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Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out into the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized.

Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity.

Thought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop it to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never not retain, nor ever, in standing still, boast about.
Errantry, Exile

Roots make the commonality of errantry\(^1\) and exile, for in both instances roots are lacking. We must begin with that.\(^2\)

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other.

These authors extol nomadism, which supposedly liberates Being, in contrast, perhaps, to a settled way of life, with its law based upon the intolerant root. Already Kant, at the beginning of *Critique of Pure Reason*, had seen similarities between skeptics and nomads, remarking also that, from time to time, “they break the social bond.” He seems thus to establish correlations between, on the one hand, a settled way of life, truth, and society and, on the other, nomadism, skepticism, and anarchy. This parallel with Kant suggests that the rhizome concept appears interesting for its anticonformism, but one cannot infer from this that it is subversive or that rhizomatic thought has the capacity to overturn the
order of the world—because, by so doing, one reverts to ideological claims presumably challenged by this thought.³

But is the nomad not overdetermined by the conditions of his existence? Rather than the enjoyment of freedom, is nomadism not a form of obedience to contingencies that are restrictive? Take, for example, circular nomadism: each time a portion of the territory is exhausted, the group moves around. Its function is to ensure the survival of the group by means of this circularity. This is the nomadism practiced by populations that move from one part of the forest to another, by the Arawak communities who navigated from island to island in the Caribbean, by hired laborers in their pilgrimage from farm to farm, by circus people in their peregrinations from village to village, all of whom are driven by some specific need to move, in which daring or aggression play no part. Circular nomadism is a not-intolerant form of an impossible settlement.

Contrast this with invading nomadism, that of the Huns, for example, or the Conquistadors, whose goal was to conquer lands by exterminating their occupants. Neither prudent nor circular nomadism, it spares no effect. It is an absolute forward projection: an arrowlike nomadism. But the descendants of the Huns, Vandals, or Visigoths, as indeed those of the Conquistadors, who established their clans, settled down bit by bit, melting into their conquests. Arrowlike nomadism is a devastating desire for settlement.*

Neither in arrowlike nomadism nor in circular nomadism are roots valid. Before it is won through conquest, what “holds” the invader is what lies ahead; moreover, one could almost say that being compelled to lead a settled way of life

* The idea that this devastation can turn history around in a positive manner (in relation to the decline of the Roman Empire, for example) and beget some fertile negative element does not concern us here. Generally speaking, what is meant is that arrowlike nomadism gives birth to new eras, whereas circular nomadism would be endogenous and without a future. This is a pure and simple legitimation of the act of conquest.
would constitute the real uprooting of a circular nomad. There is, furthermore, no pain of exile bearing down, nor is there the wanderlust of errantry growing keener. Relation to the earth is too immediate or too plundering to be linked with any preoccupation with identity—this claim to or consciousness of a lineage inscribed in a territory. Identity will be achieved when communities attempt to legitimize their right to possession of a territory through myth or the revealed word. Such an assertion can predate its actual accomplishment by quite some time. Thus, an often and long contested legitimacy will have multiple forms that later will delineate the afflicted or soothing dimensions of exile or errantry.

In Western antiquity a man in exile does not feel he is helpless or inferior, because he does not feel burdened with deprivation—of a nation that for him does not yet exist. It even seems, if one is to believe the biographies of numerous Greek thinkers including Plato and Aristotle, that some experience of voyaging and exile is considered necessary for a being’s complete fulfillment. Plato was the first to attempt to base legitimacy not on community within territory (as it was before and would be later) but on the City in the rationality of its laws. This at a time when his city, Athens, was already threatened by a “final” deregulation.*

In this period identification is with a culture (conceived of as civilization), not yet with a nation.** The pre-Christian West along with pre-Columbian America, Africa of the time of the great conquerors, and the Asian kingdoms all shared this mode of seeing and feeling. The relay of actions exerted

*Platonic Dialogues take over the function of the Myth. The latter establishes the legitimacy of the possession of a territory based usually on the uninterrupted rigors of filiation. The Dialogue establishes the City’s justice based on the revelation of a superior reason organizing rigorous successions of a political order.

**Through the entirely Western notion of civilization the experience of a society is summed up, in order to project it immediately into an evolution, most often an expansion as well. When one says civilization, the immediate implication is a will to civilize. This idea is linked to the passion to impose civilization on the Other.
by arrowlike nomadism and the settled way of life were first directed against generalization (the drive for an identifying universal as practiced by the Roman Empire). Thus, the particular resists a generalizing universal and soon begets specific and local senses of identity, in concentric circles (provinces then nations). The idea of civilization, bit by bit, helps hold together opposites, whose only former identity existed in their opposition to the Other.

During this period of invading nomads the passion for self-definition first appears in the guise of personal adventure. Along the route of their voyages conquerors established empires that collapsed at their death. Their capitals went where they went. "Rome is no longer in Rome, it is wherever I am." The root is not important. Movement is. The idea of errancy, still inhibited in the face of this mad reality, this too-functional nomadism, whose ends it could not know, does not yet make an appearance. Center and periphery are equivalent. Conquerors are the moving, transient root of their people.

