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Citizens and the Community: Dimensions of Democratic Justice in Contemporary Black Canadian Writing

Zusammenfassung

*Der Artikel untersucht die Darstellungen von bürgerschaftlicher Nationalität und Gemeinschaft in der zeitgenössischen afrikanisch-kanadischen Literatur als Beiträge einer diskursiven Auseinandersetzung mit dem Konzept der demokratischen Gerechtigkeit. Die Analysen betrachten zwei Romane, deren AutorInnen und Themen mit unterschiedlichen kulturellen und kritischen Traditionen innerhalb der afrikanisch-kanadischen Literatur identifiziert werden. George Elliott Clarke fikionalisiert mit der „schwarzen akadischen Tragödie“ in *George & Rue* (2005) einen Teil seiner Familiengeschichte, um auf rassistische Diskriminierung und materielle Entbehrungen als Bestandteile der Geschichte und des kulturellen Erbes von afrikanisch-kanadischen Bürgern aufmerksam zu machen. Als Kanadierin der ersten Generation porträtiert Dionne Brand das multikulturelle Toronto in *What We All Long For* (2005): Der Roman zeichnet die Sehnsüchte, Zuneigungen und Entfremdungen urban geprägter Bürger und steht exemplarisch für die globalen Verbindungen und Intertextualitäten der zeitgenössischen Einwandererliteratur. Neben dem Motiv der Zugehörigkeit in Bezug auf kulturelle Staatsbürgerschaftskonzepte setzt sich der Artikel mit den Darstellungen kanadischer Gemeinwesen als Orte der Anerkennung, Teilhabe und des Ausschlusses in nationalen und globalen Referenzrahmen auseinander.*

Abstract

*This article investigates representations of citizenship and the community in contemporary black Canadian writing as literary contributions to the discursive negotiation of democratic justice. The analyses focus on two novels whose authors and subject matters have become identified with different cultural-critical traditions within black Canadian literature: George Elliott Clarke's *George & Rue* (2005) fictionalizes a "Black Acadian tragedy" from the author's own family history, drawing attention to racial discrimination and economic deprivation as an aspect of the history and cultural legacy of black citizens in Canada. First-generation Canadian Dionne Brand's portrayal of multicultural Toronto in *What We All Long For* (2005) traces the aspirations, attachments and disaffections of urban citizens and stands as an exemplar for the global connections and*

intertextualities of contemporary immigrant writing. The article looks at how the novels address the question of belonging in reference to cultural citizenship, and how they portray Canadian communities as sites of recognition, participation and exclusion in national and global contexts.

Résumé

Cet article examine les représentations de la citoyenneté et de la communauté dans l'écriture noire au Canada comme étant des contributions littéraires à la négociation discursive de la justice démocratique. Les analyses se concentrent sur deux romans dont les auteurs, tout comme les thématiques qu'ils traitent, incarnent des traditions culturelles et critiques différentes de l'écriture noire au Canada: George & Rue (2005) de George Elliott Clarke raconte une « tragédie noire Acadienne » inspirée de sa propre histoire familiale, mettant en relief la discrimination raciale et la privation économique comme des aspects centraux de l'histoire et de l'héritage culturel des citoyens noirs au Canada. Le portrait de la multiculturalité torontoise dans What We All Long For (2005) de Dionne Brand, une immigrée de la première génération, reflète les désirs, sympathies et détachements des citoyens urbains et renvoie aux relations internationales ainsi qu'aux pratiques intertextuelles de l'écriture immigrante contemporaine. Cet article se propose d'analyser comment ces romans se penchent sur la question d'appartenance en relation avec la citoyenneté culturelle et comment ils représentent les communautés canadiennes comme lieux de reconnaissance, participation et exclusion dans un contexte à la fois national et mondial.

Introduction

In the last three decades, black Canadian writing has become established as an internationally renowned, commercially successful, and critically recognized branch of contemporary Canadian literature. George Elliott Clarke identified 1997 as the year that “witnessed the sudden arrival of African-Canadian literature” (Clarke 2008) on the national scene, the year when for the first time two black Canadian writers, Dionne Brand and Rachel Manley, received Canada’s most prestigious literary prize, the Governor General’s Award.¹ The distinction was accompanied by the publication of Rinaldo Walcott’s critical study *Black Like Who?* and Austin Clarke’s eighth novel *The Origin of Waves*, which, respectively, drew attention to current issues of African-Canadian culture and continued the recording of the stories of black immigrants in Canada. Other literary achievements celebrated in 1997 were Mairuth Sarsfield’s novel *No Crystal Stair*, which depicts Montreal during the era of the Harlem Renais-

1 In 1997, Dionne Brand received the Governor General’s Award for her poetry collection *Land to Light On*, whereas Rachel Manley’s *Drumblair – Memories of a Jamaican Childhood* won in the category Non-Fiction in English.

sance; George Elliott Clarke's *Eyeing the North Star*, an anthology of twentieth-century black Canadian writing; and Djanet Sears's play *Harlem Duet*, which won the Governor General's Award in the following year and manifested the national recognition of black writers and their themes. The public visibility and critical significance of black Canadian literature were advanced further in the late twentieth century by Clarke and Walcott's prominent discussion on black Canadian culture and the impact of diasporic writing on dominant national narratives; the debate laid the foundation for the establishment of black Canadian studies as an academic discipline in its own right. Subsequent black Canadian publishing successes like Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angelique* (2006), Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007), and *Fifteen Dogs* (2015) by André Alexis have since demonstrated formal and thematic diversity as well as a commitment to chronicling stories from Canadian history and contemporary society with an explicit view on the contributions of black citizens.

