

Perspectives

Contesting Clarke: Towards A De-Racialized African-Canadian Literature

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Abstract: This article draws on personal narrative, literary criticism, and multicultural Canadian literature to interrogate George Elliott Clarke's conceptualizations of a Black Canadian literature and a racialized African-Canadian literary canon in his 2002 essay collection *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literatures*. Clarke's work is juxtaposed with my own experience as a bi-racial, multi-ethnic, Black, Negro, mulatto, half-caste, African-Canadian woman, and with those of non-Black scholars, to expose the shifting contours of ethnicity and the blurred and blurring boundaries of Canadian blackness in multi-, mixed-, and indeterminately racial Canada. Through these critical comparisons, I suggest that a racialized African-Canadian literary canon excludes the multiple Canadian cultures in which our literatures are formed, and supports racial constructs that no longer fit the shapes of our multi-ethnic, diasporic, postcolonial skins. I conclude that upon the fertile ground tended by Clarke's Black literary activism, a de-racialized African-Canadian literature may grow.

Keywords: African-Canadian literature, autoethnography, Canadian blackness, ethnic studies, postcolonial studies, race theory

In Canada, some are born black, some acquire blackness, and others have blackness thrust upon them.

George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home* (16)

When I was a child living in northeast Edmonton, the term used for people like me was "Negro." This was in the early 1980s, when everyone

had Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album and Pierre Elliott Trudeau's proclamations about Canadian multiculturalism were being enacted through Canada's new Charter of Rights and Freedoms and—most relevant to my seven-year-old self—through Alberta's public education curricula. I was one of two Negroes in my elementary school, the other a boy named Harley who had darker skin and coarser hair. He had a dad who came out for Parent Day and who gave helicopter rides on his sky-high shoulders while we dug our hands in his thick afro and screamed pure joy. Harley was one grade up from me, but our parents' and teachers' expectations that we would play together was persistent and unavoidable. I remember his theatrical sighs when I approached him on the playground, and my own cramping stomach. I remember hot shame in my face and the tickle of grass on my thighs when he pantsed me on the monkey bars and I ran past the mower line into the Off Limits part of our weedy school field. There were thistles as high as my hips, with dusty purple flowers and winter-bleached garbage hemming the fence. When my cousin Jeff came to get me, his knuckles were split because he had jumped up two times to smash Harley's nose. The three of us had detention for a week. Our mothers received pamphlets about encouraging racial tolerance in young children. I hated Harley.

My grade two teacher was convinced that the colour of my skin and the bend of my hair held cultural portent, and she was both obligated and anxious to celebrate that. I embodied difference in ways extending beyond my thick lips and wide nose, or the braids woven tight to my scalp. The stories of the Middle Passage, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks' bus ride and Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," dashikis and caftans, bone-piercings and cowrie shells, tribal drums, *National Geographic* photo spreads, and advertisements flaunting starved children with flies near their eyes whose fate could be eased for mere pennies a day and whose plight served as leverage against Brussels sprouts resistance and the last limp forkful of spinach: these were all symbols I bore on my skin, at that age unwittingly. They twisted in my hair, swelled in my lips, and spread their creamed coffee stain from the seams of my soles and my pink-white palms. Africa walked with me, my teacher was certain, in step with the captivating *drama* of its terrible colonial history

now edited for prime-time TV. Imagine her surprise when I showed up for Cultural Heritage Day with a Black Forest cake and an index card bearing my auntie's handwritten spaetzle recipe.

My father had taken Africa with him when he returned to Nigeria in 1979. I grew up Negro, mulatto, half-caste, half-bred, bi-racial, mixed, racialized, ethnic, and Black, alone in a vast and indisputably white European Canadian family, settled in almost completely white urban neighbourhoods, small towns, and smaller villages. What of me is African derives from partial genetics and externally imposed suppositions about brown skin and kinked hair and the shifting cultural margin into which they entrap me. I am Canadian in my passport, birthplace, and education. I was Canadian five summers ago when skinheads outside an Edmonton Public Library threw handfuls of dime-sized swastikas at my chest, spit "nigger" at my face, and laughed at my fear. I was Canadian when I picked each crippled plastic cross up off of the sidewalk, on hands and knees, so no other woman's child would have to walk in such filth. I was Canadian when I stood in a grocery near Discovery Bay, Jamaica, and felt the blessed comfort of finally blending in. I am a Canadian wearing the symbols of Africa's pre-emancipation and postcolonial diasporas. It is a costume that does not fade, but darkens in the sun.

