

Liminality and (Trans)Nationalism in the Rethinking of African Canadian Subjectivity: Esi

Edugyan's The Second Life of Samuel Tyne.

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Canada is a location where...blackness is threatened with psychological evisceration
(George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home*)

In a Canadian context, writing blackness is a scary scenario:
we are an absented presence always under erasure
(Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who*)

Who is to say what a Canadian story looks like, where it should be set,
who should be telling it?...Indeed, what is a Canadian at all?
(Esi Edugyan, *Dreaming of Elsewhere*)

Introduction

The publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* in 1993 marked an ontological shift in the recognition of the diversity and conflict in black experiences and their cultural production. There exists an established consensus on the impact and groundbreaking potential of Gilroy's work as it propounded a global reconfiguration of the notion of a multilayered black self. Gilroy repositioned black consciousness from the margins to the center, engaging a transnational and transcultural debate that contributed to securing black subjectivity as "a central symbol in the psychological, cultural, and political systems of the West as a whole" (Gilroy 158). However, in the late 1990s Gilroy's theory generated debates over its shortcomings, namely because new readings of *The Black Atlantic* pointed out that the social realities of Africa, the Caribbean and Canada were absent from its theoretical framework.

Noting, as Daniel Coleman does, that Canadian identity has historically relied on the exclusionary nature of a national idiosyncrasy that eschews alternative epistemologies so as to be arranged in a "diverse population around the standardizing ideals of whiteness, masculinity, and Britishness" (10), African Canadian scholars George Elliott Clarke and Rinaldo Walcott seek to

(re)think and explain the subjectivity of black Canadians with regards to their placement within the nation-state through their work with Canadian literature and criticism. Until the 1980s, as Ana María Fraile-Marcos explains, “blackness figured in the Canadian national imagery as something imported from the United States, the result of the arrival of Black Loyalists” (113). Fraile-Marcos also asserts that Clarke and Walcott refused to conform to the idea of blackness as an “Otherness that reinforced the national mythology that has created Canada as the ‘true North, strong and free’, a peaceful, tolerant and law-abiding kingdom, the North Star or the New Canaan for Black slave fugitives as well as for new immigrants” (Fraile-Marcos 113). In working against this misconception, that is aligned with the previous quotation from Coleman, both Clarke and Walcott polarized African Canadian criticism by proposing two different theories in an attempt to shape and (re)define the subjectivity of black Canadians,¹ and in so doing shatter Canada’s *white civility*.

Taking this debate as a starting point, I propose using the concept of liminality as a valuable critical lens that works towards a balancing of Clarke and Walcott’s theories and, accordingly, brings about the retrieval of a rehabilitated transcultural African Canadian subjectivity that shows the complex and multiple faces of black Canadians since the term ‘liminal’ refers to multiple levels of meaning. I submit that through the appraisal of the concept of liminality as applied to the negotiation of black Canadian identity, Walcott’s theory can be reassessed and therefore nuanced so as to offer a counterweighted African Canadian identity – one that can embrace difference and, similarly, claim a proper place within a truly multicultural Canada without bolstering any sense of nationalism, as Clarke implies. To this end, liminality, as a critical outlet, is a fruitful means by

¹ The ongoing debate between Clarke and Walcott is well known within the field of black Canadian literature. Clarke advocates the inclusion of African Canadian subjectivity in the national desire to belong to a uniform Canadian culture and, in so doing, reinvents a black nationalism, that he labels *African Canadianité*, which acts as a “condition that involves a constant self-questioning of the grounds of identity (48) but always within the Canadian realm. That is to say, for Clarke, African Canadian subjectivity is always to be placed and “repositioned at the gates of the Canadian imagery” (Fraile-Marcos 114). Conversely, Rinaldo Walcott defends transnationality as the best way to explore and encompass African Canadian identity. His main goal is to draw attention to “diaspora networks and connectedness as opposed to an explicitly national address” (Walcott 15). Accordingly, and declining Clarke’s theory, Walcott warns African Canadians to “think contrapuntally within and against the nation” (22) as a means to counteract a Canadian nationality that has for so long excluded its black citizens. In Walcott’s contention Clarke fails to account for diasporic connectedness, which he deems crucial to understanding the multiethnic nature of black Canadians, revealing his direct indictment of “Clarke’s Red Tory politics” characterized by a “particular kind of nativism that understands the more recent and urban as not constitutive of Canadianness” (Walcott 17).

which ‘the other’ in the already subaltern community can claim both a sense of identity and the right to a place.

Briefly focusing on how liminality can be applied in the context of Canadian studies offers a framework for interrogating the debate regarding the construction of collective and individual ethnic identities in Canada. A debate which, in my contention, Esi Edugyan problematizes in *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* by positioning a family of black immigrants within a black town (which is also inhabited by white people) that inevitably brings the focus to African Canadian modes of representation within the nation-state.

