

Twinship Trope and the Creation of a Hybrid Space in Beyonce Knowles' Maternity Photo Album

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Abstract

This article seeks to unveil the figurative expression of the feelings of the mixed-race artist towards a hybrid identity. It examines Beyonce Giselle Knowles's Maternity Photo Album with the para-text of Warsan Shire's poem, "I Have Three Hearts," to reveal the quest for identity negotiation for mixed-race artists with African ancestry. From a postcolonial lens, particularly based on Homi Bhabha's theory of "the third space," this examination reveals how Knowles' maternity photo album serves as an allegorical interpretation of Shire's "I Have Three Hearts." Through this examination, it emerges that Shire's poem exposes the shared experiences of the African descendants in the diaspora. As the two rise from the shadows of their parents, mixed-race artists occupy an ambivalent space bearing dual identities: those of their parents and their own, whether African-Americans or Black Britons, as it appears in this case. Therefore, their living abroad creates a sense of longing for their missing African part to the extent that they seek to affiliate themselves with this lost part through their work. Hence, by doing so, they re-create a space that is integral and complete on its own. This article, therefore, treats Knowles' pregnancy with twins as a telling metaphor for biracial identity. The examination unfolds Knowles' allegorical interpretation of Shires' poem whereby Twinship serves as a trope for negotiating a space for hybrid identity.

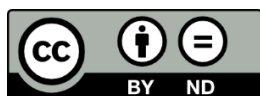
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Introduction

Shire is a Somali British poet born in Kenya in 1988. Her parents are Somali by origin and later migrated to Europe when Shire was one year old. Shire grew up in London and was recognised as the winner



of Brunel University's first African Poetry Prize in 2013. Among her works include the collections entitled *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011) and *Our Men Do Not Belong to Us* (2015). Knowles is an American singer born in 1981 to mixed-race parents. Her father is African American, while her mother is a Creole (someone of mixed African, Native American, and French ancestry). She is a superstar musician whose works are famous around the world. Her latest music album, which connected her to Shire, is *Lemonade*. Knowles and Shire were linked by the late Yosra El-Essawy, who is a friend of Shire and Knowles' official tour photographer.

Shire appears to be an influential figure in Knowles' works. In *Lemonade*, Knowles incorporates some verses from works by Shire. In addition, in February 2017, Knowles announced her twin pregnancy on her Instagram account, where she posted her maternity photo album with an attachment of Shire's poem entitled "I Have Three Hearts." My observation is that there is a purposeful connection between the content of Shire's poem and Knowles' pictures, which needs to be examined from postcolonial reading to reveal the association between Knowles' twin pregnancy and the content of Shire's poem. The controversy is Shire's poem is embedded with several deities of African and European origin. Knowles' photos are a symbolic interpretation of Shire's poem as they imitate all deities represented in "I Have Three Hearts." Despite the coverage, Knowles' photos tend to match with the Yoruba deity 'Oshun.'

Since the two artists, Shire and Knowles, share a hybrid identity with an African Ancestry, it justifies an attempt to re-discover what is embedded in associating their works with African ancestry. The fact that "I Have Three Hearts" presents deities who most of them mark the origin of fertility and twinhood in Africa, I argue that Shire and Knowles' works enter the debate of numerous critics who address Twinship as a trope in presenting the complexities of hybrid identities. This article also explores Knowles' affiliating with both African ethnic deities and, at the same time, with the Greek goddess as an attempt to create her space of belonging, which Homi Bhabha termed "The Third Space."

Twins in Works by Diaspora Writers

A good number of diaspora writers of Nigerian origin feature twins in their works. Hellen Oyeyemi, the Nigerian British writer, features twin characters in *The Icarus Girl* (2005) and *White is for Witching* (2009). Likewise, Diana Evans, the Nigerian British, does the same in *26a*. The two diaspora

novelists use the mythology of twins in their works to resolve their traumatic experience of bearing black while being British. Through the Yoruba mythology of twins, they explore various African beliefs embedded in the birth of twins, the traditional conducts of treating the soul of the deceased twin, and the beliefs of the mother of twins. All these beliefs are rooted in traditional customs, reflecting their ethnic communities. For the case of Oyeyemi, for example, her representation of Jess interacting with the ghost of her twin (Tilly Tilly) tells about the Yoruba belief on the shared combined soul of twins as argued by Leroy et al. "twins share the same combined soul (134)". Thus, the mixed-race writers' inclusion of ethnic knowledge on twins, in turn, serves as a technique to revisit African ancestry. My observation is that the fact that Knowles is pregnant with twins, her imitation of goddess Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility, gives me the insight to connect this portrayal as an attempt to revisit African ancestry just like Oyeyemi and Evance do in their works. Furthermore, Knowles' imitation of the Greek goddess Venus brings in two-ness in one-ness.

