Rereading the Diminutive:
Caribbean Chaos Theory in
Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Edouard Glissant, and Wilson Harris

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In the early 1990s, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Edouard Glissant, and Wilson Harris turned to the science of chaos theory for its rhetoric of how to upend received knowledge. The stories that these writers tell about discovering chaos theory are remarkably similar: upon hearing chaos theory described, each was struck by the aptness of the scientific discourse to his own intuitions and ideas about the formation of Caribbean culture and societies. Benítez-Rojo shares this paradigmatic anecdote:

In 1986, during a night when I was driving in my car at 15 miles per hour in a snowstorm, I turned on the radio. On an NPR station, they were interviewing a man named James Gleick. He was talking about a new science called Chaos. The theme interested me greatly, because I had a solid background in mathematics and he was talking about Benoît Mandelbrot and his fractal mathematics. That interview was an illumination for me. Right away I thought that everything I had learned in my life had now been uttered with the theory of Chaos. And so emerged The Repeating Island.¹

While Gleick’s description of chaos as a “new” science was illuminative for Benítez-Rojo, what was of interest to him was not new concepts but rather that concepts and ideas he already had about the Caribbean—“Everything I had learned in my life,” he claimed—now had a rhetorical framework. This order of discovery is important in the work of all three theorists. None seek to impose a new theory on the Caribbean; rather, the writers identify a powerful coincidence between chaos theory and ideas that previously arose organically from their observations and studies of Caribbean cultures and spaces.

Chaos theory emerged on the mass-media scene in the late 1970s, positing that tiny actions were related to grand-scale phenomena and popularizing the idea that nature’s apparent randomness could function along a different definition of order, one that privileged the continuous dynamism of differential repetition. Benítez-Rojo, Glissant, and Harris adopted chaos theory to bolster their thinking about global relations. Moreover, they suggest that the tenets of chaos theory, specifically nonlinear change and the coexistence of order and disorder, best explain the formation of Caribbean spaces and cultures. As was much discussed after the publication of Benítez-Rojo’s *Repeating Island*, the most prominent coincidence between the formation of the Caribbean and chaos theory is differential repetition, or the capacity for repetitions with a difference to enact minute changes that, over time, represent significant transformations. This essay proposes that for all three writers, repetition is the methodology that justifies the attention they give to the infinitesimal differences that separate each reiteration. As I will argue, given that analyses of small objects and movements populate their discussions of chaos theory in the Caribbean, their interest in chaos theory is aimed at revalorizing smallness.

The importance of chaos theory is that it provides Caribbean writers with a model for recasting the region’s place on the map and in contemporary geopolitical relations. In the chapter “Petit pays” in *One World in Relation*, Manthia Diawara’s documentary on Glissant’s philosophical work, Glissant discusses how to shift systems of allocating power throughout his career, summarizing his conviction that there is value in smallness:

> Je crois à l’avenir des petits pays. . . . Nous vivons encore sous l’idée du pouvoir et de la puissance. Mais peut-être que c’est déjà dépassé sans que nous nous rendions compte, peut-être que c’est déjà dépassé et que la puissance ne serve, ne suffise plus à régler les problèmes. . . .


3 Edouard Glissant: *One World in Relation*, dir. Manthia Diawara (Third World Newsreel, 2011). This documentary, based on interviews with Glissant, was filmed during a crossing of the Atlantic on the *Queen Elizabeth II* and in Martinique.
Auparavant, c’étaient les continents qui dominaient le monde. On disait, il y a cinq continents, il y a quatre races, mais nous savons aujourd’hui que ce n’est pas vrai. Il n’y a pas que les continents, il y a les archipels. . . . Donc la multiplicité vient de ces endroits un peu secrets, un peu méconnus qui bouleversent en eux-mêmes ce qui se fait dans le monde, le passage du monde, et qui en retentit sans qu’on en ait conscience sur les grandes surfaces continentales de puissance et de pouvoir.4

Here, Glissant suggests an affinity between smallness, speed, and multiplicity brought about by small changes in repetition over time that will echo throughout Benítez-Rojo’s and Harris’s writing as well. To amplify Glissant’s ideas with his sense of affection for the region, Diawara intercuts this three-minute reflection with audio of Cesaria Evora singing, “Small country, I love you so much,” in Cape Verde’s Sao Vicente Creole. As Glissant’s voiceover explains why he stands behind the potential of small places, the camera follows the direction of Glissant’s gaze over the vast sea to a group of industrial ships, all facing in the same direction. In contrast to the mechanisms of corporate globalization evoked by the tankers, Glissant notes that how we organize the world is always subject to change: counting land masses has given way to considering the seas and their islands. Following this example, he proposes the possibility that, in a similar move, the violent domination of empires might give way to another configuration of global relations, one in which smallness emerges as a core strength.

Smallness has two long-term benefits for Glissant. First, its density, which forces different elements to interact closely and generates complex multiplicities at a much more rapid rate than in large spaces. Second, its flexibility; unlike powerful but unwieldy empires, small countries are equipped to navigate transformations in the world’s economic and political structures precisely because their small size allows them to be nimble. Inspired by Harris’s use of diminutives, I also use the term to refer to the small movements that these writers explore in their discussions of chaos theory. More so than smallness, diminutive recalls the colonial context’s connotations of exoticized and endearing inferiority, as Natalie Melas has shown in her discussion of “catastrophic miniaturization” in Caribbean fiction.5 The history of using diminutives as terms of endearment for people of unequal status is part of what I argue these three writers aim to dismantle by examining smallness from the perspective of chaos.

