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**Men don't Have Nothing like Virginity: Migration,
Refraction, and Black Masculine Performance in
Austin Clarke's *The Question***

Pedro M. Carmona Rodríguez

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Men don't Have Nothing like Virginity: Migration, Refraction, and Black Masculine Performance in Austin Clarke's *The Question* (note 1)

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Abstract

This paper examines Austin Clarke's novel *The Question* (1999) paying attention to its main character's representation of masculinity. On the one hand, the performance of masculinity that the protagonist brandishes unveils itself as a parody of the models that the white imaginary has created of its other as well as of those internalised by the black imaginary. On the other, the paradigms of migration from the British Caribbean to North America and the ideological refraction they imply situate the speaking subject in an interstitial location from which he visualises the split between the code of Caribbean masculinity and its Canadian counterpart. Within this transcultural scope, issues of social

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mobility, exoticism and reified sexuality are underlined to contribute a critique of the multicultural kaleidoscope.

Austin Clarke has been renowned as the first black Canadian novelist and the first black writer who trespassed the barrier of his colour to be included in mainstream anthologies. [\(note 2\)](#) While his works have caught the eye of publishing houses like McClelland and Stewart, Clarke is still a cornerstone of those collections organised around axes like multiculturalism or race, whose target audience is more restricted (see Hutcheon & Richmond, 1990; Kamboureli, 1996a; Clarke, 1997b). [\(note 3\)](#) Clarke's liminality between the mainstream and the excentric also denotes the ambivalence of his national belonging, since, in spite of having been in Canada for more than fifty years (see Algoo-Baksh, 1994), he still occupies the limbo of the eternal immigrant, "forever poised on the verge of not belonging" (Harris, 1986: 115).

Clarke's narrative work stems from the sociological factor of the Caribbean migration to Canada, an intertext that complicates any national affiliation. [\(note 4\)](#) His works, consequently, fracture the notions of cultural coherence and unified subjectivity to advocate instead the rupture provoked by the processes of migration from the Caribbean to North America and the endless negotiation among discourses of national

belonging and ideologies of gender and sexuality. (note 5) Nevertheless, in opposition to the pursuit of the longed social welfare in novels like *The Survivors of the Crossing* (1964), *Among Thistles and Thorns* (1965) and *The Meeting Point* (1967), those produced in the last decade give prevalence to the consequences of ideological, cultural and physical dislocation. His individuals in *The Origin of Waves* (1997) and *The Question* (1999) have spent most of their lives in Canada, and through the generational contrast with their elders, the Barbadian author does not only portray the conspicuous cultural-generational clash, but the eternal debate between the ossification of roots and the equilibrium between tradition and its inevitable deformation. In this context, his choosing of protagonists is related to the need to research on the immigrant's experience as different from the expatriate's (Kaup, 1996: 171).

Clarke's recent fiction makes of cultural difference its field of study: his characters do not try to accommodate to the white norm any longer; they are as Canadians as the WASPs and participate of the exotic discourse predicated on them as much as those who coined it, this implying their extreme awareness of the role that migrancy plays in their lives. (note 6) Thus, the Barbadian author's late work emerges from a hybrid site be-

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social groups propelled by the Canadian kaleidoscope (Ramraj, 1996: 163). His latest novels abound in that space of ambivalence between the ideal of similarity and the preservation of difference; his characters' achieved social mobility locates them in a feeble centre that hardly resists the onslaught of their visible origin. When *The Origin of Waves* and *The Question* were still in progress, Clarke asserted:

At the moment I am concerned with determining or defining an identity for the Caribbean man who has lived in Toronto for some time, in such a way that he will no longer consider himself an immigrant, an outsider, or a minority person; but would come to understand that his presence here, and the ease with which he continues to live here, is caused by the solid foundation that he got from the West Indies. In other words, what I am going to do next is to draw a character who [...] because he has lived here for so long – it might be ten years or three decades – is able to see that this is where he belongs (1996: 101).

