Caribbean *World-Makers* and *Word-Breakers*. Rhizomatic Poetics and the Politics of Transcultural Imagination

Eleonora Ravizza

Abstract
This essay adopts a Deleuzian perspective to discuss how cultural transnationalism, as a methodology for cultural studies, may take up the challenge of analysing the complex, multifaceted and liquid dynamics in which individuals and culture are mutually involved, while at the same time imagining difference on a global scale. A reading of the work of contemporary Caribbean thinkers writing about transcultural imagination provides some insight on how Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome may serve as a geographical metaphor for reading the Caribbean literary and cultural space in the light of its problematic entanglement in a global history marked by colonisation, slavery and exploitation. Also, the essay deals with how Caribbean theorists mobilise and resematicise the ideas of difference and otherness in order to embrace a pragmatics of identity which is dialogical and dialectical. The emphasis on the processes of world-making and word-breaking which structures this text signals that Caribbean transcultural imagination is rooted in a transgression that takes place, first and foremost, in language.
Keywords: transcultural imagination, rhizome, language.

1. Ananse's Legacy. Imagining the Transcultural in the Caribbean

> black beating heart of him breathing
> breathing
> consuming our wood
> and the words of our houses
>
> black iron-eye'd eater, the many eye'd maker,
> creator,
> dry stony world-maker, word-breaker,
> creator…
> Brathwaite (*Ananse*, ll. 57-64)

"World-maker" and "Word-breaker": this is how the Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite invokes the spider-trickster Ananse in the poem that bears his name (*Ananse*, l. 63). A West-African god, and the hero of numberless Caribbean folktales (Deandrea 2004), Ananse crosses time and space to weave linguistic nets that connect the peoples, cultures and memories of the diaspora. Bringing fragmented stories together makes him a peculiar type of Demiurge, one who undergoes metamorphosis, transition and uncertainty alongside the world he fashions and shapes. The multiple bodily reconfigurations he goes through allow him to inhabit space in a variety of paradoxical, synesthetic manners: "he stumps up the stares / of our windows" (ll. 10-11), "he squats on the tips / of our language" (ll. 12-13), and he finds shelter in ceilings where "brooms cannot reach his hushed corner" (l. 34). Also, as he "sits with the dust, desert's rainfall of soot" (l. 35), his earthly and mythical natures become one, and while he starts "plotting a new fall from heaven" (l. 36), the ancestral tales that he keeps weaving allow him to traverse other celestial bodies ("threading / threading / the moon / moonlight stories", ll. 37-40). For Ananse, creating and destroying are simply two sides of the same coin, the inevitable consequence of his spatial rearrangements. When he spins "drum- / beats, silver skin / webs of sounds / through the villages" (ll. 17-20), his stories, riddles, proverbs or "black burr of conundrums" (l. 14) insinuate themselves in the language imposed by the coloniser, they reach Tacky, Toussaint[1], and "all the hung /-ry dumb bellied chieftains / who spat / their death into the ground" (ll. 23-26), and they manage to overthrow colonial rule.

Like Brathwaite's poem, this essay is about *world-making* and *word-breaking*. More specifically, it deals with transcultural imagination both as a constitutive feature of contemporary, post-colonial and post-modern subjectivities and as a form of rupture and subversion that begins in language. A term connoted with "a projective sense […], the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression, whether aesthetic or otherwise", which "especially when collective, can become the fuel for action" (Appadurai 1996: 7), *imagination* figures prominently in the work of several

[1] Leaders of the Tacky Rebellion (1733) in Jamaica and of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) respectively.

Caribbean thinkers as a practice of resistance to the forces of cultural homogenisation and suppression of otherness. In the light of the global interconnectedness, diasporas, and patent inequalities that shaped the Caribbean, Caribbean approaches to cultural transnationalism strive to find ways to come to terms with the complex, multifaceted and liquid dynamics in which individuals and cultures are mutually involved while facing the challenge of thinking about difference on a global scale. Transcultural imagination, as it emerges from *Ananse* and from the theoretical works that will be addressed in the following paragraphs, is deeply rooted in a conception of language as an external, trans-personal, and material phenomenon which bears the scars of a past of colonial imposition and violence. An instrument of domination and control, which openly shows the taint of power and the mark of foreignness, language is also a site in which otherness can be mobilised and resemanticised.

