

Echoes of Différance Deconstructing Language and Identity in Zeina Hashem Beck's *O* and Kamau Brathwaite's *Born to Slow Horses*

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Abstract

The authority of English has been disrupted by Beck's polyglottic callups and Brathwaite's national-language typography, highlighting the idea of identity as an ongoing negotiation of where you have been and will go. This paper argues that identity is a fluid, ever-changing entity, with the pressures of being part of a Diaspora or living a post-colonial existence constantly deferring, redefining and restructuring the nature of one's identity. The research analyzes how Beck's *O* and Brathwaite's *Born to Slow Horses* represent identity as being established using the disruption of language, through sonic experimentation and through disruptions of the structure of poetry. Both Beck and Brathwaite wrote from broken geographies; Beck from an Arab Diaspora and Brathwaite representing the post-colonial Caribbean, where language is itself a hybridised space, created through the process of exile, history, memory and violence. Using Derrida's concept of différance, the research explores how both texts build their identity as an evolving entity, rather than a fixed property. In both Beck's and Brathwaite's works, the identity of the person is created by dislocating, layering multiple languages onto and disrupting the rhythm of the language used.

Keywords: (différance, Limbo, postcolonial, diaspora).

أصداء الاختلاف تفكيك اللغة والهوية في ديوان "O" لزينة هاشم بيك و"مولود ليبطى"

الخيول" لكاماو براثوايت

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الملخص

لقد جرى تقويض سلطة اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال التوظيف متعدد اللغات لدى زينة هاشم بيك، ومن خلال اعتماد اللغة الوطنية في البنية الطباعية عند كاماو براثوايت، وهو ما يبرز الهوية بوصفها عملية تفاوض مستمرة بين الماضي والمستقبل. ترى هذه الدراسة أن الهوية كيان سيّال ومتغير على الدوام، إذ تؤدي ضغوط الانتماء إلى الشتات أو العيش في سياق ما بعد الاستعمار إلى تأجيل الهوية وإعادة تعريفها وإعادة تشكيلها بشكل مستمر.

تحلل الدراسة كيفية تمثيل الهوية في ديوان "O" لبك و"مولود ليبطى الخيول" لبراثوايت، بوصفها تتشكل من خلال تفكيك اللغة، والتجريب الصوتي، وزعزعة البنية الشعرية. فقد كتب كلٌّ من بيك وبراثوايت انطلاقاً من جغرافيات متصدعة؛ إذ تنتمي بيك إلى شتات عربي، بينما يمثل براثوايت فضاء الكاريبي ما بعد الاستعمار، حيث تُعد اللغة فضاءً هجيناً تشكّل عبر المنفى والتاريخ والذاكرة والعنف. وبالاعتماد على مفهوم الاختلاف عند جاك ديريدا، تستكشف الدراسة كيف تُبنى الهوية في النصين بوصفها كياناً متطوراً ومتغيراً، لا بوصفها خاصية ثابتة. ففي أعمال كلٍّ من بيك وبراثوايت، تتشكل الهوية من خلال الإزاحة، وتراكب لغات متعددة، وكسر إيقاع اللغة المستعملة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الاختلاف، الليمبو، ما بعد الاستعمار، الشتات).

I. Derrida's Différance and the Poetics of Dislocation

Derrida's concept of *différance* destabilizes the assumption that meaning exists as a stable, recoverable essence. Instead, meaning is produced through continuous deferral—what Derrida calls “the endless play of differences” (Derrida, 1973, p. 141). The language crisis of signification presents language as a network of signs, where other signs give meaning to each individual sign, but no sign can guarantee any final meaning. The deferral of each sign to the other signs is especially marked in poems written in relation to colonial rupture and/or exile. In these poems, the word does not reach the object (or person) to which it refers. The sign is always *late*, always displaced, mirroring the poet's own dislocation. Meaning, therefore, becomes an act of negotiation rather than revelation, a suspended gesture rather than a completed state.