I tell you this to make clear that, as for other Canadian children of temporary work permits, student visas, and trans-racial adoption so easily excluded from the academic gaze, blackness may not have been thrust upon me, but it certainly was not learned at home. What I am was constructed by others, by Black and non-Black Canadians' ways of seeing me, by the same discourses of exclusion, marginalization, poverty, and victimization that Africadian literary scholar and writer George Elliott Clarke would have black Canadian writers overcome, and the competing discourses of race-based literary criticism, celebration, solidarity, and nationalism he would have us embrace (Clarke, *Odysseys* 11–17). Who I am is all of these things and none of them. Under this skin built of discourses of race-ness, I am in exile but also at home.

In this essay I explore the panels of my racialized, ethnicized garb through Clarke's works collected in *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-*

Canadian Literature (2002). I tease out the embroidered edge of Clarke's African-Canadian writer and compare its image with those of other minority writers in Canada as well as my own. In particular, this essay seeks to trouble the perceptual boundaries through which performances of Canadian blackness are defined and constrained and consider the role of literary criticism in the social construction of those boundaries. We have, as Clarke and others argue, too few black voices in Canadian literature and Canadian literary criticism. These few are so easily taken to speak for many, or for all. Thus in order to problematize any assumption of a race-based artistic, cultural, or social homogeneity, it is productive to interrogate the racialized foundation on which Black Canadian literatures are defined.

Racialization is, inherently, a mechanism of homogenization. It infers a fundamental sameness on those individuals and texts to which a given raceness—Blackness, Aboriginal-ness, Whiteness, Otherness—is ascribed. A process of *de*-racialization is consequently one that encourages heterogeneity, difference within difference, and a movement toward what Michael Omi and Howard Winant eloquently describe as

yet another view of race, in which the concept operates neither as a signifier of comprehensive identity, nor a fundamental difference, both of which are patently absurd, but rather as a marker of the infinity of variations we humans hold as a common heritage and hope for the future. (370)

This is race as a description, not an ascription, where the term “race” is no longer “good to think with” (Hall 1), but one for which we do not yet have a better word. I believe such a circumstance can be achieved—even in systemically racist, officially multicultural, (post)colonial Canada. But the effort requires a multiplicity of voices from diverse intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and status.

Clarke's literary pedagogy of Canadian blackness represents one voice that continues to work at elevating many black voices within the confines of racialization and the strictures of literary production. My intention is not to challenge Clarke's immeasurable value to Canadian literature, African-Canadian literature, and postcolonial criticism but

to interrogate the utility of those confines and strictures such that a de-racialized, heterogeneous space for the critique of Black Canadian cultural production may be cleared. To this process, I offer my African-Canadian, bi-racial, multi-ethnic, feminine, and fledgling academic voice in the intentional and self-conscious awareness that my narrative is only one of an unheard many. I entreat others to contribute their own voices toward a de-essentialized, de-racialized re-imagining of Clarke's foundational work and a concurrent and ongoing (re)construction of what it means to be black in Canada.

I. Canada in Black and White

In the opening chapter of *Why We Write: Conversations with African Canadian Poets and Novelists*, H. Nigel Thomas outlines the overt and systemic racism facing black authors in Canada and defines the African Canadian literary aesthetic as follows: “No one with visibly African characteristics escapes the sullying such [racist] race theories deliberately or inadvertently produce. It’s a sullying that goes to the heart of our identity, and from our resistance comes that ethos that tinctures our literary works” (xi). A contrasting definition is expressed by Clarke in his interview with Thomas, published in *Why We Write*: “The broader understanding of Blacks in Canada should *include people who look White*, people who identify themselves as Canadians, and people who hate Black music” (Thomas 41; emphasis added). In Clarke’s *Odysseys Home* essay “Canadian Biraciality and Its ‘Zebra’ Poetics” he succinctly expands blackness to include “all black writers—of black, brown and beige persuasions” (232). From Clarke’s perspective, then, to be an African-Canadian writer is to be identified as one. His definitions incompletely separate African-Canadian cultural expression and the experience of racial discrimination from the observable physical determinants of Canada’s racial constructs.

Clarke’s essays focus almost exclusively on the works of *visibly* African-descended North Americans, which makes his inclusive definition of literary blackness difficult to reconcile. Multi-racial or bi-racial African-Canadians who can pass as white may be considered black by those in the know because their parents are identifiably so. They may, as Thomas

describes, have been sullied by racism, and they may choose to retell those experiences through their published works. But the popular understanding of the Black racial category is linked to observable physical attributes such as dark skin, tightly curled black hair, and full lips—never mind the American Black popular culture constructs endemic to Canada that include ghetto poverty, hypersexuality, hip hop culture, and criminality. Can one be an African-Canadian writer if one cannot be identified as black on a Canadian street?