At the end of the 19th century, Arnold Van Gennep theorized the rites of coming of age as following a three part structure: firstly, separation, secondly, the liminal period, and finally, reassimilation. The liminal, or in-between stage, stands for the process of transition that eventually leads to the construction of a proper self. In the second half of the 20th, century Victor Turner delved into Van Gennep’s theory and focused primarily on the middle stage, the liminal one, to highlight its oozing ambiguity on socio-political grounds. According to him, a liminal subjectivity is plainly that which is “neither here, nor there” (Turner 1969: 95). However, he quickly discerned the potential for the transferability of liminality which then led to the thematization of the concept to “cover a surprising variety of fields and range from literary, mobility, migration, and ethnicity studies” (Achilles and Bregmann 3). Accordingly, in the wake of new and alternative epistemologies that gained momentum during the post-colonial era and the mounting of multiculturalism, the concept of liminality proved to be a productive outlet for explaining the subjectivity of those in-between identities that oscillate between colonial resistance and a new wave of cultural awareness.

Significantly, ever since Canada became an independent nation in the late nineteenth century, liminality, as a theoretical concept, has been amply used to address matters that situate the country between two apparently antithetical divisions, such as the border that separates the nation-

state from the US, the conflicting French-English interrelations or the globalized frictions that can arise between the urban and the prairies.²

Furthermore, as a trope in literary studies, liminality can also be used to debate and analyze how a Canadian process of national identification that encompasses different epistemologies is still at odds with itself. In this light, the concept of liminality resonates in Lawrence Hill's *zebra poetics*, a derogatory metaphor which contests the term *mulatto* in order to embrace the duality of black-and-white racial status and "repudiate the perilous notion of a univocal aesthetics of blackness" (Clarke 232). The potential liminal nature of the black diasporic self serves as a point of reflection on the invoked allure of a restored African Canadian subjectivity which, in my reading, can be applied to Esi Edugyan's debut novel *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2004).

Consequently, and considering somehow reductive Pheng Cheah's assumption that "(w)e live in an era when nationalism seems to be out of favor in academia" (17), especially when taking into account Canada's neoliberal policies that then Prime Minister Stephen Harper endorsed,³ I consider that nationalism is related to a specific concept in the process of identity-building, inside and outside the black community, that the novel engages and which echo Louis Althusser's three ideological tools for becoming an integral part of a national community. This approach that is suitably contested through liminality and hybridity, and brushes up against transnationalism in Edugyan's story.

The novel has been extensively analyzed by taking into consideration the fluid diasporic nature of its characters as well as the negotiation of space and the disharmonious nature that

² Also, and transporting the concept of liminality from the ethnographic study of ritual passages to the heart of literary studies, something that acknowledges Bjorn Thomassen's statement that "liminality is today experiencing a revival" (3), Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann edited *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing* in 2014, a choral coupling of articles that focus on the generic liminality of, and in, the aesthetic composition of the short stories within the three literary traditions.

³ During conservative Stephen Harper's term in office a particular sense of nationalism was refashioned and became part of his political discourse with respect to a specific vision of Canada. The online journal "Toronto Metro" echoed how on an official business trip in 2012 he claimed: "(w)e are strong Canadian nationalists who value what is distinctive and unique about this country and think in our own modest way that this is actually a better country". More recently, in June 2015, at the celebration of Quebec's national holiday he argued that nationalism is "an expression of deep pride in a brilliant past and a solid confidence in a promising future" proving thus how a nationalist feeling has been an inextricable part of Canadian national discourse and it remains so.

Liminality and (Trans)Nationalism in the Rethinking of African Canadian Subjectivity revolves around black geographies. Although the novel epitomizes the representation of ‘other’ diasporas in global Canadian fiction, according to Eleanor Ty (2011), nothing has been said with regards to the piercing process of identity-building that the diasporic characters in *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* try to contrive simultaneously both in and outside the black community itself. I will analyze the story as an exploration of the role of literature within the debate on the two different positions concerning black Canadian subjectivity and identity that Clarke and Walcott represent. It is my argument that *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* fully thrives on this debate, and by proposing liminality as the way to present diasporic black subjectivities both helps to widen Clarke and Walcott’s scope and eventually aims to (re)define a transnational black subjectivity in Canada. If George Elliott Clarke assumes that African Canadians “are not just ‘black’ and Canadian, but also *adherents* to a region” (40 emphasis mine) and Walcott dismisses such assertion as reductive and “melancholic” (22), Esi Edugyan appears to position Samuel Tyne within a liminal position between these two theoretical visions. The protagonist of the story does feel nostalgia for his African past at the end, refiguring in this manner the concept of adherence. Therefore, and enlarging upon Achilles and Bergman’s literary contribution, I would like to argue that the use of liminality as an aesthetic concept can help us to reevaluate transnational black subjectivities by examining how Edugyan’s novel not only disallows Clarke’s postulates but also expands Walcott’s understanding of the diasporic approach.

I will conclude by showing how the concept of liminality intersects in the two ‘schools’ of thought that have traditionally read black Canada, aiming to rethink a reformed transcultural black self that counterpoises nationalism and the diasporic black Atlantic model. The Tyne family’s eventual eviction raises expectations for a new wave of thought in Canadian policy-makings and discourse to come to terms with the approval of incoming subjectivities from within and outside the black community.

