

Flesh of the World: Caribbean Contributions

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The title for this lecture comes from *Return to the Native Land*, a poem by the renowned Martinican writer and politician Aimé Césaire. In this part of the long poem, Césaire pushes against European standards for greatness, and praises those who are not known for their inventions or conquests. Instead he praises them for a different kind of knowledge. They are, he says:

truly the eldest sons of the world
open to all the breaths of the world
meeting-place of all the winds of the world
undrained bed of all the waters of the world
spark of the sacred fire of the World
flesh of the flesh of the world, throbbing with the very movement of the
world!¹

Flesh of the flesh of the world. This is not a style of postcolonial thought I would have recognized before beginning to search for Caribbean writings about the body. Trained as critical thinkers, we have become suspicious of claims of cosmological communion—at least outside religious thought. Breaths, winds, waters, and sacred fire: what kind of political claims could they ground? And would an appeal to flesh

not amount to conceding to ideologies that construe colonized and black bodies as flesh?

‘Flesh’ has a BAD reputation. Talk of flesh evokes images of sin, decay, and death. If one takes a step closer to the Latin equivalent—to the word “carnal”—the associations are even more dubious: passions and uncontrolled appetites, the indecent—or just superficial. True, in Spanish there are no terms for flesh or meat; there is only *carne*. “*Carne*” is what we eat, what our bodies are made of, and the term we use to speak about the incarnation. And yet the link between *carne* and passions is also common in Spanish-speaking cultures. In his commentary on the work of the Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant, Michael Dash comments: “For a long time, the Caribbean has been *trapped* in a discourse that accentuates carnality.” Trapped! He assumes that such appeals to carnality imply the feminization of the Caribbean in relation to the metropolis.² There is plenty of literary evidence for that. But although the use of flesh in the Caribbean needs to be understood in relation to colonialism, it cannot be reduced to its stereotypes. Indeed thought of flesh may function to unsettle colonial categories. Today I want to share with what I consider some of the elements of Caribbean thought that I find most intriguing—where earth, poetry, and flesh intertwine, offering intuitions of broad incarnations.

Since this *is* the annual Hispanic lecture, I’m compelled to admit that most of my sources are not properly Hispanic. Is there anyone in the Caribbean properly anything? But I do not want to occlude the tensions here. Two of my main

interlocutors, Franz Fanon and Édouard Glissant, were born in Martinique and wrote in French. They have influenced renowned thinkers in the Spanish Caribbean—Antonio Benítez Rojo, Nancy Morejón, Mayra Santos Febres, for instance. These intellectual/poetic relationships do not follow nationality or language; yet they shape Caribbean traditions otherwise. As Santos Febres describes it, “In a world of fixed categories, of demarcated identities, of histories of the foundation of nation states, Caribbeans know ourselves as *weird*. We proclaim ourselves inheritors of cultures that do not belong to us, we negate identities we never knew, we feel citizens and natives of countries where we have never lived.”³ How may those weird paths to self-understanding that emerge from the Caribbean, from the Other America, trouble and inflect how we think about Latinaness?

In 1952, Franz Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks*, a book that is now considered a key text in the canon of postcolonial studies. I will be referring here to the chapter entitled “The Facticity of Blackness”—where he engages philosophical questions. This chapter offers an incisive critique of colonial racialization—attending to how discourses mark and wound bodies. This remarkable essay uses corporeal language to draw the reader into the disturbing experiences it describes, where Fanon describes the shattering his own body. The structure of the chapter is also uncommon; it is a kind of performance where the author tries on himself the alternatives modes of being by other thinkers—he adopts the attitudes they

recommend to the point where they no longer function. This strategy follows the patterns of Césaire's influential poem.

There are two parts to Fanon's analysis. The first part he adopts and shows the limits of the phenomenology of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which described the constitution of the body in relation to the world. (He performs the character Merleau-Ponty imagines.) Sure, he concurs, "I came to the world imbued with the will to find meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain the source of the world," as if quoting from a phenomenology textbook. But things change when he arrives in France from Martinique. Even though he had intellectually known about racism back home, in France he experiences it in his flesh. Phenomenology did not consider this aspect of the bodily constitution. The encounters were always mediated by white mythologies: stories about primitivism, savagery, and even racializing science stood in the way of his attempts to relate meaningfully with the world he now inhabited. The weight of centuries of white mythologies fall on one subject and, Fanon observed, his corporeal schema crumbles--DEFINE. Sometimes he is locked in his body.

