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with Édouard Glissant and Gloria Anzaldúa

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**RESISTANCE AND
EXPANSE IN
NUESTRA AMÉRICA
JOSÉ MARTÍ, WITH
ÉDOUARD GLISSANT
AND GLORIA ANZALDÚA**

MIGUEL GUALDRÓN RAMÍREZ

Is there still any relevance in José Martí's idea of *nuestra América* (our America), coined more than 125 years ago as a declaration of the need for a collective form of resistance against a colonial past and present and an imperialist future for the people in Latin America and the Caribbean? After recent critiques of the role that indigenous peoples and those of African descent play in Martí's writing, should we seriously consider his call for the unity of all the peoples in the region in the struggle for independence?¹

In the famous manifesto of the same name, Martí coins the term *nuestra América* to refer to the purported unity of the countries and regions that had achieved, or were still fighting for, independence from European colonial powers, in particular Spain. It is also a way to distinguish these emerging nations from the United States and the threat of imperial power over the region. The image of *nuestra América*, however, does not suggest a literal, political unification of the lands; when read as a manifesto, Martí's "Our America" is a declaration that performatively constructs the basis for liberation as voicing a call for unity among the different peoples of the continent.

This call locates independence in an indeterminate space and time. On the one hand, it describes a unified march toward the freedom of the continent, as a whole, to take place in the mountains, valleys, and deserts of Latin America, viewed as a homogeneous land, considered as a whole. On the other hand, the idea of *nuestra América* locates the declaration (and realization) of independence of the continent within a strange interval that mixes temporal elements from the past, present, and future. Thus, the text imagines independence as already having taken place—as a declaration—but constructed (and narrated) in the present as always about to reach the entire continent.

It is this twofold indetermination that opens the door to the common criticisms that the text (and the idea) has sparked among Martí's present-day readers. I believe, however, that if we set aside momentarily some of the political context surrounding the writing of the text and focus instead on the mode of reflection and writing about unity, we will discover an image that is still relevant today in the context of decolonial thought in *nuestra América*. A decolonial approach would be positioned in a way that Martí's text is not, and it would offer some of the elements that some critics find lacking, or wrongly presented, in the manifesto.

In the first section of this essay, I analyze the performative gestures of the manifesto, suggesting that the declaration in "Our America" is emblematic of the tension between the need for different groups to close ranks in the struggle for independence and the risk of losing sight of the specificity of the individual struggles, histories, and people who are being brought together in unity. To approach this tension, and to show a way to recuperate the mode of unification that Martí proposed, while maintaining the situated character of particular histories of colonization and decolonial resistance, I then turn to the work of Édouard Glissant and Gloria Anzaldúa, in particular the *modal* aspect of returning to one's own land as a means of a unified, yet heterogeneous, form of resistance. In the final section, with the help of Glissant's notion of *expansión*, I will suggest how this gesture of returning to one's own land can, in turn, be extended to other parts of the continent, and beyond. I will show as well how this approach allows for a new

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reading of Martí's notion of *nuestra América* that is better suited to the specificity of the peoples that inhabit this region of the world.

>> MARTÍ'S *NUUESTRA AMÉRICA*

Martí developed the concept of *nuestra América* toward the end of his long stay in the United States, where he was a well-known journalist for several Latin American newspapers and magazines. I will focus on two of the texts written during this time: an 1889 speech delivered to the Hispano American Literary Society in New York, commonly known as "Madre América" (Mother America), and "Our America," the famous anti-colonial and anti-imperialist manifesto published in *La Revista Ilustrada de Nueva York* in 1891.

The poetic images in these texts speak of a cohesive and integrated *nuestra América*, one that is not, however, spatially or politically unified in the sense of being merged: it acknowledges the vast diversity of its peoples, races, and cultures marching together both toward and away from liberation, while maintaining nevertheless their differences. There is also a mixture of past, present, and sometimes even future tenses in the declaration of the processes of independence and liberation. What Martí describes is a march toward liberation and the construction of new nations as a movement founded upon a unique declaration of independence from colonial powers. As he imagines it, this took/

takes/will take place for all of the peoples of *nuestra América* at the same time, even if nations like Cuba, for example, had not yet achieved political independence (and will not have achieved it in Martí's lifetime): "All the nations of America declare themselves free at the same time."²

A declaration of freedom articulated in this way thus assumes a decolonization of thought that would represent the first sign of freedom; indeed this decolonization may be the requisite condition for political independence itself. Martí is describing an

event that—in his writing—has already taken place, even if the description appears in the present tense; it is not a historical reality, and it definitively does not occur at the same time with a chronological, temporal regime. As a whole, the people of *nuestra América* have already declared independence, even if this news has not yet reached the whole continent; perhaps this news has not completely reached the continent even today.³

