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Black Canadian Literature as Diaspora Transgression: *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to interrogate some of the challenges involved in the articulation of a black Canadian literature and suggests that such a literature may best be understood not as a set of "coherent" national narratives but as a complex engagement of the multiple diasporic experiences that inform and influence understandings of Canadian-ness. The study argues, therefore, that the very diasporic character of black Canadian literature—its pluralism and heterogeneity—articulate a deliberately transgressive Canadian-ness. By linking narrative and social geographies, the paper situates the works of black women writers in the Americas as part of a tradition of the counter-novel, involved in acts of boundary crossing and cultural and textual unmanageability. The paper explores finally the disruptive, but also potentially liberating, function of the literature by engaging in a detailed discussion of Esi Edugyan's novel *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte tente d'interroger quelques'uns des défis impliqués dans l'articulation d'une littérature Afro-canadienne et suggère qu'une telle literature serait la mieux comprise non pas comme un tout cohérent de narrations nationales, mais comme un engagement complexe d'expériences diasporiques multiples informant et influençant les compréhensions des Canadianismes. Argumentant que le caractère très diasporique de la littérature Afro-canadienne—son pluralisme et son hétérogénéité—exprime clairement un canadianisme transgressif délibéré, ce texte situe les travaux d'écrivaines d'origine africaine dans les Amériques comme faisant partie de cette tradition de traversées transgressives de frontières et d'impossibilités

culturelles à gérer. Enfin, ce texte démontre la fonction transgressive, mais aussi potentiellement libératrice de la littérature en s'engageant dans une discussion détaillée de le roman *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* de Esi Edugyan.

Attempts to delineate a black literary tradition in Canada have largely been a contestation over space and place articulated within an equally contested discourse of citizenship and (un)belonging. George Elliott Clarke, literary theorist and anthologist, has managed to successfully chart a long history of black writing in Canada that dates to as early as 1785 (Clarke 1997: xiv). He has written African-Canadian[11] presences indelibly on a Canadian landscape, arguing for a right to belong based primarily on historical residency. It has been much more difficult, however, to articulate a national literature that can take into account both the historical presence of blacks in Canada and the multiple and increasingly complex expressions and experiences of blackness that demarcate a post-1950s Canadian reality. The problematic of a black literary tradition is, in fact, invariably tied to the question of cultural citizenship. To identify a black Canadian literary tradition assumes that black experiences are accepted as critical to wider understandings of what it means to be a Canadian. Yet for blacks in Canada, questions of citizenship and belonging are still deeply contested. Daiva Stasiulis and Abigail Bakan, in "Negotiating Citizenship: The Case of Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada," offer a re-conceptualization of citizenship that accounts for the ways in which gendered and racialized bodies often get positioned outside the Canadian nation-state. Drawing on their definition of citizenship as a "negotiated relationship" (1997: 113), this paper argues that citizenship goes beyond a static legal relationship between an individual and a single nation-state and is influenced by a host of competing social and cultural relationships. As Stasiulis and Bakan explain, "subject to change," the citizenship experience "is acted upon collectively, or among individuals existing within social, political and economic relations of collective conflict, which are shaped by gendered, racial, class and internationally based state hierarchies" (113). While formal citizenship is, therefore, legally possible, and while citizenship in advanced postwar capitalist nations like Canada is often constructed as "ideal," the right to belong is one which has to be earned differently. For blacks bringing with them historical linkages to slavery and more recent connections to "third world" and formerly colonized spaces, that right to belong is always tenuous.

For this reason, Clarke has been impelled to demarcate a "legitimate" black presence in Canada, indeed to legitimize his own presence as a Canadian writer and literary theorist, by establishing more than two hundred years of history, memory, toil and sacrifice forged in the nation. Clarke's very term, "Africadia," gestures towards multiple sites of belonging: historically through shared Canadian memory; geographically through the inscription of that history on a Nova Scotian

landscape; and politically through proven loyalty to British Canadian government. His attempt to identify a black nation within a white settler nation, however, relies on a static definition of citizenship in order to impose an essentialist form of blackness in Canada. Still, if Clarke's "ideal" citizen is called upon to demonstrate a right to belong, then what of the large influx of black bodies that have come from the Caribbean and Africa in the 1960s and after? Does it matter that many of them, like the black Loyalists and refugees before them, deliberately chose Canada as their preferred site of exile (Foster 1996: 48)? If, as Statiulis and Bakan argue, citizenship is also a global relationship, negotiated both at the international and national levels, then at what point does the immigrant become an "ideal" citizen when that immigrant is not only non-white, but also "third world," marked from the outset as "foreign" to Canada's national and cultural identity?

Since much of the writing we seek to gather under the category of black Canadian literature today is being articulated through the experiences of these immigrant bodies, the questions I pose are enormously relevant. Clarke, himself, admits in *Odysseys Home: Mapping African Canadian Literature* that despite a long history of writing by blacks in Canada, there was no attempt to articulate "an African-Canadian literature" until the 1970s (Clarke 2002: 7). This need to name a tradition of black writing in Canada was made necessary precisely because of the increased presence of black immigrant writers. While I am not trying to demarcate historical or political divisions in the writing being done by blacks in Canada, I am attempting to map the deeply complex relationship of black writing to the Canadian nation-state.

