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THE SPATIO-TEMPORAL DIMENSION OF DIASPORIC
DISCOURSE FROM THE CARREBIAN ON THE
CANADIAN LITERARY SCENE

By way of preamble to this article, I would like to emphasize the fact that the following is going to be case studies of selected works by two authors: *Austin C. Clarke* and *Dionne Brand*, who can trace back their roots to the Carribean in their idiosyncratic ways. The close reading of the texts will basically rely on the concepts put forward by Yi-Fu Tuan *Space and Place* (1977) and *The Production of Space* (1974) by Henri Lefebvre. I do not intend to problematize the notions of space and place in this paper but theoretical clarifications are in order. I shall apply the notion verbalized by Yi-Fy Tuan according to whom: “‘Space’ is more abstract than ‘place’. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (6). Henri Lefebvre notes, “We are thus confronted by an indefinite multitude of spaces, each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature’s (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on” (6) Let me also add the space of religion and that of language as well. Spatial references of different sorts will be pointed out in the texts.

Since the authors under discussion are not necessarily known some words about their backgrounds are going to be made. Cyril Dabydeen, himself a poet from the Caribbeans, writes of Clarke, “[t]he Carribean literary groundwork has been laid in the seminal work of the Barbadian-born novelist: Austin Clarke; his place in Canadian

literature is well-established” (10) Austin C. Clarke has become “[C]anada’s first major black writer” (Algoo–Baksh 1994). His whole life continues to move back and forth between his Caribbean heritage and his Canadian affiliations. Duality has been at the core of his existence and doubleness continues to characterize his literary output, too. His contribution both to Canadian and Caribbean literatures is of real significance. Not only does he belong to these two bodies of literatures but he also belongs to these two countries in his different missions. He immigrated to Canada in 1955, when a huge flux of immigration started from the Caribbeans, but became a Canadian citizen only in 1981. He ran for election as a candidate for the Progressive Conservative Party in the Ontario government in 1977. He was an adviser to a Barbadian prime minister, was cultural attache to the Barbadian Embassy in Washington, and was on the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada as well. He says in an interview with Linda Hutcheon:

That is not to say that, now that I am a Canadian citizen, I am not Barbadian, because I am Barbadian by nature—the best of me is Barbadian; the best of my memories are Barbadian. But when I look at my presence in this country, the problems of duality arise each time there is a threat to my stability, each time there is a slur on a whole group of persons with whom I could easily identify, each time there is a slur on a larger group of persons with whom I politically have to identify. (69)

He has written several novels and a large number of short stories. In order to be able to find an explanation for his dual alliances, I have chosen to discuss his memoir *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack* (1980), which provides the reader with the colonial roots of Clarke’s development as a writer and as an individual. It is a narrative of transformation. Algoo–Baksh (166) considers the novel together with *The Prime Minister* (1978) and *Proud Empires* (1988) to form a trilogy in which “the works encompass the experience of essentially one protagonist who is the product of a colonial heritage” (166).

Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack is at one level about Clarke’s formative years in his childhood and adolescence, and on another level it describes the colonial society of Barbados in the 1930s and in the 1940s together with its relation to the outside world. It is the adult Clarke, who looks back on these years in his life in the process of

revealing essential dichotomies he was brought up amongst and which have deeply penetrated his psyche.

The novel's basic theme is education. The very school and the church have become the *places* to describe the colonial *space*. I shall elaborate on these *places*, the way they form a *space*. It is only through "proper" education that one could move up in the caste-ridden society of Barbados, based on class and race. Clarke happily complied with his mother's wish; "Go 'long, boy and *learn!* Learning going make you into a man." (5) His mother did not want him to miss out on what she could never have hence her wholehearted support. In the discursive narrative, built on association rather than chronology, we move in and out of different educational institutions primarily schools and the church. The British school-system that was imported to Barbados and the Anglican Church have had long-lasting effects on Clarke. After primary school where flogging was in the centre of teaching, Clarke happily immersed himself in Western culture avidly reading Keats, Byron, Shelley, Dickens, the classics, studying Latin, French and becoming familiar with British history. Years later he clearly saw the one-sidedness of the knowledge acquired in Barbados.

I knew all about the Kings; the Tudors, Stuarts and Plantagenets; and the Wars of the Roses; but nothing was taught about Barbados. We lived in Barbados, but we studied English society and manners. (72)

Clarke's devotion to the literary history of Britain became stronger and stronger. He lived through the important events in the history of the Empire.

