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Caribbean Cultural Identity and the Art of Cactus Maintenance

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I saw the place I called home with new eyes and it looked sinister.
Maryse Conde - *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*

I keep a cactus in the cup holder of my little pick-up truck—a tiny slice of green to take with me on the road. The cactus has traveled with me to various places in the U.S. and has remained green despite my neglect to water it properly, replenish the soil, and park in the shade on blistering summer days. The cactus has been crushed by unsympathetic passengers and knocked out of its tiny pot onto the floor of my truck. Still green, the cactus surprises me with its resilience. However, I think I can safely assume that the cactus's ecological niche is not a space in a stifling pot inside a truck. Even though the cactus is not in its ecological niche in my car, it would be difficult to say that the plant is not still a cactus; it shares an evolutionary/genetic history with other cacti of the same species. However, the adaptation enacted by my cactus as a result of the environmental factors in my truck makes it different from other cacti of the same species; the general shape of the cactus or the growth pattern of its stems and roots is determined by the artificial and often damaging environment of my truck. I like to think of my cactus as an apt metaphor with which to begin a discussion of Caribbean cultural identity as both unified in a common history but separated by varying diasporic experiences; Caribbean identity, while fixed in the history of slavery, colonization, and revolt, among other factors, transforms or adapts, like my cactus, to changes in place and environment. Both Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" and Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* imagine Caribbean cultural identity as simultaneously unified and separate by factors related to place and movement. Moreover, my cactus metaphor directly engages with Edwidge Danticat's use of the saguaro cactus in *The Dew Breaker*.

Both these writers' works are positioned in the context of their own diasporic experiences. Of course, Danticat's experiences materialize in her fiction whereas Hall's experiences inspire his theoretical work, which deals with cultural identity. In his essay "You Can Go Home Again, You Just Can't Stay: Stuart Hall and the Caribbean Diaspora," Grant Farred offers a psychoanalytic reading of some of Hall's major and recent works based partially on biographical information given in interviews. Farred argues that, "Hall's Jamaican upbringing disabled, except for rare moments, an engagement with race and distorted Hall's own identity, politically and psychically. It is apropos that Hall should take up the matter of his past within the context of identity politics" (32). Farred, then, reads Hall's interest in the subject of cultural identity as linked to the racist actions of his mother and the resulting breakdown of his sister. Indeed, Hall notes that his "decision to emigrate was to save myself" (Chen 489). Where Hall made his choice to move to England, Danticat's parents made the choice for her. In an interview with Jessica Horn, she notes that her "parents made a very difficult decision. You could say they were economic exiles" (20). Left with family in Haiti, Danticat's parents moved to New York;

she left Haiti to join them at age twelve. In another interview with Eleanor Wachtel, Danticat speaks of the “pull and tug” of emigrating by which she means the simultaneous desires to remain and to leave and her use of those emotions in her fiction (111).

Despite the very different socio-historical factors resulting in the transplanting of Hall and Danticat from the Caribbean to what Hall calls the metropolis, both of their relationships with their islands of origin are marked with a certain degree of relational distance that parallels their lives’ geographical distances from the Caribbean. Danticat describes it in this way:

I have come to terms with the fact that my relationship with Haiti is different than someone who lives there ... I love being there, there’s a kind of peace about it that I can’t explain. But I realize that I’m not living, I’m staying for a certain period of time, at the end of which I travel back. And so, it’s a relationship of insider/outsider. (Wachtel 118)

Because Danticat has been an immigrant living in the United States since she was twelve, she does not share the same development, experience, or memories of those whom she left when she emigrated. So, when she goes back to Haiti, although Haiti is her country of origin, she does not and cannot feel the same connection to Haiti that Haitians living in their country feel. Similarly, Hall says of his relationship to Jamaica and the friends he left there: “They lived those years in a different way from me, so I’m not of their generation either. I was at school with them, and I’ve kept in touch with them, but they have an entirely different experience from mine. Now that gap cannot be filled. You can’t ‘go home’ again” (Chen 490).