Challenging African Canadian Identity through Liminality and Transnationalism in *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*

In *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* Esi Edugyan envisions a fictional town called Aster that represents the real settlement of Amber Valley, Alberta, peopled by black Canadians. In a three-way conversation with African Canadian poet Wayne Compton and professor Karina Vernon, Edugyan recognized that despite having been raised in Alberta she was “fascinated to discover the existence of these black settlements” (Compton, Edugyan and Vernon 2006). However, as Vernon rightly notes, Edugyan complicates “the historical record by playing around with and, to some extent, re-writing history” by inserting “a family of Ghanaian immigrants into a historical community” that was originally “American-descended”. Hence, from the very outset of the story the concept of Canadian nationalism, carried out, furthermore, in the Northern prairies, is overtly contested, refiguring a forgone interrelationship between space and identity “from both a historical and a social perspective” (Cuder-Domínguez 432) and rendering blackness as liminal in the context of a transnational and transracial account of the nation-state.

The story revolves around the diasporic character Samuel Tyne, who was born in Ghana (then still the Gold Coast), and later moved to England before finally relocating to Western Canada (Calgary) hoping for a second chance to lead a better life. The novel evinces that, in Canada, “(b)lack matters are spatial matters” (xii) as Katherine McKittrick states in her insightful work *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. That which defines Canadian nationalism is understood, with regards to blackness within the state, “as enmeshing with traditional geographic arrangements in order to identify a different way of knowing and writing the social world and”, more importantly, “to expand how the production of space is achieved across terrains of domination” (McKittrick xiv).

Therefore, the transcultural moves that influence Tyne’s existence turn him into a liminal character from the very beginning and confirm Achilles and Bergmann’s remark that “(l)iminality...is of obvious importance in an age of global mobility” (3). From this point of view, Tyne’s liminal subjectivity as an African Canadian citizen fits with Walcott’s theory because,

according to him, in Canada “black identities must be rooted elsewhere and that elsewhere is always outside Canada” (105). Geography and identity are entangled concepts because “the history of black subjects in the diaspora is a geographic story that is, at least in part, a story of material and conceptual placements and displacements, segregations and integrations, margins and centers, and migrations and settlements” (McKittrick 2006: xiv).

As such, Samuel Tyne and his wife Maud, both children of the African diaspora, find themselves becoming woven into the racist policies of Canada which occlude the complex constitution of black Canadians. Although he appears to be represented as a liminal entity, and thus “possessing nothing” (Turner 359), Tyne yearns to be a Canadian citizen. His object of desire is Edugyan’s alibi to unearth the jarring policies of inclusion in multicultural Canada. Having inherited a house from his dead uncle Jacob, he admits that to be part of his new reality he might as well “become his uncle” (Edugyan, 2004: 4) or, in Arnold Itwaru’s words, step into “the inner chambers of assimilationism” (14). This process of mimesis, an imitative aspect of human behavior, exhibits Tyne’s transition through liminality and follows Victor Turner who, aware of the imitative aspect that liminality encompasses, emphasized that “the middle phase of a ritual represented a mimetic enactment of a crisis” (Szokolczai 154). In other words, the *crisis* of (national) identity surfaces from the beginning due to this dual nature that Samuel Tyne embodies in and outside the black community. By liminally positioning the main character, Edugyan offers the space of liminality as a place for rethinking diasporic subjectivities, that is to say, as a place of possibility for alternative epistemologies in the current system that operates in the so often touted multicultural Canada.

Consequently, the rejection of the African memory and past and the acquisition of Canadian ideals becomes pivotal to claim a Canadianness that supposedly grants them a seemingly genuine subjectivity although, down the line, the Tyne family undergoes what Turner calls a “‘leveling’ process” in which “signs of their preliminal status are destroyed and signs of their liminal non-status are applied” (1974: 59). In order to fit into such specific Canadianness, Samuel Tyne and his

family try to match their sense of personhood with the ideological category of what they convey as truly Canadian. By developing this sense of subjectivity they yearn to achieve the highest level of integration. Rejecting their diasporic consciousness makes the Tynes embrace a Canadian sense of national identity that will eventually prove ill-omened for them. If, as Louis Althusser warns us, “[i]n nationalism, individuals are interpolated through a complex ideological mechanism in which they come to believe that they are truly liberated and autonomous if they identify with particular national subjectivity” (224), the Tyne family seek, then, to accomplish Althusser’s approach through the three ideological tools that nationalism prescribes to be undertaken by individuals who try to become an integral part of a national community: inventing a national history, the adoption of the language and the substantialization of national culture.

As such, when arriving in Canada, “Maud refused to speak anything but English, though Samuel knew the language of her tribe” (Edugyan, 2004: 8). Indeed, Maud embodies the perfect example of how to “serve in the nationalist project of homogenizing the national consciousness” (Zake 230). In truth, despite their efforts to see otherwise, this is nothing but proof of a liminal subjectivity because both “have to submit to an authority that is nothing less than that of the total community” (364), in Turner’s words. The accommodation showcases the fake Canadianness that the Tyne family comes to represent for what is at stake at length is not the assimilation of new subjectivities but the protection of Canadian nationhood. The adoption of the national language is a procedure that is “less important for the preservation of the language as a cultural value per se” but rather it is an “ideologically based and often state administered ritual of production of national subjects, who can later be interpolated as real, autonomous and self-motivated by addressing them in the *national* language” (Zake 232-233, emphasis mine). However, Edugyan ensures that any effort from the Tynes to acquire a sense of Canadianness is unrelentingly wiped out and as such it highlights the cracks in the national dream through unaccepted diasporic subjectivities.

