Must All Blackness Be American?: Locating Canada in Borden's "Tightrope Time," or Nationalizing Gilroy's The Black Atlantic

by George Elliott Clarke

The first ontological conundrum to confront the analyst of African-Canadian literature is both obvious and complex: How Canadian is it? The question cannot be dismissed, for the literature is awash in African-American and Caribbean influences. These 'presences' are so palpable, so pervasive, that the literature may seldom seem 'Canadian (whatever that means) at all. This paper explores, then, the supposed alterity of African-Canadian literature, especially in regards to its problematically open absorption of African-American literary modes and models. Yet, it also scrutinizes the manner in which one specific writer, Walter M. Borden, produces 'Canadianness' within his text, chiefly, by revising an African-American mentor. The paper concludes by reading Paul Gilroy's thesis, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, in the light of Borden's post-colonial practice, to examine the points where Gilroy's pronounced anti-nationalism fails to be practicable.

Until the onset of major black immigration from the Caribbean Basin in the mid-1950s, Euro-Canadians imagined African-Canadians as once-and-always Americans. In a 1956 magazine article, Edna Staebler ventures that some Black Nova Scotians "had a broad Southern accent" (qtd. in Dillard 517), even though the last great migration of African-Americans to Nova Scotia occurred during the War of 1812. Two generations later, Trinidadian-Canadian writer André Alexis complains that "no one, black or white, has yet accepted the fact and history of our [African-Canadian] presence, as if we thought black people were an American phenomenon that has somehow crept north..." (18). American-Canadian literary scholar Leslie Sanders agrees that "The Canadian literary and media establishment ... too often chooses to read race through the American situation..." (2). If Canadians have viewed blacks as misplaced Americans, African-Americans have tended to annex African-Canadians within their dominant, cultural matrix. African-American anthropologist, Arthur Huff Fauset, collecting folklore in Nova Scotia in the mid-1920s, was astonished, then, to find that his black respondents spurned the Joel Chandler Harris-promulgated, Uncle Remus tales, which he identified with echt African-American culture:

Throughout the province I found this reticence of the Negroes to tell a story if they feel that it is below their level, or, shall I say, dignity? I seemed to detect a disdainful attitude toward telling tales which put them in the role of minstrels, let us say. (ix)

Though Fauset admitted that some Nova Scotian blacks seemed to have "religious customs and even habits of living distinctly their own" (viii), he could only scrutinize them through the blinkered lens of African-American norms. Likewise in his biography of the great African-American intellectual, W. E. B. Du Bois, historian David Levering Lewis asserts, with admirable aplomb, that Du Bois's Cambridge, Massachusetts, landlords, John and Mary Taylor, were "African-Americans originally from Nova Scotia" (84). Such erasures continue. The
These piebald denials of what I will term African Canadiannot illuminate the dynamic dilemma of African-Canadian culture. Euro-Canadian critics often consider it as Other, while African-American (and Caribbean) critics read it—unashamedly—as extensions of their own. To complicate matters further, African Canadians utilize African-American texts and historical-cultural icons to define their own experiences (a fact which can seduce the unwary into believing that no uniquely African-Canadian perspective exists3). Examples are legion. In 1912, the African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia heard a proposal to invite famed African-American leader and educator Booker T. Washington to lecture on education in Black Nova Scotian, that is to say, Africadian communities. In the pages of The Atlantic Advocate, a black community newspaper issued in Halifax, Nova Scotia, between 1915 and 1917, one finds the poetry of African-American writer Paul Laurence Dunbar juxtaposed with surveys of race progress in the United States. In October 1968, Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Ture), the charismatic, Black Power orator, toured Halifax, unnerving whites and inspiring blacks to adopt militant stances, a process intensified by the visit, the following month, of two members of the radical, U.S.-based, Black Panther Party. Spectacularly, in Toronto, in May 1992, black youths rioted in sympathy with those who had taken to the streets in Los Angeles.

Too, most African-Canadian writers, whether native-born or first-generation immigrant, eye African-American culture with envy and desire. Novelist Cecil Foster, a Barbados native, defends the attractiveness of African-American culture for African Canadians, stressing that, if black Canadian artists have developed African-American sensibilities in place of a strong Canadian consciousness, well, c'est la vie:

Also, I do not have any problem whatsoever in laying claim to black icons from any place in the world. I feel they are all common property and we can use them.... Should I disown a Martin Luther King or a Malcolm X? Other cultures don't. English writers—even those who are living here in Canada—can deal with Chaucer and the pre-Chaucerian writers, and Shakespeare. (21)

Rejecting interviewer Donna Nurse's argument that "African-American culture fails to reflect accurately the black Canadian experience," Foster insists that "the reality for many blacks in Canada may be closer to what they see in the streets of New York or Los Angeles than what many people assume as being their reality" (21). Given the gravitational attractiveness of Black America and the repellent force of a frequently racist, Anglo-Canadian (and Québécois de souche) nationalism, African-Canadian writers feel themselves caught between the Scylla of an essentially U.S.-tinted cultural nationalism and the Charybdis of their marginalization within Canadian cultural discourses that perceive them as 'alien'. Hence, African-Canadian writers are forced to question the extent and relevance of their Canadianness (that notoriously inexpressible quality).