In these novels, the concept of *home* has widened its borders to include a *Canadian home* that, drawing on Dionne Brand, Rinaldo Walcott has baptised as “a tough geography”. Inscribing Clarke's literary output within this spatial dimension of Caribbean-Canadian writing, “it seems that one of the challenges facing contemporary black Canadian art is to move beyond the discourse of nostalgia for an elsewhere and to

address the politics of its present location” (Walcott, 1997: 40-41). Simultaneously, this complex *home* unveils as a site of ambivalence and shifting, shaky positions, where cultural or gender hegemony and supremacy are in jeopardy, as we will see below. In the Barbadian author’s production, the exploration of this locus of transplantation has been made through his domestics, participants in the Caribbean-Canadian development programme known as the Worker Domestic Scheme, and very especially through the archetype of the black lonely man in the urban landscape of Toronto. (note 7)

This paper employs one of Clarke’s men, Malcolm in *The Question*, to analyse how the process of transculturation affects the configuration of masculinity via cultural refraction (see Coleman, 1998). As an immigrant, Malcolm is located between two cultural sites and is forced to reorganise his Caribbean masculine ideology to adapt it to the demands of his Torontonionian immigration. The *dictum* “men don’t have nothing like virginity” (Clarke, 1999: 84), rescued from the protagonist’s childhood, bears witness to a Canadian destabilisation through which the hegemonic superiority that it brings about is questioned. Unaware of this ideological refraction and in a gesture denoting a tangible dislocation, Malcolm appropriates the stereotyped images of black masculinity and the white fan-

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tasies on black sexuality presiding over the popular imaginary to further legitimate his social position by resorting to an annihilating relation with two white women. By means of the opposition between Malcolm and the other stereotype reigning in Clarke's work, the WASP woman, *The Question* displays an inversion of gender roles that turns the black man into the dominated pole of the duality in terms of his origin and the site of desire he occupies in the white mentality. In turn, the habitually marked pole of the opposition, the woman, articulates a remarkable domination on the basis of her ethnicity. Her identification with the host location produces a feminisation of that place (Kamboureli, 1996c), and ultimately enacts the emasculation of the immigrant. Malcolm's autobiographical narration, as presided over by its ambivalence between gender domination, ethnic superiority and sexual subjugation, works in and out of the dichotomies structuring the discourse of gender and colonialist hegemony.

In *The Question*, Malcolm is a liberal professional enjoining an excellent social position, and, nevertheless, apt to internalising a number of stereotypes on black masculinity like an extreme sexual might and an unfathomable desire. Malcolm, now a Canadian immigration judge born in Barbados, is more conscious than his fictional predecessors of his exotic figure

in the eyes of white women; he is prey to that exoticism and inverts it for his benefit in an instance of how gender, sexuality, class and culture function within similar performative parameters. As Judith Butler has stated (1990; 1993), gender configurations are constructed by repeated acts that socially circumscribe the subject as male or female, in the same way that sexual practices determine the body on which they materialise producing a hetero or homosexual identification. In the same context of iterative acts, cultural and national affiliations interpellate the individual as much as the subject (re)produces them (see Bhabha, 1990). This pattern of performed identities connects contemporary gender and postcolonial theory to Clarke's work, where his characters mimic the models that marginalise them to produce threatening copies that interrogate the authority of national and gendered borders. This challenging performance appears in most of Clarke's novels, but it is in *The Question* where it is explicitly concerned with its parodic nature.

Malcolm's narration is the story of a transcultural transit from his Caribbean homeland to the north of the continent that contradicts many of the precepts on which Canadian multiculturalism has been written, among them the ideal of equality propagandised from the official multiculturalism. In this sense,

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"*The Question* is also commenting on a multicultural nation. Who makes the laws, who makes the decisions, who keeps the gates, controls the doors of home? The Earth is a globe; people migrate, culture happens where person and place intersect" (Bridgeman, 2000: 2). Within the assumed egalitarian politics of multiculturalism, Malcolm, the former immigrant, has turned into the gatekeeper of the new world, and from that position he denies or gives entry to those who look for a new life in Canada. From his court, he makes of exoticism the lenses of his reality, others what he sees as alien, qualifies and disqualifies by means of an ethnocentric and phallic gaze that delegitimizes the narration of his own immigration. His story is embedded in an zone of continuous interference among national discourses and pervasive deterritorialisations where the same ambivalence that precludes the solidification of positions as regards gender and ethnicity deconstructs the line between the national subject and its other. Migration, refraction and iterative performances constitute the subject in transit in an area of *international* displacements.

