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Unraveling the Threads of Identity: Examining Diana Bishop's Multifaceted Journey towards Self Discovery in the All Souls Book Series

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Abstract: The article examines the character of Diana Bishop in Deborah Harkness' All Souls book series, focusing on her gradual acceptance, and ultimate embrace of her hybrid identity. Partially through a Deleuzian philosophical lens, the article explores Diana's character, analyzing her portrayal through descriptions of the body, as well as references to medical history and modern genetics. Ultimately, Diana's transformative journey towards self-actualization and embracing of hybridity, a journey that sees her becoming the Book of Life, reflects our need to understand our own hybridity and constant state of becoming, as well as our connection with the universe at large.

Keywords: identity, hybridity, becoming, book of life, fantasy, Deborah Harkness

Fantasy creatures have long served as a powerful tool for discussing issues such as race, gender, and the demonized "other". In modern days they have been employed to address prejudice and recontextualize perceived identity as well. In her All Souls book series, starting with *A Discovery of Witches* (2011), Deborah Harkness conceives a world that is inhabited by four seemingly distinct species: vampires, witches, daemons, and of course, humans. These species populate the earth and begrudgingly co-exist, although humans remain largely unaware of the other species. That said, as it is revealed in the third novel *The Book of Life* (2014), the various "species" are in fact all human "with a difference"; and the way to combat their genetic deterioration, a problem that is referenced numerous times throughout the novels, is for them to "blend" back together. This is driven forward by the series' protagonist—Diana Bishop, who herself has a multilayered and blended identity that allows her to connect with the various creatures she meets, and work towards reunification, rather than separation.

The All Souls series is rooted in the author's academic work as a social historian, with a particular interest in the history of medicine and science in early modern England. Deborah E. Harkness' scientific publications include urban history of early modern London, history of medicine, early-modern scientific revolution, links between English and European science, and history of alchemy in Elizabethan England. She described the "great world" of early modern London (Harkness and Howard 2) as a vibrant site of world-changing historical development. In "A View from the Streets" she described the overlooked and marginalized contribution of women to "medical work" in everyday life in the Elizabethan period (52). A number of articles focus on history of science in the 17th century, including the coexistence of modern science with the practice of alchemy and magic, including an Isis article on John Dee's household (1997). In her novels, Harkness brings these themes to fictional life, transforming historical research into literary imagery, and

asserting the unchanged importance of diversity and inclusiveness in medicine and natural science. When Harkness introduces witches, daemons, and vampires as characters, she merges these characters with scientific imagery, medicalizing them and linking them to natural science, including modern genetics. In this way, fantasy in Harkness's fiction cannot be marginalized as "fantasy" but becomes part of the history of ideas, and assumes a new currency. The present article will interpret Harkness's characters in this light.

Throughout the novels, an underlying theme of self-discovery, self-actualization, and blending of identities prevails, which allows Harkness's fiction to be seen as part of the living tradition of character development based on the self-discovery plotline (Emerson 131-132). This article will examine the character of Diana Bishop partially through the lens of Deleuzian philosophy, focusing on descriptions of the body, references to the history of medicine, and to modern genetics. Diana not only embodies the essence of becoming, but is rhizomatic both in identity and to some degree-body, as she ultimately becomes the ever-sought "Book of Life" in the third novel and the symbol of "species" blending. In her All Souls trilogy, and its follow-up novel *The Time Covenant* (2018), Deborah Harkness, draws from her background as an early modern historian as she infuses the books with literary references from the overt to the obscure, medieval imagery, and interestingly enough references to biology and heredity. Harkness' blending of the fields of literature, art, history, philosophy and science, mirrors her protagonist's identity as a witch who is a historian of alchemy, amongst other things.

