THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF IDENTITY AT THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND DIVERSITY

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Abstract

This essay traces the relational dynamics of cultural difference and diversity as represented in Pan-American fiction by Gisèle Pineau, Maryse Condé, Dionne Brand, T. C. Boyle, Conceição Evaristo, and Alejo Carpentier. In the process, it addresses and problematizes the following questions: How is identity constituted, produced, and enacted when identity-based forms of oppression deny or delimit the negotiation and comprehension of its meanings? How do difference and diversity designate the other? How are boundaries of difference and borderlands of diversity constituted, maintained or deconstructed? And finally, if these boundaries and borderlands constitute the space of power relations where identifications are performed, then, what are their effects on the formation of identity?

Keywords: cultural identity; cultural difference (as separation); cultural diversity (as relation); transculturation, mangrove space; border(land)s.

Resumo

O presente ensaio enfoca as dinâmicas da diferença cultural e da diversidade e suas representações na ficção panamericana de Gisèle Pineau, Maryse Condé, Dionne Brand, T. C. Boyle, Conceição Evaristo e Alejo Carpentier.

Ao longo do texto, são abordadas e problematizadas as seguintes questões: como é constituída, produzida e encenada a identidade quando formas de opressão com base na identidade negam ou delimitam a negociação e compreensão de seus significados? Como a diferença e a diversidade designam o outro? Como são constituídos, mantidos ou descontruídos os limites da diferença e as fronteiras da diversidade? E, finalmente, se esses limites ou fronteiras constituem o espaço das relações de poder onde as identificações são performatizadas, então, quais são seus efeitos sobre a formação da identidade?

Palavras-chaves: identidade cultural; diferença cultural (como separação); diversidade cultural (como relação); transculturação; espaço *mangrove* (mangue); fronteiras.

"We know how to be a thousand different people in turn, and we name the sum of these people 'I.'" (Huston 2002, 88)

"A la gente no le gusta vivir con gente distinta. ... Otras costumbres, otra manera de hablar la asustarán, como si el mundo fuera confuso, oscuro, de repente. La gente quisiera que todos fueran iguales ..." (Vargas Llosa 1993, 211).

"En el encuentro de culturas del mundo, debe asistirnos el poder imaginario para concebir todas las culturas como factores que tienden, al mismo tiempo, a la unidad y a la diversidad libertadoras" (Glissant 2002, 71-72).

"Construire dans une diversité qui s'ouvrait en souffrance sur tous les continents. ... Une manière d'existence dans les chants du Divers"(Chamoiseau 1997, 175; 208).

In response to this issue's theme, the aim of my reflections is to trace the relational dynamics of cultural difference and diversity as represented in Pan-American fiction. In the process, they address the following questions: How is identity constituted, produced, and enacted in a world characterized by disjunctive flows of objects and persons—flows nourished by the contradictory complementarity of location, displacement and relocation, difference and diversity, broken origins, deferred homecomings and newly established homes—when identity-based forms of oppression deny or delimit the negotiation and comprehension

of identity's meanings? How does difference designate the other? How are boundaries of difference constituted, maintained or deconstructed?

Let me first outline my theoretical argument. According to James Clifford (1997, 1), we live in a "new world order of mobility, of rootless histories." Movement between and within communities, nations, and continents is not a new occurrence. What is new in our times of neoliberal globalization is the rapid increase in both national and international population mobility: millions of people migrate or travel across the borders of their region, state, nation, or continent in search of work, well-being, or pleasure in ever-changing global markets. Furthermore, this human mobility goes with heightened flows of objects, ideas, ideologies, messages, images, and commodities characterized by complex conjunctive and disjunctive relations (Appadurai 1996, 33-36, 43, 46). This post-national state of the world marked by migration, exile, and diaspora—constructions of *imagined communities* beyond common origins, local traditions, geographical and linguistic borders—creates new forms of belonging, "fractally shaped cultural forms," which undermine fixed, stable notions of the nation and the self-contained subject.