Literary criticism has responded to black Canadian writers' increasing prominence and discussed both their focus on "the multiple ways in which African-Canadians were othered and racialized" and their "raising issues of citizenship and belonging in Canada for African-Canadians [...] as part of a current project to rewrite the script of other Canadians' imagined community" (Cuder-Domínguez 2010, 127). As Winfried Siemerling has acknowledged, the "past emerges in many forms and genres in contemporary black Canadian writing" where it becomes interrogated "as an active condition of the present and a useful resource for the future" (Siemerling 2015, 12). In this way, black authors' reviewing of the history of racial discrimination and marginalization has fuelled contemporary Canadian debates of national belonging and multicultural diversity, and also linked them to issues of social justice such as parity of participation, equality of opportunity, and the equity of wealth distribution. Moreover, black Canadian writers have joined forces with the literary contributions of other visible minorities in Canada who contested "hegemonic citizenship discourses" by drawing attention to racialized political and economic discrimination and the legal status of immigrants, and connecting loyalty to and engagement in the community with the concept of cultural citizenship (Sarkowsky 2010, 48). From their position as articulators of a "racial minority experience and culture", black Canadian writers have also tied their reflections on citizenship to global values such as personal freedom and social responsibility and their realization in local and transnational contexts (Chariandy 2016, 540).

As George Elliott Clarke's groundbreaking scholarly work in particular has shown, the history of black Canadian literature reaches back to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century testimonies and slave narratives. Today, the field encompasses writers whose family history connects them with the period of early colonial settlement as well as a growing number of first- and second-generation Canadian authors, many of whom with a Caribbean background, who arrived in Canada increasingly since 1967 when restrictions on non-white immigration were effectively lifted with the introduction of the points-based system. Reflecting this cultural and ethnic

heterogeneity, the debate between Clarke and Walcott mentioned above has resulted in what are now considered two schools of black Canadian literary studies allusively termed “roots” and “routes”. The terminology is derived from the epistemological framework of cultural anthropologist James Clifford, who examined the predicaments of transnational migration, transcultural legacies, and the tensions and dynamics of present-day diasporic cultures in order to show that the roots and routes of a culture engage in a dialogic relationship (Clifford 1997). The latter becomes particularly fertile in literature, because “the diasporic search for roots often translates into narratives of routes”, as Siemerling noted in acknowledgment of the work of Michael Bucknor and Daniel Coleman on Caribbean-Canadian writing (Siemerling 2015, 210). The “roots” approach of black Canadian literary studies, however, identified with the literary-historical research of scholars like Clarke, Siemerling, and Karina Vernon, has “unearthed [...] the full 200-year archive of Black writing” that is now “critically articulated with urgent debates regarding cultural politics and social activism at national and regional scales, as well as the underlying grammars of cultural citizenship” (Chariandy 2016, 541). The school literally has rooted black Canadian writers in the national literary tradition, incidentally proving their and the approach’s Canadian disposition by simultaneously affirming and critically negotiating the concept of nationhood. The “routes” school, represented by scholars like Bucknor, Walcott and Andrea Davis, represents not so much a contrast as a conceptual complement, for it

may be understood as primarily emphasizing the transnational migrations and identifications of Black Canadians of *all* historical periods, but with notable emphasis on the writings of recent immigrants and post-immigrants, [...] whose complicated attachments to ‘elsewhere’ perhaps exhibit greater cultural and technological mobilization today. (Chariandy 2016, 541)

The critical agendas of both schools reflect central preoccupations of black Canadian writing: to challenge hegemonic definitions of citizenship in history and present-day culture by drawing attention to racialized experiences, and to reveal how transnational relations have shaped, and continue to influence, how the Canadian community is imagined.

This article is interested in analysing black Canadian writers’ representations of citizens and the community as discursive negotiations of democratic justice. This concept is derived from the more established notion of social justice, which refers to the equality of opportunity and the equity of wealth distribution, both of which the modern nation state is expected to promote, and to realize, through political and social measures. In Canada, the ideal of equality is associated in particular with what the Canadian Supreme Court has called the “accommodation of differences” (*Andrews v Law Society of British Columbia*, 1989), and while “Canadian history con-

tains its share of intolerance, prejudice, and oppression, it also contains many attempts to find new and creative mechanisms for accommodating difference" (Kymlicka 1996, 153). Citizenship, on the other hand, is defined as a status that entails "political rights, civil rights and social rights" (Kemp 2014, 288) bestowed on those who are recognized as "full members of the community" (Marshall 1950, 28). The protection of these rights is directly related to "the just ordering of social relations within a society", which involves "equality of opportunity", and citizens' participation in their community "on a par with others" (Fraser 2007, 18).

