“Common Place: Common-Place”. A Presentation of Édouard Glissant’s Poetics of the Compounding of Places – Part 2

Pascale Guibert

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/4781>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.4781

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2016

Number of pages: 113-125

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Pascale Guibert, ““Common Place: Common-Place”. A Presentation of Édouard Glissant’s Poetics of the Compounding of Places – Part 2”, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 39.1 | 2016, Online since 05 April 2021, connection on 18 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/4781> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.4781>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

“Common Place: Common-Place”

A Presentation of Édouard Glissant’s Poetics of the Compounding of Places – Part 2

At the end of *Poétique de la Relation*, a list of “binarities” constitutes what Glissant’s philosophy of Relation sets out to reshuffle. Among them, the pair “Lieu commun: lieu-commun” is what will be analysed here. Beyond enabling us to survey a vast area of Glissant’s œuvre, it will also lead to the analysis of one of Glissant’s most operative metaphors: the “common-place,” advancing toward the configuration of an alternative, ever compounding, reality. The first part of this essay was published in the previous issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*.

To Oakley, analyzing the “Rhetorical Figures of Difference in Heidegger and Glissant,” the particular achievement of the latter consists not in just naming and defining concepts, but in devising a way of writing that, in itself, in its very formulation, produces concepts, opens their history and presents them for immediate use. Oakley writes:

Whereas Heidegger highlights the poet thinking (i.e. measuring), Glissant emphasizes the poet writing. Glissant’s poet is a “builder” of a grammar and syntax, even as he builds inside a particular *langue*. (17)

The sentence could even have been prolonged to point to the fact that it is through this thoughtful rhetorical edification that another way of inhabiting the world is being built. The “*lieu-commun*,” in its original French, or “common-place,” as we can translate it in English, is one of these new concepts brought forth by Glissant’s writing.

We saw, in a preceding part, what the common-place, as a sign propelling the imaginary of a new way of cohabiting with the world, owes to Glissant’s “source reality,” (*Philosophie de la Relation* 47) to his ordinary Martinican place of birth and development. We will now analyse the visible presence of this sign as a sign. We will consider it in its manifestation drawing attention to itself as a writing trace. Retracing its genealogy via Derrida’s *a* of *différance* and Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome, mixed with Creole word composition and the specific presence of the Martinican landscape, we will expatiate on this neologism, this breach in proper spelling, which aims to configure a surprising new way of conceiving the world – in Relation. Since the importance of the hyphen will be shown here (in French, suggestively, the hyphen is called a “*trait d’union*,” a “line of junction”), as regards the “*lieu-commun*,” “common-place,” “*Tout-monde*,” or all other such Glissantian word formation realized by pairing them with such a stitch, Betsy Wing’s English translation of the pair “*Lieu commun: lieu-commun*” appearing in the French original by “Common place: commonplace” will have to be questioned.¹ Indeed, Wing’s choice of the word “commonplace” introduces authoritative clarity and propriety to Glissant’s original formulation, “*lieu-commun*,” which definitely appears improper, unclear, composite, and which remains outside all pre-existing dictionary definitions in the same way that it also escapes careless usage.

1. In this essay, I will quote Betsy Wing’s brave translation of *Poetics of Relation* (1997) whenever my reading of Glissant can agree with it. Wing will then be referred to in the parentheses following the quotations I make of her text. But when my interpretation of the Glissantian original text in French diverges from Wing’s English translation, I will provide my own formulation of Glissant’s original French. The French title of the original volume will then signal this.

Carefully attempting not to dispel the functional obscurity of Glissant's word and world formation, we will first evoke the way the place shapes the writing of the common-place; and then follow some of the paths which the hyphen opens between the two component parts of the word.

The Place

At the end of the original *Poétique de la Relation*, we reach a small archipelago of "Commonplace notes" ("Notes en lieux communs") (227-36), on the far side of which appears what Glissant calls a "litany," a list of "binarities, whether or not they can be transcended" (Wing 223).² Let us go back there, then. This litany unfolds both vertically (as the list rolls on) and horizontally, with the repetitive punctuation of commas, dashes and colons which hold the pairs apart and together, and indicate a relation which remains to be developed by each of us. Glissant himself gives an orientation by specifying the value to be conferred to his punctuation marks, but in no way does he clarify the relation or hand it over as ready-made:

In this litany commas (,) indicate relation, dashes (—) opposition, and colons (:) consecution. (Wing 224)

Hence the way the common place relates to the common-place, as schematically intimated by the colon in the pair "Common place: common-place," remains to be pondered and (re)constructed, worked upon together.

What appears without a shadow of a doubt is that the common-place follows the common place. It derives from it, just as the reality withheld in the concept and its written trace will derive from this typical movement of Glissantian poetic philosophy which always goes back, repeats, and, thence, displaces and propagates.

