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Borders Blurred: Internalizing the Other in *Tropic of Orange*

“What are these...lines anyway? What do they connect? What do they divide?” asks the final page of Karen Tei Yamashita’s magical realist novel *Tropic of Orange* (Yamashita 268). The “lines” spoken of – the orange-ferried Tropic of Cancer – possess the ability to warp the fabric of space, pushing Mexico into the United States as the Tropic pulls further northward. Ironically, this warping renders connection and division (at least in their physical senses) essentially meaningless; the method of relation, rather, becomes internalization – the incorporation into the Self of what is normally perceived as Other. International border-blending is far from being the only instance of this phenomenon in the novel. Some examples, like the character Rafaela’s cannibalism of her organ-dealing adversary, are quite blatant. Others are far more subtle – for example, the musical compositions of homeless ex-doctor Manzanar Murakami, which are composed of his internalized perceptions of the people that daily pass him on the freeway. This specific mode of contact bears with it consequences both detrimental and benign. Relating to a perceived Other by internalization is inherently deconstructive; in internalizing the other, the border between Other and self are dissolved, and differences appear to be erased. Though this deconstruction certainly has the potential to support absorption, exploitation, and loss of personal identity, it also retains the potential to promote a unifying ethos and a heightened understanding of the Self.

Before analyzing what it means to internalize an Other, it is first necessary to understand what an “Other” is. In the simplest terms, the Other is an entity defined by its difference. It is

what is foreign to the Self. Celebrated cultural theorist Stuart Hall states that, “Difference matters because it is essential to meaning; without it, meaning could not exist... We know what “black” means... not because of some essence of blackness, but because we contrast it with its opposite – white. Meaning... is relational.” (Hall 234). Difference in and of itself is not problematic; it is fundamental to our ability to view the world rationally. Thus the Other, too, is a necessary component of the way in which we understand our environment and ourselves.

Yet because popular thought tends to mark noticing difference as a negative attribute, Othering– the process of considering someone an Other – is commonly viewed as a moral flaw. To Other someone is to notice what makes them different from the Self, and perceptions of such differences are commonly exaggerated and abused. Problems arise when we view the Other as a being not merely different from ourselves but absolutely contrary to all that we are. Rather than regarding Self and Other as both resting on a spectrum in which various levels of sameness and difference coexist, we view them as a binary in which the Other is all that the Self is not. Hall claims that “there is always a relation of power between the poles of a binary opposition” (Hall 235). In regarding Others as such in the fullest possible sense, one begins to view them as forces that must be subdued. They are perceived either as threats that must be subdued in order for the integrity of the Self to be protected or as dehumanized beings that the Self can subdue and then exploit without moral concern.

One means of subduing an Other is, ironically, to take it into oneself – to “include [it] within [one’s] field of operations” (Hall 235). Internalizing an Other allows one to break boundaries against the will of one or more parties. People are forced to take on conditions or identities (generally assigned by the dominant force) that they themselves may not desire. In *Tropic of Orange*, this kind of internalization – internalization with the intent of domination – is rampant. Take for example the illicit organ trade operated by Hernando, the man who sells the organs of impoverished Mexican children to Americans wealthy enough to afford black market

body parts. The Americans purchasing these organs are Othering the children in the most extreme sense; they see them as existing at the lower end of a binary in which the two options are: humans who deserve to live, or objects that exist only to be used. The children are completely dehumanized, viewed as commodities whose sole value lies in their death. In this dehumanization and subsequent internalization, the Selves of the wealthy Americans are able to retain and reinforce their power over the Other of the Mexican children. They incorporate pieces of Others into their Selves because they desire for the Other to work in service of the Self.

The same concept can be applied on a larger scale to international relations. *Tropic* frequently references NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, as a hostile arm of American neocolonialism. Economic domination through NAFTA is accomplished primarily by means of internalization, both internalizing the Other and forcing the Other to internalize the Self. The U.S. accepts the Other of Mexican low-wage laborers and raw materials while simultaneously forcing Mexico to take in the United States by purchasing U.S. material goods.