Yet, African-Canadians cannot avoid assimilating African-American influences, for both African Canada and African America were forged in the crucible of the slave trade, an enterprise the British aided, abetted, and affirmed, then suppressed, then finally abolished in 1833. Before the American Revolution, New World Africans—both slaves and freeborn—were probably traded (or migrated) up and down the Atlantic coast, given the existence of New World African English in both the American South and Nova Scotia. Linguist J. L. Dillard confirms that "the literary evidence ... provides a clear picture of a continuum of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century Black English from the American South to Nova Scotia, with no great break in such places as New York City, Boston and Connecticut..." (517). Thus, both African Canada and African America originated in the working out of the global fate of the British Empire; both arose (with the exception of communities situated in Hispanic and francophone locales) in a colonial, English milieu.

Certainly, anglophone African Canada can trace its origins to the arrival, following the American Revolution, of roughly 3,500 African Americans (or "Anglo-Africans," to use the nineteenth-century term). These Black Loyalists opposed the Revolution, supported Britain, and, in the aftermath of the republican victory, were accorded refuge in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Significantly, those who did not come as the chattel of white Loyalists, but as free persons—the majority—did so because they could not support a Revolution waged to secure a theoretically egalitarian society in which those who were of African (or, for that matter, of First Nations) ancestry would still endure a pernicious oppression. Another 2,000 African-Americans were settled in Maritime Canada following the War of 1812, while tens of thousands of others found asylum in Montreal, southern Ontario, and even SaltSpring Island, British Columbia, in the years between the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) and the end of the American Civil War (1865). African Canada was created, then, by the struggle to extinguish slavery—both in British North America (where it had essentially withered away by the early 1800s) and the United States—and to secure a free 'homeland' for blacks. It is, then, a kind of inchoate, New World version of Liberia, the African state organized by anti-slavery African Americans.

Crucially, too, African Canada and African America share a history of marginality that has impinged on the constructions of their literatures. Both entities resist the fugues of racial erasure indulged in by mainstream Canadian and American critics. African-American and African-Canadian writers create "texts that are double-voiced in the sense that their literary antecedents are both white and black [texts], but also modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition" (Gates xxiii). For both estates—African Canada and African America, the development of usable identities—in the face of strong, countervailing, imperial(ist) influences, has driven their histories. Close readings of African-American literature can highlight, moreover, the manner in which post-colonial theory can be applied to ever-smaller units of 'mass' identity. For one thing, ethnic texts are, writes Joseph Pivato, "on the periphery of this North American margin," Canada, which "is itself marginal" from "the perspective of the literary traditions of Europe..." (44). Hence, as Canada seeks to establish its difference from the United States, so does Québec confront English Canada, and so do, in turn, Haitian émigrés challenge the dominant Québécois culture.

II
This constant regression of post-colonial politics, its shrinkage about each particularity, also governs the construction of African-Canadian literature. This point is underlined by a contemporary Africana drama, "Tightrope Time: Ain't Nuthin' More Than Some Itty Bitty Madness Between Twilight & Dawn" (1986), by Walter M. Borden (1942-), an Africana poet and actor of African-American descent. Borden proves himself to be a deft, post-colonial exploiter of the 'parent' culture of African America, one who engenders a Canadian différence (that race-conflicted, native sensibility), even while he confiscates significant, African-American intertexts. In Borden, one finds, as does Margery Fee in her analysis of Australian/Aboriginal literary duality, "the use of repetition to effect a reversal ... through signifying, power relations are changed through the signifier’s clever (mis)use of someone else’s words" (18-19). Borden pursues a tradition in which Canadian writers strive "to forge new meanings out of foreign links and foreign chains" (Trehearne 320).

A one-man show, "Tightrope Time" was selected to represent Canada at the International Multicultural Festival in Amsterdam in 1987. Composed of two acts (of fourteen and nine scenes respectively), the drama's printed text features a dozen photographs of Borden playing most of the drama's twelve characters, namely—in order of appearance, the Host, the Old Man, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Health and Welfare, the Child, the Old Woman, the Pastor, the Minister of Defence, the Minister of the Interior, Adie, Ethiopia (a "drag queen"), and Chuck. "Tightrope Time" does not stage a single protagonist, however, but rather a bizarrerie of speakers delivering a pot-pourri of monologues, melding song, poetry, and prose. This bigarré semi-musical, blending Jacques Brel chansons, African-American spirituals and blues, Top 40 pop (circa 1978), and other music, is unified, though, by recurrent discussions of identity and consciousness. These overarching interests are broached and buttressed by felicitously utilized, African-American interpolations.

