

Rough Play:
**Reading Black Masculinity in Austin Clarke’s “Sometimes, a
Motherless Child” and Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For***

Phanuel Antwi

Volume 34, Number 2, 2009

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl34_2art10

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Antwi, P. (2009). Rough Play:: Reading Black Masculinity in Austin Clarke’s “Sometimes, a Motherless Child” and Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 34(2), 194–222.

Rough Play: Reading Black Masculinity in Austin Clarke's "Sometimes, a Motherless Child" and Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*

PHANUEL ANTWI

FOR MANY OF US IN THE BLACK DIASPORA, the journey from being a regular black male subject to becoming *the* black male subject under duress is a short distance. Most times, we do not fully know how or when these distances are closed or crossed. Through the multitude of literary and cultural texts circulating in mainstream consciousness, we quickly become aware that the singularity of an individual black man's performed subjectivity easily becomes obscured; the multiple faces that differentiate us barely emerge, or upon emergence, quickly get re-categorized as more alike than distinct. Because we do not quite know when we will become the suspicious black (male) subject under the eye of the law or when we will escape the fishbowl phenomenon of being watched, many of our movements tend to be calculated and guarded, so guarded that each movement seems strangely immobile. How can it be otherwise, when most of our parents remind us, daily, how dangerous it is "out there" for black folks?

A memory: "Phanuel Kwaku Antwi," my father calls, signalling for me to listen and listen carefully to what he's about to say: "Make sure you get your hair cut today; you don't want *them* to confuse you with *those* people." While growing up in Toronto, I heard these loaded words from my father once a month, and sometimes I still hear them. To my dad, cutting my hair involves limiting public suspicions of me as a criminal. To him, I assume, cutting my hair means disidentifying myself racially from Caribbean men. One paradox in my dad's beliefs is this: on the one hand, practising this form of disidentified identification resists mainstream white cultural assumptions that there is a common black culture; on the other hand, these beliefs buy into the ideology that Caribbean (and particularly Jamaican) black youths are perpetrators of the misdeeds often linked to them. To his mind, I

believe, the crew cut is not just a hairstyle but a strategy for ensuring (as much as possible) my safety and survival, a strategy that attempts to set the lingering residues of Negrophobia to rest. My father didn't, and still doesn't, want *them* (the police) to confuse me (a Ghanaian Canadian) with *those* people.¹ He wanted this confusion avoided since, on every Sunday morning throughout the 1990s, he delivered to many Canadian houses, via the *Toronto Sun*, news of black families mourning their lost sons. My dad reminds me, through stories, how photographs of Canadian black youths populated the front pages of both national and "ethnic" newspapers. The influence of these photographs affected my dad to the point that he wanted me to "assimilate," so to speak, in order to avoid the widely circulated image of the hardened, aggressive, even criminal black man whose survival tactics might include illegal activities. Despite the malleability that my dad implicitly encourages — given that his paradoxical advice at times yielded opportunities that escape the binaries of pure submission or (largely self-harmful) aggression — little did he acknowledge that mainstream society would not allow for my complete assimilation; that I would always be a wannabe-chameleon, never a chameleon; that I would never be able to disappear in the crowd. My father, however, was not alone in his fear for me. Like BJ, the protagonist in Austin Clarke's "Sometimes, a Motherless Child," I used to hear parents on my block warn both their sons and me about "living in this place with all the things happening to black people, to men and boys like you" (332); you best not become another statistic; you best be careful. To be quite honest, although I was careful, the design and weight of their warnings did not burden me until years later. It wasn't until I became conscious of what my dad and other parents have experienced; it wasn't until I had my own stories to recount; it wasn't until I learned that when black men are talked about there is a hasty and nasty conflation of masculinity and race; it wasn't until all these experiences accumulated that I learned my dad's words were not just advice; they were also his reality. It's a reality that dawned on me in my late teens: I learned then that I was never to other people a man *and* black, but that I was always to them a "blackman." To many people, I was a blackman — with no ands.

In *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, a theoretical text that blends fragments of autobiographical accounts, memoir, music, newspaper clippings, and poetry with meticulous care, Dionne Brand

triggers and brings back for me teenage angst around racial trauma (and parental warnings of racial trauma) when she contends that the black male subject “is situated as a sign of particular cultural and political meanings in the Diaspora. . . . All of these meanings remain fixed in the ether of history. They leap onto the backs of the contemporary — they cleave not only to the collective and acquired memories of their descendants but also to the collective and acquired memories of the other. We all enter those bodies” (35). Continuing, she points out that “every space [that black male subjects] occupy is public space”; this means that “they are never in place but on display” (50-51); the space/place they occupy is predetermined by history.

Put concretely, the black male subject’s subjectivity — in socio-diagnostic terms — is constantly and consistently held in “captivity” by mainstream society (40). The fact of his blackness fixes and reduces him to be-for-others. In his poem “The Reinventing Wheel,” Wayne Compton not only reworks these constructions of being-for-others but also critiques the ideological perspective that fixes and legitimates the black (male) subject’s non-presence and non-humanness. In the section “Moses, says the speaker,” he writes,

I’m out of sync
with the attrition. Perpetually
beat juggling history and ethnicity.
From Hegel to turntablism,
revolution to fusion . . .
Hip hop is black Canada’s CNN [sic].
Talk stops for no border cop. Black
slang is the new cash crop. (102)

Compton laments this fixity because the distinct human presence of black slang cleaves, enters, or leaps into the mainstream consciousness as a cultural object available for consumption by a white audience; this displaces attention from the black artist’s careful and creative recombination and re-contextualization of history, philosophy, and formal language. To resist this displaced reading practice, Compton’s speaker asks,

can you take us to the bridge?
Can you hit it and quit? Can you shake your meaning maker,
old restless spook? Speak us

out of this mess, this unpassable test, this pattern . . .
 Fix that word, cause the shit is broke. (101-02)

Moses is linked to two major endeavours — ending the bond of Egypt and establishing a “new” order, one in which religious and political elements are inseparable. If we associate meaning-makers such as Dionne Brand and Austin Clarke to these two accomplishments and align their work on black masculinity as a response to Compton’s questions, we witness progressive models of black masculine subjectivities that reinvent the dominant image of black men.

In what follows, I examine the cultural and political patterns of sensibilities of black masculinity as represented in Clarke’s 1992 short story “Sometimes, a Motherless Child” and Brand’s 2005 novel *What We All Long For*. In examining Brand’s and Clarke’s fictional representations and their re-envisioning of black masculinities, the scale of perceptions of black male identity are extended as (discursively) multiple, open, and always contingent on environment. In this sense, Brand’s and Clarke’s narratives about blackness, masculinity, and black male voice (silence) offer literary-historical documents that comment on a cultural moment in a cultural system that frames black men within hateful cultural projections.

What We All Long For is a novel set in 2002 that captures the multi-cultural relations of four young Canadian adults (Tuyen, Carla, Jackie, and Oku) and their families. With the careful eye of an investigator, Brand depicts the visible and invisible movements of these racialized characters through their joys, sadness, and the sets of demands placed on them in the immediate post-9/11 period. Foregrounding the uniqueness of the city of Toronto, with its heterogeneity and its “polyphonic murmuring” (149) in the multiple neighbourhoods showcased in the novel, Brand portrays the experiences of alienation and displacement that these characters feel toward the city and, most importantly, toward their families. Picking up on Brand’s characters’ refusal to perform pre-determined scripts of who and what they should become, Kit Dobson notes that “*What We All Long For* represents a generational shift in the politics of being in Canadian space” (88).

