

*Towards a New Canadianness: Re(-)Membering Canada*

*in Lawrence Hill's Any Known Blood (1997) and David Chariandy's Soucouyant (2007)*

Mathilde Mergeai

Université de Liège

**Introduction**

In her essay entitled “‘Freedom Is a Secret’: The Future Usability of the Underground”, Katherine McKittrick has argued that “the Underground Railroad continually historicizes a national self-image that obscures racism and colonialism through its ceaseless promotion of Canadian helpfulness, generosity, and adorable impartiality” (98-99). If it is true that this episode of Black history has allowed the country to take the moral high ground vis-à-vis its American neighbours, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, passed in 1988, can be seen as yet another means of displaying the image of an allegedly ‘minority-friendly’ and tolerant nation. It bears repeating that while the Canadian multicultural policy seems to illustrate a willingness to integrate ethnic minorities and to recognize their existence as well as the specificity of their history, it also serves as a way of minimizing the presence of racism in the country. In other words, the Multiculturalism Act contributes, to a similar extent as the Underground Railroad, to an ‘embellishment’ of national history by presenting a romanticized picture of Canada as ‘the North Star’, or in other words as a welcoming country to migrants.

Arguably, “[f]or many Canadians, multiculturalism represents Canadian progressiveness, not only in comparison to monocultural nationalisms of other countries but also in comparison to earlier eras of monocultural nationalism in Canada” (Coleman: 7). Yet, this multicultural

policy has also been criticized for, among other things, its failure to provide a collective vision of the Canadian nation and for the ineffectiveness of its anti-racist ambitions. The idealistic vision conveyed by the Multiculturalism Act has also been, although less directly, put into question in the fictional works of contemporary Black Canadian authors such as Lawrence Hill or David Chariandy. In this paper, I would like to argue that through their respective novels—*Any Known Blood* (1997) and *Soucouyant* (2007)—these two writers aim to portray a new, less idealistic Canada, one that combines the specificities of the Black experience (what can be characterized as ‘beyond’) with a more traditionally (White) Canadian context, namely here a specific vision of space that draws on long-established clichés of rurality and regionalism, while keeping the emphasis on urban scenes. The authors also find ways to project their own (sometimes remote) backgrounds—the Caribbean for Chariandy and African America for Hill—onto the Canadian literary and geographical landscapes.

Before turning to my main argument, it is first necessary to provide some context about these two novels. *Any Known Blood* recounts the complex story of Langston Cane V and his longing to know his origins. He is, as his name indicates, the fifth Langston Cane of his family, thus representing the fifth generation since his great-great-grandfather, a fugitive slave from Virginia, settled in Oakville, Canada, in 1850. The novel presents the protagonist’s journey into the past and his investigation of his four ancestors’ histories to discover his own identity. Likewise, *Soucouyant* reflects on the implications of migration for the following generations. It tells the story of a young man who returns, after a two-year absence, to the house of his mother, Adele. More precisely, he goes back home to care for her, as she suffers from dementia, which means in this case that she forgets more and more every day: names, words, people, or even how to be and behave in the world. Adele’s condition has been steadily worsening for years; as a result, the harsh reality of the disease has driven all the

members of her family (her husband and her two sons) to abandon her one way or another. What I would like to argue in this essay is that the spatial representations in Hill's and Chariandy's fictions highlight the darker sides of the national past and present, including the blatant discrimination against Black people in the 1950s and 1960s, and reminding us that migrants today still experience racism and feel alienated from 'mainstream' society.

### **Multicultural (Con)Text**

The 1988 Canadian Multicultural Act emerged as the result of the growing awareness of the cosmopolitan nature of the nation. As the Act states,

the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race, national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural and political life of Canada. (*Canadian Multiculturalism Act*)