One of the aforementioned references is the idea of a book of life itself, and as said object plays a major role in driving the plot forward and informing Diana's character development, it bears mentioning to briefly examine the concept. According to Laura Estill, the book of life was a "theological concept" (283) derived from Revelation 20:12-5, and several other places in the Bible, where the phrase denotes a book (or books) that God will consult on Judgement Day, to send people to heaven or hell. Estill notes that "certain medieval churches created actual books of life and wrote names in these physical libri vitae with the hope that these names would also be copied into God's book of life" (284), and that those physical books now are important sources in historical and linguistic research. Because books of life did not only record names, but also kinship and other biographical information, their meaning could be expanded to cover the general idea of destiny and existential uncertainty (302-3). The book of life seems to be evidence of magical thinking that associated a theological concept, perhaps a metaphor of God's wisdom and power, with an actual physical object, whose name was used as a metaphorical vehicle. In Harkness's novels, the book of life is further associated with genetics and more generally, with the idea that nature (biology) shapes human destiny in individual and collective life.

To go back, *A Discovery of Witches* opens with American historian (and witch) Diana Bishop researching alchemical manuscripts in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, when she comes across an Ashmolean book that turns out to be a magical palimpsest, in addition to a book of alchemy. Although she returns it to the stacks and tries to forget about it, every other creature around starts to

approach her to discover the secret of her ability to get the book. This is because the book is enchanted, and no one has been able to lay a hand on it for hundreds of years. This also brings the vampire Matthew Clairmont to her door as well, and their adventure into discovering the secrets of the book, as well as Diana's own power ensues.

The story contains many plot elements, but at the core of it is a witch who is initially in denial about her heritage, and constantly strives to excel as a "normal" human, due to the trauma of her parents being killed for their (or as turns out her) magic. Her journey towards self-actualization, as she learns, bit by bit, to accept and embrace her heritage as a witch contains elements of a coming-of-age story to a character that was held back by fear and rejection of a part of herself (Emerson 145). Throughout the better part of the first novel, Diana vehemently rejects her identity as a witch, asserting that she does not wish to look back at a life where she took things (through her abilities), instead of earning them. Matthew, on the other hand, attempts to help her reconcile with her identity as a witch, drawing attention to the fact that these abilities are a part of her. At one point, while showing her mitochondrial data regarding ancient witches, he emphasizes that witches, driven by the pressure of living amongst humans through the ages, relied less and less on their power, and started to lose it. Diana quickly takes this as a subtle rebuke towards her. But even taking into account that nothing is as simple as that, and that it is ultimately revealed (in the third novel) that a major factor of this species' deterioration relates to "species" segregation. Diana is, in effect, trying to suppress her rhizomatic self, and her multiplicity of identity, to no avail.

Even beyond Diana's struggles with personal identity and heritage, the conversation between Matthew and her exemplifies Harkness' medicalization of fantastical concepts/beings, such as witches. There are references to mitochondrial Eve (mtEve), and by extension mtLilith (as the first witch from whom all witches descend). Throughout the novels, Harkness builds a complex reference to genetics, understood as a book of life (Etil 300; Bearman v), and to the role of historical medicine in witch-hunts, the "medical origins" of the "witch craze" in early modern Europe (Estes 271-275). Medical science, or rather a paranoid discourse based on the authority of medicine, was used both as a delusional system that defined some women as witches (Estes 271), as a tool of oppression that presented persecution as a medical treatment (Green and Bigelow 195-200). Of course, persecution (seemingly due to genetics) is a prominent theme in the novels, mainly through the overt "species" segregation, and the stereotypes each group carries toward the others. In her article "The Prevalence of Racial Prejudice and Segregation in Deborah Harkness' All Souls Trilogy," Magdalena Łapińska asserts that the species prejudice and segregation found in the book series mimics and "reflects the American reality through a juxtaposition of the race issues presented in the novels and the ones pertinent to the history of the United States" (80). The road forward, the novels and medical science seem to indicate, is by breaking down perceived "walls" of racial identities, and, in a sense, embracing hybridity.

But this does not apply only to racial identity. Diana is both a witch by birth and a scholar by choice. Two "identities" that seem at odds with each other; and

indeed, Diana begins her journey with the perception that in order to embrace being a scholar, she needs to reject her witch self, amongst other things, because using her power would give her what she sees as an unfair advantage over others. Yet Diana also chooses to study the history of science, with a focus on alchemy which as a field blends chemistry, philosophy, and mysticism. When Matthew asks her about her chosen field during their first honest heart-to-heart, she states that she chose history at first for its seeming neatness, only to be further interested once it became more challenging and that her choice to focus on the history of science was driven by her desire to understand how humans could delude themselves into not seeing magic:

Common sense told me to remain silent, but the knotted threads of my own secrets began to loosen. 'I wanted to know how humans came up with a view of the world that had so little magic in it,' I added abruptly. 'I needed to understand how they convinced themselves that magic wasn't important.'