I was not a "History Fool": I just loved and cherished my past in the *History of England* book. I did not use it as a stepping stone to the Civil Service or the Department of Sanitary Inspection. I decided instead to live it, to make it a part of me. (73)

The boys' brains were filtered with the idea that everything English-made was superior. To acquire knowledge was important because it led the way to possess wealth coming from outside into the country: "We were the English of Little England. Little black Englishmen." (52) So, they tried to imitate English accents, but ironically enough:

We could not know, because the vast Atlantic which separated us from England, that the speech we were imitating was really working-class London fish-sellers' speech. We, the black aristocracy of an unfree society, exchanged our native speech for English working-class patois. (52-53)

Knowledge of the Western world was available only for the privileged who could afford it; many with the support of relatives from America. The educated boy's image conjured up the word "fool".

Any black boy who achieved brilliance at book learning, who got a job that no one remembered ever being held by a black boy, such a boy was said to be "bright-bright-bright". He was either a "Latin Fool," or a "mathematics fool," or a "Science fool." He was also said to be slightly mad. "Off his head." (69)

As Brown points out the word "fool": [in] the Creole usage ... implies an awesome expertise. [...] it also voices the colonial's deference to the colonizer's culture" (15). The application of the ambiguous meaning of the word serves also as an example for the binary cultural oppositions embedded in Clarke's early experiences.

Clarke was not only a "history fool" but a "dreaming fool" (137), too, and Milton has always been dear to him, which accidentally happens to be the name of his best friend in the novel, too. Clarke is thoroughly familiar with Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, thus Brown sees a connection in Clarke's wish to explode the two myths; one associated with the Caribbeans as Paradise and the other with the New World as El Dorado. (191) He clearly demonstrates the falseness of these beliefs. Brown argues:

Nothing has more forcefully emphasized the fallacy of a Caribbean Paradise than the islander's stubborn quest for their economic and social El Dorado: in the Panama Canal Zone at the turn of the century; Great Britain after the Second World War; the United States over the last forty years; and Canada since the fifties. (2)

And the image of a possible El Dorado in the New World often vanishes when immigrants face the harsh reality of the society where they have hoped to fulfil their dreams and instead find themselves culturally, socially, politically suppressed.

Clarke's early education unhidden in the novel originated not only in the St. Matthias school and the Combermere Secondary School. Closely

related is the instruction provided by the Anglican Church. They intensely studied the Scriptures, prayed from the Book of Common Prayers, and he sang enthusiastically in the church choir, too. The local church always “too loud” (84) was for other people.

In the same way that schools and people and fools were categorized, so too was the Church of the Nazarene. It was slotted at the lower end of the religious ladder. Only poor people, people who had suffered, who had the hardest of lives, who were black in a population of black people, only these worshipped at the Church of the Nazarene. (110)

Yet Clarke acknowledges, “But it was a part of the village; and if I could have thought about it in those days of no serious social thought and awareness, it was a part of ourselves.” (110) And in-between there was the AME church for middle-class people. The society of Barbados was very fragmented in all areas of life. The *genius loci*, that is the distinctive atmosphere and the particular character of this place is manifest in different ways that create a unique space with its linguistic and religious characteristics as well.

Religious holidays like Christmas were celebrated in a special way. It was a time for feasting, getting the artificial snow and for women to gather and tell anecdotes. The oral tradition of handing down stories and communicating in general was very strong:

“We never wrote a local letter: we would walk with that meage, or give it verbally to a friend, to give to a friend, to give to the person. I never could understand why.” (37)

The novel depicts the way the local culture lives side by side with the imported culture of the colonizers in a cross-cultural space. The dominating culture of the colonizers controlled over everything in every possible way. Being able to get rid of the school uniform during the summer symbolizes a kind of freedom that could not be experienced otherwise. Algoo-Baksh notes, “[t]he book is a source of insight into the absurdities and contradictions of a colonial legacy that was responsible for making cultural schizoids of Clarke and his fellow colonized” (147). Being an illegitimate child in a matriarchal society was not something to be ashamed of but the dominant culture stigmatized it. Having no legal father, Clarke had to live through embarrassing episodes at school. At the same time, it is with warmth that Clarke talks about his mother and stepfather. The autobiographical impulses are very strong in the novel.

