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# The Literary Legacies of Black Britain and Black Canada: A Comparative Reading of Andrea Levy's and Austin Clarke's Early Works

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**Abstract:** This essay offers a comparative, transnational reading of Andrea Levy's first two novels—*Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996)—and Austin Clarke's Toronto Trilogy—*The Meeting Point* (1967), *Storm of Fortune* (1973), and *The Bigger Light* (1975). These early works bear striking similarities to one another; they are also notably different from those of the Windrush generation, the first wave of Caribbean writers such as George Lamming and Samuel Selvon who published in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. While the Windrush writers framed themselves and their works as articulating a Caribbean consciousness, both Levy's and Clarke's early texts demonstrate a profound interest in exploring Britain and Canada, the spaces from which the authors wrote and in which their novels are set. Levy and Clarke display a similar literary commitment to negotiating a place for Blackness in nations that were, in the 1960s and 1970s, actively hostile to non-white people. Their early novels indict and hold their respective nations accountable for their marginalization of the Black immigrants and their descendants who are, or will become, their legal if not their social citizens. The essay also examines the various literary traditions in which Levy and Clarke are—or are not—positioned and how they situate themselves vis-à-vis their respective nations. By insistently naming themselves, their characters, and their works as English and Canadian, respectively, they write against dominant narratives that use their Caribbean ancestry to attach them to elsewhere.

**Keywords:** Andrea Levy, Austin Clarke, social citizenship, nationhood, anti-Black racism

## I. Introduction: Remembering

In December 2019, when the guest editors contacted me about submitting an article for this special issue on Andrea Levy, I enthusiastically agreed. A week later, my mother died. As I thought about how to approach an essay for an "in memoriam" issue in the early months of my grief, I was reminded of another recent literary loss: the passing of Austin Clarke in July 2016. His was the first funeral I attended after my father died. These personal and literary losses were deeply intertwined for me and left me to dwell in the same overwhelming sentiments David Scott expressed in the wake of Stuart Hall's passing in 2014: "[I]t's just that this nonnegotiable fact of death is so precipitous, so vertical in its irreversibly absolute finality. So much is left suspended in the sudden, unlit absence. It's what makes death so radical and so unforgiving an interruption, I suppose, so impossible to really prepare for" (*Stuart Hall's Voice* 3).

In this article, I bring Levy's first two novels—*Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994) and *Never Far from Nowhere* (1996)—into conversation with Clarke's Toronto Trilogy—*The Meeting Point* (1967), *Storm of Fortune* (1973), and *The Bigger Light* (1975). My desire to stage this conversation, however, is not merely self-indulgent, given the entangling of these literary losses with those of my family members. I am aware that Clarke and Levy write from different geographic locations, and from what Scott calls very different "problem-spaces" (*Refashioning* 8). Levy's and Clarke's novels are set in the 1960s and 1970s, but while Clarke wrote and published his trilogy about the experiences of Barbadian migrants in Toronto during those decades, Levy wrote retrospectively, publishing her first two novels about the children of Jamaican immigrants in London in the 1990s. Nonetheless, like Mark Stein I want to trouble any simple notion of generation, both in terms of immigration and literary generation, because sometimes "writers and texts cannot be readily taxonomied according to their age . . . or their parents' or grandparents'

arrival in their country of residence" (Stein 6). Despite these differences, I argue that Levy's and Clarke's early works bear striking similarities to one another and that they are also notably different from those of the Windrush generation—the first wave of Caribbean immigrant writers, such as George Lamming and Samuel Selvon, who published mainly in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. If we are to think in more complex—indeed transnational—ways about literary chronologies and legacies, it is notable that Clarke's Toronto Trilogy, published between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, occupies a relevant geotemporal interstice between the novels written by the Windrush generation in the 1950s and 1960s and Levy's output in the 1990s and 2000s. This timeline and the notable confluences of Clarke's and Levy's geographic preoccupations with Canada and Britain—rather than the Caribbean—suggest that there are compelling reasons to examine Clarke's early Toronto-based works alongside Levy's early London novels.

Both Levy and Clarke eventually won international acclaim for later novels set partly or entirely in the Caribbean, which explore the histories and legacies of colonization and transatlantic slavery. After a long, under-recognized literary career, Clarke's tenth novel, *The Polished Hoe* (2002), received multiple accolades, winning the 2002 Scotiabank Giller Prize, the 2003 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Canada and the Caribbean region, and the 2003 Trillium Book Award. Similarly, Levy published her first three novels to modest acclaim, only gaining widespread popular and critical success with her fourth novel, *Small Island* (2004), which won the 2004 Whitbread Book of the Year, the 2004 Orange Prize for Fiction, and the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Europe and South Asia, and her fifth and final novel, *The Long Song* (2010), which won the 2011 Walter Scott Prize. Despite being celebrated for their novels that engage with the Caribbean, both Levy's and Clarke's early works demonstrate a profound interest in exploring Britain and Canada, the spaces from which the authors wrote and in which their novels are set. Although Levy's and Clarke's early works do not always explore these spaces in the same ways, both authors display a similar literary commitment to negotiating a place for Blackness in nations that were, in the 1960s and 1970s, actively hostile to non-white people. Their early

novels indict and hold their respective nations accountable for how they marginalize Black immigrants and their descendants who are, or will become, their legal if not their social citizens. Indeed, what is striking about the five novels I discuss in this article is the extent to which they are not psychically preoccupied with the Caribbean and do not look back to an imagined or idealized Jamaica or Barbados.[1]

