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IL(LEGITIMATE) THIRD SPACES IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S THE DEW BREAKER

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Abstract: *Ethnic life narratives and works of fiction offer myriad ways for the exilic, diasporic writer and his or her characters to assert a form of identity and resist the homogenizing forces of dominant cultures. At times, the resistance displayed by diasporic individuals seems to reject a totalizing "American ethnicity," while simultaneously supporting the ideals on which the "American dream" is founded.*

*As diasporic individuals seek to assert their individuality through their writing, the fragmented nature of their identities leads to the creation of narratives that are stylistically hybrid, experiment with chronology, and stretch the boundaries between genres. This in-betweenness mirrors the reality of individuals' lives in diaspora, where they are often found inhabiting "third spaces," both territorially and psychologically. Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* is a narrative of diaspora where the reader encounters Haitian immigrants attempting to straddle two cultures simultaneously. In the third space they inhabit, somewhere between Haiti and America, the characters are always walking the fine line between legitimacy and illegitimacy in the eyes of the "pure" Haitian community and the domineering gaze of "true" Americans. They live and work instead in an artificially constructed third space that allows for ease of movement, but which prevents the formation of a "grounded" or permanent identity. This feeling of being in constant flux between countries and emotions creates a permanent tension between an always encroaching, new identity in a foreign country and the nostalgia that engulfs memories of the homeland.*

*Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* offers an unapologetic look into the political, social, and economic conditions that dictate a diasporic identity. The novel also complicates the idea that a "fixed" identity can ever truly exist, especially for diasporic individuals whose legitimacy is always questioned by the society in which they make their home away from home.*

In discussing diaspora, one cannot escape invoking terms such as hybridity, change, flux, and fluidity. Therefore it is important to realize that much of the theory and therefore the language used in discourse about diaspora must itself be thought of in the same terms. However, we must understand and use such theory to inform our discussions of diaspora only insofar as we recognize that what we are dealing with is not a constant, but may at any moment be revealed as partially inadequate, outdated, no longer pertinent. I argue in this paper that any talk of diaspora or diasporic literature is fraught with the danger, and by its very nature, the necessity of turning the subject of discussion into an "other" for the purposes of positioning it within a familiar, recognizable context. This reductive naming carries with it both the potential of legitimizing and the risk of illegitimizing the diasporic subject's condition in respect to the homogenizing forces of the dominant culture where such discourse first originates.

Instead of thinking about legitimacy and illegitimacy in terms of a struggle between different, already established identities, modern socio-political and economic conditions require a shift in the identity paradigm from identity "formation" to identity "positioning." Several defining aspects of modernity can be located as the site for the positioning relationship between "others" and the larger context in which they find themselves, including globalization, increase in travel, new record levels of migration, and the technological explosion that according to theorist Paul Virilio has virtually erased time and distance, entities we once thought of as fixed. Regardless of the myriad reasons for the modern

condition of the individual, their effects on identity formation have been severe and undeniable. However, no one group of people has likely been affected as much by this shift in the identity paradigm as diasporic individuals, specifically immigrants and exiles.

Stuart Hall, in the essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” argues for a pivotal re-imagining of how we interpret identity – and for the purposes of this argument, the identity of diasporic people. Hall writes that,

instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think...of identity as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (Braziel & Mannur 234).

Hall’s argument leads us to reassess the relationship between culture and identity and how one informs the other. Journalist and social critic David Brooks once wrote that new neighborhoods have no identity until people start moving in, who in turn attract other people with similar tastes and values until the place becomes almost a parody of itself (Atwan & McQuade 346). A typical immigrant or ethnic enclaves anywhere in the world are testaments to the ability of people to cling to the familiar and transform a place through their very presence (ex. China Town or Little Italy in New York City). However, this act of identity creation takes on another dimension when looked at under the lens that Halls offers us. If identity is not fixed, and our individual identities are what make up a collective, cultural identity, then especially for diasporic peoples identity must itself be fluid and never complete. In other words, we create and are created by the cultural spaces we inhabit in a process that is constantly evolving. However, for diasporic individuals this reimagining of the self is always complicated by much more than the simple human impulse to congregate together for the sake of safety and familiarity.

