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CyberRace Constructs: Transnational Identities

in Roshini Kempadoo's *Ghosting*

Introduction

In the flood of scholarly work seeking to calibrate and explicate the effects of new media, the question of race has become an increasingly contentious point of debate. In part, this debate is fuelled by a view of computer technology as a vanguard example of globalization where "the new world media order reshapes the globe," and by doing so undermines the role of the nation state as an impetus in "nation-building, history-making, culture-preserving" and "identity" formulation (Hess and Zimmermann 149, 150). According to John Hess and Patricia Zimmerman, such "adversarial transnational digital imaginaries" seek to "rewire some of the circuits of control" by creating an environment where "there are no immigrants, no border patrols, no closed off-national fantasies, [and] no monolithic linear narratives" (150). Cyberspace, has seemingly created the perfect egalitarian environment where "information has come to matter more than bodies or things" and where "recombinant structures" challenge the underpinnings of the dominant by being "always provisional and nomadic, always moving and reforming" (150, 151). As a result, "the old lines of division–systems of order, relations of signification, hierarchies of value and power–are palpably beginning to crumble," which in turn demands that "the cultures of the past must give up their claims to autonomy" (Poster 318, 317). From this perspective, new

media technology creates a new kind of universalism, a sort of utopic space populated by nation-less "posthuman" cyborgs and "humachines" founded on "the intertwining of humans and machines to such an extent that properly speaking one cannot locate a position that resembles that of a subject nor that of an object" (Hayles 2; Poster 318, 319). It seems inevitable then, that race, as a salient force in identity construction, should be decommissioned and relegated to oblivion along with other analog cast-offs.

The difficulty with this presumption is that not all cultures share the "rather euphemistic" view of "a post-human era" as the dawning of a raceless global society (Fusco xvi). There is valid reason for suspicion, for constructs like Hayles' posthuman cyborg, Poster's humachine and Hess and Zimmermann's cyberspace as "that non-place where bodies don't matter anymore," all give primacy to precepts developed through engagement with specifically eurocentric histories of computer technology (Hess and Zimmermann 152). Although all these theorists see the possibility for resistance in new media forms, they also advance a universalist assumption that the body, dissembled into data, will cease to exist on a material, cultural basis. For theorists and thinkers in the black diaspora, who have experienced very different relationships with history and western technology, "the literal and virtual whiteness of cybertheory" seemingly perpetuates existing "strategies of domination" instead of transcending them (Weheliye 21, Fusco xvi). More specifically, the contention that new media subjectivities are somehow completely disconnected from the oscillations of past subject/object/Other formulations seems remarkably shortsighted. In the end,

there is always a return to the real material body behind the mouse and keystroke. Raceless cyberspace, therefore, if it exists at all, is an illusory state at best, the product of eurocentric history that can afford to ameliorate, ignore or rewrite its own culpability in the persistence of systemic racism.

Perhaps more to the point, the theoretical imaginings of black diasporic thinkers offer a powerful counterpoint to the western domination of cybertheory. Adept at transnational configurations, black diasporic theorists and thinkers have extensive knowledge with global flows of cultures and histories: propelled by the slave trade, migration or exile, these theories present a very different relationship with time, place and space, making them ideally situated for expanding the current lexicon of cybertheory. Based on the central tenet that "identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse," black diasporic theory emphasizes that subjectivities "are constructed through, not outside difference" (Hall 4). Given this context, I will explore *Ghosting* (2004), a digital media installation by London-based artist, Roshini Kempadoo, which deals with the transnational identities of black Caribbean subjects that have been formulated through slavery and immigration. In particular, I will consider Kempadoo's "aesthetic engagement with [the] historical trauma of colonialism and slavery" in tandem with Edouard Glissant's notion of "creolization" as a basis for exploring a specifically Caribbean formulation of digital aesthetics (Fusco xvi, Glissant 1989 142). By examining how "the cultural process of creolization" goes beyond center/periphery binaries, Kempadoo's work argues for "a more creative

interplay" between histories, cultures and race (Hannerz 68). Thus, Kempadoo

foregrounds the racialized body as a crucial element of cyberspace discourses.