Employing the influence of the “sorrow songs,” as W.E.B. Dubois called Negro spirituals (250), Clarke’s “Sometimes, a Motherless Child” takes readers back to the 1992 race riots in Toronto to shine a critical spotlight on police violence toward black young men in the city and to

express a black mother's deep-rooted concern for her son's safety from police brutality. BJ, a young Canadian black man of Jamaican decent, and his Italian Canadian friend, Marco, are pulled aside by the cops because they are driving a white BMW — a car they bought with their winnings from the horse races. The police mistake BJ and Marco for drug dealers. This mistake in identity sets up a stereotypic field of identification that fixes the possibilities of (black) youths and holds them in check. So it is not surprising that BJ's mother's fear of losing her son to police brutality becomes a reality when she walks onto her driveway and sees her son's body, covered in blood, being carried away by those in blue.

I compare these two texts because they both offer a textured and challenging depiction of black masculine identity that extends far beyond the conventional black macho identity. In representing BJ's and Oku's masculinities in these seemingly idiosyncratic perspectives — that is, in deviating from the mainstream media's tendency to overdevelop the image of black men in restricting stereotypic frames — Brand's and Clarke's literary representations interweave a tapestry of new ideas. For instance, BJ and Oku embody the “richness” that diaspora theorist Khachig Tölölyan notes is often missing in works on diasporic identity. Tölölyan bemoans the “reduction of or an inattention to the complexity of the past and present of diasporic social formations” (28). Tölölyan's argument in this matter is that “diasporic identity has become an occasion for celebration [and theorization] of multiplicity and mobility” (28) and that there is not enough “fleshing” or investigation into what he calls the “social . . . life . . . that mobilizes dispersion into diaspora” (29). In mapping Oku's and BJ's masculine identities, Brand and Clarke pay attention to and mobilize such social dispersions. Throughout each text and, particularly, throughout the scenes that depict Oku's and BJ's experiences with police brutality in Toronto, Oku's and BJ's black masculine identities embrace radical discontinuities within performances of black masculinity. Such performances rupture the overdeveloped images of black men as aggressive, hyper-sexualized “thugs” or “hoodlums” by exposing the faulty assumptions within the images. They do not, for instance, abide by the monadic conceptions of black patriarchy or of black solidarity. Rather, Brand and Clarke retexture depictions of black men to offer multi-textual black subjects who enact the varieties of black masculinity. For example, Oku, the twenty-five-year-old black

man, and BJ, the eighteen-year-old youth, believe strongly in the social ideologies of American black consciousness. Their strong affinity to a transnational black consciousness suggests a rethinking of borders and their meanings. In their introduction to a special edition of *Canadian Review of American Studies* on transnational borders, Richard Almonte, David Chariandy, and Jennifer Harris argue that a rethinking of African American and black Canadian border crossing is necessary because of the “increased transnational migration, heightened cultural interaction, and the emergence of an electronic culture that subverts existing borders. The result of these phenomena,” they go on to suggest, “is the emergence of new and challenging ways of conceiving of identity” (121). If we take jazz and American black consciousness to be part of the “transnational migration” of cultural goods, such a reading allows us to see the plasticity of African American cultural products as adopted by Oku and BJ to “subvert existing borders” that limit their desired movements in Toronto. The dexterity in this kind of plastic play is what George Elliot Clarke, writing about black America’s influence on black Canadian youths, describes as a “bold-faced absorption of African-American literary [and musical] modes and models” (*Odysseys* 71). In other words, the plasticity of transcultural interest allows Canadian black men such as Oku and BJ to “resist the fugues of racial erasure” imposed on them by Canadian mainstream society (74). That is to say, one means for some black men to resist racial erasure is for them to style their identities through a web of social relations that situates identity within diverse borders as well as within a history of collective and communal actions. This stylization highlights a cultural linkage and a political affinity between American and Canadian notions of black masculinities. But contrary to turning Canadian notions of black masculinities into “appropriations” of American black masculinities — into the paradigm George Elliot Clarke identifies as “a version of Edward Said’s Orientalism: that . . . Black America is, for Black Canada, an exotic Other” (*Odysseys* 39) — the two texts under discussion here situate their enactments and portrayals of the unceasing brutality of police violence toward black male subjects in tension with the city of Toronto.

Brand’s and Clarke’s characterizations of Oku and BJ depart from the inadequate yet inherited machismo of black masculinities circulating in mainstream consciousness, thus highlighting the limiting corporeal schema and historico-racial schema that form the psychological and

subjective processes of black-male subject formation. The alternate codes of black masculinities performed by these men might not easily yield immediate or necessarily practical models of masculinities for survival and safety, but they do revise the inadequate masculinities portrayed within Canadian black communities. BJ and Oku, for example, understand how the performative circuit of cultural productions works to codify black masculinity by conflating the racial, gendered, classed, and sexualized codes as understood by the public. As a result, they not only recognize the consequences and codes of hardness that underlie “hard” masculinity (the consummate tough-guy persona of assertiveness) and *thumos*² (the energy that often provokes many men to risk their lives in order to live their lives); they also refuse to tangle themselves in this cultural narrative. Their ambivalent and uneasy refusal of “hard” masculinity becomes for Brand and Clarke an approach to undermine any stable codes of masculine performative behaviours naturalized in black politics.

Reading Leonardo da Vinci’s “Designs for a Castle,” in *What a Man’s Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*, Antony Easthope uses the metaphor of a fortress to outline the modern Western ideal of manliness as an impregnable fortification. Employing Easthope’s metaphor of the fortress, hard masculinity can be thought of as a performance caught “in a ceaseless struggle to keep itself together, to close all gaps, watch every move, meet aggression with aggression”:

The purpose of the masculine ego, like that of the castle, is to *master* every threat, and here the male term is particularly appropriate. The castle of the ego is defined by its perimeter and the line drawn between what is inside and what outside. To maintain its identity it must not only repel external attack but also suppress treason within. (39-40)

Embedded in this choreography of masculinity lies the mania or obsession with the optical illusion of masculine stability. This mistaken belief — a make-believe view we take of the male fortress as an un-refracting and stable construct — along with the ceaseless struggle of the aggressive man, positions the “criminally” coherent blackman as an equally make-believe fiction. For example, this ceaseless struggle to keep one’s self together, to master every threat, is portrayed by Jamal in *What We All Long For*; Jamal is constantly in trouble with the police. Visiting

Jamal “again” in Mimico Detention Centre, his sister, Carla, witnesses her brother “trying to be someone she could not recognize. She didn’t know why he insisted on speaking in [a Jamaican] accent. Something he’d picked up with his friends on the street. He did it to assume badness” (30). Here, the assumed badness, the accent of hard masculinity, is performed through speech and is linked to a particular (albeit limited) understanding of blackness, Jamaican-ness.