**II. Interpellation into the Nation: Black Canada and Black Britain**

In order for this article to stage this conversation between Levy's and Clarke's works, it is important to understand the literary traditions within which they are positioned as well as how their authors situate themselves and their writing within their respective nations. While Levy turns away from the writers of the Windrush generation (a point I elaborate on below), drawing comparisons between her own and Clarke's early writing requires us to consider the intertwined relationship between Caribbean, Black Canadian, and Black British literary histories. Canada and Britain have different immigration histories; there is no Canadian equivalent of the Windrush generation. However, given that Clarke (1934–2016) is a near-contemporary of Selvon (1923–1994) and Lamming (b. 1927), he might be understood analogously to that wave of writers in a Canadian context. Clarke's position in the history of Canadian letters is certainly noteworthy since he was the first Black writer to publish a novel in Canada. Critics such as George Elliot Clarke, however, are reluctant to position Austin Clarke as inaugurating any kind of Black Canadian literary tradition; George Elliot Clarke insists that "[d]espite assertions to the contrary, [Austin Clarke] was neither the first nor the second African-Canadian novelist, but the *sixth*" (*Odysseys Home* 239; emphasis in original). This claim is arguably inaccurate, given that George Elliot Clarke himself "induct[s]" (329) the first five authors into the African-Canadian literary canon despite their tenuous attachments to Canada in terms of citizenship, residence, and the subject matter of their writing.[2] I am certainly sympathetic to his insistence that Black Canadian literature does not begin in the 1960s, just as, in Britain, one cannot suggest that the writers of the Windrush generation somehow inaugurated Black British writing. Both nations

have a long history of Black presences and Black creative expression that predate the mid-twentieth century. Nonetheless, Austin Clarke did not look toward the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers George Elliot Clarke cites; instead, he turned more often toward his contemporaries for inspiration: Black writers and thinkers elsewhere in the diaspora, most notably African-Americans and those who were, like him, born in the Caribbean. Clarke was also the first Black Canadian writer to be recognized, albeit provisionally and problematically, within the context of the dominant Canadian literary culture. In the 1970s, he became the token Black creative voice within a supposedly emerging narrative of multiculturalism.

In the introduction to *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*' memorial issue on Austin Clarke, guest editors Andrea Davis and Leslie Sanders note the significance of the ways he wrote about Blackness in Canada and inscribed it into the nation. Davis and Sanders state that "for many of us who read, and think with and through Black Canadian literature, Clarke provided much of the initial language, the early imagery and motifs we used to demarcate Caribbean immigrant and Black people's experiences as a constituent product of Canadian life" (1). In this regard, while I position him on a (tentative and exploratory) parallel track with the writers of the Windrush generation given the ways they opened spaces for subsequent Black writing in Canada and Britain, Clarke's writing is quite different from that of his near-contemporaries like Lamming and Selvon, whose personal, creative, and intellectual identities are consistently oriented toward the Caribbean. I argue that Clarke's assertion of his Canadianness and his literary focus on Caribbean-born characters who struggle to negotiate a space for themselves within a hostile Canadian nation are precisely what facilitates a fruitful comparative literary conversation with Levy, whose early novels similarly explore British-born protagonists struggling to claim a nation that uses their Caribbean ancestry to write them out of the national imaginary. The similar ways in which Clarke and Levy are often cast as outsiders by their respective dominant national narratives, literary institutions, and reading publics suggest that understanding how they position themselves vis-à-vis Canada and the UK is also important.

Throughout her career, Levy insisted that she be understood not as a Caribbean writer but rather as a British—and, more specifically, an English—writer.[3] In an article published in *Waterstone's Magazine* around the same time *Never Far from Nowhere* was published, she famously stated: "If Englishness doesn't define me then redefine Englishness" (Levy qtd. in Jaggi 64). Despite this insistence, Kadija Sesay observes that "it [took] her to her fourth . . . novel to get people to wake up and see that there is another Britain within Britain. And it has the colour Black in it" (17). Similarly, Clarke had to repeatedly emphasize his Canadianness in a literary landscape that sought to define him otherwise. The second edition of Rinaldo Walcott's *Black Like Who: Writing Black Canada* (2003) opens with an epigraph from Clarke wherein he asks: "How can I be more Barbadian than Canadian when I have spent two-thirds of my life in Toronto? If I permit this reasoning then I am saying Canadians are white[,] . . . [a]nd if one is black . . . one cannot be Canadian" (qtd. in Walcott, *Black Like Who* 11). According to critics, Clarke had insisted on this fact since the publication of his famous trilogy, in which he "inserted his concept of Blackness into the narrative of the nation, broadening and blackening the notion of who and what is a Canadian" (Beckford 61).[4]

According to Walcott, "easy nostalgia has come to mark much immigrant writing" (*Black Like Who* 45) in Canada, and he argues that Black Canadian art needs to "move beyond the discourse of nostalgia for an elsewhere and toward addressing the politics of its present location (45–46). This rejection of nostalgia is evident in both Levy's and Clarke's early works. Instead, their writing illustrates what Walcott calls "a deterritorialized strategy that is consciously aware of the ground of the nation from which it speaks" (15). Referring to Clarke's epigraph, Walcott states that "Black people are . . . fully aware of the fluidity of citizenship" (22) and are, "more than any others, . . . written into our nations conditionally" (23). Given these provisionalities, Black writers like Levy and Clarke are uninterested in a simple project of inclusion and instead actively engage in rearticulating the terms of social citizenship in their respective nations. I argue that Clarke and Levy demonstrate "resistance to simply reproducing national frames" (Iton 259). Rather, "[i]t

is this ethical lack of commitment—this anarchist-inflected imagination, that enables subaltern subjects to push for inclusion among those protected by the prophylactic state while at the same time recognizing the limits of this recognition" (Iton 202). Despite their insistence on being understood as English and Canadian, respectively, Levy and Clarke simultaneously reject the exclusionary terms of nationhood offered to them as Black citizens, repeatedly laying bare these processes of marginalization in their early novels.

It is perhaps because of this marginalization that Levy sometimes felt she did not necessarily have a literary tradition from which to draw. In a 2015 interview she outlined the tentative steps she took in beginning her writing career, stating that she "just wanted to examine the life that [she] had led in this country" (qtd. in Rowell 260). She recalls:

> I went to the bookshelves and there wasn't anything there very much. There were a few black British writers like Caryl Philips and Fred D'Aguiar. Jackie Kay had written something at that point, but very little considering. I thought I was going to be able to immerse myself in the black British experience through fiction, and I couldn't, because it wasn't there. I thought, 'Actually there is a hole here where the black British experience is missing.' So I thought, 'Hey, I'll do it, I'll start.' (qtd. in Rowell 260)

Kwame Dawes observes that many of Levy's generation of British-born Black writers "will reject any lineage with the writers of the fifties and sixties . . . and . . . assert a new invention of the Black British voice" (258). He calls this move "arrogant" and "foolish" but also "understandable" given that this generation "are often either unwilling to or incapable of wearing . . . a migrant identity . . . of 'otherness'" (258). Their task instead "is to challenge the notions that they are not at home when they are in England" (Dawes 261). There is thus a particular political motivation for Levy to distance herself from the Caribbean-born writers of previous decades and assert her Britishness—and more specifically, her Englishness—in a country whose dominant national narratives perpetually attach her to elsewhere.

