الهجنة والصوت المكتوم في رواية "مياه مفتوحة" لكاليب أزوماه نيلسون: قراءة ما بعد كولونيالية

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المستخلص:

تفحص هذه الدراسة رواية "المياه المفتوحة" (٢٠٢١) لكاليب أزوماه نيلسون من خلال الأطر النظرية لمفهوم الهجنة الثقافية عند هومي ك. بابا ونظرية الصوت الخاضع (السوبالترن) عند غايتري تشاكرافورتي سبيفاك. من خلال تحليل نصي دقيق لكيفية تنقل بطل الرواية بين الهويات كرجل أسود بريطاني شاب، تستكشف هذه الدراسة كيف يصور نيلسون مفارقة العيش في فضاءات ثقافية هجينة بينما يعاني من صمت عميق في نفس الوقت. تصور الرواية راويًا يحتل "الفضاء الثالث" للهجنة الثقافية—لا هو غاني بالكامل ولا بريطاني بالكامل—ولكنه يجد أن هذا الموضع الحدودي لا يمنحه صوتًا حقيقيًا أو وكالة فعلية. بدلاً من ذلك، تصبح الهجنة موقع محو حيث يبقى البطل مرئيًا بشكل دائم لكن لا يُسمع في الأساس. يوضح هذا التحليل كيف يعقّد نيلسون النظريات ما بعد الاستعمارية للهوية الهجينة بالكشف عن أن احتلال مواضع ثقافية متعددة لا يؤدي بالضرورة إلى التمكين أو التعبير الذاتي الحقيقي. بل تشير الرواية إلى أنه بالنسبة للأفراد السود البريطانيين، قد تكثّف الهجنة بدلاً من حل حالة الصمت والحرمان من الصوت، حيث يتنقل البطل عبر فضاءات تحتفي به في نفس الوقت الذي تخنقه فيها. تساهم النتائج في النقد الأدبي ما بعد الاستعماري المعاصر بإلقاء الضوء على كيفية أن الأدب البريطاني في القرن الحادي والعشرين يعبّر عن أزمة التمثيل المستمرة للأشخاص الذين تم تعريفهم عرقيًا في مجتمعات يُفترض أنها متعددة الثقافات.

Hybridity and the Silenced Voice in Caleb Azumah Nelson's Open Water: A Postcolonial Reading

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Abstract:

Through the theoretical frameworks of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper studies Caleb Azumah Nelson's *Open Water* (2021). Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Spivak's theory of the subaltern voice will be observed closely in this paper. This study, through a close reading of the protagonist's navigations of identity as a young Black British man, seeks to explore how the combination of the portrayal of the experiences of being placed in hybrid cultural spaces but also being profoundly voiceless. The novel depicts a narrator who occupies the "third space" of cultural hybridity; he is neither Ghanaian nor British but finds that this liminal positioning does not lend authentic voice or agency. Instead, hybridity becomes an erasure where the protagonist is always seen but fundamentally unheard. The critique of post-colonial theories of hybrid identity has been a large part of the body of work on Nelson. It demonstrates that occupying multiple cultural positions does not necessarily produce empowerment or authentic self-expression. Instead, the novel postulates that for Black British individuals, hybridity can intensify rather than resolve voicelessness, as the protagonist wanders spaces that at once celebrate as well as silence Black bodies. The results contribute to contemporary post-colonial literary criticism by revealing how twenty-first-century British fiction articulates the ongoing crisis of representation for racialized subjects in seemingly multicultural societies.

Introduction

Open Water (2021) is the debut novel of Caleb Azumah Nelson, which tells a love story of two Black British artists living in Southeast London. Beneath the romantic narrative, there is the pleasure of meditation on the paradoxes of post-colonial identity in modern Britain. The protagonist is a photographer of Ghanaian descent. According to Homi Bhabha, he currently resides in the third space of cultural hybridity. This third space exists between the Ghanaian traditions of his parents and his lived experience as a Black Briton. Nelson's novel complicates celebratory readings of hybrid identity by showing how this liminal positioning does not lead to empowerment but rather to a devastating form of voicelessness.