4 The full citation, translated in the subtitles by Christopher Winks: “I believe in the future of small countries. I believe that economic upheavals will be more devastating in big countries because small countries will have indigenous resources that the big ones lack. The great powers are no longer certain of their ability to maintain domination of the world. Empires collapse, and empires aren’t eternal. But small entities that are able to subsist on their own because of their indigenous resources have, perhaps, more of a future in the complexity of the world than big ideas do. We are still living under the old idea of power and might, but maybe that’s outdated and we are not aware of it. Maybe it’s obsolete and power alone no longer suffices to settle problems. The complexity we spoke of occurs initially in small countries before resonating in the big ones, the complexity occurs in the archipelagoes before resonating in the continents. Previously, the continents dominated the world. We used to say there were five continents and four races; we know today that’s not true. There aren’t just five continents; there are the archipelagoes; there are all the oceans, which are sources of life. There aren’t just four races, there are hundreds. Therefore, multiplicity comes from those somewhat secret, somewhat unknown places that overturn in themselves what’s being created in the world, the world’s passage, and which resonate, without us knowing, on the great continental land masses of power and might.”

theory: they deploy the more readily legitimated discourse of scientific discovery to justify attending to processes that from other epistemological perspectives might escape notice, as in “Petit pays” in which Glissant claims that power is not a national asset. I examine how Benítez-Rojo and Harris, like Glissant, take up the problem of asserting the importance of the diminutive and reflect on the implications of the question, How do you ascribe importance to the apparently unimportant?

Benítez-Rojo, Glissant, and Harris differ in their uses of chaos theory, however. For example, as Celia Britton comments, Benítez-Rojo is concerned with finding common factors through Caribbean chaos in order to “lay claim to a certain cultural specificity,” whereas Harris consistently folds the Caribbean into a broader global postcolonial configuration, and, according to Curdella Forbes, Glissant highlights the role of chaos theory and Western science “in the context of global interdependence.” Moreover, the types of descriptions of Caribbean geographies as examples of chaos theory diverge: Glissant and Harris are relatively focused on specific places—Diamond Rock off Martinique’s southern coast and the interior of Guyana’s forests, respectively—whereas Benítez-Rojo tends to reference the sea as a general source of metaphor. Despite these differences in disposition, I propose that we read the three writers together in their shared use of chaos theory as an instrument of interruption that provides the occasion for reshaping interpretive practices around their various conceptions of Caribbean space. In the context of the Caribbean region, rendered incoherent by differences in histories, languages, and political realities, chaos theory offers a narrative for thinking about the region as a whole. Alongside the plantation, performance practices, and insular geographies, chaos theory offers a comparative approach for analyzing the region. My purpose in joining together readings of Benítez-Rojo’s, Glissant’s, and Harris’s evocations of chaos is to highlight how chaos theory provides each of them with a similar methodological example for how to leap across differences in scale and how to demonstrate the impact of small gestures on large phenomena.

In what follows, I compare the use of chaos by Benítez-Rojo in the introduction to Repeating Island, by Glissant in Poétique de la Relation, and by Harris in his essays “The Fabric of the Imagination,” “Continuity and Discontinuity,” and “The Music of Living Landscapes” in order to elicit how each writer mobilizes the discourse of chaos theory to articulate a methodology for thinking about the details of geographic and cultural production on a microscale and large-scale phenomena simultaneously. This methodology allows these writers to reframe the Caribbean region in itself, reconsider how it acts within global relations, and reflect on the well-rehearsed drawbacks of diminutives as well as on their potential.


7 See Sara Upstone, Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), for a comparative analysis of how these three writers use chaos theory to change conceptions of space and “undermine the authority of the territory and the map” (11).
Chaos theory offers these writers a wedge with which to destabilize received knowledge and therefore makes possible a radical rereading of Caribbean space. As Harris writes, gesturing well beyond the Caribbean region to a global postcolonial, “The true capacity of marginal and disadvantaged cultures resides in their genius to tilt the field of civilization so that one may visualize boundaries of persuasion in new and unsuspected lights to release a different apprehension of reality, the language of reality, a different reading of texts of reality.”

That destabilizing wedge relies on Caribbean activity analyzed by these writers in the most exquisite detail: that of the movement of rocks and leaves in the region’s geography and the development of regionally specific cultural performances and the practice of repetition in human movement. In order to elaborate the centrality of repetition and the methodologies of shifting scales in these writers’ use of chaos theory, I begin with an analysis of the rhetoric all three theorists deploy in their brief descriptions of chaos theory, then discuss how chaos theory provides them new ways of reading with which to challenge Eurocentric constructions of global relations. As a result, I argue these writers are able to pivot between looking inward to redefine the Caribbean region and looking outward to assert that attending to diminutive spaces bears on the functioning of massive global systems.

Chaos Theory’s New Ways of Reading

A fundamental allure of chaos theory for Benítez-Rojo, Glissant, and Harris is the new interpretive methods it opens. To describe what Harris and Benítez-Rojo will phrase as a new or different form of reading, they all evoke three prominent aspects of chaos theory: nonlinearity, repetition as their formation, and the shifts in the scales of time and size that nonlinear repetition produces. These aspects of chaos theory are evident in the simulations of a system’s behavior over time, for example, the Lorenz attractor, which, in tracking the activity of how gases trapped in a closed box move as they are heated and cooled, reveals two paradoxes. First, in a closed system, the movement of gases should be wholly predictable, and yet, as it appears to the naked eye in real time, the gases’ motion appears random, fluctuating at unpredictable times and speeds. But if this seemingly random movement is plotted out over a longue durée, a predictable pattern emerges: two ovals, traced innumerable times, are joined together at their bases such that they form the shape of a butterfly’s wings. Chaos theory renders this randomness sensible and the simulation of this complex feedback mechanism makes structures within apparent disorder. This unstinting repetition of minute movements

8 Wilson Harris, “Continuity and Discontinuity” in Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination (London: Routledge, 1999), 183 (italics in original). Written in 1970, “Continuity and Discontinuity” points to the long-standing nature of Harris’s goal to call attention to the theoretical and methodological work produced by marginalized peoples.