Space and connection through space, which in *Ananse* are symbolised by the web spun by the little spider-god, play a key role in the perspectives on transcultural imagination here addressed. The influence of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on seminal works such as Edouard Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation* (1990, Eng. trans. *Poetics of Relation*, 1997), Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *La isla que se repite* (1989, Eng. Trans. *The Repeating Island*, 1996), and, though in a subtler way, Wilson Harris's *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination* (1983)[2] cannot be underestimated. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome – not a model, but rather a geographical metaphor for mapping non-hierarchical thought and for privileging the multiple over the one or the dual – is often associated with the Caribbean as a complex, non-linear system. The rhizome, as the French philosophers put it (2004: 3ff), differentiates itself from the root-thought, or the root-book, whose inherent logic is one of binary division, a logic of the one which becomes two and then perhaps three, or four, or five, but always presuming a central unity or an origin that makes generative models based on division possible. Rhizomatic thought, by contrast, is "an assemblage of connected multiplicities, without center or origin, and is always in process of

[2] On Harris and Deleuze, see Allen-Paisant 2018.

becoming" (Sprouse 1997: 83). A rhizome, in other words, does not imprison alterities because a rhizome is, in itself, a connection of alterities.

The next sections of this essay engage in a discussion of how the rhizome enters Caribbean figurations of the transcultural by following the path traced by Ananse's peculiar powers, *world-making* and *word-breaking*. Firstly, the essay engages with how the rhizome is utilised by Caribbean thinkers not only to envisage their own, specific Caribbean experience in the context of their transnational relationships with the rest of the world, but also to create specific poetics and pragmatics for the transcultural, inscribed in spatial and linguistic practices. Literature figures in their work as "a privileged access to language as both *Lebensform* and *Sprachspiel*" (Locatelli 2009: 74) and as a site which allows them to come to terms with "the plurality of complexity" (p. 67). Secondly, the essay deals with language as a space of an otherness which is never completely dissolved, but which becomes the starting point for the dialogic processes through which transcultural subjects come into being.

2. *World-Making*. Transcultural Imagination as a Spatial Practice

Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome allows Caribbean thinkers to establish an interrelation between praxis and imagination as the premise on which their conceptualisation of the transcultural is based. This is observable, for example, in the incipit of Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*: "[t]hinking 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 people, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realised" (1997: 1). Glissant is concerned with poetics – a word which he uses in its etymological sense (from the Greek verb *poein*, meaning 'to make', 'to construct') – as praxis and as a collective endeavour which is not only able to produce change within the world, but which has a material existence of its own. What interests Glissant is not literature or poetry as forms of exploration of the world and of language, but rather the "work of the poet sharing in the world" (p. 34). Glissant's statement

is certainly consistent with Deleuze and Guattari's claim that "[w]riting has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (2004: 5). A book's capacity to map the world, in the French philosophers' view, does not depend on its content, or on its being a mirror image of the world. Indeed, they argue, writing does not double reality, but is entangled in a multiplicity of rhizomatic relations with it. A book is a conjunction of different surfaces and materials whose relationships are first and foremost external – it is "a little literary machine" connected to a variety of other machines: of war, of revolution, of love, and so on. Also, it is the locus where processes of articulation, segmentation, de- or re-territorialisation may take place. Therefore, a book can be conceived as a map for its contiguity with an intertext which is not just within the text, but which expands itself well beyond the borders of the text. It is a consciousness of space, a spatial logic of connections and interconnections, which, as such, are never fixed or stable, but rather always in the process of becoming.

Deleuzian philosophy thus enables Caribbean writers to operate discursive transitions from the semiotic into the economic and the corporeal. As the French Marxist scholar Jean-Jacques Lecercle puts it, the rhizome "involves rendering the metaphor of the body-politics literal […]: the social body is as material/corporeal as the body of the earth; it is traversed by energy flows, segmented by coding operations" (2006: 125). These displacements are illustrated by Wilson Harris's description of what he calls "the cross-cultural imagination" as the product of the "womb of space", as well as by Antonio Benítez-Rojo's description of the machine of Atlantic capitalism, in which the inception of an economic system based on exploitation and discrimination is described in the form of a birth ("Let's be realistic: the Atlantic is the Atlantic […] because it was once engendered by the copulation of Europe – that insatiable solar bull – with the Caribbean archipelago; the Atlantic is today the Atlantic […] because Europe, in its mercantilistic laboratory, conceived the project of inseminating the Caribbean womb with the blood of Africa", 1992: 5). Similarly, Glissant's concept of *relation* enables him to conceive of the world as a changing organism that speaks differently and reinvents itself according to different times and cultures. *Relation* is a term with which the Martinican poet,

novelist and essayist denotes the rhizomatic, multiple connections of Caribbean to the rest of the world, and also through which the text comes into being in the form of surfaces connecting to other surfaces, discourses connected to other discourses, within a machine of sense by which continuous processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation determine endless transformations of sense. The idea of relation also allows Glissant to develop a way for overcoming the reductive, constrictive binary distinction us/them, coloniser/colonised, emphasising instead how fragile and unstable the boundaries between selfhood and otherness are.