In response to contemporary challenges such as global migration, cybertechnology, international terrorism, and the economic and political influence of transnational corporations, philosophers like Nancy Fraser have argued that our notion of social justice must be extended to include the "political dimension of *representation*, alongside the economic dimension of distribution and the cultural dimension of recognition" (Fraser 2007, 19). This three-dimensional concept, which she calls "democratic justice", takes into account the transnational significance of present-day socio-economic relations, for it no longer questions "*what* is owed [...] to community members" but rather asks "*who* should count as a member and *which* is the relevant community" (Fraser 2007, 19). Fraser's definition of democratic justice problematizes the definition of citizenship insofar as she is concerned with representation not only as a signifying practice, but also as "a matter of social belonging; what is at issue here is inclusion in, or exclusion from, the community of those entitled to make justice claims on one another" (Fraser 2007, 21).²

As Lily Cho recently pointed out, the "connection between Canadian literature and citizenship has been understood largely as a pedagogical question", since literature communicates both a critical understanding and the inherent contradictions of citizenship, such as its "promise of equality and its failure to fulfil that promise" (Cho 2016, 527). In this way, the representation of citizenship and the community in contemporary black Canadian literature contributes to democratic justice debates, for it addresses not only issues of equality but also matters of economic distribution and social belonging, exploring on what grounds community membership is recognized, and to which effect.

Communal Legacies of Deprivation and Exclusion: George Elliott Clarke and the "Black Acadian Tragedy" of *George & Rue* (2005)

In his scholarly and literary engagement, George Elliott Clarke has been committed to unearthing and making visible the contributions of black citizens to Canadian history and culture. Born as "a seventh-generation Canadian of African American and Mi'kmaq descent" (Dudek 2007, 51) who grew up in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Clarke

2 An overview of contemporary philosophical discussions on the dialogic creation of cultural recognition can be found in Katja Sarkowsky, "Questions of Recognition? Critical Investigations of Citizenship and Culture in Multicultural Canadian Writing," *Zeitschrift für Kanadastudien* 30.1 (2010): 47-63.

studied English at the University of Waterloo and at Dalhousie University, and completed his doctorate in 1993 at Queen's University with a comparative study on English Canadian and African American poetry. Since 1999, he has been a professor of English and Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto. Parallel to his academic career, Clarke has been a prolific and versatile literary writer since the early 1980s, whose oeuvre includes poetry, drama, a novel, screenplays and libretti. Described as "multimedia pieces of art" (Dudek 2007, 51), his poetry collections reflect the diversity of black Canadian culture in that they feature black and white photographs as visual comments upon the verses, and combine synaesthetic metaphors, song lines and colloquial speech.

Both as a creative writer and as a scholar, Clarke has gained prominence for his critique of what he calls the "constant erasure" (Moynagh 1996, 73) of black citizens from Canada's historiography, an obliteration that researchers of the "roots" school aim to expose and counteract. As a means to this effect, Clarke coined the term *Africadia* to call attention to the fact that a black community has existed in the Maritimes for almost three centuries, highlighting that

We have a history here, a history full of trials, triumphs, struggles, etc., and there is just no legitimate way that we can be excluded from the history of this place. And so this explains my commemorative efforts and my general interest in involving history and photographs in my creative work, because it is a means of contesting that constant erasure, which has led ultimately I think to racism, to the idea that "you folks do not count; you're not even a fit subject for history." (Moynagh 1996, 73)

For Clarke, the black diaspora's "belonging" is not a question but an unrecognized fact of Canadian history, and he works towards "construct[ing]" and establishing "an Africadian tradition within Nova Scotia" (Moynagh 1996, 75). Combining Northrop Frye's famous statement that Canadian identity is directed by the question "Where is here?" with the postmodern exploration of "Who am I?" (Frye 1971, 220), Clarke's vision of an Africadian legacy emphasizes the history of black presence in Canada, for "we are here. Where we have always been. Since 1605" (Clarke 1997, xxv).³ His demand for the inclusion of black communities in the national narrative becomes most poignant in Clarke's condemnation of the destruction of Africville, a black neighbourhood in Halifax that was demolished in the late 1960s. Its citizens were forced to relocate to public inner-city housing, and the name of the community has since become a symbol for Africadian cultural identity.⁴ Clarke is convinced that "Africville might have become the spiritual capital of Africadia, the conscious annunciation of our existence" (Clarke 2002, 294), which is why its demolition has

3 Clarke refers to the documented migration of the first black man to Canada, Mathieu de Costa, who settled in Port-Royal, Acadie, with Samuel de Champlain in 1605 (cf. Clarke 2002, 18 en3).

4 More information on Africville can be found in Juang/Morrisette 2008, 228-230.

destroyed not only a place but a cultural and economic manifestation validating the inclusion of the black community in Canada's local and national history. In his work, he re-creates to preserve aspects of black Canadian life: his poetry gives lyrical image and voice to Africadian people and places, and his scholarly work also appears driven by a black citizen's longing to feel at home in Canada.⁵