The central tension of the novel arises from a fundamental contradiction: the protagonist is always visible under police scrutiny, surveilled in public spaces, and objectified as "Black body," yet also rendered mute, unable to articulate his interiority or authenticate self-representation. This paradox immediately invokes Gayatri Spivak's famous question: "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak, 1988, p. 271). According to Nelson, the solution makes it apparent that when the subaltern tries to speaк, the power strucures deteremins what is allowed to be heard, effectively silencing Black British students in multicultural spaces. *Open Water* is especially significant in contemporary British fiction as it rejects the redemptive narratives that often accompany discussions of multiculturalism and hybrid identity. Instead of seeing hybridity as a vehicle for creative synthesis or political resistance, Nelson suggests that it is rather a condition of permanent instability in which the protagonist can never fully claim his Ghanaian or British identity. As the narrator contemplates, "You are a Black body, container, vessel, property" (Nelson, 2021, p. 141), revealing how racialization reduces hybrid subjects to their physical appearance while stripping them of their subjectivity and voice.

The form of the novel enables the crisis of voice in The Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. The second-person narration in the text creates a distance between the speaking subject and the experiencing self. As a result, authentic first-person articulation remains impossible. The protagonist is only capable of calling himself "you". Consequently, they cannot claim the authoritative "I" which would entail them being fully subjective and having a voice. The formal choice shows what Spivak characterizes as the structural impossibility of subaltern speech in hegemonic discourse: even self-narration becomes a form of ventriloquism in which the dominant structure speaks on behalf of the racialized subject (Spivak, 1988, p. 308).

Research Questions and Aims

This paper focuses on Nelson's depictions of hybridity as sites of simultaneous visibility and voicelessness for Black British subjects, how the novel demonstrates the limitations of Bhabha's concept of the 'third space', how the protagonist's artistic practice enables and complicates his attempts to claim voice, and what the novel suggests about the relationship between physical presence, surveillance, and the denial of interiority of racialized bodies. Furthermore, this study investigates how Nelson's second-person narration formalizes the crisis of subaltern voice theorized by Spivak. It also looks at ways in which silence and the inability to speak function as forms of violence.

Significance

This paper contributes significantly to post-colonial literary criticism and the study of modern British fiction. The death of peppered moths was expected to be caused by their habitat changing to a light-colored environment. Although Bhabha's concept came about as a theoretical framework for analyzing colonial contexts, Nelson's novel suggests that cultural liminality has evolved in ways that require theoretical revision. According to Bhabha, the third space is a site of possible liberation; for Black British subjects, however, it is a site of compounded marginalization.

Also, it fills a gap in Spivak's scholarship by investigating her theories of subaltern voice in contemporary metropolitan centres rather than post-colonial peripheries. *Open Water* showcases how structural conditions that prevent subaltern speech continue to exist in multicultural societies. The novel allows us to see that the celebrated diversity of London does not translate into actual platforms for Black British voices. Visibility becomes a form of surveillance that makes authentic self-voicing difficult (Spivak, 1988, p. 308).

Another contribution of the present study is understanding how literary form can embody postcolonial theoretical concerns.

Nelson's use of second-person narration is not just a choice of style but a formal enactment of the problems Spivak outlines: the impossibility of the subaltern claiming first-person authority as speaking positions are predetermined by racial structures. Through the analysis of this formal choice and the thematic content, it shows how contemporary fiction may advance postcolonial theory aesthetically.

This study looks at Black British identity, highlighting current discussions about race, belonging, and citizenship in contemporary Britain, specifically through its cultural politics. The novel comes in light of increased focus on structural racism due to the Black Lives Matter movement. According to Nelson's portrayal of a protagonist who "can't always feel" himself because he is "not always allowed to," the1st person narrated intimate interludes are grounding in rigorous postcolonial theoretical frameworks (Nelson, 2021, p. 44).

Theoretical Framework

Bhabha's Theory of Hybridity and the Third Space

Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of cultural hybridity in *The Location of Culture* (1994) affords a foundational framework for postcolonial identity. Homi K. Bhabha argues that colonial encounters produce hybrid cultural

forms that cannot be understood as simple combinations of colonizer and colonized cultures. Hybridity determines or creates what he calls 'the third space'; that is, an intervening space of which he says that 'the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity' and 'the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew' (Bhabha,1994, p.37). The potential liberation in this third space comes from the third space being a space where the oppositional terms colonizer and colonized are disrupted. We see that identity is performative. It makes identity unstable instead of essential and permanent.

