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Glissant and the Politics of Coordination

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This is an ironic moment for Edouard Glissant's growing community of readers. So many are discovering Glissant's work for the first time, myself included, in part because a fervent commitment to a politics of recognition now dominates in many corners of the humanities. This is ironic largely because while the choice to engage with Glissant might be motivated by an all too generalized logic of recognition, to read Glissant is to learn about how the basic premises underpinning this logic are deeply misguided. The politics of recognition, as a term of art, after all, is built on the conceptual planks made available by the standardizing impulses of the nation-state form and capitalism combined.[1] Glissant, on the other hand, is nothing if not a theorist calling fervently for a path forward that does not depend on the complicities found in the conceptual imperialism inherent to the bureaucratic standardizing practices that bolster both the nation-state and contemporary capitalism. Glissant calls instead for an approach that offers the philosophical building blocks for a politics of coordination, which is described in Patchell Markell's book, *Bound by Recognition* (2003) as a politics of acknowledgement. This politics entails forgingan alternative approach to the self and other, to identity and place, and to social orders in general than what the politics of recognition espouses.[2]

Before outlining Glissant's path towards a politics of coordination, it is worth addressing what precisely is the politics of recognition that his perspective encourages readers to put aside. When activists and critics of dominant bureaucratic systems argue for political recognition, these are moments in which they are attempting to create a response to injustice, mired in a particular strand of classical liberalism, in which injustice is primarily characterized as a denial of someone's legitimate and authentic identity. Markell explains that "the ideal of recognition […] anchors sovereignty in *knowledge*; that is, in the prospect of arriving at a clear understanding of who you are and of the nature of the larger groups and communities to which you belong, and of securing the respectful recognition of these same facts by others. The idea is that mutual recognition of this sort would eliminate the

obstacles of misunderstanding, ignorance, and prejudice that alienate us from each other and ourselves, making it possible for us to act in accordance with who we really are, and to do so with the support rather than the resistance of our fellows."[3] Recognition, thus, requires a belief in a socially produced and yet also authentic self, an identity that is simultaneously socially constructed and part of one's fundamental essence, and the path towards justice lies in honoring each person's identity. There is a corollary: authentic identities, should they be recognized as legitimate, will presumably allow people to be treated as all equal, and thus granted equivalent opportunities to be valued as meritorious by state bureaucracies and in capitalist market-based exchanges. No one should be kept from being accepted into a public institution, hired, promoted, cited, or married based on their identity. This exclusion is putatively the source of the majority of injustices in daily life that must be urgently remedied. There are good reasons why a politics of recognition has been so persuasive. We all move across social spaces that have been built upon centuries of institutionalized judgements emerging from and cementing exclusions based on static identity categories. At first glance, insisting on recognition as a recourse for justice can appear to be a pressing and viable strategy.

Yet, reading Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* or *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*, one can see the ways in which Glissant quickly and determinedly unravels the grounds upon which a politics of recognition is built. Recognition, after all, depends on a stable identity. And not just any stable identity – no one is (yet) arguing for widespread recognition of the rights of Pisces, or of sports fans, or of people whose excessive love of purple has become one of their defining features. Recognition depends on those aggrieved accepting the classificatory categories of the state or of capitalism, agreeing to accept that these categories are stable enough and generalizable enough to cross many contexts.[4] And acting to remove stigma of many kinds from these hegemonically stabilized categories is seen as righting injustice. Glissant steadily offers an alternative.

For Glissant, no one is that consistent, no one is legible in quite the ways in which recognition requires. Cultural identities—and here I turn to cultural identities because Glissant discusses culture rather than identity, but in a fashion that I hold can be gently laid on the shoulders of the people whose actions comprise the cultures he describes—cultural identities are a set of agreed-upon strategies for trying to describe a way of being in the world that reference a complex heterogeneity. These identities are often built out of relationships to languages, and it is precisely the stability of this relationship that Glissant calls into question. He does this by beginning with the small observation that quickly becomes a much larger claim. His small observation: how very contextually specific one's metalingual consciousness of speaking a language can be: "The language that I most enjoy speaking is Italian, because when I speak Italian I am not worried about making mistakes. I don't at all

