On the Brink: Negotiating physical borders to negotiate social borders in *God of Small Things* and *Conjure Tales*

Borders exist everywhere, from the natural borders of the human body to the physical borders of fences and state lines to the socially constructed borders of class, race, and religion. Because we live in a world partitioned by this array of borders, there also intrinsically exists the definitions of inside and outside. Traditionally, a border separates an inside space from an outside space. Often times, people or things exert energy to keep others (things and people) on one side of the border at all times. These ideas of borders, the inside and outside of objects, and social constructions bleed into literary works. Authors often implant socially constructed borders into their works (for example, socially expected gender roles) so that the world in which their characters live is recognizable to (most of) the audience. So how then, do authors create alternative realities as a form of social critique (or resistance) even when they incorporate the very rules they are trying to subvert?

Throughout their novels, Arundhati Roy and Charles Chesnutt ask us to consider the reality of their characters as we should be considering our own reality — as a fluid, dynamic, living system. Social economics have perpetuated the idea of a binary reality, of an inside and an outside, of a border between states. By idealizing this image of humanity as an ordered system in which people, places, cultures, and languages fit neatly into pre-designated categories, humans have integrated and accepted the idea of borders into the fabric of their lives. But as we have discussed all year, and as Keith Byerman puts succinctly, we live in a dialectic world, a world where "the pattern of dynamic oppositions [exists] within the context of a whole" (3). And thus it is nearly impossible for our world to be so strictly partitioned by these borders. For how can we continue to abide by the standards of the borders erected by society, when our personal, social, and worldly definitions of ourselves and the relationships we maintain are so fluid? These socially constructed borders "seek to suppress individuality, community, imagination, voice, freedom, or even life itself by imposing a homogeneous order on a heterogeneous reality" (Byerman 3). I believe that through their representation of classical borders and their depiction of the crossing of these borders, Roy and Chesnutt attempt to offer the reader a means by which to also cross the psychological border that upholds the power and rigidity of social borders. By illustrating the physical borders in their novels' worlds and showing that characters cross these borders, both Roy and Chesnutt indicate a simultaneous potential crossing of the socially-constructed barriers that their characters face.

In order to illustrate these crossings, Roy and Chesnutt first define for their readers some of the borders in which they are interested. Houses and bodies are only some of the borders that both authors consider. In a classical definition, houses maintain a barrier between an inside where domesticity and order dominate and an outside where nature and chaos reign. Bodies too, are expected to create borders between individuals and between an individual and the environment. In this way, bodies may be seen as the personally-defined borders that we may recognize as self-identity rather than the socially-designated borders that houses seem to uphold.

The Ipe family's Ayemenem house is a place from which the Christian Syrian family can maintain physical distance from the world outside. The house is "a grand old house" but also "aloof-looking" (Roy 157). For the family, the Ayemenem house maintains the border between orderly domesticity and chaotic nature, but it also maintains the border between classes. Through their house, the Ipe's are able to display their social status and remind those who visit of their social status. The house has a "dignity of a stage and everything that happened there took on the aura and significance of performance" (158). Here, not only does Roy illustrate the grandeur and power of the house, but she also shows that the social border that the house claims to maintain is imagined and easily altered. The Ipe family is a Syrian Christian family with connections to England, this should elevate their status in the community even further. But Roy indicates that power the Ipe's have is merely socially constructed, that it is not intrinsic to their identities, and thus it is a performance on a stage. Earlier in the novel, Roy hints at the idea that house, and thus its borders, is not a permanent fixture as she describes its slow decay. We see that "[f]ilth had laid siege to the Ayemenem House like a medieval army advancing on an enemy castle" (84). The house no longer reflects the supposed power and status of the Ipe family. The image of an advancing army of filth reminds the reader that the border of house actively exerts energy to maintain a distinct inside and outside. This too, indicates that the social borders erected with the physical borders of the house must be actively maintained and enforced. But we see that the "[w]hite walls had turned an uneven gray. Brass hinges and door handles were dull and greasy to the touch" (84). The filth, meant to stay outside the pristine image of the house, has found its way inside. With the house falling into disrepair, Roy tries to show that it is possible for these seemingly rigid structures, both physical and social, to be broken down.

