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Journal Article as: peer-reviewed accepted version (Postprint)

DOI of this document* (secondary publication): <https://doi.org/10.26092/elib/2717>

Publication date of this document: 21/12/2023

* for better findability or for reliable citation

Recommended Citation (primary publication/Version of Record) incl. DOI:

Borst, Julia. "Re-Thinking the Haitian Other 'in Relation' as 'Prochain': A Reading of Édouard Glissant and Lyonel Trouillot." *Journal of Haitian Studies* 19, no. 1 (2013): 139–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24344215>.

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RE-THINKING THE HAITIAN OTHER *IN RELATION* AS *PROCHAIN*: A
READING OF ÉDOUARD GLISSANT AND LYONEL TROUILLOT

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“*Rares, les États ayant cultivé le long de leur histoire une telle somme de déshonneurs*” (Rare are the states that have cultivated in their history such an abundance of dishonor).¹ With this ironic statement Haitian writer Lyonel Trouillot criticizes the long tradition of neverending prejudices and stereotypes about Haiti. In Western discourse the country is still frequently represented as the “barbaric” antipole of modernity, condemned to an endless story of chaos and violence. From this notion arises the perpetuity of a (neo)colonial construction of the Haitian Other in strict opposition to a Western identity, a construction that has left its mark on Haiti’s reputation in the global opinion until the present.²

Lyonel Trouillot and other Haitian intellectuals have vehemently criticized this vision of Haiti based on stereotypes and binaries because it results in a distorted view of the country that largely ignores the complexity of both the Haitian past and its present. Therefore, Trouillot envisions transcending such binary thinking in order to assign Haiti a new place in the global public perception. And this can be achieved by re-thinking the Haitian Other as “*prochain*” (a concept related to “fellow human” but enveloping an ethical component) (cf. EH 14).

This paper explores Lyonel Trouillot’s idea of the “*prochain*” as an innovative vision of the Other, using Édouard Glissant’s *Poétique de la Relation* (*Poetics of Relation*),³ which permits the recognition of the Other as entangled in a network of *identité-relation* (relation identity) in an (ethical) relation to the Self (cf. PR 158, 169). Furthermore, based on a decolonial critique of the discourse of Western modernity, this paper will analyze to what extent the current vision of Haiti is based on a dichotomy of Western identity and Haitian alterity that imagines the country as the “uncivilized Other” and as such dominates the global perception of this Caribbean nation. Subsequently, this paper examines how Édouard Glissant transcends binary constructions of identity and alterity in his *Poétique de la Relation* and asks us to envision the Other “in relation” to ourselves. Finally, Glissant’s

idea of the Other “in relation” will be linked to Trouillot’s request to inscribe Haiti as “*prochain*” into global knowledge; thus enabling us to think of the difference of the Other in relation to our own identity.

HAITI AS AN “UNCIVILIZED ALTERITY”? STEREOTYPING AND COLONIALITY OF POWER

Beverly Bell depicts the popularity of a distorted vision of Haiti as a hopeless case: “The nation is often characterized, overtly or through inference, as a troubled, Godforsaken place, where troubling, Godforsaken things happen.”⁴ Such a bias stems from colonial times and the allegedly “unthinkable” event of the Haitian Revolution, which according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot defied Western categories of thinking of the time.⁵ Such a stereotypically affected perception of Haitian history has for the most part persisted until the present. It has become manifest in the country’s reputation as a “place of violence” and in the consideration of its history as a “neverending story of carnage and brutality.”⁶ This view then became evident again following the earthquake of 2010, when in a “plethora of ill-informed speculation,”⁷ the topoi of the “*cliché d’une Haïti maudite*” (cliché of a cursed Haiti)⁸ and its “unending tragic destiny”⁹ joined in the tradition of the global North’s stereotypical and prejudiced discourse about Haiti:

The news that emerged in the first few days after the earthquake salivated over ‘looters’ and ‘criminals’ set loose on a post-apocalyptic wasteland. This is the same story that has always been told about Haiti, ... since the slaves had the temerity to not want to be slaves anymore.¹⁰

However, the persistence of such a discourse, which still imagines Haiti in terms of “unthinkability” and “malediction,” fails to recognize the complexity and multifacetedness of the country’s past and present-day situation. The discourse therefore seems to downright refuse to believe in ways out of the violence. In analogy to the event of the Haitian Revolution during the transition from the 18th into the 19th century, which was “unthinkable” because it “undermined the terms in which the questions had been asked,”¹¹ the faith in a way out goes beyond the topos of malediction.

Consequently, Michel-Rolph Trouillot vehemently criticizes the discourse of Haiti as a “deviance”¹² that defies conventional categories of analysis: “When we are being told over and over again that Haiti is unique, bizarre, unnatural, odd, queer, freakish, or grotesque, we are also being told, in varying degrees, that it is unnatural, erratic, and therefore

unexplainable.”¹³ He states that not only the public’s assumption that Haiti defies analysis and comparison, but also its myth of uniqueness is a fiction that the global public and academia must give up.¹⁴ Furthermore, talking about Haiti’s “apartness”¹⁵ and stigmatizing it as a place of violence are signs of the persistence of (neo)colonial power structures. These structures let us think of this Caribbean nation, already ‘unthinkable’ on the threshold of the 19th century, as a country fallen prey to violence and chaos. Thus, by maintaining this kind of epistemological control and dominance, one both questions the survivability of Haiti without help (from the global North) and continues to disguise the actual nature of the problem. For this reason, Paul Farmer complains: “All of this together – distortions, half-truths, myths [about Haiti and Haitians, J.B.], old and new – leaves even people of good will and discernment puzzled as to what is really happening in Haiti.”¹⁶

