

Article

“Diversity” Is “The Motor Driving Universal Energy”: Édouard Glissant’s (1928–2011) Relation and Watsuji Tetsurō’s (1889–1960) Fūdo

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Abstract: This paper critically examines Édouard Glissant’s philosophy of relation through the lens of Watsuji Tetsurō’s theory of *fūdo* (climate and milieu), arguing that Watsuji’s insights help address some of the tensions and limitations in Glissant’s thought. While Glissant foregrounds relationality as a dynamic process of cultural creolization, his emphasis on fluidity and opacity at times risks obscuring the material and environmental conditions that shape human interactions. In contrast, Watsuji’s *fūdo* provides a framework for understanding relationality as always embedded in specific climatic and spatial conditions, grounding Glissant’s poetics of relation in a more concrete phenomenological and ecological perspective. By integrating Watsuji’s attention to the reciprocal formation of human subjectivity and milieu, this paper argues for a more nuanced articulation of relational identity—one that does not merely resist fixity but also acknowledges the formative role of an (interconnected) place (or places) and environment (or environments). Ultimately, this comparative approach highlights the potential for a deeper ecological and material grounding of Glissant’s thought, offering a corrective to its occasional indeterminacy while reaffirming its decolonial aspirations. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on the intersections of environmental philosophy, postcolonial thought, and theories of intersubjectivity.

Keywords: Édouard Glissant; Watsuji Tetsurō; relation; *Fūdo*; archipelago; environment; climate; diversity; decolonial



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1. Introduction

The tension between rootedness and errantry, between the necessity of identity and the fluidity of relation, is a central concern in Édouard Glissant’s *Poétique de la Relation* (Glissant [1990] 1997). At the heart of Glissant’s thought lies a paradox: while communities often ground themselves in narratives of origin, these same narratives reveal a latent desire to resist the very rootedness they affirm. Ulysses’s hesitations in *The Odyssey*, Roland’s fatal pride, and Sundiata’s moment of reckoning all expose an ambivalence toward the idea of belonging—one that Glissant reads as a dialectic of rerouting. Yet in the Caribbean context, this dialectic takes on an even more radical inflection. The forced displacement of enslaved Africans and the subsequent emergence of creolized cultures mean that errantry is not simply a chosen mode of existence but a necessity imposed via history. The challenge, then, is to conceptualize identity in a way that neither falls into the rigidity of nationalist essentialism nor dissolves into the chaos of undifferentiated flux.

Glissant’s concept of *relation* responds to this challenge by proposing an identity that is “rhizomatic” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 6–7)—open-ended and dynamically en-

gaged with the Other. (In its original botanical sense, which Deleuze and Guattari adopt in their 1980 book titled *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, a rhizome is an underground stem, like ginger or bamboo, that spreads non-hierarchically, generating new shoots and roots unpredictably.) However, while Glissant's emphasis on non-hierarchical diversity as the motor driving universal energy is a powerful counterpoint to hegemonic notions of identity, Glissant's insistence on opacity and the unpredictable, chaotic nature of totality risks an unsettling contradiction. If the relational subject is entirely unmoored—if the *Tout-Monde* (whole world) dissolves all particularities into an indistinct cry—how can individuals meaningfully navigate their place in the world? Is it possible to theorize relationality without succumbing to an undifferentiated mysticism that erases the lived specificities of place and cultural formation?

This paper argues that a productive way to engage with this problem is to bring Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* into conversation with Watsuji Tetsurō's concept of *fūdo* (風土). In *Climate and Culture* (1935), Watsuji develops a philosophy of spatial and environmental embeddedness that directly challenges the primacy of temporality in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927). For Watsuji, human existence is always *ningen* (人間), a being-in-relation shaped via the dynamic interplay between individual and community, self and milieu. His notion of *fūdo*—the interrelation of climate, geography, and cultural formation—offers a way to think about identity that is neither rigidly essentialist nor abstractly globalized. Unlike Glissant's *Tout-Monde*, which sometimes risks dissolving into an amorphous totality, *fūdo* articulates relationality through site-specific, material conditions. By hybridizing Glissant's relation with Watsuji's *fūdo*, this paper seeks to develop a framework that preserves the dynamism of cultural interaction while maintaining the intelligibility and specificity of place.

In what follows, I first examine Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, focusing on his critique of rooted identity and his proposal of a rhizomatic, errant subjectivity. I then explore the limitations of this model, particularly its tendency toward an indistinct universalism. Next, I introduce Watsuji's *fūdo*, emphasizing its attention to spatial and environmental particularity as a constitutive element of human existence. Finally, I propose a hybrid theoretical approach, drawing on both thinkers to articulate a model of relational identity that balances movement with situatedness, difference with coherence. By bringing together Glissant's Caribbean poetics and Watsuji's Japanese spatial thought, this paper aims to offer a conceptual alternative to both the rigidity of fixed identities and the mysticism of the undifferentiated.

2. Édouard Glissant and *Poetics of Relation* (1990)

Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) was a Martinican poet, novelist, philosopher, and literary critic whose work has profoundly shaped postcolonial thought, Caribbean literature, and theories of cultural identity (Glissant 2025). Born in Sainte-Marie, Martinique, Glissant studied in Paris at the Sorbonne during a period when existentialism and phenomenology (represented by thinkers like Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Karl Jaspers), surrealism, and the Negritude movement dominated intellectual circles. However, he soon distanced himself from Negritude's essentialist tendencies, advocating instead for a more fluid and dynamic understanding of cultural identity.

Glissant's most influential theoretical contributions center on the concepts of relation, Créolisation, and *Tout-Monde* (whole world), which emphasize the interconnectedness of cultures beyond fixed, hierarchical structures. His seminal work, *Poétique de la Relation* (1990, *Poetics of Relation*), challenges monolithic identities and promotes—to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's terminology—a “rhizomatic” vision of cultural exchange. This

model rejects arboreal (tree-like) structures—with their linear logic of roots, trunk, and branches—in favor of decentralized, interconnected networks.