Both Hall and Danticat feel a sense of displacement in relationship to their islands of origin. Where they both feel a sense of connection to the Caribbean, as evident in Danticat’s sense of peace and Hall’s contact with old friends, neither feels as though it is a place where they fit or where they would want to permanently position themselves. In both cases, the inability to permanently return to the Caribbean seems to be a result of the familiarity developed with the metropolis due to the years spent there and the resulting shared experiences with other Caribbean immigrants—experiences distinct from the experiences of those they left behind.

It is not surprising then, that in light of both authors’ diasporic experiences, Danticat and Hall have been interested in the subjects of diaspora and identity and that their works have been discussed in terms of the botanical metaphor of roots and the metaphor of transportation, routes. In a discussion with Mark Nash about Stuart Hall, Isaac Julien uses the metaphor of “roots” to discuss Hall’s ideas on cultural politics as they relate to the diasporic experience (477). Grant Farred uses Hall as the subject of his analysis and speaks of “the complex psychic roots of migrancy” and “his own journey’s tortuous routes” (33), to compare Hall’s diasporic experiences to the psychological impacts of the diasporic experience that Hall describes in his works. Similarly, in “Daffodils, Rhizomes, Migrations: Narrative Coming of Age in the Diasporic Writing of Edwidge Danticat and Jamaica Kincaid,” Jana Evans Braziel takes a comprehensive

look at the use of imagery related to roots in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Braziel compares the diasporic experience displayed in Danticat's novel to "uprooting, rerooting, seeking out new points of relations, even as old ones are disrupted and rerouted" (123). Braziel positions Danticat's text as a site to examine the effect of a simultaneous connection to and disconnection from the Caribbean. Both writers' preoccupation with matters of solidarity, diaspora, and the like open their respective works up to analysis that makes explicit use of metaphors such as roots and routes.

While I am not the first to discuss these authors in terms of botanical metaphors and metaphors relating to transportation, critics—if they have set these authors in conversation with each other at all—have yet to place the texts of Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" and Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* in comparison to each other. Since both authors are part of the diasporic experience through immigration and have experienced both the solidarity and difference of the diasporic experience, then it should be interesting to set the two authors in dialogue with each other on the subject of black Caribbean cultural identity and to analyze how their respective texts position cultural identity both explicitly and symbolically.

In his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall recognizes two ways that theorists think of cultural identity. He rejects or at least problematizes the view of cultural identity as something that can be defined "in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall 393). Instead of this view of cultural identity that attempts to locate and reinstate or replant a single, essential black Caribbeanness and sees the Caribbean as one homogeneous culture to which all black Caribbeans belong, Hall prefers to view cultural identity as something that is not "an essence but a *positioning*" (395). Hall's use of the term positioning refers not only to the idea that cultural identity can be viewed as rooted in a history, whether common or detached, but also as something positioned or placed both from within the culture and from outside of the culture; the term positioning also refers to geographical positions and boundaries at which and in which cultural identity is rooted. Of course, within the places where cultural identity is positioned, Hall implies that cultural identity is not just rooted but en route, since it is constantly being transformed or becoming something new or different. That is, cultural identity, while rooted in places and histories, cannot be static since views of history are constantly changing, and indeed history itself along with any particular place is in a process of change. So, cultural identity, while neither a static or homogeneous entity, is constantly being repositioned or replanted from within and outside of the culture.

In addition to his view of cultural identities as positioned, Hall uses the metaphor of vectors to situate his view of cultural identity as rooted in a notion of historical solidarity but en route to a different view of cultural identity. He argues that "[w]e might think of black Caribbean identities as 'framed' by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture" (Hall 395). So where Hall's view is

rooted in prior theories of cultural identity, he sees the need to reposition prior theories by acknowledging the heterogeneity, the “difference and rupture,” of black Caribbean cultural identity (or identities). Hall seems to be using the term vector in the geometric sense that one can plot Caribbean identity between the two line segments of continuity and rupture, but by redirecting the use of the word vector, one might think of vectors in terms of routes or courses or directions that as they might be read on a compass. If one thinks of Hall’s use of vector in these terms, then the positioning of cultural identity is not simply something that can be found and plotted. The directional allusions of the word vector point to a cultural identity that is en route and constantly changing. (This view also alludes to the movement of peoples to and from the Caribbean—to diaspora). So, where one can figuratively plot the location of cultural identity, one can only do so while acknowledging that it is constantly moving in some direction.