Infinitesimal and Intimate

As he does with all the conceptual tools that he shapes, so that we can build something new in our world, with our world, Glissant always turns back to the common place to found the common-place. Using the nautical term for a ship that turns back, by which he marks his affiliation to his originative island floating amidst the Caribbean Sea as well as to its history determined by the slave trade, he calls his a "reverting poetics," "*une poétique dévirée*" (*Philosophie de la Relation* 147).³ Following the gesture proper to such a "reverting poetics," all starts with the minute attention given to the humble place of one's birth, a place both infinitesimal on the scale of the physical universe and always borne within oneself, most inwardly. Glissant calls this place "*infime (intime)*" (147) – infinitesi-

2. In her English translation of *Poetics of Relation* (1997), Betsy Wing includes the "Notes," (211) without further ado, bluntly. They are just common "Notes," one word in plain font that appears only one inch above the translated text of the notes proper. Yet, the original French edition of *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) presents "*Notes en lieux communs*," "Common place notes." The group of words is in italics floating amidst three blank pages that constitute a place for gathering and rallying our thoughts, before quotations and borrowings, thoughts shared and thinking to be launched and shared — the text of the notes — are elucidated by Glissant.

3. In her article "The Birthplace of Relation," Radović pursues the imaginary left in the wake of "The Open Boat" image which gives its name to the opening chapter of *Poetics of Relation*. She most convincingly shows how important the boat motions that occur there are to the process of beginning anew, in all uncertainty, tremblingly, that is being launched by Glissant at that moment of his work. They situate the work of the poetics on an unfixed terrain — "which matters precisely as origin and not as ground. To do otherwise would amount to ignoring or forgetting the slave ship and the ocean itself, while displacing the Caribbean by rooting it elsewhere" (475).

mal and intimate. In the French, the replacement of one consonant by another, graphically very close to it, creates, thanks to the strange effect of a repetition compounded with a change, the impression that the two terrains slide into each other, or fold upon each other, and are blurred. Besides, the parentheses provide the convex (baroque or surrealist?) walls doubling the place and materially producing an “inside” to foster the intimacy which the word denotes. The unremarkableness of the place and its being of the order of the intimate both exacerbate its particularity. But this particularity is never, in Glissant’s œuvre, a pretext to reach for the universal. Quite the contrary. The universal is antithetical to the common-place. We could write it in the form of a Glissantian pair thus: “The particular – the universal.” The idea of the universal is loaded with desires — and realities! — of conquest and domination. It also testifies to a proud self-confidence in one’s indisputable superiority, when it does not hypocritically disguise in this still valorized qualification a savage acculturation by the imposition of a basic, impoverished and reductive discourse. No wonder then that Glissant’s common places all bear a proper name. Each one of them is endowed with a specific sensory presence, heavy with a very particular and distinctive history, and produces a certain poetics intimately connected to the imaginary they evoke. Even though it is through their common unremarkableness, through a banality widely shared all over the planet, and a very human intimacy which they guarantee, that they can be related to so many other places all over the world, there is nothing universal about them.

I will repeat for you, in an anxious way which may seem mad to you, that we were dealing here (there) with elements from a reverting poetics, which has first gathered the idea or the representation or the imaginary, that is to say the history, of those chance places, the Morne of Bezaudin, the mongrove of Lamentin, the Diamant Rock (*and of what there is still underneath*, which cannot be considered by examination but by exultation and breathing), around the necessity, unpredictable too, of the diverse manifestations of the world and flavours of a country, of their relation between country and world. Everyone has their ways, individual and collective, of thinking this relation, which has nothing whatsoever to do with what is said to establish itself between the particular and the universal. Because the place appears from the very first shared, and from the very first then the Tout-monde⁴ would also be infinitesimal and intimate [*infinie (intime) lui aussi*]. (*Philosophie de la Relation* 147)

Repetitions

Glissant’s “place of birth and continuity” (*Philosophie de la Relation* 101) appears all but exceptional. Common, then. We have already seen a number of factors that make it common. But this asserted quality is also augmented by an intense poetics of repetition. In the writing of Glissant, repeating is celebrating. It is also asserting the existence of what is thus repeated, at the same time as this very assertion and this very presence are also questioned by the difference introduced with the repetition of the same. Glissantian repetition is a work of decolonization, or at least part of the process of unsettlement that the poetics of Relation aims to bring about, as it dis-places the object beyond which it goes in its redoubling of it. It does not hammer anything, but entangles and confuses, infiltrates as a slight trembling into what had hardened into simple certainties.

4. I will follow Betsy Wing’s choice here of leaving this compound untranslated, “not only because of the inherent difficulty in translating them concisely but also because they function as neologisms” (xv). The surprise it occasions as a compound word and the obscurity of its sense hint at the reality to be constructed therefrom.

Like all Glissantian rhetoric, it is not stylistic affectation. It is a rhetoric displaying a philosophy, obviously manifesting its aesthetics, and intended to do its poetical work: to create in Relation.

