



The Shifting Profile of Africa in Twenty-First Century Black Canadian Writing

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ABSTRACT

The affective link with Africa was visible in those Black Canadian works composed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In contrast, the profile of Africa has shifted for younger generations of Black diasporan writers in Canada. The purpose of this article is to open up a conversation into how Black Canadian affects, both concerning national identity and homeland connection, seem to have shifted roughly after 2000. In order to do so I analyse *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (2017), a reinterpretation by Black Canadian playwright Lisa Codrington of George Bernard Shaw's 1932 short story of the same title. Her play was a milestone in the history of Black Canadian writing, because for the first time a Black Canadian playwright (and a woman, too) was invited to participate in one of Canada's most prestigious and longest-established theatre festivals, the Shaw Festival.

KEYWORDS

African Affects; Black Canadian Writing; Lisa Codrington; Shaw Festival; George Bernard Shaw.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROFILE OF AFRICA AND BLACK CANADIAN AFFECTS

For anthropologist Paulla A. Ebron, the global imagination of Africa is often marked by "dystopic images of war, famine, and regional political strife" (2009: 3). Side by side with

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those pervasive images, according to Ebron, stand a number of counter-representations stemming from the enthusiasm for African cultures of some communities: “Africa, in this imagined geography, is expressive culture. Africa is evocative, disruptive. It is the noise of the outsider continent, the recalcitrant space, the resistant thorn that pricks the sides of the West in its refusal to embrace ‘the modern project’” (2009: 3). A third group of representations stems from members of the African diaspora, keen on reflecting on their personal and historical links to the continent, and often displaying a certain ambivalence towards it.

In the case of Canadian Afrodiasporic writing¹, the range of stances towards Africa is extremely wide due to the heterogeneity of the Black population of Canada, that descends not from one long wave of enslaved Africans but originates in a number of smaller waves, spanning centuries, with multiple points of departure and circumstances, sometimes arriving after a double —via the United States or the Caribbean— or even triple migration —for instance, through the Caribbean and the United Kingdom. The process is still very much ongoing, since the country continues to be the destination for immigrants from several African nations, like Somalia and Ghana (Mensah, 2002: 111). A key element to consider is each individual author’s personal history and sense of kinship. African-born writers such as George Seremba or Juliane Okot Bitek directly engage in their writings with the intricate realities of life in their countries of birth². Lawrence Hill, who spent considerable time in several African countries during his youth, has unambiguously asserted that part of him is African and that he feels the need to reconnect to the motherland (2012: 306)³. In contrast, Antigua-born Althea Prince’s self-definition as an “African woman” rests on her need to expose the racism of her host society, which marks her off from her own mother, who simply calls herself West Indian: “the issue of my African self was a burning concern for me [...] because I lived in Canada, in a white cultural hegemony. It had never been an issue for my mother [who] had not had to define herself within the cultural hegemony of the Other” (2001: 45). Yet for others, like Dionne Brand in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Africa is “a place strictly of the imagination” (2001: 25). A diverging viewpoint is expressed by Esi Edugyan, for whom her parents’ birthplace, Ghana, is undoubtedly very real, even though she claims her right not to belong there or indeed elsewhere (2014).

Because mobilities and linkages between Africa and the African diaspora in the Americas have unfolded for centuries, as attested to by the Black Nova Scotian resettlement in West Africa narrated in Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* (2007), these connections are extraordinarily complex and hard to unpack. In her discussion on Pan-Africanism in Jamaica, West Indian writer Erna Brodber points out that in the nineteenth century there was significant return migration to Africa of a missionary kind, allegedly meaning to look after the ‘spiritual welfare’ of Africans. Brodber concludes that “by the early 20th century, Africa became firmly established as a point in the continent of black sentiment and became bound in

a new way to its diaspora. It had become an alternate home of choice, a heaven —the place where the gods love to be, an icon” (2003: 93-4).