Esi Edugyan's novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2004), offers a critical entry point into this discussion about the relationship between black writing and the nation-state. A Canadian of Ghanaian parentage, who grew up in Calgary and now lives in Victoria, BC, Edugyan is herself a product of the post-1950s generation of Canadian blacks. Her novel is important for a number of reasons. It allows us to think through questions of nation and belonging by interrogating what it means to be black in western Canada, a Canadian space historically constructed as imaginatively white. By inscribing a complex black presence on the Canadian prairies—one that is based both on long historical residency and the arrival of newer immigrants from continental Africa—Edugyan expands and complicates the question of belonging by situating multiple black bodies in Canadian spaces west of Nova Scotia and Toronto. This "unexpected" inscription of blackness on the whiteness of the Canadian prairies represents a kind of spatial transgression, a critical disruption of the construction of Canadian cultural and national identity as primarily white and British. By linking narrative and social geographies, Edugyan's discursive intervention—the literary "transgression" of writing blackness into western Canada—allows us to explore a political reworking of the question of nation. Her novel not only challenges the "illegitimacy" of black

experiences in Canada, but also insists that black Canadian literature has much to reveal about the specific needs and conditions of the Canadian nation.

The questions that Edugyan's novel poses have meaning for wider discussions about "ethnic" writing in Canada. Ranu Samantrai, in a discussion of Rohinton Mistry's fiction, insists that arguments about place and belonging are also central to university debates about canon formation:

> We know from the histories of our own academies that nation building and canon formation are two sides of the same coin. How a writer is received and named perhaps tells us more about the intentions of the namer than about the writer himself or herself. (34)

By locating Mistry, a Parsi Indian writing in Canada, within a Canadian literary canon, Samantrai argues that we "explode the very idea of Canada, impossibly stretching its boundaries to include places, people, and memories conventionally excluded from the Canadian mainstream" (34). All "minority" writing in Canada thus poses a critical challenge to a Canadian national identity supported by a North American literary canon. Black Canadian literature, as part of this wider contestatory literature, positioned self-consciously on the margins of a Canadian canon and exploding the notion of Canadian-ness, finds itself in an uneasy relationship with the nation. From its very beginnings, it has been called upon to challenge, to contest, to unmask the nation.

Yet the very term black Canadian literature also implies recognition of national consciousness, the ability to represent the particular social, cultural and political consciousness of the nation space from which it writes. Other black literatures of the Americas have responded to, at one point or another, to this nationalist imperative. The early literature of the English-speaking Caribbean, responding to the postcolonial independence euphoria of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, seemed self-consciously preoccupied with a discussion of political nationalism and cultural autonomy. During the same period, African-American literature was also busy (re)defining itself within an American canon according to black nationalist and black aesthetic traditions. The fiction of "minority" Canadian writers like Edugyan and Mistry, however, suggest the possibility of a different literary model. This alternative model disrupts the construction of Canada as a homogeneous, stable signifier by inserting other Canadian identities, transgressive because of their ability to disrupt, but also deliberately unstable and less obedient to the Canadian nation-state.

In *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, Edugyan converges multiple African diasporic voices, coming from different ethno-cultural and national spaces, but together articulating a kind of Canadian-ness that not only recognizes cultural differences, but also locates the lived experiences of black Canadians as essential to discussions about what it means to be Canadian. She offers us, importantly, a way to approach

black Canadian literature that accepts its plurality and heterogeneity, the very signs of its incoherence, as essential to the definition of a black Canadian literary project.

In a 2006 panel discussion on black Canadian literature at the annual Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences held at York University in Toronto,[2] the panelists seemed ironically ambivalent about whether there was even such a thing as black Canadian literature. Returning us to Samantrai's problem of canon formation, the difficulty for the panel seemed to result, precisely, from the fact that this literature has not yet been formally recognized. George Dei, one of the panelists, in making the case for the inclusion of black Canadian literature within a Canadian literary canon, argued that a national literature must "address 'the particularity' of its various constituent ethnicities" (Kurata 2006). In making this argument, Dei was not only pointing to an absented black Canadian literature, but was also making two paradoxical claims: that Anglophone Canadian literature is itself diasporic and constituted through multiple and competing ethnicities; and that Canadian literatures have the responsibility to represent the experiences of the specific nation. While agreeing with Dei that Canadian literatures bring together multiple diasporic narratives, I want to also insist, as I do in this paper and elsewhere,[33] on a reconceptualization of black Canadian literature in a way that can move us beyond the problematic of the nation and open up a more radical, but potentially liberating, concept of the Canadian nation-state.

