



2-15-2019

On Being as Passage and Plurality of Self: Postcolonial Caribbean Identity in Merle Hodge's Crick Crack, Monkey

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Abstract

This essay examines questions of home and identity in a postcolonial Caribbean context. Situating itself in the dialogue between continental philosophy and postcolonial theory, this research explores how identity formations are processes which negotiate fragmentary demands of being as well as the various ruptures and dislocations that are resultants of colonization. This paper proposes that in thinking of postcolonial identities, we must explicitly and necessarily consider multiplicity, alterity, diaspora, and interstitial spaces. Focusing on Merle Hodge's novel *Crick Crack, Monkey*, this essay thinks through protagonist Tee's process of becoming, a process which is fluid, dynamic, and never complete. In doing so, this research explores questions about race, enslavement, bearing witness, language, space and place, and (literal and metaphoric) diasporic movements.

Keywords

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PATHWAYS

A JOURNAL OF HUMANISTIC AND SOCIAL INQUIRY



VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1

Published February 2019



Graduate School of Education
PennGSE



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Abstract: This essay examines questions of home and identity in a postcolonial Caribbean context. Situating itself in the dialogue between continental philosophy and postcolonial theory, this research explores how identity formations are processes which negotiate fragmentary demands of being as well as the various ruptures and dislocations that are resultants of colonization. This paper proposes that in thinking of postcolonial identities, we must explicitly and necessarily consider multiplicity, alterity, diaspora, and interstitial spaces. Focusing on Merle Hodge's novel *Crick Crack, Monkey*, this essay thinks through protagonist Tee's process of becoming, a process which is fluid, dynamic, and never complete. In doing so, this research explores questions about race, enslavement, bearing witness, language, space and place, and (literal and metaphoric) diasporic movements.

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The postcolonial subject is being in an abyss. What follows is an exploration of this abyss: the space of abandonment to the radical excess of the self where we are exposed to the otherness of ourselves. In this space, it is the absence and the impossibility of arrival at a definite and absolute identity and home that are the foundationless foundations of being. In this exploration, I echo the fluidity of being that has been proposed by scholars like Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Stuart Hall in works such as *Monolingualism of the Other*, *The Inoperative Community*, and *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, respectively. Moreover, I think through how the motions of fragmentation and diaspora, which all beings grapple with—and which result in the experience of multiplicity and alterity in all beings—are overtly present in postcolonial subjects. For postcolonial peoples, the process of identity formation negotiates not only pre-theoretical

fragmentary demands of being, but also the overt displacement born out of such subjugating projects as European hegemony, slavery, and colonization. These dislocating experiences provide the context and the conditions for postcolonial subjectivity. This essay will analyze the fragmentary conditions for being and will then examine how literal displacement factors into the kind of being which postcolonial subjects negotiate. Finally, the process of identity formation will be sampled and contextualized through Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey*. Hodge's novel, situated in Trinidad and published in 1970 (just eight years after independence from Britain) is a work that enables us to recognize the fragmentation, multiplicity, and alterity of being and thus opens itself to an examination of the infeasibility of arrival at a definite home and identity.

Though the ruptures of being are overtly present in the face of diaspora and/or colonization, this does not mean that they are not present in other contexts. For all singularities (whether they have gone through the ruptures of literal diaspora or not), being is fragmented, divided, and shared. In fact, no singularity is immune to the motions of fragmentation. My focus here, though, is the postcolonial being because those displaced in a postcolonial space live the experience of multiple ruptures—exile, diaspora, colonization—to which they bear witness. It is in these border-crossing situations where the borders are not necessarily geographical but temporal and linguistic that identity is, in a single motion, constituted and deconstituted.