This wholeness contained in the declaration can be understood by following Martí's description of the processes of colonization and independence in the southern half of the continent. Indeed, one of the most important aims of "Mother America" is to compare this process with the one that historically occurred in what became the United

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States. For Martí, the process of colonization in *nuestra América*—the occupation and dispossession of our peoples and territories—comprises more brutal and exploitative practices that render attempts at decolonization more difficult and more radical than in the North.⁴ Thus, these two different regions (*nuestra América* and what Martí terms the “Other America”) cannot share a common form of resistance and independence; indeed, Martí praises the efforts that led to independence in the North American colonies, but at the same time stresses that ours has been/will be due only to our own efforts.⁵

Unity is Martí’s answer to the particular brutality of the Spanish colonization of *nuestra América*. The first step toward this unity is the construction of a notion of shared collectivity that does not come from the common identity of its peoples, but perhaps from a shared experience of domination. “Mother America” is itself the construction of such a national image, which at times exhibits, in tone and content, characteristics of a national myth. It is based on a comparison with North America and the processes of colonization, but it also evokes the beauty, richness, and nobility of its natural territories, customs, and peoples. Even if it might be true that it maintains the dangerous tone of the construction of a myth, I would like to stress that this call for a *pueblo originario* cannot be understood as a sort of naïve rejection of the conditions imposed by the conqueror and the return to a precolonial state. For Martí, the greatness of *nuestra América* comes primarily from its endurance, resistance, and the transformation of colonial conditions: “And we have transformed all this venom into sap! Never was there such a precocious, persevering and generous people born out of so much opposition and unhappiness. . . . In the public squares where they used to burn heretics, we built libraries.”⁶

A similar call for the construction of a collective image of *nuestra América* is defended in the manifesto “Our America.” As we have seen in “Mother America,” it is a call that presupposes the difference and non-identity of the diverse peoples that constitute it, some of whom continue in struggle against each other to this day. The main objective of the text is to identify enmity between siblings as the condition that fosters colonialism, which is perpetuated by a structure that profits from divisions. This is what he calls *pensamiento de aldea*, village-thinking. By contrast, Martí wants to create an image of unity that would allow for marching together, not only toward independence, but toward a New America that can govern itself.⁷

It is precisely in the context of the perils of village-thinking that we should understand the most polemic example of this unity: “There can be no racial animosity, because there are no races” in *nuestra América*.⁸ Races on our continent are defined and situated according to “discordant elements inherited” from the colonizer.⁹ Martí writes with a clear sense of urgency:

We can no longer be a people of leaves, living in the air, our foliage heavy with blooms and crackling or humming at the whim of the sun’s caress, or buffeted and tossed by the storms. The trees must form ranks to keep the giant with seven-league boots from passing! It is the time of mobilization, of marching together, and we must go forward in close order, like silver in the veins of the Andes.¹⁰

Ultimately, then, the unity of *nuestra América* is especially necessary because of the dangers of a *pensamiento de aldea*, the inability to see beyond the needs and conditions of one's own circle or region, and the idea that the struggle is isolated: as long as one is fine in one's state, everything is fine. The struggle requires consideration of the collectivity, because the enemy (the giants of the earth or the stars in the sky) has an overarching scope. Thus, those who do not know each other, and those who are still fighting among each other, should establish common ground and settle their disputes. It is the time to march together.

The image of unity of *nuestra América*, which presupposes that independence has already been declared, will take place in the present by establishing a government created from and for *nuestra América*. And the condition of possibility, in the present,

for the construction of our government is achieved by shifting the source of knowledge from Europe to America, in a decolonization of the *content of their thought*.¹¹ Against Domingo Sarmiento, Martí stresses in "Our America" that the new thought of decolonization is not only inspired by republican ideas of freedom and independence, but by what he calls a "natural man," or the "real man," the figure of a pragmatic American who is neither educated in a European form of government, nor ignorant of the particular needs

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and conditions of his own region. This individual would be willing to resist any form of government or thought that does not address the conditions of the region.¹² This "natural man," is, in this sense, a figure that can be embodied by anyone, that should be embodied by every American, even those who have been theoretically left out.

In her unpublished paper "Resistance to Colonialism: Latin American Legacies," Ofelia Schutte offers a detailed analysis of perhaps the most common objection to the idea of *nuestra América*: the rejection of *mestizaje*, or the mixing of races. Schutte summarizes this view as claiming that Martí

takes "nuestra América" to be too enveloping a concept, one which hides the near-infinite modalities of perspectives, ethnic and racial groupings, and economic sectors in Latin America. . . . It claims, on the contrary, that for Hispanic Americans to generalize our main cultural difference from Anglo-Americans through the notion of "mestizaje" is to marginalize or silence Blacks, indigenous peoples, and others whose racial or cultural heritage may not fit neatly into the "mixture" of one race/culture with others.¹³

This criticism seems to be a fair approximation of Martí's formulation. While the notion of *mestizaje* is not developed at length in "Our America," Martí begins "Los códigos nuevos" (The new laws, 1877) with the term *mestizo* to describe this new people created through Spanish colonization.

