4   Negotiating singularity and alikeness

Esi Edugyan, Lawrence Hill and Canadian Afrodiasporic writing

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ABSTRACT

Approaching the concept of the Afropolitan as one among various contemporary endeavours to redefine Afrodiasporic identities, this article compares Selasi's gesture of self-naming to the debates on terminology and affiliation engaged in by Canadian Afrodiasporic writers, which shift between demanding recognition in the national imaginary and declaring allegiance to the African diaspora. Focusing on belonging, alikeness and (creative) singularity in the Kreisel lectures delivered by Esi Edugyan and Lawrence Hill, it proposes that a reading within recent theories of diaspora and neo-cosmopolitanism may provide an interpretive framework for the apparently contradictory allegiances and the open citizenship practiced by Afrodiasporic writers.

At the heart of Taiye Selasi's formulation of the concept of the Afropolitan (Selasi, 2005) lies, among other issues, a personal rebellion against the repeated essentialising of African and Afrodiasporic subjects, fuelling a desire to practise an alternative self-definition which may allow the author, and others in her generation, to position themselves in a globalised, urban, mutilocal world. Her neologism *Afropolitan* clearly appealed to a very extended desire in a variety of diasporic Africans around the world, given its subsequent proliferation in popular, consumerist and intellectual spheres. In the academic world, prone to coinage of terminology, sometimes in its own version of consumerism, the concept has been as much debated and critiqued as outside the academy. Whether the neologism is a useful or accurate analytical category in a variety of research fields is, of course, a suitably academic concern. My own intervention here will attempt not so much to judge the convenience of its existence or application to cultural and literary analysis, as to read its significance in parallel to other examples of Black/African self-designation, in this case in the context of a specific nation, Canada, whose iconicity as official multicultural state may offer an instructive vantage point for comparison.

Taiye Selasi's act of self-naming is only one of recent attempts to redefine various Afrodescendent subjectivities which do not concur with stereotypical ideas of 'Africa' (as portrayed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in 'The Danger of a Single Story', 2009) nor are coterminous with the subjectivities of those descended from transported slaves or from

early migrants. With contemporary 'Africanness' no longer conceived necessarily in opposition to 'Westernness', the complexities of Black diasporas across the world are being foregrounded and analysed from within and from multiple geolocalisations. Black writers in Canada have been dissecting such complexities for several decades, in both national and transnational frameworks[1]. They have done so from the relatively peripheral position occupied by their country in global cultural affairs, but also from the nuanced and articulate discourse derived from years of multicultural practice and critique, in a culture which has, however imperfectly, allowed difference into its imagined self. Canada's 'hyphenated identities', 'visible minorities' and immigrant dwellers are, together with First Nations, recognised constituents of Canadian citizenship. And yet, African Canadian and Black Canadian subjectivities have been unearthed in their varying historical dimensions only in relatively recent times, with writers playing an active role in the research and dissemination of this new knowledge. The rapid manner in which the Canadian cultural scene has incorporated and been shaped by Black Canadians (as well as other visible minorities) since the 1990s, and the depth of the ensuing debates, are impressive developments which may, nevertheless, veil the as yet unnaturalised citizenship and 'belonging' of many of its actors.

By focusing on Esi Edugyan's and Lawrence Hill's respective Henry Kreisel lectures, *Dreaming of Elsewhere* (2014) and *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book* (2013), which relate directly to the novels that established each of them as international writers, *Half-Blood Blues* (2011) and *The Book of Negroes* (2007), I will engage with the commonalities and yet singular character of the writerly stances and practices of these two second-generation Canadians, in an attempt to assess some of the long-standing complications of those 'old', apparently resolved, diasporic concepts of home and belonging, of local and transnational allegiances. For this purpose I will discuss Edugyan's and Hill's Kreisel lectures, first in the context of Canadian redefinitions of Blackness and then in light of recent approaches to neo-cosmopolitanism. Such an analysis may help to gauge the extent to which Canadian debates, and particularly these two authors' stances and practices, may relate to 'Afropolitanism', and whether their strategic positions may be read through the lens of what Sneja Gunew (2017) has recently described as the 'neo-cosmopolitan mediation' of post-multicultural writers.

Debating the Afro-Canadian

The history of Black Canadians is today fairly well documented, and extends back almost as far as transatlantic settlement.[2] A small number of Africans arrived in the territory later to be known as Canada in the seventeenth century, slaves taken into New France from New England or from the West Indies. Some were also transported later by British Loyalists, although a higher number in fact arrived as free persons, having earned their liberty through their own loyalty to the British Crown. In 1783, the names of 3000 Black Loyalists who were granted admission into Canada were recorded in the historical document known as 'The Book of Negroes', which inspires and gives title to Lawrence Hill's 2007 novel. In fact, before the twentieth century, the majority of Africans or their immediate ancestors had entered Canada fleeing slavery, many through the Underground Railroad, with another notorious group, composed of Jamaican Maroons, also arriving in Nova Scotia in 1796. These incomers settled in Eastern Canada, mostly the Maritimes. However, there had also been smaller migrations of free Americans to the Canadian West, from California to Vancouver Island in the 1850s and, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a migratory move from Oklahoma to

