
Transversality as Disruption and Connection: On the Possibilities and Limits of Using the Framework of Trauma in Glissant's Philosophy of Caribbean History

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Abstract: What do we mean when we describe the history of the Caribbean as traumatic? Is it possible to use the term 'trauma' here in a more technical sense, or should we give it the less strict connotation of an extreme form of an event in which the past no longer stays just in the past and the future never ceases to demand something from the present? In this paper I analyze the image of *the abyss*, used by Édouard Glissant to evoke poetically one of the beginnings of the Caribbean, as leading to a paradox on the attitude toward history: Caribbean communities have been burdened with a non-history that feels, at the same time, like too much history. I show that this image resembles the paradoxical structure of trauma developed in the works of Cathy Caruth, according to whom trauma is a paradoxical structure of experience in which the subject (or a community) is painfully possessed by an image that they have barely perceived and that is so minimal that it cannot be controlled. However, I argue, there are limits to this resemblance. I focus on the question whether the (traumatic) paradox is escapable in this region of the world, that is, whether Caribbean communities can be de-traumatized, and what are the connections of this possibility with the question, central to Glissant, of decolonization. In order to answer these questions, I analyze a central feature of the Caribbean history according to Glissant, transversality, to show in what way the paradox of history can be loosened.

Keywords: Édouard Glissant, Cathy Caruth, abyss, trauma, history, transversality, decolonial.

"Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis?"

Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

Introduction

Because of its particular geography, the Caribbean became the first, and one of the most important points of contact between Europe and America, turning it into the testing location of many of the colonial strategies and economic exploitative systems that were later used by European powers to colonize the rest of the continent and even other parts of the world. In such a context, the history of this region is usually described as the continuous unfolding of traumatic experiences for the communities of enslaved, colonized, and assimilated human beings that constitute it,

a history that continues until today. This particular language, the language of trauma, is especially common when addressing Édouard Glissant's approaches to the birth of the Caribbean. In his work, Glissant examines the many political and economic devices employed by the colonizers to found and maintain the submission of dozens of millions throughout more than four centuries. This is read in some secondary bibliography through the framework and lenses of trauma. To mention just one prominent example, in the recent collection of essays *Theorizing Glissant* (edited by John E. Drabinski and Marisa Parham), six of the eight academic contributions (including the introduction) associate the words 'trauma' or 'traumatic' with the experience of the Middle Passage and the relocation of African slaves in the new territories, with the space and landscapes of the Caribbean as well as its economic and political forms of production (i.e. the plantation, the *hacienda*, the *encomienda*, etc.), and with the possibility of memory and remembrance under such conditions. This is of course not a coincidence, or a whim; Glissant himself designates as traumatic some of the effects of racism and colonization in the region, and, as the epigraph above makes clear, he even considers its possibility from a more technical perspective.¹

But what do we mean when we describe the history of the Caribbean as traumatic? Is it really possible to use the term 'trauma' here in a more technical sense, as it is used today in psychology and psychoanalysis? Or should we give it the less strict connotation of an extreme form of an event in which the past no longer stays just in the past and the future never ceases to demand something from the present? In what follows, I would like to examine what is perhaps a combination of these two approaches: an understanding of trauma as arising from the works of Cathy Caruth, primarily based on her reading of Sigmund Freud. According to Caruth, trauma is a paradoxical structure of experience in which the event is marked by the encounter between an excess and an absence of meaning. Namely, an experience in which the subject (or a community) is painfully possessed by an image that they have barely perceived and that is so minimal that it cannot be controlled. I believe Glissant's description of *the abyss* as one of the images connected to the beginning of the Caribbean resembles this paradoxical structure. In what follows, I want to ask whether, in this sense, it would be possible to say that the history of this region of the world is indeed a

traumatic history³. As I will suggest in the final section of this text, I am particularly interested in examining whether this (traumatic) paradox is escapable, that is, whether Caribbean communities can be de-traumatized, and what are the connections of this possibility with the question, central to Glissant, of decolonization. Is the abyss something that the descendants of millions of enslaved Africans can overcome, forget, leave behind? In what way? Up until when is it possible to preserve the image of trauma as a lens to understand, produce and read the history of the Caribbean?⁴

I.

I would like to begin with a comparison between two poetic images to show in what sense and to what extent Glissant's notion of *the abyssal beginning*⁵ of the Caribbean could serve to describe a "traumatic" condition. The first of these images is given by the mythic figure of Benkos Biohó, one of the earliest, and the most remembered leader of the resistance of the African slaves in the city of Cartagena, at the beginning of the 16th century. I would like to focus on one of the written imaginations of Biohó's death, included in the novel *La ceiba de la memoria* (2016), by Roberto Burgos Cantor.⁶ After a betrayal on the part of the authorities of the city, who had agreed with Biohó's forces in the *palenques* to cease fire and let the maroons govern themselves, Biohó is hanged in the main square of the city and his body is dismembered and paraded. In the last moments of his life, staring at the Atlantic sea, and turning his back to the land of his childhood, Biohó reflects on the connection between Cartagena and Africa:

Frente al mar va a ser ahorcado Benkos Biohó rey de la Matuna. Aprieto los ojos y no veo mi tierra. Mar y mar. Mis dioses no acuden. La aldea de mis padres los hermanos se han vuelto invisibles. Digo padre: nada acude. Digo madre: nada viene. Casa: no aparece. Enamorada digo: y una piedra una piel de sapo muerto en la playa un vacío que absorbe y oprime se anuncia en mi pecho y no cabe. (Burgos Cantor 2016, 376f)⁷

Biohó's attitude is consistent with his resignation, throughout the novel, to the inescapability of the black slaves' present. The way back to their homeland is lost forever; the enormous sea that the majority of slaves fear because of what it meant for them on their transportation to Cartagena, cannot be walked back. In his last moments before his death, seeing all the work of his life as a futile attempt to resist and restore what cannot be restored, Biohó senses that his land is so far away that his gods no longer can respond to his calls; they either cannot hear him or they do not know how to navigate across the sea to come to meet him. What remains is a desperate, nostalgic gaze at his well-remembered land, and the sea is the constant reminder of the insurmountable distance to this past. To come back in time in the form of traveling back in space would solve the desperate present and offer redemption. These, however, will never be an option for the slaves. Their African past is irrecoverable because they will never travel back to their homeland.⁸

Now, let's compare this attitude toward the past with another fiction. In "Utopia of a tired man," a piece included in his 1975 collection of short stories *The Book of*

Sand, Jorge Luis Borges describes the wanderings of its protagonist, Eudoro Acevedo, through an unknown (though familiar) country similar to Oklahoma, Texas, or the Pampa, in Argentina. These wanderings, at first only in space, lead Acevedo to a different time, the future, in which he encounters a very tall man simply called 'Someone' who is 400 years old. This anonymous man explains how in this present (Acevedo's future) facts or history no longer matter. People have gotten rid of newspapers, statistics, governments and money, and each individual lives only for themselves, without any significant appeal to the past. Each one must invent their own science in order to solve daily life problems, plant their own food, make the furniture they need and produce their own art. Printing has been abolished, all museums and libraries have long since been abandoned and, with them, all the existing knowledge *produced* in the past and *about* the past. Every individual is a new human race in themselves, with enough time to focus on the present, to invent (or discover again and again) the most strictly necessary knowledge they need to survive, and then to die in the most peaceful way. "[E]veryone must be his own Bernard Shaw, his own Jesus Christ, his own Archimedes" (Borges 1977, 69). When they decide it is time to die, they burn their bodies with all their possessions (furniture, tools, handwritten books, works of art), that is, with the only thing that constitutes now their *individual* past, and simply wave goodbye.