Therefore, while Africa was an actual destination for some from early on, for most African descendants the continent has always loomed much larger as a mythical place. Separating the one from the other, however, is not as easy a task as it might seem, if one considers the strong sentiments and overall longing to reconnect those histories and bloodlines severed by the slave trade. African American scholar Saidiya Hartman has voiced feelings on visiting Ghana that quite resemble Edugyan’s own estrangement from those who looked so much like her. Hartman felt “the stranger in the village” (2008: 4), an unwelcome reminder of the slave trade and its catastrophic effects on African life. The thwarted longing for a homecoming is only one of the components of what Hartman has called “the afterlife of slavery” affecting Blacks in the United States (and to a degree, in Canada): “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (2008: 6).

The pull to heal the psychic renting brought about by slavery explains the strong urge to reconnect to the place that many Black North Americans still consider at some level their motherland. Migration scholars have identified over the last few decades a significant increase among many diasporic groups of what they are calling “return mobilities”, a term encompassing both visits to the ancestral homeland —understood generally as a “return”— and longer sojourns possibly with the intention of permanent resettlement —grouped under the more specific term “return migration” (King & Christou, 2011: 452). Moved by the vague fantasy of return that haunts diasporic groups, large numbers of Black Americans travel to African locales every year on ancestry ‘pilgrimages,’ occasioning the rise of so-called ‘root’ or ‘heritage’ tourism in West African countries as part of “a larger political economy in which Western tourists seek cultural heritage experiences from the non-West” (Clarke, 2006: 139). Ghana has become the main supplier of these experiences through ‘roots packages’ that usually involve visits to sites of the transatlantic slave trade and rituals of homecoming and symbolic healing for the returnees⁴. The desire for a “diasporic homecoming” (Tsuda 2009) conveyed by these return visits is evidenced too in how a growing number of African-descended North Americans have been trying to ascertain what their specific place of origin in Africa might be by submitting to DNA testing (Fehler 2011). The impulse to pinpoint a sense of belonging is also evident in Tessa McWatt’s memoir *Shame on Me: An Anatomy of Race and Belonging* (2019), in which she delves introspectively into her multiple inheritance while awaiting the results of DNA kits she has ordered from two popular DNA testing online systems, 23&Me and Ancestry.com.

While there may be a large variety of causes for an “ethnic return” —i.e., the permanent return to an ancestral land of diasporan people separated from it by several

generations (Tsuda, 2009: 1)— and economic pressures often play a role, affective ties are a substantial part of many of these returns. This is precisely the case of the African diaspora; due to the harrowing experiences constitutive of the dispersal of enslaved people, the very notion of return to the ancestral homeland is highly emotional. Sentimental links already extant have been strengthened by cultural representations since the 1970s, particularly in TV products like the miniseries *Roots*, based on Alex Haley's novel, or the documentaries written and hosted by African American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. since the 1990s, encouraging the notion that the Door of No Return may not have irreparably severed all African descendants from their ancestry. Although it is true that these are US-produced and -oriented cultural products, they have circulated well beyond US borders and these days they are largely available worldwide on the internet. *Roots* is “the third most watched program in the history of television —130 million people, representing a broad spectrum of viewers worldwide, were estimated to have seen it” (Clarke 2006: 140), among them Black Canadians like the impressionable young writer Lawrence Hill was at the time (Hill, 2001: 66-7). While *Roots* allowed a shift from a popular representation of “black Americans being victims of slavery who were saved by Abraham Lincoln to blacks as noble survivors and agents of their own freedom” (Clarke, 2006: 141), Gates's documentaries for PBS starting in 1999 reinforced this message, first by offering viewers a new, more positive image of the African continent in *Wonders of the African World*, and from 2006 onwards in documentaries such as *African American Lives* and *Finding your Roots* by tracing the genealogy of Black American celebrities with the help of a variety of sources, ranging from historical archives to experts in genetics⁵. Regardless of the business aspect of these TV products⁶, they all foreground deeply traumatic histories of forced or voluntary migration and exploitation and they map out landscapes of interconnection that also surface in the writings of Black Canadians.