By degrading Haitian history to a “*longue nuit de barbarie*” (long night of barbarism),¹⁷ the country is turned into a “barbaric antipole” of Western modernity, as the Western world attempts to assure itself of its own non-violence by locating violence not only at a spatial distance, but at the same time as temporally regressive and barbaric.¹⁸ Correspondingly, Jan Philipp Reemtsma confirms: “The modern enemy is the enemy of modernity. Being called a barbarian means being consigned to a zone in which violence is permitted or mandated—for now.”¹⁹ Gayatri C. Spivak identifies such a discursive construction of the non-Western Other as *Othering*, by which she describes a dialectical process that conceptualizes the Western imperial Subject in opposition to the “subaltern”²⁰ as the “inchoate ‘other.’”²¹ It thus establishes a hegemonial, inegalitarian relationship frequently generalizing and stereotyping the Other.²²

Contemporary research has shown that a homogeneous, uniform notion of modernity as a Western phenomenon being transferable to other cultures of the world²³ itself constitutes a Eurocentric concept.²⁴ However, innovative approaches that aim to emphasize continuities and parallels as well as ruptures and local particularities assume that there is a multiplicity of heterogeneous modernities.²⁵ Although this article assumes a stereotypical discourse about Haiti that has emerged from a Western tradition of binary thinking and the coloniality of power, it nevertheless does not aim to perpetuate the dualism on which this epistemology is based.²⁶ Rather, the article refers to the “formations of knowledge”²⁷ of a specific period and the historical Western modernity traditions of discourse, which were based on claims of totality and hierarchical contextualization of difference and which evolved from a logic of “imperialism/colonialism.”²⁸ The stereotypical discourse about Haiti has emerged from these epistemic

traditions and is still nowadays based on paradigms that can be explained by a logic that through its discourse divides up the world into Europe and a non-European Other and assumes this dichotomy to be an ontological fact.²⁹ By using the term “discourse of Western modernity,” this article does not postulate a static binary opposition between the “West and rest of the world,” but describes an epistemology predominant in the thinking of Western modernity, which tends to present itself as homogeneous while disguising its own heterogeneity in order to emphasize its universality and its hegemonic status.³⁰

As a result from such a discourse, conceptualizing Haiti as the alterity of modernity and thereby as a place of violence and barbarism is a symptom of the phenomenon Aníbal Quijano subsumes under the paradigm of the “coloniality of power,” which he defines as persisting and permanently re-emerging as geopolitical power structures.³¹ Whereas “colonialism” refers to an actual territorial, political, and economic hegemony over colonized regions, “coloniality” relates to an “epistemological expropriation”³² of the production of knowledge, images, and symbolic systems in terms of a “relationship of power that survives political colonialism and encompasses economic, social, cultural, and ideological aspects.”³³ According to Quijano, coloniality not only confines the cultural production of the dominated cultures, but also simultaneously functions as a mechanism of social and cultural control.³⁴

In a postcolonial world, Quijano in particular identifies the persistence of racism as a geopolitical category of social hierarchisation and preservation of power as one of the most evident and widespread symptoms of the coloniality of power.³⁵ He also unmaskes the category of “race” as “*une construction idéologique nue*” (a mere ideological construction),³⁶ as it is built on an artificially constructed biological hierarchisation based on skin colour, which has been raised to a new epistemological level by the differentiation between “civilized” and “primitive.”³⁷ According to Quijano, the origin of this hierarchisation can be found in the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, which strictly detaches the latter as an object from the reason of the subject and therefore devalues the body as belonging to the domain of nature.³⁸ Quijano illustrates that if one follows this line of argument, one runs the risk of establishing a hierarchisation of “races,” in which the one that counts as superior is the one considered least close to the realm of nature. Therefore, overcoming this dualism represents a precondition for surmounting the racist and discriminating ways of thinking of geopolitics of coloniality.³⁹ As long as this has not happened, one continues to construct the (post)colonial Other as a “[p]ure otherness,”⁴⁰ denying the rhizomatic interpersonal connections between human beings which, according to

Édouard Glissant, explicitly characterizes the “relation to” the Other (cf. PR 23).

Walter Mignolo refers to such a production of knowledge that claims universal validity as a “global design,” the intention of which is to blur its own locus of enunciation in order to turn its own “local history” into a “unique and universal . . . production of knowledge.”⁴¹ This kind of thinking implies that knowledge produced at other places is devalued as “irrelevant and ‘prescientific’”⁴² and leads to non-Eurocentric epistemologies being marginalized by insisting on the hegemony of Western modernity and its epistemological models.⁴³ With regard to this geopolitics of knowledge, Santiago Castro-Gómez even speaks of a form of “epistemological violence exercised . . . over other forms of production of knowledge, images, symbols, and forms of signifying.”⁴⁴

Re-reading Frantz Fanon, André Lucrèce confirms that a distorted vision of Haiti based on stereotypes cannot be narrowed down to the Western world, but that it has also had an impact on the Caribbean itself:

*Relire Fanon aujourd'hui, c'est comprendre pourquoi des Antillais clament haut et fort que les malheurs historiques et naturels qui touchent Haïti sont les conséquences d'une malédiction qui fait de ce pays une nation maudite, reprenant quasiment les mêmes mots et les mêmes expressions qu'employaient les évangélistes à propos de tous pays habités par des nègres.*⁴⁵

(Re-reading Fanon today is to understand why Antillean people claim loudly and strongly that the misfortunes of history and nature that have affected Haiti are the consequences of a malediction that has turned this country into a cursed nation; they repeat practically the same words and expressions used by the evangelicals with regard to all countries inhabited by black people.)