In the Canadian context, a similar narrative has been perpetuated by a literary establishment that, particularly in the decades in which Clarke began writing in and about Canada, sought to identify him as a "multicultural" writer rather than a Canadian one. Sharon Morgan Beckford argues that Clarke "must be recognized for the pioneering work he did, and what he has achieved, in highlighting the Black experience . . . as quintessentially Canadian in the grand Canadian narrative emerging in the second half of the last century" (56). She places Clarke's Toronto Trilogy within the same literary context as some of the so-called founding narratives of Canadian literature, such as Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972) and Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* (1971), that were written during this period of burgeoning Canadian literary nationalism in the wake of the Massey Report. The Massey Report, released in 1951 by the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, called for Canadian cultural producers and institutions to strengthen a vaguely defined (but implicitly white) Canadian culture in the face of American cultural imperialism in film, radio, and television. Beckford claims that well before, and coterminous with, these theoretical texts, Clarke, as "the one Black writer to be acclaimed during those early days of the shaping of the national consciousness through its literature, introduced a fresh perspective on Canada into the literary canon" (58). Given that "[f]or Clarke the liberating function of writing was not only artistic but also political" (Beckford 59), there is a strategic purpose to Beckford's posthumous interpellation of Clarke into the Canadian literary canon. While he insistently named himself a Canadian, Clarke "never considered himself part of the CanLit firmament" and "refused to acknowledge the influence or importance of a Canadian tradition on his writing or outlook" (Beattie). I suggest that there are, nonetheless, important reasons for understanding him and his work as formative to that tradition, "given his foundational status in CanLit" (Barrett, "Style" 90).

**III. The Windrush Generation**

The ways Levy and Clarke write themselves and their characters into the nation are notably different from the strategies employed by the generation of Caribbean writers publishing in the 1950s and 1960s. While

authors such as Selvon and Lamming broke important literary ground, their conceptual focus was on the Caribbean, even when writing in and about London. Susheila Nasta observes that during these decades, "London had become a kind of 'literary headquarters' [in which a] recognizable tradition emerged as a specifically Caribbean consciousness was created and a literary movement was born" (x). While some of the novels written during this time are set in London, they demonstrate a psychological preoccupation with the Caribbean that is distinctly absent from Levy's and Clarke's works. Throughout their careers, writers like Lamming and Selvon "understood themselves to be West Indian first" (Dawes 257). Nasta describes Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), for example, as a "novel of exile" (5). In a 1977 interview, after having lived in England for over twenty-five years, Selvon consistently referred to himself as a "Caribbean writer" (qtd. in Fabre). Even after he moved to Calgary, Canada in 1978 (where he lived until his death in 1994), he continued to think of himself in these terms. It is puzzling to claim, as George Elliot Clarke does, that Selvon's *Moses Ascending* (1975) is a "'Canadian' work" (*Directions Home* 118), even if the scare quotes suggest this assertion is tentative. In a special issue of *ARIEL* commemorating Selvon's passing, Ken McCoogan observes that, despite his affection for Canada and his prominent role in Calgary's literary community, Selvon "always identified himself as a Caribbean expatriate and felt most comfortable writing about West Indians" (72). He writes that "all his life, Selvon championed the development of a multi-cultural, pan-Caribbean consciousness" (73).

This Caribbean consciousness is articulated in *The Lonely Londoners* through an expression of profound nostalgia for Trinidad that is evident from the opening pages. The narrative begins with Moses traveling to the docks to meet the newly arrived Henry "Sir Galahad" Oliver, during which time Moses "had a feeling of homesickness that he never felt in the nine-ten years he in this country. . . . [T]his feeling of nostalgia hit him and he was surprise" (Selvon, *Lonely* 4). When Henry asks Moses if he has any advice for him about navigating London, Moses replies, "I would advice you to hustle a passage back home to Trinidad today" (20). This discourse of return is prevalent throughout the text; at the end

of the novel, a decade later, Moses repeats these words nearly verbatim (125). Moses and his friends consistently refer to Trinidad as "back home" (123; 126), and although none of them returns, their desire to do so is overwhelming. In Moses' case, "sometimes tears come to his eyes and he don't know why really, if is homesickness or if it is just that life in general is beginning to get too hard" (136). Such nostalgic longings for the Caribbean rarely occur in either Clarke's or Levy's works, despite many of their Caribbean-born immigrant characters expressing similar struggles about their difficult lives in Toronto and London.

The characters in Selvon's novel describe London, a city that has been monumentalized by and through a colonial history that was imposed on them through their education and exposure to popular discourse long before they arrived in the city, from a uniquely Caribbean-inflected perspective. As Henry/Galahad travels to Charing Cross station, "when he realize that is he . . . who was going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about (it even have the name in the dictionary) he feel like a new man. . . . [J]ust to say he was going there made him feel big and important" (72). Galahad also delights in visiting Piccadilly Circus: "Always, from the first time he went there to see Eros and the lights, that circus have a magnet for him, that circus represent life, that circus is the beginning and the ending of the world" (79). James Procter observes that such moments recur in the texts of this first wave of Caribbean writers: "Black literary and cultural narratives of the 1950s and 1960s ritually focus on a central, 'tourist' London that includes Piccadilly Circus, Hyde Park, and Trafalgar Square" (3). By contrast, the British-born characters in Levy's early novels feel a sense of exile from the city of their birth. In Levy's first two novels, "the question of London remains out of reach because . . . the characters are . . . divorced from the wider space outside. In the space of the council house and its perimeters, questions of self develop, but they lack context in the outside world" (Pready 17). In fact, central London is conspicuously absent from Levy's early novels, which focus on the experiences of poor and working-class immigrant families in suburbia. These works, instead, give readers a window into the lives and geographies of the city that rarely, if ever, appear in tourist narratives.

