

Some thoughts on diaspora and hybridity: an unpublished slide- lecture*

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Written shortly after the "Postscript" to "Olympia's Maid," this lecture delivered to the Wellesley Round Table, a faculty symposium on *Miscegenated Family Album*, takes a retrospective look at O'Grady's earlier life and work through the prism of cultural theory.

Perhaps I should begin by giving you some background on how the topic of "Diaspora and Hybridity" relates to me personally.

My parents both came from Jamaica in the 1920s. They met each other in Boston at the tea table during a cricket match in which one of my uncles was bowling. It was the post-World War i period of the great West Indian migration, and most of their compatriots had settled in Brooklyn. In Boston, the tiny West Indian community could barely establish and fill one Episcopal church, St. Cyprian's.

Growing up I understood that, as a first-generation African American, I was culturally "mixed." But I had no language to describe and analyze my experience. It's hard to believe, but it's been just two or three years since words like "diaspora" and "hybridity" have gained wide currency for the movement of peoples and the blending of two or more cultures. The lack of language, plus pressure to fit in with my peers, combined to keep me from thinking about my situation consciously, from understanding how I might both resemble and differ from my white ethnic classmates and my black friends.

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As a teenager with few signposts and role models, I was trying to negotiate between: (1) my family's tropical middle and upper class British colonial values; (2) the cooler style to which they vainly aspired of Boston's black brahmins, some of whose ancestors dated to before the Revolution; (3) the odd marriage of Yankee and Irish ethics taught at the public girls prep school where, after six backbreaking years that marked me forever, I was the ranking student in ancient history and Latin grammar; and (4) the vital urgency of the nearby black working-class culture, constantly erupting into my non-study life despite all my parents' efforts to keep it at bay.

I had a wildly unproductive young adulthood, spent rebelling against the conflicting values instilled in me. But though it may have been easy to say "a pox on all your houses," eventually I realized that I had to inhabit each of them. Looking back, I can see that the diaspora experience, however arduous, has been critical for my life and work. Not so much in the mixed details of my background as in the constant process of reconciling them. Wherever I stand, I find I have to build a bridge to some other place.

For me, art is part of a project of finding equilibrium, of becoming whole. Like many bi- or tri-cultural artists, I have been drawn to the diptych or multiple, where much of the information happens in the space between, and like many, I have done performance and installation work where traces of the process are left behind.

The new prism of diaspora-hybridity helped me see that the hybridized form and content of *Miscegenated Family Album* was symptomatic of larger forces just coming into focus in the culture as a whole. Though I had been operating primarily out of personal compulsion (to resolve a conflicted relationship with my dead sister) and the aesthetic necessities of the work, it contained what Edward Said in *Imperialism and Culture* (1993) called "overlapping territories and intertwined histories."

Miscegenated Family Album, the installation which is premiering now, is in fact extracted from an earlier performance,

Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline, which I did in 1980. Both pieces have benefited from the fact that, since 1980, the work of post-colonialist thinkers such as Said, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Spivak, and Trinh Minh-ha has shown that our old idea of ethnicities and national cultures as self-contained units has become in an era when "There is a Third World in every First World, and vice versa." In fact, we were never, even in situations of the most extreme brutality, hermetically sealed off from each other. This realization, marked out in cultural studies, has been paralleled in contemporary art with an additional understanding: that the intellectual, emotional and political factors from which art is made have themselves not been segregated. We do not look at or produce art with aesthetics and philosophy over here, and politics and economics over there.

In fact, as these false barriers fall, we find ourselves in a space where more and more the entrenched academic disciplines appear inadequate to deal with the experience of racially and imperially marginalized peoples. Perhaps the only vantage point from which the center and the peripheries might be seen in something approaching their totality may be that of exile, or diaspora. As the 21st century approaches, we could be facing a prolonged period of intellectual revisionism. Perhaps all of us, the newly de-centered as well as the already marginal, will have to adopt (in the spirit of DuBois's old theory of "double consciousness") what Gilroy has called "the bifocal, bilingual, stereophonic habits of hybridity."

It's true, diaspora inevitably involves sexual and genetic commingling. But this aspect of hybridity, though fascinating in itself, is not essential to the argument I am making. "Diaspora," a Greek word for the dispersion or scattering of peoples, includes by extension the lessons that displaced peoples learn as they adapt to their hosts or captors. It is diaspora peoples' straddling of origin and destination, their internal negotiation between apparently irreconcilable fields that can offer paradigms for survival and growth in the next century. Well, I should say that the caveat is if, and always if, they choose to remember the process of straddling and negotiation and to analyze the resulting differences. A simplistic merging with the host or captor always beckons. But I do think that in a future of cultural crowding, the

lessons of diaspora and hybridity can help us move beyond outdated originary tropes, teach us to extend our sensitivities from the inside to the outside, perhaps even help us maintain a sense of psychological and civic equilibrium.

As an artist I like to be concrete. Perhaps this example from my own practice will show what I mean by hybridity, how a process and an object can be more than one thing at a time.

Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline was the 1980 performance from which I later developed *Miscegenated Family Album*. It was an early attempt to treat these ideas in terms of my personal background. Of course, the performance wasn't created in an emotional and intellectual vacuum: it was a working through of a troubled, complex relationship with my dead sister, Devonia, a relationship that ran the gamut from sibling rivalry to hero worship and was itself a sort of hybrid.

The performance functioned on a lot of levels. On one level, that of a certain emotional distance, it dealt with the continuity of species experience—the old *plus ça change, c'est plus la même chose*, or the more things the more they stay the same. While this idea might appear essentialist on the surface, I don't feel there is any necessary conflict between permanence and change. To me, the continuity reflected in the piece's dual images was a kind of geological substratum underlying what was in fact a drastic structural diversity caused by two very different histories. The similarities in the two women's physical and social attitudes didn't negate the fact that Nefertiti had been born a queen and Devonia's past included slavery. The performance was not "universalist" in the current sense of the term.

