

Contagious Im/Possibilities Infectious Encounters in Austin Clarke's *The Meeting Point*

Danielle Wong

Volume 38, Number 2, 2013

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc138_2art03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Wong, D. (2013). Contagious Im/Possibilities: Infectious Encounters in Austin Clarke's *The Meeting Point*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 38(2), 47–66.

Contagious Im/Possibilities: Infectious Encounters in Austin Clarke's *The Meeting Point*

DANIELLE WONG

WHEN THE CANADIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT announced its decision to make significant cuts to healthcare coverage for refugee claimants and protected persons under the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) in April 2012, Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism minister Jason Kenney justified the move by claiming that the so-called reforms would protect “public health and safety” and defend the “integrity” of Canada’s immigration system by discouraging people from filing “unfounded refugee claim[s]” (Canada, “News Release”) in order to receive medical care. In other words, according to Kenney, policing access to medical care would keep foreign bodies from contaminating or leeching off the national body of citizens. It is particularly telling that, under these changes, coverage for medication and vaccines was provided only to diagnose, prevent, or treat diseases of public safety or public health concern (Canada, “Health Care: Refugees”). This rhetoric of national wellbeing and quarantine has its roots in a colonial history of racialized Western discourses around “public health” that emerged in European countries over the nineteenth century, as Alison Bashford argues, to categorize the “clean and unclean, normal and pathological, healthy and unhealthy, self and other” (39). In the Canadian context, anxieties around the imagined infectiousness of the foreign body manifest in public health policies found in legislation such as the *Immigration Act* of 1952, which barred people who were “insane” or had been insane at any time, as well as those with tuberculosis, trachoma, or “any contagious or infectious disease . . . that may become dangerous to the public health,” from being admitted into the country (Canada, *Immigration Act*).

Set in Toronto, during an era of changing immigration policies under the 1955 West Indian Domestic Scheme and ongoing revisions to the 1952 *Immigration Act*, Austin Clarke’s novel *The Meeting Point*

(1967) provides an insightful entry point for the exploration of the intersections of race, disease, (post)colonialism, and citizenship. The novel, the first in Clarke's Toronto Trilogy, was dismissed by earlier critics as a "novel of excess" that failed to portray "realistic" representations of the lives it sought to depict (Bucknor 141). However, in more recent years, it has been taken up by scholars as a literary work that points to the complexities of racial categories, the im/possibility of cross-racial alliances, and the performance of the past and memory in the formation of subjectivity (Casteel 122; Bucknor 166). I contribute to and expand upon this discussion of the novel's "meeting points" by calling for a critical analysis of the embodied exposures — the instances of bodies' reciprocal infection, inoculation, and staining — described in this story of West Indian domestics working for Jewish families in the 1960s. I argue that the cross-racial encounters portrayed in *The Meeting Point* are transmissions of contagion, in which the virus of what I theorize as *colonial and imperial "residue"* — the living histories and effects of violence and oppression — exposes the impossibility of static ethnic identities and the unstable interconnectedness of marginalities transmitted between displaced subjects. The novel's complex treatment of domestic-employer relationships simultaneously echoes and challenges the imperial discourses of public health in order to unveil past and present realities that trouble narratives of national progress. I examine the metaphor of contagion in *The Meeting Point* by discussing miscegenation as a form of *racial vaccination*, and the (non)reproductive body of the Other as a subversive contamination of the modern nation.¹

With this approach to Clarke's novel, I seek to place postcolonial theory, existing scholarship on the text, and Canadian legislative language in conversation with theories of biopolitics and histories of colonial science. In her 1995 essay on Clarke's collection of short stories *Nine Men Who Laughed* (1986), Smaro Kamboureli situates her investigation within the framework of "contamination" and argues that this way of reading the stories "converts the body of the text and the bodies represented by it into undecidable figures" (220). She contends that this "undecidability" points to the writer's disbelief in stable categories and "the intractability of meanings that are generated within the borderline space of contaminated bodies" (221). In a similar spirit, I use transmission and infection to discuss the uncomfortable cross-racial and inter-ethnic relationships depicted in *The Meeting Point* as sites of

ambiguity, rife with the im/possibility of connection. However, I specifically use contagion as a mode of reading in order to trace moments in the novel to particular colonial histories of public health and infectious disease. By discussing contagion as a medical, historical, and literary phenomenon, I explore Clarke's novel within the historical context of immigration law while reading the text as a site in which past, present, and future overlap and intertwine.