A number of words are repeated throughout Glissant's œuvre. They are those that express the gesture of Relation, and even though they are distinct, they must be taken as working all together, as being shimmering facets of the common-place in process: diversity, errantry, turbulence, chaos, opacity, baroque, unpredictable, beauty, circularity, entanglement ... Sometimes, aphorisms reappear as leitmotifs, like "Act in your place, think with the world." Sometimes too a whole text reappears, repeated over and over again, in different books and different places. This is the case with "Archipelagoes and Continents," for example, which, as we read in *Philosophie de la Relation* (94), was repeated "at least four or five times," in New York, Fort-de-France, Carthagene and Paris. It was also "translated, diverted, abridged, written down in symbols, prolonged" at the same time as it was filmed, taped, printed, shown on a screen, "without my having to apologize," writes Glissant. And indeed, why should he apologize for this repetition through which a philosophical text was becoming poetry (91), a poetry which in its turn, in the course of this repetition, testifies to a "nomadic philosophy" (91) in action? Repetitions produce displacements and displacements, repetitions. And here is an abridged version of what the *Tout-monde* is all about: a world that is our world but not in its actual state of oppositions and compartmentalizations, the same but always slightly changed and changing (dis-placed). What the repetitions, the pairs, the doublings and the compoundings make very clear, is the creative vitality coming from the necessary presence of what is and what was. Even though the words are neologisms, the concepts are new, and the reality yet and forever unachieved, the poetics of the "nomadic philosophy" create out of the old and used.

[...] the text that would be new and without feedback, the sentence that would not be doubled up, and the invocation to which no echo answers, no matter how fulgurant, would only end up as one of those small heaps of dry grass, lying in traces and furrows abandoned in between two harvests that, by miracle, are repeated. Like literature, the philosophy of Relation is recurrence and displacement together. (94)

Repetition appears here to be associated by Glissant with the cycle of seasons, which produces harvests. Repetition then contains the promise of germination, ripeness, and seed. But this should not be mistaken for sentimental rehearsing of trite images, when re-placed and dis-placed into the context of the Caribbean islands. There, indeed, it is easy to "picture an uncultivated land" that "would only be used for leisure, a kind of Voyage in which seeking and knowledge would have no place at all," a place that would have "become scenery" (Wing 150). The agricultural metaphor here in Glissant, sustaining the poetics of repetition, is combative. It is a fight against the tourism industry that wipes cultivated lands off a place, threatening both its ecosystem and its autochthonous means of survival. The repetition that accompanies it is a fight, too – because, as we must keep in mind, "poetics do not stop fighting" (*Philosophy of Relation* 85) – against mediatic spectacular feats, the flashes of a brutal communication enforced by violent techniques.

Today flash agents are the relay agents who are in tune with the implicit violence of contacts between cultures and the lightning speed of techniques of relation. They send consciousness hurtling into the sudden certainty that it is in possession of the obvious

keys of interaction or, usually, into the assurance that it does not need such keys. They dictate fashion and commonplace – these two modern embodiments of interrelation. (Wing 166)

Against the “flash agents” which act quickly and violently to impose supposedly all-illuminating commonplaces, poetics produces the imaginary of common-places. It modelizes their construction, through the operation of a repetition which weighs the sentence down toward the ground from which it comes, slows its pace, renders it obscure.

The Politics of Detail

The world is Tout-monde, first of all, in the distension and detail of its situating and reverting. This is the lesson that shines forth here (there): from its detail, that is, from its poetics, to the details of all, from which a politics is drawn. The political is the harmony revealed between bare detail and open totality, without the incitation to commit the crimes of generalizing ideologies. (*Philosophie de la Relation* 34)

In the writings of Glissant, the repetitions are also those, and maybe first of all those of his place. Some elements associated with his place are repeated over and over again, reappearing in all the detail of their natural manifestation. They are those which are intimately linked to Édouard Glissant personally because they have played specific roles in the course of his life as a poet, but also the most typical (or should I say: expected, commonplace) of a Caribbean island: the volcano, the forest, the beach, the sea, the fallen rock, the archipelago. Incessantly revisited and reiterated, they produce a schematic landscape, a place of an abstract figurative quality, from which other places will be convoked, slightly different, but always sharing something structurally similar. The emotional process at the heart of Relation, recognition (intuitively and intellectually), is brought into play there.

Each place of Glissant’s Martinique is returned to and reconfigured through writing, first as the place where he was born and lived, and then as a place of memory. It appears as a place both marked by history and marking it. From place comes an aesthetic – which is transcribed by a rhetoric –: the poetics is therefore localized. Hence it can found a philosophy called “nomadic” (*Philosophie de la Relation* 91) since it comes from a certain place, returns to it by writing, then departs from it again and radiates into so many fields such as the historical, the mythical, the ethical, the political, the poetical Its concepts never leave the ground of our common earth. This is how they carry and propagate a political ethics. We will see with the sea how all this works.