Despite the seemingly honourable intentions behind this text, its practical applications are far from idyllic. The image of the Canadian mosaic—used to convey “notions of equality, plurality, beauty and unity in diversity” (Sylvester: 38) that the authorities want to promote through multiculturalism—is questioned by numerous critics who have repeatedly voiced their doubts regarding this policy. For instance, the Trinidadian Canadian writer Marlene NourbeSe Philip, who has written abundantly on the place of Black people, especially Black women, in Canada, clearly takes on John Porter's “vertical mosaic” in her essay “Why Multiculturalism Can't End Racism,” when she writes that “At its most basic, multiculturalism describes a configuration of power at the centre of which are the two cultures recognized by the constitution of Canada—the French and the English— and around which circumnavigate the lesser satellite cultures” (181). In this configuration, she goes on to argue, “Black people of African heritage will be found at the bottom of the multicultural pool. And below them will probably be found Natives” (NourbeSe Philip: 184). Rinaldo Walcott *Canada and Beyond* 1-2 (2011): 85

similarly points to the ‘two-sided’ nature of a multicultural policy that “inscribes those who are not French or English as Canadians, and yet at the same time works to textually render a continued understanding of those people as from elsewhere and thus as tangential to the nation-state” (2003: 117). Another major drawback of multiculturalism, according to NourbeSe Philip, is that 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 and white supremacist thinking” (185). George Elliott Clarke goes even further as he characterizes the Multiculturalism Act as “a racist policy of assimilation at best, exclusion at worst” (Huggan and Siemerling: 100). In a similar vein, both Neil Bissoondath and Walcott agree that the Canadian Multiculturalism Act is defined by an “obsessively backward gaze” (Bissoondath: 102), or by what Walcott calls the “discourse of heritage” (2003: 135). This means concretely that the policy tends to reduce cultures to their sole fixed past—which for Bissoondath is a “simplification of culture” (72)—and to “reify and exoticize alterity” (Bennett: 4), to borrow David Bennett’s words, rather than show the ‘true’ culture as experienced daily by people from so-called minorities.

As already mentioned, multiculturalism plays a significant part in Canada’s self-congratulation “for being the end of the line of the underground railroad” (Bissoondath: 128). As Bissoondath puts it, “In the popular imagination, blacks fled the hellhole of American slavery to come to the paradise of Canadian freedom. The reality is less commendable” (128). This inconsistency between reality and the collective imaginary has created what Pilar Cuder-Domínguez has called the “African Canadian writers’ complaint about the erasure of Black experiences from the national imagination” (2011 (Forthcoming): 113), and the subsequent necessity for writers such as Hill or Chariandy to write or perhaps recreate a more ‘accurate’ version of national history (at least one that includes slavery, discrimination, racism, prejudice, and intolerance). A similar observation is made by Daniel Coleman:

whatever civil ideals multiculturalism may represent, whiteness still occupies the positions of normalcy and privilege in Canada, and anti-racist activity remains hamstrung until we begin to carry out the historical work that traces its genealogy, or “the ideological lineage of the belief system,” in an effort to combat the national injunction to forget the brutal elements of our racial history. (7-8)

If it appears that Canada has highlighted certain episodes of its history and understated some of its more inglorious moments, for these many critics, then, the key to achieving a true state of pluralism seems to lie in a more unbiased recognition of the nation’s ‘shameful’ past and its present inability to truly integrate minorities into its national cultural project.

### **Remembering**

It seems obvious that in the recreation of history, memory plays a highly significant role, especially if the aim is to unforget the past of a population that was never clearly given a proper voice. In Hill’s and Chariandy’s novels, both narrators engage with the task of remembering national history through an investigation of their family past. In doing so, these authors make their narratives conform to Walcott’s concept of “counter-novels” (borrowed from Sylvia Wynter), which he defines in the Canadian context as novels that “are reshaping and refashioning both the literary landscape of Canada and rewriting Canadian historiography” (1999: 61).

In *Any Known Blood*, Langston Cane is searching for his family history, and more specifically that of his four Langston Cane ancestors, because his lack of a proper sense of origins prevents him from constructing a future for himself. The novel illustrates his attempt to remap the connections with his ancestors and explore how their personal story ties in with national history, a link that was already emphasized by Cuder-Domínguez in her article “African Canadian Writing and the Narration(s) of Slavery” when she stated that “The Cane dynasty is [. . .] placed squarely in the centre of momentous events for black North Americans and especially in the midst of key episodes of the histories of the United States and Canada”

(2003: 60).