Simultaneously, our world order is characterized by relatively stable social structures. While the role and organization of the nation and state institutions (and implicit notions of sovereignty and territory) have changed in the wake of late transcultural and transnational phenomena, global processes operate and materialize (at least partly) in and through national territories and institutional arrangements of the nation state (Sassen 2001; Harvey 2000). That is to say, late globalization is characterized by conjunctive and disjunctive relations between different global flows *and* by the conjuncture and disjuncture between these flows and more stable forms and practices, creating various types of friction in different local situations: of subsistence, justice, government, episteme, and identity, among others. Globalization as a new world order of conjunctive and disjunctive flows, then, produces a series of local problems with global contexts, or, as Walter Mignolo (2000) theorized, "local histories" and "global designs" are intertwined in a

mutual relation of appropriation and reappropriation within a hierarchical structure and process of domination and subordination. This confluence of "cultural entities" (Huntington 1993, 23), in which cultural differences are essentialized into firmly rooted, civilizationally and nationally specific identities, and transcultural spaces characterized by overlaps, juxtapositions and mixtures of cultural fragments makes it necessary for us to reconsider the representation of cultural, identitarian relationality.

Cultural identity is determined by the cosmology and cosmogony of a nation/tribe/ethnic group in a historical process. Thus, the subject position is "assigned" within a network of power relations imbued with ideology (Foucault 1972, 96). This assignation, however, fixes identity only temporarily in a specific position. First, since the interplay of "residual" and "emergent" cultural elements, forces and practices (Williams 1997, 40-42) constitutes the dynamic nature of the subject's order of knowledge. Second, since the subject constantly reinvents his/her identity on the basis of complex subjective reasons connected with his/her social positioning (race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, class, work, etc.) and experience. Identity, then, is continuously recreated in a process of "being" and "becoming" (Hall 2000)—a process in which identity conditions and is conditioned by the subject. Furthermore, identity is constituted out of difference in that its meaning depends on its relation to, its difference from, other identities. The one we talk about by saying 'I' is not the speaker herself/himself. The 'I's gaze/utterance as refracted in the eyes, imagination and speech act of others undermines the fixed (b)orders which separate them. In the process, these (b)orders are opened up to their adjoining heterotopic borderlands where the self intersects with others against and through which it is constituted. This means that the self is intimately connected with and yielding to its others and vice versa. Thus cultural identity can only be understood as one that stems from and is imbued with its multiple differences. Cultural difference, then, is not structured by binary oppositions (the 'one' and the 'other'; the 'same' and the 'different' etc.) but by heterogeneous relations: a migratory site of ever-changing conflict-

ing and complementary positions and positionings. Against certain multicultural discourses, which have imbued difference, the process of differentiation, with ideologies of division, separatism, exclusion, and otherization based on an authentic, stable identity, I understand difference as a form of multiple differentiations/layers within, between, and across multiple entities. The relation between these entities is characterized not by an irreducible quality but a continuous, indeterminate oscillation such that each nourishes the other into plurality; a process through which the rigid boundaries between the interior and exterior are dissolved.

Neither the one nor the other, neither here nor there, but shuttling between them, this identity-in-process moves on shifting grounds between temporarily rooted social locations from one departure to the next. This concept of cultural difference based on oscillation implies belonging not "without identity," as Grossberg (1996, 103) suggests, but within, between and across multiple identifications. It describes a process of hybrid negotiation across differences toward a partial, erroneous, temporary but mutual understanding of a shared experience in a shared context. To have an identity, then, is to be located in a shifting, open site from which we respect and share the diversity of our differences. Thus, identities are both imagined/invented (linguistically, politically, socially, theoretically, etc.) and lived/experienced, that is connected to and shaped by social and politico-economic structures, forces and practices. What we have to transcend, then, is not difference per se, but the notion of difference as unsurpassable separation and exclusion since difference, in Audre Lorde's memorable words (1984, 111),