In comparison with the Ayemenem house, Roy also presents us with the History House. An imagined house, used to illustrate Chacko's frustration with his identity within his family's

history (and history in general), the History House becomes a border that disrupts the traditional sense of a border. Chacko describes the History House as a place where ancestors whisper secrets about the Ipe family (and the world connected to them) but also as a place that the current family cannot fully access. Says Chacko to Estha and Rahel, "we've been locked out. And when we look in through the windows, all we see are shadows. And when we try and listen, all we hear is a whisper" (Roy 52). Chacko acknowledges and illustrates the dilemma that borders present. He is locked out of his own history, he cannot access its secrets because they are on the inside of this house while he remains outside. Yet the history within the History House belongs to him, is a part of him, and he cannot reach it. Chacko, then, belongs both inside and outside the History House — some of him resides on both sides of the border. But, this idea immediately contradicts the classical definition of a border. Roy illustrates here the complicated but existing relationship between the inside and outside of a border. Although separated by a boundary, whether physical or social, the inside and the outside of a border are always inextricably linked, that is they make up two halves of a whole entity.

In a similar fashion, Chesnutt also presents his reader with the physical construction of a house. After buying his vineyard, John discovers an old house in one corner of his property. He describes its decay from years of neglect:

> Against on end of the house, and occupying half its width, there stood a huge brick chimney: the crumbling mortar had left large cracks between the bricks; the bricks themselves had begun to scale off in large flakes, leaving the chimney sprinkled with unsightly blotches. These evidences of decay were but partially concealed by a creeping vine, which extended its slender branches hither and thither in an ambitious but futile attempt to cover the whole chimney. (Chesnutt 14)

This rigid construction is also susceptible to decay. The border between the outside and inside has been breached and nature has begun to seep in through the creeping vine. It is important to note that this house was also a schoolhouse. The schoolhouse embodies the ideal of maintaining socially constructed borders as it is the place where young children are taught the rules of society and also where they learn to discern and uphold its boundaries. The decay of such a house, like the decay of the Ayemenem house, indicates the impermanence and fragility of the physical boundaries that seems so solid and strong in reality and the same can be said for the social constructions taught within the school. In this description of the schoolhouse, we also see that the

inside of the border has begun blending with the outside as the creeping vine makes its way over the chimney. This attempt by nature to invade and cover up (although futilely it seems) the borders of the house indicates that it is possible to exist inside and outside of a border simultaneously, but that the imprint of the border, and thus its consequences, still remain. This idea fits into John's struggle with Uncle Julius. As a white, Northern man, John maintains the power and race boundary between himself and Uncle Julius. But as we see, through his story-telling, Uncle Julius clearly crosses the power border, making John unsure of his own status and boundaries. The house becomes a good physical illustration of the psychological and social crossing that Uncle Julius and eventually John undergo.

While Roy and Chesnutt both argue that borders can be crossed and the homogenizing social norms subverted by individuals, they also present an illustration of the same system in reverse. It is possible for individuals to create their own borders to identify themselves and then subsequently for society's expectations to wear away at that self-made border until it fits society's ideal image of that individual. As Roy illustrates with the twins Estha and Rahel, sometimes the border between two bodies is not so well-defined. Although they are two separate people, early on in life, they "thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or Us" (Roy 4). In reality, the twins exist as two separate bodies, but they share a "joint identity". Estha and Rahel have established this joint identity despite society insistence that they should, in fact, be two separate humans, incapable of experiencing each other's emotions and situations. Together, the two twins make up an entire identity — "Me", and individually, they account for each other's presence and influence by calling themselves "We". Roy breaks down the border between two individuals by allowing them to identify as the same individual. This allows Rahel to remember events that she did not directly experience, but that Estha did. We see that "[s]he remembers, for instance (though she hadn't been there), what the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man did to Estha in Abhilash Talkies" (5). Stepping back, this micro-moment illustrates how the borders between the events of history are are crossed by allowing those who did not directly experience an event to be able to experience emotions and fragments of that event.

