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Identity Crisis: Modernity and Fragmentation

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IDENTITY CRISIS:
MODERNITY AND FRAGMENTATION

by

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Identity Crisis: Modernity and Fragmentation

Thesis directed by Professor David Ferris

Discontinuity is a key feature of modernity, seen in both the modern city and modernist thought, and plays out particularly strongly in relation to the concept of identity. This project begins with Walter Benjamin's studies of modernism and the concept of distraction or shock effect, which inhibits a person's space and time for contemplations. Such rupture is also crucial in discourse and being, according to Maurice Blanchot's work on interruption. By harnessing interruption as a positive, structuring force rather than battling it as a negative, the fiction of Gérard Gavarry invites reflection on the supposed continuity of language and form, and calls attention to the disparate elements of its construction. An attempt at recovering a cohesive sense of identity can be found in the post-colonial renovation of cosmopolitanism; this effort, however, ultimately comes up short as it does not take into account the full problematic of its modern context.

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I. Introduction

With the arrival of modernity, the concept of identity reaches a crisis. As is seen in the standpoint of Walter Benjamin, the traditional notion of identity becomes impossible in the modern urban environment because of identity's foundation on contemplation, by which a person can "give himself up to his train of associations" ("The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version"¹ 267). Contemplation in a modern environment is impossible, as a city full of distractions does not permit such reverie. A parallel to this movement from contemplation to distraction can be seen in the changing face of art, with the controversial advent of Dadaism, photography, and film. Despite this drastic shift, however, something of identity does remain, though evidently in a changed form. Different movements, including post-colonialism, have understood this shift in a variety of ways and with varying degrees of complexity. In this paper I will show how such an "identity crisis" comes about and is understood, how the notion of interruption relates to it, and how theories of post-colonialism attempt to reconcile the crisis through a positing of hybridity or cosmopolitanism, but ultimately fail to confront the full situation of identity within modernity.

The city is an embodiment of modernity, a constant breaking-free of what went before, a perpetual movement-toward that never reaches a destination. As such, the city itself contributes to the fragmentation of identity. The physical layout of cities contributes to the way in which identity develops among their inhabitants. Is the city constricted and pre-defined, or does it allow for growth, change, and development? Urban structures shape the development of identity, a fact that plays strongly into

¹ Subsequently referred to as "Work of Art."

Benjamin's understanding of cities and the modern. For Benjamin, contemplation (or lack thereof), the shock effect, and the observant *flâneur* are all central elements contributing to the disintegration of the concept of identity.

A key motif which emerges in Benjamin's argument is that of rupture or fragmentation, as the distractions of the city present constant stimulus and interruption. Interruption as a theme can also be deeply explored through the work of Maurice Blanchot. The plural essence of unity is key for Blanchot; plurality is held together by an overarching unity, yet it is only through the presence of interruption that the elements are held together. If all instances of unity are actually plural elements held together by interruption, then this inevitability of interruption complicates a simple notion of continuity, particularly within discourse. The concept of fragmentation, considered first through the work of Benjamin, can thus be explored in greater depth in the writing of Blanchot.

The centrality of interruption or fragmentation in modernity can also be brought to life through fiction, as is the case in the novel Hop là! un deux trois² by Gérard Gavarry. Examples of interruption as structural elements contributing to a unified work are prominent in Gavarry's novel. The various levels of rupture that play into the novel elucidate the effects of highlighting discontinuity, rather than couching it in a false homogeneity. Like the theoretical work of Blanchot, the fiction of Gavarry leaves readers with a question about how a coherent understanding of identity is possible given the inevitability of fragmentation of identity amid the distraction of urban modernity.

² Subsequently referred to as Hop là.

Post-colonial theory, which has a central preoccupation with the question of identity, has tried to resolve this tension in part with theories centering on hybridity, the progressive cultural blending that results from an increasingly fluid international environment. Theories that idealize hybridity as a means of moving toward cultural understanding and reconciliation are not uncommon, and bear a strong resemblance to the concept of cosmopolitanism, particularly as it appears in its modern revival. On first glance, idealized hybridity or its particular manifestation in cosmopolitanism may appear to be a way of understanding and working through the concepts of plurality and unity posited by Benjamin and Blanchot. However, in cosmopolitanism the prioritization of unity (over plurality or rupture) becomes a potential threat to individuality and risks leading to increased marginalization. A close inspection of cosmopolitanism's utopian outlook reveals its limited understanding of the question at hand, as well as its inadequacy as a response. A strong critical example of the problematic nature of cosmopolitanism is found in the work of Timothy Brennan, who posits that because cosmopolitanism still rests in a strongly western perspective while appearing to take on a global perspective, it cannot equalize existing biases or injustice, and instead will merely paint them in a different way. Zadie Smith's novel, White Teeth, is similar to Brennan's critique in its comical yet nuanced satire of the cosmopolitan outlook, which presents idealization of hybridity as untenable and unrealistic despite its good intentions.

Each of these elements – the physical structure of cities, Benjamin's understanding of the city and modernity, the fragmentation inherent in experience as well as discourse, and the insufficient response of post-colonial theory through the

idealization of hybridity – will contribute to the conclusion that a modern understanding of identity cannot escape rupture and fragmentation if it is to maintain its validity.

II. City and Identity: Benjamin

With the modern shift toward the urban and the technological, the perception of both space and time undergoes a transformation, as each can be perceived as more efficiently used when filled to a higher capacity. High-rises allow more people and businesses to occupy a smaller space, while technological advances permit more work to be done in less time. As a result, suddenly room for contemplation – the traditional foundation of a concept of identity, according to Benjamin – begins to fill up with distractions. Urban spaces in particular witness this elimination of silence and openness, filling instead with sound and sights. Identity of an individual within the city becomes threatened by the city's structure and rhythm, despite the potential creative force of these same elements. In this manner, modernism brings in its wake a fracture in the concept of identity. Partly because of this resulting crisis of the notion of identity, cities themselves, with their perpetual (and simultaneous) development and deterioration, emerge as important objects of critical study. Additionally, the element of figuration plays heavily into the concept of the city, as figures within the city often become figures representing the city itself. Each city fosters different sorts of development and deals with different sets of problems concerning identity, due in part to its physical layout. This is certainly the case with Paris and its suburbs, site of Gavarry's Hop là!, and London, where Smith's White Teeth takes place.

That the physical place and space of the city play an integral part in the identity of the individuals within it is central to Benjamin's understanding of urbanity and modernity. According to Graeme Gilloch, "In his cityscapes Walter Benjamin seeks to present urban 'physiognomies', readings or decipherments of the metropolitan environment in which the key to understanding social life is, on one level, located in the physical structure of the cities themselves" (Myth and metropolis 6). Perhaps Benjamin, in his writing on nineteenth-century Paris, had the effect in mind that Victor Hugo describes in Notre Dame de Paris. Hugo describes Quasimodo as being defined by the space of the surrounding cathedral:

C'est ainsi que peu à peu, se développant toujours dans le sens de la cathédrale, y vivant, y dormant, n'en sortant presque jamais, en subissant à toute heure la pression mystérieuse, [Quasimodo] arriva à lui ressembler, à s'y incruster, pour ainsi dire, à en faire la partie intégrante... On pourrait presque dire qu'il en avait pris la forme, comme le colimaçon prend la forme de sa coquille. C'était sa demeure, son trou, son enveloppe. (Hugo 171-2)

In Hugo, the metaphor extends to the people of France being both formed and trapped by the space in which they live, and the same can be said for urban space in general and the effect it bears on those who live within it. Like Hugo, Benjamin also discusses the dwelling place as a shell leaving its unmistakable mark on the being living inside, and relates it to the role of the *flâneur*, who will come to be a crucial figure in Benjamin's concept of the city.

The primal image of 'dwelling,' however, is the matrix or shell – that is, the thing which enables us to read off the exact figure of whatever lives inside it. Now, if we recollect that not only people and animals but also spirits and above all images can inhabit a place, then we have a tangible idea of what concerns the *flâneur* and of what he looks for. Namely, images, wherever they lodge. The *flâneur* is the priest of the genius loci. ("Return of the *Flâneur*"³ 264)

³ Subsequently referred to as "*Flâneur*."

The skill of the *flâneur* is thus the gift of observation: by taking in all the images a city presents, he learns, as one may learn by observing the inside of a shell, what creature it may be who lives inside. The *flâneur* provides an invaluable tip for the scholar: it is by such observation of the city's images that one may learn most about those who walk its streets.

Because the space of the city leaves such an indelible mark on its inhabitants, observing the structure of a city reveals much about those who reside in it. Paris and London have idiosyncratic elements of their structure that contribute to their ability to shape identity in certain manners. For one thing, each city has dealt very differently with its imperial past. While London's sprawling layout gives the impression of being rather open, and of providing a meeting ground on which individuals from former colonies come together, Paris – despite high levels of immigration – has an air of being closed-off due to fairly sharp boundaries. A look at Paris, for instance, reveals a city which is laid out in such a way as to eliminate slums, to push them to the exterior. Paris has a relatively tight, concentrated, well-defined center, yet is surrounded by the poorer *banlieues* it has attempted to exclude. The result is a city which breeds obvious in-groups and out-groups, a definite sense of belonging or not belonging, and therefore a high degree of tension (which erupted in the fall of 2005 as riots swept from Paris across the country). Even the streets are laid out in a way to highlight those in power. The post-Revolution wide boulevards, like the Champs Elysées, allow not only for the parading of a victorious army down the center, but also prohibit the possibility of barricades or other attempts at subversion. Benjamin discusses this alteration of the Parisian cityscape:

In 1864, in a speech before the National Assembly, [Hausmann] vents his hatred of the rootless urban population, which keeps increasing as a result of his projects. Rising rents drive the proletariat into the suburbs... Meanwhile he estranges the Parisians from their city. They no longer feel at home there, and start to become conscious of the inhuman character of the metropolis... The true goal of Hausmann's projects was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all time. ("Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century" 42)

Hausmann's attempt at security served to undo the city as home by changing its face and refusing to allow natural movement and development of its inhabitants. The effects of this change – particularly that of the working class being forced to the outskirts – continue to have resounding repercussions today.

London, on the other hand, appears as a city of greater potential for plurality, with various centers emerging in different neighborhoods of the city's spread. With a variety of different voices finding their home in the city, the threat to identity in London seems to be less acute than that caused by the sharp line of definition as found in Paris. Instead, identity in London comes under attack by a sort of homogenizing hybridity which denies the divergent pasts of individuals, as will be seen in Smith's White Teeth. London gives the impression of being the perfect place for post-colonialist theories – and particularly cosmopolitanism – to find their battleground, as it is home to a stunning amount of diversity and a complicated history. In what John Clement Ball describes as a sort of colonialism in reverse, London finds samplings of people from every corner of its once extensive empire within its city limits (15). Former colonial subjects enter the city of London, often imagining it on a wildly symbolic scale of global power and influence, and carry out their daily lives within earshot of the ringing of Big Ben. This results in a potential for interesting interactions between different players in an old power game. In his study of migrancy

and hybridity, Andrew Smith notes that one result is greater complexity in what is meant by claiming British identity: “What makes [one] ‘British’ cannot be referred to essentialist or absolutist notions of nation or culture, race or ethnicity. At the very least it is clear that we can no longer hold comfortably on to the notion of a closed national culture, complete within and for itself” (245). The changing concept of British identity may admit a variety of distinctive groups under one umbrella, but the risk is that in doing so, all differentiation may be washed out.

Each of these cities has particular attributes that influence its overall personality (and in turn those of its inhabitants), yet both are also affected by certain elements which are common to cities in general. One characteristic of the city, according to Benjamin, is that of distraction or the shock effect. Shock is brought about in part by over-stimulation, as confrontation by incessant stimuli (often visual) inhibits any depth of understanding by the recipient. The shock effect can perhaps be most easily understood in its manifestations in the world of art. Benjamin asserts that shock is an attribute of certain artistic trends, such as Dadaism, which present the audience with elements so unexpected that a coherent response becomes impossible. The result of the shock effect, both in art and in the urban environment, is a collapse of space or time for contemplation. Benjamin here considers the effect of modern art on the viewer or reader:

Before a painting by Arp or a poem by August Stramm, it is impossible to take time for concentration and evaluation, as one can before a painting by Derain or a poem by Rilke. Contemplative immersion – which, as the bourgeoisie degenerated, became a breeding ground for asocial behavior – is here opposed by distraction. (“Work of Art” 267)

Likewise, the Dadaists actually made it part of their aesthetic goal to refuse to allow the viewer a time or space in which to contemplate their art: “The Dadaists attached much less importance to the commercial usefulness of their artworks than to the uselessness of those works as objects of contemplative immersion” (Benjamin, “Work of Art” 266). Shock in the city goes a step further, as a person is not simply affronted by one incongruent image, but by an unending barrage of shock. An encounter with the city, therefore, even further collapses space for interpretation, as a new shock is constantly already occurring. Film highlights this perpetual element of the shock effect: “The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it, he can give himself up to his train of associations. Before a film image, he cannot do so. No sooner has he seen it than it has already changed. It cannot be fixed on” (Benjamin, “Work of Art” 267). It is precisely the constant onslaught of shock that prevents contemplation and instead leads to distraction: “Indeed, the train of associations in the person contemplating these images is immediately interrupted by new images. This constitutes the shock effect of film” (Benjamin, “Work of Art” 267). Shock, as Benjamin understands it, is a fundamental quality of cities, where a constant stream of stimuli enters the ears and especially the eyes of a person walking or driving their crowded streets. Signs, shops, other passers-by, traffic, spectacles, all compete for the attention of an individual that does not have time to interpret and meditate on all that is going on. Distraction, instead of contemplation, takes center stage.

Here, the parallel between the city and the work of modern art or film takes an interesting turn. In considering the consequences of distraction as opposed to

contemplation, Benjamin posits that in contemplation, “a person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters the work” (“Work of Art” 268). The result of distraction, on the other hand, is that “the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves” (“Work of Art” 268). Does this mean, then, that the mass of distracted city-dwellers, confronted with an endless flood of shock effects, likewise absorbs the city? It may be the case, as Benjamin illustrates his point through the consideration of architecture, a distinctly urban development. “Architecture has always offered the prototype of an artwork that is received in a state of distraction and through the collective” (“Work of Art” 268). This absorption by the masses occurs “by use and by perception. Or, better: tactilely and optically,” as these are the elements of habit and incidental observation (Benjamin, “Work of Art” 268). As the masses encounter the architecture of the city in routine, habitual ways, the buildings disappear, absorbed by the effect of distraction.

The role of interruption, shock, and distraction sets the stakes in regards to the construction or understanding of identity in an urban environment. While the individual may be said to absorb the surrounding stimuli when there is no opportunity for contemplation, as shown above, there is also the question of how this person will define her- or himself amid such a clamor without being similarly absorbed.

If information and impressions are transmitted in the city by means of shock, the primary figure who is able to relate to this process is Benjamin’s *flâneur*. The character type of the *flâneur* demonstrates the possibility of defining and maintaining identity within the constant shock of the city by remaining heterogeneous to the rushing crowds. In his article on the *flâneur* and realism in Benjamin, John Rignall

interprets the role of the *flâneur* as one of tension: the *flâneur* is a character about to be overcome by the “alienating system of commodity exchange into which he will eventually be absorbed” (112). In other words, the *flâneur* is on the city’s margins, and it seems inevitable that the center will swallow him. According to Gilloch’s interpretation,

[O]ne of Benjamin’s principal goals is to give voice to the ‘periphera’, the experiences of those whom modern forms of order strive to render silent and invisible...The ‘invisible’ are made visible; the mute are given a voice. Benjamin’s ‘phenomenology’ of the city is an attempt to comprehend the experience of modernity via the examination of some of its most eccentric and despised representatives. (Myth and Metropolis 9)

Gilloch’s word choice in this passage resembles common parlance of post-colonial discourse, particularly in its reference to re-focusing readers’ attention on the peripheral or marginal. The *flâneur* is indeed one on the margins or borders of the society, as he resists the modern capitalist social order (though it will inevitably overtake him eventually). In an environment where the crowd determines the pace, and where the desire to possess controls the eye of the passer-by through the shop windows, the *flâneur* meanders and observes, uninfluenced by the speed of traffic and unwilling to alter his steps to ease another’s path.

Though the *flâneur* may inhibit or counter the natural rhythm of the city in his indifference to it, he is also a crucial figure to understanding the city. Any margin serves to define the area from which it is excluded, so by studying the *flâneur*, one comprehends the city’s shape. One key characteristic of the *flâneur* is the emphasis on observation as his primary occupation; he devotes himself to seeing, noting, taking in what the city presents. The typical passer-by who notices a city’s objects only in his or her relationship to them – the building she will enter, the street he must cross –

therefore absorbs the city into him- or herself, as seen above. The *flâneur*, however, observes and considers, becoming absorbed by the city, the inverse of the masses. It is indeed his home: “For it is [the streets] that are the dwelling place of the eternally restless being who is eternally on the move, the being that experiences, learns, knows, and imagines as much between the houses as the individual between his four walls” (Benjamin, “*Flâneur*” 264). Through this process, the *flâneur* is able to read (or perhaps create) meaning within the city, for “seeing is knowing; description yields meaning; representation involves faithfully mirroring what is seen” (Rignall 116). For the *flâneur*, the city becomes both exterior and interior, freedom and enclosure: “The city splits into its dialectical poles. It becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlor that encloses him” (“*Flâneur*” 263). Identity is indeed affected by space in this manner; the surrounding space is both a place of liberty and a set of limitations and confines, as evidenced by Quasimodo in the towers of Notre Dame. But what is it that is so interesting about the *flâneur*? What can an understanding of his identity reveal? For Benjamin, “The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane. Not to mention that most terrible drug – ourselves – which we take in solitude” (“Surrealism” 216). The *flâneur* seems to open a door to a supernatural understanding of the self, though the glimpse that it gives may possess all the strangeness, sublimity, and horror of a dream or a drug trip.

As the *flâneur* reveals in his observation, the city’s environment of shock and the subsequent fracturing of contemplation do not mean that meaning or identity has been lost, but rather that any understanding of them must come through the

fragmentation, rather than through a denial of it. The image of the mosaic with its myriad disparate pieces forming a single composition is a useful way to understand the concept of fragmentation in modernity, and is central to the argument posed by Hans-Jost Frey. His analysis of presentation and discontinuity, which takes Benjamin's The Origin of the German Mourning Play as its impetus, recognizes the centrality of discontinuity and interruption to the particular form of the treatise (though it can easily be extended to other forms, both discursive and experiential). Images of montage and mosaic appear repeatedly in his discourse, and with good reason. For Frey, presentation (as opposed to any sort of telling or communication, though it cannot be wholly separated from them either) includes the illogical by necessity.

In place of a seamless continuity of argument or a chain of evidence, there is a movement of thought that again and again is interrupted and begins anew in order to approach the object over and over again from different angles... The discontinuous treatise is presentation. It presents not by what it says, but by saying it intermittently... Interruption opens up the treatise onto what is excluded from thinking, understanding, and saying. Presentation is not the communication of a sequence of thoughts, but the discontinuous arrangement of 'fragments of thought' (Origin 29) whose coherence lies outside knowledge and flashes forth in the gaps and breaks. (Frey 140)

Understanding comes not solely through content, but also (and perhaps primarily) through the manner in which the content is arranged. It is the element of juxtaposition which facilitates the possibility of polyvalent comprehension. Rather than approach the topic with a single-minded purpose, a path which permits the unplanned-for allows the horizons to remain open to unexpected conclusions. This openness can be seen as a kind of "contemplation that Benjamin describes as incessant pausing for breath and that persistently circles the object" (Frey 141). Frey finds the comparison

to the mosaic particularly compelling, as that which each tile shows is completely different from the image of the relationship of all the tiles to one another. In Frey's terms, this is

the superimposition of two orders. The contours of the image do not coincide with the boundaries between the individual shards. The image emerges out of disparate elements. It shines forth out of ruins. The two orders are those of the subject matter and the truth content. In order to get from one to the other, one must leave the order of the shards and focus the gaze on the order of the image. (Frey 147)

Forms such as the mosaic allow for a sort of non-literal communication between artist and viewer, in which multiple understandings are possible and a certain degree of flexibility is required to move from one to the other. Yet it is precisely this flexibility (of both the presenter and the receiver) which is important, according to Frey and Benjamin, for only through it can the viewer glimpse the true fullness of the composition. Though the idea of this openness can perhaps not be pinned down in a step-by-step procedure, Frey argues that it can indeed be termed a method. "What is methodical in the procedure of discontinuous presentation consists in abandoning the effort to insulate the characteristic linear progression of the argumentative discourse from the unexpected" (Frey 142). Later on, I will more closely examine the role of interruption in discourse, and Gérard Gavarry's novel, Hop là! un deux trois, will show itself as an example of such methodical discontinuity.

The view of the city as fragmented and ephemeral has a variety of consequences for Benjamin, ranging from aesthetics to urbanity to identity. Benjamin perceives a strong affinity between the urban environment and photography or film, as these modern art forms enable the capture of moments, the sole way in which meaning within the city can be found. Perhaps it is for this reason – the importance of

the fragment – that his work on the Arcades Project took its shape as a collection of fragments. Gilloch also describes this phenomenon of discontinuity: “the world is splintered into fragments, is legible only in fragments, and is representable solely through fragments – these are axiomatic for Benjamin and have come to have an increasing importance in social and cultural theory” (Critical Constellations 237). If a person’s identity takes on the likeness of the city in which she or he lives, then the essential fragmentation of urban centers will inevitably result in a problematic, fragmented identity, one composed of many seemingly unconnected shards. To make sense out of these shards involves changing one’s visual focus so that the field of vision can admit fragmentation and interruption while still grasping a sense of coherence.

III. Interruption: Blanchot

Benjamin’s understanding of fragmentation, seen both in the shock effect of modernity and in the image of the mosaic, can be further explored through Blanchot’s work on interruption. Blanchot recognizes the inevitability of interruption, and indeed goes so far as to call the very possibility of foundation into question while asserting the ubiquitous, unavoidable, and infinite nature of interruption. Blanchot’s work refuses to give unity priority over plurality, and focuses instead on the insurmountable separation which is present even in that which appears cohesive. Blanchot emphasizes that his concept of interruption is so profound and pervasive that it cannot even be contained by the traditional category of discontinuity, which

always has continuity as its opposite. The plurality he describes occurs at the most basic level possible, which is one of the reasons for its inevitability.

In considering a dialectical opposition between continuity and discontinuity, Blanchot determines the inadequacy of this oppositional structure to the very idea of discontinuity. As he observes, “Deux opposés, parce qu’ils ne sont qu’opposés, sont encore trop proches l’un de l’autre ; la contradiction ne représente pas une séparation décisive ; deux ennemis sont déjà engagés dans un rapport d’unité, alors que la différence entre l’ ‘inconnu’ et le familier est infinie” (L’Entretien infini 8).

Blanchot’s criticism of the dialectical relationship is its failure to be sufficiently deep or radical; in his understanding, true discontinuity is not simply the opposite of continuity, but instead goes so far as to undermine the notion of foundation. Infinite difference, rather than mere opposition, is what his analysis undertakes, so that dialectical synthesis will not assert priority over rupture. Essential plurality, rather than unity, is what his demand for discontinuity posits:

Comment parler de telle sorte que la parole soit essentiellement plurielle?
 Comment peut s’affirmer la recherche d’une parole plurielle, fondée non plus sur l’égalité et l’inégalité, non plus sur la prédominance et la subordination, non pas sur la mutualité réciproque, mais sur la dissymétrie et l’irréversibilité, de telle manière que, entre deux paroles, un rapport d’infinité soit toujours impliqué comme le mouvement de la signification même ? Ou bien encore comment écrire de telle sorte que la continuité du mouvement de l’écriture puisse laisser intervenir fondamentalement l’interruption comme sens et la rupture comme forme ?...Tout langage où il s’agit d’interroger et non pas de répondre, est un langage déjà interrompu, plus encore un langage où tout commence par la décision (ou la distraction) d’un vide initial. (L’Entretien infini 9)

The infinite aligns itself with impossibility, refuses definition, and yet pervades discourse. In other words, Blanchot seeks a definition which will include inside itself that which it is not: “Écrire: tracer un cercle à l’intérieur duquel viendrait s’inscrire le

dehors de tout cercle” (L’Entretien infini 112). Questions of primacy, foundation, and inclusion/exclusion become intricately interwoven, admitting infinite ambiguity and resisting definition.

Blanchot is not alone in his focus on and analysis of discontinuity; ideas of the centrality of interruption have been articulated by a variety of thinkers. The idea of the inevitability of rupture, for instance, bears striking resemblance to Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of plurality as seen through rhythm and touch, which in turn highlights the necessity of plurality in all comparison. Touch may be a bringing together of two things, but at the heart of this bringing together must be a separation, a distinction, a distance between the two, or no movement toward the other can be made. “Le toucher *est* l’intervalle et l’hétérogénéité du toucher”, Nancy asserts (35). The touch, like the plurality/unity of a mosaic, in a sense owes its existence to the gap, the separation by distance constantly diminished but never eliminated. Plurality is likewise essential to rhythm. Only if at least two beats make themselves heard – separately – can the sound be called a rhythm with any accuracy. What is necessary, then, is not only the beats but also an absence of sound interrupting the two sounds, separating them and making them clear as two, so that together they form one rhythm. “‘Le Rythme’ n’a son moment propre que dans l’écart du battement qui le fait rythme” (Nancy 46). Like touch, which exists in the distance and heterogeneity between two things, rhythm exists in the space between two sounds. One touch or one rhythmic sequence is never simply “one;” each is always necessarily a plurality even in its totality. Nancy goes on to interpret plurality as being the core of the world’s unity:

Comment produire le fond, de quelle manière, si le *fond* n'est pas *un* et n'est pas un *fonds* d'où prendre sa ressource ? Ou bien, sa ressource est celle d'une hétérogénéité. Le fond ne se produit pas lui-même et il n'est pas produit en aucune manière. Le fond est l'évidence ou la patence de l'être : ...l'existence en tant que 'l'infinie multiplicité du monde' (Badiou 361). Mas la multiplicité du monde ne reste même pas la multiplicité d'un monde : elle qualifie le monde comme hétérogénéité de mondes *en quoi consiste l'unité du monde*. (Nancy 51).

Nancy's notion of comparison is not unlike Blanchot's concept of communication.

For Nancy, plurality is the basis of unity; for Blanchot, "la discontinuité assure la continuité de l'entente" ("Interruption" 870). For both, wholeness does not exist except through interruption of wholeness.

Having established the profundity and inevitability of interruption, Blanchot enumerates two possible forms that this discontinuity can take. The first of these forms is a silence in discourse, not unlike the gap of Nancy, which permits exchange between two partners in a conversation ("Interruption" 870). It is the pause which allows for a true exchange of words and ideas. In this sense, it may potentially complicate the dialogue, but nevertheless it is this interruption which is essential to the continuity of discourse: "La rupture, même si elle la fragmente, la contrarie ou la trouble, fait encore le jeu de la parole commune ; non seulement elle donne du sens, mais elle dégage le sens commun comme l'horizon. Elle est la respiration du discours" ("Interruption" 871). This first instance of interruption actually works toward continuity by fragmenting (and therefore structuring) discourse in such a way as to facilitate understanding and exchange.

The second form of interruption is what Blanchot considers "une autre sorte d'interruption, plus énigmatique et plus grave"; rather than a pause contributing to coherence, this is rather a rupture which marks vast, insurmountable distance

(“Interruption” 871). “Elle introduit l’attente qui mesure la distance entre deux interlocuteurs, non plus la distance réductible, mais l’irréductible” (“Interruption” 871). Deeper than between words, this interruption is between beings, and marks the insuperable alterity between them. The distance is indeed more than vast; it is infinite, and yet it is essential to any exchange, for only through this separation can communication take place (perhaps as a touch can only be felt because of the heterogeneity of and distance between the things touching, as in Nancy). To this effect, Blanchot expounds on this interruption not only of words, but of being or identity itself:

Ce qui est en jeu et demande rapport, c’est tout ce qui me sépare de l’autre, c’est-à-dire dans la mesure où je suis infiniment séparé de lui, séparation, fissure, intervalle qui le laisse infiniment en dehors de moi, mais aussi prétend fonder mon rapport avec lui sur cette interruption même, qui est une *interruption d’être* – altérité par laquelle il n’est pour moi ni un autre moi, ni une autre existence, ni une modalité ou un moment de l’existence universelle, ni une surexistence, dieu ou non-dieu, mais l’inconnu dans son infinie distance. (“Interruption” 872)

Infinite alterity, then, is at the base of every dialogue and even every existence, and it is to this infinite space that textual interruption must reply in order to be coherent, in order to be continuous. “C’est à ce hiatus – l’étrangeté, infinité entre nous – que répond, dans le langage même, l’interruption qui introduit l’attente” (“Interruption” 872). The first sort of interruption seems to be a response to the second, infinite rift between beings.

As a model for continuous interruption, Blanchot borrows the concept of a “surface de Riemann” as indicated in his title. He describes it as “un bloc-notes idéal comprenant autant de feuillets qu’il est nécessaire...Sur cette surface feuilletée, ils inscrivent des nombres dont plusieurs occupent la même place sur différents feuillets”

(“Interruption” 872, footnote 1). It is thoroughly singular and plural, unified and interrupted. Things can be simultaneously written, spoken, prepared, all at the same conversational point but located on different sheets of the surface. Blanchot’s proposals incorporate such structural complexity, denying interruption as simple silence and emphasizing instead a formal or structural alteration: “l’arrêt ici n’est pas nécessairement ni simplement représenté par du silence, un blanc ou un vide (combien ce serait grossier), mais par un changement dans la forme ou la structure du langage” (“Interruption” 872). Similarly, he denies that the spoken word is simply a bridge to cross this infinite chasm: “parler, c’est *cesser de penser seulement en vue de l’unité* et faire des relations de paroles un champ essentiellement dissymétrique que régit la discontinuité...donner la parole à l’intermittence, parole non unifiante, acceptant de n’être plus un passage ou un pont, parole non pontifiante” (“Interruption” 873). Plurality, not unity, takes priority here, both in structure and content.

Of course, since language and interruption are essential one to the other in Blanchot’s line of thinking, expecting language to conquer rupture is not only impossible, but also undesirable, for the rupture is necessary. This is the same mindset that is essential in order to comprehend the fragmentation of identity within the city: rather than attempting to eliminate the elements that cause interruption, a new understanding of identity which incorporates rupture must emerge. For a writer to recognize interruption and to write in a way that is consistent with it, whole concepts of form and structure may be swallowed up. For instance, perhaps instead of pretending omniscience and continuity, a writer may create a narrator with limited

perspective, who does not tell a story straight through from beginning to end but allows the curves, detours, and silences to make themselves felt. In any case, a new form and content is required both in writing and in the understanding of identity in order to make sense of increasingly prevalent interruption.

IV. Fictional Solution: Gavarry

Gavarry works through the problem of fragmentation that modernity poses to identity in his novel, Hop là! un deux trois. Because of Gavarry's manner of writing and structuring his innovative novel, the reader's focus falls first not on some substance (like plot line, character development, etc.), but on a lack or confusion, particularly in regards to language itself. By calling attention to interruption and making it explicit through codification, triptych structure, and re-telling an established story, Gavarry makes rupture an object for reflection rather than engaging in a futile attempt to eliminate it in favor of homogeneity.

The basic plot of Hop là! takes root in the story of Judith from the Apocrypha, in which Judith, a beautiful widow from the town about to be conquered, seduces the oppressive Holofernes and cuts off his head, inciting the town to rebellion, by which they overcome their conquerors. The story is re-adapted to the backdrop of the Paris suburbs; in Gavarry's version, Ti-Jus, a young man from the *banlieue*, rapes and murders his mother's boss, Madame Fenerolo. The same basic story is recounted three times. With each re-telling, Gavarry employs a different linguistic and thematic lens which, on first sight, does not seem to bear much relation to the text itself. The first section, "Le cocotier", takes on the jargon of exoticism, beaches and coconut

trees; the second, “Le cargo”, of movement and ships, ocean and transport; the third, “Le Centaure”, of mythology and hybridity. Each successive re-telling causes the reader to re-evaluate the story as a whole.

While discontinuity and incomprehension initially present themselves as barriers to understanding, they also open up deeper and more complex possibilities for understanding precisely by emphasizing fragmentation. Because of the priority on interruption in its structure, Gavarry’s work is a possible response to Blanchot’s question, “comment écrire de telle sorte que la continuité du mouvement de l’écriture puisse laisser intervenir fondamentalement l’interruption comme sens et la rupture comme forme ?” (L’Entretien infini 9). By re-interpreting an apocryphal work (thus creating proximity with that work while maintaining insuperable distance from it), by writing in a plural triptych form, and by using coded language that is obscure on the literal level but clear on a connotative level, Gavarry crafts a work whose form is indeed rupture. Through its structural discontinuities, Gavarry’s novel can be read as a depiction of the shattered concept of identity in modernity. Additionally, the setting of the novel is the Parisian suburbs, which opens up the possibility of understanding the text through the city in which it takes place. Paris strongly defines its center and margins, pushing to the outside those who do not fit within the desired categories of the core, leading to intense rivalry and group identification. With its themes of socio-economic oppression and subversion, as well as strong implications of in-groups and out-groups based on initiation, the novel underscores the city’s tendency to shape the experience of its inhabitants.

A. Re-Telling Judith

The relationship of Hop là! to the story of Judith is a preliminary structural form of interruption, as the novel approaches the original story while always maintaining a distance. Gavarry creates his own story while maintaining enough surface-level details to ascertain a concrete connection between the two stories (though depending on the reader's familiarity with the story of Judith, the link may only become apparent upon reading Gavarry's explanation of the novel, Façon d'un roman⁴). According to Gavarry, the use of Judith provided the "fil dramatique, qui d'une situation de défaite collective mènera à un meurtre individuel et libérateur, ou supposé tel" (Façon 16). Starting with this thread of plot, he then drastically changes many elements, but because of the relationship between the two, rich possibilities for interpretation remain open throughout the story's course.

First, to note the similarities: Gavarry retains the names of people and places, though with some distortion, most notably in his choice of reversing the genders of the protagonist and the antagonist. Thus the heroine Judith becomes the young male Ti-Jus, while the oppressive Holofernes is incarnated in Ti-Jus' mother's boss, Madame Fenerolo. Similarly, place names are kept relatively intact (though places themselves are not), as are character traits. The widow Judith was famed for her beauty, and Ti-Jus is a seductive youth, while Madame Fenerolo, like Holofernes, exudes injustice and class inequality. Like Judith putting on her finest clothing to approach Holofernes, Ti-Jus dresses in his best before making the trip to Madame Fenerolo's apartment to deliver the clothes altered by his mother: "Il choisit les vêtements qu'il va mettre. Il sélectionne ce qu'il a de mieux" (Hop là 58). This

⁴ Subsequently referred to as Façon.

preparation, like that of Judith, is in anticipation of sacrifice, as Gavarry notes: “C’est pourquoi avant de se rendre chez Madame Fenerolo Ti-Jus se lave et se change, sorte de rituel précédant le sacrifice” (Façon 117). These details enable the reader to draw the two stories together, and their relationship facilitates a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the story. A re-telling never stands alone; it constantly calls on the reader to question why certain things either recall, or stand in contrast to, the original.

Still, Gavarry is obviously doing more than repeating an ancient story. The fundamental interruption lies in the combination of similarity and difference, which also sustains the power of the re-telling. By joining his narrative with one that has been told and re-told, Gavarry leaves open the possibility of understanding things in the text that may only be hinted at, but which are developed more fully in the original story of Judith. Notions of injustice and oppression, for instance, take on a very unusual tint when transposed from biblical text to contemporary Parisian suburb. Social oppression replaces the foreign oppression of Judith’s society, as Warren Motte notes: “Hop là! also wagers on the notion of a besieged people, though this time the siege is laid not by a foreign power, but by another social class” (4). Political systems, institutions, and social norms are all necessarily different from the original text of Judith, but the relationships between them retain a similar flavor of subjugation. A re-telling unavoidably casts both versions in a different light; when something is re-told, whether it be through translation, oral storytelling, or a re-casting of certain elements, the two versions are inevitably different, or the new version would be nothing more than a re-print of the first. Both take on shades of the other; the similarity between them allows them to be juxtaposed and considered

together, but their difference is what enables newness and unexpectedness to jump from each. An effect of the simultaneous proximity and distance is that each tale calls the other into question. One moment in which Gavarry invokes the themes of the original woven into the re-telling occurs during “Le cargo,” in the living room of the Deux-Rivières family.

Dès lors, notre conscience moribonde hésite à reconnaître le dehors, le dedans... L'Indistinction a tant progressé qu'il n'existe plus dans la salle de séjour être physique ni chose idéale dont l'identité ne soit très amoindrie... à peine femmes les femmes davantage que reflets de femmes, ou pire, aucune bien clairement Deux-Rivières plutôt que Fenerolo, ni rébellion rien nettement plutôt que soumission. (Hop là 124)

Themes of submission and rebellion link the two women to the original story of Judith, making theirs an ancient struggle, all while identity becomes strangely diminished into reflection and confusion. By re-telling a story that wields authority because of its positioning as a religious text (although the fact that it is apocryphal raises interesting questions about canonicity, margins, and authority), Gavarry makes use of the weight of the original story. Only the interruption between the two texts – their proximity but also their separation – makes this borrowing a possibility.

B. Triptych Structure

If the novel in its entirety demonstrates interruption through its relationship of proximity and distance to Judith, the interior structure also exhibits rupture through its own multiple re-telling. Gavarry's creation is a take on the visual art form of the triptych: a tripartite work, three separate pieces which are to be considered in relation to one another, as they are joined to depict a single story. In the case of Hop là!, each of the three panels is an internal re-telling of what is essentially one story. According

to Gavarry, the three parts of his novel are tools that provide a forum for articulating disparity and proximity: “plutôt que des thèmes, ils seraient des outils rhétoriques” (Façon 14). Rather than reading a story told from one consistent perspective, in which the reader has a (false) sense of integrity and wholeness of the work, here the perspective is splintered, and so the first thing noticed is the fracture. The relation of parts to the whole is similar to Frey’s discussion of the different fields of view engaged in consideration of mosaic, and the rupture leaves the reader in the state of shock that Benjamin describes. However, through further contemplation, the viewer or reader may realize that by interrupting the supposed perspective, the writer is calling into question the authority of that perspective and the fullness that it can convey. Therefore, by interrupting the perspective of narration, Gavarry is both highlighting the impossibility of full continuity, and providing a possible alternative which admits fragmentation.

Similar to the triptych in visual art, which integrates interruption into its form, Hop Là! in its triple-telling creates an entirely different aesthetic experience than if the same story were told only once. A sense of possibility, of uncertainty, of multiplicity is fostered by the playful articulation of the three accounts with their drastically different lexicons following the same narrative thread. The reader sees something through “Le Centaure” which is not found in “Le cargo;” something in “Le cargo” which was not visible in “Le cocotier”. Gavarry reiterates the infinite potentiality of the narrative details when, in the middle of a particular description, he inserts an “ou bien...” and launches an entirely different possibility which nevertheless leaves the plotline intact (Hop là 93, for example). Through each of the

three parts, “L’histoire reste la même, ou presque la même, mais autrement développée, autrement éclairée et, bien sûr, autrement métaphorisée” (Façon 58). The effect of this construction is like that of the triptych; the reader perceives a sense of completeness in each element, of uniqueness in each compared to the other two, while simultaneously noting the parallels between each; upon completion of the novel, the three parts layer one over the other to instill sense of fullness in the work as a whole.

Gavarry also notes his need to “percer dans la fiction quelques brèches, par où de soudaines et lointaines échappées constitueraient autant de fugues vers de réalités situées hors champ, faisant naître au sein même du texte le sentiment de l’ampleur, de l’ailleurs, de l’illimité” (Façon 127). Interruption here permits the entrance of the infinite. Gavarry’s desire to pierce the text to allow the entry of the infinite seems echoed by Madame Fenerolo’s interrogation of Ti-Jus regarding his torn jeans : “Ces déchirures, questionna-t-elle, était-ce fait exprès ?... Quels courants d’air ça devait laisser passer ! En cette saison, quel froid !” (Hop là 72). Perhaps these tears, as rupture, are what Blanchot is looking for when he calls rupture “la respiration du discours,” as examined in the first section (“Interruption” 871). In any case, the rips of this novel are indeed intentional, and their rupture is an element of life and movement in the fiction. By creating such breaks, Gavarry refuses to stifle the modern reality of perpetual interruption; instead, he embraces it by letting it play out through the structure of the novel.

C. Coded Language

While the plotline and structure both incorporate interruption on a fairly large-scale, a form of multiplicity more intimate to the details of the novel is that of the codification of language. Gavarry announces the key to each of three codes through the section titles – “Le cocotier”, “Le cargo”, and “Le Centaure” – then allows the codification to be played out through the narrative voice and through the jargon of the youths. The code is both intra- and extra-diegetic, as both the reader and the characters within the novel are jolted by the use of an uncommon vocabulary. It functions as a method of simultaneously covering and revealing. The reader, unlike the characters, has access to the keys of the code (stated plainly in the section titles), and the overall sense of the ideas remains clear through tone and context, but the meanings of the words are deliberately out of reach for a typical vocabulary. This effect is, of course, intentional on the part of Gavarry. His stated criteria were as follows: “1. Une réplique formulée en jargon devait N’ÊTRE PAS traduisible en langage ordinaire. 2. Il fallait, en revanche, que soit clairement intelligible l’humeur, ou l’intention dont la réplique était porteuse” (Façon 35). He certainly meets his goal; the literal meaning of the jargon is extraordinarily difficult to follow without the aid of Façon d’un roman as well as a dictionary, yet the readers as well as the “others” within the fiction can follow the tone and connotation of the dialogues with relative ease. “Et quant aux non-initiés, puisqu’ils ignorent tout du jargon qu’ils entendent, ils reportent leur attention sur les intonations des voix, sur les postures et les élans des corps” (Hop là 30). When words fail to reveal their signification, attention turns to meanings found in body language and other non-verbal clues.

One effect of the code is that of inclusion and exclusion: who understands, and who remains uninitiated? In the narration-reader relationship, the reader is clearly the uninitiated one, forced to either leaves blanks in his or her understanding of the language – thus interrupting the reading through lack of comprehension – or more literally interrupt his or her reading by flipping between dictionary and novel for each unexpected word. Within the fiction, these in-groups and out-groups can be seen most clearly during the train scenes, in which the young people speak using a slang which leaves fellow riders baffled. The codification creates social boundaries, as Motte notes, for “like any specialized idiom, it serves to create community and to reinforce the identity of the group that speaks it” (Motte 8). This language of Ti-Jus and his friends “est un jargon, ou un semblant de jargon. Compréhensible seulement à de supposés initiés, elle est faite d’éléments d’emprunt, déformés, détournés, disparates quoique ayant tous quelque rapport avec le cocotier” (Façon 34). Interruption through incomprehension serves to communicate a sense of separation, perhaps more clearly than a standard description ever could.

The code interrupts the act of reading in a variety of literal and figurative ways, contributing, like the tripartite structure and the reliance on the story of Judith, to the pervasive interruption that is written into Gavarry’s fiction. Gavarry’s version of interruption is prominent and crafted, with nothing left to chance; the fractures knit the fullness of the story. If the novel is considered in relation to Blanchot’s notion that communication actually hinges on this interruption, then Gavarry’s work provides deep possibility for communication precisely because of its multiple, fractured form. By calling attention to fragmentation and making it explicit, Gavarry calls attention to

rupture as a stylistic and structural tool. Blanchot's analysis of interruption and Gavarry's use of it in the structure of Hop là! reveal a profound extension of Benjamin's perception of fragmentation in the city. The medium of rupture is no longer the concrete stimuli found in a city or a shocking work of art, but language itself. Since we understand and filter all of experience through the medium of language, fragmentation becomes even deeper and more pervasive, as it is actually prior to experiential understanding of the city or any other environment.

V. Skirting the Problem: Post-colonialism & Cosmo-theory

Unlike Gavarry's novel, which lets confusion and interruption remain prominent and unresolved, the field of post-colonial studies often attempts to recover a cohesive notion of identity in modernity. Because post-colonialism is so fundamentally situated within the realm of the modern, it faces the challenge of responding to and thinking beyond the effects of modernity. Its effort to do so, however, is more of a return to the traditional, unified concept of identity than a true re-thinking of it. Post-colonialism, as one domain which deeply internalizes the notion of an identity crisis, grabs on to the fact that while the idea of identity constantly deteriorates in a modern environment, it does not totally disappear. Yet the commonly drawn conclusions and solutions to the modern fracture of identity do not fully respond to the profundity of the schism. If fragmentation is knitted into language itself, then any modern theory of identity must take this rupture into account, as language cannot be avoided. The idealization of hybridity – a spin-off of classical cosmopolitanism – has become a popular response to the shattering of

contemplative identity. Most theories of hybridity, however, lean too far toward utopian hopes rather than fully grappling with current realities. Instead of incorporating shock and discontinuity as fundamental elements to a notion of identity (or even discourse or language), ideas of hybridity as an ideal generally focus on a resulting synthesis or wholeness which ignores the inevitability of fragmentation.

The utopic and universalizing theory of cosmopolitanism actually works against the equality that it seeks by undermining the nature of human experience. Because of the pervasiveness of interruption – throughout all texts, all communication, all cities – to deny it in favor of an unrippled surface is to deny the reality of modern experience. What some post-colonial theories attempt to do in championing hybridity is therefore a dangerous obliteration of distinction. When these theories focus on synthesis rather than rupture, the disparate elements that make up a person's individuality vanish. Interestingly, interruption actually features prominently in other areas of post-colonial studies; for instance, the intrusion of diaspora cultures back to the imperial center causes a rupture in the historic and geographic continuity of both cultures. Also, post-colonial theories nearly always champion the opposition of the self and the other, which creates an unavoidable dialectic structure within post-colonialism. While Blanchot would argue that simple opposition does not go far enough in defining the distance between two beings, nevertheless to undermine this dialectic structure in favor of unified hybridity – which effaces the need for an other – creates a rupture within the discipline itself.

A strong critique of the utopic tendencies of cosmopolitanism can be found in the work of Timothy Brennan, who finds it to be not only an ineffective paradigm,

but also a counter-productive one, as it perpetuates western dominance. Similarly, in the novel White Teeth, Zadie Smith provides an excellent portrayal of the inadequacy of theories centering on idealized hybridity or cosmopolitanism by satirizing the characters of her novel that excessively embrace similar ideas. If hybridity is understood as an attempt to recuperate the shards of identity splintered by modernity and the city, it proves to be a well-meaning but insufficient endeavor that focuses once again on unity rather than the centrality of rupture, on the full mosaic image rather than the individual pieces.

A preliminary look at cosmopolitanism may be helpful in order to more fully understand the reason for its critique. Traditionally, the theory of cosmopolitanism posits that one's primary allegiance must be to humanity, rather than to any particular culture, history, religion, or political ideology. The hope is that this shift in loyalty from the particular to the universal will put an end to oppression and intolerance. Cosmopolitanism suggests an implied ideal of full hybridity and multiculturalism, in which differences become blurred in favor of the unity of common humanity.

Modern cosmopolitanism is rooted in the Greco-Roman ideal of the world citizen. Essentially, the cosmopolitan is the individual whose primary allegiance is to the worldwide human community rather than to country, religion, or ideology. Such an individual is set in opposition to the patriot or nationalist, whose primary allegiance is to country. The hope behind cosmopolitanism is that if people find their primary identity in something particular to any specific group, conflict is bound to ensue. If, on the other hand, identity is located in that which unites all of humanity, all humanity will begin to work toward common ideals of justice and the common good.

Cosmopolitanism has an inherent tendency to homogenize. This blurring of distinctions is seen already in the ideals of Stoic philosophy, according to which an individual is surrounded by

a series of concentric circles. The first one is drawn around the self; the next takes in one's immediate family; then follows the extended family; then, in order, one's neighbors or local group, one's fellow city-dwellers, one's fellow countrymen – and we can easily add to this list groupings based on ethnic, linguistic, historical, professional, gender and sexual identities. Outside all these circles is the largest one, that of humanity as a whole. (Nussbaum 5)

The role of cosmopolitanism, then, according to Nussbaum's citation of Stoic philosopher Hierocles, is that "our task as citizens of the world will be to 'draw the circles somehow toward the center,' making all human beings more like our fellow city dwellers, and so on" (5). Perhaps this would indeed lead to greater tolerance, but at the expense of understanding the full richness and complexity of individuals outside one's innermost circles.

Transformed into a contemporary theory, cosmopolitanism suggests a sloughing off of history and cultural identity in order to ensure harmony and guard human rights. Martha Nussbaum's article, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," is a good example of the modern renewal of the theory. Rather than assume one's own culture to be the natural norm against which other cultures are measured, Nussbaum advocates an educational system which prioritizes the local only insofar as it is morally and functionally appropriate to do so (as, she argues, in the case of caring for one's own child rather than all children equally). Outside of these instances, a global curriculum is to be pursued, thereby increasing tolerance and understanding cross-culturally. Nussbaum recognizes rightly the value that can exist in cultural variety and open-mindedness; still, the premise is not without problems.

At a glance, cosmopolitanism seems to be an unequivocally positive solution to much of the complicated conflict facing the world today. The theory, however, does not admit the complexity of human experience in its tendency to smooth over and ignore the particularities of individuals and groups. In his article “Cosmo-Theory,” Timothy Brennan argues that while cosmopolitanism typically shuns patriotism for being detrimental to the values it attempts to protect, cosmopolitanism harms its own cause as well, actually exacerbating the cultural hegemony it sets out to eliminate. The reason this occurs is because rather than re-valorize that which has been marginalized, cosmopolitanism has a tendency to merely commodify the local while continuing to observe through a western lens. Even the understanding of an anti-nationalist stance such as cosmopolitanism is rooted in and depends on a particular cultural perspective, which undoubtedly springs from the West, as it remains the home of the powerful and therefore the seat of the norm. Another problem Brennan finds with the ideal of cosmopolitanism is the assumption (inherent in the desire to transcend national issues) that individuals in all nations are on equal footing in regards to basic needs such as education, food, and health care. Until such foundations do become equal, lofty goals of transcendence remain not only unattainable, but irrelevant. If Brennan’s observations are accurate, then cosmopolitanism can never be the tool it intends to be, for rather than erasing oppression and marginalization, it deepens them while seeming innocuous. Brennan’s proposed alternative is a renewed emphasis on the social, political, economic, and social realities of a place, strengthening its sovereignty rather than erasing it into an oblivion of universality. Brennan’s proposal, compared to the false unity to which

cosmopolitanism aspires, is more aligned with the mosaic of modernity. In it, value resides not only in the synthetic whole but also (especially) in the parts and their relationship to one another. Were post-colonialism to absorb the theories of interruption posited by Blanchot and depicted fictionally by Gavarry, the result would likely echo Brennan's assertions.

Smith's novel, with its critiques of "Happy Multicultural Land" and biting satire, uses fiction to convey the same problems with cosmopolitanism as Brennan delineates, though not with the same degree of structural discontinuity as found in Gavarry (Z. Smith 384). Smith populates White Teeth with characters brimming with apparent hybridity: mixed backgrounds, a variety of religions, plus a subsequent generation of blended cultures. This would seem to be an ideal backdrop for a cosmopolitan viewpoint – though the characters inhabit such vastly different spheres, they are united and able to relate to one another through their common humanity. Smith, however, does not present such an idyllic conclusion. Rather, the ideas most "cosmopolitan" in nature are put in the mouths of the most satirically-depicted characters, and are shown to be untenable – indeed, ludicrous. Still, ideas of patriotism – cosmopolitanism's supposed opposite – are also mocked in those characters who hold to their cultural and historical pasts too tightly and cannot accept the realities of their present. Many of her characters seem capable of seeing only the fragments of the mosaic, or only the overarching image it represents, rather than maintaining the flexibility necessary to admit both.

Cosmopolitanism as an ideal repeatedly faces Smith's heavily satirical hand. The few characters that seem to take a genuinely cosmopolitan stance are painted as

laughable, idealistic, or naïve, while more complex characters oppose them from a variety of viewpoints. Additionally, each character that is markedly cosmopolitan in outlook is also decidedly western in cultural background, which corresponds with Brennan's idea that cosmopolitanism, though ostensibly shedding national bias, is still profoundly western in its implementation. Smith conversely presents hybridity not as an ideal, but as a simple reality, and, as such, reveals the foolishness of praising it or striving for it. Her perspective echoes that of Brennan, who notes that much of post-colonial thought simultaneously campaigns for hybridity as a goal and acknowledges it as inevitable: "Without ever questioning the fundamental self-contradiction of the move, the modernist then vigorously urges on a future that *should* unfold (because it is good) while simultaneously arguing that it *must* unfold (because it is inevitable)" ("From Development to Globalization" 122). In White Teeth, Smith approaches the theme of hybridity using a variety of tones, from a satirical glimpse at characters that swallow liberalism whole, to a tragic treatment of the Bengali immigrant Samad Iqbal in his intense fear of losing his culture, to a more directly authorial look at the reality of multiculturalism and the consequences that ensue.

The most prominent voices of an implicit cosmopolitanism are the school system in its watery efforts at political correctness, the Chalfen family in their wide-open tolerance, and to a lesser degree the Englishman Archie as he attempts to make sense of the world. These characters are experts at simplification as a way of dealing with changing cultural portraits. The school, for instance, maintains a vague goal of tolerance but never passes beyond stereotypes to arrive at true cultural understanding. First, in the PTA meeting, the organizer momentarily worries that she may be acting

“unfair or undemocratic, or worse still *racist* (but she had read *Colour Blind*, a seminal leaflet from the Rainbow Coalition, she had scored well on the self-test), racist in ways that were so deeply ingrained and socially determining that they escaped her attention. But no, no” (Z. Smith 106). The pamphlet has assuaged her conscience; the issue has been dealt with and can be swept aside. In the same vein, music teacher Poppy Burt-Jones attempts to smooth over cultural differences, but her admonishing hints of condescension and a fear of looking directly at the issue. Attempting to bring about tolerance in her classroom, she chides, “I don’t think it is very nice to make fun of *somebody else’s culture*... Sometimes we find other people’s music strange because their culture is different from *ours*...But that doesn’t mean it isn’t equally good, now does it?” (Z. Smith 129). Poppy is so intent on the ideal of multiculturalism that she fails to realize that the cultural image she projects onto Magid and Millat does not resemble their reality as second-generation children of immigrants, who care more about being cool among their peers than about preserving the culture of their parents.

The most explicit and ludicrous promotion of hybridity comes from Joyce Chalfen through her gardening advice. “Cross-pollination produces more varied offspring, which are better able to cope with a changed environment... If my one-year-old son is anything to go by (a cross-pollination between a lapsed-Catholic horticulturalist feminist and an intellectual Jew!), then I can certainly vouch for the truth of this” (Z. Smith 258). The irony of this statement, however, is that while Joyce is tremendously proud of her own experimentation in hybridization and is outwardly fascinated by Millat and Irie because of their multicultural backgrounds, she does not

seem to trust her own hypothesis that they are “better able to cope” with their situations; instead, she insists on trying to patch things up. Her surface-level interest in other cultures, which is divorced from any deep understanding of historical realities, comes off as lacking sincerity and serves to deepen rifts rather than establish genuine relationship.

Archie’s perspective presents a similar problem in that while he hopes for peace in a vague, general way, he has no understanding of what would have to be overcome in order to attain it. This naïveté is revealed in conversations with his friend Samad, whose sense of cultural heritage is clearly much more intense and deeply-rooted. Samad critiques the families of his wife Alsana’s sisters, who have “no respect for tradition. People call it assimilation when it is nothing but corruption. Corruption!” (Z. Smith 159). In response, “Archie tried to look shocked and then tried disgusted, not knowing what to say. He liked people to get on with things, Archie. He kind of felt people should just live together, you know, in peace or harmony or something” (Z. Smith 159). Both Archie and Joyce approach topics within multiculturalism or hybridity with a breezy stance, but (perhaps due to their western perspective?) are unable to actually grasp the complexity of the situations they critique, which Smith makes clear through the tone she uses with each character.

