

POETICS ASHORE

Mayra Rivera*

Abstract

This article focuses on distinctive traits of poetics in the works of Caribbean thinkers, its critique of colonialism and slavery, its orientation toward the world and attention to the creativity of survival. It draws on writers who have influenced my work—particularly Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter—to give the reader a sense of the textures of their works.

Keywords: Colonialism, Slavery, Caribbean, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter, Survival, Body

I. INTRODUCTION

Here is allocated to praise a subterranean geography
whose breaches are never erased . . . Here is a remembrance
of seers and those who remain, may they recognize one another . . .
Édouard Glissant, 'Fastes'

The use of the term 'theopoetics' in the 20th century emerged at the time when discussions of Death of God theology were prominent in the United States. It was used in a series of conferences at Drew University, organised by Stanley Hopper.¹ Amos Wilder, then at Harvard, was part of some of those conferences and used the term in the title of his book.² David Miller describes these conferences as 'located intellectually at the intersection of left-wing Bultmanian Biblical hermeneutics, the thought of the late period of Heidegger's existential phenomenology, and the religion and literature movement'.³ At the heart of the discussions were questions about the nature and referent of theology.

To situate the current moment of theopoetics, it is necessary to consider not only the critiques of the masters of suspicion—Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx—and Heidegger's response to it, but also developments in continental philosophy, especially the work of Jacques Derrida, which stimulated new interest in negative theology for its insights into struggles with the limitations of language. Theologies informed by these discussions have raised important questions

*Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Email: Mayra_Rivera@harvard.edu

about language, the nature of representation, the assumed distinction between the real and the imagined, understandings of metaphors, and the like.

The impact of liberation movements in theology should not be ignored, although it is seldom mentioned in discussions of theopoetics. Many liberation theologians challenged the reifications of particular notions of God—the gods of capitalism or patriarchy. This was then their motivation for opening up the question of projection, the nature of theological statement, and their material effects. Their main concern was not questioning the facticity of the referent of theology, but rather the effects of its images. Dominant images of God sustained patterns of marginalisation and death, they argued, and such patterns had to be exposed in order to open spaces for other metaphors for the divine. Following the insights of early liberation and feminist thinkers, many theologians have developed a modality of theology attentive to the constructive potentiality of all religious language as *poiesis*.⁴

All these strands of theopoetics have shaped my understanding of theology as a critical and creative practice. But my own use of ‘poetics’ is informed by, or rather grows out, of intellectual and affective relations with Caribbean modes of writing. In those works, the central concern is not how language might point toward a transcendent God, but rather how words shape our very humanity.

In *Poetics of the Flesh* I used the term ‘poetics’ to describe my approach to reading and writing, alluding to analytic sensibilities that might be lost under the terms ‘philosophy’ or ‘theology’ as they are used in current scholarly writing.⁵ Poetics in that book describes a way of engaging texts—whether religious or philosophical—that is attentive to the specificity of their metaphors and their imaginative dimensions as well as a form of analysis that acknowledges the affective dimensions of knowledge. I focused on the productivity of words, on the ways in which ‘social constructions’ materialise in our socio-material environment, and ultimately in human flesh. Conversely, I addressed creative practices that seek to counter harmful social imaginaries of bodies by exposing their corporeal effects as well as by imagining and putting into words alternative sensibilities and different possibilities for our bodies. Poetic writing can give voice to injuries suffered, challenge received certainties, and conjure new possibilities. Yet for the Caribbean writers I engage, poetics refers not only to styles of writing, but also to modes of knowing, being, and acting in the world.

In this short piece, I focus on what I see as distinctive traits of poetics in the works of Caribbean thinkers, its critique of colonialism and slavery, its orientation toward the world and attention to the creativity of survival.⁶ I draw on writers who have influenced my work—particularly Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Wynter—to give the reader a sense of the textures of their works.

II. COLONIALISM AND SLAVERY

Caribbean poetics is inextricable from broader ontological arguments about the dehumanising legacy of colonialism and slavery.⁷ The catastrophe of the middle passage and the ongoing devastations of colonialism are ever-present in these works, as reminders that the very existence of Caribbean peoples is a testimony to the power of their creativity under the worse possible circumstances, of their embodied poetics.⁸

Édouard Glissant's celebrated *Poetics of Relation* begins with 'The Open Boat', a poetic reflection on the slave ship as both abyss and womb of Caribbean peoples. The book, like the story it tells, begins with devastation. He imagines the terrifying voyage from Africa to the shores of the Caribbean as a series of abysses: the boat, the sea, the unknown land. 'The Open Boat' tells the story of 'a debasement more eternal than apocalypse' that is also the beginning.⁹

This voyage produces immeasurable loss. 'This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death.'¹⁰ Glissant imagines also its subtler dimensions—what it would feel like to arrive at an unknown island, 'feeling a language vanish, 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'.¹¹ What it would feel like to experience the end of one's world.