The attractive interpersonal space helps him to cope. He appreciates his mother's and stepfather's endeavours to move up the social ladder. They move up in the physical sense of the word, too: "We moving up the hill, Flagstaff Hill" (54). The road was named after the flag staff on which the Union Jack was raised each morning. (65) The fractured society inhabited easily distinguishable locations in the dwelling: Belleville packed with the rich and Carrington Village with the extremely poor.

Growing up has happened in an idiosyncratic way for Clarke. It is only with mixed feelings that he remembers his sexual initiation into manhood, but his mental growth provided him with pleasure and it saw no limits:

Every other boy at Combermere wanted to be a barrister-at-law. It seemed as if it was the only profession open to us. And it meant going *up* to England. Nothing could be better than seeing the Mother Country with your own eyes. (172)

Thus Brown rightly observes:

[...] *Growing Up Stupid* is as much about emigration as it is about Barbados *per se*. Poverty and colonialism are forms of social dispossession, amounting to a kind of local exile. Emigration, real or imaginary, is a logical extension of that sense of exile. (13)

In the novel it is England that seems to be the best country to go to. America is depicted both with admiration and despire. Canada in the 1940s loomed only at a very large distance and as something unknown: "Canada was not talked about ... It was a blur on our consciousness." (31) There was a strong disire to move from one cultural zone/space to another.

The numerous episodes unfold in a blend of different languages in the course of the novel. Standard English and the language of native Barbadians nicely mix. By the end of the novel we almost hear the local dialect:

Day in and day out I working my fingers to the bone in that blasted Marine, and I can't see myself getting nowhere or it. It's slavery. Tomorrow is Monday, however, and the tourisses leffing. They going back up to Englund and Amurca. (36)

The multicoloured nature of the text is enhanced by the insertion of songs, hymns, proverbs, letters and tales.

Brown notes that in Clarke's works the satiric contempt for corruption combines with "an insistence on the creative possibilities of life itself" (186). At the end of the novel, before entering Harrison College Clarke remembers: "I knew then that the time had come for me to dream of a new beginning." (192) Growing up "stupid" under the Union Jack did not prevent Clarke from going on and finding new possibilities for developing himself. Gaston Bachelard's comment holds true for Clarke, "Spaces remain in our memories and become creative" (10).

There is a generational distance but not a literary discontinuity between Austin Clarke and Dionne Brand. Belonging to the African diaspora Brand was born in Trinidad, and left for Toronto in 1970, where she studied English and philosophy. She has become known as a poet, fiction writer, university lecturer, oral historian, filmmaker, and also as social activist supporting black and feminist/lesbian communities. It is in the authentic black experience that most interest lies in Brand's works. In an interview with Linda Hutcheon she says, "Basically, I really didn't think of myself as an immigrant *per se*. ... I knew that the problems that I would have would not stem from my being an immigrant, but would stem from being black." (272)

It is not only Clarke that Brand has often been compared to but also Neil Bissoondath but for different reasons. Bissoondath's endeavours are realized in universalizing human experience. In contrast Brand claims to Hutcheon, "I am wary of appeals to universality. ... I write about what is specific" (272-3). When she talks about her place on the Canadian literary scene and the dialectics of her identity she says in the interview mentioned above:

Yes. I've heard other writers talk about being on the margins of Canadian writing. *I find myself in the middle of black writing*. I'm in the centre of black writing, and those are the sensibilities that I check to figure out something that's truthful. I write out of a literature, a genre, a tradition, and that tradition is the tradition of *black writing*. And whether that writing comes from the United States as African American writing or African Caribbean writing or African writing from the continent, it's in that tradition that I work. I grew up under a colonial system of education, where I read English literature, and I liked it because I love words. But within that writing, there was never *my* presence. I was *absent* from that writing. (273) (emphasis added)

I have chosen an intriguing collection of short stories *Sans Souci* (1988) to concentrate on out of her many works. What connects the ten stories in this volume is the portrayal of the genuine black immigrant experience which is the recurring theme textured in excitingly varied subject matters. This particular experience is not individualized, however, but can be rather interpreted as a collective experience. The stories nicely pieced together create an overtly politicised space, which is to some extent even provocative. The feminist view is prioritized, the gender and racial identity of the main protagonist is embedded in multiple voices. Black perspective dominates; in an intertextual remark in a story called "At the Lisbon Plate", Brand criticizes Camus for his own white approach, "[h]ow come all this high shit about Camus. Didn't it ever strike you that Meursault was a European and the Arab on the beach was an Arab? And the Arab was an Arab, but this European was Mersault." (111–12) Cross-national interpretations of specific social phenomena makes the reader acutely aware of Brand's disbelief in bridging the gap between white and black systems of world-views. In her opinion to eliminate these inherent differences would be a challenge but possible with an outcome that would satisfy neither side.