mind making mistakes in Italian; there is a pleasure in speaking Italian, and making or not making mistakes doesn't matter at all to me. But when I speak English I'm always thinking: oh no! perhaps I have made a mistake there; and suddenly I am stuck. That is the problem of Relation (perhaps together with the weight of my prejudices), which has nothing to do with the fact of speaking or not speaking, knowing or not knowing, being obliged or not obliged to speak a language, but which is the current situation of the world, the current situation of cultural relations and relations of sensibility, of aesthetics (and of languages) in the world today."[5] Here Glissant opens with a familiar observation—some languages one might speak without worrying about an invisible taskmaster noting any mistake, other languages one speaks cautiously and anxiously, all too aware of a potential mishap lurking in one's next utterance. Yet he immediately cautions the reader that it is not the act of speaking a particular language that is at issue. It is instead "the problem of Relation" --the complex web that is always already present and yet in the act of performance instantiated only in partial ways—that presupposes a mesh of complex historical trajectories and calls forth a world.[6] With this move, Glissant unsettles the stability not just of one's relationships with languages, but any definitiveness to identity. It is always relational, an assertion in a given moment of a patchwork of communicative repertoires, pedagogical infrastructures, and past political and economic decisions cemented into totalizing systems. Thus, cultural identity may be an assertion in the moment, possible only because of all that has gone on before, but it is only ever a partial assertion, with a vast number of alternatives always in the background.

It is also an assertion that builds on others' assertions of identity in that specific moment. Utterances of cultural identity are not only contextual, they are also always co-textual, interwoven with other people's assertions of cultural identity in that very moment as well.[7] When one person chooses one cultural signal among the many available to them, the other chooses a response that is a co-textual engagement. Glissant tends to highlight this co-textual element in moments when the participants deliberately turn away from the richness of a potentially shared context, as they choose to craft a conversation based on a developing communicative repertoire shared only by two people encountering each other in passing on a beach, gesturing greetings without words.

> This is where I first saw a ghostly young man go by; his tireless wandering traced a frontier between the land and water as invisible as floodtide at night […]. All the languages of the world had come to die here in the quiet, tortured rejection of what was going on all around him in this country […]. I made an attempt to communicate with this absence. I respected his stubborn silence, but (frustrated by my inability to make myself "understood" or accepted) wanted nonetheless to establish some system of relation with this walker that was not based on words. […] It was really a minute, imperceptible signal, sort of

> seesawing his barely lifted hand, and it became (because I adopted it as well) our sign of complicity. It seemed to me that we were perfecting this sign language, adding shades of all the possible meanings that chanced along.[8]

Here one sees a moment in which a form of repeatable communication is emergent, relying only on what one brings with immediacy to the interaction, not relying on repertoires of utterances established by previous speakers—yet this also occurs in more fraught moments than simply a chance encounter on a beach. As Glissant points out in the opening chapter of *Poetics of Relation*, this same co-textual focus can occur on a slave ship that has traveled across the Atlantic abyss with enslaved people trying desperately in crisis to craft an effective Creole among a wide array of African languages.[9]

Glissant's take on both the contextual and co-textual aspects of cultural identities as communication presupposes that communicative expressions are always fundamentally compromises. Communication is always bringing the fundamental opacities of each individual into an inevitably failed but future-building dialogue with another, or many others—it is always the imaginative act of translation. These dialogues can begin quietly and in small ways between people with no shared communicative repertoires in common—the hand gestures between two people, one committed to social isolation, walking past each other on a beach. Or the desperate attempt of two chained and enslaved people to share water in the dark hold of a ship. They are efforts to capture a complex and intricately specific reality in terms that other people could comprehend. In the process of creating these compromises, classification starts to carve up the world. These ways of carving up the world presuppose that the classifications articulated are describing a more common reality, one that is not distinctively and irrevocably bound to time and place. And then, once people move past the moments of the abyss, once they have established signs that can be shared and repeated, re-purposed from long histories of previous compromises, then strategies are handed down to future generations as if they always already existed. These strategies, however, are happening alongside or within contexts that are built upon compromises that have been organized around exclusions, around asserting dominant and putatively stabilized assertions of control and exclusions. Thus the strategies that were initially playful and built out of a need for solidarities become available to be controlled by the plantation and the state. These institutionalized forms, in turn, transform these social relations from fluid and heterogeneous connections that shift from context to context into classifications that can exclude and exude cruel displays of power. But this undercuts what what existing as a social being is in practice. Because no action, no place for Glissant is truly generalizable, or should be standardized and then circulated as static across contexts.

Another way to put it in a more anthropologically inflected register might be this: every performance of identity is deeply reliant on context and

co-text. The Jewish woman I am at my local synagogue is significantly different from the Jewish woman I am when my partner and I quibble about how to store a thermometer properly after use.[10] Both are legibly Jewish and gendered performances for the right audience, yet they both rely on such a different range of social interactions that insisting on sameness and stability around my identity is to overlook the complex social labor that goes into coordinating an identity across many contexts. The recognizable, authentic, and stable self is a fiction that many Euro-Americans commit to daily,[11] but need not be the only basis, or the most desirable basis for insisting on justice. Indeed, Glissant shows how one can strive for justice without this first deluded step of relying on a self that is recognizable across all contexts.