With these words, he refers to the minority complex and the mechanism of alienation of the colonial subject's self-conception mentioned by Frantz Fanon.⁴⁶ Lyonel Trouillot equally notes that the stereotypical discourse about Haiti not only comes from the outside, but also reproduces itself within Haitian society whose elite has turned its eyes “*vers l'ailleurs*” (elsewhere) (EH 13).⁴⁷ Therefore it would be misleading to assume that the Haitian elite has simply adopted a Western discourse about Haiti. Rather, it has equally been instrumental within Haitian society in maintaining and perpetuating (colonial) power structures. Moreover, the picture is heterogeneous. While on the one hand some Haitian intellectuals speak of a “*fantasme de la violence*” (delusion of violence)⁴⁸ or a “*pays profondément zombifié*”

(deeply zombified country),⁴⁹ which is haunted by a continuous cycle of violence and counterviolence,⁵⁰ there are others (like e.g. Lyonel Trouillot) who explicitly reject such attributions of violence and representations of the Haitian Other as “a cursed Other.”⁵¹ This context raises two questions: how far does such a rejection of the cliché of violence and playing down its impact in Haitian reality represent an objective correction of existing stereotypes and how far does such a discourse aim at not protracting these clichés by repeating them? Discussing this question becomes even more delicate if one considers that such a vision of Haiti might also represent an elitist view that tries to shake off the stigma of an affinity with violence in order to emphasize that Haiti is no less civilized than the West. Laënnec Hurbon’s studies, for example, point out that after the Haitian Revolution, the country’s elites came to the conclusion that it was their mission to defend “Black culture” against “Western culture” and to reject images of barbarism and lack of culture, a conclusion that has influenced literary texts as well.⁵² Simultaneously, one needs to understand Haitian criticism of the discourse of Western modernity as a resistance to the fact that it is mainly Western experience that serves as a model for criteria of normality and universality.⁵³ It is the placing of the discourse of Western modernity in the universal position that leads to a tendency to point out the failures of non-Western societies, while emphasizing Western achievements.⁵⁴

THINKING THE OTHER “IN RELATION”

Glissant criticizes a universalization of such thinking patterns as the breeding ground for visions of exoticism. He insists that humankind has to overcome thinking in binaries, which he describes as continental or systematic thinking.⁵⁵ Instead he has introduced his idea of “*pensée de la trace*” (thinking of the trace) as a “*non-système de pensée intuitif, fragile, ambigu, qui conviendra le mieux à l’extraordinaire complexité et à l’extraordinaire dimension de multiplicité du monde*” (non-system of intuitive, fragile, ambiguous thinking, which would best suit the extraordinary complexity and the extraordinary dimensions of multiplicity of the world) (IPD 25). According to Eric Prieto, only adopting such a thinking of the trace can extirpate discourses of exceptionalism which postulate absolute difference, “recogniz[ing] and honor[ing] those things that make a culture unique, while also acknowledging that none of them are signs of some kind of absolute difference, but rather local manifestations of more general principles.”⁵⁶ Transcending a thinking in binary oppositions is at the same time an imperative if one wants to overcome a stereotypical discourse about Haiti as a place of violence and chaos and question the universal validity of concomitant knowledge productions with regard to the Haitian Other as

an “uncivilized alterity.”

When Haitian intellectuals attack the Occidental discourse as universalizing and totalizing,⁵⁷ they ask for the right to differ (*droit à la différence*) which Glissant postulates in his *Poétique de la Relation* (cf. PR 203). He infers that Western discourse imposes a restriction on this right by claiming transparency and systematization. The result of this restriction is that the Other is imagined in universalistic categories and not accepted as just “being different.” Glissant therefore claims a right to opacity, which induces us to respect the Other in his or her difference, “resist[ing] one’s attempts to assimilate or objectify.”⁵⁸ Even if, at first, the Other might defy our understanding by his or her opacity,⁵⁹ this opacity is not to be equated with an “*autarcie impénétrable*” (PR 204) (impenetrable autarchy) that leads to exclusion, but rather with the insight “that there are no truths that apply universally or permanently.”⁶⁰ Therefore, Mignolo equally emphasizes that one needs to critically discuss the alleged totality of Western epistemology⁶¹ in order to unmask absolute truths as illusions, “*en [se] faisant sensible aux limites de toute méthode*” (by making [oneself] sensitive to the limits of every method) (PR 206).

The duality of “[p]ensée de soi et pensée de l’autre” ([t]hought about one’s self and thought about another) (PR 204) is consequently invalid, so that aspirations of a holistic understanding of the Other must be disapproved, particularly as they would imply an aggressive act and a reduction of the Other to a status of an “object of knowledge”⁶²: “*Il y a dans ce verbe comprendre le mouvement des mains qui prennent l’entour et le ramènent à soi. Geste d’enfermement sinon d’appropriation*” (In this version of understanding the verb *to grasp* contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation) (PR 206).⁶³ Mignolo equally stresses that it is necessary to overcome the opposition between (Western) subject and (‘subaltern’) object, “between the knower and the known, between a ‘hybrid’ object (the borderland as the known) and a ‘pure’ disciplinary or interdisciplinary subject (the knower), uncontaminated by the border matter he or she describes.”⁶⁴ He introduces another argument into the discussion when he both exposes these binaries as Western knowledge productions, whose alleged universal validity merely disguises the underlying power mechanisms, and points out that we should not only question these epistemologies in principle but question them from alternative locuses of enunciation “to produce knowledge from such in-between spaces.”⁶⁵

