

BINA TOLEDO FREIWALD

## Identity, Community, and Nation in Black Canadian Women's Autobiography

This may not be comprehensible to someone who has not lived as a peculiarity, the idea that a child must one day tell herself, "I am allowed, I was meant to be, I have the right to exist." But when you are a Black child who looks out into the world and sees hostility towards Blackness, you begin to ask why, you look for rationality behind hostility, until the day you realize racism is not your responsibility, it is the responsibility of its perpetrators. That day, you say, "I belong in the world. I belong here in Western Canada where my family has lived and worked for four generations." (Foggo 83)

It is only in belonging that we will eventually become Canadian.  
(Philip 16)

This essay engages with four autobiographies by black women born and raised in Canada: Carrie Best's *That Lonesome Road* (1977), Carol Talbot's *Growing Up Black in Canada* (1984), Cheryl Foggo's *Pourin' Down Rain* (1990), and Karen Shadd-Evelyn's *I'd Rather Live in Buxton* (1993). I read these autobiographies, which narrate lives that span the twentieth century in Canada, in the context of what Rinaldo Walcott describes, in *Black Like Who? Writing. Black. Canada* (1997), as the project of articulating "some grammars for thinking Canadian blackness" (xiii). "Blackness" here, Walcott clarifies, does not denote an innate, fixed identity, but is understood as a sign embedded in "particular histories of resistance and domination," one "never closed and always under contestation" (xiv). Similarly, George Elliott Clarke

adapts Glissant's term "Antillanité" – used to refer to the ongoing search for identity in the Caribbean – and coins the term "African-Canadianité" in order to capture both the heterogeneity and the "(in)definition," the "constant self-questioning of the grounds of identity," that characterize, for Clarke, Canadian blackness (25–6).

Mindful of this plurality of blackness in Canada, I have grouped the four Canadian-born autobiographers together in recognition of the different kinds of negotiations that have to be undertaken, for example, by immigrants from the Caribbean Islands, who form the largest group of blacks in Canada today (Kymlicka 78). Conceptually, the essay draws on two critical frameworks. One emerges from a view of autobiography as a genre profoundly implicated in the articulation and construction of subject positions (both dominant and resisting), and of autobiography studies as a site for cultural critique and social change, where one can "examine the effect of discourses on subjects, both those that seem to guarantee prevailing social relations and those that critique them" (Bergland 162). A second framework informing my readings here arises out of the work of Rinaldo Walcott, George Elliott Clarke, André Alexis, Dionne Brand, and Marlene Nourbese Philip, among others. The critical project they outline is motivated by the recognition that the "founding narratives of Canada leave little, if any, room for imagining Blackness as constitutive of Canadianness" (Walcott "Introduction" 7). As the contributors to *"We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up": Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Bristow et al 1994) note, "in Canada even the black historical presence has yet to be acknowledged" (8). Their project, however, ultimately seeks to pursue both critique (of dominant narratives of the nation) and re-construction (or reclaiming of the national space); they aim to "refashion how we understand Blackness in Canada" so as to "redesign the very house that is the nation" (Walcott "Shadd" 45). I propose to read the four autobiographies, then, in the spirit of such an on-going interrogation and reimagining of "who and what a Canadian might be" (Walcott "Shadd" 46).

### **"Canadian Blackness" or Where, Exactly, is Here?**

The project of thinking Canadian blackness immediately launches us into the problematics of collective identity in Canada, for the semiotic

excess produced by the doubling of categories already exposes, thereby denaturalizing, the very grid of identifications on which such terms rest. Etienne Balibar has articulated the logic of such a grid in his study of the anatomy of racism: “The racial/cultural identity of ‘true nationals’ remains invisible but is inferred from . . . the quasi-hallucinatory visibility of the ‘false nationals’ – Jews, ‘wops,’ immigrants, *indios*, *natives*, blacks” (quoted in Bhabha 55). To be able to counter the effects of such a “prejudicial knowledge” (Bhabha 55), one would need to turn to a different understanding of the nation, an understanding akin, for example, to Jeremy Webber’s view of Canadian national identity not as a fixed set of characteristics, but as a continuously re-created *shared conversation* and a “sense of engagement in the debates of one’s society” (312). Debating who or where ‘here’ is has, of course, been a perennial Canadian preoccupation. While we might not agree with David Staines’ assessment that “in whatever direction you happen to be going, you always meet Frye on his way back” (162), still, reading Northrop Frye for those moments that disrupt his own modernist vision might prove useful in attempting to identify some elements of the shared Canadian conversation.