Clarke's expansive inclusion criteria for pretenders to the African-Canadian Writer title echoes the storied "one drop rule" which, in the pre-emancipation period and for decades afterward, classified any known African descendant as some variation of Negro, Black, or Coloured, no matter how fair her skin, straight her hair, or narrow her nose. In "Treason of the Black Intellectuals," Clarke uses his experience of being dismissed as not black enough by some African-Canadian activists in the summer of 1979 as a jumping-off place for his literary and political exploration of the Americanized African-Canadian community's sub-segregation of bi-racial or multi-racial people of colour (182–84). Placed early in the *Odysseys Home* collection, this "treason" foreshadows the conflicted and conflictual situation of light-skinned or mixed-blood blacks in North American literatures that Clarke relates in "Canadian Biraciality and Its 'Zebra' Poetics." Here, we represent the actual or figurative rape of female slaves by white slave-owners. We embody the preferential treatment lighter skin earned in slave owners' homes, if not the broader community. Clarke describes how both the white slave owners and the darker skinned slaves mistreated some mulattoes. They did not belong, yet could not escape, and bore the weight of their "blacker" extended families' resentments.

Through Clarke's descriptions, I see a slave-owner chained to a way of knowing that viciously twists his humanity and ties his fortune, status, success, and livelihood to a static interpretation of race. I see slave-born children chained to self-hatred and confusion deriving from what is known about family—about what a father and mother should be—and what is lived when a child's father is the hated Master, a living devil, and her mother can be sold, shipped, rented, defiled, and beaten in public

view. I am reminded of Alex Haley's posthumously published *Queen: The Story of An American Family*, and of the woman on the city bus who introduced my Nigerian/Jamaican/European-Canadian daughter to her African-American own with a cheerful, "Look at that yellow baby" in a rich Southern accent. These are moving and enduring possible motivations for Clarke's expansive categorization of blackness, but they deny a postcolonial re-imagining of diasporic African-Canadian identities. According to Black Canadian scholar Rinaldo Walcott, this is a major flaw in Clarke's work (Walcott 14–23).

If the Tragic Mulatto tropes persist, it is because we perpetuate them. Yet such textual archetypes are only partially destabilized in Clarke's critique. In providing the official recognition of Canadian Aboriginal Métis bi-raciality as precedent for public acceptance of African bi-raciality (Clarke, *Odysseys* 232), Clarke links bi-racial African-Canadians' contemporary blackness to a history of struggle and marginalization that is uniquely Aboriginal-Canadian and ignores the vast multiplicity of cultural shades marking current Canadian ethnicities. Clarke's words seek to seam-stitch a definable culture into which a canon of black literatures can be enfolded, defended, and shared—an admirable and necessary project toward a meaningful reconstruction of uniquely Canadian discourses on black identities. But Clarke's African-Canadian writer is fashioned from incomplete re-definitions of Civil Rights Movement equality and borrows resonance almost solely from American, Caribbean, and Africadian voices. Writers from Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, Rwanda, and Ethiopia who came to Canada over the last few decades for work, school, or safe haven are absent from *Odysseys Home*. There is thus a void in Clarke's African-Canadian narrative of lives. Racialized tropes, however well intentioned, are inadequate substitutions.

Clarke's definitions of African-Canadian are by turns racially essentialist (*Odysseys* 15) and phenotypically inclusive (*Odysseys* 232), and he does this for a reason. In "Discovering African-Canadian Literature," he writes that "five centuries of Eurocentric Imperialism have made it impossible for those of us descending from Africa, Asia, Oceania, Aboriginal Australia, and Aboriginal America to act as if we are pure, raceless beings" (*Odysseys* 17). He asserts, "we confront the global com-

plex of a white supremacist capitalism that vigorously *rac*es and erases whole populations—as it so will” (17; emphasis in original). His inclusive definition of African-Canadian literatures as the cultural production of Black Canadian authors is thus as reactive and radical as Dany Laferrière’s Vieux undertaking intentionally exploitative seductions of white bourgeoisie Québécoise in *Comment faire l’amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*: while Vieux runs satire-smooth lynch-ropes over the throats of his oppressors, fucking their once biting now slackened forms, Clarke embraces their mixed-blood progeny, the strange fruit ripened, and celebrates its black/brown/beige/sand-white flesh. This is an admirable departure from militant Black/White racial essentialism.

Yet Clarke’s wholly reasonable—even welcoming—racialization of African-Canadian literature minimizes or excludes our potential to flourish in non-black, non-African, non-ethnicized soil. In “Canadian Biraciality and Its ‘Zebra’ Poetics,” Clarke allows that “African-Canadian mixed-race writers have challenged puerile categorizations of their complex *selves*” and maintains that “the only real intolerance is the demand for oneness coupled with the demand for sameness” (*Odysses* 232; emphasis in original). But he also insists that our literatures, our lyrical expressions of self, are *Black* literatures. The demand for oneness coupled with the demand for inclusion under a socio-political title that has long imputed sameness, however erroneously, remains a demand for intolerance. Clarke presents a “rainbow-gorgeously coloured” (232) and a deeply human idea of what it means to be a Black Canadian against a monolithic body of white that denies what is half of us, or imputes a sort of functional schizophrenia as we negotiate between impossibly distinct racial categories.