Arguing on behalf of a black cultural politics of difference, Kobena Mercer suggests that this hard performance of black masculinity “occurs when Black men subjectively internalize and incorporate aspects of the dominant definitions of masculinity in order to construct the definitions of dependency and powerlessness which racism and racial oppression enforce” (139). Given the risks involved in this construction, Wesley Crichlow suggests that hard masculinity “asserts black manhood as both macho and largely heterosexist” (130). This assertion of manhood “enacts a structure of dominance that casts as traitors those black men who are unable to identify with and/or perform within the codes” of a heteronormative and heterosexual economy of masculinity (129). From these two critics, I suggest that the extra pressure on black men to perform a “hardened” masculinity is not solely, as Crichlow rightly notes, “the Black nation fulfilling a biologically determined, gender-specific, and genetically maintained racial purity [—] one that inscribes the individual Black body with the investments of a nation” (132). It is also the pressure of black men responding to the reality of economic and labour struggles and to institutionalized practices of oppression such as sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia.

The “hard-ass,” confident, and even sexist performances of black masculinity commonly present in Austin Clarke’s works, such as “The Man” in *The Question*, are complicated in other Clarke stories, such as “On One Leg” in *The Origin of Waves* and “Sometimes, a Motherless Child” in *Choosing His Coffin*. In this short story, BJ’s masculinity is tenderly fashioned. This tenderness is introduced to readers through BJ’s exchange with Marco, his Italian Canadian best friend. “They embraced,” we are told,

bodies touching, heads touching the right shoulder, and slapping each other on the back three times, as if they belonged to an old fraternity of rituals and mystery. They let go of each other, and did it a second time, with their heads touching the other’s shoulder. It

was Italian, and it was African, and it was this that had joined them in their close friendship for the past nine years. They saw each other every day, either at school or here in BJ's room. (334)

Perhaps what drew my attention to the embrace between these two eighteen-year-old boys is the “softness” that dwells within their “hard” performances of masculinity: the “slapping” of each other’s back as if to avoid feeling the touch of each other’s body, as if to maintain the manliness or “*Man-thing*” of masculinity (Brand, *What* 46). Clarke’s portrayal goes to great lengths to counter the commonly gendered and stereotypical depictions of male-bonding exchanges that occur when men are inebriated. For instance, rather than represent BJ’s and Marco’s expressions of attachment as a practice that happens when the boys have been drinking — when alcohol has loosened the hard parameters of masculinity — Clarke directs us to read their embrace as a ritualistic performance that joins Italian and African cultures together. With textual details of the boys “touching” “each other’s shoulders” and “bodies” “in BJ’s room,” Clarke hints at a queer sensibility of masculinity; this underscores a queering of masculinity that entails love and affection — not simply or exclusively the erotic. I suspect that Clarke blurs the hard parameters of masculinity with a queer sensibility as a way to call into question the stability of the myth of the black macho identity. Insisting that this touching between the two boys is a cultural bond that “joined them in their close friendship for nine years,” Clarke situates the boys’ tender feelings for each other not only in a realm of male intimacy but also in male-to-male eroticism. The repetitious rituals of “heads touching” that occur in BJ’s room are examples of affection that allude to their erotic experiences. Here, as in “BJ’s room,” lies the clue to Clarke’s queering of black masculinity. If we take the safe yet claustrophobic confines of “BJ’s room” and read the touching that privately takes place there in relation to another room, James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, then we can see how Clarke positions the room as a site of transgression to foreground the boys’ desire to protect their relationship from two converging social pressures: the rigid racial regime of parents (the microcosmic home environment) and the exclusion of young people from established institutional spaces, which, in turn, results in the creation of alternative spaces by youths. Consequently, we can read the boys’ desire to skip school and retreat into BJ’s room as a crucial refusal, on their part, to take on the function of youth;

they neither devote their lives to the construction of a future society nor abide by expectations laid out for them by the previous generation. This refusal, which can be read as the politicization of youth, furthers their construction as rebels in public discourse at the same time that it highlights a practical strategy for them to deal attentively with the unsympathetic public perception and reception toward them in the early 1990s. BJ's room becomes an experimental space in which he and Marco can take risks and determine the codes "in their close friendship." This intriguing detail of male-to-male erotic desire is quickly shut down in order to direct our attention to the more conventional significance of the embrace as masculine bonding and to the transcultural connections made possible in multi-ethnic Toronto. Yet it is possible to emphasize, as Daniel Coleman does in a different context, the "shifting referent[s]" or the "codes for masculinity" in this story (6, 30). It is not necessary, as Clarke tries to explain, for BJ's and Marco's masculine identities to be associated with "fraternity" in order to invoke the "hardness" of their masculinity; what is important to note is that the codes for their masculinity refract and shift. This explains why their emotional and practical demonstration of close friendship offers an image of black masculinity that challenges "the bad public hard-ass kind of black man that everyone appreciates" (Brand, *What* 163-64).³ Hence, in the private and safe space of BJ's room, black masculinity can be both flexed and made vulnerable in order to emphasize the uncertainty and fluidity to which both "soft" and "hard" masculinities are subject.

In *What We All Long For*, Brand depicts variations of this "bad public hard-ass kind of black man": Derek and Kwesi, the city's drug hustlers; Jamal, "a young black man-child" (48) with his unsuccessful carjacking; and Fitz and Derek, the respective fathers of Oku and Jamal, whose attempts to enact hegemonic masculinities are undermined by their sons.⁴ All these men set Oku's masculinity in sharp relief. Oku's way of life, like BJ's, challenges gendered understandings of black masculinities. Unlike Jamal and Kwesi, who accept the "inevitable" life of the hard-core black man, Oku refuses to be pigeonholed into these invented identities; he adopts and changes masculine codes in order to survive in his environment. The gendered positions he adopts allow him to navigate with relative ease the moving spectrum of black masculinities presented in the novel. Oku honestly cares about and nurtures people around him. He often goes to his friends' homes to "cook elaborate meals from their

scanty cupboards” (129). He continually checks up on Jamal “up there in the jungle” where they hang out because Jamal is the younger brother of his friend Carla (45-46). He befriends Clifford Hall, the “mad” musician who plays “phantom piano” in front of “the Market Café” near St. George subway (172-73), and the old Rasta, the man who “worked the blocks of the city, panhandling” (168). Oku forges a friendship with both men even though he knows “they had gone mad, the worst kind of giving into the system that would be imagined among black people in the city” (174). In addition, Oku spends time with “his boys” (161), a group “of young . . . hard core . . . brothers” from Eglinton (46). These boys hassle him and, at times, call him “a faggot” (166), hoping “one day [to] wear [him] down” so that he will “face [what they believe to be] the inevitable” life of a black man: hustling (162). Because Oku refuses this “hard” performance of black masculinity, he is relegated to a complicitous or subordinated masculinity, a form of masculinity that blurs — under patriarchal arrangements — its distinctions from femininity (Connell 79). In other words, the epithet “faggot” is not only a term of disempowerment used to refute the masculinity of an adversary but, in Oku’s case, it also speaks to his failure at heteronormative masculinity, or so “his boys” logic would have us believe. Refusing such narrow reasoning, Brand’s novel offers a guide to envisioning new images of black maleness.