This poetics starts with a recognition of the immensity of loss, with the unspeakable. And that awareness gives poetics an unusual orientation. The writer is like the storyteller who sings, 'in utter solitude' to 'the earth and those who suffer through it', that Glissant conjures elsewhere. He 'does not offer his voice to those it pleases, those who are exalted by them; but to bodies burned by time'.¹² His words are neither representation nor celebration, but an offering in a liturgy of lament.

The relationship between loss and language is as complex as the relation between the devastation of our past and our experience of the present. 'What then is language? This cry that I elected?', asks Glissant in *Poetic Intention*. 'Not only the cry, but absence beating in the cry'.¹³ An 'absence beating in the cry', is a corporeal sensibility, not yet an idea or a message. Glissant continues:

And it is to this absence this silence and this involution that I *bind*
in my throat my language, which thus begins with a lack:
And my language, rigid and dark or alive or strained is that lack
first, then the will to slough the cry *into* speech before the sea.¹⁴

Absence, cry, language—they are all entangled in this poetic intention and in the body of the poet. The relation to the past is one of both historical necessity and responsibility. I see it as a religious duty, inspired by the

etymological root of religion in Latin, *'religare'*, to bind. And indeed, the commitment to poetics takes on a sacred aura throughout these writings.¹⁵

The poet speaks before the sea. Rather than moving from past loss to growth, this writing refuses to turn away from the site of devastation. The loss of worlds that is our ancestral inheritance is not recovered. But this poetics strives to carry a cry into speech. Lament. But even this is too simple. The odd grammar of Glissant's sentences guide us through the complex temporality of the poetics he describes, in its winding paths the past touches upon the present.

Narrating the past does not mean tracing a genealogy or lineage. The wreckage of the Middle Passage stands as a reminder of the impossibility of such a project. More importantly, belonging should not be based on the same ideals that led to this destruction: lineage as 'entitlement to the possession of the land, which thus becomes a territory'.¹⁶ Religious epics, like nationalist Histories, assume and disseminate views of belonging based on a common origin or filiation. Those religious epics need to be replaced with different forms of 'sacred' writing, which Glissant says will be a 'poetics of relation'.

This is not simply a matter of the *content* of such narratives; it also pertains to genres of writing. Academic modes of History, including of History of religions or of theology, can replicate in their style the traits of such totalising stories, with their singular point of origin, boundary-setting depictions, clear lines of progression from past to future, their absence of shadows. In contrast, poetic modes of writing keep visible the silences, absences, undecidability, and gaps of history; they attend to the specificity and affective charge of word and place.

III. TRANSCENDENCE IN THE WORLD

Acknowledging loss and discontinuity does not entail renouncing relations. From the specificity of word and place, Caribbean poetics seeks to foster attentiveness to the material world as the ground of our relations. Aimé Césaire describes poetics as a practice of connection with the universe. In contrast to the scientific knowledge that sought mastery over the non-human world, poetics seeks to immerse itself in the world, 'to consent to that immense life that transcends' us.¹⁷ Transcendence here does not point beyond the world but toward it; I would call it 'relational transcendence'.¹⁸ The poet 'puts humanity back in universal concert ... unites the human flowering with universal flowering'.¹⁹ The relationships extend deep into 'nature' and wide across the world—and they tap into the submerged collective past, the 'original relations that bind us to nature' as well as the images of our collective history.²⁰ For Césaire, only a poetic sensibility can bring to light these images and the ties inscribed in them.

Césaire's view of poetics is influenced by renowned French writers, like Charles Baudelaire, André Breton, and Arthur Rimbaud. But the distinct

contribution of Césaire's work is his articulation of the political implications of a poetics arising from the Caribbean. His calls for a poetic embrace of relations to the 'flesh of the world' are uttered against the dehumanising logic of colonialism which still denied many Antilleans their claims to the land of their birth. To counter utilitarian reason is to attack the values of capitalism on which colonialism and slavery are founded, as Sylvia Wynter observes, and thus to question their definitions of humanity.²¹

The practice of poetics as a search for connection to 'nature' and to others also shapes the work of other Caribbean thinkers, notably Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*. Glissant's multilayered, exuberant language demonstrates in style, not just in its content, the significance of a poetic orientation toward the world. Words reach out beyond the here and now, to call forth realities that are no longer or not yet. Detached from the lament and the witness against devastation and dehumanisation that undergird them, and to which they always return, these appeals to relation and their beautifully rich language might seem idealistic or naïve. Thus I name the specificity of the Caribbean history and material context of this poetics, to remind us of the absences to which its language is bound. And conversely, I want to register their refusal to acquiesce to the determinism of history. Genres of lament express the affective weight of loss, despair at the site of irreversible destruction. But they do not condemn existence to history, or writing to 'servitude to the muse of history'.²² As Derek Walcott warns, to adopt such an attitude would amount to betraying our past, construing ourselves as superior to those ancestors whose survival depended on creating themselves anew.²³ 'Survival is the triumph of stubbornness, and spiritual stubbornness, a sublime stupidity, is what makes the occupation of poetry endure.'

