Opacity in Open Air
Producing Queer Outsides through Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*

M. Garea Albarrán

Abstract

This essay provides a queer reading of Édouard Glissant's critique of Western metaphysics as presented in his 1990 work *Poetics of Relation*. Glissant's text is interpreted as offering conceptual tools for understanding the production of an outside of the gender binary, as well as for a critique of the naturalisation of the bourgeois framework underlying queer visibility and inclusion as political ends. Based on the self-transgressive character shared by the notions of Relation and queerness, it is further argued that both the potentialities and the aporetic elements of Glissant's proposal can elucidate those of queer theories and practices.

Keywords

Licence

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> Si no entiendes lo que digo, mala mía.
> —Villano Antillano

Introduction

Drawing upon Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, this essay aims to analyse the obscured metaphysical foundations of transparency and visibility with regard to gender determinations. It is not my intention to trace mere parallels between Glissant's decolonial proposal and queerness in an analogical manner, i.e. presuming an external relation between race and gender. Rather, provided that the gender binary is inherently modelled in racial terms, as a functional device for the same colonial enterprise that constitutes the object of Glissant's analysis,[1] I will apply Glissant's thought to the gender struggle[2] focusing on queer assimilation within the epistemological—therefore, political—realm of representation. This essay proceeds on the basis that queer people are 'included' and made 'visible' and 'equal' by virtue of a series of procedures that are justified through appeals to values that must be, in turn, cautiously examined, for they arise from the Modern, bourgeois actualisation of the Western paradigm of presence as the theoretical expression of class relations in capitalism. In order to keep on reaching its anti-identical, deterritorialising—or, in Muñoz's (1999) terms, disidentifying—character, queerness must address its own conditions of emergence and consequent determinations; as Cohen remarks, when gender is understood abstractly, the potential subversiveness of queerness is easily deactivated and put in service of the hegemonic determinations operative in cisheteronormativity (1997, 447)—and, ultimately, in Capital.

To the extent that it constitutes a critique to Western metaphysical schemes, *Poetics of Relation* may work as a device to explore, specifically, queerness and the gender binary. In this text, the idea of Relation is proposed as the movement of an open totality, unsubjectable by those theoretical devices that emerge from within it—including that of Relation itself. In Glissant's ([1990] 1997) words, "[t]he idea of relation does not limit Relation, nor does it fit outside of it. The idea of relation does not preexist (Relation)" (1997, 185). Hence, Glissant attempts to present Relation not as yet another transcendental universal principle (1997, 33), but as an immanent movement of relative singularities beyond the logical binaries of Western identity. For the dismantling of the latter, he proposes opacity as a relativising strategy whereby colonialism's pretensions of fixity, absolutisation, and systematic completeness may be shown in their ultimate failure. It is in this sense that Glissant's thought may be rendered useful for analysing the gender binary as a manifestation of Western, Modern epistemology in its metaphysical, politically motivated commitments.

It is nevertheless worth noting that *Poetics of Relation* pays little attention to gender, which is neither thematised nor implicitly deployed in a critical perspective. The only occasion in which gender is directly addressed is a footnote where Glissant discusses

the relationship of Antillean women with feminism (1997, 60). Here, as well as in the formula "men and women," which he frequently employs throughout the text, sex-gender designations are assumed as given categories, while gender as such is considered only in relation to women. This implies that the point of view of Glissant's abstraction of gender is that of universal masculinity, and thereby presupposes the gender binary. However, there are several precedents in considering Glissant's thought as a queering device. Within the subfield of queer opacity, to which my paper aims to contribute, scholars such as El-Tayeb (2011), De Villiers (2012), Blas (2016), and T. (2020) have already suggested possible ways to apply Glissant's proposal that may undo its implicit position on gender. Glissant's notion of Relation and that of queerness share a fundamental anti-self-identical character that attempts to subvert Western, Modern epistemology as the theoretical expression of the colonialist and capitalistic frame that came to structure and produce our current social relations. Since the political aims involved in this epistemology also gave birth to the gender binary as we know it, I claim that some of the key concepts presented in *Poetics of Relation*, such as opacity and Relation itself, may be turned into powerful instruments for queer perspectives. Moreover, it is my intention to show that even the structural aporias found in Glissant's critique of Western thought may be helpful for gender analyses, albeit in a negative manner, since they reflect some of the crucial risks that must be considered for examining the terms and implications of queer visibility and representation when presented as emancipatory demands.

On this basis, the first section will examine Glissant's notion of transparency and its relationship with his notion of the Empire, with the purpose of exploring the necessary invisibility of the ideological devices that mediate what we understand by (queer) visibility. In the second section, Glissant's concept of opacity will be applied to gender as a potentially subversive tool with respect to the binary, exclusive logic of identity that grounds Western, Modern epistemology. The third section will confront Glissant's proposal with itself, considering its limits as another way to reflect back on queer theory and praxis.