During scenes of police arrest, this retexturing of black masculinity involves the expected practice of negotiation that Brand, in *What We All Long for*, calls a “passion play” (165); these confrontations are hyped with contradictions and tension. When Oku encounters a police officer, he “simply lifted his arms in a crucifix, gave up his will and surrendered to the stigmata” (165); similarly, BJ simply “stood silent and calm” while enduring harassment from law enforcement officers. Such tense moments reveal disturbingly mundane realities for many black male subjects, such as the (tension of) sexual violence that is “acted out” or en-acted upon black male bodies by police officers during moments of arrest; these occasions of “perverse fondling” are what Brand identifies as a “passion play.” This play, Brand informs us, is “played out at its most ecstatic with the cops” (165).

It may appear striking that Brand uses explicitly religious terms and imagery, such as “stigmata” and “passion play,” in Oku’s first arrest, especially since these Christian symbols seem to reinscribe a whole

history of religious affliction or run the risk of making martyrs out of black men abused at the hands of police officers. However, like Toni Morrison, who in *Playing in the Dark* demands that the “unspeakable things unspoken” be examined and reinterpreted (11), Brand not only connects Christ-like attributes to Oku to correlate the arrest scene with a passion play’s dramatization of the humiliation and torture of Jesus Christ but also to connect the figure of the police officer to a lynch mob and thereby link the humiliation and torture of Oku to the practice of lynching. In this respect, Brand’s staging of the public exhibition of the arrest scene unites two archetypal figures in Oku: the racial victim of torture and the figure of Christ-like suffering and saintliness. Brand links these two figures to Oku’s masculinity in order to represent a black man’s attempt to maintain a cool pose in these difficult moments. This linkage does not mean we fix Oku as a saint-like figure; rather, because of the social control embedded in the passion play (or, for that matter, in a lynching scene), this connection highlights both police officers’ deliberate use of extralegal violence as a means to defend a defeated social order and the ongoing public indifference to (or implicit support of) police officers who abuse and profile black men. However, Carla’s response to *Riot*, a photographic installation mounted by Tuyen to depict the “unseen” negotiations between Oku and the cops, challenges this public indifference/support. The narrator writes, “The photographs made Carla queasy. She told Tuyen and Oku that they were sick. She rushed up the staircase and into her apartment quickly each time she came in” (206). I am less concerned with why Carla responds the way she does than with the response itself. Her avoidance and queasiness matter; they signify the costs of her caring. At the same time, they highlight the individual human costs; when the police play rough, their actions wound both black men and those with whom they have relations. In this sense, my principal concern in drawing a relationship between policing and lynching is to emphasize the way in which communal violence is enacted upon black (male) bodies. Although there is not a perfect correlation between the type of violence inflicted by the police and that by a lynch mob, if we align the violent ecstasy of a lynch mob with that of the police officer, I believe that the correlation that I am drawing between these two repressive social/state orders is more than probable.

In episodes of anti-black male unrest, the trauma of the moment makes us forget the historically over-sexualized fantasy that has turned black men's bodies into objects of spectacle that need taming. We forget the perverted sexual mythology by which whites not only reduced black people to subhumans but also conferred upon them a hyper-sexuality that projects white lust and puritan guilt onto black subjects. One forgets the rape of blacks by whites. One forgets how black male subjects have been victimized by white males. But black writers of fiction and non-fiction who determinedly remember violence show the perils of forgetting. As Cornel West writes in *Race Matters*, "white supremacist ideology is based first and foremost on the degradation of black bodies in order to control them. One of the best ways to instill fear in people is to terrorize them" (122). Although West is referring to black sexuality and the physical attractiveness of the black body, I introduce this quotation to highlight the internalized acceptance, if not conviction, in the black male subject of this naturalized "degradation" of his body. In Brand's and Clarke's texts, the moment of arrest foregrounds this degradation and, as in Oku's and BJ's cases, it does three things. First, it conflates violence and sexuality. Second, it diverts attention away from the violence of the arrest itself to shed light upon the tableau of arrest-as-molestation (maybe even rape, since consent to the body search is not granted). Finally, it shows the unfazed reaction of the black man to his attacker; this implicitly suggests that arresting a black man invites an "embrace" into which he naturally and willingly "slid[es]" (*What* 165).

In "Sometimes, a Motherless Child," BJ's first encounter with the cops has become an event he had "almost wiped from his memory" (359). This inescapable event — hence the difficulty of wiping it from memory — took place while BJ was a young child playing in a small neighbourhood park. He recalls this memory while pacing in "another cell" of the "same police station" (52 Division)⁵ where he is detained for driving while black. As BJ "paced up and down, with various thoughts entering his head" (358), he recalls, as a child, spending "four hours . . . locked up, not having had a charge laid against him about the alleged theft of a kid's bicycle" (359). From his recollections we learn that BJ and "three other kids were horsing around and pretending to be bagmen" when "one of the other three kids took" a child's first bicycle as part of their play. This little kid goes home, returns with his father, and points to BJ and says: "the coloured fella, Dad. The coloured fella is

who took my bike" (359). With the frequency with which a perpetrator is identified as black and male in the mainstream media, I am not surprised that a little white kid sends an innocent black child into captivity with a wave of his finger. From this scene, we learn how this white child is already aware of and socialized to the particular cultural and political meanings and narratives attached to black men. Here, it is important to remember the pedagogical ways in which mainstream media teach children about "race," or dominant understandings of "race." The ramifications of this little lie told by a white kid go beyond the telling of a little lie, and point to the social uses of dominant authority against black men. Although I can perhaps understand the pain of the child at having his bicycle stolen (and which might explain the fib he tells), it is negligent on the part of the police officers not to inquire further into the "pranks" of children whom they automatically identify as "ghetto delinquents" (359). The identification of these children as delinquents belonging to a ghetto allows police officers to brutally harass and constrain their ways of life and/or refuse to protect them. The police reaction draws attention to the state's domination of the lower classes: they send "two carloads of [cops]" to attend to "a small neighbourhood kid's prank" (359). This intense surveillance by the police department shows an imposition of institutionalized power on the powerless.

The violence of hands is matched by the violence of words. The officer says to BJ, "into the cruiser, nigger; into the goddamn cruiser, you goddamn nigger, [sic] . . . No, not in the goddamn front seat, in the fucking back, where youse belong" (359-60). If we can read this excessive and hostile verbal attack as the police officer's response to the white kid's appeal to white racism against "the coloured fella . . . who took my bike," then we cannot overlook the hypocrisy of the Canadian self-congratulation that is quick to distinguish its treatment of racialized people as superior to that of the United States. The phrase "ghetto delinquents" simultaneously calls attention to economic discrimination, which in this neighbourhood conflates race and class, and illuminates the rough play within Canadian nationalisms. In particular, we witness that one of the reasons for inter-ethnic and racial battles in Canada is the unequal distribution of privileges across ethnic and racial groups. When the officers learn (after four hours of detaining BJ) that they have made a mistake, they do not apologize; instead, they justify their abusive treatment by negatively stereotyping

him as the “West Indian” thief who needs to “mend his thieving ways” (360). To the officers’ minds, BJ’s alleged moral inferiority renders him undeserving of an apology. To use the words of the three white women who observe BJ inspecting his BMW and report him as a thief to their building superintendent, he “looks like one of those drug dealers . . . not because he looks like a Jamaican or anything, but . . .” (344) — *but* because he’s a blackman with no *and*. What all these scenes with the cops and the white women and the white kid suggest is that the practice of policing the black male subject begins in childhood, continues through the teenage years, and, as the three white women demonstrate, extends into adulthood. Hence, the surveillance and racial profiling of blackness and black men becomes a work for all — citizens, courts, and laws all contribute.