I believe Glissant's account of the situation of the peoples in the Caribbean (and by extension some of the African descendants in the rest of the Americas) falls in-between these two images, namely, between these two descriptions of an attitude toward the past. The Caribbean experience is for Glissant unique because it can be told as manifesting a spirit of a people that has never existed before. According to Glissant, no other group of people has been almost artificially invented in this way. Countless other communities have been displaced, persecuted, even eradicated from the face of the earth, but never before has there been such a systematic abduction of millions of people, a carefully executed transportation of those millions to another continent, and then such a perfectly organized expansion of their numbers and exploitation of their bodies for generations and generations until there was very little of their "original" cultures. What this unprecedented "creation" of a people amounts to is, according to Glissant, both a transfer [*transbord*] and a reinvention. He writes:

There is a difference between the transplanting (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transfer (by the slave trade) of a population to another place *where they change into something different*, into a new given of the world. (DA 40/ *Caribbean Discourse* 14; translation modified)⁹

The latter can no longer be studied as a historical phenomenon like any other, because it implies a radical rupture, a dislocation at its very beginning. The Caribbean people began existing with/in the experience of the slave trade, and not before. The result is that this population

has not brought with it, nor collectively continued, the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual, which it practiced before being uprooted. These methods leave only dim traces or survive in the form of spontaneous impulses. This is

what distinguishes, besides the persecution of one and the enslavement of the other, the Jewish Diaspora from the African slave trade. (DA 42/15)

This uniqueness of the Caribbean experience leads to a paradoxical attitude toward history, one that I would situate in between Benkos Biohó's gaze at the Atlantic sea and Borges' utopian future. Perhaps the most succinct account of this attitude by Glissant's can be inferred from the preface to the first edition (1961) of his play *Monsieur Tous-saint* [MT]. According to the preface, this play struggles in a literary form with the double character of the past for some of the peoples in the Caribbean, namely, the experience of those for which the *absence* of history¹⁰ can be felt simultaneously as *too* much history.

For those whose history has been reduced by others to darkness and despair, the recovery of the near or distant past is imperative. To renew acquaintance with one's history, obscured or obliterated by others, is to relish fully the present, for the experience of the present, stripped of its roots in time, yields only hollow delights. This is a poetic endeavor.

Of course this attempt seems incomprehensible, indeed useless, if not harmful, to those who, far from feeling an absence of history, may on the contrary feel that they are laboring under the tyrannical burden of their past. (MT 7f/15f)

Let us analyze in detail this paradox. On the one hand, it is possible to say that a sort of *absence of history* has been imposed by European colonizers and slave traders on the descendants of black slaves transported to the "New World". The slave trade as the "beginning" of their history is described by Glissant as a "brutal dislocation" (DA 223/61) of which there is no recollection, performing therefore an "erasing of [their] collective memory" (DA 224/62). This is the sense in which it is possible to say that these peoples have no history, or that they have a non-history [non-historie] that has been created and forced upon them. Because of the way the slave trade functioned, and particularly, because of the fact that peoples from different backgrounds (with different religions, languages, traditions, cultural practices, etc.) were forced to live together under completely new rules and in a foreign completely unfamiliar land, the result is the radical severance with their previously existing cultures and natural surroundings. There is no possibility of "continuum" between their "past" and their new reality, no linearity between their previous experiences and their way of coping with and apprehending the present. The only chance seems either to begin only after the dislocation occurred, that is, *only* two, three, or four hundred years ago, or to yearn nostalgically for a connection between culture and nature that existed only *before* and *somewhere else* (before the transportation, in Africa). This latter attitude might seem closer to Biohó's reflections before his death.

On the other hand, as a result of the experience of this dislocation and the future awaiting those who were being transported in the slave ships, the inhabitants of the Caribbean would suffer also from what we could call *too much history*, that is, in Glissant's words, the "tyrannical burden of the past," the weight of a tradition of massacre, enslavement, exploitation, impoverishment, segregation, etc., that can be experienced as all too present because of

all of its material effects on the lives of current inhabitants: poverty, illiteracy, lack of access to basic public works and services, high rates of infant mortality, etc. Such an absence is felt, even if colonization makes it impossible sometimes to name what causes this state of being, or how to combat against it. If we take this burden into account, it would be impossible to understand why someone would feel the need for more history. The one they have, a couple of centuries of living and dying under the worst conditions possible, seems to be oppressive enough. Why would they want to have even more? Such a concern could lead to the decision, accounted for in Borges' story, to abandon history and the past altogether, instead of looking for it forever on the other side of the ocean.¹¹

It is at this point where it could be helpful to introduce Glissant's use of "the abyss" [*le gouffre*], a term he analyzes only later in his thought, but that seems to incorporate precisely both sides of the paradox.¹² Its thematization opens indeed Glissant's *Poetics of relation* [hereafter PR] and becomes one of the most well know motives of his theoretical works. The abyss shaped by the Middle Passage is the paradoxical beginning of the Caribbean history and marks the rest of the analysis in PR. It is also mirrored in subsequent analyses of images of the history of the Caribbean such as the plantation system, colonization, assimilation, etc.

Even though the experience of the Middle Passage is itself "petrifying," for Glissant the abyss does not arise primarily from what is experienced *during* the travel, but mostly from what is *not* experienced, namely, from what was unknown to millions who did *not know* what to expect. Because of this, the abyss can only be opened to the imagination of the reader in its poetical form; hence, not as a description of the actual conditions of the transported slaves, but rather as the evocation of what is not known (and unknowable) in the experience itself. We could try to put ourselves in their situation, Glissant writes, and imagine how it would be to try to survive during several months under such conditions, and yet we would not *know* what was really terrifying about it. This poetic attempt is what is captured in the image of the abyss, a canyon without a bottom, a passage that cannot be bridged, a distance that cannot be covered, an impossible step; a brutal dislocation that radically disconnects the past from the present, and that uproots the lives of those who are submerged in it. And yet, and this is where the paradox lies, it *was* crossed; a people entered the Middle Passage, and a people emerged from it. A people began existing *in* it. The paradox lies in the fact that something that by definition—and by its link to the unknown—cannot be crossed, was effectively crossed; something that devours, consumes, destroys, was at the same time, and in that same devouring, a source of creation. A *non-history* was imposed to a people, thereby producing with that same gesture the burden of *too much* history.