The novel references the limited availability of traditionally Mexican products, now replaced by cheaper American imports. While in a Mexican cantina, Arcangel asks his server, “But we are in Mexico, are we not? Where are the Mexican beers?” to which the server replies, “Perhaps you would prefer Coca-Cola or Pepsi?” (Yamashita 131). In another instance, Arcangel notices that: “all the hungry and miserable people in the cantina [were] eating hamburgers, Fritos, catsup and drinking American beers. Only he, who had asked the cook the favor of cooking his raw cactus leaves, ate nopales” (131). Due to NAFTA, it becomes more economical for Mexico to import products from the U.S. rather than produce them within its own borders. Not only do the financial situations of the Mexican people suffer as a result of this but, as demonstrated by the cantina’s offering hamburgers and catsup over more traditional fare such as nopales, aspects of their culture suffer too.

Meanwhile, America solidifies its power over Mexico by taking in Mexican low-wage workers and cheaply produced Mexican goods. Bobby remarks on the “gifts from NAFTA”: “Oranges, bananas, corn, lettuce, women’s apparel, tennis shoes, radios, live-in domestics, gardeners, dishwashers, waiters...undocumented, illegals, aliens” (162). Under the influence of NAFTA, people become commoditized, just as prone to import and export (i.e., deportation) as any other raw good. The U.S. internalizes Mexican people on the very condition that they are Others – even the terminology used, “alien,” signifies them as such. Being Other, in the larger American psychology, renders them suitable to be dehumanized and dominated.

In his essay “Conceptualizing Hybridity: Deconstructing Boundaries through the Hybrid,” Haj Yazidha speaks of “the flimsy consistency of the historical narratives that cultures rely upon to draw boundaries and define themselves” (Yazidha 32). In order to retain its place of power over the Mexican Other, the U.S. makes (indeed, all nations make) Othering a cultural standard. Consider the dialogue between Buzzworm and his friend, Margarita: when she mistakenly calls a Florida orange “imported,” Buzzworm says, ““if it’s Florida, it’s not imported. Same country, see. If it’s Mexico, it’s imported.”” Margarita, confused, asks, ““Por que? Florida’s more far away than Mexico”” (Yamashita 85). Boundaries between what one must consider Self and what one must consider Other are not merely drawn but naturalized to the point that one rarely considers their subjective nature. It is these naturalized boundaries, as well the “Us” versus “Them” paradigms they produce, that ultimately make exploitation and oppression possible.

Yet internalization for the purpose of domination does not always act in the service of an oppressive force. In many cases, it does just the opposite. Internalization has the ability to reverse existing power dynamics as well as sustain them. Speaking of the empowerment that can be found in internalizing the language of another group, Yazidha says:

“The use of a colonizer’s language by the colonized to speak of the crimes of colonialism is its own transgression and act of resistance. In taking ownership of the language, changing the way that it is used, the boundaries of language as belonging to a specific place or race are dissolved....” (Yazidha 34).

Arcangel demonstrates this “act of resistance” in his poetry. His speeches incorporate both Spanish, his native language, and English, the language of America. He is thus able to lament the crimes against his “Us” in language that the “Them” will understand, directly implicating the “Them” in his accusations. Arcangel speaks of seeing: “Haitian farmers burning and slashing cane/ workers stirring molasses into white gold./ Guatemalans loading trucks with/ crates of bananas and corn/ Indians who mined tin.../drinking aguardiente/ to dull the pain of their labor” (Yamashita 145). His poetry is plainly political, and his predominant use of English signifies that he does not intend to address a commiserating audience of fellow wage-laborers, but rather, the people deriving their profit from the pain and labor of those marked as Other. Yazidha claims that “hybridity has the potential to allow once subjugated collectivities to reclaim a part of the cultural space in which they move” (Yazidha 36). In speaking both Spanish and English, Arcangel is able to denounce the crimes of Americans while retaining his own sense of cultural heritage. In a world in which power has been removed from him, claimed instead by the United States’ neocolonial force, Arcangel internalizes the language of his oppressors in order to wrest blame from the systems’ victims and “reclaim” his dignity as a Mexican man.

