

“Identity Crossings: Alternating Voices in Canada”

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Regarding the concepts of culture and cultural identity within English-speaking frameworks, according to Gerald Graff and Bruce Robbins, there is a need to consider them “as a contested space” because “like texts, cultures are seen as indeterminate sites of conflict that cannot be pinned to a single totalized meaning” (Greenblatt 434-5). In their opinion, these concepts must be re-defined and not “defined in advance;” they should move away from nation-focused constructions and take into account the complexity of boundary-crossing identities and alternating voices which have actively contributed but have been later silenced or misperceived by mainstream cultural constructions. But, this approach does not plead for focusing strictly on these voices’ cultural specificities but “to challenge the belief that blackness, femaleness [...] are essential, unchanging qualities” (435). The lack of understanding towards these alternating voices is, according to Eric Sundquist’s interpretation of Franz Boas’ essay “On Alternating Sounds”, a consequence of turning “unfamiliar signs into familiar and hence potentially inappropriate paradigms” or avoiding “features that seem inconsequential, perhaps even antagonistic and nonsensical” (6).

Likewise, according to Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial perspective: “culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational”. His approach complicates “the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*” moving away from established cultural constructions. It also offers a more accurate vision when attempting to reflect the complexities of mingling cultural identities as it incorporates the “histories of cultural displacement” and the ways in which they produce “meaning” and “value” (Greenblatt 438). Bhabha pleads for new critical approaches that neither

“disavow or sublimate the otherness (alterity)” nor rely on “theories of cultural relativism or pluralism” (439). In his opinion, “cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity” (441), and therefore it is necessary to recognize identity claims as ex-centric (443). In Bhabha’s opinion we should start working for the deconstruction of cultural identities based on binary oppositions that confront mainstream to “other” discourses, and commodify alterity into too narrow categories or into a multicultural whole disrespectful for differences, and establish a dialectical process considering them, in Montrose’s words, “as joined in a mutually constitutive, recursive, and transformative *process*” (Greenblatt 413).

Taking into account literature’s centrality in the construction of cultural identity, Homi Bhabha also claims for the crucial significance of the “discourses of “minorities.”” In fact, in his opinion, their presence questions mainstream discourses “that attempt to give a hegemonic “normality” to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples” (Greenblatt 437). These voices claim for a very different cultural identity that considers nations as fictions and crosses their boundaries alternating with and challenging mainstream literary discourses; at the same time, they call into question accepted literary assumptions and open the debate about “the construction of culture and the invention of tradition” (438).

This invention of literary traditions and identities has been, according to Graff and Robbins in relation to Anglo-Saxon literary contexts, “the perfect instrument for socializing a threateningly, heterogeneous ethnic population into the values of Anglo-Saxon culture” (Greenblatt 522). Actually, regarding Canadian multiculturalism, this “anglo-saxonization”, led to the construction of a multicultural identity which, despite pretending to foster cultural heterogeneity, has not entailed a serious debate about

fundamental questions, as for instance race issues; as Marlene Nourbese Philip points out:

Multiculturalism, as we know it, has no answers for the problems of racism, or white supremacy – unless it is combined with a clearly articulated policy of anti-racism, directed at rooting out the effects of racist or white supremacist thinking. (185)

In her opinion, Canadian multiculturalism is actually “based on a presumption of equality, a presumption which is not necessarily borne out in reality” as the silencing of specific aspects of Canada’s history as well as some writers’ literary contributions demonstrates. These evidences are, in her view, proofs of Canada’s Eurocentrism as its identity debate has been “shaped and fashioned by a belief system that put white Europeans at the top of society and Native and African people at the bottom” (182). In this way, under the rubric of multiculturalism not only cultural differences are blurred but, as Vevaina and Godard explain, “power relations [...] are effaced within a fiction of ‘Canada’” (16).

Eric Sundquist, Coomi S. Vevaina and Barbara Godard agree in stating that the silencing of alternating voices in the construction of a national literary identity is a consequence of culture’s inability to enunciate cultural difference. Within Canada’s literary context, among other writers of the so-called “minority,” hyphenated literatures or literatures of “lesser” diffusion/value, this situation is epitomized by two Black/African writers: Mary Ann Shadd Cary, author of *A Plea for Emigration; Or, Notes of Canada West* (1852) and Martin R. Delany and his novel *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1861).

Black literature, among many other “ethnic” or “minority” Canadian cultures, has frequently been left aside by Canadian mainstream literary criticism. Although modern black writers are gaining more recognition, early black writers are usually forgotten. According to George Elliot Clarke’s “A Primer of African-Canadian

Literature”, Shadd’s text published in 1852 is “the first text by an African - Canadian woman... a tract intended to persuade African - Americans to move to southern Ontario.” Likewise, Martin R. Delany is mentioned as “the first African-Canadian novelist.” In this way, their texts are proofs of his claim about the fact that “even a cursory survey of early African-Canadian literature renders untenable the position that it is only a recent invention” (“A Primer”). The significance of both writers, as early participants of North-American Black/African literature in the diaspora, and their literary contributions, is many-sided.