The affective link with Africa was more visible in those Black Canadian works composed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, for instance in the African crossings performed by Djanet Sears in her play *Afrika Solo* (1990; the first published play by a Black Canadian woman), in M. NourbeSe Philip's fictional travelogue *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991), or in the earlier fiction of Lawrence Hill. In contrast, as I argue here next, the profile of Africa is being re-signified by younger generations of Black diasporan writers in Canada. This complements David Charandy's contention that “among second-generation blacks in Canada, only 37.0% felt it possible to articulate a strong sense of belonging to Canada—a statistic lower than for any other group” (2007: 818), a change that he attributes to the failure of Canadian institutions to instill in them a sense of cultural citizenship. The purpose of this article is to open up a conversation into how Black Canadian affects, both concerning national identity and homeland connection, seem to have shifted in the twenty-first century. In order to do so I have selected as my main case study the play *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (2017), a reinterpretation by Lisa Codrington—a

Canadian-born actor and playwright of Barbadian heritage— of George Bernard Shaw's 1932 short story of the same title. Thus, after rehearsing the shift in the works of some major Black Canadian writers, the last part of the essay turns to consider the implications of Codrington's play, selected for analysis as a milestone because for the first time a Black Canadian playwright (and a woman, to boot) was invited to participate in one of Canada's most prestigious and longest-established theatre festivals, the Shaw Festival.

2. RE-SIGNIFYING AFRICA

In an exchange with M. NourbeSe Philip, Anthony Morgan stated: “The main thing I’ve learned about Black Canadian history (recent and not) is that we’re taught to forget. This is especially true of African Canadian histories of resistance. Indeed, it is a disservice to ourselves, our communities and our collective future when we forget” (Philip, 2017: 320). Black Canadian literary texts of the 1980s and 1990s resisted the call to forget extended from colonial institutions that framed African histories and trajectories as so many absences, but this momentum gradually slowed down and the African continent currently appears to have lost some of its strong hold on Black diasporan cultural memory. In the twenty-first century, Black Canadian texts do not as closely engage with African locations or characters nor do they explicitly try, like texts of the 1990s, to challenge the reductive terms and clichés about Africa that persist in the western imagination after centuries of colonial rule⁷. A bemused Lawrence Hill, for instance, has addressed in an essay for *The Walrus* —“Is Africa’s Pain Black America’s Burden?” (2005)— what he feels is the general indifference of most black North Americans towards the dire situation in many African countries of late. Most Black Americans now —Hill claims— would have trouble locating any African countries on a map, a comment that echoes the African character in his novel *Any Known Blood*, Yoyo, when he challenges African Americans who self-identify as Africans to “tell me the capital of Burkina Faso” (1997: 248). Furthermore, the Black Canadian author states: “[W]e identify less and less with Africa, and our battles here at home take our attention away from a threatened people whom we don’t even know. Africa is too distant, too big, too confusing, too *much*” (n. p.). To a certain extent, Hill’s thoughts on this growing detachment carry an echo of Brand’s *Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), a memoir which, while acknowledging that Africa haunts Blacks in the diaspora, lets go of it as an ancestral land and locates their origin in the sea instead. It is from this centre that what García-Zarranz has called a “cross-border pathogeography” can be performed (2017: 105). Even though Brand returns again and again to maps and cartography as signposts of an imperialistic, acquisitive outlook, her gaze drifts away from Africa, burdened by affects that have been circulating more globally for centuries now.