My ability to think the two women, ancient and modern, in the same space came most immediately out of an experience I had in Egypt in the early 60s. On the streets of Cairo, I'd been stunned to find myself surrounded by people who looked like me, and who thought I looked like them. That had never before happened to me, either in Boston where I was raised, or in Harlem, where I used to visit my godparents. All my life I had noted a resemblance between Devonia and Nefertiti. But in Cairo,

I'd been jolted into an intuition of what that resemblance might be based on.

When I returned to the States, I began an amateur study of Egyptology. Of course, without the benefit of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, not published until 1987, I was really reinventing the wheel. I soon came to feel that many of Ancient Egypt's primary structures—the dual soul, its king who was both god and man, the magic power invested in the Word, a particular concept of justice or *maat*, as well as its seemingly unique forms of representation—were, in fact, refractions of typically African systems. I could detect a ghostly image. . . a common trunk, off which different African cultures, north and south, east and west, had branched. It was significant that the heroic period of Egyptian culture, the one that created the Egypt of our minds—that of the pyramids and hieroglyphic writing—came during the first four dynasties at Thebes in the southern, "African," part of Egypt. And yet traditional Egyptology with few exceptions, such as the works of Henri Frankfort and E. A. Wallis Budge, had voluntarily impoverished itself by not exploring the possibility of an African origin for these taxonomically "difficult" structures, whose forms may have further hybridized with intercultural contact. Instead, the discipline in the 60s and 70s continued trying to fit Egyptian culture into the "round hole" of the Near East. There seemed, on the part of most, to be an almost magical insistence that the cataracts of the Nile were somehow a more impassable barrier than the Alps or the Pyrenees.

I should also say that there is no need, on the opposite side of the debate, for the unscholarly claim that Cleopatra was black. Like all the Ptolemies, the line of pharaohs imposed by Alexander the Great in Egypt's waning years, Cleopatra was Greek. But 300 years of Greek Ptolemies could have little effect on the "Africanness" of three millennia of Ancient Egyptian culture, including the dynasty of Akhenaton and Nefertiti a thousand years before Alexander's death blow. One of the concepts that enabled my use of historic imagery in *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* and the later *Miscegenated Family Album* was my suspicion that, like some ancient Cuba, Egypt had been hybrid racially. . . but, culturally, had been aboriginally black. Given the abysmal state of mainstream scholarship, the Africanist intuition was as good as

any other. Stating that, though, seemed more a matter of intellectual necessity than simple nostalgia. European scholarship had converted Egypt into a kind of *sui generis* limbo, a rose blooming in the desert, severed both from its later “cuttings” in Greece and from its roots in Africa. The more primitive version of this had been in geography class, when our third-grade teacher had pulled the map of Africa down over the blackboard and said, “Children, this is Africa, except,” pointer poised on Egypt, “except Egypt, which is part of the Middle East.” For me, locating a sense of continuity by forcing the matter visually was a matter of intellectual sanity. The performance was not “Afrocentrist.” It had a political pedagogy that I could use in other ways.

I do think every good artwork is over-determined, with multiple composing elements. One of the primary conscious elements in *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* was something I would call, for lack of a better term, “subjective postmodernism.” Of course, to refer to the mix of ongoing personal, cultural and aesthetic preoccupations in my work as “subjective postmodernism” is to deliberately ignore that it is an oxymoron. For subjectivity is the baby that got thrown out with the bathwater in the binarism of postmodern theory. When Western modernist philosophy’s “universal subject” finally became relativized (we know which race, we know which gender), rather than face life as merely one of multiple local subjects, it took refuge in denying subjectivity altogether. In addition, contemporary theory stoutly denies its enduring binarism. But through its almost Manichean inability to contain nature and culture in a common solution, it tends to rigidly oppose nature and the “personal” on the one side, and culture and the “historic” on the other. All my work, including *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline* and *Miscegenated Family Album*, is devoted to breaking down this artificial division between emotion and intellect, enshrined in the Enlightenment and continued by its postmodern avatars. It makes the historic personal and the personal historic.

In my performances and photo installations, I focus on the black female, not as an object of history, but as a questioning subject. In attempting to establish black female agency, I try to focus on that complex point where the personal *intersects* with the historic and cultural. Because I am working at a nexus of

things, my pieces necessarily contain hybrid effects. In *Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline*, the aesthetic choice to combine personal and appropriated imagery worked, I think, in both traditional and postmodern ways. Using images with so uncanny a resemblance to my late sister and her family helped objectify my relationship to her and to them and may have given viewers a traditional narrative catharsis. On the other hand, because personal images were compared to images that were historic and politically contested, a space was created in which to make visible a previously invisible class. They were also able to open out to other cultural, i.e. impersonal questions. The piece was not "individualist."

Nefertiti/Devonia Evangeline and the later *Miscegenated Family Album* attempted to overcome artificial psychological and cultural separations through the strategies of hybridism. The work I am doing now in my studio continues these preoccupations but locates them in the more recent 19th century.

For those of you who have just seen the *Miscegenated Family Album* installation here at the Davis Museum, or who may have seen images from it in your classes, I have tried to examine my practice in words that hopefully cut a crevice between the magic of the installation and my overdetermined creation of it. I wanted to set up a situation where the movement back and forth between the experience of the piece and the process of hearing me talk about it might be disorienting, might create the feeling of anxiously watching your feet as you do an unfamiliar dance. Because it's what happens when you get past that, when you can listen to the music without thinking, that is most of what I mean by hybridism and diaspora.