The short stories can be read separately from each other; some of them appeared as individual pieces in different literary journals, but most of them are connected to each other on different levels, and thus they form a special literary space.

The first story "Sans Souci" sets the tone for the whole volume. Claudine is estranged from her brutal husband and later from her children, too. The cruel female subjugation is described in a subtle poetic style, which evokes Brand's poetry: "Always in and out of seeing him, or wondering who he was and disbelieving when she knew." (5) In this small community generations live together and the male and female worlds are ostensibly distinct. The concise characterization of Mama, the bar owner, and Uncle Ranni add to the fact that *Sans Souci* gains real life on the pages.

In "Train to Montreal" the main protagonist goes from Toronto to Montreal to meet one of her lovers. Being black surrounded by white people fills her with fear; she is shaken all through the journey: "She was surprised, really shocked at *all white faces* on the train. Ridiculous of course. It was amazing, given all this time, how alarmed she *still* was

at the sight of *white* faces.” (18–9) (emphasis added) The train ride becomes a racial and cultural space, where racial differences are not suppressed. She tries to create a dialogue with a hippie-like young man who seems not to be interested in politics at all.

“And besides who supported us in Africa? The United States never gave us any weapons. It’s them that we’re fighting.”

And he, “I abhor violence of any kind. I don’t care which side you’re on.” (20–1)

She is frustrated for disclosing her views without being understood by a fellow-traveller: “She reprimanded herself for talking to him. She felt she had been duped into revealing her opinions. It would have been best to keep quiet instead of giving this white boy so much effort.” (23)

During the journey her sense of fear deepens; her emotional space is becoming darker and darker. She hears children singing ironically about Montreal’s two largest ethnic groups the French and the Italian: “Wops and frogs, Montreal is full of frogs.” (24) Wop means “without official papers”, describing the Italian community, and “frog” refers to French-Canadians. She thinks: “She should stand up before they did, before they started singing about ‘Wops and niggers’”. (24) She is frightened with good enough reason. When she gets off the train she is shouted at:

She would be safe among other passengers. Finally, she met the escalator, then “Nigger whore!” a rough voice behind yelled hoarsely. She kept walking, slightly stumbling onto the clicking stairs. “Whore! Nigger! Whore!” (27)

The racial hegemony is voiced in a very distressing way. Her sense of belonging is utterly deranged.

The main character in “Blossom” has a telling name. Having been humiliated by serving white people, she decides to change her life and “bloom”: “She look at she face in the mirror and figure that she look like an old woman too. Ten years she here now, and nothing shaking, just getting older and older, watching *white* people live.” (37) (emphasis added) To achieve this end she returns to her own past. Brand explains the need for rootedness to Hutcheon:

Yes, each time I write, I find that I’ve got to go back. I have to go back five hundred years to come again. Blossom had to go back to come back again to make everything beautiful, to understand anything about the world that she was living in. She had to dig into

that past of hers which she retained; she becomes an Obeah woman because that was one of the things that black people in the Americas managed to retain, some sense of the past that is not a past controlled by those things that seem to control her now. (273)

Blossom turns to, and builds up a mystical relationship with Oya, the black goddess and becomes a priestess to her. She talks in “old African tongues” (42).

Each night Blossom grow more into Oya. Blossom singing, singing for Oya to come,

“Oya arriwo Oya, Oya arriwo Oya, Oya, kauako arriwo, Arripiti O Oya.”

Each night Blossom learn a new piece of Oya and finally, it come to she. She had the power to see and the power to fight; she had the power to feel pain and the power to heal. For life was nothing as it could be taken away any minute; waht was earthly was fleeting; what could be done was joy and it have no beauty in suffering.