Yet reading *The Question* also reinforces the assumption that Clarke's work is prodigal in sexist stereotypes that, nevertheless, have never angered his audience thanks to an ambivalent treatment of the black *macho*. Despite being an inescap-

able presence in Clarke's novels, such an archetype cannot reach the status of a cumbersome figure, since its presence conveys its own deconstruction. In Malcolm's and his predecessors' gestures, the masculine overaction evinces the falsity of the image they insist on providing and promotes a critique of hegemonic masculine models. Malcolm exaggerates his masculinity to immediately reveal its construction and deconstruction, a double move that reasserts the contemporary crisis of traditional masculinities. And in this sense, the ambiguous treatment of black masculinity in Clarke's fiction contradicts bell hooks' opinion that "[...] we have not begun to create new forms of masculine behaviour, blue prints for the construction of self that would be liberating to black men" (1991: 75). Through his novels, Clarke has shown an alternative form to disrupt the usual representations of the black man, contributed to dissolve the patriarchal spectre and its bearing on black male subjectivity. His fictions, therefore, agree with hooks on that "masculinity as it is conceived within patriarchy is life-threatening to black men" (1991: 77).

In Clarke's novel, the deconstruction of masculinity relies on the previous deconstruction of some of the cultural notions in which it is deeply ingrained. Malcolm, like his fictional peers, is the product of two cultural sites in continuous tension (Brown,

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1989: 7), and both are prone to a critical examination that, as Ángels Carabí explains, is difficult. For her, “deconstruir la cultura de la que forma parte [la masculinidad] resulta un proceso complejo porque no sólo es un ‘algo intangible’, sino que las rutinas jerárquicas de género, raza y orientación sexual entretrejen el sistema, económico, social y político en el cual él es todavía el centro de referencia” (2000: 26). In opposition to his fellows in Clarke’s male catalogue, Malcolm knows the contingency impinging on his identity; he is conscious of living a balance between two cultures separated by the stereotypical constructions that each of them has made of its counterpart. This distance notwithstanding, Malcolm intends to root in Canada the masculine code he learnt in the Caribbean without bearing in mind that masculinity, like any ideology (see Gilmore, 1990), is a cultural product.

As a consequence, Malcolm is a site of open contradiction beyond the paradox inherent in any masculinity, in other words, “[i]n so far as men live the dominant version of masculinity [...]. They are themselves trapped in structures that fix and limit masculine identity” (Easthope, 1990: 7). From Toronto, Clarke’s protagonist idealises the island that he left behind, a place now veiled by the exotic, and its production of masculinist ideologies. Whereas his colour sets him aside from the

white sector of population in which he professionally moves, his absorption of ethnocentric Canadian ideals is an obstacle for his eventual return. However, the axis around which Malcolm displays his autobiographical narration is his masculinity, and this is governed by a Caribbean code of irreducible binarisms but all equally subjected to immediate refraction in Canada.

The implantation of the Caribbean models of masculinity in Canada is intent on contesting the stereotyped perception of the black immigrant. Such a representation also interrupts an easy transcontextualisation and transculturation of masculinity, since “[...] the male West Indian migrant’s experience of cross-cultural refraction produces disruptive parody when he takes on certain Canadian norms for masculinity” (Coleman, 1998: 29). Incapable of reconciling the demands of both codes, Malcolm undergoes a cultural dislocation unlikely to be assuaged in which his gendered subject cannot reach configuration beyond a continuous negotiation of times and spaces; between two gendered formations that are deeply at odds. The *excess of masculinity* that the judge grafts in his life in Toronto is automatically desauthorised. However, conscious of the exoticism of his male figure and attached stereotypical constituents like sexual potency, Malcolm employs it

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to favour an obsession of social acceptance that brings about the internalisation of white stereotypes.

In this sense, the gender formation deployed by *The Question* is complicated by the subtext of class, since, on the one hand, the mobility that Malcolm has achieved with his studies and his profession proves useless. On the other, the white recognition he pursues relies on overlooking the patterns of his Caribbean masculinity, the visible centre of his identity. In search of that acceptance, Malcolm highlights his *black macho* performance first, then disidentifies and criss-crosses personally the line that he had already trespassed professionally, that is, the border between the *we* and the *they*. The cultural white, middle-class mark he looks forward to exhibiting denaturalises his adopted gender representation, and as a result, his masculine performance recedes, and then he *underperforms*. If, “[Clarke’s] characters are very conscious of acting male” (Coleman, 1998: 32), Malcolm knows that his performing the masculine Caribbean code in Canada conveys an almost ridicule effect, as it also does his representation of the black stud. His position among a multitude of masculine codes ends in the eventual emasculation that he culminates as the novel progresses to its conclusion. Confronted with the fact that his unnamed white wife and her best friend, Reens, have been

lovers for the four years of his marriage, Malcolm thinks of committing suicide, but he finally carries out a truncated version: he submerges his wife's dresses in the tub. Significantly, what *dies* there are the symbols of the social ascent greedily hankered after by the immigrant. At that moment, Malcolm's apparent castration reveals certain liberation, since many contemporary cultures "lay on a man the burden of having to be one sex all the way through. So his struggle to be masculine is the struggle to cope with his own femininity" (Easthope, 1990: 6). (note 8)