Flows of Transnational Histories

Forged in the crossfire of slavery and the global economic impulses that

drove it, Caribbean cultures have long been actively aware of globalization and

its effects. As Glissant suggests, "the dialectic between inside and outside is

reflected in the relationship of land and sea" where a "multiple series of

relationships" brought to the island by European, African, Indian and other

migrations create "a Caribbean imagination" that "liberates us from being

smothered" under the weight of discordant histories and oppressions (1989 139).

For Glissant, this multiplicity of cultures spurs Caribbean writers and artists to

repudiate western universalisms as "edict[s] that summarized the world as

something obvious and transparent, claiming for it one presupposed sense and

one destiny" (1997 20).   From this perspective, the models of new media theory

proposed by Hayles, Poster, Hess and Zimmerman with their insistence on

universal application and western historical underpinnings are clearly in conflict

with the hybrid cultures and histories of the Caribbean. As Glissant further

suggests, such "generalization[s]" are fundamentally flawed because they

represent "one side of the reports, one set of ideas" which are then "export[ed] as

a model" specifically geared to masking voices of resistance (1997 20-21). In

order to "help to correct whatever simplifying, ethnocentric exclusions may have

arisen" from such models, Glissant argues for a view of historical interaction that

"reproduces the track of circular nomadism" which "abolishes the very notion of

center and periphery" by redefining its boundaries in response to local imperatives (1997 21, 29). Referring to this as a "poetics of Relation," this concept sees meaning, history and identity functioning as a "network inscribed within the sufficient totality of the world" in a set of flexible "dialectics between the oral and the written, the thought of multilingualism, the balance between the present moment and duration" and "the nonprojectile imaginary construct" (27, 29, 35). Meaning, then, depends on who is speaking in what context and why.

This position is salient when considering the role, or perhaps more correctly, the absence of race as a marker in digital culture. As concepts, both the posthuman and the humachine are, in part, abstractions fuelled by the history of western technology, which gives primacy to "technological expertise" as a "means of dominating nature" (Glissant 1989 182). In this context, the notion of cyber-disembodiment seems to be a natural development since it is the body that is most directly connected to the material world of nature. However, for Caribbean nations, race, initially proscribed by colonialism and slavery and later by the importation of waves of indentured laborers, has meant an ongoing struggle against systemic dehumanization. The body, on which these histories of "creolization" are inscribed through discourse, therefore remains evocative of "the unceasing process of transformation" at the center of Caribbean identities (142).

As an interactive installation, the physical layout of *Ghosting* foregrounds creolization as an active force in Kempadoo's use of digital aesthetics. The installation is comprised of a console facing a large screen on which the artwork's images are projected. On the console is a large object of weathered

wood, carved in the shape of a warri board. Five pits are hollowed out of the top of the warri board and are equipped with interactive off/on switchers. These pits contain four heavy stones and as these stones are moved into different configurations among the pits, the user triggers one of six story strands that comprise the artwork's narrative.

The warri board, as an object, becomes a tangible representation of both roots and routes: a game of strategy, Warri has a long history in Africa and was introduced to the Caribbean and America to African slaves.[1] The fact that this object is central in mediating the user's control of the artwork connects the user simultaneously to the African roots of the Caribbean slaves as well as the implications of the globalized slave trade responsible for their displacement. Furthermore, the aged appearance of the warri board, and its contemporary reconfiguration as a digital portal to Caribbean culture, indicates an ongoing practice of transforming western technology to serve specific cultural needs that is common to the black diaspora, and indeed to other cultures outside the west. In other words, technology does not define Kempadoo as an artist or as a subject. Instead, it functions as a tool redefined by Kempadoo to serve the demands of cultural self-expression. This is a key distinction: universalized concepts like the humachine and the posthuman tend to present technology as a homogenizing force redefining human endeavor as if human agency has ceased to exist. In Kempadoo's art, human agency, more specifically Caribbean culture, is the force that shapes technology and gives it form. As Glissant argues, "to declare one's own identity is to write the world into existence," and by fusing the

warri board with digital technology, Kempadoo effectively establishes a creolizing aesthetic strategy (169).