In contrast to the satirized cosmopolitan standpoint of Poppy, Joyce, and Archie, Samad holds a more traditionally patriotic view. Smith presents his perspective with a good deal more sympathy and complexity than the cosmopolitan characters, but ultimately underscores the inefficacy of his approach. Samad’s point of view is typified by his deep-seeded fear of losing his identity, unlike the

lightheartedness (and sometimes arrogance) of the characters above. His fears are not unfounded, as Samad has already been displaced in such a way that much of what he clings to as his identity has been swept away, leaving intact only his past cultural heritage, which he consequently guards preciously. In the novel's fictional past, after Samad has been at war fighting on behalf of England, he laments, "I'm fit for nothing now, not even Allah...What am I going to do? Go back to Bengal? Or to Delhi? Who would have such an Englishman there? To England? Who would have such an Indian? They promise us independence in exchange for the men we were. But it is a devilish deal" (Z. Smith 95). He ends up in England, fiercely proud of his rebel great-grandfather Mangal Pande, for "When a man has nothing but his blood to commend him, each drop of it matters, matters terribly; it must be jealously defended" (Z. Smith 212). Alsana criticizes his stubborn stance, encouraging him to live and let live, but he retorts that "It is not a matter of letting others live. It is a matter of protecting one's culture, shielding one's religion from abuse" (Z. Smith 195). Smith's sympathy for this defensive posture (and her simultaneous recognition of the true trauma of hybridization) comes through clearly and somewhat didactically:

This has been the century of strangers, brown, yellow, and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment... Children with first and last names on a direct collision course... Yet, despite all this mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort...it is still hard to admit that there is no one more English than the Indian, no one more Indian than the English... But it makes an immigrant laugh to hear the fears of the nationalist, scared of infection, penetration, miscegenation, when this is small fry, *peanuts*, compared to what the immigrant fears – dissolution, *disappearance*. (Z. Smith 271)

Cultures inevitably blend, but through a violent process which threatens all sides with fears of contamination or obliteration. Still, despite Smith's apparent sympathy with

Samad's fears, his staunch cultural pride ultimately comes off as petty and separatist. Smith mocks his patriotic musings when, during a devastating storm, "[Samad] was just in the process of happily formulating some allegory regarding the bending Eastern reed versus the stubborn western oak when the wind reasserted itself, knocking him sideways" (Z. Smith 185). While Smith paints Samad's point of view as understandable and legitimate to a point, his perspective is still not an adequate means of dealing with modern cultural reality, for by focusing exclusively on the roots from the past, he fails to acknowledge the new way in which historical threads are woven together in the present.

Instead, Smith implies that the greatest potential for understanding and healing lies in a full recognition of complexity, denying neither past nor present, acknowledging the variety of influences that come into play and the mixed emotions concerning both mother country and adoptive country. In other words, her fiction (through its content rather than its form) advocates an incorporation of fragmentation and discontinuity, as in *Gavarry*. The images of tangled roots and root canals are important rhetorical tools for this perspective. As Alsana wisely points out to Archie's wife Clara during their simultaneous pregnancies, "'The past is made of more than words, dearie... these bumps' – Alsana pats them both – 'they will always have daddy-long-legs for fathers. One leg in the present, one in the past. No talking will change this. Their roots will always be tangled. And roots get dug up'" (Z. Smith 68). Alsana later re-emphasizes the impossibility of purity during an argument with Samad over his cultural elitism, reminding him that "you could go back and back and back and it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person,

one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy tale!" (Z. Smith 196). If hybridity is ubiquitous and unavoidable, it would follow that it is neither something to work toward nor something to avoid, but merely a fact that must be accepted and dealt with. In a rare moment of intercultural acceptance (brought on by his illicit relationship with Poppy), Samad envisions tangledness in the form of a coconut, which he presents to Poppy as a gift. "It is a mixed-up thing," he tells her, "with juice like a fruit but hard like a nut. Brown and old on the outside, white and fresh on the inside. But the mix is not, I think, bad" (Z. Smith 139). These exchanges are some of the few that are not tinged with irony or satire. Neither a naïve hope for harmony that transcends differences nor a narrow-minded fixation on the past suffice as paradigms. If present reality is considered as the mosaic, then both of these views are faulty because they fixate on either the shards or the overarching image, but cannot reconcile them to each other.

The revival of cosmopolitanism and the positing of hybridity as an ideal rather than a reality are means of attempting to recover a sense of wholeness in identity, but the result is one of superficiality and renewed misunderstanding. Within the architecture of modernity, discontinuity (of language, landscape, and experience) is so pronounced and prevalent that any theory that denies or ignores it will inevitably fall flat. The effort to establish universal equality through the goal of hybridity misunderstands the problem of fragmentation of identity, as equality alone cannot recover wholeness within the interrupted reality of modernity. The inadequacy of mere equality is similar to the central premise of Jacques Rancière's La Méésentente, in which a fundamental equality of humanity is never an adequate means to

establishing social equality, and actually proves to be irrelevant⁵. Theories of idealized hybridity appear to be attempts to re-create a cohesive sense of identity, denying the inevitability of rupture. These theories do not move farther than a simple synthesis of plural, fragmented elements, and therefore they essentially eliminate fragmentation rather than incorporate its plural structure. Turning again to Benjamin's notion of the mosaic, David Ferris notes that the shards have priority over the full image:

[Benjamin] focuses on the individual pieces, the details and discovers brilliance on this level. Contrary to traditional expectations, the significance of these details is derived not from the overall picture or underlying idea (which would be a direct relation) but from the stark contrast between such a picture or idea and the fragmentary, discontinuous material it is composed from. (6)

Cosmopolitanism does the reverse, finding brilliance in the synthetic whole rather than the disparate elements. To idealize cosmopolitan hybridity is to allow the pieces of the mosaic to form a complete image, but to then efface the characteristics of the individual pieces until their edges can no longer be seen.

VI. Conclusion

The discontinuity and interruption heralded by modernity necessarily pervade the concept of identity as well. The result is a need to fully re-think identity in such a way as to admit and even prioritize the fundamental fragmentation and plurality that

⁵ In *La Mésentente*, Rancière demonstrates that although all individuals are indeed equal at a basic level as established through their possession of language, the declaration and even recognition of this equality is essentially meaningless because it does not affect the underlying power structure. Thus the cycle of dominance and submission continues, despite a common acceptance of equality. This contradiction of what is meant by "equality" is the basis of the *mésentente* itself: "La mésentente n'est pas le conflit entre celui qui dit blanc et celui qui dit noir. Elle est le conflit entre celui qui dit blanc et celui qui dit blanc mais n'entend point la même chose ou n'entend point que l'autre dit la même chose sous le nom de la blancheur" (12). Establishing basic equality, therefore, is not enough to eliminate the pattern of dominance by the powerful.

are equally prevalent in discourse and the urban environment. To understand the nature of identity as it exists in an increasingly urban, modern society, it is necessary to take into consideration the depth of the fissure which has occurred, and also the pervasiveness of different forms of rupture. Benjamin's analysis of distraction and the shock effect testifies to the lack of continuity that is characteristic of the modern. Because, as Blanchot proposes, interruption is both inevitable and infinite, any attempt to understand modern identity that glosses over fissures can never succeed in doing more than superficially uniting a heap of fragments. Gavarry's fiction provides an illustration of the depth of discontinuity, whose medium is language itself, making it truly unavoidable.

Post-colonialism's subsequent effort to recover a coherent notion of identity, however, generally does not take the inevitability of fragmentation into account. The duality of cosmopolitanism and patriotism underscores the dilemma and the need to think beyond traditional binaries, as neither approach is truly plural in its existence, and neither fully engages with the problem of fragmentation. It may be argued that post-colonialism is addressing a different set of issues and therefore does not need grapple with the question of interruption. However, while it may be true that post-colonialism is concerned with other questions, nonetheless both its object of study and its existence as a discipline are solidly rooted in modernity, and therefore must be in dialogue with the questions that surface in the modern environment. Additionally, post-colonialism faces its own particular issues of continuity and interruption. These are primarily seen as ruptures in linear history that emerge due to the movement between imperial and colonized culture, and also through the fundamental, dialectical

distinction between self and other. Interruption is an essential concept to be explored within post-colonialism as within modernism, and only an understanding of identity which admits both fragmentation and wholeness will demonstrate fullness and validity. Cosmopolitanism's tendency to smooth over distinctions to the point of homogeneity results in a well-intentioned move toward human unity, which nevertheless falls short by failing to admit the necessity and depth of fragmentation that underlie coherent image.

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