In "'Keep on Movin': Rap, Black Atlantic Identities and the Problem of Nation," Rinaldo Walcott acknowledges the potential of black creative artists to uncover the "true" face of the nation and registers this potential importantly as part of the cross-border, cross-cultural tendency of their art: "the practices of citing and referencing across borders, when coupled with the movement of actual black bodies across state lines, prove disruptive, in profound and disturbing ways, to the romantic, fictive narratives of the unified nation-state" (Walcott 1999a: 28). Black identities in Canada, representing one of the most complex amalgamations of the African Diaspora in the black Atlantic, constitute multiple African diasporas. This cultural and political movement across borders unsettles easy narratives of the Canadian nation by positioning the experiences of black Canadians as critical to discussions about what it means to live and be in Canada. Walcott thus sees the ability of black diaspora cultures to contest fictive narratives as one important "attempt to produce new fictions of what Canada might be" (32).

In her discussion of Canadian "ethnic" writing, Ranu Samantrai also sees this writing as a product of a dynamic cross-border, cross-cultural relationship. She believes, like Walcott, that this relationship offers us an opportunity to "reevaluate our idea of Canada" (Samantrai 1996: 37). In specific reference to Mistry's fiction, she argues that his work,

suggests a breakdown and an overlap of nations such that it is unclear where India ends and Canada begins. Far from coherent, self-enclosed facts of nature, nations and cultures (which themselves fail to coincide) are revealed as interpenetrating, not distinct from each other but made by, and making, each other. (34)

For her, it is irrelevant that most of Mistry's stories are set outside of Canada. These stories still have meaning within a Canadian context, "for the voices heard in them have to be grappled with not in Bombay but in Toronto" (37). This diasporic fluidity, she insists, is not only productive, but crucial for the expansion of democracy in Canada by insisting that various Canadian bodies have meaning and function in a Canadian landscape (34).

Since, as Edugyan's and Mistry's works demonstrate, black Canadian and other "minority" literatures cannot be read as a set of neat, untroubled national narratives, they allow us to (re)think community in a different kind of way that privileges heterogeneity and diaspora consciousness. Rather than trying to articulate Canada's plural and heterogeneous blackness as part of a coherent and therefore obedient nationalism, it is more useful to explore how this heterogeneity functions as a sign of a deliberately disruptive Canadian-ness. As Walcott points out, "the histories, memories and experiences of dispersed peoples always act as a transgression of nation-state principles" (1999a: 29). Within black Canadian literature, this transgression may, importantly, allow us to explore the possibility of a transformative Canadian identity and may take us toward a desired "new 'national' terrain from which to attempt newly ethical thought on 'race' today" (Chariandy 2002: 212).

The trope of the counter-novel, Walcott suggests further in "The Desire to Belong: The Politics of Text and their Politics of Nation," may offer us one way of understanding how the terrain of this "newly ethical thought" may be mapped through black literary production (1999b: 61). Walcott deploys the trope of the counter-novel, borrowed from Sylvia Wynter, to delineate the political trajectory of black Canadian literature. According to Walcott, by making possible a reworking of "the novel's form and its conceptual premises," the counter-novel, which is always a production of "Minority Discourse" within a specifically Canadian context, can reshape and refashion the literary landscape of Canada and rewrite Canadian historiography (61). The question of desire and how it structures belonging—the ways in which Canadian counter-novels write "Canada as a place and space of desire"—are central, Walcott insists, to their "ability to effect and evoke new possibilities" (62). By reading Esi Edugyan's *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* as a type of counter-novel, this study illustrates the potential of black Canadian literature to offer alternative, and potentially liberating, ways of thinking about community and national identity, to write Canada as a place and space of black desire.

The novel also forces us to explore questions of gender as essential to any articulation of ethical thought on race. Black women writers, like Edugyan, radicalize the meaning of patriarchy and nation precisely because they are writing from a place of multiple exclusions. In the Americas, the very act of writing for black women has been an act of transgression. Because black women writers engage both a critique of gender and race, they have had to challenge the racist and sexist discourses of the (post)colonial societies from which they write. Marlene NourbeSe Philip, a Trinidadian Canadian, argues that, historically, black women were confronted with "the management of the overseer's whip or gun, but there was [also] the penis, symbol of potential or real management in male-female relations" (Philip 1990: 299). To carve out spaces of survival, black women writers, Philip insists, continue in a long tradition of unmanageability:

> As women writers we each attempt in our own way to write and rewrite our experiences.... In this act of writing we too are unamanageable, for the managers have not traditionally thought of us as thinkers, or writers, or keepers of memory and history. (300)

For Philip, this unmanageability also takes place at the level of the text, in "the urge to interrupt the text," to make it record the catastrophe and chaos of the African's encounter with the "New World" (298). Black women writers' thematic and textual unmanageability, as Barbara Godard also suggests, challenges not only the "norms" of the societies they critique, but also the academy:

> The writing of women of colour poses challenges not just to the canon, to whose books are considered "classic" or even worthy of publication, but also to textuality. What organization of words constitutes a "publishable" text? What modes of address and protocols of signification are "normal" textual practice? Whose "real" is configured by these textual strategies? (Godard 1996: 107)

In contesting not just race, but also gender, black women writers transgress at every turn. Black feminist demands challenge the racist sexism of patriarchal white societies and their social institutions, as well as the racism encoded in anglo-American feminist movements. But it is in their challenge of sexism within black communities that black women's voices and writing are often perceived as most disruptive, because black women writers potentially disrupt the racial unity demanded within black nationalist discourse by their seeming need to privilege "gender" over "race."