Principally, Borden sounds the work of celebrated playwright Lorraine Hansberry (1931-1965), both directly and indirectly. While Hansberry's best-known work, A Raisin in the Sun (1958), treats the desire of the Younger family to escape the claustrophobic poverty of their apartment, where "The sole natural light the family may enjoy in the course of a day is only that which fights its way through [a] little window" (12, her italics), Borden veers away from this limited setting to explore "the mansions of my mind" (13). Whereas Hansberry regards the move from a blighted apartment to a hitherto segregated suburban neighbourhood as the record of the progressive amelioration of the Younger's and, allegorically, the African-American, condition, Borden evades such plain social realism, opting instead for intellectual abstractions. This difference is enunciated immediately. A Raisin in the Sun opens with the preparation of a breakfast of fried eggs, but "Tightrope Time" begins with the Host's recollection of a like breakfast as he launches into a philosophical revery. Borden's first, indirect allusion to Hansberry's work stresses, then, not the nobility-versus-indignity it privileges, but rather the casualness of causality:

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Born on some forgotten FRyday,
That's FRyday with a 'y',
Not FRiday with an 'i',
At half past discontent,
Mama sat down on life's sidewalk,
Spread her legs
And pushed one ain't-no-problem time;
And spewed me there
Where MAYBE-YOU-WILL-CHILE BOULEVARD
Cuts across MAYBE-YOU-WONT-CHILE AVENUE,
And Indifference sauntered by
To serve as midwife,
To wrap me in my soul and say:
You are Nature's love-chile—
And Freedom is your father. (14)
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Borden's speaker seems disengaged from active, socio-political struggle; rather, he emphasizes, in an almost neo-neo-Platonist manner, the "many mansions / in the complex of my mind" (13). The gallery of speakers in "Tightrope Time" depicts a multiply divided consciousness. The function of the Host is, in fact, to provide the cranial space—a cabinet of Dr. Borden, if one likes—in which the motley'd monologuers can assemble. If Hansberry promotes laudable black bourgeois aspiration, Borden expresses a kind of quixotic black psychoanalysis.

Borden imports Hansberry directly into his work in 1.2, where he re-christens the "Hermit"—a character from an early draft of Raisin—as the "Old Man." Save for this single—and signal—alteration, Borden reprints Hansberry's speech for the "Hermit" with uncompromised fidelity:

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And so, to escape time, I threw my watch away. I even made a ceremony of it. I was on a train over a bridge ... and I held it out the door and dropped it. (Borden 16; Hansberry Be 3)
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The arty speech that Hansberry omitted from her most successful play is precisely (or perversely) the one that Borden feels compelled to use in his own.3 Tellingly, rather than appropriating a discourse from the finished, realist version of Raisin, Borden cribbs Hansberry's more philosophical musing on time. Even as he honours Hansberry, Borden dissents from her dramaturgy, scribing a metaphysical stance to her more physical focus on place and race.

Yet, Borden's predilection for intellectual abstraction manifests his Canadiantité, for Canadian poets have tended to value an "academic" as opposed to a "popular" ideal of poetics. According to John Matthews, "academic poetry refers to that based directly upon
Borden"s adoption of Hansberry"s Hermit hints, too, that "Tightrope Time" is only tangentially about race; or, rather, that it avoids discussing race in any stock sociological-empirical fashion. For instance, the Old Man"s penultimate speech in 1.2 turns on, not explicit concerns about race or racism, but, instead, one concrete and two abstract nouns—piec(s), time, and value—a trinity of tropes that presides over the play:

I am afraid men invent timePIECES(timepieces); they do not
invent time. We may give time its dimensions and meaning;[;] we
may make it worthless or important or absurd or crucial. But,[ ]
ultimately,[ ] I am afraid it has a value of its own.
(Borden 16; Hansberry Be 4)