1. Transparency and the One

The Empire and Totality

To publicly count as something, it must first be possible to be understood and seen as such: one must satisfy the digestible standards for the identification of a given attribute. Yet, this visibility and consequent identification cannot possibly depend on any 'pure,' immediate knowledge: as Mills (2015) reminds us, "[c]ognition is, contra the Cartesian paradigm, essentially social" (2015, 74), for "our perception of the world is theory-driven rather than data-driven" (2015, 75). Here, 'pure knowledge' works as an ideological presumption that conceals the specific social and historical determination of our current (Western, Modern) epistemological paradigm and its key notions, among which one finds a set of seemingly neutral concepts, such as 'freedom,' and the 'individual' as the 'subject' of 'humanity.' Far from containing an acknowledgement of both the theoretical mediation involved in perception and the social production and material character of theory itself, the invisibilised epistemology that produces the visible rests on a naturalistic presumption

of immediacy and transparency in respect to its objects—one that obscures the specific prerequisites imposed over them in order to bring them to light, thus naturalising their mode of appearance under these conditions. What is visible is then *made* visible by the penetration of the light of (a certain) knowledge through its own conceptual grid, whereby the acknowledged, identifiable existence of an entity is always already preconditioned on the basis of its commensurability with the ideological commitments that define our gaze.

In Glissant's (1997) *Poetics of Relation*, transparency is fundamentally related to his notion of the (colonial) Empire, which he understands as the absolute manifestation of Totality (1997, 28). Imperial Totality amounts to totalitarianism, i.e. not to the *actual* totality of beings and relations—in Glissantian terms, the All—but to the ideological, generalising *totalisation* of an absolutised particular within which everything is subsumed. Inclusion of particular elements within Totality is, therefore, grounded on an a priori exclusion that defines both the included and the excluded on its own terms. Glissant identifies the Empire with the One—or Being: a universalised idea that tries to reduce the incommensurable community of singular beings that makes up the actual totality. Transparency then amounts to an instrument for the imperial enterprise of domination, in such a way that what is made visible is already conditioned, "preconceived" (1997, 193) by the Empire: "As Mediterranean myths tell us, thinking about One is not thinking about All. These myths … are functional, even if they take obscure or devious means. They suggest that the self's opacity for the other is insurmountable, and, consequently, no matter how opaque the other is for oneself …, it will always be a question of reducing this other to the transparency experienced by oneself. Either the other is assimilated, or else it is annihilated. That is the whole principle of generalization and its entire process" (1997, 49).

For Glissant, the Empire tries to realise this self-generalisation by absorbing and instrumentalising every potential opposition in the most effective way—either by conversion or by annihilation. It thus provides both direct paths for its uncritical embracement *and* fake routes of escape that hinder and reassimilate the production of actual ones. Precisely because opposition appears as a threat to the system, as soon as the former is absorbed within the latter, it is conveniently substituted by an *appearance* of (absolute) opposition that works as the Empire's best tool. Yet, the given 'other' is not outside of the binary itself—of the One—but rather contained in it as the necessary 'other' to elevate the 'one' to the One: its 'difference' cannot, then, amount to actual alterity with relation to the One. Implicitly aligning with a whole tradition of critical voices against difference as just another face of identity, Glissant states that "difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent" (1997, 189): "Accepting differences does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale. I understand your difference, or in other words, without creating a hierarchy, I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh. —But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction" (1997, 189f.).

Drawing upon these insights, I argue that Glissant's scepticism regarding the subversive power of mere difference provides instruments for a critique of reformist demands—such as that for gender *equality*—that present themselves under the guise of revolutionary counterpowers. If, contrary to our (presumably) immediate intuitions,

hierarchy is not a removable accessory but, rather, the fundamental aim that motivates the very construction of the binary, equality between two intrinsically hierarchised, 'different' poles cannot possibly break with such power dynamics. Although Glissant does not directly address these issues, he does leave some hints that could be put to work in that direction: "[W]hen we speak of a poetics of Relation, we no longer need to add: relation between what and what?" (1997, 27). Moreover, according to him, we should not allow identities "to become cornered in any essence" (1997, 192).

Applied to gender, Glissant's remarks may be useful for an understanding of gender abolition, within the context of the abolition of capitalistic social relations, against emancipatory proposals grounded on liberal epistemology and articulated in terms of rights and equality between 'abstract,' presumably stable, autonomous subjects.[3] Conceiving (pairs of) identities—man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, cis/trans, etc.— as corrupted by power *only a posteriori*, due to 'disbalanced' social relations, can only deliver an *appearance* of liberation that contributes to the naturalisation and reification of such (constitutively hierarchical) categories and, ultimately, of the ideological framework within which they operate. On these grounds, rather than embracing a liberal cosmos of given identities—of atomic, 'equally legitimate' alternatives—, a more effective understanding of gender emancipation would require the denaturalising acknowledgement of the historically constructed character of the gender binary. Here, the social nature of the presumably transparent 'biological' concepts that lay the metaphysical ground for the production and identification of human subjects as such appears as a crucial aspect to unveil (Oyĕwùmí 1997, 9). In the case of gender binarism, which presupposes sexual difference ('biological sex'), Laqueur has remarked on this inevitable conceptual—hence social—mediation of our perception, whereby "powerful prior notions of difference or sameness determine what one sees and reports about the body" (1990, 21). Regarding the seemingly transparent, 'biological' ground of both gender and race, "what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction" (Wittig 1992, 11f.). Just like, for Wittig, heterosexuality constitutes a normative condition for being a woman (1992, 13ff.), the gender binary—being either a 'man' or a 'woman'— appears as a prerequisite for being human, while Whiteness constitutes a prerequisite for being, unambiguously, either a 'man' or a 'woman.' The human condition, presented as the maximally inclusive category—as the *first* ontological determination, *before* any particular attribute—, conceals its own exclusive conditions through a neutral, abstract formulation that ultimately obscures the actual ground of 'biology' as an ideological device.