His first novel *George & Rue* is part of Clarke's mission to assert the black Canadian presence in the national narrative.⁶ Based on an event of Clarke's family history about which he learned only as an adult, it fictionalizes the story of his mother's cousins George and Rufus Hamilton, who grew up during the economic depression of the 1930s, and were hanged in 1949 for murdering a taxi driver with a hammer (Clarke 2006: 219).⁷ The novel offers a historical trajectory for the murder, rooting its causes in the brothers' circumstances: it shows George and Rufus as growing up under conditions that prepare them for a life of predestined disaster. Excluded from "equality of opportunity" and participation in their community on the grounds of race and class, and raised by a brutal father and a mother who mostly neglects them, they lack not only material provision, but also emotional comfort and intellectual encouragement: "Polluted by their papa's mean drunkenness, the boys grew like poisonous weeds" (Clarke 2006, 22). Their childhood is characterized by "East Coast-style [poverty], and it had a long pedigree. It was an apocalyptic genealogy" (Clarke 2006, 26). In the first half of the twentieth century, abject poverty, violence and hopelessness shaped the existence of a considerable part of the black population in Nova Scotia. Most of them made their living as subsistence farmers, or worked unskilled for the few industries in the Halifax area, where they earned only a fraction of the wage of white labourers. Confronted with these hardships, which the novel portrays, George and Rufus's development into lawbreakers is presented as somewhat consequential: having left school at the age of eleven and ten, they take up a few low-paid jobs, but they also scavenge and steal, committing petty crimes.

Both their ambitions and the means by which the brothers try to realize them illustrate the racialized cultural and socio-economic restrictions of their time and place. George finds work as a help on a farm, and later joins the army, which however he soon leaves to go to the Merchant Marine instead. For desertion and petty theft, he is imprisoned after the war, and later resorts to a life as a dishwasher and burglar. Eventually, he returns to Three Mile Plains to marry his sweetheart Blondola,

5 The titles of Clarke's critical monographs suggest that he conceptualizes Canada as a home that requires a journey before it can be reached: *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (2002) and *Directions Home: Approaches to African-Canadian Literature* (2012).

6 Clarke's most recent novel *The Motorcyclist* (2016) also takes inspiration from his family history; it fictionalizes the life of his father as an escape from the obligations of working-class existence in pursuit of the sexual and artistic promises of bohemian life.

7 After learning about this aspect of his family history, Clarke conducted extensive research on the matter that eventually resulted in the poetry collection *Execution Poems* (2000). His first literary attempt to come to terms with the case, his verses imagine the Hamilton brothers' lives and their crime in lyrical snapshots characterized by sensual and sexual metaphors.

and they move to Fredericton to establish a life together. It seems that happiness is, finally, within reach:

George figured he could work as a labourer in the city proper but do small farming outside. Too, he'd have a new life: no one'd know him; he'd know no one. [...] George liked this little city, and his happy-go-lucky personality seemed to win him neighbourly regard. [...] He thought he might come to plant an acre of potatoes, keep a patch for strawberries, and own a couple of maple trees and sixteen hundred bees visiting hundreds of flowers to make honey a salary. [...] And in their shack, they lived as one, out of a black iron frying pan. It was their wealth, their communion, their experience of time at its fullest. (Clarke 2006, 84, 86, 87)

In the meantime, his brother Rue pursues a more promising path, for "Vice meant steady work" (Clarke 2006, 63): he teaches himself to play the piano and finds work in a brothel in Halifax. Since he learned to play on a broken instrument, he knows how to use only half of the keyboard, so creating a very particular version of improvised jazz:

The first half of the keyboard was constantly fooling and shocking him with its heavy, sable, deep bass notes, too resonant, and so he nixed all requests. All his pieces were originals: he had no repertoire. [...] His style was not unpleasant, but also not pleasing. His [...] playing didn't inspire dancing, drinking, coupling, tipping, or any of the merrymaking that should accompany money-making. Rather, Rufus's pianist style forced everyone to just stand around sipping, pondering, as if attending a recital instead of revelling in a blind pig and cathouse. The piano was spooky; its music haunted every room in the house, messin up lovers' rhythms. (Clarke 2006, 65, 65-66)

Rue's broken music illustrates his broken dreams: Easter, the woman with whom he was in love, had died in an accident, taking with her all of his attempts to build a decent life. In the novel, Easter represents the few opportunities black people had in these years: she is "one of those better-off Negroes who had houses, new clothes, flash, big words, cars (or horses), quiet gumption, RESPECT, gardens, white friends, and style, but who kept their furniture covered up in sheets to preserve the newness" (Clarke 2006, 57). Her father is a railway porter with a regular income, and Easter wants to become a nurse as soon as black women are allowed to enter the training courses. She dreams of middle-class comfort, and Rue "loved the luxury of that dream as much as he loved Easter" (Clarke 2006, 56).

While admitting that social belonging and recognition are, within limits, achievable for black people, the text concentrates on exposing "the materiality of an Afri-

can-Canadian rural community living on the verge of starvation and on the very fringes of White society. Clarke demythologizes the figure of the outlaw, uncovering the brothers' despair, their poverty-stricken lives, their lack of prospects" (Cuder-Domínguez 2010, 126). What Clarke elsewhere had labelled the brothers' "Black Acadian Tragedy"⁸ continues to take its course when Rufus, after losing his job as a piano player for beating up a prostitute, is caught robbing a man and sentenced to two years in prison. After his release, he visits George and Blondola, who have just had their second child. George is worried about how to provide for his family, an easy prey for Rue, who plans another robbery. They agree to call a taxicab in order to attack the driver – a plan that will result in the murder of the man, and the brothers' subsequent trial, sentence, and execution.