In Lamming's work, a Caribbean consciousness is expressed less through nostalgia and more through a refusal, by both Lamming and his characters, to be framed by England's literary and cultural contexts. Reflecting in 1960 on the emerging literary conversations among Caribbean writers in London, he stated: "What the West Indian writer has done [has] nothing to do with . . . English critical assessments. . . . The discovery of the novel by West Indians as a way of investigating and projecting the inner experiences of the West Indian community [is an] important event in *our* history" (qtd. in Welsh 261; emphasis in original). This distancing is expressed in his novel *The Emigrants* (1954) through characters' alienation from English cultural landscapes. In this novel, as in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*, characters refer to the Caribbean as "back home" (Lamming, *Emigrants* 236) and reminisce about "another climate [and] another time" (192). Yet they also express a profound disconnect from England that is very different from the fervent devotion to London conveyed by Selvon's characters. For Lamming's characters, "England was simply a world which [they] had moved about at random, and on occasion encountered by chance. It was just there like nature, drifting vaguely beyond our reach" (*Emigrants* 237). When the Governor, one of the group of emigrants that gives the novel its title, raises a toast at a party, he says, "England, you don't know me, I don't know you" (271). This line is echoed by Gilbert, one of the protagonists in Levy's fourth novel, *Small Island*, when, upon arriving in England from Jamaica as a Royal Air Force serviceman during World War II, he asks: "How come England did not know me?" (117). Such a representation of England's ignorance and uninterest in its colonies speaks to why Lamming and others of the Windrush generation turned away from the imperial centre and toward the Caribbean. Lamming's line is also echoed—but in notable reversal—by Faith, the protagonist of Levy's third novel, *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999). Upon returning to London, the city of her birth, after her first trip to visit relatives in Jamaica, Faith proclaims confidently: "I knew this was England" (Levy 339). Her claim to this knowledge asserts her sense of belonging to the only place she truly knows as home.

Like his characters, Lamming expressed a similar sense of disconnection from British society and letters. In "Sea of Stories," he reflects

on how his own history eventually led him to feel alienated from second- and third-generation British-born descendants of Caribbean immigrants: "The colonial entanglement makes for a complex relation between colony and metropole—a psychic entanglement that is often beyond the understanding of a third-generation British citizen of West Indian ancestry." By the 1980s, he claims, "I felt a gradual disengagement from the domestic policies of the United Kingdom" ("Sea of Stories"). Moreover, "the third generation of Black British had created a world and language, rich and admirably rebellious, that was no longer within my immediate grasp" ("Sea of Stories"). Instead, Lamming "decided to go home and stay there" ("Sea of Stories"). His naming of Barbados as "home" is significant given that it indicates a very different conceptualization of identity than that expressed by either Levy or Clarke.

Often, male writers are associated with the Windrush generation of the 1950s-1960s, while the important work of women authors such as Beryl Gilroy and Joan Riley, who began to publish in the 1970s-1980s, is neglected, despite their important contributions to Caribbean, Black British, and diasporic discourses. Riley's work in particular provides an important foundation for Levy since she was one of the first writers in the UK to examine at length the experiences of Caribbean-descended Black girls and women, many of whom grew up with a similar sense of alienation as Levy's protagonists. Riley's relationship to her Caribbean origins is much more ambivalent than that of the male writers of the Windrush generation, as evidenced by how she describes Jamaica in her first novel, *The Unbelonging* (1985). Hyacinth, the Jamaican-born protagonist of *The Unbelonging*, arrives in London at age eleven and experiences an adolescence of abuse and neglect at the hands of both her father and the state. Throughout these difficult years, Hyacinth's "one ambition" (Riley, *Unbelonging* 46) is to return to Jamaica "where she felt she belonged" (68). A decade of longing for her childhood home, however, culminates in disappointment upon her return to Kingston an adult. The city has become a "nightmare place" (138) of poverty, alcoholism, and sickness. One of her best childhood friends is dead, while the other tells her to go "back whe you come fram" (142), because "we

noh like farigners in a J.A." (142). Never having considered England "home," Hyacinth is left devastated and feeling the sense of unbelonging that gives the novel its title. As a writer who has been marginalized by various literary and cultural communities, Riley has expressed similar frustrations. In a 1994 article published the same year Levy's first novel came out, Riley notes that she began writing about Black experiences in Britain at a time when "women came out of nowhere. The community was defined in terms of men" ("Writing Reality" 548). "[I]f Afro-Caribbean men had little space for expression in Britain," she asserts, "women seemed to have no place in the Caribbean experience" (548). Throughout her career, she faced opposition from both Caribbean-born and British-born Black men and women. She writes: "To be a black person and a woman, writing in Britain is to tread a thin line. . . . For many British-born black people, it is seen as a marked failure, that much of what is written as a representation of their environment comes from what they would consider non-indigenous people" (549). At the same time, she notes that the dominant culture was similarly unreceptive to writing about Black people in Britain: "It is hardly surprising that the only [Black] authors writing in Britain deemed worthy of notice were those who concentrated on elsewhere. . . . One wonders if this might not be due to the British reluctance to come to terms with the existence of a settled permanent black presence" (550). The literary atmosphere Riley describes is the one in which Levy struggled to publish *Every Light in the House Burnin'.* In a 2009 interview, Levy, echoing Riley, remarked that "publishers didn't quite know what to do with a North London working-class girl talking about an ordinary family" (qtd. in Morrison 328).