'Have you found out?'

'Yes and no.' I hesitated. 'I saw the logic that they used, and the death of a thousand cuts as experimental scientists slowly chipped away at the belief that the world was an inexplicably powerful, magical place. Ultimately they failed, though. The magic never really went away. It waited, quietly, for people to return to it when they found the science wanting.'

'So alchemy,' he said.

'No,' I protested. 'Alchemy is one of the earliest forms of experimental science.'

'Perhaps. But you don't believe that alchemy is devoid of magic.' Matthew's voice was certain. 'I've read your work. Not even you can keep it away entirely.'

'Then it's science with magic. Or magic with science, if you prefer.'

'Which do you prefer?'

'I'm not sure,' I said defensively. (*A Discovery of Witches*, 72-73)

Diana's defensiveness can be seen as her attempt to maintain a separation between her rejected and embraced identities. It might stem from her unreadiness or subconscious unwillingness to deal with the notion that she has not, in fact, divorced herself from the world of magic; that she is not simply an outside observer, clinically studying a scientific conundrum. That said, this conversation marks the first challenge to Diana's perceived identity, as, despite previous attempts by fellow witches (including her aunts) to bring Diana into the fold, it is a conversation with a vampire, her seemingly "natural enemy" that gently challenges her ideas regarding her identity and her separation from the world of magic. Her confession, mostly to herself, that she chose alchemy because she needed to understand how humans could deceive themselves into disregarding magic, might be a projection of her own attempt to rationalize her relationship with the world of magic, covering it with the seemingly objective façade of scientific studies. Yet, even science is not completely "pure," as Matthew, who is a renowned scientist, asserts. "Good" scientists, he maintains, are just as occupied with the "why" as the "how." Considering philosophical questions regarding our existence occupies Matthew's thoughts just as much as his scientific experiments.

Matthew himself, like Diana, has a hybrid identity, and like her, he also somewhat defies neat categorization. Using this character, Harkness discards the “regular” vampire known from modern pop culture, and brings back the early, “unstable” vampire, known from a variety of sources in folklore and ancient fiction (Leinweber 80-82). Matthew is both a vampire and a devout catholic, one who struggles with the guilt of the fact that he became a vampire while attempting to kill himself to “save” his dead wife and son’s souls (which speaks to the mental state that he was subject to). He is a knight, a spy, and an assassin. At the same time, he secretly suffers from a “disease” called blood rage that makes susceptible vampires more volatile, and much more dangerous. This disease is initially hidden, as its revelation would bring about the extermination of Matthew and his entire blood-related family by fellow vampires. This is a point of similarity between the two characters, as both, in addition to having a multilayered and hybrid identity, are haunted for genetic reasons by their own kind. In Diana’s case, it is revealed in *Shadow of Night* (2012) that she, like her father before her, is a weaver of spells; and that weavers have become semi-extinct, as fellow witches sought to exterminate entire families to prevent their existence. In both the case of blood rage vampires and weaver-witches, it is one’s own “people” that seek to destroy them. This could perhaps be viewed through Julia Kristeva’s abjection. In both cases, they can represent the “me that is not me,” which brings about a sense of alienation and rejection among their kind, as they are repulsed by those that are different.

That said, after meeting each other, both Diana and Matthew begin to embrace their hybrid identities, as well as their differences. In fact, their growing relationship can be seen as a major contributor to the embracing of their hybrid identities. Together, they are more willing to “face their demons,” as well as to accept and embrace the “less neat” parts of their selfhood—a self that is in a constant state of flux and is rhizomatic in nature. And in Diana’s case, this embracing of hybridity and “messy” identities becomes quite poignant, as she comes to her own as a witch, gaining more and more confidence in herself, even though the road towards others’ acceptance is tremulous. This is punctuated by the fact that one of the things she needs to give up to attain the book of life in the third novel is fear itself:

‘Fear.’