In spite of it all, Tyne makes a greater effort to root his identity as a real Canadian emphasizing that his two twin daughters are a product of the Canadian multicultural nation.

Henceforth, when Samuel and Maud move into Aster they introduce themselves as Canadians and highlight that “(t)he twins were born here. In Canada” (Edugyan, 2004: 23). Although Aster, a black village made up of African American refugees who migrated from Oklahoma escaping out of slavery, is presented as “the first black hamlet in Alberta” (Edugyan, 2004: 33), Tyne underscores his desire to belong to the town as a metaphor of his wish and commitment to participate in the idea of the nation, fleshing out his notion of nationalism: “(a)nd so within minutes the dream had been bought...Samuel Tyne had signed the lease on his own little piece of the world. After this, there could be no more doubts” (Edugyan, 2004: 61).

More often than not, the Tyne family realizes that Aster is far from being the idealized spot they had envisioned and the little village serves as the mirror that reflects the problematics of the Canadian multicultural myth. Ray, a white Canadian who apparently befriends the Tynes, gives voice to the racist musings that Aster has come to develop, and when he refers to the slaves who escaped from the U.S., like Tyne’s ancestors, he blurts: “(a)nd you get ex-slaves...where is there to put these people?” (Edugyan, 2004: 141). He quickly singles out Samuel and Maud from his racist prerogatives accepting: “(a)nd I don’t mean you – you two are model” (Edugyan, 2004: 142) although the Tynes’ dismay is more than evident.

Reality imposes itself on them and, despite being black in a once entirely black town, Samuel Tyne and his family are soon signaled as outcasts just as Yvette, one of the twin sisters, decries: “(e)ven though this town used to be black, everywhere you go they stare at you” (Edugyan, 2004: 88). Having been denied the recognition as Canadian citizens, the Tyne family’s liminality, which swiftly lays bare the impossibility of a national attachment, swerves into mistrust as the result of their protracted diasporic self because “blackness in Canada is largely imagined as black and therefore belies longer black histories in Canada” (Walcott 135). The meta-narrative of the nation-state excludes the diasporic self from the notion of Canadianness because “the tensions of belonging are significantly different from a diaspora sensibility producing an elsewhere” (Walcott 134). Again, the liminal nature that defines the Tynes is the façade that brings out the

complicated tensions that Canada, albeit priding itself on being a cosmopolitan nation and a mosaic of cultures, manifests.

Samuel Tyne's liminality, then, highlights how new diasporic subjectivities are bound to be cornered "at the edges of structure" (Turner 1969: 372) by (black and white) Canadian nationalism. It should not be taken for granted that the black village is located in the northern prairies with a view to enhancing a sense of nationalism. In fact, the distinctiveness of the Canadian identity has been amply predicated on a myth of wilderness that has definitely come to configure a genuine nationality in terms of Nature. Yet, in *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* the prairies come to represent not a double but a triple space of renegotiation as the black pioneers that settled them did so by erasing the history of the Indigenous populations, thus continuing to see and perform the myth of the North as a land that is "there for the taking" (Amadahy and Lawrence 106).⁴

In his insightful study *Deemed Unsuitable*, R. Bruce Shepard thoroughly explains how "[b]oth white and black settlers eventually moved into Indian Territory, and together with the aboriginal inhabitants created a unique volatile racial situation" (19). These snarled and pressing racial conflicts seem to resonate in Edugyan's story when it comes to claiming a national identity on behalf of diasporic black consciousness also within the northern prairies. In short, and in Karina Vernon's words, Esi Edugyan "diasporizes" prairie history (204). Considering such thoughts and mirroring, again, white settlers' actions, black pioneers have traditionally been involved in some form of settlement process in an "area which was at once familiar, and strangely different" (Shepard 66). This is so because the failure to negotiate a mutual relationship to inhabit the land involves the risk of becoming 'settlers' and therefore "complicit in the extermination of those whose lands they occupy" (Amahady and Lawrence 119). What the novel precisely recalls is that although settlement in Canada has been carried out "overwhelmingly on a White-only basis" (Amadahy and Lawrence 114) the difficult period of native dispossession and black marginalization turned a specific black

⁴ I wish to thank Dr. Belén Martín-Lucas for suggesting to me the possibility of considering the Indigenous presence in the renegotiation of the Northern prairies.