**IV. Levy, Clarke, and the Turn Away from the Caribbean**

Given the ways they position themselves in relation to their respective nations, as well as the strategic reasons they have for not identifying with the earlier writers of the Windrush generation, Levy and Clarke demonstrate a noteworthy turn away from the Caribbean in their early novels and instead write about Black lives and communities in Toronto and London. While both writers' understandings of these cities as home are complicated and sometimes ambivalent, they assert Blackness as a

persistent and complex presence within these urban spaces. Levy's first two novels contain only a handful of references to Jamaica. In *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, the protagonist, Angela, introduces readers to her father; only one paragraph mentions his arrival: "He came to this country on the Empire Windrush ship. . . . He never talked about his family or his life in Jamaica. He seemed to exist in one plane of time—the present" (Levy 3). The novel focuses on the family's life in North London, and Angela's parents express little interest in or desire to return to their birth country. When Angela's aunt and uncle pass through London while on a European holiday and visit for an afternoon, the family calls out "see you in Jamaica" (128) as they bid each other goodbye, but what hangs in the air is the knowledge that Angela's parents will not return because of their lack of interest and finances. Later, a schoolteacher pries into Angela's family origins, not accepting her reply that she was born in England. She asks if Angela has ever been or would like to go to Jamaica, to which Angela replies, "Not really" (187). She understands herself largely in relation to the country of her birth: "I knew this society better than my parents. My parents' strategy was to keep as quiet as possible in the hope that no one would know that they had sneaked into this country. They wanted to be no bother at all. But I had grown up in its English ways. I could confront it, rail against it, fight it, because it was mine—a birthright" (88). In this conversation, she refuses to allow her teacher to narrate her as something other than English, displaying a confidence in the face of authority that contrasts sharply with her parents' obsequiousness.

*Never Far from Nowhere* contains even fewer references to Jamaica; when it does refer to Jamaica, it does so largely to actively reject it. As in Levy's first novel, the narrative devotes only one paragraph to the family's "Caribbean legacy" (Levy, *Never* 1), after which Vivien, one of the two protagonists, offers a sardonic view of what this legacy means:

> I used to think how lucky this country was to have them. How grateful people should be that they came here and did such responsible jobs. And how if they went back—if they went back to Jamaica—well, who knows what would happen to the buses,

> to the children or the new hospital wings. My parents helped this country, I thought. . . . But even when I was young, when I was still having my cheek pulled by passers-by and people winked at me on the tube, even then I knew that English people hated us. (5)

Immediately, the novel illustrates the impact this hatred has on Vivien, her sister, Olive, and their mother. As readers are introduced to Olive, she describes having nightmares and regularly waking up in a sweat (6), both of which are signs of trauma. We also learn that their mother "didn't believe in black people" (7), demonstrating a profound internalized racism that she teaches her daughters by denying their family's ancestry. Vivien, too, internalizes this denial. As a teenager, she tells her boyfriend and his parents that her family is from Mauritius. When Olive finds out, she angrily corrects her: "She's not from Mauritius, she's from Jamaica, and so's our dad for that matter. . . . She's ashamed—she's ashamed we're from Jamaica. . . . She don't want anyone to know we're black" (171). Throughout the novel, Vivien repeatedly turns away from her family's Caribbean origins. Only in the final lines of the novel, after finally beginning to understand the extent to which she has denied her familial history and present poverty in a desperate attempt to fit in amongst her peers at art college, does Vivien acknowledge her connection to Jamaica. When asked by a stranger on the tube where she is from, she answers truthfully: "My family are from Jamaica. . . . But I am English" (282).

Although Levy's subsequent works become increasingly interested in examining the colonial entanglements between Britain and the Caribbean, as I have started to demonstrate, her first two novels are much more local in their preoccupations and include British-born protagonists who are ignorant of, or indifferent to, this history (Olive is one notable exception who will be discussed further below). These texts illustrate that such denials often come at the cost of second-generation characters' mental health and well-being.

This is not the case with Clarke, who, in the *Toronto Trilogy*, narrates immigrant characters for whom, by contrast, looking back to the Caribbean takes an emotional or psychic toll. For this reason they often

turn away from memories of Barbados and rarely situate themselves in relation to what they might refer to as "back home." In *The Meeting Point*, Part 1 is titled "The Experience of Arrival," arguably in irony given that any sense of genuine arrival for the immigrant characters is perpetually denied by a racist society throughout the trilogy. The novel begins by narrating Bernice's "new life in this country" (Clarke, *Meeting* 29) but recounts almost nothing about her old life in the Caribbean: "[T]he moment the plane took off from Seawell Airport, Bernice put Barbados . . . out of her future plans" (35). While she reads the letters sent by her son's father, Lonnie, and her mother because "she wanted to remember what home was like" (38), they rarely bring her comfort; more often they leave her angry, exhausted, and frustrated because people repeatedly ask her to send money. Similarly, the characters in *Storm of Fortune* rarely think about their lives in Barbados; when they do, their memories are usually negative. For example, Bernice remembers stealing hot cross buns as a child to give to a poor family and being harshly punished by the schoolmaster (Clarke, *Storm* 108–09). Her best friend, Dots, thinks back to the poverty in which she grew up, remembering her shame when her parents sent her to the store to buy food on credit (304–05). As Dots states in *The Bigger Light*, "the picture of remembering, of remembering back to things and happenings and memories in that damn island, is like a tragedy itself" (Clarke 237). In *Storm of Fortune*, there is only one brief moment of longing expressed by Bernice's sister, Estelle, who, after having moved out of her sister's apartment to land in a dirty, run-down rooming house, wonders what her mother is doing in that exact moment: "It was becoming dark outside. In the West Indies it would be night, and Mammy would be going to bed" (Clarke 194). This moment is the only scene in the trilogy in which a character reflects in real time about what might be happening coterminously in Barbados, a rare moment that makes the Caribbean present—literally and metaphorically—rather than relegating it to the past.

While it is understandable that Levy's second-generation protagonists do not describe Jamaica as home, it is perhaps more surprising that Clarke's immigrant characters do not consider Barbados as a place of return. In some cases, they actively reject it. While Bernice still refers to

Barbados in these terms, she largely gives up on any notion that it will ever be *her* home again. In *The Meeting Point*, she reflects: "She thought of returning home; but she knew the chances of living happily there depended on the amount of money she could save here; and after hearing Estelle talk about the number of people unemployed back home, and after talking to some domestics who had gone back on holidays, Bernice decided that going back to Barbados to live, was not such a good idea after all" (Clarke 132). Although Estelle has only been in Canada for a few months, she offers an even more dramatic refusal of Barbados than her sister: "Home to Estelle was any place where she couldn't see Mammy; where she couldn't see the poverty of her village and the villagers; where she didn't have to go behind the house (within the tall rotting paling) to go to the outdoor closet, in rain, in wind, and in the sun. Home was *away*. Away from that home" (187–88; emphasis in original).