9 It is important to note that while these thinkers seize upon specific aspects of chaos theory and use these elements and images as poetic inspiration, in general, they do not aim for scientific exactitude.

produces a series of loops, each of which is metonymically contiguous to the previous and following lines, and each line transfers meaning to the next on the basis of associations built up over time. By identifying nonlinear change over time, chaos theory holds together the paradoxical ways order and disorder coexist through differential repetition.

I propose that for Benítez-Rojo, Glissant, and Harris, differential repetition is the method that they extract from chaos theory in order to further their aims to radically reread diminutives and the Caribbean region. Repetition with a difference, a concept drawn from both chaos theory and performance theory, justifies the attention that these three writers give to the examples of minute movement in Caribbean artistic aesthetics and geography, which I will discuss in the second section of this essay. Moreover, differential repetition describes the mode of thinking that resonates with specifically Caribbean phenomena, a way of thinking that while stressing similarity also affirms the distinctions between multiple iterations and the generation of momentum through repetition. Glissant is particularly explicit about this use of repetition in his own oeuvre: “Aussi bien la répétition est-elle, ici et là, un mode avoué de la connaissance. Reprendre sans répit ce que depuis toujours vous avez dit. Consentir à l’élan infinissimal, à l’ajout, inaperçu peut-être, qui dans votre savoir s’obstinent.” By broadening, refining, and clarifying ideas, the practice of repetition emerges as more than simply a reiteration of what is already known; it creates a way for thinking to shift with each minute propulsion. Put otherwise, we miss the larger transformation of ideas or development of patterns of relation when we neglect diminutive movements.

Yet, as Glissant implies in “Petit pays,” the world is configured to pay attention first and foremost to the large and the dominant. Chaos theory provides a rationale for turning our attention to that which appears insignificant when in the shadow of dominant power. Harris explains how chaos theory encourages attention to smallness in his 1990 essay, “The Fabric of the Imagination”:

12 As Kariamu Asante Welsh explains about the function of repetition in African dances used for transformation, “the more a movement is repeated, the greater the level of intensity.” Asante Welsh, World of Dance: African Dance, 2nd ed. (New York: Chelsea Books, 2010), 16.
13 Edouard Glissant, Poétique de la Relation (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 57. “Repetition, moreover, is an acknowledged form of consciousness both here and elsewhere. Relentlessly resuming something you have already said. Consenting to an infinitesimal momentum, an addition perhaps unnoticed that stubbornly persists in your knowledge.” Edouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 45; all English translations of Poétique are from this edition.
Quantum physics and the new science of chaos correspond in some degree in our age to a possible breakthrough from ritual habit, ritual normality that seals our eyes and ears. Only a few weeks ago, I learnt of the new science of chaos in which the subtle rhythm of a butterfly’s wing may signal the coming eruption of a storm in the changing climates of the globe. I was fascinated to hear of this, for it validated my own long-held intuitive premises of diminutive poles, namely, “the shadow of a dancing rose,” “the decrepitude of a lily” associated with Alice Bartleby, the “blade of grass” associated with Melville’s Bartleby, the “grain of dust or light” associated with Australian Byrne. To scan such frailties and diminutives in the text of fiction—my argument runs—is to unravel a thread in the dense loom or economy of being (density means economy), to unravel a thread that may sustain us to cope with an abysmal otherness whom and which we dread but which may also bring resources to alter and change the fabric of the imagination in the direction of a therapeutic, ceaselessly unfinished genesis.16

The butterfly effect to which Harris refers here reveals the relationship between the small and the large—it is neither causal nor certain, as Harris notes in his equivocating verb choice, “may signal.” As Stephen Kellert clarifies, it is not that every small event has large ramifications but rather that “in a chaotic system, each and every butterfly matters, and that is what produces intractable unpredictability.”17 The emphasis on each and every infinitesimal movement as having potential import, as highlighted by chaos theory, is precisely what requires a careful look at “diminutive poles” and not only dominant narratives.

Postcolonial theory has long challenged teleological articulations of history, a challenge that chaos theory sustains by upending Newtonian chronological time and Euclidean linear-based geometry, two examples of scientific epistemologies that privilege order over disorder. Rejecting received knowledge has a particular importance for Harris with regard to the context of literary history: according to Paul Sharrad, Harris’s survey of mid-twentieth-century Caribbean literature produces “a desperate cycle of defeat [that] seems to confront the construction of a Caribbean identity. . . . It is this view of Caribbean history that Wilson Harris specifically rejects.”18 Chaos theory provides Harris with a rhetoric for interrupting this cycle. In addition to opening up new approaches for rewriting history, one of the broad consequences of the rise of chaos theory is that it effectuated an intellectual shift from considering nonlinear dynamic systems “poor in order” to seeing them as “rich in information,” as N. Katherine Hayles has shown.19 Changing the conversation from poor to rich by changing methods of collecting, interpreting, and evaluating data is, I propose, what these three writers hope to achieve by integrating chaos theory into their philosophical work. Epistemological perspectives that can take the constant flux of fractal shorelines and nonlinearity into account provide a methodology for potentially rethinking global orders of importance.

beyond historiography and for intervening into cultural politics and the imagination that grounds economic development planning.20

The question of how to manage the diminutive is a major concern for Caribbean nations in terms of protecting political autonomy and economic health. The framework for these considerations is often whether it is possible to overcome the drawbacks of smallness, as Lloyd Best explores in his landmark essay “Size and Survival,” first published in 1966. In questioning the automatic assumption that smallness has only negative consequences, Best criticizes local elites for their failure to imagine models beyond that of North American corporations and proposes that economists study what has been overlooked, namely, the need “to perceive or create, and in any case, to exploit a multiplicity of little openings and opportunities.”21 He thereby ties programmatic development plans to imagination and perspective. As Natalie Melas notes in her reading of Aimé Césaire’s Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, “Smallness derives comparatively from an external gaze.”22 In offering a change of perspective and a radical rereading of proportional relations between large and small, chaos theory has the potential to impact the political and economic imagination of Caribbean nations. Glissant gestures to this potential impact in an aside in the essay “La plage noire” (“The Black Beach”): “Je me demandais si, dans de petits pays comme le nôtre (‘je crois à l’avenir des petits pays’), les perspectives économiques (leur inspiration) n’auraient pas dû être à l’image de la plage du Diamant: cycliques, changeantes, mutantes, parcourant une économie dont les vues d’ensemble changeraient à grande vitesse, selon les variations de la conjoncture.”23 Drawing on an affinity between speed of acceleration and small size,24 Glissant suggests that