Glissant begins by addressing how multiplicity can function as a potentiality that offers a different political promise. People in Creolized spaces are engaging with multiple logics that define the spaces they dwell in, as the residual layers of the colonial empire's spatial ordering shape how they understand moving through that landscape often as much as the recent national borders do. At any moment, those living on in Creolized spaces might see the land as part of their families' long history with the places, as the still structuring residues of plantations, as a site for tourists to revel, and as the remnants of a colonial empire, whose relationships to territory was so different from that of the modern nation-state. It is not just, as Sarah Green and her co-authors put it, that "[…] the value and significance of any particular place is at least partly determined by its connections to and separations from other places."[12] In any colonial or postcolonial context, dwellers and travelers are encountering a multiplicity of locating regimes, that is, a multiplicity of the logics that can "classify and evaluate spatial differences, combined with the power to ascribe or even enforce that logic in practice."[13] In a given context, the question people in these places face is which locating regime or spatial ordering will dominate: who would have the power to make one location, or a specific configuration of locations, determine how social interactions would unfold in a given moment? States, plantations, markets, embody power precisely because they are so very effective in asserting a single order that will seem to dominate across numerous contexts. And the authentically recognizable self fits all too easily into accommodating this single order. For many who are opposing nation-state representatives, multiplicity is the goal. Thus, resistance might involve maintaining alternative spatial orderings or simultaneous alternative identities for as long as possible. But that is precisely what the politics of recognition does not in fact do.

What Glissant proposes instead of the politics of recognition, in his evocative accounts of seeing a man on the beach who is a walking exemplar of the opacity of the Other, sounds to my ear quite similar to the politics of coordination or acknowledgement as Patchen Markell describes it. The politics of coordination, in Markell's words is "accepting that the existence of

others—as yet unspecified, indeterminate others—makes unpredictability and lack of mastery into unavoidable conditions of human agency. Such acknowledgment is a crucial part of justice, yet it is not something we owe or give directly to others. It cannot be. At most […] others are its indirect objects and beneficiaries, and not some particular others but any others at all, since part of the point of acknowledgment is to expose ourselves to surprise appearances and unexpected developments."[14] To do so involves rejecting what claims to justice that depend on standardization will overlook, that is, acknowledging that even at the heart of the state, or of capitalism, there is a tremendous amount of unpredictability and heterogeneity which challenge the day-to-day workings of market and bureaucratic machinery**.** Glissant is suggesting that living with grace and kindness alongside other people involves allowing everyone to sidestep identity, to be unstable beings who are not knowable through the standardizing tools that nations and markets insist upon. Thus, to walk in the path Glissant has carved is to aim for a form of justice that does not engage with a game of including and excluding stably classified people. It is instead to aim for a justice built around creating the conditions for people to be repeatedly and continually opaque for one another, to live alongside each other's opacity at the same time that no one is harmed or deprived of food, shelter, and the chances to create.

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[1] See Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[2] For a fuller explication of a theoretical approach based on presupposing porous social orders that underpins my reading of Glissant, see my "Porous Social Orders," *American Ethnologist* 46 (2019): 404-416.

[3] Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 22.

[4] See also Bonnie Urciuoli, *Neoliberalizing Diversity in Liberal Arts College Life* (London: Berghahn, 2021).

[5] Édouard Glissant, *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*. trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 29-30.

[6] See also Marilyn Strathern, *Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

[7] For a fuller discussion of the co-textual as opposed to contextual in discursive identity creation, see Michael Silverstein, "The Voice of Jacob: Entextualization, Contextualization, and Identity," *ELH* 81 (2014): 483-520.

[8] Edouard Glissant, Édouard, *The Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 122-123.

[9] Ibid., 5-9.

[10] I write this sentence during the High Holiday days in 2022, quarantining because both my partner and I have Covid for the first time, so these two ways of being a Jewish woman are top of mind.

[11] For one of many ethnographic counterexamples see Strathern, 1990 (cited above) or Kay Warren, "Each Mind is a World: Dilemmas of Feeling and Intention in a Kaqchikel Maya community," in *Other Intentions: Cultural Contexts and the Attribution of Inner States*, ed. Lawrence Rosen (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1995), 47-68.

[12] Sarah Green, Samuli Lähteenaho, Phaedra Douzina-Bakalaki, Carl Rommel, Joseph Viscomi, Laia Soto Bermant and Patricia Scalco, *An Anthropology of Crosslocations* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki Press, 2024), 10.

[13] Ibid., 20.

[14] Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, 157.