the Prairies, mainly Alberta. These successive waves of migration did not produce a substantial Black Canadian population in terms of numbers, and arrival directly from Africa continued to be very rare. In fact, in a parallel with Britain that David Chariandy (2007) has highlighted, the numerical growth of the Black and African population in Canada takes place only after the Second World War (particularly after the 1967 lifting of policies which restricted 'coloured' immigrants). Many West Indians, but also Africans, particularly from Ghana and Nigeria, immigrate at this point in larger numbers. This mid-twentieth-century migration has contributed to the popular and often resented belief that all Black individuals and communities are recent arrivals. Further historical data from every period is undoubtedly awaiting retrieval, as the Hogan's Alley Memorial Project in Vancouver, among others, testifies, but it is worth noting that this enhanced historical knowledge of Black/African Canadians' past has grown in parallel to the advent of an active and talented community of writers who have contributed effectively to rescuing this past and, as is the case with the Afropolitan debate, have maintained an intense writerly dialogue on the naming and ascription to Africanness, Canadianness and Blackness, a dialogue on national or transnational identifications.

'Black Canadian literature' is therefore, as Chariandy puts it, 'a creaky and polyvocal field' (2007: 820), where writers align to varying degrees and in different manners with an African past. The classic polarisation in this debate, loosely identifiable with Paul Gilroy's routes/roots distinction (1993), filtered through a Canadian lens, has been represented by the divergent argumentations of Nova Scotian writer and critic George Elliot Clarke and Caribbean-born critic Rinaldo Walcott, both based in Toronto. Clarke's term 'Africadian', a composite of African and the Acadian culture of Nova Scotia, was coined to describe the Black communities established in the Maritime area for generations. Clarke (2002) advocates the recognition of their Canadianness in an appeal to the right of national belonging. His poetry, critical theory and novelistic practice compose a historical-fictional project of *Canadian rootedness* for Africadians, whom he sees as forming a 'settled diaspora' (Eguíbar Holgado, 2015), an oxymoron that may nevertheless accurately describe the contradictory position of those whose roots are firmly established in their country of birth but who have not quite been accepted into its imaginary. The other end of the theoretical spectrum is represented by Rinaldo Walcott's transnational position, expressed early on in his ground-breaking volume *Black Like Who?* (1997), which, inspired by Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), follows 'the circuitous *routes* of Black diasporic cultures, their connectedness and differences' (17, my emphasis), focusing on transcultural migrations and rhizomatic subjectivities. As is now the case with the term 'Afropolitan', writers have tended to identify with one or the other position, even if these have come to be found, in effect, not so incompatible. Writers of West Indian origins like Marlene NourbeSe Philip or Dionne Brand tend towards an international, diasporic identification with the commonalities of Black experience, viewing Africa as a twice-removed home, 'a place strictly of the imagination' (Brand, 2001: 25), while also rejecting national allegiances. Marlene NourbeSe Philip uses the term 'Afrospora' to encompass those she describes as united by a loss of home and a shared psychic wound. Dionne Brand speaks eloquently on her transnational stance in her essays (particularly *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 2001) while practising a located transnational representation in celebrated works such as her novel *What We All Long For* (2005), whose protagonists are four young characters of different diasporic origins sharing friendship and urban lives in multicultural Toronto. A further contribution to the debate, and one that, like Clarke's Africadia, is closely identified with a specific Canadian location, is Wayde Compton's *After Canaan*

(2010), born from the experience of being Black in Vancouver. Compton proposes an assertive 'Afroperipheralism', which might contest hegemonic visions of Blackness circulated in studies that presume either a 'Black Atlantic' pattern or a subjectivity tinged with the particular circumstances of the United States. Vancouver's Black community has developed outside the direct sites of slavery, with migrants arriving from the US or through other recent routes, and a high percentage of its members living in interracial families whose mother tongue is English, rather than a diasporic language. One of its historical locations, Hogan's Alley, which housed most of the Black population in the city, was demolished in the urban development frenzy of the 1960s, and its inhabitants scattered. Compton leads the Hogan's Alley Memorial project, which salvages the memory of that communal life. Combining the features of writer and historian, he works to record the genealogy of Black presence in Vancouver and British Columbia, which he has explored in his creative writing (*The Outer Harbour*, 2014).

This condensed account of the dialogue on Africanness in contemporary Canadian letters[3] attempts to illustrate the ongoing search for what Rinaldo Walcott denominates 'a Canadian grammar for black' (1997: 145 ff), a search which might ring familiar to Afropolitans seeking 'a way of being African in the world' (Gikandi, 2011: 11; Selasi, 2005), a way which necessarily involves cultural hybridity. This projected grammar is further complicated by the many so-called mixed-race subjectivities, so well represented in recent generations by writers such as Lawrence Hill, Wayde Compton or Suzette Mayr, among others, who address mixed parentage both in autobiographical essays and in fiction.