Black women writers in the Americas are involved not just in a critique of their societies, but in a critical cross-cultural dialogue that situates their work within a shared diasporic literary tradition. The discussion of the diaspora as a complex cross-cultural space with possibilities for creation and revisioning is critical to any reading of the literary works being produced by black women in this hemisphere.

Caroline Rody in *The Daughter's Return* insists that black women read themselves in relation to each other and accept the ways in which their experiences invariably intersect. For her, black women writers in the Americas are not just writing against one master or within one minority tradition, but are responding to a "heterogeneous intertextual universe" (Rody 2001: 14). Black women writers are already and out of necessity engaged in self-conscious intertextual relationships:

> It is essential to my understanding of African-American and Caribbean
> women's texts … that they participate in trends of global scope, that their
> writers read (and review and endorse) one another as well as other "others"
> across ethnic, national, and linguistic boundaries. (14)

As most of the black women writing in Canada represent multiple diasporic identities, understanding their work as part of a shared literary tradition is particularly useful. The women's use of polyvocality and shifting perspectives allows them to engage multiple acts of boundary crossing and transgression and to thus open up possibilities for creation and transformation.

In the reading of Esi Edugyan's counter-novel as a transgression of nation, race and geography, I find the work of Katherine McKittrick to be especially useful. McKittrick's work on black geographic thought in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* identifies both the dangers and potential of black women's geographies: "the history of black subjects in the diaspora is a geographic story that is, at least in part, a story of material and conceptual placements and displacements, segregations and integrations, margins and centers, and migrations and settlements" (McKittrick 2006: xiv). But black women, she also insists, have the power to interpret and rupture the knowability of their surroundings. It is this contestation, she argues, that makes possible the kind of "black geographies" that form "*the terrain* of political struggle itself" (6). Yes, as Carole Boyce Davies argues, black women writers are involved in a crossing of boundaries and a redefinition of geography (Davies 1994: 23). In Canada these acts of boundary crossing are multiple and necessarily disobedient.

In a published email exchange with Wade Compton and Karina Vernon, two other black Canadian writers who live in western Canada, Edugyan admits at least one political motive in the writing of her first novel. She was interested, she explains, in the excavation of a black historical presence in Alberta:

> the discovery of Amber Valley's existence (and other Albertan settlements
> like it, such as Campsie, Wildwood, Breton) was the novel's main spur. I
> have no historical ties to Amber Valley. The appeal for me was this: Having
> grown up in 1970-80s Alberta, in which there seemed to be very few black
> people, I was fascinated to discover the existence of these black settlements.
> (Compton, Edugyan and Vernon 2005)

Edugyan's fictional town of Aster is, in fact, a contemporary rendering of the historical all-black town of Amber Valley. Between 1908 and 1911, approximately one thousand black settlers relocated to Alberta from Oklahoma in response to advertising campaigns by the Canadian government and increasing racism in the United States. Canada, which had earlier been constructed in African American mythology as the "North Star"—a site of freedom from slavery—seemed through these advertising campaigns to also represent a site of 20th-century economic opportunity. Relying, then, on this dual construction of Canada as a site of racial tolerance and economic possibility, these early pioneers brought with them their dreams wrapped in a history of fortitude. They soon found that the symbol and reality of Canada were far estranged. Despite overt expressions of hostile racism, and a 1911 petition preventing the entry of any more blacks into the province, several black communities, including Amber Valley, survived and even thrived during the earlier part of the 20th century (Walker 1980; Winks 1997). Because the record of these pioneering lives has largely gone missing from Canadian history and has been obliterated from Canada's geography, Edugyan finds it necessary to excavate that history. Like George Elliott Clarke, she is interested in recording a genealogy of Canadian blackness, in inscribing blackness indelibly on a Canadian landscape.

This (re)recording of blackness in Canada is also for Edugyan, as it is for Clarke, a personal act of recovery. For her, that recovery is necessary to make sense of her presence as a black woman in western Canada where blackness seems to have no relevance. As McKittrick helps us understand,

> Reconstructing past interior lives of black people in the diaspora is an important geographic act, which brings to life new ethnicities and different senses of place; by humanizing black subjects who are otherwise bound to the historio-racial schema, it situates the geographies of the black diaspora in a time when this was considered impossible; it allows past and present black geographies to be believable. (McKittrick 2006: 34)

Although Edugyan's story takes place past the middle of the 20th century, she fuses historical memory in the novel by intimately linking the lives of a newer immigrant family with that of the only remaining black settler, Saul Porter. In a rapidly transforming town, where blackness is quickly disappearing, the fictional Porter is the only link to the past, the only proof that Alberta's black history, buried deep in amnesia, might not simply be historical myth. In this way, Edugyan's counter-novel challenges the terms of fiction and reality, by privileging a different historical "truth" that contests anglo-Canadian reality. "Whose 'real'," Godard asks, "is configured by these textual strategies?" (Godard 1996: 107).

