
Paul Barrett. *Blackening Canada: Diaspora, Race, Multiculturalism*.
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Paul Barrett's *Blackening Canada: Diaspora, Race, Multiculturalism* interrogates anti-black racism within multicultural Canada via an analysis of black diasporic literature. According to Barrett, the aesthetics of "blackening"—as practiced by authors Dionne Brand, Austin Clarke, and Tessa McWatt—challenge Daniel Coleman's notion of "white Canadian civility" and "[Frances] Henry and [Carol] Tator's theory of democratic racism" found in public policy and news media (104, 106). Building on W. E. B. Du Bois, Rinaldo Walcott, and Lily Cho, Barrett describes "blackening" as both a process of invidious racialization and a set of critical, diasporic practices. In other words, while blackening produces double-consciousness by racially discriminating against non-white subjects as "foreign" or "criminal," its capacities for "process, performance, and strategy" by black authors engender resistance to Canadian

multiculturalism as a colour-blind discourse of inclusion. It does so by re-signifying time, space, and movement in the nation (13), where whiteness is not at the centre and writers can “inhabit [the nation] on their own terms” (190).

Barrett’s introduction challenges commonplace assumptions that multiculturalism promotes diversity. Assessing government documents from the 1960s onward, he shows how white supremacy undergirds Canadian multiculturalism by eradicating “questions of race” (4). Arguing that Canadian multiculturalism promotes assimilationist identities premised on “white civility,” Barrett rejects diversity discourses as a state strategy for managing and containing difference, emphasizing rather “the significance of diasporic histories in the formation of multicultural identities” (5). Accordingly, Barrett calls for a rethinking of literary criticism and its role in the institutionalization of Canadian multicultural literature.

Barrett’s opening chapters discuss the works of Brand and Clarke. Chapter One offers invigorating close readings of Brand’s *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes on Belonging* (2002), *thirsty* (2002), and *Bread out of Stone* (1994), discussing how her activist poetics challenge colonialist notions of national time and unity. Where some critics find Brand’s work pessimistic, Barrett suggests that Brand “rejoices . . . in the unraveling of fixed forms” (64) with a focus on “diasporic time and analepsis” (41). Moreover, he finds that Brand’s image of the door and the actions of leaning, delaying, and interrupting in her poetics help innovate the Canadian long poem. Conversely, in Chapter Two Barrett finds Clarke’s “Sometimes, a Motherless Child” (1992), *The Origin of Waves* (1997), *The Polished Hoe* (2002), and *More* (2008) to be less optimistic. Focused on locations where blackening has and still occurs, Clarke rewrites “the chronotopes of the ship, the train, and the automobile,” revealing “continuities between the spaces of the plantation, the colony, the city, and the nation” (69); Canada becomes “not the site of arrival or origins” but a place “of movement and transition within broader diasporic patterns” (86). Although Barrett is careful to distinguish between the two authors’ works, he finds commonality in their commitments to blackening as “voice, accent, idiom, diction, register, and genre” (102).

Chapter Three shifts focus and method to critique the mainstream news media sources that reported on the case of Albert Johnson, a black Jamaican immigrant who was shot and killed by white Toronto police officers in 1979. While such an analysis is a welcome addition to the study, it is not altogether clear why Barrett focuses solely on Johnson rather than a broader history of Canadian racism in relation to policing—except, perhaps, that both Brand and Clarke have responded to Johnson’s life in their writing. Nonetheless,

this chapter helps to ground the work of Brand and Clarke in the realities of Canadian anti-black racism. Barrett ultimately credits the black alternative press for examining the Johnson case critically and charges mainstream media with catering to the public's racist sentiments by criminalizing Johnson through focusing not only his blackness but also his status as a Jamaican immigrant.

Chapter Four explores depictions of mixed-race identity and the possibility of a multiracial coalition between black and indigenous communities in McWatt's *Out of My Skin* (1998). Barrett's fascinating discussion of "a pre-multicultural document," *Notes on the Canadian Family Tree* (1960), finds that "Anglo and French white Canadians" served as the neutral foundation—"the central trunk of the family tree"—while the category of "Negroes" was made "to account for all black Canadians, despite their varied ethnic, cultural, and national origins" (151). In addition, Barrett reflects on how government documents promote the assimilation of indigenous populations to eradicate treaty and separate status rights (151). This discussion of policy provides a historical context for McWatt's challenging of genealogical claims to Canadian heritage and racial authenticity and his assertion of the political value of a double-consciousness on the part of many citizens.

Revisiting the central claims of the book in Chapter Five, Barrett concludes with a "re-beginning" (190)—a more personal reflection upon racial tensions and "critical multiculturalism" in his hometown of Brampton, Ontario (193). This final chapter gestures toward a politics of location. Both anecdotal and aspirational, Barrett challenges tendencies by critics and writers to fetishize major cities as exemplary sites of immigrant experience while surrounding areas seldom enter the Canadian imaginary. Brampton thus allows Barrett to rethink where critical multiculturalism occurs and how it is practiced.

One wonders whether Barrett might have integrated such a personal approach to multiculturalism throughout his study; nonetheless this concluding gesture—which broaches methodological possibilities for future scholarship—is just one of several notable interventions in *Blackening Canada*. For instance, Barrett critiques and counters literary criticism's tendency to produce sociological readings of authors like Brand, Clarke, and McWatt by adopting a politicized New Formalist approach that excavates from these works "an alternative vocabulary of presence and belonging that exceeds the boundaries of the nation" (15). Exploring the political work of black literary aesthetics, Barrett never loses sight of the urgency to expose the perversity of multicultural tolerance and to interrogate Canadian complacency toward anti-black racism. Barrett rightly argues that "multiculturalism is not strictly policy but also a vocabulary for imagining and narrating diasporic and

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national subjects” (189), although at times his methods of analysis raise questions. In particular, while Barrett’s assessment of how the news media reported the case of Albert Johnson’s murder by white police officers is insightful and memorable, it also carries too much symbolic weight; it is troubling that Johnson is made to stand in for the historical and ongoing racial violence associated with policing and for the political commitments of Barrett’s chosen authors. Moreover, although Barrett confronts the problem of homogenizing blackness, his study does not offer substantial engagement with differences of language, religion, or country of origin; such considerations would enrich and complicate the analysis of blackening as practiced by the state and black diasporic communities. Overall, Barrett’s *Blackening Canada* makes a significant contribution to critical literary studies of Canadian multiculturalism and studies of black diasporic communities in North American contexts while raising exciting possibilities for the future work of literary criticism.

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