Although the scope of this essay is limited to the analysis of colonial and imperial residue in *The Meeting Point*, the second and third volumes of Clarke's Toronto Trilogy, *Storm of Fortune* (1973) and *The Bigger Light* (1975), also provide generative sites for the examination of the ways in which the terms for citizenship and belonging are entrenched in racialized discourses of public health, particularly along the lines of cleanliness and hygiene. Most notably, in the narrative spanning across the two texts, a West Indian character named Boysie Cumberbatch experiences financial and social upward mobility when he begins working as an office cleaner, develops his own office-cleaning business, and eventually earns a substantial income by buying properties and renting them out to tenants. His climb up the socio-economic ladder is illustrated in his shift away from being the one who cleans to the one *who is clean*, as seen in the ways in which the narrator describes Boysie's business clothes and his heightened awareness of his wife's "body odour" (*Bigger Light* 28). When Boysie receives his Canadian passport and citizenship, the narrator in the trilogy's final novel describes the West Indian man as feeling "strong as he usually did when he got into the bathtub with the water hot" (*Bigger Light* 233). In other words, his body is made clean — baptized — in the government recognition of its health and acceptability by the end of the trilogy.

The protagonist in *The Meeting Point*, Bernice Leach, moves to Toronto from Barbados to work as a domestic for the Burrmanns, an affluent Jewish family residing in Forest Hill, almost a decade after the introduction of the Canadian 1952 *Immigration Act*. The Act reflected concerns around guarding the fitness of legitimized bodies: in section 5, for instance, people with "any disease that may become dangerous to the public health" are deemed part of the "prohibited class" (Canada, *Immigration Act*). Margrit Shildrick contends that the notion of public health relies on the implementation of epidemiological measures not only to control the "threat of another," but also to

avoid that which would expose “our underlying vulnerability to bodily degeneration” (155). Her argument supports a reading of Clarke’s novel alongside Canadian regulations on the entry and exit of bodies across national borders, as Shildrick points out that public health concerns are entrenched in discourses of anxiety over the seepage between the Self and the Other. Bernice’s sister, Estelle Shepherd, arrives in Canada shortly after Ottawa amended its *Immigration Act* in 1962 in an attempt to rectify its previously racist policy by allowing unsponsored immigrants to be considered suitable for entry regardless of colour, race, or national origin, as long as they could financially support themselves, were not “criminals or terrorists,” and did not suffer from a disease that put public health in danger (Canada, “Forging Our Legacy”). While race was supposedly taken out of the equation in this revision to immigration law, the language of public health survived the amendments, affirming that there is a “right” kind of body that can pass national borders. In fact, a 1974 government report, *Immigration and Population Statistics*, showed that the highest refusal rate during preliminary disposition applications for landed immigrant status from 1969 to 1973 was for West Indian applicants (Johnston 592). Thomas Johnston attributes this high refusal rate to a history of racial prejudice against black subjects that dates back to the trepidation felt by Canadian whites that Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 Emancipation Proclamation would lead to an “exodus” of black immigrants into Canada, and also to the racist policies placed to limit black bodies from entering the country over the following century (590). The justifications for these racist regulations were couched in discourses of public health, as seen in the common argument in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that black populations were unsuitable for the cold climate in Canada and therefore risked becoming “public charge[s]” (Johnston 591).

The racialized discourses of public health and national security that form the backdrop for Estelle’s arrival in Canada come to the surface as she develops a sexual relationship with her sister’s employer, Samuel Burrmann. Estelle’s relationship with Sam constitutes a form of vaccination that exposes the vulnerability of the Self in its interpenetration with the Other, as well as the problematic desires involved in such an inoculation. Estelle moves into her sister’s apartment upon arriving in Canada and meets Sam when he comes knocking on his domestic’s door one winter day. Their first meeting fills the lawyer with both lust and