The two texts that I will discuss here are based on lectures delivered by writers who share the condition of second-generation 'Black Canadians', but whose personal histories differ in a number of ways. They also share notable literary success that begins in each case with a highly imaginative, historically grounded novel. Lawrence Hill received international acclaim for *The Book of Negroes* (2007), telling the story of Aminata Diallo, who is captured as a child in Niger and transported to South Carolina as a slave. Aminata eventually becomes one of those inscribed (and helping to inscribe others) in 'The Book of Negroes', moves to Nova Scotia and later returns to Sierra Leone, where Nova Scotians founded Freetown. At the end of her life she contributes to the Abolitionist campaign in London and writes her life story. This encompassing book, which charts the globality of the slave trade and dispels the myth of Canada as a haven for slaves, has received international awards, sold beyond most Canadian expectations and inspired a TV mini-series. It successfully blends imaginative storytelling with an impressive amount of historical knowledge, a trademark of Hill's work. In turn, Esi Edugyan's first international success, *Half Blood Blues* (2011), is set in Berlin and Paris and features the members of a young jazz band escaping Nazi persecution. Hieronymous Falk (Hiero), the inspirational leader of the band, is one of the so-called 'Rhineland Bastards', the children of white German mothers and Black French colonial soldiers who participated in the occupation of the Rhineland after the First World War. These children were subsequently declared 'hereditarily unfit' and persecuted by Hitler. In 2012 and 2013 respectively, Hill and Edugyan were invited to take part in the Henry Kreisel Lecture Series at the University of Alberta. Both based their talk on issues related to these most famous of their books, while also referring, in different degrees, to their diasporic identities and allegiances. The published versions of these lectures therefore provide access to two recent reflections, by established second-generation Canadian writers, on the complexities of self-naming and identification, reflections which directly inform their creative practices.

Writing home: Esi Edugyan on estrangement and belonging

Perhaps the first striking feature of Edugyan's text, prominently underlined in the title, *Dreaming of Elsewhere. Observations on Home* (2014), is its involvement with the issues of home and belonging, relatively 'old', over-discussed concepts in postcolonial and diasporic theories. The significance of this revisiting, however, should not be underestimated, as it alerts us to its contemporary relevance and the incompleteness of the multicultural project. Edugyan weaves her lecture from a number of stories, some personal, others involving Afrodiasporic characters. She begins by recalling the life of Amo, a historical figure who in 1707, as a young boy, was transported from Ghana to Germany, probably as a slave or 'gift'. On his master's decision, however, he was educated at the University of Halle, excelled in various scientific disciplines and languages and taught at a number of universities, but eventually returned 'home' to Ghana, 40 years later, in 1747, following his public lampooning during an anti-liberal period of hostility towards Africans. The second story told is the author's encounter with a Ghanaian taxi driver in Toronto, a former professor of physics in Accra. In both cases she tries to imagine the feelings of estrangement and un/belonging involved, despite the different historical and personal circumstances:

> Three hundred years separate their lives, and so much has changed. And yet the nature of belonging has not. As the daughter of Ghanaian immigrants, raised in a household where Twi, Fante and Asante were as likely to be heard as English or French, my life has been an uneasy one in relation to the ground under my feet. Home, for me, was not a birth right, but an invention. (Edugyan, 2014: 6)

This uneasy belonging, it must be noted, does not extend to the act of writing, given that 'minority' writing in Canada, Britain and the US, she argues, has become 'the new dominant kind of narrative', much sought after by publishers who encourage young writers to 'flaunt their ethnic distinctiveness' (7). With this understated suggestion of 'ethnographic' interest in the designated 'multicultural writers', Edugyan declares postcolonial literary challenges a thing of the past, and her own writing path paved by pioneers. And yet, she hastens to add: 'do I believe that we live in a colour-blind society, a society where race goes unnoticed? I confess I find the notion ridiculous' (7). Her text, and our argument here, build on these contradictory realities.

The concept of *home* is, of course, pivotal in all diasporic theorising. Some of the most lucid analyses remain those put forward by Avtar Brah (1996), who describes home as 'a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination' but also 'the lived experience of a locality' (192), mediated by specific social relations. The notion of home, Brah reminds us, 'is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It relates to the complex political and personal struggles over the social regulation of "belonging"' (194). Edugyan's text begins the personal side of her account precisely by speculating about what moved her to travel extensively in Europe in her twenties, 'leaving myself behind for a month or two at a time' (2014: 8), never quite escaping the ubiquitous 'home' question, the racialising 'Where are you from?' and its telling sequel, 'Yes – but where are you from *really?*' (11, emphasis in the original). 'Home is the first exile' (10) she concludes, and moves into the discussion of 'the kind of belonging with which I have been most concerned recently, that of citizenship' (13).

