

## **Abyssal Islands: Absolute Singularity and the Poetics of the Sacred**

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In *Desert Islands*, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze reflects on the figure of the island as a conceptual framework for thinking about reconstruction of the world as an act of new beginning, an act of absolute singularity. For Deleuze, the island represents the creative tension marking the singularity of beginning, for beginning is always a new act, of starting from scratch, alone and separate, like the island that drifts away from continent.<sup>1</sup> However, “the island is also that toward which one drifts.”<sup>2</sup> Though separate and perhaps alone, it is the site of a new creation and new beginning. It represents the singularity of each event or act of becoming. The island is its own origin, “radical and absolute.”<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I build on the figure of the island as a metaphor for thinking about ontology, coloniality, and the question of God. I situate my brief reflection in the historical experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (post)colonial Caribbean, particularly in the works of essayists and poets Edouard Glissant and Derek Walcott—both of whom often turn to the figure of the island in search of a conceptual framework for articulating the decolonial vision of a creolized ontology. I employ the island as a metaphor for thinking colonial difference that is the problem of modernity/coloniality as well as the implications creolized ontology bears for thinking about the notion of God.

### **Abyssal Islands**

For Deleuze, both the openness and the insularity of the island helps us detach being from the notion of origin, and reconceptualize it in terms of a singular act of becoming/beginning, each time radically anew. Similarly, for many Caribbean thinkers too, the island defies the teleological myth of origin grounded in definite beginning and end. The landscape of the archipelago, particularly the figure of the island in its relation to the sea symbolizes the abyss overwhelming the (post)colonial Caribbean subject, revealing both the depth of its agony and the possibility that the profound intensity of creolized existence opens up.

The totalitarian logic of Oneness structuring the traditional Western metaphysics subsumes everything into sameness so that the present is always a repetition of sameness (the past). Multiplicity is a mere replication of the One; each new act of beginning is a mere continuation of the teleological trajectory leading to the definite end. The rhizomatic multiplicity Deleuze proposes cancels out the linear worldview which sublates difference into sameness/oneness. Unlike the “arboreal” mode of thinking

structured by “the alpha and omega,” the rhizome “has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle from which it grows and over-spills.”<sup>4</sup> Islands represent Deleuze’s ontology of becoming in which being signals a new beginning: a beginning that starts from separation (from other continents), “being lost and alone.”<sup>5</sup> But insularity implies that the island is “also the origin, radical and absolute.”<sup>6</sup> Every beginning, this way, signifies an absolute singularity.

When thinking from the perspective of the humans encountering and populating the island, the new beginning on the island can be viewed as a rebeginning, a second origin. This second origin surpasses the meaning of original beginning. Referencing the biblical story of the Flood, he writes, “the ark sets down on the one place of the earth that remains uncovered by water, a circular and sacred place, from which the world begins anew.” This second origin which has greater significance than first origin, takes place in the middle of the ocean: a sacred island.<sup>7</sup> The island turns us to that which precedes beginning, the absolute solitude of the island surrounded by the abyssal sea; the solitude of the being who must take on the work of creating the world without gods. Beginning is abyssal.

While Deleuze hints at the abyssal depth haunting the imagery of the island and second origin/beginning in this short text, we know perhaps all too well that Deleuze is not a thinker who is commonly associated with negativity. He is better known as the staunch advocate for affirmation of desire and creative flights, of movements of becoming that defy frames and limits. Deleuze’s imaginary of islands as second origin finds resonance in the works of the two Caribbean writers, Glissant and Walcott, both of whom are equally invested in the question of Caribbean identity. The island evokes the abyssal double bind of the colonial subject: both the colonial difference conditioning its present—like the insular island surrounded by the sea—and the possibilities such difference signals—like the sea that connects the island to a limitless number of shorelines.

### **Drifting Islands: Continent and Islands**

Why does the postcolonial Caribbean identity haunting Glissant and Walcott matter for those of us writing and teaching about God in North America in the first place? The Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel locates the origin of European modernity outside of Europe, namely, the Americas. It is the Americas as the Other of Europe, Dussel argues, that gave birth to Europe’s modernity. If Paul Gilroy claims “the Black Atlantic” to be constitutive of modernity, Dussel and his Latin American colleagues view the Americas (including the Black Atlantic) as constitutive of modernity.