When the natural and majestic work of the American civilization was interrupted by the conquest, a strange people, not Spanish, was created with the coming of the Europeans, for the new sap rejects the old body; not indigenous, for it suffered the interference of a devastating civilization, two words that, being antagonistic, constitute a process; a *mestizo* people was created in form, which with the *reconquista* of its freedom develops and restores its own soul.¹⁴

If I find this convergence of the races to be at odds with the non-identitarian analysis of “Mother America” and “Our America” that I have presented so far, it is consistent, I believe, with the importance of a shared experience of colonization for the different peoples (Indians, Blacks, Mestizxs) in order to construct a shared notion of *nuestra América*. Furthermore, it emphasizes an important distinction from the other America, that of the Northern peoples, and the threat that the development of this global economic and military power constitutes for the emerging nations of *nuestra América*.

The assertion of a shared experience of colonization, with similar forms of oppression under various colonial regimes is also problematic. Jorge Camacho’s extensive work on Martí, in particular on his newspaper columns, questions not only the motivation behind this purported unity among the peoples of *nuestra América*, but more importantly the possibilities of unification on a practical level. His *Etnografía, política y poder a finales del siglo XIX: José Martí y la cuestión indígena* (2013) offers a detailed analysis of how several newspaper articles and book reviews from these years in the US confirm Martí’s acceptance of a liberal, positivist tradition that considers the indigenous and black populations as a stumbling block, rather than a valuable part of the emerging Latin American nations. In a chapter titled “La cabeza socrática,” Camacho focuses on “Our America” and other texts from the end of the 1880s to argue that Martí is not promoting a shared, egalitarian struggle toward independence, but one that is led by the educated, white elites. In this light, even the statement that there are no races can be seen as a mere political strategy to win over former slaves and the oppressed, i.e., the black and indigenous populations of Latin America and the Caribbean, to the independentist cause.¹⁵

Although Camacho focuses on the undeniable hierarchy that Martí establishes in many of his images, he does not take into account Martí’s lengthy descriptions of the injustices that slavery, poverty, and segregation have caused among black and Native American populations. The importance of this forceful denunciation in the newspaper articles can be found in Oscar Montero’s keen analysis in *José Martí: An Introduction*, especially in the chapter “Against Race.” Camacho and Montero come to strikingly different conclusions, as is evidenced in Montero’s claim that Martí worked tirelessly to fight racial categories based on biology:

At the time when pseudo-scientists studied the proportions of human skulls to create racist categories, Martí deplored the proto-fascist notion that proclaimed the “purity” of one race or another. He spoke forcefully against violence and oppression, justified in part by a belief in a “racial” pantheon ruled by the whitewashed deity of a fraudulent antiquity.¹⁶

The reading I propose focuses on a different level of the discussion. Acknowledging the possible hierarchy Martí embeds within the idea of *nuestra América* as well as the traces of positivism in his thought, I develop a way to understand the text's attempt to unify the struggle and voice a shared call for liberation. If we take imperialism as the continuation of colonization (as postcolonial and decolonial traditions have theorized extensively), does this mean that our current experience in Latin America is an example of shared subjugation?¹⁷

>> CREOLE AND CHICANX MURMURS

Édouard Glissant's work addresses these questions in a straightforward way: the endless individual expressions of subjection of the peoples of the Americas require a careful and detailed analysis, one that cannot begin with a preconceived theory. Even if we could speak of a similar process of colonization of the territories in America by Spanish conquerors and settlers (and even this is insufficient, if the goal is to include Portuguese, French, and English former and current colonies in *nuestra América*), the situation of the peoples involved in this particular process is unique. Glissant describes the specificity of the forms of transplantation, transportation, forceful displacement, colonialism, subjugation, assimilation, interdiction, etc., showing how each one constitutes a singularity to which no theory of generalized contact can be applied.

This does not mean that an account of the systematic aspect of these practices is impossible, nor that these forms of subjection are not related to each other. It is possible to create a map of cultural contacts, structures, and practices of domination, as long as it is constructed as a moving entity. Any attempt of generalization is bound to fail, because of the constant permutations of cultural contact. Glissant suggests a cartography of permutations in *Caribbean Discourse (Le discours antillais)* where he outlines possible categories of the transmutations of peoples: populations that are transshipped or transferred (*transbordée*),¹⁸ dispersed, that reconquer their lands, that conquer others' lands, populations exterminated, immigrants, people already divided in their own land, etc.¹⁹

In a sense, Glissant provides what is lacking in Martí's texts: a detailed analysis of the particular forms of colonization of a particular people, in this case, African slaves and their descendants, brought to the Caribbean and exploited by French settlers. However, this completion of Martí's reconstruction becomes so focused on a particular history (that of the Antilles), that it may risk losing the expansive character of the notion of *nuestra América*. What Glissant calls *creolization*—both as a colonial and decolonial experience—seems to reflect exclusively the conditions of the black, francophone population in the Antilles, to the point that it is not possible to extrapolate and apply it to other African descendants in South and Central America or in the US. If this is true, it would not address the unity that Martí promotes, but would endorse yet another divisive particularity.