As a matter of fact, while terms such as 'identity' and 'alterity' play a central role in the works of all the authors cited, the Deleuzian perspective they adopt foregrounds these concepts in a pragmatic fashion which re-signifies them and puts them into question. As Lecercle explains, the subject disappears from the work of the French philosophers: "[i]n its stead, various concepts do the same philosophical work: the collective assemblage of enunciation, haecceity, impersonal, non-individual, non-subjective singularity […] the body without organs" (2006: 123). If the subject as a centre of consciousness is replaced with the machinic assemblage, Caribbean theorists similarly engage with subjectivities as processes of social production and reproduction (what Deleuze calls the socius). In other words, if subjectivities are linked to machines of enunciation connected to a variety of other machines, the questions their theorisations of the transcultural raise are not simply related to abstract notions of self and identity, but rather to the spatial entanglements with multiple others. As literature and language are presented as privileged sites for the enactment of the subjectivation process, they discuss how texts connect themselves to other multiplicities, how they are related to external reality, or how they participate in the social production of new hybrid subjectivities. By the same token, Glissant's conception of identity rejects the idea of filiation, or of nationality based on blood and natural belonging, in order to emphasise how the self is always constituted in a process involving the other: "[w]e 'know' that the other is within us and affects how we evolve as well as the bulk of our conceptions and the development of our sensibilities", claims the Martinican writer (1997: 27).To embrace the thought of the Relation means to transform oneself

together with multiple others, to make a rhizomatic connection with them, like a wasp with an orchid, or like a virus using a germ cell to transmit itself into the cellular genes of a complex species (cf. Deleuze 2004: 11ff.). Rhizomatic connections should not just be understood as imitation of the other, but rather as a way of capturing their codes, of becoming-other, as well as starting a process of reciprocal deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. The two French philosophers imply that the encounter with the other frees schizophrenic libido from pre-established objects of investment and re-invests this libido within a process that pushes this becoming ever further away: "There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome that cannot be attributed to or subjugated by anything signifying" (Deleuze 2004: 11).

Otherness as a constitutive part of an unstable, transformative conception of identity can be read in Wilson Harris' claim that "[t]he paradox of cultural heterogeneity, or cross-cultural capacity, lies in the evolutionary thrust it restores to orders of the imagination, the ceaseless dialogue it inserts between hardened conventions and eclipsed or half-eclipsed otherness, within an intuitive self that moves endlessly into flexible patterns, arcs or bridges of community" (1983: xviii). Glissant also reads heterogeneity in spatial terms, by arguing that "[t]he root is not important. Movement is" (1997: 14). His words remind us that rhizomatic space is a space of encounter and transformation, as well as nomadism and errantry. The fact that all knowledge must be a shared knowledge, and that becoming means to evolve with the other, dissipates the possibility of retaining knowledge, of dwelling in a stable space, of standing still: "[t]hought draws the imaginary of the past: a knowledge becoming. One cannot stop to assess it nor isolate it to transmit it. It is sharing one can never not retain, nor ever, in standing still, boast about" (p. 1). The rhizome resembles Ananse, who seems frozen in time at the beginning of Brathwaite's poem as he sits inactively "thinking thinking through glass / through glass" (l. 3), but whose potential becomes actualised, later on, through dialogue and relation with the other. Alterity becomes thus not the counterpart of identity, something that must be annihilated or controlled, but its very constituent.

3. *Word-Breaking*. Language as a Site of Resilience and Resistance

The premise of this reading of Deleuzian influence on Caribbean theorisations of the trans-cultural imagination is that world-making and word-breaking are strictly interrelated. The Deleuzian readings of Caribbean space as a matrix for the inception of new forms of becoming which have been presented so far are actually coterminous with images of death and destruction. Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is characterised by what the philosophers describe as the principles of *connection*, *heterogeneity*, *multiplicity*, *cartography* and *decalcomania*, which the previous paragraph has implicitly addressed as forms of world-making. This paragraph focuses instead on the principle of *a-signifying rupture*, according to which, in a rhizome, if identities are built around nets of relations, the sudden and abrupt cutting of all ties – emotional, national, cultural, political, economic, and so on – does not endanger further possibilities for action. By the same token, as Glissant deals with the triangular trade and the Middle Passages as generative moments of a hybrid, Caribbean culture, he also stresses the fact that, alongside being a womb, the slave-ship was a stomach, devouring people and throwing them into what he calls a "nonworld" (p. 5ff). What produces the shift from a state of non-world to a state of humanity is the possibility of sharing. Glissant focuses on the bond established among people facing the same experiences, people coming from different parts of Africa, and speaking a variety of different languages. Moreover, he stresses that the outcome of this voyage into the abyss will be "all humanity" – thus implying that this bond will not be an exclusive one, but that the boats will continue to connect Africa to Europe and to the Americas in what we call the triangular trade, giving shape – in a most conflictual and painful way – to what we perceive as our modernity.