Arguably the novel’s most overt use of internalization to reverse a power dynamic is Rafaela’s act of cannibalism against Hernando. The two engage in a magical shape-shifting battle: he transforms into a jaguar, she into a serpent. Initially, he rapes her – forcing her to internalize his Otherness in the most literal sense – but she achieves her revenge in consuming him whole (Yamashita 220-222). Her cannibalism symbolically functions as retribution for an

entire host of people and natural entities long subjugated and exploited for colonial purposes. The novel says that during their fight,

Battles passed as memories: massacred men and women...one million more decaying with smallpox...And there was the passage of 5,000 women of Cochibamba resisting with tin guns an entire army of Spaniards...of one hundred mothers pacing day after day the Plaza de Mayo with photos of their disappeared children...the ravaged thousands of birds once cultivated to garnish the tress of a plumed potentate...the scorched land that followed the sweet stuff called white gold and the crude stuff called black gold, and the coffee, cacao, and bananas, and the human slavery that dug and slashed and pushed and jammed it all out and away, forever. (221)

In transforming into a serpent, blurring the borders between the literal and the metaphorical, Rafaela is raised into symbol and thus becomes (much like the novel's other human symbol, Arcangel) able take on the burden of history's oppressed. Her consumption of Hernando is a victory not merely for herself and the murdered children whose organs Hernando trafficked, but for every human and non-human victim of wrongdoing. Through her act of cannibalism, the power-based binary of oppressor/oppressed is successfully reversed.

Magic and metaphor do not represent the novel's only means of internalization of an Other in order to reverse power structures – the same concept functions even on the literal level. Take, for example, the insertion of the homeless into the abandoned cars on the freeway. In *Tropic of Orange*, the homeless are considered “the insects and scavengers of the city” (56). Manzanar, in calling them this, refers specifically to their ability to recycle the trash of others for their own purposes, but the terminology reveals another truth – much like insects and scavengers, the homeless are devalued, thought of as worthless and unclean, and generally Othered by the more “respectable” inhabitants of the city. When the homeless choose to camp in the abandoned

cars after their makeshift home is destroyed by fire, they force the “Us” of mainstream American culture to internalize the “Them” that they represent. The novel says that, “Manzanar wondered if the storming of the Bastille could not be compared to the storming of this mile-long abandoned car lot” (122). This primarily practical acquisition is explicitly paralleled with one of history’s most renowned democratic movements. The poor “insects and scavengers” assert themselves as people worthy of respect, dignity, basic human rights (such as shelter) through their occupation of what is often considered one of the most highly valued spaces of the mainstream American’s Self.

The significance of the cars to their original owners, valued even above the lives and wellbeing of other humans, is made clear in some of Buzzworm’s interviews. One man says of his car, “Got a homeless mother and her child living in it...At first I thought, shit, if they screw up the upholstery...I put my life into that car” (215). The upholstery of the car is essentially allotted more worth than a mother and child – even to the point that that the owner implicitly threatens harm if the car’s interior is destroyed. Later, however, this owner is given the chance to interact personally with the squatters. His tone changes drastically: “But I been down there,” the man says, “sat in the car and held the baby for her. It’s not so bad. And I think that baby likes me” (215). The binary paradigm has been broken; no longer is the man thinking in terms of “homeless” and “homed,” but rather in terms of “one human” and “other human.” Love, connection, family – when factors such as these that define existence on a universal scale are drawn into the conversation, difference suddenly appears less extreme. Author Giles Gunn, in his essay “American Literature and the Imagination of Otherness,” states that “The essential purpose of man’s encounter with ‘otherness’ is to compel him however he responds...into some new understanding of and relationship to himself. The desired goal...is deliverance and new life, and the method is always some form of recreation, a sloughing off of the old and encounter with

something astonishingly new” (Gunn 202). In coming to value the lives of Others above his own material goods, the car owner is recreated into a more compassionate version of himself.

Power structures, then, need not be reinforced or upset when the Other is internalized; in fact, they can be avoided altogether. Rather than focusing on the ways in which the Self can dominate and reshape the Other, the focus must shift toward how the Other alters and influences the Self. David Palumbo-Liu, in the introduction to his book *The Deliverance of Others*, suggests “...not a focus on ‘fusion,’ the evaporation of the walls that separate self and others, but rather a meditation on the mediation of that relationship” (Palumbo-Liu 20). In other words, rather than attempting to determine ways to eliminate difference and render the Other and the Self identical (seeing as the Other is defined by its difference, such an attempt is essentially impossible), one must come to understand the Other in terms of its relation to the Self.