Most cultural and postcolonial theorisation on belonging has centred on the imaginary, the affective or the biopolitical, appropriately viewing formal citizenship as the mere starting

point of belonging. The focus on citizenship has returned to the forefront of international political agendas after 9/11, but – albeit on different terms – citizenship has always figured prominently in Canadian practice and imagination, given the country's character as settler colony and immigrant nation. From its founding moment, Canada negotiated citizenship laws with issues of race on the agenda. What Edugyan investigates here, however, is a reversed journey into citizenship: with the extreme but paradigmatic example of the Third Reich in mind, she asks through what mechanisms one is, rather than granted, *deprived* of citizenship in one's own country, how one becomes stateless and vulnerable, and what strange affiliations are forced on subjects so dispossessed. Edugyan's research into Afro-German history yields the surprising discovery that some of the mixed-heritage children who were forcibly sterilised by the Reich were then accepted into the Hitler Youth, thus acquiring, in the author's words, 'a new kind of skin, neither black nor white: simply German' (17). Such precarious belongings, dictated by shifting rules of citizenship, inform key events in the plot of *Half Blood Blues*, where the mysterious disappearance of Hiero is retraced 50 years later, narrated by his bandmate Sid. The powers conferred on citizenship also underpin secondary characters like Hiero's father, a former African chief who embraces Germanness uncritically: in his son's words, 'he make hisself into a German' (Edugyan, 2011: 71).

In imagining the life of Hiero, a Black German citizen marked by the 'broken citizenship' characteristic of exiles (25), Edugyan delves into historical records but also pulls on her personal experience of the elusiveness of belonging. Part of the process that led to the writing of the novel, together with her time in Stuttgart, was her 2006 journey to the home of her parents in Ghana, her first visit to Africa, which she describes in the lecture. The odd sense of alikeness and difference, which begins on the flight to Accra, is described with a mix of wonder and empathy that does not circumvent the sometimes eerie quality of the experience. 'Home' is a taken-for-granted place for their Accra host, Kojo, a relation/friend of the family, who drives them through the city while disparaging Nigerian women, 'French Africans' and university-educated Ghanaians who do not return home, plus the children of such traitors, who visit as tourists. This notwithstanding, he assumes, like her direct family will do in the village, that the travellers (Edugyan and siblings) are 'home' in Ghana. This assumption is perplexing for the author, swept into 'a kind of tribal inclusion, a bond of blood and history which *did not require mutual consent*' (23–24, my emphasis), no matter that she and her siblings struggle with the affiliation: 'We were simply, profoundly not at our ease. We did not belong' (24). The ambiguity of alikeness and difference encountered on the plane to Accra, where she had recognised her features in other passengers while feeling alien to their conviviality, has come full circle. Not belonging, she concludes, can also be rooted in similarity, and she later draws on this experience for her portrayal of Hiero.

It is worth noting that Edugyan frames her lecture between two significant questions, the iniquitous 'Where are you from?' which prompted her early travels in Europe, and a second, related, question directed to her by a woman in her parents' Ghanaian village: 'Eh, Obruni, why don't you come home?' This affective moment of inclusion ('*Come* home, she'd said. Not *go* home', 2014: 31, emphasis in the original) is subsequently tempered by a new knowledge, 'It wasn't until later that I learned obruni meant White Person' (31). For Edugyan, the child of parents whose lives still 'straddled two worlds' (30), but herself 'a Calgary girl, born and raised' (Endicott, 2014: xviii) and 'feel[ing] as much a Canadian as anyone' (Edugyan, 2014: 30), home becomes ultimately 'a *way* of thinking, an *idea* of belonging' (emphasis in the original), rather than belonging itself. Wherever their setting, she claims, 'All our stories

are about home' (32). Edugyan's lecture focuses on moments where belonging ceases to be a choice: removal of citizenship or fixed 'tribal' affiliation, to affirm instead an identity that is self-defined and shaped, a journey towards being 'at home, in ourselves' (32).

Shaping alikeness: Lawrence Hill on diasporic identifications

Lawrence Hill's background differs from Edugyan's in the trajectories of his activist parents, a mixed-race couple who migrated from Washington DC in the 1950s escaping the laws against interracial marriage in the US. Lawrence himself was born in Newmarket, Ontario, and fairly early in his career he dissected the experience of 'being black and white in Canada': in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice* (2001), he writes a sharp enquiry into a number of everyday matters, including reactions to 'The Question' (the dreaded 'Where are you from?'). An accomplished writer and researcher, familiar with the African continent through various visits, and a confident speaker on race, he nevertheless states in his Henry Kreisel talk his shock on receiving an email beginning with the words that constitute the lecture's title: 'Dear Sir, I intend to burn your book'. Sent shortly after the publication of *The Book of Negroes* in Dutch in 2011, the message was signed by Roy Groenberg, a Surinamese Dutch activist, and the reason for the announced burning was the use of the word 'negro' in the title. Hill's polite reply in explanation goes unheeded, and the book covers are publicly burnt in Oosterpark in Amsterdam, the event recorded and disseminated via social media. Aside from the symbolic violence of the act, Hill's shock stems from the conviction that 'Mr Groenberg and I should have been on the same side of issues having to do with the treatment and depiction of people in the African diaspora' (Hill, 2013: 6). Hill provides a reasoned and passionate defence against book burning and the more general practice of censorship as the main subject of the lecture. Crucially for our purposes, however, his response is hugely affected by the transnational identification that he feels should exist between the perpetrators and himself, as fellow diasporic Africans:

> One emotional challenge for me, in dealing with the issue, was that the Dutch book burners, albeit small in number, were people of Surinamese descent. Suriname, in South America, was one of the most important slave colonies of the Dutch. In the broader Diaspora of African peoples, these are my own people. And it hurts, frankly, when your own people reject you, or tell you that you don't belong, or challenge *the very identity that you have shaped for yourself*. (10, my emphasis)

In making an effort to understand the motives for the painful attack on his book by a group with whom he disagrees but empathises (11), he interprets their action within the context of the unacknowledged racism of the Netherlands: 'Canadians and the Dutch have one unusual point in common. We both tend to deny, or sweep under the rug, the history of slavery as carried out by our own countries' (23). As proof of this Dutch colonial past, Hill refers to archival documents on the Dutch slave trade, the anti-Muslim remarks of politician Geert Wilders (which unfortunately have found further echo since) and two symbolic aggressions against which Surinamese activists have campaigned: the racist adverts for Negerzoenen ('Negro kisses') chocolates and the perpetuation of the 'traditional' figure of Swarze Piet, a clownish Black helper of Saint Nicholas, revived every Christmas in his colonial, Sambo-style, sometimes Surinamese-accented incarnation, despite antiracist protests. Hill acknowledges Groenberg's merit in forcing a name change on the chocolate company, but while suspecting they would agree 'on nine issues out of ten with respect to the history and current situation

of peoples in the African diaspora' (31), he cannot but dissent in the book-burning strategies.

This episode told by Hill is particularly relevant to our discussion because it hinges on a specific term, 'negro', which, as the author concedes, has taken a derogatory turn in certain localities, particularly in the US, where the title of his book had to be changed before publication. Hill is driven to reflect, however, on the contingency of meanings, as he recalls his own Black activist father, whose PhD, written in the 1960s, was entitled 'Negroes in Toronto: A Sociological Study', and who proudly referred to himself as a 'negro' – even if he would not do so today, when Lawrence confesses to cringing at the hip-hop use of 'Nigger' or 'Nigga'. 'Racial terminology will always fail, because it is absurd to try to define a person by race' (30), Hill argues, as he wonders what terms for self-definition the future holds, beyond 'Black' and 'African Canadian', and how new generations might scorn these currently acceptable denominations.

This is not to say that the contingency of meaning turns naming, particularly self-designation, into a futile exercise, as our focus on the term 'Afropolitan' demonstrates. Whether the word under discussion is 'Negro' (originally, of course, meaning only 'black'), African Canadian, Africadian, Black, Aphroperipheral or Afropolitan, the choice is not neutral, and in a world order which still evidences a heritage of colonialism and its associated racisms, naming is far from banal. Names may, however, serve a temporary cause. I will therefore return to the term 'Afropolitan' and the basic alliances and subversions that it has implied, in order to draw possible parallels with African Canadian practices, distinctly set within the frame of a declared multicultural nation. I sustain that shifting and contradictory alliances are better illuminated by recent theorisations on diaspora and cosmopolitanism which break the binary divides between home/host and national/transnational, as well as between singularity and communality.

Afropolitan, diasporic, cosmopolitan agencies: ways of being (African) in the world

As explained in the introduction, my concern is not so much with the precision of the term 'Afropolitan' as an analytical category,[4] as with the reasons for its creation, its usefulness as perceived by those who embrace it, and the links with similar strategies across the African diaspora. My focus here will be on possible connections with 'Africanness' as performed by Canadian writers.

A crucial reason for embracing the term 'Afropolitan' seems to be its contribution to the redefinition of 'what it means to be African' (Selasi, 2005). It does this by working very markedly against the oversimplification of the continent, too often conceived and represented in reductive terms, treated as 'a country' despite the intricacy of its nations and peoples. Furthermore, the concept of the Afropolitan implicitly contradicts the expectations that 'African literature' should address such stereotypes, as conveyed in Binyavanga Wainaina's ironical 'How to Write about Africa' (2005), published in the same year as Selasi's 'Bye-Bye Babar', and part of a comparable rebellion – even if Wainaina aligns himself with Pan-Africanism rather than Afropolitanism (Bosch Santana, 2013). 'Bye-Bye Babar', like Esi Edugyan's *Dreaming of Elsewhere* (2014), deals prominently with the concept of home, which for Selasi's Afropolitans is multilocal. The article also focuses on cultural hybridity and issues of the triple ('national, racial, cultural') identifications required of her proposed new category