The issue of power imbalance is central in Caribbean figurations of the transcultural, and poetics that start from the margins of what were once colonial empires necessarily need to confront a history of abuse and violence whose legacies are visible in language, culture and society. The transcultural imagination is a form of *resilience*, like the one exerted by Ananse when he hides himself in the corners of the ceilings where people unsuccessfully try to shoo him away (ll. 33-34), and of *resistance*, symbolised by the linguistic nets that the little

spider-god weaves and which exhort people to subvert colonial rule. Resistance does not only take shape in language, it also develops against a language that was forcibly exported from somewhere else, and which needs to be reappropriated in order to be rightfully called a *nation language* (Brathwaite 1984). It is the possibility of transforming language, which in Deleuzian theory emerges as "a site of subjectivation through interpellation" (2006: 128), as well of putting it in a state of internal tension and radicalised exile which allows the Caribbean theorists, writers and artists discussed in this essay to fashion transcultural imagination.

Creolisation, a word whose relevance in trans-cultural studies was sanctioned with the publication of Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé, and Raphaël Confiant's literary manifesto *Eloge de la Créolité* (1989, Eng. Trans. *In Praise of Creoleness*, 1990), is strictly correlated with ideas of struggle and reappropriation which start from the linguistic and move to the cultural, social and political. Benítez-Rojo for example speaks of *polyrhythm* as a creolised, syncretic form of resistance, the word *polyrhythm* indicating the way African rhythms of percussion – which used to beat in time with work on the plantation – break other rhythms (in language and sound, as well as in literature, culture and society) imposed by the slave-owner, creating something new with each performance. Polyrhythms are always composite, always changing, making and then breaking new connections.

Glissant, instead, deals with creolisation as a process through which "the most heterogeneous elements that are the furthest away from one another are put together and produce an unpredictable result" (1997: 22). He also connects it with what he calls "circular nomadism" as opposed to "arrowlike nomadism" (pp. 11ff), the latter being based on discovery and conquest and resting on the imposition of a language and fixed identity constructions. Circular nomadism reverses the direction of the "arrowlike nomadism" of the colonisers because its movement starts from the margins, just like linguistic processes of creolisation that start from "minor languages" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986) transform the language of the coloniser. It is a "not-intolerant form of an impossible settlement" based on the thinking of errantry and totality. The desire for totality, Glissant explains, is a far cry from totalitarianism. Writers who strive to understand what he calls *le tout-monde* are not

conquerors or invaders. They do not impose their own world view, their own perspective, but on the contrary, are deeply aware that their enterprise is unattainable, because they will never be able to fathom a space which is deeply and inherently diverse and multiple. The space of their own search is a deeply opaque space, a space marked by difference, by the mutual untranslatability of cultures, as well as by a continuous process of evolution and metamorphosis. Circular nomadism "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" (p. 18).

Creolisation is, in other words, a *deterritorialising* practice which is not limited to language but traverses the ways language shapes realities and cultures and appropriates otherness "for strange and minor use" (Deleuze 1986: 17). It is a *collective* endeavour, as language, literature and imagination are not solipsist exercises, but are rooted in assemblages of utterances connected to other utterances. Finally, it is deeply *political*, not only because it is connected to struggles for survival, but because it is an essential precondition for future actions. Creolisation and resistance, in other words, move across what Deleuze and Guattari called *Littérature mineure* (1975, Eng. trans. 1986). The three characteristics of *minor literature* (there being *deterritorialising*, *collective* and *political*) as they have been read against the grain of the work of Caribbean theorists, put language and the potential for transformation within language at the very centre of the transcultural imagination. Writing arises from the impossibility of not writing, from the absolute need people have to find a voice to actively participate in the process of transformation enacted by an unexpected encounter with alterity which may be multiple, unforeseeable and disruptive, but which can also bring out something completely new and unexpected.

4. Conclusion

This short essay started with a poem by Edward Kamau Brathwaite dealing with the metamorphoses of African culture, memory and identity in the context of the African-Caribbean diaspora. *Ananse* represents transcultural imagination as class struggle as it deals with an African god who, despite being surreptitious, humbled and

highly-carnivalised, inspires rebellion and resistance. Language is his weapon of intervention in a world which tries to impose cultural homogeneity through its state apparatuses, and which tries to silence him by relegating him to the marginality of otherness. Similarly, this Deleuzian reading of Caribbean theories of the transcultural has highlighted how Ananse's struggle is embedded not only in the specificity of the Caribbean experience, but also in a much wider pragmatics in which otherness may become a constitutive part of a transcultural imagination that does not repress difference.

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