The most vehement rejection of Barbados comes in *The Bigger Light*. After living in Canada for nearly two decades, Dots' husband, Boysie, tells her: "Barbados is no longer in my plans. Or in our lives. I am not going back there to live. I am not even going back there to spend a vacation. I am fixed here in this country now" (Clarke, *The Bigger Light* 38). Later, as he sits at the airport bar watching people getting off a plane from the West Indies, he recognizes that "he remembered very little about Barbados" (109) and reflects at length on his lack of desire to return, knowing he can no longer find a place for himself in his birth country (109–10). Over the course of the novel, he begins to express an active hatred for Barbados and "he knew he was never going back" (226). Freeness, his one friend who does return, writes him a long letter discouraging him from making the same choice: "If you ever have any desire to emigrate back down here, even for a vacation, well, forget it. Go up North in Northern Ontario instead" (268). This turn away from Barbados and toward the Northern landscape is noteworthy. Dominant national narratives deploy a symbolic geography that features Canada as a Northern country and prioritizes its historical connections to England and France rather than situate it within the context of the Americas and the violent histories of Indigenous genocide, colonial conquest, and

transatlantic slavery on which the Western hemisphere has been built. While Boysie does not call Canada home, he does insist that it is now "the country of his adoption" (176). He states that he intends to apply for Canadian citizenship "the morning after I qualify for it" (17); when he does so, he claims that "he fe[els] strong" (227). My point is not to endorse Boysie's rejection of Barbados, and nor does the novel—his refusal comes at a significant psychic cost. Although it is beyond the scope of this discussion, the novel explores at length, largely through Boysie, the profound toll that assimilation takes on Caribbean-born citizens of Canada. My point, however, is that Clarke purposefully explores this issue throughout the trilogy by illustrating Boysie's increasing distance, literally and psychologically, from Barbados. Rather than focus on the past, Clarke critiques the problematic expectations of assimilation the dominant culture places on its Caribbean-born citizens in Canada, the space they presently inhabit. Levy's early novels similarly examine the significant psychic costs of assimilation for their British-born protagonists. Together their works reveal that, whether born in the Caribbean or not, the dominant culture's expectations of assimilation have a devastating impact on Black characters' psyches in Toronto and London respectively.

**V. Literary Realism as Social Critique**

Clarke and Levy use similar literary techniques to make poignant, sometimes biting, commentaries on the social injustices their Black characters face. In particular, they use literary realism as an effective tool to name and illustrate the pervasive racism their characters experience and how it impacts them. As I suggest elsewhere about Levy, however, her turn to realism is done on "deeply negotiated terms" (Medovarski 29). This claim can also be applied to Clarke's use of realism in his trilogy. Rather than drawing on the mimetic agendas of nineteenth-century literary realism—which were based on scientific discourse, assumptions of reason and rationality, and the need to reflect homogenous and rigid perceptions of "truth"—Levy and Clarke might better be described as utilizing what I call "a critical realism rather than an unquestioningly mimetic one" (29). "Critical realism" documents social and racial inequalities in

order to challenge established structures of power. In this regard, it is not surprising, perhaps, that both Levy and Clarke cite James Baldwin as a significant literary influence.[5] According to Charlotte Beyer, Levy draws on "a range of realist narrative techniques, such as retrospective reflection, internal monologue, first person . . . perspectives, and episodic narrative structure" (107); she also makes use of "flashbacks, as well as . . . episodic or anecdotal reminiscences" (107). Clarke, too, uses many of these techniques in his trilogy, although early critics of his work did not always interpret them in the context of critical realism or societal critique. Michael Bucknor notes that "the history of early Clarke criticism exposes a critical enterprise limited to representationalist assumptions of mimeticism and aestheticism. . . . [G]enerally, Clarke's work has been limited to readings addressing the authenticity of representation in it" (141). He argues that, when discussing *The Meeting Point*, there is "disagreement among critics regarding the success of [Clarke's] realism" (141) and that the book is sometimes viewed negatively as "a novel of excess" (141).

What might have potentially—and problematically—been viewed as excessive (particularly by a body of critics that in the 1960s and 1970s was almost exclusively white) is the extent to which Clarke exposes the racism and displacement his characters experience in Canada even while laying claim to it as home. His trilogy demonstrates little concern with potentially offending a white readership. In an excerpt reprinted in the paratext of the latest Vintage edition of the trilogy, Norman Mailer states that Clarke's fiction is "unique, surprising, comfortable until the moment when it becomes uncomfortable. Then you realize that you have learned something new that you didn't want to know—and it's essential knowledge. And so on you go, alternately congratulating and cursing Austin Clarke."[6] More recently, Steven Beattie, in an article in *Quill and Quire* published immediately after Clarke's passing, similarly observes "the sense of discomfort white readers feel encountering the author's work. Clarke refused to comfort his readers, or to reassure them that they were not complicit in the issues or problems he wrote about." According to Walcott, Clarke's work often "spectacularizes" whiteness "for the violence it does to Black life" ("The Trouble" 4–5). Levy's first

two novels similarly shine a spotlight on the attitudes of a dominant culture in which, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, blatant anti-Black racism was normalized in many segments of British society. This fact, however, had been rarely narrated in mainstream British fiction to the extent that Levy does in *Every Light in the House Burnin'* and *Never Far from Nowhere*. Blake Morrison, in his interview with Levy, remarks on "the sheer number of racist incidents that occur" (329) in her writing. As is the case with Clarke, Levy does not shy away from representing the violence the dominant white society enacts on Black citizens.

In examining the formal elements of Clarke's work, Paul Barrett characterizes his writing as "monological" ("Fantasies" 44) and claims that it "eschews . . . dialogue . . . and instead asserts a kind of narrative standoffishness insofar as his writing demonstrates moments of dialogue breaking down" (44). Barrett's choice of the term "standoffish" is noteworthy given the popular stereotype regarding Canada's so-called politeness and the perpetuation of a dominant national narrative that the country is welcoming of immigrants—despite a long history of racist immigration policy. Barrett suggests that the "doubly-conscious" (44) voices in Clarke's fiction often turn away from the dominant culture and are instead represented through turns to interiority: "diversions of memory, extended moments of introspection, and outright silence, all of which indicate the refusal of his characters to engage in the trap of dialogue" (44). Dialogism is a trap, Barrett contends, because of the ways it has been deployed within discourses of Canadian liberalism. He states that "Clarke excoriates the liberal trap of dialogue[,] . . . instead detailing the manner in which liberalism's call for dialogue and recognition silences Black people in Canada" (44). This silencing occurs in part through the terms the state establishes for conversations about race in Canada, offering multicultural platitudes through what Barrett calls "a symbolic gesture of recognition" (44) rather than meaningful material changes that address structural inequalities or systemic racism.