In reconfiguring Canadian geography, in (re)inscribing blackness on the prairies— a Canadian space historically written as alien and antithetical to blackness—

Edugyan's novel allows us to explore how space and place affect racial experiences. In clarifying how her characters and story function, Edugyan explains that,

> What's interesting to me is that by dramatizing them at a distinct point in history within a certain geography, one is saying something very different about the racial experience in a given locale than if those same characters were placed into a different society. And that to me is an uncomfortable prospect. (Compton, Edugyan and Vernon 2006)

The prairies have not only been deeply constructed in a Canadian national consciousness as white, but that whiteness has also historically exercised various kinds of cultural and political violence in its erasure and management of black bodies and in its marginalization of indigenous communities. These communities and bodies have either been scrupulously contained within carefully delineated reserves and/or deliberately locked outside the national imaginary. In its location of black presences west of multicultural Toronto, in a Canadian terrain where blackness is a painful and maybe impossible contradiction, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* challenges black alienation from the land and contests taken-for-granted notions of a liberal democratic Canadian nation where diverse cultural identities and ethnicities are always welcome. Rather, the novel forces its readers to think about identity, nation and belonging in different and more radical, but also more liberating ways. Still, before the novel can lead to a place of healing or reconciliation, it must first lay bare the historical and personal trauma inflicted on the lives and bodies of black people, violently inserted in and then wrenched from the Canadian heartland. The novel helps us to interrogate the specific kind of trauma that results from the insertion of blackness on to certain kinds of geographies, as well the fragmentation that occurs in the (dis)location of African diasporic families across differing national spaces. As McKittrick explains, "Black women, men and children have been forcefully and not, implicated in the uneven development of space because overarching traditional geographic projects require that they be placed and displaced" (McKittrick 2006: 12).

I now turn, then, to a closer reading of the novel in an attempt to explore one example of the disruptive as well as liberating function of black Canadian literature. *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* spans a thirty-year period beginning in 1968, although most of the novel's action takes place in the first summer. The novel is the story of a west African immigrant family that moves to Canada, and the plot revolves largely around the father and husband's search for the fulfillment of a perceived but frustrated greatness. Samuel Tyne, the novel's protagonist, is a deeply (dis)placed character unable to reconcile the demands of space and place across different locations in the African diaspora. Having emigrated from Ghana (then still the Gold Coast) in 1955, he moved first to England, where he completed a first-class honours degree in economics, and then relocated to Western Canada. Samuel's education and his search for success, premised on a European imperialist

capitalist model, misfit him for life in west Africa and cast him as a perpetual exile. Torn by guilt of his personal rejection of Africa and his extended family there, Samuel finds himself increasingly estranged from the cultural traditions of west Africa as he attempts to rebuild his life in Canada. Samuel's attempts to assert ownership of space and place, to inhabit the Canadian landscape, are deeply frustrated at every turn. He finds himself positioned irrevocably in a subordinated relationship with that landscape.

(Re)casting himself as a contemporary pioneer, Samuel quits his government job as an economic forecaster in Calgary and decides to relocate his wife and precocious twin daughters to the once historic all-black town of Aster. His return to nature and history is a symbol of his search for a "true" self, but it is also a desire for final reconciliation with the Canadian landscape. Understanding that a return to Ghana (fixed permanently in his mind as the Gold Coast, a place before independence) is impossible, Samuel believes that he must reject African historical memory and an African past if he is to embrace fully a new life in his new world. For him, Aster is a perfect compromise: "Between Samuel and Jacob there had been a silent agreement that neither would return to Gold Coast. Exile is hard to overcome. Aster, with its black origins, became a surrogate homeland, a way of returning without returning" (Edugyan 2004: 323).

Samuel's wife has her own ghosts of the past. As a young woman, she was forced to escape the emotional abuse of a cruel father by accepting a position as nanny with a Canadian missionary family returning to the Canadian prairies. While she and her husband are both dutiful to their families in the monthly remittances they send back, Maud, even more than Samuel, is cut off from her past, haunted by her father's curse that follows her and her family across the Atlantic: "Death comes soon to those who kill their parents. Abandon me and your mother's spirit will fell your husband and dry your insides to stone" (23). While Maud does not always agree with her husband's choices, she finds her future, then, permanently linked with his.

