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Wastelands.
Eco-narratives in Contemporary Cultures in English

Edited by Oriana Palusci and Héliane Ventura

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Thomas Glave's Queer Eco-phenomenology

Abstract: Contrary to the colonial fantasy which sees the 'new world' as the reproduction of a utopian garden of Eden, the Caribbean has often represented a sort of wasteland for its own inhabitants, and this not only because of the history of Colonialism and more recently Neo-colonialism, but also because of the enforcement of institutionalised practices like heteronormativity. Drawing on second wave Ecocriticism, particularly on Eco-phenomenology and on Queer Ecology, this paper intends to explore the way in which the contemporary Jamaican writer Thomas Glave articulates an alternative to the violence of heteronormativity in the Caribbean (specifically in Jamaica, where homosexuality is still illegal) by turning to the natural world linked to the Caribbean land- and seascape. Drawing on the aquatic imagery offered by the Caribbean Sea, both in "Whose Caribbean?" (2005) and in "Jamaican, Octopus" (2013) Glave emphasises the creative, (re)productive potential of sexual pleasure and fluidity in order to resist the discourse that does not only link queer existence and (non-reproductive sexual) practices with 'waste', but that also 'justifies' the violence perpetrated on queer bodies in Jamaica. The exploration of the 'queer' figure of the octopus, for example, enables Glave to advance what I term a queer eco-phenomenology through which he finds a language that, by voicing the violence of the queer experience and the 'unspeakability' of queer desire in the Caribbean, discloses the empowering potential for militant change.

Keywords: *abjection, Caribbean, ecocriticism, human waste, queer-ecology, Thomas Glave*

Caribbean Queer Heterotopia

Instead of seeing the landscape as a passive thing, to be manipulated, to have your formulae imposed upon it, we entered into a dialogue with it.
(Wilson Harris, *The Radical Imagination*)

In 2008 the American writer of Jamaican descent (or 'Jamerican' as he likes to define himself)¹ Thomas Glave published *Our Caribbean*: a ground-breaking anthology of lesbian and gay narratives from the Caribbean. In the introduction to the volume, Glave recalls the obstacles that he encountered in finding a publisher for the manuscript which was considered too "narrow" in topic to be valuable for the publishing market:

What, I wondered, did they [some American publishers] in their continental North American worlds – context rife with spurious images and conjuring of the *Caribbean as a fetishized "paradise" for tourists* – really know about our lives? The Caribbean, as packaged globally for tourists, purposely obscures quotidian (and often poor) Antillean lives – existences rendered as of scant importance beyond obsequious servitude in the generally consumer-directed

¹ See Thomas Glave, "Between Jamaica(n) and (North) America(n): Convergent (Divergent) Territories", in *Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 90-115, 91.

packaging. Lesbian and gay lives generally do not enter into this truncated representation at all, unless they surface in some momentary wink of sexual tourism.²

² Glave, ed., *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Durham: Duke U. P., 2008), 4 [emphasis mine].

In today's consumer-oriented capitalist society, as Glave's words suggest, the legacy of Western colonialist constructions of the Caribbean as a utopian paradise remains dominant. This neo-colonial construction overshadows the everyday lives and struggles not only of poor people, but also of queer people whose existences are considered of scarce importance.

The attribution of a lower value to certain lives seems to point to the understanding of queer people, not only in some Caribbean countries but also within the context of any heteronormative system, as human waste:

There are many ways in which queer existence and practices are culturally coupled with waste. Gay men's lives, for instance, are often posited as "wasted," because by wasting their seed in non-procreative sexual practices, they waste the fatherly inheritance and break the clan's lineage – not unlike the biblical prodigal son who "scattered his substance, living riotously".³

³ Tomasz Sikora, "Queer/Waste", in Tadeusz Rachwał, ed., *Rubbish, Waste and Litter: Culture and Its Refuse/al* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo SWPS Academica, 2008), 378.

Coupled with waste, the lives of queer people are not only considered 'worthless' or 'defective' (which are synonyms of waste) but can also face vicious aggressions causing, in certain circumstances, severe injuries and even death. This is particularly true in Jamaica where homosexuality is still illegal and punishable with up to ten years of imprisonment sometimes inclusive of hard labour. Forced to live into a sort of psychological wasteland – as a way of life that is spiritually and emotionally arid and unsatisfying – queer people in Jamaica, as *Human Rights First* reports, face violence and discrimination also at a material level as physical aggressions and unequal access to housing, employment, and healthcare are part of their daily lives.⁴ As documented by the *Jamaican Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays* (J-FLAG) – a human rights organisation of which Glave is a founding member – between 2009 and 2012 there were 231 reports of discrimination and violence based on gender identity and/or sexual orientation in Jamaica, an estimate which leaves aside many more cases of unreported violence for fear of revenge.⁵

⁴ Human Rights First, "The World as It Should Be": Advancing the Human Rights of LGBT People in Jamaica" (updated July 2015), <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/HRF-Jamaica-Report-final.pdf>, accessed 7 September 2015.

⁵ Ibid.

The violence resulting from the widespread homophobia in Jamaica is nothing more than the exacerbation of the constitution of queer people as abject within heteronormative systems. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'bare life' in *Homo Sacer* (1995) and in particular on how the exclusion of the *homo sacer* from citizenship is necessary to define the unity of the *polis*,⁶ Christopher Schmidt affirms:

⁶ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1998 [1995]).