Glissant asks us to replace the systematic thinking based on binary polarities be with a thinking of plurality, “[où, J.B.] [d]es opacités peuvent

coexister, confluer” ([where, J.B.] [o]pacities can coexist and converge) (PR 204; cf. also 205). His demand for the right to opacity therefore has to be seen as a chance to overcome the idea of a ‘barbarian alterity’ that is deeply rooted in dual occidental thinking categories that try to confirm their own “degree of civilization” by locating what is considered “archaic” and “backward” elsewhere (cf. IPD 72; PR 204).⁶⁶ This right is a precondition for the realization of the principle of “relation,” “*selon laquelle toute identité s’étend dans un rapport à l’Autre*” (in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other) (PR 23). Glissant’s “relation” is a non-hierarchical, rhizomatic concept that moves beyond the universalizing and marginalizing tendencies of Western discourse and substitutes the figure of the “subaltern” Other imagined as absolutely different by a vision of the Other “in relation,” which epistemologically transcends his or her alleged subalternity.⁶⁷

Glissant emphasizes that inbetween the artificially constructed opposition subject / “subaltern” object there is no vacuum but an infinite quantity of variants and variations: therefore, the Other is always “*en relation*” (“in relation”). With that, Glissant opens “the domain of overlap between ... imperial binary oppositions, the area in which ambivalence, hybridity, and complexity continually disrupt the certainties of imperial logic.”⁶⁸ With his non-totalitarian understanding of *totalité* (totality) as a “*totalité ouverte, en mouvement sur elle-même*” (open totality evolving upon itself) (PR 206), he manages to overcome the rigid opposition of equality and difference. Hence, the Other is no longer the “inherently Other,”⁶⁹ but related to the Self in a rhizomatic network of relations, he or she is “repeated” in the Self in a “discontinuous conjunction”⁷⁰: “*l’Autre est en nous*” (the Other is within us) (PR 39).⁷¹

Such a conception of the “subaltern” Other transcends the classical postcolonial discourse by taking into account the complexity of postcolonial realities.⁷² Although this postcolonial discourse has already vehemently criticized the colonial conceptualization of the colonized Other, it has not been able to epistemologically move beyond the initial binaries. The persistence of categories such as “the colonizer” and “the colonized”, for instance in Frantz Fanon’s or Albert Memmi’s texts, confirm this observation.⁷³ Glissant goes a step further and converts the Other’s marginalized position into a network of relations. While classical postcolonial discourses continue to suggest that the West does not want to and cannot understand the Other, Glissant adopts a different perspective: accepting that one does not need to totally understand the Other in order to enter into an ethical relation with him or her (cf. PR 169). Proximity and relation take the place of distance and contrariness

without forsaking difference, a sign of diversity. However, this requires the individual to respectfully accept the Other's opacity and to stop striving for an understanding of the Other as an object about which he or she can gain knowledge.⁷⁴

By 1981, Glissant had already written in *Le Discours antillais* (*Caribbean Discourse*) that what opacity really represents is the freedom of people,⁷⁵ which illustrates the ethical dimension of this concept: "*La pensée de l'Autre, c'est la générosité morale qui m'inclinerait à accepter le principe d'altérité, à concevoir que le monde n'est pas fait d'un bloc et qu'il n'est pas qu'une vérité, la mienne*" (Thought of the Other is the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity, to conceive of the world as not simple and straightforward, with only one truth - mine) (PR 169). To feel solidarity with the Other therefore does not imply that one needs to understand him or her. Rather, it means that one needs to accept the Other's difference as an opacity as well as to acknowledge his or her epistemology as equally valuable as the Western one (cf. PR 207), for: "*Le consentement général aux opacités particulières est le plus simple équivalent de la non-barbarie*" (Widespread consent to specific opacities is the most straightforward equivalent of nonbarbarism) (PR 208-209).

Consequently, Glissant's theory represents an approach that does not shrink back from the complexity of the world, which is very often simplified by binary thought. Glissant, on the contrary, is not afraid of substituting integral solutions and the desire to holistically understand the Other by introducing the principle of opacity, which only allows one to approach a phenomenon, but never to conclusively explain it.⁷⁶

"INVENTER L'HAÏTIEN COMME PROCHAIN"

Glissant's approach, which gives prominence to complexity and "relation," finds an echo in the Haitian writer Lyonel Trouillot's reflections on foreign perceptions of Haiti and the role of violence in Haitian society. When contemplating prefabricated stereotypes about his country, he particularly bemoans that Haiti is often reduced to a reality of violence:

I reflect violence in my work because one writes with one's gaze. But it would be a mistake for a New York or a Parisian reader to view this violence as a sort of new exoticism. Violence is one aspect of the reality of my country—a country where one lives, one makes love, one drinks, one sings. I say this both to you as the reader and to me as the writer, so that I will not replace cocoa trees with cadavers. (emphasis added)⁷⁷

With this statement he points out the danger that the Western world

continues to imagine the Haitian Other as an exotic alterity, while simply substituting traditional categories of the Caribbean paradise with new clichés of violence.⁷⁸ He considers it a writer's duty to show Haiti's complexity "*pour éviter les réductions, les clichés. ... C'est ce que j'appelle 'parler du pays'*" (in order to avoid reductions, clichés. ... That's what I call 'talking of the country').⁷⁹ He wants to emphasize the multiple aspects of Haitian reality by fictionalizing everyday Haitian experiences. Even if this approach embraces a representation of violence, it refrains from limiting Haitian reality to this element. By emphasizing that Haitians "live, make love, drink and sing"⁸⁰ he also transcends the abstractness of allegedly unambiguous perpetrator and victim categories and gives priority to the Other as an ethical subject.