In this sense, Hall argues that in different geographical locations, one finds different cultural identities; this notion points to Hall’s rejection of the way of thinking about cultural identity that searches for a singular Caribbean essence. Hall posits the islands of Martinique and Jamaica as examples of this cultural difference in relation to each other, noting that the “richer, more ‘fashionable’” Fort de France contrasts with the “visibly poorer” Kingston—which is not only visibly poorer, “but itself at a point of transition between being ‘in fashion’ in an Anglo-African and Afro-American way” (397). The difference in cultural identity that Hall speaks of is positioned in terms of the general appearance of the capital cities, but his observation that Kingston is taking a directional shift and becoming a more fashionable city positions his view that cultural identity is not fixed—not static but moving, since Kingston is en route to a different cultural status or positioning among blacks at different points of the diaspora. Particularly interesting here is that the geographical position—the boundaries that distinguish the differences—become sights of movement in themselves; the history, culture, and identity of Martinique and Jamaica are en route in different directions in relation to each other despite any historical, geographical, or cultural similarities they might have, that is, despite the routes that position the two islands as rooted in a historically common experience.

While Hall problematizes the idea that Caribbean cultural identity is homogeneous and fixed in a singular history, he seems to stop short of fully extending the examples in his argument beyond the idea that the difference and rupture found in the Caribbean is indicated by the cultural differences found in separate islands. Although he mentions a host of Caribbean islands, Hall more specifically uses as his example one island of the Anglophone Caribbean, Jamaica, and one island of the Francophone Caribbean, Martinique. So, while Hall seems to want to rethink the boundaries of cultural identity, he does nothing to unsettle that theorization’s rootedness in the boundaries already apparent within the Caribbean—the very obvious boundaries of the respective islands, countries, or territories themselves. However, Hall does note that “[a]t different places, times, in relation to different questions, the boundaries are re-sited. They become, not only what they have, at times, certainly been—mutually excluding categories, but also what they sometimes are—differential points along a sliding scale” (396). To sort of re-site

the boundaries in which cultural identity is positioned, Hall's observations can be extended to look at the differences in cultural identity within a given island itself. Indeed on the island of Hispaniola, we can see a rather obvious rupture between two separate cultural identities indicated symbolically and literally by the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. But to pursue this point further, it might be argued that even within a single nation, where we may not be able to identify a singular cultural identity, cultural identities might be just as unfixed or ruptured in relation to one another as a result of where communities or individuals position themselves—or are positioned politically, economically, educationally, spiritually, and so on. Hall's use of the sliding scale metaphor forces a rethinking of a view of culture as determined by an us/them binary while pointing to the role of one's position on sliding economic, political, and linguistic scales, to name a few, as determining factors in the positioning of cultural identity.

In continuing this trend of recasting the boundaries of cultural identity, one might consider the effect of immigration on the positioning of cultural identity. Speaking of the differences in cultural identity between the respective islands, Hall notes that to “return to the Caribbean after any long absence is to experience again the shock of the ‘doubleness’ of similarity and difference” (396). While Hall is commenting on the apparent observable differences in the culture of separate countries, his phrasing exposes the difference that separates him as an immigrant living in the United Kingdom from the specific culture(s) of his island of origin, Jamaica. It is in the act of leaving for “any long absence” that immigrants such as Hall begin a new experiential, political, and economic history not necessarily rooted in the Caribbean, rerouted and rerooted in the non-Caribbean diaspora, and it is in the “return” after this transplanting has caused a transformation of cultural identity, that the immigrant is more aware of the “‘doubleness’ of similarity and difference” (396). Indeed, both Stuart Hall's and Edwidge Danticat's sense of connectedness or rootedness along with their sense of disconnectedness from their islands upon visiting the Caribbean attests to the rupture that is apparent in the identities of “natives” and immigrants. In these terms, Grant Farred's argument, that “Hall's work as cultural theorist and a member of the political left is a means of overcoming his historic alienation from the Caribbean community in order to refashion himself as an intellectual” (40), seems a bit less shocking. While it might be speculative to assume that Hall's work is primarily motivated by a sense of alienation from the Caribbean, it is not as difficult to assume that his theoretical interest in the cultural identity of the Caribbean is rooted in his diasporic experiences.

