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**Cultural Identity, 'Resistance,' & Women's Postcolonial
Writing
from the African-Caribbean/British Borderlands:
Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging***

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Homi Bhabha claims that the 'theoretically innovative' and the 'politically crucial' investigation of subjectivities and cultures rests in the borderlands of the present. Following his line of argument, scholars who are interested in understanding the complexity of cultural identity should analyze critically the 'in-between spaces' which yield to 'new signs of identity, and innovative sights of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (Bhabha, 1994; 2). Joan Riley's novel, *The Unbelonging*, exists in Bhabha's 'in-between spaces' and challenges static notions of identity, specifically the construction of 'third world' or 'postcolonial' women, and of the notion of *homme*.¹ According to feminist theorist Chandra T. Mohanty, scholars often locate third world women in terms of the 'underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism and "overpopulation" of particular Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries' (Mohanty, 1991, 6). The fluid, everyday lives of postcolonial women do not get acknowledged or explored when these stereotypical representations circumscribe our understanding. Rather, theoretical arguments and visual images continue to recreate binary oppositions between 'modern,' 'educated,' 'free' Western women and 'oppressed,' 'poor,' 'traditionally-bound' third world women. Certainly, as Mohanty and other postcolonial feminists argue, Western feminists and other scholars need to engage critically with the historically specific and dynamic location of women in Caribbean, African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American countries so as to not participate in cultural productions that reduces women's lives to a form of spectacle (Boyce Davies, 1994; Chow, 1993; Mohanty, Rosso and Torres, 1991; Mohanty, 1995; Lewis, 1996; Lionnet, 1995).

In an attempt to reclaim and write against the representation of third world women as the exoticised 'other,' postcolonial feminist/scholar/writer Trinh T. Minh-ha points out in *Woman, Native Other* that '[w]riting as a social function -- as differentiated from the ideal of "art for art's sake" -- is the aim that Third World writers, in defining their roles, highly esteem and claim' (Minh-ha, 1989; 10). According to Minh-ha, third world writers consciously serve political purposes by writing against the grain of Western imperialism and patriarchy. As she argues, they write in the context of a community whose population does not have the luxury or skills to read and write; therefore, Minh-ha sees herself (and other postcolonial scholars like her) as the 'neighborhood scribe,' the one who represents and speaks for 'the people.' Importantly, she justifies her approach by claiming that writing is 'one of the most gratifying and unpretentious ways of dedicating oneself to one's people' (10). In part, Riley writes back against (white) Western domination, as Minh-ha suggests, by exposing the patriarchy, racism, and neo-colonialism inherent in both Jamaican and British society. However, to claim that *The Unbelonging* serves a social function as a 'resistant,' postcolonial text is to miss the complexities and contradictions inherent in her interpretation of African-Caribbean/British women's migrant identity. Rather, she crafts a coming of age

story in which Hyacinth (Riley's main character) struggles to understand herself and find a home in a racist, violent, and bleak world. If literature is, among other things, the exploration of human identity in all its fullness -- its historical, social, psychological, spiritual facets -- reading migrant African-Caribbean British literary texts through the lens of history and material relations ('resistance') can render only a partial view of the dynamics of identity.² As I argue here, one must take into account the emotional and material complexity of living in the cultural borderlands in order to produce interpretations and theories that more accurately reflect women's migrant experience.

'Writing back' against the center dominates postcolonial literary and feminist theory (Said, 1978; hooks; Spivak, 1988; John, 1996; Minh-ha). However, this statement may prove to be a Western idea, and therefore, a contradiction of terms. Who writes postcolonial literary/feminist theory? Whose 'resistance' is at stake in the literature and for what reasons? How can scholars who are geographically, politically, economically, and socio-culturally situated in the West offer theories that 'write back to the center' when, at least in part, they have become members of the center? Caribbean literary and cultural theorist, Carol Boyce Davies in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* offers this scathing criticism of postcoloniality:

My positions are that post-coloniality represents a misnaming of current realities, it is too premature a formulation, it is too totalizing, it erroneously contains decolonizing discourses, it re-males and recenters resistant discourses by women and attempts to submerge a host of uprising textualities, it has to be historicized and placed in the context of a variety of historical resistances to colonialism, it reveals the malaise of some Western intellectuals caught behind the 'posts' and unable to move to new and/or more promising re-/articulations. (Boyce Davies; 1994; 81)

In this context, Davies argues that postcoloniality becomes the 'center' of theory announcing its own political agenda without reference to indigenous self-articulations. And while it may be countered that postcolonial theories open-up discourse, it is necessary to ask, whose ideas must widen to include the experience of 'others?'