Glissant explores three different manifestations of this link between the abyss and the unknown, all of which seem to perform the same paradoxical mechanism, that is, each one of them simultaneously dislocates (and erases) collective history while also burdening it with an unbearable weight. The first manifestation of this abyss is evoked by the image of the "belly of the slave boat." Glissant writes: "For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a

boat does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out" (PR 18/6). In this devouring, however, the boat also expels, by vomiting or giving birth to those who made it to the other shore. The abyss is in this sense, as Glissant calls it, a "womb-abyss."

The second manifestation of the abyss is marked by the depths of the ocean, filled with millions of chained slaves' corpses who were thrown overboard when they were sick, had died because of the conditions under which they were being transported, or whenever it was necessary to lighten the boat. Even if a continuous, linear trail of the boat could be theoretically followed, by tracing these corroded balls and chains, gone green by the passage of time, the experience itself cannot be continuous; there is no connection between these corpses by now dissolved in the ocean. The ocean with which the life on these shores in the Americas begins is made nonetheless out of these decomposed corpses of slaves with dysentery, measles, smallpox, or simply exhaustion and starvation. The life in the Caribbean begins, quite literally, with an ocean filled with death, disease, and starvation.¹³

The third and most "petrifying face of the abyss," writes Glissant, "lies far ahead of the slave ship's bow, a pale murmur; you do not know if it is a storm cloud, rain or drizzle, or smoke from a comforting fire" (PR 18f/6f). In this voyage into the unknown, the future (physical and temporal) vanishes into something that can only remain as a murmur coming from an eternal ahead. The abyss breaks effectively with this future, but also lets this future constantly resonate, even until today. It promises an end (in both senses of the word: a final and a completion) to this traumatic Middle Passage, and end to slavery, colonialism, exploitation, etc., namely, it promises a future that can only be a projection of the past, of the other shore. Glissant writes: "Paralleling this mass of water, the third metamorphosis of the abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left behind, not to be regained for generations except –more and more threadbare– in the blue savannas of memory and imagination" (PR 19/7).¹⁴

Glissant highlights three different aspects of the abyss through this poetic evocation of its the three-fold image. First, the travel of the slave ship through the ocean marks the impossibility of piling up these experiences chronologically, the impossibility of the sedimentation that would make it possible for the Caribbean people to trace their history linearly back to Africa. Second, it also tarnishes this passage, and the history that begins with it, with the abominable experience of millions of human beings who suffered the particular conditions of being treated, transported, and killed in this way. Third, a consequence of the two former, the Middle Passage constitutes above all a beginning [*commencement*] capable of turning the unknown into knowledge. Glissant writes: "the land-beyond turned into a land-in-itself. And this undreamt of sail, finally now spread, is watered by the white wind of the abyss. Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became knowledge" (PR 20/8). The petrifying unknown is thus transformed into "knowledge"; the abyss goes beyond itself by always carrying itself with it. Such knowledge is neither a nostalgic gaze at a destroyed

civilization beyond the sea, nor an arrogant disregard for what the past has initiated in the present.

II.

The description of the beginning of the history of the Caribbean thus resembles in its paradoxical structure a "traumatic" experience; in particular, as I would like to show, the paradoxical, abyssal description of trauma that authors like Cathy Caruth have developed in the field of trauma and literary studies.¹⁵ In this section I will review Caruth's account of trauma and how it relates to Glissant's description of a birth of the Caribbean; in particular, I will address some of the common criticisms of this framework, and why I think Caruth's version does not fall in any of them, making its comparison with the Caribbean experience even more fruitful.

In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth offers a reinterpretation of traumatic experience that highlights its paradoxical character. Departing from what she calls modern trauma theory (see UE 63), this approximation not only focuses on the evident devastating aspects of traumatic experience, but also on the fact that *inhabiting* trauma presupposes, first of all, having survived an "original" but inlocatable shocking experience. Thus, Caruth writes, "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, the *enigma of survival*. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a *paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival* that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience" (UE 58, my emphasis).

I would like to bring this paradox closer to my analysis of the abyssal beginning of the history of the Caribbean, following at least in three paths. First, traumatic occurrence is not only something that signals an extreme dislocation, inscribing a break between two moments in history or in the life of a person; it entails also a creative aspect, which goes beyond the paralyzing effects of the "original" experience. Second, there is a connection between (at least) two moments in the occurrence that mark a new form of temporality, described by Freud as 'belatedness.'¹⁶ Trauma, Freud explains, only occurs after the "fact," in a second moment in which the first original event comes back and is relived in another light, with another meaning, with an unbearable force. Third (and perhaps more importantly), the event itself to which we are referring (the abyss, the traumatic experience) is barely an "event," since we lack a means to construct it into something known, understandable, graspable, and yet, it constitutes the definitive beginning of a new life, the life of survival. There is no memory attached to it, and it precludes any way of constructing in a definitive way such a memory. Its belated character does not point to a past experience available to the individual (or a community) as part of the stream of consciousness.

Let us then analyze the structure of trauma, according to these three elements, following Caruth's reconstruction. Traumatic experience relates to events that are so sudden, catastrophic, or unexpected, that our response only begins to take shape *afterwards*, in flashbacks or repetitions that cannot be controlled by the traumatized person (see UE

11). This does not mean that the *location* of trauma lies in the event itself, or in a set of characteristics, because different subjects react in different ways to the same event. “[T]he pathology consists, rather,” Caruth writes, “solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth 1995, 4f). Trauma is thus, just as the abyss in Glissant, marked by its ultimate connection to the unknown, to what is ungraspable in the experience itself, and not by the terrifying, actual events.

Freud’s examples are the nightmares and flashbacks of soldiers who have returned from the war apparently unaffected, or the victim of an accident who only begins to suffer symptoms days after the event. In experiences such as these, the subject’s relationship to the event is so overwhelming, or occurs so unexpectedly, that the subject does not appear to be truly “present” at the event. Trauma relates in this sense to an *absence* of understanding, one has not yet lived through the experience of the event. Caruth writes: “The shock of the mind’s relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known” (UE 62). In the aftermath of the event, however, this absence leads to a belated *excess* the survivor cannot deal with: flashbacks, repetitions, symptoms of trauma. In extreme cases, the survivor is unable to move forward and remains caught up in an experience that, paradoxically, they never had.