Hall supports this idea of a perpetually shifting individual and cultural identity when he writes that,

We cannot speak very long, with any exactness, about “one experience, one identity,” without acknowledging its other side – the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s “uniqueness” . Cultural identity in this [...] sense, is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being” [...] not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But...they undergo constant transformation...they are subject to the same continuous “play” of history, culture, and power (Braziel & Mannur 236).

It is this continuous play of history, culture, and especially power, which I will argue provides the potential to empower diasporic individuals while at the same time threatens to illegitimize their condition.

In his discussion of diaspora, Hall mentions the Caribbean as a unique site and embodiment of the diasporic condition. It is here that we will take up the discussion of characters and events in Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*. We will approach the characters in this work of fiction from the standpoint of “unstable points of identification or suture” that exist within “discourses of history and culture” not as “an essence but a *positioning*” (Braziel and Mannur 237). Again, for the diasporic subject, it isn’t so much identity formation as it is a positioning in order to navigate the overwhelming influence of the homogenizing culture and even the influence of other diasporas.

I would like to argue that this positioning, which is only made possible because of a rupture, a dislocation, is a necessary component of the diasporic condition and becomes simultaneously a source of liberation and entrapment, the perceived reality of which depends on the position of the subject (Ashcroft, Gareth & Griffiths 218). The term *positioning* rather than identity formation or construction is also revealed to be a more appropriate term in this discussion diaspora. For example, in the book, *The Empire Writes Back*, Stuart Hall is quoted as saying that, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 236). “Positioned by,” in other words, implies that it depends on who is doing the “looking” at the diasporic individual, or whose narrative it is. Therefore, it is no accident that such positioning must take place within the above-mentioned framework created by the interplay history, culture, and power. Power,

and who controls it, ends up being a significant determinant of how diasporic individuals see themselves and are seen by others as constituting a legitimate cultural identity.

This turns out to be the case for the “dew breaker” in Danticat’s collection of stories. The dew breaker is a former torturer and member of the Tontons Macoute during the 1960s under Haiti’s brutal Francois Duvalier regime. He has immigrated to the United States in search of a new life and as a way to escape his brutal past. In the first story of the novel, the dew breaker is believed to have disappeared on a trip with his daughter, Ka. When questioned by the police about her background in order to begin an investigation, Ka tells the officers that she is from Haiti, despite the fact that she was born in America. She says, “I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, have never been to my parents’ birthplace. Still, I answer “Haiti” because it is one more thing I’ve always longed to have in common with my parents” (Danticat 4). For Ka, there are two communities she imagines being a part of – the one in which she lives in America as the daughter of Haitian immigrants, and the Haitian community which she imagines in order to retain some superficial connection to the homeland of her parents and therefore by extension to her parents themselves. These two imagined communities provide for Ka the hyphen in her identity, Haitian-American, but for her, as someone who has only experience America, both sides have positive connotations. However, for her mother and father, the Haiti they imagine nostalgically was left behind 37 years ago along with pieces of themselves and can never be recaptured. The Haiti they re-imagine in America, through Arjun Appadurai’s concepts of “mediascapes” and “technoscapes” (television, radio, newspapers, the telephone, etc.) is fraught with negative associations of corruption, violence, and suffering (Braziel & Mannur 32-33). Since they have essentially cut all ties with Haiti, the news that reaches them through dominant channels of communication tend to be disparaging, creating a skewed vision of the homeland, further distancing them from their former selves, requiring a repositioning within American society.

Furthermore, the dew breaker’s memories of his “prison work” as torturer in Haiti leads to his nightmares in America, and the reality of his crimes not only taints those memories with gruesome details, but also prevents him from ever returning home due to possible prosecution for his role in the deaths of many of his countrymen. In other words, as Appadurai argues in his essay “Disjuncture and Difference,” “One man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison” (Braziel & Mannur 30). Appadurai complicates Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagines communities” by revealing that diasporic communities can be potentially restricting. For the dew breaker, both Haiti and America, his imagined community, act as different kinds of “political prisons.” In the chapter titled, “The Book of Miracles,” we discover that the niche the dew breaker and his wife had cut out for themselves in Brooklyn was out of necessity rather than choice, and therefore limited their experience as Americans in the way that illegal immigrants of migrant workers often avoid contact with others outside of their comfort zone for fear of ridicule and deportation. Danticat writes that,

Anne was beginning to rethink the decision she and her husband had made not to get close to anyone who might ask too many questions about his past. They had set up shop on Nostrand Avenue, at the center of the Haitian community, only because that was where they had the best chance of finding clients. And the only reason they rented the rooms in their basement to three younger Haitian men was because they were the only people who would live there (76).

