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“Boxing Ain’t No Game”: Clement Virgo’s *Poor Boy’s Game* as Canadian Racial Counter-narrative

ABSTRACT

In its exploration of racialized poverty, carceral regimes and the disciplining of Black bodies in social space, Clement Virgo’s *Poor Boy’s Game* provides a radical counter-narrative to Canada’s dominant narrative of benevolence and racial tolerance. Few critics, however, were willing to consider the film in these terms. Reviewers were largely unable—or unwilling—to discuss the film’s visual gestures to slavery, an absence that I argue speaks to the nation’s inability to acknowledge this aspect of its history or to speak meaningfully about questions of race. Instead, critics relegated the film to the status of a boxing movie, and their repeated and disproportionate emphasis on sport was one means through which they attempted to minimize the social and political issues the film attempts to address. While sport is often assumed to be apolitical and has historically been seen as the opiate of the masses, critics like C. L. R. James, in *Beyond A Boundary* (1963), have observed that societal prejudices are often rehearsed in the microcosm of the playing field, or in Virgo’s representation, the boxing ring. This paper situates *Poor Boy’s Game* within this framework, to emphasize the ways the film also writes a

counter-narrative of athleticism which challenges the historical role of sport in the writing of dominant national narratives.

RÉSUMÉ

Par son exploration de la pauvreté racialisée, des régimes carcéraux et de l'assujettissement des corps noirs dans l'espace social, le film *Poor Boy's Game* de Clement Virgo présente un contre récit radical au récit, dominant au Canada, de bienveillance et de tolérance raciale. Peu de critiques, cependant, inclinaient à considérer le film en ces termes. En grande majorité, les commentateurs étaient incapables – ou ne désiraient pas – discuter des allusions gestuelles du film à l'esclavage, absence que je considère éloquente pour ce qui est de l'incapacité de la nation à reconnaître cet aspect de son histoire ou de discuter en profondeur des questions de race. Au lieu de cela, les critiques l'ont relégué au statut d'un film sur la boxe, et leur insistance disproportionnée sur le sport représentait une tentative de minimiser les questions politiques et sociales qu'il abordait. Tandis que souvent le sport est censé être apolitique et que, sur le plan historique, on l'a considéré comme l'opium des masses, des analystes tels que CLR James, dans *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), ont observé que les préjugés sociétaux se rejouent souvent dans le microcosme du terrain de sport, ou, dans le cas de la représentation de Virgo, le ring de boxe. Cet article situe le film *Poor Boy's Game* dans le cadre d'analyse de James, pour souligner de quelle manière le film rédige également un contre récit de l'athlétisme qui remet en question le rôle historique du sport dans l'écriture des récits nationaux dominants.



In December 2007, celebrated Canadian film director Clement Virgo released his sixth dramatic feature film, *Poor Boy's Game*, in relative obscurity. Starring Danny Glover and Rossif Sutherland (son of Donald and half-brother of Kiefer Sutherland), the film opened on only a handful of screens across Canada and received comparatively little media attention in this country. This lack of interest is surprising given the film's well-known cast, large budget—substantial by Canadian standards, more than \$5 million—previous success at film festivals, and significant international interest. The first dramatic feature film in Canadian history to take the Black community of Halifax as its focus, *Poor Boy's Game* is, arguably, Virgo's best and most important film to date. The film's lack of visibility speaks to a dearth of support for English Canadian cinema in general, a problem which has for decades plagued a nation which does not even have access to 98 per cent of its own screens as a result of American film studios' practice of block-booking.¹ This paper, however, proposes an examination of the film's discursive and critical marginalization in specifically racial terms. Through the lens of boxing, Virgo's film dramatizes racial tensions in Halifax, perhaps one of the most racially

segregated cities in this country, and its visual imagery foregrounds the ways this racism has its roots in centuries of slavery, violence, exclusion and marginalization. This paper asks: how does the Canadian nation's collective disinterest in a film like *Poor Boy's Game* speak to the lack of critical debate about issues of race in this country? Or, more to the point, what is there in Virgo's film that Canada cannot bear to hear if it wants to promote a national narrative of benevolence and racial tolerance? Virgo's film pulls no punches (pun intended), offering a deeply critical examination of current racial politics. I argue that the alternate political possibilities it proposes, metaphorically, in the boxing ring, have gone largely unnoticed by a body of cultural critics—particularly media critics—who are unable, or in some cases unwilling, to consider them.

This type of critical attenuation is not unique to Canadian cinema. Cultural productions that make genuine inquiries of the nation and what it means to challenge or to racialize the category "Canadian" have been regularly marginalized, even when they are produced by some of the nation's most established Black artists and writers. For example, Dionne Brand and Austin Clarke, both well entrenched within the Canadian literary establishment, have offered extended interrogations of race and colonialism in their bodies of work. Their trenchant criticisms are much better received when they are directed at nations other than Canada. Brand's 1997 volume of poetry, *Land to Light On*, refuses to be framed within a single geographical location, and contemplates racial and sexual identities and the ongoing legacies of colonialism and violence in this hemisphere. Brand's often-quoted claim that she is "giving up on land to light on" resonates with a geographic refusal that is not directed specifically at Canada. This volume received a tremendous amount of critical recognition, winning the Governor General's Award for poetry in 1997, as well as a Trillium Award for literature. Her second novel, *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999), similarly diasporic in scope, was also widely recognized, and cited as one of the reasons for her winning the 2006 Harbourfront Prize. By contrast, her third novel, *What We All Long For* (2005), which is set largely in Toronto and explores the racial tensions experienced by Canadian-born children of immigrants, has not received the same kind of critical attention. Although widely studied and taught in university literature courses, this novel's challenge to consider alternate political possibilities than those envisioned by the nation have gone unheeded beyond academic circles, and unlike her earlier work has largely disappeared from popular cultural discourse in this country.