Unlike BJ, Oku’s somewhat non-sexualized passion play occurs during his second arrest when he is older, at twenty-four years of age. By this time, he has experienced police brutality or has witnessed many black men encountering police brutality; his second arrest is an event for which he is “prepared.” He and his friend Tuyen, a photographer, join a Black Bloc anarchist and go “to Quebec to demonstrate against globalization” (*What* 204). If, as Dobson suggests, Oku goes to the demonstration because the “protest excites [him]” (100), he is excited by his need to show resistance to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). He goes to Quebec City “knowing there would be trouble,” yet he regards this trouble as his “service to the people” (*What* 205). Using Brand’s non-fiction to add weight to my analysis, I see Oku’s participation in the demonstration as his attempt to “tear down all manifestation of a system that keeps its foot at [a black man’s] throat” (*Bread* 121). I am fearfully concerned, on the one hand, that black men like Oku naturalize the “aggressive and perverse embrace” of black militancy by joining “the black anarchist” movements (*What* 204) and thereby communicate their acceptance of, or worse, their expectation of state violence; on the other hand, I am also hopeful because aggressive embraces such as the demonstration against FTAA and scenes like the 1992 Yonge Street Riot, communicate that black youths like Oku stand up to “send a message to this country about not taking it anymore” (*Bread* 121). Both these direct action protests suggest that the fight is not over, that change is still to come.

Regardless of the message that this “aggressive embrace” sends,

Brand freezes the embrace in Tuyen's photographs to depict the violent "motion in them, their sequence" (*What* 206). Tuyen's photographs document police brutality, but they also encourage readers to recognize the physical and psychic scars that, in the name of correcting "social ills" and making the streets "safer," many black men, guilty and innocent alike, suffer at the hands of police officers. Like Carla, we experience the art of violence that gets enacted upon and toward the black male body through Tuyen's photographs. At the same time, Brand demonstrates, perhaps too problematically and too quickly, the guilty pleasures involved in this violent, normalized, and ritualistic script of police arrests. We learn that

Oku got his foot sprained when an undercover dragged him into a van. He was one of the first ones to climb the fence. He made up the opening lines of poems, calling them out to the group he was with. He was enjoying himself, screaming poetry about the downfall of everything. He even enjoyed the arrest. (205)

This moment in the April 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec City serves as a source for creativity not *solely* because Oku has become familiarized with the excessive force of the police officer's embrace, nor because it shows a young generation of activists engaged in what will be seen as acts of civil disobedience. As Oku climbs the ten-foot-high and over two-mile-long concrete fence that has been nicknamed the "Wall of Shame" (the wall that hid the undemocratic and shameful FTAA negotiation process), Oku oozes (brims over) with creativity and "even enjoy[s] the arrest" because he works to reinstate the democratic rights of assembly and protest that the fence and police presence tries to curtail. Hence, the revelry that he attains as he screams poetry while being arrested should not be mistaken for unfettered enjoyment or pleasure but rather seen as an ambivalent miming of creativity. What Oku mimes as he climbs the "Wall of Shame" are the racist exclusions and daily shame encountered by many black subjects. For a brief moment, Oku symbolically climbs the structures of oppression. The image of him climbing the fence can be seen as a sign of hope; it is the sort of hope that is born from confrontation and that gives rise to merrymaking. Hence, his creativity is the kind that relies on the double spin between playing and fighting, between pleasure and pain, between suffering and ongoing hope of overcoming the oppressive power of state violence. It

is an “unending struggle work” of hope (Dobson 102). To put it simply, Oku captures the work and creativity in hope. The hope in Oku’s climbing — rather than sitting on — the fence holds the promise that an alternate approach to globalization is not only possible, it is on its way.

Oku’s first encounter with the police, however, renders him silent; his silence becomes a moment of disgrace that reverberates with a resounding truth about the sexual violation involved in police arrests. At 2 a.m., walking home from a party in Toronto, Oku, the solitary poet, experiences an involuntary contact with the police. Out of the blue, he

saw the flashing turning light as it swerved into him. He stopped. Two cops came out of the car. He can’t remember if they called him, if they told him to stop. His arms rose easily as if reaching for an embrace. One cop reached for him. He can’t remember what they said or what they wanted. He only remembered that it was like an accustomed embrace. He yielded his body as if to a lover, and the cop slid into his arms. That was the fucked-up thing about being dangerous. It was a surrender to violence, to some bruising, brutal lover. He remembered how instinctively his arms opened, how gently, as gently as they would have opened to embrace Jackie. But this was another kind of impeachment. A perverse fondling. Another car sped by, slowed to look and then sped on again. The cops didn’t find anything on him, and he said nothing to them, just smiled and shook his head. They asked him his name, he smiled again. Their fondling became rougher. Oku let his body go limp. The cops folded him into their car with a few more shoves. He laughed. He was still high. They took him to fifty-two Division. They couldn’t find anything to charge him with and let him go around 6 am. (*What* 164-65)

I quote at length from this scene not only to highlight the adversarial contact of black male youth who are stopped, questioned, and searched by police officers without cause or due process but also to illustrate a number of conceptual points: the poetry of the mind in dialogue with itself “holds the soul together and [stops] Oku” from becoming “homicidal” (169, 165). Also, Oku lives this moment not merely because “he was still high” but mostly because of his love for jazz,⁶ a musical genre that emphasizes self-mastery and control in response to external crisis and “respects composure and asserts the importance of personal control over a situation” (Imani Perry qtd. in G.E. Clarke, “Cool” 12). Furthermore, his relations with jazz equip him in this emotionally and

psychologically charged situation with the “essential survival mechanism” (G.E. Clarke, “Cool” 12) to survive the four hours of detainment in police custody and to “smile” in the face of sexual assault at the hands of the police officers. Instead of “screaming poetry about” (*What* 205) these practices, as he does in his later arrest when he is much older, the younger Oku *allows* the police to fondle him because “to engage constantly in these racial plays” of resistance, as Brand writes in a different context, “is a hazard” that “wound[s] the brain,” body and soul (*Bread* 172).

