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“Trust me, I’m telling you my life story”: Queer Return in the memoirs of Jeanette Winterson and Jackie Kay

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*This essay will consider the notion of ‘queer return’ through examining the experience of adoption in Jeanette Winterson’s *Why be happy when you could be normal* (2011) and Jackie Kay’s *Red Dust Road* (2010). I will use definitions of Derrida’s ‘eccentricity’ to expand the remit of the word queer.*

This paper will consider the notion of ‘queer return’ through examining the representation of adoption in contemporary memoirs. I refer, in particular, to the memoirs of Jackie Kay, *Red Dust Road* (2010) and Jeanette Winterson, *Why be happy when you could be normal?* (2011). These books work to re-present earlier fictional accounts of the adoption experience, in *Adoption Papers* (1991) and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) respectively. I will use definitions of ‘eccentricity’ to expand the remit of the word queer; I want to clarify that I am not using it strictly in terms of sexual identity, quite the opposite. This has nothing to do with assuming heterosexual identity is normative/straightforward, but rather distances my argument from understanding the writing of Winterson and Kay as notionally lesbian. For any so-called ‘straight’ writer, their work is not read as notionally anything to do with sexual preference and it is precisely the sensitivity of my examples that prove this point. I will acknowledge the wider theoretical discourse within which my ideas regarding repetition sit; however, this is a brief essay designed merely to ‘interrupt’ current popular Deleuzian trends. I will reapply *ex-centricity* as a deconstructive practice inherited from Jacques Derrida so as to offer a decentred reading of the queer narratives of these memoirs (Derrida, “Ellipsis” 371-378).

This paper concerns memoir and its form reflects the subjectivity of the content; consequently, this paper embraces the use of “I.” However, in the manner of *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), this “I” is not “me,” the *author* of this paper – “I is only a convenient term for someone who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping.” (Woolf 29-36). In this sense, this paper is always already a repetition of the famous Woolfian fallacy.

My starting point then for this exploration of Jeanette Winterson’s *Why be happy when you could be normal?* (2011) and Jackie Kay’s *Red Dust Road* (2010) is the contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, whose work explores the relationship between lack, meaning and repetition in writing. One of Nancy’s major influences is Jacques Derrida, and his debt to Derrida’s thought is particularly apparent in his essay *Elliptical Sense*, which explicitly explores the connection between writing, lack and difference: “Meaning is lacking to itself; it misses itself; and this is why ‘all meaning is altered by this lack.’ Writing is the outline of this altering” (Nancy 177). There is much at work in this quotation, but I choose to emphasise the sense it conveys of writing as outlining an

inaccessible yet enabling lack, which facilitates my analyses in this paper. Moreover, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida describes the function of the *revenant* in *Hamlet* (the return of the father as a ghost) in terms of repetition *without the first time*. So, the ghost is Hamlet's father, though simultaneously occupying a position at a remove since the apparition is different from what has gone before. The ghost is understood in the text as Hamlet's father, the same, though entering for the second time necessarily constitutes a departure, or difference. This understanding of repetition (without original) in *Specters of Marx* will also be useful for reading the problematic origins in the memoirs under scrutiny here (Derrida 1-5).¹

It is important to consider for a moment the memoir genre as nostalgic. Salman Rushdie published his memoir *Joseph Anton* in 2012, and I feel that such "repetition" (the facts of Rushdie's life have of course already entered into print) is far from straightforward; it concerns an act of finalising "the past," an authorising movement towards mastery. The definition of "nostalgia" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests an impossible displacement of time: "Sentimental longing *for* or regretful memory of a period of the past." It constitutes a longing for something that never was, i.e. a single, unified story about the past. Moreover, in Rachel Cusk's "sequel" to her first memoir, *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation*, the text occupies an impossible polarity: "It was [my husband's] story, and lately I have come to hate stories. If someone were to ask me what disaster this was that had befallen my life, I might ask if they wanted the story or the truth" (Cusk 3).² Here, on the one hand, there is "truth," and on the other there are "stories;" one might want to call Cusk's analysis naïve, but really it is all part of the story, and the real agency remains within the text. This strange, and estranging, sense that the truth is something we can grasp and master, totally *other* to the process of story telling, however wrong-headed, is a symptom of our cultural moment. It concerns, I think, a rejection of the necessity of imitation (repetition is the *theme* of my essay, imitation the form) and repetition for the meaning-making process, and instead triumphs a celebration of the absolute – the hallowed and unassailable original.