This is mostly exemplified through the peculiar relation that Langston's family has with the Underground Railroad, a historical episode which, according to McKittrick, "has been one of the [most] important narratives bolstering perceptions of Canadian generosity and goodwill—of Canada's and Canadians' friendliness, neutrality, and likeability" (98). Evidently, in his effort to portray a less propagandized vision of Canada, Hill draws a more realistic, and perhaps more negative picture of the Underground Railroad. While the first Langston Cane undertook a journey north to seek freedom, the narrator travels down the Underground Railroad, in a reverse journey as it were, in order to find in his past some answers to his rootlessness and his anxieties regarding his Black identity. This voyage to the south appears as an opportunity for the protagonist to explore the similarities and discrepancies between the history of Black people in Canada and in the United States. With the discovery of the manuscript, written by Langston Cane I in the late nineteenth century, the novel takes us to the traumatic history of American fugitive slaves and underlines how Canada was (wrongly) regarded as "a place called heaven": "Oakville [. . .] was a strange and lovely town. Nobody beat up on you, or brought out a whip, or threaten to drag you back to slavery. But colored people were still made to feel like outsiders" (Hill: 461). Hill's narrator also mentions that "colored people had [trouble] eating in taverns, staying in inns, and buying homes in Canada West" (462). Following the time-span of the five generations of Cane men, the novel further demonstrates that the Ku Klux Klan was also present in Canada around the 1930s, when a Black man was threatened and attacked for wanting to marry a White woman. It also shows how Langston's parents, a mixed-race couple, were denied rental accommodation or entry in certain restaurants of Toronto in the 1950s.

These respective episodes from the novel illustrate quite clearly Hill's belief that the foundation of Canadian identity—which is defined in opposition to the United States—is

mostly based on illusions: if Canada appears more welcoming than its neighbours because of the country's reputation of being nice to strangers, it is no less racist. Indeed, as Jennifer Harris points out in her article "Ain't No Border Wide Enough: Writing Black Canada in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*," "What the nation does not like it obligingly projects elsewhere—usually onto that country conveniently located just south" (367). Therefore, Hill's ambivalent account of the Underground Railroad and its consequences ceases to promote the idea of a clear-cut frontier between the 'nice' Canadians and the 'evil' Americans. In Walcott's words, "Hill's text seems to suggest that it is impossible to make sense of some aspects of Black Canadian history without a serious and sustained consideration of the place of the US in that history" (1999: 73).

If *Any Known Blood* is concerned with shedding light on the relationship between African American and Black Canadian history, Chariandy's novel shows how a young mixed-race protagonist constructs his identity as a second-generation Canadian of Trinidadian ancestry, a family background shared by the author himself: "I was born in Canada to immigrants from Trinidad, a 'mixed' Black mother and a dark-skinned South Asian father" (Chariandy and Dobson: 810). In *Soucouyant*, the narrator remembers his mother's story and depicts her early years as a Caribbean immigrant in Canada in the early 1960s, recounting examples of discrimination on the part of restaurant owners or landlords. For instance, the protagonist's mother is thrown out of a restaurant by the owner who "softly explains that this is a family restaurant and that no coloureds or prostitutes are allowed to eat here, though he knows of other places on another street where she would be welcome. He knows that she hasn't come to this country to cause trouble and he hopes that she will understand and respect the rules of this here place" (Chariandy: 50). This passage illustrates quite well the paradoxical nature of the Canadians' behaviour towards immigrants and visible minorities who are "softly" told that they are not welcome. The narrator of *Soucouyant* also gives a vivid

picture of the life of his “dark-skinned” family in the mainly White suburban area of Port Junction, “one of the last remaining ‘good’ parts of Scarborough, meaning distant from the growing ethnic neighbourhoods to the west” (Chariandy: 59-60). As readers, we are introduced to only one other non-White Port Junction family, that of Meera, a young woman who becomes the narrator’s friend and his mother’s caretaker. In Chariandy’s words, “both Meera and the unnamed protagonist [. . .] are young, ‘second generation’ mixed-race blacks who were raised in a Canadian community where there were very few visible minorities, and where they were isolated and racialized in similar ways” (Chariandy and Dobson: 814). However, it is interesting to note here that the narrator’s family differs from Meera’s as they suffer from social isolation in their area not only because they are not White, but also because they are poor. In addition, Adele’s relatives are also stigmatized by her dementia—a symbol of her alienation—because it gives her a more visible and disturbing place in their neighbourhood.