Clarke's interpretation of the story of George and Rue portrays their fate as both inevitable and culturally – racially – constructed. His story and the historical evidence on which it is based are anecdotal and local in focusing on two neglected boys who grow into criminals in a destitute community. This community, however, serves as a synecdoche for the wider Canadian context. The narrator, who repeatedly expresses sympathy for the characters, deliberately reads their lives as determined by the historical legacy and framework of racial discrimination:

[T]heir personal destinies were rooted in ancestral history [...] Their own dreams and choices were the passed-down desolations of slavery. [...] Black people arrived in Canada] with nothing to nowhere, were landed with indifference and plunked on rocky, thorny land (soon laced with infants' skeletons), and told to grow potatoes and work for ale. (Clarke 2006, 14)

Authorial digressions such as this one demonstrate Clarke's political agenda: he establishes a connection between the exclusion of black citizens from a particular Africadian community in the first half of the twentieth century with the deprivation and neglect that had determined the lives of black Canadians since the early colonial period. In this way, the novel places individual guilt in a historical context defined by the absence of social justice measures, drawing attention to the situation in black communities before "Civil Rights [...] and fair-employment legislation and multiculturalism and all those things that have made life somewhat better for minorities and others in Canada" (Wylie 2007, 149). Clarke identifies the brothers as tragic characters because, as citizens, they lived at a time when black Canadians were excluded from skilled professions and subjected to structural racial discrimination. As individuals, however, they dismiss the means of subsistence and communal participation

8 "Black Acadian Tragedy" is the subtitle of the poetry collection (Clarke, *Execution Poems*, 2001) in which he first dealt with the story, a label that Clarke takes up again at the end of *George & Rue*.

that would have been available, and respond to hegemonic contempt with a career as criminals and murderers: sinned against, yes, but also, very much, sinning.

The novel was written against the wishes of Clarke's own family and in spite of the victim's daughter's explicit request not to fictionalize the murder of her father.⁹ It is an attempt at both representation and recognition of what being a Canadian citizen was like for many black people in the early twentieth century: determined by violence and criminality, and the exclusion from opportunities that was not counterbalanced by political attempts to accommodate such differences by economic redistribution. However, this historical situation is described in detail not to justify the murder, but to counteract the erasure of what Clarke feels are crucial aspects of the black Canadian legacy: anger, abuse, violence, poverty, and hatred. The Hamilton brothers are depicted as victims of their time and circumstances; the tragedy that is shown is communal, but the responsibility and guilt remain individual. The novel does not render the murder less horrendous by implying that George and Rue "were [simply] hitting back at a [...] racist, white-supremacist society" (Wyile 2007, 147). In fact, Clarke stressed that

Even if someone were to argue that the historical George and Rufus Hamilton can be excused for committing robbery, because they were in need [...] how do their crimes actually ameliorate their dreadful circumstances? And what about their victim [...]? Even if he had been an out-and-out Ku Kluxer (and he was absolutely the opposite), how would his murder have resolved slavery, segregation, and the relegation of Black people in the Maritimes to [second class] economic status? (Wyile 2007: 147)

George and Rufus are trapped by their belonging to an impoverished community, a belonging that is racialized, that restricts their chances, and affects their ambitions as well as their decisions. Eventually, it also accounts for the severity of their punishment for it racializes the recognition of their legal status: the novel concludes by referring to another historical case, the murder of another taxi driver in the same

9 According to Clarke, the descendants of Burgoyne, the murdered man, had expressed reservations when his plans to publish on the crime became known, but they accepted the poetry collection more readily than the novel: "[The] elder daughter [of the victim] wrote to me back in the summer of 2000 to ask, on behalf of herself, her siblings, and her mother, that I *not* write this story. They were worried, she said, that my aim was to profit from a tragedy that had wrecked their family life. I responded that my aim was certainly not financial gain, but that, given that my late cousins' crimes harmed *two* families – hers and mine – I had to try to understand why they did what they did, that I had to reclaim their bodies for us (meaning my family). [...] S]he and her family still disagreed with my desire to write about this story, but [...] they essentially understood my motivation [for writing] *Execution Poems*. [...] However, when *George & Rue* appeared, Mr Burgoyne's daughter wrote letters to the Fredericton *Daily Gleaner* and even did an interview with CBC Radio, blasting me for 'exploiting' her family's pain in the hopes of making a million dollars" (Wyile 2007, 148).

year, committed for similar reasons and in a similar way, by two men who also were sentenced to death for it. Unlike George and Rufus, however, these murderers were white – and before they could be hanged, their sentences commuted to life imprisonment (Clarke 2006, 214).

Longing to Belong: Black Urban Citizenship in *What We All Long For* (2005)

While *George & Rue* describes how economic deprivation, social exclusion, and unequal legal recognition defined the lives of black Canadian citizens in small-town early twentieth-century Nova Scotia, Dionne Brand's depiction of twenty-first century Toronto as a multicultural urban community in *What We All Long For* individualizes and complicates the practices of contemporary black citizenship and democratic justice. A first-generation Canadian poet, novelist, filmmaker and scholar, Dionne Brand was born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1953 and moved to Toronto at the age of twenty, where she obtained university degrees in English and Philosophy. She was appointed as the Toronto's Poet Laureate from 2009 to 2012, and at present holds a University Research Chair at the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph. Three of her four novels – *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), *What We All Long For*, and *Love Enough* (2014) – feature Toronto as their setting. Addressing both roots and routes, conceptions of home and the nation, and feminism and the black body, Brand's writing exemplifies central concerns as well as the diversity of contemporary black Canadian literature.