Later on in the lives of the twins, they can no longer see themselves as "Me". Instead, "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks, and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons" (5). As they grow up in their socially-constructed world, the border between

Estha and Rahel becomes defined and concrete — it finally mirrors the fact that they are two separate humans. It is important to note that Estha and Rahel are only able to share an identity as small children. At that age, they have not learned the rules of society and are indeed even confused by them (for example, they love Velutha who is an Untouchable). Perhaps Roy is insinuating that this more malleable, fluid identity that crosses the physical, bodily border, is almost a natural state and it is only after growing up and being taught the rules of society that the borders and boundaries between humans truly appear and solidify.

Chesnutt too investigates the relationship between bodily borders and psychological borders. Through his character Dave, Chesnutt reveals how social rules and expectations can disrupt and destroy the self-made boundary between an individual and the environment. Uncle Julius describes Dave as a tall, strong man who could do more work than anyone else on the plantation. He was also "one er dese yer solemn kine er men, en nebber run on wid much foolishness" (Chesnutt 92). It seems that Dave has established for himself a very rigid and routine identity despite his being a slave. This identity acts as a boundary between Dave as an individual and Dave as merely a slave, an object. But it is when Dave is framed for stealing one of his master's hams and punished that this border begins to deteriorate. Dave is made to where a ham around his neck at all times as punishment for stealing his master's ham. Uncle Julius explains that at first Dave seems unaffected by having to wear the ham necklace. His self-identity provides protection from the jokes of the other slaves. But "bimeby, w'at wid dat ham eberlastin' en etarnally draggin' roun' his neck, he 'mence' fer ter do en say quare things" (97). The punishment slowly begins to drive Dave crazy. The ham can be seen as a physicalized symbol of the rules of Dave's society and his place in it. The ham is an object meant for eating, it is meant to provide energy for the consumer in the same way that in his role as a slave, Dave is meant provide energy to work on his master's farm. But that is the extent of the identity of the ham, and thus the identity of an idealized slave. Dave is only meant to provide this one service, he is not supposed to be an individualized person. We can see the effect of the ham necklace on Dave when he asks Uncle Julius, "'Did yer knowed I wuz turnin' ter a ham, Julius?'" (99). The necklace has worn Dave down to the point where he believes that he is actually becoming the ham, the symbol that he is supposed to embody as the ideal slave. This description, showing how social rules and norms can break down the more natural, self-identified borders of individuals

and create new ones in their place, is mirrored in the erecting of borders and boundaries between Estha and Rahel.

If borders erected by society and by the individual can both be crossed and blurred, then how do these authors intend to subvert societal norms and create the possibilities for new alternative realities? Perhaps emphasis should not be put on the fact that both authors illustrate society's work that breaks down the individual's self-made borders, but that the individuals themselves are still willing and able to create those borders in the first place *and* cross society's borders despite the danger or unknown that it might present. I wrote in the very beginning, about the psychological borders that individuals must cross as they cross physical and social borders. Perhaps it is when individuals are able to cross the psychological border between what society tells them is the ideal state and what they themselves envision as their own personal ideal state, that true subversion of social norms occurs.

As individuals create their own self-made borders between themselves and society, they immediately open the possibility for an alternative reality in which their border *is* the ideal image. Again, through the depiction of borders, we see that both authors illustrate a willingness of their characters to imagine such alternative borders. Their depictions of physical spaces in which borders are broken down and boundaries blurred create an environment in which their characters may renegotiate the accepted societal boundaries and define their own. In this way, they open the possibility for these characters to change with fluid borders.