With this sort of extension of Hall's placement of cultural identity, one can make a connection between black Caribbean cultural identity and my opening metaphor of the cactus. While the cactus is, in fact, still a cactus—in that it shares an evolutionary history with other cacti of the same species—it is different from other cacti in that it has been rerouted from its natural environment and re-rooted in a small pot and transplanted into the new environment of my truck; its adaptation to this new environment has caused it to grow and form differently than if it was in its natural environment. In the same way, one can think of Caribbean cultural identity as, in a sense, rooted in a common “origin” or “point of similarity”—Africa, slavery,

colonization, etc.—but has taken on a growth—Hall calls it “becoming” (394)—of its own within different sights in the Caribbean, which are historically different or ruptured from the points of similarity in Africa’s history as well as in relation to the historical growth and adaptation in the various islands and nations of the Caribbean.

But my cactus metaphor seems to speak most suitably to cultural identity as it is positioned or planted or transplanted in relation to the experience of immigration from the Caribbean. It is as if the Caribbeans living in the non-Caribbean diaspora, while they can look to the Caribbean as a place that can be thought of in terms of an origin, a history to be rooted in just as Caribbean history is rooted in African history, the adaptation that occurs as a result of the new environment in which immigrants are transplanted causes the cultural identity of the immigrant(s) to take on a growth, however slow or fast or in other ways different, to their own. Not only does this transplanted experience cause a shift in the perceived cultural identity of the immigrants in relation to *the* Caribbean and vice versa, but the experience has an effect on the positioning of Caribbean cultural identities from outside of the culture, that is from the metropolitan cultures into which the immigrants reroute and reroot. And just as my cactus becomes my piece of green to take with me, so the communities of Caribbean immigrants that form might be described as plantings of culture that the metropolitan cultures can point to and lay claim to. In South Florida, Little Haiti and Little Havana and other communities filled predominantly with Caribbean peoples become a sort of representation of the cultures of the Caribbean. But these communities and their respective cultural identities are something other than their points of origin as a result of a new shared experience of transplanting, through which immigrants encounter a new set of environmental determinants and varying amounts and forms of discrimination from and hybridization with and to the culture in which they are transplanted.

In her third novel, seemingly a collection of interrelated stories *The Dew Breaker*, Edwidge Danticat presents relationships involving characters with varying cultural identities. In these relationships, Danticat also positions cultural identity somewhere along what Hall calls the vectors of similarity and difference. In “Night Talkers,” Dany has returned to Haiti for a visit with his aunt after immigrating to New York. While attempting to hike to his aunt’s house in a very rural section of Haiti, Dany comes across a cactus. Of the cactus, the narrator informs us that “the roots were close to the soil, a design that his aunt Estina has once told him would allow the plant to collect as much rainwater as possible” (89). To this, the narrator adds, “There were many paths to his aunt’s house, and seeing the lone saguaro had convinced him that he was on one of them” (89). This sentence is ambiguous since the phrase “one of them” does not specify whether Dany is another cactus or if he is one of the paths to his aunt’s house. While it makes more sense for Dany to compare himself to the cactus, the ambiguity allows the reader to think of Dany, even if just momentarily, as a path alluding to the routes of his journeys to and from Haiti as well as the movement and change in his relationship to Haiti, his country of origin. However, if one accepts that Dany is like the cactus then one must pay attention to the offered description of its roots, which are functionally shallow. This image alludes to Dany’s rootedness

in the Caribbean and more specifically the country of his origin, Haiti, but the cactus is alone which complicates any allusion to Dany's rootedness in Haiti as one that creates solidarity with him and the many Haitians who have not immigrated to the United States. Through Danticat's depictions of Dany's relationships, we can see this positioning of cultural identity as something simultaneously rooted, en route, and adapting.