Two such moments in Northrop Frye’s Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada* prove relevant to the understanding of “Canadian” that informs my reading of “Canadian blackness” in the four autobiographies. The first occurs in Frye’s 1976 Conclusion, where he argues that it took the Quiet Revolution, and French Canada’s new sense of identity, “to create a real feeling of identity in English Canada” (320). I glean a dual recognition from this observation: first, that the nation is not singular but plural, and second, that identity is not immanent but relational. Although Frye defines this plurality in a rather limited fashion, by prying open the crack first introduced by the binary, one might see through to a differently conceived landscape, such as the one described by Walcott:

If we look at the history of Canada, with its ethnic mix of English, French, Ukrainians, Italians, Jews, Germans, Poles, Portuguese and other Europeans, as well as Japanese, Caribbean, Chinese, South Asian, continental African, black Canadian and Native peoples, what we get is a complex picture of who and what the Canadian might be. All of these groups (except for the

Natives) migrated at different points in time, and have found themselves placed differently in the narratives of the nation, in ways which complicate the fiction that the modern nation-state is constituted from a 'natural' sameness.... What the European groups demonstrate, as well, is that sameness is constituted in the process of forgetfulness, coercion and various forms of privilege and subordination. (Walcott, *Black* 74–5)

As I will argue, the four autobiographies represent a direct challenge to a binary national narrative – and the interests such a narrative might serve<sup>1</sup> – by addressing the two imperatives identified by Walcott: they articulate differences that implode any fiction of (national) sameness, and they voice some of the history that fiction had willed into silence. A second recognition implied in Frye's formulation of English Canadian identity as emerging in response to French Canada's own emergent sense of identity resonates with a transactive or relational view of identity formation. Such a view holds that identity – whether individual or collective – is neither natural nor inherent, but a continuous construction arising out of relations (not always benign) to and with others: "The capacity to be addressed as a 'you' by others is a preliminary to the ultimate capacity of being able to say 'I' of oneself" (Shotter quoted in Eakin 63). I will be drawing on Althusser's and Foucault's theorizations of such a process – the hailing and self-constitution of the subject by and through discourses and social practices – to examine the racializing and racist scenes of interpellation that frame all four autobiographies and precipitate what Carrie Best describes as that long journey "down a lonesome road in search of an identity" (Dedication).

One is, of course, never wholly alone in the search for identity. "Each 'I,'" writes Norbert Elias, "is irrevocably embedded in a 'we'" (quoted in Eakin 63). This notion provides a second connection with Frye, mediated through Linda Hutcheon's reading of the famous "garrison" passage in Frye's 1965 Conclusion. "What we may provisionally call a garrison mentality," Frye writes, is developed by

1 Walcott suggests that absencing blackness from Canada's history and erasing "all evidence of any other presence (First Nations and Black) is crucial if the myth of two founding peoples is to hold the crumbling nation of Canada together in the face of Quebec's impending [sic] separation and declaration of nation status" (Walcott, *Black* 44).

small and isolated *communities* surrounded with a physical or psychological “frontier,” separated from one another and from their American and British cultural sources: *communities* that provide all that their members have in the way of distinctively human values, and that are compelled to feel a great respect for the law and order that holds them together, yet confronted with a huge, unthinking, menacing, and formidable physical setting. (225; emphasis added)

Reading the passage for a different emphasis – attempting a postmodern “‘recoding’ of Frye’s insights that could account for our current cultural scene more adequately” – Hutcheon foregrounds not the totalizing binary of garrison vs. wilderness, but what can be glimpsed between the garrison and the wilderness: a social space populated by communities (114). Considering, then, the concept of community from the perspectives of Benedict Anderson’s theory of the nation as “imagined community” and Zygmunt Bauman’s understanding of community as both desirable and vulnerable precisely because it is not grounded in fixed, essentialistic terms of identity, Hutcheon proposes that we see the Canadian national landscape as made up of “plural and shifting communities” (115). The allegiances and responsibilities of such communities are a function of, but not exclusively contained by, factors such as race, ethnicity, region, class, and gender.