20 In her discussion of narrative form, Jo Alyson Parker summarizes how chaos changes conceptions of temporality: “The Newtonian view of time is, after all, absolutist, predicated on notions of linearity and periodicity.” Jo Alyson Parker, Narrative Form and Chaos Theory (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5. However, “Newton’s notion of an absolute time, apparently running along a symmetrical line, cannot help us account for the temporal qualities of a chaotic system. The emergence of chaotic structures ‘demolishes the centuries-old myth of predictability and time-symmetric determinism, and with it any idea of a clockwork universe’” (10; Parker quotes Peter V. Coveney and Roger Highfield, The Arrow of Time: A Voyage through Science to Solve Time’s Greatest Mystery [New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992], 37). See also Ottmar Ette’s discussion of the contrast between Euclidean linear-based geometry and fractal geography such that “incoherent insularity becomes characteristic of a geographically coherent continent.” Ottmar Ette, “Islands, Borders, and Vectors: The Fractal World of the Caribbean,” in Lieven D’hulst, Jean-Marc Moura, Liesbeth De Bleeker, and Nadia Lie, eds., Caribbean Interfaces (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 122. Riffing off of the definition of a fractal, which is formed through the reiteration of one element, Erik Camayd-Freixas explicates in reference to Benítez-Rojo’s The Repeating Island that “each nucleus or fragment (read ‘island’) reproduces the image of the whole pattern.” Erik Camayd-Freixas, “El fractal de Mandelbrot: Del travestismo al Caos; Fuentes del nuevo realismo aleatorio de Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Mujer en traje de batalla,” Caribe 10, no. 1 (2007): 12.


22 Melas, All the Difference, 174.

23 Glissant, “La plage noire,” in Poétique, 140: “I wondered whether, in little countries such as ours (‘I believe in the future of little countries’), economic prospects (their inspiration) ought not to be more like the beach at Le Diamant: cyclical, changeable, mutating, running through an economy of disorder whose detail would be meticulously calculated but whose comprehensive view would change rapidly depending on different circumstances” (“The Black Beach,” in Poetics, 125).

24 Kenneth Laws and Cynthia Harvey give the following example for the affinity between horizontal acceleration and small size: “The toppling of the body from a vertical configuration to one of increasing angle with the vertical makes it possible to exert an increasing horizontal accelerating force against the floor. But the rate of topple is slower in direct proportion to the linear size. So it will take longer for a taller dancer to ‘topple’ to a sufficient angle to exert the required horizontal accelerating force against the floor.” Kenneth Laws and Cynthia Harvey, Physics, Dance, and the Pas de Deux (New York: Schirmer, 1994), 88.
if economic strategies could draw from a chaos-bound imagination, they would have access to the benefits of being a nimble size instead of solely suffering under the limitations of small markets. With the exception of this brief mention in *Poétique*, the policy implications of a shift in the imagination are not within the purview of Benítez-Rojo’s, Glissant’s, and Harris’s work with chaos theory. Rather, they focus on how chaos theory can transform the imagination.

Such transformations of the imagination result from the capacity of chaos to interrupt the “ritual normality” of received knowledge, thereby opening up the possibility not only for new knowledge but also for that knowledge to spring from small, less-attended-to, spaces. To understand how chaos theory creates interruptions, I turn now to a close examination of the verbs that all three writers use to characterize what chaos is and, more important, what it does. The activity they ascribe to chaos informs the rhetoric they develop to reconfigure a philosophical approach to disorder and incoherence. Benítez-Rojo, for example, focuses on volatility and changing directionality as generative:

I think that this recent interest of the scientific disciplines, which owes a lot to mathematical speculation and to holography, brings along with it a philosophical attitude (a new way of reading the concepts of chance and necessity, of particularity and universality) which little by little is sure to permeate other fields of knowledge. . . . The field in which Chaos may be observed is extremely vast, for it includes all phenomena that depend on the passage of time; Chaos looks toward everything that repeats, reproduces, grows, decays, unfolds, flows, spins, vibrates, seethes; it is as interested in the evolution of the solar system as in the stock market’s crashes, as involved in cardiac arrhythmia as in the novel or in myth. Thus Chaos provides a space in which the pure sciences connect with the social sciences, and both of them connect with art and the cultural tradition.25

The activity of chaos, as Benítez-Rojo defines it, develops out of the initial pairing of the verbs *repeats* and *reproduces*, such that repetition is figured not only as the iteration of the same but also as the birth of the new. Later, multivalent directionality is located in the contradictory actions of *grows* and *decays*. Finally, by connecting chaos with that which “flows, spins, vibrates, seethes,” he evokes a roiling motion that recalls the instability of the rising and falling gases in the Lorenz attractor. While the oscillations between pent-up energy and its explosive eruptions reveal the tension between order and disorder that has emerged as the defining aspect of Benítez-Rojo’s use of chaos theory, this passage also highlights his play with scale: broadening the scope of a temporal scale is necessary to register both evolution that is measured by millennia and economic crises that take place over a matter of months. Size is likewise called into question: how a single individual person functions, in “cardiac arrhythmia,” is as important as how a society organizes itself around its myths. The sensation of instability that accompanies the vertiginous changes in scale is at the core of an epistemic shift that Benítez-Rojo suggests is the “new way of reading” that chaos theory offers.

Through a series of directives that resonate with Benítez-Rojo’s effort to devise a new way of reading, Glissant engages with what he calls the *chaos-monde*:26 “Déstructurez ces données, annulez-les, remplacez-les, réinventez leur musique: l’imaginaire de la totalité est inépuisable et toujours, et sous toutes ses formes, entièrement, légitime, c’est-à-dire libre de toute légitimité.”27 The actions that result from adopting the aesthetics of the chaos-world involve destroying and canceling out “these facts,” that is, received ideas about the world produced according to colonial frameworks. Chaos theory requires the capacity to hold contradictory thoughts in one’s mind simultaneously and direct one’s thoughts in opposite directions: “La poétique de la Relation (qui est donc une part de l’esthétique du chaos-monde) pressent, suppose, inaugure, rassemble, éparpille, continue et transforme la pensée de ces éléments, de ces formes, de ce mouvement.”28 Chaos both begins and maintains, as in “opens” and “continues the thoughts”; it simultaneously “gathers” together and disseminates or “scatters”; and in the first pairing of the verbs *pressentir* and *supposer*, it vacillates between foreshadowing the future in the verb *to sense* and assuming things to be true in the present in the verb *to assume*. In this list Glissant presents a wide breadth of actions and emphasizes a constantly fluid motion between them. Rather than the turbulence that Benítez-Rojo emphasizes, it is the capacity for multiplicity that Glissant elicits from chaotic activity.

In the verb choices all three writers use to describe how chaos acts, they home in on chaos theory’s capacity to pull apart concepts and to drive us into a constant state of creating new knowledge by undoing our received assumptions. Like Glissant’s command to undo and replace, Harris’s striking metaphor for chaotic activity described in the previous citation from “Fabric” is that of an unraveling thread that undoes ideas that present themselves as complete and knowable in order to make way for the unknown. For both Glissant and Harris, the emphasis chaos theory places on the absolute specificities of infinitesimal differences leads us to consider the unfathomable depth of the imagination—Glissant’s “inépuisable” or Harris’s “abysmal otherness.” To create interpretive practices that may account for this profound unknowability, Harris offers three actions: first “scan frailties and diminutives,” or examine the

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26 *Chaos,* like many of Glissant’s key terms, signifies multiply: it refers to the speed and dispersal of globalization, and it also holds out the promise of new relations and perspectives as Glissant indicates in an interview with Philippe Artières in which he calls chaos “le chaos-monde actuel, c’est ce qui nous est donné et que nous n’avons pas encore exploré” (“the current chaos-world, it’s that which is given to us and which we have not yet explored”; translation mine). Philippe Artières, “‘Solitaire et solidaire’ entretien avec Edouard Glissant,” *Terrain,* no. 41 (2003), terrain.revues.org/1599. Citing Glissant’s description of the *chaos-monde* as a universe “cleared of a priori values,” Lorna Burns identifies Glissant’s definition of “chaos as movement” and further elaborates the chaos-world as “a plane of consistency upon which individuation occurs without organization or hierarchy, as differentiation.” Lorna Burns, *Contemporary Caribbean Writing and Deleuze: Literature between Postcolonialism and Post-continental Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2012), 135. Despite the violence of globalization, Glissant takes a positive view of chaos: he sees it, according to J. Michael Dash, as “lead[ing] inexorably . . . towards the elaboration of a poetics that breaks with a mechanistic and systematizing view of the world.” J. Michael Dash, *Edouard Glissant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 177.

27 Glissant, *Poétique,* 109; “Déstructurez ces faits, declarez-les vains, replacez-les, reinventez leur musique: totalité’s imagination is inexhaustible and always, in every form, wholly legitimate—that is, free of all legitimacy” (*Poetics,* 95).

28 Glissant, *Poétique,* 108; “The poetics of the Relation (which is, therefore, part of the aesthetics of the chaos-monde) senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters, continues, and transforms the thought of these elements, these forms, and this motion” (*Poetics,* 94).
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putatively small or weak with exquisite care and detail; second, “unravel a thread in the dense loom or economy of being,” or dismantle an entire piece of fabric by selecting one minute element within it; finally, once the constraints created by already-extant narratives have been destroyed, “change the fabric of the imagination.” The act of destroying or unraveling presents a frightening but crucial step in a broader use of the imagination and the continuous emergence of new stories. In urging us toward a “ceaselessly unfinished genesis,” Harris converts the dread of difference into the desire for difference, a desire that begins with focused attention to the specificity of diminutives and, in so doing, creates new forms of reading.

The Global Resonances of Chaos’s Diminutive Gestures

It is through the mechanics of chaos theory and the awareness of how repetition enacts difference in every iteration that Benítez-Rojo, Glissant, and Harris develop interpretive practices that can recognize the liveliness in beings that are otherwise identified as lifeless, the humanity in those relegated to the category of nonhuman, and the value of the world’s diminutive spaces. In the following analyses of Benítez-Rojo’s introduction; two essays by Glissant from *Poétique*, “La plage noire” (“The Black Beach”) and “La plage ardente” (“The Burning Beach”); and Harris’s essay “The Music of Living Landscapes,” written in 1996 as a BBC Radio 4 broadcast, I propose that these three writers are able to forcefully assert the presence of such surprising or even paradoxical connections between powerful and diminutive by drawing on the scaling properties of the science of chaos. To varying degrees, all three connect the chaos in the specificities of the natural Caribbean landscapes to cultural expression: Harris ascribes to the landscape the capacity for dance and song; Glissant and Benítez-Rojo analyze the most basic activity of walking as the example of how the chaotic formation of the region operates in people’s and nature’s repetitions. However, while Glissant returns to the fractal shorelines and the evocation of nature’s chaotic activity throughout his meditation on the walker, giving equal attention to each, Benítez-Rojo uses the natural activity as a springboard for deeper examinations of how chaos theory can influence our understanding of the development of cultural phenomena. While uses of the description of geography differ greatly in both the types of landscapes and levels of specificity, these writers share the methodology of mapping human gestures onto metaphors of Caribbean geographies and scaling out from those diminutive gestures to movements of global import. Thus they mobilize the capacity to hold the minute and the massive together in their thinking and perform the reconfigurations of the diminutive for which they argue in their more explicit discussions of chaos theory.