In the story "Seven," the repositioning of cultural identity occurs in a transplanted Haitian community in New York. We are told that while Dany is in New York, he and his Haitian roommate visit a nightclub less frequently after a Haitian man "was arrested there, then beaten and sodomized at a nearby police station" (38). It appears that their fear of going to this nightclub is related to a unified cultural identity as Haitians. They are acting on the assumption that if this sort of treatment can happen to one Haitian, it can happen to any of them, pointing to a similarity or unification in the positioning of Haitians by the community in New York or at least by the police force. Similarly, by presenting Haitians living together, Danticat shows Haitians positioning themselves in the city based on shared experience, a result of not only a rootedness in a unified Haitian history but also a shared movement to New York and the solidarity that occurs as a result of similar diasporic experiences. So, Dany and his Haitian community living in New York become a representation of Haitian culture in New York, and at the same time the community becomes a sort of home away from home for Dany, even if the transplanted community in New York is subject to a new set of discriminations and resulting difficulties in negotiating and or adapting to the new cultural environment.

However, the scene in New York does not solely attest to the solidarity of the Haitian community living there. As is evident in Dany's conversations with his aunt in "Night Talkers," some of the historical difference and rupture of cultural identities rooted within Haiti itself have transplanted to the community in New York. Speaking of the Dew Breaker, Dany tells his aunt that he "found him in New York, the man who killed Papa and Manman and took your sight" (97). So, in a sense, the community in New York does reflect the country from which its inhabitants originated, but it reflects it in its difference—in its appearance of solidarity but more so in the rupture that has transplanted itself into the new environment of New York, the metropolis. In an interview with David Barsamian, Danticat echoes this positioning of transplanted cultural identity when she notes that immigrant Haitians "try so hard to keep some aspects of the past with us and forget others, but often we don't get to choose" (2). So the rootedness in the country of origin becomes a route to rupture and difference that allows the transplanted community to, in a sense, become a reflection of the culture found in the Caribbean nation, even if that reflection is one of adaptation and difference.

When Dany returns to Haiti, the rupture is formed between his transplanted cultural identity and the cultural identities of the Haitians living in the rural village where he goes to find his aunt. While hiking to his aunt's village, Dany shows a lack of connection to the land of Haiti, that is, to its natural environment. Two hours into his hike, he feels a pain in his side and "tried some breathing exercises he remembered from medical shows on television" (87). Since Dany's

ability to negotiate the mountains and the physical strain of a hike in Haiti is altered by the years spent in New York, he decides to supplement his altered connection to the land with techniques he learns from television, a symbol of metropolitan cultural influence on Dany. In a sense, Dany's disconnect with the land of Haiti is symbolic of an altered Haitian identity experienced by Haitians living abroad, and his reliance on the exercises learned from a television show point to a new transplanted rootedness in the metropolis of New York; Dany has adapted to or at least has begun a sort of hybridization with the culture that he has found in New York. Dany's lack of connection to the rural landscape of Haiti contrasts with the pictures presented of his aunt, who despite her blindness seems to have no trouble making her way around to the surrounding rural villages, and Old Zo, who with his "machete and a sisal knapsack" (91), along with his presence in nearly every scene seems to be as much apart of the land of Haiti as his aunt's banana grove. In this way, Dany begins to experience the sort of insider/outsider experience or rooted/transplanted experience that both Danticat and Hall report experiencing upon return to the Caribbean after time spent as emigrants.