Austin Clarke's most recent publications have witnessed a similar critical trajectory. Clarke's literary career arguably reached a peak in 2002 with the publication of his ninth novel, *The Polished Hoe*. Set in the 1950s on the fictional West Indian island of Bimshire, the novel is an extended meditation on the histories of slavery and colonialism that have shaped the Caribbean. Widely acclaimed both in Canada and internationally, *The Polished Hoe* won the 2002 Giller Prize, the 2003 Commonwealth Prize and a 2003 Trillium Award. Clarke's tenth novel, *More*

(2008), can be read as a companion piece to *The Polished Hoe*, as it engages in a similarly contemplative examination of the pain, tragedy and disappointment experienced by Caribbean immigrants to Canada and the ongoing hardships faced by their children. This novel, an explicitly political critique of the systemic and institutional barriers faced by racialized minorities in Canada, won the 2009 Toronto Book Award; however, it has not garnered anywhere near the critical acclaim of Clarke's previous work. This lack of attention is surprising given his long literary career and his recent elevation in stature with *The Polished Hoe*. Arguably, like many of his earlier works which offer similar social critique, *More* presents a vision of the Canadian nation that many readers and critics are reluctant to consider. In this regard, both Brand and Clarke have been celebrated when they can be situated as Caribbean-born writers; however, when their writing turns toward particular types of interrogation of the Canadian nation or to comment on the racial injustices experienced here by immigrants and their Canadian-born offspring, their work is far less well-received.

Clement Virgo's corpus similarly fits within this pattern. While his earlier films offered a space for conceptualizing blackness in Canada in multifaceted ways, at least one of its incarnations has been Caribbean; most of his previous films include Caribbean-descended characters. But, like Brand and Clarke, he has increasingly shifted his attention toward challenging the assumptions of Canadian racial politics. In the 1990s, Virgo spent some time in Halifax and the experience had a profound impact on him. Unprepared for the pervasive racial segregation he encountered, which was so different from his experiences living in Toronto, Virgo states, "Being in Halifax really affected me so I wanted to make a film about the feeling I had there."² *Poor Boy's Game*, in turning specifically to Halifax's centuries-old Black population, represents an insistently Canadian blackness that has, I would argue, been written out of the nation through critical silence and marginalization. Yet Virgo's film can be situated within a small but growing body of cultural production that considers Halifax's Black community.

The poetry of Maxine Tynes published in the 1980s and early 1990s provided an important source of inspiration for George Boyd's play, *Consecrated Ground* (1999), which explores the razing of Africville in the 1960s. George Elliot Clarke's sustained interest in Nova Scotia's Africadian population shifts specifically to Halifax with his *Execution Poems* (2001), and his first novel, *George and Rue* (2005), both of which are set in the 1940s. Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007), widely diasporic in scope as it traverses three continents, takes 18th and early 19th-century Halifax as one of its locations, narrating the struggles of the earliest Black settlers in the region.³ These histories have also been the focus of a handful of films, most notably some of the documentaries of Sylvia Hamilton, and the short film *Welcome to Africville* (1999), by experimental filmmaker and video artist Dana Inkster. Collectively, these works are a sustained examination of history and memory, and an attempt, through cultural production, to write a

critical counter-narrative that responds to the nation's historical erasures. *Poor Boy's Game* is the most contemporary representation of Black Halifax, but the film gestures in both visual and musical ways to these broad-ranging histories, positioning them as clear antecedents to current racial divisions.

At the outset of the film, Donnie Rose (Rossif Sutherland), has just been released from jail, where he has served a ten-year sentence for a racially motivated attack on Charles Carvery (K.C. Collins), who has been left mentally and physically disabled by the beating. Charles's friend, Ossie Paris (Flex Alexander), a talented boxer, offers Donnie \$20,000 for a prize match in which he plans to murder Donnie in the ring as an act of retribution. While Charles's mother, Ruth (Tonya Lee Williams), supports the move, as does most of the Black community, his father, George (Danny Glover), does not. Donnie, struggling to come to terms with his actions, his own turbulent and impoverished family legacy and his indeterminate sexuality, agrees to take the fight. George, despite his own anger, does not want to see any more violence done in his son's name and agrees to coach Donnie in an attempt to keep him alive in the ring. These interactions, and in particular the dramatic fight sequence in which the film culminates, enact in microcosm a nation's turbulent history of slavery, segregation and racial/spatial containment.

While many of the reviews of the film in major Canadian newspapers were reasonably favourable, none mentioned the significance of Virgo's representation of Halifax, nor did they reference the racial tensions of the film in any but the most cursory manner. Instead, most reviewers positioned the film as a boxing movie, suggesting that it was inferior to some of its American predecessors in this regard. As *National Post* film critic Jay Stone put it, "this isn't *Raging Bull*. It's not even *Rocky*" (Stone 2007). The review by Rick Groen in *The Globe and Mail* was by far the most dismissive and vitriolic. In it he stated that any attempt to find the film even "remotely inspiring" should be "beat[en] back with a hockey stick" (Groen 2007). Groen, perhaps the only critic to mention the film's social commentary, argued that *Poor Boy's Game* was a "top-heavy melodrama that hopes to explore the city's racial divide and concomitant cycle of violence. Hopes to but doesn't, leaving us with a big theme in vain search of a credible narrative" (R6). While it is certainly a critic's prerogative to dislike the film, such responses are troubling for multiple reasons. First, the film's dismissal because it was only about sport, came with the insinuation that it could not take up serious social and political issues as a result. As Gamal Abdel-Shehid argues in *Who Da Man? Black Masculinities and Sporting Cultures*, "a split between sport and art is always rigidly policed and disciplined" (Abdel-Shehid 2005: 22). This division, which was rigorously maintained by some critics, assumed that boxing and art necessarily cancelled each other out, implying as a result that the film lacked significance. More troubling, however, is Groen's impulse to "beat the film back with a hockey stick," a telling metaphor that works to write *Poor Boy's Game*, and the issues it addresses, out of the nation.