Even in the contemporary moment, state sovereignty over the reproductive

lives of its citizens depends on some excrescence of “bare life,” such that state-sanctioned ideologies of heterosexuality and the production of family life have – until perhaps very recently – depended on the denial of rights to homosexuals in order to define the “rightness” of heterosexual marriage.⁷

⁷ Christopher Schmidt, *The Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbury, Schuyler and Goldsmith* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 162.

The vilification, and subsequent abjection, of queer people is therefore instrumental to the consolidation of heterosexuality as the norm in society. In *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980) the Bulgarian linguist, philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva uses the term ‘abjection’ in order to define the processes of exclusion and boundary setting involved in subject formation.⁸ For Kristeva, abjection refers to the human reactions of horror, nausea, and so on, caused by a breakdown in meaning when facing the loss of distinction between the subject and the object, or between the self and the other.⁹ The permeability of the body represented by its fluids (e.g. faeces, blood, sweat, sperm), and especially the decomposition inherent in the corpse, epitomise the abject for Kristeva:

⁸ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia U. P., 1982 [1980]).

⁹ See Dino Felluga, “Modules on Kristeva: On the Abject”, *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* (Purdue University, 2011), <http://www.purdue.edu/guidetothory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>, accessed 9 May 2015.

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.¹⁰

¹⁰ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

Through a casting off of the abject, which is neither subject nor object, the ‘I’ establishes and consolidates the contours of its own subjectivity in order to emerge. As Kristeva stresses: “[i]t is ... not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”.¹¹ It is exactly through the transgression of the borders that regulate heteronormative behaviour that queer people (but the same is true for women and black people in the context of sexist and racist systems respectively) become abject: as they are excluded from the social body, “discharged as excrement”¹² or, literally, human waste. Since the abject represents that something which threatens the ‘order’, its casting off is therefore essential for the consolidation of hegemonic identities and, as Judith Butler suggests drawing on Iris Marion Young, instrumental in understanding sexism, homophobia, and racism: “[t]he repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an “expulsion” followed by a “repulsion” that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation”.¹³ Similarly, as Darieck Scott maintains in his *Extravagant Abjection* (2010), where he draws both on

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), 169.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 170. See also Iris Marion Young, “Abjection and Oppression: Dynamics of Unconscious Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia”, in Arleen B. Dallery et al., eds., *Crisis in Continental Philosophy* (Albany, SUNY Press, 1990), 201-214.

Kristeva's concept of the abject and on Frantz Fanon's discussion on how blackness functions in Western cultures as a repository for fears about sexuality, in Western racialised heteropatriarchy black people, and especially black queer people, learn to live in and as abjection.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Dariack Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York U. P., 2010).

¹⁵ Glave, ed., *Our Caribbean*, 4.

In the tension between the utopian representation of the Caribbean as a "fetishized "paradise" for tourists"¹⁵ and the rather dystopian consideration of queer people as human waste within the context of homophobia in Jamaica, Glave imagines in his writing a diversity of responses in which strongly opposed elements co-exist: a 'heterotopia', to say it with Michel Foucault, that is an ensemble of all the real places, sometimes counter-sites, within a culture that are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted".¹⁶ Places of this kind" says Foucault, "are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality", they are, like the mirror, at once absolutely

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", trans. by Jay Miskowicz, *Architecture/Movement/Continuité* (October 1984 [1967]), 3.

¹⁷ Ivi.

real and unreal.¹⁷ In order to give voice to the queer experience in the Caribbean and to shed light on how the history of the region has contributed to shape it, Glave presents a Caribbean 'queer' heterotopia, where "both real and imagined social and political elements are experienced together, in a complex dialogue",¹⁸ by turning to the Caribbean landscape in "Whose Caribbean? An Allegory, in Part" (2005) and to the aquatic imagery in "Jamaican, Octopus" (2013). In their interrelation not only of the material embodied experience and the imagination but also of the human and the natural world, both meditations¹⁹ enable Glave to create an eco-phenomenology, that is "a study of the interrelationship between organism and world in its metaphysical and axiological dimensions".²⁰ He then uses this eco-phenomenology not only to register the violence on queer bodies in Jamaica but above all to expresses the capacity of queer people in the Caribbean to build up from the pain in order to re-create worlds in which to belong.

¹⁸ Elaine Savory, "Utopia, Dystopia and Caribbean Heterotopia: Writing/Reading the Small Island", *New Literature Review*, 47-48 (2011), 35.

¹⁹ I use the term 'meditation' in order to emphasise the hybridity of these texts in which Glave interweaves the speculative philosophical form (typical of essay writing) with the expression of intimate personal feeling. See Anthony Levi, "Meditation", in Tracy Chevalier, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Essay* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), 550-551.

²⁰ Charles S. Brown, and Ted Toadvine, "Eco-Phenomenology: An Introduction" in Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, eds., *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), xi-xxi, xiii.