The problem of coloniality is not just about the lingering past and its spectral presence in the present. Rather, it is a problem of the ongoing framework of epistemology that informs the dominant modes of knowing/knowledge. Here, “dominant” is not confined to hegemonic modes of thinking that reproduce oppression. Coloniality is often pervasive in different forms of progressive and radical thoughts as well. As Jeff Robbins diagnoses in his recent book, the inability to read liberal modernity critically reveals the intrinsic limits of radical forms of thought (radical theology, in particular). This way, the radicality of radical theology “amounts to a radicalization, but still a continuation of Enlightenment norms.”<sup>8</sup> To this, I would add, radical theology’s genealogical continuity with liberal modernity is not just a limit, but a problem, for modernity is inseparably linked with coloniality. The notion of modernity/coloniality advanced by Anibal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo demonstrates how western liberal modernity could not have been installed without coloniality.

Edward Said’s groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) opened the door to the critical study of the orientalist construction of the non-West operating through the archive of knowledge production in imperial metropolises. Said and the field of postcolonial studies who followed his footsteps made invaluable contributions by analyzing the mechanism of knowledge production constitutive of the hegemonic epistemic platform circulated and reinforced by Western modernity. However, Said and the mostly Anglophone post-Saidian scholarship reproduced the same mistake that many scholars who theorized the origin and constitution of modernity have made by leaving out the Spanish colonial encounter and the Americas out of the picture. Said locates the origin of European colonialism in the Orient (Asia) that is the 18<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialist expansion of Europe. Such view renders colonialism the consequence of modernity: colonialism is understood as *one of the many dark sides* of modernity. Against such view, the group of Hispanophone scholars headed by Anibal Quijano, Enrique Dussel, and Walter D. Mignolo argue that colonialism is the cause of modernity: modernity would have not been possible without colonialism or, better, coloniality. Modernity is inherently colonial.

Seen from the perspective of modernity/coloniality, I wonder if the “radically new future” that radical forms of postmodern and post-theistic endeavors are searching for might be a future perhaps all too familiar to us: one that does not break from the old Christian cosmopolitan world order (*Orbis Christianus*) that keeps reproducing itself each time with a different name: modernity, capitalism, liberal democracy, globalization, postmodernity, and so forth. This is why, Walter D. Mignolo reminds us, any critique of modernity devoid of post/decolonial analysis is a “critique of modernity from inside modernity.”<sup>9</sup>

Islands, Deleuze writes, “drift away from continent.” The drifting island is separated from the continent by an abyssal ocean. The repeating islands in the archipelago are separated by each other by the sea. The unfathomable depths of history and memory marking the blurred shorelines of the repeating islands are easily ignored by continental tourists who “love” the islands, “meaning that someday they plan to return for a visit but could never live there.”<sup>10</sup> Derek Walcott’s cynic portrayal of West’s commodification of the archipelago is an important charge against us, philosophical theologians, especially those of us who exploit the figure of the subaltern, the colonized subject, the oppressed, or the poor, without the commitment to decolonize thought. Advancing new forms of theological thought that could serve as a corrective to modern theology and the violence inflicted on its other without tackling coloniality might amount to a form of a theological tourism, a love for the island as the destination for a short vacation, “conducted to the music of Happy Hour and the rictus of a smile.” Walcott adds, “What is the earthly paradise for our visitors? Two weeks without rain and a mahogany tan, and at sunset, local troubadours in straw hats and flor shirts beating ‘Yellow Bird’ and ‘Banana Boat Song’ to death.”<sup>11</sup>

The repeating islands become a mere repetition of sameness. Out of necessity, they sell themselves, the “high-pitched representation of the same images of service that cannot distinguish one island from the other.”<sup>12</sup> But the thresholds that draw the thin contours of the islands trouble boundaries: the boundary between beginning and end, between limits and possibilities. Thresholds open room for abyssal thinking, the radical indeterminacy lurking in the space of the “in-between.” The abyss nests both finitude and possibilities. Neither the geography of the island nor the identity of its people can be determined by the cartographic confines that separate the island from the sea, for, as Walcott writes, “There is a territory wider than this—wider than the limits made by the map of an island—which is the illimitable sea and what it remembers.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Creolizing Islands**