I also want to outline several caveats to this paper. The writings of Winterson and Kay are not my specialism. Moreover, my focus here is memoir as repetition rather than the earlier fiction or poetry, although the "originary" status of both *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *Adoption Papers* will be briefly considered. I will deliberately emphasise my own subjective position in response to the sensitivity of these memoirs, appropriately in line with a suspicion of "personal" truth as inherited from Woolf's famous essay. And finally, in order to keep my introductions brief, I will assume some readership familiarity with the work of Winterson and Kay, but please beware, I am asking more questions than I can answer.

I push a consideration of the troubled status of "origins" and originals in the aforementioned *Why be happy* and *Red Dust Road*. Memoir is a retrospective form offering the reader a time-displaced narrative; furthermore, there is deconstruction *at work within the work* of such nostalgia, as I have already tried to illustrate. And there is a sense that memoir is inherently repetitive anyway (apart from the fact that seemingly *everyone* is doing it, all repeating the same process for their own

“lives”) – these writers are *copying* each other into the memoir form, and explicitly playing with notions of imitation and repetition. It is apparently a written repetition of experience, though this privileges experience as somehow fully present in a way that makes me slightly uncomfortable, and that I intend to undermine. Consequently, the genre provides an interesting means through which to explore the singularity of adoption, which explicitly helps limit my field and focus on lack as both formally and thematically significant.

Winterson’s *Why be happy when you could be normal?* published in 2011 explicitly repeats material from *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, her first novel from 1985, a fraught relationship I will consider in more detail shortly. Primarily though, *Why be happy* describes the psychological breakdown that prompted Winterson to trace her birth mother; the following quotation reveals some of the pain informing this difficult decision:

The baby explodes into an unknown world that is only knowable through some kind of a story – of course that is how we all live, it’s the narrative of our lives, but adoption drops you into the story after it has started. It’s like reading a book with the first few pages missing. (5)

Despite the poignancy of this statement, as with Nancy, Winterson’s writing emphasises the *possibilities* offered by such ‘primary’ lack: “The missing part, the missing past, can be an opening, not a void” (5). A point of departure perhaps, offering return? What Derrida described as *the return of the always still to come*, from Friedrich Nietzsche, which prevents a word, a concept, an object, returning so completely to itself that the demarcation whereby it took on meaning entirely vanishes – resulting in full presence, or death. For example, the reappearance of a full stop is accepted as identical to all previous full stops, and yet it is also a departure since if it were truly identical it would be indistinguishable.

Red Dust Road was published a year earlier in 2010 and implicitly orbits material from *Adoption Papers* through re-presenting childhood, adoption, motherhood and, most significantly, *perspective*. Primarily though, *Red Dust Road* focuses on questions of race, belonging and rejection affected by the tracing of Kay’s Nigerian birth father. The emotional sensitivity of such content immediately raises an experience versus narrative problematic. Considering the painful reality of the adoption experience it seems callous to analyse the real insistence in these texts to reach an origin, or resting point, that can explain *everything*; this seems an understandable objective for an adopted child who has grown up.³ However, such insistence is very marked, as illustrated by this extract from *Red Dust Road*:

I’ve become so accustomed to reading everything in signs. I have done this all my life; but now that I’m in Nigeria, my obsession with what things mean suddenly seems to make sense, because everybody does it. It is an Igbo⁴ way. (Kay 246)

This is why it is necessary to highlight the subjectivity of my position as reader of these texts. I am a white woman raised by my birth parents, which makes me uncomfortable with the implicit criticism my analysis carries, i.e. that Winterson or Kay may believe that they have located the “truth,” but *I* know different. Tracing is obviously a process that informs identity, recognition and belonging. Yet I contend that the notion of such a *stable* arrival – “It is an Igbo way” – is potentially a constructed one, however packed with powerful real-life consequences and effects.