fear, as he gazes on Estelle's nipples and sees "right through the apex of her legs" (156), yet is reminded of how his childhood friend's black mother, Mrs. Carson, called him a "crooked blasted Jew" after her son was blamed when Sam stole an apple from an elderly Jewish vendor (157). The initial sexual encounter between Estelle and Sam occurs during their next meeting, as the Jewish man wordlessly enters Bernice's unlocked apartment while Estelle is lying on a chesterfield, staring at the cobwebs on her sister's ceiling. When Sam stands over Estelle "like a landlord," the narrator notes that Estelle knew she "would have to save him now — from his conscience and from the deceit of his white body" (190). The cure for Sam's deceitful white body is in Estelle's hands, and it is the woman from Barbados who muses about the charade of cleanliness in Forest Hill just before she has sex with, or is raped by, her sister's employer. The novel's description of this moment teeters along an uncomfortable, ambiguous line between sex and rape, as the novel states that Sam "conquered" Estelle (193) and that the Barbadian woman thinks to herself as Sam explores her body, "*You're going to pay for this rape, white man!*" (194). But it is Estelle who possesses "*the power*" in this situation and "[does] not insist on blocking his path; but allow[s] him the arrogance and the comfort of trampling his feet on the black soil of her body" (192). Hence, Estelle's apparent decision to "save" Sam from his deceitful body with her own is one that involves simultaneous violence and treatment, of historical subjugation and its apparition in the present — a paradoxical synchronicity that is paralleled in the concurrent consensual and non-consensual miscegenation between Estelle and Sam.

In order to make sense of this narrative of treating the white body in this moment fraught with colonial pasts, I turn to Sarah Phillips Casteel's exploration of the "racial ambiguity" of Jewishness as a challenge to the simplistic equation of Jewishness and whiteness (120). Casteel points out that while Jewish and East European immigrants were not considered desirable members of Canadian society in the early twentieth century, post-World War II prosperity and suburban expansion allowed for the "incorporation" of Jewish people into the nation's category of middle-class whiteness (121). Casteel further contends that the Jewish employers of Forest Hill in *The Meeting Point* lay claim to their whiteness by consoling themselves with the knowledge that at least "they are *more* white than the Caribbean immigrants they employ," and

that they “exhibit a sense of marginality with regard to whiteness but a sense of whiteness and belonging with regard to blackness” (121). The shifting dynamics of ethnic identity and the constructedness of the categories “white” and “black” are evident in Sam’s discomfort with his own body, his love for African-American jazz despite his wife’s opinion that “a man in [his] position should not waste time listening to” it (181), and his impoverished past growing up in a Jewish downtown neighbourhood where he was in “gangs” with West Indian boys. Hence, the “deceit” of Sam’s body alludes to an internal conflict between his Jewish diasporic subjectivity and the construct of whiteness attached to his body — a tension that the wealthy lawyer seeks to relieve in Estelle, whose black body immunizes Sam against his feeling of displacement by re-establishing him as a white landlord over a West Indian woman. This process of treatment is depicted in Sam’s internal narration of his carnal experience as both diasporic and colonial. While he is having sex with Estelle, the lawyer thinks of Poland, a country “far away from his life where his history had begun and ended; thinking there was nothing beyond his semi-illiterate father and his silent mother . . . and of his successes in his profession; and of his great insatiable desire for this black woman beneath him” (192). As the novel continues to explore Sam’s ecstasy, it transports the reader to yet another history in which Estelle “was the land. And [Sam], the explorer” (192). It is within Estelle that Sam moves away from his inferior position as a “poor Jew, who had brains, but no social acceptability” (5) toward a positioning as white settler and landowner.

However, this instance is more complex than a problematic claim on or appropriation of the Other; it is an instance of immunization in which the contagion of imperial and colonial residue creates possible connection and simultaneously ruptures it. The Western concept of vaccination, stemming from the nineteenth-century public health practice of smallpox inoculation, entails the introduction of a contagion or a “foreign body” into the individual (Bashford 39-40). Bashford notes that the concept of vaccinations was received with apprehension in the nineteenth-century West because the procedure was a “deliberate confusion of the normal . . . as a minute amount of a pathological foreign body became a normalised part of the self, and a bit of one’s own transformed body became part of another” (45-46). In this sense, vaccination became metaphorical of the crossing of species and racial or

sexual transmissions (Bashford 57). *The Meeting Point* plays with these traditional anxieties to reflect the blurring between Self and foreign, as Estelle and Sam's first tryst is described as a "journey of love, and a journey of pain and violence" (193-94) — a journey that, for Sam, involves remembering Poland, where "his history had begun and ended" (192). This journey through Sam's diasporic heritage frames his body as a Jewish one in the presentness of the sexual act.