Interesting connections can be drawn between Clarke's and Levy's formal approaches. Clarke's trilogy is narrated in the third person, while Levy's first two novels are written in the first person, *Every Light* from

Angela's point of view and *Never Far* alternating between Vivien's and Olive's perspectives. Yet in deploying many of the same turns to interior monologue and introspection, Levy's novels suggest a similar refusal of the dominant epistemological perspectives that silence Black voices in Britain. Her first two novels, like Clarke's trilogy, insistently centre Black voices, lives, and perspectives. If any sense of dialogue occurs, it takes place within and between Black characters, family members, and communities. Even if they do not always understand one another, characters like Angela and her parents and Vivien and Olive often share experiences of marginalization. In moments in which these central characters interact with white characters or institutions, their conversations are laden with microaggressions or outright anti-Black hostility, perpetual misunderstandings, and silencings. Like Clarke's, Levy's early novels and aesthetic choices demonstrate how Black voices are shut out of and down by the dominant society.

As they shine their unrelenting light onto hegemonic Canadian and British society through their writing, Levy and Clarke narrate the ways interpersonal and institutional racism are deeply intertwined and offer trenchant commentary on some of these institutions, such as schools, the legal system, and the medical system. Alison Nyhuis argues that Clarke's trilogy "develops a persuasive critique of Canadian labour practices and migration legislation" (88). These critiques are often expressed explicitly, and Clarke pulls no punches as he takes the nation to task for its marginalization of Black immigrants and citizens. In *Storm of Fortune*, Henry offers extended commentary on the policies that bring many Caribbean women to Canada, most notably the Caribbean Domestic Scheme, which operated from 1955–67, a period in which Canadian immigration policy was actively restricting non-white entrants. The Domestic Scheme allowed a very limited number of single, childless Caribbean women into Canada to work as live-in domestics and permitted them to apply for landed immigrant status only after a year of service. Henry states: "Fuck the domestic scheme. No woman should have to leave the West Indies to come up here in this prejudiced, unfair, two-mouth, cold country to work as a servant. . . . No black woman should work in

a serving job for no fucking white man, in a white country, and in the same country these fucking white people don't want to rent you a room or give you a job" (Clarke, *Storm* 57). His words offer a sophisticated analysis of how the Caribbean Domestic Scheme "reproduced Black women's economic, political and social subordination in Canadian society" (Maynard 65). Additionally, although at the time *Storm of Fortune* was published there were laws in place to prevent housing discrimination, Henry calls out their ineffectiveness: "If the government wants to find out, let the fucking government walk 'bout with me . . . and I will show the fucking government some apartments in this city, man, where no fucking law don't apply, at all at all" (Clarke, *Storm* 282). Boysie, tired of the interpersonal racism he and his friends experience, says, "All white people is bitches, if you ask me" (239). In *The Meeting Point*, as Bernice watches her bank account grow, she states that she is "glad as hell that I come here, that I is Canadian" (135). Yet, a few lines later, as she and Dots read a newspaper story about a fellow domestic who was denied housing because of her race, they say frustratedly that "Canada ain't worth shit" (135). Clarke's characters' ambivalence toward Canada and Clarke's harsh appraisals of Canadian government policies are notable given that the trilogy was published during the era of Canadian literary nationalism. In the 1960s and 1970s, writers were tasked with building a national consciousness and national identity in the wake of the Massey Report. Clarke's work, however, consistently challenges this (sometimes-, if not often-) celebratory narrative of cultural nation-building to instead reveal Canada's erasures, exclusions, and hypocrisies.

Levy, too, demonstrates the pervasive, sometimes relentless, racism of North London, particularly in *Never Far from Nowhere*. In the novel, characters and, by extension, readers are offered no relief when "spaces outside the home are often scenes of extreme violence" (Pready 18), but, as Olive notes, "it [i]sn't safe inside either" (Levy, *Never* 39). The home is, for Olive in particular, a traumatizing site of racist misogyny and domestic violence enacted by her daughter Amy's white father, Peter, while for Vivien, public social spaces are sites of discomfort at best and hostile threat at worst. The after-school club she attends is frequented by skinheads, although her white friends try to convince her they are

"okay" because they are "nice ones" (19). A bar Vivien and her friends go to erupts in racially motivated violence when a boy in Vivien's social circle picks a fight with a Black boy for talking to her, claiming he needs to protect "one of his women" (94) while calling him a racial slur (one of many uttered by white characters in the novel). Vivien and Olive experience pervasive racism in the education system from teachers and administrators. Olive also becomes entangled in the systemic racism of the Welfare State after Peter leaves her: she experiences blatant racism and sexism in the welfare office from a man who, in the crudest language possible, blames Black people for his own poverty (178), as well as threats from the council office that Amy will be removed and put "in care" (211). On the streets of the council estate, Olive and Vivien contend with a neighbour who hands out flyers for the National Front (225). There is nowhere either of them can go that is free from threats of racist violence.