Abdel-Shehid further argues that in Canada certain sports, such as basketball, track and field and boxing, are placed in sharp contrast to the iconic status of hockey. He states that “[t]hese ‘black’ sports, by virtue of the fact that they are played by immigrants, or by people who ‘look like’ immigrants, have largely been narrated as *un*-Canadian sports. By extension, their participants have not been narrated within the national sporting iconography” (2005: 98). Groen’s dismissal of Virgo’s film via a gesture to hockey plays directly into this assumption, positioning a Canadian film about boxing as an anomaly. This logic, if taken further, also suggests, at least indirectly, that the racism the film works to address must also not be a Canadian problem.

Groen’s throwaway sporting references thus attenuate any meaningful debate in which Virgo engages with *Poor Boy’s Game*. Yet boxing, race, masculinity and sexuality are recurrent themes in Virgo’s work, and he has also given sustained attention to these topics in his first film, *Rude* (1995), and his third film, *Love Come Down* (2000). Given the repeated confluence of these topics, Virgo seems to be asking the same questions in his corpus that Canadian athletic historian Colin Howell poses in his book *Blood, Sweat and Cheers: Sport and the Making of Modern Canada*: “What is sport? And what is it for?” (Howell 2001: 8). Virgo’s body of work, and *Poor Boy’s Game* in particular, insists that boxing does not fall outside the realm of political and social inquiry; rather, the ring becomes a forum in which readily available societal prejudices are enacted and rehearsed. This is the premise on which cultural critic C. L. R. James bases his revolutionary study of Trinidadian cricket, *Beyond a Boundary* (1993). Narrating the complex and agonizing process through which he chooses his first cricket team, James rejects the premise of sport as the opiate of the masses. Observing that the teams reflect the complex lines of both skin colour and class on which Trinidadian society is based, he argues that “Cricket had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it. When I did turn to politics I did not have too much to learn” (James 1993: 66). Virgo’s film, when read through this framework, raises some similarly important issues. Howell and Abdel-Shehid have both observed the intersections between sporting narratives and national narratives, demonstrating the ways sport has historically been used in Canada as a tool for nation-building. If sport is used to write the nation, then what kind of national, or counter-national, narrative does Clement Virgo write with *Poor Boy’s Game*?

To this end, Virgo’s turn to boxing to explore both national and racial politics should not be surprising, given the history of the sport. For the last two centuries boxing has been an athletic forum in which North American racial and political tensions have been manifest, and I want to argue that Virgo’s representations of boxing and race cannot be understood in isolation from this long and turbulent history. According to Othello Harris, “black participation in sport in America has its origins in plantation activity” (Harris 1999: 151). From the late 18th century, boxing was among the most profitable sports for plantation owners, who would

train Black slaves and stage fights for entertainment and gambling purposes, often accumulating large sums of money by betting on the pugilistic prowess of their slaves. Muhammad Ali was surely aware of this history when, in the 1970s, he publicly commented that “boxing always gave him the feeling of ‘two slaves in the ring’” (Sammons 1988: 219). In the early 19th century, Oscar Molineaux, a former slave who had been freed after winning his former owner \$100,000 in a bout, was the first Black boxer to contend for the World Heavyweight title, losing to British champion Tom Cribbe. Theirs would be the last interracial bout for nearly a century, as the colour lines of slavery and segregation extended into the boxing ring. For most of the 19th century white boxers would refuse to fight Black opponents. Black boxers could fight for the “Coloured Heavyweight” title, but whites refused to meet them for World Heavyweight bouts.

Such racial anxiety pervades the history of the sport in the 20th century as well, as white America projected both its fears and its desires for racial acquiescence onto some of its most well recognized boxers. In 1908, after struggling for years to arrange a bout, Coloured Heavyweight champion Jack Johnson finally secured an opportunity to fight for the World Heavyweight title. His defeat of titleholder Tommy Burns secured Johnson’s position as the first Black Heavyweight champion in history, but his accomplishment went unrecognized by the American press, who claimed his talents inferior to those of his white predecessors (Harris 1999: 157). When in 1910 Johnson defended his title by defeating Jim Jeffries, who was held up as America’s “great white hope,” widespread race riots and lynchings ensued throughout the country in the following days. Many whites viewed Johnson as “a threat to the established social order and to Anglo-Saxon civilization” (Sammons 1988: 43), not only because of his boxing victories, but also because of his public displays of both affluence and racial defiance, and his numerous affairs with white women. Even after losing his title to Jess Willard in 1915, and eventually falling into financial ruin, “Johnson’s legacy haunted boxing and America for years to come” (Sammons 1988: 44).

It was largely this legacy that informed the ways Joe Louis was represented in the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike Johnson, Louis was light-skinned and quiet—mainly because of a speech impediment—and his promoters utilized this to their advantage, carefully crafting an image that was the antithesis of Johnson, of a clean-living, humble and obsequious man whose greatest vices were gum-chewing and ice-cream. Despite these efforts, his defeat by German boxer Max Schmeling in 1936 provided an “enormous propaganda victory for Nazi Germany” (Sammons 1988: 108), especially in the wake of African-American track star Jesse Owens’s exemplary performance at the Berlin Olympics. Louis’s second fight against Schmeling in 1937 was laden with the same kind of symbolic weight; victorious this time, the match was hailed as a triumph of American democracy over fascism.⁴ Louis continued to be utilized as a symbol of patriotism when, during the Second World War, he enlisted in the U.S. army, which was racially

segregated. Relegated to the coloured troops, he made great personal sacrifices, fighting exhibition matches on military bases and donating many of his purses to the war effort. Aware of the discrimination directed at him, throughout his career Louis “attempted to walk a tightrope ... pursuing a course of extreme loyalty in public while quietly pressing for an end to discrimination” (Sammons 1988: 128).