Language in this framework is not a vessel of presence but a field of absences marked by traces and supplements. Derrida notes that every sign carries within it “the trace of other signs which precede it” (Derrida, 1976, p. 65), meaning language is haunted by what is not said as much as by what is spoken. The addition that has traditionally been viewed as secondary makes visible the incompleteness of the primary through its disruption of it (Derrida, 1976, p 144). In poetry, there is also the potential for rupture to generate new forms of expression. Gaps, silences, and broken forms in poetry do not detract from the work; rather, they create opportunities for poetic creation. Absence has more to say than presence within the context of poetry.

From a deconstructive perspective, poetic voice is similarly unfixed. Derrida's dismantling of the metaphysics of presence (Derrida, 1976, p. 18) undermines the notion of a stable lyrical “I.” The poetic subject becomes a dispersed field of voices, echoes, and contradictions rather than a singular expressive entity. Within modern poetics, this type of “unfixing” appears as changes in the type or position of pronouns, moves to/from one language group to another (i.e. code-switching), broken or fragmented lines, and diverse uses of rhythm. A poem becomes an area in which the speaker's voice does not express the immediate person who is being represented, but is instead used to create two separate identities at once. The speaker represents both themselves as present and absent, and situated and not situated and thus acts as an echo rather than a stable source of identification.

II. Theoretical Framework: Derrida, Decentering, and the Poetics of Difference

Différance, as presented by Derrida, confronts the belief that words used through language convey absolute or apparent meanings. As an alternative to that perspective on language, it's more accurate to state that meaning in a given context exists only through an inter-relationship of many signs over time within the overall organization of signification (différance). In this sense, language is not the storehouse of self-identity but rather the tool that tears apart, alchemizes and reshapes our self-identity; this notion is one of the chief concepts in the works of both Zeina Hashem Beck in *O*, and Kamau Brathwaite in *Born to Slow Horses*. It is in the chasms of language, accent, and historical narrative where we may find their poetics flourishing. (Derrida, 1978; Culler, 1983). The instability Derrida describes becomes a methodological tool for reading postcolonial poetry that resists any singular linguistic or cultural center.

Deconstruction (as applied to Beck and Brathwaite's works) demonstrates how Beck and Brathwaite create identity through poetic language rather than representing it. Beck's use of multiple languages, including Arabic, English, and French, shows that he cannot write in one language and suggests an inability to create a single coherent identity. He evokes Derrida's assertion that identity is always made manifest through the presence of the 'trace' of the absentee (Derrida, 1976).

III. Echoes of Displacement: Linguistic Exile and the Shifting "I" in Zeina Hashem Beck's *O*

Zeina Hashem Beck's *O* illustrates how linguistic exile is both a wound and a means to survive. In addition to being unstable, the pronouns "I" provide an element of instability rather than being a secure point of reference for the author or as a narrator. Beck opens the poem with a confession of linguistic fracture: "I slip between my tongues as if fleeing one burning house into another" (Beck, 2022, p. 11). The absence of concrete language creates a contradiction within one's self-identity. Wherein the "I" is perceived to be placed in juxtaposition with many other languages, these languages exist side by side, creating a dislocation. The most recent from this dislocation is that the speaker has found herself feeling a sense of disconnection from the language she uses as the way in which she expresses herself.

Prayer becomes another space where the displaced “I” struggles with language’s insufficiency. The poem declares:

“Even my prayers refuse to stay in one tongue O Allah,
O God,

O Dieu each name a door that opens into another absence” (Beck, 2022, p. 17). The poem highlights the spiritual impact that language exile has through the use of three different languages for the name of God. Through language exile, the poet expresses God's representation as being multi-lingual and disjointed or fragmented in different ways. This unstable nature of the divine mirrors the idea proposed by Derrida (1978), who asserts that every utterance carries within it the inherent capacity to destroy itself and that no single name could adequately articulate the sacred presence. The speaker of Beck's poem represents this paradox as they attempt to pray, but every time, they find themselves in an endless process of translation, continually searching for an "origin" that escapes them. In effect, the "I" in Beck's poem is constantly searching for a language with which to express their worship.