Borden absorbs Hansberry"s academic musings and terms, detecting in them corollaries for his interests. This fact is clarified by his use of the word(s) piece(s). Though the term occurs in contexts that can allude to Hansberry, they are wholly Borden"s own. In 1.4, the Minister of Health and Welfare relates that his dream "dried up, just like that raisin in the sun" (24), a clear allusion to Hansberry as well as to African-American poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967)23; then the Minister continues on to assert that "painful thoughts rummage through / the few last pieces of my heart" (24) and that he seeks "bits and pieces of love / that I have known" (25). Borden shifts from the specific concerns of both Hansberry and Hughes to anatomize alienation. In fact, the African-Americans are sounded only after the Minister declares that "this celebration is not so much an historical documentation of the quest of a people in the Nova Scotian or indeed the Canadian mosaic, as it is an illumination of the resiliency of the human spirit" (22). An abstract universalism takes precedence, thus, over African-American utterance—even though, paradoxically, Hansberry herself is the source of the notion of "the resiliency of ... this thing called the human spirit" (Borden 80; Hansberry Be 256). This pattern recurs in 1.4, where Hansberry is again directly quoted. This time, Borden seizes a passage from Hansberry"s The Sign in Sidney Brustein"s Window (1964), uttered by Brustein, a white, ex-fighter for social justice, who feels compelled to re-enter the fray:

I care. I care about it all. It takes too much energy not to care. Yesterday, I counted twenty-six gray hairs on the top of my head all from trying not to care.... The why of why we are here is an intrigue for adolescents; the how is what command the living. Which is why I have lately become an insurgent again. (Borden 25; Hansberry Be xvi)

Just as Hansberry"s Brustein continues to struggle for social liberation, so does Borden"s Minister of Health and Welfare, this Canadian liberal, decide to shore pieces—of love, of heart—against his potential ruin. Borden"s transference of words written for a white American character to the mouth of a black Canadian, is, once again, a universalist gesture. His audacious reconfiguration of Hansberry"s words accents their innate universality. Racial identities are collapsed within his enveloping view that "the human spirit has no special resting place. It will find a lodging wherever it is received" (22). Thus, Borden dislodges Hansberry from an easy essentialism or empty liberalism, choosing to use her words to gird his interest in the universalist gesture. His audacious reconfiguration of Hansberry"s words accents their innate universality. Racial identities are collapsed within his enveloping view that "the human spirit has no special resting place. It will find a lodging wherever it is received" (22). Thus, Borden dislodges Hansberry from an easy essentialism or empty liberalism, choosing to use her words to gird his interest in the "mansions of the mind," that is to say, the multiple addresses where "the human spirit may dwell.

Towards the conclusion of the play, Borden utilizes the term pieces one last time, citing Hansberry"s rhetorical question, "Life?" and her reply, "Ask those who have tasted of it in pieces rationed out by enemies" (Borden 80; Hansberry Be 256, their italics). Ironically, "Tightrope Time" is itself just such a piece of theatre, just such a PIECE OF RESISTANCE (62, his italics), to use an epithet that Borden ascribes to Ethiopia, his transvestite character, for it flouts both racism and homophobia.

This last point necessitates a brief examination of Borden"s use of value, another term that he teases from Hansberry, his putative mentor. His assault on prejudice is predicated upon its reduction of the worth of human beings. When Borden utilizes (with slight amendments) Hansberry"s comment that time "has a value of its own" (Borden 16; Hansberry Be 4), he lets it follow the Host"s act of satiric self-evaluation:

I read the other day
That, on the open market,
I"m worth about five ninety,
Allowing for inflation.
But that"s alright—
I"d hate to think
That I was priced beyond accessibility. (13)
To Hansberry’s insight that time possesses its own value, independent of socially-imposed, ideological criteria, Borden adds the body. He goes on to besiege racial (and, thus, physical) devaluations throughout his play, as in these lines:

A second glance, however,
Reveals a flaw in pigmentation,
So, regretfully, you must look for me
in the reduced for clearance section. (13)

In 1.7, the Host recalls a childhood incident in which his mixed-race heritage resulted in his receiving a ‘high’, but unsought, racially-inflected, evaluation:

i knew that there was something wrong
the day i watched my living room become
an auction block
[and a visitor]
...called my blue eyes,
honey hair and
mellow/yellow presence
A WONDERMENT! (30, his italics)

Throughout “Tightrope Time,” Borden juxtaposes ‘face’ value and ‘soul value’, specifying that the oppressed are those "who have no place / the ones who have no face" (32), whose value, then, is little. They are "CHEAP GOODS" (34, his italics) to be bought up by Death. In 1.10, the Host remembers an Old Woman who spent her days "puttin the pieces together" of a patchwork quilt (36, his italics), and whose speech reiterates the connections between time and value. The Old Woman notes that "the young folks" are "wastin' all that precious time / at tryin' to be what other folkse want" (38). The loss of time, of life, is affiliated with trying to live according to false notions of one's worth. The Minister of the Interior, in 1.14, restores value, lustre, to blackness by producing a roster of worthies whom, he alleges, have been wrongly claimed to be white, including Queen Charlotte Sophia (the spouse of King George III), the Queen of Sheba, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Charles XIV of Sweden, to name but a few (55-56). Ironically, Borden 'borrows back' these ‘credits to the race.