Brand's retreat from a mythical Africa is representative of Black Canadian works published in the twenty-first century. Lawrence Hill's fiction of the 1990s featured a recurrent Cameroonian character (Yoyo) that connected North American plots and characters to Africa. As the cite above suggests, Hill strategically deployed this character to probe into and throw into sharper relief the nature of Black Canadianess first (*Some Great Thing*, 1992) and African Americanness later (*Any Known Blood*, 1997)⁸. Although Yoyo did not fit into the broader geography or chronology of Hill's third novel, the international success *The Book of Negroes* (2007), which tackled the Black Atlantic territories at the peak of the slave trade, he still made a brief final appearance in *The Illegal* (2015) as the protagonist's father. However, in that later work Yoyo was no longer located in either Cameroon, the United States, or Canada, but on a fictional island state in the Indian Ocean, Zantoroland. The author's retreat from realism in his choice and depiction of the setting signals that his intent is no longer to play national traits of Blackness against each other, but that he is framing the overarching question of how (or if) Blackness can travel across borders and how it is interpellated by each nation state in turn; in other words, which forms of anti-Black violence are in force against Black subjects globally, and specifically in border crossing, as the novel title's suggests.

The Book of Negroes (2007) is by and large the most sustained of Hill's engagements with Africa. It is, nevertheless, quite unlike earlier Black Diasporic Canadian texts insofar as it details the transformation by which an African person becomes unrooted, rather than depicting the search for roots of a Black diasporic person⁹. As a result, one recurrent idea in the novel is that Africans are "travelling peoples" (2007: 301, 318-9, 404), which encapsulates the message that "no place in the world was entirely safe for an African, and that for many of us, survival depended on perpetual migration" (2007: 385). Thus, the novel portrays multiple arrivals and departures—rather than one straight-forward migration and return—through the consciousness of a young woman of mixed Western African parentage, Fula and Bamanakan, living in the small village of Bayo. The first section or "book" depicts Aminata Diallo's early years until her kidnapping at the age of eleven. There, Hill perceptively imagines the moment of rupture with the African continent and the closing of the Door of No Return in terms that reference Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789) and other similar accounts of the late eighteenth-century, the period in which the narrative is set. In the second book, Aminata experiences the loss of identity that characterizes enslavement and is progressively transformed into Meena Dee or Miss Dee under a series of owners in the Thirteen Colonies. The loss of her African name, that no one around her can pronounce, cuts her off from her earlier life; instead, this is "a new name for the second life of a girl who survived the great river crossing" (2007: 127). In the third book, Aminata manages to run away and works for the loyalists in the American War of Independence, which grants her free passage to the British colony of Nova Scotia. But in the

fourth she is again on the move. After the loss of her loved ones, she decides to join the African resettlement project of the Sierra Leone Company in an attempt to return to her roots and find her village.

However, this return mobility is again quite unlike those featuring in Hill's earlier fiction. For one thing, Aminata always resisted the very term "Africa" as a European construction at odds with her own sense of self: "I belong to nobody, and I am not an African. I am a Bamana. And a Fula. I am from Bayo, near Segou. I am not what you say. I am not an African" (2007: 122). In fact, when she eventually gets access to a map of her region, she feels no jolt of recognition because the contours of the lands shown on it have been codified according to the colonial gaze of appropriation and conquest. These Eurocentric renderings show lions, elephants, and savages: "the map told me nothing of where I came from" (2007: 211). In addition, the Africa that receives her is quite unlike the Africa she left; it has been changed beyond any possibility of recognition by the slave trade and the colonial project, just like Aminata herself has been altered by her experiences as an enslaved person in a number of plantations and later as a runaway. Like other Black diasporic persons in the examples we have discussed above, she is not received by the local Temne as she expected, that is, as a long lost family member, but on the contrary, she is labelled a "toubab", an honorary white person deserving equal distrust: "By the way they [the Temne women] squeezed my hands and arms, they seemed to think that I was as foreign as the British" (Hill, 2007: 386).

In this section, then, Aminata must come to terms with the impossibility of a true return. She is unable to locate her hometown of Bayo, nor anyone she knew as a child. For a while she compromises, temporarily taking up the role of *djeli* or storyteller in a village in the interior that harbours her after being close to recapture and re-enslavement. But once Aminata recovers her physical health and mental balance, she realizes that belonging is not as important as remaining free. This Africa continues to be under the sway of the slave trade and its economic interests; there is no safety for anyone until the slave trade and slavery itself have been eradicated. In the next book, Aminata has resettled in London and has become a prominent member of the abolitionist cause. Her strong voice for Black freedom is making a powerful contribution to global change and she has reconciled herself to being a person of many places. Aminata has finally learnt to embrace her several languages, accents, and ways of being in the world comprised in a diasporic self-identification. As a result, *The Book of Negroes* confirms rather than contradicts my argument about the changing forms of the trope of Africa and the (im)possibility of a home for the diaspora in twenty-first century Black Canadian writings.