We have to start with a commonplace: the sea surrounds the island of Martinique. The sea is a wide mass of water particularly moved in Glissant by a wind called swell. The swell determines the motion of the waves of this sea: backwash. “Swells, Backwashes” is the title of one of the chapters of *Traité du Tout-monde*. Its plural form manifests what writing does: it repeats and multiplies. After the swells that it relates in its first ten pages, this chapter takes us to where it had told us it would: to the backwashes. Like “Swells,” “Backwashes” is a sub-chapter that can be taken either as prose or as poetry, it would be difficult to say for certain. It deals with languages. It begins with the assertion: “We write in all the languages of the world” (85) and ends on a parenthesis written in italics: “(Backwash is repetition, endlessly frayed.)” The italics bend the typographical signs just as the swell bends the waves into backwash. By this we come to recognize how Glissant’s sea, characterized by its movements of swell and backwash, informs his language not

only on the level of its signifiers and figures of speech, but is also imprinted onto the very materiality of his language. A little further down in *Traité du Tout-Monde*, Glissant juxtaposes “the place where we live, where we speak from” (119). In this apposition, which is like a stammer, we do hear the place (the sea) speaking (in) Glissant’s language. It truly stammers, repeats, curls back on itself. Incessantly. Like backwash. Involution is its congenial movement: it turns back to history, in order to better move forward from it.

The trembling mass of the sea which surrounds the island of Martinique gathers together little trinkets of islands. As a place, reappearing with its own rhetoric, and to which a certain history is attached (the historical movement of turning back) and from which, we will see, a certain philosophical ethics is expressed, it has to be distinguished from the deep sea and its sub-marine currents, which carry yet another aspect of history – the dead bodies of the slaves thrown overboard that form a fluctuating layer of silt, invisible to the eye but always felt as an influence – in its own specific rhetoric. Even though the Caribbean sea is in extremely close relation with the Atlantic Ocean (in Glissant’s philosophical matrix as well as in the actual geography of Martinique, where the two meet in the Passages at the north and south of the island), the two have to be distinguished. The Atlantic Ocean appears in Glissant as that powerful territory that favoured Western expansion:

Later, the thought of the Atlantic Ocean, reinforced by the abyss of the slave trade, will impose itself as the symbol and reality of power. *The Northern Atlantic Forces*. That Ocean is a continent. Its mass fascinates. (*Philosophie de la Relation* 49-50)

Glissant conceives the Atlantic Ocean as the negative of the Caribbean Sea. It is cited not with the aggressive intention of seizing it and fighting it with its own weapons (power) or even the silly desire to see it eradicated, wiped off of the maps. On the contrary, the Atlantic Ocean is what enables Glissant to configure the Caribbean Sea in his typically deviatory way. They are posed together in a relation of opposition, *against* each other, and not parted and confronted in a fight to the death. This relation of opposition maintains an exchange, and from exchange, we have seen, changes occur (*Philosophie de la Relation* 56). From what we can truly call a *configuration*, then, of the Caribbean Sea, Glissant shapes the ethical and political principles which guide his philosophy of Relation: mobility (of the waves), non-power (of the Caribbean Sea as distinguished from the Atlantic Ocean), opacity (of what is latent below and beyond), diversity (in the entanglements of currents).

The Hyphen

“[...] we would say that *there is no writing innocently*, and that what we say and how we say it is *all* in the form of what we write,” writes and underlines Glissant in *Une Nouvelle Région du Monde* (71). As the extension brought about by its formation into a compound word immediately shows, the common-place repeats and goes beyond what is. Its printed form conveys onto the page the shape of the “composite country” (184) that it is – a “composite country” being, according to Glissant, a country with historical foundations, not metaphysical origins, in other words: a country that has been constructed and thus can be deconstructed. In the surprising formation of this neologism, a new reality, composite, compounded, is manifested. Besides, in keeping with what the unex-

pected and unaccepted compounding announces, the precise nature of the creation is not given. Both with the colon and the hyphen of the new region of the world that is announced in the double pair “common place: common-place” we are on unknown and opaque ground. Neither the colon nor the hyphen lets us draw the definite contours of the new region which we nevertheless understand each points to. They leave it to us to divine it, as they launch a relation whose ways and destinations are not fixed in advance. Both these combination marks, in the utter allusiveness of their minor traces, as they do not project any definite contours, are the signs of the commons (or of *le commun*, in the singular singular French which Dardot and Laval have coined to refer to this reality in construction). As the philosopher and the sociologist have convincingly shown, the commons is neither a thing – hence the word coinage by which they designate it in the singular – nor common goods – hence the substantivation of an otherwise adjectival form. It does not precede its institutive practice (148). It is an institutive practice, a beginning to which all incessantly contribute (578), in an act of collaboration which is the very condition of the commons (48). Dardot and Laval insist repeatedly on these conditions, which are also qualities, of the commons, from different historical and philosophical angles and at different moments in their magisterial *Commun. Essai sur la Révolution au XXI^e Siècle*. Glissant’s writing, for its part, incites this institutive practice, which starts with a questioning of what is, through the use of these minute, minor and common typographical signs, –: Even though the typographical signs belong in common to both written and graphic languages, instead of being twice as explicit and transparent for this very reason, they are all the less clear for it. We are left to question their opacity, to enter into relation with their printed trace