Canadian population into “ambiguous settlers” (121), in Amahdy and Lawrence’s words, forced to forage out a land of their own “not only through a desperate need to survive after slavery, but by Christian beliefs that land must be cultivated to do God’s work and by their acceptance that the land would be theirs if they could claim it” (Amahdy and Lawrence 121). In this way, those “ambiguous settlers” that stood for black pioneers adopted the white settlers’ national paradigm and “bought in to the myth of Canada as an empty land where they [could] remake themselves and their lives” (Amadahy and Lawrence 118). Balancing the national moves concerning the appropriation of land between white people, black people and Indigenous people, operating in the context of strong colonialism and overt genocide, the prairies epitomize the postcolonial “Third Space” and come to signify Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry as a site of resistance on the part of these black settlers. According to the postcolonial scholar, the process of mimicry involves a double articulation for it “‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (86). Black settlers in the (black) prairies reverse “in part the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence” (Bhabha 88). In this way, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* evinces, yet again, that the invention and appropriation of national history – as one of the three aforementioned ideological tools, nationalism is mobilized in search of a national project, according to Althusser – reflects the standard for building both collective and subjective identities as inherited from “the beginning of [...] time” (Zake 227). This opportunity for the Tynes to revamp their former subjectivity into that of proper Canadian settlers is undone as they are unwelcome in the city of Aster, peopled already by black and white settlers, and they are excluded from the renegotiation of the prairies. Although the stark reality is, as Zainab Amahdy and Bonita Lawrence remark, that the “peoples of African descent created by slavery...living in the Americas...are living on the lands of other Indigenous peoples” (119), Samuel Tyne and his family’s diasporic selves are also rejected from this black appropriation of lands, and thus personify the liminal existence *per excellence*.

The “ambiguous settlers” then “*repeat* rather than *re-present*” (Bhabha 88; italics in the original) white Canadian nationalism and as such they wind up excluding the Tyne family from

participating in this revision of the myth of the North, despite Samuel's hot-headed attempt to participate in the mimicry process: "First stop, Aster. Next stop, the world" (Edugyan, 2004: 140). The clannish tenor of the prairies as the central site for the unfolding of a nuanced national conception of the country is Edugyan's attack against a community that mirrors a cultural nationalism premised only on whiteness that eventually offers a liminal subjectivity as the only way for black diasporic identities to compose themselves. As Diana Brydon highlights, Edugyan embraces the concept of 'glocality' (a hybrid term in itself attuned to the Tyne family's liminal selves), in which the global is embedded in the local and both forces intermesh to foster a healthier version of multicultural identities. In respect to that, the 'glocal' sensibility in *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* enables the Tyne family, according to Brydon, "to live attuned to...civilization systems without needing to choose between them" (qtd. in Lacombe, 55).

However, Tyne bitterly comes to understand that Aster is far from being understood in glocal terms and has definitely fallen short of its idealistic image of a black Canadian haven because the rejection of alternative diasporic epistemologies leads necessarily to the waning of the sovereignty of the nation. Besides, the interdiction of the Tyne family resonates in Pilar Cuder-Domínguez's recounting of the infamous ways in which black settlements in the northern communities were politically threatened with "petitions and council resolutions passed throughout the prairies variously advocating the total exclusion of Black people from the area, or at least the limitation of new arrivals, or even their segregation" (2014: 434). Making use of biblical undertones to inform the reader of a forced and degrading exile, the novel emphasizes that "(n)o one wanted them for neighbors, blacks bringing with them a plague of racial problems. The government decreed immigration akin to suicide" (Edugyan, 2004: 170-171).

Consequently, Samuel Tyne overtly complains about Aster's exclusionary policies, for "[i]t was as though they did not believe that man has in him the ability to change, to better himself. To adapt" (Edugyan, 2004: 145). In this light, and posing Samuel Tyne's liminality as a generative move to ruminate on Canadian self-representation, Edugyan's story aligns with Walcott by

refracting and reconsidering the image of Canada as a compassionate and egalitarian nation-state. Though the country has erected a national identity which seems to respect the legal acknowledgement of difference, Edugyan demonstrates how liminal and diasporic subjectivities openly challenge the core of the Canadian democracy. The cultural dislocation that the Tyne family endures in *Aster* reveals the pitfalls of the Canadian ideal of tolerance that finally shuns any interpretation that esteems the presence of the authentic (multi)ethnic diversity of the country.

Stressing that what essentially was an all-black town is the source of the exclusion of alternative African Canadian subjectivities is the way in which Edugyan conveys the message of the necessity for the acceptance of a “diasporic cultural expression” (Walcott 135). In many ways, the novel not only “challenges the perceived whiteness of Western Canada by re-inscribing a historical Black presence that is full of discontinuities and erasures” (2014: 432-433), as Cuder-Domínguez reminds us, but also exposes the interracial tensions within the Canadian black community. In this case, if the desire to belong to the nation with the blurring and jettisoning of the African past proves in vain for Samuel Tyne, the agreed difference between Canada and the US is simply a confection. Tyne himself pinpoints: “I have always thought that a black can, and should, define himself beyond being black...And this country, claiming it’s all for human rights, claiming it’s superior to the States and accepts everyone, didn’t treat us no better than a common dog” (Edugyan, 2004: 168-169).