The West, therefore, is where this movement becomes fixed and nations declare themselves in preparation for their repercussions in the world. This fixing, this declaration, this expansion, all require that the idea of the root gradually take on the intolerant sense that Deleuze and Guattari, no doubt, meant to challenge. The reason for our return to this episode in Western history is that it spread throughout the world. The model came in handy. Most of the nations that gained freedom from colonization have tended to form around an idea of power—the totalitarian drive of a single, unique root—rather than around a fundamental relationship with the Other. Culture's self-conception was dualistic, pitting citizen against barbarian. Nothing has ever more solidly opposed the thought of errancy than this period in human history when Western nations were established and then made their impact on the world.

At first this thought of errancy, bucking the current of nationalist expansion, was disguised "within" very personal-
ized adventures—just as the appearance of Western nations had been preceded by the ventures of empire builders. The errantry of a troubadour or that of Rimbaud is not yet a thorough, thick (opaque) experience of the world, but it is already an arrant, passionate desire to go against a root. The reality of exile during this period is felt as a (temporary) lack that primarily concerns, interestingly enough, language. Western nations were established on the basis of linguistic intransigence, and the exile readily admits that he suffers most from the impossibility of communicating in his language. The root is monolingual. For the troubadour and for Rimbaud errantry is a vocation only told via detour. The call of Relation is heard, but it is not yet a fully present experience.

However, and this is an immense paradox, the great founding books of communities, the Old Testament, the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Chansons de Geste, the Islandic Sagas, the Aeneid, or the African epics, were all books about exile and often about errantry. This epic literature is amazingly prophetic. It tells of the community, but, through relating the community’s apparent failure or in any case its being surpassed, it tells of errantry as a temptation (the desire to go against the root) and, frequently, actually experienced. Within the collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim. When the very idea of territory becomes relative, nuances appear in the legitimacy of territorial possession. These are books about the birth of collective consciousness, but they also introduce the unrest and suspense that allow the individual to discover himself there, whenever he himself becomes the issue. The Greek victory in the Iliad depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his Odyssey and is recognized only by his dog; the Old Testament David bears the stain of adultery and murder; the Chanson de Roland is the chronicle of a defeat; the characters in the Sagas are branded by an unstemmable fate, and so forth. These books are the begin-
ning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they will be put). These are books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history.

Some of these books are devoted entirely to the supreme errantry, as in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The very book whose function is to consecrate an intransigent community is already a compromise, qualifying its triumph with revelatory wanderings.*

In both *L'Intention poétique (Poetic Intention)* and *Le Discours antillais (Caribbean Discourse)*—of which the present work is a reconstituted echo or a spiral retelling—I approached this dimension of epic literature. I began wondering if we did not still need such founding works today, ones that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting,¹ asserting, for example, political strength but, simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community’s reasons for existence on a modern form of the sacred, which would be, all in all, a Poetics of Relation.**

This movement, therefore (one among others, equally important, in other parts of the world), has led from a primordial nomadism to the settled way of life of Western nations then to Discovery and Conquest, which achieved a final, almost mystical perfection in the Voyage.

In the course of this journey identity, at least as far as the Western peoples who made up the great majority of voyagers, discoverers, and conquerors were concerned, consolidates

*Hegel, in book 3 of his *Aesthetics*, shows how the founding works of communities appear spontaneously at the moment in which a still naive collective consciousness reassures itself about its own legitimacy, or, not to mince words: about its right to possess a land. In this sense Epic thought is close to that of Myth.

**The necessary surpassing of mythic and epic thought took place in the political reason organizing the City. Epic expression is obscure and unfathomable, one of the conditions of naïveté. Political discourse is obvious. Surpassing can be contradiction.
itself implicitly at first ("my root is the strongest") and then is explicitly exported as a value ("a person's worth is determined by his root").* The conquered or visited peoples are thus forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror. A tragic variation of a search for identity. For more than two centuries whole populations have had to assert their identity in opposition to the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders. Whereas the Western nation is first of all an "opposite,"** for colonized peoples identity will be primarily "opposed to"—that is, a limitation from the beginning. Decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit.

The duality of self-perception (one is citizen or foreigner) has repercussions on one's idea of the Other (one is visitor or visited; one goes or stays; one conquers or is conquered). Thought of the Other cannot escape its own dualism until the time when differences become acknowledged. From that point on thought of the Other "comprehends" multiplicity, but mechanically and still taking the subtle hierarchies of a generalizing universal as its basis. Acknowledging differences does not compel one to be involved in the dialectics of their totality. One could get away with: "I can acknowledge your difference and continue to think it is harmful to you. I can think that my strength lies in the Voyage (I am making History) and that your difference is motionless and silent." Another step remains to be taken before one really enters the dialectic of totality. And, contrary to the mechanics of the Voyage, this dialectic turns out to be driven by the thought of errantry.

*That is, as we have said, essentially by his language.

