

## THE «RIGHT TO OPACITY» AND WORLD LITERATURE

### *El «derecho a la opacidad» y la literatura mundial*

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RESUMEN: Este trabajo propone una crítica de las definiciones corrientes del concepto de literatura mundial. La mayoría de tales definiciones la presentan como un circuito de lectores indiferenciados entre sí, que depende de la circulación de la literatura más allá de su lugar de origen. Según estas definiciones, la literatura mundial constituye una industria que se limita a participar en la transformación de la diferencia en una mercancía. Citando la defensa que Édouard Glissant hace de «el derecho a la opacidad» y la experiencia de la opacidad de Derek Walcott como lector y traductor de textos de Patrick Chamoiseau, yo demuestro cómo la opacidad, concepto que extrae Walcott aproximándose a las obras literarias escritas en una lengua «estándar», afirma lo local y lo particular de tal manera que eluden su propia traducción y su absorción en la circulación y en los circuitos de la literatura mundial actualmente.

*Palabras clave:* Opacidad, Créole, Lo Irreducible, Literatura Mundial, Circulación.

ABSTRACT: This study proposes a critique of the current definitions of the concept of world literature. Most of these posit world literature as an

undifferentiated circuit of readers that relies on the circulation of literature outside their sites of origin. According to these definitions, world literature constitutes an industry that simply partakes of the commodification of difference. Citing Édouard Glissant's defense of the «right to opacity» and Derek Walcott's experience of opacity as a reader and translator of Patrick Chamoiseau's writing, I demonstrate how opacity, extracted from Walcott's approach to a literary work written in a «standard» language, affirms the local and the particular in ways that elude translation and absorption into the circulation and circuits of world literature today.

*Key words:* Opacity, Creole, Irreducibility, World Literature, Circulation.

Cada hombre en el rencoreso trabajo de recortar  
los bordes de la isla más bella del mundo.

Virgilio PIÑERA, «La isla en peso».

According to most recent definitions, circulation—that is, the circulation of literary texts beyond their place of origin—constitutes the *sine qua non* of world literature. Even though she favors the terms «international literary space» or a «world republic of letters» over «world literature», for instance, Pascale Casanova amply demonstrates that this «republic» operates on the basis of a «peculiar economy» that is not nation-bound but which, due to an original dependence on the nation, reproduces relations of unequal trade in international literary space (Casanova 2004, 12). Similarly, when he identifies world literature with Goethe's coinage of the term and with Marx's and Engels' brief description (in the Communist Manifesto) of when and how this literature emerged, David Damrosch draws attention to the reliance of world literature on networks of readers and the circulation of texts across national boundaries and oceans. «I take world literature», he asserts, «to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language» (Damrosch 2003, 4); and, positing such works as more than just material objects of consumption, he argues that «world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading» (5). World literature, it seems obvious to say, does not acquire its cosmopolitan status until it departs from its place of origin and enters the world beyond. Yet, defining world literature on the basis of extra- or supra-national networks of circulation and readership has often led to the view that the place from which the literary work departs is never simply an origin but the abject negation of cosmopolitanism, worldliness, and sometimes even of the world.

This negation is clearly at work in the Communist Manifesto, which necessarily denounces bourgeois capitalism in order to proclaim the readiness of the world for proletarian revolution and communism. However, it is not difficult to perceive the ambivalence or, arguably, the disingenuousness with which Marx and Engels describe the bourgeoisie's rapid expansion of its markets and free trade around the world as nothing short of revolutionary. Alluding to the cosmopolitan character with which this class imbues all manner of production, they write:

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature (Marx and Engels 1978, 476-477).

This passage leads Damrosch to concur with Goethe, Marx, and Engels that «world literature is the quintessential literature of modern times» (Damrosch 2003, 4), as if, analogous to the forward march of nineteenth-century bourgeois capitalism itself, nothing could impede this literature's expansive circulation. The uncritical acceptance of the presumed inevitability of ever-expanding networks of circulation has produced questionable representations of the local and the national. In the implicit bid to imagine and promote communist internationalism over the class antagonisms that feed and embroil nationalisms, the manifesto's authors identify autochthony and the nation with «seclusion» and «self-sufficiency» –the latter being a negative condition for Marx and Engels that today rings oddly utopian in light of the entangled interdependencies of Western economies and the growing concern for sustainability. World literature thus emerges in the manifesto as the desired obsolescence of nationalism's purported «one-sidedness» and «narrow-mindedness».