A few decades later, Muhammad Ali would not demonstrate this same kind of obsequiousness, and the storm of controversy surrounding his career reflected in microcosm the political turmoil of the civil rights and global decolonization movements. Coming of age as a boxer in the 1960s, Ali embraced Islam and used his position as a world-class athlete to speak out against racial oppression, a move which led the World Boxing Association to threaten to strip him of his heavyweight title. The U.S. Government’s plan to draft him into the army in 1967 for Vietnam was an attempt to make him play a similar role as Joe Louis in the Second World War. Hours after his vocal refusal to be drafted, the New York Boxing Commission stripped Ali of his World Heavyweight title and his boxing licence, and he was found guilty of draft evasion. Ali’s subsequent struggles to have his conviction overturned, his ongoing attempts to have his licence reinstated so that he could continue to box, and his subsequent fights with opponents such as Joe Frazier and George Foreman, who repeatedly attempted to discredit his racial politics, belie the pervasive attempts by the state to separate the athletic and the political.

Such correlations similarly pervade Virgo’s film. Nonetheless, although boxing is certainly a significant aspect of *Poor Boy’s Game*, Virgo has insisted repeatedly in articles and interviews that the sport is a metaphor for the larger issues he tries to raise.⁵ Outside of the ring, the various events narrated in the film can be situated in broader contexts, both historical and contemporary, local and global. The confluences between these events and those of the world beyond film may be intentional or coincidental, but they speak to the pervasive experiences of racial segregation in Nova Scotia as well as to broader diasporic phenomena. In this regard, the violent events dismissed by Groen as melodramatic do not take place in a cinematic vacuum but instead become a haunting reflection of the society in which the film is produced. After Donnie’s release from prison, racial tensions are exacerbated during his job at the night club owned by his Uncle Joe (Stephen McHattie), where Donnie and the other security guards are instructed not to allow more than two Black patrons in at a time. The resulting riot outside the club “echoes a violent event in Halifax history, the “Rosa’s Riot” in 1991 where 150 Blacks and whites clashed outside Rosa’s Cantina, a popular Argyle Street bar” (Howell 2007).

In *Poor Boy’s Game*, Ossie Paris’s racial profiling at the club also gestures to the infamous case of Black Halifax boxer Kirk Johnson, who was stopped by police and

had his Mustang impounded in 1998; he subsequently fought this discrimination for six years through the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission. The burning of the Black church by Donnie's brother Keith (Greg Bryk) and his friends is a frighteningly prophetic scene that reflects two 2006 incidents in which Black heritage sites in Nova Scotia were attacked: during principal shooting for the film, the Black Cultural Centre in Dartmouth was bombed by six Molotov cocktails; less than two months later the Black Loyalist Heritage Society's office in Birchtown was burned to the ground (Nelson 2008: 148). In the final fight scene in the film, a member of the crowd waves a sign in support of Ossie that reads "Paris is On Fire." Perhaps an ironic gesture to *Paris is Burning*, the 1990 documentary about African-American and Latino drag balls in New York, the sign might also be read as a reference to the 2005 riots in the suburbs of Paris, during which poor Black youth protested their poverty and the French police's racial profiling by setting cars on fire. Although never mentioned explicitly, Africville also haunts the film, most notably through the music of hip hop artist Maestro and George Elliot Clarke's poetry; Donnie Rose also shares a last name with Albert Rose, the white urban planner from Toronto who, in 1963, advocated Africville's speedy destruction in the name of progress. As Jennifer Nelson points out in her timely historical study, Africville "is not 'over'—in the sense that nothing has really been done about it; it is not unique—racialized communities are neglected, denied, destroyed all the time" (Nelson 2008:4). Traces of this episode remain, and are reflected in the film, while also being intertwined with more recent episodes of racial trauma to suggest a continuum between past and present violences.

All of these events are shown, through Virgo's lens, to have their origins in the nation's legacy of slavery. Unsurprisingly, not a single critic made any reference to these images. This absence speaks to what Virgo has called the "prism of whiteness"⁶ through which Canadian cultural criticism is articulated, which often renders such visual metaphors invisible, and by extension makes evident the nation's inability to acknowledge this aspect of its history. Several key scenes in the film take place at an old abandoned fort on the coast of Halifax; the images of its crumbling, dark, windowless, low-ceilinged rooms, with open expanses of ocean beyond, bear a haunting resemblance to the slave fortresses that dot the Western coast of Africa. Both Donnie and George come here to contemplate their turbulent lives, and the images of both men staring out over the empty ocean with the fortress in the background evoke the terror of the Door of No Return. These images remind viewers that slavery was not something that took place elsewhere; it was a Canadian institution and its impacts continue to resonate centuries later—for both the Black and the white characters. The fort is also the site of an important exchange between Donnie and George, when they meet there by chance a few days after Donnie's brother Keith has been killed by Ossie's friend, Nathan (played by hip hop artist Maestro/Wes Williams). Both men struggle to come to terms with their losses as Donnie tells George for the

first time the details of Charlie's beating, which took place at the fort, and reveals to him that Keith also participated, and might have been the cause of Charles's brain-damage. In a moment of reconciliation that is both literal and symbolic Donnie asks George's forgiveness for their actions. His simple and heartfelt, "I'm sorry, George," is both an attempt to atone for the wrongs enacted on Charles, his family, and the Black community, and also a powerful metaphor representing the kind of reconciliation and atonement for slavery—which has yet to happen in Canada in any national context.

