

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Introduction: Poetics of Space – Archipelagos & Wanderings

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This special issue of *Karib* includes authors with different disciplinary backgrounds in conversation with the Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) and with each other. Glissant has inspired and challenged us to use his essays and imaginary as a vantage point, a base from which to view the world and create the schema of belonging and relational rootedness. The focus is on how Glissant's work continues to be interpreted in new ways in disciplines other than philosophy or literary studies and on exploring fundamental questions about physical spaces and their 'imaginaries' around the world. Glissant used diverse examples and terms, each drawing meaning from the others. The authors of this issue set out to do exactly that as they wander around the globe, drawing specific attention to certain points or to the process itself. The insularity of an island (literally and metaphorically) in Glissant's writing is also a paradoxical globality: the wandering (errance) does not have a start or a finish. In this case, it seemed symbolically appropriate to set out from the Caribbean and return to it in the final paper of the collection.

Keywords: Glissant; archipelago; imaginary; *Tout-Monde*; New Region

This issue includes authors with different disciplinary backgrounds in conversation with the Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant (1928–2011)¹ and with each other. Glissant has inspired and challenged us to use his essays and imaginary as a vantage point, a base from which to view the world and create the schema of belonging and relational rootedness. The focus is on how Glissant's work continues to be interpreted in new ways in disciplines other than philosophy or literary studies and on exploring fundamental questions about physical spaces and their "imaginaries" around the world. The authors in the pages to follow have chosen to use this Glissantian neologism for the simple reason that whereas the English language does not accommodate a noun form of the adjective "imaginary", Glissant's French draws a sharp distinction between the substantives "imaginary" and "imagination". Glissant's use of the term "imaginary" has little if anything to do with the better-known Lacanian imaginary register; instead, it refers to a broader human faculty allowing us to conceive of our world, providing a more fruitful alternative to the "imagination". In establishing his contradistinction between the imaginary and the imagination, Glissant (2009: 112) holds that: "The world as representation is given in the imagination but insofar as it is also the *Tout-Monde*, which is to say a non-totalitarian totality, whose details and multiplicity are not lost, it opens itself up to the imaginary". With the *Tout-Monde* Glissant embraced both particularity and totality, which, in his view, were in a symbiotic relationship, both dependent on and influenced by each other. This is a philosophical space that is dedicated to new forms of being and knowing. This world may be seen as connected by a Glissantian rhizome or archipelagic thinking, or as in our case as expressed by Glissant in Betsy Wing's translation (1997: 225): "And sometimes the suggested theme will have a ripple effect, set rootlets, or serve in some new direction."

The suggested theme was "Geographical Landscapes/Changing Landscapes of Geography" as announced for the Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers Annual International Conference held in 2018, in Cardiff, Wales, UK. A session for this conference and further cooperation grew out of a joint effort of art historians, anthropologists, cultural (historical) geographers, and ecologists in the frame of the Foundation for the Baltic and Eastern European Studies funded project "A New Region of the World? Towards a Poetics of Situatedness" originally put together by Charlotte Bydler. The core team was joined by Glissant scholars, primarily by those with a background in (Francophone)

¹ For an excellent web resource on Glissant, his work, translations, and writings about him see Library of Glissant Studies, <https://www.glissantstudies.com> (accessed 21 April 2020).

literary studies and philosophy, as well as by artists, some joining in fleetingly, others investing long-term. We would like to thank them all for this time we shared.

The discussions started at the conference have now been shaped into contributions to this issue. This path has never been straight but meandered into questions about language and challenges of translation, about being connected and how to express that connectedness, about space, situatedness and context, as well as about hybridity of the human and more-than-human world, various mediums, materialities and imaginaries. The authors have often been slightly baffled by a Glissant who offered a broad range of ideas to follow up on, expand on, or question but who also declared that nothing is true and that everything, including our mentalities and how we think, is always changing. The underlying current here for avoiding getting totally lost in chaos or chasing red herrings, errantry that Glissant encourages but that cannot be fully followed in an academic publication, is offering plausible alternative histories and highlighting the connectedness of peoples, worlds and the ways people organize these worlds to make sense of their existence. Glissant's thought has come to be known for a number of key words such as the *Tout-Monde* or Relation and it unfolds in a self-sustaining intellectual universe, where each such term draws its meaning from the others in a pattern of infinite referential relays. As it does so, it leads readers to embrace and think within its own epistemological bounds, declining to step outside of them. Hence it was, in a way, a violent act, to pick only a few concepts around which to build a discussion and adding some related ideas that the authors have worked with and leave others out. Space and archipelago became the key words, within a background of geography and island studies and the outlet of a geography conference. Archipelagic thought was associated with the privileging of suppositions over conclusions, with prominence accorded to particularity, to the smallest to be considered, existing alongside an awareness of the entire world.