As readers we’re left to wonder what would have prevented the couple from opening shop elsewhere in Brooklyn or the rest of New York. Was it the color of their skin, their accents? Why would no one else rent from them? What made them incompatible with the rest of society outside of the Haitian community of Flatbush? Were they empowered by finding a place where they could feel a sense of comfort around other Haitians, or were they restricted by forces outside of their control, including racism and economics? Did they resist the homogenizing force of the dominant, “American” culture, or did they become outsiders in their adopted homeland?

Such a condition places the dew breaker and his wife in limbo between Haiti and America, in the so-called “third space” inhabited by diasporic individuals. If we take this “third space” to be indicative of

the diasporic condition as caused by the dislocations described by Stuart Hall, we can better understand how such spaces can lead to liberation or entrapment, legitimacy or illegitimacy depending on context.

For example, to Haitian immigrants living in their newly created imagined community in Brooklyn, and who frequent the dew breaker's barbershop and his wife's beauty shop, a hyphenated Haitian-American identity is perfectly valid and legitimate. This is the identity they've established for themselves. However, as soon as it is exposed to the gaze of others, the legitimacy or authenticity of either one of the two identity markers to the left or right of the hyphen is brought into question. This is how others perceive them. To Haitians currently living in Haiti, their Haitianess is little more than a distant, barely remembered fragment of the past. They are not really Haitian, they do not know what it is to be Haitian now, dealing with the harsh realities present in the country. To native-born Americans, their claim as Americans is always accentuated first by the left side of the hyphen, the Haitian identity, which forever marks them as "others," as foreign, different, not quite equal in their claim to authentic Americanness. They become instead emblems of a condition, representatives of an entire ethnic group.

Legitimacy and authenticity in the above examples are terms loosely open to interpretation, for what one person perceives as authentic and legitimate may not be seen as such by another. What constitutes these flexible interpretations are varied points of reference and cultural context, which once again are subject to the overlap of culture, history, and power. One way to think about this is that not all diasporas or diasporic individuals are created equal. Depending on the condition by which a person enters or is considered part of a diaspora, his authenticity and legitimacy varies in relation to other diasporic peoples and to the dominant culture. For example, legal immigrants, illegal immigrants, political refugees, and migrant workers are seen as having varying amounts of rights and levels of legitimacy in the country where they find themselves.

As a diasporic individual, we know Danticat's dew breaker is an immigrant, but it is also important to recognize his specific condition, which sets him and his wife apart from other immigrants. Even though they emigrated legally, they are essentially political refugees living in both self-imposed and forced exile. They cannot return to Haiti for fear of being recognized, and therefore choose to remain in exile in America. Their daughter, Ka, hints at what this means when she wonders what her father is preparing to tell her before he discloses his real occupation in Haiti. She asks herself,

Is he going to explain why he and my mother have no close friends, why they've never had anyone over the house, why they never speak of any relatives in Haiti or anywhere else, or have never returned there or ... have never taught me anything else about the country beyond what I could find out on my own, on the television, in newspapers, in books? (21).

Because of the political reality of his situation, the dew breaker is forced to constantly lie about his origins to avoid recognition. He is not the only one. Appadurai explains that, "as nation-states shift their policies on refugee populations, these moving groups can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long, even if they wish to" (Brazier & Mannur 32). Even in the dew breaker's imagined community in Brooklyn he must always shift in relation to his history, his past, in order to avoid recognition. Danticat shows us how this happens through the image of the dew breaker's scar, which he received while at the hands of a preacher he was getting ready to torture. As the preacher wounded the dew breaker using a broken piece of wood, we're told that he "at least ... left a mark on him, a brand that he would carry for the rest of his life. Every time he looked in the mirror, he would have to confront this mark... Whenever people asked what happened to his face, he would have to tell a lie, a lie that would further remind him of the truth" (227-228). Scars typically remind people of tragedies and make them aware of themselves, of their shortcomings and inadequacies. And consequently, because the dew breaker is unable to hide and escape the history of his scar, symbolically he is unable to shed what marks him as Haitian, as different. Unable to flee completely from past histories, he is also caught up in the making of new ones where he sees himself as inadequate and incomplete. This causes an internal rupture in his identity, never quite allowing him to claim his true Haitian self, and therefore opening up a space for others to begin questioning its legitimacy or authenticity, to treat him as "other."