Glissant's literary career spans multiple genres. His debut novel, *La Lézarde* (1958, translated into English as *The Ripening*), won the Prix Renaudot and explores themes of colonial resistance and political awakening. Other notable novels include *Malemort* (1975, *Bad Death*) and *Mahagony* (1987), both of which weave together Caribbean history, myth, and personal narratives. In addition to fiction, Glissant produced important critical works, such as *Le Discours Antillais* (1981, translated into English as *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*), which critiques the colonial legacy in the Caribbean.

A lifelong advocate for decolonization and cultural multiplicity, Glissant's legacy remains vital in contemporary debates on identity, globalization, and the politics of language. His work continues to inspire scholars, writers, and activists engaging with postcolonial and transnational perspectives.

2.1. The Desire to Go Against the Root

In *Poétique de la Relation* (1990)—*Poetics of Relation*—Édouard Glissant discusses the “immense paradox” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 15) characterizing the great founding books of communities, such as the Old Testament, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, the *Chansons de Geste*, the Icelandic sagas, the *Aeneid*, and the African epics. These works revolve around exile and often errantry, revealing that within these collective narratives—concerned with the formation or reintegration of a community—lie both the temptation and, frequently, the actual experience of the community's failure. Such an imagined or real failure, Glissant argues, is driven by “the desire to go against the root” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 15)—a resistance to the very cult of roots that these stories seemingly seek to establish.

In the following paragraphs, we examine selected epic narratives that exemplify Glissant's “immense paradox” inherent in the foundation of communities and cultural identities. These works demonstrate the fundamental tension between communal rootedness and individual errantry, revealing how foundational myths simultaneously establish and subvert the very communities they seek to create. In our view, this paradox—the simultaneity of opposed instances—lies at the origin of a possible inconsistency in Glissant's thought. Indeed, when the “desire to go against the root” leads to the erasure of all rootedness, cultural identities collapse upon themselves, dissolving into an indistinct and unintelligible magma of natural, pre-linguistic forces. Hence, this paper argues for the necessity of rectifying the most untenable consequences of Glissant's “immense paradox” by complementing—and hybridizing—his philosophy with Watsuji's topological notion of *fūdo*.

But what are some of the epic narratives that embody Glissant's paradox—the tension between resisting rootedness while simultaneously revealing the need to be rooted somewhere?

For instance, in Book 9 of the *Odyssey*—a poem centered on the return home—Ulysses initiates an interaction with Polyphemus out of pride and curiosity despite having the opportunity to leave the island of the Cyclopes after seizing some food with his shipmates. Instead, he lingers dangerously, eager to test his wit and challenge himself (“Why not take these cheeses, get them stowed, come back, / throw open all the pens, and make a run for it? [...] / How sound that was! Yet I refused. I wished / to see the caveman, what he had to offer—[...].”; Homer 1963, p. 151, lines 195–201). What is this, if not Ulysses's barely concealed desire to postpone indefinitely his return to Ithaca and his community? Similarly, in *Odyssey's* Book 12, bound to the mast of his ship, Ulysses is overtaken by an insatiable urge to hear the song of the Sirens, even at the risk of never returning to Penelope (“The lovely

voices in ardor appealing over the water/made me crave to listen, and I tried to say/“Untie me’ [...]”; [Homer 1963](#), p. 216, lines 155–157).

Furthermore, in the French epic, namely in *The Song of Roland*, Roland is depicted as fiercely loyal to Charlemagne and to the idea of defending the community. Even so, in the poem’s climax, Roland refuses to blow the oliphant (his horn) to summon Charlemagne’s help during the battle of Roncevaux, despite the overwhelming odds against him and his men. He does so out of pride, believing it would dishonor him to call for help, and seeking to maintain his personal sense of valor (“Better it were to perish than that shame on us should light”; [Bacon 1914](#), LXXXVII, p. 42). This decision leads to the destruction of Roland’s band of knights and, by extension, undermines the very community he is meant to protect.

As far as the African epics are concerned, the story of Sundiata Keita (1217–1255), the founder of the Mali Empire, offers another instance of the paradox characterizing the founding of communities. In the transcription—by Guinean historian, playwright and writer Djibril Tamsir Niane (1932–2021)—of the epic poem *Sundiata*, which is part of the West African oral tradition, Sundiata has returned home to reclaim his kingdom. There, he faces a personal struggle that threatens the unity of his people ([Niane 2006](#), chaps. 13 and 14, pp. 77–92). His half-brother, Dankaran Touman, who ruled in his absence, lays a legitimate but divisive claim to the throne. Thus, in his attempt to unite the Mande people, Sundiata is tempted to act on personal vengeance, rather than prioritize communal unity.

Ulysses’s *hybris*, Roland’s contemptuous pride, and Sundiata’s wish for retribution exemplify, according to Glissant, the paradoxical desire to go against the root underlying the foundational myths of communities.

How can a community, then, conceptualize its own birth, rootedness, and preservation?

As Glissant puts it, *The Odyssey*, *The Song of Roland*, and *Sundiata* are “at the beginning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic, and totalitarian certainty”, representing a “compromise” between the “wanderings” of a presumptuous, proud and resentful individual in search of himself and the intransigence of the “community” ([Glissant \[1990\] 1997](#), pp. 15–16).

According to the Martinican writer, today, we need epic narratives, but ones—like those above—centered on a “dialectic of rerouting”, a dialectic that combines “political strength” with “the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other” ([Glissant \[1990\] 1997](#), p. 16).