Her third novel *What We All Long For* has been praised for its depiction of "affective" (Brydon 2007), "global" (Dobson 2006) and "cosmopolitan" (Johansen 2008) citizenship, for presenting characters who experience the multicultural, urban community of present-day Toronto as their homeland. Fellow Torontonians Rinaldo Walcott celebrated the novel's portrayal of the city, which features "as central a character as any other in the novel. [...] Toronto is magnified and specified as its own unique place. [...] This novel is Toronto's book" (Walcott 2005). In her essay "Bathurst", published in the collection *Bread out of Stone* (1994), Dionne Brand had reflected on the different communities within the urban entity that have come to distinguish the city:

The city is colourising beautifully. In a weird way this is a very hopeful city. When you think of all the different people living in it. [...] And you've got to be hopeful despite the people. They all may not know what they are doing, and they may hate each other's guts [...] this city has a life that white folks, at least the ones that run things and the ones that write letters to the editor, don't know about and can't talk about because they're too busy reading their newspaper for the latest validation of their stereotypes. (Brand 1994, 77, 79)

Twenty years later, *What We All Long For* introduces four young protagonists in their twenties who were all born and bred in Toronto, and whose Vietnamese, Jamaican, Jamaican-Italian, and Africadian backgrounds have contributed to “colourising” the city. Tuyen, an aspiring artist, is the child of Vietnamese boat refugees; her parents were separated from their son Quy on their flight, and have never recovered from this tragedy. Her best friend Carla, a bicycle courier, was born to an Italian mother and a Jamaican father. She struggles to come to terms with her mother’s suicide when she was a child, with her father’s indifference, and she tries to protect her criminal brother. Their friend Jackie owns the store *Ab und Zu*, “just on the border where Toronto’s trendy [meets] Toronto’s seedy”, where she sells second-hand, “post-bourgeois clothing” (Brand 2005, 99). Her Africadian parents came to Toronto from Halifax in the 1970s, but failed to realize their ambitions for a better life. Jackie’s admirer Oku, a hopeful poet and a student of literature, still lives with his parents and struggles with his Jamaican father, a diligent and proud working-class snob who disdains his son’s intellectual ambitions. Tuyen’s lost brother Quy’s narrative about growing up in East Asian refugee camps, drawn in parallel to the stories of the Torontonians, acts as a foil to their individualized, and less existential, struggles and escapes.

The characters’ status as a ‘visible minority’ affects the ways in which they experience Toronto, but their citizenship is not defined by their ethnic background to the exclusion of other influences. In their narratives, they create Toronto as an “urban space [that] is not represented by skyscrapers, information technology, or a flood of images but [that] becomes palpable in how [the] characters use and experience the city[,] and in [their] emotions and desires” (Rosenthal 2011, 218). In fact, allegiance to a particular diasporic and/or minority community is problematic for all of them because they identify this form of socio-cultural belonging with their parents. The mothers and fathers in the novel embody the different cultures that are contributing to the diversity of the nation, symbolized by the Canadian mosaic, but unlike their children, they do not consider themselves to be multicultural in either heritage or self-definition. Their children, however, prefer to choose their ways of life and their relationships from the varieties offered by a liberal, multicultural society, and in deliberate differentiation from their parents’ traditions and ethnic backgrounds. As Maureen Garvie has pointed out,

All struggle with the guilty freight of their fathers’ and mothers’ sorrows. They see their parents living on broken dreams, blighted by loss, greed, and stupidity. In their parents’ generation, families stuck together. Redemption took the form of punishingly hard work that paid off in cash. In their children’s eyes, that price was too high. Their antidotes are sex, food, jazz, art, style, hope – and love. (Garvie 2005)

Eager to dissociate from their families, Brand's young characters still harbour the wish to belong; the novel explores both their yearning and on what grounds they want to be included in a community. It shows them all projecting their longing onto their urban, globalized community where choosing one's allegiances – to a role model, a companion, a culture, a neighbourhood, or a style of art – is a fundamental principle of communality rather than an exception. It also qualifies the extent to which choosing can be considered a post-racial practice in contemporary Toronto. The identifiably black characters Oku and Jackie experience cultural recognition and exclusion as related to race, but for them, as for Carla and Tuyen, urban citizenship is more strongly tied to age, sexual desire, family, individual ambition and the opportunities they decide to take. The social construct of race permeates their multicultural Toronto insofar as the characters have experienced racialized thinking in dimensions of social justice – participation, equality, redistribution – as well as in their personal relationships and decisions.