Bhabha's framework grows out of his reading of colonial mimicry, where colonised subjects both imitate and disrupt colonial authority through imperfect reproduction of colonial culture. He proposes that this contradiction generates vigorous spaces for resistance and agency. A third space is therefore a place where new cultural meanings can be negotiated and where subordinated subjects can exercise agency through creative reinterpretation of dominant cultural forms. This theory has had a major impact on postcolonial studies and cultural studies more generally, giving scholars a vocabulary to understand how identity works as fluid and multiple rather than fixed and essentialist.

Bhabha has faced considerable criticism with respect to his concept of hybridity. Critics say that his schism and emphasis on the subversive potential of the hybrid obscure the material realities of ongoing oppression and unequal power relations that structure post-colonial contexts (Ahmad,2000, p. 68). Bhabha views hybridity as producing "a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86) through his concept of mimicry. Some scholars simply argue that this recreates rather than challenges colonial hierarchies. Besides, Bhabha's theory can romanticise the lived experiences of post-colonial and racialised subjects by highlighting the creative and liberatory potential of hybrid spaces. Furthermore, it can obscure how hybridity can operate as a mechanism of control instead of resistance. Nelson's novel grapples with this tension as it

reveals the limitations of celebrating hybrid identity without attending to the structural conditions that determine who can enjoy hybridity's benefits.

Spivak's Theory of the Subaltern Voice

In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), she addresses the issue of representation and voice for the subalterns in colonial and postcolonial contexts. According to Spivak, those who are regarded as subalterns are not able to speak as the meaning intended may not reach the proper subject since their speech may not be heard or understood. The subject of the subaltern is the subjection of the concepts of difference and otherness, according to Stuart Hall. She points out the distinction between "speaking" (Sprechen) and "representation" (Vertreten/Darstellen) and argues that even when subaltern subjects speak for themselves, what counts as meaningful speech is dictated by dominant structures. Thus, the subaltern is effectively translated into terms that reinscribe subordination (Spivak 275- 276).

Spivak's intervention fundamentally questions the belief that subaltern subjects need space or opportunities to speak. On the contrary, she traces the problem to structures that are built into the basic organization of knowledge and power that determine whose voices can be acknowledged as legitimate and authoritative, and can even carry meaning. The subaltern is not unable to speak; rather, the epistemic violence of colonialism and postcolonial structures ensures that some voices cannot speak within existing frameworks of intelligibility. This distinction plays an important role in the understanding of contemporary forms of racialization, where increased visibility and the perception of opportunities to speak may coexist with more persistent structures of silencing. According to Spivak, the issue of subaltern voice exists not only in representation but also in the basic conditions that make certain types of speech speakable. Her analysis shows how well-meaning efforts to amplify marginalized voices can themselves become forms of epistemic violence when they do not address structural obstacles to subaltern speech.

Black British Identity and Literature

Recent research on black British identities has highlighted the specificity of the racialisation dynamic in contemporary Britain, where official multiculturalism coexists with entrenched structural racism. *The Black Atlantic* (1993) contends that Black identity is inherently transnational and hybrid, founded on the history of slavery, colonialism, and diaspora. As the cultural identity expert Stuart Hall states, "identity is a matter of becoming as well as being". He maintains that the identities of the diaspora are always producing and reproducing themselves through transformation and difference (Hall, 1990,p.225). According to Hall, there are physical limitations and continuous exclusions that limit Black British individuals' ability for self-definition. Modern-day Black British authors often use formal experimental techniques to engage with and represent racialization as well as to challenge assumptions about what Britishness is (Procter, 2003,p 45; Bentley, 2015, p. 112).

The article uses Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity and cultural liminality and Gayatri Spivak's theorization of subaltern voice to analyze *Open Water* and its depiction of Black British identity paradoxes. The notion of the "third space" has been developed by Bhabha, and it helps us understand the position of the protagonist between Ghanaian and British identities. Although the "third space" gives rise to unlimited possibilities as Bhabha sees, Nelson's novel shows how hybridity can also enhance marginalization (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37-38).