Academics have noted that the Jewish subject has historically been affiliated with disease. Shelley Reuter, for example, links the hostility toward Eastern European immigration to the United States in the early twentieth century to the belief that Tay-Sachs disease was found only in Jewish foreigners (305). Sander Gilman also traces a record of racialized European science associating the Jewish body with madness and sibling incest in the late nineteenth century ("Sibling Incest" 158) and with the spread of syphilis in the 1920s and 1930s based on the marker of the so-called Jewish nose ("Plague in Germany" 1148). Such anti-Semitic sentiments were evident in Canada's own restrictive immigration policies during the 1930s when it did not offer asylum to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, one Canadian official declaring that "none is too many" (Thompson and Weinfeld 188-89). The Burrmanns' contrived sex life can also be read as a form of self-containment that harks back to these tropes of the diseased Jewish body. Rachel Burrmann is obsessed with the "after-cleanliness" of sex, so much so that she lays out clean towels, Vaseline, and ointment before intercourse (184). Sam quips, "I'm going to use the *wrong* towel, HERS! and then I'll see if I contract syphilis, or some damn incurable disease" (184) — perhaps making reference to the historical affiliation of Jewishness with syphilis. The Jewish body is thus marked by and embodies the spectre of Nazi imperialism and North American denunciation, rendering it a form of diseased Other in its sexual encounter with the black Other. The remnant of Nazism is most blatantly resurrected in German domestic Brigitte's anti-Semitic attitude toward her Jewish employers, the Gasteins. Brigitte confides in Bernice: "Working for these Jews is terrible. I am a Nazi. I am German. I confess to you, Bernice darlink, that as German, I know what Nazis had in their heart about these people" (205). Bernice, who is upset because an elderly Jewish woman has denied her a room for rent, shares in Brigitte's anti-Semitic sentiments and tells her that she "understand[s]" (205).

While it may be tempting to align Bernice with Brigitte and, by

extension, the West Indian subject with the German subject, the association is destabilized by the fact that Brigitte makes more money than the West Indian domestics. The race-based and economic inequality that renders shared marginality between West Indian and German domestics impossible is illustrated in a parable that Brigitte tells Bernice when the Barbadian woman confronts her about the “evil and sufferation and tribulation that her German tribe poured on this Christ’s earth” (138). Although Bernice’s reference to the German “tribulation” on Christ’s earth alludes to the Holocaust, Brigitte’s story is an illustration of a broader history of oppression against subjugated or colonized peoples. Brigitte tells Bernice a tale about a scorpion that asks a frog if it can ride on its back across a river and promises not to sting it. The scorpion ends up stinging the amphibian right before they arrive on shore. According to Bernice’s narration of the allegory, the scorpion explains its betrayal by pointing out that its actions are simply due to its nature: “*I is a scorpion! I can’t help that, Froggy boy!*” (138). When Bernice recounts the allegory to Estelle, she concludes, “well think ’bout that, because *them* is the scorpion, and we, the blasted frog” (138). Bernice retells this fable, which is similar to parables found in South Asian folklore and Talmudic literature (Frembgen 103; McKenzie 11), as a way of warning Estelle of the dangers of associating with white men in Canada. Estelle’s relationship with Sam is thus bound to Bernice’s complicated friendship with Brigitte.² While both liaisons are marked by the potential for kinship, such a possibility is continually disrupted by the race- and class-based imbalances that ultimately position the West Indian women as frogs and the white subjects as scorpions.