Hutcheon outlines a vision continuous with recent reflections on Canadian identity in works such as Jeremy Webber’s *Reimagining Canada: Language, Culture, Community, and the Canadian Constitution* (1994), Will Kymlicka’s *Finding Our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada* (1998), and Eva Mackey’s *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (1999). Crucial to the Canadian identity conversation, according to Webber and others who see Canada in pluralistic, multiethnic, and even multinational terms, is the following recognition: while there exists

a very real Canadian community, with its own dynamic and history...[t]he Canadian community is not...the only community that means something to Canadians. We also cherish more local societies, each with its own distinctive character, its own dynamic, each having substantial autonomy from that of Canada as a whole. (Webber 313)

Webber ends *Reimagining Canada* with an exhortation: "We don't want to see those communities washed out in a single, Canada-wide political debate" (313). Autobiographical discourses, I would suggest, open up avenues for the kind of national conversation Webber calls for, although they often reveal experiences far removed from Webber's happy ideal of mutually-respecting communities, each enjoying a dynamic, autonomous and distinctive existence. The relationship between nation and self-narration, moreover, is a complex one, and one would do well to attend to the complexities of the relationship between nation and self-narration when turning to autobiography in order to explore the formation of collective and national identities.

Anthony Appiah has observed that a sense of national belonging is often central to the making of a self, while life narratives play a key role in the construction and promotion of collective identities:

It is a familiar idea that modernity allows the ordinary citizen to make a national identity central to an individual identity... It is a slightly less familiar thought that the identity of this nation is tied up with the stories of individuals... whose stories, in helping to fashion a national narrative, serve also, indirectly, to shape the individual narratives of other patriotic – nationally identified – citizens. (9)

Such a mobilization of autobiographical writing in the service of a homogenizing national project has, until recently, characterized much critical writing about autobiography in both English Canada and Quebec.<sup>2</sup> As Shirley Neuman notes in her overview of (English Canadian) autobiography criticism in Canada, the predominant mode until the late 1980s was that of "addressing autobiographies as 'Canadian'" (5). A typical example is K. P. Stich's introduction to *Reflections: Autobiography and Canadian Literature* (1988), the published proceedings of the 1987 University of Ottawa conference of that title. Autobiographies, Stich writes, "give an inner life to individual Canadians and add life to Canada's psyche or soul" (x), so that taken together, these self-narratives offer "the life script of Canadian culture" (xii). Such a critical project becomes problematic, however, when the principle of selection determining the chosen autobiographical corpus,

2 Regarding the critical literature on personal writing in Quebec, see Freiwald, 38–9.

and the national narrative these autobiographies are “made” to tell, function to elide constitutive differences within the nation.

Helen Buss’ *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women’s Autobiography* (1993) offers an instructive example. A powerful thematics of familial and national belonging underlies Buss’ selection and reading of her chosen corpus – as well as her self-reflexive and autobiographical discourse throughout the book.<sup>3</sup> This thematics constructs its collective subject – the “Our Selves” of the title – in terms that embed female subjectivity and kinship (a maternal lineage that includes literal, literary, and theoretical mothers) within a framing national narrative (Canada the homeland). The home that Buss (re)constructs in and through these autobiographical accounts inevitably results from her own interpretive strategy, as she reads selected individual lives in relation to “two ‘meridians’”: a “maternal pre-text” and a specifically inflected “sense of the place that is Canada” (103). One could thus read *Mapping Our Selves* as Buss’ own answer to Frye’s paradigmatic question. “Here,” for Buss, is the home for which women like Moodie and Jameson helped lay the foundation, but her study remains silent, for instance, on their contemporary Mary Ann Shadd. Shadd’s *Plea for Emigration; Or, Notes of Canada West* (1852), it bears recalling, was published “with the express purpose of attracting Black American immigrants to Canada” (Almonte 9) and appeared the same year as that other emigration guide destined to become a Canadian classic, Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush*. “Here,” for Buss, is a home inhabited, for the most part, by the pioneering, achieving, and literary women (to echo the book’s main sections) who make Buss feel at home, who remind her of “figures from [her] own childhood” (33), and whose accounts resonate, in some way, with her own life. A strong and consistent voice runs through *Mapping Our Selves*. It is the voice of one at ease with the first person plural, one blessed with a sense of continuity and belonging, conceiving of life as existing along an uninterrupted continuum that links one’s life to “our parents’ lives, and those of our forebears in the places they have made their homes, the places that have become our homes” (Buss 150).