Ever-increasing creative work in geography has attempted to explore space through different literary and artistic conventions with the aim of expanding horizons. Exploring the possibilities for hybrid cross-cultural and more-than-human studies with the added suspicion of clear-cut "appositions",² the idea that Glissant at numerous points called "the right to opacity" fits well into such geographical story-telling. Although the fact of geographers working together with artists and literary scholars is not particularly innovative in geography as a discipline, a geographical approach was new for most of our authors. They wandered off to write about their subject considering not only time but space while staying connected with material concerns to explore this Glissantian new world. His *Nouvelle région du monde* – a "new region of the world" – does not, in our understanding, need to be a physical space, although the studies are anchored in specific locations, indicating a materiality of an otherwise abstract vision. The contemporary world is conflicted and is transforming both literally and figuratively by our consciousness of its past, present and future (Glissant 1993, 2006). It is a habitual world with limited resources requiring careful and inventive approaches that acknowledge unprecedented and unpredictable effects ranging from the levels of bacteria and viruses to insects and snails, as well as rodents and other mammals. Humans share this world with many other creatures, the effects of this involvement have never been as glaringly evident as in spring 2020, at the time of completing this work.

The central themes of the poetics of space, archipelagos and wandering were thus formed to foster the study of literary, artistic and visual worlds geographically and to think beyond the persisting conceptual barriers and scholarly divides of disciplines, as well as of text, image, and physical space, in order to explore and expose the poetics of place in Relation. Glissant unfailingly rendered this term with a capital "R" in his writing, thus underscoring its import as the cornerstone of his thought: "Relation re-links, relays, relates", he explained. "It does not relate one thing to another, but rather the whole to the whole. The poetics of relation thus accomplishes the diverse" (Glissant 2005: 37; original French in all capital letters). Relation took on a near-metaphysical preeminence for Glissant who insisted that it "knew no bounds" (Glissant 2009: 45–46).

For Glissant, poetics evoked an aesthetic grounded in the composite, non-linear, nomadic, and unpredictable culture generated by lived experience and increased awareness of otherness that also have long been central in geographical research. He also frequently used spatial metaphors and concepts. Somewhat surprisingly, his notions have not attracted much attention and his work is not well-known among geographers, with the possible exception of island studies (Stratford et al. 2011; Pugh 2016). Glissant's sense of the uncharted profusion of an opaque and elusive world can be perplexing but it was crafted to unsettle geographic and social imaginations and landscapes. Others (notably Diaz 2006: 577) have felt that Caribbean theorization has "hypercirculated through academic practices and institutions as an increasingly preferred model for cultural analysis". Although archipelagos, and the Caribbean archipelago in particular, were in Glissant's writing central and his approach has been adopted widely in post-colonial studies, his thought was aligned with anti-essentialism, the unpredictable and the unforeseeable. He rejected any model and urged towards the horizontal and the open that was picked up in our discussions. Glissant's approach certainly encourages to engage more deeply with theory, while simultaneously dislodging fixed geographic notions, such as "North and South", or "East and West". New connections may be found by looking deeper into postcolonial relations and indigeneity in places other than physical archipelagos. The cases bound in this issue range from Glissant's native Caribbean to South Africa, the Baltic and the Arctic, as well as to theoretical, artistic and practical considerations of being connected to, and constituted by, the global, while nevertheless being unique and specific.

² Glissant contrasted opposition and apposition, framing the latter as the juxtaposition of terms without antagonism or implied hierarchy (Glissant 2009, 145; Glissant 2006, 152).