Voicing the Unsayable

The sea. The sea has locked them up. The sea is History.
(Derek Walcott, *The Sea is History*)

If on the textual surface, "Jamaican, Octopus", as the author himself suggests, represents Glave's attempt to come to terms with his many selves (i.e. writer, artist, political activist, intellectual),²¹ on a deeper level it encapsulates his struggle to reconcile his being Jamaican and queer in order to "tell the story not yet written, that must be written" (*JO*, 94). This unwritten, and unwriteable, story will become clearer as Glave's text, and my exploration of it, evolves, but for the moment let us consider why – as he tries very hard to move, "even swim, sentence by sentence" (*JO*, 92) through his text – Glave decides to

²¹ See Glave, "Jamaican, Octopus" in *Among the Bloodpeople. Politics and Flesh* (New York: Akashic Books, 2013), 91-105, 91-92. From now on quoted 'JO' in the text.

embody a sea creature, and an octopus at that:

Octopus? But yes. The idea, or rather reality, of myself as an octopus ... emerged earlier this year as a more or less private joke with a friend; a joke with (as that friend understood it) a distinctly erotic center well-rooted in manifestations of a sort of intimate “queerness” ... between us ... experienced not so much as frank desire but rather as intimate and tacit understanding between us of our discreet and generally verbally unexpressed, most secret desires. (*JO*, 91)

In a private joke with a friend, the figure of the octopus emerges as something symbolising an intimate, and verbally unexpressed, queer desire. The subtlety of this desire, understood tacitly and experienced secretly (as if underwater), becomes the *leitmotiv* of Glave’s meditation.

And so, toward exploration of a kind – my own non-linear journey into a sort of interior – I must consider octopuses. Queer creatures. And mutable. Mutable in form, to a degree, and size, although not, unlike some other sea creatures, mutable in gender; creatures that possess the ability to change shape ... and color (and so ... avoid detection), and that regularly seek ... invisibility by way of camouflage ... they seek to remain unseen, or at least largely often unrecognizable as octopuses. (*JO*, 92)

Octopuses’ capacity of remaining unseen by camouflaging in order to avoid danger and death, their moving underneath the water surface (read under the radar), their living in an environment which seems to be mainly populated by other species (i.e. fish, crabs, sharks) and in which nothing else quite like themselves exists, all point to a parallelism with the life of queer people in Jamaica. For, like octopuses, queer people in Jamaica have to remain unseen, their behaviour pass for heteronormative, lest they face criminal persecution, homophobic violence, even death. But, exactly like octopuses, they indeed exist, they might go under different names – ‘queer’, for example, is a very contested term in the Caribbean and in the Afro-diasporic cultures, as it is usually associated with white, male, upper class individuals – but they retain their place, albeit complicatedly negotiated, in Jamaican society.²² As Glave sustains in a 2014 interview: “(i)t may not be acceptable in Jamaica for a man to kiss another man on the road – as it still isn’t in many parts of the US and the UK – but it could be OK to receive a man discretely in your home; it depends on the contracts you have with those with whom your life interacts”.²³ The reference here, as Glave explains, is to the social contract that structures Jamaican culture and that revolves around the development of a particular form of kinship or social network that allows Jamaicans to collectively survive and help each other in the absence of social services, or other adverse conditions. It

²² My use of the term ‘queer’ does not only reflect the political praxis of challenging (hetero)normativity but is also aligned with Glave’s own view and work. See Glave, ed., *Our Caribbean*, 8-9 and Glave, “Whose Caribbean? An Allegory, in Part”, in *Words to Our Now*, 43-58, 245-246 [note 3]. From now on quoted ‘WC’ in the text.

²³ Glave interviewed by Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell in *The Queer Caribbean Speaks: Interviews with Writers, Artists, and Activists* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 33-59, 43.

is this emphasis on collective, reciprocal and relational aspects that characterises, in Glave's words, Jamaica as a "'We' society, as opposed to an 'I' one".²⁴ Opposing the limiting perspective which sees Jamaica only as a homophobic place, Glave presents in his work the complexity and the ambiguity of the country where familial ties, or other types of social kinships (i.e. 'play uncles', 'play aunties'), may prevent homophobic outbreaks, and where material wealth may buy some privacy, and therefore keep violence and anti-homosexual law enforcement relatively at bay. It is in this sense that the title of Glave's meditation – "Jamaican, Octopus" – has to be intended: as a complex negotiation between two collective forms of identification, one national (Jamaican) the other sexual (octopus as queer), typographically separated by a comma. If, on the one hand, the comma signifies the impossibility of being both Jamaican and queer, on the other hand the small pause or caesura that it represents delineates a possibility, albeit deferred and/or secretly taking place, of a co-articulation.

Among the characteristics that connect Caribbean queer people with octopuses, Glave mentions also the threat represented by the octopuses' mating exercise (both male and female octopuses die within a few months after mating) which seems to refer to HIV and AIDS that continue to claim many lives especially among men who have sex with men in some Caribbean countries, with Jamaica sadly in the lead.²⁵ Another characteristic is the presence of melanin both in the octopus' ink and in people's skin. Used as a defence strategy, the ink released by the octopus to confuse the enemy and escape is possibly used by Glave to hint at what Édouard Glissant has termed the "right to opacity",²⁶ particularly to the expression he uses in *Le discours antillais* (1981): "the welcome opaqueness, through which the other escapes me".²⁷ The right to opacity is, in fact, a defence against understanding in a hierarchical and objectifying way which resists the 'transparency' required by the Humanist tradition of the Western *cogito* to safeguard the Other's difference, and represents therefore the opacity that Glave seeks in the underwater world that he conjures up. What particularly strikes Glave's interest is, nevertheless, octopuses' ability to perform autotomy. From the Greek *auto-* 'self-' and *tome* 'severing', the term refers to a self-amputation involving a discard of one or more of the animal appendages, usually used during mating or as a form of self-defence when confronted with dangerous situations (i.e. to elude the grasp of the predator or to distract it in order to escape). In Glave's parallelism, the octopus' physical dismemberment seems to hint at the physical violence and emotional loss that queer people in Jamaica experience on a daily basis and that Glave poignantly expresses at the end of the open letter that in 2008 he addressed to Bruce Golding, the then Prime Minister of Jamaica:

²⁵ See "HIV and AIDS in the Caribbean", *AVERT: AVERTing HIV and AIDS*, <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-around-world/caribbean>, accessed 17 May 2015.