Power relations are ever present in this positioning of the dew breaker in relation to society. It is also present in the lives of many other exiles and illegal immigrants who find themselves in a legal no man's land, at the mercy of the system in which they exist.

David Adams, a correspondent for the St. Petersburg Times Latin America, wrote in a November 19, 2004 article that,

unlike Cubans fleeing communism, who are allowed automatic entry if they reach U.S. shores, undocumented Haitians are routinely detained. U.S. officials have gone as far as arguing that the Haitians represent a national security threat; Attorney General John Ashcroft recently cited intelligence reports that Muslim terrorists were trying to use Haiti to infiltrate the United States.

The question of belonging and legitimate status as an immigrant depends on who is doing the "looking," who is interpreting the positioning of the diasporic individual.

We further see how diasporic people's legitimacy is questioned by comparing how Danticat approaches her identity and her work and, in turn, how others see her. This kind of comparison between Danticat's characters and her own life is not without basis, especially when one reads her work alongside her interviews. One of the first things we are struck by is how autobiographical her writing is, especially how events in her life and the lives of people she knows informs her work. This is important on two levels. First, it gives Danticat's work a certain level of authenticity and credibility since she is the "expert" on the subject. Second, as a diasporic individual herself, writing both from and about diaspora, her identity is, as Hall argues, constituted within, not outside representation. Because of this phenomenon, Danticat is keenly aware of its significance on the lives of her characters, and by extension in contemporary literature.

However, while the knowledge and experience, the ability to see and become multiple variations of the same thing are what give Danticat's work authenticity and legitimacy, it can make her (and other diasporic peoples) simultaneously illegitimate or inauthentic in the eyes of others. Here, it is language (and by extension writing and communicating) that becomes a crucial determinant of this condition.

In explaining why she writes in English, Danticat says that when she came to the United States at the age of 12 she "was speaking Creole, which I wasn't writing, and I was writing in French, which I wasn't speaking at home...English met me at a time when I was starting to think about writing, so I write in English" (The Writer's Chronicle interview). This is a significant statement about the role of language in diaspora. Danticat also puts it this way regarding her writing:

It was both translating another language into English and translating a culture...There aren't always literal parallels between words of places...When I came to the United States I had to do a lot of translations like that in my mind. You have to take some things from one culture and combine them with another to create a common language. That merging becomes creative (qtd. in Lyons *Contemporary Literature*).

In her review of *Brother, I'm Dying*, the *New York Times*' Jess Row quotes Emil Cioran, a Romanian exile in Paris for nearly 60 years where he chose to write entirely in French instead of his native Romanian. Cioran once wrote that, "A man who repudiates his language for another changes his identity. He breaks with his memories and, to a certain point, himself" (Row *New York Times*) For Cioran, language was a key determinant of one's identity, a theme reiterated by other contemporary diasporic writers such as the Mexican-American Richard Rodriguez and Gloria Anzaldúa.

That language determines one's identity is not in question here, but how one interprets this identity shift, or identity positioning. Danticat sees hybridity in the languages one uses as full of possibilities and creative play. It is a positive source of creativity. However, in the same *New York Times* article mentioned above where Danticat's father questions his "belonging" in America, the author writes that such sentiments lead us to question the identities of such people. What Danticat calls "creative," the article's author takes the liberty to interpret in a series of inquiries into the authenticity and legitimacy of Haitian-Americans. She writes,

Are Haitians in America immigrants, and the children of immigrants, or exiles? Do they accept a hybrid identity, a hyphen, or do they keep alive the hope of “next year in Port-au-Prince,” so to speak? Of course, in one sense they are pointless questions: when her parents couldn’t understand her “halting and hesitant Creole,” Danticat reports, they would respond, “Sa blan an di?” – “What did the foreigner say?” She and her brothers from all appearances, are fully, firmly assimilated; her own success, as a writer of novels in a distinctly American idiom – English being her third language – is the ultimate proof of that. There is, however, such a thing as self-imposed, psychic exile: a feeling of estrangement and alienation within one’s adopted culture, a nagging sense of homelessness and dispossession (NYT Book Review).

