



# Ontological Magma: Between Difference and Relation

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# Ontological Magma

## Between Difference and Relation

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Édouard Glissant undertakes a radical rethinking of ontology. The relations of creolization have key political and cultural consequences: they destabilize the Eurocentric foundations of knowledge; they affirm hybridity; they dislocate the colonial systems of power. Yet they also have another, perhaps even more consequential ambition. As Glissant says in *Poetics of Relation*, creolization contains an “attempt to get at Being.”<sup>1</sup> Relation operates at the ontological level as a process of creation of a different constitution of being. Relation, which names the “new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere,”<sup>2</sup> the diffracted “*totalité-monde*,”<sup>3</sup> the event by which “[t]he elementary reconstitutes itself absolutely,”<sup>4</sup> brings forth an ontological autopoiesis and reframing of the world.

Glissant’s theoretical intervention has been linked to the so-called philosophies of difference of the second half of the twentieth century. Several scholars have explored the multiple aspects and implications of Relation. Peter Hallward has connected Glissant’s thinking to Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology of immanence and has thus described Relation as “a kind of self-asserting, self-constituting singular immediacy on the Deleuzian or Spinozist model.”<sup>5</sup> Alexander Leupin has interpreted Relation as a reintroduction of the most original, pre-metaphysical and pre-ontological, naming of the ontics of beings or the “space where things themselves (beings) speak.”<sup>6</sup> John E. Drabinski has decoded Relation as the abyss of “the middle passage” represented by the beginning of colonization and the traumas of forced displacement and slavery.<sup>7</sup> Clevis Headley has stressed the existential nature of Glissant’s ontology of difference.<sup>8</sup> Michael Wierdon has explored the central function of paradox in archipelagic thinking.<sup>9</sup>

My aim here is to add an inflection to these inquiries while moving in a somewhat opposite direction. The question that I want to explore is how Relation glimpses at something ontologically different from difference itself. The hypothesis, in other words, is that the assault on ontology of Relation

entails a dissociation from the logic of otherness. The figure of the magmatic, which appears in several occasions in Glissant's thinking, constitutes a possible expression of this disassociative shift or what we could call the non-differential moment of Relation. I propose that, beyond Glissant, the magmatic can help us theorize current manifestations of the ontology of the global world.

The purpose and meaning of difference was to de-totalize the ontology of the world. In the classic formulations by Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, or Deleuze, difference opened the constitution of being to its inherent alterity. Leaving aside the specific articulations of each thinker, the philosophies of difference attacked the foreclosure of Western metaphysics by reflecting on the constitutive otherness of ontology. The space of difference resulted from an internal operation of philosophical thinking. The breaks, the gaps, the undecidability and the impossibilities of ontology and difference were interstices of the very edifice of Western philosophy. Indeed, Derrida, in one of the Baton Rouge conversations with Glissant, acknowledges that he is interested in "les phénomènes d'autodéconstruction" of the philosophical tradition. For Derrida, difference destabilizes the European, colonial systems of knowledge and power from within; difference is therefore internal decolonization, as "il y ait dans le principe colonisateur aussi une négativité, un principe d'autodestruction ou d'auto-contestation."<sup>10</sup>

For Glissant, the edifice of Western philosophy was founded on the ancient "Mediterranean myths"<sup>11</sup> of filiation, which projected a univocity between Being and One. He claims that the philosophical deconstruction of difference that took place in the second half of the twentieth century resulted from a historical event—the postcolonial struggles in the Third World: "poor nations, by their very eruption, had made it possible for new ideas to be born: ideas of otherness, of difference, of minority rights, of the rights of peoples."<sup>12</sup> Glissant, however, questions the capacity of the frame of difference to understand the consequences of this eruption: "These ideas, however, seemed only to dust the surface of the swirling magma."<sup>13</sup> The postcolonial magma—marvelously represented by the geology of the Caribbean archipelagos that had arisen out of the sea—created the relations of "*chaos-monde*"<sup>14</sup> that transformed the appearance of the world. The world could no longer derive from the history of the filiation of Being, or of "Being-as-Being;"<sup>15</sup> the world would now be shaped by the "problematic (threatening) relation to the other."<sup>16</sup> Whereas the Western worldview had been founded on the self-referentiality of Being, this "self-important entity that would locate its beginning in itself,"<sup>17</sup> in the global poetics of Relation, by contrast, "each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other."<sup>18</sup>

But...wait a second! Was this Other not precisely the central category of the philosophies of difference, the philosophies that Glissant had just said that could not "dust the surface" of the magma of postcoloniality? Is the Other of postcolonial Relation at odds with the Other of Western, self-deconstructed

difference? Why does Glissant conceive Relation under the differential term of otherness if he has himself questioned the power of difference to explain the new postcolonial world?

Indeed, *Poetics of Relation* presents an ambivalent picture of the position and possibilities of difference. The meandering sections of Glissant's texts contain multiple positive references to otherness and alterity. And yet, suddenly, an expression of distrust erupts like the lava of a volcano. He exclaims: "But difference itself can still contrive to reduce things to the Transparent!"<sup>19</sup> Glissant's concern is that difference presupposes an unidirectionality between One and the Other that may reduce the singularity of relations. Relations are built on the opacity of experience, and difference can quickly make them transparent by turning them into a correlation between sameness and otherness.