Relational Narratives, Interactive Assemblage

The central task facing Kempadoo as a digital artist is the need to go beyond "the long and painful quest" of creating identity schema in "opposition to the denaturing process introduced" by the Caribbean's colliding histories of colonialism (Glissant 1997 17). Yet, paradoxically, this cannot be achieved without addressing "the processes of identification or annihilation triggered by these invaders" whose actions fundamentally shaped the political, historical and economic contexts of Caribbean nations (17). To bridge this seeming contradiction, Kempadoo chooses to view Caribbean experience as a "rhizome" comprised of global flows of history highlighting "the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation" between creolized viewpoints of that experience (18). Such a strategy undermines linear eurocentric depictions of Caribbean histories by positing identities that arise from these histories as multifaceted, multidimensional and profoundly interactive.

Digital narratives are particularly useful for promulgating such complexities, given the possibilities of multilinear constructions. Kempadoo uses this malleability to great advantage in *Ghosting* by creating a narrative structure composed of six story strands that represent different aspects of Trinidadian histories. Each of the storylines has a specific focus: Aunt Ruth's reminiscence of the slave girl, Elsie, recounts the psychological cost of slavery and the plantation system; the reading of the will of Sampson de Boissiere, a French

plantation owner, represents the history of French colonization and miscegenation; a debate between Jonas Muhammad, Jean Baptiste Phillippe and Ram over the fight for their rights exposes the fractures between ex-slaves who wish to return to Africa and the status of free colored Afro-Caribbeans and indentured laborers of Indian descent respectively; a personal conversation between Ram and Elsie touches on the crucial importance of land ownership; Victoria May's story strand reveals the entrepreneurial spirit and independence of Caribbean women; Marie Louise recalls the day Jean Baptiste's medical practice was shut down because he was Afro-Caribbean and reflects on the complexities of a nation where Afro-Caribbeans have gone from slavery to running the Trinidadian government within the reach of her living memory.[2] In addition, each of these strands is interlinked. For example, through the content of his will, de Boissiere grants Elsie her freedom, and acknowledges her daughters Marie Louise and Victoria May as his own, revealing the familial connection between the women. In the debate with Jonas and Jean Baptiste Phillippe, Ram discloses his reliance on Elsie as a confidante, a relationship that is further developed in the strand where they pool their resources to purchase land from Marie Louise and thus affirm that they are lovers working to a common goal. Marie Louise notes Aunt Ruth's status as a healer in the preface to her recollection of Jean Baptiste's travails as well as acknowledging him as her husband. The warp and weft of these revelations places the user in the position of interactively creating an assemblage of the histories presented as she/he considers the relations created by the multilinear narrative strands.

More to the point, because the user is actively engaged in mining the narrative for interconnections, the view of Trinidad as a nation is profoundly influenced by the duration and depth of the user's interaction. For example, the user's freedom to access story strands by moving the stones affects the experience of the narrative by determining sequence and duration: a user can watch a story strand in its entirety or move at will from one to the other, thus affecting the type of knowledge base she/he develops, which in turn affects the meaning the user derives from the experience.