3 Such thematics, however, stands in a curious relation to Buss’ own experiences of outsidership – both as a woman still faced with patriarchal traditions, and as a transplanted Newfoundlander in the West – experiences further explored in her own 1999 memoir, suggestively entitled *Memoirs from Away: A New Found Land Girlhood*.

But a home, by definition, also functions as a prototypically exclusionary space, and the “illusion of safety and coherence” it affords is purchased at a high price, as it is often based “on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself” (Martin and Mohanty 196). Buss’ closing gesture is telling in this regard. As she escorts us through the last remaining rooms of the house we have been invited to visit (no room here for Carrie Best or Carol Talbot either), there is no mistaking who its familiar residents are, who the (however welcome and respected) guests. Buss chooses to conclude her book by considering three works by writers from cities that have been home to her: two by Winnipeg-born writers – Melinda McCracken’s *Memories Are Made of This* and Helen Porter’s *Below the Bridge: Memories of the South Side of St. John’s* – chosen because they are “close to my own life”; a third work, Cheryl Foggo’s *Pourin’ Down Rain*, has been chosen because of its “different experience of the place [Calgary] I now make my home” (201). Although Buss rejoices that a young black woman’s words “can find a place in our culture” (206), Foggo’s words fail to find a place in Buss’ own book. While Buss’ discussion of the first two autobiographies engages with the texture of the lives recounted, the very brief and generalizing reference to Foggo’s narrative lacks detail and direct quotation. Yet Foggo’s defiant declaration in *Pourin’ Down Rain*, “I belong here” (83), invites us to rethink some of the answers to Frye’s suggestive question.

## Who Are You?

The four autobiographies present a broad range of collective experiences, but also a core of recurring concerns. The autobiographers come from different regions of the country: Best from Nova Scotia, Talbot and Shadd-Evelyn from southwestern Ontario, Foggo from Alberta. While Foggo writes about growing up in a small black enclave within a predominantly white urban setting, Talbot’s Windsor, Shadd-Evelyn’s Buxton, and Best’s New Glasgow offered larger and more organized black communities. All four, however, share a strong sense of the familial and collective history that ties them to Canada: Talbot descends from a freed slave who came to Canada from Maine in 1841; Foggo



(born 1956) establishes a lineage to maternal great-grandparents who came to western Canada from Oklahoma in 1912 hoping to escape racism; Best (born 1903) traces her ancestry back to a small 1787 black settlement in Tracadie in Guysboro County; and the Buxton Shadd-Evelyn (born 1958) grew up in, Elgin Settlement, was founded in 1849 by Reverend William King, who freed the fifteen former slaves he had inherited. All four autobiographers, moreover, share a common interest in exploring the complex relationships between self, community, and nation for black subjects in Canada. In that tripartite configuration, the middle term – community – functions much like Homi Bhabha’s third space, an in-between zone in which the subject’s fraught relationship with the nation can be interrogated and possibly re-visioned.

As these narratives abundantly document, the black subject’s relationship to the nation has been made problematic by the many manifestations of racism, a racism all the more difficult to combat because, as Talbot contends, “one of the main problems of racism in Canada [is] ‘The Great Denial.’ ‘There is no problem; therefore we don’t have to do anything about it’” (82). Such denial becomes even more insidious, she adds, when internalized by black subjects. All four narratives address the erasure of the history of blacks in Canada from the national imaginary; Talbot writes in exasperation: “If nothing else gets said, this should be: Blacks have been in Canada a long time – coming as refugees, explorers, pioneers, loyalists, and even slaves” (38). Best devotes the bulk of her autobiography to documenting (both textually and visually through photographs) some of that history, a task she regards as inextricable from the personal story she has set out to tell: “As I journeyed back along the road while preparing this autobiography, I found it increasingly difficult to separate Black history past and present from my story and the events related to it” (28). In this, Best’s autobiographical project resonates with a long tradition of resisting African-American autobiography in which “testimony – the construction of a ‘we’” – has played a central role (Mostern 50).