The Biological Root: Coming Out to Being through *Compréhension*

In relation to his critique of essentialism, Glissant provides the notion of the Root to describe the traditional, Western determination and fixation of identity (1997, 141) that appeals to myths of filiation to legitimise one's right to conquest (1997, 143f.). The Root establishes an ontological anchorage in some glorious past from which a vertical narrative is traced up until the present: the West thus secures itself retrospectively in an original myth whose chronological remoteness expresses its *essential depth*. In this sense, the Root appears as the stable, objective ground upon which Western identity

rests, and as the source of *truth* from which it derives the legitimacy of its exercise of power. Following this formulation, what I will here call the Biological Root, as a specific instance of Glissant's concept, renders beings intelligible in gendered terms through the ideology of 'sexual difference.' In the last decades, rather than being hindered by it, the Biological Root has *relied* on the separation, famously impugned by Butler (1990), between the natural (objective and given; here: 'sex') and the artificial (subjective and socially constructed; here: 'gender'). The aim of this scission might well be understood as the provision of an *instrumental* acknowledgement of gender as constructed: a 'validation' of 'gender identity' as a (merely) 'subjective' phenomenon, with the ultimate intention of posing 'the biological' ('sexual difference') as the 'objective,' truthful realm. It is precisely by means of its presumed transparency that the Biological Root obscures its own construction and perpetuates its role as a Trojan horse for gender.

For the epistemological procedures of colonisation typical of the Empire, Glissant employs the term 'to comprehend' (*comprendre*), from Latin *comprehendere*. Etymologically, this word suggests a conception of understanding tied to operations of seizure (Wing 1997, xiv), i.e. of containing, taking, grabbing, or even arresting something. Glissant's (1997) choice is then meant to describe a knowledge formulated in terms of an enterprise of domination that is executed from a transcendental point of view with regard to its content, which in turn becomes objectified and commensurable in terms of the container: "In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce" (1997, 189f.). Accordingly, Glissant understands this epistemology as based on transparency, which presumes to provide (and demands to be provided with) an immediate and objective revelation of every being in its 'inner truth.' Yet, the illusion that presents this revealable Totality as the All is both the prerequisite for and the predetermined outcome of *compréhension*. Again, imperial transparency is rather opaque in its procedures of fraudulent identification with all there is, and therein lies its success: it supposes that everything can be brought to its *absolute* light—which is, particularly, that of the *universalised* Western universality. A being is then ontologically constituted and remains rooted in Being only insomuch as it is dominated by the epistemology of light that corresponds to the metaphysics of presence.[4] Consequently, our way of being 'free' to 'express (and be) *ourselves*' within the framework of Modern democracies may well amount to being rather *forced to* embody a socially functional, predefined ideal. In other words, the most effective and sophisticated way of being silenced might well be that of being forced into the terms of a certain speech that presents itself as all-including. The imperative of subjection to confession, disguised as freedom of speech, leaves no room for complaints: as Foucault (1980) famously argued, these mechanisms force the very existence of a secret that must always be confessed. Hence, the transparent creates the opaque—the secret—just as light attempts to create and define darkness in its own terms, posing the consequent obligation of revelation without loss.

Here, coming out—making oneself explicitly visible-as-queer—may appear as situating identity "in a speech act by which one discloses a previously closeted 'secret'" (De Villiers 2012, 1). In this sense, it implicitly amounts to (the presumed possibility of) revealing (or even rooting) our (presumed) truth (Foucault 1980, 59)—one that is

already determined, when constructed as a secret, in imperial terms. As a reveal of a *true essence*, coming out supposes having lived a fake life under a fake identity and thus that one is now living one's authentic life, albeit not free of danger. This danger is, however, generally understood as exclusively coming from those social spheres that are intelligible as 'reactionary,' in such a way that this narrow location of 'reactionarism' works as the necessary exception that confirms the norm of 'progress.' Thereby, paradigmatical manifestations of imperial thought are conceived as irrational, accidental "puzzling anomalies" (Mills 2015, 75), separate from normal, reasonable society. Of course, what is being concealed here is the real character of these 'anomalies,' i.e. their coherence as manifestations of the implicit epistemological (political) commitments that ground the realm of normalcy, from which both 'reaction' *and* 'progress' arise. The act of coming out, when conceived as getting included and welcomed among the rightful ones—those who, despite (read: because of) remaining within sexual decency and gender normativity, do *understand*—, points to a hegemonic conception of sex in terms of knowledge (Foucault 1980; De Villiers 2012; Sedgwick 1990): "[A] *scientia sexualis* that turns sexuality into an object of paranoiac knowledge" (De Villiers 2012, 18).