Not only does Borden rescue the devalued black body, he also redeems that of the homosexual. If Act One centres—albeit usually obliquely—on race, Act Two considers sexuality—the repressed side of black self-consciousness. Here Borden revalues, in order, Adie, a female prostitute; Ethiopia, a homosexual cross-dresser; and Chuck, a hustler. Ethiopia disparages hypocritical, bourgeois sexual mores, declaring, "& HAPPY DAYS / unsanitized for early primetime viewing / meant more than suckin' lollipops out back behind some diner / but no one really thought that we was fuckin' up / TRADITION / coz / no one saw / no decrease in / the surplus population" (62, his italics). Chuck augments the currency of his Gay body by coupling coitus with money:

I don't fuck for I.O.U.'s
    for Master Charge
or Visa
Just hard old cash.... (66)

In a sense, here, Borden conducts a radical raid on Hansberry, for he drafts her voice, that is to say, her insight into value, for a liberatory movement for which it was not, perhaps, originally intended.

The most ostentatious broadside against devaluation in Act Two speaks, though, to race. At the conclusion of 2.7, a "tired and beaten" black mother, whose innocent son has been slain by a paranoid white man,
Borden's 'deformations' or 'reformations' of Hansberry, his major African-American influence, must be read in the context of an intra-racial post-coloniality. Certainly, Borden's emphasis on 'piecing together' his patchwork drama reinforces Paul Gilroy's notion that "even where African-American forms are borrowed and set to work in new locations they have often been deliberately reconstructed in novel patterns that do not respect their originators' proprietary claims or the boundaries of discrete nation states and the supposedly natural political communities they express or simply contain" (98). Moreover, Borden's post-coloniality vis-à-vis African-American texts pushes him to adopt a contestatory stance, for this is the condition of the ex-centric writer. No matter how deeply lies the commitment to imitate the 'parent' culture, any 'imitation' must always be different—and critical—because of its temporal lateness, its automatic status as 'post'. Max Dorsinville maintains that all emerging literatures suffer a similar condition of lateness. Yet, his notion that post-colonial writers are merely "indigenous writers hypnotized by the cult of metropolitan 'models'" (201) is wrong. The standard practice of these writers—which Borden's (mis)use of Hansberry illustrates—is to revise original influences or intertexts. In other words, Borden does not—and cannot—read Hansberry in the same way as would an African-American. His acts of quotation represent not, then, abject capitulation to metropolitan forces, but polite subversion; his 'lateness' is a marginal position that permits radical reinterpretation of the 'original' source. Eyed from this perspective, the margin is a time-devoid centre in which literary forms and movements co-exist in democratic chaos; it becomes a location where the neoclassical car jack against the surreal, the sonnet clang against the haiku, and dead authors possess the living. Thus, Borden's text can be read as exemplifying the ability of temporally 'late' Canadian writers to adapt a variety of European and American forms and influences to their unique contexts—of environment, history, and language, including different forms of English. "Tightrope Time" testifies to such hybridity or bricolage. This peripherally situated text becomes a homeplace where African-American literature—in its northern, existentialist exile—is assimilated, domesticated, into a Canadian context. Borden's relationship to Hansberry affirms, too, Harold Bloom's thesis regarding, as Stephen Sicari puts it, "an Oedipal struggle between a great precursor poet and his follower" (38). If "the later poet looks for (and discovers) places where the precursor fails to communicate to a [contemporary] reader ... and requires 'updating' by the [contemporary] poet" (Sicari 221, n.6), Borden amends Hansberry in similar terms, translating her (African) American predilections into (African) Canadian ones. He observes, wryly, that "Black folks always seem to get those / Hand-me-down revisions!" (72). Borden's rewriting of Hansberry demands a theory of post-colonial 'placement' and 'displacement', one which recognizes that the supposed recipient of meaning (the 'colonial') can instead become its bestower (the resister, the newly subjectivized).

Gilroy himself needs to tussle more fiercely with this imperial-colonial dialectic. Though Gilroy argues that texts like that of Borden represent the "unashamedly hybrid character ... of black Atlantic cultures" which thus confound "any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity" (99), he forgets that cultural nationalism never entirely evaporates, even when techniques of "creolisation, métissage, mestizaje, and hybridity" (3), are in play, as in Borden. Au contraire, it is exactly the use of forms of bricolage which allows new understandings of the native (or post-colonial) culture to be articulated. When Borden reads Hansberry (and Hughes and James Weldon Johnson) into his own Canadian text, his Africadianité is not refuted but reinforced.