In *Tropic of Orange*, Manzanar Murakami demonstrates this “mediation” most clearly. He mentally internalizes the people moving about their daily lives all around him, incorporating this world of Others into his own identity as he shapes their lives into his music. By his encounter with the Other, he redefines himself not only as a musician, but as a member of a grand interconnected community – indeed, even as the very force that connects them. “And perhaps they thought themselves disconnected from a sooty homeless man on the overpass,” the novel says. “Perhaps and perhaps not. And yet, standing there, [Manzanar] bore and raised each note, joined them, united families, created a community, a great society, a new civilization of sound” (Yamashita 35). He calls his melodic creations “the greatest jam session the world had ever known,” a testament to his exaltation of difference – in a jam session, it is imperative that there are different instruments playing at different times in order for a pleasing melody to exist (206). Likewise, it is the sheer diversity of the Others around him that lends his art its significance.



Hall's words, "Difference...is essential to meaning," are thus made to operate on a human scale (Hall 234). Cohen, paraphrasing Levinas, echoes Hall in saying, "meaning as expression...originates neither in being nor in culture. Significance originally emerges from the face-to-face encounter as an ethical event" (Cohen xxx). It is only in the difference between Self and Other that the meaning of each is created and identity is rendered. It is our very "non-interchangeability" – our individual backgrounds, our idiosyncrasies, in short, our uniqueness – that defines us (Levinas 68). This non-interchangeability can only be fully realized through the encounter with the Other – the person who, in being different in some ways from us, proves to us our own difference.

Sameness is unachievable; fusion precedes power; but similarity between Self and Other must always exist in some form, simply due to the fact that both share the experience of existing as humans. What difference remains then becomes not a threat, but rather the origin of identity as well as a factor that compels the moral sense of the Self into action. Cohen states that the "otherness of the other person...pierces the self with moral obligation, with service to the other. Indeed, the true self-hood of the self occurs precisely in and as this service....Care for the other trumps care for the self, is care for the self" (Cohen xxvii). Arcangel's "moral obligation" to defend all oppressed people, for example, is one of his defining traits; it is an integral part of his "true self-hood." Care for the Other is what drives him. He himself is more metaphor than man – he is simultaneously a performer, a centuries-old wise man, a wrestler, and a poet – yet he devotes himself to the everyday working man and woman. He blurs the boundaries between Self and Other, seeing in the oppression of Mexican laborers a cause for which he may struggle. In doing so, he defines himself not as a "circus freak" or sideshow act, but as "Conquistador of the North" – a hero for the common people, one member of a greater whole (Yamashita 198).

In embracing the people's struggles, Arcangel proves the internalization of the Other can be regarded as "not as a means of division or sorting out the various histories and diverse

narratives to individualize identities, but rather a means of reimagining an interconnected collective” (Yazidha 36). The Tropic of Orange itself, that magical out-of-season fruit and the geographic line it draws with it, behaves as a symbol of this fact. On one hand, the Tropic of Cancer is very much real – it is a demarcation of an astronomical phenomenon, the location where the sun is directly overhead at noon on the summer solstice (Rosenberg). On the other hand, it is fictitious. One can step on or over the Tropic without any idea of having done so. There is no border formed by its presence; in terms of matter, it has no significance. Similarly, Otherness is both very real and very not, both insignificant and of “astronomical” importance. The boundaries we draw between Self and Other are often exaggerated and arbitrarily defined. Still, Otherness undoubtedly exists – each person inhabits his or her own internal world which no other person can ever wholly understand, and it is precisely these distinctive parts of ourselves that make us who we are most truly.

How fitting, then, that it would be an orange – a product simple, natural, that daily crosses man-made borders by the truckload; a product of both economic and individual import; a potential force of oppression (according to the politics of its production) as well as sustenance (in its eventual consumption) – that carries the Tropic with it. In “[pushing] the Tropic ever northward,” the orange forces the United States to internalize the Other of Mexico (Yamashita 211). This internalization behaves as the novel’s true connecting force. It draws together a plethora of Selves and Others – Arcangel to Rafaela, Rafaela to Bobby, Gabriel to Buzzworm, Buzzworm to Manzanar, Manzanar to Emi, the homed to the homeless – all by dragging this semi-imaginary border in its wake. In the border-blurring that the orange causes, power structures are established and toppled, identities are reshaped, and we, as readers, are challenged to discover what chaos and magic can potentially be birthed when we dare to cross the lines dividing “Self” and “Other.”

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