That this writer refers to Danticat’s condition as “homelessness and dispossession” is a typical indicator of how a diasporic individual’s claim to legitimacy and authenticity is questioned, if not sometimes undermined, through the gaze of others. Danticat herself explained it more like this:

We live in a world where people float between borders. When you come from such different circumstances and you end up in the United States, it’s like space travel. Within hours you’re on a different planet. The other effect of migration is that you have these extreme separations and families having to come together again and new communities being created (qtd. in Johnson *The Writer’s Chronicle*).

She clearly does not see herself as homeless or dispossessed. Instead she sees herself as belonging to an imagined community that she is part of and is helping to create here in America. In *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur argue that “Diaspora and diasporic movement must be examined within the context of global capitalism” (11). If we consider their use of the term global capitalism as an extension of what Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* termed “print capitalism,” then we can see clearly how writing, print, or language in general is critical in establishing the “imagined communities” of diasporic peoples. As a writer, Danticat then is not homeless, she has a home, which happens to be in a different country than where she was born, therefore requiring her to form and patch together a hybrid identity from the various reference points she carries with her. One of these crucial referents happens to be language.

The identity issue raised by language and writing in diaspora is brought up by Bill Ashcroft in *The Empire Writes Back* when he argues that,

writing is one of the most interesting and strategic ways in which diaspora might disrupt the binary of local and global and problematize national, racial, and ethnic formulations of identity...

Ashcroft also quotes Stuart Hall, who suggests that

the diasporic writer provides the prospect of a fluidity of identity, a constantly changing subject position, both geographically and ontologically. More importantly, perhaps, diasporic writing, in its crossing of borders, opens up the horizon of place. What does “home” mean in the disrupted world of colonial space? How can “home” become the transformative habitation of boundaries? [...] Can it also be a source of liberation? (218).

The duality of this condition plays out in Danticat’s fiction as well as her memoir and its interpretation, and is mirrored in the lives of millions of diasporic individuals around the world. The idea of home as understood by what were once assumed to be fixed markers such as common language, physical boundaries, and shared customs is disrupted and either replaced entirely or hybridized. In *The Dew Breaker*, Anne, the protagonist’s wife, clearly accepts the idea that her home will change once she leaves Haiti, and therefore she becomes “busy concentrating on and revising who she was now, or who she wanted to become” (241). In her own words, she is in the process of revising or repositioning herself.

Another way to look at this is through the words of travel writer Pico Iyer, an American citizen born in England to Indian parents. He defines home this way: “Home is the place of which one has

memories but no expectations” (Atwan & McQuade 472). That means that one can have old memories and new memories. In other words memories of things long past, and new memories created in a more recent past (i.e. old versus new places of residence). Therefore a diasporic individual can have multiple homes simultaneously, which can be real or imagined, and which constantly change. Whether this is a dilemma or an invigorating force depends on one’s interpretation. For the dew breaker, we see how it can be both simultaneously when he is made keenly aware of his defects, his scar. What he is able to repress by living a new, re-imagined honest life in America, becomes exposed when others pry into the past. He becomes the primary example in Danticat’s fiction of how dislocations can lead to both liberation and further entrapment, whose determining factors are multiple and varied. At the same time it is significant to note that while diaspora opens up the possibility of “myriad, dislocated sites of contestation to the hegemonic, homogenizing forces of globalization” (Braziel & Mannur 7), the factors that determine the successful contestation of those domineering forces differ depending from whose point of view we look at the diasporic condition. Those reference points are in turn fluid and shift according to changing socio-political conditions and power structures that always require us and the diasporic individual to position ourselves in relation to whatever homogenizing force is in effect at any moment in time. This constant manoeuvring in real life as well as in theories of diaspora makes it nearly impossible that when we speak of diaspora we can also otherize and illegitimize those who we try to empower through discourse.

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