Andrea Davis points out that Tyne’s twin daughters, Yvette and Chloe, are the ones who are directly “made to bear the scars of cultural displacement and racism” and thus wind up choosing to “retreat into an internal, fictionalized world in search of protection from exclusion” (44). The twin sisters outline “the degree of trauma that results from the (dis)location of African diasporic families in the Americas, permanently estranged from space and place, from history and memory” (Davis 42). Unable to comprehend how a black town cannot accommodate the unfolding of their African Canadian subjectivity both children withhold themselves from the Canadian multicultural reality by admitting to being “tired of being black” (Edugyan, 2004: 27). In so claiming, Edugyan’s novel

delves into Walcott's statements and undergirds that if black Canadian subjectivity does not overcome the crippling discourse that only attempts "to render blackness outside the nation" (Walcott 103), the African Canadian self will never be constituted within the politics of recognition and, consequently, the liminal nature that Edugyan identifies at the heart of its definition will be engulfed "to invisibility" (Turner 1969: 259). The twin sisters, then, posit a double challenge in national terms "to a hypocritical liberal democracy and its thinly-veiled racism, both of which determine the nature of Canadian social behaviour, that disturb the landscape they inhabit and, at the same time, exclude them firmly from participation in Albertan society" (Davis 47).

When the shadow of a mysterious arsonist that terrorizes the town covers the twin sisters, the Tyne family is forced to leave the town and consummating the exclusion they were pushed into since their arrival. As Winfried Siemerling acutely points out, even "(t)he town reveals itself as a liminal space of uncertainty" (331) whereby the Tynes cannot belong. This, together with the troublesome relationship between Tyne and his daughters exemplifies how the *adherence* to the substantialization of a national culture also ends up being a failure in their attempt to participate in a national idea of Canada. For Althusser, "(f)amiliar gender roles are translated into 'natural' justifications for nationalist power distribution" (qtd in Zake 235). In contrast, the twin daughters' weird behavior and their tumultuous connection with their parents appear, once more, as a disrupted mechanism when trying to reconcile personal matters with a nationalist reading of the family. Samuel Tyne even goes as far as to slap Yvette, thereby highlighting the impossibility of reconciling nation and family alike. When he finally apologizes to his daughter, he openly admits that his attachment to a Canadian nationalism is but a corollary of his wish to be a proper Canadian: "(f)or some reason apologizing to Yvette seemed like admitting the stupidity of his grand dreams (Edugyan, 2004: 207).

In fact, the dream is a key element in Samuel Tyne's hope for assimilation and acceptance. His 'bought dream' to move to Aster turns into a stupid act in the end and reveals that the outer and inner worlds are unrelentingly intertwined. Edugyan's privileging of liminality as the intersection

between new readings of nationalism and diasporic detachment transcends the physical world and also delves into the character's mind for even his psyche expresses itself in liminal terms. According to psychoanalyst Donald Kalsched, the psyche lives in liminality when an individual expresses disillusion and trauma. It is when a person's psyche splits "not necessarily in the mind or in the body" (65) but, in Tyne's case, with regards to his feelings towards a sense of national identity. Tyne's dream, as an outcome of his traumatized psyche, shows the real truth of the self he wants to believe in, and is revealed as another example of his liminality because, as Mather explains, dreams are also "liminal, between phenomena occurring on the threshold of consciousness" (116). In *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* the liminality that illustrate the wiping away of any effort to be truly Canadian is not only applied to Samuel Tyne in the real world but also in his unconscious world and his respective dreams since it conjures up psyche and reason, both in the individual self and the dreams envisioned. Rather than thinking of Canada as a national enclosure, it is here materialized as an ever-changing concept in constant evolution both in personal and collective memory. Put briefly, through liminality Edugyan leans toward total inclusion and rejects both nationalism and also a deterritorialized conception of the diasporic self that withholds collective memory and as such rethinks a transnational identity.

Due to the impossibility of balancing such visions, the longing to anchor a verily transnational African Canadian subjectivity in Canadian soil surfaces as a chimera because Aster is rife with the rhetoric of shutting out a diasporic account of blackness within the Canadian realm. For this reason, Samuel's lament towards the end of the novel is a scathing critique of black nationalism, or *African Canadianité* in Clarke's terms, that acts ineffectively when it comes to assuring the plurality of blackness: "(l)and of opportunities, land of law and justice. Let me tell you, all I have learned in coming here is that nationalities don't matter" (Edugyan, 2004: 243).

The white and black Canadian inhabitants of Aster disregard the (multi)diasporic configuration of black subjectivity and so they emulate the historical Canadian *white civility* that has dislodged the racial alterity of the nation. In a literary move that encourages readers to pause

and think, the ending of Edugyan's tale holds out a transnational African Canadian subjectivity obliterated and accepted as an "arbitrary punishment without complaint" (1969: 359), as Victor Turner proposes. Although Samuel Tyne rebuilds his family after the death of his wife and links his subjectivity with Akosia, another Ghanaian, both are cast away and eventually depart from the rural area as he dolefully acquiesces: "(e)xile is hard to overcome. Aster, with its black origins, became a surrogate homeland, a way of returning without returning" (Edugyan, 2004: 184). What Edugyan proclaims with this outcome, which not only shows the way in which her realization of the black Canadian self veers from Clarke's theory but also separates her postulates from Walcott's, is how "the struggle of asserting black in/and Canada necessitates an understanding of geography that is ongoing, connected to, yet displaced from, white geographic domination" (McKittrick 96).