Such a dialectic of rerouting should not spin in circles; for this reason, political strength is necessary. Ulysses, Roland, and Sundiata must all find their way home, whether in a literal or ideal sense—their errantry must remain, at least imaginatively, a “rooted errantry” ([Glissant \[1990\] 1997](#), p. 37). Likewise, Dante (1265–1321), the pilgrim in the metaphysical journey of the *Comedy*, and Virgil must *riveder le stelle*, “see—once more—the stars” ([Dante 1980](#), Inferno, XXXIV, line 139). At the same time, one of the many rhizomatic roots characterizing the multiple, non-hierarchical, and networked relationship with the Other should not establish itself, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest ([Deleuze and Guattari 1987](#), pp. 7–13), at the detriment of another root, avoiding any “predatory rootstock taking over permanently” ([Glissant \[1990\] 1997](#), p. 11).

Glissant calls this delicate equilibrium between political unity and the decentering of roots poetics of relation—a “modern form of the sacred” underlying “every community’s reasons for existence” ([Glissant \[1990\] 1997](#), p. 16).

In a spirit very close to Glissant’s, and to what he thinks of Ulysses, the American scholar of Italian Studies Sante Matteo reflects on his own Italian American identity and explores a plurality of non-static roots that do not simply discard the concept of rooted-

ness. For Matteo, these roots, once connected—like the dots of a journey or an archipelagic formation—become an opportunity for self-exploration and a deeper understanding of oneself (Matteo 2019).

2.2. *The Abyss of Deportation*

The paradox at the heart of community formation and preservation does not manifest solely through the subjective temptation to subvert rootedness, as seen in the “compromises” of *The Odyssey*, *The Song of Roland*, and *Sundiata*—or in the reconstruction of one’s migratory heritage, as in Matteo’s *Il secondo occhio di Ulisse* (Ulysses’ Second Eye, 2009). In some cases—such as Glissant’s own Caribbean identity and community—the paradox violently emerges from a supra-individual force, such as colonialism.

As a consequence of organized colonialism—which differs from a personal act of *hybris*, pride, or vengeance—“the conquered or visited peoples”, Glissant writes, “are [...] forced into a long and painful quest after an identity whose first task will be opposition to the denaturing process introduced by the conqueror” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 17). Colonial conquests introduce into history something fundamentally different from the subjective “desire to go against the root” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 15). Colonialism, in fact, uproots people from their surroundings without their consent and forces them into a denaturing process. From this moment onward, deported individuals and their descendants will have to painfully—and in the midst of conflict—build upon that ‘unnatural’ violence in order to come to terms with a new, multilayered identity—one whose premises were originally imposed on them, regardless of their will.

In the case of cultural identities born out of centuries of colonialism—such as the archipelago of the French Antilles, which includes the islands of Martinique, half of Saint Martin, Saint-Barthélemy, Guadeloupe, and its own archipelago—we still find a community founded on a “compromise” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 16), that is, on a Creole language and on ethnic *métissage* (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 93). Nonetheless, in the Antilles, the “poetic” characterization of the relationships that constitute them and their compromise-based identity (Glissant’s poetics of relation) is the result of a fierce struggle; it is itself a conquest. Here, there is no desire to go against the root but, rather, the painful and violent necessity to find one, or a constellation of many, in order to survive. These struggles, shaped by echoes from the past, reflect the enduring trauma of uprootedness and forced displacement.

The issue of survival, in fact, is inseparable from deportation from Africa; it is not a choice made by those who “fell into the belly of the boat” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 6). Glissant’s “poetic prose” seeks to express this with a crudity that parallels that of colonialism: “peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 8). For these deported people, relation is not an option; they simply “live” it and “clear the way for it” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 8).

Still, in order for that terrifying experience to point beyond itself, the deported—the original victims—must first experience, from one generation to the other, “the oblivion of the abyss” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 8), that is, the oblivion of their own cruel uprootedness. Only under this condition is a compromise possible, but it is a compromise with the abyss—with death—into which the deported have been thrown; it is not a compromise between an already existing community and some of its proud, presumptuous, and independent-minded members.

In other words, the deportation to the Americas’ plantations serves as a tangible and concrete example of what Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), in §29 of *Being and Time* (1927)—“The Existential Constitution of the ‘There’”—calls *Geworfenheit* (thrownness). *Geworfenheit* expresses the idea that we are “thrown” into the world, not by our own choosing, but into

circumstances and situations beyond our control. It reflects existentialism's fundamental rejection of Cartesian and Platonic dualisms between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* or thought and world—there are no abstract essences hovering above the concrete realities of lived existence. When Glissant writes of the deported who “fell into the belly of the boat” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 6)—and “falling” (*Verfallen*) is, like “thrownness”, another key concept in Heidegger's *Being and Time* (§38)—he appears to transpose Heidegger's vocabulary and conceptual framework from ontology to history. In the belly of the boat, or in the abyss of the Atlantic Ocean, the deported is surrendered, “given away” by a force they cannot control: “the expression ‘thrownness,’” Heidegger writes, “is meant to suggest the *facticity* of [existence's] *being delivered over*” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, p. 174). In the opening pages of *The Poetics of Relation*, such facticity takes the shape of the deportation of African peoples to the Americas.

In light of these considerations, one might argue that Glissant engaged indirectly with Heidegger's philosophy. Having studied at the Sorbonne (University of Paris) in the late 1940s and early 1950s—when Heidegger's work dominated European philosophical circles—Glissant would have encountered Heidegger's ideas, though no direct evidence confirms Heidegger's inclusion in his formal curriculum (Glissant 2025). *Being and Time* and Heidegger's later essays were particularly central to postwar existentialist and phenomenological debates in France, constituting an intellectual milieu Glissant necessarily inhabited.

Beyond the previously noted parallel between Heidegger's “thrownness”, *Geworfenheit*, and Glissant's “abyss”, their thought might be compared along two principal axes (Oakley 2008). First, Glissant's opacity—of language, communication, and culture—directly challenges Heidegger's conception of truth as *alētheia* (“disclosedness” of being through language; Heidegger [1927] 1962, pp. 256–73, §44). Second, Glissant's relation radicalizes Heidegger's “Being-in-the-world”, *In-der-Welt-sein* (Heidegger [1927] 1962, pp. 78–90, §§12–13), extracting from Heidegger's abstract notions of “world” and “worldhood” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, pp. 91–95, §14) the concrete particularities of postcolonial Caribbean existence.