Obviously, I would not go as far as state a total absence of African characters or topics, particularly in what concerns African-born Canadian writers who remain closely connected to African events, like the poet Juliane Okot Bitek's poetic response to the 1994

Rwandan genocide in *100 Days* (2014). Or even second-generation Black Canadian writers like Esi Edugyan, whose first novel *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* (2004), featured Ghanaian immigrants to Alberta. What I am arguing here is that there is an identifiable and significant shift in recent years in the affects connecting Black Canadian literary production to the original homeland. This shift comes through clearly in the way younger Black Canadian authors currently handle African-related materials. A case in point is Lisa Codrington's play *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (2017)¹⁰, an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's short story of the same title commissioned by the Shaw Festival for their 2016 season. Although not an original play, *The Adventures* was a watershed moment in Canadian theatre: it was the first time that a Black Canadian playwright was featured in the Shaw Festival, which was by then in its fifty-fifth year. The lack of diversity that this fact suggested did not go unheeded, as will be discussed below, nor did the play's being scheduled in the less attractive lunchtime slot.

The original story, published in 1932, was written during Shaw's short sojourn in South Africa, a fact that the writer acknowledged in a lengthy preface in which he also detailed how the story resisted a dramatic form and structure that he would have been happier with. Shaw's socialist politics are an established fact; many of his works gave rise to heated debates and *The Adventures* was no exception; for some, its approach to God and the Bible was nothing short of blasphemous. It narrates how a young African girl raised by a missionary who resented her constant questioning was sent off on a quest for the only being who could provide answers to all her queries. Armed with a copy of the Bible as her guidebook and the quote "Seek and ye shall find me", the Black girl "strode right off into the African forest in search of God" (Shaw, 1932: 22). In Shaw's telling, the unnamed Black girl, though curious and feisty, is a one-dimensional character, built for the purpose of proving the author's point: that "the Bible, scientifically obsolete in all other respects, remains interesting as a record of how the idea of God [...] develops" (Shaw, 1932: 13). In Shavian thought, this evolution started off with a "destructively omnipotent Bogey Man", then shifted to a benevolent sage, then to a just judge, and to an affectionate father, only to be later superseded by modern science and philosophy in accounting for the existence and purpose of the universe and its inhabitants (Shaw 1932: 13). In order to meet this goal, the narrative had to be conducted by a character that was an outsider to those European Christian cultures involved¹¹. Thus, Shaw argues that "[the adventures] could hardly have happened to a white girl steeped from her birth in the pseudoChristianity of the Churches" (Shaw, 1932: 18). Once the Black Girl has fulfilled her role, she is promptly discarded. Or, in Shaw's words: "she finds it wiser to take Voltaire's advice by cultivating her garden and bringing up her piccaninnies than to spend her life imagining that she can find a complete explanation of the universe by laying about her with her knobkerry" (Shaw, 1932: 18). Considering Shaw's relatively progressive views on gender and Empire, the story's profoundly sexist, racist, and

imperialist ending might come as a surprise. The Black Girl was married off to a red-headed socialist Irishman who could not be persuaded “that God was anything more solid and satisfactory than an eternal but as yet unfulfilled purpose” (Shaw, 1932: 69) and was not particularly happy either to wed “a black heathen niggerwoman” (Shaw, 1932: 71), although, in looking after her husband and her children, the Black Girl eventually forgot all her pressing questions.