In Glissantian terms, one could sketch a *compréhension* of sexuality as domination—an epistemologico-political configuration whereby one comes out to the external world as an identity that is easily digestible by the Empire, hence still subjectable to the Biological Root. Passing from the given 'one' to the given 'other'—from the private to the public, from the invisible to the visible, as if they were fundamentally different spheres—is conveniently *comprehended* in terms of liberation from the realm of political subjection, which is in turn identified with only one of the poles. Meanwhile, the relative improvement of queer people's lives carried out by reformist politics is weaponised by the system, only for it to once again let all its weight fall legitimately upon those who dare to denounce the complicit role of reformist politics in subjection.[5] Within these coordinates, and getting back to coming out, the passage *per se* does not amount to any radical, substantial difference—it may even reify the very grounds of the closet (Casarino 2002, 188–9). Appealing to transcendent, supra-social essences in the name of some lost authenticity only amounts to summoning the very ideology that underlies our *current* social determinations: "[I]n the ethereal suspension of language, is a renunciation of the earth: a disorientation of words which end up joining with the only available authority" (Glissant 1997, 30f.). On these grounds, *Poetics of Relation* may be useful for arguing, *à la* Butler (1990), that any actual overcoming of the gender binary will not be a matter of uttering either a trivial 'yes' or an impossible 'no' to our interrelated existence within material determinations, but one of acknowledging our given involvement with power and then trying to grasp *how* to engage with it, necessarily *through* it, so as to immanently actualise its (our) dynamic character.

2. Opacity and the All

Paradoxical Lives and Binary Logic: Indirect Opacity Beyond Formulas

Due to the incommensurability of Relation with respect to the binary schemes that articulate the realm of representation, the movement that may overcome the latter may

not adopt a direct, predictable form, such as that of mere difference (Glissant 1997, 82). Rather, indirection underlies the Glissantian notion of opacity, which, as Relation's mode of movement, is not only different from transparency, but also from the secret that the Empire offers as the other face of the transparent: "The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence. We are far from the opacities of Myth or Tragedy, whose obscurity was accompanied by exclusion and whose transparency aimed at 'grasping'" (1997, 191).

The fundamental difference between opacity and the dialectics of visibility and invisibility provided by the paradigm of transparency is that opacity's mode of appearance is not established a priori. Following Britton, "opacity cannot mean simply hiding, because there is … nowhere to hide" (1999, 25). Opacity is not necessarily translated in terms of hiddenness, nor does it exclude them either; rather, it *uses* both the intelligibly transparent and the intelligibly opaque—the visible and the invisible—against the very binary they constitute, and thus becomes opaque to their exigences of univocality. For De Villiers, "opacity is visible only outside of the purity of the opposition opaque/transparent itself" (2012, 22). Appearing every time as radically committed to non-commitment—to Relation—rather than subject to the Root, opacity shows how the Totality of the Empire, in the dualistic articulation of its dreamt monolithic absoluteness, remains relative to the All.

Flowing in accordance with Relation and, thereby, necessarily also relating to the binary structures that arise from it, opacity ultimately forces these schemes to hint at what overwhelms them. The opaque, open character of materiality from the point of view of abstract formulas shows how the ideals posed by the Western binary are also entangled in Relation: "Someone who thinks Relation thinks by means of it, just as does someone who thinks he is safe from it" (Glissant 1997, 185). As for queerness, opacity underlines the fact that we are always already determined in relation to gender structures and categories whose compelling power is, however, far from absolute, for their translation—or incarnation—is neither direct nor stainless (Butler 1990). Fighting the hegemony of these abstractions involves paradoxical, opaque manoeuvres that are in tune with material life as impossible to fully subsume within the binary structure of Modern judgement: "Thought of self and thought of other here become obsolete in their duality" (Glissant 1997, 190). As irreducible to the secret, opacity takes place in open air while remaining equally irreducible to confession, unsettling the logic whereby 'truth' is 'the natural' ('the biological') and 'falseness' is 'the artificial': how could a *travesti*, walking unapologetically in the light of day, be possibly transparent through the lens of *comprehénsion*? Rather than the archaeological discovery of a true essence, opacity is a horizontal flow of (aesthetic, epistemological, political) production—something close to what Hall conceived as a becoming (1990, 225). Thereby, one may find subjection *and* subversion both in the 'opaque' and in the 'transparent,' in such a way that it becomes difficult to maintain the dichotomy between remaining in the closet and coming out[6] by means of a direct translation of these two poles in terms of, respectively, invisibility and visibility.