Digital Orality, Shifting Time

The relational exchange of information between story strands reflects what might be described as "a dialectical relationship between [the] settling and unsettling" of Trinidad's discourses of nation (Puri 75). Kempadoo's work shares similar ground with that of Glissant given the primacy she places on creating "a critically engaged relationship to oppositional nationalist politics" by establishing a "delicate equilibrium" that prevents any one discourse of nation from "gaining priority" (75). The interplay of the polysemic voices of her characters is crucial to establishing this balance, allowing Kempadoo to present one construct of history in a strand and counteract it in another. Most importantly, the structure of the strands as recollections and/or personal events places a primacy on "lived" oral history versus that of "recorded" written history as a dominant means of understanding Trinidadian identity. For example, this crucial difference is typified by the screen that arises as a prompt should the user fail to continue moving the stones on the warri board. The screen is black and features two small archival

portraits of a mixed-blood woman left of centre on the screen. Significantly, one portrait faces right and the other faces left, as if representative of the multiple voices that contrast each other in the narrative. The words to the right ask the user, "if is more stories yuh wan, you best move dem stones…" As a touchstone, this screen foregrounds the creolization of Trinidadian culture through the figure of the woman and the use of creolized English as a means of address. Furthermore, the emphasis on "stories," places emphasis on the role of oral history as a counter to more eurocentric constructs: to understand Trinidad, it is crucial to hear the voices of its people.

As an element of orality, memory, or the personal recollection has a long history in Caribbean artistic practice. As Antonio Benítez-Rojo argues, the "irreducible memory" of race is a recurrent "theme" in the "ethnographic, economic, political, and sociological terms" encompassing the shifting boundaries of Caribbean identity (202). Certainly, race plays a vital part in the recollections offered by Kempadoo's characters, and its intersections with the histories of the nation provide a framework for debating the issues raised by each individual voice. Moreover, because this personal oral testimony is offered as voice-over narration supported by non-individualized archival images of Caribbean peoples, Kempadoo's characters become outlets for broader spectrums of Caribbean cultures. As a result, the characters' recollections extend their boundaries beyond the narrow construal of personal experience becoming barriers and bridges between individuals and concepts of nation.

Kempadoo expresses this intention most directly in Aunt Ruth's recollection of Elsie as a slave. The segment begins with Aunt Ruth's statement, "Well, I tell you, hoist up any one rock on dis island it's the same plantation story" whether "it's of Trinidad, Barbados, or Grenada or petit Martinique, wheresover dem have plantation, yes." The comment not only places Elsie's experience of slavery within the global flows of colonialism, it also casts her as a representative figure within slavery itself. As Aunt Ruth reveals, Elsie is a house slave who is keenly aware of the suffering and utter degradation of the field slaves she can see from the window of the plantation house. Consumed by the guilt of being trapped "the round of rituals of power inside" and "the suffocating, dehumanizing hell outside," Elsie finds herself unable to cleanse the "twas-up soul inside the plantation heart." Aunt Ruth's history of slavery, as told through Elsie's story, is expressed in psychological terms, when the toll of the historical context is not revealed through the misleading "dispassionate" recitation of fact and figure, but is written on the hearts and minds of the persons who endured and survived its ravages. It thus becomes a profoundly human story where the physical bodies of the African slaves, with "backs distorted" by the "brittle limbo pole of slavery," become literally symbolic of their oppression.

Aunt Ruth's role as a narrator is also worthy of consideration.[3] Rooted in an indeterminate present, Aunt Ruth's recitation becomes an act beyond mere recollection. By documenting Elsie's life, Aunt Ruth is making the events of her time accessible to a present-day generation, thereby giving her presentation a pedagogical purpose by linking the past seamlessly with the present. Kempadoo

reinforces this notion through visual strategies intended to suggest that the past

is a ghosted image imprinted beneath the present. For example, as Aunt Ruth

describes Elsie's sense of entrapment, Kempadoo presents a still photograph of

a dilapidated, thatched roof structure, clearly taken in a contemporary context.

Over this image she superimposes an archival photography of slaves processing

sugar cane, one of the primary staples of plantation agriculture. Through digital

compositing, the slaves' figures are integrated into the contemporary landscape,

creating an affirmative connection between past and present. This confrontation

of time thus becomes a means of denying eurocentric "linear structure" by

refusing an order of events that divorces the past from the present (Glissant

1989, 145). The end result "is not merely space; it is also its own dreamed time,"

and as a result, the original image of the structure becomes a portal to past

events, validating their continued impact on present-day Trinidadian identities

(Glissant 1997 58).