Furthermore, Clarke’s novel troubles any seemingly neat metaphor of shared Jewish-West Indian marginality in its very representation of Sam and Estelle’s tryst as a journey. Bashford notes that the late-twentieth-century impetus placed on vaccination was orientalist in nature, as the vaccination scar marked a kind of “passport for safe (‘immune’) travel into dangerous places” (47). The language in the novel used to depict Estelle as being “the land through which [Sam] had to travel like a man exploring . . . cutting through a jungle of vines” (192) consequently gestures toward the colonial past and haunting of this moment that troubles the possibility of love and disassembles the potential of cross-racial alliance. Instead, it figures Sam’s sexual exploits with the West Indian woman in his car, in hotels, and at jazz

clubs as his “safe travels” into an exotic place, and echoes an earlier passage in which Sam muses about how he had “emerged ‘clean’” from his “share of Negro culture” in the neighbourhood where he grew up, thanks to his law career and university degree (181). Sam again emerges “safely” — that is, reinstated in his privileged position — after “the adventure is over” (194) in Bernice’s apartment, and he returns to his study. However, he realizes that he cannot emerge “clean” from his experience of “Negro culture” this time around, for he smells Estelle’s body “on him . . . and in him” (194) even after having washed himself three times. In one sense, this feeling complicates a narrow reading of his relationship with Estelle as merely landlord-slave miscegenation, as the apparition of imperial history creates an inter-staining between Sam and Estelle. In another, larger sense, it renders a site of shared diasporic displacement between Sam and Estelle non-existent because of the asymmetrical class- and race-based dynamics that remain between them. After all, Sam resolves to embrace the lingering smell of Estelle on his body and “decides he does not want to get rid of [it]. He has a new power and new glory now: his wife drifts into the background of impotence, and he feels free of the inferiority of being unable to have a son” (194). But Estelle is physiologically marked by their cross-racial relationship to the point where her body is figured as an infirmity that the country must expel from its body of legitimized members. It is fitting that Clarke begins his third and final section of the novel with the foreshadowing sentence, “Summer came to Toronto like a plague” (251), as the new season ushers within Estelle a foreign-yet-familiar being. As her pregnancy becomes more apparent later in the novel, the descriptions of her illness paint a picture in which “the *thing*” (313) inside her is the contagion. After walking past a group of protestors who had rallied to support the civil rights movement in the United States, Estelle runs behind a building near an unnamed university by the Toronto General Hospital so she can vomit, but before she reaches her destination, “the slime and disgust and the hate for Sam within her . . . rebelled like a storm,” and she vomits through her nostrils and mouth (313). It is particularly interesting that Estelle becomes nauseous in the wake of her dispute with Bernice about whether or not they have a role to play in the American civil rights movement. Estelle tells her sister that if she had known about the march, she would have been at the front of the pack of demonstrators. Bernice retorts, “But

this is Canada, dear, *not* America. You and me, we is West Indians, not American Negroes. We are not in that mess” (306). Later, one of the sisters’ West Indian friends, Henry White, finds them listening to the bells at the downtown university and tells them that “the fight” is also theirs: “West Indian, Canadian, American, Bahamian — we is all niggers to Mister Charlie!” (310). Estelle’s queasiness during Henry and Bernice’s argument is metaphorical of the multiple unstable loyalties that form hybrid immigrant subjectivities. When Estelle vomits and thinks that she can see Sam in her regurgitation (313), she sees that the Other is contained in that which is inside of her. Later, as she and Bernice listen to the bells playing, Estelle senses the hymns “washing out the problem that lay at the bottom of her womb” and wishes the music could wash her “clean” of her problems (308) — again envisioning the Self-Other “thing” inside her as a disease or infection.

The trope of the “public charge” in Canadian legislative language is integral to my investigation of *The Meeting Point*’s references to illegitimate reproduction, for the body that is a social and financial burden on the state assumes the existence of a national community that is both exclusive and *parental*. The 1952 Immigration Act stipulates that immigrants who are “dumb, blind, or otherwise physically defective” are part of the prohibited classes, unless they have a “legitimate mode of earning a living” to ensure that “they are not likely to become public charges” or are accompanied by family members who can give “satisfactory security against such immigrants becoming public charges” (Canada, *Immigration Act*). The concept of the public charge has been carried on into Canada’s current Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which states that a foreign national is inadmissible if his or her health condition “might reasonably be expected to cause excessive demand on health or social services” — unless, that is, he or she is a sponsored member of the family class or a protected person (Canada, *Immigration and Refugee*). These policies figure the unwanted foreign body as an infantile body that is dependent but necessarily outside of the nation’s familial structures; it is the responsibility of its *own* family members. Thus, when a twenty-three-year-old Jamaican domestic in *The Meeting Point* becomes pregnant with a “two-tone” baby, finding herself “in the family way” (207), she is deported. This case remains on Bernice’s mind as a key warning: the reproduction of mixed-raced bodies — the contamination of whiteness — is to be quarantined from the body of

