

---

H-France Review Vol. 18 (February 2018), No. 37

Jarrold Hayes, *Queer Roots for the Diaspora: Ghosts in the Family Tree*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. x + 325pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-472-07316-0; \$39 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-472-05316-2; \$39.95 U.S. (Adbobe Digital Editions e-book). ISBN 978-0-472-12206-6

Review by Onni Gust, University of Nottingham.

In 2004, the British television series, “Who do you think you are?” aired for the first time on BBC Two. The programme, now in its thirteenth series, traces the ancestral roots of popular celebrities. As Hayes notes in his introduction, “Who do you think you are?” proved so popular that it was replicated in the USA, Canada, Australia, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, the Czech Republic, and France. Its success reflects a wider cultural fascination in the West with genealogy, a fascination that appears to span racial and cultural divides and is facilitated by the marketing of DNA testing kits to identify ethnic heritage, archival research facilitated through web-based companies such as ancestry.com, and magazines devoted to genealogical research. Tracing roots has, in other words, become an immensely popular pass-time, and multi-million dollar business.

In *Queer Roots for the Diaspora*, Jarrold Hayes takes this popular, cultural phenomenon as a starting point for the project of interrogating and deconstructing the form of desire that is inherent to what he calls “roots narratives.” Hayes opens with the debate about the authenticity of Alex Hayley’s *Roots*, published to much acclaim in 1976, and later revealed to be at least partially fabricated. This debate offers an entry-point into the key premise that underpins *Queer Roots for the Diaspora*—that all “roots narratives” are ultimately works of fiction. The origin and origin-story cannot be disentangled from each other. For Hayes, the paradox of “roots narratives” lies in the fact that the discovery of an “origin”, which provides the rationale and structuring for the narrative, is ultimately an effect of the narrative. There is, then, no possibility of a return to origins, unless the very idea of “return” is itself called into question. Like the mangrove swamp, which Hayes, following Guattari and Deleuze, employs as a symbol of this entanglement, the roots of “roots narratives” are rhizomatic, they have no beginning or end.

Focusing on the “roots narratives” of a number of different diasporas, Hayes aims to “queer” these narratives by deconstructing the heteronormative foundations upon which ethnic and national identities are based, and to open up a space for questions of gender and sexuality. Hayes employs “queer” as a verb, an act that destabilizes and deconstructs essences. By making diasporic literature the central theme, Hayes attempts to place non-whiteness at the centre of “queer”, and to understand “queer” and “diaspora” as mutually constitutive. This “queering” of diasporic literature, and the diasporic nature of “queer” plays out across the five chapters of the book. *Queer Roots for the Diaspora* brings very different types of media together, including fiction, ethnography, history, internet chat forums, film, and musical theatre, to offer a critical, inter-textual analysis of the discursive production of identity. The main focus of the book is literature by, and about, different ethnic diasporas. Hayes looks at French-Caribbean Créoliste literature; African literature alongside popular, ethnographic, and historiographical writings on Africa; Jewish writing; Armenian film; and, finally, the literature, landscape and memories from the

author's hometown in North Carolina. Each chapter focuses on one of these "diasporas" yet Hayes layers them over each other, drawing out interconnections and common themes that run throughout seemingly disparate contexts and narrative forms.

*Queer Roots for the Diaspora* begins with a long introduction that locates the book in the context of critical race theory, queer theory and deconstruction. Hayes brings Gilroy, Hall, and Glissant into dialogue with Derrida, Spivak, Guattari and Deleuze in order to discuss the relationship between Blackness, diaspora and deconstruction. Hayes then offers a brief discussion of several queer of colour theorists, including Eng, Gopinath, and Puar to situate the book in the context of other works on queer diasporas. As these queer of color critics have long noted, the idea that to return to one's ancestral roots is to find one's essence, relies on a logic of heterosexual reproduction and patriarchy. Indeed, the power of the "roots narrative" lies in its suggestion that there can be no *jouissance* without rootedness. In this respect, "roots narratives" form a part of the disciplinary mechanisms of compulsory heterosexuality, whereby any desire beyond reproduction is necessarily marked as aberrant or perverse. For those who cannot find "home" within the narrow parameters of patriarchy and heterosexuality, this genealogical tracing and longing for biological roots offers no hope of wholeness. Yet ultimately, Hayes argues, the patriarchal, heteronormative "roots narrative" contains the seeds of its own destruction. Concluding the introduction with a discussion of "hauntology" and the legacies of trauma, Hayes lays the foundations for the book's aim of "queering" the diaspora.