II. Black Ink on White Presses

When I was a child, my favourite thing about writing stories was the associated feeling of anonymity. At that time, I believed I could write whatever I wanted, however I wanted, using words like mortar to brick the doors of safe places, blocking myself in or out. A writer could be anyone, and in those years before Wordpress, Goodreads, Facebook, Google, and any desire I might have had to study literature’s crafts and

craftspeople, it was possible to believe readers could enjoy my stories without apprehending my difference. I could disappear into my words and write my way out of this costume I wear on my skin—*not* toward whiteness as another suit to wear, but to a home place where such skin suits would matter less than the red muscle and grey nerves they contain.

Clarke and Thomas both recount the struggles facing African-Canadian writers in getting their works published by major Canadian and American publishers (Clarke, *Odysseys* 333–35; Thomas vii–xvii). Traditional publishing houses, owned and operated by Caucasian-Canadians of British or Western European descent and representing enduring vestigial colonialism, were unwilling to risk royalty advances and publicity funds on books containing “Black themes” (Thomas ix). Some African-Canadian authors founded their own small presses and magazines, and many continue to self-publish (Clarke, *Odysseys* 334). A lucky few broke through to national and international success. Others, Thomas argues, remove all indication of race from their work to improve their chances at being published (xv).

While I have no doubt that black authors have removed racial indicators from their work, I challenge Thomas’ implication that all have done so in order to “look white” in print. Can the omission of racial themes not be as politically radical an act as their inclusion? Does “raceless” necessarily mean “white”? The African-Canadian writers interviewed in Thomas’ *Why We Write*, including Clarke, unanimously assert that their works should not be defined by any externally imposed ethnic or sociocultural boundary. Why, then, does Clarke maintain the necessity of marking African-Canadian literatures as Black literatures, however broad-spectrum our blackness? In conversation with Thomas, Clarke responds:

The vast majority of the critics of Black Canadian writing are White women. They have every right to be our critics, and they do a good job, generally speaking. At the same time, there is a kind of liberal feminist agenda at play, which while useful and helpful and good, is also limiting, obstructionist, and vague about what particular writers are trying to do. (Qtd. in Thomas 56)

Clarke's tripartite activist agenda, through which he defines, expands, and defends Black Canadian literatures, is an act of protection against systemic racism in the publishing establishment and the academy, against stereotypically white responses to racialized non-white writings. According to Thomas, the phrase "[a]ll art is a cry for identity" is among Clarke's signature statements (39). Taken together, these motivations cast the act of African-Canadian canon formation as the construction of a community, a belonging-place from which personal identity and political agency can be derived. This need to draw a meaningful social identity from Canada's postcolonial multicultural milieu is a condition I understand very well. But the practice of ethnic inclusion necessitates a concurrent practice of ethnic *exclusion*, a raised rough seam that chafes at my neck.

Like Clarke in his youth, I worked hard at discovering what it means to be Black, to be African-Canadian next to the African-American cultural machine. And it was a *resolutely* American cultural machine because, as Clarke so aptly expresses:

[t]he history of Black people in Canada is one of erasure. And it continues to this day. We don't have the institutions that Blacks in the US have, that disseminate knowledge of ourselves, and so we're beholden to the majority group institutions that have historically not been interested in recording the legacies of Black achievement, of Black presence, and so on. So we're constantly running up against this massive ignorance: a constant chorus of "I didn't know." So those who know must fill in the blanks. (Qtd. in Thomas 39)

Where we differ, perhaps, is in our understanding of the engine driving this erasure of African-Canadian history in Canadian academics and media: silencing the past does support the agendas of the cultural majority in preserving the status quo, including social stratification, cultural exclusion, and the marginalization of minority groups. It does maintain the very illusion of cultural equality, as perpetuated by Canada's self-congratulatory multiculturalist discourse, which brings visible minorities from other nations to Canada and keeps many of them poor.

But this illusion, however false, allows the hopefulness we hear in Somali-born Canadian writer/musician K'naan's "Wavin' Flag" and glimpse in Trinidadian-Canadian Claire Harris' *Drawing Down a Daughter*, and which breaks our hearts in East Indian Canadian Rohinton Mistry's "Swimming Lessons," African Asian Canadian M. G. Vassanji's *No New Land*, Italian-Canadian Paul Tana and Bruno Ramirez's *Sarrasine*, and Viennese-Canadian Henry Kreisel's "The Broken Globe." The myth of harmonious, tolerant, truly equitable Canadian multiculturalism is no less false for this hopefulness, but does clear a space for the real work of decolonization to begin. Here I am reminded of Bengali-Canadian Himani Bannerji's admission that while Canada's institutions of liberal democracy are mechanisms of systemic racism, we black/brown/beige Canadians may still have to use those mechanisms to fight our way free of society's margins (Bannerji 119). To fight racism with racialization may have been—and may continue to be—a necessary insanity engaged to protect the rights and voices of those who would be silenced. It was for many years our only available tactic. But whether this or any ethn racially essentialist counter-campaign has unproductive side effects must also be continually interrogated.

