

Hybridity as a “Narrative of Liberation” in Trevor D. Rhone’s *Old Story Time*

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Abstract: “The problem is important. I propose nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself” (8), writes Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Patrick Taylor has been identifying what he calls the “narrative of liberation” throughout Fanon’s critical work, and his analysis of this can be linked with phenomena of hybridity.

In Trevor D. Rhone’s play *Old Story Time*, hybridity is presented as such a liberating narrative. Hybridity is included in the play on several levels, beginning with the setting. The vernacular used by many of the play’s characters also reveals its hybrid character. Furthermore, on the formal level Trevor Rhone has created a drama that resists categorization into the Western form of epic drama by emphasizing the role of the Caribbean storytelling tradition. On the level of characters, Miss Aggy overcomes her self-destructive internalized racism in the final scene when she accepts the hybrid nature of her identity.

In this sense, *Old Story Time* incorporates what Taylor terms an “imperative of liberation” (188). Read as an allegory to the society of the West Indies, the play calls for the acceptance of its hybrid nature as a means of overcoming the colonial legacy.

The problem is important. I propose nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself” (8), writes Frantz Fanon in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*. The central word in this quotation, according to Patrick Taylor, would be “liberation.” Taylor identifies what he calls the “narrative of liberation” and traces it throughout the work of Fanon (5-6). He sees the starting point for Fanon’s liberating narrative in a “revolutionary consciousness of colonial and neo-colonial socio-political systems and the

possibilities of their *transformation*” (185, my italics). Taylor further states that “[t]he form of consciousness that ultimately manifests itself in Fanon’s work is liberating national consciousness, committed to transforming relations of oppression” (186), indicating that the cultural transformation that Fanon has envisioned in his work is directed against the oppression that is inherent in the colonial system and its discourses.

A cultural transformation that bears this liberating potential, according to Taylor, needs to encompass both the “oral tradition of the colonized and the culture that began as the borrowed art of the colonizer” (185). This means that the main aspect of the narrative of liberation in Fanon’s work is the perspective that “[t]wo formerly opposed cultures are now able to face and enrich each other” (Taylor 186). As a result, the Fanonian narrative of liberation, regarded by Taylor as “the key to a new critical self-understanding” (185) of the formerly colonized subjects, promotes a form of self-understanding that moves away from a simple dualistic conception of the self/other relationship in colonial contexts, and from the hierarchic structure resulting from such a conception. Such issues of “in-betweenness, diasporas and cross-overs of ideas and identities generated by colonialism” (Loomba 145) are a central field of concern in postcolonial studies, with concepts of hybridity being among the most influential and most debated. Hybridity can thus be linked to the cultural transformation that Taylor identifies as a main part of what he calls Fanon’s narrative of liberation.

This narrative of liberation is identified by Taylor in works of authors such as Derek Walcott, the famous Caribbean playwright and poet, and George Lamming (cf. 183-227). In this paper, I will analyze *Old Story Time*, a 1979 play by “the father of Jamaican theatre” (Stone 40), Trevor D. Rhone. The play portrays the acceptance of the hybrid nature of Caribbean culture and identity as a potential and, in the case of the play itself, successful narrative of liberation. The central concerns of this paper therefore revolve around instances of hybridity that are negotiated and staged in the play’s setting, its language, and also its genre. The liberation of Miss Aggy from her deeply-internalized racism in the final scene of *Old Story Time* also foregrounds the liberating potential of hybridity.

A first impression of the plurality of concepts linked to the term hybridity can be gained from the respective entry in *Metzlers Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie*, where hybridity itself is introduced as a hybrid concept (Griem

269). Originating from botanics and biology, the term has gained prominence in (post-)colonial discourses ever since the nineteenth century—even though the concepts linked to it have been widely divergent. In nineteenth-century racist discourses the originally-botanic meaning of the cross-breeding of two species was applied to mankind and played a part in discussions about mono- or polygenetic origins of mankind (cf. Zapf 39-40).

In the field of cultural theory, the term “hybridity” underwent a drastic re-evaluation when it entered that field of study in the 1980s in linguistics, before being applied to cultural phenomena in general (Griem 269). In its most encompassing definition, “hybridization” is the general term for a “mingling of two or more distinctively different elements that form a new one” (Seibel 268, my translation). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin further identify different fields in which phenomena of hybridization can occur, for example in “linguistic, cultural, political [or] racial” (*Key Concepts* 118) contexts. Not surprisingly, hybridity is deemed as “[o]ne of the most widely employed and most disputed terms in post-colonial theory” (118) and “there are widely divergent ways of thinking about these issues” (Lomba 145).

The topic of this paper on Trevor D. Rhone’s *Old Story Time* makes it seem reasonable to focus on Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of Cultural Hybridity because of its liberating potential. Before the introduction of Bhabha’s concept, hybridity was also used to describe phenomena of cultural mixing that made possible “a direct retracing of the mingled elements to their respective origins” (Zapf 41, my translation). Therefore, the basic claim of cultures as homogeneous figures was not put into question. Recurring on Bakhtin’s idea of Linguistic Hybridity, Bhabha then expands the meaning of the term to “new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonialism” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 118), orienting it towards a deconstructive approach by incorporating Jacques Derrida’s concept of *différance* (Griem 269). This incorporation of the French philosopher’s term, which is based on the occurrence of difference and deferral in the process of the creation of meaning (Bertens 125), implies the impossibility of purity. Harald Zapf confirms this point, writing that “[the term hybridity] indicates . . . that for deconstruction there is . . . no clear cut, ‘no purity and unsulliedness of discourse’” (49, my translation).