Samuel's contemporary "pioneering"—his movement across the prairies not just to (re)settle, but to conquer, to achieve greatness—reveals the extent to which he understands his own search for self-fulfillment and national acceptance as dependent on a certain historical narrative of what it means to be a "real" Canadian, an "ideal" citizen. His relationship with the land, his struggle with the terrain, marks for him a movement away from passive citizenship (an immigrant economist in a Calgary office) toward national desire and political ownership of the nation and its land (a black settler on the Canadian prairies). "One of the many ways violence operates across gender, sexuality, and race," McKittrick argues,

> is through multiscalar discourses of ownership: having "things," owning lands, invading territories, possessing someone, are, in part, narratives of displacement that reward and value particular forms of conquest …

this reward system repetitively returns us to the body, black subjecthood, and the where of blackness, not just as it is owned, but as black subjects participate in ownership. Black diasporic struggles can also be read, then, as geographic contests over discourses of ownership." (McKittrick 2006: 3)

Samuel explores Walcott's question of desire and how it structures belonging through Canadian historical narratives of conquest. By inserting himself and his family as part of a long historical presence in Canada, however, he relies on a static notion of citizenship. He believes that the house he inherits from his uncle and the storefront he leases to develop his prototype of the computer, along with his abandonment of the city, will be enough to prove his desire and secure his right to belong: "And so within minutes the dream had been bought … Samuel Tyne had signed the lease on his own little piece of the world. After this, there could be no more doubts" (Edugyan 2004: 71).

But the very people who befriend Samuel and Maud constantly remind them of the incongruity of their physical and historical presence in Western Canada. Far from being understood as contributing to a Canadian national narrative, Samuel and Maud are fixed permanently as immigrants. Seen as outsiders who threaten the nation's development, they and their daughters are always suspect. In his espousal of a deeply conservative right-wing politics, Ray, one of the white characters in the novel and a friend of the Tynes, argues vehemently against liberal immigration policies:

> We've got a policy to change in this country if we don't want to see another depression. Year after year, rules of entry just get laxer, and if we keep on like this, we don't just risk our culture, but bankrupting ourselves. What happened with ranching turn of last century could happen to any cornerstone of our culture. (159)

Still, Ray is able to balance his own political conservatism with a kind of liberal democracy that Maud and Samuel are unwilling to challenge: "Fact is, newcomers weigh hard on our social system. And I don't mean you—you two are *model*" (161). Functioning in opposition to this deeply problematized white Canadian nationalism are the black and African nationalist narratives of two of the novel's minor characters, husband and wife Porter and Akosua, who both come to reject the dream of Canada.

In Edugyan's novel, however, the two characters who most clearly unmask the perceived innocence of the Canadian nation are Yvette and Chloe, Samuel's twin daughters. Maud and Samuel's inability to claim ownership of Alberta, or even Aster, is played out most painfully in the lives of their daughters. Edugyan uses the twins to mark the degree of trauma that results from the (dis)location of African diasporic families in the Americas, permanently estranged from space and place, from history and memory. But she also uses the twins' growing psychosis

to mark their necessary transgression and disobedience to the nation. Both the transgression and psychosis appear unavoidable; they must be worked through in the ongoing struggle to name self and place.

Edugyan admits to basing the twins in her novel on the actual case studies of two famous sets of twin girls in the United States and Britain (Compton, Edugyan and Vernon 2005). Poto and Cabengo, born in San Diego, California, were identical twins wrongly diagnosed with a seizure disorder because they reportedly lifted their heads and made eye contact with their parents within hours of birth. Socially isolated by their parents who believed they were mentally challenged, the girls, unable to communicate in English, developed and used a secret language of their own until they were eight years old. In a similar story, the silent twins, June and Jennifer Gibbons, born in 1963 in England to parents of Barbadian descent, developed a private language combining Barbadian Creole and English. As Thomas Couser explains, their isolation in white communities and daily experiences of racism, as well as a speech impediment, encouraged their personal resistance in the form of a self-imposed "mutism" (Couser 2003: 244). Because of the girls' strange (in)ability to facilitate language, they were forced to undergo inappropriate medicalization aimed at helping them conform to British social standards. After the Gibbons twins were convicted of setting fire to a public building in 1982, they were sentenced indefinitely to a high-security facility for the criminally insane where one of the twins, Jennifer, eventually died (246). Interestingly, the twins' experiences were recorded in the copious and detailed journals they kept. Edugyan's fascination with these twins is, perhaps, also encouraged by the fact that in West African societies, like the Akan, twins are considered sacred and are said to possess divine powers (Bartle 1983; Herskovits 1993).

The real-life stories of Poto and Cabengo, and the silent twins, are proof of the kind of trauma that afflicts women and girls in deeply classist, sexist and racist societies of the (over)developed world. First legitimized by an early 20th-century eugenics movement that promoted sterilization, marriage laws and the segregation of the mentally challenged in an attempt to "improve" the racial qualities of future generations of Canadians, social difference and non-conformity are still often read, even in the contemporary period, as clear indications of an inability to function "normally." This social "handicap," then, gets read as behaviour inimical to the nation's growth, development and prosperity. June and Jennifer Gibbons, children of Caribbean immigrants in Britain, are a social and historical record of the trauma that often results from the experiences of cultural dislocation that take place in migratory movements from "third world" to "first world" spaces. The need for unskilled labour in the aftermath of the Second World War led to radical changes in British immigration policies and the massive migration of Caribbean blacks in the 1950s. As Winston James explains, this movement often brought with it deep disappointment and permanent exile (James 1993: 249). While James and others[4] have carefully interrogated the experiences of the early immigrants themselves,

fewer studies have looked at the effects of Caribbean migration to Britain of the British born. Sara Davies, in a discussion of the treatment of psychosis in London, notes the ongoing high prevalence of severe mental illness among Caribbean people in Britain. She also demonstrates that black patients of Caribbean descent, particularly young men, are most likely to experience compulsory admission usually after contact with the police (Davies et al. 1996: 533). There is a way, then, in which social disorder and psychosis are linked to racialized gender in a British context. While we cannot translate the British statistics to Canada, the British discussion has relevance to a Canadian social geography because Britain and Canada are both North Atlantic, "Commonwealth" spaces across whose borders black bodies move in multiple directions.