My claim is that for Glissant, in texts as varied as *Caribbean Discourse* or *Poetics of Relation*, the Caribbean space (its colonization and decolonization) becomes a special closed site from where a cry can nevertheless emerge, an echo that the rest of the world can hear, a murmur. Thus, it is not the particular strategies in the struggle for liberation that can inspire transformation across the world, but the mode of its formulation and its voicing, a mode of elocution that considers space in a new way and exposes it to the world. Following a Glissantian possibility of expanse, I suggest a different way to understand Martí's *nuestra América*: a new interpretation based on the expansive characteristic of the Caribbean and its capacity to voice a cry, an echo, or a murmur that can then be heard in other parts of the continent.

I will focus on two elements of Glissant's vast analysis: first, the confluence between reversion and diversion as tactics of resistance, and their indication of a point of departure for decolonization. This gesture implies a particular form of return, one that I see represented as well in the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa.²⁰ Second, I will analyze the possibility of expanding this point of departure or, better yet, expanding the act of returning to the point of departure.

>> A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR DECOLONIZATION

As I have said, Glissant focuses on the experience of the populations in the West Indies, in particular on the territories colonized by the French, an experience that Glissant calls a *transbord*: "There is a difference between the displacement (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transshipment (*transbord*) (by the slave trade) of a population to another place where they *change into something different*, into a new given of the world."²¹

The transatlantic slave trade did not represent a displacement of people; it introduced a new category of transmutation by creating a new population. This population undergoes at least three processes that mark a strong difference with other forms of displacement by enacting a radical rupture with the past. First, they are driven to adopt a critical attitude toward their former collective faith as their rituals and customs are prohibited in the new territory. In losing a sense of collectivity, they also lose the power they had to deal with challenging situations. Second, their transformation into a new population comes with being taught a new identity that often took the form of what Glissant calls "the illusion of a successful mimesis": a new system of beliefs, a new religion, and new image of themselves was successfully introduced to the slaves in order to maintain the system. And third, these populations are given new models of resistance, that can only affect their sense of being able to resist.²²

This radical rupture with their past has been famously theorized by Glissant in the image of the abyss (*le gouffre*) in the first section of *Poetics of Relation*: the passage from one continent to the other is marked by a paradoxical process of devouring and expelling, a regurgitation that gives back to the world a transformed entity (a group of people) that was not there before.²³ Because this population has undergone the crossing of the

abyss, it did not bring with it, “nor collectively continued, the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual, which it practiced before being uprooted. These methods leave only dim traces or survive in the form of spontaneous impulses.”²⁴

Two impulses are maintained: the compulsion to go back, to metaphorically return to the land that was taken away from them and to the conditions in which they existed before, and the impulse to stay in place but evade the particular forms of oppression imposed on them. The first impulse, *le retour*, amounts to the attempt to continue inhabiting a preexisting culture (in this case, a set of African cultures) in a new context where such practices are persecuted and repressed. The second tactic of resistance, *le détour*, shifts the emphasis away from the past and focuses on escaping, in the present, the oppressive conditions that African enslaved people are forced to endure.

Glissant’s analysis in “Reversion and Diversion” in *Caribbean Discourse* shows that in isolation neither tactic has the potential to succeed. On the one hand, the abyss of the middle passage has made a literal return impossible, and has severed ties that with a former territory and culture. On the other hand, an attempt at a *détour* proves unsuccessful on its own; it is incapable of finding the source of oppression, in order to bypass it, because the strategies of domination make this “enemy” almost invisible.²⁵

The specificity of the system of domination in the Caribbean requires a convergence of these two tactics: an attempt at a *retour* that is infused with tactics of a *détour*.²⁶ The possibility of linking these strategies rests upon what I interpret as a change in perspective: instead of finding a moment in time free of domination to return to (the free African past), the Antillean communities must attempt to “return to the point of entanglement (*point d’intrication*) from which we were forcefully turned away.”²⁷ This “point” cannot be understood as the past time in Africa, nor as the moment of the abyss of the middle passage. Indeed, it cannot be any moment in time or in history, since it has never been the case that Antillean communities have escaped colonial rule.²⁸ Rather, the change in perspective suggests a spatial interpretation of this point:

For us Martinicans, this place (*lieu*) already is the Antilles, but we do not know it, at least not in a collective way. The practice of *Détour* can be measured in terms of this existence-without-knowing. Herein lies one of the objectives of our discourse: reconnect in a profound way with what we are, so that the *Détour* would no longer be maintained as a tactic indispensable to existence but would be channeled into a form of self-expression.²⁹

To finally return to the Antilles, which has never been the land of its inhabitants, but always that of their conquerors, even today, would finally allow for a true form of self-expression, and not a mere tactic of resistance and survival. This requires as well a temporal aspect of the return implied by the conjunction *retour/détour*: it is no longer about Africa (a land in the past) nor about France (a future of complete assimilation in the metropole). Glissant makes it clear that the gesture of resistance refuses to seek an elsewhere (in time or in space) in its narrative of liberation; it requires that these communities return to what they are, “the necessary return to the only point where

our problems lay in wait for us.”³⁰ As such, it does not look for precolonial spaces, or moments, nor does it seek narratives of future emancipation.

While the Antilles are not a universal place, and thus cannot become the point of departure for decolonization for every community in the world,³¹ the gesture can be extended to other parts of the colonized world: taking up our own space, going back to where we live, reconnecting with who we ultimately are in order to liberate ourselves. This “what we are” is, in the case of the Antilles (and I suggest that this is also true of *nuestra América*), a synthesis of elements from all over the world, an embracing of the creolization of communities that can no longer claim a unique root, a linear tracing of their ancestors in order to secure a safe place in the world.

>> *EL RETORNO*

I would like to turn now to another model for returning to one’s own land, found in Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Admittedly, the context of this return is very different from the one Glissant describes; creolization is not *métissage*. In connecting Glissant and Anzaldúa I am not equating the creole populations of the Caribbean with chicanxs on the border between Mexico and the United States, for this would ignore their diverse origins and mixture of heritages. Neither am I saying that the contexts, histories, and challenges are similar. I do, however, see the possibility of a decolonial model similar to the one that I have described, following Glissant’s formulation, as “going back to the point of entanglement.” As I will show, this model of return does two things: first, it imagines a model of return that does not seek a pure, original place devoid of conflicts, suffering, or tensions. Rather, it describes the exploration of the entanglement, the site where all the tensions produced by chaotic cultural contacts and clashes take place. Second, it shows a commitment to a new temporality of the return, one that does not take the past as the standard for coming back, but focuses on the present as the locus of resistance and decolonization.

At the end of the section “El retorno,” Anzaldúa describes an experience whose painfulness is double. On the one hand, her return to the land of her childhood, in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, evokes the pain of having been away: “I have come back. *Tanto dolor me costó el alejamiento*.”³² She narrates missing the experiences of being there, of feeling this beloved landscape only in memory. The details of what it is like to be back in her *tierra natal* are graspable in a different light because she is there, present again, although in a different time. Most of these details (the pain of not seeing *el viento soplando en la arena*, *la escasa lluvia*, *un lagartijo*) are conveyed in Spanish, perhaps because the words that allow for their description do not fully exist for her in other languages, in other experiences, in another time.³³

On the other hand, there is also pain as a consequence of experiencing, then and now, the poverty of the people, their houses, and the material conditions of their lives:

I still feel the old despair when I look at the unpainted, dilapidated, scrap lumber houses consisting mostly of corrugated aluminum. Some of the poorest people in the U.S. live in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, an arid and semi-arid land of irrigated farming, intense sunlight and heat, citrus groves next to chaparral and cactus. I walk through the elementary school I attended so long ago, that remained segregated until recently. I remember how the white teachers used to punish us for being Mexican.³⁴

This despair is felt simultaneously with the ache of having been away, thus creating a tension in the text that might be described as the effect of inhabiting a land constructed around dispossession, occupation, and colonial forms of organization and oppression: for the inhabitants of the border it is painful to be away, but also to be present or to have returned.³⁵ Returning does not heal that first grief, because it is accompanied by a new form of absence, the sorrow of all that is missing in this land, of the experience of dispossession and persecution that Anzaldúa's works have described in so much detail.

The borderland inhabits this duality, this tension that becomes paradoxical at times. The borderland is a mistreated land, but also a land of mistreatment; it is, as Anzaldúa calls it, a "struggle of borders":

Because I, a *mestiza*,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan
*simultáneamente.*³⁶

Instead of opening new paths, this state of being constantly pulled in all directions, this contradictory character of a life on the border, leads rather to perplexity, to paralysis. This passage describes a *mestizaje* that does not represent the form of unity that Martí had constructed for *nuestra América*; it is instead an internal *choque*, a cultural collision or an inner war with oneself. The dual pain of experiencing this land is not a condition that can be overcome in order to find a pure, originary starting point. Rather, *la tierra natal* has always been *chicana*, has always been torn between the prevailing white culture, its disdain for Mexican and indigenous cultures, and the clash between them.