Caruth’s interest, however, does not lie only at the individual level of the traumatized, but moreover at the level of history, or perhaps, one should say, at the level of what these insights on the structure of traumatic experience have in relation to our understanding of history.¹⁷ Even further, I believe Caruth wants to insist on an inherently traumatic structure of history (or some instances of it¹⁸), developed in her 2013 book *Literature in the Ashes of History* [hereafter LAH], where the question is explicitly raised in terms of the possibility of bearing witness to a history that erases itself, that erases its own traces, and thus a past that works in the undoing of its own possibility. What is at stake here seems to be the structure of history, and how in *some* it functions precisely by suppressing memory. Thus, history as erasure makes it impossible to access its own past, and at the same time, encounters the imperative to return. See, for example, Caruth analysis of Freud reading of the dreams and memories of soldiers who came back from the WWI:

No longer capable of interpreting these memories as expressions of unconscious desire, Freud came to understand them as repetitions of the experiences that the soldiers could not grasp, a form of memory that, in enacting what it could not recall, also passed on a historical event that this memory erased. These memories, in other words, in repeating and erasing, did not *represent* but rather *enacted* history: the *made* history by also erasing it. (LAH 78)

This is the conception of “traumatic history” that I find particularly relevant to understand the history of the Caribbean as presented by Glissant. The intolerability of the excess of history (the need to return again and again in

order to understand) is created precisely by a dislocation that erases history, producing thereby an absence. This absence is marked in Glissant’s work in the continuous lack of a link between nature and culture, that is, between the community’s relation to its surroundings and the accumulation of experiences. Caribbean communities live in a constant state of suffering as a consequence of the imposition of a history (of enslavement, colonialism and dispossession) that simultaneously erases its traces and imposes itself as a non-history.

Before showing how this reading of trauma arising from Caruth’s works can be used to understand some aspects of Glissant’s reconstruction of the Caribbean history, I would like to address two usual criticisms of the use of the framework of trauma in connection to history, and show why the reconstruction I have offered so far could eventually avoid both. Authors such as Dominick LaCapra have warned against the perils of taking a paradoxical structure of trauma as a way to approach the experiences of painful historical events. This move, LaCapra insists, can result in a complicated and often counterproductive attitude towards history. By uncritically accepting a traumatic structure of history, we run the risk of being paralyzed in two different ways. Each of these risks corresponds to putting too much weight on one of the sides of the paradox, and therefore losing the ability to give any meaning:¹⁹

i) The first risk is to fall in a totalizing, archival attitude when confronted to the specificities of the traumatic experience, an attitude that leads to being unable to assign any meaning to it. When dealing with traumatic experiences, it is easy to put too much emphasis on the excessive violence, and all the details and particularities, of the event that we call ‘traumatic.’ It is what we do when we circle around the injustice, the pain, the literal descriptions of violence and suffering, over and over again, because we have *too much* to say. But, by focusing on the event as if it were *the cause* of trauma, it is easy to forget that being traumatized means, among other things, surviving the event, that is, leaving in a sense the event behind. This amounts to staying only on one side of the paradox, what Caruth calls the devastating or destructive side of trauma, or what I would call, following Glissant, the *too much history* of colonized communities. By situating ourselves exclusively on this side of the paradox, we would be thinking again and again of the intolerability of the event, preclude the possibility of assigning any meaning to it other than negativity and disruption; there is no way to categorize, and therefore understand, if we obstinately refuse to move beyond the excessive character of the experience. This is connected, in LaCapra’s analysis, to an archival account of the past.

ii) But it is also possible to become paralyzed with the traumatic structure of history if we stay too much on the side of the absence of history, that is, on the fact that the erasure of the events, or the fact that they are barely events, makes it difficult to offer a chronological, understandable account of “what happened.” This often leads to a melancholic attitude toward history, one that emphasizes the absence of experience at the heart of trauma. If the survivor cannot even “explain” or give an account of the event, there is no way to make sense of it, neither for that person, nor for those of us who are trying to understand its

history; there is simply *nothing* to say. By emphasizing this side of the absence of meaning (a difference absence of meaning than the previous risk entailed), we run then the risk of refusing to say something about it, because nothing would be faithful, because there are no possible frameworks through which we could grasp the specificities of the traumatic event, because attempting to reduce someone's unbearable pain to a sense would be an affront to it. Adopting this attitude toward a traumatic structure of the event would imply surrendering to the side of non-history, the absence or erasure of it. But accepting this impossibility risks, LaCapra suggests, a sacralization of trauma, either by way of sublimation (making it something that can never be overcome, that will always haunt those who are affected by it), or by adopting a paralyzed melancholic, mournful.

Caruth's approach not only does not fall in any of the two sides of the paradox, but offers a way of remaining rather in the space opened by them, *at the site* of trauma, and not in an attempt to escape it or to completely overcome it. i) Caruth is not interested in locating *what* makes an event traumatic, but rather in the response to such an event, both on the part of the survivor, and on the part of those who are there to listen to their story. In this sense, Caruth does not dwell on the excess itself, on the too much history, and on the paralyzing effects of this perspective. She focuses instead on the fact of the survival, and therefore, on the temporality of a present opened up by the belatedness of the traumatic experience. As it is clear in LAH, the question to ask is rather "*In what way is the experience of trauma also the experience of an imperative to live? What is the nature of a life that continues beyond trauma?*" (7) ii) On the other hand, Caruth's position is also not situated only on the side of the absence of history, by restating the radical absence of frameworks to understand or make sense of trauma. There is indeed a history to investigate, a truth that is communicated by the voice coming out of the traumatic wound, and thus it is necessary to reject in Caruth a claim to non-history.²⁰

For Caruth, this two-fold attitude toward the experience of trauma, requires investigating a "new kind of listening." She writes: "To listen to the crisis of a trauma, that is, is not only to listen for the event, but to hear in the testimony the survivor's departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listener, in other words, is *how to listen to departure*" (1995, 10). This *listening to departure* conveys the demand of the paradoxical beginning of the Caribbean I have outlined above following Glissant. The abyss, one could say, also demands in Glissant, as in Caruth, "a speaking and a listening *from the site of trauma* [that] does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don't yet know of our own traumatic pasts" (Caruth 1995, 11).

It is this idea of trauma as a *site* from out of which it is possible to listen, especially when most of what surrounds this *site* is unknown, that I want to investigate in Glissant's notion of the abyss. Caruth's main example of history as this *traumatic departure* comes from a reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, and more precisely, she suggests, from his own traumatic dealing with history in the essay (see UE 12-18). But in the case of Glissant, the fact that the *creation of culture* depends on this very same departure seems to me even more evidently connected to the *dis-*

location of culture involved in the creation of a people in the Caribbean. The Middle Passage is still in a sense a site; how then can it be the location of a dislocation? More importantly, how can we depart from this dislocating site? How can it be also a site of reconnection, creation, and liberation of a new, creole, culture?