The theory of Spivak exposes the novel's main focus as the visibility and recognition gap. The protagonist is always being watched, surveilled by police, and objectified in public spaces, but never authentically self-represented. Visibility instead becomes a form of silencing (Spivak, 1988, p. 308).

Bhabha's notion of the "third space" supplies a vocabulary for understanding the protagonist's position between Ghanaian heritage and British identity.

However, where Bhabha emphasizes the potentially liberatory aspects of this liminal positioning, Nelson's *Open Water* reveals how the concept of hybridity can intensify marginalization. The protagonist's inability to claim either cultural position fully does not produce creative synthesis but rather a sense of perpetual homelessness and lack of authentic voice (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37-38).

Spivak's theory of subaltern voice illuminates the novel's central concern with the gap between visibility and recognition. The protagonist is constantly seen surveilled by police, objectified in public spaces, marked as "Black body" yet this visibility does not translate into the capacity for authentic self-representation. Instead, visibility becomes a form of silencing, as the protagonist's physical presence is read and interpreted by others in ways that preclude his own self-articulation (Spivak, 1988, p. 308).

This study also draws on Sara Ahmed's phenomenology of race, particularly her analysis of how racialized bodies are "stopped" by dominant white spaces, creating what she terms "orientation devices" that constrain movement and limit possibilities for self-determination (Ahmed,2000, p.111). Ahmed's framework helps explain how the protagonist's experiences of surveillance and police stops function as mechanisms for denying voice even while claiming to "see" Black subjects.

Additionally, this analysis engages with Fred Moten's theorization of Black sociality and his concept of "resistance of the object" the ways that Black subjects resist their reduction to objecthood even within structures designed to deny their subjectivity (Moten,2003,p. 1). Moten's work provides insights into how the protagonist's artistic practice serves as both an attempt to claim voice and a revelation of the structural impossibility of such claims within existing systems of representation.

The Paradox of Visibility: Surveillance and the Denial of Voice

The main theme of hypervisibility and voicelessness in the novel is made when the protagonist reflects on attending a white private school. Having been one of the few Black students present, he was always visible, but his visibility was less about recognition and more about surveillance: "You wanted to get closer to yourself so this was progress, wasn't it?" he recalls. Seeing how he found solace in basketball, which was "a place where you could escape your anxieties" (Nelson 30). This shows how his hybrid position produces alienation from self rather than empowerment.

The different kind of violence that hypervisibility exerts on bodies is revealed in an encounter with the police: "They don't hear your protests. They don't hear your voice. They don't see you. They see someone, but that someone is not you" (Nelson, 2021, p. 64). This text crystallizes the text's engagement with Spivak's theory of subaltern voice. The protagonist tries to articulate, but his sounds do not penetrate the structure of police power, which already codes what his Black body means. The police witness a menacing figure that the protagonist cannot see; they do not recognize the voice that they deny. Spivak identifies exactly this situation: structures of power render speech inaudible or translate it into forms that reinscribe subordination (Spivak, 1988, p. 308).

The protagonist's reflection reveals his understanding that voice has been structurally denied: "To be you is to apologize and often that apology comes in the form of suppression." Hybridity entails the continual self-suppression of a group that voluntarily silences itself to prevent more violent silencing. The protagonist faces epistemic violence even in spaces that are supposedly welcoming of difference, which is the systematic denial of subjectivity and voice (Nelson, 2021, p. 76).

The Impossibility of Heritage: Liminality Without Belonging

The protagonist's connection to his Ghanaian ancestry shows how hybridity works by displacing, and never synthesizing. His contemplation of the visit to Ghana with his grandmother reveals this crisis of belonging: "Your grandmother prays for you while waiting for your arrival during a fierce snowstorm". This speaks to the weight of familial hopes and the fragility of life, as the speaker is conscious of the decline of his grandmother's health and his emotional distance from his roots in Ghana (Nelson, 2021, p. 27). The "emotional distance from his roots" suggests that this ancestry is beyond reach as a lived identity. Although the protagonist is linked via blood with others, he shows cultural and geocultural distance, stating Bhabha's terms "the third space " and alienated by it (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38).