In his critique, Lyonel Trouillot unmasks the one-sidedness of a discourse that tries to reduce Haiti to violence, chaos, and neediness by insisting on the fact that the reality of a country never consists of only one specific characteristic. Instead, it has to be imagined as complex and multidimensional, "*récus[ant] l'édit universel, généralisant, qui résumait le monde en une évidence transparente, lui prétendant un sens et une finalité présumés*" (challeng[ing] the universal dictum, which, simply put, summed the world up as something obvious and transparent, claiming its meaning and purpose as presupposed) (PR 33). The ubiquity of violence in the works of contemporary Haitian fiction is therefore not to be mistaken for a continuation of the discourse that reduces Haiti to a place only of violence. Notwithstanding, Trouillot acknowledges that violence is a central element of Haiti's everyday life and that one cannot turn a blind eye to its implications: "There is no ivory tower here. And the problems of the individual and the problems of the group are so entangled that even if one wants to speak of his sexuality the immediate social reality knocks at the bedroom's door."⁸¹

Even though the topoi of Haiti's exceptionalism and malediction seems to acknowledge the complexity of Haiti's reality by suggesting that there always remains something that cannot be completely demystified, they actually show in fact how such a discourse tries to cope with unexplainable phenomena by imposing unambiguous categorizations within the tradition of systematic thinking. They reflect an apodictical "*exigence de ... transparence*" (requirement for transparency) (PR 204) criticized by Glissant, which simplifies complex matters in order to let us 'grasp' (*comprendre*, cf. above and PR 206) what "disturbs"⁸² us when we are confronted with Haiti's complex history. Instead of acknowledging that no approach can holistically explain Haitian (or any other) reality and

that prefabricated explanations are useless when looking for solutions to the ongoing violence in this Caribbean nation, such a discourse striving for absolute transparency pretends to fully understand something that it cannot holistically explain. Glissant considers such a generalization to be “*totalitaire*” (totalitarian) (PR 33) and replaces it with his concept of “open totality” (cf. PR 185). He adds that those thinking “in relation” already know that they will never achieve a complete understanding of this totality “*et qu’en cela réside la beauté menacée du monde*” (and ... that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides) (PR 33).

Furthermore, Lyonel Trouillot bemoans the deaf ear that the Western world turns on alternative knowledge productions from Haiti, which question existing prejudices and clichés:

L’acte de parole haïtien, c’est un monologue, ou plutôt une adresse dont le destinataire reste sourd. ... L’État haïtien naît sans voisins égaux, et les États occidentaux ne le reconnaissent pas comme leur égal. Réalité innommable, impensable, condamnée dès lors à une parole inaudible.
(EH 12)

(The words spoken by Haiti are a monologue, or rather a message whose addressee is deaf. ... The Haitian state has been born without equal neighbours, and the Western states do not recognize it as their equal. Unspeakable, unthinkable reality, its words condemned thenceforth not to be heard.)

This deafness results in Haiti’s “*solitude*” (solitude) (EH 13),⁸³ as the country has always lacked listeners, particularly as the West and Haiti talk so to speak “at cross-purposes”: “*quand l’Occident parle d’Haïti, il parle à ses oreilles, et se dit ce qu’il peut, veut entendre. Indépendamment du turbulent soliloque haïtien*” (when the Occident talks about Haiti, it talks to itself and says what it can and wants to hear. Independently of Haiti’s turbulent soliloquy) (EH 12-13). This is why, according to Trouillot, Haiti must find a way to overturn the deafness of the Occident, who until now has ignored Haiti’s soliloquy, letting it fade away as an inaudible echo (cf. EH 13). Such a triumph would enable Haitians to communicate the complexity of Haitian reality to prevent it from being thought of as an absolute alterity of no concern to the rest of the world.⁸⁴ Instead of focussing on absolute differences of identity and alterity, Haitian writers, in Trouillot’s view, should aim to inscribe the Haitian Other as *prochain* in the global consciousness in order to transcend stereotypes and prejudices:

L’écrivain haïtien est le seul scripteur d’un pays sans prochain et de voix inaudibles dans leur pays même. Ou devrait l’être. Ou pourrait

l'être. Ou le sera quand il ou elle aura assumé, au-delà de la gloriole, cette condition. L'exigence: dans le murmure ou le hurlement, répondre à l'appel de l'inaudible. Inventer l'Haïtien comme prochain. Pour lui-même et pour l'autre. (emphasis added) (EH 14)

(The Haitian author is the only writer of a country without something next (*prochain*) and of voices inaudible in their own country. Or should be. Or could be. Or will be when he or she will have fully accepted this condition, beyond misplaced vanity. The demand: amid the murmurs or the roaring, to answer the call of the inaudible. Invent the Haitian as up and coming (*prochain*). For himself or herself and for the Other.)

If one combines Trouillot's reflections with Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation*, an innovative concept emerges in which the Other is no longer defined by binaries, but "in relation" to the self and therefore as our *prochain*.⁸⁵ By using the word *prochain*, Trouillot places the Other in a rhizomatic network of relations on a linguistic level as well because he chooses a term that does not emphasize exclusion by difference (*l'autre*), but rather similarities and proximity in difference (*le prochain*).

Such a conception of the Other as *prochain* becomes particularly significant when one considers the discussion about violence in Haiti, as it shifts our focus from an abstract to an ethical perspective. Judith Butler stresses the ethical relation to the Other when she criticizes that, in the end, it is public discourse that decides about whose life is "grievable" and whose is not: "the differential allocation of grievability ... operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human."⁸⁶ Therefore it is extremely important to admit "those who remain faceless ... and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed ... into public view,"⁸⁷ for one's own vulnerability has to be recognized in the vulnerability of the Other in order to overcome violence and to value every life again. This discussion is of the utmost importance in the context of coloniality. As Nelson Maldonado-Torres states, the Being of the "subaltern" (*damné*) is characterized by "killability" and "rapeability," which has been inscribed into the colonial body by an act of epistemic violence and which conceals its grievability.⁸⁸ Trouillot follows a similar line of argument when he criticizes that, after the earthquake of 2010, Haitians were said to be extremely "resilient," a delicate commonplace conception that makes people forget that Haitians are as vulnerable as every other human being (cf. EH 12-13).