III.

In my reconstruction of the paradoxical stance toward history arising out of the abyss I have also shown that Glissant's understanding of the Middle Passage does not fall in neither of the excesses that LaCapra fears when accepting trauma as a framework for understanding history. As is the case with Caruth and LaCapra, Glissant also wants this paradox not to be paralyzing, and in this sense, it seems that the framework of trauma (the paradoxes involved in it) works well to describe the abyssal character of the Caribbean: i) On the one hand, there is no paralyzing, archival excess of details, nor an obsession with the violent particularities of the experience; in fact, as I have said, the abyss does not lie on the experience itself, horrific as it is, of being transported from one side of the Atlantic Ocean to the other, but rather on the relationship of this passage to the unknown, namely, to what has not been (yet) experienced.²¹ ii) On the other hand, Glissant's evocation does not lead to a paralyzing affirmation of an absence of meaning. The abyss created something, meant something, resulted in something that we can investigate. And this investigation can only be started out from a present of surviving, which is so rich that it has become "a new region of the world," as Glissant's title for one of his last books suggests.

This double structure of Glissant's analysis also becomes clear in his opposition between what he calls (Caribbean) histories and what he takes to be a Westernized notion of History, with a capital H. Right after he wonders about the validity of the framework of trauma in his Note 1 "Concerning history as neurosis" (DA 229/65f), Glissant adds a second note responding to this interpretation. He entitles it "Concerning transversality:"

However, our diverse histories in the Caribbean have produced today another revelation: that of their subterranean convergence. They, thereby, bring to light an unsuspected, because it is so obvious, dimension of human behavior: transversality. The irruption [*L'irruption*] itself of Caribbean history (of the converging histories of our peoples) relieves us of the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History that would run its unique course. It is not this History that has roared around the edge of the Caribbean, but actually *a question of the subterranean convergence of our histories*. The depths are not only the abyss [*abyssse*] of neurosis but primarily the site [*lieu*] of multiple converging paths. (DA 66/230; translation modified; my emphasis)

In this crucial passage Glissant confirms that the framework of trauma would not be sufficient to speak about the experience in the Caribbean, if by 'trauma' we understand "only the abyss [*abyssse*] of neurosis," that is, the paralyzing impossibility to go beyond the disruption. It is possible to break with this neurotic paralysis by emphasizing the productive, creative side of the abyss (perhaps as *gouffre*,

as described in the first section of this paper) and the histories that connect the multiple ramifications of the middle passage itself. Such ramifications, as it becomes clear in the quote above, reveal spatial, and not only temporal, connections of transversality. The abyss is a *site* that disrupts and connects, breaks apart while also branching histories together.²²

But we can take a step further. If we take seriously the *spatiality* of this transversality, I believe that these “converging histories of our people” would do more than just reinscribing the paradoxical framework of trauma. The transversality of Caribbean histories puts into question the need to accept a traumatic framework as the ultimate way in which the history of the Caribbean can be approached. As I will show in what follows, the converging paths allow for a second form of disruption, one that challenges what I would call ‘the future necessity’ of the paradox. Glissant’s interest (at least in DA) is eminently decolonial, and to decolonize in this context means, as I will suggest, to attempt a *de-traumatization* of the Caribbean, to relieve the too much history that becomes too little, and the too little that has become too much. With this gesture (with this emphasis on transversality) Glissant would be taking a step beyond Caruth (and Acosta López’s) responses to the demand of trauma: for the Martinican thinker, the demand is indeed to find a way to listen to the departure, but in order to *go beyond* the paradox with regard to history.

Can the paradox of history be loosened? And can it be untied in connection to a decolonizing critique of the present? I have shown that the abyss, taken as a beginning of the Caribbean history, is unsurpassable; it effectively breaks any possible linearity with Africa, and thus, in a sense, the abyss will always remain part of its history. And yet, if this abyss was externally imposed on African slaves, this means that the non-(too-much)-history is also an external imposition, one that could be overcome if the weight is lifted. Glissant’s analysis does not claim that the structure of *every event* is traumatic. Neither does he argue that there is something like a traumatic character of historicity. Rather, it is only the very particular (exclusive, perhaps) history of the Caribbean that opens a paradoxical conception of history.²³ The reason why this difference is relevant is to recognize that, in Glissant, the experience that leads to a paradoxical attitude towards history is not *produced* by history itself, but rather by an external imposition on the enslaved Africans, and then the people in the Caribbean, by the forces of slavery, colonialism, and assimilation. The Caribbean seems to be an exception to a traditional History, and since the paradox is externally imposed, the Caribbean can be liberated from it. So, if this is possible, should Caribbean communities attempt such liberation? What would it entail to lift off this void that weighs so much?

Transversality offers a new form of connection. According to the paradox, what forces the intolerability of the burden is the *concealment* of the history of the people in the Caribbean, the imposition of a non-history, and not the possibility of history and memory itself. To accuse the peoples in the Caribbean of having a non-history is only possible if we accept a philosophical perspective on history that assumes that the only possible history comes from a continuum, *a* History. But,

the lived circumstances of this daily [Caribbean] reality do not form part of a continuum, which means that its relation with its surroundings (what we would call its *nature*) is in a discontinuous relation to its accumulation of experiences (what we would call its *culture*). In such a context, *history, as far as it is a discipline* and claims to clarify the reality lived by this people, will suffer from a serious epistemological deficiency: it will not know how to make the link. (DA 223/61; my emphasis)

In order to “make the link,” it would be futile to offer a linear connection as if the abyss had never existed. But it is possible to make the link in a nonlinear way. The intolerable weight of an absence of experiences (of not hearing, not being fully present, not being able to relate to the new environment) can be lifted; it is possible to reconstitute history in order to connect nature and culture.²⁴ To be sure, this creation of the link does not amount to putting into question the abyssal character of the Caribbean, to forget it (like in Borges’ *Utopia*, perhaps), or to move beyond it as something that has no effect in the present; rather it implies taking the abyss as a beginning, and not as the fate of the peoples in the Caribbean. Read from a Glissantian perspective (at least in DA), any attempt to uncritically accept the framework of trauma implies not only acknowledging the validity of the paradoxical structure of its history, but also taking the conditions of colonialism as necessary and unavoidable. If histories can be created, however, if the connection between nature and culture can be recreated, trauma has to begin to fade, because the history (or better, histories) that emerge from it would no longer be felt as *too much*.