The opaque procedures of Relation can contribute to relativise another false

dichotomy: that of passive determination *versus* voluntarist liberation. From the perspective of the former, one might say that individuals remain subjected *no matter how much they try to set themselves free*. As Althusser pointed out, subjects are, by definition, *subjected* ([1971] 1984, 44ff.); at the same time, no individual essence precedes the production of subjectivity ([1971] 1984, 49f.). It could be further argued that the pre-existence of a *free* individual, prior to subjection, works as the ideological supposition that might render subjection complete; in that case, emancipation is not to be found in voluntarism. Rather, a rigorous examination of determination may unveil another face of oppression—one brilliantly noted by Fanon: individuals remain subjected *no matter how much they try to adapt*. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes: "Every hand was a losing hand for me" (1986, 132). Put differently, the other face of our impossibility of attaining full freedom (from determination *qua* determination) is that we never attain full subjection (to this or that mode of determination). Since we are forced to play a game in which we are doomed to fail, our incarnation of abstract functions of Capital—our subjection to socially functional ideals, such as those of gender—remains both operative *and* susceptible to deactivation thanks to its necessarily inconclusive nature. In this failure that subjects us by kidnaping our desire—by driving us towards gender ideals while granting that we never fully attain them—the game reveals its own misfire with respect to its all-encompassing intention. Indeed, as a social construction disguised as a 'natural' base for 'the social,' the presumed self-evidence of the Biological Root needs to be constantly maintained and reproduced, precisely because "[t]here is nothing natural about it" (Laqueur 1990, 13). As Lugones puts it, "[t]he cosmetic and substantive corrections to biology make very clear that 'gender' is antecedent to the 'biological' traits and gives them meaning" (2007, 195). The continuous struggle in the production of oneself as commensurable with 'one's own gender'—cis or trans—shows that there exists more than those abstract, presumably stable identities.

Although this 'more'—this outside—is not to be found in any pure realm beyond or prior to social determination, queer people may remain compelled to appeal to 'truth' (to 'pre-social biology') as a matter of short-term survival—as shown in naturalistic, 'strategical' essentialism, i.e. the understanding of those practices that challenge cisheteronormativity as 'natural' and/or 'innate.' But this contradiction contains the seed of a potentially revolutionary move: the necessary failure of the perfect replication of the ideal, which keeps it alive, is what simultaneously exceeds its monopoly on reality (Butler 1990, 39). This failure might be turned into a relative success in uncovering the instability of categorical distinctions, hence becoming operative for producing new horizons through a "refusal of legibility" (Halberstam 2011, 88) that can also be derived from Glissant's opacity. The 'strategic' essentialism behind, for instance, the assertion that we were 'born this way' is a backfiring manoeuvre, for the naturalisation of possibly subversive practices only reifies the naturalistic framework that grounds normativity in the first place. Thus, hegemonic practices receive the appearance of being, ironically, 'just as legitimate' ('natural' and/or 'innate') as their non-normative counterparts, while their structural character is conveniently concealed. From this perspective, the relatively higher resistance that queerness finds when trying to appeal to the Biological Root may rather be embraced for the realisation of emancipatory possibilities that expose and

accentuate, through the destabilising production and stressing of contradictions, the cisheterosexual matrix's own lack of stable ground.

Gender Cannibalism and Queer Theorisation

According to Glissant, even under the harshest conditions—when subject to need with no apparent margin for more than mere survival, as in the Plantation (1997, 74ff.)—, revolutionary possibilities may still flourish, and perhaps more fiercely than under the narcotising illusion of freedom. Subversion may arise here even without any possibility of subversion *in sight*, for the oppression of the One carries within it the seed of its own reversal (1997, 49): "[R]ight from the first shock of conquest, this movement contained the embryo ... that would transcend the duality that started it" (1997, 56).

This relativisation guides Glissant's engagement with Western thought—and language.[7] Starting from the factual reality of oppression, Glissant is far from advocating for a definitive solution in an impossible negation of Western influence. His position is in tune with Césaire's rejection of an essentialist "backwards return, a resurrection of an African past that we have learned to know and respect" (2012, 33), as well as with her proposal of 'cannibal poetry' (2012, 27) as a transformative engagement with what is imposed by the West.[8] In fact, Césaire's cannibal poetics seem to have informed—though in an obscure(d) way[9]—Glissant's thought, and particularly some of the elements that here appear as most useful for thinking queerness. For Césaire, the possibility of overcoming nostalgia (2012, 45) arises from the very fact that Antilleans have been deprived of what Glissant calls the Root. In Glissant's view, the Caribbean was indeed immersed in a hardly surmountable tragedy, but also simultaneously provided with the possibility of overcoming the tragic scheme itself, i.e. the systematic imperative of re-rooting (1997, 47ff.). Nevertheless, this surpassing does not depend on an abstract, direct rejection of the *Western* Root, in contrast with an alternative, original myth that might legitimate the Antillean truth as one that would have remained pure and separate from external influences. Without amounting to a direct *assimilation* of the binary logic that grounds Western identity, this Glissantian move would rather involve an engagement with such logic, yet only in order to push forward its corruption: "[T]he West itself has produced the variables to contradict its impressive trajectory every time. This is the way in which the West is not monolithic, and this is why it is surely necessary that it move toward entanglement" (1997, 191).