Both writers thus use the story of their genealogy—which allows for flashback images of their family and of the country, for instance—to paint a new picture of national history. By doing so, they are able to underline certain episodes of the country’s past so that their readers, whether Canadian or not, may acknowledge and recognize the illusory self-image projected by Canada. Nonetheless, the authors’ interests do not only lie in remembering past discrimination but also in emphasizing that the on-going existence of racism and prejudice in contemporary Canada prevents migrants from fully integrating into the national space.

### **Re-Membering**

In Hill’s and Chariandy’s writings, the capital act of remembering is often accompanied by a process of “re-membering.” As Helen Lock points out, “to ‘re-member’ something is to perform the act of reassembling its members, thus stressing the importance to the memory

process of creative reconstruction” (Lock: 203). This ‘alternative’ definition is particularly relevant in this case because the narrators of both novels must (re)collect the pieces of their fragmented genealogies in order to get a full grasp of their origins and find a way to build a future for themselves. This echoes the idea of a “fragmented memory” specific to the Caribbean developed by Derek Walcott in his Nobel lecture (1992), in which he praises the creativity of Caribbean artists: “Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent” (Walcott)—a characteristic that in my opinion could in some sense be extended to all ‘minority’ writers. As a matter of fact, Hill and Chariandy’s ‘historical’ narratives can also be called “creative” because neither one of the authors is interested in providing a unique, objective vision of history so much as in showing that history is constituted of a multiplicity of individual voices, conveyed here by each member of the respective genealogies.

If the image of the ancestor(s) helps Hill’s and Chariandy’s respective narrators to re(-)member their families’ and the countries’ pasts by inserting flashbacks into their accounts, it also allows them to remap the connections between Canada and the world beyond the national frontiers, mostly by moving the narrative between the Caribbean and Toronto, between American cities and small Canadian towns, between urban centres and rural surroundings. In *Any Known Blood*, Langston Cane V engages in a personal journey on both sides of the US-Canadian border—more precisely between Baltimore and Oakville, a small town by Lake Ontario—to collect the dispersed information about his family, which Cuder-Domínguez views as a “cross-border dynasty” (2003: 59). Oakville is portrayed by Langston Cane III as “a small but clean town. There is a small Negro community. The town is on the shores of Lake Ontario. The winter is harsh” (Hill: 190). This description, which draws on Canadian clichés of peacefulness and nature such as ‘the lake’ and ‘the harsh winter,’ contrasts with the

image of Baltimore, a city where violence is omnipresent and where Black people suffer from segregation and racism. This comparison between an American metropolis and a small Canadian town forces Langston Cane V to reconsider his previous opinion of his parents' hometown: "*Oakville is so boring, I had complained to my father when I was a teenager. Why did you move here? He said, I wade into chaos every day, but I like to sleep outside it. Also, I like to put my head down at night knowing that the lake is there. What do I like about water? It offers itself up like a bridge for people to move between countries and continents*" (Hill: 46, italics not mine). The lake, which evokes wild nature and is deeply rooted in the Canadian imagination, also stands here as a symbol for Black history, as Lake Ontario was the last place for Langston Cane I to cross to escape the US and slavery. Quite obviously, the authors' ambivalent use of the lake—as a part of both White and Black history—represents their determination to underline the similarities and connections that exist between 'traditional' Canada and the cultures from 'beyond.' In other words, the Canadian nation cannot deny that the national identity is being constantly challenged, whether by the arrival of new migrants, or even by "'remote' cultural legac[ies]" (Chariandy and Dobson: 812) carried on by second- or third- generation migrants.