When Malcolm accepts a double relation with his wife and Reens, he is subsumed within a love triangle in which, once his sexual fantasy of possessing the white woman is seemingly fulfilled, the symptom of social mobility he sees as adjunct to it vanishes. He does not possess either of *his* women, but is possessed by his antagonists as a castrated entity, turns into the upper vertex of a pyramid whose other two apexes desire each other, while avoiding the projection of their desire onto the Caribbean man. The extinction of the attraction that gave way to the three-fold relationship is construed as a lack of naming provoking that Malcolm's autobiographical narration does not issue the name of his wife, in spite of the fact that "[t]he first thing a man does when he meets a woman, [...],

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is to get the name of the woman he is facing” (Clarke, 1999: 151). Yet his name does not appear anywhere either. Just in passing, and in the course of a conversation with his previous girlfriend, the Philippine Room, the protagonist's name comes to light, whereas in the relationship between Malcolm and his wives, the only name that appears is Reens, which evinces that she structures desire and power in the unusual trio. (note 9) In contrast, those unable to name or lacking a name of their own are immediately demoted, showing that “una de las formas de poder es la capacidad de nombrar, describir y definir”. Accordingly, “nombrar al Otro es el correlato del constituirse como grupo” (Puleo, 2000: 69), and as subject, I would argue. Retrospectively assessing his marriage, Malcolm concludes: “[a]nd in all this time, Reens never once called me by my name” (Clarke, 1999: 132), suggesting in this way his non existence for the woman.

On the contrary, in being named by Room, also of immigrant origin, and not by any of his white Canadian women, the power of the dominant culture to name the other is undermined. Between Malcolm and Room, desire is articulated between two *others*. In Room's mouth, the authority to name challenges the barrier between the national and the external. It is also the appropriation of agency that, in Clarke's former stories,

the immigrants never held. *The Question*, then, far from being centred on the previous assimilation, delves into the space separating the national and the non-national, complicates in the process the usual rites of passage and sheds some light on the unavoidable hybridisation of the Caribbean immigrant in Canada. In this way, the novel endows Malcolm with a parallax that lets him visualise the difficulty of his Caribbean-Canadian masculinity.

Part of the conflict between masculinities with which Malcolm is faced is given by the dethroning of his place in the family unit. When Reens, initially a friend of his wife, comes into the intimate nucleus formed by the black man and his wife, the limit between the public and the private disappears. When his wife-to-be and Malcolm marry in an impersonal ceremony in the lunch-break of their respective jobs, he claims: “and we become like a family: one husband and two wives”. That is why, the black man explains, “from that cold November morning, on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, I have included the number three in all my lottery tickets, and not once has my number come up” (Clarke, 1999: 121). Apart from entering into the couple’s privacy, an unforgivable transgression for Malcolm, Reens governs the marriage between her friend and the Caribbean man, and imposes on it the principle of

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a dysfunctional family that contradicts the nuclear Caribbean unit. Mainly articulated as a domestic patriarchy, the Caribbean family that Malcolm recalls cannot overlook the paternal figure as centre of its public sphere. When he is turned into a domestic, sexual commodity, Malcolm witnesses how his masculinity, a body of ideology he believed to be safe from the transcultural negotiation, is affected. In his regretful acceptance of this atypical family, his masculine identity retreats and Malcolm asserts: "I want to be with my wife. And I want to be with Auntie Reens. I want to be with the dog. With the man who could have been the father of my wife's child, making me the child's uncle" (Clarke, 1999: 239).