Part of the difficulty in addressing this dramatic scene of gendered and racial violence as sexual abuse is the symbolic inversion of the roles of “victim” and “perpetrator”: the police officer becomes the victim who has to deal with pathological black subjects (in the view of the mainstream white culture), while the black man becomes the perpetrator (who is a menace to society). Because such a victim-perpetrator relationship has already been established — with public sympathy overwhelmingly in favour of a police officer who serves and protects the public by putting his or her life in danger — the police officer is seen as a potential victim of a black suspect, and, for this reason, his or her violent actions toward the black male suspect are not only excused but the police officer may legitimately “beat, crucify, fondle, and shove” the suspected perpetrator (*What* 165). The public legitimization of police power is clear when we pay attention to the location of this scene; it is the public space of the street. In these circumstances, the relationships that evade legitimating evaluation are the power relations that animate the threat to the supposed victim and the actual power of the alleged perpetrator. The supposed victim — significantly empowered with his or her uniform and gun — embodies the state’s right to police purported crises with violence. The image of Oku being roughly fondled by the police officer — characterized as a brutal lover — articulates a racial injury in the cultural space of the street. Oku is reduced to a spectacle that links this moment of humiliation to a larger continuum of black subjugation and suffering that turns him into an “endangered species” (*What* 48); people in their cars slow down to take a last look before he disappears. Alongside this scopophilic consumption of black suffering, the images of the police officer beating, crucifying, and fondling Oku before shoving him into the cruiser exemplify how the ideological vehicle of shame is used during moments of arrest to reduce black men

into subjugated positions. This dual legitimization of shame — of black men subjects and eyewitness spectators — helps explain why cars can slow down and recognize an endangered black man without stopping to intervene.

Like Brand's Oku, Clarke's BJ also experiences sexual abuse at the hands of police officers. The older BJ, unlike the older Oku, does not resist in his second arrest nor does he explicitly express the masochistic pleasure that Oku expresses during his passion play. However, like Oku, BJ complies with the police commands:

“Spread your legs! Spread your legs! Come! Open up! Come! Open up!”
 And they obeyed him. BJ could feel the dust from the side of the cruiser, which needed a wash, entering his nostrils. He could feel the policeman's stick moving around his legs, around his crotch, up and down, up and down. Touching his penis. He could feel the policeman's hands, tough and personal, strong as ten pieces of bone, feel his thighs, his chest, under his arms, between his legs, and feel his penis and his testicles; and then the ten pieces of bone spun him round, so that he now faced the policeman. BJ stood silent and calm as the policeman did the same thing to Marco. He thought the policeman was treating Marco more severely. (351)

On the surface of BJ's arrest, the instrument of disciplining the alleged criminal, spreading his legs, feeling him, moving around his legs, round his crotch, up and down, up and down, seems only to be the (abusive and sexual) touching hand; the hand is an instrument that enacts social power between unequally situated individuals — white policeman over black man, policemen over youth. The intimacy of this violent touch stands in sharp contrast to the intimate pleasure of touching between BJ and Marco in the privacy of the home, in BJ's room. The intimate touch between the boys foregrounds a relationality that is not a manifestation of heteronormative masculinity or patriarchal social order; their intimacy highlights the multiple registers of touch. As both texts make clear, touch can be imposed, invited, or uninvited; touch can be loving or violent, desired or undesired. The detailed description of BJ's arrest, with his “manhood” — his penis and testicles — being fondled by the policeman's weapons (his hands and stick), frames the image of punishment with sadistic desire. Another concern in this scene of molestation is the police officer's inability to look BJ in the face. It is after the policeman has repeatedly felt BJ up that he “spun him round,

so that he now faced him” (351). What the “now” suggests in terms of black masculinity is black men’s struggle for recognition without judgment. It is as though the police officer deliberately avoids the visual recognition that produces human affect and leads toward an ethics of answerability. In staging this avoidance, Clarke foregrounds the materiality of the police officer’s power while he problematizes the denial of police brutality.

The narrator’s depiction of this scene — particularly the phrase “as the policeman did the same to Marco” — invites us to wonder if BJ and Marco experience “the same thing.” Another question arises: Beyond the level of language, is any lived experience comparable to another? We must be aware that the narrator’s use of “as” — to mark a relationship between BJ’s and Marco’s encounter with the cops — works to deflect at the same time that it converges the differences between them, thereby assimilating their experiences. As a result, this scene must be grounded in the differences the narrator establishes between them. BJ has nightmares, he is terrified of being shot (329); he has arrests (351, 359). Marco is “almost natural,” “almost perfect in his *imitation* of the speech of black people” (336; emphasis added). They come from different neighbourhoods: Marco “*up* in North York,” BJ in the Bathurst Street area (336; emphasis added). When both are arrested, BJ, the “unlucky one” (360), the unlucky black youth, ends up looking “as if a cannon had struck [his] head, and [his] head had exploded and had been cut into pieces, like a watermelon that had slipped out of the hands . . . as if the brains of [this] young man were coming through his mouth, as if his eyes were lost against the impact of the bullet” (364), while Marco, the lucky one, is “held until *his* parents could come down from North York, to sign him out” (361). Given these significant textual details, it would be a mistake to suggest that the policeman abuses BJ and Marco in the same way; to do so is to overlook the narrative strategy employed to mark difference. Such an oversight implies that we read for or pay more attention to *what* is being said and not so much to *how* it is said. If we read for both the what and the how, it is possible to note that the non-black young man who is said to be treated identically to, or even “more severely,” than the black young man underscores one way the narrator highlights questions of anti-youth rhetoric and performance that underline images of youth in 1990s Toronto. Through rhetoric and performance, the police position Toronto youth — such as BJ and

Marco — as dangerous rebels who occupy racial and ethnic subclasses by conflating relationships between youth, race, and crime within an environment of frightening urban tensions. Let us remember that BJ's and Marco's parents "never met. And did not know of their sons' deep friendship" (334). This unconsciousness about their sons' relationship nullifies any normalization of their interracial friendship and leaves the parents immune to any alterations in their fear and (perceived) threat of difference. One other point I want to draw attention to in this scene has to do with the act of reading. As we read this scene and imagine ourselves inside the narrative details, we enter the dizzying world of BJ's passion play and "feel the dust," but we are also asked to (re)imagine the abuse, onto Marco's body. The conduct of reimagining or remembering the details in order to inscribe the verbal and physical brutality onto Marco's body highlights a temporality in reading that, in turn, highlights the cognitive process required to rework narrative details — in this case, the imaginative empathy to transfer one experience onto a different body. In this respect, I believe the narrator performs, on the page, the entrapment tactics used by the police in order to counterbalance the different experiences of the individual youth.

Undeniably, the submission of BJ's and Oku's bodies to police brutality highlights the fusion of eroticism and aggression, of desire and hatred that Cornel West argues is the "basic ingredient of white racism" (121). This essential ingredient of white racism construes black sexuality as excessive lust and regards the figure of the black man as a violent and "uncontrollable beast," a beast whose essential nature is embodied in excessive lust for aggression and sex. Piqued by the fact that black sexuality was "the subject of a widespread fantasy," and that this fantasy "fixes the black man [to] the level of the genitals," Frantz Fanon declared, "one is no longer aware of the Negro, but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis" (170). Within this synecdochic masculine sexual economy is a competitive model of masculinity in which the police officers, according to BJ's mother, "show the black man who had power and pull" (A. Clarke 354). As she explains, the "policeman hold his truncheon, as if it was, in fact, a long penis, in an everlasting erection, as if he was telling the black man, 'Mine is bigger, harder, and longer than yours!'" (355). In this masculine economy of competition played out with BJ and Marco, only one of the players, the police officer, is interested in competing.

Because BJ refuses to perform a “hardened” ideal of black masculinity and define his potency through his penis, the economy of whose penis is bigger and harder does not render him powerless; nevertheless, this market of masculine power is especially fatal for BJ. The encounter exposes this messy model of masculinity and exposes the falsehoods of black hyper-masculinity. The scenes with Oku and BJ each provide insights into the gendered racism and sexualized violence directed toward black men, and the tense moments of those scenes dramatize the asymmetry between perception and performance. What I mean to say is that

if Oku and BJ spoke openly,
 if they intimate to the inmost ears with words not with smiles,
 with silence,
 would they express how their mouths still bleed when they remember those hands?
 how their bodies still limp when they remember those hands?
 their eyes weep when they remember those hands?
 their heads ache when they remember hands fondling?
 how would the protest that swung off their eyes be understood?
 would we understand their calm,
 their smiles as the rumbling music of their tears?
 if they were to speak of what-was-just-happening, what-is-just-happening,
 call their treatments assaults,
 say, “What is being done to us is wrong, inhuman,”
 will any one of us listen?

And so, “letting” their bodies go limp could be what shields them from further brutality. This seeming submission or letting go can be read as an attempt at self-concealment; they refuse to perform a hard model of black manhood in order to avoid enacting the stereotype expected of them and to resist increasingly violent touching. Oku and BJ submit because to do anything else would be “the worst kind of giving into the system” and has the potential to send them into a jail cell where they would have even less autonomy.⁷ But to submit to the indignity of invasion allows the police to maintain their image as protectors of innocence; the real experience of black men like Oku and BJ is turned into a living lie. The policeman’s stick, his truncheon, and his hands — “the ten pieces of bone” — symbolically perform the charged image of masculine domination. These phallic symbols contribute to redefine the mythologies of masculinity and, at the same time, they also threaten to

distract from another strategy of instituted power that the police officers use in both BJ's and Oku's scenes of arrest. They use public places/spaces to turn the men into animate and visible cultural displays.

By the aggressive and invasive action of detainment and search, the young men are put on display; these episodes of arrest are theatrical performances staged in the public space of the street. "Another car sped by, slowed to look and then sped on again" as Oku was "surrender[ing] to violence, to some bruising" (*What* 165); BJ and Marco "watch" each other go through the pat-down rituals of body search that situate their experiential dramas in "street theatre." Within the cultural field where this street production is staged, BJ and Oku are put on display in the roles of violent criminals or predators, and they themselves see and experience the danger involved in this exposure. In the roles that BJ and Oku inhabit, each is trapped in a refined visual field where their bodies are made to signify unmanageable players. This familiar signification precedes the particular event in the awareness of the watching audience; it is part of the understood cultural fabric woven about black men. As a result, this public performance is important not only because the signification takes place in the shared socialized space of the street but also because it highlights the preconceived imagery the cultural and political field of visual culture has imprinted on the minds of the drive-thru audience; such a pre-constructed narrative of policemen in confrontation with black men suspends disbelief in this street performance, and the observer is rarely shocked into outrage.⁸ And yet, this pre-constructed performance produces disorientation in the passing driver — the car slows down. The driver's disorientation or uncertainty about whether the scene unfolding in front of him is television theatrics or real life dramatizes a slippage between reality and fiction. This detail alone serves to make a crucial point: the street theatre of these episodes of arrest is interrelated with other representations of black masculinity. Therefore, cinematic and visual images — as well as existing popular myths of black men as aggressive, mean, and rough — work as mechanisms that confuse the reality of these events and undermine the driver's imagination. The fiction of Brand and Clarke disrupts the preconceptions of Torontonians who assume they understand the spectacle of the black male in police custody. Brand's novel and Clarke's short story accomplish what the "real" spectacle cannot — they expose a complicated racial history of exploitation, resistance, and reinvention.

The overexposed moments of Oku's and BJ's arrests also attest to the silent suffering of black men — both “hardened” and “softened” men — irrespective of the public spectacle that assigns them the role of “hoodlums” and thus tough. The inclination to conflate “hard” masculinity — irresponsible and reckless, as represented by the media — with an inability to feel is challenged in Brand's and Clarke's representations of black men. Rather than read BJ's silence or Oku's embrace of violence as acts of tacit consent or helpless passivity, my analysis suggests that these seeming acts of passivity during the moments of arrest communicate an active refusal to perform and confess to the anticipated roles; instead, they perform their own life-scripts. In both texts, silence dissembles speech and becomes an arresting element with expressive potentials; when Brand and Clarke use silence as an expressive device to create bewilderment, to simultaneously disclose and conceal, they stress that in the heated moment of non-verbal speech these black men “reject,” and even denounce, the “importance” attached to “the act of enunciation.” BJ's and Oku's silences become their own language and, therefore, should not be set in exclusive “opposition with speech.” This silence must also be read as an intention of their “will not to say or [their] will to unsay” (Trinh 416). By not speaking, they demonstrate their will and deny false accounts or narrations of their life-scripts. Such a reading of silence (as actively denying and withholding) situates BJ's and Oku's resistance (and especially their practiced tenacity and determination to not narrate their life-stories) as expressions of their agency and autonomy. If, as Michel Foucault points out, “there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say,” and if “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse” (27), then BJ's and Oku's silences can be read as acts of discretion that promote self-concealment; these strategies lend poignancy and force to Clarke's and Brand's project of reinventing and reenergizing the expressive possibilities of black masculine identity and agency. For this reason, BJ's and Oku's tactical negotiations — their retreat into non-verbal speech to avoid coerced confessions — are themselves active forms of articulation. Therefore, to read their silences as strategies of discretion is to imbue these moments of silence with strong affirmations. By embedding BJ's and Oku's silences into descriptive sentences, Brand and Clarke invite and agitate readers to recognize the patterns of injustice that animate the relations between black males and law enforcement officers.

As I have tried to make clear in this essay, the fates of these two similar black men offer only two models from a myriad of black masculine identities. Clarke's model shows adolescence in the midst of the struggle for independence and identity; Brand's model presents in Oku a black man who, through experience, has learned to strategically use his body as an instrument of dissent to navigate grey zones with police officers. Through Oku and BJ, Brand and Clarke break open the suffocating and repetitive representations of black men and black masculinities in popular media to articulate secrets that, for many black men, are not hidden truths. Brand's and Clarke's accounts offer narratives that rehabilitate the public opinion of black masculine identities as they educate the public about the consequences of fixing blackness in monocultural stereotypes that automatically delude difference into opposition that utterly exiles singularity to the far side of a great divide. Rather, the authors seem to suggest that when we each bring our differences in dealing with each other into our readings of black masculinities, the multiform nature of the *real* begins to be textured and re-textured.

Because BJ is dead, we must release him from the grip of our imagination and allow him to explore his un/ravelling self. We must also release Oku so he can "remain in motion," (as Kit Dobson suggests in his readings of Oku) and not "fall prey to the limited lives offered to him" (99). I say it again:

release Oku
 release him
 from the spools that reel him out with ease
 turning him into a spectacle
 for the pleasures of y/our nightmare
 release him
 knot
 reLEASE him into an enemy that never was
 he's not y/our nigger-ticker-trigger-happy
 bloodthirsty insect
 nor y/our . . .
 and even if he were . . . — fuck the flashing sirens that whirl my eyes
 and release him
 he's the ruffle feather in y/our pillow:
 dreaming
 the thread in y/our pants:
 tickling

the poetic and critical words of Brand and Clarke show, lives and fictions are emergent; they are part of a process of negotiation. Therefore, they are vital, complex, and changeable. It is in this thick realm of negotiations that I explicitly mark the experiential-I in this essay with an epistemic advantage. Therefore, my exploration of the relationships between black men and the police is experienced through a multiplicity of experiences, and my voice — as a careful man, resilient man, Ghanaian, Canadian, creator, black male academic, son, brother, feeling Blackman — opens out (for me) a site of analysis where criticism can embrace the personal-political involvement in intellectual projects in the academy and beyond.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Daniel Coleman, Don Goellnicht, and Susan Giroux for their generous feedback on an earlier version of this paper, which grew out of my master's thesis at McMaster University. Also, my thanks go to Grace Kehler, to the editor, John Ball, and the two anonymous readers of this paper for their advice, suggestions, and support.