Brand suggests that belonging to a multicultural community comes at the price of exclusion from those cultures that are identified with the novel's first-generation immigrants to Toronto. For example, Oku, a black second-generation Canadian born to Jamaican parents, is subjected to unjust treatment from the police who repeatedly stop and search him. Unlike his father, who shows understanding for black men that react to racial profiling with violence, Oku prefers a strategy of ironic de-escalation (Brand 2005, 165). Responding to such injustice with anger would, he believes, reinforce his victimization and blight his life as a poet and citizen of the urban community. As the only character who still lives in a more homogenous immigrant neighbourhood, his decision is made in defiance of the conflicted masculinity that he observes in his father and in black men of his own generation. His decision to pursue an academic degree in literature also does not correspond to the black male role models of his community. For Oku, the anti-intellectual snobbery of his father and the criminal dealings of his friend Kwesi are consequences of a racialized discrimination that has affected black self-consciousness:

His father said he lived too much in his head. The truth was living in his head was what kept him safe. Living in his head meant he didn't react reflexively to the stimuli of the city heading toward him with all the velocity of a split atom. That's why he kept pretty much to himself. That's why he risked being called a "flake" and a "faggot" by the guys in the jungle. That's why he cultivated the persona of the cool poet – so that he wouldn't have to get involved in the ordinary and brutal shit waiting for men like him in the city. They were in prison, although the bars were invisible. (Brand 2005, 166)

With the character of Oku, Brand illustrates both the damaging impact of racism and the inadvertent collaboration of victims in the manifestation of their status. For

Oku's friend Kwesi is one of these "guys in the jungle", a criminal who very successfully trades with stolen goods. Kwesi offers Oku the opportunity to join his thriving business, a temptation to make easy money that his friend Jackie's father had been unable to resist twenty years earlier. He was caught and went to prison for illegal dealing, which effectively ended Jackie's parents' hopes for building a better life. Aware of the trap that this criminal legacy of black masculinity represents, Oku becomes involved with the black anarchists instead, attends anti-globalization demonstrations, and seeks refuge in the circle of his multicultural friends. The critics Tavares and Brousseau applaud the sense of self-worth and strength that Oku shows, arguing that

temporary humiliation is the price he pays to retain agency over his life and social identity in the city. In effect, by choosing not to identify himself as part of the black youth subculture of the Little Jamaica and "the Jungle", Oku resists the racialization of his urban social identity by his peers and the urban authorities alike. (Tavares/Brousseau 23)

Oku possesses the strength to confront racism when it threatens to victimize him, but his jealousy of Jackie's boyfriend Reiner provokes him in different ways: frustrated with Jackie rejecting his, Oku's, advances, he calls Reiner "Nazi boy" (Brand 2005, 71) and "fucking Nazi" (Brand 2005, 133) because he is German. Germanophobia appears as an agreed-upon, accepted form of prejudice in several passages of the novel: during the Football World Cup, Germany's national team is dismissed as "the machine" (Brand 2005, 311) and as a "Teutonic bunch [that] have no creativity, but [...] order" (Brand 2005, 283). According to Andrea Stolz, the insult of Reiner, which is mockingly repeated by Tuyen and Carla behind Jackie's back, demonstrates "the depths of racist thinking that runs deep in both the black and white community" (Stolz 2014, 377). In fact, competing for Jackie's affections renders Oku so helpless that he resorts to stereotypes of black masculinity he normally rejects. With embarrassment he remembers that "he had said the lamest line, the most insipid words in the black vernacular, the most washed out, most overused" (Brand 2005, 81) when he told Jackie to "hook a brother up" (Brand 2005, 73, 81). Reiner himself never moves beyond stereotypical projection: the guitar player in an industrial metal band, he hardly speaks, is rarely depicted with Jackie, and she does not appear to feel guilty when she eventually cheats on him with Oku (Brand 2005, 192). The character serves as a means to shed light on black identity conflicts, for it is Reiner's lack of racialized self-consciousness that renders him attractive for Jackie: with him, "she knew who she was, separate and apart, in command of self. With Oku, she was on that train, liquid and jittery and out of control" (Brand 2005, 101). Being with Reiner meets her longing to be recognized as an individual separate from her background: he has never met her defeated father and her drinking mother, has never been to the social housing neighbourhood where she grew up, and he does not associate

her with the deprivation that features strongly in Africadian history. Oku, on the other hand, knows about the conflict between loyalty and self-determination: "He knew that to Jackie he probably looked like so many burned-out guys in Vanauley Way [the neighbourhood where she grew up]. [...] But] he wasn't a player, [...] and] he wasn't her father. He would never allow that look to come into his eyes, the wry look, the defeated look, the bitter look" (Brand 2005, 265). The novel does not offer any closure to Jackie, Reiner and Oku's story, but it suggests a possibility. Walking through Vanauley Way, Oku begins to understand her motives for warding off his affections. It is this realization that renews the sense of purpose he needs to resume his studies: "He was going to work the rest of the summer, the rest of the year, then go back and finish the master's. Why? Because he loved that, and what he loved he wasn't going to have taken from him or give up" (Brand 2005, 265).

Against the background of both structural discrimination and the criminal legacy of black masculinity, Jackie and Oku's struggles for recognition and inclusion are distinctively, but not exclusively, racialized. Both characters long to be citizens of an imagined post-racial, urban, multicultural Toronto rather than to be recognized as members of impoverished black communities restrained by mutually reinforcing discrimination and criminality. And while Oku embraces African-American literature as a part of what could be designated a diasporic black heritage – he reads Amiri Baraka and Jayne Cortez as part of his studies – Jackie displays no interest in any aspect of Africadian culture.