In Bhabha’s definition of hybridity, the notion of cultural diversity, meaning the existence of “pregiven cultural ‘contents’ and customs” that support “liberal

notions of multiculturalism” and are being based upon “a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity” (155), is rigidly put into question and replaced by the concept of Cultural Difference. The basic assumption of Bhabha’s idea of Cultural Difference is that “[c]ultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other” (156). On the one hand, Bhabha denies the possibility of a pure culture with this statement, on the other hand he dissolves the strict binary oppositions emerging from thinking in such categories.

Zapf takes the deconstructive element as the particular strength of Bhabha’s concept, which becomes clear when he states: “Deconstruction . . . in particular allows, philosophically thinking, ‘hybridity’ without a primacy of purity for the first time” (41, my translation).¹ This aspect of Bhabha’s notion of hybridity is very important, since it undermines the dualistic oppositions that hegemonic groups and their discourses of purity operate with (Zapf 51). But, as Zapf further notes, not only are claims by the dominant group rejected by this conception of hybridity, but also those of minority groups and discourses “that want to differentiate and fix racial and cultural features in an essentialist way” (51, my translation), such as the *négritude* movement in the Caribbean. Therefore, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin suggest, hybridity can be seen as “a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth” (“Introduction” 137). In this sense, Bhabha’s concept of hybridity answers Tejumola Olaniyan’s call for a “post-Afrocentric” discourse that

subverts . . . the *culturalist* notion of difference that animates *both* the Eurocentric and the Afrocentric discourses—the fixation of one upon a white = civilized – black = barbaric opposition and of the other on a “white aesthetic” against a “black aesthetic”—and the quiet disregard by both for the complexity of the enabling conditions of their utterances. (27)²

1 Julika Griem notes that the term “hybridity” in general discussions is not only used in the sense of Bhabha’s concept. She writes that hybridity “oscillates between a multicultural understanding oriented more towards integration and a deconstructive one” (269, my translation). For the purpose of this paper, however, Bhabha’s concept with its deconstructive component is more fitting.

2 “Difference” in this quotation is not to be confused with what Bhabha defines as “cultural difference” and sets against the idea of “cultural diversity” (Bhabha, 155-156). “Difference”

Bhabha claims that culture is constructed in what he calls the “Third Space,” which he sees represented by “both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy” (156). Since the subject making the utterance cannot consciously be aware of this strategy, Bhabha contends that “this unconscious relation introduces . . . an ambivalence in the act of interpretation” (156). Ambivalence here describes the “fluctuating relationship between mimicry and mockery” that is “fundamentally unsettling to colonial dominance” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 13). This form of ambivalence created within the Third Space therefore shatters “the very basis on which imperialist and colonialist discourse raises its claims of superiority” (121): the assertion of authenticity. Instead of creating a binary opposition in which the colonizer is the preferred and only powerful term in contrast to the powerless colonized, Bhabha “stresses [the] interdependence and the mutual construction of [the] subjectivities” (118) between both parties. He thereby rejects the notion of the simple one-way power structure in the colonial situation (118).

In the Caribbean, discourses of hybridity carry a special and historic importance, which is underscored by Shalini Puri when he writes: “As an archipelago whose culture was forged in the crucible of colonialism and slavery from what Derek Walcott has called a ‘shipwreck of fragments,’ discourses of hybridity have been central to the Caribbean’s political culture” (2). Not surprisingly, the West Indies with their “radically dislocated culture” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 137) are one of the regions where discourses of hybridity have surfaced strongly—as there is “no simple possibility for asserting a pre-colonial past” (137) due to the eradication of most of the pre-contact cultures.

As noted earlier, “hybridity” as a term bears a close connection to concepts of race and racism. Race, now generally recognized as “a cultural rather than a biological phenomenon” and therefore as “the product of historical processes” (205), has had a major influence in the colonial as well as the postcolonial situation. The concept has been extremely useful in “both establishing the innate superiority of imperial culture . . . , and at the same time lumping together the

in this case refers to the creation of binary oppositions in Eurocentric or Afrocentric discourses (Olaniyan, 27-28).

‘inferior’ races under its control” (202), as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin point out.

Despite the claim that the category of race was a construct, Fanon contended that “racist ideas such as ‘blackness’ . . . acquired an objective existence in and through the behaviour of people” because of their “psychological force” (205). Even though being constructed under social pressure, the negative “self-images . . . might be transmitted from generation to generation” and in this process lead to forms of internalized racism within the colonized subjects—meaning the despise of one’s self for being part of what is perceived as the “inferior race” (205). The liberating potential that the concept of hybridity possesses under such conditions is summed up by Zapf, who wants to regard hybridity as a “liberating discourse concerning encrusted textual structures and social structures that are fixed hierarchically” and as “the basis for a new social and cultural orientation” (42, my translation).

THE PLOT OF TREVOR RHONE’S *OLD STORY TIME*

Trevor Rhone’s play *Old Story Time* portrays a Jamaican storytelling situation in two acts with one and six scenes, respectively. Pa Ben, who is the narrator as well as a character in the play, tells the story of the Tomlinson family. Using flashbacks, Rhone stages events in a time span of around thirty years, beginning with Len Tomlinson’s boyhood. Miss Aggy, Len’s mother, puts him through school with rigid pressure and is obsessed with the idea that he should marry Margaret, the minister’s light-skinned daughter, in order to advance his social status.

While abroad on a scholarship, Len keeps only scarce contact with his mother. When she finally learns that he has married Lois, a black woman, she is absolutely infuriated and convinced that Lois could have worked this only with a spell. Len returns home as a successful banker and sets out to ruin the business of George McFarlane, a light-skinned upper-class former schoolmate now involved in dubious financial dealings. When Miss Aggy speaks up on behalf of George, whose family she still holds in high regard, this results in a serious confrontation between mother and son. Miss Aggy again blames Lois for using magic to alienate

her son from her and decides to employ a fatal obeah spell against her daughter-in-law.