At the old fort the most explicit gestures to slavery are also the most complicated, in that Virgo does not simply reproduce expected visual or discursive tropes. Here, in an earlier sequence, Donnie finds Keith's naked body, beaten with a baseball bat and whipped with electrical wire, chained to a large metal ring on one of the cell walls. It is a reversal of the condition in which the two of them left Charles a decade earlier, according to Donnie's videotaped confession which plays in the opening scene of the film. But Charles's Black body is never shown in this manner; rather, it is Keith's chained, whip-marked white body that bears the visual burden of the nation's history of slavery. Writing about Virgo's first film, *Rude*, Rinaldo Walcott points out that "slavery has had an enormous unacknowledged impact on how we might think of bodies in the West" (Walcott 1997: 54). He argues that "certain bodies are asked to inhabit specific histories" (65) and, as a result, "the black body in Western discourse is a marked body, marked with the history of enslavement and disenfranchisement" (53); by contrast, the white body is most often constructed as normative and unmarked. Virgo, in rejecting this correlation in *Poor Boy's Game*, marks the white body to further emphasize that slavery is not just a Black history, but a Canadian history, and that the entire nation bears responsibility for coming to terms with its legacies. This evacuation of the symbols of slavery from their racialized connotations might be read as a Fanonian gesture to the notion that "when there are no longer slaves, there are no longer masters (Fanon 1967: 219). It is also an example of the ways, to again borrow from Walcott: "[B]odies leak into each other. They are not merely the separate entities that we think them to be" (Walcott 1997: 67).⁷ Virgo's representational strategies emphasize this, becoming an important means toward breaking down the oversimplified binaries on which the racial antagonism in the film is based.

In this regard, Earl (Cory Bowles), a minor character in the film, also plays an important role. In an impoverished community wherein "tribe" is evoked repeatedly by both sides of the racial divide as a signal of loyalty and community, Earl troubles the Manichean binarism and ethnic absolutism of racial discourse. A member of Keith's posse, Earl is racially indeterminate, his long curly Black hair perhaps a more potent racial marker than the light skin which allows him to pass as white. He does so, undetected most of the time, except by Ossie's friends who dismiss him as an Uncle Tom when he stringently polices the racial boundaries at Joe's night club, refusing them entry on the grounds that the club's dress code

requires collared shirts that night. The ironic slippage in their conversation, in which Ossie's crew willfully misunderstands the difference between "collared" and "coloured," draws attention to the complex, ongoing and often indirect processes through which these boundaries are maintained. In several other scenes in the film where various characters speak about the importance of tribe, the camera lingers on Earl, whose discomfort is echoed in the extreme close-ups that work to leave the viewer similarly unsettled. His character is a palpable reminder of Paul Gilroy's observation that we live "in a world in which racial or ethnic identities have been nowhere near as stable or fixed as their accompanying rhetoric would have us believe" (Gilroy 2005: 30). Earl's character demonstrates that community affiliation is interlaced with questions of power, and is often contradictory and ambivalent; it cannot be taken for granted, homogenized or naturalized. Instead, Earl reveals the ways "community is a continuous unworking" (Sooknanan 2000: 154), demonstrating that, especially when threatened from within, the exclusionary and absolutist logic of tribalism is always perilously close to unravelling.

The final boxing match between Donnie and Ossie represents the culmination of the film's desire to think beyond racial binarisms and ethnic absolutism. Far more than a dramatic fight sequence, their ten rounds in the ring are one of the most important aspects of the film, through which Virgo stages a significant discursive intervention. In *Beyond A Boundary*, C. L. R. James observes that, in a British Caribbean colony such as Trinidad, "Much, much more than cricket is at stake, in fact everything is at stake" (James 1993: 192). The same can be said about Virgo's representation of Donnie and Ossie's fight. Symbolically envisioning what Gilroy might call a "radically nonracial humanism" (Gilroy 2000:15), the fight sequence writes a counter-narrative of athleticism which challenges and rethinks the historical role of sport in the writing of dominant national narratives. Instead, it envisions a very different type of political paradigm that might enable alternate forms of reconciliation and justice. Through Donnie and Ossie, and also through the indirect participation of George and Charlie, both former boxers themselves, the film also asks, to borrow from Abdel-Shehid: "How can we conceive of athletes as political agents, and not as simply victims of larger processes?" (Abdel-Shehid 2005: 20).

As each fighter is led to the ring, the fight sequence opens by immediately establishing an impossible situation, or at least impossible by the conventions established in the Hollywood boxing movie. Who should viewers root for in this fight? Neither Donnie nor Ossie can, at the outset, be positioned as a clear choice for victor since both have done tremendous harm in the name of their so-called tribe. Do we root for Donnie? He still bears the burdens of his criminal actions, and even though he has spent the film trying to distance himself from the prejudices of his friends and family, ultimately confessing to police about his uncle's illegal discrimination at the night club, he is still held up by them as a champion of their perceived racial supremacy. Or do we root for Ossie, whose friends have

murdered Keith in an act of retaliation, and who now plans to murder again? Abdel-Shehid has argued that both sport and nation rely on a discourse of heroes and villains, since both are “narrated in a Manichean fashion, often with both good guys and bad guys in every story” (2005: 33); elsewhere, he describes this binaristic confluence of sport and nation using the provocative term “sportocracy” (2007: 195). In Virgo’s film, the labels of hero or villain cannot be readily applied to either fighter.

Refusing to operate within a sportocracy, the film enacts a different kind of narrative, which troubles the Manichaeism of both sporting and national discourse. Rinaldo Walcott has argued that nations are “spaces of tremendous human troubles” (Walcott 2006: 87), built upon violence, exclusion and marginalization, and sustained by ongoing erasure and historical amnesia. In this context, for either boxer to win the fight would be to reinscribe the violence, racism, sexism and homophobia on which national narratives are built. Symbolically, then, Virgo’s unwillingness to articulate a clear winner or loser can also be read as a refusal of the binaristic and exclusionary terms under which the Canadian nation currently operates. The film, to again borrow from Walcott, “give[s] up on the promise that nation building can ever be an ethical project in the context of the contortions of late global capitalism as the subaltern seeks justice” (2006: 89).