A Question of Writing

A “silent lapse in spelling,” (Bass 3) at the same time as it obviously traces a visible continuity between two terms, the hyphen figures what is most obscure and unpredictable in the common-place. It will definitely remain “a mute mark,” (4) difficult to apprehend. It seems difficult, then, not to recognize the affinity Glissant’s hyphen could have developed with Derrida’s “a” in *différance*... With its innovative, defamiliarizing hyphen, the common-place presents itself as a question of writing.

As such, it does not describe anything, paints nothing, settles nothing precisely. The “common-place” itself, both as a word and as a reality, does not exist. It appears and disappears. It appears and disappears in this word marked by a perplexing “silent lapse in spelling” which leaves it outside all dictionaries and stable definitions. It also appears and disappears as a verbal construction: it is indeed always already exposed, as Derrida has shown, to disappear as sign, in the process of reading (Bass 4). We also remember, at this point, how Glissant insists on the fact that all place has to be a “*lieu-dit*,” a “saying-place” (*Philosophie de la Relation* 87).⁵ This insistence on the presence of place as

5. The “*lieu-dit*” is another of these conceptual expressions in Glissant’s text which leaves the translator at pains. It refers all at once to a very common reality of the French territory – a place, originally in the countryside, that bears a name referring to some topographical or historical particularity; it also partakes of this typical and conspicuous compounding of words which we are now in the process of analysing; and then it signifies much more than the combination of its signs: related both to place and to verbal expression, it, too, points multi-directionally to poetics, politics, philosophy, ethics, history and geography. Oakley chooses to translate “*lieu-dit*” as “place-saying” to highlight Glissant’s emphasis on language.” Whereas she does explain that “Glissant is punning on the French term *lieu-dit*, which designates

a sign guarantees that the common-place is not meant to stand, one day, finished and done, total and totalitarian. As Derrida writes of *différance*:

It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone. Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge [...]. In every exposition it would be exposed to disappearing as disappearance. It would risk appearing: disappearing. (Bass 6)

A question of writing, it always calls for construction, and deconstruction too. Besides, the common-place, that will always remain to be built, does not appear systematically throughout Glissant's œuvre. It is gradually replaced by *le Tout-monde*, whose similar word construction shows it requires a similar building. This absenting of the compound word and of the reality which it bears, manifests the specific quality of their presence.

If the common-place does not expose or mimic what is, because this would imply that it has achieved a state of "being-present in its truth," (Bass 6) it nonetheless takes into account all that it finds, in its drifting progression, all that has so occurred, however ephemerally or lastingly, hiddenly or openly, unrecordedly or spectacularly, in order to go beyond it. It gathers and is made of "terms and ideas and feelings and sites and promises and imaginaries and dreams and news and manifestoes" (*Une Nouvelle Région du Monde* 110). In such a way, a new kinship can be traced between this not-fully-expressed sign of the common-place and *le commun*/the commons analyzed by Dardot and Laval. They write:

We have posited the commons as a *political principle*. It is not of our invention, it emerges from the contestations of the actual order. It designates first of all the frontlines and the zones of conflict where the transformation of our societies is at stake [...]. (455)

Like the commons, or *as* one, as the case may be, the common-place is a *principle*. It is a "beginning always at its beginning," (578) the proposition of another order which arises from what is (deemed unsatisfactory). As such, as a principle or proposition, as a sign with only half a recognized presence, the common-place will never be of the order of Being, it will never be fixed and settled. The way it is written makes us recognize what is not.

Here in this word, as everywhere else in his work, Glissantian writing manifests itself as the opposite of a communication tool, but also the opposite of those languages which self-proclaimed themselves "classical" or "universal" – among which French, that he subverts as much by creolizing it as by his using it as an insider from the margins.

There is one thing we can be sure of: a lingua franca (humanistic French, Anglo-American *sabir*, or Esperanto code) is always apoetical. (Wing 112)

Such languages, to which are attached illusions of transparency, clarity and powerful rationality, were for these reasons sent to the conquest of the world. Glissant deems them apoetical because they fix rules and norms of exclusion. They simplify, impose, condemn, eradicate. They are "a perfunctory containerization of expression," (*ibid.*) that is: the exact opposite of Glissant's language, which is all complex obscurity and "effusion" (*Une Nouvelle Région du Monde* 74).

an unincorporated village, notable building, or landmark known only locally," (21) it seems to me that the clumsiness of the expression "place-saying" makes it stand out more than the original "lieu-dit."