Locked into the body. For decades feminist theology has challenged the mind/body dualisms with which we associate the idea of a self trapped in the body—for good reasons. But the image persists. Mayra Santos-Febres adopts the same language to say that still in the 21st century, it is as if we, women of the Caribbean, could not leave the narrow cell of our bodies.⁴ To be sure, the dynamics here is not one in which a self retreats into herself for some unmediated knowledge, but rather where her body makes her inescapably visible and exposed. Sadly, we have recent

reminders of just how deadly such exposures might be. US Society marks black bodies as suspicious and potentially criminal, others as most likely immigrant, and thus a different type of criminal. My point is that Physical appearance sets in motion scrutinizing machines, and those cannot but shape people concretely. It is experienced in the body, as Fanon argued. [It is the topic of Linda Martín Alcoff's *Visible Identities*, where she....] The problematic of the political inscription of bodies has been the main concern of postcolonial engagements with the question of corporeality.

The second part of Fanon's essay, the one I am focusing on today, is a critique of one of the most influential strategies of his time for countering those colonial discourses, particularly the belittling ideas about blackness. For this he focuses on the Negritude poets, especially Senegalese poet Leopold Senghor and Martinican Aimé Césaire. The poets are part of an international movement that turned to African roots for affirmation of cultural elements deprecated in colonial racializing discourses.⁵ The movement profoundly shaped the cultural imaginary in the Spanish Caribbean.

Fanon cites Césaire's cosmological appeals and was clearly troubled by them. It reminded him of colonial anthropologies that exoticized African culture as a source of primitive religion, animism and ritualized sex. Talk of the elements—winds, water, fire, flesh—immediately sparked fears of primitivism. And Fanon would have none of it! He aspired to be a man among men. Freedom could not be found in the past, he insisted. "Fervor is the weapon of choice of the impotent," he said; and the gendering of the critique is consistent.⁶ Indulging in such ecstatic

dreams or seeking to ground strategies for today in an imagined ancestral lands was to fall prey to the very colonial ideologies that needed to be overcome, he argued. The claims to have a special connection to the world that would allow a particular group of people to see the spirit of things, as Senghor argued, is not only suspicious but dangerous. Fanon was well aware of the destructive potentials of appeals to bonds of blood. Although his reading of the poets is, in my view, too reductive, his warnings remain crucial.

This is a common stance among postcolonial critics. We have developed allergy to talk of flesh or of the earth. We fear the colonial/racializing logic will win again. Still, we do not need to assume there are only two possible options: either grounding alternative visions in blood relations as the foundations for special connections to the earth or just forget the earth altogether in favor of less explicitly material understandings of community. A view of soilless-humanity cannot help us respond to those who make claims to the land—to the US—based on blood or *paper*. Can we even envision a humanity living nowhere, or more concretely, a humanity in an unlivable planet?

Despite being concerned to avoid essentialisms that could perpetuate colonial and racist ideologies, thinkers in the Caribbean did not abandon the language of land, of the elements, of the sea. Cuban novelist and literary critic Antonio Benítez Rojo referred to the diverse community as “peoples of the sea.” Édouard Glissant’s last anthology of poetry was entitled, “Earth, Fire, Water, and Wind.” The flesh is no longer there as it was in Césaire’s poetry—but it could be.

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Like Fanon, Glissant rejects the appeals to blood and genealogy. They depend on philosophies of the One—a single creation, just one history, he notes. Glissant further associates the privilege of filiation with the Christian narrative. Jesus breaks from his Jewish roots in order to assume a new filiation as the Son of God—a “filiation without the weight of heredity.”⁷ It is this privilege of father-son lineage that is generalized in the common appeals to lineage, linear time, and human progress, he argues. (I refer you to Virginia Burrus’ *Begotten not Made*, for a historical analysis of how this particular element of the incarnational story became orthodoxy—or more accurately monodoxy.) Ultimately, the privilege of lineage “allows a community to proclaim its entitlement to the possession of the land, which thus becomes a territory.”⁸ [Remember that “territory” is the technical term for the political status of Puerto Rico.]