Precisely because this is what inhabiting the border means, the solution cannot be to position oneself on one side of the struggle, on "the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions."³⁷ Such an attempt risks erasing important parts of the culture, language, customs, and ways to relate to the land:

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the

border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.³⁸

Anzaldúa does not resolve this *choque*, but perhaps calls for embracing it, pointing to an indeterminate future. Inhabiting this struggle of borders might mean to be on both shores at once, or to cross to new land separate from the cultures in conflict. In either case, it means calling into question the dualistic thinking that enabled the clash, to being torn between shores, being pulled away from one culture by the other.³⁹ With her capacity to inhabit both of these places, *la mestiza* takes up the character of her *amasamiento*: “*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.”⁴⁰

Anzaldúa gives us another form of return that interrogates, in the very act of returning, the purity of the place and the stability of the categories with which we usually understand our dwelling. Keeping in mind Glissant’s distinction between tactics of resistance in colonial settings, this *retour* also attempts to be a form of *détour*, because it considers the source of oppression and the inherent tension in the space—what I have described as a dual pain. The land is always already *chicana*, already intervened with, woven, and crossbred in ways that cannot be undone.

Just as it problematizes the space itself, however, this passage reconsiders the temporal possibilities of *returning*, because the past is not evoked here as a distant, lost moment in time; the return to her *tierra natal* suggests the memories and the conditions of people who still live there, in a mixture of descriptions that resist a melancholic gaze.⁴¹ The return does not heal, not by itself; it does not reflect on a prior moment when life, and the land, was pure or without pain. Returning can only point to new horizons (new futures) within the present itself, in the here and now. To return is to intermingle the past and the present in a vision that seeks a transformation of the conditions that have allowed such suffering. It implies taking up the conflict and attempting to inhabit it in a different form, to change this reality.

>> EXPANSE, *MÉTISAGE*, AND THE CRY

To my mind, it is Glissant’s distinction between *l’étendue et la filiation* (expanse and filiation), developed in *Poetics of Relation*, that allows for this model of return.⁴² He discusses literary genres as a means of narrating cultural identity, showing how the importance of myth and epic in Western foundational narratives conceals a particular conception of the lineage and heritage of their peoples. This conception is built upon the search for filiation, a construction of identity that presupposes the possibility of performing (narratively) a reverse trajectory toward an originary, foundational mythical community, usually tied to the creation of the world.

A trajectory of community seen through the figure of filiation understands the history of that community as continuous and linear, starting from a common origin and extending

into the world, in time and space.⁴³ Glissant has analyzed this figure in previous sections of *Poetics of Relation* as an arrow-like nomadism (*un nomadisme en flèche*) or as rootedness, which explains (because of this conception of a direct line of descent to an absolute origin) the will to conquer and colonize.⁴⁴ Rootedness (the urgent need to settle, appropriate a territory, and then devour the rest of the land from one's own position) represents the attempt at a linear voyage of settler communities based on filiation and foundation myths.

As a different model of human migration, movement, and identity, expanse (*l'étendue*) is tied to what Glissant calls errantry (*errance*):

Errantry, therefore, does not proceed from renunciation nor from frustration regarding a supposedly deteriorated (deterritorialized) situation of origin. . . .

Errant, he challenges and discards the universal—this generalizing edict that summarized the world as something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and one destiny. He plunges into the opacities of that part of the world to which he has access.⁴⁵

Glissant's concept of errantry does not renounce the understanding of identity, migration, movement, or, ultimately, history. It strives to go beyond the individual conditions of a people, without generalizing them into a form of universality, that is, without forgetting about the particular. This is due, in part, to their opacity, that is, to certain elements of the experiences that are not completely perceivable in the attempt to narrate and understand them.

Errantry is less obviously applicable to communities whose legitimacy is grounded in foundational myths and filial linearity, and for whom a clear connection to their ancestors (in terms of racial categories, for example) is conceived of as linear. This, however, is not the case in the Creole communities in the Caribbean.⁴⁶

What took place in the Caribbean, which could be summed up in the word *creolization*, approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible. It is not merely an encounter, a shock (in Segalen's sense), a *métissage*, but a new and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open, lost in the mountains and free beneath the sea, in harmony and in errantry.⁴⁷

Glissant's emphasis on creolization constitutes a new interpretation of the mixture of traditions, heritages, and cultures that occurred, albeit in different ways, in the Americas. It shows the immediacy of a connection that cannot be limited to local encounters, but that links one's own identities and histories with those of others. And this would constitute then a different way to understand Martí's claim for a "*mestizo* people" and the denial of the existence of races in *nuestra América*. Read in this way, Martí may be seen to propose an immediate connection between the peoples of this region, a sharing of a space here and elsewhere, which is the basis for the need to rally together toward freedom and independence.⁴⁸

Glissant (at least at this point in his philosophy) believes that these conditions of creolization and connection hold true for the whole world and that no community can

linearly trace its identity to a common origin. However, the impossibility of doing so is manifest in the Antilles in ways that are not as apparent in Europe. In this sense, this space is a privileged terrain to open itself, to diffract, and to conceive of a thought of Relation and liberation that can expand to the rest of the world.

