstatic exchange and expands that capacity laterally, like a rhizome, to the vibrancy of all things, here, an ethics of Relation surfaces. Diawara’s expansion takes me to one of the most tremendous passages in *Poetics of Relation*, where Glissant impossibly seeks,

‘An aesthetics of the earth? In the half-starved dust of Africa? In the mud of flooded Asia? In epidemics, masked forms of exploitation, flies buzz-bombing the skeleton skins of children? In the frozen silence of the Andes? In the rains uprooting favelas and shanty towns? In the scrub and scree of Bantu lands? In flowers encircling necks and ukuleles? In mud hut crowning goldmines? In city sewers? In haggard aboriginal wind? In red-light districts? In drunken indiscriminate consumption? In the noose? In the cabin? Night with no candle?’

Yes. But an aesthetics of disruption and intrusion. Finding the fever of passion for the ideas of ‘environment’ and ‘ecology’, both apparently such futile notions in these landscapes of desolation.

Imagining the idea of love of the earth—so ridiculously inadequate or else frequently the basis for such sectarian intolerance—with all the strength of charcoal fires or sweet syrup. An aesthetics of rupture and connection.’

Such aesthetics would require a new way of being, or as Glissant would say, always derisive of Being, a new way of ‘giving-on-and-with’ in the world. A new movement of rupture and connection with the land, an errantry. Glissant undoes romantically held notions of nomadism, once associated with a kind-of countercultural uprootedness, by drawing a parallel to the ‘arrowlike nomadism’ of the colonizer, fed by the ‘devastating desire for settlement.’ Today, this gentrifying charge ahead and into is just as relentless, especially when coupled with a precarity that jolts settling into instability. And so we move on and through, displacing while seeking better, newer, other land, and make it similar, make it ours. But rather than a nomad we can be an errant, one ‘who is no longer traveler, conqueror, or discoverer, [who] strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.’

Simmons, I suspect an errant herself, describes how travel, the experience of being in an unknown space, and unknown in that space, ‘helps one to be excited about mystery’. Or, as Glissant celebrates, helps one to clamor for the right to opacity. That we might find hope, even joy, in not-grasping, not-reducing. Reading and working through Glissant has turned into practice for an ethics that displaces all reduction and basks in the impenetrable irreducibility of what is encountered on the other side of the abyss.

Understanding is not, and should not be, a prerequisite for care, or even solidarity. And we do not, despite what the border patrols and the cops and the immigration officers will demand, we do not have to make ourselves transparent in order to live and move on-and-with this world. There is hope in the knowledge of the unknown. ‘We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify,’ Glissant writes. ‘We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.’

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Artwork: Superunknown (Alive in the), 2010, as shown at Pérez Art Museum Miami by kind permission of David Castillo Gallery.

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*Photograph **by Xaviera Simmons / David Castillo Gallery***