Very much like Hill's protagonist, the narrator of *Soucouyant* engages in the task of (re)collecting the pieces of his mother's past. If the book is subtitled "A Novel of Forgetting," it mostly portrays the main character's struggle to 'unforget' his mother's memories in order to be able to see a possible future for himself. The young man is also trying to make sense of his parents' choice to settle in a house in the Torontonion suburb, in "a cul-de-sac once used as a dump for real-estate developers" (Chariandy: 9):

For a long time, I never understood what ever could possess my parents to live here. This lonely cul-de-sac in the midst of "a good neighbourhood," this difficult place that none of our neighbours would ever have settled for. It could have been the great lake, of course. That mirage of steel and pastels stretching out to the very horizon of the world, that inland sea inspiring all sorts of reckless imaginings. My

parents couldn't have been impressed by the house itself, its dilapidated and rotting frame, its peeling eggshell paint, its windows cloudy with cataracts or roughly boarded up, all blasted with the sounds of passing trains. They couldn't have been inspired by the idea of a long-term ownership, since any fool could see that the lake was slowly advancing, eroding inches of the backyard each year. (Chariandy: 58-59)

Paradoxically, the specific location of the house—on the Scarborough Bluffs by Lake Ontario—suggests that it is part of a 'traditional' Canadian area and could thus be seen as a proof of Adele's family's willingness to blend in. Nevertheless, the environment of the house also expresses the characters' alienation from their neighbourhood, as we learn that their house by the lake was built on a former dump site on a dead-end street. The house thus calls for several levels of interpretation. The decaying building which looks as if it were about to collapse and the attrition of its foundations embody the mother's fragile health and the erosion of one's sense of identity consecutive to both the process of migration and a declining mental condition. But these features also convey the explosion of the family's domestic sphere and the gradual annihilation of their social relationships with the people who live in the same community. In other words, the house's territorial isolation (which could allude to Adele's insular past in the Caribbean) goes along with the feeling of rejection constantly experienced by the protagonist's family and reinforces the idea that the Canadian nation is not truly welcoming to migrants, especially when they are neither wealthy nor healthy.

The disintegrating house also stands as a metaphor for the mother's crumbled memories through which the narrator reconstructs the trauma—repeatedly mentioned as the probable cause of her dementia—that she registered as a child in Carenage, her native village in Trinidad, when she saw a soucouyant, a Caribbean mythical creature defined as “something like a female vampire [that] disguises herself by dressing up in the skin of an old woman, but [that] at night [sheds] her disguise and travel[s] across the sky as a ball of fire” (Chariandy: 23). The soucouyant of the title is, among other interpretations, Adele witnessing herself and

her mother being burned, an accident that occurs because of the insulting and careless behaviour of American soldiers stationed on the island. Interestingly, there is a strong resemblance between the spatial description of Carenage and the Scarborough Bluffs:

Carenage, a village that extended from a seaside hill down to the blue. Carenage was an old village without a plan. It had winding lanes and abruptly ending roads and houses of any different colours, each fashioned out of spare wood and corrugated metal from the ancient dockyards. Many buildings were perched on pillars of brick and concrete on the lower edges of the hills to avoid flooding during the rainy season. This wasn't a nice place but one of waste and hard edges. A place where the city dumped its garbage, piles of it along on the shore. (Chariandy: 174)

Both Adele's native village and her 'new' Canadian environment seem idyllic, but present some major drawbacks: they are situated on the edge of water but are threatened by its action, including flooding and erosion. They are part of beautiful rural landscapes, but both are used as dumps for other people's garbage. Even the surrounding landscape of the family home becomes a symbol for their 'otherness' when the protagonist's mother becomes unable to make the distinction between the Canadian lake and the sea that used to surround her native island, although the topographical duality in the mother's mind might also have a more positive connotation as it could suggest that the inhabitants of the house possess two (or more) identities which are not mutually exclusive. As in Hill's work, the lake "stretching out to the very horizon of the world" (Chariandy: 174) also refers to poetics of wilderness and pure nature while being linked to a place 'beyond'—here, its description as an "inland sea" (Chariandy: 174) undoubtedly refers to the Caribbean. These parallels drawn between a Caribbean village and a Canadian landscape are not neutral because, by accentuating the similarities between the two places, the author integrates an 'elsewhere' place into Canadian space and simultaneously aims to legitimize the presence of migrants in that same space. Quite significantly, however, the migrant family ends up where no one else wants to live, which exemplifies the Canadian paradox illustrated in both *Any Known Blood* and *Soucouyant*

that Canadian people are outwardly nice to strangers, but not truly friendly.