of Africans. The contradiction inherent in the term 'Afropolitan', which declares its cosmo-politanism while locating itself in the African continent, foregrounds an affective attachment to Africa (specific or imagined), but may also betray the as yet inescapable, and therefore determining, question of estrangement through racialisation. This is represented in Selasi's experience, once again, by the interpellation 'Where are you from?' Her 'Bye-Bye Babar' reply to this question, perhaps more nuanced than is generally acknowledged, was qualified almost a decade later by a piece published in the *Guardian* (Selasi, 2013) narrating how a particularly harrowing interrogation about her origins shook her routine assumption of Afropolitan identity, and urged a 'return' journey to Ghana; a journey made 'not "to find myself" in Africa but to be myself on African soil', travelling as her artist self, rather than the '(illegitimate) Prodigal Daughter'. For this journey she abandons the mediating figures of her parents as a lens through which to contemplate Africa ('that static site of hurt and home'), and finds/creates for herself a dynamic Africa, not some 'real' west Africa, but '*my* west Africa, *my* version of home, not just a place but a way to be in – a way to know – the world' (emphasis in the original). While the description of this new version of Selasi's Africa is subject to criti-cism, being too close to the privileged social scene described for the Afropolitan milieu, the account tempers the sense of unproblematic affiliation of her earlier piece. One could argue that there is a 'real' Africa, mostly formed by less privileged people than Selasi describes, but it is equally true that, as has rightly been argued about the concepts of 'Asia' (Spivak, 2008) or 'America'/'the Americas' (Taylor, 2007), Africa is 'not a stable place or object of analysis, but a highly contested practice – physically, politically, artistically and theoretically' (Taylor, 2007: 1419). Defining one's 'Africa' is a complex and ongoing task.

In Edugyan's and Selasi's accounts of un/belonging, there is what they both describe as an 'uneasy' relationship with the African continent and the localities of their parents, where they have distinctly *not* been brought up. But there is also an instigating interpellation by others, even in places where they 'are local' (to put it in Selasi's terms, 2014), to 'explain' their origins owing to their perceived 'race'.[5] This reiteration of being interpellated as a stranger in your own place is a common feature in stories of identity formation by Black (minority) writers, the subject of much literature, and part of the sense of commonality, often of soli-darity, of the African diaspora. It is present in the stories told by Selasi, Hill and Edugyan, all of them recent accounts of living and thinking transnationally. The ambiguous and complex alliances that these authors display confirm the reasons that move diasporic theorists to complicate the classic interplay between 'home' and 'host' countries so as to match contem-porary realities. Only a modified view of diaspora, which takes into account enhanced mobil-ity and connectivity (Tsagarousianou, 2004), with a distinctly triangulated pattern, what Vertovec (2009: 4) calls a 'triadic relationship' between homeland, hostland and diasporic members in other locations, can begin to encompass today's identifications. It is that third dimension, the transversal relationships with other diasporic subjects, that informs both Afropolitan and other 'transnational' African alliances, bound as they are by mobility and connectivity. As we have seen in the Canadian cases discussed, this does not exclude a distinctly 'indigenous hostland' component. Not only does Clarke claim the right to national belonging for long-established Africadian citizens, second-generation Lawrence Hill also uses the inclusive 'we' in describing Canadians' denial of their own slave history (as quoted above), thus embracing his national culture while claiming the diasporic identity that he has shaped for himself.

Such shatterings of binary divisions (national/transnational, roots/routes) are anything but unusual. Michelle Wright perceives Black diasporic identities as moving between the extremes of the 'hypercollective, essentialist' and the 'hyperindividual', and argues that a useful diasporic definition means constantly negotiating between these, to account for singularity and diversity while demonstrating connection and commonality (Wright, 2004: 2). The complex ways in which this negotiation takes place are illustrated in the Canadian authors discussed here, who move between individual and nationally/regionally located histories to the commonalities of being Black/African, an experience still too often shaped by racialisation, as verified in Hill's and Edugyan's texts.

This social persistence of racialising thought, against all scientific and multiculturalist odds, added to the reductive thinking about 'Africa', must contribute to the preference for the 'marked' term 'Afropolitan' (versus the unmarked cosmopolitan), since its very structure allows an emphatic claiming of the Afro- side of a subjectivity while denying, in the second half of the term (-politan), the preconceived ideas about the first. The term thus acquires an empowering response value as self-definition. Its use instead of 'cosmopolitan' or even 'African cosmopolitan' would constitute a contingent strategy, which perhaps in future will be regarded as pointless as the past revaluation of 'negro', but which is at present used in a manner akin to the 'strategic essentialism' once described by Gayatri Spivak, a counter-discourse to an externally imposed identity.

The worrying effect of social prejudice and racialisation on subjectivities, regardless of formal citizenship, is a sustained Canadian preoccupation in the context of multiculturalism. David Chariandy's 'The Fiction of Belonging' (2007) opens with the results of a contemporary survey showing the disaffection of second-generation visible minorities for Canada, their country of birth, in contrast to the much stronger Canadian affiliation of first-generation Black immigrants, or of white immigrants in general (2007: 818). Chariandy relates this disaffection to the manner in which, following international terrorist attacks by 'natives', multicultural anxieties shifted from the figure of the immigrant to that of the 'discomfortingly intimate stranger born here' (819). While offering second-generation writers and their nuanced critiques as alternative renderings of this uneasy belonging, he poses a pertinent doubt:

> it's also possible that we have erred in assuming that the ideal of multicultural citizenship could entirely assuage the painful, affective legacies of diasporic displacement and racialization, or else adequately address the *material* obstacles towards security, social acceptance, and dignified labour that many visible minorities continue to face. (828, emphasis in the original)

Chariandy's insightful comment identifies the affective complications of diasporic living, even within multicultural inclusive societies, but also importantly addresses the materiality of the obstacles, thus reminding us of a social class not usually included in the affluent vision of the 'Afropolitan' (Ede, 2016).