In this sense, "returning without returning" links with the idea of a diasporic liminality that the Tyne family embodies throughout the story. In a recent lecture for The Henry Kreisel Lecture Series at the Canadian Literature Centre in Edmonton, Edugyan theorizes about nationalism by pondering the possibility of belonging and not belonging to a specific nation or home. In it, just as she writes at the end of her debut novel, the author wrestles more so with the idea of a national attachment by stating that "(h)ome is the first exile. To belong in one place is to not belong in another" (2014: 10).⁵ This echoes how, for Gilroy, identities, among other things, exceed national boundaries (7) and, all together, supports Clarke's idea of national adherence.

Contrary to Walcott's contention that in a diasporic approach "nostalgia is dead" (45), it is interesting to note that towards the end of the novel Samuel Tyne admits that melancholy and nostalgia are compatible with a diasporic consciousness and, consequently, presents both concepts as defining traits of diasporic identities in Canada, as Lily Cho's work (2007) also portrays. Just as his liminal position reduces Tyne's world to a struggle for belonging, Edugyan's builds upon, and

⁵ The lecture, entitled *Dreaming of Elsewhere: Observations on Home*, was delivered in March 2014 and in it Edugyan remarks on the fate of *home* and belonging. It is her latest contribution to the winding debate over citizenship and nationalism. Edugyan inscribes her theory within a multidiasporic conception of the self and, once more echoing the liminal character of a transnational identity-building, she reasons: "I do not think home is a place...I believe it is a way of thinking. Dreaming of elsewhere is one of the ways we struggle with the challenge of what it means to be *here*- by which I mean at home, in ourselves" (33).

therefore also shakes, Walcott's theoretical framework against nostalgia. If Rinaldo Walcott dismissed Clarke's archival attempt to configure a black nationalism as a "melancholic cataloguing" (22), through Samuel Tyne Edugyan contests this underestimation of the nostalgic ethos and brings it to life within Tyne's diasporic self, proving anew his double liminality both in a national and diasporic sense. In so doing, the author relies on liminality as a way to expose the shortcomings of Clarke and Walcott's arguments but also to define them as the only possible launch pad through which to rethink and recast black Canadian subjectivity in the so-called multicultural Canada.

As a second-wave immigrant, the protagonist is figured as a double liminal character as his un-belonging is contrasted in both Canadian-born citizens and also in first-wave immigrants. Even in Walcott's account of transnational subjectivity Tyne shows his 'permanent liminality', paraphrasing Arpad Szakolczai's terms, by bearing out his discordant diasporic self and his feeling of nostalgia. Although Samuel starts by rejecting nostalgia as a cultural mode of atonement, something which would prove Walcott's theory right – "no past beyond youth and family life" (Edugyan, 2004: 2) – Edugyan seems to display how in terms of representation of black diaspora in Canada, the question of nostalgia has not been fully addressed yet and, duly, has the protagonist changing his mind at the end of the tale. This question resounds in David Chariandy's essay "Postcolonial Diasporas" when he inquires: "Must people in a diaspora long to return home?" Edugyan does not answer the question and leaves Tyne's sense of identity hung in suspension, making the main character's liminality fluctuate "between indifference and guilt" (appearing thus always in-between) when he declares that "he'd gone wrong" in "coming to Aster" for "(t)he whole thing had been a fool's dream" (Edugyan, 2004: 263).

Samuel Tyne's nostalgia points to the impossibility of reconciling the diasporic understanding on behalf of the nation-state with the cultural implications that these particularities may offer to Canadian society. Thus, through nostalgia he aims to recover an Aster that is no longer possible within the Canadian realm but also adds to the debate regarding the polyhedral definition

of what it means, and what it takes, to be black in Canada. In other words, it prompts a rethinking and reinvention of *adherence* to diasporic black selves.

The novel's sour ending, then, aims to stir up the crosscurrent debate surrounding notions of how to fathom blackness in Canada. *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* is Edugyan's call to do away with Clarke's *African Canadianité* by showing how a black nationalism can dangerously walk the path that white nationalism has historically paved and thus break away from the ideal preeminence of a plural African Canadian subjectivity. Davis rightly notices that the story "insists that questions of belonging have to be explored both within and outside the boundaries of the particular nation" (45). That is why on his deathbed Samuel Tyne's remorseful thoughts about the scant defense of a diasporic self take over: "(it) is because I have been away from the ocean too long. Every hour away from it turns my body to ash" (Edugyan, 2004: 287).

Hence, through a liminal black character that fails to grasp the transnational dream and national attachment, Edugyan offers a crafty counter argument to Clarke and Walcott's critical theories only to show that the agitation for the definition of a black Canadian self is not an invented shibboleth but rather the outcome of a flawed political issue that urges to be rearranged. The liminal condition of the Tyne family, then, extends the notion of their role as a national *counternarrative*, to borrow from Smaro Kamboureli, for they change and erode "what Canadian identity is presumed to mean" (Kamboureli 84) within both white and black communities.