The normalisation of this notion of paternity undoes much of what the judge had already uttered, since from the impossibility to conceive it, he passes onto a passive submission. In his first conversation with his wife, Malcolm is shocked when he hears that she wants to become a single mother: "No woman worth her salt", he thinks, "would bring this 'trouble' of childbirth upon herself" (Clarke, 1999: 60). The initial impact is not comparable to the one he suffers when he knows that the man she has chosen as potential father is gay, whereas he, the prototypical black stud, is disregarded. However, Malcolm considers the alteration of the traditional family and its dis-

placement of the father as part of his life in Canada, which makes the cultural clash and his castration more acute:

I still feel awkward for the recited expression of views and trained thinking, the sway this thinking has built, and my own silence and crippling reservation that the island has schooled me in, narrowly - or narrow-mindedly [...]. But I must remember that I am living on half a continent, and should correct myself, and follow the paths of this continent, with order and orderliness that lead me to make unspoken hidden sentiments appropriate to the cold weather and regime of continents (Clarke, 1999: 60).

However, Malcolm's lack of access to this social system points out his eventual lack of adaptation to the group into which he theoretically has entered, and the comparison between himself and his wife's selected stallion suggests that his conception of masculinity does not fit into the trends increasingly present in the reception site. Malcolm's hilarious comment on his rival does not conceal the insertion of his heteronormative ideals of Caribbean masculinity in Canada:

I measure myself against this unknown father. He is six-foot-six. Brawny and bronzed. He jogs every morning and every evening. In the snow and sleet, along slippery sidewalks. And if he cannot do it before he leaves his apartment for work, he carries the equipment of his obsession with him in a parachute bag on the subway. He has an exercise bicycle. And wears skin-fitting pants that show his balls and his penis bulging through. And long blond hair, ending

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down his back in a ponytail. And his penis is the size of the leg of this table that is between us. I must not comment any more on the size; but why do I mention it? I examine the leg of the table again instead (Clarke, 1999: 64).

The Caribbean man's story reflects that his relation with the two women is a destructive liaison presided over by the already mentioned sexual fantasy, by an intertext of racialisation and social mobility. He is lured by the expectation of being in possession of the white woman as a form of retaliation for the historical evil of black reification, and additionally, by the will to complete his slippery social integration. Yet his dubious possession of the two women, usually identified in Clarke's fiction with the host site, pinpoints a compulsory attempt of assimilation that results annihilating for Malcolm. In spite of this, he consents in a tolerated seduction and allows his women to lead him into their own sexual fantasy, namely, the appealing idea of having the exotic black at home. In the context of this assumed objectification for the sake of an illusion of social and racial acceptance, it is evident that "[...] Clarke creates protagonists who view white women as symbols of Canada – that is to say, of a vamp who entices 'her' thralls with phoney promises of bourgeois comfort" (Clarke, 1997a: 116).

Malcolm's attitude is complex inasmuch as he disposes of a stable status, which means that a vested material interest is

not behind his accepted objectification. In this state of affairs, why he enters in a destructive relationship cannot be justified but brings to the fore that, in Clarke's novel, "material success is counterbalanced with moral and emotional decline" (Brown, 1989: 87). And such a decline undermines the cornerstone of those lessons on masculinity given by the protagonist's mother during his childhood: "make sure you don't get mix-up with no woman who going-horn you. You hear me, son" (Clarke, 1999: 239). The act in which Malcolm is seduced by the white woman puts an end to the black macho's fierceness, since he adopts a passive role in opposition to the activity defining Reens and his/her wife. This procrastination prevents Malcolm from coping with the two women's authority, and hence his unavoidable emasculation. In the context of gender binaries leading his life, nothing is more telling of his castration than his loss of authority in the sexual intercourse with his wife. Malcolm and his wife make love in an act in which the man lies back and his wife immobilises his body with her legs, "[...] when it is she who wants it to happen" (Clarke, 1999: 96). The image of his immobility supplements his metaphoric castration and questions Canada's emasculation as seen by Smaro Kamboureli in Clarke's works. For her, it is a form to counteract what she terms *prepossessiveness* (1996c: 231). In other words, transforming Canada into a female subject

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mitigates the power imbalance between dominant and dominated, since the *feminised* reception site is subjugated to the immigrant's male presence, this constituting an inversion of the cultural roles of dominant and dominated. But in *The Question*, the emasculation is at least double and affects the female Canada as well as the feminised black man. Nevertheless, the gender inversion is ineffective, as the inequality is hardly amended: the immigrant is physically and culturally possessed by the white presence to be later dispossessed of the seminal support of his identity, his masculinity.