Thus, Kempadoo repeats these elements in other story strands, and by

doing so, provides aesthetic cohesion within *Ghosting*'s multi-linear narrative. An

illustration of this occurs in the segment where Marie Louise, Elsie's daughter

and the wife of Jean Baptiste Phillippe, recollects the forced closure of his

medical practice by the British colonial authority.[4] The strand begins with an

elderly Marie Louise declaring that although her "bones ache with age," she is

"still strong of memory" and can recall the events of that day "as if it is happening

now." This initially roots the history of the moment in the past, but as the scene

progresses, it transitions from a past-tense recollection to a present-tense

discussion between a young Marie Louise and her husband concerning his rights as a free colored landowner. The shift between past and present is further enhanced by a long tracking shot of a series of ruined structures all covered with white, peeling paint. As Jean Baptiste Phillippe defiantly refuses to be treated "like a slave," Kempadoo superimposes ghostly archival images of a variety of colonial authority figures, some in police and military uniforms, over the ruined buildings, thus connecting past oppression to contemporary times. In this case, the slow procession of figures against the degraded white background contrasts with the passion expressed by both Marie Louise and Jean Baptiste Philippe as they map out their next moves to insure their rights, including organizing into a society of free coloreds. In addition, this presentation also suggests that despite the erosion and eventual undoing of the colonial social structure, its legacy is still present beneath the surface of contemporary Caribbean nations.

Digital Landscapes, Caribbean Identities

As the above exemplars illustrate, the physical landscape of Trinidad plays a powerful role in Kempadoo's aesthetic project. Glissant argues that "the inescapable *shaping force* in our production of literature is what I would call the language of landscape" (1989 145). Similarly, in her digital reconfiguration of Trinidad, Kempadoo places a strong emphasis on landscape as a bearer of history and a portal to memory. Furthermore, the intimate relationship between land and bodies and between possession of that land and race, results in an indivisible merging of the two: it was by the labor of slaves' bodies that land in Trinidad was developed and wealth created, just as it is by virtue of indentured

Indian servitude that the same land and wealth is maintained after emancipation.

Landscape thus becomes symbolic of this struggle in which race, freedom and

oppression continually state and restate themselves.

Land, the implications of its means of cultivation and race serve to link

several story strands.[5] However, the most overt statement made by Kempadoo

regarding the nature and status of land occurs in a story strand where Ram, an

ex-indentured laborer, and Elsie, now his lover, discuss pooling their resources to

support the entrepreneurial activities of Elsie's daughter, Victoria May who

wishes to become a food seller. As Ram speaks about his youth and time as an

indentured laborer, Kempadoo foregrounds two images on a divided screen. The

first image is of a ramshackle apartment, and the second, a long shot of the

Trinidadian landscape. As he reveals that he was cared for kindly and taught to

read and save for his freedom by the white plantation manager, Kempadoo

overlays an archival photograph of a black family on the balcony of the

apartment. She also places next to the landscape image a long shot of an older

man, presumably of Indian ancestry, dressed in white with a cheerful Indian child

lying on the ground next to him. The juxtaposition of the back family on the right

and the Indian man and child on the left, suggests that they both lay claim to the

landscape that separates them in the middle. This composition is a visual

commentary on the historical divisions between Afro- and Indo- Caribbeans: as

Shalini Puri notes, the "antagonism between a racialized 'us' and 'them'" lies in

"the series of oppositions" used to justify the importation of Indian labor by

stereotyping Afro- and Indo- Caribbeans as "the thriftless African/the thrifty

Indian; the lazy African/the hard-working Indian; [and] the childlike African unable to control his sexual appetites/the calculating and ascetic Indian" (172-173). In doing so, white planters were successful in polarizing the two cultures and thus preventing a challenge to their authority.