In *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, it is Yvette and Chloe who are made to bear the scars of cultural displacement and racism. The historical erasure of black settlers in western Canada, the daily alienation suffered by their parents, the loss of abandoned cultural traditions, the growing trauma of "alien" bodies exiled on the Canadian prairies—a space inimical to blackness—are all played out on the teenage bodies of the girls. Again McKittrick helps to frame this discussion in a useful way: "What is it about space, place, and blackness—the uneven sites of physical and experiential 'difference'—that derange the landscape and its inhabitants?" (McKittrick 2006: 3). In *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, the twins experience a dual derangement. It is their responses and challenges to a hypocritical liberal democracy and its thinly-veiled racism, both of which determine the nature of Canadian social behaviour, that disturb the landscape they inhabit and, at the same time, exclude them firmly from participation in Albertan society. Because the discussion of racism is only a subtle subtext in this novel, its brief appearances often shock the readers and even the characters themselves. One such early example is Samuel's realization that what he mistook as his daughters' childish dance was actually a parody of racial behaviour and exclusion in Canada:

> Only later did Maud tell him that their headscarves were really an attempt to duplicate the hair of their classmates, and that she'd eavesdropped on a conversation in which Yvette had said she "got tired of being black." Tired of the sugary way she had to behave to get people to play with her. Tired of being asked where she was *really* from, tired of being talked to as though she didn't speak English and tired, above all, of feeling incapable of great things. (Edugyan 2004: 34)

Yvette and Chloe, in fact, increasingly retreat into an internal, fictionalized world in search of protection from the exclusion they feel from the external world. But their growing psychosis is also a refusal to conform, to be obedient, to accept without challenge the place carved out for them in Canadian society. And their nonconformity is played out in large part in their relationship with their parents, precisely because of their parents' own willingness to accept the status quo. The

twins are identified from the very beginning as defying all social categories; they are not "normal" babies, adolescents, girls or even blacks. They are too gifted for the world in which they live and are, therefore, "out of place." Unable to fit neatly within the social geography of western Canada, they also refuse to "know their place," to be obedient or, to borrow Philip's term, to be manageable. The girls' unmanageability is evidenced most clearly in their subversion of language and the moral codes of social behaviour that the townspeople of Aster take for granted.

In the end, the values of a white Canadian society appear to, once again, conquer all. When the girls are suspected of burning their neighbour's house, they are driven from the community. Their parents are forced to deliver them to the custody of the state by agreeing to their indefinite detention in a mental facility. Although the girls are only diagnosed with moderate psychosis, the fact that their black bodies are perceived as especially threatening is evidenced by the facility's insistence on treating them with haloperidol, a high-potent neuroleptic only used to treat acute psychosis or chronic schizoprenia (297). It is also telling that when the Tynes arrive at the state-run facility, the only other couple there is Aboriginal Canadian (296). Only certain bodies, then, get constructed not just as marginal— positioned outside the nation—but also as inimical to the nation's health.

Despite an overriding sense of pessimism that pervades the novel, and the easy way in which its characters could be read not just as hopeless but also as homeless, I want to argue that through the various transgressions of her counter-novel, Esi Edugyan allows spaces for more radical and redemptive definitions of nation and national identity. Her novel challenges us to critically expand our understanding of Canadian-ness by helping us conceptualize a kind of Canadian identity that can take into account multiple national and ethnic presences and can bring those presences into an honest conversation with each other. Part of the reason for the twins' psychosis has been their parents' inability to reconcile historical memory with their present experiences. Both Maud and Samuel believe that acceptance in Canadian society is dependent on the wholesale abandonment of the west African cultural traditions that have nurtured their families for generations. In rejecting those traditions, they and their family are left deeply vulnerable. Edugyan seems to suggest in this novel that Canada has to be reconnected with Africa before healing can take place.