In this sense, the question becomes a different one: not only how to narrate or bear witness to trauma, or how to rethink language in order to find a new way of listening to what was so far inaudible,²⁵ but how to disrupt the colonial link between nature and culture and create a new one that will be able to overcome the vertigo of history, and thus render the paradox inoperative.²⁶ No longer, then, how to witness the paradox and its survival, but rather how to lift the externally imposed weight; how to reconnect, reconstitute, possess, this spatio-temporality that has never been possessed by these communities.

Glissant’s answer in DA begins with what he calls “counterpoetics”, or “forced poetics”, and the struggle to turn them into a form of “natural poetics.” This is the subject of two decisive sections in DA, “Natural poetics, Forced poetics” and “Cross-cultural Poetics [*Poétique de la Relation*]” (DA 401-431/120-142). In these sections, Glissant defends the idea that the only possible form (so far) of expression in the French Antilles is a forced one. As opposed to a natural form of expression, in which a manifestation flows freely even if it is uttered against an oppressive power, a forced (or counter-) poetics is one in which its own manifestation negates itself from the very beginning (see DA 401f/120.) Such is the case, for example, with the way Antilleans speak French and Creole. The former is (for Creole speaking communities) a language that inhibits expression because it always feels foreign, and insufficient. French seems to follow a different logic, different from their “own” language. However, and at the same time, Creole,

which could have led to a natural poetics (because in it language [*langue*] and expression [*langage*] would correspond perfectly) is being exhausted. It is becoming more French in its daily use; it is becoming vulgarized in the transition from spoken to written. Creole has, however, always resisted this dual deformation. Forced poetics is the result of these deformations and this resistance. (DA 403/121)

Creole itself has always been a forced way of resisting the external impositions that are part of the mechanisms of slavery and colonialism, such as the plantation; a way to "reject" and "defy" French and to create a language different from the one used by the slave-owner, one that the latter could not understand.²⁷ However, since the plantation system was never replaced by a new form of production, and its abolition led simply to other extractive and exploitative forms of labor, Creole did never metamorphose into a "natural" form of poetics. Perhaps as opposed to any other well-established language (see DA 410-413/127f) it became traditional (and with it, the form of life that corresponds) as an expression that is derisive, always going against itself and the possibilities to move toward a natural form of manifestation.²⁸

As the example of Creole shows, forced poetics does not lead to a connection between culture and nature, but merely to a "detour, diversion" [*détour*] in its tactic of resistance. It is still "an unconscious body of knowledge through which the popular consciousness asserts both its rootlessness and its density. We must however move from this unconscious awareness to a conscious knowledge of itself" (DA 418/132). Thus, such a strategy is necessary, but not sufficient, if the goal is to finally connect that which has never been connected on this side of the ocean. As it becomes clear in one of the first sections of DA, "*Le retour et le détour*," diversion strategies must be coupled with tactics of reversion. This means that an attempt at decolonization means not only using the language as a form of resistance, which all colonized communities already do, but also as a form of self-expression. Glissant writes:

We must return to the point from which we started. Diversion [*détour*] is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion: not a return to the longing for origins, to the immutable One of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement from which we were forcefully turned away; this is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of Relation, or perish. (DA 56f/26; translation modified)

This point of entanglement, as the quote makes clear, is not an idealized, mythical point of origin; not the time in Africa, nor even the moment of the abyss, which has been shown as a non-experience. As a matter of fact, it cannot be a moment in time or history, since it has never been the case that Caribbean communities have successfully connected culture and nature. It is, I would suggest, a spatial point, and not merely a temporal one. The Caribbean itself is the site from which communities have been deranged, and the place where they have to return in order to finally achieve a true expression of themselves. And the Caribbean, as a site itself, is revealed as a "multiple series of relationships [*une multi-relation*]," where transversality becomes a new form of history. "For us," Glissant writes, "this place is not only the land where our people were transplanted, it is also the history they shared (lived as

non-history) with other communities, with whom the link is becoming apparent today. *Our place is the Caribbean*" (DA 426/139; my emphasis).

The task is then to return to the Caribbean as a site, a place of and in history that, nevertheless, has begun in the abyss of the Middle passage as a traumatic experience. According to Caruth, "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to *tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available*" (UE 4). How does the reality of the abyss address us? What is the wound of the Middle Passage inviting us to do? The wound of the Middle Passage does not cry out to be preserved, idealized or romanticized, and also not to be represented (representation as rational knowledge is impossible in the abyss); as Caruth and Acosta López show in regard to the traumatic wound, the abyss indeed calls and demands to be heard, and carries with it a resistance to the threat of forgetting about this reality that we have not been able to hear before. But following Glissant, these *voicing* and *listening* (what he calls 'self-expression'), this refusal to forget, do not only have the aim of witnessing or accompanying the wound, but of healing it.²⁹ It is perhaps in listening to it that it can be healed, because it allows for the construction of a new kind of reality. That this wound can be healed does not mean to erase it from history. The abyss will always have been a beginning of the Caribbean. But it does mean that the paradox of history that coloniality presently imposes on the traumatized communities of the Caribbean can be overcome, by lifting the weight of the *too much* history and filling up the space of the *too little*. This is what Glissant means by the idea of a reconnection of these communities with themselves: "Herein lies one of the objectives of our discourse: reconnect in a profound way with ourselves, so that the strategy of diversion would no longer be maintained as a tactic indispensable to existence but *would be channeled into a form of self-expression*" (DA 57/26; my emphasis).

IV.

The possibility of reconnection, of self-expression, of taking transversality seriously and coming back to the point of entanglement, implies a new understanding of spatiality altogether. This would allow, in turn, a creation of a new form of temporality understood in terms of *histories*, and not History. Whether this makes it possible for the Caribbean communities to alleviate the weight of an externally imposed non-history that feels like too much history, that is the question and the task of Glissant's poetics. It is a matter, as we have seen, of developing a form of poetics that combines two tactics of resistance, by linking a temporal question with a spatial one, namely, not only resisting the language, the culture of the ruler, but also being able to construct one's own reality in words. Finally, it is a way to start hearing what was impossible to hear before, to relieve traumatized communities of the history of this trauma by enabling a new way of listening and speaking. The task is not to discover a reality that runs the risk of becoming out of reach, but to create one in language. The possibility of linking culture and nature would not absolve

the Caribbean from its abyssal beginnings making apparent the need to find a new temporal approach³⁰ that can make sense of the disruption; rather, it absolves the Caribbean from an abyssal future, which in this context would amount to reducing the future to a colonial fate.

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Notes

¹ It is important to say that Glissant himself opens up this possible link with trauma in *Le Discours antillais* [hereafter DA], on a brief passage titled "Concerning history as neurosis": "Would it be ridiculous to consider our lived history as a steadily advancing neurosis? To see the Slave Trade as a traumatic shock, our relocation (in the new land) as a repressive phase, slavery as the period of latency, "emancipation" in 1848 as re-activation, our everyday fantasies as symptoms, and even our horror of "returning to those things of the past" as a possible manifestation of the neurotic's fear of his past? Would it not be useful and revealing to investigate such a parallel? What is repressed in our history persuades us, furthermore, that this is more than an intellectual game." (DA 229/65f) See also Acosta López's essay in the present special issue for another side of the possible connections suggested by this passage.