> must be ... seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity of interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of

being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

The notion of cultural difference as a hybrid, transcultural process of sharing implies the confluence of differences without a sublimation of its diverse elements into a coherent whole: a recognition of the superimposition and/or juxtaposition (the collage) of the diverse others in oneself—especially in one's "*inconscient*" (Kristeva 1988, 271)—rather than the making of "soi-même comme un autre" (Ricoeur 1990).[1] In this sense, identity and culture imply mutually fracted differences. This, I contend, is the basis on which to think cultural alterity in a global context. Cultural comprehension is not located in melting-pot notions of *cultural synthesis*, which gloss over the internal heterogeneity of its various parts for the sake of national consensus, and *cultural plurality* that appropriate and distort cultural difference for the sake of multiculturalism. Rather, it can be achieved through the negotiation of cultural contradictions, antagonisms, and similarities within, between, and across its heterogeneous elements. To measure this process of negotiation, which constitutes cultural diversity, we have to map the spaces, places, and spheres of its existence: in-between sites, liminal thresholds and passages, borders and borderlands, transborder, transnational, transregional diasporic movement. The keyword stitching together this mediatory process of negotiation between cultural differences is arguably the term 'transculturation' (Walter 2003, 351-367). I contend that it is through the transcultural/transtribal/transnational dynamics of mutual give and take at the crossroads of intercultural exchange, sites characterized by nonsynchronous and heterotopic spatiotemporality and myriad processes of cultural fusion and fissure, that we can begin to grasp and analyze the ambiguity inherent in the translation of cultural difference and diversity as repressive totalizing and expressive liberating forms, forces, and practices.

Thus it is necessary to distinguish between two basic modalities: difference as a process of domination and subjugation; and difference as a process of liberation. Since both modalities are constituted by so-

cioeconomic, political and cultural forces expressed through written and oral discourse, I will move now to creative writing. In the process, I will focus on representations of homogenizing cultural identity that block constructive interactions of difference and representations of heterogenizing cultural identity that supplement difference-as-separation by diversity-as-relation.

"How do you live in a country that rejects you because of race, religion, or skin color?" asks the narrator in Gisèle Pineau's *Exile according to Julia* (2003, 114).[2] Born French nationals on the island of Guadeloupe and part of the massive transplantation of Antilleans to France after World War II, the narrator and her family theoretically enjoyed equal footing with the French. The color of their skin, however, meant a life on the margins of French society and culture. Whereas the island is one of several Overseas Departments (*Départements d'Outre-Mer*), the islanders' integration has not translated into their right to cultural difference. In Guadeloupe, too, color functions as one of the most important tropes in the configuration of the hierarchical societal order. A remnant of the colonial plantation system, when physical features and heredity justified social status and economic privileges based on domination and exploitation, racist ideology has been internalized and continues to characterize all strata of society. Racial prejudice exposes a reductive apprehension of difference, resulting in the dissolution of individual identity into a collective entity characterized by codifying inherent and immutable difference. Represented as racial this imputed difference is mapped on to social collectivities: whites discriminating against mulattos, who discriminate against blacks, who discriminate against coolies, etc. Displaced into an intermediary nonplace, neither here nor there and yet both, Pineau's characters struggle (through storytelling) to convert the routes of their double cultural displacement into roots of cultural relocation.

How, then, does difference designate the other? How are boundaries of difference constituted, maintained or deconstructed? Difference designates the other and deconstructs otherization through an interconnected, web-like relation of factors, such as gender, sexuality,

race, class, color, ethnicity, and age, among others. As such a conglom-
eration of interconnected issues, difference and its boundaries are in-
scribed within the historical process of the global social order. In order
to illustrate this in more detail I would like to move now to a scene in
Dionne Brand's first novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*. It delineates
Elizete's experience as a Caribbean migrant woman in Toronto. Drift-
ing through the maze of streets and houses as an illegal "woman from
nowhere" (Brand 1996, 49) in search of work and a place to stay, Elizete
is unable to name this new environment. Toronto "resisted knowing.
When she tried calling it something, the words would not come. ... Her
names would not do for this place" (Brand 1996, 69-70). Elizete's speech-
lessness, her inability to develop a sense of belonging, has to be seen in
connection with the specific "mutedness" of the city itself: "concrete-
grained deserts" characterized by isolation, loneliness and distrust;
spaces with "many rooms but no place to live" (Brand 1996, 63); rooms
stifling the screams of the victims of racial discrimination, sexual op-
pression, and economic exploitation. Brand describes Toronto as a night-
marish neocolonial borderland where Caribbean people lose their iden-
tity (speech, behavior, worldview and ethos) in exchange for material
benefits, where ruthless sweatshop owners denounce illegal workers
on payday and colored women continue to be tossed by the waves of a
predominantly white male power structure. In one of the most impres-
sive images of the novel, Brand voices her severe criticism of a white
patriarchal world order, which, as she writes elsewhere, was and con-
tinues to be "built on slavery" (Brand 1989, 140):