Like Walcott, the entire oeuvre of Edouard Glissant’s writings are marked by the colonial abyss engulfing the colonial subject. The figure of the abyss merges with the historical reality of colonialism, particularly the historical memory of the traumatic middle passage: “Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it; straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violent belly of the ocean depths they went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this continuous/discontinuous thing; the panic of the new land, the haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these metamorphoses.”<sup>14</sup>

The impasse of the Caribbean writer is the burden of coming to terms with a past characterized by trauma and oblivion as well as the equally ruptured present.

The haunting memory seems unfathomable and unending, like the bottomless depth of the ocean, yet new history is to be born at the very point where its thin line of demarcation meets the land, the rugged soil of history, just as the end of the sea marks the beginning of land. In this sense, the island marks a beginning, a re-beginning from the ruins. This is not a glamorous beginning, but “lowly, paradoxical, and unspectacular.”<sup>15</sup> Beginning on the island has none of the auras of the romantic and blithe experience espoused by continental accounts of subjectivity—including the Deleuzian ontology of becoming.

For both Glissant and Walcott, loss (singular and irreparable, therefore absolute) need not be conducive to resignation. Beginning requires reconfiguration or rather creolization of ontology. It means working with the elemental force, with the “shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs.”<sup>16</sup> Such is the fate of creolized beings and creolized/creolizing islands. Abyssal islands promise no shorelines. Both their insularity and infinite openness solicit an exilic consciousness.

Both Glissant and Walcott view possibilities of a new ontology at the site of a historical wound. The unbearable pain of “transportation destroys the idealist conception of being as permanent essence. However, this perdition opens up the possibility of relation instead of essence.”<sup>17</sup> Creolization is the political reinvention of displacement as the means of re-assembling and reconstructing the fragmented identity and to affirm the life that goes on after trauma: “Having no place, the seer finds exile... for exile did not arise yesterday: it began with the departure of the first caravel. It is not a state, but a passion.”<sup>18</sup> Creolization is about living exile passionately. It does not indicate the normalization of displacement, but an active cosmopolitical engagement and re-appropriation—a passionate exploration—of its unmaterialized possibilities.

Creolized ontology presupposes that the place of the other lies at the heart of the self. The notion of the coherent and autonomous self yields its place to the other, for there is an ineluctable otherness, the indelible trace of alterity prior to and inherent in the texture of the self. Such notion of otherness echoes tellingly the ethics of alterity articulated by the thinkers of the continent (Levinas, Derrida, Irigaray). But the other on the colonial island points at the ties of relation from which the self emerges—and through which the self survives the horror of colonial violence. The freeing power of creolized ontology lurks in the shared experience and knowledge that survives history: “knowledge of the Whole, greater for having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole.”<sup>1</sup> After trauma, ontology becomes a matter of partaking in the web of relation. In this sense, creolization differs from the limitless freedom

advocated by the postmodern modality of becoming which is oriented towards an ever-unfolding fold of self's endless becoming.

### **Sacred Islands (Disenchanting Islands)**

Thinking about the notion of God from the abyssal islands suggests the abyss as a method and figurative framework for reconsidering (post)theism. The abyss as the figure recurring in the Neoplatonic and medieval mystical tradition indicates indeterminacy. But the abyss does not indicate a static temporality. Rather, it is associated with movements: passion, rather than a resignation. The abyss refers to the work and prayer, the reordering and re-creating of the world, a (re)beginning; not from nothing or pure potentiality, but out of the shipwreck, fragments of haunting memory, shards of vocabulary, and the other who marks both the limit and possibilities of the self's abyssal becoming. Having lost her original name, the self, creolized, renames herself, renames God, finding new metaphors and assembling new vocabulary, which resembles "[the] process that the poet faces every morning of his working day, making his own tools like Crusoe, assembling nouns from necessity..."<sup>19</sup> Such process of creolized beginning as the making of poetry, Walcott adds, consist of "its remaking, the fragmented memory, the armature that frames the god, even the rite that surrenders it to a final pyre; the god assembled cane by cane, reed by weaving reed, line by plaited line..."<sup>20</sup>