With racism, Talbot further argues, comes the deadly assault on the “integrity of [a person’s]...self-identity” (16). This assault on one’s sense of self and of self-worth precipitates, to a large extent, the autobiographers’ journeys in search of identity. Indeed, the four autobiographers share a common perception of the Canadian social landscape within which their journeys have unfolded. This landscape,

Shadd-Evelyn learns as a child, resembles “a white sky where black stars would have to shine doubly bright just to be seen” (57). “In one way the term ‘visible minority,’” Talbot concludes, “is a misnomer” (16), and so the four autobiographies are also resistance narratives, seeking to rescue personal and collective histories from invisibility, striving to give voice – and here Talbot underscores the irony – to an all-too-Canadian search for individual and collective identity. The autobiographical genre suits these purposes well, for creating a sense of identity through collective belonging may indeed be one of the primary motivations for, and functions of, the autobiographical act. The real question for the autobiographical self, Janet Varner Gunn has suggested, is “Where do I belong? not, who am I? The question of the self’s identity becomes a question of the self’s location in the world” (23). Posing Frye’s question differently, then, we may ask, What does “here” look like from atop the Liberty Bell in Buxton, the bell that was offered as a gift to the town in 1850 by the “coloured inhabitants of Pittsburgh” in the hope that “when the bell calls you...[you will] remember your brethren who are in bonds” (Shadd-Evelyn 61); or from the halls of Mercer Street Public School, in what Talbot remembers used to be called “the ‘black belt’ of the city of Windsor” (15); or as seen from the steps of Halifax’s Cornwallis Street Baptist, “the ‘Mother Church’ of the African Baptist Association” (Hamilton 35); or from the corner of 70th Street in Calgary, the street, Foggo recalls, whose five black families comprised “the closest thing to a black community that one could find in Calgary in 1961” (4).

These autobiographies remind us that in the beginning, for the subject, there is “always-already” the interpellating gaze of the other.<sup>4</sup> Foggo’s autobiography literally opens with such a gaze. “Upon occasion when I was growing up,” she begins, “we went to eat in Chinatown.... We were stared at, of course. In 1965 it was rare to see a large group of mostly black people in Calgary” (1). Tellingly, the openings of all four autobiographies take us back to the same primal scene: in the beginning,

4 The “always-already” phrasing flows from the theoretical understanding of the subject that informs the essay, referring to Louis Althusser’s specific formulation. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser writes that “ideology is eternal, I must now suppress the temporal [causal] form in which I have presented the functioning of ideology, and say: ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects” (164).

for the black subject in Canada, the many manifestations of racism – its history and continuing reality – emerge. Talbot prefaces her autobiographical narrative proper with a one-page excerpt from an 1862 report by a sub-committee of the School Trustees, City of London, arguing for school segregation on the grounds that – and these are not the most offensive lines – “the negro differs so essentially from the Caucasian race in organic structure, in the effects of climate influences, or both, that any close or intimate relations with them are not desirable.” Shadd-Evelyn’s dedication to *I’d Rather Live in Buxton* is graphically laid out like an inscription on a grave:

to the memory of Robby Shane Robinson  
in the hope that an improved understanding  
of the common denominators of humanity,  
and an appreciation for its differences,  
might somehow abate the existence of the racism  
that took him from us,  
and the injustice that pardoned it.

Following this dedication, the first chapter of *I’d Rather Live in Buxton* begins where Buxton began, with slavery – the defining trauma that continues to mark the history of the present, the crisis that all four autobiographers return to, and what Best describes as “the shadow that followed me during my journey” (28).

Talbot begins her autobiography by revisiting her younger self and recalling an originary scene of racial interpellation that repeats itself in all four texts. This scene recalls Zora Neale Hurston’s paradigmatic account of how she “became colored” when, at 13, she left the exclusively black community of Eatonville to attend school in Jacksonville. “I left Eatonville...as Zora,” Hurston writes; “when I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. I was now a little colored girl” (1499). In the first chapter of Talbot’s autobiography, entitled “School Days...School Days,” she similarly identifies the school as the site of that first major assault on “the psyche of the black child growing up in Canada” (14). She doesn’t know “exactly when or how I became conscious of the fact that we were ‘colored’” (14), but she does remember the triggers: the day the only other black child in the class misbehaved she thought, “He should know better than to ‘shame us’ by behaving like that”; she remembers

“the ‘Little Black Sambo’ book” she liked so much but was careful not to indulge in “because I didn’t want anyone to identify me with that thick-lipped, big-eyed, nappy-headed ‘jungle’ boy” (14). And, most painfully, she remembers the name-calling:

“They” taught us the meaning of humiliation very young. “Their” children could gain immediate superiority over us merely by uttering that hated epithet, “nigger.” My poor little ego would shrivel into a tiny knot of insignificance even when the taunt was not directed at me... [and] My ego doesn’t do much better today. (14)

The hateful name calling and other manifestations of racism, Talbot concludes, have such a devastating effect on a child’s sense of self because words, no less than sticks and stones, can break your bones, and because they “symbolize the insidiously intangible whole assault that the visible minority child had (and still has) to contend with in his education in Canada” (16). Foggo concurs in this assessment of the power of racist interpellations, likening their effect to the slave-master’s branding: “Even a fiercely proud mother’s constant reassurances cannot protect her Black child from learning, sooner or later, that skin is a badge you will always wear, a form of identification for those in the world who wish to brand you” (5).