Perhaps then it is easier to consider, why now? Why are these memoirs being published now? For example, Winterson’s memoir states explicitly that 1985, the year *Oranges* came out, “wasn’t the day of the memoir” (3), meaning that it was not an attractive publishing proposition in the eighties, though it is in the post-nineties. Why has it come-of-age post-millennium: *Red Dust Road* (2010), *Why be happy when you could be normal?* (2011), and *Aftermath* (2012). This pattern leads me to think that truth, origin and narrative in recent memoirs, especially those *repeating* earlier fictions, constitute an emerging “Queer Return” in contemporary writing, primarily by women.

I will now strengthen my application of such a category by suggesting a few possible meanings. Firstly, “queer” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: one definition of this adjective is – “Strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric.” And I wish to highlight the *eccentric* meaning of queer. Ex-centricity is a deconstructive practice inherited from Derrida that I will reapply so as to decentre the narratives of these memoirs (“Ellipsis” 371-378). Moreover, I consciously resist the stability implied by any use of the author’s perceived sexual identity in order to “explain” their texts. Nancy, for example, is a male philosopher, therefore his sexuality is not up-for-grabs; consequently, within the remit of this paper neither is the orientation of either Winterson or Kay. “Return,” I define more straightforwardly via the parallels, repetitions and reversals that connect *Why be happy* and *Red Dust Road* of which I choose to develop five, although I believe there to be more at work. The first is adoption and displacement, as already noted, but especially its *representation* as a “missing piece” in both memoirs and I have two clear examples of this emphasis. In *Why be happy*, Winterson writes: “The feeling that something is missing never, ever leaves you – and it can’t, and it shouldn’t, because something is missing” (5). This affecting description is *echoed* by Kay in *Red Dust Road*: “Often people would even use that expression, don’t you want to find out the missing pieces to your jigsaw?” (193).

My second evocation of re-turn develops my earlier point regarding textual re-presentation of earlier fiction or poetry. *Why be happy* quotes extensively from *Oranges* whereas *Red Dust Road*, perhaps more notably, omits any mention of *Adoption Papers*. Yet Kay’s memoir utilises different typefaces in order to distinguish between timeframes and perspectives, which is the same technique used in her first poetry collection. Therefore, both the form and the content (or perhaps content and *tone*) of Kay’s earlier work *surface again* in *Red Dust Road*. And this notion of re-surfacing helps introduce my third parallel, which is the appearance of “truth” as like a *palimpsest* in the two memoirs. By palimpsest, I mean a manuscript that has been written over and over yet the earlier writing, though obscured, is still partially legible, or repeated. The following description in *Red Dust*

Road, concerning the past of Kay's adoptive parents, works to clarify this sensation of instability: "Somehow, even though I've been told this story of my parents' meeting in New Zealand many times, each time a new bit surfaces *that I hadn't noticed before*" (16, my emphasis). Kay's memoir perhaps handles this idea of problematic "truth" with more subtlety than *Why be happy*. For example, during Winterson's first meeting with her birth mother, her mother asks whether Mrs Winterson was in fact a covert lesbian, which apparently shocks Winterson. However, this reaction seems rather odd in the context of the allusions made about the "Mrs Winterson" in *Oranges*. Of whom Miss Dewsbury remarks: "She's a woman of the world even though she'd never admit it to me. She knows about feelings, especially women's feelings" (*Oranges* 105-6). As Adam Mars-Jones writes in his rather scathing, though extremely entertaining, review of *Why be happy*: "It's as if Jeanette Winterson is so determined not to be defined by her first book that she has forgotten what's in it" (3-8). It perhaps comes as no surprise considering Winterson's *oeuvre* that her search to locate the "truth" is even more absolute than Kay's in *Red Dust Road*.

And this leads me into my final point of connection/re-turn, and to some extent *reversal*, across the two memoirs, the status of God, religion and in particular Evangelical Christianity. There is certainly more to be explored surrounding the workings of the adoption, preaching and writing dynamic, as this quotation from the perspective of Kay's adoptive parents illustrates: "And you are special. You were chosen" (Kay 13). However, what I wish to emphasise here is the chiasmus affected across the two texts by the position of Winterson's *adoptive* parents as Evangelical Christians and the implied movement of Kay's *birth* parents towards Evangelism (independently of each other) potentially in response to having had a child adopted. There is much play in both memoirs concerning the phrase "born again" and its application in the sense of born first and adopted *second*. Kay writes explicitly in *Red Dust Road*: "[My father] told me the only way he could possibly acknowledge me would be if I agreed to be born again" (258). There is the religious meaning, but also the connotation of being born in the right time and place as well.