At the same time, the irreducibility of Relation implies that subversive practices are not necessarily direct, clean translations of consciousness or intentionality, e.g. of an activist aim. Paradoxically, the way in which Relation blocks every secure, conclusive success that our conscious will attempts to (im)pose is also what grants the possibility of an outside here and now. To the extent to which it relativises the dichotomy between freedom and necessity, Relation opens up space for subversion when all we *see* is need.[10] Nonetheless, the fact that Relation does not depend on intention does not imply that we must—nor even that we can—avoid intentional action, including that of theory. Relation is, precisely, not an external, happy-ending teleological plan towards a given liberation whose possibility is automatically realised through instrumentalised particulars. Seeking for shelter in 'passivity'[11] is then delusional and still not exempt of activity, for (actual)

"[p]assivity plays no part in Relation" (1997, 137). Hence, we need to act. And, since language cannot be located in an external realm outside the active, material immanency of Relation, "Relation is spoken" (1997, 202)—so we also need to speak. Beyond both the subsumption of knowledge in *compréhension* and the refusal of epistemology altogether, Glissant insists in imagination and in poetics—in aesthetics—as "the highest point of knowledge" (1997, 140). It is from this perspective that he proposes the notion of *donner-avec* ('giving-on-and-with') as knowledge in Relation (1997, 192): an understanding that involves "the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves" (1997, 191f.). Against the verticality of the Root and the reductive pretensions of the epistemology of transparency, *donner-avec* amounts to a horizontal, mutually transforming appropriation within the immanency of the All.

Furthermore, since this knowledge is already understood as an activity, the need for action should not be confused with an (apparently anti-elitist, yet ultimately anti-intellectual) abstract appeal to 'praxis.' Glissant's account may thus give frame not only to queer action in general, but also, specifically, to queer theorisation. From positions that naturalise 'sexual difference' in terms of immediate objectivity and material reality, queer theories are often accused of remaining 'too intellectual' and, ultimately, 'subjective'—read: referring to an 'unreal' object. These accusations of idealism themselves presuppose an idealistic conception and separation of theory and practice—parallel to that of ideas and matter—that fetishises a reductionist concept of the latter, and thus ultimately encourages the abandonment of epistemology to its on-going, hegemonic tendencies—in this case, bioessentialism. Instead of succumbing to the inherent elitism of populist transparency and thus renouncing theoretical complexity, a more sophisticated counterstrategy might be drawn from Glissant's approach to Western metaphysics of purity: that of acknowledging our inevitable engagement with 'theory,' yet only in order to corrupt and collapse—to queer—its current forms from within.

3. Faithful Betrayals: Putting 'Relation' into Relation

The Framework of Rights and the Adherence to Humanism

Poetics of Relation can be read as a warning about resting on fixations—including that of an oxymoronic teleology of Relation. Accordingly, for it to collapse its own theoretical limits and thus attain part of what it hints at, Glissant's Relation needs to be put into practice—into Relation. After having explored Glissant's proposal in its potentialities, it is now necessary to put Relation against itself to consider its possible limits and fixations.

One of the most apparent issues in this respect is the framing of the notion of opacity in a demand for rights (Glissant 1997, 189, 190, 194). When Glissant encourages us to "[a]gree not merely to the right to difference but … also to the right to opacity" (1997, 190), he attempts to go beyond the framework of identity and difference, yet leaves that of rights unproblematised. In a similar fashion, the preservation of concepts such as 'humanity,' albeit rejected in its singular form in favour of a pluralised "[exultant divergence of] humanities" (1997, 190), makes it unclear whether simply keeping this core notion can lead to the desired collapse of identity in multiplicity. Instead, it might well amount to a merely inclusive move that would still leave its own exclusionary

preconditions untouched. Against this dichotomy, one could claim that Glissant's apparently direct engagement with and naturalisation of imperial values may be an indirect, instrumental strategy—one that, precisely in light of his own account of opacity, might not be judged as assimilatory a priori. Indeed, strictly opaque indirection would not even need to assume the direct, transparent appearance of what could be identified as 'indirection.' As already explained, opacity's instrumental procedures create a space for difference precisely by refusing any *given* differential position regarding the binary of transparency. But *is* Glissant's involvement with humanism and rights ultimately an opaque, instrumental procedure for such overcoming? Even—or perhaps especially— if one assumes it to be so, then it can only be concluded that the theoretical, a priori undecidability of opacity's success or failure leads us to look for an actual difference in its mode of practice. Instead of either saving or condemning Glissant's proposal beforehand, it seems more adequate to consider *how* these notions are articulated in the text. In this sense, the invocation of 'humanities' and the appeal to rights seem underdeveloped when compared to more sophisticated and exhaustively articulated concepts—e.g. opacity— that are posed as counter-notions to corrupt imperial binaries. Glissant's surprising lack of theoretical problematisation when incorporating these elements suggests an immediate assumption of values that is ultimately mediated by (as well as paradigmatical of) the naturalisation of what he calls the Empire.