The climactic final scene of the play reveals the real reason for Len’s hatred against George: in school Len had once written a love letter to Margaret, which she and her boyfriend George considered an impudence of a “black, ugly, little big-lipped” (83) boy. They set Len up to be thrashed and utterly humiliated by George and his friends. Miss Aggy also learns that it was Lois’s family who took care of Len right after this traumatic experience, which finally makes her accept her son’s wife and realize her own wrongs. In a happy ending, “Len’s family comes together in a cathartic night of repentance, forgiveness, exorcism, and love” (Stone 46).

DECONSTRUCTING DICHOTOMIES: HYBRIDITY IN SETTING, COSTUMES, AND ROLES IN *OLD STORY TIME*

The “simple setting” (Rhone 4) of *Old Story Time* is represented by a stage divided into three frames. Of these three frames, two show the interior and exterior of Miss Aggy’s house in the beginning of the play, while the third “suggests Pa Ben’s old house” (4) with its raised veranda. While this third section remains unchanged throughout the play, the stage directions mention that during the first act, the scenery of Miss Aggy’s house is changed to represent the interior of Len’s house, while Pa Ben fittingly sings a song titled “Change the House Round” (4).

This change of the setting reveals a creation of seemingly binary difference on multiple levels. While a picture of Jesus hangs on the wall in Miss Aggy’s house, after its reversal during the song it “reveal[s] Len’s college diploma” (4). In this case, the setting opens up the dichotomy of (religious) tradition and (secular) progress. Another binary opposition, namely rich versus poor, is created by the reversal of the panels that suggest the „peeling wattle-and-daub walls” (4) of Miss Aggy’s house. After being turned around, these panels reveal the “marble finish” (4) of the walls in Len’s house and, in that, give an air of wealth as opposed to the rather poor ambience in the house of Len’s mother. The construction of this dichotomy is further emphasized by an “old curtain hung in the centre of the frame [that] reflects Mama’s poverty” (4), as stated in the paratext of *Old Story*

Time. Removal of the curtain during “Change the House Round” reveals “books, candle-holders, a vase, etc.” (4) to show the different conditions Miss Aggy and Len live in. Furthermore, the two frames representing Len’s house are later in the play also used as George’s office in the bank and described as “freely interchangeable” (5), creating yet another dichotomy: the public (working) sphere and the private sphere.

Going back to Zapf’s remarks, in which he wants deconstructive thinking to be understood as “philosophy of hybridity” (26, my translation), the aforementioned dichotomies can be seen as less essentialist. He states that categories always point to their respective oppositions. In *Old Story Time*, this general notion from the deconstructionist point of view is further emphasized by the fact that the opposite of the visible category is still to be found on the other side of the requisite, and is therefore always contained in it, even though not visibly so. The setting therefore represents one instance in which hybridity is staged in *Old Story Time*. In the change from Miss Aggy’s house to Len’s house, dichotomies are constructed and, at the same moment, deconstructed, undermining the dualistic oppositions which discourses of purity work with (cf. Zapf 51).

The dichotomy of wealth and poverty is portrayed again in the description of the costumes in *Old Story Time*. While some characters, including Margaret, Lois, the Real Estate Developer, and George are dressed in expensive clothes, the others wear old and worn-out clothes reflecting their economically-bad situation. Whereas most characters are constantly wearing the same kind of clothing throughout the different events spanning around thirty years, there are two changes in that respect: Len, who begins the play “dress[ing] in the style of thirty-odd years ago”, but later “dresses in the mode of the successful banker in today’s world”, and Pearl, who in the beginning of the play is a teenager in “well worn” clothes and goes from an “even more tattered” dress to being “literally dressed in rags” (6).

Referring to hybridity, the description of the costumes becomes relevant when Rhone writes that “[a]ll the characters are black, except George, a high brown man, and Margaret, a fair-skinned girl” (7). In this sense, the *dramatis personae* of *Old Story Time* and the different connotations of their respective costumes work against monolithic and homogeneous ideas of culture. Here, difference is portrayed on two levels: first, there is the difference between the group of black characters and the two non-black characters. Secondly, within the

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group of Afro-Caribbean characters, difference is created in terms of wealth and poverty.

By incorporating black and non-black characters in his play and bringing up the dichotomy of wealth and poverty again, Rhone portrays Caribbean society as diverse and heterogeneous. This situation, in which either a Marxist or a racist discourse with “claim[s] to a hierarchical ‘purity’ of cultures” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 118) could be imagined, is destabilized by conflicts within the potentially pure cultural groups. Within the upper class segment of the characters, George and Len constantly fight for money, power, and the chance for revenge; in the lower class segment, Miss Aggy is plagued by internalized racism and regards Pearl, who is struggling for survival throughout the play, with shame. Within the group of Afro-Caribbean characters, there is no unity either, as conflicts between Len and his mother as well as between Miss Aggy and Pearl destroy any illusions of discourses of racial and/or cultural purity. This mirrors what Ania Loomba states about the binary oppositions that are so crucial in the colonial situation:

In reality any simple binary opposition between “colonisers” and “colonised” or between races is undercut by the fact that there are enormous cultural and racial differences within each of these categories as well as cross-overs between them. (91)

This occurrence of differences within the various groups that are represented in the play supports the argument “that ‘hybridity’ of identities and the ‘ambivalence’ of colonial discourse more adequately describe the dynamics of the colonial encounter” (91-92) than notions of stable and fixed identities.

LANGUAGE IN OLD STORY TIME

In postcolonial contexts, language is highly probable to reveal phenomena of hybridity. Actually, the first field in which concepts of hybridity entered the field of cultural study was linguistics (Griem 269). In Anglophone Caribbean contexts, Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s theory of nation language is especially interesting for the purposes of this paper.