**If the idea of civilization holds opposites together, a generalizing universal will be the principle of their action in the world, the principle that will allow them to realize conflicts of interest in a finalist conception of History. The first colonist, Christopher Columbus, did not voyage in the name of a country but of an idea.
Let us suppose that the quest for totality, starting from a nonuniversal context of histories of the West, has passed through the following stages:

— the thinking of territory and self (ontological, dual)
— the thinking of voyage and other (mechanical, multiple)
— the thinking of errantry and totality (relational, dialectical).

We will agree that this thinking of errantry, this errant thought, silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us.

In this context uprooting can work toward identity, and exile can be seen as beneficial, when these are experienced as a search for the Other (through circular nomadism) rather than as an expansion of territory (an arrowlike nomadism). Totality's imaginary allows the detours that lead away from anything totalitarian.

Errantry, therefore, does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deteriorialized) situation of origin; it is not a resolute act of rejection or an uncontrolled impulse of abandonment. Sometimes, by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself. Contemporary history provides several striking examples of this, among them Frantz Fanon, whose path led from Martinique to Algeria. That is very much the image of the rhizome, prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation. Because the thought of errantry is also the thought of what is relative, the thing relayed as well as the thing related. The thought of errantry is a poetics, which always infers that at some moment it is told. The tale of errantry is the tale of Relation.
In contrast to arrowlike nomadism (discovery or conquest), in contrast to the situation of exile, errantry gives-on-and-with the negation of every pole and every metropolis, whether connected or not to a conqueror’s voyaging act. We have repeatedly mentioned that the first thing exported by the conqueror was his language. Moreover, the great Western languages were supposedly vehicular languages, which often took the place of an actual metropolis. Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually. Going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, Relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent.

At this point we seem to be far removed from the sufferings and preoccupations of those who must bear the world’s injustice. Their errantry is, in effect, immobile. They have never experienced the melancholy and extroverted luxury of uprooting. They do not travel. But one of the constants of our world is that a knowledge of roots will be conveyed to them from within intuitions of Relation from now on. Traveling is no longer the locus of power but, rather, a pleasurable, if privileged, time. The ontological obsession with knowledge gives way here to the enjoyment of a relation; in its elementary and often caricatural form this is tourism. Those who stay behind thrill to this passion for the world shared by all. Or, indeed, they may suffer the torments of internal exile.

I would not describe the physical situation of those who suffer the oppression of an Other within their own country, such as the blacks in South Africa, as internal exile. Because the solution here is visible and the outcome determined; force alone can oppose this. Internal exile strikes individuals living where solutions concerning the relationship of a community to its surroundings are not, or at least not yet, consented to by this community as a whole. These solutions, precariously outlined as decisions, are still the prerogative of only a few, who, as a result, are marginalized. Internal exile is the voyage out of this enclosure. It is a motionless and exac-
erbated introduction to the thought of errantry. Most often it is diverted into partial, pleasurable compensations in which the individual is consumed. Internal exile tends toward material comfort, which cannot really distract from anguish.

Whereas exile may erode one’s sense of identity, the thought of errantry—the thought of that which relates—usually reinforces this sense of identity. It seems possible, at least to one observer, that the persecuted errantry, the wandering of the Jews, may have reinforced their sense of identity far more than their present settling in the land of Palestine. Being exiled Jews turned into a vocation of errantry, their point of reference an ideal land whose power may, in fact, have been undermined by concrete land (a territory), chosen and conquered. This, however, is mere conjecture. Because, while one can communicate through errantry’s imaginary vision, the experiences of exiles are incommunicable.

The thought of errantry is not apolitical nor is it inconsistent with the will to identity, which is, after all, nothing other than the search for a freedom within particular surroundings. If it is at variance with territorial intolerance, or the predatory effects of the unique root (which makes processes of identification so difficult today), this is because, in the poetics of Relation, one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.

Errant, he challenges and discards the universal—this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny. He plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access. Generalization is totalitarian: from the world it chooses one side of the reports, one set of ideas, which it sets apart from others and tries to impose by
exporting as a model. The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it.

The founding books have taught us that the sacred dimension consists always of going deeper into the mystery of the root, shaded with variations of errantry. In reality errant thinking is the postulation of an unyielding and unfading sacred. We remember that Plato, who understood the power of Myth, had hoped to banish the poets, those who force obscurity, far from the Republic. He distrusted the fathomless word. Are we not returning here, in the unforeseeable meanders of Relation, to this abyssal word? Nowhere is it stated that now, in this thought of errantry, humanity will not succeed in transmuting Myth’s opacities (which were formerly the occasion for setting roots) and the diffracted insights of political philosophy, thereby reconciling Homer and Plato, Hegel and the African griot.

But we need to figure out whether or not there are other succulencies of Relation in other parts of the world (and already at work in an underground manner) that will suddenly open up other avenues and soon help to correct whatever simplifying, ethnocentric exclusions may have arisen from such a perspective.

*  

As far as literature is concerned (without my having to establish a pantheon, an isolation these works would refuse), there are two contemporary bodies of work, it seems to me, in which errantry and Relation are at play.