² The former is the case of the analysis of trauma made by Pablo Oyarzún (2007) in relation to Latin America in general, for whom trauma is the

"rhythm of every experience" (17); the latter is thematized by Drabinski (2010) in relation to the Caribbean. Oyarzún and Drabinski's approaches alter in this way the usual European approach to history and its connection to the past. I will return briefly to both of these texts, although my approach to trauma is interested in moving towards a different perspective.

³ In this text, my analysis comes primarily from Glissant's third (and perhaps most well-known) collection of essays, *Le Discours antillais* (1981), and pays a special attention to the image of the abyss (which is directly analyzed by Glissant in his fourth book of essays, *Poétique de la Relation* (1990)). Even though I use this image, my text does not present a reading of the latter book, which I believe would require a different conception of the radical disruption of history connected to the question of trauma. The analysis of such a conception must be carried out in a different place. See footnote 24.

⁴ The possibility of reading Glissant's approach to Caribbean history in terms of trauma was first suggested to me by Elizabeth Rottenberg after a paper I read at a student colloquium at DePaul University in March, 2015; I have not stopped thinking about this possibility ever since. The present text is perhaps an attempt to offer the answer I would have wanted to have at hand that afternoon.

⁵ I take this notion from Drabinski's "Aesthetics and the abyss", which investigates the consequences of Glissant's account of the abyss in an aesthetic context. (see 2015, 141).

⁶ The life of Benkos Biohó, precisely because of his outlaw character and his fierce combat against slavery, is barely documented in the official history of Cartagena, and yet has become the founding myth of the struggles of Afro-Colombians in Colombia. While it is difficult to find many written historical and literary accounts about his life, the oral traditions of the black peoples in the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of Colombia are full of Biohó's stories. Furthermore, the written accounts of his life greatly differ from one another. Thus, whereas in Burgos Cantor's text Biohó was born in Africa, in *Changó el gran putas*, the monumental work by Manuel Zapata Olivella, he is born in Cartagena, and thus represents in the most powerful way what the author calls *the American Muntu*.

⁷ "In front of the sea Benkos Biohó king of the Matuna is going to be hanged. I close my eyes and I don't see my land. Sea and Sea. My gods do not come. The village of my parents the brothers have become invisible. I say father; nothing comes. I say mother; nothing comes. Home; nothing appears. Beloved I say; a stone the skin of a dead frog on the beach a void that absorbs and pushes announces itself in my chest and does not fit." (My translation)

⁸ We could for example compare this impossibility with the actual attempts of later movements to "go back," such as "the 'Back-to-Africa movement' (19th century) or the different forms of Black Zionism (for example, versions of Rastafarianism) in the 20th century.

⁹ I will sometimes modify the English translation of *Le Discours antillais* and *Poétique de la Relation* to be consistent with some of the concepts used in Michael Dash and Betsy Wing's translations respectively. I include the pages of the French original first and then of the existing translation.

¹⁰ For an interesting reading of the idea of having (almost) no history from the point of view of Latin America, see Oyarzún 2007. If history has been erased for us, Oyarzún argues, this can be both devastating and liberating; it can mean oblivion and desperation. It can also mean that, like children (new to the world), we are nothing but futurity and openness. Oyarzún discusses these two possibilities, suggesting that there could be a different form of relating to these two aspects of Latin America history (see Oyarzún 2007, 12f).

¹¹ Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon are usually taken, respectively, as defending the need for a return to the (African) past and a radical break with it. Even though the images I am referring to here in connection to Glissant could be taken as examples of Césairean and Fanonian attitudes, I believe that both of their interpretations reduce the complexity of their thought to formulas that are misleading. I cannot show this point here in any detail, cf. Gualdrón Ramírez 2019.

¹² Glissant uses the terms *gouffre*, *abîme*, and *abysses*, all translated by Betsy Wing and Michael Dash as "abyss" in DA and PR. Whereas the latter, *le abysse*, is used to emphasize the negative, destructive side of the abyss (see for example DA 66/230), Glissant employs the two former terms, particularly *gouffre*, to denote a productive, creative side.

¹³ "In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green" (DA 18/6).

¹⁴ This is precisely the emphasis that Drabinski draws on the futurity of the structure of trauma, and in particular on the possibility of a memory of the future (see Drabinski 2010, 296). It is what he has called elsewhere

re "the obstinacy of the future" (2011, 4) or the demand for "imagining a future" (2015, 160). As I have mentioned before, this constitutes a different, but perhaps compatible version of trauma to the one I have been analyzing so far. For another threefold version of the Glissantian abyss, see Drabinski 2010, 297-303.

¹⁵ I am indebted to María del Rosario Acosta López and the students of her class on *Trauma and Memory in Latin America* (Fall 2016) at DePaul University for this characterization of the paradoxical structure of trauma, and the analysis of the risks of adopting this paradox for a reading of historical events. I have also drawn from personal conversations with Cathy Caruth, in particular the sessions around her more recent work, in the Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, in 2014, organized by the research group on Law and Violence of the same university. It has been a privilege to be able to discuss the works of these authors in person, and it has strongly shaped my interpretation of their works.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Rottenberg 2014 17f offers a clear explanation of *Nachträglichkeit*. As Rottenberg suggests in the final pages of the paper, *Nachträglichkeit* (from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* on) must be understood not as an accidental connection of one event with a previous one, but perhaps more as a structural delay in the event, and could even mark the temporal structure of experience itself. Rottenberg's conclusion, however, defends that, at least in an individual level, "for Freud, not only are we not all traumatized [...], but we are also not all traumatizable" (2014, 21).