The shifting pronoun is further complicated by the poem’s repeated refrain: “Who is this I that arrives in English but remembers in Arabic?” (Beck, 2022, p. 19). This line exposes the cognitive split produced by linguistic displacement: arrival and remembrance do not happen in the same tongue. English becomes the language of articulation public, mobile while Arabic becomes the language of memory private, rooted. The conflict experienced by both parties can establish an 'I' that has an opposite reaction. For Beck, identity is defined through multiple processes and stages of development; it is instead defined by several different sounds (or languages), and exists in between them. This dissonance between languages actively shapes our internal world, and forms a continually changing understanding of who we are based on the dialects or languages we speak.

Beck also foregrounds the bodily dimension of linguistic exile, writing:

“My mouth is a border checkpoint papers,
accents,

permissions O how the body betrays the mother tongue” (Beck, 2022, p. 21).

Using the checkpoint metaphor of the mouth, we see speaking as a political act, where every word is verified and monitored. The poem uses the approach of deconstructionalism to show how the "I" is an idea shaped and regulated by

linguistic expression. It highlights the impact of linguistic appropriation and how otherness becomes part of the texture of the author's body. This is consistent with the theories of colonialism and linguistic dominance (Bhabha,1994,p.124) and shows that the speaking body must validate itself based upon what it can profess fluently or accentually. The "I" becomes a battleground in relation to notions of belonging.

Ultimately, O presents linguistic exile as both a burden and a creative force. The speaker declares: "Still, I shape my many tongues into one trembling O, a circle wide enough to hold my scattered selves" (Beck, 2022, p. 24). The poem's final gesture reframes displacement not as fragmentation but as generative multiplicity: the "O" becomes a space where difference is not reconciled but sustained. This deconstructive identity is constructed through rupture, rather than unity. Beck's changing identity is based on the idea of "I" as being in a state of *différance*; therefore, being multilingual is to continually become. In conclusion, exile creates a kind of wholeness that is constructed through an acceptance of multiplicity in languages and cultures.

VI. Creole Disruption and Sonic Identity: Deconstructing Rhythm in Brathwaite's *Limbo*

The poem "Limbo" by Kamau Brathwaite is both a poetic representation of the Caribbean limbo dance and a musical representation of the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage. The rhythm of the limbo dance serves to represent both memory and resistance to the Middle Passage. The limbo dance is a creolized soundscape; therefore, the poem represents the merging of music, body, and history, forming a unified performative identity. Brathwaite writes:

"limbo limbo like me
the drum cracking open the night
the stick beating the skin of the dark
till the body remember its chains" (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 14).

The repetitive structure mimics the undulating motion of limbo while exposing the violent origin of that motion in the holds of slave ships. This rhythmic disruption forms what Brathwaite elsewhere calls "nation language," a sonic identity grounded in African cadence rather than European metrics.

The poem's rhythm is engineered to dislocate English from its colonial stability, making sound a mode of deconstruction. Brathwaite emphasizes this rupture in the line:

“and the beat go down and the beat go down
lower than the white man language can bend” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 16).

This context of the "beat" here describes a challenge to the boundaries placed by the English language on people's self-expression. Adding movement in rhythms gives people an opportunity to express themselves physically through sound. The act of lowering the limbo pole is used to signify that a different version of a person's language is possible, which can be achieved by incorporating other aspects of an individual's culture into a new creative piece, i.e., something that is not automatically tied to a fixed standard for English. This is what Pollard (2000,p.125) refers to as "creole disruption," whereby normative English's power is undermined, creating a new auditory persona that stems from improvisation and a will to live.

Brathwaite's sonic identity is inseparable from historical memory. In "*Limbo*," the downward movement is tied directly to the slave ship's cramped violence, as the poem declares:

“down down down
in the darkness of the ship's belly
we bend
we break
we rise again to the drum calling us home” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 17).

Rhythmic movements, as depicted in this poem, are not only choreography but are also temporal in nature. They pull the present to the Middle Passage and, in doing so, re-enact historical traumas that are imprinted within the Caribbean physical being. Accordingly, this poem's limbo-style movement can also be seen as re-enacting what Derrida refers to as the "trace," i.e., the lingering effects/'presence'/being of a non-present absence which continually influences all other presences (Derrida, p.1976, p.79).