This ambivalence is not the result of inconsistency in Glissant's thinking. Rather, the differential logic of ontology is itself necessarily ambivalent. Difference is by definition always different from itself. Thus, a twofold effect occurs. On the one hand, within the logic of difference the other can never be a transparent objectification, as difference precludes the othering of the other. On the other hand, however, as Glissant detects, this logic can also have the opposite, reductive effect. The effort to open ontology to alterity may cause the reification of otherness as the primary relation to sameness, thus turning others into reflections of identities. Glissant does not resolve the ambivalence because it is unsolvable. The fluctuation between difference and Relation brings forth an inherent ambiguity of ontology. But let us delve into this magmatic fluctuation. For one thing, we must figure out how to keep going after the eruption of this ontological volcano under our feet!

The essential dilemma lies in the location of difference vis-à-vis Relation. The two terms seem to focus their conceptual energy on two distinct spaces. Difference takes place as rupture of the interior of identitarian constructions. The logic of difference reveals the One as the falsifying projection or suppressive alignment of its internal others. Difference, in other words, dislocates the oneness of the One and shows its inherent multiplicity. By contrast, Relation negates the very possibility of the One: only relations are ontologically primary. Within the logic of relationality, the other is not an Other in relation to a Same; the other only relates to other others, which are in turn only inflections or moments of the relations themselves. In this case, ontology is not a projection that seals the break of difference and conceals, to use Levinas' terms, the infinity of the face of the other. Rather, the complete set of relations of the world are both interior and exterior, inside and outside, the ontological plane itself. Or, as Glissant puts it in *Philosophie de la Relation*, Relation is "*la quantité réalisée de toutes les différences du monde.*"<sup>20</sup>

The distinctive locations of these two logics generate a certain tension or even opposition. Seen through the lenses of relationality, difference runs

the risk of reducing others to a protrusion of the Same. Yet, seen through the lenses of difference, we may accuse relationality of not really eliminating the One but installing instead a set of relations as One. Indeed, how can difference appear once we have established that everything that is is always already in relation? If relations encompass the entirety of the world in the “*totalité-monde*,” then all differences will be part of the whole and therefore there will be no space for true otherness. When infinity is enclosed within the totality, infinity can no longer be infinite.

The truly intractable moment arrives when we try to name the space between these two deconstructive forms of ontology. The problem is that it is not possible to think this opposition without privileging one of the sides. If we say that difference and Relation are different from each other, then we will be positing a logic of otherness between the two; on the contrary, if we say that they are effects of their relation to one another, then we will be assuming the ontological primacy of relations. We can only name the disagreement between difference and Relation if we take sides with one of the contenders. Yet once we have taken the side of difference or the side of Relation, we have already missed the chance to name the space between the two.

We do not need to try to find a solution to this conundrum. The point is rather to understand that the opposition can only be conceived inadequately by falling prey to one of the two ontological logics. To put it in spatial terms, the only way to access this impenetrable space is by comprehending its inaccessibility. This should not be interpreted as a fall into the abyss of unknowability. In fact, this ontological space is perfectly thinkable, even if it propels us toward the constant rebalancing of the two modes of access, so to speak. The opposition between difference and Relation is a clear and distinct logical necessity of the same plane of ontology.

In this respect, Glissant’s enigmatic notion of magma offers us a useful figure to describe this ontological imbalance. In *Poetics of Relation*, the mixture of air, solid and liquid serves to define the emerging global reality as an “undecipherable magma” that a new “planetary consciousness”<sup>21</sup> must confront. This also corresponds to a setting of “Magma in profusion”<sup>22</sup> where cultures establish infinite relations. Finally, Glissant makes a more ambiguous use of the term to describe the possibility of mixing the transparent truths of Western philosophy and the opacity of each culture: he says that we may combine Plato or Hegel with local opacities but “without confusing them in some magma or reducing them to each other.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the semantic ambivalence of these various uses is characteristic of the activity of magma. Because of its unstable condition, magma can be the site of enunciation of both positive and negative statements. Even more generally, magma constitutes a productive epistemological framework to the paradoxical extent that it represents the vanishing of all possibility of stable knowledge.

A tentative historicization of this undertheorized figure can help us reduce some of these ambiguities. Ontology and history move at different levels and, while they can never be conflated, they are not completely separated either. Even if the matters of being cannot be reduced to historical circumstances, the urgencies of the present always determine the valences of the ontological register. Therefore, with all the necessary precautions and mediations, we can propose a tripartite periodization that correlates three historical conjunctures with the three notions, or motions, of difference, relation, and the magmatic space in between them.

First, the philosophies of difference emerged as an initially internal European reaction against the totalitarian tendencies of state power, capital, and war that defined the most destructive events of the first half of the century. The Levinasian opposition between totality and infinity perfectly revealed the urgency of the philosophies of otherness, namely, to undermine the conceptual pillars of the ontology of power that sustained the total state and the exterminating logic of total war exemplified in its extreme form by the Holocaust. Difference became the site of resistance and salvation against the destruction of otherness by the state powers founded on unity and identity. Difference, in short, was a weapon against fascism.