Canadian citizens. The guidelines in the West Indian Domestic Scheme of 1955 were entrenched in such anxieties around the boundaries of intimacy. The women entering the country through this scheme were to be between eighteen and thirty-five years old, single, with at least an eighth-grade education, and were to have passed a medical examination (Henry 83). The domestics were granted landed-immigrant status, and, after working a year in a home, could send for male partners provided that they married them within thirty days of their arrival (Henry 83). These regulations reveal the state's apprehension around interracial reproduction, as women had to be young and fit enough to do the work needed within the domestic spaces of white women, but were required to immediately marry the West Indian men they brought over so that they, or the men immigrating to Canada, did not breed illegitimate babies and, therefore, threaten white households.

Daiva Stasiulis and Abigail Bakan argue that the static understanding of citizenship in Canada keeps foreign domestic workers highly vulnerable to a racialized and gendered labour sphere where domestics' invisibility in the private space of the household leads to their exclusion from employment standards, as well as from forms of protective labour and human rights legislation (132). I take my cue from their point and argue that Estelle's pregnant body is symbolic not only of a seepage between the Self and the Other, but also of a temporal leakage between the so-called modern, progressive nation and the spectre of colonialism. The pregnant black body in Clarke's novel contaminates the private and public spaces of Toronto and subverts "legitimate" sites of modernity. My argument is informed by Jane-Maree Maher's figuration of the placenta as a "productive and necessary contagion" that connects two entities (208) and the way in which her theorization can be put in conversation with Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space." Maher argues that the placenta "figure[s] subjectivity as a process of contamination and seepage" because it is the site through which bodily fluids, including blood and waste, are facilitated between the pregnant body and the foetus (209). She reclaims the "placental body" as not simply contagious (a common medical trope because of the organ's ability to transfer alcohol and drugs), but as a challenge to the subjective-corporeal binary, writing, "It is a *between* that is always already within" (207). Estelle's placental body is a "between" not only in the sense that it blurs the line between the Self and the Other, but also because it marks a temporal

interstice that intervenes in the linearity of past, present, and future. In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha describes hybridity as a “third space,” which displaces the histories that comprise it and creates new structures of authority, for hybridity does not point to two original moments from which the third emerges but “enables other positions to emerge” (“Third Space” 211). In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha contends that the “Third Space of enunciation” is a passage between the “I and the You” that makes the structure of meaning an ambivalent process and, therefore, disrupts the narrative that culture’s historical identity is a homogenizing force with an original past (36-37). I read Estelle’s pregnant body as a fluid site of between — a third space — from which colonial histories are not traced linearly but emerge to upset static definitions of “public charge” and national progress. This placental third space is one of a temporal hybridity that emerges as a new im/possibility of cross-racial exposure without drawing a linear trajectory from the history of colonialism and slavery to Canada’s racist present; it is a third space that subverts romantic North American notions of progress and troubles the relationship between social mobility and the inclusion of the Other.

The appearance of Estelle’s pregnancy in Forest Hill insists on the presentness of colonial histories and emphasizes the process — of that which is becoming or emerging — rendering the arrival of the future impossible. In *The Meeting Point*, this *haunted presentness* is embodied in Estelle’s obstructive and highly visible pregnant body. Throughout Clarke’s novel, the West Indian characters have a heightened awareness of their public visibility. Bernice reprimands Estelle for hollering out the window at Boysie on a Sunday morning because they are the “only coloured people” in Forest Hill (168); during her first conversation with Estelle, Rachel Burmann tells her domestic’s sister that she sees her coming in too late at night “for a woman” (283), and Bernice bursts into tears after fleeing from a subway train where a child kept pointing at her and saying, “Look!” (281). Frantz Fanon describes the black subject’s awareness of constantly being the object of the white gaze as a “third-person consciousness” that “overdetermines” black identity (78): “I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not [to] the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance . . . And already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*” (82). As a captive of this external white gaze, Fanon writes, he slips into “corners” and “strive[s]