²⁶ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997 [1990]), 189.

²⁷ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: U. P. of Virginia, 1989 [1981]), 162, cit. in Celia M. Britton, *Édouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: U. P. of Virginia 1999), 18-19.

And if indeed I am murdered in Jamaica sometime in the future for being homosexual, please do make sure to tell my mother how sorry – how very sorry – you are, and will always be. She will need to hear it. With my face slashed wide open by a machete and my genitals undoubtedly cut off and shoved down my throat – the way our despised murdered are often found in open gullies and roadsides, the way too many believed to be homosexual have been discovered in the past – I will not be able to tell her.²⁸

²⁸ Glave, “An Open Letter to the Prime Minister of Jamaica (June 2008)”, in *Among the Bloodpeople*, 35.

The hideous image of the lynching of queer bodies, which often involves a castration uncannily evoking the not so old lynching of black males, is re-signified by Glave not only by somehow attaching agency to the octopus’ mutilation (which, albeit due to force majeure, is self-imposed and envisages the later regeneration of the lost appendage), but especially through what he witnesses via his submersion, his venturing, in the shape of an octopus, into what he cannot name, but so skilfully conjures up:

into the waves, the waters, into the blue and green depths of what would become my deeper venturing into–into–
Was the–*is* the–“_____” at the end of that preceding sentence unspeakable? Unwriteable? Whether it was or not, whether it is today or not, an empty space remains there. (*JO*, 96)

In order to find a language to express the unsayable – a difficult task, typographically marked by ellipsis, elisions and dashes – Glave has to turn to water, and to the Caribbean Sea in particular: the sea of his ancestors or what he has always known “personally and primordially as the Sea of We” (*JO*, 95). In those ancestral waters, Glave conjures up the time when, a twelve year old boy, he drowned for the first time led into the depths by an elderly man-octopus whose skin had the “shifting tones of primordial sand, light to dark to light” (*JO*, 95); an experience that irrevocably altered his life and that marked the beginning of his journey into a “kind of queerness” (*JO*, 95). By “swimming in the blue realm of (hopefully) fathomless imagining” (*JO*, 94) – here memory and imagination cross-fertilise each other – Glave conjures up what he witnessed at the bottom of the sea: a group of jubilant men who appear to be of all ages and that, completely undressed, execute sets of somersaults that occasionally stir the sand at the bottom of the sea. At the end of each set of somersaults, these “more-or-less men” (*JO*, 99) – because, recalling Glissant’s right to opacity, he maintains: “it isn’t always easy beneath the sea to know for certain what exactly men should look like” (*JO*, 98) – engage in autotomy, just like an octopus would:

upon the groups’ completion of the final somersault in the set, each more-or-less man’s penis detached, apparently painlessly and with no trauma or

surprise, in the hand of the man next to him, who simply raised the detached (and still fully erect) penis to his mouth, where he kissed it, then squeezed it gently. He then placed it very carefully and with the gravest precision firmly between his buttocks ... Thus all of these more-or-less men continued their cavortings, postsomersaults, in a penis-less state. (*JO*, 220 [note 2])

This scene, whose description Glave confines to a note as if emphasising once more its inexpressibility, re-inscribes the severance of the genital organs in order to deprive it of its violent nature by linking it to octopuses' mating exercises. In a sort of meticulous ritual that celebrates the 'love that does not dare speak its name', its desire, yearnings, mutuality, Glave manages to give voice to it – literally 'speak its name' – at the bottom of the sea, where dreaming happens and the strict categories of identification ruling above the waves become blurred: "I dreamt often beneath the sea, but rarely on land, at least not until I departed Jamaica" (*JO*, 103). In a penis-less state which figuratively hints at the abolishment of the legacy of patriarchy, the more-or-less men are jubilant, we learn, because they each possess what Glave refers to as a 'pussy': "(depending on your geographical origin) manpussy or man's pussy, or whatever else so many above the waves might choose to call it" (*JO*, 99-100). As a "*site of pleasure*", this 'pussy' has nothing to do with the dark opened space left by the detached penis, but resides "out of sight between their [the men's] tightly clenched buttocks ... and for all anyone knows, ... elsewhere still" (*JO*, 100).

Glave conjures up and openly writes about the unmentionable, the most hated and feared thing in patriarchal cultures:

a womanish thing, as in a womanish man: a man who has a "pussy" instead of a _____ (please fill in the blank); a man who does not necessarily put above all else his cock, and opts instead, as many men do, to be plunged: to be bored through well into the depths of his previously unknown and unknowable, unspeakable pussy. (*JO*, 102-03)

The association of anal penetration among gay men with women's sexual passivity represents a long-standing preoccupation and fear in a number of patriarchal societies, in which, as Leo Bersani argues, "*(t)to be penetrated is to abdicate power*".²⁹ Bersani draws on Michel Foucault's discussion on how in Ancient Greek culture, because of the isomorphism between sexual and social relations, civic authority was incompatible with sexual passivity. In other words, social and sexual relations were structured according to the same dichotomous hierarchies opposing dominant and subordinate, active and passive, and so on, with the first set occupying the positive side of the divide, so that "in sexual behaviour there was one role that was intrinsically honourable