Under conventional terms, the fight sequence initially appears to be the culmination of a series of retributive acts by each racial tribe, as each attempts to make the other suffer for past actions. In light of the Black community’s opposition to Donnie’s release from prison and their failed petitions to keep him in jail, Ossie’s pugilistic challenge to Donnie is an attempt to, in the words of Charlie’s mother, Ruth, “make him pay for what he done to my boy.” Donnie’s uncle Joe tightens the security at his club in part to keep out Donnie’s enemies, eventually causing the riot that does extensive damage to his establishment. As payback, further accelerating racial tension, Keith and his friends burn down the Black church, an important community marker and gathering place for George’s family and Ossie’s friends. In response, they murder Keith, and Ossie hopes to culminate this cycle of violence by murdering Donnie in a public execution in the ring. These acts can all be understood, through a Foucauldian lens, to be reliant on the carceral regime of discipline and punish utilized by the state. And, as Foucault goes to great lengths to demonstrate, these regimes are pervasive, extending well beyond the walls of the prison to discipline subjects in many different ways. He reminds us that despite the historical redistribution of punishment from the corporeal to the carceral, “the practice of public execution haunted our penal system for a long time and still haunts it today” (Foucault 1979: 15). Despite its failings, such a carceral regime has, for the last two centuries, been presented as though “it seemed to have no alternative, as if carried along by the very movement of history” (232). This is an apt description of the seeming inevitability through which the film initially presents its cycle of violence. Framed by the opening sequence, wherein Donnie

sits in front of a parole board that ultimately allows his release from prison, each retaliatory action in which both groups engage is presented as an unpleasant corrective necessity to previous failings. In this regard, from the beginning of the film the carcereal regime presented in *Poor Boy's Game* is shown to be deeply problematic and ultimately ineffective. Like Foucault, the film reminds us that “if the law is supposed to define offences, if the functions of the penal apparatus is to reduce them, and if the prison is the instrument of this repression, then failure has to be admitted” (Foucault 1979: 271). Donnie suggests as much in the opening sequence. When a parole officer, citing the Black community’s opposition to his release, asks him if he is ready for the world, Donnie wryly responds, “I wouldn’t want me released neither.”

Walcott argues that any genuine struggle for justice needs to “eschew a politics of the corrective in favour of the politics of ongoing negotiation and ethical relationality” (Walcott 2006: 97). This is the turn, away from the punitive and the carcereal and towards the ethical, which Virgo narrates in the boxing ring. The significant shift in the tenth and final round is notable particularly in the wake of the ninth. The penultimate round is by far the most brutal, as both Ossie and Donnie noticeably drop their form, replacing their sharp jabs and tight hooks with wide-swinging sucker punches in an attempt to do genuine corporeal damage. Virgo’s impressive attention to detail here belies *National Post* critic Jay Stone’s dismissal of the final fight as “unconvincing boxing” (2007). In the final round, Donnie and Ossie touch gloves, a sign of mutual respect between fighters, for the first time in the match. They then circle each other, appearing to make eye contact (which trained boxers do not normally do, their focal point usually being the centre of the upper torso), and neither seems willing to take the first swing. At this point, power dynamics shift as the crowd becomes increasingly angry, and Ossie and Donnie both become targets of the hostile fans. As they continue to circle, the camera cuts to the crowd four times to show reaction shots. In each shot, a Black man stands next to a white man and together they angrily commiserate the lack of fighting or goad the boxers on. While the crowd outside the ring has crossed the racial divide in their united thirst for violence, eager to see further discipline and punishment Donnie and Ossie by contrast have, symbolically, turned the ring into a microcosm of the ethical in their attempt to negotiate different conditions of relationality. George and Charles also become part of this dialogue when, in a passionate outburst, Charles breaks free of his father’s embrace and runs down the aisle and into the ring, taking a few feeble swings at Donnie before putting himself between the two boxers in order to stop the fight. As the crowd becomes increasingly angry, imploring “somebody [to] hit fuckin’ somebody,” a chair is thrown at Charles. The spectators rush the ring, and Ossie and Donnie surround Charles and fight off the angry mob in an attempt to keep him safe. This moment dramatizes George’s earlier advice to Donnie: “If the only thing keeping you in the ring is anger, you gonna lose.” A well-understood

truism in the boxing world, the statement becomes broadly applicable beyond the ring as well, as Donnie and Ossie turn away from sportocratic binarism in the interest of producing a different outcome for the fight. According to Gilroy, “Deliberately adopting a position between camps of this sort is not a sign of indecision or equivocation. It is a timely choice. It can ... be a positive orientation against the patterns of authority, government, and conflict that characterize modernity’s geometry of power” (Gilroy 2000: 84).

I want to argue that the film’s political possibility is represented metaphorically in the boxing ring in part because the language available to talk about the alternatives it narrates is often inadequate. In the same way that Dionne Brand suggests the need for “a kind of new vocabulary” (Brand 2005: 154) to talk about the outer-biological, outer-national forms of affiliation she represents in *What We All Long For*, so too does Virgo turn to a different vocabulary to think beyond existing political paradigms. In a literal sense, both Donnie and Ossie are among the social strata for whom “conditions of freedom, property, and literacy” (Bannerjee 2000: 67) have been severely limited. Donnie’s words are usually brief and for the most part he speaks in short lines and halting dialogue. Ossie, while considerably more verbose, speaks through extended circumlocutions, clichés and bravado-laced rhetoric. Yet both of these characters, Donnie in particular, say a great deal through their elaborate and impassioned facial expressions, which capture their torment more than their words ever could. In the ring their language is corporeal, as they put their bodily capital on the line to engage in what sociologist and amateur boxer Loic Wacquant calls a “fistic conversation” (Wacquant 2007: 148), through which they work to articulate various ethical possibilities. In the tenth round, Donnie and Ossie shift from being opponents to sharing a “pugilistic dialogue” (148), in which, like sparring partners who train together in the same gym, neither tries to silence the other as both search for a different way to end the fight. Wacquant articulates sparring as a form of “antagonistic co-operation” that is never contractually allowed in a real fight, pointing out that its “tacit norms ... seem to contradict the public principle and ethos of unlimited competition” (150). Yet this is the turn taken by both Donnie and Ossie in the tenth round, as they reject the competitive framework of the fight in a struggle toward a form of restorative justice that is very different from that articulated at the outset.

