

“Dear Prudence” as an Interaction between East and West

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Abstract

One of the noteworthy songs to come out of the Beatles' celebrated 1968 trip to India was “Dear Prudence”, authored by John Lennon. “Dear Prudence” is unique in its conjoining of Eastern sounds with a childlike Western theme, and as such it is particularly evident of the way in which Lennon in particular understood the possibilities of artistic hybrids involving the East and West. Moreover, the song can be analyzed by employing Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* as well as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* two-volume series. With such an interpretation in mind, the call for Prudence to “come out and play” involves the sharing of attention of newfound interest in the East with a continued grounding in the familiar West. This is a new “plateau” that does no violence to the past nor to any actor in the present, but instead leads to a peaceful new beginning.

Keywords: Beatles, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus

The facts of the case are not only simple and straightforward, but comprise one of the most widely known intercultural encounters in Western pop history. In early 1968 the Beatles and their spouses, a number of personal and professional friends, fellow musicians, and various others journeyed to India for the ostensible purpose of studying Transcendental Meditation at the feet of the renowned guru Maraheshi Mahesh Yogi. Within a few weeks, all four of the Beatles had departed -- albeit with a batch of memorable songs tucked away in their kits for future recordings (“The Beatles in India,” 2015, para. 3). Anyone wishing to pursue the topic of the Beatles' India visit more thoroughly may do so with freely available resources vastly beyond the *Wikipedia* article that I have just cited, as well as with trade books and other materials. As an example of the latter, the on-line firm *Amazon.com* lists 9,665 entries in their books section for the search term “Beatles.”ⁱ While many of these hits are probably repetitive, one can rest assured that Beatles reading is plentiful in the world of popular trade books alone. Scholarly literature is also well represented on the topic of the Beatles as well as their sojourn in India, with *ProQuest* returning well over 300 scholarly articles.

What is perhaps more lacking in the scholarly literature, however, is an in-depth look at one of the fruits of the Beatles' India venture -- to wit, John Lennon's beautiful song “Dear Prudence” that was recorded for the *White Album* and released later the same year. For those a bit derelict in their Beatlemania, “Dear Prudence” is the song that features a guitar opening that is somewhat reminiscent of a sitar sound, accompanied by a thoroughly Western lyrical call for a girl to cease her toils for a time in order to enjoy childlike play in the sunshine.ⁱⁱ The manner in which “Dear Prudence” forges an association between the cultures of India and the Anglo-America of the Beatles provides a unique perspective on the way in which cultural amalgamations can take place within the context of popular culture. Especially useful for this discussion is a postmodernist reading of the song (both in terms of lyrics and musical structure)

via the postcolonial work of Homi Bhabha, as well as the two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* series (1977, 1987) by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. I argue that “Dear Prudence” is constructed in such a way that the East-West interaction is exemplary of a “productive mechanism” that becomes a memorable “plateau” according to Deleuze and Guattari’s theory. In other words, the song in both its lyrics and musical structure proposes an amalgamation of contrasting cultures that thereafter becomes a new cultural artifact in itself.

The natural place to begin a discussion of the cultural amalgamation of East and West in a popular song is with Homi Bhabha, whose 1994 book *The Location of Culture* provides a substrate to account for precisely how the Deleuzian “nomad” hybridizations can occur across cultural lines. According to Bhabha, the very nature of global cosmopolitanism provides a venue in which individuals and cultures -- even those “located at the periphery” -- can generate new cultural artifacts “so long as they produce healthy profit margins within metropolitan societies” (p. xiv). Writing some three decades after the *White Album* became an instantaneous top-selling album, Bhabha is referring more in this passage to clean rooms producing microchips in cheap labor markets for American and European consumption and what-have-you, but it is apparent that a best-selling rock album is every bit as much a commodity as a cell phone, insofar as intercultural production is concerned.

However, before my argument begins sounding as if I am merely attributing crass global consumerism to John Lennon, I should counter that Bhabha’s argument seemingly implies that these capitalistic amalgamations are inevitable, given that capitalism primarily favors the arithmetic bottom-line and has little if any concern for ethnic difference. An American dollar, a British pound and an Indian rupee all have the same potential for investment in making new commodities if they are each freely available for the purpose. Therefore, global capitalism means that a John Lennon song may have a Maharishi-induced Eastern flavor to blend in with its traditional Western sensibilities, but the end purpose is still the employment of uncommitted financial resources to generate new financial resources.