Compared to the Mediterranean, . . . the Caribbean is, in contrast, a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts. Without necessarily inferring any advantage whatsoever to their situation, the reality of archipelagos in the Caribbean or the Pacific provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation.⁴⁹

Expanse is possible here not only because of the impossibility of return to an absolute communal origin, but also because the impossibility of return for this community is made explicit. The geographic specificity of the archipelago makes this clear, but also, as I have shown, Caribbean history itself (the abyss at its origin) thwarts any hope of a filial connection with an ancestral community or land. The survival tactic of reversion only goes so far: not to an absolute origin, but to the point of entanglement in the present.

The diffraction of the Caribbean that Glissant describes cannot be copied nor taken as a blueprint for decolonization. It might be seen then as merely a cry, an utterance coming from a small place that has been regarded as closed, isolated, and irrelevant. Throughout his works, however, Glissant follows different structures of closed places that nevertheless open themselves to the whole world. In the context of the closed space of the plantation, for example, he comments that the voices emerging from it in the form of music (jazz) comprise a special form of universality: “For three centuries of constraint had borne down so hard that, when this speech took root, it sprouted in the very midst of the field of modernity; that is, it grew for everyone. This is the only sort of universality there is: when from a particular enclosure, the deepest voice cries out.”⁵⁰

This reading opens the way for a Caribbean means of interpreting the notion of *nuestra América* as a form of unity of the Americas. A more interesting and productive reading of the unity Martí defended would not be based on a myth of collective kinship of the vast diversity within the peoples colonized by Spanish conquerors, but would be conceived as a cry, a declaration of freedom, and a call for independence taking place in another temporal register. If Martí’s problematic assumption that colonization has created a new, homogeneous group of people suggests that all of the peoples of the Americas share a common experience of oppression, the notion of expanse shows that such a declaration of independence does not seek to erase the differences between them. Instead, it may be seen to unify the decolonial gesture of finally returning to themselves in order to rally together, close ranks, and overcome the dangers of village-thinking.

In this reading, *nuestra América* becomes a conjectural, even a utopian space, seen not as a closed category (homogeneous, uniform) but as the echo of the different wars for independence throughout the continent and the expansive call to go back to our points of departure (not those of precolonial peoples, nor Africa, but a combination of multiple spaces that emanate throughout the world) in order to expand a decolonization of our thought and our history.

Notes

- 1 Jorge Camacho offers perhaps one of the most critical approaches to Martí's treatment of these communities. In the introduction to *Etnografía, política y poder a finales del siglo XIX: José Martí y la cuestión indígena*, he states for example that the objective of the book is to demonstrate that "the *indígena* is characterized in Martí's texts in two forms: first, as a 'lazy' being, enemy of the economic progress established by the liberal elites in America, and then as repository of a natural 'goodness' that others corrupt and vilify" (26; my translation).
- 2 Martí, "Mother America," in *Our America*, 27/78. Throughout this essay, and for the citation of all authors, I will cite the English translation, when available, followed by the original.
- 3 This declaration can also be grasped in the use of the term "our." As Ofelia Schutte shows, the formulation itself suggests a "for us" aspect of the declaration in at least two senses. First, it makes a distinction from "their" *America*; that is, to counter the colloquial and incorrect use of *America* by many in the United States even today, Martí emphasizes the importance of distinguishing our territories from "theirs." Second, it stresses that this is how we see it and how it is *for us*, a gesture in opposition to the imperial wishes of the North American country in the region (Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought*, 129–30).
- 4 "North America was born of the plow, Spanish America of the bulldog" (Martí, "Mother America," 74/26).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 79/28.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 89–90/35.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 93–94/38.
- 9 Montero analyzes a similar declaration in Martí's "Mi raza" (My race). "In 'Mi Raza,' Martí writes of a 'just racism,' which means 'the rights of blacks to maintain and prove that color does not deprive them of any of the capacities or rights of the human species'" (Montero, *José Martí: An Introduction*, 74).
- 10 Martí, "Our America," in *Our America*, 85/31.
- 11 Although he focuses on a change in content, Martí seems to maintain the European structure of creation and dissemination of knowledge: "Newspapers, universities and schools should encourage the study of the country's pertinent components" (*ibid.*, 88/34). I thank Adelaida Barrera Daza and Nathalia Hernández Vidal for this insight.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 87, 85/34, 36.
- 13 Schutte, "Resistance to Colonialism: Latin American Legacies," 13.
- 14 Martí, "Los códigos nuevos," 8.
- 15 Camacho, "Signo de propiedad," 82.
- 16 Montero, *José Martí*, 83–84.
- 17 This is in part what Martí had in mind with the name that included the word "our." "Martí envisioned a united front emerging from Latin America itself, against a second round of colonialism, this time instigated not by Europe but by the United States in a phase of intensive capitalist expansion—what in 1894 Martí called simply 'the America that is not ours'" (Schutte, "Resistance to Colonialism: The Legacy of José Martí," 184).
- 18 Michael Dash's translation of *transbordée* as "transplanted" misses the point because, as I will show, this population was not planted anywhere; there is no traditional rootedness in the lives of Africans forcefully moved to the Americas.
- 19 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 19/45.
- 20 My use of the works of Glissant and Anzaldúa, coming from such different times and places, should