A generous reading of this passage might emphasize how the transformation of the «intellectual creations of individual nations» into «common property» in bourgeois capitalism presages the communist dissolution of private property; that is to say, such a reading would corroborate the historical materialist premise that capitalism always already contains the seeds of its own destruction. Yet, by the same token, the outright destruction of bourgeois capitalism would seem to imperil the circulation by means of which intellectual works become universally available. Either the Communist Manifesto is not as rigorously dialectical as it should have been –for, why should communism be so singly capable of freeing itself from

compromising vestiges of the past?— or Marx and Engels simply overdetermined communism's potential to bring an end to history as we know it. In any case, the common intellectual property to which they refer above is predicated on the assumption that bourgeois capitalism can eliminate the «one-sidedness» and «narrow-mindedness» to which the local and national apparently give rise and which they consider entirely absent from the production of world literature.

Goethe's conception of the relationship between national and world literatures, even in Damrosch's account, is more nuanced than the Manifesto's. The critic locates Goethe at the frontier between national literature and an international circuit of readers, at a site where seclusion and narrow-mindedness might presumably be interrogated and eliminated. For example, he notes the German intellectual's claim, in the latter's words, that the «wide world, extensive as it is, is only an expanded fatherland, and will, if looked at aright, be able to give us no more than what our home soil can endow us with also» (Damrosch 2003, 8). This perception of the «wide world» neither threatens nor supplements the literary and cultural wealth of the «home soil»; more significantly, the affirmation of the autochthonous in Goethe's statement runs counter to the Communist Manifesto's description of world literature as the negation and transcendence of local and national literatures. Damrosch also suggests that the absence of political unity and a unifying discourse of national history led Goethe to suspect how German culture might be considered provincial. The simultaneity of both views—that German literary culture is at the same time germane and peripheral to world literature—is not inherently paradoxical but illustrative of Goethe's assumption of a privileged critical position on the frontier between the local/national and the «wide world». Toward the close of the nineteenth century, José Martí performs a similarly nuanced appreciation of the local in «Nuestra América» (1891), while railing against the overdetermined fascination with the «wide world» that he attributed to the Latin American literary and political culture of the time. In a period when literary cosmopolitanism and the materialistic allures of bourgeois capitalism were naturalizing the cultural and economic dominance of Europe and the United States in the region, he opens his essay denouncing the pitfalls of provincialism: «Cree el aldeano vanidoso que el mundo entero es su aldea [...] ya da por bueno el orden universal, sin saber de los gigantes que llevan siete leguas en las botas y le pueden poner la bota encima [...] Lo que quede de aldea en América ha de despertar» (Martí 1995, 117). In contradistinction to Goethe's view that the «wide world» simply expands what the «home soil» already provides the «fatherland», but still in keeping with his awareness of provincialism, Martí posits knowledge of and appreciation for the local as the precise political

and cultural antidote to neocolonial cosmopolitanism. He thus envisions «el hombre natural», whose deep familiarity with the local qualifies him for leadership, as capable of vanquishing «el libro importado» and artificial men of letters (119). Martí calls, in other words, for a rectification of the relationship between political leadership and the uneven circulation of world literature because «[n]i el libro europeo ni el libro yanqui daban la clave del enigma hispanoamericano» (123).

Both Casanova and Damrosch posit world literature as a liberating ideal that writers universally attempt to achieve. Access to circulation is so primordial in Casanova's view that she does not conceive of literary writing outside the circuits of world literature. According to her, it is the competition among writers that unifies the literary world system since «all writers attempt to enter the same race, and all of them struggle, albeit with unequal advantages, to attain the same goal: literary legitimacy» (Casanova 2004, 40). In Casanova's «world republic of letters», this legitimacy is determined by a universal and undifferentiated competition among writers, which leaves no room for writing that resists circulation or for writers who choose to seek literary legitimacy by other means. Damrosch's assertion that the provincial writer can engage more fully and voluntarily with a wider literary world precisely because he or she is free from the weight of inherited literary traditions (Damrosch 2003, 13) demonstrates greater awareness of the author's agency vis-à-vis the world-wide circulation of literature. This claim allows for Goethe's critical stance straddling the national and the international as well as for liberation from provincialisms anywhere on the globe, but it does not account for how freedom from inherited traditions might also include an author's adamant position to write first and foremost for a local or national community and at the expense of a broader network of readers. Mine is not an argument for solipsism, seclusion, and narrow-mindedness but a call for conceiving of world literature not only as the spiritual manifestation of Kant's ideal of cosmopolitanism as perpetual peace, which implicitly informs arguments for world literature as a universally democratizing good, but also as an industry that has historically been blind to the ravages of the cosmopolitan demand for openness and transparency at the level of the local.