> A man you don't know bends you against a wall, a wall in a
> room, your room. He says this is the procedure, he says you
> have no rights here, he says I can make it easier for you if I
> want, you could get sent back. His dick searches your womb.
> He says you girls are all the same, whores, sluts, you'll do
> anything. His dick is a machete, a knife. ... He shakes the
> blood off his knife and leaves. This time they searched her
> skin, this time they found nothing and took it, too. Elizete, flat

> against the immense white wall, the continent ... spread-
> eagled against the immense white wall, the continent (Brand
> 1996, 89).

While the forms of subalternization have changed during the various stages of globalization (i.e., since Western expansion in the sixteenth century), the hierarchical power structure of the hegemonic world system continues to pit oppressors against oppressed both in the sugarcane fields of the 'peripheries' and in the city streets of the 'centers'. What Brand makes cogently clear is that in the present stage of globalized world migration and cultural hybridity geographical borders may be crossed with relative ease while the boundaries of hierarchical schemes of sameness (center) and difference (margin), which segregate people, constitute insurmountable obstacles. Migrants such as Elizete, moving between different places, constitute the margin, the interior alterity that marks the limit of the Western power structure.

In the following, I want to focus on T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* and Conceição Evaristo's *Ponciá Vivêncio* in order to read difference and its boundaries comparatively in an inter-American context. In *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), T. C. Boyle foregrounds the shifting geographical and cultural border separating and uniting Mexicans and North Americans in California. By juxtaposing and intersecting the lives of Mexican illegals América and Cándido and Los Angeles liberals Delaney and Kyra, Boyle renders an up-to-date version of the American Dream as a living myth distorted by a self-serving dynamic of othering that affirms Anglo-American identity. América and Cándido's vision of the American Dream, their struggle for work, food, and a place of their own, collide with a mental border determined by Anglo-American monoculturalism, a xenophobic nationalism shot through with ethnoracial and classist prejudice that affirms a racially coded image of Americanism.[3] For Jack Jardine, resident of a newly gated hilltop community, "this society isn't what it was" because it does not control its borders. He does not blame so much the "*legal* immigrants ... with skills, money" and "education" as the illegal ones, the illiterate

"peasants" without "resources" and "skills," who have nothing to offer but their "strong backs" (101). For Kyra, a Realtor, these illegal immigrants pose a threat to the community by "ruining the schools, gutting property values and freeloading on welfare .... They were like the barbarians outside the gates of Rome, only they were already inside, polluting the creek and crapping in the woods" (311). "Barbarians," however, whose "invasion from the South had been good for business to this point because it had driven the entire white middle-class out of Los Angeles" and into neighboring areas up the coast (158-59).[4] Unable to continue their flight, the inhabitants of these hilltop communities decide to wall themselves in.[5]

Conceição Evaristo's Bildungsroman *Ponciá Vivêncio* (2003) delineates an Afro-Brazilian woman's identity crisis resulting from emotional shocks (the death of her grandfather, father and her seven children, the separation from her mother and brother) and social factors (poverty, social injustices). Filtered through Ponciá's remembrance, this crisis links the past and present as a site of memory, weaving a tapestry of multiple "departures," "mutilations" and "absences" (76, 131).[6] What she decodes and recodes in this mnemonic process is the reason for her family's uprootedness. Their errantry between the countryside and the city is embedded in the multiple axes of ongoing social inequality in Brazil—race and color, social class, gender, region, latifundio system—summarized by Ponciá as follows: "Being born, growing up, living—what for? ... Life in bondage has continued until the present. Yes, she too was a slave. A slave of a repeating condition of life. A slave of desperation, hopelessness, the impossibility of waging new battles, organizing new maroon camps, and inventing another, new life" (83-84). To continue to work for the white land owners as sharecroppers after abolition in 1888 was one thing. To be robbed of the land by the same landowners who had given them the land was another. This objectification of being had driven her grandfather mad, provoking him to murder his wife. Yet the family's legacy of shame goes back to earlier times. Writing her name, Ponciá feels the pain of an existential vacuum: "it was as if she cut herself with a sharp blade, torturing her