The story does not pay lip service to the nation because by removing the Canadian mask of tolerance and, though cognizant that "(i)t will not be an easy road" (Edugyan, 2004: 289), as the final words of the novel warrant, presents an excuse to nourish a political imperative that can over-determine new readings of what is, or should be, a Canadian citizen. Edugyan and Walcott concur in their view to propose that solely "self-conscious diasporic affiliations offer a way out of the mess that modern nation-states represent for black peoples" (Walcott 20). Still, by presenting a final touch that confides a pervading odor of national nostalgia the novel reveals liminal subjectivity as a suitable way to signify upon new interpretations and black Canadian definition and is akin to what

Spivak coined a “planetary vision” in which, considering the process of identity-building, “alterity remains underived from us” (73).

Conclusion

As Rinaldo Walcott woefully maintains “[t]he impossibility of imagining blackness as Canadian is continually evident even as the nation-state policies like multiculturalism seek to signal otherwise” (48). This claim becomes more evident when different black subjectivities interplay in search of a place within Canada.

Calling this to mind, and taking into account the interconnectedness of the neo-liberal and postmodern world, the liminal subjectivity, or “an in-between position” (48) in Walcott’s words, exposes the aspiration for the respect and tolerance that a black nationalism dodges. Rebuffing, in this way, Althusser’s ideological approach, Tyne’s liminality offers a fruitful position from which to cast aside identity in terms of citizenship rights endowed by the nation-state in favor of the acknowledgement of a transnational reality that buttresses claims from different positions with regards to race. Thus, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* yearns for Canada to conform to Turner’s concept of *communitas* in which individual distinctiveness, within and outside the black community, is unapologetically preserved and rejects the strenuous postulate which maintains that “black people in Canada are geographically un-Canadian” (McKittrick 99).

Esi Edugyan’s novel asserts that the reconsideration of ethnic identities as they are laid out in the Multicultural Act ought to lead the way for a new understanding of a transcultural black self that all at once serves and works toward the acceptance of difference. Certainly, the novel points towards liminal selves enfolded in what Charles Taylor has coined “a politics of difference” in which every subject might as well “be recognized for his or her unique identity” (qtd in Kamboureli 92). As a result, through the Tynes Edugyan visualizes the “Ellisonian ‘ectoplasmatic’ presence” (Clarke 326) of diasporic black subjects in Canada and succeeds in painting a “complex picture of

Black people in Alberta, torn apart not only by the different chronologies of migration and their own transnational trajectories, but also by diverse identity features” (Cuder-Domínguez 2014: 437).

Edugyan sides with Walcott’s train of thought, aiming to shatter a monolithic picture of blackness and insisting upon new “ways in which the Other is imagined or not imagined in the Canadian nation-state” (Walcott 118). In this case, a liminal and transnational identity feeds on a new version of the chiefly misunderstood multiculturalism, exposing the very crevices of national policies, and follows Manuel Castells’ assumption that in postmodern societies “(f)or a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities” (6). However, liminality, as a theoretical framework that best represents the subjectivity of those ‘in-between’ people caught always in constant negotiation in the process of identity-building, also shows here the pitfalls of Walcott’s diasporic approach since it highlights the difficulty of starting anew and hence brings to the fore the necessity of exploring the negotiation between nationalism and transnationalism.

Far from picturing Canada as a nation of opportunities, Edugyan offers a Canadian ideology riddled with different forms of ethnic disavowal and constructed upon “narratives of absence or elsewhere” (McKittrick 99). What shimmers under the surface of Edugyan’s *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* is the image of a liminal black subjectivity envisaged from different angles that highlights how black Canadians can be repositioned as a relevant and imaginable part of the nation-state and, in so doing, it channels “African-Canadians writers’ complaint about the erasure of Black experiences from the national imagination” (Cuder-Domínguez 2010: 113). By acknowledging the varying and multifarious spaces of black lives or black geographies and warning, through the use of liminal status, against the erasure of subjectivities that may result from the unfeasibility of bridging nationalism and transnationalism, Edugyan’s novel argues for “the very polyvocality of blackness” (Davis 47) and takes an active part in the debate for the representation of blackness in Canada. In such an attempt, the novel’s threads converge with a resonance that opts for uprootedness and transnational politics as the way to praise a self-(re)definition of the coeval African Canadian subjectivity while it helps to promote, “reconfigure, remap and chart a nation of nations as a new

land not concerned with narratives of geographic and textual boundaries but a nation that is constituted through the practices of justice, ethical politics and progressive race relations” (Walcott 129).

The novel’s preeminent focus on diaspora and transnationalism casts off Cheah’s underestimation of nationalism and, thereby, follows Christine Kim and Sophie McCall’s premise which argues that “the nation itself is a concept that is constantly being transformed through engagements with Indigenous, diasporic, transnational, postcolonial, and neo-colonial forces, pressures and communities” (16). The conflicting exposures of a liminal configuration of the self helps to bridge, examine, and balance the overlaps, as well as the possible dissonances between the different epistemologies that comprise the Canadian nation-state with the endeavor to “reconstruct it as something much greater than the western modernist Project of nation-building suggests” (Walcott 122). Yet, instead of rejecting nostalgia as a melancholic hindrance, Edugyan builds upon Walcott’s theory and advocates the bridging of memory and the present with the purpose of cultivating a new reading of the diasporic approach and hoping to chart fresh understandings of a rehabilitated transnational black self.

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