Chapter one examines the use of the Créole word *makoumé*, which Hayes translates as "sissy-faggot", and which also means "gossiping woman", in the writings of Créolistes. Focusing particularly on Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove* (1989), Hayes shows how queerness "lurks" in the very roots of Créoliste literature. Hayes contrasts this "lurking" with the seminal literature of pan-Africanism—particularly in Fanon—in which homosexuality is denied and erased. In contrast to critics who have read Créoliste literature's representation of the *makoumé* as homophobic, Hayes sees the acknowledgment of the *makoumé's* existence as a form of acceptance. Whilst some critics argue that the figure of the *makoumé*, and his/her association with emasculation and subservience to the colonizer is homophobic, Hayes argues that the naming of the *makoumé*, alongside the Créoliste's ridiculing of burlesque masculinity, queers Créoliste's "roots narratives".

Chapter two continues the theme of denial and naming by looking at the erasure of queerness in Africa and the claim that homosexuality is a "Western" import. Reading a range of texts together, from internet chat forums to ethnographic and historical scholarship, to novels, Hayes argues for the existence of queerness in African history prior to, and in spite of, European colonization and Christian missionary influence. These alternative texts offer a different context through which to read novels that have been conventionally understood as homophobic by literary critics. Reading Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), Hayes argues that, as with the Créolistes' novels, the references to homosexual characters reinstates the history of homosexuality in Africa. In doing so, "the novel historicizes this rejection and ... rather than defending a pre-colonial African purity, may actually only be repeating a discourse [...] learned from European missionaries" (p.97). By reading across genres, Hayes claims that it is possible to offer a more generous analysis of novels such as Aidoo's and V.Y. Mudimbe's, *Entre les Eaux* (1973). Both these novels, Hayes argues, acknowledge the existence of a pre-colonial African homosexuality and reveal the condemnation of homosexuality by European colonists from the nineteenth century onwards. That recognition is, in itself, an act of resistance against the erasure of African queerness as a result of European colonial power.

Whereas the previous chapters focused on the erasure of homosexuality in roots narratives, Chapter three explores the paradox inherent in the idea of "roots". The chapter focuses on *Un Mensonge* (1990) by Sapho, a Jewish-Moroccan writer, singer and actress. Hayes uses this novel about the search for the truth of roots and origins alongside Edmund Jabès and Jacques Derrida, to illustrate the role of narrative in the production of beginnings, and to explore the idea that all beginnings start with a lie. As

in previous chapters, Hayes reads *Un Mensonge* against the grain, arguing that rather than heterosexual intercourse representing a return to origins, it is actually a mockery of hetero-romance. The novel might appear to end with heterosexual sex as the inevitable climax and resolution of the question of truth and origins. Yet, Hayes argues, the final sentence reclaims the lie in the very moment of truth, casting doubt on certainty and the stability of binaries. The novel's "simultaneous participation *in* and challenge *to* the genre of the roots narrative" (p.152) links back to Hayes' original argument, laid out in the introduction, that deconstruction must necessarily both believe in and reject roots narratives.