In my reading of *The Unbelonging*, Riley's central concern is Hyacinth's struggle to exist in both British and Caribbean worlds where she is neither liked or wanted -- as such, she must constantly reconceptualise 'home' to find a place where she belongs. Emotionally, financially, and socially she must navigate the treacherous terrain of race, gender, class, and sexuality in order to survive and succeed. With each new cultural encounter (e.g. in her father's home, school, social services, and university), Hyacinth must re-negotiate her identity and emotions to try and fit in, but the violence, hatred and racism she experiences keeps her an outsider, an 'unintelligible' young woman in her adoptive country. Hyacinth herself explains, 'It's awful being different, and she hated the way people in the village near her home would nudge each other and stare when she passed . . . if only she could belong' (68). Frantz Fanon, Judith Butler, and Diana Fuss' theories on cultural 'performativity' shed light on the processes taking place in the novel.

As Butler argues, essentialised identity construction (she specifically refers to 'feminine' and 'masculine' identities) are illusions made possible through repeated cultural performances. Gendered identities are 'acts, gestures, enactments [that] are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications' (Butler; 1990; 136). Identity is thus a process, an on-going performance that gains acceptance and coherence through repeated, and sometimes unconscious, enactments of specific utterances and signs (e.g. dress, speech, and body language). As a result, 'culturally intelligible' identities appear as natural categories of existence. Challenging essentialised notion of the self, Butler argues that 'the "coherence" and "continuity" of the "person" are not logical analytic features of personhood, but socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility' (15). Through regulatory discourse, socially enforced, 'intelligible' cultural identities form: female=feminine=heterosexual and male=masculine=heterosexual.³ What exists outside this strict construction, remains 'unintelligible' -- transgressive, discontinuous and misunderstood. However, by suggesting that identity is an 'illusion' or 'repeated performances,' she breaks down the dichotomy between culturally 'intelligible' and 'unintelligible' identities, leaving the door open for social and cultural

change.

Race/ethnicity, nationality, and 'third world' constructions must be included in this performative matrix if we are to understand the historically specific and dynamic relationships in the Afro-Caribbean/British cultural borderlands. Boyce Davies argues:

If following Judith Butler, the category of woman is one of performance of gender, then the category Black woman or woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist. (Boyce Davies, 1994; 8-9)

These complicated locations of multiple and variable subject positions are what Hyacinth must manage as she grows up in a violent home, attends unwelcoming schools, shifts from one care facility to another, enrolls in college and university, and eventually returns to Jamaica. Her identity is undeniably rooted in each of these social locations, but it is also caught up in her unconscious -- in her emotional and spiritual outlook on the world. Although theorists do not often deal with the powerful emotions that radiate from the text, Riley wields her pen to embrace and enact this more full reading of identity formation.

When Hyacinth arrives in England to live with her father at the tender age of eleven, she is racialised and ghettoized into the 'other' as soon as she steps off the airplane. She senses and understands that she's come to a land where she is marked as 'unintelligible' and therefore does not belong: 'There had been a sea of white faces everywhere, all hostile. She had known they hated her, and she had felt small, lost and afraid, and ashamed of her plaited hair' (13). Before she could utter a word, much less grow accustomed to her new surroundings, the persistent racist stereotypes and discourses that circulate through British culture -- similar to those that circulate on the Texas/Mexican border as evidenced in cultural critic Jose Saldivar's work -- cordon her off as 'alien' and unwelcome in 'their' country (Saldivar, 1997). Importantly, as she looks around the airport and sees so many of 'them' and just one of her, she decides that there must be something wrong with her. As an eleven-year-old child, she unquestioningly accepts their hostility (based solely on visible differences: black skin, thicker lips, and plaited hair) and internalizes her 'unbelonging,' fueling her growing sense of shame and alienation.

Hyacinth's sense of dislocation drives Riley's narrative. Hyacinth's feelings not only keep her on the margins of British culture and feeling homeless, but they also initiate a downward-spiraling process of self-hatred, a desire to be 'white' so she can fit in: 'How much she hated her brittle hair, the thickness of her lips . . . She had always wanted long hair, would have given anything for it, and she wished with all her might that her prayers would be answered and she would become like them' (13; 78). Frantz Fanon's groundbreaking work in Black Skin, White Masks sheds light on the cultural processes taking place here. In his chapter titled, 'The Man of Color and the White Woman,' he writes powerfully of his own sense of (sexual) alienation and desire to possess the power of the colonizer: 'Out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly white. I wish to be acknowledged not as black but as white' (Fanon, 1967; 63). Similar to Fanon's description of being disempowered and black in France, Hyacinth wishes to shed her 'otherness,' her blackness, and perform as 'white' in British society so she can feel empowered in her new homeland, even if this means simply blending into the cultural landscape. However, as Hyacinth discovers, in order to feel as though she belongs in England, she will first have to bridge the emotional and psychic gaps between being black in a white world and female in a patriarchal society.