Lyonel Trouillot's adaptation of Glissant's epistemology to the Haitian context moreover offers a new option to approaching the phenomenon

of violence in Haiti. On the one hand, it becomes evident that simple explanations are insufficient. Not only is the stereotypical discourse of “malediction” and “barbarism” to be questioned, but the voices that tell Haiti’s local histories have to be made audible again, too.⁸⁹ The continuity of violence in Haiti’s reality cannot be narrowed down to simplistic explanatory models but has to be analyzed within the complex network of history.⁹⁰ Lyonel Trouillot’s complaint about the discursive *status quo* relates to Mignolo’s observation that the critique of Western epistemologies should be realized from a position of “epistemological subalternity.”⁹¹ It is not only necessary to challenge the universal validity of existing explanatory models, “help[ing] us to ... escape from the jail of History (with a capital ‘H’) and put together our histories (without this capital ‘H’)” (CM 274). But above all it is necessary to do so from a Haitian perspective by making the Haitian soliloquy widely audible. On the other hand, Lyonel Trouillot elaborates that, in Western discourse, the image of the Haitian as “barbarian” has to be replaced by the notion of *le prochain*. Against the background of “relation,” his claim to consider the Haitian as *prochain* shows that the Other is the key to overcoming violence. Violence cannot be tamed by incessantly striving to understand oneself and the Other, for Glissant makes us aware of the fact that the act of understanding as a “*geste ... d’appropriation*” (gesture of ... appropriation) (PR 206) can itself be considered as an act of epistemic violence. Rather, our striving for transparency has to give way to opacity and a focus on our Relation to the Other. A vision of the Other as “barbarian” and “[p]ure otherness”⁹² has to be given up in favour of the *prochain* to whom one has to establish a “relation” “*pour [se] sentir solidaire de lui, pour bâtir avec lui, pour aimer ce qu’il fait*” ([t]o feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does) (PR 207). This implies that he or she has to be acknowledged as a subject possessing knowledge (rather than solely an object of knowledge).

But how can the Haitian as *prochain* be inscribed into the global consciousness? Lyonel Trouillot—just like Glissant (cf. IPD 71; PR 129)—ascribes this potential to literature. It is the writer’s duty to re-establish the dialogue with the rest of the world, to offer alternative, local epistemologies and to start the real work of decolonization (cf. PR 29) by revealing “relations,” for he or she is “*le seul scripteur d’un pays sans prochain et de voix inaudibles dans leur pays même*” (the only writer of a country without something next and of voices inaudible in their own country) (EH 14).

Notes

An earlier version of this paper appeared in German under the title “‘Inventer l’Haïtien comme prochain’: Der Andere en Relation zwischen Differenz und Nähe.” In *Kreolisierung revisited: Debatten um ein weltweites Kulturkonzept*, edited by Gesine Müller, and Natascha Ueckmann. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013. 201-19.

- ¹ Trouillot, “Écrire pour Haïti”, 12. Future citations to “Écrire pour Haïti” are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as EH. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from all French and German texts are my own.
- ² For dualistic constructions of (Western) identity and (‘subaltern’) alterity cf. e.g. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 155.
- ³ Cf. Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*. Future citations to *Poétique de la Relation* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as PR. All corresponding English citations are taken from Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, translated by Betsy Wing.
- ⁴ Bell, *Walking on Fire*, 9.
- ⁵ Cf. M.-R. Trouillot, “Undenkbare Geschichte”, 84-85.
- ⁶ Glover, *Haiti Unbound*, 15. For existing prejudices and stereotypes of Haiti cf. Farmer, *The Uses*; Lawless, *Haiti’s Bad Press*.
- ⁷ Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks*, 3.
- ⁸ Lahens, “Haïti ou la Santé”, n.p..
- ⁹ Munro, “Introduction”, 1.
- ¹⁰ Wagner, “Salvaging”, 18. Cf. inter alia the critique in Etoke, “Libérer”, 88, as well as numerous contributions in Munro, *Haiti Rising*. This distorted view of Haiti after the earthquake of 2010 has equally been criticized by a multitude of Haitian intellectuals and writers, cf. e.g. Métellus, “Terre meurtrière”; Lahens, “Haïti ou la Santé”; Rousseau, and Laferrière, “Haïti”; Savigneau, and Théodat, “Jean Marie Théodat”; L. Trouillot, “Carnet de Bord”.
- ¹¹ M.-R. Trouillot, “Undenkbare Geschichte”, 94.
- ¹² M.-R. Trouillot, “The Odd”, 5.
- ¹³ M.-R. Trouillot, “The Odd”, 6.
- ¹⁴ Cf. M.-R. Trouillot, “The Odd”, 11.
- ¹⁵ M.-R. Trouillot, “The Odd”, 8.
- ¹⁶ Farmer, *The Uses*, 41.
- ¹⁷ Hurbon, *Le Barbare*, 6. Cf. also Farmer, *The Uses*, 197.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Reemtsma, *Trust and Violence*, 150-151; M.-R. Trouillot, “North Atlantic”, 850. For the representation of the Other through binary oppositions and his marginalization and exclusion by the creation of reductive and essentialistic stereotypes, which consider the unknown as abnormal and unacceptable, cf.