The dialogic relationship between truth and lies that Hayes discusses in Chapter three is developed in Chapter four in relationship to hetero- and homosexuality. "From Roots That Uproot to Queer Diasporas" returns to the lies and fabrications in Hayley's *Roots*, in order to introduce the problem of where we lay down roots. "What happens," Hayes asks, "when other people live where we want to plant our roots? Do we have a responsibility toward them? Is it possible to uproot others as we plant our roots?" (p.156). This question leads to a brief discussion of the desire for a "gay" past, and particularly the claiming of Native American gender and sexual expression by white anthropologists for "gay" history. Yet the main body of the chapter examines the contestation over Palestine, and the narrative of Zionism. Focusing on Steve Reich's *The Cave* (1993), and Albert Memmi's novels *Agar* (1955) and *La Statue de Sel* (1953), Hayes argues that circumcision, as an event, joins Muslim and Jew in a homoerotic remembering. This looking back to the moment of circumcision, which Hayes locates in relationship to Lot's wife looking back at Sodom, queers Zionism by challenging its heterosexual origin-myth. Hayes then turns to the circumcised penis in Derrida's autobiographical writing, relating the circumcision (*débander*) of the penis to the work of deconstruction; both challenge truth claims, binaries and the privileging of biology as the ultimate site of origins. Chapter five builds on this challenge to biology through an examination of Egoyan's filmic representations of the Armenian diaspora, and his exploration of the relationship between loss, sexuality and subjecthood. Egoyan's films, Hayes argue, offer alternative, "queer" family structures that mirror diasporic narratives in their crossing of borders, and in their desire for a wholeness that remains unfulfilled, and is thereby exposed as impossible.

The final chapter is an auto-ethnographic discussion of the author's own "roots narrative" that begins in Booger Hollar, Stanly County, North Carolina. Whilst "Booger Hollar," which the author effectively translates into standard English as "ghost hollow," is officially recognized as a place name, it draws on oral culture that is rarely written down. "Booger Hollar" acts as an entry-point for thinking about the "hauntings" that underlie narratives, including Hayes' own family history and that configure white, North Carolinian identity. Focusing on Wolfe's novel, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), Hayes discusses Wolfe's use of "quare" to mean a combination of strange, gender-nonconforming, and not-quite belonging to the family. 'Quare,' Hayes claims, is a specifically Southern word (although it surely derives from Gaelic, for example in Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954), and therefore has a very complex connection to whiteness and imperialism). Nonetheless, for the author, the association between 'quare' and the South brings genealogy, sexuality and slavery together. Analysing Grimsley's novel, *Dream Boy* (1995), Hayes discusses a scene in which two boys have sex in an old plantation house haunted by the ghosts of a slave revolt. For Hayes, the haunted house serves as a symbol for the necessary coming-together of the history of slavery and racial terror, and the histories of "sexual secrets" (ie. child sexual abuse), and "histories of family violence." By bringing violence and desire together, Hayes argues, "this haunted site is thus fertile ground for a very queer love that seems inseparable from the very violence that would prohibit it" (p.266).

Throughout *Queer Roots for the Diaspora*, Hayes argues for the impossibility of a singular truth or origin and the "queer" entanglements that are inherent to even apparently "straight" roots narratives. Against this search for origins, Hayes posits a "queer diaspora" that undoes "roots narratives" by recognizing the crossings, deviances and disruptions that are inherent to them. This method of reading is fundamental to Hayes' argument that "queer" history and histories of racial violence are co-constitutive. Yet given the emphatic nature of this call, I found it strange that queer of colour scholars receive quite a cursory

---

reading in the book, whilst a number of key queer of colour scholars--José Munoz, Sara Ahmed, and Saidiya Hartman--are missing entirely. Furthermore, the lack of engagement with studies on whiteness means that the argument for the inseparability of queerness and anti-racism rings somewhat hollow, especially in the final chapter. As the central and silent, whiteness is surely fundamental to all of the "roots narratives" that Hayes discusses. Whiteness, after all, enacts cultural power as the structuring device through which all other narratives must operate, and/or to which they must necessarily refer in order to gain legibility. I am not convinced that simply removing reference to whiteness undoes any of its power. Whilst the range of literature and media covered in *Queer Roots for the Diaspora* is remarkably impressive, without this analysis of power, the deconstructivist approach that Hayes takes risks reaffirming the normalizing and universalizing power of whiteness.

Onni Gust  
University of Nottingham  
[onni.gust@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:onni.gust@nottingham.ac.uk)

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172