For all singularities, "being," as an active verb and not just as a noun, necessarily implies a movement, a transgression, and a constant reimagining. The gerund deconstructs any idea of full presence and transcendental meaning. Being must be an act/event of (re)constructing and becoming. This, further, is a "becoming" but never a "having become," because there can never be an arrival. If we think of identity along the same lines of being, then identity, too,¹ is a constant reaching for that which can never be grasped. Identity is a diasporic experience insofar as it is a movement, but one that has no origin—no starting point (and, in the same motion, no endpoint). This diaspora is a dispersion/fragmentation in an in-between space where beings must always be in a state of transformation (because there is no essentialized meaning to which beings can arrive or return). This is not a diaspora in the traditional sense, where one is moved from an original homeland. The idea I am putting forth is that there is no origin and no homeland (because such concepts connote an essence and a fixity), and it is the movement itself (literal as well as metaphoric) that is the space of being.

It is important to note the distinction between, on the one hand, the notions of origin and homeland not being real (or, essential) and, on the other, absent altogether. When I say that there is no origin and no homeland I am motioning towards an understanding of being as coming to signify because of a diasporic movement. Simultaneously, though, there is indeed a historical utility to the conception of a homeland. For postcolonial subjects grappling with the ruptures of enslavement, for example, producing the idea of Africa as a homeland is a way to

¹ I am conflating being and identity because I am examining not just pre-conscious being but also historically-constituted being. I am preoccupied with the motions of fluidity and diaspora that are both metaphoric and literal, noting that being occurs primordially as a disruption and then analyzing how the disruption of colonization serves to further dislocate.

cope with the conditions of trauma, shock, and genocide that are resultants of slavery. This conscious or strategic homeland/origin conception evidences that these entities are not essential but constructed, and that they necessarily occur within a temporal structure. If this structure is temporal, then it is located within the diasporic movement I previously noted. If, then, identities occur within this movement, it follows that they are always being negotiated. Identities are not born out of an essentialist project which, by setting itself as an origin, necessitates an endpoint whereby identities signify transcendently. Identities occur in movement, which is to say in a space of reaching.

This reaching that being occurs in/as is towards others of self; identity springs from the intersection of various aspects of being—aspects which are situated in time and space and are culturally and historically (and discursively) constituted. These aspects of being can be thought of (or, must be thought of) as others of self. Indeed, "there is nothing *behind* singularity—but there is, outside it and in it, the...space that distributes it and shares it out as singularity... distributes and shares the confines of singularity—which is to say of alterity—between it and itself" (Nancy 27). In other words, being does not *emerge from*, nor is it the *result* or *effect of*, a pre-established ground. Rather, there is a groundless ground in being, a space of radical alterity which Nancy calls the *clinamen* (3) in order to highlight the inclination towards otherness that makes being an event and thus requires us to interpret it as fluid. The singular being is not absolute, fully present, or static. Rather, its being is shared (divided/distributed) into others of its self, which is to say that the groundless ground of being is precisely its being comprised by its own radical alterity. This intersection of the aspects of being is necessarily a space in which they open themselves to each other while, in the same motion, cut open (or fragment) the subject. We inhabit the space where our others of self-touch, in and as the resulting fragmentation. It is in this space where we find our home, and we live in and as the negotiation of our identities. We live not exactly in the intersection of the aspects of our being, but in the interstice, the space of reaching characterized by multiplicity and alterity. In short, home and identity are inextricably linked and neither is ever fixed nor static.

How do identity and home manifest themselves in postcolonial spaces? It is characteristic of being that it be ecstatic²: not fully present and thus not at one with itself. Since beings exist as outside of themselves, it follows that they cannot be fully present because (temporal) alterity is constitutive of being. The reaching, then—the movement that being happens in and as—is a form of fragmentation. No singularity, then, is immune to the motions of fragmentation. In fact, beings must be fragmented: they cannot *be* otherwise. Yet, indisputably, these motions of decentralization and displacement are unambiguously and prominently evident in the face of literal diaspora, exile, and colonization.