Pre-existing ethnic/racial subjectivity makes migrant characters identifiable targets for oppressive practices. Hyacinth explains that 'as one of eight black children in school, she had become the butt of many jokes, taunts and cruel tricks' (12). Whether she's on the playground or in the classroom, she cannot find refuge from the racism and hatred that circulate around her. During recess, she assumes the safest position she can against the school wall with head and eyes down on the ground, and when she lifts her eyes only to stare blankly ahead, she gets preyed upon:

‘What are you staring at?’ The aggressive question brought her back sharply to the cold of the small, mean-looking playground . . . ‘I . . . I wasn’t looking at you,’ she stammered. . . ‘Well, don’t look again . . .’

Now her head flew up, mouth opening to protest. After another prod in her chest she clamped it shut, and her heart began to race with renewed fear . . . She had seen other black children picked on in this way, and an audience would surely cause the same thing to happen to her . .

‘Kill the wog!’

It was a loud cry from somewhere in the crowd, but suddenly it didn’t matter where, for it was picked up and flung back from everywhere.

‘Kill the wog! Kill the wog!’ (15-16)

Authority figures offer her no additional comfort or safety. She knew that the white teachers ‘disliked her and had done so since her first day’ (16). Mrs. Mullens, the PE teacher, is the most vocal and offensive one, challenging Hyacinth’s right to exist in England. She recalls a specific event that left her feeling vulnerable and desperate to return to Jamaica:

She had been late getting to the lesson, and had found everyone jumping over a strange box thing which the teacher insisted was a horse. Hyacinth had known she could not jump over it. Everyone else had bloomers under their short skirt; she did not. The teacher had ordered in vain, she could not bring herself to look so stupid. Not even the taunts of the other kids had made any difference. Try as she might, the thought of the shame of exposing her panties had been too much for her. She had tried to explain to Mrs. Mullens but the woman had simply got angrier.

‘You blacks had better learn that *you are in our country* now!’ she snapped before order her to report to the headmistress. (16-17; my emphasis)

Importantly, Riley carefully constructs this scene from Hyacinth’s perspective. With each event (and there are numerous examples throughout the text), the reader understands the complex reasons for Hyacinth’s actions and responses. The verbal, physical, and sexual violence she experienced while briefly living with her father, plus the pervasive racism she feels in school and care, allows us to understand and feel Hyacinth’s acute suffering. As readers we empathize with why she believes her only choice is to live friendless, alone, and in a constant state of fear. Poignantly, these are the moments in the text where Riley ‘writes back’ to the dominant, white culture, challenging those who are culturally privileged to feel the pain associated with living on the margins and make clear that *this abuse* is part and parcel of the post-colonial condition of racial/ethnic migrants.

In *The Unbelonging*, British society operates under the illusion that essential ethnic, gender, and national identities exist. These repeated English performances render Hyacinth’s African-Caribbean identity ‘unintelligible.’ Hyacinth responds to this persistent sense of ‘feeling alien among the white people’ with intense nostalgia for Jamaica (67). She escapes to the safety, comfort, and security of her dreams in order to feel as though she belongs somewhere and is not alone in the world. As she tells us ‘the region of the night holds all my familiarity and comfort’ (38). Her dreams revolve around how she remembers her loving Aunt Joyce and the rejuvenating experience of the Jamaican landscape. Her memories of Jamaican space (the land, the town, and buildings), as well as her relationships with others, play crucial roles in the performance of nation, ethnicity and gender. Hyacinth’s idealisation of Jamaica and her determination to return to where she belongs, gives her hope and a reason to carry on living. ‘Her heart, her one ambition remained constant, steadfast -- to return to Jamaica’ (47).

Importantly, it also reflects her assumption that her ancestral culture exists in a pure, mystic, uncontaminated state. Despite her university friends insisting that the ‘real’ Jamaica is tainted with political corruption and neo-colonialism, Hyacinth refuses to believe them. ‘She herself could remember Jamaica perfectly and the one thing she had to say about it was that racism did not exist there. She supposed there might be some prejudice among the more ignorant people, but it was certainly nothing compared to Britain, and Jamaicans never meant any harm anyway’ (117). Given all that Hyacinth has

been through, her blinders to the 'real' Jamaica must remain intact because returning to her childhood Jamaica is the only thing that gives her a sense of self-worth and belonging -- a sense of home. As a result, nostalgia not only makes characters such as Hyacinth unassimilable to British culture, it points the reader to deep feelings of cultural loss and the inevitable pain that unrealistic expectations of 'home' will mean for the returning migrant.