Nevertheless, it is my view that this inner contradiction, albeit relevant for an examination of Glissant's thought 'in itself,' does not prevent us from looking for conceptual tools in relation to the analysis of queerness and the gender binary as far as the paradigm of visibility goes. On the one hand, it is indeed possible to find more evident, direct potentialities in notions such as Relation, the Root, and opacity. And yet, on the other hand, Glissant's seemingly spontaneous assumptions of bourgeois values may still be useful, insofar as they offer a practical illustration of relevant issues that still arise, under the same form, from within the queer struggle. Glissant's appeals to the frame of rights and to the notion of humanity may well be understood in terms of what Muñoz (2009) calls 'gay and lesbian pragmatism,' i.e. the reformist demand for inclusion of gender minorities within bourgeois structures in the name of 'equality,' 'visibility,' 'diversity,' etc.—values which, presented as ends in themselves, ultimately work as means to invisibilise and totalise what Glissant understands as the Empire. While this implicit endorsement of the liberal framework collides both with Glissant's own articulation of Relation and with queer revolution, it is interesting to note that it also coincides with one of the most pernicious risks haunting the latter. In Gossett's words, "[t]rans (neo)liberalism and its attendant visibility and respectability politics not only obfuscate liberatory trans politics ... but ultimately offer little recourse to those of us most targeted by the prison regime and white supremacy under the guise of feminism" (2017, 183f.). Here, the notion of humanity, as the inclusive concept *par excellence*, puts its own constitutive prerequisites to work in favour of exclusion in an indirect and extremely efficient way—one that contributes to a deactivating fixation of both Relation and queerness.

Relation beyond 'Relation' – Queerness beyond 'Queerness'

Relation must be enacted every time and, following Glissant himself, embraced against its own stable concept. Only by turning our available idea of Relation against itself may this theoretical device be simultaneously opaque and unattainable by means of *compréhension* and in practical accordance with itself as *donner-avec*. When self-confronted, Relation may be fertile for dismantling the Root in identity politics (Blas 2016, 150) while dynamising all possible fixations of the notion of queerness, insofar as the latter, as such, cannot constitute an identity (Edelman 2004, 17; Muñoz 2009, 25). If "the idea of totality alone is an obstacle to totality" (Glissant 1997, 192), just like the (ossified) idea of queerness is an obstacle to queerness, this All is free of exclusion only in virtue of its constant movement to which 'merely' theoretical approaches can also contribute—as long as they keep on moving as well.

However, both fixation to abstraction and its overcoming are themselves far from abstract. Considering queerness in a fundamental relation with the gender binary allows us to see how its gendered fixation is given as immediately concretised, in the service of the reproduction of class society, in racial terms. Consequently, going beyond the naturalisation of the gender binary that underlies that of queerness involves the overcoming of the constitutive determinations through which gender is made to produce the human as such. In this respect, Mills (1997) has explored the racial preconditions implicit in the Kantian concept of the human and unmasked whiteness as "a prerequisite for full personhood" (2003, 47). Yet, while Mills's critique still poses a liberal demand for inclusion within a reformed—broadened or pluralised—notion of the human, authors such as Gossett find in Blackness "a refusal of the genre of the hu-Man" (2017, 188) whereby "Blackness ruptures trans representability, respectability, and visibility" (1997, 185). This queerness beyond 'queerness,' as a line of flight[12] out of itself—and hence of the gender binary—, might thus be only produced from the blind spots on which the (white) light of the metaphysics of presence necessarily rests.

Thereby, Glissant's Relation as posed beyond its fixation in its very idea may illuminate the notion of queerness in virtue of a parallelism concerning both form and content, which poses a coincident direction as well as shared challenges. In both cases, one faces a concept that attempts to point beyond itself, defining its object as beyond its own conceptual objectification and definition. Remaining faithful to such a notion in order to activate its potential for producing an outside of itself supposes its constant betrayal: its practical actualisation by means of a systematic corruption of its 'pure' theoretical and systematic formulation, including its concrete, defining commitments. The need for a practical self-transgression that is inscribed at the core of the theoretical notion of Relation contains the seed for overcoming the inner contradictions in *Poetics of Relation*. When applied as a perspective to consider gender identity and binarism, as well as the aporetic character of queerness, Relation becomes an effective perspective for dealing with the reification of bourgeois values within queer theory and practice.

Concluding Remarks

Although *Poetics of Relation* remains implicitly formulated in hegemonic terms with regard to gender, its theoretical articulation may nevertheless be rendered useful for

queer approaches. In this text, Glissant provides notions that contribute to the analysis of the political commitments of Western, Modern epistemology and metaphysics, and therefore to an anti-essentialist critique and relativisation of its binaries. Such critique, when applied to the analysis of the sphere of representation through which subjects are themselves determined and produced, may contribute to understanding the production of an outside of the gender matrix.