So, what is identity? And what is home? Neither one is an "is;" rather, both are events. In a context of displacement and fragmentation, identity and home are especially non-chronological

² I am motioning towards a Heideggerian understanding of being as outside the self (ek-static, outside of stasis, and thus necessarily in movement).

processes with neither beginnings nor ends: they are always being constructed, imagined, and negotiated. They occur in the space where all the possibilities of our being meet and where we resist arrival and fixity. Arriving at a point of full, transcendental, realized meaning is a fiction because it denies possibilities and therein connotes non-being. As Stuart Hall puts it, "perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact...we should think...of identity as a 'production,' which is never complete, always in process" (222). The answers we seek when we ask what identity and home look like presuppose fluidity. What we aim to understand is not what beings finally become or what an established home looks like. Rather, we are in search of an understanding of the ways in which movement of various kinds is fundamental to the subject who has, through both fundamental ontological events as well as historical ones, been objectified and subjugated. My query concerns the intersection of home, identity, and diaspora but this intersection is not a point but an abyss (the interstice of the intersection) where the postcolonial being comes to signify. Hodge's novel is emblematic of this very idea because by exposing a transversal (as opposed to a transcendental) identity, it preoccupies itself with the infeasibility of arriving at a point of an absolute and fixed way of being.

CRICK CRACK, MONKEY

In *Crick Crack, Monkey*, Merle Hodge explores the idea of defining and understanding identity. Set in post-colonial Trinidad, the novel introduces us to Tee, whose mother has just died and whose father has emigrated, leaving her in the care of her paternal, dark-skinned, working-class aunt, Tantie, and her grandmother, Ma Josephine. Tee's maternal aunt, Beatrice, lighter-skinned and middle-class, starts to take care of an adolescent Tee from secondary school forward. Tee's life is a performance of constant boundary crossing. Switching between the contrasting value systems embodied by Tantie and Aunt Beatrice, she is never able to fit in either half of the created binary and thus is always in a process of negotiating her identities.

One of the identities which Tee wrestles with is engendered in the context of Ma Josephine, who tells Tee Anansi stories. These tales, which have undertones of resistance to enslavement, thematize the possibility of the oppressed outwitting the oppressor and form part of a genre which was created against—and within the milieu of—imperial authority. Originating in West Africa and crossing the waters during the Transatlantic slave trade, the Anansi stories were shaped by the experience of enslavement. In response to such a violent dislocation, these tales became signifiers of resistance.

A reason for continuing the tradition of telling Anansi stories on the other side of the Atlantic was precisely to establish a sense of community among the enslaved and to retain (or, create) a sense of *Africanness* in this new context of identity ambiguity. Wilson Harris, coining the limbo-anancy syndrome,³ notes that limbo (and, because of the limbo-anancy syndrome, we can assume that the Anansi stories as well), is:

³ Harris describes the limbo dancer as "[moving] under a bar which is gradually lowered until a mere slit of space...remains through which with spreadeagled limbs he passes like a spider...Limbo was born...on the slave ships of the Middle Passage. There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders...Limbo...is related to anancy or spider fables" (378).

not the total recall of an African past since that African past...was modified or traumatically eclipsed with the Middle Passage...Limbo was rather the renaissance of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures. (380)

The looking back towards the past that is the limbo identity is also (and necessarily) an informing on the past. That is, because we live in a world that is historically and culturally constituted, and because our memories respond to the experiences of trauma and rupture, we cannot remember or access the past in a way that is objective (or, "as it really was"). As Stuart Hall puts it, "[the past] no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it...is always- already 'after the break'" (226). We can say, then, that the *Africanness* awarded to the Anansi stories was not natural but constructed within the experience of diaspora. It was, indeed, an attempt at establishing a home in the face of exile. Thus, the past bleeds into the present so that the history that frames identity is not a set of discrete and static points but rather an always-necessarily-being-re- defined history. Consequently, if the history that informs identity is always shifting, then identity itself must, as well.