¹⁷ The latter seems to be the suggestion by Acosta López in her reading of Caruth's work, in particular in connection to what she calls "grammars of listening" or "grammars of silence." Departing from Caruth's work, Acosta López shows that history itself requires a new framework when faced with the challenges that the structure of traumatic experience poses to our traditional conceptions of temporality, representation, memory, etc. Such a framework needs to respond to the epistemological and ethical demands of traumatic experiences. In her own words: "Se trata pues de una verdad—de una dimensión de la experiencia, e incluso, de aquello que concebimos como experiencia— que desde su naturaleza irrepresentable (pues cómo *representar* aquello que aún no se ha hecho *presente*) exige ser escuchada y comprendida en y desde su incomprendibilidad. Se trata de aprender "a ver y a escuchar de otro modo," dice Caruth, desde ese lugar no lugar abierto por la experiencia traumática, desde el evento que se inaugura justamente en aquella "incomprensión", y desde la resistencia que el "lenguaje del trauma" ofrece a la representación y a la clausura de sentido." (See Acosta López 2017)

¹⁸ I read a certain ambivalence in Caruth's works regarding whether all history has a traumatic structure (that is, "no longer straightforwardly referential" (UE 11)), or if it is rather just *some* instances of it: "a new history of disappearance", or a type of erasure, "new to the twentieth century" (LAH 79), in particular twentieth century's history as read by Arendt, Freud, Lacan, Derrida, etc. (see LAH xi 76f, 88). On the one hand, it seems that there is something in the experience itself as arising from the analysis of trauma that opens up a new way to conceiving history altogether. See, for example, the following passage: "I will suggest that it is in the notion of history that Freud offers in this work, as well as in the way his writing itself confronts historical events, that we may need to rethink the possibility of history, as well as our ethical and political relation to it" (UE 12). However, Caruth's analyses always come from particular instances of trauma, even historical trauma, in a way that resists generalization, because not every instance of what we want to call history is the aftermath of war, totalitarianism, displacement, torture, etc., which are the cases Caruth's books focus on. Thus, these questions could be phrased in the following way: is the structure of history itself (what we could call *historicity*), something we should rethink in terms of a past that does not exhaust itself in, but is always questioned by, the futurity of our own attempts to cope with what we cannot understand? Or do we grasp the non-referentiality of history only in *particular* cases of collective trauma? I believe these questions should also be addressed by Glissant, in order to inquire whether the figure of the abyss can be extended to other instances of history, or perhaps even to *all* history.

¹⁹ See LaCapra 2009, 65. To be clear, LaCapra is not suggesting that these paralyzing responses to traumatic events constitute mistaken attitudes, or even reactions that we should prevent. Victims of such events become paralyzed almost by definition, and we would be doing nothing to help or even understand them if we take their responses as erroneous. What the author is trying to deal with is the theoretical response of psychoanalysis and trauma theory scholars, who might also become paralyzed by responding to the paradox of trauma in an uncritical way. The question is thus not 'How should we react to traumatic histories?', but 'What does it imply to assume a traumatic structure of history?'

²⁰ When introducing the essays included in the volume *Trauma: explorations in memory* (1995), Caruth describes this approach to trauma in a

way that shows the interconnection between these two attitudes: "If on the one hand they [the two attitudes] remind us of the inaccessibility of trauma, of its resistance to full theoretical analysis and understanding, they also open up a perspective on the ways in which trauma can make possible survival, and on the means of engaging this possibility through the different modes of therapeutic, literary, and pedagogical encounter" (1995, 10).

²¹ This is what is most compelling about the poetic evocation of the abyss, the fact that is only possible through the imagination, and not as a consequence of factual statements.

²² This is perhaps LaCapra's answer to the challenges that trauma theory poses to memory and history, what he calls a new notion of working-through: "neither the simple binary opposite of acting-out or the repetition compulsion nor a total transcendence or disavowal of the traumas and losses of the past that continue to haunt or even possess the present [...]. In working-through one does not totally transcend but rather attempt to generate counterforces to melancholia and compulsive repetition, both through psychic "work" on the self and through engagement in social and political practice with others [...]" (2009, 84)

²³ It is important to clarify here that I have developed an interpretation of the figure of the abyss (in PR) from the point of view of Glissant's understanding of the Slave Trade in DA; this is, of course, a *Caribbean abyss*. But if we look at PR as a separate work, I would say that part of Glissant's aim is to suggest that there is indeed an abyss at the core of *all* history, and the fact that this abyss is more graspable from the present-day Caribbean leads him to defend the idea that this region, and *Antillanité* [*Antillanité*], is a privilege place (or thought) in order to understand a *Relation* that infuses the whole world. The specificity of this answer, as different from the one in DA, must be developed in another text.

²⁴ "Consequently, this is not a minor aspect of our counterpoetics, our lived history, to which we are introduced by our struggle without witnesses, the inability to create even an unconscious dating, a result of the erasing of memory in all of us. For history is not only absence for us, it is vertigo. This time what has never been ours, we must now possess" (DA 473f/161; translation modified).

²⁵ Such is the suggestion by Acosta López, following Caruth, Nelly Richard, and Shoshana Felman (among others), when faced with the question of the relationship between trauma and a new form of language. As it is clear in her recent work on this question (See for example her contribution to this issue and 2018), the focus is on instances of historical trauma that run the risk of being forgotten altogether because we lack the frameworks to listen to the voice that cries out of the wound. As Acosta López put it in an oral presentation of her work in Universidad de los Andes (2017), what is at stake is to listen to the silence of that which will perhaps never be said but should not remain unheard.

²⁶ I want to make clear, however, that this question becomes fundamental in a context of slavery and colonialism, a context that I am linking to trauma theory and that is not immediately present in Caruth's or Acosta López's analyses. Thus, I am in no way suggesting that these authors would defend the necessity of *just* bearing witness to colonialism, accompanying it, or narrating it. What I am defending is that if we want to link trauma and colonialism (as Glissant himself wants to do), we need to acknowledge that the question becomes a different one: not how to narrate trauma, but how to overcome it; how to de-traumatize colonized communities.

²⁷ In this sense, it could be said that in the Caribbean there was always a language of resistance that was not immediately the language of the colonizer, even though, as I have tried to show following Glissant, it does not offer the complete conditions for decolonization. Not every element of the forms of expression is imposed externally by the colonizer; there is neither an absolute disconnection between reality and the words used to express it, nor a "state of hallucinated lucidity," where every image is like the image coming out of the dream of someone else", as Acosta López puts it in her contribution to this special issue following a well-known image of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez. The problem is not only that the colonized lack the means to "voice" or to "hear" their own reality, but also a matter of not having the right tools to create a new one.

²⁸ Glissant's analyses of the Creole folktale, for example, show the self-contradictory character of a forced poetics that is ultimately incapable of putting into question the validity of the oppressive system itself; the character representing the slave-owner, or the exploiter, is always ridiculed by the trickster, even fooled, but the system itself is never challenged in these stories. (See DA 414/130)

²⁹ That is, it does not amount just to any form of expression. The poetic that is demanded to deal with the paradox of history should not focus only on the "scream" or the "cry" [*cri*] that signals the inconformity with the current set of conditions; "it is a question of transforming a scream

(which we once uttered) into a speech that grows from it, thus discovering the expression, perhaps in an intellectual way, of a finally liberated poetics" (DA 418/133).

³⁰ Glissant describes the labor of the writer who is approaching this new temporality as a "prophetic vision of the past" in different texts (See DA 226f/64; MT 15/7). A careful description of how this constitutes indeed a different temporality would have to be carried out elsewhere.