The fact that both narratives are partly set in conventionally Canadian (rural) topographies further demonstrates the willingness of the authors to inscribe their multicultural characters into a Canadian countryside traditionally seen as a White space, and not only in a Canadian metropolis such as Toronto. This approach also allows the writers to question the very elements constitutive of Canadian identity and, by extension, of the Canadian nation. Their texts expose the inability of the national frontiers to enclose a uniform standardized Canadian culture, if only because after inheriting many cultural features from Britain, Canada is now being culturally colonized—like most of the world—by the United States (in addition to being a privileged destination for West Indian and Asian migrants, among others). Moreover, the multiplicity of perspectives of these two novels and their transcultural nature could also be considered a deconstruction of the idea of the ‘nation’ itself, in the sense that the authors clearly state that the nation should not be equated with culture (as might have been the case in colonial times). In doing so, they point to the inadequacy of state-managed multiculturalism in a world that is becoming global and that calls increasingly for “cross-border identification” (Walcott 1999: 73); they also insist that an individual needs access to a multiplicity of models in order to construct his/her own identity.

Both fictions also specifically target the concrete implications of the policy of multiculturalism by showing some of its absurd repercussions. In *Any Known Blood*, Langston Cane V passes for every minority that is being denigrated—what he calls his “game of multiple racial identities” (Hill: 2). In this context, he uses his ambiguous light skin tone to pass for Algerian in order to get a job that is “part of an active effort to promote employment equity in the public service” and for which “Only racial minorities need apply” (Hill: 2), a passing designed to prove Langston’s “theory that nobody would challenge my claim to any racial identity” (Hill: 2). In *Soucouyant*, the critique of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act is

most visible when the narrator mentions an event in the neighbourhood, the annual “Heritage Day parade”:

Every year in spring, our neighbours would organize a march that would pass by the main road just beyond our cul-de-sac. The flyers explained that *everyone* was invited to participate, since the Heritage Day parade was being revamped these days to recognize “people of multicultural backgrounds,” and “not just Canadians.” (Chariandy: 60)

Ironically, the narrator’s language shows how he feels excluded from this event, which was designed specifically to create a space for cultural exchange and to make him and his family (or in other words, ‘multicultural’ people) feel welcome in Canada. Interestingly, the fact that the protagonist remains unnamed as the story unfolds might be yet another way to convey his ‘invisibility’ as a ‘visible’ minority. These passages from Hill’s and Chariandy’s works clearly aim to demonstrate that the Canadian Multiculturalism Act tends to ‘other’ ethnic minorities instead of incorporating them into the national picture, which echoes what Rinaldo Walcott has called the “two-sided” nature of the nation. As he puts it, “The policy inscribes those who are not French or English as Canadians, and yet at the same time it works to textually render a continued understanding of those people as from elsewhere and thus as tangential to the nation-state” (Walcott 2003: 117). In this view, both narratives can be said to advocate a ‘re-membering’ of cultures that would counteract the *dismembering* action of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act which, in spite of its claims to the contrary, contributes to the isolation of ethnic cultures and communities.

### **Internalization of Multiculturalism: The Body as a Site of Memory**

This plea for a reconnection between different cultures is mostly conveyed in these fictions through the bodies of the protagonists (and the authors themselves), which carry the visible legacies of different cultures—in Hill’s case, African-American and Euro-Canadian, and in Chariandy’s, South Asian and African Caribbean. Obviously, in *Any Known Blood*,