Similarly, the Haitians found in the rural village position Dany's cultural identity as something different from, something outside of Haitian cultural identity. From his first contact with the Haitian villagers they position him as an "other" by serving him from the glass and earthen jar "reserved for strangers," and later by "speaking about him as though he couldn't understand, as if he were solely an English speaker" (91, 112). Even his aunt, who represents his closest connection to his Haitian identity, refers to him as an "American" (96). Here, his aunt joins the villagers in positioning Dany's cultural identity as something or somewhere outside of the Haitian identity of the villagers. This positioning is indicative of the Haitians' rootedness in a history that is en route or constantly changing; since Dany has been gone, it has undergone an adaptation that he has not experienced and is therefore not able to experience a complete sense of solidarity with the villagers. Dany's transplantedness into and rootedness in a Haitian history that is adapting separately from that of Haiti is visibly noticeable to the Haitian villagers and causes the rupture between Dany and the culture found in the village to become even more apparent.

The rupture of cultural identity that Dany experiences in relation to the Haitian villagers is compounded when his aunt dies, since she seems to be the major source of any solidarity and rootedness that Dany feels toward Haiti as a result of their common history in relation to the Dew Breaker. Her death becomes a symbol of just how closely to the surface Dany is rooted in his experience of Haiti as a result of his transplanted life in New York and the simultaneous but different adaptations of cultural identity occurring in the village where his aunt lives and in the Haitian community abroad where Dany has been rooted for so many years. The narrator tells us that the villagers "didn't bother asking him anything. He wouldn't have known how to answer anyway" (110). While it may be Dany's sense of loss that prevents him from answering any questions, it is the Haitian villagers that reinforce and even broaden the rupture between Dany and his rootedness in Haitian cultural identity by remaining silent with him and by performing all of the village's ceremonial procedures without him.

But it is not Dany's interaction with the Haitian villagers that is most fragmenting and alienating; it is in his interaction with Claude that Dany finds just how different he is and just how much his adaptation to the metropolis has given him a new cultural identity. This is because when none of the Haitian villagers make any attempt to speak to him or console him, Claude, who seems to be the last person that Dany wants to see, *does* talk to him, in English, and offers him his tattooed arms: "as if to hug Dany, his broad shoulders towering over Dany's head. Dany stepped back, cringing" (115). So, in Dany's moment of anguish, the Haitian villagers do not attempt to console him, and the returned immigrant Claude, with his "towering" shoulders that suggest the metropolis where Dany has been rerooted, reminds Dany that his rootedness there is a rootedness in rupture and difference. Dany symbolically acts out this rupture by cowering away from Claude and refusing him any sign of solidarity.

However, Dany eventually find a sort of solidarity with Claude. The narrator tells us that the "only thing Dany could think to do for his aunt now was to keep Claude speaking, which wouldn't be so hard, since Claude was already one of them, a member of their tribe ... a night talker" (120). The solidarity that Dany finds is a result of a shared history of speaking his nightmares which, for both Dany and Claude, are the results of moments of violent personal rupture—the death of his parents at the hands of the Dew Breaker for Dany and the death of his father due to the actions of his own hands for Claude. Here Danticat seems to be positioning cultural identity as fixed in historical similarity, but that historical similarity is transplanted from a rootedness in similarity and continuity to a hybridized version of rootedness in historical experiences of difference and rupture.

Where Hall posits black Caribbean cultural identity as something that is positioned somewhere along the two vectors of similarity and rupture, Danticat's book positions Hall's vector of similarity as another vector of rupture and difference. Indeed, in all of Dany's relationships pointing to solidarity, there is an underlying element of rupture that unites those relationships—with his aunt it is the death of his parents, and with his community in New York it is the fear of violent discrimination and the knowledge that former torturers are among the community. Of course, Danticat's replanting of Hall's vector of similarity is not altogether oppositional to Hall's perspective since the latter's analysis of Caribbean history posits it as a history rooted in difference, hybridity, and rupture. In a sense, Danticat's characterization of Dany along with his various relationships of solidarity and rupture replants Hall's positioning of cultural identity in the specific environment of Haitian immigration, in which environment we see just how much the factors of movement and place are instrumental in the adaptation and positioning of black Caribbean cultural identity. Through analysis of both texts, we can conclude that Caribbeans living in the non-Caribbean diaspora like Dany—or even Hall and Danticat—cannot maintain complete solidarity with the islands they once called home as a result of the adaptations of cultural identity in both their islands of origin and in their transplanted communities in the diaspora.

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