Throughout the introduction to *Repeating Island*, Benítez-Rojo uses various examples to identify archipelagic qualities that he occasionally calls “a certain way” of Caribbeanness: Cuba’s patron saint, la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre; the regionally shared experience of Carnival; and a way of walking—the most simple movement of all and the focus of my analysis. While the concept of the “Peoples of the Sea” evidently relies on nature, descriptions of the
sea as “a field of observation quite in tune with the objectives of Chaos” quickly give way to cultural production: “But what is it that repeats? Tropisms, in series; movements in approximate direction. Let’s say the unforeseen relation between a dance movement and the baroque spiral of a colonial railing.”29 Here, the railing takes on the qualities of movement through its characterization as a spiral, which records the path of a carving gesture along the edges of the wood. The “certain kind of” rhythm that connects dancing to a railing is a “certain kind of rhythm” at the core of Benítez-Rojo’s description of the gestural vocabulary of walking as a quotidian performance practice:

It’s possible, though, that a person might feel that he wants to walk not with his feet alone, and to this end he imbues the muscles of his neck, back, abdomen, arms, in short all of his muscles, with their own rhythm, different from the rhythm of his footsteps, which no longer dominate. If this should come to pass—which finally would be only a transitory performance—he would be walking like the anti-apocalyptic old women. What has happened is that the center of the rhythmic ensemble formed by the footsteps has been displaced, and now it runs from muscle to muscle, stopping here and there and illuminating in intermittent succession, like a firefly, each rhythmic focus of the body.30

By describing the walk as a fully embodied movement in which each muscle acts as its own center of activity, Benítez-Rojo identifies syncopation in the “stopping here and there” of the muscular energy, polycentrism, and after this citation, improvisation: qualities of movement that characterize African diasporic performance.

At the scale of the body, taking the activity of walking out of just the feet and locating it throughout the entire body refers to the ethos of chaos, but, more important, it describes an African diasporic movement that, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild states, contests Eurocentric values: “Movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centers may operate simultaneously. Polycentrism runs counter to academic European aesthetics, where the idea is to initiate movement from one locus.”31 In Benítez-Rojo’s phrasings in which the feet “no longer dominate” and “have been displaced” as the singular locus of energy in the gesture, walking demonstrates the epistemic change that chaos theory encourages by linking the multidirectionality of corporeal gestures in performance and the multiply repeating chaos.

In turning to the basic act of walking to exhibit the qualities of African diasporic performance that he connects to chaos theory, Benítez-Rojo uses the very methods of chaos theory, looking to small, specific detail to conceive of regional phenomena. The “transitory” gesture

29 Benítez-Rojo, Repeating Island, 2, 4. It is worth noting that Benítez-Rojo’s intertwining of natural and human history in the representation of the sea dwells much less on the history of slavery than many other Caribbean writers. In the description of the sea as “unstable condensations, turbulences, whirlpools, clumps of bubbles, frayed seaweed, sunken galleons, . . . uncertain voyages of signification” (2), only the sunken galleons make reference to the economic imperative of Atlantic maritime travel that spawned both piracy and slavery. Alongside the comparison to Glissant, we might also recall the descriptions in Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s, Kamau Brathwaite’s, and Derek Walcott’s poetry and the weight they give the presence of slavery in the sea as a contrast.

30 Ibid., 19.

refers both to the ephemeral and everyday act of getting from place to place and also marks the transition from the infinitesimal to the consequential. In this explanation of the walk, he concentrates on the micromovements of the body. However, his first reference to the “certain way” of Caribbean walking that defines the region is his memory of two Afro-Cuban women walking down the street during the Cuban missile crisis, a walk that he interprets as a signal that there could be no nuclear war because the Caribbean is a fundamentally antiapocalyptic space. This moment has rightly provoked much criticism from scholars such as Román de la Campa and Frances Aparicio as an example of essentialism and misogynist objectification. I also read this moment in light of Benítez-Rojo’s larger examination of how the differential repetition of walking fuels the creation of Caribbean culture. I therefore identify in Benítez-Rojo’s claim about Afro-Cuban women not only the incarnation of a mystical quality but also a performance practice that portends the diffusion of a potential world war. Like the butterfly’s wing whose flap is connected to coming hurricanes, this unlikely connection draws once more on chaos theory to identify the global importance that resides in the diminutive.

In “The Music of Living Landscapes,” Harris likewise links the cultural and natural activity of the Caribbean to draw caring attention to diminutives. Throughout the essay, Harris places himself in Guyana’s chaotic landscape, making connections between the hyperlocal and the global. Following the lead of his indigenous colleagues with whom he worked as a surveyor in the rainforests of Guyana in his early career, he looks to the parable of the music of the fish in the river to extrapolate from the fish to the river to the rainforest to the stars and show the connections between them, visible only through the ability to shift scales and perspectives with dizzying speed.° The move from personal history to broader reflection marks the structure of the essay as an internal example of the micro-macro methodology that permeates his work:°

I am intent on repudiating a dumbness or passivity with which we subconsciously or unconsciously robe the living world. Living landscapes have their own pulse and arterial topography and sinew which differ from ours but are as real—however far-flung in variable form and content—as the human animal’s. I am intent on implying that the vibrancy or pathos in the veined tapestry of a broken leaf addresses arisen consciousness through linked eye and ear in a shared anatomy that has its roots in all creatures and in everything.

Again, Harris underlines the embedded relationship between human repeated action and formation of natural geography by merging the vocabulary of geography and human corporeality in the phrase “arterial topography.” By blending different beings and locating their connections

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33 In four separate instances in the essay, Harris uses his personal history to begin that process of scaling out: first, his job as a surveyor scaled out to a reflection on the rainforests and rivers (ibid., 40), then, his story of emigrating from Guyana to discuss Guyana’s cultural and geographic history (41), his story of immigrating to London to initiate a conversation about unlikely connections across the world, and, finally, his story of working in a factory and how the realizations he had there impacted his career as a novelist (42).
34 Ibid., 44.
in what he terms their “shared anatomy,” Harris highlights the formation of every broken leaf within every living thing.