When Lisa Codrington started her own search for a Shavian text to adapt, she was both intrigued and bothered by this story, as she declared in a CBC radio interview shortly before the premiere of her play: “This is a white man exploring the story of a black girl and taking her on a journey, and for me, at times, I felt like I don't know if the voice of the black girl is as specific as I would like it to be”, Codrington says. “How can I make this black girl a character as opposed to ... a vessel for ideas about religion?” (CBC radio, web). In Codrington's adaptation, dedicated to Black girls in its published iteration, the Black girl continues to be unnamed and is as feisty and curious as she was in the original text. Yet, significant changes have been introduced. The Black Girl's encounters with different gods have been streamlined and the problematic ending has been removed. A more agile, effective dramatic structure has been adopted, and the comic nature of the encounters underlined. A case in point is the episode of the Caravan of the Curious that, while retaining the political message and most of the ideas in Shaw's telling (Shaw, 1932: 46-55), becomes in Codrington's expert hands a hilariously sarcastic encounter with a group of scientists¹². The playwright has replaced the group of Black bearers accompanying them with just one Black bearer “carrying all of the caravan's shit and maybe even some members of the caravan. It's a ridiculous amount of stuff for one man to carry” (2017: 157), a device that makes extremely visible the power hierarchies at play as well as the depth of white privilege and Black exploitation at work in the colonial project under the guise of scientific progress. In addition, while those bearers acted as mere onlookers to the exchange with the Black Girl, here the Black Bearer joins her in the unfolding conversation, so that to all effects, there are two clear groups engaged in dialectical confrontation, colonizers and colonized. Black Bearer even illustrates the Black Girl on some points, like the slave trade:

MATHEMATICIAN: Our guns have saved [Africans] from the man-eating lion and the trampling elephant.

BLACK BEARER: Uh, I was thinking more about how they delivered us into the hands of the man-beating slave-driver and the trampling boss.

BLACK GIRL: Seriously?

BLACK BEARER: Yeah, you don't know this?

BLACK GIRL: No.

BLACK BEARER: Let me guess, you were raised by a merciful missionary / on a meaningful mission?

BLACK GIRL: On a meaningful mission! How'd you know?

BLACK BEARER: White people don't like to talk about this.

MATHEMATICIAN: (*to caravan*) They know we can hear'em, right? (*The PHYSICIST and BIOLOGIST shrug.*)

The BLACK GIRL and the BLACK BEARER continue to ad lib, "I can see why", "every time I bring up..." etc. (Codrington, 2017: 162-3)

As this passage illustrates, Codrington adroitly engineers the exchanges so that they switch from one group talking *to* the other to talking *about* them in an aside, as if they were not present. This technique allows her to create a neat division between "us" and "them" in such a way that the audience can both enjoy the irony of the piece and assume the subject position of "we/colonized peoples" rather than that of "they/colonizers".

Chief among the changes introduced is the fact that a prologue and an epilogue (here named "preface" and "postface") now provide a dramatic frame for the Black Girl's quest. In these new sections, George Bernard Shaw himself (concisely identified as GBS) makes an appearance, engaging in dialogue with the Black Girl (a mouthpiece for Codrington) and later with another character, Black Mamba. In the tradition of prologues and epilogues, Codrington uses these framing sections and part of scene 4 to address the audience more pointedly by inserting her own comments on the materials and the theatrical conditions she is working within. In the preface, the Irish playwright, unhappy with Codrington's rendering of his story, is comically keen on delivering his lengthy preface to the audience, but the Black Girl firmly cuts him short, making clear that his works no longer enjoy the high profile they used to have:

BLACK GIRL: You wouldn't be the first dead white guy from across the pond to have a prestigious theatre festival named after him ... and then not. If you don't believe me, go dig up Shakespeare and ask him what it's like to catch a show at the STRATFORD FESTIVAL these days. "To be or not to be". That's the question, GBS. (Codrington, 2017: 125)