Critics who survey the works of the diaspora with twin characters point out their varied ideas. Mostly, they treat twins as a telling metaphor for a hybrid identity. Through the interaction of twins in association with the personal history of the authors, Twinship is viewed as a trope for addressing the complexities of a hybrid identity. Brender Cooper, in "Diaspora, Gender and Identity: Twinning in Three Diasporic Novels," examines the making use of twin characters by writers of mixed race as a telling metaphor for their cultural consequences. Cooper argues that diaspora writers "occupy an ambiguous space of contested citizenship because of what they inherit from Africa and because they wear the signs of their parents' backgrounds on their black bodies." Hence, the use of twins serves as a telling metaphor for their own "splitting, doubling and questing for their identities in London or Alberta, as well as for their connection with Africa (51). In line with Cooper, the Shires poem includes several deities like African goddesses Nefertiti and Oshun and the Greek goddess Venus. Linking this portrayal with Knowles's photos, which imitate those goddesses, reflects the splitting of a hybrid identity and the efforts made by the diaspora toward reconnecting the two halves. Hybridity, as argued by Torika Bolatagiki in "Claiming the (n) either/ (n) or of "Third Space": (Re) presenting Hybrid Identity and the Embodiment of Mixed Race." serves as a cultural phenomenon of the mixing of unique entities to create a third, wholly indistinguishable category where origin and home are

intermediate” (76). Therefore, Knowles and Shires attempt to blend goddesses of the two origins, Africa and Europe, suggesting their attempt to create a space that allows the co-existence of their biracial identities as one in its wholeness.

Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, in “Double Consciousness in the Works of Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans,” presents that the two writers use the sets of twins to resolve their traumatic conditions resulting from double consciousness and the need to find a sense of belonging. Cuder-Dominguez, in examining the works by the two diaspora writers, observes that their sense of belonging is destabilised. This situation evokes the feeling of belonging to neither rather than to either of the two cultural worlds: Africa and Europe. Their attempt to include scenes with beliefs rooted in Nigerian ethnic communities gives them room to participate in the Nigerian world, hence making a balance between belonging to both. As observed in the photo album and the poem attached, the two artists, Knowles and Shire, are captured by the two cultural world views: Africa and Europe, just like Dominguez’s observation in Oyeyemi and Evans’ works. Their acceptance of hybrid identity resolves this feeling of double consciousness, which creates their sense of un-belonging. Hybridity, therefore, offers a solution to the syncretic situations. Sakamoto in “Japan, Hybridity and the Creation of Colonialist Discourse.” *Theory, Culture, and Society* argues that “giving up the desire for a pure origin, hybridity retains a sense of difference and tension between two cultures, but without assuming hierarchy; it is not just a new identity but a new form of identity” (115-116). In this sense, I argue that Knowles and Shire resolve their identity crisis by revisiting their African ancestry through the topic of maternity, which symbolizes the rebirth of their identity, and twinship, which signifies their dual existence. Therefore, Knowles's body constitutes a space in fusing the two cultural worlds materialises to achieve oneness in its wholeness. The body serves as a powerful metaphor for a hybridity space.

Furthermore, Sarah Illiot and Chlore Buckley, in “Fragmenting and Becoming Double: Supplementary Twins and Abject bodies in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*,” write about Jessy’s symbolic negotiation between Nigerian culture and traditions and that of the British Empire. Through Jessy, Illott and Buckley address the “tension between the desire for self-identification (in the case of both individuals and nations) and the problematic expulsion that this can entail (Illott and Buckley 404)”. These critics reveal that Twinship serves as a trope for addressing the splitting and

doubling of a hybrid identity. They reveal that the use of twins who are born to white fathers and African mothers serves as writers' deliberate attempts to revisit their African ancestry. By doing so, they try to create their space of belonging as Homi Bhabha sees that the hybrid space "displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority and new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha 2004, p. 211).

In line with Bhabha, I argue that Knowles's photo album is an allegory for revisiting her African ancestry to re-create the hybrid space. This article, therefore, analyses Shire's "I Have Three Hearts" as interpreted by Knowles through pictorial representation to reveal the shared experiences of the displaced people. Shire's poem comprises many deities, including Nefertiti of Egypt, Oshun, Yemaya of Yoruba, and the Greek goddess Venus. All these are imitated in Knowles's photo album based on their dressing styles (costumes) and postures. This imitation, in turn, serves as a technique of blending two cultural worldviews to re-create a hybrid space.