not be taken as a conflation of their experiences, nor as a suggestion that they represent a paradigmatic, decolonial attitude to be followed by the rest of the peoples in *nuestra América*. Rather, I am interested in how these authors approach the starting point of their reflections on and actions toward decolonization, that is, a type of spatiotemporal return to a multidimensional land that has been indeed inhabited, but not adopted as their own, by those who live there.

21 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 14/40; translation modified.

22 *Ibid.*, 14/41.

23 See “The Open Boat,” in Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 5–9/17–21. I analyze the image of the abyss in my paper “Transversality as Disruption and Connection: On the Possibilities and Limits of Using the Framework of Trauma in Glissant’s Philosophy of Caribbean History.”

24 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 15/42.

25 “[The community] must search elsewhere for the principle of domination, which is not evident in the country itself: because the system of domination [assimilation] is the best of camouflages, because the materiality of domination (which is not only exploitation, which is not only misery, which is not only underdevelopment, but actually the complete eradication of an economic entity) is not directly tangible” (*ibid.*, 19–20/48; translation modified).

26 I present an analysis of these two tactics and the need to consider them in tandem in “To ‘Stay Where You Are’ as a Decolonial Gesture.”

27 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 26/56.

28 It is obviously also not the myth of belonging to France, an ideal that has replaced the dream of returning to Africa, but that is nevertheless equally alienating. See, for example, this passage: “This is not the ancestral space; the traumatism of the dislocation

from the original matrix (Africa) is played silently.

The dream of a return to Africa that marked the first two imported generations certainly disappeared from the collective consciousness, but it was replaced in the imposed history by the myth of French citizenship: this myth contradicts the harmonious (or not) rootedness of the Martinican in his land” (Glissant, *Le discours antillais*, 148; my translation; this passage is not included in the English edition).

29 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 26n7/57; translation modified.

30 *Ibid.*, 25/56–57.

31 This is Glissant’s main criticism of Aimé Césaire’s and Frantz Fanon’s approaches to liberation: the necessity to look for an *elsewhere* in their quest for decolonization (*ibid.*, 25–26/55–57).

32 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 89. Because Anzaldúa does not translate the passages written in Spanish, I will not include translations either, to respect this decision. I believe it speaks for the *ambigüedad* that the passages I will discuss try to capture.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

35 “This land has survived possession and ill-use by five countries: Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the U.S., the Confederacy, and the U.S. again. It has survived Anglo-Mexican blood feuds, lynchings, burnings, rapes, pillage” (*ibid.*, 90).

36 *Ibid.*, 77.

37 *Ibid.*, 78.

38 *Ibid.*, 78–79.

39 Anzaldúa describes this state as *nepantilism*, “an Aztec word meaning torn between ways” (*ibid.*, 78).

40 *Ibid.*, 81.

- 41 This is why the description of the return is mixed in a present tense with the memories of Anzaldúa's childhood in the fields, but also suggestions of a future (ibid., 91).
- 42 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 47–62/59–75.
- 43 The translation of Glissant's formulations might sound ambiguous. Whereas the form of understanding an extensive movement linked to the notion of filiation is referred to in French as *expansion*, Glissant consistently uses *l'étendue* to describe the non-rooted form of reaching out to the rest of the world, which I link to the decolonial gesture of returning to one's own place. In her remarkable English translation of *Poétique de la Relation*, Betsy Wing distinguishes between *l'étendue* and *expansion* by using, respectively, *expanse* and *expansion*. I will adopt this distinction as well.
- 44 This idea is developed by Sylvia Wynter in "1492: A New World View" following the idea of the attunement of "Man" to the explorability and orderability of the earth.
- 45 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 18, 20/31, 33.
- 46 I suggest that Anzaldúa's description of *el choque* at the core of her experience makes this point equally true for chicanxs.
- 47 Ibid., 34/46.
- 48 There is, nevertheless, a Glissantian critique of *métissage*, as the previous quotation suggests, one that might apply to a traditional reading of Martí (ibid.).
- 49 Ibid., 33–34/46.
- 50 Ibid., 74/88; translation modified.

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