Other-than-geographical issues had to be tackled as well, including language, the primacy of text (over image or sound), writing style, and format. The first language the authors speak is Danish, English (American), Estonian, French, German, Spanish, Swedish; several of us are bilingual and most speak several languages fluently. Some have experience in professional translation and thus are attuned to verbal expression, its potential and pitfalls. A few have been able to read Glissant's original texts in the French language and to think and write down their thoughts in English without more trouble than translation usually presents. Glissant's texts nevertheless pose a challenge as all his translators unanimously agree.³ They have filled numerous pages with notes about semantics and origins, spelling conventions and self-ascriptions, which makes naming the translator as significant as the author in picking a certain spelling or in framing it. One goal of this collective effort is to reconsider the significance of translation in our engagement with texts, as we read in between, and beyond, their lines.

Glissant did not make the interpretation of his work easier in the course of his long writing career by changing the emphasis as it were to real-world conventions of differences. He constructed images and language games of great complexity, claimed a right to obscurity in the name of creolization. Raphaël Lauro (2014: 3; trans. Emily A. Maguire) adds that Glissant was "[...] to cite an expression of Glissant's with regard to William Faulkner – attending to that which the text 'says without saying everything by speaking'". Glissant's (1996: 156) original French held that Faulkner *a dit sans dire tout en disant*, which could also be taken to mean that he "said without saying, while saying nonetheless". Glissant's concise formulation was a paradoxical one, for it proclaimed a way of speaking that would be other-than-speaking, or rather more-than-speaking, or perhaps one that might say without saying. This is certainly valid with regard to his own texts, which point us to an archipelago of understandings that are as distinct as they are interconnected.

All of the authors have been conscious of these terms and their relations, but we tackle Glissant's keywords in different ways. According to our training and academic habits, we have mediated concepts and placed them in a theoretical framework aimed at a broad approach in which materialist and discursive concerns converge. To our knowledge, this has been the first time that Glissant scholars have worked together with researchers with backgrounds in social and physical sciences and with artists. It has been an enormous task for the editors to walk a fine line between ensuring general readability and constability, asking the authors to explain matters that they normally take to be given in their own discipline, and at the same time allowing them freedom and variability and thus the possibility to provide deeper insights. Together, with the help of Catriona Turner (an experienced English language and technical editor), we have compromised between standardizing in a broad sense and leaving the authors to express their individuality, and in a sense, the indigeneity of their discipline. These challenges have contributed to the abandoning a myth of a single tradition in academic writing and publishing, as well as what is written and defined with a Glissantian creolization of academic language as a result.

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Michael Wiedorn discusses some of the key concepts in Glissant's essays and thus lays the ground on which the other authors wander across the world picking out different aspects in Glissant's writing that sprout (and hopefully blossom) in the various locations that they call their own. Wiedorn's essay also serves as an introduction to Glissant's role in philosophical and postcolonial thought, especially his archipelagic thinking as apposed to a Hegelian "system". Heidi Bojsen continues by discussing the geography of Relation further and highlighting the effects of education on understanding the same historic events from the viewpoints of the colonizer and the colonized. By contrast, in the following paper by Tiina Peil, the focus is on time, bringing time and history as interpreted by Glissant into the geography of one specific location, a port in the Baltic. Glissant's archipelagic thinking is connected to the concept of *edgeland* in order to highlight the aspect of any place being the centre or a vantage point, and on the edge, simultaneously. Thereafter, Johanna Dahlin continues by examining how culturally creative processes have systematically helped to sever indigenous peoples from their lands. She discusses this complexity through the story of the former Soviet gulag and mining town of Norilsk, which can be regarded as part of an archipelago interpreted by Canadian filmmaker Françoise Jacob. Katja Aglert explores the possibility of practicing, in Glissant's terms, archipelagic thinking by performing a lecture together with the audience and then by formatting the performance as an academic text that creates new imaginaries with Spanish slugs. The story of the slug connects back to Heidi Bojsen's discussion of more-than-human space and attitudes to nature. Finally, Carlo Cubero brings the reader back to the Caribbean by introducing the idea of transinsularism and offering an account of musical politics on the Caribbean island of Culebra. In summary, the authors present an archipelago that is neither a solution nor an answer but rather a source of creation and creativity, an opening for new journeys across the disciplines to think differently, offering an open ending.

³ See the bibliographies of the papers in this issue for references and names of the translators; translations of the quotes in the Introduction are by Michael Wiedorn unless indicated otherwise.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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