A Schematic Rhizome

The hyphen, the sign of an indefinite language, sketches a movement. In its short straight line, it sketches this typically Glissantian movement which, after having returned to the place of birth, will generate continuity by diffusing in an obscure and unforeseeable way. The hyphen is a schematic rhizome. Rhizomes abound and extend luxuriantly over the ground between volcano and Martinican seaside. But the rhizome is also one of the fruitful concepts, developed by Deleuze and Guattari, through which, Glissant writes, they “criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted” (Wing 11). Re-grafting it on to his own work, Glissant prolongs this un-racinated and proliferating surface root, which, here (there), after a strange circumvolution journey, finds once more its indigenous place on Martinican soil to become the natural metaphor of Glissant’s poetics of Relation:

Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other. (Wing 11)

The hyphen signals and launches, between singular places and what is common to us all, between common place and common-place, “a rooted errantry” (37) / “*une errance enracinée*” (49). The chiasmus around which, in French, the title of this chapter from *Poetics of Relation* turns, retraces all our steps so far: it writes the return to the common place, its repetition – which rootedness semantically conveys. In this entanglement of sounds, it elicits the fact that errantry occurs within rootedness, that it starts from it. Yet this sound variation on rootedness does not bind us in its coils since the aural pair (in French) softly but decidedly leads us from one word to the other. What is more, these words may have sonorities in common, they nevertheless have two different roots. The chiasmus, opacifying the sense, is an anti-sabir which writes and creates this demanding inextricability of the common-place. It performs rhetorically what this sentence from *Une Nouvelle Région du Monde* explains:

The common-place gives us the intuition of the Tout-monde, the common place, without a hyphen, is also necessary for us to recapitulate the world’s histories, and we have extensively gone back to it, here, since it is the repetition of what is obvious that helps us penetrate the inextricable. (111)

The Pictogram of Rooted Errantry

We see, even though we cannot grasp, this very tiny trace. A minor sign, introduced as if by mistake, the hyphen is the pictogram of a concept which, it must be said, is a major concept in Glissant’s œuvre: errantry.

Errantry is not of the order of Being: it is in extension. But its extension does not proceed indiscriminately. It is neither “arrowlike nomadism” nor “circular nomadism,” both “overdetermined” according to Glissant (Wing 12). It is neither conquest nor tourism: Glissant equates them within the same parenthesis or around the same conjunction “or” (17) because both proceed from the same will to seize and get, either oneself or those that are still called “Others.” Both tourism and conquest, on the one hand, continue positing the difference between self and other. They operate upon “the duality of self-perception” according to which “one is visitor or visited; one goes or stays; one conquers or is conquered” (17). On the other hand, both are made possible by scientific and economic power which, as Edward Said has amply demonstrated, work together.

Errantry, in fact, is not only the activity of a living person moving over a geographical area. Both in the French “*errance*” with its double reflection of knights of old and contemporary *différance*, and in the well-inspired choice of fabulous and anachronistic “errantry” for the English translation, the word points in different directions. In the imaginary which it launches, we also recognize the involutive movement, opaque paths and benevolent inclination of Glissant’s writing. From all this, we are led to understand that errantry is poetical – and indeed, “The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation” (18).

Like Glissant’s philosophy, the manner and the intention of which it determines, errantry “contravenes” (*Poétique de la Relation* 27):

At first this thought of errantry, <running against the tide> of nationalist expansion, was disguised “within” very personalized adventures – just as the appearance of Western nations had been preceded by the empire builders <going overboard>. The errantry of a troubadour or that of Rimbaud is not yet a thorough, thick (opaque) experience of the world, but it is already an arrant, passionate desire to <contravene> the root. (Wing 14-15)⁶

Contravene: what a superb verb! It speaks, all at once, of anchorage (*contra*) and motion (*venire*); the step retraced and the expectation of what (who) is to come; all the while being firmly based on, attached to, a contestation which is its starting point. Errantry is the poetical political gesture which contravenes all that would tend to be fixed, arrested, settled, imposed. It is then the mode of approach fitted to the common-place. The hyphen that signals it as a writing creation and makes it contravene authorized spelling, also pushes it adrift one knows not where, to a place that remains to be put together. Like errantry (or as a figure of errantry), the common-place is not of the order of Being: it is in extension. It is a verbal poetical extension adjoining/disjoining what is otherwise either kept apart or fused. The common-place, bearing its drifting current in its very heart, is always already a transgression.

Blends, compounds, forgeries, chiasmi, words decomposed recomposed, all these words which are not words (since they do not appear in the dictionary) do trace the philosophy of Relation in their refusal to pin it down. They make it appear in the unsettlement created by the writing of it. All these words which invent as they are being invented stage the happiness arising from playing with language, a language which manifests itself as ductile, labile, shimmering in its opacity, drifting: anything but a sealed container remaining squarely put in its allotted place.