Given that the song “Dear Prudence” came at a time when Western musical sensibilities were still seated firmly in material dealing with Friday-night dates after the prom and such, the very idea of a call for a girl to come out and play to the tune of a guitar emulating a sitar may today seem a bit unorthodox. Actually, the tenor of the times was such that an unconventional song merging East and West was by no means unusual, nor would it even raised many eyebrows. In fact, the news media blithely followed the Beatles along on their Indian junket and reported their every move at the Maharishi’s ashram in Rishikesh, as exemplified by the several *New York Times* articles published at the time that are footnoted in the Wikipedia article “The Beatles in India” (2015). Nor would the Beatles have broken new ground for themselves even if they had used an actual sitar for the recording on the 1968 *White Album*, for as the *Beatles Bible Website* notes (2015), George Harrison had played a sitar on the 1965 song “Norwegian Wood,” and later employed the Indian stringed instrument on the 1966 *Revolver* album for the song “Love You To,” and on 1967’s *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* for “Within You Without You” (“Beatles and India,” para. 4-7).

But even if sitar pieces (or guitar pieces that arguably sound a bit like sitars are being played) had been uncomfortably odd for 1960s audiences -- which they certainly were not -- the work of Deleuze and Guattari in the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* series would nonetheless deftly explain away the problem. To demonstrate the argument, it is sufficient merely to explain why the two-volume series by the two French philosophers is so named. A gross oversimplification is the adage “a little craziness is a good thing,” but what Deleuze and Guattari have in mind primarily is

an attempt to herd themselves away from “state-sanctioned” philosophizing. Because certain people on the border of insanity (or clearly over the edge) manage this independence -- albeit at a personal cost -- the very functioning of schizophrenic thought processes perhaps hold certain keys to liberation of thought and action.

However, it is necessary at the outset to state that Deleuze and Guattari are not saying that schizophrenia is a good state for an individual to find himself or herself in, but rather that certain symptomatic associations involving the schizophrenic process, if not the process itself, enigmatically show the way to innovative and often useful social mutations. Or, as Deleuze and Guattari’s English translator and commentator Brian Massumi (1991) explains, “schizophrenia is the enlargement of life’s limits through the pragmatic proliferation of concepts” (p. 1). The work had its origin in the chaotic French protests of 1968, which coincidentally occurred in the same year as the Beatles’ Indian sojourn, and which in certain ironic ways led to much greater social confusion within the establishment than four middle-class British musicians could manage even if they tried. At any rate, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* have been viewed by many as a particularly efficacious explanation of why workers and students took to the street in 1968 in what one would normally assume to be a protest against the conservative establishment, and much more enigmatically, why the Left had nothing to offer the protesters (Buchanan, 2008, p. 2). In short, the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project rejects attempts by both the establishment and the liberal opposition to hammer it into conformity, in much the same way that the 1968 protests themselves resisted pigeon-holing.

With this explanation in mind, it becomes apparent that “Dear Prudence” exhibits a certain freedom of expression and form, and moreover, that it is somewhat resistant to traditional interpretation. Furthermore, this resistance begins with the very motivations of the narrator of the song, whose stance toward the girl whom he is serenading is reflective of the differentiation between desire and production explained in *Anti-Oedipus*, the first book of the two-book *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* series. Desire, as can be inferred from Deleuze and Guattari’s explanation, is manifested in the unconscious wish of the narrator of “Dear Prudence” to “come out to play,” but at the same time to do so to the tune of an Eastern-sounding instrument (or at least a guitar with a distinctive Eastern-sounding twang). The simple explanation is that the narrator is in India and in near proximity to Prudence.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, the narrator perceives no need for utility or even for suiting the needs of his friends or the greater good, but merely wishes to issue the most appropriate plaintive call to a sequestered chum when “the sun is up” and “the sky is blue.” Production, by contrast, is manifestly involved in activities of a social nature. Both the narrator and Prudence have been socialized for a certain type of behavior, whether due to parental or peer influence, which can lead to both freedom and constraint, according to Deleuze and Guattari. But as Deleuze and Guattari tell us by way of invoking Freud’s Oedipus Complex as both metaphor and concrete example, socialization can have its oppressions. Best of all from a social standpoint would be for the narrator to merely invite Prudence out for an afternoon in the sun, just as he would do if the two were teenagers in a nondescript town in the Midwest or in Lennon’s home city of Liverpool. But he has other desires that override his needs for conformity, and this is what makes “Dear Prudence” worthy of being characterized as one of Deleuze and Guattari’s “thousand plateaus.”