It is precisely because Glissant proposes a relational (and relativising) conception of colonising procedures that he cannot turn his back on the fact of colonisation by means of a direct, mere negation that would appeal to some available externality. Rather, *Poetics of Relation* takes the determining character of the Empire into consideration to show—and enlarge—its own cracks. However, Glissant's engagement with Western thought may also be judged as still committed to several concepts that remain, in principle, as problematic as those criticised throughout the text as fundamental for the (re)production of Western metaphysics. And yet, such 'failures' may be rendered useful as well, insomuch as they point back to Relation's constitutive need for constantly surpassing its own fixed abstraction. Glissant's sporadic—yet in no way trivial—endorsement of some of the core elements of the object of his critique can then be put to work in a negative manner for illuminating tensions in gender emancipation, for queerness both arises from and opposes the same framework. In this regard, the problematic aspects in this text reflect specific difficulties in the queer struggle, both in relation to itself and within the broader context of gender determinations in capitalism. As for queerness, the imperatives of bioessentialist rooting and translation to intelligibility cannot but emphasise the need for us to persist in examining our own production as mediated by the gender binary—in a way that should ultimately contribute to its corruption.

Notes

1 See, for instance, Oyěwùmí (1997), Lugones (2007), and Schuller (2018).

2 I understand the gender struggle as a fight for the abolition of the gender binary, involving the self-destruction of gender-sex categories via their necessarily immanent, destabilising transformation and corruption, within the context of the downfall of the capitalist mode of production.

3 As underlined by Vaid, it is neither the lack of rights that causes oppression, nor the demand for rights that will attain change (1995, 183).

4 It is interesting to note how the semantic relation of the word 'theory' with the primacy of sight in knowledge and conquest is present in the Greek term θεωρία [*theoria*], among whose acceptations one finds not only 'speculation,' but also 'sight' and 'mission.'

5 A clear example of these manoeuvres can be found in homonationalism (Puar 2007), which proceeds by abstracting queerness from other social determinations so as to employ the instrumental 'inclusion' and 'tolerance' of (certain) queer individuals in a given State as a legitimisation of the latter's racist and imperialist agenda.

6 Insights on the subversive potential of the closet can be found in Sedgwick (1990), Britton (1999), De Villiers (2012), and T. (2020).

7 Creolisation and creole languages make good linguistic illustrations of these opaque, cannibal procedures, for their nature appears, against the vertical subjection to the depth of the Root (Drabinski 2018, 13), as a horizontal expansion consisting in "always being open ... never becoming fixed" (Glissant 1997, 34). French in France is not French in the Antilles, for "the oppressed didn't adopt the oppressor's language as they were expected to" (T. 2020, 95). Instead, they "corrupted it, altered it, adapted it, communicating in parallel ways among them, creating poetry, music, narratives the oppressor did not have full access to" (2020, 95). Similar considerations may be posed concerning queer languages. Queer slang "disrupt[s] binaries and thus function[s] outside ideas of truth and confession" (2020, 115) in such a way that it "negate[s] the ideal of transparency" (2020, 115). In this sense, albeit susceptible to co-optation, queer jargon keeps on subtracting itself from the cisheterosexual structures that ground the linguistic norm: while inevitably arising from within the latter, it may end up producing Glissantian opacity by apparently transparent means.

8 Beyond the presumed substantial stability underlying the dichotomies between the Antilles and Europe, and passivity and activity as the only alternatives for dealing with colonialism, Césaire (2012) pictures the genuinely Martinican poetry to come as one that engages with Western influence in terms of an *active assimilation* that

produces a transformation in both the poles involved. Historically, her proposal must be understood as contributing to the overcoming of Négritude. This operation was carried out by moving away from identitarian, ancestral purity through the dynamisation of Caribbean identity towards Antillanité, which, for its part, stressed the specificity of the uniquely multiple and relational character of the Antillean self over the unilateral emphasis on its African heritage. Further considerations on the epistemological radicality of Glissant's own approach, regarding the potential overcoming of Antillanité through the rhizomatic thought of Créolité, can be found in Burton (1993), Dash (1995), and Clarke (2000). Albeit beyond the scope of this paper, Bhabha's (1994) notion of 'hybridity' can provide deeper insights for the discussion of cultural transformation within the context of colonisation.

9   For explorations of Césaire's thought and its general omission in the canon of decolonial studies, see Sourieau (1994), Condé (1998), Rabbitt (2006, 2013), Kok (2024), and Krone (2024).

10   The relativisation of intention also demystifies the domination of the archetype of the West: the heroic individual in charge of executing the task of tragedy—restoring the Root, for the sake of the identity and structure of the community (Glissant 1997, 202).

11   For T. (2020), passivity is the *locus* of subversive political action. Yet, her notion of passivity in queer slang is closer to Glissant's opacity than to an actual refusal of agency (88), for what she rejects is rather the subsumption of activity within the given terms of Modern individual freedom.

12   I am using this term (*ligne de fuite*) as elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari ([1972] 2003), whose thought had a notable influence on Glissant's. With 'line of flight' I thus refer to a fleeing movement towards a vanishing point carried out by means of a transformative production of new connections within multiplicity, resulting in materiality leaking through and from the given frame of representation.

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