My mother had warned me of its power, but I had misunderstood, as children often do. I’d thought it was the fear of others that I needed to guard against, but it was my own terror. Because of that misunderstanding, I’d let the fear take root inside me until it clouded my thoughts and affected how I saw the world.

Fear had also choked out any desire to work magic. It had been my crutch and my cloak, keeping me from exercising my power. Fear had sheltered me from the curiosity of others and provided an oubliette where I could forget who I really was: a witch. I’d thought I’d left fear behind me months ago when I learned I was a weaver, but I had been clinging to its last vestiges without knowing it.

No more. (*The Book of Life*, 463)

When Diana acknowledges her fear and releases it, she is able to attain the Book of Life and then become it. The book in question is absorbed into her own body and becomes a part of her. It is perhaps the case that only a witch who herself has a hybrid identity (and hybrid body), one who has acknowledged and embraced what Deleuze and Guattari would term as her multiplicitous identity, who is able to embody the Book of Life that contains the history and present of creatures; that is about and made up of creatures. The book itself can be seen as a symbolic representation of Diana, as even before merging with her, it is in a constant state of being written. Like her, it is in constant flux, mirroring her continuous state of becoming. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write:

the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities. Each multiplicity is defined by a borderline functioning as Anomalous, but there is a string of borderlines, a continuous line of borderlines (fiber) following which the multiplicity changes. And at each threshold or door, a new pact? A fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible. Every fiber is a Universe fiber. A fiber strung across borderlines constitutes a line of flight or of deterritorialization. It is evident that the Anomalous, the Outsider, has several functions: not only does it border each multiplicity, of which it determines the temporary or local stability (with the highest number of dimensions possible under the circumstances), not only is it the precondition for the alliance necessary to becoming, but it also carries the transformations of becoming or crossings of multiplicities always farther down the line of flight. (275)

Both the book and Diana embody the multiplicity mentioned above. The book contains semi-literal thresholds in the shape of chapters and pages, each of which is a door to another multiplicity; while Diana represents the fiber that stretches between being, molecules, and ultimately the universe. She is a witch “twice over”; the product of two ancient and powerful magical lineages (although one had been better hidden than the other). She is also, as it turns out, a genetic chimera, having absorbed her twin brother’s cells (and abilities) in the womb through “vanishing twin syndrome”. She is a weaver, a time spinner, a witch who is able to see and use both light and dark magics, and a scholar, one who is able to conceive the child of a vampire. At first, this is solely attributed to her weaving, though it later comes to light that weavers and vampires with blood rage both have daemonic ancestry (with daemons mostly being born to “humans”). In *Shadow of Night*, one witch tells Diana: “Some say a witch’s true power comes from being a creature between life and death, light and darkness. At the crossroads of the world, she can undo the work of nature and unravel the ties that bind the order of things” (52). Diana does indeed possess this power. As she learns to embrace her multilayered (and rhizomatic identity—for she defies categorization), Diana becomes one with the universe. She is able to summon a familiar—a fire Drake, which is a creature of three elemental powers: water, fire, and air, and is able to tap into different worlds and different timelines. “Each multiplicity is symbiotic; its becoming ties together animals, plants, microorganisms, mad particles, a whole galaxy. Nor is there a preformed logical order to these heterogeneities” (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 275-276).

In conclusion, Diana's journey towards self-actualization encompasses the notion of acceptance of hybridity and represents our need to understand our state of constant becoming, so as to be one with the universe. Diana's initial attitude is representative of many people who feel that by embracing one aspect of their identity they must eschew everything else, and for whom fear of flux, or as they see it—lack of stability, is a hindering factor that does not allow them to tap into their full potential. Diana's acceptance of her lack of stability, her difference, and everyone's uniqueness allows her to blossom both figuratively and literally, as she changes bodily (for example her hair color), raises trees from the floor, becomes the book of life, and embraces her power and various roles. She is no longer othered, and perhaps her quest towards the unification of humans, daemons, witches, and vampires can be representative of our need to embrace everyone (even if they seem extremely different from us), not in a way where we only focus on our similarities, but in celebrating our differences, and seeing them as a source of strength rather than strife. Perhaps, as is the case with the birth of Diana and Matthew's son and daughter, said acceptance can lead to the elevation of human potential (as well as the decline of prejudice).

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