Most crucially, while Heidegger confined philosophy to Greek and German (i.e., Western) thought, Glissant systematically decenters philosophy—along with Heideggerian concepts like “truth” and “world”—from this exclusively Western framework.

2.3. Overcoming the Abyss? An Unresolved Tension in Glissant's Thought

A poetics of relation emerging from colonialism is initially affected by asymmetry, shaped by the violence of nonconsensual displacement and uprootedness—a distinct inflection of Heidegger's *In-der-Welt-sein* and *Geworfenheit*. This asymmetry is not just a condition (an ontological one, as is the case with Heidegger's philosophy) but a measure of historical rupture. Accordingly, as John E. Drabinski argues, because of its refusal to confront the real, historical trauma of the Middle Passage—the brutal transatlantic forced transportation of enslaved Africans to the Americas—modern Western philosophy (including Heidegger's, we might add) has embraced an “intellectual imperialism” (Drabinski 2019, xiv). In doing so, Western philosophy deliberately obscures the true historical meaning of terms like “the Americas” and “the New World” (Drabinski 2019, xiv). In other words, Western thought fails to acknowledge how the Middle Passage fractures linear genealogies and reconfigures the Caribbean as a “post-natural and abyssally-born [space]” (Drabinski 2019, p. 58).

Conversely, because a poetics of relation is neither inherent nor static but, rather, a historical process and an ongoing task, its development must emerge from asymmetry—if not from the abyss itself. This requires first asserting identity “in opposition to the process

of identification or annihilation” imposed via colonial forces (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 17). For the colonized, identity is, from the outset, a “limitation” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 17)—a struggle and an act of resistance, not a free and linear unfolding of possibilities but an assertion forged against an Other (those who cast the deported into the abyss). The logical consequence is that “decolonization will have done its real work when it goes beyond this limit” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 17), transcending relation as mere contrastive opposition: colonizer versus colonized, citizen versus foreigner, or even the dualism between those who belong to a territory and those who go—the errant ones, the inheritors of the abyss.

For Glissant, moving beyond an oppositional stance is the next step away from asymmetry toward a (de-colonized) poetics of relation. This shift occurs when “differences become acknowledged”, allowing the thought of the Other to “comprehend”—both include and understand—multiplicity (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 17). However, Glissant insists that merely recognizing differences—perceiving and cataloging them (Sartori 2023, pp. 41–42) as one might when encountering new cultures on a voyage—is insufficient. Understanding multiplicity does not necessarily mean one is prepared to *live* among differences or to embrace them—diversity—even within oneself. As Italian poet and critic Franco Fortini (1917–1994) observed during his first visit to post-revolutionary China in 1955, “it is not possible to *see* a different situation; it can only be lived” (Fortini [1956] 2007, p. 30). Acknowledging partial and discrete differences does not compel one “to be involved” in the “dialectics of their totality” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 17). This dialectic is not simply mechanical or selective, as in the recognition of certain differences at the expense of others but, rather, dynamic, “driven by the thought of errantry” (Glissant [1990] 1997, 17). Such thought holds errantry as a universal category, one that generates the very “reasons for existence” of “every community” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 16). Here, totality’s imaginary is not totalitarian; it envisions a rhizomatic multiplicity of roots, rather than a single root that, in each instance, defines the compactness of national entities in opposition to one another.

For Glissant, roots are not to be simply erased from the poetics of relation, as they carry within them the often mysterious and opaque variations of errantry (Glissant [1990] 1997, pp. 111–20). The traces of an errant past, in fact, are not wholly unintelligible but, rather, decipherable, albeit with effort and difficulty.

Yet, although he asserts that the poetics of relation requires “to approach the specificities of communities as closely as possible”, Glissant repeatedly indulges in a kind of mysticism, or mystic monism, surrounding the very “undifferentiated conglomerations” of cultures and identities that he explicitly rejects, since in those conglomerations no intelligible “system of relation” is detectable (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 142). This reveals a tension and an unresolved contradiction in Glissant’s thinking: his commitment to relationality and specificity coexists with moments where he seems to blur distinctions, rather than engage with them (“everywhere [...] it is the same necessity to fit into the chaotic drive of totality that is at work”, a “chaotic drive” producing the “Roar, in which we could still hear intoned every language in the world”, Glissant [1990] 1997, pp. 124–25). In doing so, Glissant ultimately equates totality and chaos (Glissant [1990] 1997, chap. “The Black Beach”, pp. 121–27; chap. “The Burning Beach”, pp. 205–9), thereby weakening the emancipatory and decolonizing potential of his own poetics of relation. It is as if Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic model—with its interconnected roots branching unpredictably—collapses inward, evacuates all logic, and leaves only chaos in its wake, rendering connection itself—whether hierarchical or non-hierarchical—ultimately impossible.

It is significant that the tension and unresolved contradictions we have identified in Glissant’s thought emerge from within an essay—specifically, his *Poetics of Relation*. Indeed, as philosopher Alain Ménil notes, the essay as a genre is more suited than others (e.g., novels, poems) to evade straightforward categorization: it resists any “unified def-

inition and generic frame" (Ménil 2011, p. 9), thereby creating space for conflicting and irreconcilable perspectives to coexist within it.

However, the emancipatory potential of Glissant's poetics of relation lies in its capacity to counteract the condition of "thrownness" and the chaotic indistinction of the "abyss"—a space where the survival of individuated existence is at stake. By occasionally lapsing into an undifferentiated vision of cultural entanglement (the view of "diversity" as an "incredible explosion" that is valid per se; Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 104), Glissant risks undermining the very possibility of preserving distinct identities within relation, thereby complicating its promise of liberation.

