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Poetics of Relation

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The Open Boat

For the Africans who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas,* confronting the unknown with neither preparation nor challenge was no doubt petrifying.

The first dark shadow was cast by being wrenched from their everyday, familiar land, away from protecting gods and a tutelary community. But that is nothing yet. Exile can be borne, even when it comes as a bolt from the blue. The second dark of night fell as tortures and the deterioration of person, the result of so many incredible Gehennas. Imagine two hundred human beings crammed into a space barely capable of containing a third of them. Imagine vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped, the dying crouched. Imagine, if you can, the swirling red of mounting to the deck, the ramp they climbed, the black sun on the horizon, vertigo,

*The Slave Trade came through the cramped doorway of the slave ship, leaving a wake like that of crawling desert caravans. It might be drawn like this: ❗️非洲 countries to the East, the lands of America to the West. This creature is in the image of a fibril.

African languages became deterritorialized, thus contributing to creolization in the West. This is the most completely known confrontation between the powers of the written word and the impulses of orality. The only written thing on slave ships was the account book listing the exchange value of slaves. Within the ship’s space the cry of those deported was stifled, as it would be in the realm of the Plantations. This confrontation still reverberates to this day.
this dizzying sky plastered to the waves. Over the course of
more than two centuries, twenty, thirty million people
deported. Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than
apocalypse. But that is nothing yet.

What is terrifying partakes of the abyss, three times linked
to the unknown. First, the time you fell into the belly of the
boat. For, in your poetic vision, a boat has no belly; a boat
does not swallow up, does not devour; a boat is steered by
open skies. Yet, the belly of this boat dissolves you; precipi-
tates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat
is a womb, a womb abyss. It generates the clanon of your
protests; it also produces all the coming unanimity. Although
you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown
with others whom you have yet to know. This boat is your
womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant
with as many dead as living under sentence of death.

The next abyss was the depths of the sea. Whenever a fleet
of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten
the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with
balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the
course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Islands.
Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melan-
cholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or tradi-
tional races of yoles and gommiers—still brings to mind, com-
ing to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps,
with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains.
In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the
entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of
sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time
is marked by these balls and chains gone green.

But for these shores to take shape, even before they could be
contemplated, before they were yet visible, what sufferings
came from the unknown! Indeed, the most petrifying face of
the abyss lies far ahead of the slave ship’s bow, a pale mur-
mur; you do not know if it is a storm cloud, rain or drizzle, or

smoke from a comforting fire. The banks of the river have
vanished on both sides of the boat. What kind of river, then,
has no middle? Is nothing there but straight ahead? Is this
boat sailing into eternity toward the edges of a nonworld that
no ancestor will haunt?

Paralleling this mass of water, the third metamorphosis of the
abyss thus projects a reverse image of all that had been left
behind, not to be regained for generations except—more
and more threadbare—in the blue savannas of memory or
imagination.

The asceticism of crossing this way the land-sea that,
unknown to you, is the planet Earth, feeling a language van-
ish, the word of the gods vanish, and the sealed image of even
the most everyday object, of even the most familiar animal,
vanish. The evanescent taste of what you ate. The hounded
scent of ochre earth and savannas.

"Je te salue, vieil Océan!" You still preserve on your crests the
silent boat of our births, your chasms are our own uncon-
scious, furrowed with fugitive memories. Then you lay out
these new shores, where we hook our tar-streaked wounds,
our reddened mouths and stifled outrages.

Experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The
torrent of those who never escaped it; straight from the belly
of the slave ship into the violet belly of the ocean depths they
went. But their ordeal did not die; it quickened into this con-
tinuous/discontinuous thing; the panic of the new land, the
haunting of the former land, finally the alliance with the
imposed land, suffered and redeemed. The unconscious
memory of the abyss served as the alluvium for these meta-
morphoses. The populations that then formed, despite hav-
ing forgotten the chasm, despite being unable to imagine the
passion of those who foundered there, nonetheless wove this
sail (a veil). They did not use it to return to the Former Land
but rose up on this unexpected, dumbfounded land. They met the first inhabitants, who had also been deported by permanent havoc; or perhaps they only caught a whiff of the ravaged trail of these people. The land beyond turned into land-in-itself. And this undreamt of sail, finally now spread, is watered by the white wind of the abyss. Thus, the absolute unknown, projected by the abyss and bearing into eternity the womb abyss and the infinite abyss, in the end became knowledge.

Not just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole.

Just as the first uprooting was not marked by any defiance, in the same way the prescience and actual experience of Relation have nothing to do with vanity. Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it, to the extent that the oblivion of the abyss comes to them and that, consequently, their memory intensifies.

For though this experience made you, original victim floating toward the sea's abysses, an exception, it became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others. Peoples do not live on exception. Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge. This experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange.

For us, and without exception, and no matter how much distance we may keep, the abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown. Beyond its chasm we gamble on the unknown. We take sides in this game of the world. We hail a renewed Indies; we are for it. And for this Relation made of storms and profound moments of peace in which we may honor our boats.

This is why we stay with poetry. And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer—at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone.