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Constructing Diasporic Identities in Austin Clarke's *The Origin of Waves*

Construction des identités diasporiques dans *The Origin of Waves* d'Austin Clarke

Tanja Cvetković

Abstract

The paper examines how traumatic experiences shape diasporic subjects' identities in a host country and examines how other types of memory influence the construction of identity in a diaspora. By way of a close analysis of *The Origin of Waves*, a 1997 novel written by Canadian writer Austin Clarke, who was born in Barbados, the author shows that homeland experience is important for the formation of diasporic identity as life in a new environment play itself out against the memory of another environment. The experience is problematized when it is marked by trauma which results in a more complex and difficult integration in a host country. The paper shows how Clarke's novel challenges the fixed self and how the frozen and rigid identity becomes a matter of dynamic construction and self-fashioning through the process of migration.

Keywords: place of origin, nostalgic memories, narrative memories, cultural memories, colonial memories, diaspora, homelands.

Résumé

Cet article examine comment les expériences traumatiques façonnent les identités des sujets diasporiques dans le pays d'accueil, ainsi que les autres types de mémoires qui influencent la construction de l'identité en diaspora. En analysant minutieusement le texte du roman *The Origin of Waves*, l'auteur montre que l'expérience acquise dans le pays d'origine est importante pour la formation de l'identité diasporique parce que la vie dans un nouvel environnement se déroule parallèlement à la mémoire de l'autre environnement. L'expérience devient problématique quand elle est marquée par un traumatisme qui a pour conséquence une intégration plus compliquée et plus difficile dans le pays d'accueil. La présentation de l'identité diasporique que Clarke a proposée dans son roman représente un exemple de transformation du soi diasporique, fait d'origines multiples, en un soi fluide.

Mots-clés : lieu d'origine, mémoires nostalgiques, mémoires narratives, mémoires culturelles, mémoires coloniales, diaspora, patries



The paper examines how immigrant experience in a diaspora shapes diasporic subjects' identities in a host country and how different types of memories influence the construction of identity in Austin Clarke's novel *The Origin of Waves*. In this novel Clarke presents how his fictional characters negotiate identity in a host country – Canada – as well as in their experience at home – in this case, Barbados. As Stuart Hall suggests in his article "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," "the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and where they come from" (Hall 1995, 3) are the best places to explore when defining people.

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," meanwhile, Stuart Hall states that we should think of cultural identity in diaspora not "as an already accomplished fact" but "as a 'production' which is never complete..." (392). What is evident in *The Origin of Waves* is the production and not the (re)discovery of identity. The production of identity is grounded in the re-telling of the past. According to Hall, there are two ways of understanding a diasporic cultural identity. The first defines cultural identity in terms of shared collective culture that diasporic subjects have in common. In Clarke's novel, cultural identities at work reflect the common Caribbean historical and cultural experience and Caribbean cultural codes underlying diverse imposed selves. In the process of identity construction, the characters face their Caribbean experience, which is just one phase in their process of creating fluid, drifting identities through narration. As Clarke introduces two major metaphors – the conch-shell and the inner tube – whose complex meanings reflect different layers of Caribbean heritage, the whole novel becomes the story about the construction of a diasporic identity. Ultimately, however, the identities in Clarke's novel are produced through narration based on the memory of diasporic subjects' lives in their homeland, which is actually the second, more common way of understanding cultural identity in diasporic texts.

Hall thinks of Caribbean identities as framed by two axes or vectors: the vector of continuity and the vector of rupture (1994a, 395). Caribbean identities result from the dialogic relationship between these two axes. The vector of continuity is grounded in the past, whereas the vector of rupture represents the discontinuity which diasporic Caribbean subjects experience when they leave their homeland, be it voluntarily or involuntarily. The rupture gives rise to feelings of trauma and nostalgia in a host country. The profound feeling of rupture from the past of the enforced separations from Africa is what the Caribbean people have in common, which is particularly formative for Caribbean spiritual life. The paradox is that the uprooting of slavery and the discontinuity with the past unified people in their new countries in spite of the differences their cultural identities carried with themselves.

Diasporic subjects in a host country feel an overwhelming nostalgia for "lost origins." In Clarke's novel, they continually return in their minds to the Caribbean, the islands of enchantment, thereby create imaginary homelands of plentitude.



The homelands of their imagination, their fictitious creations, belong to the realm of the imaginary order through which diasporic identities reproduce themselves and in which the fulfillment of return is deferred. It is a Lacanian symbolic order of representation where the subject, through an infinite memory of desire and search, produces a renewable source of narratives.

As diasporic subjects construct imaginary homelands while building relationships to a new place, nostalgia, as a sentimental longing for the past time and place with happy personal associations, plays an important role. The role of nostalgia, its significance for the past, is the subject of concern for many critics who belong to different cultural milieus, such as Dennis Walder or Salman Rushdie (whose ideas on the nature of nostalgia in postcolonial world I will briefly refer to). As Walder writes, “this recall and return to “lost times and places brings a kind of truth of the past into the present, reviving not merely the past moment, but the epiphanic experience of the past in its entirety” (Walder 2011, 8–9). It is Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* (1981) who explained postcolonial nostalgias as resulting from “some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt” (Rushdie 1991, 10). When nostalgia brings the past to the present through memory, it revives the present in a new colour and signifies the necessity of the reintroduction of the past when the subject is in the process of self-recreation.

In “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie, whose work is concerned with many connections, disruptions, and migrations between the East and the West, quotes a British novelist and a short story writer, L. P. Hartley, whose observation in *The Go-Between* that “the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there” (Rushdie 1991, 9) has become almost proverbial and reflects an exile condition in a true sense. Hartley uses the idea in a metaphorical sense, and merges a sense of time and place. However, for diasporic subjects the present is literally a foreign country, and the past is the home they came from, though there's a sense of loss. Rushdie adds further that since we cannot reclaim the thing we've lost, we “create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (1991, 10). By reflecting on the past and our homeland, we “deal in broken mirrors” (11) and make use of the remains, “the shards of memory” (12), from which we can reconstruct the past in a form of a narrative. Thus, Rushdie adds another dimension to connecting memory and narration to a homeland experience.

In her essay “Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern,” Linda Hutcheon discusses irony and nostalgia as the two sides of the same postmodern coin. Though the two components are opposites, they are two inevitable sides of the postmodern condition. By trying to define nostalgia, Hutcheon starts from its original meaning, namely the desire to return home (from the Greek roots *nostos* – “to return home” and *algos* – “pain”). Nostalgia is further defined in terms of the emotional “upheaval ... related



to the workings of memory” (Hutcheon, 3). In the postmodern society, nostalgia is often related to the immigrant condition as it seems to have been connected to the desire to return specifically to the homeland and for what is perceived as unified identity. In other words, the focus is on the immigrants’ sense of loss and mourning for the cultural unity and ethnicity that the immigrants once had. That sense of “lost authenticity” that the feeling of nostalgia represents means that the immigrant condition has a prominent concern with the past and the sense of remembering and forgetting. In that sense, nostalgia can be interpreted in relation to Clarke’s characters in the novel.

Clarke’s characters are exiles, the term he uses in his essays. The most defining aspects of exile experience for his characters are place and their identities (Callaghan 1996: “A Preface”). As exiles, they live in the space of the in-between: between the Caribbean and their new country. For an exile, the impossibility of returning home equals the impossibility of never arriving in a new place. Both Callaghan and Walcott explain that “the dilemma of *can’t return* and *never arrive* is both literally and symbolically what might be said to characterize Austin Clarke’s body of written works, both fiction and non-fiction” (ibid.). Clarke’s characters often act from “the location of residence” (ibid.), for this is the space from which “political demands and actions might be possible” (ibid.), which is very important for building up their diasporic selves.¹ But they return to their homeland, usually Barbados, as a locus of nostalgia that could be imagined, recreated, longed for, remembered through the diasporic imaginary (Anthias 1998, 577; Baumann 2000, 327; Clifford 1994, 310).

* * *

The narrative of *The Origin of Waves* is based on two immigrant stories which John and Tim tell. After bumping into each other on Christmas Eve in Toronto fifty years after immigrating, they begin reminiscing about their lives as small children in Barbados and their lives as immigrants in North America. Their stories of remembering have a therapeutic effect. Though John is a successful psychiatrist in the United States, he seems to have missed out on life. Tim is retired and has been struggling with his immigrant past and his present loneliness. In order to connect the past and the present moment of their lives, they go to a nearby bar and spend the night spinning a narrative.

Tim and John, situated in time and space in their host country, are unavoidably involved in constructing a thread of meaning that enables them to know and

1) Austin Clarke was influenced by the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements in the United States and was well-known for his political activism and his great influence on the Caribbean cultural life in Toronto, such as the initiation of the Caribbean festival in Toronto. His works are often politically charged in their discussion of home and diasporic life in Canada.



understand who and what they are in the present, a meaning they construct through narrative. The memories of their past homes continue to live through their present narration as a sort of an impression the characters preserve in their minds. As many thinkers, from St. Augustine to Sigmund Freud and Antonio Damasio (Walder 2011, 6–7) believe, our consciousness is held together by a narrative of memory. Walder further cites the neurologist Damasio who, attempting to define a relatively stable self, “resorts to the language of narrative fiction” (Walder 2011, 7). Knowledge of the self springs to life in the story, or to put it more imaginatively and artistically, as famous Canadian author Robert Kroetsch says in *Creation*, “the fiction makes us real” (Kroetsch 1970, 60). According to Damasio, the core self is born as the story is told, within the story itself. In that way, the autobiographical self – as Tim’s and John’s selves are in the process of becoming – is always under (re)construction. The process is never-ending and, as Damasio concludes, our consciousness is expanded by structured thought processes which are best seen in language and narration, as the drama of the human condition comes into existence and the self is shaped.

John and Tim employ both narrative and traumatic memories in the text. Traumatic narrative is the way that John and Tim render their traumatic experience when they experience rupture from their homeland. Barbados continues to live through their memories as a sort of an idealized past, the paradise they left behind. The disconnection from the place is a traumatic event which disrupts their relation to their selves and the world (Bal 1999, 43). That trauma seems to be Tim’s problem; he cannot relate properly to other people and experiences terrible loneliness. After having lost Lang, the Chinese woman he was in love with, he is not able to reconstruct his identity. His conversation with John allows him an opportunity to articulate and transmit the story, to reconstruct the self from the scattered fragments of disrupted memory. Tim’s story also represents a way of “regaining lost cognitive and emotional capacities” (Bal 1999, 45).

Apart from being traumatic, Tim’s and John’s memories carry colonial influences from their lives in Barbados. They are proud of their British education and their inclinations both at home and in diaspora. The values that Tim and John cherish were instilled in them by the British education system in Barbados. Though unaware of “anything like colonialism” (Clarke 1997, 18), Tim draws on his memories of schooldays with John, hardly recognizing himself “as colonial[s], sitting on that sand, staring at waves that washed assertive and sullen strangers ashore, as if they were born like us, in the island, as if they were born here, to rule over us, here” (Clarke 1997, 19). Tim’s idea of an ideal home is based on the painting he saw in John’s mother’s room, which was a water colour of “an English cottage with a thatched roof” (Clarke 1997, 144) painted by an Englishman and entitled “home sweet home” (Clarke 1997, 144). In a similar vein, while describing his office in the States, John says that it has “fancy



telephones, those old-fashioned ones from England in the nineteenth century, like the ones you see in books, or in murder movies with Sherlock Holmes and Dickens, things you come across in a library book” (Clarke 1997, 73).

Though both John's and Tim's identities are influenced by British values they acquired in Barbados, they handle their colonial upbringings differently. Tim remains more attached to British standards of living and his memories of the colonial way of life, in particular by his view of his headmaster. In contrast, John fluctuates between different ways of life while living in different countries in Europe and North America. This fluctuation is clearly reflected in his accents: he imitates an English or an American accent, for example, or uses just his “broad and flat” Barbadian accent (Clarke 1997, 166).

Another type of memory employed in the novel is cultural memory, which results from the deeply relational nature of the self. Unlike John, Tim does not fluctuate between different cultural milieus and is dedicated to his immigrant neighbourhood in Toronto, which triggers vivid memories of being an immigrant and emotions of loneliness. Not being able to relate to other people, Tim is connected to events of his immediate surroundings only. These associations exemplify the influence of cultural memory. Cultural memory gives existence to people and the world both for Tim and his fellow immigrants as they experience the same existential annihilation of the place they inhabit in the foreign country: “And the snow has hidden all colour and life from the street, and the Christmas colours of green and red, silver and gold, from store and windows; and I am alone, and I can see nobody, and nobody can see me. There are only shapes; the shapes of people I hear ahead of me” (Clarke 1999, 21–22). This passage shows Tim's lack of human relations to other people and the resulting nothingness that Christmas can induce in immigrants, though their endeavour to build up their diasporic self still persists. In her essay “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” S. J. Brison explains that people suffering from traumas experience nothingness and cites numerous examples of Holocaust survivors (Bal 1999, 43–47).

Tim's struggle to reinvent and recreate the self continues throughout the novel. Traumatic memory and the feeling of loneliness reoccur many times either through dreams, flashbacks, or as disconnected fragments of uncontrollable feelings of despair and melancholia. Tim underlines his feeling of not being able to relate to other human beings and the world: “[...] there is nothing, nothing that I see that has any bearing, any relation, any connection to me. Did you know that not *one* street in this city has a similar name to *any* street back home? So, I don't even see *that* connection” (Clarke 1997, 70). The feeling that Tim describes is reminiscent of the sense of loss he experienced in the past. Being unable to make any relation to other human beings, he is “nothing but a walking ghost” (Clarke 1997, 70). By comparing the place of the host country to his homeland, he tries to connect to the new place of residence.



Tim is imprisoned in his house, which still contains a two-year-old Christmas tree that denies the progress of time and divides the world into the inside and outside. He sits in his chair looking at the patterns in the carpet and kills wood-ants which threaten to eat through the foundations of the house and destroy it. Tim exterminates the black ants with a can of Black Flag. The words “Black Flag” which appear “in big white capital letters on the can” (Clarke 1997, 92) stand for Tim’s identity, while white capital letters signify the hegemony of the white society he lives in. Tim’s retreat from the outside world, which points to his inability to communicate in the host country, isolates him from the outside world.

Every day he walks down Yonge Street to Lake Ontario. The daily walk arouses memories of his happy times on the beach with John and colours his experience of the city with his immigrant emotions of loneliness and alienation:

Every day, at the same time, in any kind of weather, I leave my house and walk down Yonge Street leading straight for the Lake, and back from the Lake up again on Yonge Street and back to my house, walking the streets, seeing people passing, and sometimes, I try to smile with them ... (Clarke 1997, 69)

The passage highlights Tim’s invisibility in the metropolitan city. At the end of the novel, he spots an inner tube, real or imagined, in the lake which saves him from his immigrant condition of alienation because he associates the tube with the inner tube floating away on the beach from him and John in Barbados. The inner tube connects him with the new place in Canada, signals his acceptance of place and probably his final arrival in Toronto.

Relationships with women and place seem to be important for the construction of diasporic identities for the male characters in the novel. Tim’s and John’s relationships with women are crucial for the formation of their diasporic identities. Tim’s dream of paradise is related to the dream of a beautiful woman and unrequited love. The loss of love is similar to the loss of paradise, for he sees the two sets of being as identical. Lang is “a jewel” (Clarke 1997, 87), precious like life, the embodiment of Tim’s dreams and imagination. Tim feels that his love for Lang is like paradise regained. However, being more realistic about love, John feels that paradise is lost. As a dreamer, Tim imagines ideal love as “Life and Lang. Moving out of reach, like a wave in the receding sea. My experience in this journey is limited. Fantasy and poetry. I had to use imagination. I bite it. I eat it. But I lost it. And then it was morning. Morning came as a relief” (Clarke 1997, 84). Tim experiences that “dream and fantasy at [his] age are the same as fact.” (Clarke 1997, 87)

For John, with his matter-of-fact attitude to life, paradise does not exist. He does not believe in the ideal love and the story of Adam and Eve: “A simple question.



A question that was first axed in the Garden o'Eden. A question put to that stupid bastard, Adam, when Adam couldn't make up his goddamn mind to take a piece offa Eve, or take a bit outta the apple, speaking metaphorically, of course!" (Clarke 1997, 106) John has had relationships with several women in his life. Consequently, his relation to his home country is more the experience of nostalgia than the feeling of loss and annihilation that it is for Tim. While living with women of different ethnic origins (Italian, French, German), John accommodates to different cultures and ways of life and thus broadens his identity in a transnational way. As Frank E. Manning notes in the *Foreword* to the study *El Dorado and Paradise: Canada and the Caribbean in Austin Clarke's Fiction*, Clarke himself "rejects the popular myths of El Dorado and Paradise, but maintains his faith in the noble possibility of achieving social progress, racial harmony, genuine community, political decency, and an honest tolerance for human differences" (Brown 1989, x).

Clarke describes John in a comic way. He is primarily concerned with his relationships with women. In addition, the sense of having a family, of belonging to a family, is very important to John; these are the relationships that he cherishes. He has ten children from three women, although Tim doubts that all the children are John's. John's reason for coming to Toronto is to visit his wife and child who are staying in Sick Children's Hospital. Unlike Tim who has no family and who cannot properly relate to women, John believes that "every man have a family! Even if it's a rotten family" (Clarke 1997, 62).

While talking to Tim, John finally locates Tim's problem and poses a central question in dealing with the immigrant condition and Tim's loneliness: what kind of women does Tim like? As a psychiatrist, John believes that the cause of his loneliness is sexual deprivation. Tim has no answer to the question. John points out to Tim that all he needs is companionship: "All. You. Godamn need. Is. Female companionship" (Clarke 1997, 113). Suggesting that one's relationship to others is the relationship to one's real self, John gives a piece of advice to Tim: "I mean living alone without anything like an anchor to tie-you-down, or anchor-you-back to your real first living. With no strangers you grew up with, only strangers, people you meet after you come here, strangers who, because of something in this place and in this time, turn into friends. But not the real friends you grew up with, in the island" (Clarke 1997, 110). Unlike Dionne Brand, whose characters maintain fluid identities to the point of rejecting any kind of anchor from the past and perform at the level of global and transnational identities (as in *What We All Long For*), Clarke challenges the notion of fixity by questioning the importance of the past, place, and human relationships as well as nostalgic feelings for the construction of diasporic self. In other words, he relies to the memories of the past experience and place in order to create a fertile ground for the creation of the fluid identity.



John's immigrant condition is less devastating than Tim's, a fact which rests on his making up stories. He even begins his story with "Once upon a time ..." several times in the text. Describing his life as "a bed o' roses" (Clarke 1997, 74), John asserts: "I tried to practice the profession of a psychiatrist in the States. The States is a big place that likes big people, big ideas, and that take big risks. I am a big man. I live big" (Clarke 1997, 72). His story about life in the States is that of the promised land, where he has carried out his dream of success as a professional, as a husband and man, and as a parent who takes care of his children and wives: "I am an Amurcan. A Yankee. You seen my gold credit cards, when I showed you my family, didn't you? A man can live there" (Clarke 1997, 74).

While listening to John's story, Tim begins to doubt the truth of his narrative. He notices that "the language he has retained from the countries he visited is not a real language, not a true language" (Clarke 1997, 166), especially when John uses "an honest, native, broad and flat Barbadian accent" (Clarke 1997, 166), without any trace of French, Italian, German, which he said he spoke.² That's why Tim is confused: "I am beginning to wonder how much of his talk he expects me to believe, how much he expects me to trust, out of all his stories which have me laughing and sad. But I know he expects me to trust all of them. We both know that time erodes truth and memory; doubting and accepting" (Clarke 1997, 166). Tim's point here is that an event from the past narrated in the present is not true anymore; it is time that harms both truth and memory. Some theorists (Bal, for example) explain that "the presentness of memory implies that "the past is adopted" as part of the present (as object of its narrative activity)" (Bal 1999, xv) and as such has a problematic role in truth telling. The narration of an experience from the past includes the reconstruction of events which can be fabricated and hence narrative memory is fraught with issues of falsehood and truth.

Since the past no longer exists the way Tim and John experienced it a long ago, Tim's narration becomes a fiction, a pure fabrication of his mind, a fantasy, which is evident when he says:

Perhaps what I just described to you is a dream or a fantasy. Dreams and fantasy at my age are the same as fact. Something like being able to make an imagination come true, like wanting to be with the woman from China. Perhaps what I just narrated is nothing more than what my mother call a "friction" of my imagination. I use it to light the loneliness I live with. The boredom. Nothing so good in real life has ever happened to me. Not even in a dream. (Clarke 1997, 87)

2) As for the language of the novel, please see my article "Traces of Caribbean English in *The Origin of Waves*" which is coming out in the conference proceedings by the Faculty of Philosophy, Niš (2018).



The truth about his life has been turned into a story, a fiction. It is a means for healing the self by way of memory.

Unlike Tim, who turns fact into fiction, John turns fiction into fact. John's story in the text, a little bit exaggerated and pompous, is pure fiction. John fabricates the truth of his experience of immigration in order to impress Tim and to hide the boredom and mediocrity of his life in the States. Whereas John recreates himself through fiction, Tim heals himself through fiction. Tim's healing starts at the very end in the novel when he gives a hug to John that re-establishes a connection to another human being. Walking by the lake, Tim hears the footsteps of another human being behind and stops being anxious any more. He only feels uncertainty about "warning of attack or of approach" (Clarke 1997, 244). A touch upon his winter coat resolves the doubt like a miracle. Tim connects to another human being, and after the night he spends in the same room with another man, his ordeal of loneliness begins to disappear. It is the moment of success for him, giving him "the hard-earned bountiful rewards of the sea" (Clarke 1997, 244), or of life.

Tim's and John's real or imagined relationship to their homeland, mediated through memory, reflect both African heritage and European colonial heritage. The network of transnational relationships that exists between different cultures and places gives rise to hybrid places and identities. As Hall argues, if identity is contingent on establishing origins, it is impossible to locate a single origin in the Caribbean (Hall 1995, 5). Caribbean identity has already undergone a process of hybridization on the islands, and when it migrates and settles in new locations, Caribbean cultures and identities are exposed to complicated processes of negotiation and transculturation. Thus we see Tim who, throughout the novel, negotiates his identity with the new place of Toronto he inhabits and the way he accepts place both psychologically and socially adds a new aspect both to his self and the place he inhabits and opens up the way to hybridization. We also see how John quickly changes places and then adapts to his new surroundings, which creates a path towards a hybrid identity. Consequently, the places these Caribbean people live are twice diasporized: both at home and in a host country where they are forced to negotiate the expectation and policies of social life in a place where they do not have any socioeconomic power.

While distant from their homelands, Tim and John envision new homelands of their past. Clarke disputes the assumption that distance provides objectivity and critiques a sense of place as viewed from distance. As John explains to Tim, the meaning of an island/place can be assessed truly only after leaving it: "And anything surrounded by water is a place you really don't know the size of. Like you have to swim – way far from it, and then you would know the measurements of the place" (Clarke 1997, 17). This passage demonstrates Clarke's tendency to portray Barbados from Canada, but this



time he emphasizes how immigrants' relationship to their homeland influences their life in Canada.

* * *

Two central metaphors – the conch-shell and the inner tube drifting in the sea – epitomize a special meaning of the novel. The novel opens with the description of the conch-shell which Tim and John notice on the beach in their native Barbados:

We were sitting on the sand. The sand on the beach was the same colour as the shell of the conch. The conch was empty, dead and old. [...] On this afternoon, we just watched the conch-shell, as the waves came in and covered it, and changed its colour for just one moment, and then the waves hid it from our sight two times. (Clarke 1997, 1)

The image of the sea as a symbol of life contrasts with the description of “an empty, dead and old” conch-shell whose taste was once sweet. The picture of paradise as place is immediately violated by the image of a dead shell, which anticipates life in its later phase affected by time and experience and what is to come in the text. The author announces immediately the vanishing of paradise and the upcoming tragedy of migration. The beach is the place where John and Tim dream about distant lands, the past and the history of their Caribbean African ancestors as well as their British colonizers. The sea waves that erase their footsteps in the sand arouse both positive and negative recollections as they wash ashore memories of drowned fishermen who did not survive the crossing of the Atlantic, as well as memories of beautiful scenery with a bounty of food and pleasure for the two boys.

The sea's history is closely related to the metaphors of the conch-shell and the inner tube which carry with themselves the meaning of the Caribbean history and contemporary experience as well. According to Heike Harting, “the conch-shell already carries the characteristics of an imagined cultural belonging and originality” (Beneventi et al. 2004, 107). The metaphor of the conch-shell does not have a single origin, however. It represents different cultural and ethnic meanings and reappears in diverse contexts in the novel. Being displaced on the beach, the conch-shell bears traces of Tim's and John's memories such as the death of Tim's uncle, fear of drowning, the dream of Chermadene, Tim's and John's childhood love and their idealized past in the Caribbean. The inner tube made of an old truck tire is “patched in many different colours of rubber, black, brown and red” (Clarke 1997, 5). It floats in the sea and marks “Barbadian economic deprivation, and cultural and racial heterogeneity” (quoted in Beneventi et al. 2004, 118). Both the conch-shell and the inner tube symbolize the traumatic losses of the two characters: the original loss of their homeland and the loss of Lang for Tim. For Tim, the inner tube that he recognizes in Lake Ontario incites



the process of self-recognition when he abandons nostalgic feelings for Lang and the conch-shell and gives up on committing suicide, and for the first time responds to John in a compassionate way.

In “This Tormenting Time of Indecision: Performative Metaphors in Austin Clarke’s *The Origin of Waves*,” Harting gives a reading of the conch-shell and the inner tube metaphors that question the dominant theoretical conceptualization of metaphor in the discourse of ethnic writing. Though the conch-shell and the inner tube function as metaphorical carriers of Caribbean history and heritage that add up to the essentialist notion of identity that Tim constructs in terms of cultural belonging, the repetitions of the metaphors dramatize the weakening of culturally essentialist traditions. According to Harting, the two metaphors operate performatively and they reiterate, disidentify, and resignify (quoted in Beneventi et al. 2004, 106–107) the historically accumulated effects of their prior meanings in Caribbean literature and in the discourses of identity production. A performative reading of the two metaphors facilitates a critical reading of how social and psychological conformity to the cultural authenticity influences the construction of cultural identity in Clarke’s novel. Thus, Harting concludes that a performative understanding of metaphor in ethnic writing “emphasizes a catachrestic notion of identity based on cultural difference and allows for a conceptualization of metaphor in less homogenizing forms” (Beneventi et al. 2004, 124).

By generating multiple meanings of the two metaphors and the sea in the novel, Clarke references the multiple origins of the Black Diaspora and different cultural heritages in the Caribbean (African and European), as well as different meanings of Tim’s and John’s homeland. These multiple meanings significantly contribute to the two characters’ process of moving away from a stable identity towards a more fluid identity which crosses cultural borders. Tim’s and John’s memories of their original home become stories, but the place, the concept of home, that they reflect upon exists no more as John explains to Tim: “Man, there ain’t no goddamn home back home” (Clarke 1997, 70). The place also becomes part of the narrative of home. The sense of time and place in their reflections and conversations blur and the borders between homeland and host-land as well as diaspora are bridged. The representation of a text, the imagined form of spatialization, the two stories rendered in the novel, add new dimensions to the sense of place and time in the text. The imaginary place/landscape described in the text, like the two main metaphors, acts as a symbol reflecting different meanings.

By floating between fact and fiction, like the conch-shell and the inner tube from the sea to the shore, both characters turn to their fantasy, imagine the ideal state of living in Canada and in Barbados, tell stories about their own lives in order to construct their new identities abroad. Since John’s and Tim’s links with earlier times and places have been severed by migration and displacement, they feel an urge to



explore and represent their own memories which are permeated by nostalgia. Tim and John dream of a blissful past, their garden of Eden in the Caribbean, long to return there, though the return is not possible any more. Their generalized desire for the original home - and what Kundera refers to as home is “the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return” (Kundera 2002, 5) - the strong nostalgic feelings in the text push Tim and John to re-inscribe their past into the stories they produce. Still, by reflecting the past and his characters’ nostalgic feelings for their homeland, Clarke negotiates Caribbean identities in diaspora and shows that “identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and what they came from” (Hall 1995, 5). Similarly, in *The Womb of Space*, Wilson Harris explains hybridity as a struggle of the self to be freed from the past, from roots and ancestry, and attempts to construct the future while he values difference over essentiality.

In *The Origin of Waves*, Clarke challenges the notion of fixity of identity since the fixed self and close attachment to the past and the original homeland do not influence the creation of identity as the end product – they are merely a phase in the process of achieving a fluid diasporic identity. This is the fact evident from the way Tim moves forward towards a more fluid diasporic identity and a new sense of the host-land. Clarke’s representation of diasporic identity in the novel exemplifies the transformation of the diasporic self from multiple origins into the fluid self, which Clarke shows more clearly in his other works. Hybridity results from identity’s fluctuation between different transnational levels when it frees itself from common roots and bases itself on difference. Memory of the past and homeland experience impact the process of healing the trauma of rupture from common origins and make up for a phase in the process of the formation of the fluid diasporic identity in a host country.

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