Imagine, for instance, an Italian Egyptian teenager living today in the *quartiere* Corvetto in Milan, Italy. Born in Egypt and having emigrated to Italy with his parents as a child, this teenager is accustomed to spending winter holidays with his grandparents in Cairo and playing soccer with his school friends in Milan. One day, however, he starts to wonder, "Who am I?" and "What am I doing here?"—unable to find a convincing answer for himself. Is this not, *mutatis mutandis*, the experience of an "abyss", of profound dismay—an "existential" crisis that throws the teenager's entire life into question just as he stands on the threshold of adulthood?

Clearly, in the teenager's questions (temporarily) without answers, there is a great deal of energy—literally, the energy that moves the world. In fact, for Glissant, "diversity" is the "motor driving universal energy" (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 30). Still, diversity, as Glissant himself writes, should be understood as the "quantifiable totality of every possible difference" (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 30) and not as a completely anarchic impulse, an undifferentiated, "swirling", "undecipherable magma" (Glissant [1990] 1997, pp. 136, 164). In such magma, "opacity" (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 194)—of one's identity, language, and true motivations for action—is total and irredeemable, and fundamental questions, such as "Who am I?", "What am I doing here?", and "What is my place in the world?" spin in circles and never come to have an answer. While Glissant rightly asserts our "right to opacity" (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 194)—the right to stay silent, to misspeak, or to be misunderstood by dominant cultures—this opacity must not congeal into absolute obscurity: neither becoming the wordless void of an abyss, nor (in a Deleuzo-Guattarian vein) the schizophrenic proliferation of anarchic and utterly unintelligible rhizomes. As Glissant himself cautions, "Chaos has no language", even as it "gives rise to quantifiable myriads of them" (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 125).

If the opacity Glissant advocates for becomes total unintelligibility—preventing the marginalized or oppressed from communicating their identity or experiences—it risks re-establishing or exacerbating asymmetrical power dynamics between cultures. Rather than fostering an equitable, relational exchange, it could generate a new cycle of exclusion and disempowerment, in which the dominant culture continues to misunderstand and assert control, while the marginalized remain trapped in unintelligibility.

What, then, is a possible way out of the untenable paradox of an unrooted diversity—an abyssal magma where identities, languages, and cultures become indiscernible, and thus unlivable and unspeakable, except as a cry? A pre-linguistic cry: a primordial "Roar" (Glissant [1990] 1997, pp. 124–25) of maladaptation, expressing both chaos and a condition of radical unbelonging, where everything is possible, yet nothing is real—a kind of permanent adolescence of humanity?

3. Toward a Hybrid Configuration of Concepts

The Italian Egyptian teenager's question about their identity—"Who am I?"—is not merely an intellectual exercise; rather, it is deeply tied to a practical concern about place: "What am I doing here, at Corvetto?", "What is my place in the world?". If we take these

questions literally—as inquiries about place—we can discern the trajectory of Glissant’s speculation as he seeks to escape the deadlocks of his own thinking. This perspective also allows us to envision how to integrate—rather, how to hybridize—his poetics of relation more fruitfully.

Glissant frequently employs the term “world” (*monde*)—a concept broader than “place”—on many occasions, since for him, errantry from one culture to another, from one root to another, does not occur in abstraction, in a vacuum devoid of cultural and geographical points of reference. Rather, it unfolds within a dynamic space where media—the “flash agents” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 141) of communication that can be brutal and discriminatory—such as songs, music, films, video clips, and snapshots, not only literature, reverberate and refract cultural echoes across the world (*échos-monde*). This process amplifies the global interconnectedness of each of us (*la totalité-monde*) within a chaotic yet structured reality (*le chaos-monde*), which, according to *The Poetics of Relation*, should develop through interconnection (see Betsy Wing’s “Translator’s Introduction”, Glissant [1990] 1997, pp. xiii–xv).

However, one might argue that Glissant’s very category of “world” (*monde*)—which Heidegger understood as “Being-in-the-world in general” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, pp. 78–86, §12), rather than ‘Being-within-a-specific-portion-of-the-world’—carries the same generality and abstraction that Glissant seeks to critique when he focuses on the Caribbean context within a postcolonial perspective. It is likely no coincidence that Glissant’s 1993 novel is titled *Tout-Monde* and that the essay he published seven years after *Poétique de la Relation* bears the same mark of generality—and even mystic monism—in its title, *Traité du Tout-Monde* (1997) (“It is the whole world that is speaking to you, through so many gagged voices”, Glissant [1997] 2020, “The Cry of the World”, p. 7).

To what extent is this “world” both human and natural—a space shaped by language, as well as materiality, including diverse cultures and landscapes? To what extent does it comprise distinct yet interrelated physical and natural ecosystems?

Glissant addresses these issues by invoking the crucial notion of the “archipelago”, which appears only a few times in *The Poetics of Relation*, precisely to counter the risk of excessive abstraction—and theoretical contradiction—surrounding the concept of “world” (“the reality of archipelagos in the Caribbean or the Pacific provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation”, Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 34). Through the notion of the “archipelago”, cultural diversity can be conceived in terms of its embeddedness in physical spaces, allowing individuals to situate themselves within the world according to their family’s migration history (or errantry) and personal experience.

In the next section of this essay, after introducing Watsuji Tetsurō, I argue that his notion of *fūdo* provides a more effective conceptual framework for understanding the “archipelago” than the “world”. This is because *fūdo*, as Watsuji conceives it, is inherently relational yet remains unaffected by the overgeneralizations of Glissant’s notions of “world” and “Whole World”. As Jean-Louis Joubert argues, the “archipelago” in Glissant’s work is defined by a productive conceptual contradiction, one that the world as a whole fails to recognize: “l’idée d’archipel conjoint deux notions contradictoires: l’isolement de l’île et la liaison de l’ensemble”, (“the idea of the archipelago brings together two contradictory notions: the isolation of the island and the connection of the whole”, Joubert 2003, p. 318).