Langston's passing games and his frequent concern not to be recognized as a Black man by the Black community are evidence of his attempt to challenge "the assumption of an authentic racialized self based on history, culture, community, and experience" (Harris: 370). Even though the 'light-skinned' Langston Cane V immediately acknowledges what Siemerling has called the "segregated geography" of Baltimore (37), his experience with local people is ambivalent. People, Black or White, have different reactions to his mixed-race heritage. On the one hand, he is the victim of blatant racism on the part of a potential *White* landlord who labels him as an "octoroon" (Hill: 94)—meaning someone with one-eighth African ancestry—and he is welcomed by most of the *Black* congregation of the African Methodist Episcopal church of Baltimore. On the other hand, he gets mugged by a coloured thug after witnessing a shooting in a 'Black' area of the city, and a young man from the AME church accuses him of not being Black enough, two episodes that show how Black people also contribute to the continuation of colour-prejudice. Hill, as Siemerling has argued, challenges through his writing—that is, in his novels but also in his non-fiction *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada* (2001)—the racial borders of identification—or "disidentification" (35)—by deconstructing the boundary that separates Blacks from Whites (Siemerling). Quite evidently, the character's racial ambiguity in *Any Known Blood* embodies the legacies of both Black and White histories, in Canada and elsewhere, while disrupting any frontier that might all too easily be traced between those categories.

The unnamed narrator in *Soucouyant* also embodies various heritages. In addition to repeatedly qualifying himself as "dark-skinned," his mixed race is also visible through his hair, "a texture somewhere between the soft and tight curls of her own [his mother] and the spiny quills of my father's" (Chariandy: 41). Hair has a special significance for people of African descent, arguably because it is frequently mentioned as a specific feature of Blackness—it is no coincidence that Hill's non-fiction *Black Berry Sweet Juice* has devoted a

whole section to “Hair Issues” (Hill: 89-103), or that the Black Canadian writer Althea Prince has dedicated an entire book to *The Politics of Black Women’s Hair* (2009). The narrator’s bones also symbolize his legacy, as he inherited a deformity in his knee from his Trinidadian grandmother. As he says himself in an episode in which he is talking to his mother,

Here. Press your fingers against the walnut-shaped lump of bone at the side of my knee. Hold them there until my knee bends and some rogue tendon bunches against that lump and against your fingers before suddenly snapping over. With a click. My body’s trick. Her smile. (Chariandy: 8)

The body thus plays an important role in Chariandy’s narrative as reading her son’s body comes to be the only way Adele can re(-)member:

Touch has remained important to Mother. It steadies her to an increasingly alien world and jars her to recollection when sight and sound fail to do so. Mother may not always be able to remember me. Not always. But she instantly remembers physical quirks like my trick knee. (Chariandy: 41)

As her dementia grows, Adele comes to depend more and more on touching to apprehend reality and to recollect memories—for example when she spends hours letting tap water flow over her fingers because it reminds her of the sea in her native village—, as well as depending on smell, which “is [another] trustworthy sense” (Chariandy: 41). In both Hill and Chariandy’s novel, the body thus becomes an internalization of a true multiculturalism, combining different ethnic heritages and set in a true, ‘traditional’—both urban and rural—Canadian environment. This might indicate that these authors advocate a true cross- or trans-culturalism in Canada, that is, a blurring of cultural boundaries, a real blending of different cultures, instead of a mosaic constituted of heterogeneous composites that fail to interact with each other.

## **Conclusion**

By portraying the experiences of mixed-race characters in Canada, Hill’s and Chariandy’s novels can be seen as two attempts to achieve a double ‘reconfiguration’ of both the present

and past of the Canadian nation. It is interesting to note that, although these writers are from different origins and have different origins, their discourse on the Canadian nation is strikingly similar. First, their works both aim to draw a new picture of their country, one that does highlight the multiplicity of identities existing within the national framework, while simultaneously exposing Canada's shortcomings, that is, its failure to accommodate not only immigrants but also Canadian citizens from ethnic minorities. These narratives thus fall into what Nora Tunkel has categorized as

novels [. . .] representative of a deconstruction of the multicultural myth in that they rise above and go beyond the idea of nations or ethnicities as the dominant parameter in the definition of individual and collective identities. They do so by moving across borders, within and outside Canada, in an actual and metaphorical sense, situating the ethically conscious individual at the center of its map. (122)