Whereas Malcolm did not need to resort to the exotic aura of his masculinity to make room for him in Canada, he makes recourse to it to validate his position, and incarnate a figure that exceeds his personal reality. His disguise as a black hunk is nothing but an exaggerated plagiarism of the Afroamerican *hustler*, the black man that underlines his masculinity and the commerce of his sexuality to open a path to the obligatory success dictated from the narrative of the American dream. Featured by the highlighting of visual signs of economic comfort and racial affiliations, the hustler aesthetics neutralises a narrative of white progress by means of an excess of ethnicity. As Coleman has detected in a number of Clarke's men, the *hustler* challenges "the dominant culture's socio-economic

codes of masculine success”, while it solidifies “the racist stereotype of the black stud in the process” (1998: 39). Malcolm’s performance of masculinity takes certain characteristics from this urban representation, such as the interest in clothing. He is worried by the extreme care of his expensive shirts in the Caribbean dry-cleaning services of the city, whereas the trousers he wore when he firstly met his future wife were fraying. The trousers, an ancestral symbol of masculinity, showed then an evident deterioration affecting the place where masculinity acquires visibility, the pubic zone:

[...] my eyes touched the rich, soft material of my linen trousers shimmering through the cellophane bag, and I saw the zipper slightly damaged, and looking rusty. I thought of the pain it would cause if it stopped suddenly while zipping and climbing up the front of the thick hairs it was supposed to protect and hide from the public (Clarke, 1999: 20).

Malcolm’s masquerade is exhausted when his wife imposes on him a calendar in which Italian dinners and sexual activity are located at the same level, once a week. Food and sex are grouped within a ritualistic and mechanic schema deriving in a sense of frustration for the immigrant, who is unable to perform the sexual role devised for him by the white imaginary of exotica. In the Canada depicted by *The Question*, however, such a role is doubly contested: on the one hand, the racist

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context brought to the fore precludes a free circulation of the black man and constraints to the minimum the possibilities of interracial relations (see Philip, 1992). On the other hand, the abiding hostility towards any social behaviour likely to denote the male chauvinism underneath the myth of the black macho is censored in a society in which female emancipation is unquestionable. Brancato identifies both circumstances at the basis of the entanglement contributing the extreme marginalisation of the black man and the polarisation of his representations between the rapist and the stud (2000: 110). In his performance of the latter, Malcolm realises that his masculinity *in excess* has derived into castration. Consequently, he states,

[...] in order to stave off further disappointment, I become disregarding and callous, defensive against further penetration. In order to guard against more assaults on my manhood, on my secretive nature, I think for a fleeting moment of going back to the fantasies of women I used to draw in the dark, small room, holding the pictures of their bodies in my hands, and becoming contented, filled, satiated, and climaxed with the muted trumpet of Miles Davies (Clarke, 1999: 59).

The racialised discourse of cherished exotic tokens is also present in Malcolm's daily activities as an immigration judge. Now, as agent of that discourse, he reifies those people willing to offer him a narration that may account for their admis-

sion in Canada, which attests to the mutability of positions in the novel and the shiftiness of the binary oppositions that structure it. Whereas his masculinity and his manufactured performance of the black macho locate him as other with respect to the white mainstream, his post as immigration judge includes him within the national frame. Additionally, as he emphasises, “[...] I am a judge who is first a man” (Clarke, 1999: 25), a shaky justification to erotise and exoticise a South Asian woman who tries to obtain a Canadian passport:

[...] [T]his talk and thought of power? Sexual power, they call it? Is it sexual? Like my interest in the Indian woman that sits before me in sari and rings and bangles on her arms, and wrists and toes? And in her nose?. [...]. No! I am a gentleman who is a judge. [...] Is this the way a man born in an island is conditioned to think? And is supposed to think? My thoughts begin to shame me (Clarke, 1999: 56).

As his fictional predecessors do, Malcolm looks for his masculine reference in the island of his childhood. He extracts the archetypal masculine models from his memory, and, in relation to them, he establishes the Canadian transgressions of masculinity. Through memory, he idealises his mother as the depository of the insular culture and the regulator of the masculine code he has adopted; in turn, the white Canadian woman is demonised as a castrating presence. The polarisa-