4. Watsuji Tetsurō and *Fūdo* (1935)

Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) was a Japanese philosopher, historian, and literary critic whose work bridges ethics, cultural theory, and the philosophy of existence (Carter and McCarthy 2014). Born in Himeji, Japan, he initially engaged with Western philosophy, par-

ticularly the works of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). However, he later developed a distinctive philosophical approach that synthesized Japanese and Buddhist thought with European existentialism (Heidegger, above all), particularly in response to what he saw as the Western overemphasis on individualism (for an overview of Japanese philosophy during Watsuji's active years, see [Piovesana 1969](#)).

One of Watsuji's most influential contributions is his concept of *ningen* (人間), which he presents as a fundamentally relational and dynamic understanding of the human being—one that transcends the Western dichotomy of individual and society. This idea is central to his major work, *Rinrigaku* (1937, *Ethics*), where he argues that ethics emerges from the interdependent nature of human existence, rather than from isolated rational deliberation (on the broad implications of interdependence, as a concept, in Watsuji's ethics, aesthetics, and social philosophy, see [Shields 2009](#)).

Another key work, *Fūdo: Ningengakuteki Kōsatsu* (1935, *Climate and Culture*), explores how geographical and climatic conditions shape cultural and philosophical worldviews. In this text, Watsuji critiques Heidegger's neglect (in *Being and Time*, 1927) of spatiality and embodiment, emphasizing that human existence is always embedded in an environment (on Watsuji's critique of Heidegger's neglect and its ethical implications, see [Mayeda 2006](#)).

Watsuji's contributions to Japanese intellectual history also include studies on figures such as Prince Shōtoku (592–622) and Dōgen (1200–1253). Watsuji's thought continues to influence discussions in philosophy, anthropology, and environmental ethics, particularly in the areas of nondualist approaches to selfhood and the relationship between humans and their surroundings.

4.1. Thinking Glissant's Relation Through Watsuji's *Fūdo*

Despite the temporal, cultural, linguistic, and likely ideological distance separating Glissant from Watsuji Tetsurō, it may be productive to hybridize Glissant's concept of relation with Watsuji's notion of *fūdo* (風土). This approach helps counter the impression of generality and abstraction—if not theoretical inconsistency—that Glissant's concept of “world” (and “Chaos”) sometimes induces in the reader.

But why are we talking about hybridizing a concept with another concept belonging to a different cultural tradition? And what does hybridization mean?

“Hybridity” in philosophy transcends its biological roots (mixing species or genes) to describe the blending of cultural, epistemological, or ontological categories. It challenges rigid binaries (e.g., nature/culture, self/Other) and emphasizes fluid, dynamic interconnections. For instance, critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha shows how hybridity destabilizes colonial hierarchies by revealing the ‘liminal’ space where colonizer and colonized identities intermingle, creating ambivalence in power structures ([Bhabha 1994](#)). In contrast, Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory uses “hybrids” to dissolve the dichotomy between nature and society, demonstrating how entities (e.g., technologies, ecosystems) are entangled in networks of human and nonhuman actors ([Latour 2005](#)). Through his work on creolization, Glissant—no less than Bhabha and Latour—frames hybridity as a counter to universalism, particularly as a challenge to abstract dichotomies among languages and cultures (“the thought of hybridity can save us from the limitations or intolerances that lie in wait for us and will open up new spaces of relation”—[Glissant \[1997\] 2020](#), p. 7).

Yet, as we have seen in this essay's first and second sections, Glissant's thought is not immune to overgeneralizing categories like “world”, “Whole World”, and “Chaos”—hence the opportunity to “correct” his theory by using his own openness to cultural hybridization against these ambiguous, incoherent results of his speculation.

But what does Watsuji's *fūdo* mean, and how can this concept—originated in Japan—fruitfully hybridize Glissant's apparently distant Poetics of Relation?

Often translated as “climate and culture” (Watsuji 1988) or “milieu”, *fūdo* explores the dynamic relationship between human beings and their geographical and climatic environments. In this sense, *fūdo* can contribute to the theoretical development of the “archipelago” as both a concept (“opérateur conceptuel”, “conceptual tool”, Joubert 2003, p. 318) and a lived reality.

Fūdo (Climate and Culture) was written in 1929 and published in 1935. In this book, Watsuji also began his critique of Western individualism—the very individualism without which, as Glissant argues, Ulysses's desire to go against the root would not be intelligible. Watsuji committed himself to this critique following a trip to Germany in 1927, during which he read Heidegger's *Being and Time*, published that same year (Carter and McCarthy 2014). As McCarthy summarizes, through *fūdo*, “Watsuji encourages us to think about our place in the [archipelagic] network of relationships comprising our world”, for “from the moment we are born”, we are all “embedded” in interconnected relations with other humans and “our planet” (McCarthy 2019, p. 504; see also McCarthy 2010).

In Japanese, *fūdo* (風土) literally means “wind and earth” (Watsuji 1988, p. 1): 風 (*fū*), meaning “wind” or “climate”, and 土 (*do*), meaning “earth” or “land”. As a compound term, *fūdo* encapsulates the paradox at its core: using Glissant's vocabulary, we might say that it represents both rootedness in the earth or in the land *and* errantry in the wind, shaped by the specific climatic conditions of a given space on the planet and by how these conditions resonate with the subjectivities dwelling in that very space.

Thus, *fūdo* is not merely an objective environment in the narrow sense of the adjective “objective”—something that technology, industry, and speculation can manipulate ad libitum—but is instead phenomenologically intertwined with the groups and individuals who experience and inhabit it. From this perspective, as Lucy Schultz (2020) argues, Watsuji's *fūdo* challenges traditional normative hierarchies that privilege spirit over matter—hierarchies that demand human domination over an objectified nature: “Natural environment is usually understood as an objective extension of ‘human climate’ regarded as a concrete basis. But when we come to consider the relationship between this and human life, the latter is already objectified, with the result that we find ourselves examining the relation between object and object, and there is no link with subjective human existence. [...] It is essential to my position that the phenomena of climate are treated as expressions of subjective human existence and not of natural environment” (Watsuji 1988, p. v).