The protagonist is aware that he can't completely claim to be Ghanaian: "Language fails us especially when he doesn't open his mouth" (Nelson 27). The crisis of hybrid identity is expressed through this claim: language itself–the prime means with which to claim voice and articulate identity–fails to unite heritage with lived experience. The lack of effective communication due to age and cultural differences shows that there is a 'cultural distance' issue, even within families.

Artistic Practice and the Limits of Self-Representation

The protagonist, as a photographer, directly engages with issues of representation and voice. Photography may provide a way for subjects whose voices are systematically denied to assert their agency and self-representation. Nevertheless, Nelson's novel shows how artistic practice is incapable of addressing the structural problems of subaltern voice Spivak identifies.

The characters in the novel like to be seen but not to be looked at, "It's one thing to be looked at and a different thing to be seen" (Nelson, 2021, p. 95). This describes a core problem of representation for racialized individuals.

The term "looked at" suggests one thing, while "seen" suggests another. The artist's practice of the protagonist seeks to create conditions for authentic seeing, particularly through his project documenting Black lives (Nelson, 2021, p. 20). The phrase "moments of freedom" suggests that Godfrey is primarily concerned with exceptional instances, rather than enduring ones. Freedom from objectification is short-lived. It is obtained by a conscious artistic intervention, yet is not established as a permanent transformation (Nelson, 2021, p. 95).

The Violence of Silence: Language Failure and the Body

Nelson's Open Water shows the absence of voice as physical and psychic violence. The protagonist's inability to present himself is not merely frustrating but actively hurtful, producing a splitting between body and self that reflects the violence of racialization.

This dynamic becomes outright when the main character in the novel describes his experience of self-alienation in moments of crisis:

"Sometimes, it hurts to be me. Sometimes, it hurts to be us. You know?" (Nelson, 2021, p. 117).

The variation from first person ("me") to second person ("us") to direct address ("You know?") brings the crash of the statement described. The main character can not continuously inhabit first-person voice—the grammatical status of independent subject speaking for himself. Instead, he sways between subject statuses, seeking confirmation from an addressee whose understanding remains uncertain ("You know?"). This formal instability reveals the theoretical problem Spivak identifies: subaltern subjects cannot securely occupy the position of speaking subject because elements of power continually displace them from that position.

Nelson's *Open Water* makes explicit the obscene of voice produces physical suffering. After a particularly traumatic meeting, the hero reflects: "You're

wailing like a newborn. You're alone. You don't feel in rhythm. There's nothing playing. The music has stopped" (Nelson, 2021, p. 40).

The process of comparison to "a newborn" indicates a regression to pre-linguistic existence, before the acquisition of language that would enable articulation of pain. Yet even this infantile wailing cannot be fully expressed—"You're alone"—because the conditions for receiving and recognizing his suffering do not exist.

The metaphor of stopped music has great importance. Throughout the novel, music symbolizes a kind of communication that might transcend the failures of verbal language. Music and dance create "a space" where the hero and the dancer can "feel alive and free" (Nelson, 2021, p. 44), referring that non-verbal artistic expression might supply what speech cannot. However, the end of music—the silence that replaces rhythm— shows that these alternative forms of voice can be denied.

The hero's reflection on the death of his grandfather reveals how institutional structures enforce silence even in moments that demand speech:

"Even in a moment of comfort from his friend, who offers support and humor, he grapples with the fear of revealing his true self. The narrative beautifully encapsulates the themes of identity, emotional expression, and the difficulty of being vulnerable in a world that often demands stoicism" (Nelson, 2021, p. 64).

This passage indicates what Spivak would identify as the colonization of emotional life: the hero cannot freely express sadness or weakness because "the world demands stoicism" from Black men. This demand acts as a form of silencing that is internalized—the main character polices his own emotional expression before external forces can enforce silence.

The "support and humor" of the friend cannot overcome the structural prohibition against Black male weakness, showing how even intimate relationships stay constrained by larger systems of racialization. The imagery

of still music stands out as particularly significant; music represents a way of communicating that allows people in the novel to get by without language. Nonetheless, the cessation of music shows that even these other forms of voice can be refused.