First of all, their works are paradigms of early Black/African literature, and thus, helpful tools for the re-construction not only of its literary tradition and identity, but also of frequently effaced aspects of its history because both works hold a marked historical content. In fact, between Shadd’s tract and Delany’s novel there is a very strong connection as both are literary answers to a historical event: the passing of the 1850’s Fugitive Slave Law showing Canada as a way out from slavery.

Their works are also early evidences of African-Canadian literary history and, in Clarke’s opinion, of its “distinctive canon, for it draws upon a variety of cultural (and “national”) traditions, accents, and languages” (“A Primer”). Furthermore, they are proofs of what Rinaldo Walcott denominates “the multiplicities of blackness in Canada” (29). In this respect, while Shadd’s literary attempt is a non-fiction emigrants guide with Canada as thematic axis, Delany’s work is a novel where Canada is only, but widely, mentioned. Both of them address their texts to a transnational black audience in North-America including Canada for different purposes.

On the other hand, the diasporic nature of early English Black/African literature in North America is a paradigm of crossing identities as it mingles with different literary traditions. In this way, it offers a more complex view about literary identity,

different from mainstream national concepts, because nation boundaries are crossed. Following Clarke: “African-Canadian literature has been, from its origins, the work of political exiles and native dissidents. It began in crisis, matured in crisis, and exists in crisis.” (“A Primer”). Besides, in his opinion, a Canadian repatriation of a range of African-American writers, even taking into account temporary stays, is needed in order to achieve a complete re-writing of its literary tradition. In my opinion, more than carrying out a full repatriation –which would imply accepting the belief system of nation-state boundaries as literary– it is necessary to establish literary connections between their works and Canada. In the cases of Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Martin R. Delany these connections actually exist. They coincided in Canada and actively participated within its black community; but their connections were also literary not only because Delany included “a brief and quite favourable review” of Shadd’s text in his work *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and destiny of the Colored People in the United States, Politically Considered* published in 1852 (Bearden and Butler 20) but because their works depict that diasporic nature of Black/African cultural and literary identity in connection to Canada.

Finally, from a Canadian viewpoint, Shadd and Delany’s literary achievements challenge Canada’s construction of its literary tradition and identity as they have been rarely claimed as significant, if claimed at all, even when writing in English. It is true that both writers were born in the United States and their works were first published there; but their Canadian connections and contents have been frequently ignored. In this respect, Shadd’s case is quite significant. Her text is considered an emigrants guide or settlement journal, a genre which has been claimed to be significant in early Canadian literature. As Richard Almonte explains in his 1998 edition of Shadd’s work, “emigrant guides have been accorded classical status in the realm of early Canadian literature” (9).

It seems paradoxical that whereas other writers' guides –as those written by Susanna Moodie or Catharine Parr Traill among others– have been reedited and canonized, Shadd's contribution to the genre has been ignored. In this sense, Shadd's work is an example Canada's literary selectiveness; her work, following Vevaina and Godard, has been affected by the tendency to impose expectations on works by ethnic writers which has often led to their dismissal because of an apparent "lack of literariness" (28) "as either "too ethnic" or "not ethnic enough"" (24).

The fact that their early contributions have been silenced within Canada's literary framework, speaks also for Canada's restrictive configuration of its literary identity and tradition. The analysis of texts like theirs will show how they alternate and mingle with other Canadian works, whether canonized or not; in this sense Shadd and Delany's literary contributions are helpful means in the process of de/re-constructing Canada's literary tradition and identity by opening it up into a more complex concept where literary traditions, canons and identities intersect.

Generally speaking, *A Plea for Emigration* is a non-fiction work written with the intention of promoting black emigration from the United States to Canada. The passing of Fugitive Slave Law and the need of information of the black community about the advantages offered by this country, led Mary Ann Shadd to attempt the pen. The emigration she promotes is a very specific one. In her opinion not every country is suitable for the black community, but only those where there is a strong consideration of "the questions of personal freedom and equal rights" like Canada in her opinion (Shadd 49). This is why her work can be said to embody an anti-racist and feminist ideology, that undermines the "by-product(s) of power" (Almonte 30), whether white or male.

By showing Canada as a land where different cultures could actually coexist, her text is a precursor of the later perverted Canadian identity as a paradigm of

multiculturalism. *A Plea for Emigration* shows the actual multicultural content of the country at that time, where “French, Dutch, Scotch, Irish and Indians” share a common space and “are often settled near one another” (Shadd 66). But Mary Ann Shadd also expresses her utopian image epitomized by Canada as land of freedom and equality for the black community. In this sense, she presents a metaphorization of Canada as a paradise where a non-racial social system is possible and whose achievement would mean a way of avoiding slavery to spread all around the continent. Shadd’s insistence on Canada as a “hope of a bright future” (82) and a chance to create a new social order connects her work to many other non-fiction and fiction Canadian works by emigrant writers. Shadd’s representation is thus another paradigm of the use of Canada as a literary recipient of varied and complex conceptual contents.