“Oya O Ologbo O de, Ma yak baMa Who! leh, Oya O de, Ma yak ba Ma Who! leh, Oya Oh deO Ologo arrivo, Oya Oh de cumale.” (40–1)

This particular story demonstrates that Brand lives and writes in a multi-vocal space, a special continuum, where languages commingle. Standard English is juxtaposed to vernacular Carribean English. Heteroglossia becomes one of the means of representing the intricate nature of how cultures exist in contact with one another and thus an inter-cultural space is produced. To maintain one’s linguistic heritage is of crucial importance for Brand in accordance with which she endows her characters with idiosyncratic speech manners. The multifaceted nature of cultural representation happens in a peculiar linguistic space.

The short stories “St. Mary’s Estate” and “Photograph” echo each other. These are reminiscences of a past childhood in which the specificities of colonial spaciality and colonial subordination are depicted. The construction of the following quotation built on parallels gives emphasis to the clear-cut segregation between whites and blacks:

This is where I was born. This is the white people’s house. This is the overseer’s shack. Those are the estate workers’ barracks. This is where I was born. That is the white people’s house this is the overseers’ shack those are the slave barracks. That is the slave owner’s house this is the overseer’s shack those are the slave barracks. (49)

In “Photograph” the most loveable and strong grandmother brings up her children while their mother is in England trying to gain money. By the time she goes home she has become a stranger not to her children’s surprise, though.

To tell the truth, we were expecting a white woman to come through the door, the way my grandmother had described my mother and the way the whole street that we lived on treated the news of my mother’s return, as if we were about to ascend in their respect. (69)

Having spent so much time away, the mother has acquired a “split-place” personality. As Yi Fu Tuan says, “Hometown is an intimate place” (144). What is her hometown? Cultural streams flow in different directions between the grandmother, mother, and the children. The unnamed mother figure, who has spent some time abroad trying to support her children back at home also appears in “NoRInsed Blue Sky, No Red Flowe Fences”. The split between “self and other” is a painful experience in her everyday life.

She was always uncomfortable under the passing gazes, muttering to herself that she knew, they didn’t have to tell her that she was out of place here. But there was no other place to be right on. The little money fed her sometimes, fed her children back home, no matter the stark scene which she created on the corners of the street. She, black, silent and unsmiling; the child, white, tugging and laughing, or whining. (87)

Her sense of belonging elsewhere, both to a different place and space, is unambiguously articulated here.

The narrator in “I Used To Like the Dallas Cowboys” is back on an unnamed island to join the revolution there. The story shows that racism is present in every area of life. The sports-fan narrator “used to like the Dallas Cowboys” in Canada because they had black players. Her view changes, “Four days ago the island was invaded by America. ... [w]hen they’re not playing, the Cowboys can be deadly. For the political climate on the island, as Monika Kaup observes, “Brand blames contemporary American hegemony and, by implication, ongoing imperialism.”

Ayo in “Sketches in Transit ... Going Home” flies home to join the revolution in Grenada, where Brand actually worked during the invasion. The plane is full of expatriots who go back to Trinidad for a short while because of the carnival that is held there. Ayo is

disappointed by this crowd. They become louder and louder drinking full of excitement to go home yet denying it.

“I can’t eat my bread white any more”

“I would miss the winter if I ever go back.”

“Life is much better here, yes.”

“Alberta better, it don’t have a set of black people. That is why I like it there.”

It was a sign of prosperity to lose the taste for home-made bread and to feel like fainting in the heat.

They overtake the plane, “Canadian anonymity was giving way to Trinidadian familiarity.” (141) Their double-mindedness creates a destructive mentality and also a precarious social behaviour: “They felt that they owned the *airspace*, the skies going south. Coming north maybe, the Canadians could tell them what to do, but not going home. They blared the music even louder and danced in the aisles.” (141) (emphasis added) Ayo offers multiple cultural perspectives without being biased in any direction. She is convinced about having to help her own people: “She was determined to end the ambiguity. What had said for years. When the revolution comes, I’m going to be there.” (145)

Brand applies different fictive strategies in the multi-layered stories, and yet they have a homogeneous rhetorical style in a fairly clear political context.

Despite the difference in the narrative choice of Clarke’s and that of Brand’s we can only agree with Lefebvre, who says, “Every language is located in space. Every discourse says something about a space. Distinction must be drawn between discourse *in* space, discourse *about* space and the discourse *of* space” (132). On the basis of the text analysis of *Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack* and *Sans Souci* different ways of space indications have been demonstrated. It has been shown that colonial space has its idiosyncratic nature hand in hand with its literary representation.

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