Fūdo, understood both as climate affecting human existence and as the natural environment intrinsically linked to the living subjectivities that actively experience it, is as relational a concept as Glissant's “world”. Yet, unlike the latter, *fūdo* is always site-specific and situated—climate is always already a particular climate, and a specific culture emerges from it, as there is no single *fūdo* for the entire (whole) world (on the interplay of ecology and self or subjectivity in Watsuji's philosophy, see Johnson 2018, 2019).

For this reason, geographer, orientalist, and philosopher Augustin Berque suggests that “milieu” is a more suitable translation than “climate” (Berque 1994). As he argues, for Watsuji, *fūdo* implies that the spatial and environmental dimensions of human existence are intertwined in *fūdōsei*, or “mediance” (Berque 1994, p. 498). As McCarthy explains, “etymologically, *milieu* can be traced back to ‘middle,’ but it later came to mean one's surroundings, including the environmental and social” (McCarthy 2019, p. 508).

Since *fūdo* is always *one's* surroundings or environment, it does not denote space as an empty container later filled by human activity. Instead, the phenomenological bond—or rootedness, as Glissant would say—between human existence and specific, interrelated portions of the world is always already given. Yet, it might be added that rootedness it-

self is relational, plural, and “archipelagic”: there is always some wind blowing over a fixed stretch of the earth (this is also why Watsuji’s milieu always has ethical features; see Couteau 2006).

Watsuji developed his spatial concept of *fūdo* in response to what he saw as an imbalance in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, where time is prioritized at the expense of space. “I found myself intrigued”, Watsuji wrote, “by the attempt to treat the structure of man’s existence in terms of time, but I found it hard to see why, when time had thus been made to play a part in the structure of subjective existence, at the same juncture space also was not postulated as part of the basic structure of existence” (Watsuji 1988, p. v).

In *Being and Time*, *Dasein*—existence—is primarily understood in temporal terms. When outlining his method for investigating the question of being, Heidegger states that “temporality” (*Zeitlichkeit*) is the meaning—or ultimate horizon—of *Dasein*’s very being (Heidegger [1927] 1962, p. 38, §5). Moreover, he specifies that all other structures of existence—including the most relational one, “*Dasein*-with of Others and Everyday Being-with” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, pp. 153–63, §26)—“must be interpreted over again as modes of temporality” (Heidegger [1927] 1962, p. 38, §5). As Watsuji perceives, this framing makes it difficult to conceive of existence as originally projected—without compromising its authenticity—onto a network of spatially configured and embodied relationships.

In a sense, *fūdo* does justice to the situatedness of the experience of the Italian Egyptian teenager living in Corvetto, as it does not confine them to the solitary perception of the flow of time. Nor does *fūdo* yield the erroneous impression that living with—or being-with—other teenagers from either Italy or Egypt estranges them from their deepest being, from the most authentic root of their life, as Heidegger might say. Instead, *fūdo* spatially articulates the teenager’s existence within a well-defined experiential frame, encompassing an identifiable network of relations—between cities (Milan and Cairo), climates, languages, people, and objects. These points of reference and coordinates counteract the feeling of being out of place, radically uprooted, and in search of an irretrievable identity, lost in an “undecipherable magma” (Glissant [1990] 1997, p. 164) of cultures and languages.

In the usual translation of *fūdo*, “climate” comes to signify the materiality, objectivity, and embodied nature of a life experience—an existence that unfolds in space, as well as in time. It denotes an existence that *takes place*, rather than merely flowing relentlessly, one instant after another. As Bret Davis translates an important passage from the critical edition of *Fūdo* in Japanese, “when humans become aware of the deep roots of their existence and express this awareness in an objective manner, the manner of that expression is not only historically [temporally] but also climatically [objectively and spatially] determined” (Watsuji 1992, pp. 8, 119–120; quoted in McCarthy 2019, p. 509, note 24). Notably, in this passage, Watsuji speaks of an awareness that does not belong to a disembodied mind. Such awareness is not merely intellectual or cognitive; rather, it is embodied in the surroundings where subjectivity is situated and in the actions that subjectivity performs within space. This is why the awareness of the “roots” (deliberately in the plural) of one’s existence is not just a *thought* but also a dynamic *place*—a place that is *lived* by that existence and determined by and through other people, languages, objects, institutions, and organizations as well, all of which are no less tangible and spatial than an urban environment or a natural landscape.

Fūdo is a figure of relation and interconnectedness. However, unlike Glissant’s unarticulated “Cry of the World” and “Roar”, which resonate with all the languages of the world at once, it inflects diversity through a visible and articulated spatiality—a “grammar” that renders diversity intelligible and livable, a space in which one can dwell with others.

4.2. Against the Mysticism of the Undifferentiated

The first unit of space that existence inhabits is existence's own body. As McCarthy argues (McCarthy 2010, chap. 2), Heidegger, in asserting in *Being and Time* that the ultimate horizon of *Dasein* (existence) is time, rather than space, overlooked the problem of the body. Watsuji was aware of this neglect, and in *Fūdo*, he argued that “the crux of the problem becomes the realization that [the] body is not mere matter; in other words, it is the problem of the self-active nature of the body” (Watsuji 1988, p. 11). Because of this “self-active nature of the body”, the awareness of the roots of one's existence is always embodied, constitutively tied to a body that interacts with its surroundings and origins. Therefore, the body—like the environment—is not just any object but an active entity permeated by meaning, one that *makes sense* because it is aware of where it belongs, and one that—precisely by making, *producing* sense—renders its own surroundings and environment meaningful. For this reason, although the body is individual, it is never isolated: “the self-active nature of the body has as its foundation the spatial and temporal structure of human life; a self-active body cannot remain in isolation, for its structure is dynamic, uniting in isolation and isolating within union” (Watsuji 1988, p. 11).