Like so many stories by so many writers from other ethnic diasporas, African-Canadian literatures are often marked by movement, exile, otherness, immigration, and reconstructed home. When we come to realize, like Harris' life-swollen Trinidadian She and Caterina Edwards' stoic Italian Maria, that our journey has changed us too much for us to ever find home in our home countries, is there not comfort in de-racializing our pain? Canadians must learn our history. I firmly agree with Clarke that it serves no one to hide behind the glossy pamphlets that declare a false multicultural harmony or to maintain an attitude of disbelief when hearing that Canada, like all of Britain's and France's colonies, bought and kept African slaves.¹ Our current postcolonial reality absolutely derives from colonial transgressions. But perhaps one way to move from a narrative of victimization to a narrative of healing is to emphasize the diversity of Black and non-Black experiences that continually construct Canadian ethn racial identities. A meaningful and truly inclusive peda-

gogy of postcolonial difference requires critique, dissent, resolution, and protest from within and outside all presumed cultural identities.

III. Politics of Voice and Difficult Learning

In “(Re)telling to Disrupt: Aboriginal People and Stories of Canadian History,” Susan Dion speaks to the necessity that Aboriginal-Canadian stories be (re)told in ways that allow for authentic exchange between ethnic minority storyteller and ethnic majority listener. She writes that “Canadians have told and retold themselves a particular story; hearing our stories disrupts their understanding of themselves” (59). This often results in a refusal to hear, a reflexive self-protection from psychological harm, and an avoidance of this painfully difficult learning, which is a deeply human response applicable to all people. There is thus a “need for a careful interrogation of how to tell in ways that will disrupt the resistance to hearing” (Dion 59). African-Canadian writers, like Aboriginal-Canadian writers, cannot speak through stereotypical racialized radicalism and expect the diversity of our individual stories to be heard. We need to challenge our own assumptions about the politics of black storytelling and the presumed ignorance of white listeners.

The political terrain on which the African-Canadian literary canon is forming contains overlapping borders. We live in a country where a Ukrainian minority activist writer like Myrna Kostash can, in the space of a decade, be re-labeled a white “member of the privileged *majority*” and consequently “part of the problem” (Kostash 92, emphasis in original) and where the label “black” once imputed an unfavourable ethnicity rather than an unfavourable skin-tone alone (Fee et al. 138). A shift in the public policy definition of “ethnic minority” can strip the authority from our ethnic voices and allow a hierarchy of cultural agency within minority activist groups to persist, just as the Black Power call to arms linked recycled gradients of blackness to degrees of cultural privilege and sustained a comforting blindness to Malcolm X’s caramel light skin. We exist within a politics where some French-Canadian activists can label themselves white Negroes (Clarke, *Odysseys* 165–66), degrading all of us with their thoughtless, sensationalistic misappropriation of African-American racial tropes. The solution to this divisive posturing is not, in

Kostash's view, to build up and reinforce the ethnic barriers between us. The solution is

a rearticulated idea of the common cause that cannot fulfill itself without enabling subcultures to be fully present in public life and that go beyond the usual contradictions of majority and minority, centre and margin, self and other, ethnic and universal, whose resolutions usually involve the demonizing of the one in order to satisfy the demands of the other. (Kostash 96)

Kostash's perspective bears strong parallels to Ghanaian-American writer/scholar/philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's reinterpretation of the cosmopolitan moral philosophy, in which, as he entreats in *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* cultural, literary and physical miscegenation need not undermine the political agency of its adherents.

Appiah is a humanist activist who argues for a universal appreciation of human triumphs and a universal responsibility for human failures. By contrast, Clarke's work specifically and exclusively supports an African-Canadian communalist activist agenda, gathering the fragmented, disparate, and diasporic fragments of Canada's black, brown, light, dark, immigrant, exiled, homespun fabric to drape a particularly African (or Africanized) minority form. He does not demonize Canada's dominant white culture, but he does maintain their position as Other, as the product of a white politics both different from and privileged over our own. Both Kostash and Appiah avoid such generalizations and instead affirm that a multiplicity of minority and non-minority voices is both unavoidable and eminently desirable in the ongoing reconstruction of Western cultural terrain. Appiah writes: "My people—human beings—made the Great Wall of China, the Chrysler Building, the Sistine Chapel: these things were made by creatures like me, through the exercise of skill and imagination. I do not have those skills, and my imagination spins different dreams. Nevertheless, that potential is also in me" (127). Clarke speaks to Appiah's deconstruction of racial identities in the opening chapter of *Odysseys Home*, entitled "Discovering African-Canadian Literature," and concludes that while race is a socially constructed—not

biologically determined—category, we inarguably live in a society in which meaningful racelessness has not yet been attained. He writes that “blackness remains an absolute relative epistemology” (Clarke, *Odysseys* 16), a statement with which I wholeheartedly agree.