Brathwaite traces the development of the Caribbean form of English, which he termed “nation language,” back to the very beginnings of the colonial process

in the West Indies, when the language of the colonizers (English, Spanish, French, or Dutch) was superimposed upon the colonized subjects. After the eradication of the area's indigenous population, there was a huge import of slaves from the coasts of West Africa, who brought with them their language. However, they were perceived to be inferior and "non-human" (281), as Brathwaite terms it. Even though the African languages had to submerge, Brathwaite contends that they still influenced the language of the oppressor, and in that process were changing themselves: "[They] were moving from a purely African form to a form which was African but which was adapted to the new environment and adapted to the cultural imperative of the European languages" (281).

These complex processes of mutual influencing between the language of the colonizer and that of the colonized finally led to the formation of what Brathwaite terms the nation language and defines in the following way:

[It] is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree. (282)

In this passage from Brathwaite's theory of nation language, the hybrid nature of the languages of the West Indies is easy to recognize. A separation of the African and European elements of this "language" is not easily possible, even though Brathwaite tries to identify some of the features as distinctly African in origin. However, features such as contours or timbre of the language are not easy to grasp. This is further reinforced by the use of metaphors in another description of nation language: "It may be in English: but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time" (283). Here, Brathwaite clearly foregrounds the hybridity of Caribbean nation language. This is also emphasized by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin: "Brathwaite's model of creolization can be compared with . . . 'hybridization', though creolization has generally received more historically specific discussion" (*Key Concepts* 59).

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In *Old Story Time*, deviations from standard English occur right from the beginning of the play. When Pa Ben enters the auditorium and addresses the audience, he does so in nation language, which he uses throughout the play:

PA BEN: An’ mi father would wax warm, him mind ‘pon the story an’ one eye ‘pon the young gal them. Ah, boy, those were the days. Yes, A can still hear the bamboo clarinet, and the fife a whistle, and the drum a lick, an’ A can still see miself dress up in all mi finery stepping into the dance yard. (9)

It is obvious that Pa Ben uses a form of dialect³ here, as do, to some degree, most of the other characters in the play. The written forms “mi” (instead of “my”), “pon” (instead of “upon”), “an” (instead of “and”), “gal” (instead of “girls”), or “A” (instead of “I”), for example, indicate different pronunciations and/or intonations of the Caribbean dialect in comparison to standard English. The use of “him” (instead of the possessive pronoun “his”) and “them” (at the end of the first sentence in the above quotation) points to different grammatical structures, or different uses of the same lexical items in nation language. Furthermore, differences in the lexicon between the standard variety of English and the Caribbean vernacular used in *Old Story Time* can be seen in the play’s glossary, where some of the different lexical items are explained (xix-xx). Overall, the dialogue of *Old Story Time* is largely written in a Caribbean dialect of English (cf. Stone 41), or—using Brathwaite’s terminology—in nation language. The fact that nation language is a phenomenon of linguistic hybridization adds another level of hybridity to Trevor Rhone’s play. The only characters that avoid using dialect forms on a frequent basis are Lois, George, and Len—the latter, however, does so only after his return from studying abroad. This can be ascribed to their wish to distance themselves from the Afro-Caribbean culture that they perceive as inferior throughout the majority of the play.

3 Even though Brathwaite explicitly coins his term “nation language” in order to avoid using “dialect” to describe Caribbean language, the term is used here (282-83). However, dialect here is not used to imply “inferior English” (282). Rather, it is used the same way as in recent sociolinguistic terminology, namely without any value judgment. The term here is simply referring to a regional or social variety of English that has its distinctive features regarding pronunciation, lexicon, or syntax, for example (Herbst, Stoll, and Westermayr 200-01).

STORYTELLING, THE HYBRID FUNCTION OF PA BEN, AND HYBRIDITY OF
GENRE IN OLD STORY TIME

A study of the hybridity of genre in *Old Story Time* requires an analysis of the Caribbean storytelling tradition (its representation in the play) and of the hybrid figure Pa Ben, who functions as the storyteller. This is due to the point that the incorporation of storytelling and Pa Ben's hybrid function are of great importance in creating a hybridization of genre in the play, as will be shown later in this chapter.

In the beginning of *Old Story Time*, Pa Ben enters the auditorium singing and addressing the audience:

Make yourselves comfortable on them nice chairs. You people lucky, years ago when A was a boy and A use to go listen to story, it was never in no fancy place like this, with all them pretty fandangles, pretty lights and whatnot. No, sir. (8)

In this very moment at the beginning of the play, his role as narrative voice is established and he reveals himself as the storyteller.

Pa Ben himself outlines the tradition of storytelling for the audience while the actors who later play the different characters gather around him, representing the villagers:

On an evening in the district, we would gather at the village square, everybody gather round the shop piazza, some sit 'pon old drum, others 'pon the old crocus bags filled with salt, everybody chatting, some meddling in people's business, others giving remembrance to who dead the week before, who saw the ghost and what not, and my father was the chief Storyteller when him feel in the mood. (8)

Here, it becomes clear that storytelling is not only about educating—in the sense of passing on the history and culture of a community—but that it also has an entertaining function. Gilbert and Tompkins confirm this in their analysis of storytelling “as an entertainment *and* an educational device” (126, my italics). Elaine Savory further points out—quite in accordance to Gilbert's and Tompkins's remarks about storytelling—that *Old Story Time* “portrays storytelling as a major avenue of reconnection for the audience with their past and also of political reworking of the present” (249). Moreover, in Pa Ben's explanation of the storytelling tradition, its importance as a communal action that supports the

formation of a close-knit community is highlighted by the description of people gathering to talk to each other, to give advice, and to mourn the dead.

Storytelling is portrayed by Gilbert and Tompkins as an important tradition in “non-literate communities” where “history was preserved by the story-teller who held a privileged place central to the maintenance and sustenance of the group’s culture” (126)—indicating that the tradition dates back to pre-slavery times. In the colonial situation, however, the role that storytelling plays has changed. Preserving the suppressed group’s culture was made difficult by the dominant group, which tried to designate the subaltern as “not just outside history and civilization, but genetically pre-determined to inferiority” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Key Concepts* 47). In this climate of racist ideology, the role of storytelling changed from being purely an educating as well as entertaining device to being a moment of resistance to the colonial situation. As Gilbert and Tompkins argue, the storyteller’s function in colonial contexts is to undermine claims to authenticity from the dominant group by appearing as a “significant manipulator of historical narrative in colonised societies” (126).

In *Old Story Time*, there are indeed instances in which Pa Ben, in his role as storyteller, assumes a function of resistance to traditional Western views. In the prologue, he openly admits that certain facts are unknown to him: “What A don’t know as a fact, A will make up as A go along, and if A can’t do it by miself, mi friend here will help me. [*Indicating his rum bottle.*]” (10). By that, he blurs the boundaries between fiction and history and indicates that the one is not to be entirely separated from the other. In Gilbert’s and Tompkins’s words, Pa Ben in this situation “challenges the assumption that history is closed or immutable, suggesting instead that the ‘truth,’ if any, is in the telling” (128).

This notion is further emphasized in the beginning of act II, scene one, when Pa Ben appears as the storyteller again. The frame-tale from the prologue is picked up again as the actors once more portray the listening—and commenting—villagers gathered around Pa Ben:

ACTOR WHO PLAYS GEORGE: What secret Mongoose carrying for Miss Lois?

PA BEN: Miself want to know.

ALL THE ACTORS/VILLAGERS: You know, man, you know.

ACTOR WHO PLAYS LEN: Yes, him know.

PA BEN: I don’t know, honest, would I tell a lie?

ALL THE ACTORS/VILLAGERS: Yes. (48)

Here, the notion of truth is once more put into question. Pa Ben again admits that he does not know every detail of the story he is telling to the villagers. When they do not believe him, he poses the ironical rhetorical question if he would lie to his audience—which is promptly answered in the affirmative. The truth, it seems, in this case really is in the telling, as Gilbert and Tompkins suggest (128): The audience grants full narrative authority to Pa Ben and wants the story to be continued, while readily accepting the fact that Pa Ben could (and has already been proven to) lie to them.

The fact that Pa Ben appears in *Old Story Time* not only in his role as the storyteller, but also as a character within the fictional world of the play itself, necessitates a distinction between these two roles. For this purpose Manfred Pfister's model of communication in dramatic texts can be used, which he compares to that of narrative texts in the following way: "The difference between the two models can be found in the fact that in dramatic texts . . . the mediating system of communication . . . is omitted" (21, my translation).

While this distinction is very useful, Pfister concedes that "the introduction of characters that function as director or commentator in modern 'epic drama'" (22, my translation) establishes a mediating system of communication. This is also the case in *Old Story Time* with Pa Ben addressing the audience (which represents the second level of sender and receiver in Pfister's model) in his role as storyteller. When Pa Ben takes the role of a character within the fictional world of the play (that is, the story he is telling) and interacts with the other figures, he thus appears on the first level of Pfister's model.

By performing both as the storyteller and as a character taking part in the story he is telling, Pa Ben can be seen as having a hybrid function, since it is difficult to completely separate the two roles he takes in the play. This becomes evident in two exemplary instances quoted and analyzed below, in which Pa Ben switches between his two roles:

PA BEN: [*Speaking directly to the audience*] If A had mi wits about me, A would save the boy a licking that evening. A should tell him mother that is me send him out. A have to find him before she catch up with him. Lennie! [*As he goes off calling, MAMA can also be heard calling off stage, "Lennard!"*] (12)

Speaking towards the auditorium, Pa Ben offers his thoughts. Here, it is difficult to determine whether he is speaking to the audience as the storytelling

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voice or whether he addresses it in the form of a monologue in the role of his character. When he eventually goes off calling for Len, Pa Ben leaves that space of undecidability between the two roles he takes in the play and returns to the world of fictitious characters. Another instance in which the hybrid nature of Pa Ben’s character is portrayed is the following:

PA BEN: [*Coming through the door of his little house*] A year go by, and not a word pass between us. One piece a malice she keep up on me. A try to talk to her. [*He walks over to her space.*] Morning, Miss Aggy. [*MAMA’s head flashes around only to flash back again. She does not return the greeting. PA BEN returns to the audience.*] It hurt mi soul case how she was going on. [*MAMA changes her scarf again.*] After all, she was mi best friend. A had to keep trying, for me is not one to keep up malice. [*He goes across to her space again.*] Evening, Miss Aggy. (24)

Here, Pa Ben unquestioningly talks to the audience in the role of the play’s storyteller. This becomes clear by him taking a mediating function and telling what has (or, rather, has not) been happening between him and Miss Aggy over the course of a year. Pa Ben then spontaneously switches to his role as a character in the play when he walks over to Miss Aggy’s house and greets her. Thereafter, he switches back to his role as storyteller and, in the end of the quotation, reassumes his role as a character within the fictional world of the play again. These two instances illustrate the complexity of the character Pa Ben. This blurring of the boundaries between him as the storyteller (being the mediating system of communication) and him as the character (participating in the dramatic situation) cannot easily be dissolved, which makes it seem reasonable to speak of a hybrid function which Pa Ben carries in Trevor Rhone’s play.

This hybrid function that Pa Ben carries is also important in creating a hybridity of genre in *Old Story Time*. Judy Stone classifies the play as one of the theater of social realism, which, according to Stone, tends “to adhere to the traditional structure and values of modern Western theatre,” with the distinctive regional features of such plays being mainly “the idiom of the dialogue, and secondarily [the] setting and circumstances” (39). As shown, the setting and circumstances as well as the language of *Old Story Time* bear a distinctively Caribbean mark. Nevertheless, they do not adhere to discourses of purity, but rather portray the hybridity of Caribbean culture as positive and dismantle the instability of binary oppositions created in the colonial process. In contrast to Stone’s remarks about the theatre of realism’s adherence to traditional values of

Western dramatic texts, *Old Story Time* also incorporates this celebration of the hybrid nature of Caribbean culture into the form of the play, which will be shown by a closer investigation.

From a strictly formal point of view, Trevor Rhone's play can be categorized as an epic drama in the Brechtian sense, meaning the incorporation of a narrative voice, music, and dance, among others, into the drama (cf. Cuddon 273-74). Rhone's use of the storytelling device, however, manages to introduce a specifically Caribbean element into this form of epic theatre. This "Caribbeanization" of the play is also evident by the integration of Caribbean folk songs, as in the very beginning of the play when Pa Ben enters the auditorium singing "Old Story Time . . . Old Story Time" (8) to the tunes of the music.

In *Old Story Time*, however, not only the inclusion of Caribbean music adds a notion of hybridity to the Western modern form of epic drama. There is also the narrative voice, one of the most obvious features of an epic drama, which is represented in this play by Pa Ben in his role as the storyteller. In this role, Pa Ben is actually more than just a narrative voice. He appears as the focal point of the play, because without a storyteller there would be no story told—and in extension, no play. However, he appears in this role only in parts of the play.

While the play depends to a large degree upon the incorporation of the storytelling device, the parts where Pa Ben appears only as character within the fictional world of the play serve to destabilize this notion. Actually, the lack of dialogue between distinguishable fictitious figures in the beginning of the play would initially make it difficult to decide if *Old Story Time* was not merely Caribbean storytelling presented on a stage. After the end of the prologue, the dramatic action *per se* begins, but Pa Ben still appears as storyteller for the greatest part of act I. In the end of act I, though, no instances of storytelling are to be found in the play (30-47). In act II, the storytelling device is used only in the first and sixth scene, with especially-strong presence of Pa Ben in the beginning of scene one and towards the end of scene six.

The strong presence of the storytelling voice in some parts of the play, in combination with the complete lack of it in others, leads to a blurring of the genre boundaries. While *Old Story Time* is without any doubt a form of drama in the most encompassing sense of the term, it does not seem sensible to subsume it under the genre of epic drama, which is so closely associated with the tradition of

modern Western drama. The play’s continual oscillation between the tendency of appearing as staged Caribbean storytelling on the one hand and as traditional dialogue-based drama in the Western sense on the other leads to a hybridization of genre. From this point of view, it seems more fitting to call *Old Story Time* a “storytelling drama” than to categorize it as an epic drama, as this draws attention to the fact that a hybrid genre has emerged from the Caribbean and European elements in this case.

“ANYTHING BLACK NUH GOOD”: INTERNALIZED RACISM, FAMILIAL CONFLICT AND HYBRID IDENTITIES IN *OLD STORY TIME*

The central theme in *Old Story Time* is the familial conflict developing between single mother Miss Aggy and her son Len and the final solution of this in the last scene of act II. The figure of Miss Aggy is especially interesting in this respect, due to the fact that her internalization of racist stereotypes fuels the conflict immensely. Internalized racism can be seen as one of the effects of “the miserable schizophrenia of the colonised’s identity” (Loomba 124). According to Fanon, the reason for this schizophrenic state of mind of the colonized is that “[f]or the black subject . . . the white other serves to define everything that is desirable, everything that the self desires” (Loomba 123-24), which leads to racial self-hatred of the black subject, who is designated as inferior and perceives himself as powerless in the colonial situation .

Miss Aggy is already characterized in her social status when Rhone describes the setting and costumes of the play: we learn that the figure of Miss Aggy is black (7) and lives in a rather poor house. After the prologue of the play, Miss Aggy is the first figure to appear in the fictional world of the play when she is looking for Len⁴, who is not at home even though she wanted “him to stay in the house an’ study him book” (10). Her authoritarian style of education becomes clear in the following dialogue with her neighbor Pa Ben:

4 In the play, Miss Aggy is also referred to as “Miss G” or “Mama” by the different characters. Len is also called “Lennie,” “Lennard,” or “Missa Len.” In this paper the two figures are commonly referred to as “Miss Aggy” and “Len,” respectively—except for direct quotations from the play. Their family name, Tomlinson, is also used on occasion in this paper.

MAMA: If him can't hear him mus' feel. [*As she is going off*] Is you help spoil him.

PA BEN: Lawd! Harass the poor boy so!

MAMA: [*As she is leaving she sees a switch on the lower level*] Ah, see it here. Wait till A catch up with him, A going to scour his behind for him this evening. (12)

When she finally catches up with him as he is playing with Pearl, she stops her son from running away by the threat: "If you run A murder you tonight" (13). Even though these words are not likely to be serious, it becomes clear that Miss Aggy does not accept any objections and does not hesitate to use physical punishment if her son violates the rules she has set.

The motivation of Miss Aggy's harsh style of education is shown in the dialogue with her son, which also reveals much about her psyche:

MAMA: Miss Esmeralda frowsy-tail, jiggerfoot, jersey ears, board head gal is your friend? Where is yuh ambition? You don't have any ambition? After A struggle out mi soul case to send you to big shot high school, you come home come mix up with that little dry-head gal? How much time A must tell you, don't mix up with the little dutty black gal dem in the district? How much time A must tell you, anything black nuh good? She is no advancement. It look like A will have to beat it into you. (14)

Here, Miss Aggy reveals one of her most predominant traits of character: she despises anything that is black. This hatred towards black people and, in extension, towards herself, is emphasized even further when Pa Ben in his role as storyteller explains her behavior to the audience: "You have to understand Miss Aggy. She wouldn't even have a black chicken in her yard. One chop, off with the head" (14). Even though this is very likely to be an overstatement, it serves to show how deep-running Miss Aggy's despise of blackness actually is. Judy Stone also emphasizes how "the workings of the colour bias that not so long ago was upheld within the West Indian society even by its victims" (46) are represented in the dramatic figure of Miss Aggy.