Negotiating a Hybrid Identity through Allegorical interpretation of Shire's "I Have Three Hearts"

In this sub-section, I analyse Shire's "I Have Three Hearts" to reveal the thirst of diaspora artists to be affiliated with African ancestry to negotiate their space as African Americans or Black British. Knowles' attached photographs help in interpreting what is embedded in Shire's poem. Having shared the experiences of being mixed race, Knowles' and Shire's works are read as a deliberate attempt to redefine their hybrid identities. This analysis focuses on four pictures from Knowles' album, which speak along together with Shire's poem.

Shire presents a persona dreaming about having been surrounded by African goddesses (Osun, Yemaya, and Nefertiti). As she wakes up, she is crowned. The persona narrates about her mother being pregnant with her, and she has one foot in this world and another in the next. In this situation, Venus (the Greek goddess) fell in love with her mother. The persona calls her mother black Venus. However, the persona explains that her mother turned into black Venus in the process of becoming a mother. Shire winds up her poem by saying that life is growing inside this persona, and the persona is wondering about the feelings she is having as she hears a voice speaking to her from inside. Hence, she says, "I have Three Hearts". In this regard, the persona narrates:

in the dream i am crowning
Osun
Nefertiti
and emoji
pray around my bed

In this stanza, Shire creates an image of a woman in bed who is surrounded by three deities: Osun, Nefertiti, and Yemoja. All this is happening through the dream. The two deities: Osun and Yemoja are of West African origin particularly identified by the Yoruba ethnic community of Southwestern Nigeria and Eastern Benin (Leroy et al. 2002). Even though Osun is a river deity (*orisha*) associated with purity, fertility, love, and sensuality, Yemoja, also known as Yemaya, serves as the Ocean mother goddess, symbolizing a source of strength and protection (Mark J. 2021). Furthermore, Nefertiti stands as a symbol of beauty and fertility. She was the wife of the queen of the 18th Dynasty of Ancient Egypt and the royal wife of King Pharaoh Akhenaten. Therefore, all three Osun, Yemoja, and Nefertiti are female figures of African origin who are associated with beauty and fertility. Therefore, Shire is creating an image of a woman who is aware of the roles of African goddesses in sustaining life. The prayer that this woman is receiving from those African figures is what makes her strong while waiting to give birth. Hence, Knowles' photographic representation of this verse entails her affiliation with her African and European ancestry as the subsequent pictures illustrate.

Figure 1 (RIGHT, Source: Beyonce. com) shows Knowles in a Greek goddess Venus-like posture (see Figure 3 below). Moreover, the statue of Nefertiti, the Queen of Ancient Egypt, features in Knowles' picture at the bottom left side, which sends a clear message regarding the aesthetic and creative intent. Knowles' imitation of the Greek goddess Venus and her standing beside a statue of Nefertiti implies her being caught by two-ness in one-ness – Africanness and Europeanness. Moreover, the dream is represented as the wish to occupy a full hybrid space. An expectant woman who is crowned by African goddesses is in the transition to become a mother of twins. Figure 2 illustrates a legendary figure of Queen Nefertiti of Ancient Egypt:





Figures 2 and 3: Ancient Egyptian Queen Nefertiti and Venus Goddess in her famous pose that Beyonce imitates. **Sources:** Nofretete Neues Museum and Adobe Stock, respectively.

This suggests that the dream is a wish of the mixed-race artist to blend the two halves of her identity for the attainment of a hybrid identity. As far as the two artists, Shire and Knowles, are diaspora based, the representation of being crowned by African goddesses is the symbol of being accepted by the family lineages of their second half, Africa. These wishes are the reflection of their nostalgic experiences of being displaced abroad to the extent that they feel departed from Africa. In one of her pictures, Knowles is on top of an old red car. A car is full of flowers at the back, inside the seats, and at the place where the engine is located. The top part (at the roof) where she sits divided this car into relatively two equal parts. Knowles neither looks at the back nor front of this car. She looks in a side direction, and at her back, there is a background of clouds as if she is in her own space. The fact that his car can no longer move from one place to another in the picture suggests that it is Knowles' choice to arrive at that place. From my observation, there is a connection between the dream of a woman in "I Have