²⁹Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", in Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996 [1987]), 212.

and valorized without question: the one that consisted in being active, in dominating, in penetrating, in asserting one's superiority".³⁰

Considering that 'passive' anal sex is disregarded even in cultures that do not consider sexual relations between men as unnatural or sinful,³¹ it results that being the receptive partner in an anal intercourse means embodying the position of the abject. Drawing on Mary Douglas' work *Purity and Danger* (1966),³² Butler explains that – since the margins of all systems are considered vulnerable and, through their permeability, dangerous, and considering the body of the individual as a synecdoche for the social body – anal and oral sex among men, via a symbolic and material penetration of the borders of the subject, transgress, and therefore threaten, the hegemonic heteronormative order that gives rise to the Western *cogito*.³³

"If the rectum is the grave", maintains Bersani with reference to male-to-male anal intercourse, "in which the masculine ideal (an ideal shared – differently – by men *and* women) of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death".³⁴ The possibility of such practice to provoke a shattering of the identity, of self-dismissal, should be celebrated, according to the theorist, for its potential to deconstruct a patriarchal system largely based on masculinist domination and could be thought of, therefore, as "our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence".³⁵ The masculinist fear of losing power, as the base for misogynist and homophobic violence, is exacerbated in Jamaica, reminds Glave, by the country's traumatising history of slavery that has had a strong impact on the understanding of masculinity:

It seems plausible to assume that at the present-day end of such a history, our bodies would be – are – very fraught subjects that also spent centuries as objects, or at least as beast of burden that could also be sexually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually abused. Take all of that ... and imagine how Jamaican masculinity must have been influenced by this history and reality. Look at how men in Jamaica today, across social classes, perform their masculinity – how and from whom they learn it, and the ways that, as is the case everywhere, sexism and misogyny go hand in glove with masculine supremacy, and with homophobia.³⁶

The erasure of part of the history of slavery (e. g. the sexual exploitation and rape of enslaved black men by white men, homosexuality, etc.), as Darieck Scott reminds us, has served to secure not only white heterosexual identity (while also saving it from guilt), but also black male identity, through a denial that renders more abstract the notion of lost or stolen manhood.³⁷ In other words, if for "black people in general, but for black men in particular, the abject is *like* the feminine ... that is, to be abjected is to be feminized",³⁸ then the disavowal of a forced (rape and/or castration) or chosen (homosexuality) 'feminisation' becomes an instrument to recast an image of unchallenged

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990 [1984]), 215.

³¹ See Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", 212.

³² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1966]).

³³ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 168.

³⁴ Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?", 222.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Glave interviewed by Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell in *The Queer Caribbean Speaks*, 40.

³⁷ Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*, 149.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

autonomous selfhood (necessarily masculine and epitomised by the Phallus as the symbol of patriarchal authority) in the face of racism and exploitation.

Jamaican standards of masculinity, together with the widespread idea that homosexuality was something foreign to the country and antithetic to black skin, inevitably influenced also Glave in his growing up between New York (USA) and Kingston (Jamaica). As a child he remembers being loathed by many people, to include members of his family, because of his ‘failing’ to fit into the mould of the ‘Black man’ or the ‘Black Caribbean man’, being perceived, instead, as “faggot-ish” or “unmanly”.³⁹ He explains how the dissociation of homosexuality from black skin, as well as the stereotypical linking of black skin with virility and sexual potency, and on the contrary of lighter skin with effeminacy and sexual ambiguity, are all a legacy of “plantation mythologies”, whose constructed knowledge has been naturalised and transmitted in history.⁴⁰

³⁹ Glave interviewed by Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell in *The Queer Caribbean Speaks*, 45.

⁴⁰ Ivi.

Towards a Queer Eco-phenomenology

...true democracy, as fragile as the most endangered of ecosystems, requires respect for and attendance to not only its ideal and aims, but also its scrupulous, honourable practice.
(Thomas Glave, “Whose Caribbean?”)

Since modern understandings of sexuality and race are naturalised by being grounded in biological discourses (e.g. Linnaeus’ plant taxonomies in his 1735 *Systema Naturae* developed into sexualised and racialised systems of human categorisation),⁴¹ in both “Jamaican, Octopus” and “Whose Caribbean?” Glave offers an alternative paradigm to rethink the biosocial construction of the natural world. In this gesture, he follows in the footsteps of a previous generation of Caribbean writers who turned to “non-human nature as a source of both cultural and linguistic regeneration”.⁴² As DeLoughrey, Gosson and Handley have highlighted in the introduction to their edited collection *Caribbean Literature and the Environment* (2005), in the Caribbean the history of transplantation (of people, plants, animals, pathogens, etc.) has contributed to the development of an environmental ethic connected to a peculiar sense of place.⁴³ This environmental ethic brought Caribbean writers to refuse the simple depiction of the natural world (privileged by the white settlers) and to emphasise, instead, the strong relationship between landscape/seascape and power.⁴⁴ In this context it is not only important to consider the specific relationship to the natural world that colonialism produced (e.g. the plantation as a site of violence and exploitation), but also, and especially, the emergence of other sites – mountain ranges, mangrove swamps, provision grounds, etc. – that, by embodying the slaves’ resistance to the plantocracy, created alternative (and

⁴¹ See Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); Elizabeth DeLoughrey et al., eds., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 6-7; DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, eds., *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2011), 10-12.

⁴² Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Ecocriticism: The Politics of Place”, in Alison Donnell and Michael A. Bucknor, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 267.