In every part of the novel, dance and music symbolize alternative forms of performance that might transcend the failures of verbal language. The dancer's expression of what movement offers suggests that non-verbal artistic practice might do what speech cannot:

"'I like to move,' she starts. 'I always have. Used to catch me on the playground out-dancing everyone. It's my space, you know? I'm making space and I'm dancing into the space.' 'I dance to breathe, but often I dance until I'm breathless and sweaty and I can feel all of me, all those parts of me I can't always feel, I don't feel like I'm allowed to'" (Nelson 44).

Nelson's *Open Water* complicates any redemptive reading of artistic performance as solution to absence of voice. The hero's reflection on society gathering and music reflects both the power and limitations of these alternative forms:

"Do not resist the call of a drum. Do not resist the thud of a kick, the tap of a snare, the rattle of a hi-hat. Do not hold your body stiff but flow like easy water" (Nelson, 2021, p. 40).

The injunction to "not resist" and to "flow like easy water" shows both music and dance as giving liberation from the rigid self-control that racialized survival demands.

The particular musical performances, "the call of a drum," "the thud of a kick," "the tap of a snare" recall Black musical traditions that make collective space for expression and resistance. Open Water demonstrates that music and dance, while offering crucial forms of performance, cannot basically resolve the structural denial of voice. After moments of artistic

liberation, the hero returns to a social world that keep refusing recognition of his subjectivity:

"You're wailing like a newborn. You're alone. You don't feel in rhythm. There's nothing playing. The music has stopped" (Nelson, 2021, p. 40).

When the music ends, when the temporary space of artistic performance closes, the protagonist faces renewed silence and isolation.

The Second -Person Subject: Formal Enactment of Voicelessness

Much of Nelson's second-person narration in *Open Water* enables the theoretical problems of subaltern voice and hybrid identity. The author chooses to narrate mainly in the second person, not simply for stylistic reasons but for substantive reasons, for the protagonist does not appear to be in full possession of subjective authority. In the conventional Western narrative, a first-person narration indicates autonomous subjectivity; the protagonist of *Open Water* rarely occupies this grammatical position. He mentions himself as "you" instead, thus establishing distance between the speaking voice and the experiencing subject. This splitting reflects what Bhabha describes as the doubling produced by colonial conditions in which the hybrid subject must constantly see themselves through the eyes of the dominant culture, internalizing a foreign gaze that disallows direct presentation to the self (Bhabha, 1994, p. 45).

The novel occasionally shifts into first-person, but those moments come in reported speech or remembered conversations and not as direct narration of present experience. One example comes from recounting dialogue with the dancer, "I love you, you know?" (Nelson, 2021, p. 86). The first-person pronoun appears in quotation marks, surrounded by dominant second-person narration, which suggests that the protagonist can only claim "I" within restricted spaces of interpersonal exchange, not as the authoritative narrator of his own experience. This formal strategy corresponds to Spivak's claim

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concerning the structural impossibility of subaltern speech: Spivak argues that the protagonist must be narrated from outside himself, as if his own consciousness requires mediation by an observing "you" (308).

Intimate Relationships and the Persistence of Silence

The protagonist's romantic relationship with the dancer initially promises the possibility for authentic voice and mutual recognition, transcending the silencing he experiences in public spaces. Their initial talks reveal real potential for connection: "Their dialogue shows a playful and deep connection talking about identity, vulnerability, and their respective passions like photography and dance." (Nelson, 2021, p. 20). The protagonist can talk with the danger and expect to be heard, which is much unlike his encounters with the police. The protagonist describes his inability to communicate his pain and needs: "There is a difference between being looked at and being seen" (Nelson, 2021, p. 95). The basic difference still exists in the relationship. The seductive woman looks at him with love and desire, but this visual attention does not automatically translate into recognition of interiority that would enable him fully to articulate himself. The term "fear of exposing one's true self" refers to the view that authentic self-revelation remains dangerous, since the protagonist has internalized that one's full subjectivity cannot safely be realized.