While Glissant warns against trying to ground communal specificity in appeals to roots, he moves away from Fanon’s appeals to a common humanity. Instead Glissant proposes an imaginary of Relation [capital R]. “We propose neither humanity’s Being nor its models. We are *not* prompted solely by the defining of our identities but by their relationship to everything possible as well—the mutual mutations generated by this interplay of relations. Creolizations contribute to Relation but not to universalize.” Negritudes, ideas of Frenchness, of Latinaness,” he argues, are “all generalizing concepts—more or less innocently.”⁹ **Transition**

In Relation, land is not conceived as territory “but as a place where one gives-on-and-with.” [check French] The claims to the specificity of a community should be grounded in a form of participation rather than passive consumption. And this participation expresses itself in relationships with the natural surroundings and in the protection of the land. The new relationship to the land would be based on what he calls the “complicity of relation,” its specificity is not simply a pronouncement; but something to be put into action.¹⁰ Protecting the land is clearly not about guarding borders, because land itself is not the same as a political territory. What actions are undertaken depend on the context; it certainly entails choices about how one moves and what one eats, but these decisions are not absolutes, but rather relational considerations. A complicity of relation. A thought of abstract humanity will not get us there. “Passion for the land where one lives”—land as tierra, literally soil—“an action we must endlessly risk.” (151) Instead we’d need to think of the material specificity of human needs, where flesh is seen as constituted through elemental relations—to the social as well as to the more broadly ecological.

Glissant asserts a dichotomy between two ecological orientations. The first one is ecology as political action, which he affirms. To this he opposes ecology as mysticism, which he denounces as an extension of the sacred. As I said before, Glissant assumes that the sacred is inherently intolerant because based on the logic of the One. But is an intolerant, exclusive Oneness the only way to conceive the sacred? To be sure, such dichotomies are common in political philosophies. But it is surprising in Glissant’s work, not only because he is not simplistically refusing any idea of All. While he writes explicitly against totalitarian thinking—of a self-

important Oneness—he does not renounce the All. Surely, this all cannot be know. And that is not a weakness. But “not wanting to imagine it” certainly *is* a failure.

As a theologian, I cannot ignore how this language resonates with theological apophasis—the all cannot be fully know, but it needs to be imagined—a strand of the mystical traditions that he so quickly dismissed. Yes, postmodern philosophers have recognized the power of the negative theological traditions to point to the limits of language. But Glissant’s negations go well beyond those of his contemporaries. For the poetics he proposes incorporates unknowability into a cosmology of sorts and through it into politics.

Glissant seems to be suggesting that participating in the world requires a imagining an all-embracing Relation. He argues, “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.”¹¹ Persisting in imagining a love of the earth, no matter how inadequate our concepts might be.

I’m not accusing Glissant of ontology. What are these visions? And why would one discount visions of the sacred? Contrast between the mystical—still the poetics that he proposes suggest a connection that is neither reducible to the human nor fully knowable. Would that not be properly mystical? Not in the sense of exclusivism nor an immaterial principle that relativizes the political. On the contrary. Poetics Glissant argues that the variability of Caribbean relations reveal

the impossibility of ontology. Beings are not simply substance, which would be self-sufficient. Thus instead of philosophies of Being he offers a poetics of relation.

I am arguing, on the one hand, that the labor of immigrants is an instance of the action on which any connection to the land can be claimed. A connection that constitutes the place and the community continuously, not as a simple appeal to real or imagined roots. But I am also suggesting we integrate the ecological in the thought of our culture, of a specifically Latina way of inhabiting the world, connecting to its rhythms, perceiving its movements, and caring for its health. “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” (153). Antonio Benitez Rojo reaches back to the Negritude poets to claim rhythm as a principle of relation. One could dismiss it as naïve essentialism. Or one could adopt it as a project and a contribution—not a fact to be pronounced but an attitude to be enacted. What if we read Césaire’s verses as a commitment rather than an accomplished fact?