Faulkner’s work, somehow theological. This writing is about digging up roots in the South—an obvious place to do so in the United States. But the root begins to act like a rhizome; there is no basis for certainty; the relation is tragic. Because of this dispute over source, the sacred—but henceforth unspeakable—enigma of the root’s location, Faulkner’s
world represents one of the thrilling moments in the modern poetics of Relation. At one time I regretted that such a world had not gone farther, spreading its vision into the Caribbean and Latin America. But, perhaps, this was a reaction of unconscious frustration on the part of one who felt excluded.

And Saint-John Perse's erratic work, in search of that which moves, of that which goes—in the absolute sense. A work leading to totality—to the out-and-out exaltation of a universal that becomes exhausted from being said too much.
This flood of convergences, publishing itself in the guise of the commonplace. No longer is the latter an accepted generality, suitable and dull—no longer is it deceptively obvious, exploiting common sense—it is, rather, all that is relentlessly and endlessly reiterated by these encounters. On every side the idea is being relayed. When you awaken an observation, a certainty, a hope, they are already struggling somewhere, elsewhere, in another form.

Repetition, moreover, is an acknowledged form of consciousness both here and elsewhere. Relentlessly resuming something you have already said. Consenting to an infinitesimal momentum, an addition perhaps unnoticed that stubbornly persists in your knowledge.

The difficulty: to keep this growing pile of common places from ending up as dispirited grumbling—may art provide! The probability: that you come to the bottom of all confluences to mark more strongly your inspirations.
Distancing, Determining

Contemporary violence is the response societies make to the immediacy of contacts and is exacerbated by the brutality of the flash agents of Communication.\(^1\) It is not all that easy to forego the comfortable expanses of time formerly allowing changes to occur imperceptibly. In cities this speed becomes concentrated, and the response explodes. These same mechanisms are at work both in cultures of intervention and in emerging cultures: New York or Lagos.* In the shantytowns and ghettos of even the smallest cities the same gears engage: the violence of poverty and mud but also an unconscious and desperate rage at not “grasping” \([\text{com-prendre}]\) the chaos of the world. Those who dominate benefit from the chaos; those who are oppressed are exasperated by it.

This speeding up of relationships has repercussions on how the full-sense of identity is understood. The latter is no longer linked, except in an occasionally anachronistic or more often lethal manner, to the sacred mystery of the root. It depends on how a society participates in global relation, registers its speed, and controls its conveyance or doesn’t. Identity is no longer just permanence; it is a capacity for variation, yes, a variable—either under control or wildly fluctuating.

The old idea of identity as root, whenever it proves hard to

*The cultures that I call “emerging” are those that do not have at their disposal the institutionalized—nor, for that matter, improvised—means of speaking up in the planetary flow of Communication.
define or impossible to maintain, leads inexorably to the
refuges of generalization provided by the universal as value.
This is how the elite populations in southern countries have
usually reacted when choosing to renounce their own
difficult definition. A generalizing universal reassures them.

Identity as a system of relation, as an aptitude for “giving-
on-and-with” [donner-avec], is, in contrast, a form of violence
that challenges the generalizing universal and necessitates
even more stringent demands for specificity. But it is hard to
keep in balance.* Why is there this paradox in Relation? Why
the necessity to approach the specificities of communities as
closely as possible? To cut down on the danger of being
bogged down, diluted, or “arrested” in undifferentiated con-
gglomerations.

But, in any case, the speed with which geocultural entities,
aggregates formed through encounters and kinships, change
in the world is relative. For example, there is a real situational
community among the creolizing cultures of the Caribbean
and those of the Indian Ocean (in Réunion or Seychelles).
However, there is nothing to say that accelerated evolution
will not soon entail equally powerful and decisive encounters
between the Caribbean region and Brazil, or among the
smaller Antillean islands (both French- and English-speaking),
that will lead to the formation of new zones of relational
community. It would not be possible to base ontological
thinking on the existence of entities such as these, whose very
nature is to vary tremendously within Relation. This variation
is, on the contrary, evidence that ontological thought no
longer “functions,” no longer provides a founding certainty
that is stock-still, once and for all, in a restrictive territory.

In such an evolution we are justified in maintaining the
following principle: “Relation exists, especially as the particu-
lars that are its interdependent constituent have first freed
themselves from any approximation of dependency.”

*There is a growing tendency in Western aesthetic theories, from
ethnopoetics to geopoetics to cosmopoetics, to make some claim of
going beyond notions or dimensions of identity.
Gradually, premonitions of the interdependence at work in the world today have replaced the ideologies of national independence that drove the struggles for decolonization. But the absolute presupposition of this interdependence is that instances of independence will be defined as closely as possible and actually won or sustained. Because it is only beneficial to all (it only stops being a pretext or ruse) at the point at which it governs the distancings that are determinant.

One of the most dramatic consequences of interdependence concerns the hazards of emigration. When identity is determined by a root, the emigrant is condemned (especially in the second generation) to being split and flattened. Usually an outcast in the place he has newly set anchor, he is forced into impossible attempts to reconcile his former and his present belonging.

Despite their French citizenship, most of the Antilleans who live in France, participating in the widespread movement of emigration into this country (North Africans, Portuguese, Senegalese, etc.), have not been spared this condition. It is through a rather impressive turnabout in history, in Martinique, that its leaders are now speaking up to suggest that it would not, after all, be such a bad thing to participate in a dignified manner in this citizenship.

Summarizing what we know concerning the varieties of identity, we arrive at the following:

Root identity
— is founded in the distant past in a vision, a myth of the creation of the world;
— is sanctified by the hidden violence of a filiation that strictly follows from this founding episode;
— is ratified by a claim to legitimacy that allows a community to proclaim its entitlement to the possession of a land, which thus becomes a territory;
— is preserved by being projected onto other territories,
making their conquest legitimate—and through the project of a discursive knowledge.

Root identity therefore rooted the thought of self and of territory and set in motion the thought of the other and of voyage.

Relation identity
— is linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures;
— is produced in the chaotic network of Relation and not in the hidden violence of filiation;
— does not devise any legitimacy as its guarantee of entitlement, but circulates, newly extended;
— does not think of a land as a territory from which to project toward other territories but as a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps.

Relation identity exults the thought of errantry and of totality.

The shock of relating, hence, has repercussions on several levels. When secular cultures come into contact through their intolerances, the ensuing violence triggers mutual exclusions that are of a sacred nature and for which any future reconciliation is hard to foresee. When a culture that is expressly composite, such as the culture of Martinique, is touched by another (French) that “entered into” its composition and continues to determine it, not radically but through the erosion of assimilation, the violence of reaction is intermittent and unsure of itself. For the Martinican it has no solid rootstock in any sacred territory or filiation. This, indeed, is a case in which specificity is a strict requirement and must be defined as closely as possible. For this composite culture is fragile in the extreme, wearing down through contact with a masked colonization.

Consequently, wouldn’t it be best just to go along with it? Wouldn’t it be a viable solution to embellish the alienation,
to endure while comfortably receiving state assistance, with all the obvious guarantees implied in such a decision? This is what the technocratic elite, created for the management of decoy positions, have to talk themselves into before they convince the people of Martinique. Their task is all the less difficult since they use it to give themselves airs of conciliation, of cooperative humanism, of a realism anxious to make concrete improvements in circumstances. Not counting the pleasures of permissive consumption. Not counting the actual advantages of a special position, in which public funds (from France or Europe) serve to satisfy a rather large number of people (to the benefit, however, of French or European companies that are more and more visible in the country or castes of békés converted from former planters into a tertiary sector and thus won over to the ideas of this elite) and serve to foster the hopes of an even greater number.*

And it is true that in a context of this sort one spares oneself both the sacred violence, which is boundless, and the violence of absolute destitution, which is spreading with such lightning speed over half the planet. What remains here is only the suppressed and intermittent violence of a community convulsively demonstrating its sense of disquiet. What sense of disquiet? The one that comes from having to consume the world without participating in it, without even the least idea of it, without being able to offer it anything other than a vague homily to a generalizing universal. Privileged disquiet.

Traumatic reaction is not, however, the only form of resistance in Martinique. In a nonatavistic society of this sort three rallying points have grown in strength: relationship with the natural surroundings, the Caribbean; defense of the

*This year (1990) Martinique, which is an underdeveloped country with 40 percent unemployment, consumed 1.3 tons of Iranian caviar (imported from France) and forty million francs’ worth of champagne; there are 173,000 cars registered for its 320,000 inhabitants. As the television newscaster, in a felicitous commentary on these figures, said, “We’ll do better next year!”
people’s language, Creole; protection of the land, by mobilizing everyone. Three modes of existence that challenge the establishment (three cultural reflexes that are not without ambiguity themselves), that do not link, however, the severe demand for specificity to the intolerance of a root but, rather, to an ecological vision of Relation.

Ecology, going above and beyond its concerns with what we call the environment, seems to us to represent mankind’s drive to extend to the planet Earth the former sacred thought of Territory. Thus, it has a double orientation: either it can be conceived of as a by-product of this sacred and in this case be experienced as mysticism, or else this extending thought will bear the germ of criticism of territorial thought (of its sacredness and exclusiveness), so that ecology will then act as politics.

The politics of ecology has implications for populations that are decimated or threatened with disappearance as a people. For, far from consenting to sacred intolerance, it is a driving force for the relational interdependence of all lands, of the whole Earth. It is this very interdependence that forms the basis for entitlement. Other factors become null and void.

Concerning the Antilles, for example, there is a lot of discussion concerning the legitimacy of land “possession.” According to the mysterious laws of rootedness (of filiation), the only “possessors” of the Archipelago would be the Caribs or their predecessors, who have been exterminated. The restrictive force of the sacred always tends to seek out the first occupants of a territory (those closest to an original “creation”). So, in the Caribbean would this be Caribs and Arawaks or other older and, consequently, more legitimate and “determining” populations? The massacre of the Indians, uprooting the sacred, has already invalidated this futile search. Once that had happened, Antillean soil could not become a territory but, rather, a rhizomed land. Indeed, Martinican soil does not belong as a rooted absolute either to the
descendants of deported Africans or to the békés or to the Hindus or to the mulattoes. But the consequences of European expansion (extermination of the Pre-Columbians, importation of new populations) is precisely what forms the basis for a new relationship with the land: not the absolute ontological possession regarded as sacred but the complicity of relation. Those who have endured the land's constraint, who are perhaps mistrustful of it, who have perhaps attempted to escape it to forget their slavery, have also begun to foster these new connections with it, in which the sacred intolerance of the root, with its sectarian exclusiveness, has no longer any share.