When the protagonist goes through trauma, he thinks, "It is easier to hide in your own darkness than to come out naked and blinking in your own light" (Nelson, 2021, p. 70). Having to speak is vulnerable beyond belief, especially for someone whose voice has been systematically denied. He has discovered that silence is safer than speech; isolation is better than the risk of being identified.

Artistic practice: Music and Dance as Self - Representation

Alongside the sections already discussed, the matrix presents more crucial dimensions of the way racialized subjects negotiate artistic practice and

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representation. The protagonist, collaborating with the dancer on documenting Black lives through photography, is not only a political commitment, but the novel also shows the complexities of this project.

Neither the act of creating images nor the subjects themselves can guarantee meaningful representation outside existing visual economies. The works of artists such as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and Sola Olulode, whom the protagonist looks up to, show that highlighting Black interiority remains an exceptional achievement rather than a normalized practice (Nelson, 2021, p. 95). The fact that the art world views this exceptional status as an outlier at best and an indicator of the continued marginalization of Black self-representation beyond the cultural to the curatorial demonstrates how even successful artistic interventions operate within constricted fields.

Furthermore, what it shows is that the protagonist's own photographic practice cannot escape the problem of representation, which it deploys. The camera's mediation enables and disables: it allows certain types of seeing while at the same time blocking others. Photographing the dancer, he experiences an unmediated connection: "she is looking at you, not the lens, but you, and all guises slipped away with the ease of a gossamer sheet in the wind" (Nelson, 2021, p. 86). However, we usually cannot recognize ourselves in a representation because it is mediated and distanced. The protagonist cannot control how his images circulate once created, nor can he guarantee that his intention to document Black interiority will be received as such by viewers shaped by different interpretive frameworks. Such a limitation is particularly significant given contemporary discussions of Black representation and the fetishization of Black bodies across cultural forms.

Throughout the novel, music and dance serve as alternative modes of expression that may succeed where words fail. According to Nelson, the movement popularly referred to as dance "is what makes me feel like I am all of me; all of those parts of me I can't always feel, I don't feel I'm allowed to" (Nelson, 2021, p. 44). Dance is not just a set of movements but a feeling of totality. This explicitly forbids full self-experience, which structures

Black British life. The dance creates an exception to this prohibition; the dance allows her "to feel all of me".

Nonetheless, the novel complicates any redemptive reading of artistic expression as a solution to voicelessness. The protagonist's reflection on music reveals both power and limitations: "Do not resist the call of a drum. Do not resist the thud of a kick, the tap of a snare, or the rattle of a hi-hat. Do not hold your body stiff but flow like easy water" (Nelson, 2021, p. 40). This refers to the ability offered by music and dance to break from the rigid self-control that the survival demands of race impose. However, this liberation is still temporary and in jeopardy. "Your time has come. Enjoy your glory, for it is yours to do so" (Nelson, 2021, p. 40). All we can do is try.

Following this artistic liberation, the protagonist goes back to a social world that continues to refuse recognition of his subjectivity:

"You're wailing like a newborn. You're alone. You're not feeling the rhythm. Nothing's playing. The music has stopped" (Nelson, 2021, p. 40).

When the music stops, the protagonist faces silence once more, and isolation when the artificial space of artistic expression closes.

Discussion and conclusion

Hence, a close reading of selected passages from the novel allows us to work through the connections between hybridity, visibility, and voice. Rather than exploring *Open Water* in its entirety, I shall focus my discussion on those moments when the protagonist's hybrid positioning creates crises of articulation spots in the film where he tries to speak but is silenced; where he seeks recognition, but only faces surveillance; and where he asserts identity, but finds it unavailable. The methodological approach highlights the way literary form and content contribute to the comprehension of theory. The second-person narration, disjoined chronology, and shifts between the different registers of language enact the theoretical problems that are thematized in the novel. The analysis highlights Nelson's theoretical

interventions through poetic formal innovations. Since form and content are inseparable, these efforts advance postcolonial thought aesthetically instead of discursively.