This fraught relationship between multiculturalism and its designated beneficiaries, as well as the multiple manners in which creative writing engages with such unease, and may offer alternative, complex perspectives that break the 'us' versus 'them' binary, is essential to any analysis of the Canadian cultural context and to that of Black Canadian writers in particular. The shortcomings of multiculturalism policies, together with the potential of 'post-multicultural' writers, are in part the subject of Sneja Gunew's recently published *Post-Multicultural Writers as Neo-Cosmopolitan Mediators* (2017). Gunew revises recent debates on (neo-)cosmopolitanism, describing them as 'attempts to imagine a new critical framework that is more culturally inclusive and to think in "planetary" rather than "global" terms' (Gunew,

2017: 1). She aligns her methodology with a number of neo-cosmopolitan perspectives, such as Walter Mignolo's critical cosmopolitanism (2000), and the 'post-western' meaning of the concept, defined by 'a condition of openness to the world and entailing self and societal transformation in light of the encounter with the Other' (Delanty, 2012: 41), that is, a form of denaturalisation enabling receptivity to other ways of 'being at home in the world'. In this sense, it is a decolonial project influenced by Walter Mignolo, who, Gunew reminds us, frames cosmopolitanism in an ethical context, linking it to a dialogue among civilisations, and emphasises its pedagogical dimension: 'Cosmopolitanism … is not something that is just happening. Someone has to make it happen' (Mignolo, 2012, quoted in Gunew, 2017: 2). Gunew advocates a return to the concept of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' (coined by Homi Bhabha, 1996) in order to depart from elitist or banal (consumerist) cosmopolitanisms, and to define a neo-cosmopolitanism that is local, subaltern and peripheral, one that makes visible the cosmopolitan nature of groups marginalised by the nation. Within this framework, she overturns established expectations about diasporic/multicultural writers, giving them a major role in moving towards the understanding and practice of cosmopolitanism:

> if we engage seriously with the terms offered by the debates in neo-cosmopolitanism, such [dias-poric, immigrant, multicultural and ethnic minority] writers would be given critical recognition as mediating figures that facilitate new relations between national cultures and the global or, in the more felicitous term suggested by Spivak, Gilroy and Cheah, the *planetary*. The very elements that have been traditionally deployed to illustrate their constitutive suffering and oppression (the 'migrant condition'; *migritude*), the belief that they are at home nowhere or in more than one place (and thus constitutively disloyal and 'unpatriotic'), could be rethought to comprise their greatest attribute – that they can navigate the structures of belonging in numerous ways, not least by putting into question the complacent assumptions or self-evident universalisms that undergird many forms of both nationalism and globalization. (Gunew, 2017: 5)

Gunew's project also proposes a revisiting of multiculturalism, a salvaging return, inspired by Lyotard's conception of 'the future anterior' (1986), to examine what was left out of – but existed in – multiculturalism. She concludes that 'what was left out of multiculturalism was the cosmopolitan element', and contends that 'post-multicultural writers offer a cosmopol-itan mediation and translation between the nation-state and the planetary', destabilising fixed identifications. Multicultural or ethnic artists 'provide a "hinge" between national cul-tures and globalization as well as putting those concepts into crisis' (Gunew, 2017: 11). This perspective validates a creativity and way of knowledge too often presented as fraught with trouble. Cosmopolitanism understood in these terms revalues the multiple manners of belonging and the differing approaches to writing from the margin, not as an exotic object to be 'flaunted', as Edugyan put it, for the benefit of readers, publishers and reviewers, but as signifying worlds that exist fluidly, moving between the local and the transnational. While this may constitute a utopian objective (and one which may again appear to lay a further representational burden on writers), it has the value of making structurally compatible – indeed interdependent – the apparently divergent demands for national belonging/indi-geneity (as claimed by Clarke for Africadians) and the transnationalist/diasporic allegiance defended by Rinaldo Walcott or Dionne Brand, and collectively practised in writing.

Conclusions: reading and writing singularity and alikeness

The specific Canadian context of the African diaspora produces a variety of affiliations and self-namings that can be seen to combine, in varying degrees, some form of rootedness in