This is how Sylvia Wynter interprets a wide variety of cultural practices in the Caribbean. The retention and reinvention of African cultures and religions allowed the peoples of the Caribbean to survive in the new land and to resist their dehumanisation. Recovering the history of resistance is necessary to counter colonial representations of the enslaved as passive. Wynter argues that 'the reinvention of a culture was an even more significant part of the black revolt than the occasional physical revolts. For the latter sprang from the seedbed, the ideology, *the emotional states of feeling* of the former'.²⁴ The ongoing creation of a culture, was necessary in order to be. Before this sensibility was expressed in literary writings, creative making was embodied—in work, dance and ritual, in the invention of languages. The body is both the vehicle and the product of self-transformation, Wynter argues. Through these processes our ancestors not only survived, but also reinvented new ways of being human.²⁵

III. RETURNS

These writings have specific tonalities and sounds, images, and themes; they are attuned to how colonialism and slavery mark our memories, languages, and bodies, indeed how past injustices return like the waves that caress and sometimes threaten our shores. This poetics does not look to the heavens, but rather to the world around us.

Today I find Caribbean poetics indispensable to address ecological devastation, which despite its undeniably global scale, I feel most acutely as a threat to a small Antillean island I cannot bear to lose. I confess I have imagined myself as the one who sings in solitude to the earth and to those who suffer through it, uttering a lament for an island buffeted by wind, devastated by dehumanising colonial/capitalist policies. But I am not alone. I interrupted my work on this piece to meet a friend for lunch. Telling me about his recent lecture in Baton Rouge, the historian told me, ‘in order to convey what we are experiencing in Puerto Rico, it would be necessary to supplement history ... We need poetry’.²⁶

The sensibilities of this poetics, and the commitment to the ethical or even sacred duty, has always been imbedded in an affirmation of collective ties, not just to human history, but also to its ecologies. I find such grounded practices of lament and outrage and stubbornness, socially and religiously vital. I seek the example of Caribbean thinkers who inflect their words with the affective charge of their connections to their islands to develop disciplines of attunement to the world.

REFERENCES

- ¹ David L. Miller, ‘Theopoetry or Theopoetics?’, *CrossCurrents* 60.1 (2010) 6–23. Catherine Keller, ‘Theopoiesis and the Pluriverse: Notes on a Process’, in Roland Faber and Jeremy Fackenthal (eds), *Theopoetic Folds: Philosophizing Multifariousness* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 179–94.
- ² Amos Wilder, *Theopoetics: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1976).
- ³ Miller, ‘Theopoetry or Theopoetics?’, p. 9.
- ⁴ The theologians in this group are too many to name. But others have offered excellent reviews of this tradition of theology. See Shelly Rambo, ‘Theopoetics of Trauma’, in Eric Boynton, Peter Capretto, and Mary-Jane Rubenstein (eds), *Trauma and Transcendence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). Keller, ‘Theopoiesis and the Pluriverse: Notes on a Process’.
- ⁵ Mayra Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
- ⁶ I discuss a Caribbean vision of survival in, ‘Poética de la supervivencia’, *Concilium* 373 (2017) 91–8.
- ⁷ Too often, poetics is misconstrued as politically neutral or narcissistic, as ‘unreflective intuition’ in which ‘anything goes’, as a political theologian recently objected.
- ⁸ Mayra Rivera, ‘Embodied Counterpoetics: Sylvia Wynter on Race

- and Religion', in Yountae An and Eleanor Craig (eds), *In the Image of Man: Race, Coloniality and Philosophy of Religion* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
- ⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 6.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ¹² Édouard Glissant, *The Collected Poems of Édouard Glissant*, trans. Jeff Humphries and Melissa Manolas (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 103.
- ¹³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention* (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 1997), p. 37.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38. Italics mine.
- ¹⁵ Walcott describes his poetry as prayer, for instance. Derek Walcott, 'The Art of Poetry', *The Paris Review* 37 (2012).
- ¹⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 143.
- ¹⁷ Aimé Césaire, 'Poetry and Knowledge', *Sulfur* 5 (1982) 17–32, p. 24.
- ¹⁸ For a theological elaboration of 'relational transcendence', see Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God* (Westminster John Knox, 2007).
- ¹⁹ Césaire, 'Poetry and Knowledge', p. 24.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- ²¹ Sylvia Wynter, 'Novel and History, Plot and Plantation', *Savacou* 2 (1971).
- ²² 'The Muse of History', in Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).
- ²³ 'The Muse of History', in *ibid.*
- ²⁴ Sylvia Wynter, 'Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World' (Institute of the Black World Records), p. 83.
- ²⁵ For a fuller discussion of Wynter's theorisation of embodied poetics see Rivera, 'Embodied Counterpoetics: Sylvia Wynter on Race and Religion'.
- ²⁶ Personal conversation with Pedro Ángel Reina, 1 March 2019.