“Imagining the idea of love of the earth”

“thought of the other is sterile without the Other of thought” (154).

“If...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.” (155)

“The highest point of knowledge is always a poetics” (140).

“I began wondering if we did not still need such founding works today, ones that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting, 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” (16).

“The thinking of errantry conceives of totality but willingly renounces any claims to sum it up or to possess it” (21).

“The infinity of its potentiality presses either way toward physical actualization. But to ply this infinity knowingly, to contract it as practice, remains perhaps only possible within an apophatic underground, where the folds known fold into folds unknown, folds within folds, *plis selon plis*” (Keller).

“Knowledge as imaginative reconstruction of relations” (Maduro)

“knowledge as relative imagination. Rather than the passive capacity to capture things in isolation, to know is the particular ability to intervene in reality by imagining relationships among elements that emerge from collective and individual experience” (Maduro).

“Things are tied to us, and it’s as a part of this dynamic network that we try to creatively imagine how these links emerge and change”(Maduro).

“knowing implies ties between diverse elements of our experience” (Maduro).

“knowledge of what (still) isn’t” (Maduro)

In circumstances of exhausting and devastating problems “it is all the more important and urgent to develop the capacity of knowing what hasn’t existed before and of imagining what might be feasible, not only useful or desirable” (Maduro).

“What ‘isn’t’ and ‘doesn’t exist’ isn’t a simple matter. It encompasses what was and what will never be again, the forgotten and what we refuse to see, what is feared Opacity. Being at Drew, I’m sure you have heard about the luminous darkness

Antonio Benitez Rojo

[Let me give you a quick example. If I were to trace the intellectual history of the appeals to the earth and the elements in relation to Caribbean identities in the twentieth century, I would begin with the poets of *negrismo* Luis Palés Matos (Puerto Rico) and Nicolás Guillén (Cuba), who sought to highlight African cultures as the key foundations for *national* identity. After the US invasion, when some Puertorricans and Cubans were turning to reassert Hispanic heritage to counteract the efforts to Anglicize the islands, these poets asserted an African heritage. The story would have to mention also that Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes translated Guillén’s poetry into English, and that Negritude poets Leopold Senghor (Senegal) and Aimé Césaire (Martinique) translated Hughes into French—both of whom would be challenged by Martinican Franz Fanon. Cuban writer Antonio Benítez Rojo would return to Senghor’s writing to theorize the Caribbean. In his award-winning book, *The Repeating Island*, Benítez Rojo begins observing that the traits named as the difficulty for the study of the Caribbean are the same ones used to describe it. That is, the descriptions are most often based on what it lacks: homogeneity, continuity. Let’s keep these fluid exchanges in mind as I turn to the question of the flesh of the world.]

The Flesh of the World: Caribbean Contributions

In the Caribbean context, discussions about the body are ambivalent. They have celebrated carnal connections to ancestral lands and sensibilities. Yet they have also denounced the destructive uses of “the body” in colonial and racial ideologies—and their corporeal effects of such ideas. These tensions inform Caribbean works that offer distinct views of the material relationships between peoples and their lands. This lecture will engage these contributions and explore their significance for a capacious incarnational theology.

¹ Césaire, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, cited in Fanon 124.

² The problematic feminization is disturbingly re-stated in Benítez Rojo ({Benitez Rojo, 1996 #1102@5})

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⁴ Mayra Santos Febres, *Sobre piel y papel*.

⁵ The movement had already started in Puerto Rico and Cuba in the 1920s, with poets like Luis Palés Matos and Nicolás Guillén. By the 1930s it had taken ground in the Caribbean, and among black intellectuals in the United States and France. The celebrated poet of Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, translated Nicolás Guillén’s poetry into English, and the Senegalese Léopold Senghor translated Langston Hughes’ poetry into French.

⁶ {Fanon, 1967 #1007@9}

⁷ {Glissant, 1997 #1101@50}

⁸ {Glissant, 1997 #1101@143}

⁹ {Glissant, 1997 #1101@90}, check the original French

¹⁰ {Glissant, 1997 #1101@147}

¹¹ {Glissant, 1997 #1101@148}