for anonymity, for invisibility” (82). Estelle’s black pregnant body resists the Western gaze not by slipping into invisibility but by defiantly staring back, as she vomits outside near a university, vomits again on the street as Henry and Bernice hurry to hide her in the privacy of Henry’s room, and bleeds in the Toronto General Hospital. Henry experiences the humiliation of being affiliated with this “diseased” body when he supports Estelle by the left elbow and sees that people are looking at them. We glean from this moment not only that the West Indian man is afraid of being contaminated by Estelle’s pregnant body, but also that the visibility of the contagion within her on a public street in Toronto is a temporal disruption in which “Time had left them, as the sun had” (315). The black placental body disturbs the private-public sphere of the neighbourhood, as well as the temporal divide between a supposedly forward-moving country and its history of oppressing marginalized subjects. What is created in this uncomfortable scene is a kind of third space, a “rememory” that does not necessarily trace itself back to a black woman and a white man — but to a site of interwoven pasts that bring to light ongoing injustices. Toni Morrison’s term *rememory* describes interpersonal mental recollections that exist outside of the individual and involve both construction and rediscovery (Rushdy 303-304). In her essay “The Site of Memory,” Morrison describes her fictional writing as a “literary archeology” that journeys to a site of remains, stating, “What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image — on the remains — in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth” (92).

Estelle’s pregnancy embodies just such a rememory, as it bears a contagion of colonial residue that infects public spaces in Toronto with a haunting of violent pasts to “yield up a kind of truth.” Her placental figure embodies a contagion that is transmitted to others upon contact and is hence felt as an unwanted intrusion that threatens cross-racial intimacy, as a West Indian man quickly ushers his white girlfriend away when they walk by Estelle vomiting on the street (315). This intrusiveness is illustrated again in Henry’s room, where Bernice and Henry take Estelle after she collapses at the university while listening to the bells play. Henry frets that his Jewish girlfriend, Agatha, will walk into his room and see the pregnant Barbadian woman bleeding on his bed, thinking to himself: “*God-damn, a woman bleeding in my bed! and suppose my woman come now*” (317). It is important to note that Agatha’s

healthy white body is contrasted against Estelle's pregnant, bleeding body in this scene. In fact, when the Jewish student faces resistance to her relationship with Henry in *Storm of Fortune*, she insists that "she [is] the only healthy person: everybody else [is] sick," and assures herself that she is the only woman for Henry because of her strongly built frame and "mouth full of teeth" (220). Thus, Estelle's reproductive body is rendered ill and contagious in comparison to the "right" kinds of productive figures: white subjects and dark bodies that labour within public spheres. When Bernice brings Estelle to the hospital, a black nurse named Priscilla calls her "another black whore," in order to make it "clear to the white nurse that there are two kinds of black women" (344).

The presence of Estelle's bleeding body flies in the face of discourses of Canadian progress and multicultural modernity to which Boysie, Dots, and Bernice subscribe at various moments in *The Meeting Point*. On their trip to Forest Hill from the airport on Estelle's first day in Canada, Boysie tells the women that the Chinese stewardess Estelle saw on the plane is a sign of "progress" (82); Dots tells Bernice that Toronto is a "technicolour city" where interracial couples are a "modern trend" (48); and Bernice envisions a future for Estelle as a nurse in the Toronto General Hospital. In other words, the integration of racialized subjects into public, productive spaces of labour and study is perceived as moving toward modernity and away from the position of the public charge. But Estelle's bloodied pregnant body infects the legitimized spaces of the university and the hospital, contaminating modernity with a visual marker of its violent histories and causing Priscilla to anxiously deem her "another black whore" in order to readjust Time.³ Therefore, it is especially telling that Estelle, who had previously asked Boysie how she could live permanently in Canada and was told to have a child by a Canadian, wearily asks Bernice near the conclusion of the novel, "what time is it?" (342), before telling her sister she wants to return to Barbados. Although Sam is arranging her landed-immigrant papers, Estelle rejects the linear futurity of North American progress and expresses a desire to return home after being exposed to the contagion of gory pasts and presents inside of her.