The hyphen of the common-place is a powerful sign. It is a sign of errantry in many ways. It is obviously an error, a spelling mistake which augments the obscurity of the formation and hence opens up space for interpretation. This space, in French, would be an “*aire*” pronounced in the same way as the “*err-*” of “*errance*,” “*error*,” “*errantry*.” So the error which the hyphen represents opens the necessary space for drifting and wandering, a space which obscurely amazingly corresponds to the region announced in “common-place.” But it does not stop here. It also provides the energy to propel the motion of errantry, in errantry: the homophonous “*erre*” is also the headway, a nautical term designating the motion of a ship that continues progressing forward after it is no

6. I have slightly changed Wing’s translation here, in the two marine terms (which do matter in the drifting impetus on which they carry errantry forward) as well as in the verb “*contrevenir*” which the French brings forth at this point in the essay (*Poétique de la Relation* 27).

longer propelled by an engine. The space traced by the hyphen does not only open, it produces the necessary movement of continuity.

If the sign of Relation in errantry is the hyphen, its figure is "the walker." Not any walker, but the walker who repeatedly goes silently by "the little garden between the [Glissant's] house and the beach" (Wing 122). The beach itself is black and/or white, sometimes covered with brown seaweed and uprooted coconut palms, sometimes recovering its white sand, in the dry season (121). (It should be noted in passing that we ought not to be too quick to link this black and/or white beach to the hasty easy symbolism of the page being written, because in the chronology of the *Poetics of Relation*, it first appears as "The Black Beach" (as a chapter, and in the chapter) before it comes again as "The Ardent Beach" with its dazzling white sand).⁷ Appearing a first time with "The Black Beach" at the heart of the volume, the walker reappears at the very end of the volume, on the same beach, geographically speaking, but now "appearing: disappearing" under the name "The Ardent Beach." This "ghostly young man" is completely mute, which of course makes Glissant "attempt to communicate with this absence". He just walks and walks circularly around the island, so his "tireless wandering trace[s] a frontier between the land and water as invisible as floodtide at night" (122). The walker, in his repeated, mute and ungraspable wandering, makes a trace, "a frontier between the land and water." This is the shore, the narrow area which constitutes the beach, as a shrunken "corridor of black sand" (121) or as the reduced strip of white sand left where the tourists have not spread their towels on it (205). On this space always already covered with an entanglement of signs – seaweed and fallen trees or towels – the walker leaves a trace – which is hard not to relate to the trace of writing. The trace of writing makes, creates, poetically, its own area, an area that is not a place as such and that never stays put. Like this beach which appears and disappears with the tides and the seasons, sometimes black and sometimes "ardent." Glissant explains what "ardent" means, regarding this beach, beyond the sheen of the sand irradiating in the sun:

Beneath the conventional image, the kind one sees developed – or summarized – in publicity films in the United States or Japan, the luxuriously fatal image for selling a country ("The Antilles cheap"), beneath this insipid facade, we rediscover the ardor of a land. I see the mockery of the image, and I do not see it. I catch the quivering of this beach by surprise, this beach where visitors exclaim how beautiful! how typical! and I see that it is <ardent>. (Wing 205)

When the beach passes from black to ardent, it passes, without disappearing utterly, from a state of common good or *res communes*, from being an object of consumption, to becoming a principle of sur-reality. This principle is motion: it is "quivering"; and effusion (diffusion): it is "ardent."

A spirit of the place, a spirit of the text, too, drawing hyphens where they are not expected, and leaving them to meander obscurely behind him, the walker appears like a spirit of the gesture of Relation. Ghostly and mute, he also appears like an embodiment of the hyphen which Glissant's writing has insinuated here and there. A mute and obscure sign, reappearing at intervals, the hyphen haunts and defines the space where

7. I have slightly deviated from Betsy Wing's translation of this beach into English, preferring to stick to the original "ardent" rather than go for the "burning" which she has chosen. The polyptoton "ardor"/"ardent" which is attached to the beach in Glissant's original formulation makes its sand tremble as sea water to reveal another reality beneath the immediately visible and hastily consumed surface (*Poétique de la Relation* 221).

it appears and creates mystery. Both walker and hyphen will continue their errantry. We will not have been able to grasp them. Only approach them. Approaching is another of Glissant's leitmotifs: it suggests both our condition as regards the common-place and the way to deal with it. Glissant tells us:

There is so much of the world to be uncovered that you are able to leave this one person alone in his outlook. But he will not leave you. The shadow he throws from a distance is cast close by you. (Wing 208)

So we know now: tracers of traces, walkers and hyphens throw a shadow that will not leave us, as the shadow extends and reaches us, or maybe, is cast by us (as the ambiguity of Wing's choice of the passive subtly makes possible).