There is yet another reason for why continuing to tell the Anansi stories is significant: the responsibility to bear witness. The Atlantic is a gravesite for the countless kidnapped and enslaved Africans who died during the slave trade. The voice of the dead is not lost in their death but rather survives as a trace. Yet, the bodies and the singular voices of the dead are inaccessible because they can never respond again. This inaccessibility begs us to add to and inform on the non-silent silence. After all, to bear witness for the dead is to bear witness in our voice, not the voice of the other; in speaking in our voice we supplement⁴ the voice of the other. To tell the Anansi stories is to bear witness to those voices because it is to tell the stories they told. It is to remember the past of dismemberment, to recall the first moments of dehumanization and of the imposition of a foreign tongue and the subversion of a mother language. Furthermore, to tell Anansi stories is to a large extent to fight against the discursive hegemony of imperial authority that wants to totalize and annihilate the voices available to us in traces. Moreover, by responding to the voices that colonization tried to erase, telling the stories means resisting the colonization project at large.

It is not only through the sharing of the Anansi stories that Ma's context becomes a place of identity as embodied resistance: "The cheups⁵ with which Ma greeted the day expressed her...attitude before the whole of existence" (Hodge 18). Ma's cheups are of non-representational linguistic importance. It is through her reactionary cheups that she can express the most honest kind of dissatisfaction because she can do it outside the colonizer's hegemonic language. Although it may appear misleading or contradictory to imply that being

⁴ Supplement like the Derridean *supplément*, which means "both an 'addition' and a 'substitute'" (Johnson 345). In the logic of the *supplément*, "A is necessary so that B can be restored," but "A can never satisfy the desire for B" (345). In a similar vein, the voice of the living restores the voice of the dead but always incompletely because the singular voice of the dead (by virtue of being singular) cannot be accessed.

⁵ The gesture of sucking one's teeth to express frustration.

can exist outside of language, we must mark the distinction between representational hegemonic language and non-representational language of frustration. The colonizer imposed his foreign language on the colonized, henceforth causing a feeling of displacement. If language is the house of being and we can only bear witness to our world through our language(s), then the subjugation of a native language by means of the forceful imposition of a foreign tongue results in a distinctly diasporic experience. Frantz Fanon notes that "a [person] who possesses a language⁶ possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language" (2). Since our world and culture are precisely constituted by language, an erasure or even a suppression of a mother tongue necessarily results in fragmentation. Celia Britton adds: "The lack of language⁷ is experienced as a lack of being...not having a language that adequately...expresses what one wishes to say about the world and, perhaps particularly, about oneself, becomes equated with not having a...self" (180). The notion of fragmentation as a result of not having a language is one that prompts us to ask the question of how we can bear witness in the colonizer's language. The question I am posing is not *if* we can bear witness, precisely because bearing witness is all we can ever do. Rather, I ask *how* we can do so if, after the colonizer's discourse has been established, that seemingly becomes the only tool we have for self-expression. As Britton reminds us, the language of the colonizer does not adequately allow us to conceptualize our process of identity. How, then, can we *be* in that language?

Before I attempt to answer that question, I would actually like to introduce a different one, posed by Jacques Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin*: "Is language a possession?" (17). Derrida eventually answers that language is in fact not a possession, and in a later work reveals that it is instead an inheritance (*Sovereignties* 104). What does this mean for the formulation of a question of how we can bear witness in the colonizer's language? It calls for a reformulation because the language is not of the oppressor, belonging to the oppressor, but rather appropriated and imposed by the oppressor. Derrida affirms: "Because the master does not possess exclusively, and *naturally*, what he calls his language...he can...articulate this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantic constructions" (*Monolingualism* 23). Following Derrida, it might help to think of the language of the oppressor as a phantasm. Yes, language resists proprietorship, but that is not to say that the hegemonic discourses that are thereby established do not have material ramifications. Indeed, "language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth,' 'order,' and 'reality' become established" (Ashcroft, et al. 7). Therefore, the language of the colonizer, conceived as such, both is and is not.

However, an understanding that this power structure is not absolute but rather constructed allows for reinterpretation and reappropriation of language. As I previously indicated, we cannot exist outside of language, but existing in it does not mean blindly and voluntarily subscribing to the notions it encloses. Even in such a context as colonialism, characterized by the will to totalize and essentialize the other, the singular being cannot help but resist.

⁶ We must be careful here because, as we will see soon, language is not a possession.