### Returning the Gaze

While hegemonic interpellations are a powerful and primary force in the process of identity formation, their grip on the subject is far from absolute, as the dedication page of Carrie Best’s autobiography playfully suggests. Best dedicates *That Lonesome Road* to her mother, who guided her first “uncertain steps down a lonesome road in search of an identity,” and pens this dedicatory poem:

Society Said  
 You are an inferior being,  
 born to be a hewer of wood  
 and a drawer of water  
 because you are Black.

## My Mother Said

You are a person, separate  
 and apart from all other  
 persons on earth. The pathway  
 to your destiny is hidden,...  
 You alone must find it.  
 ...And then she said...  
 Take the first turn right,  
 and go straight ahead... ( iii; ellipses in original)

As all four autobiographies demonstrate, the potential for resisting “what society says” already lies in the very logic and structure of interpellation itself. Best can counter the racist hailing because there are other sources of interpellation and other collective identifications available to her. A short narrative embedded in Best’s autobiography exemplifies this approach. Best recalls a story her mother often used to tell of an incident that happened when Best was about four years old: she was sitting on the front steps of her home and a local lawyer, later to become Mr. Justice Henry Graham of the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, “passed by on his way to the office and winked at me.” Knowing him by name since her mother worked for him, Best “rushed upstairs and declared Da’ Hennie Game look at me and winked he eye – but I never toined; *I let he know I no two-cent dude.*” Best explains: “Two-cent dude was the term applied to people of low esteem.... Apparently I had interpreted his greeting to mean that he felt that I belonged in that class” (41). Confirming her daughter’s understanding of the degrading meaning of that interpellating wink, and affirming her refusal to be so hailed, Best’s mother’s retelling of the story serves as an early education in solidarity and the possibility of resistance. Such an education will serve Best well: it helps her recognize the pattern connecting that incident with her first “physical contact [at the age of eleven] with the senseless discrimination of the area,” making her realize that “the slave-master relationship of a century gone still existed in the minds of some Pictonians” (41). And the story acquires a fitting closure when it turns out that the same Henry Graham was among the Supreme Court judges who upheld a lower court conviction, in 1946, of Viola Desmond, accused of “refusing to sit upstairs in the segregated section reserved for Blacks” in the local theatre (41). By this point,

Best's community of resistance has grown from the initial familial unit, to the larger constituency that would include the "concerned Black citizens in Halifax who were present" at Desmond's appeal (41), to the wider readership of Best's own published newspaper, *The Clarion*. Indeed, the various black organizations and community efforts with which Best has been involved throughout a long life play as central a part in her narrative as in her life – a fact recognized by many honors and awards, including her appointment as a Member of the Order of Canada in 1974 and an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1979.

### **Belonging – How?**

"To be black and 'at home' in Canada is both to belong and not belong," Walcott observes, and he expresses a wish that a "grammar for black will cement blackness to the nation and reconfigure the nation for the better" (1997: 136, 149). The four autobiographies articulate such longings to belong, while charting their authors' attempts to conjugate self, community, and nation. To make Canada her home, Best sets out to tell a part left out of the nation's narrative, namely the history of some of its black citizens, their past and present struggles to gain full membership in the national community, and the crucial role that black organizations have played in these struggles. Shadd-Evelyn wrote *I'd Rather Live in Buxton* "to define the character of the community" and "convey the spirit of the place, that quality that draws its people to return, and compels them to think of it, fondly and always, as home" (11). Like Best, then, Shadd-Evelyn anchors her personal story in that of the community, and her narrative, too, deals with the black subject's search for a collective home. And like the other autobiographies, hers also narrates a story of a black subject under assault. The language of Shadd-Evelyn's introductory paragraphs bespeaks this sense of a besieged existence, and the need to turn to community for survival and comfort; Buxton has functioned "as a haven for its community," as a "society within a society," offering much needed support (9). Recognizing the community's gradual diminishment over the years, she reflects on a past time when those "inexorable bonds of kinship... were like anchors in a strong wind: we bound ourselves with, and to them" (9). Three chapters, placed towards