These vexed constructions of race and ethnicity in Canada involve what Sneja Gunew calls pedagogies of estrangement (Gunew 137), a consequence of “vernacular cosmopolitanisms” (134) that occupy a conceptual middle-ground between Clarke’s regionalism and Appiah’s universalism. Here, the lived and local experience of alienation or exclusion is not subsumed or diminished by larger cultural or political concerns—by international constructions of race or by global ideals of moral obligation. Put another way, vernacular cosmopolitanisms permit ethnoracial and sociocultural identities to be interpreted as multiples, not absolutes, and allow estrangement to be interpreted as a matter of degree within and across socially constructed categories. I agree with Gunew that theorizing vernacular cosmopolitanisms is a valuable “counter tactic” (134) to a postcolonial cosmopolitan utopianism that masks systemic ethnocultural marginalization. Her approach can be engaged to critique and destabilize Canada’s multicultural mythology and therefore to expand Clarke’s foundational work on bringing silenced narratives to voice. But it remains a different thing to be excluded based on invisible or semi-visible markers of Otherness, such as Ukrainian heritage, homosexuality, or low-income status, than it is to be rendered lesser by the colours of our skin. Whether we perceive it as our home-place, our identity, or a costume pressed on from outside, race remains our African-Canadian black/brown/beige reality. For now.

IV. After *Odysseys Home*

Through the process of drafting, discussing, revising, and presenting this essay, I have been extremely fortunate to receive both praise and criticism for the arguments it contains. Many readers responded warmly. Some were shockingly furious. One accused me of White apologetics, self-hatred, and attempting to set Canadian Black activism back to the 1960s. For two others, my criticisms of *Odysseys Home* were taken as attacks on a personal hero—or so their vitriolic responses suggest. Clarke

is perhaps Canada's most preeminent, highly decorated, successful, and recognized African-Canadian literary scholar. Who am I to question his work? Who am *I* to challenge his conclusions?

More constructively, readers asked me to consider *Odysseys Home* in the context of Clarke's life's work, as the first Canadian publication of its kind, and particularly as a work that was published in 2002, over a decade prior to my attempt at critique. While I agree with Walcott that celebrating "firstness" is counterproductive insofar as it deflects meaningful criticism (27), and even more strongly with Teun van Dijk's statement that "following" a given theorist—even a pioneering one—is prone to "a form of academic obsequiousness" that is "incompatible with a critical attitude" (95), my initial reading of *Odysseys Home* was erroneously divorced from its temporal context. Despite the present-tense timelessness academic writing gives texts that are always, invariably written in the past, a decade is half of a generation of changes in perspectives, politics, and life and must be so contextualized.

Some of those changes are evident in Clarke's 2005 essay "Towards a Pedagogy of African Canadian Literature," wherein a shift in focus from what African-Canadian identities *are* to what the teaching of African-Canadian literatures can accomplish echoes Stephen Slemon's re-situation of Canadian postcolonial studies as a multivocal, multifaceted social justice project in his Afterword to Laura Moss' collection *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*. However, although Clarke gestures toward a more heterogeneous plurality of African-Canadian cultures than we find in *Odysseys Home* and argues forcefully that "the history and currency of African-Canadian *cultures* may serve to reveal the operations of oppressive state practices" ("Towards" 59; emphasis in original), in the conflictual field of postcolonial studies any sack sewn around a racial identity—especially in the cultural (and biological) interstices where those racial identities shift and blur—is problematic. Which bags are for those of us whose cultures do not match our skins?

In response to an early draft of my essay, Clarke was the first to suggest I consider his 2012 collection *Directions Home: Approaches to African-Canadian Literature*. The opening chapters of *Directions Home* are devoted to addressing the criticisms *Odysseys Home* evoked, including those

of essentialism, racialization, and inadequate consideration for the post-slavery, post-Civil Rights Movement African diaspora I address earlier in this essay. Despite Clarke's somewhat apologetic admission that *Odysseys Home* was written with a chip on his shoulder which may have inadvertently caused critical misunderstandings (*Directions* 4), and given the shin-kicking between Walcott and Clarke in the opening arguments of their respective essay collections, I am hesitant to conclude that *Directions Home* marks a significant change in theoretical foundation when compared to his original collection. Clarke's shift in stance away from racial essentialism is incremental and his narrative segregation of African-Canadians from other ethno-racial categories only slightly less absolute.