⁷ We will interpret this not as a lack of language but as a lack of a traditionally-conceptualized language which can speak of the ruptures and oppressions of colonization.

How, then, do we bear witness to the ruptures of being? I propose that we do not need to do so in the language of the colonizer, which works within the structure that subjugates and oppresses the colonized. Rather, we bear witness in our own formulations and reappropriations (insofar as language, which is not a possession, can ever be reappropriated). We bear witness in "the language of frustration" (Dash xxiii). Ma's cheups function as a type of language of frustration: The cheups can be conceived of as a result of (linguistic) diaspora to the extent that their significance comes from the displacement created by the subjugation of a language by means of the exalting of another. The hegemonic English of the colonizer that subverts the African languages of the enslaved tries but does not erase completely the language of the oppressed. We can think of Ma's cheups, then, as a kind of trace, left behind by that attempted but failed erasure.

It is not until Tee starts schooling that she faces the hegemonic discourse to which Ma responds with resistance. Tee starts to see herself as other and her identity is shaped by the tension that results from being dark-skinned and working class in a context that values light skin and bourgeoisie respectability. It is her existence between contexts, as never fully one nor the other, that marks her identity as "never complete, always in process" (Hall 222). Her experience in school marginalizes her because the content she is being taught is not for her. She reveals that her "reading career...began with A for Apple, the exotic fruit" (Hodge 27). This fruit with which she is unfamiliar is significant because it exemplifies how this academic sphere was not made for people who look like her and by extension does not benefit people who look like her. She is so far removed that she does not belong. In Sunday school, she is given "pictures of children with yellow hair" (Hodge 33) and made to read prayers with overtly racist notions that strengthen the binary oppositions that are born out of the colonial project. Her response to the hegemonic discourse that subordinates her is to fashion a new identity—Helen—but always within the understanding that Helen is not her. She says: "Helen wasn't even my double. No, she couldn't be called my double. She was the Proper Me. And me, I was her shadow hovering about in incompleteness" (Hodge 68).

Helen is theoretically significant for three reasons. First, the importance of the name that Tee gives her. Hodge reveals later in the novel that in Aunt Beatrice's house hangs a large photograph of "The White Ancestress, Elizabeth Helen Carter" (90). She is practically worshipped by Aunt Beatrice because she was white and thus the "purest" ancestor, regarded with a respectability that is exclusively hers. It is not coincidental, then, that Tee named "the Proper her" Helen, who, also non-coincidentally, has an apple tree. Fashioning Helen is Tee's response to the colonizer discourse that creates a hierarchy that oppresses her race. Subscribing to the equating of white with purity and "Rightness," Helen is White Tee. And yet, she cannot be. Tee removes herself from Helen, acting within the understanding that Helen is a kind of "valid" to which she cannot even aspire. Furthermore, Helen could not be her double because her existence as the "right way to be" denotes an arrival. Helen is not *being* (verb): she is someone who has already reached a full, transcendental, essential meaning and identity. For Helen to be Tee's double, Tee herself would also have to have reached the point at which she has embodied all the characteristics opposite Helen's: Improper, Wrong, Black—and this

necessarily suggests that there is a transcendental meaning to these qualities, existing outside of language and culture, in a vacuum that allows them to always signify the same. However, because transcendental meanings existing outside of language and culture are a logical impossibility, there cannot be any relation of "doubles" between Tee and Helen. Tee acknowledges her incompleteness: She realizes that she is always in a state of boundary crossing, switching personas, as it were, depending on her context. She understands that there is no Tee, as such. Frustrated at this realization, Tee is in search of arrival; she longs for the moment when she can define, fully and absolutely, who she is. Tee desires the full presence of her identity, aware that she exists in a space of abandonment, insofar as she understands her identity as an absence. But, ontologically, this is the only way that identity works. Identity occurs spatially and temporally. It is informed by our being in and with the world. Thus, there can never be an ultimate Tee-ness. Rather, it is the way in which she reacts to the world that constitutes who she is. In this way, then, identity must necessarily be a process that is always already in a state of transformation.