the beginning, middle, and end of the autobiography, constitute a paradigmatic narrative of the search for belonging as seen from the vantage point of the present. Entitled "Snapshots of the Universe," the first of these chapters introduces the crisis of racialized interpellation against the backdrop of a blissful period of childhood innocence inside the sheltering black community of Buxton; Shadd-Evelyn writes: "[t]hat vast country out there surrounding us, where I would be different, did not exist for me. Until I was nine" (47). But that vast country will, inevitably and violently, intrude: when her white best friend Vicky gets frustrated, she uses the ultimate weapon: "Hauling me close to her menacing scowl by the front of my sweater, she growled loud enough for my ears only, 'Haven't you had enough, nigger?'" (56). Shadd-Evelyn's response echoes Talbot's, as the power of these words crushes her: "She truly had had the last word. . . . I burst into hysterical tears. . . . I was never again to underestimate the power in that one word" (56-7). Entitled "The Universe Revisited," the second chapter in this paradigmatic narrative revisits the scene of the black child's shaming; in this instance, armed with her father's encouragements, she fights back "the bigotry of the white kids" who taunt her "with the word 'nigger,'" but is again reduced to inconsolable crying, not so much by the teacher's equally bigoted response, but "because I couldn't hit her too" (81-2). Aptly titled "Eulogy for the Universe," the concluding chapter in this narrative *en abyme* is also the autobiography's last chapter. Coming back to Buxton to show her son the place and way of life that had shaped her, Shadd-Evelyn has to acknowledge their passing, and mourns their loss: the loss "of a way of life. . . a bonding of community that, once gone, may not be replaced" (148). But that bonding, she also realizes, had partly been a response to a hostile environment; in a more hospitable social order, such bonding and the protection it offers might not be so urgently sought. In the autobiography's concluding lines, the sentiments of loss and mourning thus give way to new and sobering thoughts: one would hope that "[t]he circumstances which combined to create this atmosphere [of community bonding] . . . will, God willing, never be duplicated" (148). And so the autobiography ends with photographs of the open road, the caption "The End," and underneath "(A New Beginning)." Shadd-Evelyn's closing words express the hope that the history of Buxton will not be forgotten – so that future generations will know "why they are

strong" (148). But they also kindle the hope that such history (which gave rise to what was exceptional about the community) will not repeat itself, the hope that "[o]ur children may no longer need Buxton's refuge, no longer want its solace from the world" (148).

Talbot, too, turns to community in response to the assaults of racism. Tellingly, when she writes, "'They' taught us the meaning of humiliation very young" (16), she surrounds "they" but not "us" with quotation marks. "They" thus points not so much to a human collectivity as to an instrument of racism; "us," on the other hand, is the signifier of a viable community, a community that will give the young child a sense of self-worth and belonging. In the second chapter of the autobiography, entitled "A Little Folk Geography," Talbot reproduces what she calls a memory map of her community in Windsor, a map of "home" and its extensions – the black community of her childhood where, she writes, "our most meaningful life transpired" (19). Not surprisingly, the school lies outside this territory.

The exercise of producing the memory map and exploring its ramifications helps Talbot locate *her* Canada: starting with the "family tribe within the greater community," it extends "to include all of our original settlements" in Ontario and Nova Scotia, as well as later ones in the bigger cities (20). These, Talbot writes, are "my Canada – some places where I could go and not be the 'only one.' These are the places steeped in the history of our people in this country. These are where we first set down roots in this country" (20).

But feeling rooted, Talbot suggests, has been made difficult by a hostile environment: "The dignity achieved in our small community," she observes, "could not erase the scars of humiliation imposed on the battlegrounds of the larger Canadian society" (80). This experience of exclusion from the larger Canadian society motivates Talbot to seek belonging in a collectivity greater than the national. The political and affective needs that lead her to embrace a transnational-diasporic community are articulated in a poem entitled "Afrocentricity," with which Talbot concludes the "Little Folk Geography" chapter. "Daddy, Daddy," the speaker says, "Once you asked/ Why Afric/ For our Mask?" She then replies: "Why a homeland/ Why a tryst/ Why a beginning/ And an end" (22).<sup>5</sup> In the autobiography's concluding

5 Shadd-Evelyn, too, reflects on the viability of an Afrocentric model of identity for herself



chapter, entitled “Diaspora,” Talbot reaffirms both Canadianness and blackness – a Canadian blackness – by presenting her search for origins, which she finds “in the pages of African history” (95), as the prototypical Canadian search. “Canadians,” Talbot remarks, “have a long-term identity crisis.... Nobody seems to know who they are. Some are not even sure of who they were. Others are not too sure of who they want to be” (93).