the national (Canadian) with a transnational, Afrodiasporic outlook. Whether the link to Africa is mediated by a previous national origin (the US, in Hill's case; a Caribbean nation, in Walcott's and Brand's), or directly through migrant parents, as in the case of Edugyan, their production shows a clear historical awareness, often focusing on Canadian Black history (in Vancouver, in Alberta, in the Maritimes), which is never independent of transnational connections. The historical subject-matter allows writers to combine a sense of communal responsibility with the uniqueness of human existence and of creation, a tension which is an intrinsic part of writing, but which may be enhanced by the burden of representation in 'minority' writers. In conversation with Amatoritsero Ede (perhaps the only critic fully engaging in the Afropolitan discussion from Canadian soil), Esi Edugyan rejects the idea of defining herself as an Afropolitan or through any other label, arguing that her sense of otherness has always led her to 'distrust the collective path, and to lurk on the sidelines' (Ede, 2015). In the same conversation, she alludes to the problem of 'being regarded as a hyphenated writer, an Afro-Canadian, etc., as if there were some special topic or subject required, and some special audience expected, rather than simply being seen as a writer telling stories about the world'. This formulation of the desire to be read simply as a writer, free to approach any subject, is also common to racialised or peripheral writers, however politically committed their work. Ede (2016) has argued that the Black political agency of Afropolitanisms is cancelled out by its privileged class dimension and its disengagement with historical issues that underpin Black history. I would argue that the way in which most Canadian authors elude this limitation is precisely by their strong engagement with the historical. In response to criticism of her book *Half-Blood Blues* as 'un-Canadian' in setting and time, Edugyan claims, on the one hand, the 'Canadianness' of her story by virtue of her being Canadian, and, on the other, the freedom to write unrestricted by citizenship or any other imposed definition.

The pull between singularity and commonality described by diasporic theorists (Wright, 2004) is particularly powerful in writers (Gunew, 2017), and in the genre of the novel, whose early history embodies the representation of individualism but has always allowed the collective into its malleable form. The Canadian texts discussed here bridge these polarities by their engagement with history, but also through the act of imagination and empathy involved in recreating otherness. Such acts of empathy, trying to imagine oneself as the other or the stranger, are described in both Hill's and Edugyan's Kreisel lectures (the Surinamese book burner; Amo and the taxi driver) and most fully in the extended acts of imagination of their novels, the recreation of Aminata and Hiero, which required from the authors a crossing of boundaries in terms of time, space and gender, among others.

Both Esi Edugyan and Lawrence Hill conclude their Kreisel lectures claiming a role for literature in the world of human relations. Edugyan, who declares herself 'a firm believer in the power of stories to affect and alter the realities of our world' (2014: 31), ends with a condensed manifesto which defines writing as an exploration of 'what it means to be alive in the present moment' (32), and a belief in the power of empathy, however insufficient:

> We have always dreamed of elsewhere. It is our privilege as creatures of language who exist within a narrative space, that is, who are trapped inside time. And it is our responsibility, as well. We owe it to each other to see past those differences which separate us. 'Where are you from, *really*?' Here. If every act of empathy is a leaving of the self, then such journeys are more necessary than ever in this world. 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. (32, emphasis in the original)

Lawrence Hill, for his part, concludes his lecture by denouncing the act of intimidation that book burning represents, arguing that it runs counter to the very nature of literature:

> The very purpose of literature is to enlighten, disturb, awaken and provoke. Literature should get us talking – even when we disagree. Literature should bring us into the same room – not over matches, but over coffee and conversation. It should inspire *recognition of our mutual humanity*. Together. (Hill, 2013: 32, my emphasis)

These declared aims in the writing of literature, and the imaginative and ethical practices of both writers in their Kreisel lectures and the related novels, are very much in tune with the utopian perspective of cultural neo-cosmopolitanisms, which value literature as 'a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world' (Cheah, 2012: 138). While it is doubtful that racialised writers should be charged with the obligation of (consciously) bridging the local and the global, I do believe that a cosmopolitan reading practice, receptive to difference beyond limited 'ethnographic' approaches, giving writers – African, Afropolitan or AfroCanadian – their due as complex artists and communicators, may constitute the first appropriate response to the strategic self-designations of Afrodiasporic writers, who ultimately, as Rinaldo Walcott argues, claim the world as home. As Sid, the narrator of *Half-Blood Blues* puts it, 'You talk about this sea and that sea … Atlantic. Pacific. But it all one water, ain't it? Why divide it up?' (Edugyan, 2011: 172). This intellectual denial of affiliations is echoed in Edugyan's Kreisel lecture, when she argues that 'not belonging, also, can be a kind of belonging. There are all sorts of nations on this earth. It is a lonelier citizenship, perhaps, but a vast one' (2014: 25). Such advocacy of cosmopolitan citizenship from writers of recognised historical awareness reveals a determination to negotiate the singular and the communal, together with the utopian desire for broader and more open encounters, both human and creative, which underpins Canadian and Afropolitan debates.

Notes

1. Although aware of the complications of using the umbrella term 'Black', I choose it here owing to the explicit identification of a number of Canadian authors when interpellated on identity. It is used in this article only in reference to African descendants who identify as Black.
2. For a detailed history of the Black diaspora in Canada, see Joseph Mensa's *Black Canadians: History, Experiences, Social Conditions* (2002). See also Tettey and Puplampu (2005).
3. For a recent discussion of Black Canadian writing and its relation to history, see Siemerling (2015).
4. The complex reception of the term 'Afropolitan' and its implications for African writers, as well as its value as an analytical category, are covered in depth by other contributions to this special issue, in particular Toivanen, and Knudsen and Rahbek.
5. Selasi's traumatic trigger for her visit to Ghana is a question asked of her at the 'white' wedding of her best friend in Jamaica, when, after she 'explains' her background, the man assumes her father to be polygamous.

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