⁴³ See DeLoughrey et al., eds., *Caribbean Literature and the Environment*, 2-3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

oppositional) communities.⁴⁵ Through his figurative underwater community of men-octopus Glave draws on this tradition in order to develop what Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson name a queer ecology (which Glave also entrenches into the body's phenomenological dimension: a queer eco-phenomenology), that is a critical analysis of the interrelations between nature and sexuality as they exist and are produced "institutionally, scientifically, politically, poetically, and ethically" in order to engender a sexual politics that encompasses these discourses to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of sexuality (and nature).⁴⁶ If, for example, wilderness is usually highly heterosexualised and heterosexuality becomes naturalised so that all non-reproductive sexualities appear as deviant,⁴⁷ Glave turns to the water to express a sexual fluidity that conjures up a sort of primordial hermaphroditism deeply embedded in nature.

⁴⁵ See Anissa Janine Wardi, *Water and the African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), especially the third chapter.

⁴⁶ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, eds., *Queer Ecologies. Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2010), 5.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4; 7.

⁴⁸ Glave interviewed by Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell in *The Queer Caribbean Speaks*, 55.

Influenced by his fascination for the presence of hermaphroditism in a number of African deities,⁴⁸ he populates both texts with characters whose sexualities are complex and ambiguous, from the octopus-men with their 'man-pussies' and the "older woman" with her "time-toughened penis-cock ... heavy hoary balls and all" in "Jamaican, Octopus" (105), to the dreaming child "that was both female and male" and whose bodily features are strongly interwoven with the Caribbean landscape in "Whose Caribbean?":

AND SO IT CAME TO PASS THAT UPON THAT TIME, NOT SO long ago, in that part of the world, there lived a child who dreamed.... The child – let us know him/her as "S/He" – possessed a slender penis of startlingly delicate green, the truest color of the sea that s/he had always loved... as s/he also possessed a pair of luminous blue breasts the tone of the purest skies.... Nipples did not grow at the end of the child's breasts, but rather berries the inflamed color of hibiscus in its most passionate surrender to the sunset and dawns that for millennia had washed over that place. The child also possessed a vagina and uterus, which ... produced at least twice or three time per year ... a race of brazen dolphins – creatures the fierce color of the sun.... The child dreamed; again, nothing unusual in what would come to be known by some as a region of dreamers. S/He dreamed of tamarinds, of course, and star-apples and green mangoes that, eventually rendered senseless by the day's stunning heat, plunged from their trees to ooze their fragrant juices along the largely still unexplored inner paths of her/his thighs. (*WC*, 43-44)

The child that Glave conjures up opposes the culturally created masculine/feminine strict duality to emphasise the multiplicity and ambiguity that originates in nature. Her/his body assumes the forms and colours of the Caribbean, so much as to become its allegory; even the eroticism of her/his dreaming is conveyed through a metaphorical reference to ripe local fruit: either indigenous as the star apple, or imported during the colonial period, like tamarinds and mangoes. The natural landscape of this (partial) allegory of the

Caribbean soon becomes populated with violent images of a faded, but not vanished, colonial past. Between memories of the Middle Passage (“tormented hands outstretched, at last vanished forever beneath the night-blackened waves”) and of unsympathetic plantation sceneries (“shrugging mountains, and cane. Always cane. Field upon field of it, whispering. Muttering”), the child is nevertheless able to evoke hope, even joy, as the “plummeting stars” provide “a last flash of hope... to condemned slaves” (*WC*, 44). The heterotopic presence of the child moves then to contemporary Caribbean sceneries of unstable economy, inadequate housing and health care, unemployment, sexual exploitation, and homophobia.

The child’s ubiquity and atemporality gives her/him a magical, extraordinary aura: s/he “must have been some sort of god/dess” says Glave (*WC*, 48). A god/dess or the embodiment of the *hieros gamos* as Gloria Anzaldúa poignantly argues in a passage of *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) with reference to non-heteronormative sexualities:

Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures’ magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift. There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 19.

Both male and female, the ‘extra-ordinary’ child intimates an evolution of the common conception of the human while pursuing a very ordinary desire: “out of waves and centuries of un-voicedness, complete despair ... s/he yearns for two things only: to be loved, of course, and to be safe” (*WC*, 45). The child’s presence and longing, already an allegory of the (queer) Caribbean, becomes embodied, Glave suggests, in the work of the activists like himself with the J-FLAG, who against all odds continue to dream, to fight for equality in Jamaica, the Caribbean, and in the world. In Jamaican patois he exhorts the Caribbean queers to “stop de foolishness and get past de fear and get on wid making a place fi weself inna dis ya country”, because now they have a choice, that is to join the company of dreamers “who have survived and, for all I know, just might, beneath their sensible tropical clothes, sport blue breasts and green penises and uteruses filled beyond capacity with cavorting baby dolphins” (*WC*, 48).