By writing Canada as a site where multiple African diasporas converge, Edugyan insists that questions of belonging have to be explored both within and outside the boundaries of the particular nation. Samuel has to learn to reconcile his deep guilt, and Maud must find a way to recover from her own trauma of the past. While Maud is never able to do this, overwhelmed as she is by her own betrayal of her daughters and her perceived failure as a mother, it is Samuel who must begin to build the bridge that can allow his ancestors to move freely in both directions across the Middle Passage. Akosua, Samuel's neighbour and the African

nationalist in the novel, names the cause of his children's mental and emotional trauma as Samuel's refusal to honour tradition and pay respect to the dead and the past. Samuel has refused to perform the rituals that will honour the memory of his uncle and his ancestors. Upon his wife's death, however, he begins finally to reconcile the past with the present. In performing the religious rituals that will help reconnect his family line to a severed history, he clears the path into the present and future. As Samuel places his wife's body in the cemetery, he realizes that "their citizenship had been finalized; their flesh, his kin, cold in the ground, were now inseverable from Alberta" (314). At the end of the novel, when Akosua returns to Ghana, Samuel knows that he is now tied irrevocably to a Canadian landscape: "He himself could not return. His dead were in the ground" (320).[5] In the end as in the beginning, Edugyan writes blackness indelibly on a Canadian landscape. Canada is the site in which historical memories converge, grapple with the present and are finally reconciled.

Another important source of healing in this novel is, surprisingly, Ama, Samuel's white surrogate daughter, who spends that first painful summer with his family in Aster. Ama, who is now a nurse, is also scarred by her own sense of complicity in the twins' hospitalization and thus returns to care for Samuel in the last days of his life. Ama's own history is one of French diasporic settlers who relocate to Alberta and intermarry with Aboriginal Canadians. But her life from the very beginning is also linked with the lives of these African immigrants. Her name, Ama, short for Amaryllis, is also a Ghanaian Akan name meaning "Saturday." It is significant that no one in the novel ever refers to her by her European name. It is also important that Ama is made to suffer with Samuel's family, although for most of the novel the relationship she shares with them is ambiguous. Samuel seems to idolize her in a way he does not idolize his own daughters, and the rejected daughters, in turn, punish Ama. His relationship with Ama, in fact, seems to mirror his simultaneous rejection of west Africa (Yvette and Chloe) and deep, but frustrated, desire for Canada (Ama). That it is Ama who returns to care for him at the end of the novel is, therefore, significant. Again, for Edugyan, it seems necessary to reconcile the history of whiteness in western Canada with a much wider and potentially "contaminating" history in order to reveal the true character of national identity.

Still, Edugyan's story does not end with Ama. In the closing sentences of the novel, Ama has a vision of the future in which one of the twins returns. The unnamed twin is the one who will bear the weight of the family's historical memory and will forge the path into the future:

> ...she walks the weed-strewn path to the old house to find it so identical to her memory of it that already it is changing ... burdened with her past and the dead sister she carries like a conscience inside of her, she sits where Ama sat, trying to endure her first night of freedom, waiting for the sight of dawn to believe she is strong enough to begin again. (328)

In *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne,* the transgressive (re)configuring of nation, race and geography marks home and national belonging as firmly located in Alberta. Canada is where this family's historical memory now resides and where it must be protected and guarded into the future. This novel is the coming together of many stories across multiple geographies at different historical junctures. As the novel closes, Ghana is etched into the landscape of Alberta, continental Africans join their histories with those of diasporic Africans, and the shared memories of the past converge in the present and are finally reconciled.

By suggesting that narrative and social geographies may be linked, this study has argued for a reconceptualization of a Canadian cultural and national identity that can account for the multiple black bodies and communities dispersed across the Canadian nation. By further refusing to accept blackness as a monolithic, homogeneous sign of a particular, fixed relationship to the nation-state, the study argues that the very polyvocality of blackness, its fluidity and heterogeneity, form part of a diaspora consciousness that both disrupts uneasy understandings of nation and offers more liberating definitions of community and belonging.

Notes

1. I use the term "African-Canadian" in specific reference to Clarke's work because of his own preference for this term. Clarke's project of recovering African-Canadian cultural traditions and history, I argue in this paper, is an attempt to articulate a fairly coherent and self-assured black presence in Canada, self-assured largely because of its long history and, therefore, its right to belong. The term black Canadian, on the other hand, references identities that are deliberately less self-assured, more unstable, more in flux, and less obedient to the nation.

2. This panel was organized by the Canadian publisher, McClelland & Stewart and hosted by the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (AC-CUTE), one of the member organizations of the 2006 Congress. The four panelists were Donna Bailey Nurse, Hyacinth Simpson, Lawrence Hill and George Dei.

3. See Andrea Davis (2006).

4. See Margaret Byron (1994); Lydia Lindsey (1992); and Ransford Palmer, ed. (1990).

5. There are many black cemeteries across Canada, often the only remaining proof of early black pioneer life in this country. The Gosfield cemetery, also known as Negro Cemetery, in Kingsville, Ontario, is all that remains of an early settlement of black United Empire Loyalists; the reduction of the Priceville cemetery in Ontario to a potato patch in the 1930s has almost entirely erased all evidence of black life in that town; Nigger Rock was the burial ground for slaves two centuries ago in the eastern townships of Montreal, specifically the Saint-Armand area; and the historic Nova Scotian community of Africville destroyed in the mid 1960s was denied a cemetery. The geographic ambivalence produced by the novel is recorded in the simultaneous insertion and erasure of black bodies across Canada.

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