## 1. THE «RIGHT TO OPACITY»

The purpose of this essay is to interrogate how the late Édouard Glissant's defense of what he called the «right to opacity» challenges the current conception of world literature as undifferentiated circulation and circuits of readership by elucidating the integrity of the local or particular

within the wider world. What interests me is not the writing of opaque literature as such –that is, works like Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* that nonetheless manage to circulate within an elite, transnational readership– but literature, specifically from the Caribbean though not limited to it, that presents significant problems for translation and, hence, circulation as world literature. Both Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* and Walter Benjamin in «The Task of the Translator» theorize the existence of an ungraspable core at the heart of literary creations. The Martinican poet and philosopher posited literary writing as an opposition between two opacities, namely, the «irreducible opacity of the text» and the evolving opacity of the author or reader, who, if he or she were to become conscious of this opposition would describe the writing as “difficult” (Glissant 1997, 115). For Benjamin, the «essential substance of a literary work» is «unfathomable», «mysterious», and «poetic» (Benjamin 1992, 71), but he asserts, nonetheless, that the translatability of linguistic creations should still be attempted even if men are destined to fail trying (72). Both thinkers posit a fundamental opacity to literary works that they describe as an unavoidable irreducibility or difference that is undecipherable and untranslatable. It thus behooves us to ask, if all literary texts can be defined by such an ultimately unfathomable irreducibility, why call for the defense of an opacity that the text and the author and community that give rise to it already seem to possess?

Glissant substantiates his defense of the right to opacity with a radical and ambitious critique of occidental epistemological practices for the ways in which they historically privileged the demand for transparency in their approaches to global human relations. «If we examine the process of “understanding” people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought», he writes, «we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency» (Glissant 1997, 189-190). Virgilio Piñera, for instance, is well aware of the adverse affects of transparency when he writes in his famous poem, «La isla en peso» (1943), that «[...] la claridad avanzada, invade / perversamente, oblicuamente, perpendicularmente», so that «Los secretos más inconfesables son dichos», which leads the Cuban poet and playwright to proffer that «Todo un pueblo puede morir de luz como morir de peste». In order to counter this invasive scrutiny that accompanied the imperial extension of power and sovereignty over the extra-European world, Glissant promotes opacity as a collective responsibility:

For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities. Thought of self and thought of

other become obsolete in their duality. Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian. What is here is open, as much as this there (190).

Taking the Western treatment of heteronomy to task, Glissant proposes a fundamental overhaul of the master-slave dialectic that informs Hegel's theory of the subject in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, whereby difference and otherness—be they the master's or the slave's—always emerge threatened a priori by dissolution into sameness. Opacity for Glissant is thus not only an ontological proposition about the irreducible difference that a text contains but also an idealistic call to rectify historical and current conceptions of heteronomy with an eye toward a more democratic and globally conscious «divergence of humanities».

Like other thinkers who have assumed the intellectual burden of defining political action (or Marx's charge that the philosopher should also transform the world) since the emergence of poststructuralist thought, Glissant places difference at the core of his claims for opacity, freedom, and Relation. Implicitly critiquing how Hegel theorizes difference in his dialectical theory of the subject, he writes: «I am thus able to conceive of the opacity of the other for me, without reproach for my opacity for him. To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) not to «make» him in my image» (193). It is in this theoretical vein that Glissant proposes the right to opacity, not as «enclosure within an autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity» (190). Stated alternatively, opacity should not be claimed on the basis of the fiction of the self's triumph over heteronomy, that is, as a hermetic and absolute self-mastery that, incidentally, recalls the «seclusion» and «narrow-mindedness» of the local and national to which Marx and Engels alluded; rather, and in contrast to the imperial history and exigencies of transparency, the right to opacity should be predicated on the desire for and embrace of heteronomies in global human relations that the Martinican intellectual posits as the «subsistence» or bare adequacy of «irreducible singularity». Opacity, in the final analysis, designates an irreducible difference that is incomplete and thus open to engaging with the world. It is «the force that drives every community: the thing that would bring us together forever and make us permanently distinctive. Widespread consent to specific opacities is the most straightforward equivalent of nonbarbarism» (194).