body." Her family name was given to her great-grandparents by their owner before abolition. Thus, the name carries the memory of chattel slavery, "leaving the mark of those who declared themselves the masters of man and land" (27). It turns her into a cipher within a historical process that continues to write endless new chapters. Afro-Brazilians, as the novel reveals, occupy the bottom rung on the social ladder of a racialized system in which they are "the owners of misery, hunger, suffering, and suicidal revolt" (82).

Both novels tellingly illustrate the link between space, race, gender, sex, and patriarchy in the politics of difference—a politics based on violent dispossession and displacement that were *and* still are at the core of the invention of the Americas. They demonstrate how spatial formation is constituted by racial ideologies and how gender is (ab)used to maintain spatial dominance and, most important, how this network of power relations determines subjectivity and identity (formation). The mind and the body figure as bearers of immutable difference imposed by the violence of conquest, imperialism, and (neo)colonization. As such, they are uprooted between the self and the Other and exist internally split within a *nepantla* borderland where identity is continuously put under erasure through a steadily advancing neurotic present that began in the past. As long as race, class, gender, and skin color act as apparently ineradicable markers of social difference, the mind and body of both colonizers and colonized will continue to be battlefields where the traces of broken origins weave endless circular patterns of violated and stifled histories, landscapes and destinies.

The boundaries which these politics of difference instantiate are both lines and spaces where contradictory tendencies supplement each other. As dividing lines of spatiotemporal and cultural differentiation these boundaries distance the inner from the outer of the other and as shared spaces in between they link both to each other. Furthermore, they establish hierarchies not only between the inside and the outside but also within the inside. They are created to contain cultural and ethnoracial difference by transforming people into (dangerous) 'aliens' and 'illegals' and thereby rendering them outside the intelligibly real,

normal and/or human. Simultaneously, in the process of resisting subalternization and marginalization, borders are reproduced and reimagined to subvert this control. Borders and borderlands, then, constitute the terrain where identities are acted out in the tension-laden and contradictory interplay of cultural stasis (difference as separation) and cultural transgression (diversity as relation). Borders connote cultural stasis by channeling cultural identity into nationally identified epistemes (orders of knowledge) whereas the transgression of these borders reveals interstitial spaces (borderlands) where cultural differences are translated into cross-cultural relationships of symbiotic or synthetic plurality. In this sense, borders and borderlands are actual material entities and symbols that constitute sites of both repressive (normalizing) state power and transgressive transnational/transcultural functions and practices. This means that space is not "an abstract, metaphysical container for our lives" (Vidler 1993, 37) but an ongoing production that is integral to the construction of identity and agency through the interplay of difference and sameness.

Edouard Glissant (1992, 97-98) differentiates between "the all-encompassing world of cultural Sameness" and "a pattern of fragmented Diversity." Diversity signifies "the human spirit's striving for a cross-cultural relationship, without universalist transcendence. ... Sameness requires fixed Being. Diversity establishes Becoming. ... Sameness is sublimated difference; Diversity is accepted difference," leading to "cultural contact." Diversity, then, is the key concept of Glissant's thoughts on "rhizomatic" cultural relations constituting *le tout monde* "in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (Glissant 1997, 11). For Glissant identity is continuously constituted and reconstituted through an interplay of "rootedness and errantry"; a complementarity of contrary elements inherent in the New World's baroque styles and *Weltanschauungen*, which José Lezama Lima (1993, 80, 177) has tellingly described as a "protoplasma incorporativo," a "contraconquista" characterized by "voracidad." Carpentier (1995, 93, 98) has delineated the baroque as an "art in motion, a pulsating art, an art that moves outward and away from the

center, that somehow breaks through its own borders ... with its geometries of both straight and curved lines ...." For Carpentier, the baroque is ubiquitous in the Americas since, like the continent, it results from "transformation, mutation or innovation ... symbiosis ... *mestizaje.*" What interests me here in particular, is the baroque force of diffusion, a force of relational diversity that I see at work in Carpentier's writing.