Although more briefly, Shadd also mentions some negative points of the situation in Canada. Perhaps, the most important aspect is that she does not only talk about white but black prejudice. She tries to explain how prejudices exist within both communities as an inheritance of racism in her attempt to gain a mutual understanding (71). Her text points out and analyzes important questions about race in Canada, because apart from presenting her vision of Canada as a land of freedom and equality, she mentions cases of racism, although few in her opinion. *A Plea for Emigration* is then a proof of the fact that a debate about race issues was attempted in Canada long before the Multiculturalism Act. This seems even more significant taking into account that her work has been silenced under the frame of an official multicultural context where this same debate, according to Marlene Nourbese Philip, has been left out.

On the other hand, Delany’s *Blake or the Huts of America* must also be considered as an important agent of black/African literary tradition by itself and through its constant references to other literary works (slave narratives, poems, and songs).

Besides, its fictional representation of Canada, and its connections with Shadd's text, turns his novel into another paradigm of an alternating voice within an identities crossing.

Delany's fictional depiction of Canada reinforces and complements Shadd's picture, although for him it does not represent the ultimate solution for abolishing slavery, but black insurrection. Along the first part of the novel, the author also develops that utopian metaphor of the country as a paradise of freedom and safety, always in comparison with the United States. In chapter 9, Henry, the main character, talks about escaping "to a free country" and this is no other than Canada (Delany 30). Again, at the end of Part I Henry referring to Canada affirms: "This is the North Star, the slave's great Guide to Freedom!" (132). Actually, the North Star as a guiding light, representing Northern free states and Canada, stands for freedom not only for Delany but for the whole black community in North America as the reference to other slave narratives included in the novel demonstrates (135).

But Delany's depiction of Canada goes further than Shadd's. After a long and harsh runaway trip, Henry and some of his comrades arrive to Canadian soil. Some of them could not suppress their emotions for having gained freedom at last and said: "Is dis Canada? (...) Is dis free groun'? De lan' whar black folks is free! Thang God a'mighty for dis privilege!" (152). But immediately after, the narrator presents a more realistic picture by giving a detailed information about Canada's attitude towards blacks and, thus, undoing and demythologizing the utopia:

He little knew the unnatural feelings and course pursued toward his race by many Canadians [...]. He little knew that while according to fundamental British Law and constitutional rights, all persons are equal in the realm [...], his race with some exceptions [...], is excluded from the enjoyment and practical exercise of every right [...] to find such state of things in the long-talked of and much-loved Canada by the slaves. [...] An emotion of unutterable indignation would swell the heart of the determined slave, and almost compel him to curse the country of his adoption. (152-3)

In this way, another important connection between *Blake or the Huts of America* and *A Plea for Emigration* can be made. Both works rise as significant landmarks in the process of de/re-construction of Canada's multicultural identity which is currently being questioned as well as in opening the necessary debate about race issues.

Likewise, Delany's novel strong historical basis seems an attempt to write blacks neglected history and to re-tell the history of slavery making reference to some of its epicentres, including the United States and Canada, while depicting black culture's diasporic nature in North America. As the novel shows, blacks were forced to move from one place to another, whether by their white masters or by their will to escape; they had to cross "national" frontiers and created different cultural frameworks within others' cultures. In this sense, Delany shows a transnational and boundary-crossing black identity which alternated with other voices from the cultural background it was forced into. The clearest example in this novel is its main character who tries to break slavery impositions and provoke a black insurrection at the expense of constantly changing his identity: Henry, Gilbert, Carolus Henrico Blacus, and Blake.

I am Carolus Henrico Blacus, your cousin and schoolmate [...] I dropped Carolus and Anglicized my name to prevent identify, going by the name of Henry Blake. (193)

Blake represents the black community and its culture which, apart from suffering a diaspora, not only had to adapt to different cultural mainstreams whether pro-slavery or not, but to make itself almost invisible in order to exist and remain. The dismissal of this novel among many other black literary contributions shows how those cultural mainstreams took advantage of this enforced silencing process.

As a conclusion, it can be said that what works like Delany and Shadd's are claiming is the need "to "redraw the boundaries" in order to show "inescapable cultural

difference, division, and dissonance” (Greenblatt 433). Consequently, cultural and literary identities should be redefined taking into account all those dissonances and complexities. From a Canadian viewpoint, the analysis of their works seems challenging not only as early expressions of Black/African literary identity in English and its diasporic nature, but as proofs that question the monolithic configuration of *a* Canadian literary identity. Their literary contributions as “tactic[s] of intervention in what constitutes the basis of “national” as of “literary” identity” (Vevaina and Godard 50) help us to see the diverse and complex ways in which identities intersect enriching the literary heritage of different “nations,” as well as showing the paradox of Canadian literary identity as “both a single tradition of many parts *and* a series of winding, sometimes parallel traditions” (Sundquist 18).

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