Before exploring Glissant's conception of opacity as a «right», I would like to provide an example of opacity that renders some Caribbean works resistant to easy literary and cultural translations in the circuits of world literature. For the most part, this opacity is both linguistic and stylistic and can be summarized as the decision that the writer takes when

he or she chooses and employs one or more of the region's Creole tongues in the literary work. Needless to say, not all Caribbean writers create literary works in these languages, but, probably without exception, they are all familiar with those that are spoken on their respective islands. Even though there are translations for some of the texts that employ this mode of oralliterature, the difficulty of translating them culturally –even from island to island– raises questions about intelligibility beyond their places of origin. The forms of opacity that these linguistic and stylistic practices produce are not meant to be obscure. According to Glissant, opacity is not obscurity, though it can be so, but an irreducibility, «which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence» (Glissant 1997, 191). What these opacities thus require are the «participation and confluence» of readers who, invited to engage with the texts *qua* readers, must be prepared, especially if they are outsiders, to undertake this effort as linguistic and cultural translators as well. For Benjamin, translatability poses two questions about the translation of an original text that are relevant to these opacities: «Will an adequate translator ever be found among the totality of its readers? Or, more pertinently: Does its nature lend itself to translation and, therefore, in view of the significance of the mode, call for it?» (Benjamin 1992, 72). That the translator can only aspire to be «adequate» in Benjamin's query and Glissant's argument that «[o]pacities must be preserved» in translation (Glissant 1997, 120) reinforce their respective views of the original text's irreducible difference. However, the linguistic and stylistic opacities to which I have referred do not facilitate but defy translation and circulation.

Choosing to write in one or more of the Caribbean's Creole languages obviously delimits the text's readership beyond its place of origin. Even though a scale of usage (from the occasional class-inflected slang to «pure-Creole) vis-à-vis «standard» languages exists for the speakers of these local tongues, the latter are limited in geographic extension as well as in comprehension outside the islands where they are spoken specifically because of the histories of openness (both imposed and retaliatory) that gave rise to them as languages in the first place. For instance, the various Creole tongues that are spoken in the Caribbean would not have emerged as such had it not been for both the forced opening of these lands to European sovereignty, commerce, agriculture, and slave labor and the daily linguistic usage and subterfuges that these activities elicited from their speakers. A language's ability to absorb foreign words is crucial for its longevity as a living tongue, but the colonial demand for labor, which represents the very foundations of these island societies, produced internal social antagonisms that were and remain clearly articulated in Creole languages.

As astute as Shakespeare's depiction of Caliban's experience of enslavement and linguistic domination might have been, the encounter with Prospero still represents a moment prior to linguistic creolization, when Caliban could speak the master's tongue as well as his own native language. Creole languages and the Spanish spoken in the Greater Antilles contain words that are marked by violent histories in which the competition for wages comes into contact with racial formations and ethnic identities. For example, deep economic, racial, and ethnic antagonisms and politically charged narratives cohere around the words *jíbaro* in Puerto Rico and *gaujuro* in Cuba. In Trinidad, where Asians were introduced in order to resolve the demand for labor after Emancipation, *bak wai*, the Cantonese word on the island for «nigger» (literally, «black devil»), is employed to describe locals with Chinese and black features; similarly, *douglá* on the same island and in Guiana refers to individuals of African and East Indian ancestries who, by their very existence, denoted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transgression by or the rape of an East Indian woman. Caribbean Creole languages, George Lang aptly reminds us, are «born out of catastrophe» (Lang 1997, 29). The names above may indeed be obscure for the outsider and culturally opaque, even after they are literally translated, but creolized societies in the Caribbean reveal this additional complication in which the other is not only the outsider or foreigner but could well be a neighbor. In other words, the «divergence of humanities» in some of the islands is so internally disjunctive for the island or national community that it is difficult to imagine the opacity or «irreducible singularity» that Glissant defends as a universally shared value unless the community enjoys access to a common language through which solidarities and antagonisms can be articulated.