Carla and Tuyen's longings are likewise defined by their conflicted relation with the ethnic communities they grew up in, by their decision to pursue their individual ambitions, and by their attempts to escape and emancipate themselves from dysfunctional families, both of which are blighted by tragedies in the past. Their identification as citizens of an urban community differs from Jackie and Oku's insofar as it is not derived from racialized discrimination. Carla's looks would have allowed her "to disappear into this white world" (Brand 2005, 106); she chooses to identify as Jamaican, though not out of loyalty to her Jamaican father, whom she despises, or his culture, which makes her feel uncomfortable. Her decision is her way to remain close to her late Italian mother, Angie, who committed suicide when Carla was just a girl. To Carla, her mother was the true "border crosser" (Brand 2005, 106), because she "tried to step across the border of who she was and who she might be" (Brand 2005, 212). Anxious to escape from Little Italy and from the prospect of marrying into lower middle-class boredom in the suburbs (Brand 2005, 314), Angie had loved the hippie music of the 1960s, songs about journeys and freedom and a different way of life without cultural or familial restraints. Her affair with a married black man, Carla's father Derek, is Angie's daring and her escape. It is also her undoing, for Derek deserts her after the birth of their son Jamal, a betrayal that Carla's memory links with her mother committing suicide. Angie's story provides Carla with the master narrative on which she builds her own life, for

Her mother must have made her choice [to consort with Carla's father] for a good reason: good or bad she had crossed a border. Carla instinctively understood. And [...]he hated her father because she loved Angie, she loved Jamal because she loved Angie, she loved her friends because she loved Angie, she was a bicycle courier because she loved Angie, she hated policemen and ambulances and bank tellers because she loved Angie. Loving Angie was a gate, and at every moment she made decisions based on that love, if the gate swung open or closed. She kept from loving because she loved Angie. (Brand 2005, 106, 111)

Carla's mother's exclusion was self-chosen, as is Carla's decision to follow her example – a strategy to embrace difference that is shown to be rather all-encompassing during the 2002 football World Cup, when the four characters all cheer the Korean team because, for the moment, "the World Cup made [them] feel [Korean]" (Brand 2005, 206). The novel connects the idea of choosing to belong with the more or less superficial appropriation of individual aspects of the various traditions encompassed by the multicultural mosaic: their greeting of cultural differences as folklore, as a mixture of attributes from various food cultures, music, literature and art, and their willingness and ability to take their pick from all of these elements, distinguish the citizens of the heterogeneous urban community that is Toronto. Their preference of cultural consumer flexibility is contrasted with their shared longing for binding individual companionship. In the words of David Chariandy, there is a "yearning for comradeship and friendship beyond the often restrictive claims of kinship, race, and especially nation [that] is a consistent feature of Brand's writing" (Chariandy 2016, 553). Retrospective glimpses to their childhood reveal that feelings of loneliness and a vague sense of being different to "the white kids in class" (Brand 2005, 20) and a shared "opposition to the state of things" (Brand 2005, 19) was, at first, all they had in common. Since this experience of difference is never further explicated nor particularly racialized, it could refer to any independent-minded children, possibly from a non-academic background, who are too curious and probing to accept normative culture without question. Somewhat pragmatically, the novel suggests that a way to accommodate for racialized differences is including knowledge about Canada's different cultures in the school curriculum. The urban citizens' longing to belong must be met in the cosmopolitan community that has shaped it.

Conclusion

Brand's four protagonists inhabit Toronto as a space where they associate with people of their own choice, and where they establish their lives independent of their families and at a critical distance from the cultural and racialized legacies of their diasporic backgrounds. With regard to the demands of democratic justice, their portrayal raises the question of how, and if at all, differences should be accommodated in an urban community that so obviously thrives on an appreciation

of difference. As Stephen Marche has recently pointed out, present-day Toronto has become known as the

city of others [... because more than half of its inhabitants are] foreign-born, with people from over 230 countries, making it by many assessments, the most diverse city in the world. But diversity is not what sets Toronto apart; the near-unanimous celebration of diversity does. Toronto may be the last city in the world that unabashedly desires difference. (Marche 2016)

For the young urban citizens in *What We All Long For*, cultural diversity is the language they speak, and it differs significantly from the racialized difference their parents have experienced as first-generation immigrants to the multicultural community. While also foregrounding the experiences of black citizens, George Elliott Clarke's *George & Rue* exhibits very different ideas of the importance of black Canadians' communal identity. The novel is aimed to counteract the erasure of black knowledge and black contributions to Canadian history, an agenda that opposes a liberalism that "bulldozes difference" for the sake of "integration" (Clarke 2002, 22 en14). Clarke seeks to strengthen a distinctive Africadian cultural identity, which comprises a shared historical experience of political exclusion and economic deprivation as well as cultural difference from white mainstream Canada. Multiculturalism and tolerance, he insists, must not only accept but value – and therefore seek to preserve – difference: "I'm not in favour of segregation at all; [...] But I do think that it's important that communities be able to exist so long as they do not keep other people from joining that community" (Moynagh 1996, 76). While problematized in the context of different historical periods, settings and themes, Brand and Clarke's representations of citizenship and the community demonstrate the preoccupation of contemporary black Canadian writing with issues of democratic justice, and map out the ongoing literary debate on matters of belonging and inclusion in the multicultural nation.

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