Harris’s writing about landscapes attempts to make visible and audible through the inner eye and ear that which is ignored by the general human approach to measuring the activity of natural systems. While he references forests and rivers many times, he also returns throughout the essay to rocks—stable objects that take on energy in his description.35 Harris uses the phrase “sleeping, yet singing” several times to describe rocks and clay jars then, at the essay’s close, he returns to this expression of counterintuitive simultaneity and adds a sense of momentum to their musical activity as he considers the architecture of river rocks and how they shape the river:

In my years of surveying rivers I was drawn into the sensation that sleeping and singing rocks are also dancers (stationary as they seem) even as trees and plants are known to walk under the close scrutiny of science.

The phenomenon of apparently immobile rocks which play a tidal role in non-tidal rivers is a miracle of evolution. . . . They dance an inner, staggered, relay dance subsisting on the volumetric ball of the river that they bounce from hand to foot in their guardianship of resources, in their cultivation of their mystery of freedom and passage through diverse channels.36

In the parenthesis and adverbs, Harris marks what is visible from a passing glance, then identifies the movement that is invisible yet must be taking place because of the impact the rocks have on the river’s system. This shift from the insignificant to the significant through different methodological approaches or temporal perspectives is the transformation in thinking that chaos theory enacts.

By taking up the long temporal scale of evolution and the practice of “scanning” the landscape, here referred to as “careful scrutiny,” the rocks emerge from their immobility as dancers. Harris elicits the polyrhythmic and communal elements of the rocks’ dance in the syncopation of their stagger and the mutual engagement of the relay. Furthermore, the identification of the rocks’ “cultivation of their mystery of freedom”37 in this dance connects this representation of movement in the supposedly immobile to the elaboration of the limbo in one of Harris’s most famous essays, “History, Fable, Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas.” Here, he explicates the origins and significance of the limbo dance as an original creole form in which African dance traditions were reshaped by the architecture of the slave ship.38 The intensifying properties of differential repetition in the limbo as a dance form are, for Harris, foundational to Caribbean philosophy: “The limbo imagination of the folk involved a crucial

35 On the philosophical implications of endowing objects with liveliness and scaling up the hierarchy of animacy, see Mel Chen’s discussion of Aristotle’s example of a stone as “soul-less” dead matter. Chen, Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 4–5.
36 Harris, “Music,” 46.
37 Ibid.
inner re-creative response to the violations of slavery and indenture and conquest.” The re-creative/recreative—both creating again, through the repetition of older forms in newer contexts, and recreation, or a break from forced labor—pushes away the totalizing domination of enslavement. The repeated gestures of the limbo reject slavery on the temporal scale of human history, and that historical arc echoes the geological temporal scale along which the repeated gestures that take place between the river and its rocks cultivate freedom as well.

The shift in scales that Benítez-Rojo and Harris use to change the perspective of historical narratives, enables for Glissant a move between relations between two individuals to interpersonal relations on a global scale. In order to manage this vast difference in scale, Glissant locates the point of departure for his thinking in the absolutely specific, in this case, le rocher du Diamant (Diamond Rock), an islet located barely two miles off the southern coast of Martinique in the Bay of Lamentin. This volcanic rock is redolent with historical and artistic significance: it was the site of the last slave-ship shipwreck off of Martinique in 1830, commemorated by Laurent Valère’s haunting memorial of Anse Cafard, “Cap 110,” a statue installation in which fifteen larger-than-life pillars with downturned visages face the sea and lean into the trade winds in a triangular formation. Le Diamant was also, as J. Michael Dash has discussed, an object of surrealist inspiration for André Breton and André Masson in the 1940s and, along with the chaotic disorder of the waves, the source of Glissant’s archipelagic thought. The shoreline that faces le Diamant is deeply meaningful to Glissant’s thinking, and two essays in Poétique, “La plage noire” and “La plage ardente,” are set there. Situating himself on this narrow stretch of beach, Glissant reflects on the specificities of place and the ideas that they spur, which he then extrapolates to consider as worldwide phenomena. That is, what he terms the chaotic space of the beach itself allows him to scale up and down between the hyperlocal and the global.

In writing about the beach at le Diamant, Glissant considers its rhythmic movement and the impact this has on the possibilities or impossibilities of its development for tourism. The beach’s appearance alternates between a strip of black volcanic sand during the rainy season and pristine white sands during the dry season, according to its seasonal cycles. Glissant characterizes this alternation as “l’alternance (pourtant non déchiffrable) de l’ordre et du chaos”—a relationship that Benítez-Rojo, for example, would subsume entirely under the heading of “chaos” as encompassing both order and disorder. The volcanic activity undergirding this space lends it the illegible, unpredictable quality through which it resists potential

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40 Installed in May 1998, each of the fifteen busts is made of cement, covered with white sand and beige gravel from Trinidad and Tobago. Named after its geographic location, “Cap 110” uses white to symbolize death as does the color in West Africa, according to Valère’s description. Measuring 2.5 meters high and 1.5 meters wide and weighing 4.5 tons each, the physical—and historical—weight of the statues is palpable. See Laurent Valère, “Le lieu, la mer,” in Dominique Berthet, ed., L’art dans sa relation au lieu (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012), 187–99.
42 Glissant, “Plage noire,” 136; “The alternation (but one that is illegible) between order and chaos” (“Black Beach,” 121–22).
commercial exploitation. As Glissant writes at the outset of “La plage ardente,” the invisible volcanic activity produces hot spots: although the beach would seem ideal for tourist consumption during the dry season, the red mud that gurgles in the mangroves makes it difficult to build on. Again, the way that chaos creates a tilt in perspective is evident at the beginning of the piece when Glissant contrasts what he sees to what visitors see: “Je surprends le frémissement de cette plage, dont les visiteurs s’écrient qu’elle est si jolie ou si typique, et je vois qu’elle est ardente.”