A literature that is partly or completely written in a Creole tongue regulates the degree of openness that it extends to others on an off the islands. Writers who wish to provide their works with the greatest circulation possible probably feel obliged to render their usage of the Creole language intelligible, but there are also texts, like Frankétienne's *Dézafi* (1975) or Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace* (1991), which present grueling challenges to readers who are not conversant in Haitian Créole or Trinidadian «patois» respectively and run the risk of being considered difficult, experimental, artificial, or obscure within circuits of world literature. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that reading literature written in a Caribbean Creole language outside its place of origin, to recall Damrosch's definition of world literature, also stimulates uncanny and sometimes uncomfortable opacities for the speaker of Creole from another or neighboring island. In «A Letter to Chamoiseau», Derek Walcott describes the complexity of translating the

Martinican novelist's *Texaco* (1992) for himself as a process that augments the novel's opacity, even for the «insider» that the poet considers himself to be:

The torment of the process of translating *Texaco* is for me quadrupled. First the original, the French, then the Creole (one is talking about vocabulary, not tone, which is unified in the novel, hence its miraculousness), then the translation into English, and then into an English version of Creole whose base is French Creole; one must glide, with the translation's push, over some discomforts and perils. Since no two Creoles are identical in the Caribbean –Haitian Creole is different from St. Lucian– the sense of *opacité* increases (Walcott 1998, 225).

The «quadrupled» torment that Walcott cites complicates Glissant's notion of opacity because the St. Lucian's affective response to the task of translating across «standard» and Creole languages is less the indicator of an opacity in need of preservation than a reminder of the colonial mercantilisms, and their linguistic and cultural pressures, that strictly regulated the islands' openness to the world. Opacity, in Walcott's formulation, is not the condition of a community's ultimately undecipherable irreducibility but the consequences of a balkanized colonial history that distresses the poet because he can –through translation– attest to the degrees of separation that distance one islander or local from another and that in many ways constitute contemporary Caribbeanness. What is most impressive about the opacity that Walcott draws from his reading of Chamoiseau's novel is that he could do so in spite of the fact that the work is written in «standard» French. This ability both confirms the existence of an underground form of communication, what Edward Kamau Braithwaite called «nation language» in his seminal, *History of the Voice* (1979), and implies that opacity also constitutes a secret tongue that will always remain unattainable for the outside reader.

Walcott's acknowledgment of the familiar opacity of a neighboring island appears to corroborate Glissant's ethical propositions that one ought to be able to «conceive of the opacity of the other» for oneself, «without reproach» for one's own opacity for the other; and that it is not essential to «grasp» the other in order to be in solidarity with him or her. When the poet chooses to pen a «letter» to Chamoiseau, instead of writing a review, he designates common ground that facilitates the mutual recognition of opacities:

So, challenged by the formality of a review, I choose a letter, orotund but written in gratitude. The form allows me to be impulsive, elliptical, to indulge in that simultaneity which you call «opacity». Its style, like

yours, is adjectival rather than nominal, a style that lies in the gestures of a storyteller, and it is in the metre of Creole. It is what we both grew up with. The countryside at night with kerosene lamps and crickets (Walcott 1998, 214).

Yet, despite his deep familiarity with the novelist's writing style and its nocturnal, oral origins, how do we account for the quadrupled «torment» to which the St. Lucian poet refers when he describes the experience of linguistically and culturally translating Chamoiseau's novel? In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to say something more about this knowledge of a familiar opacity, and I would like to do so by approaching this epistemological problem via a brief detour through an episode in Martinican literary history.