While Miss Aggy's intentions in the ideologically strict upbringing of Len are based on the misguided premises of her internalized racism, they ultimately prove to be good. She tells her son that she only wants what is best for him, and explains to him that "life is hard when you black, but with a little education you still have a chance" (14). Grace Owen describes the figure of Miss Aggy as "a

woman of courage, relentless in her efforts to assist the next generation, her son, to rise above poverty through education” (72). While this observation holds true, it is still questionable if the “advancement” that Miss Aggy wants her son to achieve can be accomplished by education alone. Furthermore, Miss Aggy’s notions of ambition and advancement are highly problematic, as both actually aim at gaining an idealized whiteness: “When time come for you to have girlfriend, A have a nice girl pick out for you. Miss Margaret, Reverend Greaves daughter, a nice brown girl with tall hair down to her back. She is advancement, you hear me” (14). Pa Ben telling the audience that “Miss Margaret was like an obsession with [Miss Aggy]” (14) reinforces the notion that the figure of the reverend’s daughter is a personification of the advancement towards whiteness, which is the driving force behind Miss Aggy’s actions throughout the play.

Judy Stone identifies this “constant pressure that the endearing but obsessively feudal Miss Aggie [sic] put[s] on her young son to ‘advance’ himself towards whiteness” (45-46) as one of the problematic points in the relationship of the Tomlinson family. Miss Aggy’s internalized racism and obsession with advancement become even more of a problem after Len’s return from studying abroad. When she learns from a letter that her son has indeed married, she is shocked and embarrassed to learn that instead of Miss Margaret—or any other white or brown woman for that matter—Len has chosen a black woman. In a dialogue with Pa Ben, her feelings of disgust for her son’s wife surface for the first time:

MAMA: Me nuh care what she name. Me nuh want her beside mi son.
[*She tears the photograph in two, throwing the part with LOIS on the floor.*]
PA BEN: Shame on you, Miss Aggy. Before you happy for the boy, you come with yuh nonsense. [*Picking up the torn photograph.*]
MAMA: Nonsense. Shut yuh mouth. A know what A talking about. After I drum it into him head that anything black nuh good, I know is no way him could pick up *that* of him own free will. [*Pointing to the torn photograph in PA BEN’s hand.*] (23)

She cannot accept the fact that her son has betrayed her ideals, and therefore suspects his wife Lois of obeah, which is “used in Jamaica to denote witchcraft, evil magic or sorcery by which supernatural power is invoked to achieve personal protection or the destruction of enemies” (Senior 355). Miss Aggy, believing that any black woman is bound to intentionally destroy Len’s future and his “advancement” towards whiteness, projects all her racial self-hatred onto Lois

when Len finally returns to the village with his wife and—on Pa Ben’s bidding—makes peace with his mother.

Despite the reunion of mother and son, Miss Aggy is not able to accept Len’s decision to marry a black woman. This becomes evident in the very first meeting between Miss Aggy and her son in years, when Len brings a gift—“a pretty frock” (27)—and she is initially very glad:

MAMA: It really nice. You pick it out for Mama?

LEN: No, Lois did.

MAMA: Oh! A don’t think it going to fit me. [*She tosses it aside, not too carefully.*] (28)

Miss Aggy cannot even accept a present that has been selected by Lois. This serves once more to show her systematic hatred towards her son’s wife. While Miss Margaret served as a personification of the positive—namely the advancement towards whiteness—for Miss Aggy, Lois is evil personified—a black woman trying to bring Len down.

The first time that a direct encounter between Miss Aggy and Lois is staged in the play, the audience becomes aware of the level of confrontation between those two characters:

MAMA: [*From off*] Hold dog! . . .

LOIS: I wish you would impress upon your mother that we do not have a dog.

LEN: Lois.

LEN: Unless of course she is referring to me, which in fact she is. (32)

By referring to Lois as “dog,” Miss Aggy in fact replicates the racist claim that people of African descent were not only inferior, but in fact subhuman. Lois, however, reacts cynically and does nothing to deescalate the situation: “Now you must excuse me as I have to clean the shit out of the doghouse” (33). Miss Aggy, who promised her son “to keep the peace”, in reaction makes it clear that nevertheless she “never promised to be nice to [Lois]” (33).

Miss Aggy’s internalized racism furthermore leads to her being financially cheated by the corrupt banker George, whom she trusts mainly because he is not black, but “a high brown man” (7):

MAMA: Only say that right now him in a little financial difficulty, but give him a little time and everything will be all right, but I

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explain to him that he don’t have to worry ‘bout my couple pennies, just straighten out his own business first. Since I know is Missa Mac in charge, I know my money safe. (58)

In this passage, Miss Aggy reveals her feelings of racial inferiority by blindly believing George and by acknowledging that his financial problems are more important than her own, for which, ironically, George is responsible.

In a confrontation with Len, during which he threatens to hit his mother with a chair, Miss Aggy is pushed to the brink and is convinced that her son is under the spell of obeah by Lois. In this situation, internalized racism and religious fervor drive Miss Aggy, as she decides to no longer accept the evilness that—in her point of view—has befallen her son, and to help him: “Len, Len, son, listen to me, son. Your soul is in bondage! A have to release you! A have to set you free!” (60-61). She decides to take matters in her own hand and destroy Lois through obeah.

The figure of Miss Aggy oscillates between two main characteristics: the loving and caring mother on the one hand, and the uneducated poor woman on the other, whose “sense of self is warped” (Owen 72) as she has internalized the stereotypes and attitudes of the colonial times towards black people. Therefore, the figure of Miss Aggy can be read as an embodiment of Eurocentric⁵ discourses with their tendency to designate black people and their culture as inferior.