Three Hearts” and the pictorial representation in Figure 4 below. This picture speaks about Knowles’ placing herself in a space between the two parts. Showering flowers in both parts reflects her acknowledging the values of both sides. Choosing to look at neither part (at the front or back of the car) suggests her attempt to re-create a space of her belonging, which in turn reflects “the third space.” This representation, therefore, reveals the thirst of many diaspora artists to give value to the two halves of their identity. Figure 4 illustrates:



Figure 4: Beyonce in an illustrative floral photo. **Source:** Beyonce.com

Shire’s structural arrangement of “I Have Three Hearts” also suggests the in-betweenness. The alignment of verses at the centre implies the state of finding a balance between the two halves. They are neither at the left nor at the right but rather at the place in between. This representation is, therefore, a symbolic representation of a hybrid space for Bhabha hybridity, which is described as “a place between two conflicting cultures, or moments when identities are destabilized and deconstructed (143). Therefore, the two Diasporas represent their attempts to recreate identity, which is one and fully on its own, by making use of various symbolic structures as elaborated.

Furthermore, Shire links motherhood with transformation. In this regard, there is a transformation of Venus into black Venus, which is attained

through the process of motherhood. Shire represents a pregnant girl with twins turning to a mother who thereafter turns to Venus. But the process does not end there until she turns to black Venus. Therefore, through motherhood, there is the accomplishment of becoming both: "Venus" and, later, "the black Venus". Shire writes:

mother is a cocoon where/cells spark, limbs form, mother/swells
and stretches to protect her/child, mother has one foot in this
world/and one foot in the next/mother, black Venus

Shire, furthermore, in another verse, adds: "girl turning into a woman/woman turning into a mother." Mother turning into Venus The representation of the topic of maternity stands as a trope for blending the two halves of a hybrid identity. Because a girl is pregnant, the twins inside her belly are symbolically a representation of her two halves. The fact that all the processes of growing from foetus to complete baby are taking place in a woman's body, a woman's body can be considered as a symbol for "the third space" as it offers the growth and renewal of the hybrid identity. But this transition does not end there; Shire continues to show a woman who is now a mother turning to Venus. As I observe, by attributing motherhood to Venus, the implication is honouring the lady for giving room for the twin children to be born. This scenario acts as a trope for the creation of "the third space." It is Venus that stands symbolically as a space where the two halves of a hybrid identity grew inside. Hence, by bringing in the idea of "black Venus," Shire reflects the nature of the hybrid space, which is fragile. That is, it is a space in which hybrid identity will continue to be re-formed. Therefore, I argue that hybridity is a rebirth of a new identity which is always in a fragile form, ready to undergo another process of transformation.

In line with the Shire, the picture of Knowles in Figure 5 below symbolically presents the scenario of re-birth, which can also be considered as transformation. Knowles shot the underwater picture while her body was upside down. Knowles is covered with two clothes with the mastered yellow and pink magenta. Over her head, she is crowned with flowers. She is floating upside down, just like the twins in her belly who are waiting to be born. This image, therefore, is an interpretation of Shire's presentation of maternity as a symbol of transformation. The tendency of Knowles to imitate the alignment of her twins in the womb stands for wishes to re-create her hybrid identity. The two clothes, which vary in colour, represent the two halves of her identity. Therefore, the image reveals the process of

transformation in which diaspora artists are engaged in the search for the acceptance of their two halves. Here below is Knowles' underwater picture as presented in her "Maternity Photo Album"



Figure 5: Expectant Beyonce projected underwater. **Source:** Beyonce.com

In this case, diaspora artists negotiate the two cultural worlds, African and Western, for their space of belongingness. This space not only links them to the two worlds culturally but also marks their history and solves the problem of hailing in double consciousness. W. DuBois, in *The Soul of the Black Folks*, writes:

The history of the American Negro is the history of strife-this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and true self. In this merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America...He would not bleach his Negro soul...He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellow, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. This, then, is

the end of his striving to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture... (p. 215)

Henceforth, both artists, Knowles and Shire, through their topic representation of maternity, express the desire for the displaced people to re-create their identities without having bias on either side. The topic of maternity serves as the symbol for the re-born of a blended identity, which stands as complete in its own space.

Conclusion

A good number of Africans in the diaspora are hailing in double consciousness. This situation subjects them to the feelings of belonging to neither, rather than either, of the two cultural worlds to the extent that they strive to redefine their identities through their works. In this regard, postcolonial theory is applied to read the poem of Warsan Shire and examine Beyonce Knowles' maternity photo album to reveal their struggles with their identities and the achievements they have made so far. This reading, therefore, as argued by Bhabha, pinpoints that the hybrid spaces "displaces the histories that constitute it, and it sets up new structures of authority and new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom (211)".

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