Because identity is spatial and temporal, it becomes increasingly important to make the distinction between Tee and Cynthia.⁸ While with Tantie, the main character goes by Tee, whereas while with Aunt Beatrice she goes by Cynthia. If we think of names as identifiers, then different names signify for different identities and the character is the performance of different identities when she takes up each name. In a nutshell, Cynthia is Tee hauled out of "ordinaryness and niggernyness" (Hodge 105). Tee is situated in Tantie's and Ma's context of resistance, whereas Cynthia exists both with Aunt Beatrice and in school: that is, within the unwavering subscription to imperial thinking of white as civilized, knowledgeable, and powerful. It is worth noting that neither Tee nor Cynthia reflects the character's "true" form. She both is and is not Tee; likewise, she both is and is not Cynthia. She is both while being neither, existing in the interstice of their intersection. She exists then, as a deferral of herself. Stuart Hall, invoking Derrida, elucidates this point further:

Differance challenges the fixed binaries which stabilize meaning and representation and show[s] how meaning is never finished...but keeps on moving to encompass other, additional or supplementary meanings...what is then constituted within representation is always open to being deferred. (229)

Because our protagonist exists in the interstice of the intersection of her identities and thus necessarily in and as deferral, we can say that Cynthia signifies because she is not Tee and that Tee signifies because she is not Cynthia. These identities cannot stand alone, but rather need each other. It is the space of their difference that constitutes whomever our character is: the space in which identities intersect, which is also necessarily a space in which they open

⁸ This analysis concerns only Tee and Cynthia, not Helen. Tee and Cynthia are the names that the character responds to: the names that she adopts when she performs her various identities. Helen is a non-double double, engendered from frustration and in response to hegemonic discourses. The character exists within the understanding that she is both Tee and Cynthia but that she can never be Helen.

themselves to each other. The space where the character's others touch is the space that she inhabits, performs, and embodies. The space where her others touch, then, is her home. Hence, home is not a place fixed in space and time, but rather shares the motions present in diaspora. It is this diasporic experience that causes the existential angst that prompts Tee to ponder: "I was irritated at the sea. I considered it had no right to roll itself to and fro, to and fro, in such a satisfied manner, as though nothing at all was wrong" (Hodge 99). If we are to take water as a metonym for identity—insofar as it stands as a symbol for movement and transformation—then we can see more clearly Tee's dissatisfaction at the realization of non-arrival. She problematizes movement because she resides in a world ruled by the privileging of full presence and the idea of an absolute and static identity, both of which emerge out of hegemonic colonial discourse. Existing in limbo, in a home that is not a monolith but rather a space of multiple identities, is not only problematized but feared. In such a context, the to and fro of identity is "inauthentic." And yet, it is precisely the to and fro of identity that allows for being. It is this that allows the gerund and that gives space for an interaction with the world. It is the to and fro that allows for "cultural identity... [to be] a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'" (Hall 225).

Crick Crack, Monkey is a text that is emblematic of the postcolonial experience. Not only does it allow us to think through issues of enslavement, narrative, bearing witness, language, and identity (and the multiple ways in which these issues intersect with one another), it also grapples with the multiplicity and alterity that being necessitates. At the same time, it shows us that though identity resists fixity, the process of being and becoming is nevertheless set within hegemonic discourses and desires that figure being as transcendental, not transversal. Life in postcoloniality is overtly life in displacement, where there cannot be even a semblance of a stable and static home and identity. The ontological and linguistic dismemberments and ruptures of colonization necessarily result in a life which finds itself negotiating fragmentary demands of self in a state of movement and diaspora. It is rather appropriate that the novel closes with Tee desiring that a plane lifts her off the ground (Hodge 123). Identity is precisely groundless, and it is a plight, but a plight with no ultimate end. Tee wishes to leave but does not wish to arrive elsewhere. The last image of the novel is an image of limbo: it is groundless, it is neither here nor there, and it is in movement. Precisely because it is in limbo, it is distinctly postcolonial.

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