The reason is that constraint ironically has its moments of liberation. The narrator is at his very best when confronting Prudence with a very traditional and very conventional “mating call,” but one that is accompanied by an Eastern-sounding instrument. Inviting Prudence to play in the sun may be a norm that has been repeated countless times in Western courting behavior and in

popular music, but it is the narrator's ability to transcend the norm that provides him with the liberating moment in which union of Western and Eastern sensibilities can occur. Nor is the song a simple love ballad such as those that one might hear in countless other worldwide musical traditions.^{iv} Instead, the song rides a free wave between the crests of Eastern and Western culture, falling within the confines of neither but instead remaining free of dominance from the attractive influence of either. This may be simply a type of "craziness" that was vetted or at least tolerated by 1960s counterculture, but in Lennon's conjoining of East and West, the message is a cultural hybrid regardless of whether it conforms to the times or not.

In fact, at least one scholar has argued that the Beatles are inherently traditionalist in their thematic undertakings. In "Nothing's going to change my world': Narrating Memory and Selfhood with the Beatles," Kenneth Womack (2010) writes that the Fab Four "unashamedly believe in a form of moral center that exists in sharp contrast with postmodernism's subjective elevation of personal and cultural malaise" (p. 261). Womack invokes the critic Hugh Kenner in singling out "nostalgia as a distinctive feature of modernism that involves a turning-away from contemporary life and a subsequent retreat into the soothing interstices of memory" (p. 261).

However, Womack's analysis rests on Beatles classics such as "Penny Lane," "Yesterday," and "In My Life," which all indeed harken back to an idealized past. And while I don't have particular quibbles with Womack's overall argument, I propose that "Dear Prudence" is one of the Beatles' glaring exceptions in that it is thoroughly postmodern. In other words, the song in both its lyrics and its structure may very well recall a time when Prudence and the narrator would "come out to play" as they would have done in the older and less complicated days, but that the song inherently undermines any attempt to return to the past. Prudence may well have been enticed to "come out to play" in the less complicated rock-and-roll era of the 1950s, but now she is a pantheistic "part of everything" merging both East and West and even celebrated by the birds and the wind, and this is never going to change in any subsequent recreational emergences from her cloistered surroundings. Only the integrated Prudence of today with Eastern-flavored music in the background is of any consequence; how precisely she has played in the past, or with whom, is irrelevant.

As those unfamiliar with Deleuze and Guattari might conclude at this point, the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* volumes are postmodernist precisely because they treat of new cultural interactions and hybrids are involving not a primordial unity, but as an invariable amalgam of other interactions that have occurred in the past. Prudence's "coming out" is always therefore a "deterritorialization" in Deleuzian/Guattarian parlance -- in other words, always like a rhizome that connects living things through an interlocking system. Deleuze and Guattari explain the rhizome in the following manner:

The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. it is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added ($n + 1$). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overspills. (*Plateaus*, p. 21).

To extrapolate, Prudence is merely enjoying a milieu in which she has been invited into the sun, and this neither points to a past of heightened and unity and clarity, nor to a nostalgia for things as they once were, nor necessarily to a bright and glorious future. Rather, the invitation to "come out" is a plateau involving a reterritorialization, which in turn will lead to further deterritorializations and reterritorializations, although the present moment may indeed be a memorable one.