His choice of the patois responds to the attempt to find a language for the expression of a queer desire, that would encapsulate the past and present struggles of the Caribbean people and therefore bear a strong political valence: a sort of ‘nation language’ as theorised by the Barbadian poet and theorist Edward Kamau Brathwaite.⁵⁰ Brathwaite’s ‘nation language’ – as an underground language that, brought to the Caribbean by the African slaves, continued to evolve over time through its use by, among the others, calypsonians, storytellers, and poets – inspires Glave in his search for a new language that could express his desire for change. In other words, as Brathwaite denounced the profound colonial influence of standard English in Caribbean education and institutional life resulting in a loss of “syllabic intelligence”⁵¹ to express experiences unique to the Caribbean (the famous expression “the hurricane does not roar in pentameters”),⁵² so Glave tries to find a language to say the unsayable within the context of a homophobic system, trying to approximate the natural, environmental and bodily experience proper of the ‘nation language’:

this *total expression* comes about because people be in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty (‘unhouselled’) because they come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their very *breath* rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines. They had to depend on *immanence*, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves.⁵³

The importance of the immanent experience, of the very breath, guides Glave’s meditations as he draws on the characteristics of the ‘nation language’ (e.g. the influence of noise and rhythm, and of the oral collective tradition in meaning making),⁵⁴ to create a sort of *continuum* in which meaning is achieved through the relational contribution of the community. And in fact “Jamaican, Octopus” opens with an epigraph by Brathwaite – “the unity is submarine” – which implies a sense of shared experience across time and space that reflects not only Jamaica’s kinship and social networks but also the real and imaginary underwater (queer) comm-unity of men-octopus. Through his submersion into the Sea of We, Glave seeks to remove his “I-ness” – again the tendency is to shatter the subjectivity – in order to connect to this *continuum*: “As the writer, I am not “I”: in this ideal world, the world of blue and shadow and octopuses ... I become nothing and nobody, as the voices and the people, and the cephalopods, emerge” (*JO*, 94). Glave’s submersion is a figurative descent not only into his innermost self but also, and especially, into a collective past of struggles (both black and queer) that enables him to imagine new forms of the human, that is to say to reimagine life outside of the paradigm embodied by the Western idea of “Man” as a theological-philosophical concept grounded in anti-black,

⁵⁰ See Kamau Brathwaite, “From History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry”, in Dohra Ahmad, ed., *Rotten English: A Literary Anthology* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2007), 458-468.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 462.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 464.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 467.

⁵⁴ As noise contributes to meaning, Glave has to recur to typographical expedients to express the loss of meaning in the transposition from oral to written text.

⁵⁵ See Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument”, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3.3 (Fall 2003), 257-337.

⁵⁶ Stacy Alaimo, “New Materialisms, Old Humanisms, or, Following the Submersible”, *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 19.4 (December 2011), 283.

⁵⁷ Alaimo’s reference to hermaphroditism in the quotation reflects Charles Darwin’s tracing back of human origins to an aquatic organism that possessed both sexes, and especially to the re-appropriation of this concept by feminist and queer theorists. See Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 2000).

⁵⁸ Timothy Clark, “Phenomenology”, in Greg Garrard, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2014), 288.

⁵⁹ See DeLoughrey, “Ordinary Futures: Interspecies Worldings in the Anthropocene”, in DeLoughrey et al., eds., *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 363.

misogynist, homophobic and colonialist/imperialist logics.⁵⁵ His submersion seems to recall Stacy Alaimo’s invitation in “New Materialism, Old Humanism” (2011):

Submersing ourselves, descending rather than transcending, is essential lest our tendencies toward human exceptionalism prevent us from recognizing that, like our hermaphroditic, aquatic evolutionary ancestor, we dwell within and as part of a dynamic, intra-active, emergent, material world that demands new forms of ethical thought and practice.⁵⁶

Glave’s ability to “slip more comfortably into [his] other skin, or skins, flesh and fleshed, of octopus” (*JO*, 91) allows him to express the unsayable, and to do so through a submersion rather than a transcendence, as suggested by Alaimo’s words which are mindful also of Glave’s interest in the creative potential offered by a speculation around hermaphroditism.⁵⁷ Glave is capable of connecting to nature while retaining the materiality of the body, therefore positing himself against the all rational master (and masculinist) narrative of the Western *cogito* with its refusal of the complications, risks and vulnerabilities associated to the material world and the corporeal. His eco-phenomenology resists “the tyranny of the scientific as the solely accepted model of the real”⁵⁸ to plunge into the “subaqueous depths where the most uninhibited imagining begins” (*JO*, 94).

The descent into the abyss of creative imagination, while retaining the lived reality of the embodied experience, represents thus a sort of ritual, an ablution, “a blessing... but also often a trial” (*JO*, 96), that he feels compelled to repeat every time he is with a lover when, removing himself from the lover’s embrace, he dashes to a sink or a bathtub, fills it with warm water, and breathe it as if in drowning to the lover’s disbelief or terror. In this gesture, as he fills his lungs with the water where his lover has previously washed himself or in which he has perhaps urinated, he objects himself, again by blurring the contours of his own subjectivity through an incorporation of the other’s fluids. Recalling Kristeva’s abjection, the reaction of the lover is necessarily one of horror: “after drowning yourself in his waters, he [the lover] regarded you with such open-eyed terror; indeed, with such a horror, as if you were a creature from the beyond (which in fact you were and are)” (*JO*, 98). As a creature of the beyond, whose porous intra-species boundaries put into question the concept of the human itself,⁵⁹ Glave submerses himself in order not only to conjure up the smell and touch of octopuses but also to remember the many times in which he, and others like him, have drowned:

We have drowned innumerable times and have returned with the sea and so

much more in our lungs and in all our secret, not yet eviscerated or automatized places; returned to the places and times in which, in spite of our drowning and certain need to drown in the future, so much, for each of us in so many different ways, still remains possible (*JO*, 104).