Awareness of the underlying and broader system allows Glissant to see the beach as the hot spots that will rhythmically wipe out the island stereotype.

In both essays dedicated to le Diamant, Glissant theorizes the chaos-world on the basis of sweeping panoramas, such as the annual transformations of the beach, as well as of diminutive human movement: like Benítez-Rojo, Glissant analyzes in the act of walking an expression of the specificities of Caribbean cultural production and uses chaos theory to identify the complexity in an apparently simple action. To ground the large-scale phenomena of the chaos-world, Glissant reflects on the presence of a single young man who has stopped speaking and has replaced social interaction with repeatedly tracing a path through the landscape by walking from the volcano to the beach over and over again. Just as he writes about the beach’s environment in terms of “a circularity that draws me in,” he dwells on the physical/philosophical actions of “un jeune homme, dont la déambulation traçait infatigable une frontière, invisible comme le flux nocturne, entre l’eau et la terre.”

Glissant explicitly connects the circularity of the beach system with the walker’s itinerant connection to the land, and he portrays the walker as physicalizing the process of repetition that is at the basis of chaos theory, “comme il passait et repassait, avec une régularité métronomique,” tracing a path that is formed through the accumulation of his footprints. The repetitive qualities of human gestures resonate with this place’s chaotic patterns.

Noting his respect for how the walker’s refusal of language represents his rejection of everything from contemporary Martinican society to global relations of violence, Glissant’s consideration of how to communicate with the walker moves him to think about the struggle of silenced peoples in the world at large. In the paragraph that follows, he uses differential repetition rhetorically to make this transition, first stating, “Je pensais à ceux qui dans ce point du monde,” then a few phrases later, “Je pensais à ceux qui, dans le reste du monde,” to move from reflecting on people living in Martinique, a little dot in the world, to people throughout the world. The micro-macro scope of Glissant’s thinking derives from the figure of the walker and his interaction with the specificity of le Diamant:

43 Glissant, “La plage ardente,” in Poétique, 221; “I catch the quivering of this beach by surprise, this beach where visitors exclaim how beautiful! How typical! and I see that it is burning” (“The Burning Beach,” in Poetics, 205).
44 Glissant, “Plage noire,” 136; “the ghostly young man . . . his tireless wandering traced a frontier between the land and water as invisible as floodtide at night” (“Black Beach,” 122).
45 Glissant, “Plage noire,” 137; “since he went back and forth with the regularity of a metronome” (“Black Beach,” 122).
46 Glissant, “Plage noire,” 137; “I thought about those people throughout the rest of the world” (“Black Beach,” 123).
L’absent qui marche n’épuise aucun territoire, il ne s’enracine que dans le sacré de l’air et l’évanescence, dans le pur refus qui ne change rien du monde. . . . Mais nous savons que sa marche, qui n’est pas nomadisme, n’est pas non plus divagation. Elle trace des figures répétées sur la terre d’ici, dont nous surprendrions le dessin si nous avions moyen de les repérer. Ce marcheur est un écho-monde qui se consume en lui-même, qui figure le chaos sans le réaliser.47

In this rich passage toward the end of “La plage ardente” and the close of Poétique, Glissant returns to and brings together a number of ideas: the nature of repetition, the relationship to place as both particular and fungible, and a gesture to the methodologies of chaos theory.48 The repetition of the walker’s movements both emphasizes the particular place, “la terre d’ici,” literally, “the land of here,” and simultaneously allows him to lift out of the particular and locate himself in the unrooted air molecules that can become dispersed. Glissant is convinced that, like other chaotic systems, the walker’s path across the landscape and in the ether creates a pattern, one that we do not have the means or methods to identify. In this regard, the walker mirrors—or in Glissant’s vocabulary, echoes—the landscape in which he walks.

This specific and “diminutive” form of repeated paths maps the ways Benítez-Rojo, Glissant, and Harris propose a reenvisioning of Caribbean space through differential repetition and according to the regional affiliations emerging through these itinerant traces. For Glissant, the same perch from which he can see the Diamond Rock, the walker’s paths, and neighboring island Saint Lucia also allows him to envision connections between all of the Caribbean islands as a set of paths that, although invisible to the human eye in its totality, might yet exist according to the interpretive principles of chaos theory. At the end of this archipelagic reverie, Glissant articulates his methodology for generating this vision: “Ainsi de proche en proche, évoquant l’étendue, puis-je réaliser cet arc-en-mer.”49 The small and incremental steps of “de proche en proche,” a cliché similar to “little by little” but that adds the sense of traveling a path by infinitesimal degrees, produce the expansive breadth of “évoquant l’étendue.” An interpretive approach that conjoins incremental steps with sweeping vision is particularly suited to thinking about the Caribbean region because it maps the coexistence of what is particular to each island and what is shared across the region by thinking together the hyperlocal with a wider view. It is through such changes in scale—whether sweeping gestures or methodical steps—that Benítez-Rojo, Glissant, and Harris concentrate simultaneously on the diminutive and the massive and attend to the diminutives in which the world continuously makes itself anew.

47 Glissant, “Plage ardente,” 224–25; “The absent man who walks exhausts no territory; he sets roots only in the sacred of the air and evanescence, in a pure refusal that changes nothing in the world. . . . But we know in the end that his traveling, which is not nomadism, is also not rambling. It traces repeated figures here on the earth, whose pattern we would catch if we had the means to discover it. This man who walks is an echo-monde who is consumed within himself, who represents chaos without realizing it” (“Burning Beach,” 209).


49 Glissant, “Plage ardente,” 222; “Thus, step by step, calling up the expanse, I am able to realize this seabow” (“Burning Beach,” 206).