In fact, the very term “plateau” suggests the provisional nature of the reterritorializations. Borrowed from the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, who observed a sexual practice in Bali that downplayed orgasms in favor of heightened moments of passion -- hence, plateaus -- Deleuze and Guattari explain that the plateau is “a continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation toward a cumulation point or external end” (*Plateaus*, p. 22). Furthermore, the plateau is especially noteworthy musically for its relevance to the refrain:

The difference between noise and sound is definitely not a basis for a definition of music, or even for the distinction between musician birds and nun musician birds. Rather, it is the *labor of the refrain*: Does it remain territorial and territorializing, or is it carried away in a moving block that draws a transversal across all coordinates -- and all of the intermediaries between the two? Music is precisely the adventure of the refrain: the way music lapses back into a refrain...the way it lays hold of the refrain, makes it more and more sober, reduced to a few notes, then takes it down a creative line that is so much richer, no origin or end of which is in sight... (*Plateaus*, p. 302).

The refrain, in the case of “Dear Prudence,” is the repetition of the phrase “look around” by the lead singer (i.e., Lennon), with various voices chiming in with a monotone “round round round round.” According to the *Beatles Bible*, the song’s refrain included not only double-tracked vocals by Lennon and supplementary vocals by Paul McCartney and George Harrison, but also contributing vocals by three others, including McCartney’s cousin (“Dear Prudence,” para. 9). The *Beatles Bible* additionally quotes Mark Lewisohn’s *The Complete Beatles Recording Sessions* in noting that the original mix ended the song with a round of applause from the vocalists, although it was later deleted (para. 10). While this may seem like an irrelevant bit of trivia of interest only to the most confirmed Beatles fans, it nonetheless demonstrates that Deleuze and Guattari may indeed have something in their argument that the refrain effectively defines the plateau. It is the contributing vocalists who acknowledged that a new plateau had been reached and, at least in the original version, applauded its ascendance. In effect, the song celebrates not only the call for Prudence to blend her earnest enthusiasm for Transcendental Meditation with her socialized need for a bit of Western-style recreation, but also applauds the very call for her to do so. The song revels in its own multicultural inclusiveness.

As for the musical structure, I would like to turn to a scholarly art by Daniel Beller-McKenna (2002), “I Am/Was the Walrus,” that argues almost precisely the opposite conclusion as the aforementioned essay by Womack. To wit, Beller-McKenna sees the later works of John Lennon, in particular, as attempts to liberate himself artistically from the boxed-in persona of the early Beatlemania days. With particular reference to the psychedelic song “I Am the Walrus,” the author explains that the song’s “tense, static delivery of the lyrics throws the identity relationships in song’s text into strong relief against the shifting harmonies below” (p. 54). Arguing that Lennon invokes various surreal images from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* books, Beller-McKenna further asserts that Lennon “treated the Walrus as a mask,” thereby escaping “unnoticed from his previous Beatle image” (p. 60). The author provides no reading of “Dear Prudence” in this particular essay, but I would argue that the song is much less a manifesto of personal liberation than the decidedly avant-garde “I Am the Walrus.” If the latter is an excursion into the nomadic Deleuzian/Guattarian territory of free association and free-wheeling extravagance, “Dear Prudence” is more an appeal to temper that extravagance in hopes of bringing two worlds together.

The difference is not only in thematic intent of the two songs but also in their very structure. Whereas Beller-McKenna argues that “I Am the Walrus” denotes detachment in the

very way the chords are formed, I would proffer that “Dear Prudence” celebrates the harmony of the “major third,” which emerges after an initial descending cadence in the song’s opening. The major third is repeated four times, and then throughout the opening bars of the lyrics. In other words, the vocalist sings the opening words “Dear Prudence,” descending one full tone from the first to second syllable and then three and a half tones for the third syllable, resulting in a perfect fifth. Meanwhile the accompanying guitar plays four major thirds (from B to F-sharp) between the words “Dear Prudence” and the first appearance of the words “won’t you come out to play.” This process repeats until the final “won’t you come out to play,” which is preceded by a whole-tone drop for a new major third precisely one tone lower. This new major third repeats a couple of times and then with completion of the word “play,” the guitar returns to the original B-F# major third.