The poem's sound is deliberately unstable, breaking syntactic expectations to mirror the fragmented identities produced by colonial violence. Brathwaite writes:

“limbo eye limbo stick limbo blood

the word fracture into drum-talk

the tongue stumble into nation sound” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 18).

The collapsing of nouns into a rhythmic chant deconstructs grammatical categories, demonstrating how sonic identity escapes the rigid structures of Standard English. Here, "creolization" refers to a political refusal and demand that Caribbean identity must be expressed through rhythms that cannot be kept inside colonial language frames rather than aesthetic embellishment (Brathwaite, 1984).

In the poem's climactic moment, rhythm becomes both the memory of captivity and the engine of liberation. Brathwaite asserts:

“but see them rise now

see them rise now

beating the drum out of the broken night

bending low to free themselves” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 19).

The recurrence of "rise now" breaks down time by stitching together the past of enslaved bodies with the present of asserting culture. The repeated rhythmic pattern demonstrates the meanings of the word "rise," when considered literally in terms of movement, as opposed to symbolically as "freedom," are both present in and simultaneously conjoined in the word "rise," whereas the Creole's cadence was the act of presenting culture. Like the very nature of Creole, it was "in process, in creation," continuing to evolve.

Ultimately, "*Limbo*" constructs a sonic identity that rewrites the archive of Atlantic history through rhythm rather than narrative. The closing lines affirm this reclamation:

“limbo limbo like me

the drum carry the old bones forward

the beat stitching a new name

from the ashes of silence” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 21).

Brathwaite's "new name," created through auditory signals, indicates not just a reconstruction of one's identity; but rather, a place to reconstruct oneself without the 'expiring to erasure'. Brathwaite's poem also says, by placing creole rhythm as the source of all cultural displacement i.e. where "displacement turns to artistic and cultural sovereignty." (Johnson, 2010,p.118). Sonic identity becomes the antidote to historical silencing.

V. Comparative Analysis: Différance Across Diasporas and the Broken Mother Tongue in Beck and Brathwaite's Poetry

Différance is the governing principle in both Beck's "O", and Brathwaite's "Limbo", and it governs how language transmits wounds of diaspora in both Beck's "O", and Brathwaite's "Limbo." Beck's character admits to suffering as a result of his/her island upbringing : "I slip between my tongues as if fleeing one burning house into another" (Beck, 2022, p. 11), highlighting identity as an endless deferral rather than a fixed state. Brathwaite mirrors this instability through sound and movement:

"limbo limbo like me

the drum cracking open the night" (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 14).

Both poems show subjects whose linguistic and bodily expressions never arrive at stable presence they remain suspended in the play of différance, haunted by histories that refuse closure (Derrida, 1978).

The trace and the presence of an absence haunts Beck's multilingual oscillation. She writes: "Who is this I that arrives in English but remembers in Arabic?" (Beck, 2022, p. 19). The "I" is fractured by languages that coexist but never fully merge. In "*Limbo*," the trace appears as embodied memory: "down down down

in the darkness of the ship's belly we bend" (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 17).

While Beck's trace is a linguistic one, Brathwaite's trace is a historical/corporeal. Both Beck and Brathwaite create an identity not from a pure base of construction, but from those things that lie beneath language and those things that were never recovered or articulated.

In both poems, the mother tongue is ruptured by diaspora, but the way this rupture appears varies. Beck's speaker confesses: "Even my prayers refuse to stay in one tongue O Allah, O God, O Dieu" (Beck, 2022, p. 17). The sacred itself fractures under multilingual pressure. Brathwaite's rupture is rhythmic:

"and the beat go down and the beat go down

lower than the white man language can bend" (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 16).

Here the mother tongue is not "lost" but reshaped into creole rhythm as a counter-language. Both poets show how diaspora turns linguistic purity into an impossible fantasy.

In both poems, *différance* produces a self that is always “elsewhere.” Beck’s circular symbol; “I shape my many tongues into one trembling O” (Beck, 2022, p. 24) makes identity a revolving motion with no final center. Brathwaite uses the physical descent of limbo to enact a parallel decentering: “lower, lower till the body remember its chains” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 15).