Conclusion: To Breathe in Water

... activism will occasionally begin in dreams, provided that it moves onward
from them into definite action.
(Thomas Glave, “Whose Caribbean?”)

It is clear that the dreaming dimension evoked by Glave throughout both meditations has an important militant aspect, as the dream, the imaginary – the epigraph of this section suggests – becomes a resource to think about the actual change to bring about in reality. His queer eco-phenomenology – which through the lenses of a queer politics embedded in the flesh considers ecological matters as deeply interwoven with issues of biopolitics – has the “potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” that call into question institutionalised heteronormative practices.⁶⁰ Not only does Glave render evident to the reader the wasteland in which queer people in Jamaica are forced to live in, but he embodies the abject itself. If queer sexualities are abjected because, by transgressing strict dualities, they threaten the stability of the Western *cogito* (white heterosexual bourgeois male), Glave embraces the abject exactly for its disruptive capacity: the dissolving of the male/female divide and of the unified subjectivity. In this respect, Glave is aligned with the queer diasporic tradition of the Caribbean which highlights the importance of complex and fluid sexual practices that do not claim stable identities, but rather emphasise the prevalence of ‘becoming’ over ‘being’. As Rinaldo Walcott sustains in “Queer Returns” (2009) where he discusses the articulation of a diasporic queer politics: “sexual practices both multiple and varied, do not require a manageable identity for their practice... The ethics of the situation calls for rights without identity claims, a much more difficult set of politics to actualize”.⁶¹ This practice is typical of global south queers who “continue to keep sexuality in flux, often offering some of the most provocative ways of re-imagining ... sexual minority practices ... and ... politics”.⁶² Glave’s provocative re-imagining and re-setting of sexual practices and desiring bodies opposes the heteronormative (and its mirroring homonormative) attempt to police and eventually erase such practices. His poetics is inevitably informed by a geographical (diaspora) and a sexual (queer) displacement. It involves what Sara Ahmed describes as “processes of disorientation and reorientation”.⁶³ In other words, both the experience of migration and that of being queer – that is to say of inhabiting a body that “does not extend the shape of this world, as a

⁶⁰ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York U. P., 2005), 2.

⁶¹ Rinaldo Walcott, “Queer Returns: Human Rights, the Anglo-Caribbean and Diaspora Politics”, *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, 3 (2009), 15.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶³ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2006), 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 19. world organized around the form of the heterosexual couple”⁶⁴ – involve the acquisition of a new perspective on reality, as the body adapts to new surroundings and the world takes on a “new shape and makes new impressions”.⁶⁵ Glave shares his experience in both meditations and critically uses the imagination in order to find a site for the articulation of an alternative reality. Hence the Sea of We, through which he swims in the shape of an octopus, represents the Caribbean (queer) heterotopia mentioned at the beginning on this paper – at the same time the real Caribbean Sea and the imaginative primordial sea of his ancestors – and so does the body of the dreaming child whose contours are enmeshed with the Caribbean landscape. They both empower Glave in the expression and restoration of an alternative historiography of suppressed queer desire, that challenges hegemonic accounts (colonialist, homophobic, etc.) and that simultaneously belongs to him and to the collective memory:

Since it is the nature, so to speak, of colonial power to suppress the history of their own violence, the land and even the ocean become all the more crucial as recuperative sites of postcolonial historiography. ... This makes the process of conservation and sustainability all the more ontologically powerful, because a gesture of destruction against land and sea, then, simultaneously becomes an act of violence against collective memory.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ DeLoughrey and George B. Handley, eds., *Postcolonial Ecologies*, 8.

Through the sea and the Caribbean landscape then, Glave recovers hidden and silenced stories. In other words, empowered by his journey through the sea, his voice becomes many voices that openly speak of desire, yearning and love, against the “autocratic silence” that, meant to erase, is imposed upon queer people in Jamaica and engenders their social death and annihilation.⁶⁷ As Glave claims in “Jamaican, Octopus”, it is exactly his surviving “in octopus skin” (*JO*, 103) – read in queer skin – that enables him to imagine and write about the unthinkable, the unspeakable, that is nevertheless grounded in real experiences:

The sort of facts that make octopuses and melanin-filled ink possible; that make evisceration, automatization, and public beheading possible; that make possible a man desperate to consume the closest water within reach finally unconcerned about drinking all of the water out of his lover’s dirt-ringed bathtub or unwashed kitchen sink; that man drowning as he drinks, knowing all the while that his drinking is as possible, and sometimes as necessary, as drowning. (*JO*, 104)

In a context rife with homophobic violence, like the Jamaican one where evisceration and public beheadings remain a reality, the rehabilitation by black queer people of their own bodies is not only legitimate, but absolutely necessary. If in the wasteland that they are forced to inhabit, even a basic

physical function like breathing can be difficult (metaphorically suggesting the possibility of death by drowning), then the re-writing, the re-signification of violent experiences can offer a possibility to re-imagine life otherwise. To breathe in water, to drown, can therefore signify to fill one's lungs with History, and especially with histories, and to empower oneself in order to find a language to express the unsayable. Believing in the "possibilities and surprises of language that, like desire, desire both vilified and celebrated, becomes fluid, protean, and capable of constant reinvention",⁶⁸ in his constant and exhausting (but very necessary) interrogation of history, in the closing lines Glave is finally able to 'hear' the sea, so he throws his head back "as if maybe drowning, in order to feel, and breathe, and *breathe* and listen" (*JO*, 105).

⁶⁸ Glave, "Between Jamaica(n) and (North) America(n)", 112.