However, Hyacinth does not perform simply as a fortress guarding Jamaican identity. There are crucial moments in the text where readers see how she has internalized the racism inherent to British culture. This is particularly true when she is forced to deal with other African-Caribbean's or Africans in her community. 'She always made a point of ignoring the black students, lifting her nose high when they came close to her, feeling the need to establish herself as different in other people's minds' (81). 'Blackness' represents violence, unpredictability, 'otherness,' and mental anguish to Hyacinth, and at every opportunity, she attempts to distance herself from being 'black.' During a brief encounter between her Indian girlfriends and an African-Caribbean boy who 'fancied' her, Hyacinth's own racist feelings and self-loathing become clear to the reader:

'What's the matter with you? Cat get your tongue, or do you just prefer coolies to your own kind . . . What do you see in coolies anyway? They always smell of garlic and grease? . . .'

'I'm going,' the Indian girl said stiffly. 'I'm not staying to listen to this. . .'

'Don't go,' she said desperately [to her friend], putting out a restraining hand. 'Just ignore him.'

The girl looked at her with hostility. 'Are *your people* always like this?' she asked coldly.

Hyacinth's hand dropped to her side, allowing the girl to pass. Shame sat on her like a burden. *It was so unfair that she should be mistaken for one of them, that she could not deny their common stock.*

(83, my emphasis)

After all the years of running away from her violent father and living in state-funded, all-white juvenile homes, she equates 'blackness' with being 'undesirable,' 'common stock;' inevitably, she internalizes these ideas and reproduces them in her own life. Yet, the Indian girls whom she calls her friends and protects with such a vengeance 'spent most of their time talking in their own language, and often she would hear her name laughingly mentioned' (84). She accepts such cruel 'inclusion' because it keeps her from having to perform as an African-Caribbean in British society.

British racial performances burn in her psyche alongside her recollections of Jamaica. At University, she continues to create racial hierarchies amongst the people closest to her by insisting that Jamaica is a perfect representation of democracy and 'civil' society -- unconnected to 'a more primitive African nation.' In Hyacinth's mind, this translates as Perlene being acceptable and her equal (despite her radical socialist politics) because she is a 'true' Jamaican. Yet, their postgraduate friend Charles, a political exile from Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, is inferior because he is African. In a heated political discussion, in which she defends her beloved island from having any connection to the plight of people in African nations, she reveals her racism.

'But your country must still struggle against domination, surely?' he asked gently. 'You are still facing the problems of imperialism and neo-colonialism.'

Hyacinth shook her head, confident in his presence.

'It's not like Africa you know,' she said confidently, 'People are more civil . . . well aware of what freedom and independence mean.'

'You were going to say civilised, and yet we are the same people, Hyacinth,' he said sadly. 'European civilisation is a poor yardstick for development . . .'

'I'm not trying to say Africans are not civilised,' she said hastily. 'Only that we don't have any tribalism in the Caribbean.'

He shook his head wryly. 'Watch that when you go back to your island, you are not disappointed, Hyacinth,' he said gravely.(126)

Hyacinth conceptualises Africa (and Africans) as 'tribal,' 'primitive,' and 'uncivilised.' Clearly, she draws her conclusions based on the repeated performances of Africa circulating around her in Western ideologies and media. Essentially, her categorisation of people demonstrates the power of nationalist discourse, or in Franz Fanon's diction, a colonial discourse. Ironically, her resistance to the idea of a black Atlantic highlights *her* (white) British nationalism, which according to Fanon represents concretely how she has been colonised, unconsciously, by the mother country. For Fanon, 'every colonised people finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country' (Fanon, 1967; 18). The postcolonial migrant has no choice but to accept the dominant culture's ideology because it is a matter of survival. Although she does not see it in these terms, certainly Perlene and Charles do. They continuously argue with her that the history of the Caribbean -- her homeland -- is rooted in African politics but her British 'blindness' obscures this possibility. Hyacinth must remain loyal to seeing Jamaica as her 'perfect' homeland not for political reasons, but because it has come to symbolise herself. If she lets go of her beliefs, she will have nothing left. Charles' final words of warning -- 'watch that when you go back to your island, you are not disappointed' -- foreshadow Hyacinth's crushing return to Jamaica, but for now, they fall on deaf ears.