Borden's practice serves to highlight, then, a few of the a priori aporias in Gilroy's vaunted text, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993), which undertakes, as does "Tightrope Time," to dissent from "Americocentricity" (Gilroy, 191), the notion that authentic blackness—or Africadianité—is implicated, ontologically and epistemologically, with some subtle sense of 100% Americanism. Gilroy attempts this manoeuvre by constructing a "transcultural, international formation [called] the black Atlantic" (4), which consists of African communities in the United States, the Caribbean, Britain, and Africa. While Gilroy omits Canada (this gap in his map replicates a suspiciously 'Americentric' blindness), his 'pan-Atlanticism' is intended as a panacea for the "ever-present danger" of "ethnic absolutism" (5), or larval nationalism, especially "the easy claims of African-American exceptionalism" (4). Yet, Gilroy's project is fraught with contradiction. His very formulation, "the black Atlantic," resurrects a pan-Africanism that almost dare not speak its name. As well, his centering of African-American culture is intended to shift attention to the Caribbean-British contributions to pan-African culture. Essentially, then, Gilroy, like Borden, addresses this question: Must all blackness be American? But Gilroy's attempt to naysay this interrogative, while simultaneously vetoing cultural nationalism, scores his project with irrepressible self-negations.

Indeed, Gilroy promotes old-fashioned nationalism when he announces that "the dependence of blacks in Britain on black cultures produced in the new world has recently begun to change" (86). Gilroy notes, with relish, that "the current popularity of [pop music acts] Jazzy B and Soul II Soul, Maxi Priest, Caron Wheeler, Monie Love, the Young Disciples, and others in the United States confirms that during the eighties black British cultures ceased to simply mimic or reproduce wholesale forms, styles, and genres which had been lovingly borrowed, respectfully stolen, or brazenly highjacked [sic] from blacks elsewhere" (86). Problematically, this inchoately neotribal pronouncement denies the truth that, as Borden's work demonstrates, utterances of 'unamerican' blackness often represent deliberate 'deformations' or reformulations of African-American cultural productions (which Gilroy admits when he treats the "hybridity" of black Atlantic cultures).
In addition, Gilroy’s effort to dispense with African-American parochialism is complicated by his decision to focus his analyses on African-American writers and intellectuals, namely, Frederick Douglass, Martin Robinson Delany, Du Bois, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. Though he essays, valiantly, to set these figures in a pan-Atlantic context, he nevertheless succumbs to ideas that, once again, Americanize blackness. For example, Gilroy lauds Wright’s insight that “the word Negro in America means something not racial or biological, but something purely social, something made in the United States” (qtd. in Gilroy, 149, Gilroy’s italics), seeing in it an “anti-essentialist conception of racial identity” (149). But if the Negro is, as Wright thought, “America’s metaphor” (qtd. in Gilroy, 149), then is not all blackness (i.e. negroness or negritude) deemed American? If so, then (an American) essentialism lives. Gilroy even urges that “In Wright’s mature position, the Negro is no longer just America’s metaphor but rather a central symbol in the psychological, cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole” (159). An American conception of blackness is made to dominate the entire Occident, thus situating U.S. definitions at the centre of diasporic African experience, the very fate that Gilroy had slaughtered forth to avoid. The only possible counterweight to this de facto tyranny of influence is precisely the cultural nationalism that Gilroy, haphazardly and haplessly, both disparages and embraces, but that Borden, quietly, consistently, ‘Canadiably’, employs.

Despite the blithe assurance of some liberal theorists that the post-national, Brave New World Order has arrived, Gilroy’s infuriatingly mercurial struggle to dispel “Americocentrism” with his notion of “the black Atlantic” accents the truth that nationalism persists. For one thing, as Elizabeth Alexander sees, “there is a place for a bottom line, and the bottom line … argues that different groups possess sometimes subconscious collective memories which are frequently forged and maintained through a ‘storytelling tradition,’ however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience” (94). Though the scholarly voodoo of the notion of “collective memories” is to be regretted, Alexander inks a strong reason for the continued vibrancy of ‘tradition’, of group identities, namely, the primacy of shared (narrative) experience as the locus of ‘national’ feeling. Pavlo shares this insight, urging “The history of this century demonstrates that a distinctive culture is vital to the life of a people; it survives beyond language, beyond geography and beyond political states” (252). What one must seek is the lyricism of cultural difference, not the mere prose of cultural diversity. Consequently, the canon of ‘African-Canadian literature’ emerges when a writer or a critic declares his or her membership in that tradition. Such new canons are also created, though, through acts of resistive appropriation—the mandatory practice of Borden, the muddled practice of Gilroy. This fate cannot be evaded.

All narrative pursues an original identity, and poetry declares it.