GBS tries again in the middle of scene four, changing his lines—he plays one of the scientists in the Caravan of the Curious—to return to the preface, which he takes out as he turns to address the audience. Once more, the Black Girl stops him short as he is about to start reading, using this opportunity as a vehicle for her own ideas instead of Shaw's. The Black Girl/Codrington claims here the authorial right to transform the original story because of her own expertise in "black girl-ness" and more generally defends that GBS's work "should also be explored and scrutinized by people with a different kinda wise" (2017: 169). In the postface, though, a short dialogue between two actors playing GBS and Black Mamba

as they are leaving the stage closes the play on a note of praise and admiration for the Irish playwright's *oeuvre*, perhaps in order to compensate for the beating he had taken before as a "dead white guy". After all, Codrington is very much aware of the conditions for her own writing in the commercial theatre and of the political economy of theatre festivals. For instance, the *Black Girl* reminds GBS that this is a short, one-act play, and its performance time should not exceed an hour; it has to be "short and sweet". But it must also meet other conditions:

BLACK GIRL: This has gotta be a quick light look at religion—racism—slavery—patriarchy—privilege—oppression—voice—appropriation—colonization—discrimination—assimilation—immigration—colonialism—feminism—imperialism—iconoclasm and the intersectionality—of intersections—OH, and then on TOP of that, this has GOT TO BE a comedy, so that by the time THESE GUYS (*referring to audience*) leave, they are in the kinda mood that's gonna make them wanna plan their next trip back, tell their friends, renew their subscriptions, and, better yet, make a sizable donation to the theatre. (2017: 168; capitals and italics in the original)

Ultimately, these metatheatrical moments in the play critically rehearse the productive tensions between both authors, their times, and their theatre worlds, and are part of the reason why *The Adventures* received enthusiastic reviews. For J. Kelly Nestruck, it is not only "an exceedingly entertaining comedy" (web) but also one with great contemporary relevance, and he is quick to point out the parallelism between the *Caravan of the Curious* and those other theatre productions that reproduce similar racial dynamics, in which actors of colour play only minor or servile roles. For Lisa Codrington and surely for the play's director, Ravi Jain, it made sense to bring as much diversity to this production as possible. The published text reveals the author's preoccupation in that respect. Concerning the description of one of the characters as Asian, for instance, Codrington inserts the following footnote: "Just a reminder that THE CONJURER can be played by any person of colour who can pass for white in sunglasses and a wig. If you choose someone who is not Asian, feel free to change the line accordingly" (2017: 155). As an actor herself, Codrington is very much aware that colour-conscious casting can be a powerful means of advancing cultural equity and social justice, and therefore a helpful tool against the pedagogy of cruelty underpinning anti-Black racism. In the enthusiastic review quoted above, Nestruck disparagingly compared the Shaw Festival to the Stratford festival, where there was not a single all-white cast in the same season. The review ended with a parting shot at how backward the Shaw Festival was becoming and how it was perhaps "regressing into a celebration of Anglo-Irish-Scottish heritage" (web). Along the same lines, *The Niagara Falls Review*, for instance, noted that "[r]arely does the [Shaw Festival] do a straight-forward production of [GB Shaw's] plays any more – they're now

modernized, re-imagined or, as here, freshly adapted” (“Black Girl is Food for Thought”, web). What the reviews make clear is a general critique of the Shaw Festival as having become too conservative and out of tune with the present time. In this respect, at the very least, it seems that *The Adventures* served to probe into the health of one of Canada’s oldest and most prestigious cultural institutions, only to find it wanting in diversity, and to diagnose some of the ways in which it should improve.

3. CONCLUSIONS

All in all, the Black Canadian writers discussed in this essay and their various texts, whatever their forms, are committed to disrupting the Eurocentrism that continues to underpin the representation of Africa and to reinvesting the continent with new meanings, articulating alternative affective relations with the continent, its peoples and its diasporas. They convey the manifold ways in which ‘home’ is produced and contested, particularly in the context of diasporic or ethnic returns, and they bring attention to bear on the materiality and the affective links of those constructions. The books also attest to the sense of urgency that the idea of an African or African diasporic identity held for a while for Black Canadians and to the need to (re)interpret the painful historical experience of slavery, which both sets them apart from and binds them to Africans. The authors’ various texts and viewpoints are also related to their demystifying, anti-racist projects, in that they all address how coloniality lives on to this day across many cultural institutions that might be characterized as “white men” in the terms used by Sara Ahmed:

When we talk of “white men” we are describing something. We are describing an institution. An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behavior of a set of individuals within a given community. So when I am saying that white men is an institution, I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the *mechanisms* that ensure the persistence of that structure. A building is shaped by a series of regulative norms. White men refers also to conduct; it is not simply who is there, who is here, who is given a place at the table, but how bodies are occupied once they have arrived. (2017:152-3)

In raising our awareness about how anti-Black racism operates, these Black Canadian texts also attest to what Philip considers the subversive role of memory, “that memory is more than nostalgia —it has a potentially kinetic quality and must impel us to action” (1992: 20). All the works discussed above display a similar meaningful engagement with Black diasporan cultural memory, underlining Morgan's point that “[w]hen we don't know or allow ourselves to be grounded and guided by our Black histories of resistance and struggle, we support anti-Black power structures in doing just this: changing to remain the same” (Philip 2017: 320).

Yet, as evidenced in Codrington's play, this engagement has shifted in twenty-first century writings from an affective, deeply personal mythical journey into ancestral belonging and connection to Africa to a more detached and performative use of African-related images in order to critique the continuity of racist practices in major cultural institutions in Canada.

NOTES

¹ I follow here the term used by Isabel Carrera-Suárez (2017) for the literary production of Black Canadians.

² Seremba's celebrated play *Come Good Rain* (1992) charts the experiences leading the Ugandan writer to go into exile. Another instance of the ongoing direct involvement with African events is Okot Bitek's *100 Days* (2014), a poetic response to the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

³ For an analysis of Hill's attitudes towards Africa as rendered in his fiction and non-fiction writings, see my article "In Search of a 'Grammar of Black': Africa and Africans in Lawrence Hill's Works" (2015).

⁴ Black British author Caryl Phillips has described one such homecoming ritual, hosted by African American returnees, in *The Atlantic Sound* (2000: 167–78).

⁵ The PBS website lists the following miniseries written and hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr.: *Wonders of the African World* (1999), *America Beyond the Color Line* (2004), *African American Lives* (2006), *Oprah's Roots* (2007), *African American Lives 2* (2008), *Looking for Lincoln* (2009), *Faces of America* (2010), *Black in Latin America* (2011), and *Finding your Roots* which ran for six seasons (2012–2019). Proof of their popularity among Black Canadians is repeated mentions in non-fiction by Lawrence Hill, Dionne Brand, and Tessa McWatt, among others.

⁶ Interestingly, the TV documentaries are linked to "companion books" and sponsored by online genealogy sites like ancestry.com, suggesting how profitable the search for one's ancestry may be in today's business world.

⁷ Binyavanga Wainaina's 2005 essay "How to Write about Africa" famously rehearses some of those stereotypes.

⁸ For a discussion of what she describes as Hill's "African trickster" period, see my article "In Search of a 'Grammar of Black': Africa and Africans in Lawrence Hill's Works" (2015).

⁹ For a more in-depth study of Aminata Diallo's evolution and in the context of the slave narrative tradition, see Yorke's "The Slave Narrative Tradition in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*" (2010) and as well as my essay "Revisiting Slavery. African Diasporic Consciousness in Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*" (2012).

¹⁰ Not to be mistaken for Djanet Sears's earlier play, similarly inspired by Shaw's short story and titled *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* (2003), which does not follow the original story at all but is used as a springboard for the Black playwright's own reflection on Blackness and religion.

¹¹ However, Shaw includes Judaism and Islam in this account of the forms and evolutions of God.

¹² Most of the words in Codrington's scene are taken from the original although occasionally they might be voiced by different characters. For more on Shaw's standpoint on colonialism, see Tracy D. Davis, "Shaw's Interstices of Empire" (1998).

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