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Abstract

Review of Jarrold Hayes. *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the family tree*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. 325 pp.

Keywords

Queer, diaspora, roots, Jewish, Africa, Caribbean, Middle East, French, Francophone, Armenia, postcolonial, American South

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Queer Roots for the Diaspora examines narratives of origin and diaspora across a broad corpus of Francophone and Anglophone works. A source of creative inspiration, the desire for “rooted” identities is also wrought (and perhaps rot) with problematic paradoxes. Politically, the search for roots is often grounded in essentialist and nativist discourses, whereby ethno-nationalist claims to territories are masked under the auspices of heritage and tradition. Rather than turning from the roots metaphor with its tangled network of ideological pitfalls, Hayes instead embraces these contradictions, arguing that origin narratives deploy strategies through which roots are called into question, fictionalized, and queered.

Both a continuation and a departure from his first work, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (2000), which explores how fiction in the Maghreb became a site for imagining both political and sexual liberation, Hayes adopts an ambitious transnational and comparative approach in *Queer Roots*. Breaking with the conventional division of the Francophone world into major geographic zones (the Caribbean, Maghreb, North America, and Sub-Saharan Africa), *Queer Roots* constructs a multilingual corpus from around the globe and blends a panoply of creative genres: film, music, folklore, anthropology, and, of course, literature. In doing so, this corpus embodies and applies the study’s premise—the search for roots both unravels and recreates origin narratives and their traditionally grounding focus.

The study’s structure resembles and enacts the rhizomatic network that is conjured up through the image of the mangrove, which Hayes analyzes as a site of queer identities in the Caribbean. Though the six chapters follow a geographical progression (from the African diaspora and the French Caribbean, to diasporas of Sephardic North Africa and Armenia, to the American South), this study also weaves together a number of overlapping threads which the reader can trace throughout the book. One such reoccurring “root” is the careful deconstruction of the origin narrative itself whereby the “origin” is decentered and the narrative is interpreted allegorically. This allows for a flexible and fluid reading of texts that have been criticized for their supposed heteronormativity. For example, Hayes analyzes representations of queerness in the African novel in order to contradict the commonly held assertion that homosexuality is “un-African” or a legacy of Western colonialism. Given the criminalization of homosexuality in the political realm—for instance, Robert Mugabe’s pronouncements that align black identity with heterosexual “purity”—Hayes argues that African novels disrupt nationalist and homophobic discourses through narrative strategies and textual silences that subtly undermine seemingly heteronormative discourse. With a close reading of the novels’ structures and narrative silences, Hayes deconstructs the semblance of

homophobia in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) and suggests that, though certain characters seem to condemn queerness, we can read the narrative voice of the novels as resisting, rather than participating in, nationalist and heteronormative discourse.

In the Caribbean context, Hayes seeks to queer contemporary Caribbean literature by turning first to the origin narrative of French Caribbean identity itself, which has traditionally been rooted in a well-established, patriarchal lineage. From the "fathers" of Négritude (Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar-Senghor), to Edouard Glissant's theorization of Antillanité, finally leading to the Martiniquan authors of Créolité (Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant), men have largely theorized identity in the Caribbean. The latter Créolistes, furthermore, are often criticized for reproducing homophobic discourses spoken through their hypermasculine fictional characters. Hayes resists the image of the patrilineal Caribbean "family tree," and, instead, suggests that the rhizomatic mangrove, as described by Maryse Condé in *Traversée de la Mangrove* (*Crossing the Mangrove*, 1989), becomes a symbol for queer Caribbean identity. In Condé's novel, the mangrove is a site of narrative queerness in which characters engage in subversive sexual practices. Hayes argues that the mangrove can also be read allegorically in that it mirrors derisive and ironic narrative strategies that the Créolistes intentionally construct. For Hayes, the hypermasculinized and homophobic discourses of Patrick Chamoiseau's characters in *Solibo Magnifique* (*Solibo Magnificent*, 1988), in fact, deconstruct the masculinity that they appear to laud.

Diasporic narratives, likewise, paradoxically disrupt notions of belonging. Whereas diaspora may, in some cases, imply that identities and communities are (or once were) stable, Hayes argues that a comparative and queer approach to diaspora deconstructs these identities. An example of this is Hayes's reading of Alex Haley's 1977 novel, *Roots*, which recounts the African-American author's search for his ancestry in West Africa. Haley, sued twice for plagiarism, provoked a scandal and, more importantly, a debate around how the "truth" of one's origins can be uncovered. Hayes reads the apocryphal account of Haley's supposed ancestor, Kunta Kinte, as revealing the inherent fictionality of all origin stories. Similarly, Jewish Moroccan author and singer Sapho's novel *Un mensonge* ('A Lie,' 1990), tells lies about origin and identity and thus exposes their fictionality, which in fact uncovers the "truth" about root narratives. Autobiography and film of the diaspora, forms of fiction in their own right, also engage in this process of narrative undoing. Hayes juxtaposes Jacques Derrida's notion of *trace* in *Writing and Difference* (1967) (in which the trace is understood as the absent-presence of the Other within a binary pair) with Glissant's treatment of *la trace*, 'the trace,' in *Poétique de la Relation* (*Poetics of Relation*, 1990) as a way of thinking about origins or roots. These disseminated roots-networks demonstrate that the "origin" of the origin narrative is, in fact, a non-origin. Applying these notions to Albert

Memmi's autobiographical childhood narrative, *La Statue de sel* (*The Pillar of Salt*, 1953), Hayes argues that Memmi's fictionalized self-narrative confronts and at times contradicts his political essays. Though Memmi's non-autobiographical work may adopt the Zionist discourse of the Jewish "return" to Israel, the queer sexual encounters narrated in his autobiographical texts complicate and trouble this desire for "return."

Hayes further complicates (and indeed, perhaps over-complicates) identity in his reading of Derrida's "Circumfession" (1993). Following the notion of *trace*, and roots-which-are-not-roots, Hayes argues that Derrida's narrative of circumcision acts as the site of his emasculation, which uncovers and thus deconstructs phallogocentrism. Hayes acknowledges the paradox of this argument: can one truly deconstruct phallogocentrism with an autobiography of the phallus? Nevertheless, the reader may still be left with some questions. Almost all of the narratives studied in *Queer Roots* depict male homosexuality or male sexual desire. Is this because there simply are no examples of lesbian sexuality in origin narratives that would fit this corpus? Addressing this question directly would have strengthened this study. One could consider, for instance, novelist Calixthe Beyala's treatment of lesbian sexuality in *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlé* (*The sun hath looked upon me*, 1987) which, according to Ayo A. Coly in *The Pull of Postcolonial Nationhood* (2010), is an example of how African women authors resist notions of home and family and construct subversive narratives of postcolonial disenchantment.

Despite these questions, this work offers a timely and significant contribution to queer studies and diaspora studies, as well as to comparative literary studies more broadly. The concluding chapter, in which Hayes queers his own origin story by conjuring up the ghosts in his family tree, "rooted" in rural North Carolina, is among the most compelling aspects of the study. Ghosts, he argues, remind us of the violence of the past. Whether through the ghosts of sexual and racial violence against African Americans and Native Americans, or through the specters of economic exploitation and disparity haunting America's past, the author skillfully demonstrates how family histories—like national histories—can force us to reinterpret the present. The ghosts which haunt the Efirid family story (on Hayes's maternal grandmother's side), and indeed the American national narrative, speak to the violence inherent in the family itself, which upholds heteronormative kinship structures. Ghost stories, like narrative forms, offer a queer counter-history: they deconstruct family trees, unearth the silences in these histories, and have the power to recreate and queer the present.

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