Ecological mysticism relies on this intolerance. A reactionary, that is to say infertile, way of thinking about the Earth, it would almost be akin to the “return to the land” championed by Pétain, whose only instinct was to reactivate the forces of tradition and abdication while at the same time appealing to a withdrawal reflex.

In Western countries these two ecological options (political and mystical) come together in action. Still, one cannot ignore the differences that drive them. Not acknowledging these differences in our countries predisposes us in favor of mimetic practices that are either quite simply imported because of the pressures of Western opinion or else the baggage of standardized fashion, such as jogging and hiking.

We end up every time with the following axiom—one not given in advance: Pronouncing one’s specificity is not enough if one is to escape the lethal, indistinct confusion of assimilations; this specificity still has to be put into action before consenting to any outcome.

But the axiom, though not a priori, is unbending when applied. A perilous equilibrium exists between self-knowledge and another’s practice. If we are to renounce intolerances, why hold out against outright consent? And, if we are to follow our freedom to its “logical consequences,” why not have the right to confirm it in a radical negation of the Other?

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These dilemmas have their own particular areas of application to govern. Such as the need for poor countries to exercise self-sufficiency that is economically and physically sustaining. Such as the definition of how forms of independence are experienced or hoped for. Such as the putting into practice of ethnotechology as an instrument of self-sufficiency. Never have obligations been so chancy in reality.

To oppose the disturbing affective standardization of peoples, whose affect has been diverted by the processes and products of international exchange, either consented to or imposed, it is necessary to renew the visions and aesthetics of relating to the earth.

But, since sensibilities have already been diverted widely by these processes of exchange, it will not be easy to get anyone to replace products bearing an intense relational charge, such as Coca-Cola, wheat bread, or dairy butter with yams, breadfruit or a revived production of madou, mabi or any other “local” products. All the more since products of this sort, whose excellence depends on their fragility, do not tend to keep well, which is one of the secrets of large-scale commerce. Standardization of taste is “managed” by the industrial powers.

There are plenty of native Martinicans who will confess that when they were children they used to hate breadfruit (a staple vegetable and, therefore, intimately associated with the idea of poverty and the reality of destitution). Then the reverse has become true with age, especially for those who have lived for a long time away from the island—they have acquired a lasting taste for it. Any survey taken would show the same to be true today for most of the children in Martinique. With a fierce “tchip!” of the lips, children reject even the thought of breadfruit and relish the idea of dried sausage. In countries in which imports reign, childhood is the first deportee.

I made note of someone who, claiming to criticize novelists from Martinique whose vision of reality is expressed in
the poetics of a language irrigated by Creole, spoke disdainfully of “dachinisme” (from the word dachine [dasheen], or Chinese cabbage, another local vegetable). Thus, the same negativity is used to punish any production that does not conform to international standardization or conform to the generalizing universal.

In rich nations, in which imports are balanced with more or less difficulty by exports and in which, consequently, foreign goods offered for consumption are exchanged more or less indirectly against local production, it is easier to maintain equilibrium between the levels. The international product has a less severe impact on sensibilities; “desire” for it is not so implacable.

In poor countries any appeal for self-sufficiency grounded solely in economics and good sense is doomed to failure. Good sense is of no consequence in the tangle of world Relation. Sensibilities have become so profoundly contaminated, in most cases, and the habit of material comfort is so well established, even in the midst of the greatest poverty, that political dictates or proclamations are inadequate remedies. Here, as elsewhere, one must figure out how much we have to consent to the planetary evolution toward standardization of consumer products (the present course in Martinique, with French products widely imported) and how much we should push for invention and a new sensibility in association with “national” products.

This is where the imagination and expression of an aesthetics of the earth—freed from quaint naïveté, to rhizome instead throughout our cultures’ understanding—become indispensable.

It is certainly true that we do not work the land, are no longer the country people we used to be, with our same old instinctive patience. Too many international parameters come into this relationship. A man involved in agriculture is inevitably a man involved in culture: he can no longer produce innocently.
Daily we hear about how occupations connected with the land are among the sorriest that exist. The farmer's traditional solitude has become exacerbated by the embarrassed thought that his work is anachronistic, in developed countries, or pathetic, in poor countries. In the former he struggles against productivity, taxes, markets, and surplus; in the latter against dust, the lack of tools, epidemics, and shortages. Both here and there the display of technological wealth overwhelms him. It would be obnoxious to indulge in idiotic praise of the peasantry when it is going downhill this way everywhere. Will it die, or will it be transformed into a reserve labor force for advanced techniques?

It is said—a commonplace—that the future of humanity is at stake, unless, before extinction, such techniques make possible the massive production of artificial foods that would take care of the richest. Picture an uncultivated land when the factories producing synthetics have provided enough for the stomachs of the chosen few. It would only be used for leisure, for a kind of Voyage in which seeking and knowledge would have no place at all. It would become scenery. That is what would happen to our countries, since it is entirely possible that the aforesaid factories would never be located in them (unless they are really responsible for producing too much waste). We would inhabit Museums of Natural Non-History. Reactivating an aesthetics of the earth will perhaps help differ this nightmare, air-conditioned or not.