Notes

1André Alexis believes, for instance, that “black Canadians have yet to elaborate a culture strong enough to help evaluate the foreignness of foreign [i.e. American] ideas” 20. Nova Scotian historian Allen B. Robertson despair that “When Black History Month is celebrated in Nova Scotia … it is Martin Luther King and Malcolm X who appear on the posters, not [Black Nova Scotian heroes and heroines] Viola Desmond, Carrie Best, the Reverend William Oliver or Victoria Cross recipient William Hall” 158. Both of these presumed instances of Americanization overlook this truth: Though African-American culture enjoys wide currency among African Canadians, they remain a distinct group. As Marlene Nourbese Philip points out, “The fact that Canadian Blacks strongly opposed the production of Showboat [the 1927 American musical comedy by Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern], while there has been nary an oppositional whisper from the United States, suggests that that there are some very marked differences between the two populations” 2.

2term Black Nova Scotia Africadia and its people and cultural works Africadian. A fusion of Africa and cadie, the Mi’kmaq term for "abounding in" (and the probable cognate of the French toponym Acadie [Acadia]), the words Africadia and Africadian serve to stress the long history of Africans (mainly of African-American ancestry) in Maritime Canada. Throughout this essay, I also use four other terms to refer to persons of African descent. “New World Africans,” a phrase I have borrowed from Nourbese Philip, refers to all persons of African descent in the Americas. “African-American” applies to those whose homeland is the United States. “African-Canadian” refers to those whose homeland is Canada. Finally, I use “black” as a generic term distinguishing Negroes from Caucasians. See Nourbese Philip, “Absence” 13; Clarke [9].

3The Education Committee of the African Baptist Association recommended that the Executive Committee “endeavour to procure, during the year, the services of Booker T. Washington, or some like educator for a lecture tour throughout the Province. See Minutes of the Fifty-Eighth and Fifty-Ninth Annual Sessions [1911-1912] of the African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia 15.

4See Bridglal Pachai 247-249.

5Joseph Pavlo observes, illustratively, that “Canadian [thematic criticism] has not been open to ethnic texts since it cannot accomodate them into such national myths as the two solitudes, the ellipse with two centres, or the garrison” 72.

6Dillard also states that “slaves were transferred from one place to another, as from Nova Scotia to Surinam… quite freely in the eighteenth century” 513. Before the American Revolution, then, there was likely a good measure of black travel—voluntary and involuntary—between the Thirteen Colonies and Nova Scotia.

7Philip Brian Harper urges that while “the situation of black Americans [cannot] be posited unproblematically as a colonial one, its historical sine qua non—the slave trade—can certainly be considered as a manifestation of the colonizing impulse” 253, n.26.

8See Hansberry To Be Young, Gifted and Black 3-4.

Hansberry considered her work “genuine realism,” which she defined as depicting “not only what is but what is possible … because that is part of reality too.” She also speculated that “Ours [i.e. Black theatre] … will be a theatre primarily of emotion” See Be 211 & 228, her italics. Hansberry’s adoration of realism and empiricism explains her omission of the Hermit’s unrealistic speech from raisin, but this fact also throws into even starker relief Borden’s inclusion of the discourse in his play and his employment of expressionist theatrical
What happens to a dream deferred?

  Does it dry up
  like a raisin in the sun?
  Or fester like a sore—
  And then run?
  Does it stink like rotten meat?
  Or crust and sugar over—
  like a syrupy sweet?
  Maybe it just sags
  like a heavy load.
  Or does it explode?

See Hughes 123. Borden also reproduces the poem in its entirety, using its hint of menace to preface the Minister of Justice's discussion of the demise of his “dream” which “had something to do with my trying, in quite a humble way, to make this world a better place in which to work — and play.” See Borden 22 & 24.

In Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance (1987), Houston A. Baker, Jr., finds that African-American "discursive modernism" or, to use his preferred term, renaissancism, consists of "the blending ... of class and mass—poetic mastery discovered as a function of deformatve folk sound..." 93, his italics. In other words, African-American artistic supremacy depends on both "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" 50 (his italics), that is to say, the assertion of a signifying difference from mainstream European/American forms/norms. Ironically, Borden practices a similar deformation—of African-American styles.

Borden reprints the whole of "The Prodigal Son," a sermon-poem by African-American poet James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), in 1.11, according this piece to the Pastor. Borden is largely faithful to Johnson's text, but he introduces a few alterations. He increases the stanza breaks, producing sixteen stanzas to Johnson's thirteen. He confers extra articles, pronouns, adverbs, and adjectives upon some lines. For instance, Johnson's line, "That great city of Babylon" 23, becomes, in Borden's treatment, "That great, great city of Babylon" 44. Likewise, Johnson's line, "And he went to feeding swine" 24, is transformed by Borden to read, "And he went down to feeding swine" 44. Such relatively minor redactions are accompanied by three greater interventions by Borden. Johnson's "stopped" (23) becomes "passed" in "And he passed a passer-by and he said" (Borden 44). Johnson's "you've" (25) becomes the more idiomatic "you" in "Today you got the strength of a bull in your neck" (Borden 44). Dramatically, Borden affixes two new lines to the conclusion of the penultimate stanza of Johnson's poem:

You'll have a hand-to-hand struggle with bony Death,
  And Death is bound to win,
  Make no mistake about it;
  Old bony Death is bound to win.