The “center” of identity in each poem is revealed to be a site of historical and linguistic rupture. The subject exists in movement rather than origin.

The broken mother tongue becomes a site of resistance in both texts. Beck experiences fragmentation as wound yet reclaims it:

“my mouth is a border checkpoint

O how the body betrays the mother tongue” (Beck, 2022, p. 21).

Brathwaite transforms linguistic betrayals into sonic rebellion:

“the word fracture into drum-talk

the tongue stumble into nation sound” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 18).

In contrast to Beck’s lament for a linguistic homeland with which she cannot completely identify, Brathwaite creates a new linguistic home from his musicality and the disruption caused by Creole. Both writers show that diaspora does not destroy one’s native language but transforms it into a new hybrid form.

Temporal rupture also modifies the diasporic subject. Beck constantly bends time through memory: “a round room where every word echoes in a different ancestor’s voice” (Beck, 2022, p. 13). Time becomes circular, echoing *différance*’s refusal of linearity. Brathwaite collapses past and present through ritualized descent:

“see them rise now

beating the drum out of the broken night” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 19).

The ascent from limbo acknowledges the legacy of incarceration while reenacting release. In order to convey how diaspora distorts the connection between language and identity, both poets employ temporal dislocation.

The fractured “I” in Beck’s poem is primarily linguistic, whereas Brathwaite’s is sonic and corporeal. Beck’s “I” is constantly rewritten by shifting languages: “every word a doorway I cannot fully enter” (Beck, 2022, p. 15). Brathwaite’s subject is reshaped through the drumbeat: “the beat stitching a new name from the ashes of silence” (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 21). The identification of both speakers’ deconstructed subjects arises from disturbance rather than clarity.

Their refusal to adhere to a rigid language or cultural basis gives their voices vitality.

While there are numerous geographic differences between the Arabs Diaspora and Caribbean Diaspora, the return to one's tongue can be seen as a common point for both Diasporas. According to Beck, experiencing multiple languages creates freedom and unrest: "the O wide enough to hold my scattered selves" (Beck, 2022, p. 24). Brathwaite finds liberation through creole rhythm:

"limbo limbo like me

the drum carry the old bones forward" (Brathwaite, 1967, p. 21).

Both poets convert linguistic fracture into artistic form, demonstrating that identity is produced through rupture rather than coherence.

Meanwhile, "O" and "Limbo" both depict diaspora as a state of being characterized by *différance* - meanings that are deferred, identities that are dispersed, and broken but not dead mother tongues. The wandering language of Beck and the rhythmic descent of Brathwaite both illustrate how individuals formed by displacement must navigate through problematic languages, historical frames or references that may exist as children of displacement, and an indefinite future. In both poems, the broken mother tongue becomes a living archive of memory and resistance, where the trace persists in every echo, drumbeat, and uttered syllable (Derrida, 1976). Their comparative force lies in showing how language and sound carry the wounds and possibilities of diasporic becoming.

Conclusion

Across *O* and *Limbo*, Beck and Brathwaite reveal that identity under diaspora is never a completed structure but a process of continual rupture, negotiation, and reformation. The poetic works of Beck and Brathwaite illustrate how the experience of displacement is felt through language, as both Beck's multilayered (multilingual) speech and Brathwaite's rhythms show that it is impossible to return to a singular linguistic source. The notion of *différance* by Derrida becomes both a theoretical approach as well as an actual state of existence for readers through the continued act of deferring meaning in each poem and an ongoing sense of flux with respect to identity; it is in this ambiguity and contradiction between one's current existence and the wounds of history, where the meaning is always delayed or deferred; and thus, the trace of history is felt from what the reader can interpret from current acts of creative expression to historical

cultural memory. Beck & Brathwaite created a method with deconstruction that represents how a multiplicity of ways makes up the language of the dislocated individuals; therefore, that dislocated individual's failure with regard to the tongue does not represent failure, rather it represents an extreme opportunity for change.

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