«Le Dialogue créole» is a curious reflection on the Martinican landscape that the French surrealists, André Breton and André Masson wrote during their brief stay, some of it in a concentration camp, on the Vichy controlled island in 1941. The essay appears in *Martinique, charmeuse de serpents* (1948), a collection of essays that also includes «Un Grand poète noir», Breton's laudatory description of his first encounter with Aimé Césaire, whom he calls «un Noir que manie la langue française comme il n'est pas aujourd'hui un Blanc pour la manier», and whose poetry he esteems as «le premier souffle nouveau, revivifiant apte à redonner toute confiance» (Breton 1972, 96). This desire to renew confidence in their movement arose as many surrealists fled war-torn Europe. Breton, the nominal head of the movement and certainly the figure most responsible for internationalizing it, was elated to «discover» Césaire's engagement with surrealism in the latter's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939), which he praised as the greatest lyrical monument of their time. What inspired Breton to regain confidence in the surrealist movement was the possibility of recruiting the Martinican poet's «capacité de refus» (Breton 1972, 102), a refusal that the latter deployed as an anti-colonial stance and that the French surrealist thought characteristic of the best contemporary poetry. The surrealist's attempt to abstract Césaire's local resistance to colonialism for wider circulation as an aesthetic rather than as an anticolonial project is evident. «Le Dialogue créole» provides further insight into the ease with which the European surrealists made themselves at home on the island. The epistemological issues that Breton and Masson raise in this text are not reducible to a simplistic opposition between European ignorance and native knowledge. In this staged dialogue between the two French surrealists, there is no basis for positing their conversation as «créole», except for the fact that the «dialogue» takes place on the island: no local interlocutors appear in the text, and no attempts are made to reproduce the island's Creole speech. Most intriguing, however,

is their reflection on the purported accuracy of the tropical landscapes that le Douanier Rousseau painted without having ever traveled to such climes. Brazenly appreciating their own exoticized glimpses of the island, they claim to have intuitively known the Martinican rainforest before they arrived (Breton 1972, 19), and, declaring that they cannot limit themselves to what they see from their window, they assert that «[l]a terre tout entière nous appartient» (21). Finally, after boasting of their intuitive a priori knowledge of the island's landscape, the French surrealists engage in a dialogue in which they appropriate the natural landmarks and foliage as surrealist images and metaphors.

Walcott's prior knowledge of the neighborhood of Texaco in Fort-de-France, Martinique that Chamoiseau brings to life in his novel does not seek to assimilate or erase difference, as the French surrealists attempted to do through their proprietary gestures; rather, being familiar with such poor, urban districts in other parts of the Caribbean only increases the opacity to which Walcott refers as a reader and translator. For example, the poet's review of the novel in «A Letter to Chamoiseau» begins with repeated references to a knowledgeable collective voice. Referring to Texaco's perimeter, Walcott affirms: «We know that road around the blue harbour [...]» (Walcott 1999, 213). Turning his attention to the novel's characters, he remarks: «We know the people who inhabit these settlements, we recognize nicknames given for both ingenuity and affliction»; «We know them still by their quarrels and their imprecations»; and «We inhabit them naturally [...]» (213). Later, in a statement that could have sounded imperious, had Walcott not meant it as praise for the novelist's art, the poet writes: «And I know you, Chamoiseau. You were one of those urchins with the artificial anger of boys running on a beach [...]» (214). Writing on behalf of the broader Caribbean community, the poet describes the discovery of a Caribbean neighbor and other that itself constitutes an act of partial self-discovery. This uncanny familiarity with Texaco and its inhabitants does not dismiss difference outright but retains it in a discoverable though incomplete process of comparison and identification. Hence, while there are enough similarities for Walcott to declare that every West Indian should claim the novel, as if it were a lost heirloom that has come to reclaim them (215), he states that his St. Lucian Creole was «cautious and awkward, enthusiastic, ungrammatical» when he spoke with Chamoiseau and, furthermore, that «the tone of Martiniquan Creole, like Haitian, is more French than Caribbean» (223). These subtle differences, induced and evolving since the colonial period, render processes of identification among the islands collective experiences of opacity that do not necessarily gain transparency through the usage of similar tongues; they exemplify what Natalie Melas calls the «minimal

incommensurability» that holds out the potential for «an intelligible relation at the limits of comparison» (Melas 2007, 31) but which, nonetheless, represent the source of Walcott's quadrupled «torment».