It is also significant that this discursive shift is enacted by two characters who are, for various reasons, marginal figures within the Canadian nation, only ever provisionally admitted as social citizens, when at all. Ossie, although he has accumulated some social and material capital through his boxing, faces exclusion as a result of his race. A sports commentator’s remark that he is “the best since [Samuel] Langford” situates Ossie as part of a long line of talented Nova Scotia boxers stretching back a century. Nonetheless, the comment still writes him out of the nation by positioning him as a Black boxer rather than a Canadian athlete. Donnie on the other hand, is marginalized through class and sexuality. When

Ossie first offers Donnie the \$20,000 to fight him, he and Donnie's uncle Joe have an extended conversation about the fact that this amount is considerably more than the annual starting salary of a dockworker; it certainly appears to be more money than Donnie, his mother, or his brother have ever earned in their lives. Donnie's indeterminate sexuality is also reinscribed and foregrounded in the dressing room before his fight, when he puts on the terrycloth robe his lover and cellmate gives him the night before his release, which he has lettered with the words "Donnie Decker Rose." The remark made by his trainer Mello (Jeremy Akerman), that "You look like a fuckin' refugee in that fuckin' robe" positions Donnie as a non-citizen, an outsider on the grounds of his sexuality. Although its origins are unknown to Mello, Donnie's insistence on wearing the robe comes in the wake of a series of homophobic comments, one of which includes Ossie's public claim at the pre-fight press conference that he is going to beat Donnie "like he scratched my cock." This remark resonates in light of Donnie's taped confession, wherein he states that one of the reasons he attacked Charles was because he and his friends "were calling me a faggot and stuff." Although Keith displays a similar and pervasive homophobia throughout the film, Ossie's comment reflects what Varda Burstyn calls the "institutionalized homophobia" (Burstyn 1999: 38), which accompanies the hypermasculinity of sport. Both Donnie and Ossie have, in different ways, experienced the kind of marginalization Himani Bannerjee observes when she argues that "citizenship does not provide automatic membership in the nation's community: living in a nation does not, by definition, provide one with a prerogative to 'imagine' it" (Bannerjee 2000: 66). Thus, barred from imagining the nation in any real way or any overtly political sense, both Donnie and Ossie turn to boxing as a form of agency. In the final fight sequence, they use the boxing ring as a forum in which to reimagine the political in a way that might create alternate spaces of engagement.

In the political microcosm of the ring Donnie and Ossie begin the process of imagining a form of reconciliation that might allow them to come to terms with their own, and the Canadian nation's, racial trauma. Seeking a third way that looks beyond oversimplified binaries of right and wrong, good and bad, the outcome of the fight turns instead toward forgiveness as a means of redemption. But the film pointedly does not write a narrative of Christian redemption. In this regard, *Poor Boy's Game* is also considerably more sophisticated than some of Virgo's earlier work. While Rinaldo Walcott argues that *Rude* "opened up the space for thinking differently about Canada as a racialized space, and more specifically a black space" (Walcott 2000: 7), he criticizes Virgo's first film for ultimately "being locked within a socio-religious narrative steeped in the politics of conversion" (68). *Poor Boy's Game*, while overlapping thematically with *Rude*, takes a very different approach to questions of religion. While the church is shown to be a very important pillar of Halifax's Black population, it is also a conservative force

in the film and its politics come into question for their culpability in exacerbating the city's racial divide.

Specifically, the religious recourse to retribution is locked in too closely to the state's penal narrative and tactics of subjection. From the pulpit, Ossie preaches a perverted and hypermasculine form of muscular Christianity when he tells the congregation that "God has blessed me with a fierce left hook and speed of foot and a devastating right cross." He uses this platform to encourage the congregation to come watch him do the work of a "wrathful God" by "shar[ing his] blessings" with Donnie. The congregation's enthusiastic assent, first shown through nods and amens, quickly transforms into cheers and applause, to the extent that the Sunday morning gathering is barely distinguishable from the loud and vocal audience at the fight. This blurring of religious and athletic spectacle rehearses the strategies Anne McClintock calls "fetish nationalism" (McClintock 1995: 374), which she argues is one of the principal tools used to manage and maintain the hegemonic power of the nation. According to McClintock, nationalism and fetishism have been closely intertwined, and the organization of "collective fetish spectacle" (375), in the form of sporting events and mass gatherings, is utilized to impose and transmit collective values. In the context of the church service, the congregation's collective desire for retributive justice echoes too closely that of the state's carceral regime.

Turning away from the socio-religious, *Poor Boy's Game* instead looks toward a different paradigm to contemplate questions of reconciliation. I want to argue that, through the duration of the film, but particularly in the final fight sequence, the film contemplates cinematically some of the same questions Jacques Derrida raises in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001). Here, Derrida makes a very important distinction between forgiveness and penal law, "from which forgiveness must in principle remain heterogeneous and irreducible" (Derrida 2001: 27). Arguing that it is absolutely necessary to take the act of forgiveness "beyond the juridical instance, or that of the nation-state" (28), he suggests that forgiveness can never happen under the terms established by the nation, for in this context forgiveness is only ever about the state's self-maintenance. To this end, Derrida argues that "One could never, in the ordinary sense of the words, found a politics or law on forgiveness" (39). Arguably, Virgo's film comes to a similar conclusion. Throughout, the carceral regimes both within and without the prison walls are shown to be only a venue of punishment, not a realm in which any meaningful acts of forgiveness can take place. But the boxing ring, typically constructed as a brutal space of pugilism, becomes the site at which forgiveness is enacted, symbolically both offered and accepted by all parties. Like Derrida, Ossie, Donnie and, ultimately, Charles, all reject the idea that forgiveness requires "institutional mediation" (42), to instead assert themselves as political agents, and to articulate different conditions of relationality than those imposed by the Canadian nation. George, although he does not enter the ring in the final round, also participates

in this process. Although at first deeply conditional, reminding Donnie that “I ain’t doin’ this for you,” his decision to train Donnie, against his family’s wishes, looks beyond the rhetoric of kinship to demonstrate a profound turn toward outer-familial, outer-biological forms of affiliation. Despite being deeply painful, this is another instance in which the film attempts to articulate possibilities in the wake of ostensible impossibilities. As Derrida similarly suggests, forgiveness must announce itself as both exceptional and as a seeming impossibility: “Yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that calls for forgiveness? If one is only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable ... then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear” (Derrida 2001: 32).