Furthermore, the authors' challenging of the metaphorical and geographical boundaries of Canada appears to serve a second purpose: giving a voice to those who were silenced by the 'official' accounts of History, and who still suffer today from their lack of legitimacy in a Western country in which they nonetheless have a past. As Chariandy states, "History might be interpreted as the official narratives of the past that the powerful are able to construct and promote. The irony here, of course, is that history, as such, is wholly indebted to processes of forgetting, or the ability of the powerful to repress the full story of the past, and to convince others that there is only one appropriate way of telling or interpreting what happened" (Chariandy and Dobson: 812). These fictions therefore call into question the reliability of the 'official' Canadian history and aim at a better popular knowledge of the history of the Black presence in the country. This task, however, may seem difficult, or even impossible, as it also remains dependent on the willingness of White citizens to renounce their admiration for Canada's alleged "history of benevolence" (Mc Kittrick: 98). As Coleman puts it,

Canadians have been reminded of the brutal histories that our fictive ethnicity would disavow, but many of us Canadians may nonetheless be reluctant to give away our pride in Canada's relatively civil racial history in comparison to more

dramatically traumatic racial histories and especially our hopes in our civil history's most recent manifestation in the ideal of multiculturalism. (9)

WORKS CITED

- Bennett, David. "Introduction." *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*. Ed. David Bennett. London; New York, NY: Routledge, 1998. 1-25.
- Bissoondath, Neil. *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*. 1994. Revised and updated ed. Toronto: Penguin Books, 2002.
- Canadian Multiculturalism Act*. R.S., 1985, c. 24 (4th Supp.). <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/C-18.7/FullText.html> (Accessed 3 May 2010)
- Chariandy, David. *Soucouyant*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007.
- Chariandy, David, and Kit Dobson. "Spirits of Elsewhere Past: A Dialogue on *Soucouyant* (Interview)." *Callaloo* 30.3 (2007): 808-17.
- Coleman, Daniel. *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006.
- Cuder-Domínguez, Pilar. "African Canadian Writing and the Narration(s) of Slavery." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 79 (2003): 55-75.
- . "Portraits of the Artist in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* (2005) and Madeleine Thien's *Certainty* (2006)." *Cross-Talk/Cross-Sightings: Canadian and Global Imaginaries in Dialogue*. Eds. Diana Brydon and Marta Dvorak. Waterloo, ON, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2011 (Forthcoming). 24 pp.
- Harris, Jennifer. "Ain't No Border Wide Enough: Writing Black Canada in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*." *Journal of American Culture* 27.4 (2004): 367-74.
- Hill, Lawrence. *Any Known Blood*. 1997. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007.
- . *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*. Toronto: HarperCollins Perennial, 2001.

- Huggan, Graham, and Winfried Siemerling. "U.S./Canadian Writers' Perspectives on the Multiculturalism Debate: A Round-Table Discussion at Harvard University." *Canadian Literature* 164 (2000): 82-111.
- Lock, Helen. "'Building Up from Fragments': The Oral Memory Process in Some Recent African-American Written Narratives." *Race-ing Representation: Voice, History & Sexuality*. Eds. Kostas Myrsiades and Linda Myrsiades. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998. 200-12.
- Mc Kittrick, Katherine. "'Freedom Is a Secret': The Future Usability of the Underground." *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. Eds. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007. 97-114.
- NourbeSe Philip, M. "Why Multiculturalism Can't End Racism." *Frontiers : Selected Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture, 1984-1992* Stratford, Ont.: Mercury Press, 1992. 181-86.
- Siemerling, Winfried. "'May I See Some Identification?' Race, Borders, and Identities in *Any Known Blood*." *Canadian Literature* 182 (2004): 30-50.
- Sylvester, S.P. *Language of Dissent: African Caribbean Canadian Women Writers*. Jaipur: ABD Publishers, 2006.
- Tunkel, Nora. "Deconstructing the Multicultural Myth: Transcultural Imaginaries in Madeleine Thien's *Certainty*." *Inventing Canada = Inventer le Canada*. Eds. Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Martin Löschnigg. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2008. 113-26.
- Walcott, Derek. "Derek Walcott - Nobel Lecture." Nobelprize.org. [http://nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1992/walcott-lecture.html)  
(Accessed 25 February 2011)

*Towards a New Canadianness*

Walcott, Rinaldo. *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*. 1997. 2nd revised ed. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2003.

---. "The Desire to Belong: The Politics of Texts and Their Politics of Nation." *Floating the Borders: New Contexts in Canadian Criticism*. Ed. Nurjehan Aziz. Toronto: TSAR, 1999. 61-79.