This trend toward international standardization of consumption will not be reversed unless we make drastic changes in the diverse sensibilities of communities by putting forward the prospect—or at least the possibility—of this revived aesthetic connection with the earth.

How can such a poetics be resuscitated, when its mind-set drifts between the obsolete mysticism that we noted and the mockery of production that is emerging everywhere? An aesthetics of the earth seems, as always, anachronistic or naive: reactionary or sterile.
But we must get beyond this seemingly impossible task. If we don’t, all the prestige (and denaturation) felt in internationally standardized consumption will triumph permanently over the pleasure of consuming one’s own product. The problem is that these denaturations create imbalance and dry things up. Understood in its full-sense, passion for the land where one lives is a start, an action we must endlessly risk.


Yes. But an aesthetics of disruption and intrusion. Finding the fever of passion for the ideas of “environment” (which I call surroundings) and “ecology,” both apparently such futile notions in these landscapes of desolation. Imagining the idea of love of the earth—so ridiculously inadequate or else frequently the basis for such sectarian intolerance—with all the strength of charcoal fires or sweet syrup.

Aesthetics of rupture and connection.

Because that is the crux of it, and almost everything is said in pointing out that under no circumstances could it ever be a question of transforming land into territory again. Territory is the basis for conquest. Territory requires that filiation be planted and legitimated. Territory is defined by its limits, and they must be expanded. A land henceforth has no limits. That is the reason it is worth defending against every form of alienation.

Aesthetics of a variable continuum, of an invariant discontinuum.
Self-sufficiency can be worked out. With the sole condition that it not end up in the exclusivity of territory. A necessary condition but not enough to incite the radicalities capable of saving us from ambiguity, rallied together within a landscape—reforming our taste, without our having to force ourselves into it.

Thus, within the pitiless panorama of the worldwide commercial market, we debate our problems. No matter where you are or what government brings you together into a community, the forces of this market are going to find you. If there is profit to be made, they will deal with you. These are not vague forces that you might accommodate out of politeness; these are hidden forces of inexorable logic that must be answered with the total logic of your behavior. For example, one could not accept state assistance and at the same time pretend to oppose it. You must choose your bearing. And, to get back to the question raised earlier, simply consenting would not be worth it, in any case. Contradiction would knot the community (which ceases to be one) with impossibilities, profoundly destabilizing it. The entire country would become a Plantation, believing it operates with freedom of decision but, in fact, being outer directed. The exchange of goods (in this case in Martinique: the exchange of imported public money against exported private profit) is the rule. Bustling commerce only confirms the fragmentation and opposition to change. Minds get used up in this superficial comfort, which has cost them an unconscious, enervating braining.

This is the dilemma to be resolved. We have learned that peremptory declarations, grounded in the old Manichaeanism of liberation, are of no use here, because they only contribute to reinforcing a stereotypical language with no hold in reality. These are all liabilities whose dialectics must first be either realized or bypassed.

Thinking, for example, that ethnotechnology would save us from excessive importation, protect the vivid physical quality of the country, find an equilibrium for our drive to con-
sume, and cement links among all the individuals concerned with producing and creating amounts to saying that we would return to a pretechnical, artisan level, elevated to the rank of a system, leaving it to others to take care of providing us with the spin-off from their dizzying experiments, making us admire from afar the achievements of their science, and renting us (but under what conditions) the fruits of their industry. Have something to exchange that isn’t just sand and coconut trees but, instead, the result of our creative activity. Integrate what we have, even if it is sea and sun, with the adventure of a culture that is ours to share and for which we take responsibility.

There is no value to practicing self-sufficiency, or consenting to interdependence, or mastering ethnotechnology, unless these processes constitute both distancings from and accord with (and in relation to) their referent: the multiform elsewhere always set forth as a monolithic necessity in any country that is dominated.

We struggle against our problems, without knowing that throughout the world they are widespread. There is no place that does not have its elsewhere. No place where this is not an essential dilemma. No place where it is not necessary to come as close as possible to figuring out this dialectic of interdependencies or this difficult necessity for ethnotecchniques.

The massive and diffracted confluence of cultures thus makes every distancing (from a suggested or imposed norm) be determinant but also makes every (self-)determination be a generative distancing.

Now let us try to summarize the things we don’t yet know, the things we have no current means of knowing, concerning all the singularities, all the trajectories, all the histories, all the forms of denaturation, and all the syntheses that are at work or that have resulted from our confluences. How have cultures—Chinese or Basque, Indian or Inuit, Polynesian or Alpine—made their way to us, and how have we reached them? What remains to us of all the vanished cultures, col-
lapsed or exterminated, and in what form? What is our experience, even now, of the pressure of dominant cultures? Through what fantastic accumulations of how many existences, both individual and collective? Let us try to calculate the result of all that. We will be incapable of doing so. Our experience of this confluence will forever be only one part of its totality.