Though none of the essays in the later collection deal as directly with bi-raciality or multi-ethnicity as "Canadian Biraciality and Its 'Zebra' Poetics," Clarke's "Repatriation of Arthur Nortje" considers the multiple homelands of a multi-ethnic author in a refreshingly cosmopolitan way. Though Clarke's comparison of African-Canadian and Italian-Canadian literatures in "Let Us Compare Anthologies," the seventh chapter of *Directions Home*, allows that both of these ethnic minority communities struggle for equality under Canada's English/French dominance, he concludes that "the struggle of African Canadians is more acute" (101). His tone and manner are perhaps less confrontational than we find in *Odysseys Home*, but the elevation and preservation of the cultures of "our people" (*Directions* 10; emphasis in original) remains his central objective and theme. Taken with his 2005 work "Toward a Pedagogy of African Canadian Literature," Clarke's post-*Odysseys* perspective has demonstrably shifted to allow that the African-Canadian situation in Canada has common ground with those of other ethnic, immigrant, and minority groups still struggling against the myth of multiculturalism for social, political, economic, and cultural equality. However, the barriers between and the differences within these groups are not contested or problematized. What is African-Canadian is no less racialized Black, and the non-African-Canadian racial counter-structure is only slightly less monolithically White.

To be very clear, I do not dispute the necessity or the value of reading and teaching Clarke's work. His focus on Black Canadian history and

his celebration of literatures voiced by African-Canadians draws audible truths out of discourses of silence, and Canadians *absolutely* need that difficult learning, whatever our respective phenotype. But Clarke's literary and academic preeminence, and his writings' constant and intentional slippage between describing Black Canadian literatures and defining Black Canadian identities, presents a dangerously monovocal narrative that homogenizes our lived experiences into racialized performances of African-Canadianness, even while espousing our heterogeneity. It must therefore be made equally clear that no one person's interpretation, however skilled, can sound all of our tones. In the introduction to *Directions Home*, Clarke writes about *Odysseys*: "I did not go far enough, or I went too far; I was ignorant, or I was too indulgent" (9). How could it have been any other way?

In February 2014, I was privileged to present a portion of this paper at McGill University's Unmasking Masquerade conference, accompanied by slides displaying the incomparable Charla Maarschalk's paintings of multiethnic faces. In the discussion that followed, I was asked whether de-racialization is possible—whether African-Canadian literatures can be read as something other than attempts by non-whites to write back against colonialism's enduring oppressions. My answer was "not yet," but I believe firmly it can be done. Those of us born and raised at the interstices of once distinct and once immediately determinable ethnoraacial communities are increasing in number and in voice, in no small part because scholar-activists like Clarke cleared the space for our (re)tellings. Within the safe place opened up by African-Canadian canon-formation and literary critique, the self-told stories of our multiple, plural, heterogeneous, black/brown/beige/sand-white identities may one day render both the canon and its continually contested boundaries nominal—a description, not an ascription, of the (multi)cultural texts they contain.

V. Concluding Remarks

I was nineteen years old when I opened a book on Nigerian art and saw, for the first time, a photograph of a centuries-old Benin bronze. My connection to that image of a woman whose eyes, nose, and mouth were shaped so much like mine endured with me in ways religious dogma

and American media have never been able to do. I went to high school in a town where the only movie theatre for two hours in any direction refused to show the 1992 *Malcolm X* film, and where I saw police officers turn fire hoses on Somali and Sudanese men in town on work permits during a bar brawl that spilled out into the parking lot. To lay eyes on such a beautiful pre-colonial artifact of my father's home was a cool breath drawn fast into a burning tight throat. So, I do understand Clarke's desire to celebrate and elevate African-Canadian heritage and to fight for its inclusion in Canadian academia and literary publishing and critique. These works represent a homecoming, a safe place, in a land where we wear the current and historical victimization of a criminally transplanted minority population on our skin, faces, and hair.

But while I own the rage and shame of those men soaked and cowering while their pale-skinned aggressors smoked cigarettes and laughed, and while I cried joy when Michaëlle Jean was sworn in as Governor General of Canada because of what barriers that victory might tear down for my Nigerian/Jamaican/European-Canadian daughter, I cannot deny ownership of those fire hoses, either. If the Black victims are my people, the White aggressors are no less so. Who "my people" are cannot be presumed from the shape of my nose.