Nelson's novel questions Bhabha's optimistic view of cultural hybridity as a site of creative potential. To Abdel-Malek, Black Discourse is not simply one of oppression, but one that shows the fault lines of imperial mis-narrating. Such an opening provides an agency of the 'in-between' where something can come into existence. This novel does not explore the implications of 'Black Experience' but instead seeks the possibilities of 'Black Discourse'. The protagonist can't lay claim to Ghanaian because of geographical distance and generational refusal and can't lay claim to British because of a racialization that means he is forever marked as foreign. The experiences of a character show that hybridity is a permanent condition of not quite belonging, producing alienation and not empowerment, as Bhabha suggests. The modern Black British experience hinges on this complicating fact. In officially multicultural contexts that celebrate diversity, there is no acceptance or cultural belonging given.

In *Open Water*, the answer to Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" is devastating: the protagonist constantly attempts to speak, but the structures of power ensure that his speech cannot be recognized as valid communication. His words are "continuously translated" into dominant discourse categories, thus structurally eliminating the possibility of authentic self-articulation (Spivak, 1988, p. 308). Not just explicit racial violence, this problem includes day-to-day social interactions, educational institutions, and personal relationships. Most importantly, the novel shows how the prohibition against subaltern speech works through internalization. The main character controls his own expression before outside forces can control him. This self-silencing isn't weakness; it's seeing that as a strategy that evolved through cumulative experiences, whereby his speech was not recognized as speech. I want to extend Spivak to include the internalized mechanisms of control as well.

The narrative style of the book actually imitates the very theoretical problems that it discusses throughout the work. First-person narration has a structure that in itself is prevented from being fully inhabited by racialized subjects, and this is the result of being rendered incapable of doing so in white supremacist societies. This formal strategy advances postcolonial theory by demonstrating how literary technique can embody theoretical insights. The vagueness of the second-person addressee enables the uncertainty about audience and reception that structures all attempts at subaltern speech. If the narrator of the story cannot tell who receives his narrative, there's a basic break in the circuit of communication. As a result, it is possible to experience the protagonist's alienation from first-person authority as an aesthetic engagement with voicelessness. *Open Water,* the debut poetry collection from Caleb Azumah Nelson, offers a profound meditation on postcolonial identity in contemporary Britain. Through a portrait of a young Black British photographer, the novel shows that hybridity produces constant displacement and not creative synthesis, and that visibility operates as surveillance and not recognition. Nelson's analysis shows key contributions to postcolonial theory. Initially, it demonstrates how Black British literature of the 21st century relies upon and significantly revises foundational theories developed for earlier historical moments. Bhabha's idea of productive hybridity and Spivak's theory of subaltern silence remain applicable but need alteration for officially multicultural metropolitan contexts (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37; Spivak, 1988, p. 308).

In the second instance, the thing is interpreted as how literary form embodies theoretical insight. The second-person narration shows how formal innovation can enhance theoretical understanding to complement the discursive argument. The novel's choice not to bring closure to the tensions it identifies between visibility and voice, hybrid belonging and structural exclusion, makes readers engage with the intractability of postcolonial issues in contemporary contexts. The denial of easy resolution characterizes Nelson's approach, unlike the celebrations of multiculturalism, which offer the false hope of the easy reconciliation of racial differences.

Thirdly, the novel shows us how contemporary racialization works not only with overt exclusion, but also through complex mechanisms that pay lip service to diversity while ensuring that marginalization continues. The British multiculturalism professes to welcome Black British subjects, yet the novel shows how this apparent welcome disguises continued denial of their real voice and agency. The protagonist shows that conventional markers of success do not protect against racialization or ensure access to voice. An educated, culturally bilingual, aesthetically accomplished young artist. This complexity is important for comprehending how power structures adjust and endure, despite explicit forms of racial discrimination becoming socially unacceptable.

The novel's conclusion reflects a truth-telling contemporary culture refuses, since hybridity produces displacement, voice remains structurally denied, and visibility functions as surveillance. The novel, instead of showing a false hope that love, art, or reform can address these issues, recognizes how difficult these problems are but pays tribute to the ongoing struggle of the protagonist. The act of bearing witness itself constitutes a form of voice in contemporary literary and political discourse that creates space for the recognition of experiences that the dominant culture seeks to render bland or unspeakable. Nelson's achievement is that he produced a work that enables the very problems it theorizes; an aesthetic experience that communicates what discursive analysis cannot.

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