Roy immediately locates her novel in "May in Ayemenem", a space where the boundaries between nature and human-made constructions is undefined as nature makes its way into the structuredness of buildings and roads:

> Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen. Pepper vines snake up electric poles. Wild creepers burst through laterite banks and spill across the flooded roads. Boats ply in the bazaars. And small fish appear in the puddles that fill the PWD potholes on the highways. (3)

The natural world invades the human-made one. In effect, nature becomes the human-made constructions. We see "tapioca fences" although fences are not intrinsic in the natural world. The brick walls are covered by a layer of moss, creating a moss wall; which like the fences are not normal to the natural world. Immediately, Roy creates a space in which even borders in the physical world surrounding the characters are being crossed and overwritten. This allows her

characters the freedom to do the same with their own borders. Although Roy still presents a world in which societal norms are upheld by a majority of the society, for example the caste system, she provides her characters (and readers) with a space in which their borders may be renegotiated.

Chesnutt presents a similar space for his Northern, white characters John and Annie. Uncle Julius is the character that helps introduce John and Annie to alternative realities regarding race and power dynamics, but before this can occur, there must be a space in which John and Annie are willinging to break down their social borders and accept Uncle Julius's stories. It is in the description of John's journey to see the vineyard that we see the creation of such a space:

> We drove between a pair of decayed gateposts — the gate itself had long since disappeared — and straight up a sandy land, between two lines of rotting rail fence, partly concealed by jimson-weeds and briers, to the open space where a dwelling-house had once stood, evidently a spacious mansion, if we might judge from the ruined chimneys that were still standing, and the brick pillars on which the sills rested. (3)

The decay of gate posts and fences, objects that define borders and section off insides and outsides, indicate that John and Annie are approaching a space without the borders that society provides, such as power allotment based upon race. Like Roy's description, here we also see nature, the jimson-weeds and briers, eroding and in effect, becoming these defining borders. Finally, the open space in which John and Annie end their journey is simply the imprint of what used to be an old house. The only indicators of its presence are the old chimney and the bricks that held up the sills. John and Annie have arrived in the space in which Uncle Julius will challenge their social standards (and borders). While it is clear that the space, a human-constructed house, has decayed almost beyond recognition, its imprint and thus its influence is still present. In both Roy's and Chesnutt's depiction of nature decaying human constructions, we see that the human-made, and thus socially-made, borders are still present even within the space where the subversion of societal norms is possible. It is possible that Roy and Chesnutt intimate to the reader that the self-made borders and boundaries that their characters create and cross only exist because the societally made borders are present to resist them (and vice versa). This idea is almost a contradiction in itself, for what can individuals look like if they can only create their personal, self-identifying borders in relation to the suppressive borders that dictate an idealized

image of society? Is it also that societal borders do not exist without the personal, self-defined borders?

If we take a step back from the minutiae of these questions, we can see that all along we have simply been following the dialectic nature of the human experience. We can see that one idea defines another which defines another.. It is this undulation and the radioing back of such relationships, each dependent on the next and the one before, that creates such a fluid system. Thus, Roy and Chesnutt have attempted to illustrate that for us, those who live within this fluid system, there is no definitive way to describe the borders that surround us; for we have borders constructed by society that we can cross and that we cannot cross. Similarly, there are borders that we define for ourselves that help create our identities that society crosses (often without our consent) and that society cannot cross. But each border exists in relation to another, none exist within a vacuum and thus, we are made up of the sum and overlap of our own personal and social borders. That is not to say that, because we abide by some of the borders that exist within society, society triumphs in homogenizing individuals. But it is rather as Chesnutt and Roy have illustrated, that when we acknowledge and still attempt to disrupt the borders that do homogenize and continue to create our own borders that define our identities within this fluid system, it is then that we truly dismantle the systems that work to prevent individualism and imagination.

Works Cited

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