Hall, "Das Spektakel", 111-112, 144-146. Dubois states that it is such a thinking in oppositions that abets the striving of the Western world to form Haiti upon its own beliefs – an intention Dubois fiercely criticizes (cf. Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks*, 368; as well as Robert, and Seitenfus, "Haïti est la Preuve"), as the diversity of the Other can only be acknowledged by overcoming these binaries (cf. below).

- ¹⁹ Reemtsma, *Trust and Violence*, 167.
- ²⁰ For a critical discussion of the term 'subaltern' as a concept that already might give rise to a discursive subalternization of the Other cf. Mignolo in Iñigo Clavo, Sánchez-Mateos Paniagua, and Mignolo, "Sobre Pensamiento fronterizo", n.p., and Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality", 111. To meet these conceptual concerns, the term is used in simple quotation marks throughout this paper.
- ²¹ Spivak, *A Critique*, 113.
- ²² Cf. Spivak, *A Critique*, 211-217; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 142; Hall, "Das Spektakel".
- ²³ Cf. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," 1; Randeria, "Geteilte Geschichte," 90.
- ²⁴ Cf. Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma Studies," 227-228.
- ²⁵ Cf. e.g. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernen"; Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities"; Randeria, Fuchs, and Linkenbach, "Konfigurationen der Moderne." For the Haitian context cf. Hörmann's critique of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's argumentation in M.-R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*. He argues that Trouillot is himself silencing European critique of eurocentrism (cf. Hörmann, "Thinking the 'Unthinkable'?", 150-154).
- ²⁶ Cf. Glissant, "Creolization in the Making," 275; Glissant, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, 85. Future citations to "Creolization in the Making of the Americas" are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as CM. Future citations to *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as IPD.
- ²⁷ Kastner, and Waibel, "Einleitung," 24.
- ²⁸ Mignolo, *Epistemischer Ungehorsam*, 46. Cf. also Fernando Coronil's definition of 'Occidentalism' as a tradition of discourses that divided the world according to asymmetric global power structures, thus constructing an attainable and unavoidable vision of the world (cf. Coronil, *Jenseits des Okzidentalismus*, 179, 186).
- ²⁹ Cf. Conrad, and Randeria, "Einleitung," 20-21.
- ³⁰ Cf. Mignolo, *Local Histories*, 310. Cf. also M.-R. Trouillot's critique of the 'West' as a fiction in order to legitimate global power structures in M.-R. Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 1.
- ³¹ Cf. Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," 170-171.

- ³² Castro-Gómez, “(Post)coloniality,” 268.
- ³³ Boatcă, “Die zu Ende gedachte,” 298.
- ³⁴ Cf. Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 169.
- ³⁵ Cf. Quijano, “‘Race’ et colonialité,” 111-112.
- ³⁶ Quijano, “‘Race’ et colonialité,” 113.
- ³⁷ Cf. Quijano, “‘Race’ et colonialité,” 114, 116.
- ³⁸ Cf. Quijano, “‘Race’ et colonialité,” 117; Descartes, *Meditationen*.
- ³⁹ Cf. Quijano, “‘Race’ et colonialité,” 117-118.
- ⁴⁰ Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 17.
- ⁴¹ Castro-Gómez, “(Post)coloniality,” 279.
- ⁴² Castro-Gómez, “(Post)coloniality,” 279.
- ⁴³ Cf. Castro-Gómez, “(Post)coloniality,” 279; Mignolo, *Local Histories*. In order to overcome this epistemological eurocentrism, both local histories and fundamental experiences of decoloniality (e.g. the Haitian Revolution) have to be revalued, while the alleged superiority of European civilization and its global validity have to be questioned (cf. Escobar, “Worlds and Knowledges,” 184-185). Cf. as well Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s critique of the generalization of North Atlantic experiences (cf. M.-R. Trouillot, “North Atlantic,” 847).
- ⁴⁴ Castro-Gómez, “(Post)coloniality,” 281.
- ⁴⁵ Lucrèce, *Frantz Fanon*, 112-113.
- ⁴⁶ Cf. Fanon, *Peau noire*, 80, 90.
- ⁴⁷ Cf. also M.-R. Trouillot, “The Odd,” 7.
- ⁴⁸ Hurbon, “Violence et Raison,” 116.
- ⁴⁹ Sroka, and Depestre, “Haïti dans tous nos Rêves.”
- ⁵⁰ Particularly as numerous contemporary novels (cf. e.g. L. Trouillot, *Rue*; Lahens, *La Couleur*; Victor, *À l’Angle*) show that violence certainly is a very important subject in Haitian discourse as well.
- ⁵¹ For the heterogeneity of the (post)colonial Other cf. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern,” 284.
- ⁵² Cf. Hurbon, *Le Barbare*, 53-55, 60; *Culture et Dictature*, 77.
- ⁵³ Cf. Randeria, “Geteilte Geschichte,” 90.
- ⁵⁴ Cf. Randeria, “Geteilte Geschichte,” 90-91. This is exactly what Michel-Rolph Trouillot shows for the Haitian context in M.-R. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.
- ⁵⁵ Cf. PR 29; IPD 85; CM 275; Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 17.
- ⁵⁶ Prieto, “Edouard Glissant,” 114.
- ⁵⁷ Cf. e.g. EH; M.-R. Trouillot, “The Odd”; Hurbon, *Le Barbare*; É. Trouillot,