In his opus, but especially in *Los pasos perdidos*, Alejo Carpentier consistently mocks the idea of origins, new beginnings and absolute dominion over nature. In *Los pasos perdidos*, a musicologist travels across times, spaces and cultures in search of indigenous instruments in the South American rain forest. The scientific objective of this journey, however, becomes superimposed by a more urgent yearning—namely the search for an alternative to the alienating materialist and consumeristic life style in a Western metropolis, presumably New York. Thus, Carpentier's landmark novel is a palimpsest of the various types of travel writing by means of which identity has been produced and taken up in the New World. Rather than searching for gold or the recreation of a lost paradise, the musicologist wants to escape from the decadent vacuum of a city life whose innumerous possibilities are imprisoned in and stifled by artificial, man-made time. In a more universal sense, then, this journey describes the modern man's search for lost natural roots. Thus, when the musicologist enters the jungle at a specific place marked by the letter *V* he moves into the jungle-as-womb, indicating the gradual discovery of a more natural form of *vie*—under the guidance of his indigenous Circe, Rosario, who holds the key to innocence before the Fall of History—that energizes his creativity as composer. Yet, unable to write down his compositions for a lack of stationary he returns to the world of technologized civilization. After a short stay, however, he decides to return to nature and Rosario for good but cannot find the V-shaped entrance in the jungle. Unable to trace his lost steps, he learns the tragic lesson that a return to the beginning, "the valley where time has stopped," is impossible precisely because there are no real beginnings in life. Fixed origins are imagined through remembrance, the decoding and recoding of memory images. That is to

say, he learns that it is impossible to escape from an ever-changing identity-in-process and that it is necessary to accept the loss of tracks and traces in space and time in order to live and survive in the present.

The discrepancy between a definite loss of the (premodern) past and the necessity of confronting the (modern) present is crystallized in the protagonist's belief in a stable territory and linear time. The discovery of a fluid spatiotemporality in nature locates the musicologist in a geographic, psychological, and cultural betweenness, leaving him neither here nor there. His journey within and across this multidimensional in-between space is a journey between the interior and exterior of the self: a journey by means of which the musicologist recognizes the other in himself through a return to primary otherness—the emblem of which is Rosario, the indigenous New World Circe, guide to the primary rites of man and owner of the keys of mythic utopia—which is a futile undertaking. It is futile not in its utopian sense—to oppose the possible through the impossible intent on creating an alternative reality and thereby shaping experience actively—but in terms of its objective to recover a vanished past based on fixed origins and definite ends. These, as well as the desire for them, are forever deferred, in the making. The mestizo protagonist's baroque errantry carried by a baroque prose style constitutes a transcultural poetics of relational diversity, a poetics of infinite rhizomic translations, that supplements identity built on difference-as-separation. Here origins are lost in "the mangrove." In Maryse Condé's novel *Crossing the Mangrove* (1995, 158), Vilma alleges that it is impossible to cross or dominate the mangrove: "You don't cross a mangrove. You'd spike yourself on the roots of the mangrove trees. You'd be sucked down and suffocated by the brackish mud." Yet mangroves are constituted by fluid borders separating and linking diverse elements such as water, roots, mud, crabs, reptiles, moluscs, fish, insects, birds, plants, flowers, and lichen among other things. In this sense, mangroves could be seen as the New World baroque "incorporative protoplasm" marking the traverse of mixed meandering identifications. As such an ecosystem it is a space of transit composed of myriad places of exchange where temporary rootedness

and uprootedness nourish each other. Here boundaries exist as permeable categories that contain and release: a process whereby the difference-as-separation between the inside and the outside is supplemented by a relational diversity. The ebb and flow of the water within and across the rhizomic root system of the mangroves constitutes a transgressive, undomesticated space of constant metamorphosis, a liminal borderlands characterized by both inextricable slippage and interpenetration and intricate passageways and outlets.[7] Contrary to Vilma's statement in Condé's novel, the characters' crossing the mangrove—their rhizomic relationships with Francis Sancher—becomes the stepping stone for new phases in their stagnant lives. In this sense, I want to regard the mangrove as a concrete utopian symbol and space of identity formation based on inclusive otherness through antagonistic complementarity.[8]