Second, Glissantian Relation theorized the event of postcoloniality. Relation added the problematic of the colony to the thinking of difference. Postcolonial critique showed that modern colonialism represents a more complex and even more destructive logic of power than totalitarianism. Thus, postcolonial relations aimed to devise a new world that neither reproduced the identitarian totalizations of Europe nor envisioned an Other simply founded on difference. The model of Relation aimed to avoid both the extensions of total power and the ruses of colonialism, including the temptation of retroactively projecting a pre-colonial or non-colonial other. The dynamics of Relation made possible a thinking of hybridity that could escape from the filial grounds of Western ontology in the postcolonial reorganization of the world.

My claim is that the magmatic rebalancing of difference and Relation can define some of the historical urgencies of the present. In the twenty-first century, the dominant spatial logic of power no longer operates according to the total order of the modern state or the legal rearrangement of postcolonial territories. Globalization, as became especially evident after 9/11, has materialized as a never-ending series of constantly disruptive events and unstable politics. A variety of forces and contradictory logics, which include the full financialization of the economy, the unfounded violence of terrorist groups, narco-traffickers and states like Russia, the climate breakdown, and all types of chronic racial, health and border crises, destabilize every part of political and social life. This process involves the withering of the previous protective functions of the state, the nation, and other communitarian forms. The global order entails local forms of permanent disorder, thus generating a

sort of anomic space that Carlo Galli has defined as a “global war” and a “contradiction without system.”<sup>24</sup>

The widespread volatility of globalization, however, does not signal the absence of politics. On the contrary, the instability of the spatial order entails a hyperpoliticization of actions, bodies, languages, and institutions that emerges from their need to be continuously engaged in a struggle for the construction of political space itself. Since no systemic order provides any stable ground, politics must strive, in a self-referential way, for the very existence of political life. This struggle for political survival in turn intensifies the instability that has caused the struggle to begin with, thus generating what I have proposed to call a paradoxical “survival regime of global war.”<sup>25</sup>

In the 1990s, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman referred to the figure of liquification to describe the dissolution of modern institutions and certitudes in postmodernity. The main feature of fluids, shared by liquids and gases, is that they cannot hold their shape. For Bauman, this metaphorical figure conveyed the ever-changing nature of peoples, relations, experiences and customs in a world that could no longer rely on the premises of the state or any stable form of communal values. Liquification, in short, characterized the passage from the modern to the postmodern.<sup>26</sup>

Yet in the present phase of globalization, the world order no longer results from the unidirectional crumbling of any solid world. The global disorder builds on multiple contiguities between destruction and construction, crisis and power, dilution and force, catastrophe and event, death and life. The figure of magma can represent this multidirectionality through its dynamics of liquification, solidification and gasification passing from one stage to another without an initial reference point or final causality. In global war, the accelerated fluctuation between conflict and political form establishes a magmatic *nomos*, a disordering order of immediate transformation and simultaneous change.<sup>27</sup>

The magmatic shifts between difference and Relation offer a figuration at the ontological level of this global world of permanent instability. The magma between difference and Relation, in other words, can constitute an ontological correlate to the dominant form of spatialization of politics in the present. This space is situated between the abysses of difference and the archipelagoes of Relation, in a state that continually destroys and creates altered forms of being. The magma of ontology condenses all the differential and relational logics that make possible the events of being in the global world.

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- <sup>1</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 89.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.
- <sup>5</sup> Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 67.
- <sup>6</sup> Alexander Leupin, *Édouard Glissant, Philosopher. Heraclitus and Hegel in the Whole-World*, trans. Andrew Brown (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 196.
- <sup>7</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Glissant and the Middle Passage. Philosophy, Beginning, Abyss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).
- <sup>8</sup> Clevis Headley, "Glissant's Existential Ontology of Difference," *The CLR James Journal* 18, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 59-101.
- <sup>9</sup> Michael Wiedorn, *Think Like an Archipelago. Paradox in the Work of Édouard Glissant* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018).
- <sup>10</sup> Édouard Glissant and Jacques Derrida, "Dialogue entre Édouard Glissant et Jacques Derrida," *EdouardGlissant.World*, accessed Nov 21, 2022, <https://edouardglissant.world/lieux/jacques-derrida-edouard-glissant/>.
- <sup>11</sup> Glissant, *Poetics*, 49.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.
- <sup>20</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la relation : Poésie en etendue* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).
- <sup>21</sup> Glissant, *Poetics*, 164.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.
- <sup>24</sup> Carlo Galli, *Political Spaces and Global War*, ed. Adam Sitze, trans. Elisabeth Fay (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 163.
- <sup>25</sup> Edgar Illas, *The Survival Regime. Global War and the Political* (New York: Routledge, 2020).



<sup>26</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> For a theorization of magma as form of the global order, see my *The Magma of War. An Ontology of the Global* (New York: Routledge, 2024).