In the closing stanza of "Look Homeward, Exile," Clarke writes:

I remember my Creator in the old ways:
I sit in taverns and stare at my fists;
I knead earth into bread, spell water into wine,
Still, nothing warms my wintry exile—neither
Prayers nor fine love, neither votes nor hard drink:
For nothing heals those saints felled in green beds,
Whose loves are smashed by just one word or glance
Or pain—a screw jammed in thick, straining wood. (360)

This, to me, is the story of Canada. This is long, cold winters and the promise of democracy. It is turning soil, oil, seeds, and light into bent backs, cracked hands, and a future for our children. It is superficial transcultural tolerance knife-cut by throw-away phrases or earnest judicial declarations that re-categorize human beings into skin-tones,

eye-shapes, hair textures, accents and cadences of speech and then leave us to bleed. It is the perception of cultural homogeneity, those tightly bunched rings of blonde maple stock and the identity-rupturing force of inclusion/exclusion torqued with each twist of the screw. Clarke's poetic vignette brings to mind flesh-tan fists, amber ale, clear glass bottles flaunting caramel-dark Canadian Club and cinnamon-brown Appleton Estate Black Label; dark earth turned and strange fruit fallen, fermentation, rot, and new life; guilt, disillusionment and striving. This is *Canada* for Italian, German, Jewish, Irish, Caribbean, Swedish, Ukrainian, Scottish, African, and African-American immigrants who came here full of hope for a new beginning, a new equality, and learned there is so much work left to do.

Both Kostash and Clarke entreat readers to remember our history, the particularly Canadian betrayal of ethnic minorities, and the continually contested reshaping of our (multi)cultural fabric. Where they differ is in their willingness to revert to racialized labels for marginalized cultural formations. Kostash, like Appiah, challenges the utility of a cultural hierarchy based on colour or ethnicity. Clarke entreats African-Canadian writers to wear blackness proudly, ensuring a continual source of shared sociopolitical agency in a disparate but unified Black Canadian voice. Kostash is a Ukrainian-Canadian minority woman who had been unwittingly, unwillingly, reclassified as "White." Clarke is an African-Canadian Nova Scotian man who integrates Canada's diversity of African-descended writers into a literary pedagogy of Canadian Blackness and attaches a subtextual amendment to our hyphenated Canadian identities. As the Nigerian-Canadian, black/white daughter of an unmarried, low-income German-Canadian mother, I know the shifting seams of such subtextual identities intimately.

Writing on issues of race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism is an inescapably personal process. I struggled to separate Clarke's ideas of African-Canadian blackness from those imposed on me by well meaning and malicious European and African-descended Canadians for as long as my memory extends. I found myself arguing with his texts, challenging his phraseology, and asserting, repeatedly, that his expression of blackness is not mine, that his canon of African-Canadian literatures

does not reflect my voice, my life, my reality. Blackness is a skin-fused suit I wear over red muscle and grey nerve. It is stitched with what is assumed of me by those who choose to see only my brown skin and kinked hair. It is etched with fresh waves of African immigration, dyed through by the American Black media machine, and marked with the out-seeping, seam-marring stains of my personal cultural realities. But whether or not the visibility of my minority status *should* be a basis for inclusion or exclusion in any externally imposed cultural category, I cannot deny that it *is*. As Mistry states, the visible minority immigrant-Canadian writer “has an area of expertise foisted on him that he may not necessarily want, or which may not really interest him. He may not want to be an expert in race relations” (qtd. in Kamboureli 253). Canadian history, historiography, academia, and activism deny the possibility of a concurrently non-white and non-ethnic body of literature. Race-based, *face*-based, categorization is *currently* unavoidable.

There is hope, however, in the transient nature and uneven stitching of our stretching, bunching cultural seams: ethnic minority constructions in Canada repeatedly challenge essentialism, even one as broadly conceived as Clarke’s. Black themes in Canadian literature are as difficult to distill as the inclusion criteria for an African-Canadian literary canon, and both epistemes are subject to ongoing debate. What comprises a “minority” ethnicity is prone to change, as is assuredly what we mean by “race” at all. In cultivating his multi-shaded appreciation of blackness in others, Clarke’s efforts prepare the ground for new appreciations, and thus for revised and ultimately de-racialized definitions of these terms, to emerge. *But there is so much work left to do*. With this essay, I offer my voice to our country’s ongoing multi-ethnic, anti-racist education, as Clarke has given his. I invite you to offer your voice, too.

Note

- 1 It must be acknowledged that the history of slavery in Canada is not exclusively or simply a “white problem.” Not all slaves in Canada were of African descent and not all slave-owners were of Anglo-Celtic or French descent. I invite readers to consider Trudel’s *Canada’s Forgotten Slaves: 200 Years of Bondage* and Naylor’s *Canada in the European Age: 1453–1919*. Of particular interest is Naylor’s treat-

ment of Canada's use of Asian coolie labour in the Settlement period, which problematizes the popular definition of slavery and therefore extends Canadians' participation in slave trading for decades beyond John Graves Simcoe's 1793 Act Against Slavery and the British Crown's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.

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