In addition to being a question about intelligibility –the ability and willingness that a community possesses to comprehend another that lie at the heart of any anthropologically based comparatism and are readily presumed in current approaches to world literature– opacity is also the shared discomfort of bitter-sweet knowledge that Walcott perceives as he pushes his personal translation of Chamoiseau's novel over «discomforts» and «perils». This intelligibility partly derives from the «delight» that «makes the phrases in *Texaco* leap and finish in spray» (Walcott 1998, 214), like waves that break on a beach after arriving from a not so distant shore. The occasional parenthetical phrase «provokes laughter, a delightful scepticism» (226) that is recognizable in the opacities that the region's Creole languages articulate, even if they communicate their secret messages under the cloak of «standard» languages. However, the St. Lucian poet, as Virgilio Piñera did before him in «La isla en peso», also represents this knowledge in figures of geographic isolation or insularity. Walcott declares that even though the Caribbean islands are «circumscribed by that oceanic sadness called History», the «*histories*» that the novel narrates «are not related to the march, the rhythm, of some optimistic chronology which leads from slavery to emancipation to colonialism to independence, or the demand for it; rather, these events are simultaneous, they have only one meaning and one tense: perpetual suffering, habitual agony» (Walcott 1998, 219). There is a sense here in which the poet identifies the local with an abject past and present, but this is not because he associates the «home soil» with «seclusion» and «narrow-mindedness»; rather, it is that «guarantee of participation and confluence», which Glissant describes as opacity, and that Walcott experiences as both «torment» and «delight» in his reading of Chamoiseau's novel.

## 2. CHALLENGES TO AND OF WORLD LITERATURE

Glissant's defense of the right to opacity ultimately seeks to protect the subject against epistemologies that threaten to reduce him or her to an externally generated and imposed «truth» (Glissant 1997, 194). The proposition, with its implicit critique of the Hegelian dialectic, is universal in scope but emerges from colonial histories and experiences that transformed what Glissant calls the «divergence of humanities» into regulated identities and taxonomies that attempt to render human communities fully transparent. The Martinican philosopher's concept of opacity is ontological, since it posits the existence of an irreducible singularity, epistemological in the

designation of the opaque as a challenge to the acquisition of knowledge, and ethical in view of his call for opacity as a human right. Walcott, by contrast, offers insight into a shared Caribbean opacity as the experience of approaching the literature and culture of a Caribbean neighbor and other that is both a source of pleasure and dismay: the first arises as the joyful discovery of commonalities –the knowledge that no island is completely isolated from its neighbors– while the second is the simultaneous reminder of the borders and distances that colonial histories imposed between neighboring islands, obstacles that require feats of translation, not in order to make the other completely transparent, but for the sake of an elusive solidarity that the proximities of Creole tongues can only partially foment. If Glissant's call for the right to opacity presents a formidable challenge to a world literature that evolves only as ever expanding circuits of readers, then Walcott's description of the opacity that he and Chamoiseau share suggests that these circuits, so long as they are defined on the basis of indiscriminate circulation, will only produce superficial readers who will be incapable of comprehending the reasons for the poet's quadrupled «torture». If two island cultures, so geographically, historically, and culturally close as St. Lucia and Martinique, should produce such «discomforts» and «perils» in translation for Walcott, then world literature, according to the same definition, will be unable to appreciate such nuances.

Defined as it is according to the extension of an economy and infrastructure of circuits of readers, the term «world literature» is critically inadequate and misleading. If the goal of this term is to challenge us to read differently, then this effort also requires that the challenges and opacities of difference remain central to acts of reading in and across the world. Melas correctly critiques the kind of non-discriminating multiculturalism that «verges into the indiscriminate» and spatially opens on an apparently «limitless horizon of interchangeable objects» (Melas 2007, 41). For the idea of reading indiscriminately, that is, succumbing to the «temptation of equivalence» (41-42) that is proper to capitalism's commodification of difference, currently presents obstacles to how we define world literature today. Reading according to Glissant's argument that it is not necessary to grasp or become the other in order to feel solidarity with him or her is a demanding exercise, though entirely in keeping with his philosophical projects: it means overcoming centuries of colonial history in which transforming oneself into («civilized») others was precisely what was expected of colonized peoples; during and after abolitionism, grasping the other became key for the creation of the kinds of empathy that have informed human rights discourses since then. Walcott's method for reading the Caribbean neighbor and other is philosophically less ambitious than what Glissant proposes

but psychologically more nuanced precisely because of the ambivalent complexities of recognition and misrecognition that the linguistic opacities of Creole produce even or especially under the cover and camouflage of literature written in a «standard» language. To read literature in and across the world requires a commitment to undertaking difficult decolonizing processes of self-education that resist the impulse to create universal subjects. Until such processes are undertaken, the concept of world literature will remain aloof to the very conditions that make it possible.

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