Despite its turn to forgiveness, the film does not simply write a liberal narrative that suggests cycles of violence could be stopped if we all just get along. Although each of the protagonists have, by the end of the film, made efforts to come to terms with their actions, the film also illustrates that any efforts toward reconciliation come with difficult, painful and ongoing negotiations. George and Donnie in particular have spent the entire duration of the film in these negotiations, constantly redefining the terms of their relationship, evaluating at times whether or not it can even continue. As their relationship culminates in the final scenes in Donnie’s dressing room after the fight, the film also demonstrates that part of dealing with past trauma is to recognize both the necessity and the impossibility of getting over it. The final exchange between Donnie and George continues the project of trying to articulate an ethical political vocabulary that might help them come to terms with their own, and the Canadian nation’s, past and present histories of violence. Walcott invokes ethicality “to signal the different moral and political stances it appears difficult to take ... and to stake the claim for taking a stance concerning questions of justice without simplifying what might be at stake in any given claim” (Walcott 2006: 88). Similarly, the film refuses oversimplifications, despite what some newspaper critics complained about its outward appearance of a neat and tidy resolution.

According to Walcott, “Justice is always a work in progress that can only be made sense of by those who understand themselves to be on the receiving end of it, thus making the attempt for its accomplishment always a question or an unfinished project” (88). I want to argue that the ending of the film similarly presents this kind of unfinalizability. The last conversation between Donnie and George offers no answers; rather, it takes the form of a series of questions, leaving the outcome of the film open-ended. In the wake of the brawl into which the boxing match erupted, Donnie first inquires about the well-being of Charles, then Ossie. In the last two lines of the film, Donnie then asks George, “Are we done?” to which George responds, “Are you?” Like Donnie’s apology at the old fort, the deliberate ambiguity of this language can be read both literally and metaphorically, suggesting their attempts to negotiate their immediate situation as well as wider political

concerns. In their final scene together, George, significantly, pats Donnie on the shoulder. It is perhaps the only time in the film in which the two men make any physical contact that does not involve boxing gloves. Their verbal and corporeal exchange ultimately demonstrates that the conditions through which forgiveness and reconciliation can be enacted are always precarious, requiring ongoing care and maintenance if they are to achieve any sense of justice.

Earlier in the film Ossie reminds the other characters—and the viewers—that “Boxing ain’t no game. You see, you play tennis, you play football. You don’t play boxing.” It is a line that resonates throughout, in the various ways that Virgo has used the sport as a vehicle through which to address genuine political and social concerns, and to offer alternate possibilities to the hegemonic narratives of athleticism on which national narratives are built. Through boxing, *Poor Boy’s Game* reveals that, to borrow from Katherine McKittrick, “a brutal past can also initiate new and different ways of being” (McKittrick 2007: 103). Her argument speaks to both the brutality that is enacted, and ultimately rejected, in the boxing ring, as well as the nation’s violent history of slavery and segregation, encapsulating the cinematic counter-narrative Virgo has worked to write. The film suggests that struggling to create different conditions of livability—like practising boxing—involves pain, struggle, ethicality, tremendous hard work and ongoing negotiation. Boxing is too often dismissed as a “pejorative category” (Blackshaw and Crabbe 2004: 49), not only because of its assumed violence, but also because its practitioners are usually poor, racialized and possess little if any social capital. Yet the complex issues *Poor Boy’s Game* struggles with, both in and beyond the boxing ring, might offer an aptly complicating metaphor to the oversimplifications, binarism and exclusionary narratives offered by the nation.

Notes

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1. For further discussion about the political economy of the Canadian film industry, and block booking in particular, see Pendakur (1990) and Gasher (1992). Mike Gasher offers a deeply critical rejection of the notion of “meritocracy” which pervades Canadian cinema. He states that:

[t]his doctrine endorses the democracy of the marketplace, in which cultural consumers discriminate solely on the basis of universally accepted conceptions of artistic worth. Those cultural products which deserve to survive will survive. If Canadian films account for just 3% of screen time in Canadian cinemas, in other words, then that is their deserved share. Canadian films worth showing will be shown. (1992)

He points out that the meritocracy argument fails to account for the significant structural impediments put in place by the American film industry, which dominates Canadian

production, exhibition and distribution. Since the early 1990s, the Canadian share of its own screens has further declined as a result of the merger of the two largest exhibition chains, Famous Players and Cineplex Odeon, making it increasingly difficult for Canadian independent films such as Virgo's to garner widespread cinematic distribution.

2. Personal interview with Clement Virgo, June 29, 2009.

3. In August, 2009 Virgo's production company, Conquering Lion, purchased the film rights to Hill's widely acclaimed novel and the project is currently in development.

4. For a more detailed discussion of the symbolic weight of the Louis-Schmeling fights see chapter 4 of Paul Gilroy's *Against Race* (2000).

5. In the interview I conducted with Virgo in June 2009, he pointed out that the film does not fit within the parameters of the sports genre film, and cited critics' need for oversimplified categorization as a possible reason for its being framed in this way. Virgo instead characterized *Poor Boy's Game* as a "dysfunctional family drama."

6. Interview with Clement Virgo, June 29, 2009.

7. In Walcott's discussion of *Rude in Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (1997), he expresses concern about the ways Virgo's first film, which is comprised of three self-contained narratives, does not actually recognize the "leakage" he identifies, nor does it do enough to challenge hegemonic representations of Black corporeality. I have suggested that, in this regard, *Poor Boy's Game* is a considerably more sophisticated meditation on bodies, history, and slavery than Virgo's first work.

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