See Borden 45, my italics. Borden's revisions of Johnson's already speakerly text intensify its oratorical power. Moreover, the line, "In my father's house are many mansions" (Johnson 24; Borden 45) accents Borden's strategy of presenting the psyche as the 'Host' of various speakers. See Borden 43-45; see Johnson 21-25.

This passage has already been cited, but it requires reiteration, for it affirms the contention that Gilroy's text is an anthology of antitheses: "It bears repetition that even where African-American forms are borrowed and set to work in new locations they have often been deliberately reconstructed in novel patterns that do not respect their originators' proprietary claims or the boundaries of discrete nation states and the supposedly natural political communities they express or simply contain." See Gilroy 98-99. This analysis sets forth a vision of the resistive workings of cultural nationalism that Gilroy, elsewhere, seeks to undercut.

Sneja Gunew distinguishes between difference and diversity in a vital passage in her foreword to Pivato's Echo: Essays on Other Literatures (1994):

Like Homi Bhabha, my sympathies have always been with cultural difference as distinct from cultural diversity: an insistence on the untranslatability or incommensurability of cultural difference. For me, this is most clearly apparent in my own studies of Aboriginal epistemologies. I am trying to hear and acknowledge the difference rather than attempting to equate it with known elements in more familiar epistemologies. To put it another way, it is the opposite of the old humanist assumption that all human experience is essentially the same.

See Gunew 20-21.

Further evidence for this position occurs in a recent first-person narrative by Siobhan R.K. Barker, treating the development of African-
There has been much emphasis placed on the assertions of the African-American right to cultural identity while very little has been expressed regarding their neighbours to the north.... For African-Canadian women, prior to confronting those issues offending her American sisters, she must first tackle her omission from dramatic presentations.... Images of Whole is focused on the creation of theatre that is specific to the experiences of African-Canadian women.... The three women currently involved—Liza Huget, Celeste Insell and myself, Siobhan Barker—met when all were cast in a Canadian production of Ntozake Shange's choreopoem for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf. As any performer does in taking on a role, we tried to be as true as possible to Shange's vision and text while bringing as much of ourselves to the American characters which to some degree remained alien to us. Our African-Canadian voices were not heard through the African-American mouths of Shange's characters. Our story had still gone untold and we began searching individually for performance opportunities that would be representative of our African-Canadian heritage and indicative of our presence in Canadian Society.

Barker's reminiscence augments my argument that the construction of any particular artistic tradition requires, as well, the articulation of nationalism, even if merely naïf. See Barker 14-15.

Works Cited


Barker, Siobhan R.K. "the 'whole' truth: nothing but 'images.'" Diaspora. 1.2 (Fall 1994): 14-16.


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Jaji discusses how Gilroy's The Black Atlantic, while enriching our collective understanding of trans-Atlantic Black cultural exchange, devalues the incorporation of gender into his analysis, as can be seen in chapter one of The Black Atlantic, where Gilroy says: “Black survival depends upon forging a new means to build alliances above and beyond petty issues like language, religion, skin colour, and. Whether Gilroy wishes to universalize his theory of the black Atlantic to describe all African diaspora is unclear from the text. While at times Gilroy uses language that makes his theory sound universal—something that has been critiqued by George Elliott Clarke, who claims the text is “fraught with contradiction” because of its internal essentialism—Gilroy also claims that The Black Atlantic is focused on one historical phenomenon and not the entire world (Clarke, n/a). “Must All Blackness Be American?: Locating Canada in Borden's "Tightrope Time," or Nationalizing Gilroy's The Black Atlantic.” Athabasca University. Gilroy, Paul. Gilroy's "black Atlantic" is found in Delany's vision of the alliance between English capital, black American intellect and African labor power. Gilroy also finds in Delany's writings evidence of "the inner dialectics of diaspora identification", with Delany finding out during his visit to Africa that he is as much, maybe even more, African-American than he is purely African, and as Gilroy notes: "the ancient, ancestral home would simply not do as it was". Delany's reference to Africa as the "fatherland" indicates his tying together of nationality and masculinity. Black Politics and Modernity. If we consider black movements is the past two centuries as political opposition movements, Gilroy's question is what exactly are they opposing?