Yet, how is it possible to cross the labyrinthine mangrove where the roots and routes of identification create the rhizomic terrain of identity formation? For Alice Walker (2004, 203, 211) the solution is to open our hearts toward what is "*completely outside the circle of goodwill.*" In order to overcome the barriers of otherization that alienate us from others and ourselves, we should "[*m*]*ake friends with*" our "*fear*[*s*]." Making friends with our fears means, in the final analysis, to accept and respect the multiple identifications that constitute the open-ended process of identity formation, or, in the memorable words of Trinh Minh-ha (1991, 122), that "... there is no 'I' that just stands for *my*self. The 'I' is there; it has to be there, but it is there as the site where all other 'I's can enter and cut across one another."

In the Introduction to *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*, Gates writes: "Ours is a late twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions—to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture" (xv). If there are no pure cultures since cultures are formed through processes of mixing and transculturation, then the hybrid and diasporic quality of

multiculture asks us to transcend the limits of parochial cultures and nation-states and explore the meaning of 'identity', 'culture', and 'nation' in its complex cross-cultural, fractured and negotiated interrelationships

Notes

1   For Julia Kristeva (1988, 25, 9), the experience of cultural "*étrangeté*" is equivalent to the experience of the psychic "*altérité*" produced by the unconscious. The figure of the other, the stranger, becomes the cipher for the possible subversion of individualism: "*vivre avec l'autre, avec l'étranger, nous confronte à la possibilité ou non d'être un autre ... ma propre altérité-étrangeté.*" To understand the (situation of the) other means to recognize the incoherences, the *unheimlichen* cracks, of the self: "*étrangement, l'étranger nous habite: il est la face cachée de notre identité.*" For Kristeva, then, the other signifies the externalized representation of an internal difference and thus radically undermines any notion of a stable, fixed self. The same weakening of the self through the other is stressed by Emmanuel Lévinas (1974). For Lévinas, the experience of the other is the *conditio sine qua non* of human existence. To accept and receive difference is an act of freedom since it implies the possibility of alternative ways of living and thinking. What links Kristeva and Lévinas in their difference is that they read difference not from one pole or the other but from in between polarities. Both are concerned with the recognition and problematization of the *incommensurable* difference linking and separating the self and the other. Both think the self and the other simultaneously in their heterogeneous dis-locations and re-locations and highlight the ambivalence toward otherness: the complex economies of attraction and desire that characterize constructions of difference. Because the externalized Other is simultaneously a figure of antagonism and possibility, it constitutes a part of the self that the self both wants and fears.

2   In addition, the novel adds 'gender' and 'age' to these identity-based forms of oppression.

3   This new form of racial prejudice is discussed by Etienne Balibar (1991). It is a differentialist racism that does not rest on a biological concept of race but on insurmountable cultural borders; a racism that is against the abolition of frontiers since different lifestyles and traditions make for cultural incompatibility.

4   On the phenomenon of gated communities peopled by homogeneous ethnic and socioeconomic groups, see Dillon and Ellin.

5   Gated communities, then, further ethnic and cultural segregation.

6   Translations are mine.

7   Here I differ from Glissant (1999: 220), who speaks of the mangrove space's "inextricability." In my view, the ebb and flow of the water and the fact that mangrove spaces throughout the Americas gave shelter to Amerindians and marooning blacks make for both the inextricable and the extricable nature of the mangrove space. This also goes for Chamoiseau's *ville mangrove*, the liminal urban mangrove space in *Texaco*.

8   On the distinction between abstract and concrete utopia, see Ernst Bloch.

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