The precise harmony is important because, in Western music, the major third has been considered “an imperfect consonance” (“Major Third,” para. 5) – that is, a balance between “a level of sweetness/harshness, pleasantness/unpleasantness, acceptability/unacceptability”, and thus not as melodious as a perfect octave or the perfect fifth (“Consonance and Dissonance,” para. 1, 6), which are precisely the intervals the “Dear Prudence” singer employs in calling out to Prudence. Moreover, both the major third and the perfect fifth are deployed not as whole chords but rather in sequence. Again quoting the *Wikipedia* article on the subject, “if successive sounds are considered, their consonance or dissonance depends on the memorial retention of the first sound while the second is heard” (“Consonance and Dissonance,” para. 3).

Therefore, “Dear Prudence” is both thematically and musically a song in which things go together pretty well -- albeit not perfectly -- to forge new emergences from the building blocks of the older world. Not only is the consonance fairly melodious (but again not perfectly so), but human memory is also necessary to remind one that the harmony is an integration in time. Therefore, the plateau reached by the “Dear Prudence” singer involves a correspondence between the exclusionary desires of two individuals with varying motives, but nonetheless a correspondence that can result in an acceptable harmony.

Returning once more to Deleuze and Guattari, the nature of the harmony in “Dear Prudence” is an expression of multicultural interactions that result in reterritorializations. In other words, the individual and discrete cultural milieu combines the viewpoints of each individual actor -- in one sense, the singer of the song and Prudence herself, but in another, Prudence’s fascination with Eastern mysticism and the singer’s desire to remain grounded in familiar terrain. As Deleuze and Guattari explain,

What does music deal with, what is the content in dissociable from sound expression? It is hard to say, but it is something: a child dies, a child plays, a woman is born, a woman dies, a bird arrives, a bird flies off. We wish to say that these are not accidental themes in music...much less imitative exercises; they are something essential. Why a child, a woman, a bird? It is because musical expression is inseparable from a becoming-woman, a becoming-child, a becoming-animal that constitutes its content. (*Plateaus*, p. 299).

Simply stated, the world of Prudence is the world of becoming, and hopefully a becoming that involves the sharing of her attention between her newfound interest in Eastern mysticism and in maintaining a grounding in her own culture. This is a new plateau that does no violence to the past nor to any actor in the present, but instead leads to a peaceful new beginning.

Notes

ⁱ Due to the subject-matter, the author relies on a number of non-academic Web sites for this paper.

ⁱⁱ The Internet resource *About.com* reports that Lennon used an 1965 Epiphone E230TD Casino to record “Dear Prudence,” while Harrison played a 1968 Fender Rosewood Telecaster and a 1957 Gibson Les Paul Standard, and further that “[t]here are actually no less than five guitar tracks on “Dear Prudence”: two of John playing interlocking runs on his Casino in the right channel, one each of John and George in the left (John’s Casino playing rather distorted, brass-like chords and George soloing somewhat on his Telecaster), and one in the center of George’s Les Paul, adding extra weight under the phrase ‘won’t you open up your eyes.’” *Beatles Music History*, a Web resource at beatlesbooks.com, provides the following information about the first recording session: “What was first recorded on this day was a basic track of John on his electric Epiphone Casino guitar, playing the distinctive finger-picking rhythm work heard throughout the song, George playing a lead guitar part on his Gibson Les Paul, and Paul on drums. After this, John then double-tracked his finger-picking guitar work on his Epiphone Casino during a good portion of the song and George added another lead guitar part, double-tracking his lead work in the final verse by playing an octave higher than his first performance.” As does *About.com*, the *Beatles Music History* Web-site notes that Lennon had learned this particular technique from the musician Donovan Leitch, who was also attending the retreat in India. However, I think the most interesting point is that the very emulation of an Eastern sound is in keeping with the cultural hybridization that I argue is at the heart of the song. Lennon, in other words, gets it both ways: he refers to Eastern and Western sensibilities with a few harmonized plucks of guitar strings.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Prudence of the song was actually the real-life Prudence Farrow, a friend of the Beatles. Further information on the background, though not particularly relevant to this essay, is available at *Beatles Music History* at the Web-site <http://www.beatlesebooks.com/dear-prudence>.

^{iv} Of which there must be many; but the writer will say no more due to his painful lack of knowledge about the subject.

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