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tion that the migrant carries out between the black mother and the white woman, nevertheless, is pernicious for his masculinity (Clarke, 1997a: 120), and thus, when he leads the code that defines his masculinity back to the mother, the shadow of disidentification appears. At that moment, masculine autonomy unveils itself as a hoax, since it is the mother that determines a clear-cut masculine behaviour whose spatial structure has survived the crossing of the ocean to resume in Malcolm's memories of childhood. Thus, "the drawing room in my mother's house, back in the island contains chairs that are masculine and chairs that are feminine; and before my pee could foam, declaring and then delivering me into manhood, my place was always in a low chair" (Clarke, 1999: 22). While this subordination to the maternal figure impels him to adopt her words as a personal dogma, the mother also poses a limiting barrier to that masculinity in the guise of the extreme de-masculinisation brought about by the social panic to homosexuality. Related to the corruption of her godson by an anonymous man in the maternal narration, homosexuality inspires in Malcolm an insurmountable fear. In spite of this, and although his mother explains to him that the man robbed the kid of his virginitiy, Malcolm informs us:

[...] but I have heard the bigger boys, talking about the bigger girls, use this word 'virginitiy'. On my own I did not know about 'virginitiy';

and did not know enough about men and women to know if only women had this thing, this 'virginity'. The bigger boys told me [...]: 'Men don't have nothing like virginity, boy! Because they is men (Clarke, 1999: 84)

From Malcolm's rendering, virginity is equated to a feminine feature and inextricably linked to the physical breaking of the hymen during the first penetration. The female body's rupture and adaptation to the masculine presence in its domain surface in the anecdote, as it also does the lack of that rupture in the male body and its immediate equation to a lack of virginity. In this ideology, therefore, virginity can never be conceived as a *unisex* feature. The narration of Malcolm's mother also denies the plausibility of a sexual contact between men, reducing it to a biblical evil censored with divine wrath, which accounts for her grappling of the Bible while telling the story.

Despite being aware of the patterns he has to follow to perform his Caribbean masculinity, Malcolm's *correct* archetype is blurred in Canada. The refraction and consequent fiasco of his performance allows him to see his failure in having invested in "a relationship with no question, or with no suspiciousness in it" (Clarke, 1999: 56). Before his eyes, Reens and his wife have established a firmer relation redirecting their desire for the black man onto each other. Symptomatic of that union is the simultaneity in the sexual climax reflected

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in the last pages of the novel through a sexual inuendo in Malcolm's voice, whose final meaning, however, goes undetected for him. When his wife comes in the apartment, she usually shouts "I am coming", and since Reens' break up in their lives, she does so followed by her friend's saying "I am coming with you" (Clarke, 1999: 229). Their close friendship hides a sexual affair that materialises for the Caribbean man when he illicitly snoops his wife's intimate belongings. Once unmistakably cheated, Malcolm has to admit that after his thirty years in Canada he has not lost that same naivety usually associated with virginity, and despite being a man, shows a femininity that, according to his ideology, is a condition for virginity.

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2. As George Elliott Clarke states (1997a: 126n1), Lorris Elliot assumes in his anthology *Literary Writings by Blacks in Canada* (1988) that Bryan Gypsin, an American writer named Brion Gysin, was the first black writer to publish a novel in Canada, actually an autobiography. The Afroamerican Martin Robinson Delany published his novel *Blake en Chatham* (Ontario). It was a work that appeared in two installments issued in 1859 and 1862. Immediately after, the Afro-Canadians William Haslip Stowers and William H. Anderson wrote *Appointed: An American Novel* (1864) published in Detroit. Already in the 20th century, John Hearne, born in Montreal and educated in Jamaica, and Jan Carew, from Guyana and nationalised Canadian, published their first writings in London. Austin Clarke arrived at Canada in 1955, which makes him the fifth Afro-Canadian writer (Clarke, 1997a: 112; Algoo-Baksh, 1994).

3. In many cases, and Clarke is one of them, the authors included in this type of volumes show their disagreement with the axis structuring the anthology. Clarke's fiction instances this distrust of official multiculturalism and its practical implementation. Some of the anthologies issued in Canada in the late eighties and nineties originate in an attempt to clarify what the term *minority* implies as a political and cultural signifier, but they turn the celebration of diversity they convey into a

synonym of its constraint (Kamboureli, 2000: 164). In her introduction to *Making a Difference*, Smaro Kamboureli poses a challenge for minority representations in emphasising the instability of any margin and opting, in turn, for underlining the material conditions in which the writings anthologised are produced (1996b: 2).

4. For Lloyd E. Brown, Clarke is responsible for rewriting the travel to El Dorado. While for centuries the Europeans depicted the Caribbean archipelago in the site of their fantasies, in Clarke's fiction El Dorado is in North America, and his characters leave the islands for the continent. In Canada, Clarke's Caribbean immigrants "stand at the intersection of two powerful myths: one reflects the outsider's limited perception of the Caribbean as idyll, and the other reflects the islander's idealistic expectations of Canada" (Brown, 1989: 2).