I would like to conclude by examining the trajectory traced in Foggo’s narrative. As a child, Foggo’s barely conscious resistance to the interpellating stares is enabled by the positive terms her community makes available to her: “I believed that the staring was something we had earned, an acknowledgment of our status as important and beautiful people” (1). But the staring will continue. Remembering a family trip to Winnipeg, Foggo writes: “We...delighted in stopping for meals in towns like Medicine Hat and Swift Current, although the open-mouthed and unabashed stares that we received would be enough to put me off my dinner now” (15). As a young girl, her mother’s reassurances – “Don’t pay them any attention, They’re ignorant” (16) – create a safe haven for Foggo, but adolescence brings a heightened awareness and a more drastic response. When Brian, the white boy she dates, becomes increasingly “disturbed by the stares we encountered on the street” (52) and breaks up with her, she comes to a new understanding:

I was not Black enough, I concluded. Too many years in a White world had caused me to forget, once too often, that I was Black and that my blackness was the first thing seen and reacted to by every white person that I met and that many, many people would never see beyond my skin. Whether I liked it or not, the world was Black and White and I had been attempting to live in the middle. (53)

This moment signals a turn away from nation and towards community: “I no longer believed that Canada was a refuge from racism and resented being raised in isolation from other Blacks” (53).

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and her community, but finds it problematic. On reading a poem that her son, Scotty, had written for Heritage Day, she recognizes that “Scotty was searching for his homeland. Sensing, perhaps for the first time, that though his ancestors had been here for generations, in the eyes of the majority he was not Canadian; yet knowing that he would be no more at home in Africa” (114).

However, by the concluding lines of her epilogue, Foggo can confidently affirm: "For all the good, and the bad, I was what I was – Black, Canadian, one of my family – and so I shall always be" (117). Significantly, this (plural) sense of belonging has been enabled by the destabilization of the identity grid itself. For if Foggo's narrative both opens and closes with "black" as the collective identity designation, it also signals the "malleability and open-endedness" that Walcott associates with a blackness that exceeds "the categories of the biological and the ethnic" (1997: xiv–xv). Tellingly, Foggo's epilogue is followed by a short untitled supplement in which she discloses a crucial piece of information: her marriage to Clem Martini, a white man and childhood friend mentioned briefly in the book. She has withheld this information because it unsettles a critical aspect of the life-narrative we have just read, as it disturbed the life lived; "Yes," Foggo confides – one suspects only half in jest – "I have suffered bitterly at the hands of my relatives. It's not that they don't love Clem. It is that they all remember my familiar and ringing claim, 'I will stare out the window and cry every night for the rest of my life before I'll marry a White man'" (118). But as the family tree on the last page reminds us, race has been anything but a stable signifier in this family history full of "mistaken" or "hidden" racial identities, leading Foggo to conclude: "The curious factor I have discovered about race [is that] sometimes a person will choose their race, rather than being born into it, and occasionally society, or fate, if you like will decide a person's race" (102).

Such an awareness of the malleability of identity categories has indeed permeated Foggo's narrative from the beginning. Consider this opening paragraph in which both "family" and "Black" shift meanings, as Foggo tells who the "we" who went on those occasional outings to Chinatown consisted of:

All of my family – my mother, father, sister and brothers; all of our aunts and uncles and cousins and a few people who I thought were my aunts, uncles and cousins and a few people who were not Black at all, but were so much a part of my world that I thought they were Black in a different way – all of us went to Chinatown. (10)

The concluding paragraph of this introductory chapter opens up the circle of "us" even wider, to include now both those who stared and

those stared at, both the interpellators and the interpellated. Her book, Foggo writes, is “for all of them,” and it is, of course, for all of us, so that, she adds, “you will know” (1). Only then – when narratives like hers have become part of the known national story – would she be able to fully affirm “I belong here” (83).

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