However, as Kempadoo's later images suggest, the Trinidadian landscape was fundamentally shaped through the action of both Afro- and Indo- labor. As Elsie states passionately, "without your own land you are next to nothing," Kempadoo begins a slow upward scroll of a series of images of property, including houses, landscapes, and agricultural shots, each indicating a different aspect of ownership and shaping of the Caribbean land. This series of images underscores Elsie's assertion that "land is the surest foundation" for building a living. More particularly, the images, like many throughout the work, are devoid of human figures. Instead, human agency is reflected in the ways in which the land has been manipulated, either through the presence of architecture or agricultural crop, both of which are signs of possession and ownership. In context with Elsie's words which express a longing for ownership, the images of the Trinidadian countryside invite the user to consider all the different political and economic implications of land as a resource and a grounding of culture. Furthermore, the fact that Ram and Elsie arrive at a plan to pool resources to enable the purchase of land from her daughter, Marie Louise, also suggests that while divisions may exist between Afro- and Indo- Caribbean cultures, bridges are possible when goals are mutually shared.

Conclusion

As Kempadoo's *Ghosting* demonstrates, there are ways of reconfiguring digital art that refuse encapsulation in eurocentric paradigms. As a forerunner or perhaps as a theorist in the forefront of globalization, Glissant suggests that computer technology offers "a chance to reconnect the two orders of knowledge, the poetic and the scientific" (1997 81). Kempadoo's artwork achieves that goal by first creolizing digital technology to reflect Caribbean sensibilities and second, by exploiting the medium's multilinear possibilities to create a relational narrative and aesthetic structure suitable for discussing Trinidadian race relations.[6] As a result, Kempadoo is successful in restoring race to the discussion of new media theory and the Afro-Caribbean subject to the center of Caribbean national histories.

Acknowledgement

Endnotes

1. It is known by a multitude of different names including Adi (Nigeria), Omweso (Uganda) and Mancala (Egypt). For more information on the different variations of the game, please see the following:
http://gamesmuseum.uwaterloo.ca/countcap/pages/index.html

2. In addition to the personal histories the story strands represent, they are also indicative of major historical impetuses in Trinidadian histories. For example, de Boissiere's will connects him to an abandoned plantation in Grenada, signaling that he is symbolic of the French migration to Trinidad from that area in 1783, encouraged by the Spanish colonial authority that held Trinidad at that time (Millette 13). As a so-called "free coloured," Jean Baptiste Phillippe is representative of a class of "free blacks and coloured" planters also encouraged by the Spanish to settle Trinidad, who subsequently developed a status in colonial society "unrivalled" by other Afro-Caribbean populations (16-17). As an ex-indentured laborer of Indian descent, Ram signifies the recruitment "from 1845 to 1917" of inexpensive labor intended "to replace slave labor so as to keep the plantations functional" after the emancipation of the slaves (Puri 171). Each

of these three characters thus allow Kempadoo to present a wide representation of competing historical influences in the development of Trinidad as a nation.

3. In addition to introducing Elsie, which is done in detail, Aunt Ruth's segment also provides very brief introductions to the other characters in Ghosting, which serves as impetus for the user to explore additional story strands for more information.

4. Like many Caribbean nations, Trinidad was occupied by more than one colonial power over its history. Spain held possession of Trinidad from 1498 to 1797 (Ryan 4). The British captured it in 1797 and held it through "to the end of the First World War in 1918" (4).

5. Land as a marker of Jean Baptiste Phillippe's status as a free colored man is underscored. In Sampson de Boissiere's will, for example, the French planter gives him a parcel of land to settle a debt. In Marie Louise's remembrance of the revocation of Jean Baptiste's rights as a medical doctor, she notes bitterly that while it is permissible for a free colored man to own land, it is above his status to practice medicine.

6. Furthermore, Glissant's concept of relation has potential to aid in the analysis of multi-linear digital artworks in new media theory because it has the flexibility to account for the relational aspects of these narratives in a way that conventional, linear-based heuristics find difficult.

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