NOTES

¹ Implicit in my dad's problematic insistence of disidentification is a critique of a cultural trend that ignores African discourses and perspectives of blackness in Canada (not to mention among the vibrant and ongoing conversations in the humanities about multiple black Canadas). His critique offers a comment on a trend in black Canadian historiography, one that tends either toward the nativist forms of black cultural engagement or toward a Caribbean-centric discourse of blackness in Canada.

² Even though the concept of *thumos* is primarily understood to mean manly passion — anger, typically disrupting in social situations — we know from Homer's epic poem *The Iliad* that *thumos* is not merely an emotion in itself but also a taxonomy of emotional dispositions; it accompanies other emotions. To this end, my interest in *thumos* in relation to black masculinity is, at least, two-fold. First, for the Canadian imagination, *thumos* is deeply connected to an emotional fuel that circulates a blend of fear, hate, and resentments that ignite passions against attempts to police the movements of black men. With this in mind, we might want to reconsider the implications for black men when Tuyen asks Oku, "Why do you guys have such a stake in keeping the bullshit going? Why don't you strike?" (49). I suggest this because a strike is often a strategic action to gain (labour and/or social) recognition from the state or from corporations. To ask black masculinity to go on strike is to affirm an unbalanced regime of recognition — a regime that has succeeded in constructing black men as men who strike, as aggressive, rough, lawbreakers. Second, if *thumos* is a flexible structure of emotional disposition, and if black masculinity offers one ground of moral organization in the Canadian imagination, then it can be argued that Tuyen's

questions fail to recognize or understand that black men are already striking. Because their demands for recognition are deemed inappropriate, those demands are misrecognized. Their actions are understood to obstruct the workings of civic society; black men direct emotional energy toward others to disrupt “ordinary” civic order. This disruptive release that demands Canadian civic society drop the sanctions it has imposed on black men is one reason, I believe, many “keep the bullshit going.”

³ Here, I refer to the contested nature of masculinity as theorized by Australian sociologist Robert Connell. Instead of setting “hard” and “soft” masculinities within a fixed binary hermeneutics, always and everywhere the same, with hard masculinity being associated with violence and soft masculinity linked to the sentimental man of emotions, it is important to think about Connell’s theory of a hierarchy of masculinity that focuses on how masculinities are always in contestation with each other.

⁴ Oku contests his father’s hegemonic masculinity with what Connell, in *Masculinities*, describes as “protest masculinity.” For example, when Fitz, Oku’s militant and strident father, demands Oku present his “report card,” Oku meets the demand with an unexpected confrontation. Oku responds to Fitz’s demands with, “man, chill. You’re tripping. You must be out of your mind. I’m a grown man. Report card! I don’t have to answer to you!” (186). Oku attempts to claim his masculine identity through “an active response to the situation” — a response that “looks like a cul-de-sac” (Connell 118).

⁵ Even though Oku and BJ are fictional characters separated in time by a decade and in age by seven years, it is worth noting that both black men are arrested and detained by police officers from 52 Division in Toronto. When Oku was eighteen and was arrested for *walking while black*, “they took him to fifty-two division” (165). BJ’s fears toward 52 Division alerts readers to the cultural and racial significance of this division for black men: BJ “recognized 52 Division police station. And his heart sank. He had heard about 52 Division. Wasn’t it a police officer from 52 who had shot a Jamaican, many years ago?” (352).

⁶ Unable to “bear” “hauling gyproc or insulation,” “coming home dusted in plaster and covered in paint and wounded by falling hammers,” Oku “listened instead to Miles, investigated the futurist squeaks and honks of the Chicago Art Ensemble, he traveled the labyrinthine maze of Afro-jazz base and drum, jungle. He worked it all back to Monk’s ‘Epistrophe’” (47). Given the underlying principle of self-discipline present in the musical genre of jazz — explaining Oku’s constant listening, investigating, and travelling through the labyrinthine maze of Afro-jazz — the image of Oku’s body going limp compels us to see the expressive dynamism in this response.

⁷ In “Taming Our Tomorrows,” NourbeSe Philip suggests that submitting to the system “is sometimes the wisest and best response in the face of such indignity. . . . To enter the debate on the terms of [the police, those] who are also powerful and well connected to the media and other institutions that shape opinion is, however, a zero-sum game which one will always lose. Those who make the rules can be counted on to shift and change them when the game demands it” (272).

⁸ This suspension is rarely achieved because of TV shows such as *Cops* and televised footage such as the beating of Rodney King. These media-circulated footages contribute to the driver suspending disbelief and not being shocked into outrage.

WORKS CITED

- Almonte, Richard, David Chariandy, and Jennifer Harris. "Introduction." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 30.2 (2000): 121-26.
- Brand, Dionne. *What We All Long For*. Toronto: Knopf, 2005.
- . *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Toronto: Doubleday, 2001.
- . *Bread Out of Stone*. Toronto: Vintage, 1998.
- Clarke, Austin. "Sometimes, a Motherless Child." *Choosing His Coffin: The Best Stories of Austin Clarke*. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 1996. 327-64.
- Clarke, George Elliot. *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002.
- . "Cool Politics: Styles of Honour in Malcolm X and Miles Davis." *Jouvert: A Journal of Post-Colonial Studies* 2.1 (1998). 28 pars. 2 July 2009. <<http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v2i1/CLARKE.HTM>>.
- Coleman, Daniel. *Masculine Migrations: Reading the Postcolonial Male in "New Canadian" Narratives*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998.
- Compton, Wayde. *The Reinventing Wheel*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2005.
- Connell, Robert. *Masculinities*. Sydney: Allen, 1995.
- Crichlow, Wesley. *Buller Men and Batty Bwoys: Hidden Men in Toronto and Halifax Black Communities*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004.
- Dobson, Kit. "'Struggle Work': Urban and Global Citizenship in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 31.2 (2006): 88-105.
- DuBois, W.E. Burkhardt. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago: McClurg, 1903. 250-64. 29 Sept. 2009. *Documenting the American South*. U Library, U of N Carolina. <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/duboisouls/dubois.html#dubois250>>.
- Easthope, Antony. *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
- Mercer, Kobena. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Philip, NourbeSe. "Taming Our Tomorrows." *Literary Pluralities*. Ed. Christl Verduyn. Peterborough: Broadview, 1998. 270-77.
- Tölölyan, Khachig. "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment." *Diaspora*. 5.1 (1996): 3-35.
- Trinh, T. Minh-ha. "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference." *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*. Ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997. 415-19.
- West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon, 1993.