"The new thought of frontiers"

The shadow the walker throws as he walks away traces a continuity between what is far and what is close. In the very distance it traces it brings us together. In the same way, symmetrically, the hyphen of the common-place gathers together the place and the common. While they continuously join what they touch, shadow and hyphen let the diverse elements here and there manifest and assert their specificity. We can say they maintain diversity together as the condition of the going beyond that is going to take place in all entanglement. This is how it goes with Glissant's philosophy, which is also, obviously, ethical and political, brought forth poetically. Proceeding in such a way and with such a purpose, it contravenes the dominant system of western thought which posits distinctly a here and a there, a visitor and a visited, one and the other. But, Glissant reminds us,

Many peoples of the world do not hold the same and the other as given apart, and those peoples have not had any need of the repairing art of dialectics. (*Une Nouvelle Région du Monde* 131)

With its politics of the common-place and its art of compounding, Glissant's poetics upholds diversity. It makes it shine ardently even as it effectuates its obscure entanglements. This mode of relation makes diversity disappear as a collection of bits and pieces, atomized forms of the Other, designated, posited, essential. That is, it makes diversity appear as this unfinished totality of the same – but different, changed, changing in this exchange going on.

What is then at stake in this poetics is nothing less than "the new thought of frontiers" from which the world can be built up again and, farther, re-designed – in Relation. As the site within which the common-place is emerging, the world is already going beyond its own frontiers.

The new thought of frontiers: as being from now on the unexpected that makes a distinction between diverse realities the better to relate them, and no longer that impossibility which parted what was forbidden from what was forbidden the better to reinforce each of them. The idea of frontiers helps us from now on to preserve and appreciate the savoury taste of the differences when they are apposed to each other. (*Philosophie de la Relation* 57)

In this New Region of the World – the ambiguity of the preposition "of" making it possible to envisage Earth itself as a Region of a wider, more embracing, World – in this World in the process of becoming, frontiers do not keep irremediably apart the

walker and the man of the house, the black beach and the ardent beach, the daily-lived common place and the principles of the common-place taking form as the writing proceeds. In this revolutionary structure, what was supposed to go straight starts bending and becoming sinuous. It sinuates. Insinuates. "Frontiers no longer constitute one of the possibilities of being, but in our world a flight of passages and in-betweens," Glissant wrote in 2006, as he was working on this *Nouvelle Région du Monde* of his making (180). What is a frontier that is "a flight of passages and in-betweens" but an erratic hyphen? Because of all these hyphenating frontiers which will from now on make place bristle and radiate, which will connect any place in its opaque profusion of rhizomes to all the other places of the world, we will now write every place "here-there" (131).⁸

Pascale GUIBERT

University of Bourgogne Franche-Comté

Works Cited

- BOLLIER, David. *Think like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2014.
- CHAUNU, Pierre. *La Civilisation de l'Europe des Lumières*. 1971. Paris: Artaud, 1993.
- DARDOT, Pierre, and Christian LAVAL. *Commun. Essai sur la Révolution au XXI^e siècle*. Paris: La Découverte, 2014.
- DELEUZE, Gilles, and Félix GUATTARI. *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*. Paris: Minuit (coll. "critique"), 1975.
- . *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Paris: Minuit, 1980.
- DERRIDA, Jacques. "La différence." *Tel Quel, Théorie d'ensemble*. Paris: Seuil (Coll. « Points »), 1968. 43-68.
- . "Différance." *Margins of Philosophy*. Transl. and ed. Alan Bass. 1982. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1984. 1-27.
- GARRAWAY, Doris L. "Toward a Creole Myth of Origin: Narrative, Foundations and Eschatology in Patrick Chamoiseau's *L'esclave Vieil Homme et le Molosse*." *Callaloo* 29.1 (Winter 2006): 151-67.
- GLISSANT, Édouard. *Poétique de la Relation. Poétique III*. Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1990.
- . *Poetics of Relation*. Transl. and ed. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1997.
- . *Traité du Tout-Monde. Poétique IV*. 1997. Paris: NRF Gallimard, 2013.
- . *Le Monde Incréé. Poésie*. Paris: NRF, Gallimard, 2000.
- . *Une Nouvelle Région du Monde. Esthétique I*. Paris: NRF Gallimard, 2006.
- . *Philosophie de la Relation. Poésie en Étendue*. Paris: NRF Gallimard, 2009.
- OAKLEY, Seanna Sumalee. "Commonplaces: Rhetorical Figures of Difference in Heidegger and Glissant." *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 41.1 (2008): 1-21.
- RADOVIĆ, Stanka. "The Birthplace of Relation. Édouard Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation*: for Ranko." *Callaloo* 30.2 (Spring, 2007): 475-81.
- SAID, Edward W. *Orientalism*. 1978. London: Penguin, 2003.

8. My warmest thanks go to Emily Abbott, Kathie Birat, Fiona McCann and Claire Omhové for their careful re-readings of the English of this text and their thoughtful suggestions throughout.