5. Clarke's vast work onset its way with *The Survivors of the Crossing* (1964), *Among Thistles and Thorns* (1965), and *The Meeting Point* (1967), which opens the Toronto trilogy. In 1971 his first short story collection appeared, *When he Was Free and Young and Used to Wear Silks*, as it also did *Storm of Fortune*, the second novel of the trilogy that was later completed by *The Bigger Light* (1975). As the result of Clarke's return to Barbados in the mid-seventies to work in the local administration and the frustrating experience into which his way-back derived, *The Prime Minister* (1977) and his fictional memory *Growing Up Stupid under the Union Jack* (1980) were produced. From 1985 onwards, when the short-story collection *When Women Rule* was launched, Clarke adopted this narrative form almost exclusively, the novel *Proud Empires* (1986) being the exception. In this sense and in

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his talk to Frank Birbalsingh, Clarke affirmed that his turn from the novel onto the short-story form obeyed to a pragmatic reason. His work for the CBC Radio programme *Anthology* absorbed part of his experiments before they were in the literary market (1996: 93). His mastery with short-fiction is confirmed in *Nine Men who Laughed* (1986), *In this City* (1992) and *There are no Elders* (1993). As George Elliott Clarke has seen (1997a: 127n9), *Nine Men who Laughed* makes a blink to *Eight Men* (1961), by the Afro-American Richard Wright (1908-1960). Like in Wright's stories, Clarke's deploys a full catalogue of male characters who struggle with the set of stereotypes that construct them while making use of these images to attempt self-definition in their daily routine. The novels produced in the 90's, *The Origin of Waves* (1997) and *The Question* (1999), research on the space of cultural difference and the turn it has undergone with the institutionalisation of diversity. The exploration of this locus of cultural tensions has fostered the diversification of Clarke's work, and from his labour as social activist there emerged the pamphlet *Public Enemies: Police, Violence and Black Youth* (1992). In opposition to this combative side, *A Passage back Home* (1994) pays homage to one of the writers who have decidedly influenced in his style, Samuel Selvom, whereas *Pigtails 'N' Breadfruit: The Rituals of Slave Food* (1999) intended to preserve the presence of Barbados in his pages in an appealing combination of insular cuisine and personal memories. If, as Walcott thinks, "[...] food is one of the central markers of outsider multicultural status in Canada" (1999: 68-69), Clarke has once again proven the instability of his position within the Canadian social, literary and national spectrum in returning his work to the island landscape. Despite having told that he would never

employ the Caribbean as setting after *The Prime Minister* and *Proud Empires* (Clarke, 1996: 101), he has done so again in his latest novel, *The Polished Hoe* (2002), already awarded with the Giller Prize.

6. Although Graham Huggan opines that exotism is a discourse of the margin (2001: 27), it seems that it is the opposite, a practice to ensure the stability of a presumed centre, in turn solidified as long as the external to it is veiled as different. As usual, centres and margins are relative and temporary. All in all, Huggan claims, exotism can and must be employed to defy the metropolitan cultural codes (2001: 27), as Clarke does in many of his fictions.

7. The image of the black, helpless and lonely man in the city links the figures of Boysie Cumberbatch in *Survivors of the Crossing*, *Storm of Fortune* and *The Bigger Light*, John Moore in *The Prime Minister* and some of the male characters in *Nine Men who Laughed*: Cliveland in “Doing Right”, George in “Canadian Experience” and Joshua Miller-Corbaine in the stories “A Man” and “How he Does it”, to mention a few.

8. Easthope is here prey to a certain polarisation of gender and its representation in culture and fiction, which, unfortunately exceeds the scope of these pages. I am highly indebted to an anonymous referee for pointing this out and suggesting some other ideas incorporated to the final version of this paper.

9. This gesture is an echo of the short story “Canadian Experience” included in *Nine Men who Laughed*, where the name of the protagonist, also a black desperate man in the urban geography of Toronto, only appears in the appeal that opens a Christmas card sent to him by the

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other character in the story, Pat, a white unemployed actress. Pat is the object of desire of the Caribbean man, since, like in *The Question*, the white woman cannot help being a metonymy of the reception site, and possessing her is rapidly equated to white acceptance and social mobility.