- “L’Imaginaire,” 155-156; Zimra, and Lahens, “Haitian Literature,” 90.
- ⁵⁸ Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 18.
- ⁵⁹ Cf. Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 18-19.
- ⁶⁰ Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 19; cf. also PR 206.
- ⁶¹ Cf. Mignolo, “The Geopolitics,” 252.
- ⁶² Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 19.
- ⁶³ We also have to read Lyonel Trouillot’s critique of numerous studies on Haitian literature in this context. He blames them for their ‘ethnological’ reading of Haitian literature, which reduces literary texts to themes and structures critics are selectively looking for and which they particularly tend to impose on ‘postcolonial’ literature (cf. L. Trouillot, “La Construction des Dogmes”).
- ⁶⁴ Cf. Mignolo, *Local Histories*, 18.
- ⁶⁵ Cf. Mignolo, *Local Histories*, 18.
- ⁶⁶ Cf. e.g. Boatcă, “Die zu Ende gedachte,” 299.
- ⁶⁷ Cf. The concept of “transdifference,” which aims to think differences differently by transcending rigid binary oppositions and by “complementing them with moments of transdifference” (Allolio-Näcke, Kalscheuer, and Manzeschke, “Einleitung,” 10; cf. *ibid.* 16-17). Likewise the Other has to be recognized and acknowledged in his or her being different, but without generating an unsurmountable abyss to the Self. A thinking of transdifference simultaneously allows us to suspend differences temporarily without absolutely denying them (cf. Lösch, “Begriff und Phänomen,” 27). This makes it possible to imagine the Other ethically beyond these differences and to point out the vulnerability of every individual subject in the context of violence (cf. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30).
- ⁶⁸ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies*, 20.
- ⁶⁹ M.-R. Trouillot, *Global Transformations*, 1.
- ⁷⁰ Benítez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*, 2.
- ⁷¹ Glissant refers to Deleuze’s and Guattari’s metaphor of the rhizome and expands it by a cultural dimension to describe the diversity of *Relation* (cf. PR 23). The metaphor of the rhizome stresses the plurality of its structure, which consists of dimensions and lines rather than of binary relations, points or positions (cf. Deleuze, and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21).
- ⁷² Paget Henry states that, in the context of Caribbean philosophy, Glissant plays a central role as the thinker who through the concept of creolization transcended the binary thinking, that still had influenced Caribbean theorists such as Fanon and his critique of the West, “undo[ing] the binary oppositions and negative evaluations that block African and European elements from creatively coming together” (Henry, *Caliban’s Reason*, 88).

- ⁷³ Cf. e.g. Fanon, *Les Damnés*; Fanon, *Peau noire*; Memmi, *Portrait du Colonisé*.
- ⁷⁴ Glissant's concept of opacity does not mean that the Other defies any understanding and that differences simply have to be put up with. Rather, Glissant pleads for the right to opacity in order to show that the desire to schematize the Other should not conceal the ethical relation to him or her and that the search for a universal, eternally valid truth is an illusion (cf. above and Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 19). Cf. also: "Comprendre l'autre, les autres, c'est accepter que la vérité d'ailleurs s'appose à la vérité d'ici" (To understand the Other, the Others, means to accept that the truth from elsewhere adds to the truth from here) (IPD 44).
- ⁷⁵ Cf. Glissant, *Discours antillais*, 467.
- ⁷⁶ Cf. also Benítez-Rojo, *Repeating Island*, 3. Acknowledging complexity is especially important in a Haitian context, since in the Post-Duvalier-era the Occident has often been helpless in the face of the tense situation in this Caribbean country. In particular with regard to the contemporary violence, critical studies of recent Haitian history emphasize that there is no affinity to or culture of violence in Haiti. Rather, violence can only be explained within a complex network of historical continuities and geopolitical structures (cf. e.g. Dupuy, *The Prophet*; Fatton, *The Roots*; Gilles, *État*; Hurbon, *Pour une Sociologie*).
- ⁷⁷ Djebbar, and L. Trouillot, "Postcolonial Passages," 37.
- ⁷⁸ Cf. Caroit, "Record de Violence," 2.
- ⁷⁹ Flamerion, and L. Trouillot, "Vivant et capable d'écrire," n.p.
- ⁸⁰ Cf. Above and Djebbar, and L. Trouillot, "Postcolonial Passages," 37.
- ⁸¹ Dorcely, and L. Trouillot, "Reading Callaloo", 168.
- ⁸² Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks*, 11.
- ⁸³ Cf. also Gabriel García Márquez's Nobel Prize Lecture (*La Soledad*).
- ⁸⁴ Cf. Kilomba's critique of the *silencing* of the *Black subject* in general in *Plantation Memories*, 23.
- ⁸⁵ Cf. also both L. Trouillot's vision of the Other in *Objectif*, 2 and É. Trouillot's argument that one has to recognize the Other's humanity in Kénol, and É. Trouillot, "Évelyne Trouillot," 277.
- ⁸⁶ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xiv-xv.
- ⁸⁷ Butler, *Precarious Life*, xviii.
- ⁸⁸ Cf. Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality," 109; Spivak, *A Critique*, 211-217; Spivak, "Can the Subaltern," 208-281. By epistemic violence, I understand a kind of violence that is embedded in concepts, language or symbolic systems and that aims to maintain power structures (cf. Bourdieu, and Passeron, *Fondements*). Gayatri C. Spivak, for instance, sees the dialectical process of *Othering* as an act of epistemic violence in a (post)colonial context; cf. above and Spivak, *A Critique*, 211-217.

- ⁸⁹ Cf. Mignolo, *Local Histories*.
- ⁹⁰ Likewise, É. Trouillot states: "... Haiti is very complex. ... it's like we have one country and inside that country we have a lot of realities, so different, so opposite, so contradictory" (Brown, and E. Trouillot, "Extended Interview", 0:11-0:27 min.).
- ⁹¹ Cf. Mignolo, *Local Histories*, 9.
- ⁹² Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 17.

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