No matter how many studies and references we accumulate (though it is our profession to carry out such things), we will never reach the end of such a volume; knowing this in advance makes it possible for us to dwell there. Not knowing this totality is not a weakness. Not wanting to know it certainly is. Consequently, we imagine it through a poetics: this imaginary realm provides the full-sense of all these always decisive differentiations. A lack of this poetics, its absence or its negation, would constitute a failing.*

Similarly, thought of the Other is sterile without the other of Thought.

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. But thought of the Other can dwell within me without making me alter course, without “prizing me open,” without changing me within myself. An ethical principle, it is enough that I not violate it.

The other of Thought is precisely this altering. Then I have to act. That is the moment I change my thought, without renouncing its contribution. I change, and I exchange.

*I see the extent to which this imaginary appears to me to have a certain form in space: I spoke of circularity (imitating, perhaps, those curvatures of space-time that Einstein invented) and of volume, the spherical nature of concepts, of various poetics and the realities of the *chaos-monde*, all of which reconstitutes (for me) the image of the mother planet, an Earth that would be primordial. But mothering is excluded from this symbolic system—at least, I believe that it is. As well as the idea (so dear to Aristotle and Ptolemy) of a perfection in circularity.
This is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics is not provided in advance.

If, thus, we allow that an aesthetics is an art of conceiving, imagining, and acting, the other of Thought is the aesthetics implemented by me and by you to join the dynamics to which we are to contribute. This is the part fallen to me in an aesthetics of chaos, the work I am to undertake, the road I am to travel. Thought of the Other is occasionally presupposed by dominant populations, but with an utterly sovereign power, or proposed until it hurts by those under them, who set themselves free. The other of Thought is always set in motion by its confluences as a whole, in which each is changed by and changes the other.

Common sense tells us that the world through which we move is so profoundly disturbed (most would call it crazy) and has such direct repercussions on each one of us that some are obliged to exist in absolute misery and others in a sort of generalized suspension. We line one day up after the other, day after day, as if the world did not exist, though daily it seeks us out with such violence. Yes, we act as if. For if we stopped to think about it really we would let everything go. A commonplace—one I have heard so often repeated.

To suspend the suspense we have recourse to this imaginary construct of totality, by means of which we transmute for ourselves this mad state of the world into a chaos that we are able to contemplate. An imaginary rekindled by the other of Thought. A distancing in relation to the predetermined or imposed norm but also perhaps in relation to the norms or beliefs that we have passively inherited. How can we put this distancing into practice if we have not fully mastered beforehand the things that are ours or part of us? Dependencies are infirmities of Relation, obstacles to the hard work of its entanglement. Independencies, for the same reasons, despite being uncomfortable or precarious, are always worth something.
The suffering of human cultures does not confine us permanently within a mute actuality, mere presence grievously closed. Sometimes this suffering authorizes an absence that constitutes release, soaring over: thought rising from the prisms of poverty, unfurling its own opaque violence, that gives-on-and-with every violence of contact between cultures. The most peaceful thought is, thus, in its turn a violence, when it imagines the risky processes of Relation yet nonetheless avoids the always comfortable trap of generalization. This antivviolence violence is no trivial thing; it is opening and creation. It adds a full-sense to the operative violence of those on the margins, the rebels, the deviants, all specialists in distancing.

The marginal and the deviant sense in advance the shock of cultures; they live its future excess. The rebel paves the way for such a shock, or at least its legibility, by refusing to be cramped by any tradition at all, even when the force of his rebellion comes from the defense of a tradition that is ridiculed or oppressed by another tradition that simply has more powerful means of action. The rebel defends his right to do his own surpassing; the lives of marginal and deviant persons take this right to extremes.

We have not yet begun to imagine or figure out the results of all the distancings that are determinant. They have emerged from everywhere, bearing every tradition and the surpassing of them all, in a confluence that does away with trajectories (itineraries), all the while realizing them in the end.

Though the cultural contacts of the moment are terrifyingly "immediate," another vast expanse of time looms before us, nonetheless: it is what will be necessary to counterbalance specific situations, to defuse oppressions, to assemble the poetics. This time to come seems as infinite as galactic spaces.

Meanwhile, contemporary violence is one of the logics—organic—of the turbulence of the chaos-monde. This violence
is what instinctively opposes any thought intending to make this chaos monolithic, grasping it to control it.

Distancings are necessary to Relation and depend on it: like the coexistence of sea olive and manchineel.
GENERALIZATION

Recognizing, imagining, Relation.

Yet another undertaking, thoroughly disguised, of universalizing generalization?

Escape, the problems at our heels?

No imagination helps avert destitution in reality, none can oppose oppressions or sustain those who “withstand” in body or spirit. But imagination changes mentalities, however slowly it may go about this.

No matter where one is, no matter how strong the force of errantry, one can hear the mounting desire to “give-on-and-with,” to discover order in chaos or at least to guess its unlikely motivation: to develop this theory that would escape generalizations.

Poetics? Precisely this double thrust, being a theory that tries to conclude, a presence that concludes (presumes) nothing. Never one without the other. That is how the instant and duration comfort us.

Every poetics is a palliative for eternity.