By illustrating these aspects of British society in such detail, Levy, like Clarke, makes visible and offers a sharp commentary on the systemic inequalities experienced by Black citizens in their everyday lives and the extent to which they are traumatized by these forms of personal and state violence. Perhaps the most difficult moment in *Never Far from Nowhere* is narrated in the final pages by Olive, who is stopped for no reason by police while driving and then falsely arrested for drug possession after the police plant drugs in her purse. This moment speaks to how "[p]olicing in the 1970s was often influenced by racist notions of black criminality which also functioned to legitimate heavy-handed police tactics" (McLeod 130). Despite her lawyer's claiming to believe in her innocence, she nonetheless tells Olive to plead guilty, clearly not understanding the impact a criminal record will have on her life. In perhaps the most potent example of how dialogue between Black and white characters is shut down and the dominant culture silences Black people, Olive states:

> She didn't understand, the little white woman in her white blouse, sitting in an office with a coffee machine bubbling and her university certificates on the wall. Her England is a nice

> place where people are polite to her, smile at her—ask her for directions in the street, sit next to her on buses and trains and comment about the weather. But my England shakes underneath me with every step I take. She didn't understand that I could be innocent. Oh no. I was born a criminal in this country and everyone can see my crime. I can't hide no matter what I do. It turns heads and takes smiles from faces. I'm black. (Levy, *Never* 272)

Olive's monologue offers a profound analysis of white privilege and the uncertainty—the literal and psychological instability—that is experienced every day by Black citizens, as well as the damage caused by narratives of Black criminality. Given these experiences, Olive's trauma responses from the opening pages—her nightmares, night terrors, and cold sweats—are further contextualized as the novel progresses.

Olive's interaction with her lawyer also culminates in the novel's one momentary turn toward the Caribbean when Olive states that, after a lifetime of experiencing racism in England, she has reached a breaking point and wants to go live in Jamaica: "I'm going to live somewhere where being black doesn't make you different. Where being black means you belong. In Jamaica people will be proud of me. I've had enough of this country. What has it ever done for me except make me its villain?" (272–73). However, Olive's wish to go to Jamaica, which she has not expressed at any other point in the novel, speaks more to her disillusionment with England than any genuine longing for a place she has not seen or experienced. As Achille Mbembe argues, "[o]ften, the desire for difference emerges precisely where people experience intense exclusion. In these conditions the proclamation of difference is an inverted expression of the desire for recognition and inclusion" (183). In this regard, I suggest that the novel does not present a Jamaican "return" as a viable option for its second-generation protagonists, a view that Levy similarly rejects in her next novel, *Fruit of the Lemon*. In Clarke's trilogy, Bernice also makes a surprising turnaround in the final pages of *The Bigger Light*. After Clarke has Bernice express for nearly one thousand pages that she does not intend to return to Barbados, Bernice suddenly tells Dots in

the novel's final paragraphs that "she [i]s going back home" (Clarke, *The Bigger Light* 275). Like Olive, Dots' declaration reflects the desperation she feels after nearly two decades of loneliness, isolation, and frustration about her inability to get ahead socioeconomically in the same way her friend has.

Some of the most sophisticated societal analysis in Clarke's and Levy's work comes from ostensibly uneducated characters and suggests that readers need to think differently about what constitutes knowledge and where and how it is acquired. In so doing, their works also offer a meta-critique that disrupts the ways Canada and Britain are commonly known, understood, and narrated within dominant discourses—as liberal democracies that value equality, benevolence, and racial tolerance. Instead, Levy and Clarke narrate painful and difficult moments that bear witness to interpersonal and systemic anti-Black racism. They hold their nations accountable and, by extension, demand better treatment for all of their citizens. As Richard Iton argues, "[i]n choosing to *say something* black artists can seek both to influence outcomes and to redefine the terms of debate within and outside their immediate communities, and to bring attention to—and perhaps confer legitimacy upon—the spaces in which they operate" (23; emphasis in original). Although often painful, Clarke's and Levy's early novels are also hopeful in that they raise awareness about profound societal inequalities and agitate for change.

**V. Conclusion: Literary Legacies**

In this essay, I have staged a literary dialogue between Selvon's and Lamming's Caribbean-focused sensibilities, Clarke's narration of Caribbean immigrants to Canada as foundational to the shaping of a Black Canadian sensibility, and Levy's insistence on a Black English sensibility through her focus on the British-born descendants of Caribbean immigrants. The various ways in which these writers diverge and converge suggests the need for a diasporic turn that contextualizes all of them within a comparative transnational framework. As they deviated from the path created for them by the writers of the Windrush generation, Clarke and Levy took up the spaces of Canada and Britain in their writing while simultaneously taking up space in these nations,

laying claim to them as places of and for Blackness. Clarke and Levy laid important foundations for Black Canadian and Black British writing, respectively; I have endeavoured to examine their works and their positioning of themselves as firmly within their nations in order to interrogate—and interrupt—the dominant national narratives that depict them as outsiders. In focusing on the voices of these writers who have passed, I have attempted to make them present, to come to terms with the profound interruption of their passings, to circulate their voices, and to keep them alive even after they are gone.

## Notes

1 Clarke's first two novels, *The Survivors of the Crossing* (1964) and *Amongst Thistles and Thorns* (1965) are set in Barbados, but their approach to the island could hardly be classified as idealizing given the political and social critiques in which they engage.

2 Three of these novelists—Noah Calwell Cannon, James Madison Bell, and Martin Robinson Delaney—are African-American writers who spent only a few years living in Canada, while the other two—John Hearne and Hugh Doston Carberry—are "Canadian-born authors who made their names in the Caribbean" (Clarke, *Odysseys Home* 330).

3 "British" refers more broadly to Great Britain, Crown Dependencies, and British Overseas Territories, while "English" refers more specifically to England. There is sometimes a problematic slippage between these two terms, but the distinction was important for Levy given the ways in which Englishness as an ethnicity is so often tied to whiteness.

4 Beckford may have borrowed the term "blackening" from Barrett's *Blackening Canada*, which devotes a substantial section to the analysis of Clarke's writing.

5 Levy states that it was after reading Baldwin that she realized "fiction could be one of the most powerful political weapons you can have in your armory" (Rowell 261). Clarke also admired Baldwin's work and famously traveled to Harlem in 1963 with the intention of interviewing him. Although he did not connect with the writer, this trip resulted in his now-legendary interview with Malcom X. Arguably, then, Baldwin, given his conceptual focus on Black marginalization in the United States and on racial oppression within one's own country, is perhaps a more significant literary precursor to Clarke and Levy than the writers of the Windrush generation.

6 Although well beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that Mailer often expressed problematic views regarding race. Nonetheless, his biting observations about Clarke's work vis-à-vis dominant white culture make for an illuminating epitextual framing of Clarke's trilogy as it circulates in a contemporary context.

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