However, the familial conflict that thus evolves within *Old Story Time* dissolves into a happy ending, however. When it becomes clear to Len that he cannot protect Lois from his mother’s determination to obeah her, he decides to forgive his mother and to throw overboard once and for all his monolithic views of her as a “traitor to the race.” He hopes that she can eventually do the same when she learns the story of Len’s humiliation and how Lois and her father helped him back then. Pa Ben, who throughout the play has the role of negotiator between mother and son, brings Miss Aggy to Len’s house, where the final scene takes place. Before the story of Len’s humiliation is staged, Miss Aggy is again discomfited upon seeing Lois. She realizes the consequences of her “drumbeat[ing] Miss Margaret so much in him head” (82).

5 “Eurocentric discourses” is used in this paper as Tejumola Olaniyan defines the term, meaning that it refers to racist discourses that work with a “fixation . . . upon a white = civilized - black = barbaric opposition,” marking everything that is black as inferior (27).

Miss Aggy learns that Reverend Greaves—whom she had valued so highly—was overtly racist, “expect[ing] those [black] people to know their place” (83), and that his daughter—the “advancement” she sought for her son—was “one of [Len’s] principal tormentors” (Stone 46). Finally beginning to understand her son, she urges forward to kill George and begs for Len’s forgiveness:

MAMA: I have to kill him! [They take away the handbag.] No, don’t make me go to mi grave with mi soul in torment, Lawd, mi spirit in bondage. I have to atone for mi sins. I have to cleanse mi soul. Oh Len, how I going to sleep tonight? How I will sleep ever again? Oh Len, Len, forgive me, please, forgive me. (85)

When Len finally tells his mother that the “good Samaritan and his daughter” (85) who took care of him after his humiliation were Lois and her father, her eyes are opened and she realizes what her internalized racism has caused. Ashamed of herself, she tries to escape and to save Lois from the consequences of obeah by sacrificing herself. She is finally able to accept Lois and embraces her, calling her “daughter” (86). She recognizes that she has been “a foolish old woman” (86) because she was not able to leave her racial self-hatred behind her before it was too late.

However, Len, Lois, and Pa Ben do not let her go. Len tells his mother: “We need you, Mama” (86), even though Miss Aggy warns them that they are in danger if they try to hold her back and to break the spell of obeah that is bound to destroy her. Pa Ben, Len, and Lois all sing the twenty-third psalm and at times speak the African words “Omia n Twi. Mia Kuru. Omia n ani” (87). They succeed in freeing Miss Aggy from the evil spirits and she hugs Len and Lois and calls them both her children. Pa Ben sums up the night of exorcism:

All night long we pray. We pray for strength in this the vigil of the long night. We bind ourselves together with strength and trust and confidence, and there was no doubt between us, no enmity in our hearts, for we knew that the one force that could counteract all evil was there, and that force was love. (87)

Here, the acceptance of the hybrid nature of the family (extended by Pa Ben) is shown, as the whole configuration of figures present in this scene realizes that love is what matters most. They bind themselves together, without doubt and enmity, showing clearly that they have realized the danger of binary views of the

world. The (re)union of the family is successful because in the end of the play, “the three of them together” (87) accept their hybrid identities.

The familial conflict between Miss Aggy and her son can be read as an allegory of the society of Jamaica, or the West Indies in general. Miss Aggy embodies (amongst others) the racist Eurocentric discourse of purity, which is portrayed as destructive to the family, and therefore, on another level, to Caribbean society. The acceptance of the hybridity of identities by Len and his mother in what Judy Stone has called a “cathartic night of repentance, forgiveness, exorcism, and love” (46) and the subsequent happiness in the life of the family is the ultimate call for the acceptance of the Caribbean’s hybrid nature. With the happy ending for the family, who is “[a]ll well” (87) in the end of the play, *Old Story Time* can be read as calling for West Indian society to accept its hybridity and to rid itself of racist discourses of purity that have, for hundreds of years, plagued the area.

CONCLUSION

Hybridity is staged in Trevor Rhone’s *Old Story Time* on many levels. The description of setting and costumes in the paratext already creates binary oppositions by revealing the living conditions of the play’s main characters. These binary oppositions, however, are deconstructed and, in this process, the achievement of purity is portrayed as illusionary. While *The Gadget*—the original version of the play discussed in this paper—“was written in standard English, *Old Story Time* [is written] largely in the vernacular” (Stone 41), meaning that on the level of dialogue, Rhone has incorporated the hybrid form of what Edward Kamau Brathwaite has termed nation language into the play.

The incorporation of the storytelling device by Rhone “enable[d] him to make a smooth transition from present to past and vice versa” (45), but is also central in shattering notions of the purity of genre. Pa Ben, the storyteller, is himself a figure with a hybrid function, meaning that epic and dramatic elements in the play are intertwined and not put in a dualistic opposition. This hybrid function and the central role the Caribbean tradition of storytelling plays in *Old Story Time* consequently lead to a blurring of boundaries and, I have argued, to

the creation of what would be more fittingly described as “storytelling drama” instead of categorizing it as an epic drama.

On the level of figures in the fictional world of the play, Miss Aggy can be regarded as an embodiment of Eurocentric discourse. In the final scene of the play, however, the oppositions through which this discourse of purity operates are dissolved in a “cathartic night of repentance, forgiveness, exorcism, and love” (46). Miss Aggy realizes that her monolithic views of the world threaten to destroy herself and her beloved son, and she begins to accept the hybrid nature of the family.

The incorporation of hybridity on these different levels in Rhone’s play indeed adds to the play what so much Caribbean literature of the twentieth century, according to Patrick Taylor, lacks: an “imperative of liberation” (188). Read as an allegory to the society of the West Indies, Trevor Rhone’s play calls for the acceptance of its hybrid nature and portrays hybridity as a narrative of liberation from the colonial legacy with its discourses of purity.

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