Yet despite such similarities, there are also differences between these narratives, which emerge through perspective, chronology and especially *control*. This becomes most apparent regarding trust – "Trust me, I'm telling you stories" (641) from Winterson's *The Passion* published in 1987, arguably her most famous line, which I have shamelessly utilised for the title of this paper. However, Mars-Jones does not trust Winterson's stories and explicitly criticises *Why be happy* for factual inaccuracies. For example, Winterson's memoir forms the following argument concerning the social disadvantage of Jane Austen's gender position: "Henry James did no good when he said that Jane Austen wrote on four inches of ivory – i.e. tiny observant minutiae" (Winterson 2011: 3). A seemingly innocuous remark one might think, but not for Mars-Jones, who blisteringly ripostes:

The person who compared Jane Austen's writing to painting on ivory (two inches wide, rather than four) was not Henry James but Jane Austen, writing to her nephew in 1816, a quarter-century or so before James drew his first, possibly condescending, breath. (3-8)

It is pedantic perhaps, but it raises the point that memoir is judged differently although its processes *parallel* fiction; and this is rather queer (or ex-centric, like queer return). Winterson is still telling a story, yet that is apparently not critically acceptable within this form.

Kay also writes of familial and authorial exaggeration during story telling. Yet in terms of account and chronology, Winterson's memoir is much more linear than *Red Dust Road*. As previously suggested, Kay's text plays with both time and perspective leading to a reading experience of fragmentation that partially echoes the tracing process. Moreover, Kay's memoir exhibits a specific narrative ex-centricity. It reveals fragments of information out-of-sequence, and then much later "chronologically" explains them. There are numerous examples of this practice however I will provide one in order to clarify. A man named "Okey" is introduced casually as the man who meets Kay at Lagos airport, without any further explanation (204). Yet the very casualness of the mention suggests he has already appeared, though he has not. Then, twenty-one pages later, in a backdated section entitled simply "2009" (represented in a different typeface) he is introduced as Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's brother (225). Notably, there is no allowance in the text for any prior use of his name. It is queer and, like Winterson's seemingly provocative inaccuracies, it is a characteristic that highlights the memoir genre as just as constructed or artificial as fiction, and perhaps even more so.

This question of "trust" concerns an engagement with the process of construction, not merely the face value of its end product, in this case the memoir. Moreover, the figure of the author, and their agency (so *seductive* within memoir) is also part of this process of legitimising the coherent "truth" of the account. Yet it is a ruptured position, a story, subject to the same unravelling, if scrutinised, as any text. This is reminiscent of what a critic wrote of "alternative" singer Avril Lavigne; she pointed out that it is perfectly possible to manufacture the un-manufactured look.⁵ This leads me to surmise that it is equally possible to manufacture the look of an un-manufactured "truth."

In conclusion then, this is partly why I have resisted using apparently "known" facts about these authors, such as sexual orientation, in order to *centre* meaning in their texts. It is not that I do not think such "knowledge" stimulates meaning, but I contend that it cannot ever fix it. That today is the day of the memoir is a cultural symptom; one, I believe, of a dis-ease to fetishise an origin, an original, that is beyond reproach and precedes any notional repetition. *Why be happy* and *Red Dust Road* cannot escape the narrative processes that also define the earlier problematised fictive originals. But why do they try? And that is the question we should *repeatedly* be asking.

Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze discussed these ideas in his seminal *Difference and Repetition* while Jean Baudrillard wrote on postmodern simulation without original in *Simulacra and Simulation*. I, however, have chosen to focus on Derrida's thought purely because it is so unpopular.

² While this paper was initially in preparation, Rachel Cusk published a second memoir entitled *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation* (2012), which generated even more media commotion than her first one *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001). Moreover, confession is both historically and generically another form of repetition, or 'return' as a cultural symptom that will always be with us.

³ *Experience* is again privileged as "present," original and stable, in terms of the old "cause and effect" model.

⁴ The word Igbo refers to the people from a region of Nigeria that forms part of Kay's heritage.

⁵ "Once it is clear that Lavigne is about as punk rock as traditional liver sausage and that it is quite, quite possible to manufacture 'unmanufacturedness', it becomes easier to relax and enjoy her" (Empire 10).

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