Such an interconnected and self-active body is what Watsuji understands as the human being—*ningen*—which is the focus of his perhaps best-known work in English, *Ethics* (Watsuji 1996). The Japanese term *ningen* (人間) is a compound, like *fūdo* (風土), and consists of two characters: 人 (*nin*), meaning “person”, and 間 (*gen*, in Chinese-derived readings; *aida*, in native Japanese readings), meaning “between”. As Watsuji explains, *ningen* “refers not merely to an individual ‘human being’ nor merely to ‘society.’ What is recognizable here is a dialectical unity of those double characteristics that are inherent in a human being” (Watsuji 1996, p. 15). This dialectical unity, in turn, inhabits the dynamic space that it helps shape. As McCarthy argues, *ningen* itself “is not to be understood as a thing or as a substance but more like a place or a space—yet a fluid, not a fixed space” (McCarthy 2019, p. 507), a space characterized by interconnected, mobile and *errant*, so to speak, roots.

Watsuji's thought is nondualist and distances itself from the Western philosophical tradition, which—from René Descartes (1596–1650) to Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and their epigones—is marked by the dualism of subject and object, mind and body, human and natural, individual and society.

However, as McCarthy poignantly points out, Watsuji's “nondualism is not the same as monism or holism, [because] neither the whole nor its parts are given priority” (McCarthy 2019, p. 512). In fact, for Watsuji, the whole does not assert itself over the individual parts; nor do the latter assert themselves over the whole. In human existence, the whole and the parts—society and the individual, the human expansiveness of the mind and the natural situatedness of the body—co-originate from the 間 (*gen*, *aida*), or “between”. *Fūdo* is regulated by such relational logic, influenced by “the Buddhist belief that [...] there is no permanent, independent, abiding self” inhabiting space, since “*ningen* [the human being, the self] is constantly in flux, never fixed or permanent, continually moving between [*gen*, *aida*] the poles of individual and social” (McCarthy 2019, pp. 512–13).

Watsuji's philosophy—emphasizing the priority of betweenness as a structure and its embodiment in specific spaces and climates—does not indulge in the mysticism of the undifferentiated, a whole where every individual, language, and culture mystically collapse. In Watsuji's concept of *fūdo*, such a whole does not yield the unformed, “natural”, and uncultured “Cry of the World” or primordial “Roar” found in some of the most inspired and lyrical passages of Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* and *Treatise on the Whole-World*.

Moreover, since Watsuji's *fūdo* is radically relational, and within it, the whole is not given priority over the parts—nor do the parts take precedence over the whole—it avoids the false dichotomy between the two fundamental approaches in environmental ethics

outlined by Berque. These approaches, Berque writes, “extend between two theoretical extremes, one of which would be humanity’s subordination to the biosphere, and the other the subordination of environmental issues to humanity’s interests. In general, the first set of views is labeled holism and the second anthropocentrism” (Berque 2005, p. 6).

For Watsuji, spatializing existence—against Heidegger’s privileging of temporality—does not entail essentializing the world and nature to the detriment of humans. Humans are not identical to nature, yet they exist in an interdependent (ecological) relationship with it. This is how, as Berque states, the human is “brought down to Earth” (Berque 2005, p. 6). In fact, as McCarthy notes in her discussion of feminist environmental philosopher Val Plumwood’s groundbreaking essay “Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy and the Critique of Rationalism” (Plumwood 1991), “caring for nature requires a sense of being different from it” (McCarthy 2019, p. 518). Without a distinction between (*gen, aida*) humans and the biosphere, no relation between (*gen, aida*) them would be possible—nor would they share any *milieu* (*fūdo*).

5. Conclusions

This paper has sought to enrich Édouard Glissant’s Poetics of Relation by engaging it with Watsuji Tetsurō’s concept of *fūdo*, highlighting the ways in which environmental and spatial specificity can serve as a corrective to the occasional abstraction of Glissant’s thought.

Watsuji’s perspective adds a topological depth to Glissant’s theoretical model. He argues that the foundations of human existence form an active space—one shaped by lived experience and defined by interactions with others, linguistic influences, material objects, and social structures. These elements, though intangible in some respects, hold the same concrete and spatial significance as cities or natural terrains. In this view, existence is not isolated but emerges within a network of relational and environmental forces.

While Glissant’s emphasis on Relation, opacity, and errantry—the latter two terms evoking something “slippery” (*glissant* in French)—serves as a powerful challenge to essentialist identity formations, it sometimes risks dissolving the material and ecological dimensions of human existence into an indistinct flux. Watsuji’s *fūdo*, by contrast, grounds relationality within spatial and climatic particularity, ensuring that cultural hybridity does not become an undifferentiated totality but instead remains dynamically embedded in lived environments. (Notably, even Watsuji’s name resonates conceptually: *tsuji*, 辻, in Japanese means “crossroads”, a notion intimately aligned with *fūdo*’s inter-relational reality.) By bringing Glissant and Watsuji into dialogue, this paper has proposed a conceptual hybridization that preserves both movement and situatedness, errantry and rootedness, opacity and intelligibility.

The importance of such hybridization is not merely theoretical but also deeply existential, as it concerns not abstract intellectual debates but the lived experience of individuals navigating multiple cultural identities. Consider the Italian Egyptian teenager growing up in Milan’s Corvetto district, a figure whose search for belonging oscillates between the streets of his Italian upbringing and the familial warmth of Cairo. His experience embodies the challenges and potentialities of relation: his identity is neither singular nor fixed, yet it cannot dissolve into an amorphous globality. The framework developed here suggests that his path forward lies not in an impossible return to a singular root, nor in an embrace of pure de-territorialized flux, but in a mediated, situated negotiation of his *fūdo*—his personal archipelago of belonging.

Ultimately, this theoretical synthesis underscores the necessity of relational identity as both a mode of being and a political imperative. In an era of forced displacement, climate crisis, and cultural reconfigurations, the interplay between relation and *fūdo* offers a

model for conceiving diversity as neither chaotic nor rigid but as the generative motor of human existence.

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