Although traveling to Jamaica is meant to be therapeutic and rejuvenate Hyacinth's spirits, it forces her to come to terms with her identity, and ultimately leaves her feeling utterly isolated. When she arrives in Jamaica, she 'looks around blankly at the unfamiliar landscape. . . [t]his is not the place she remembered' (135-137). People address and treat her as a 'foreign lady' and ask her why she must travel to the 'slums,' an unsafe and violent section of the city (135). The familiar tug of fear and uncertainty returns to haunt her, and in a twist of fate that she doesn't quite comprehend, she finds her comforting thoughts and memories revolve around England: 'She thought longingly of England, so far away and safe. God, how civilised England seemed now' (138). Steeling herself against her own fear, she walks up to the old 'shack' where she had lived with her aunt and forces herself to knock. The woman she meets is withered, terminally ill, unkempt, and surviving the pain through alcohol. 'She stood frozen, head shaking in denial as the nightmare came to life' (139). The gifts she brought from England feel awkward and inappropriate, and she has nothing to say to her aunt. Her aunt, however, has a few choice words for her:

'Yu is a different person wid you speakey spokey ways...' She turned abruptly, walking away, still shaking her head, muttering to herself. . . . 'Go back whe you come fram.' The words whirled about inside her head. How many times had she heard that since coming to Jamaica, or was it since she had gone to England? She felt rejected, unbelonging. Where was the acceptance she had dreamt about, the going home in triumph to a loving, indulgent aunt? Was this what she had suffered for? It was all so pointless, all for nothing. . . [I]f it was not Jamaica, where did she belong? (141-142; my emphasis)

Hyacinth must return to England defeated. The book ends without closure; we only know that Hyacinth must still go through a process of self-discovery to find her place of belonging -- to find 'home.'

The complexities of life in the England, coloured by her nostalgia and experience in Jamaica creates a portrait of a young, migrant woman's life that is full of violence, pain, suffering, and chaos. Hyacinth is caught between two worlds, and we leave her story knowing that she must re-negotiate her identity in hopes of healing the troubled child that remains inside of her. Although Gloria Anzaldúa writes about her personal experiences along the U.S. Texas/Mexico border, Riley's story breathes new life into the meaning of culturally dangerous borderlands that Anzaldúa describes:

the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off

your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart

pound and pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread, but dead;
To survive the Borderlands
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads. (Anzaldúa, 195)

Hyacinth survives by constantly negotiating her Jamaican and British identities, living somewhere in-between, *sin fronteras*.⁴ In the concluding pages, it is impossible for Hyacinth to retreat to Jamaica, but it is equally impossible for her to live out a life free of racism, hatred and pain in England. Therefore, her means of resistance from the ‘razor white teeth’ of the dominant British culture rests in the telling of her story and her process toward an alternative re-writing of home.

Endnotes

¹ Note to the reader: I’ve put quotes around ‘third world’ and ‘postcolonial’ to indicate my hesitation in using these labels. There’s an inherent racial, national, economic, and socio-cultural hierarchy in terms such as ‘first world,’ ‘second world,’ and ‘third world.’ Such naming creates power relations between and amongst people and should raise more questions than it does answers. Who and/or what constructs the ‘third world’ or the ‘postcolonial subject?’ Do people within the ‘third world’ label themselves with these terms? Isn’t this categorization a continued form of colonization? And if we must create categories for understanding, shouldn’t we acknowledge and use labels that the people we are researching use within their own communities. To do otherwise is to impose rigid academic structures and hierarchies where they do not belong. ‘Third world’ and ‘postcolonial’ will appear without quotes in the rest of the essay for easier reading, but my hesitation remains.

² I am grateful to Dr. Karen Christian for discussing these ideas with me at length. For Christian’s full critique of identity theory and literature, consult her recent book, Show & Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction.

³ Importantly, Butler credits Michel Foucault’s work on power to explain how ‘regulatory discourses’ circulate through culture. In his History of Sexuality, volume 1, Foucault makes clear his aim to locate the forms of power and the discourses it permeates in order to effect our behaviors -- ‘how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure . . . through the “polymorphous techniques of power”’ (11). For Foucault, power develops through dispersed systems, which is then exercised over the body, and ironically, we keep it functioning. We do not question ‘the archive’ or the systems of statements that appear to us as ‘law;’ thus power continues to be deployed -- scripted on our bodies and modifying our behaviors. Consult his text, The Archaeology of Knowledge, for further discussion of the archive.

⁴ *Sin fronteras*: without borders.

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