Theopoets have for a long time tried to free theology from the bondage of metaphysics. As John Caputo tells us, theology is not a search for a certain *logos*, but a passion and prayer for "the event to come," for the event that solicits, promises, and calls us to the unknown future.<sup>21</sup> What sustains the faint hope for a future on the abyssal island is not that which is to come, to emerge, or to be revealed, but the self who resilient rises up in order to begin again: "the stripped and naked man, however abused, however disabused of old beliefs, instinctually, even desperately begins again as craftsman."<sup>22</sup> Redemption does not happen radically.

Can writing redeem the past? Does poetics reconstitute the self? What is loss to the future? Writing starts with absence and silence, in absolute solitude, as an absolute singularity. Words fail, so do names. It is not history that we are talking about but destruction; not memory, but lamentation; a self, dumbfounded in the stupor and absurdity of the unjust and unspeakable. Contesting Heidegger's notion of world, Derrida writes (I'm grateful to Clayton Crockett for sharing this passage with me):

The worlds we live in are different to the point of the monstrosity of the unrecognizable... the absolutely unshareable... the abyssal unshareable—I mean separated, like one island from another by an abyss beyond which no shore is

even promised which would allow anything, however little, to happen, anything worthy of the word 'happen' – the abyssal un-shareable, then, of the abyss between the islands of the archipelago and the vertiginous untranslatable, to the point that the very solitude we are saying so much about is not even the solitude of several people in the same world,...but the solitude of worlds, the undeniable fact that there is no world, not even one and the same world, no world that is one.

What kind of world and what kind of self does poetics of creolization gather between the abysses that do not promise shores? Perhaps there is no world that is shareable, but the world that must be created, each time anew: the solitude of creating the world without gods; the solitude of creating gods without the world. The fate of poetry, Walcott writes, is "to fall in love with the world, in spite of History."<sup>23</sup> The fate of theopoetics is to fall in love with the world in spite of (the absence of) God; to fall in love with God in spite of (the absence of) the world. Beginning on the abyssal island is a work of love, "stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole."<sup>24</sup>

Sacred islands are disenchanting islands. Creolizing the self means disenchanting from the colonial "order of discourse" which, from 1492 and on, has constructed itself as the secular-rational subject over against the "enchanted" colonial other. The long history of the Caribbean intellectual tradition is, Sylvia Wynter adds, in a way a revolt against the secularizing project of the West: The colonial (politico-theological) order in which the theological notion of original sin was transferred to racial/colonial other in the form of an ontological lack.<sup>25</sup> Thus, coloniality is a theological problem: a mechanism of Manichean theodicy in which whiteness symbolizes the good while blackness embodies evil. Like the Schmittian sovereign that haunts "secular" political imaginaries, coloniality (as well as its primary operating platform, anti-blackness) is constitutive of Western metaphysics---"an order of discourse which it is our task to *disenchant*."<sup>26</sup>

The open horizon of the unknown future beckons upon the repeating islands, revealing the scars holding the ill-fitting fragments together. The possibility of a radical, singular future is murmured in the solitude of the self drifting on the abyssal ocean between openness and insularity; an abyss that does not promise shorelines but promises new beginnings, in the generosity of Relation that does not exhaust; in which God is another name for the sigh of optimism, of the fragile hope that remains in the aftermath of survival.

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<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 10

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 39; Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand Plateaus*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Desert Islands*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>9</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Walcott, "The Antilles," in *What the Twilight Says*, 77.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 81

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>14</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Dash, "Preface," in Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, xii.

<sup>16</sup> Walcott, "Crusoe's Journal," in *What the Twilight Says*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Celia Britton, *Edouard Glissant*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> Walcott, *Twilight*, 70.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>21</sup> John Caputo, *The Weakness of God; The Insistence of God*.

<sup>22</sup> Walcott, *Culture or Mimicry*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> Walcott, *Twilight*, 79.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>25</sup> Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man," 637-648.

<sup>26</sup> Wynter, "Disenchanted Discourse," 237.