Finally, the symbolism of blood and excrement can be examined more closely through two brief scenes in *The Meeting Point* in which the perceived *unreproductive* body of the Other contests the clean-unclean

binary and consequently challenges hierarchies of being. I suggest that the seemingly unproductive queer body in Clarke's novel is aligned with the reproductive West Indian body in its socially constructed relationship with disease and its pollution of "legitimate" spaces. After Dots leaves Bernice's apartment following one of her visits, Bernice looks out her window and sees two black "missy-missy" men standing in the dark, waiting for their dogs to finish defecating by Mrs. Burrmann's maple tree before wiping the animals clean. Bernice notices that the tissue paper used to wipe the dogs has stool mixed with blood and thinks, "*Nobody can't convince me that when two young, clean, strapping gentlemens walk 'bout the place, holding hand in hand, something ain't wrong! . . . [A] man, any man at all who does a thing like that to a dog, who is only a animal, that man isn't really and truly a human being anymore*" (54-55). Bernice's disgust is expressed as her inability to reconcile the men's "cleanliness" with their willingness to handle dog excrement. At the same time, this irreconcilability suggests another layer of her incredulity: her reading of queer sexuality as dirty and non-human, as animalistic.⁴ In her mental address to Dots and "the world and the room, which was the world" (54), Bernice reads the couple's queerness as a discrepancy between their actions and their "clean" appearance, declaring, "*I have seen them two niggermen pass here, and I have wonder if, because o' the things I see, they aren't two she-she men. What you think?*" (54). Scholars such as Steven Seidman and Meira Weiss observe that homosexuality, and subsequently HIV/AIDS as a "gay disease," are often figured as the pollution of the purity of heterosexual families (Seidman 189; Weiss 464). Although Clarke's novel was written prior to the first diagnosed Canadian case of AIDS in 1981 (Canada, "A Brief History"), the fear of contamination by the queer body is illustrated in the 1952 Immigration Act and in Bernice's reaction to the two men. The Act lumped "homosexuals" in the same category of prohibited immigrants as prostitutes, pimps, or "persons coming to Canada for these or any other immoral purposes" (Canada, *Immigration Act*). Bernice's awareness of the blood and dog feces that the men are willing to wipe signifies a fear around making contact with the Other's bodily fluids and waste — a trepidation that is rooted in colonial, biopolitical, and gender theoretical frameworks. For example, Warwick Anderson argues that sanitary practices put in place in the Philippines under American colonial rule became part of a "civilizing" mission that required Filipinos to "confess repeatedly their

filthiness” by changing their ways of handling food, human feces, and even ear discharge (89). Under the new rules, Filipinos could not use their excrement as a regenerative power in their fields; instead, their waste became “a source of shame” (Anderson 89). In a similar way, the trope of “waste” in contrast to (re)productivity is integral to my analysis of Clarke’s novel. Bernice associates the queer couple’s bodies with the filth of excrement — a bodily excess that is seen in North America as dispensable and unproductive, paralleling the historical understanding of queer subjects as being synonymous with death (Puar xii). But it is the couple’s “pollution” of the pristine Forest Hill neighbourhood and of Mrs. Burrmann’s maple tree that prompts Bernice to question just how “civilized” Canada is compared to Barbados if people in Toronto treat their dogs like humans (55), drawing attention to the mistreatment of and lack of protection for West Indian domestics in the country by comparison.

The narrator states that the two men stood “like landlords” who were “pretending their presence was based on the pretences of the past, and all the time, the endless sausage was coming out of the two dogs; and they pretended they knew it was going to end” (53). This image is entrenched in gendered and class-based narratives of hygiene in multiple ways. First, the allusion to “landlords” conjures a master-slave image — an illustration of a power structure that was necessary for the fruition of Western “modernity” — that is ruptured and rendered a performance when one of the men stoops to wipe the dogs’ behinds. The historical relationship between landlord and slave is troubled in this moment on two levels: it is the human master who bends down to collect the animal’s bodily waste, and it is the black man who assumes a landlord position. In this brief moment, the “pretences of the past” are being recreated in a performance that not only challenges the tradition of master-slave relations but also exposes the upward mobility that these two “clean” black “gentlemen” ought to represent as a mere charade. Moreover, the perceived staticity of historical master-slave binaries is turned on its head by the *infinity* of the “endless sausage” coming out of the animals “all the time” while the two men “pretended they knew it was going to end” (53). In other words, the ever-presentness of the excrement flies in the face of the futuristic promise of the social progress that two “clean” black “gentlemen” were supposed to represent.

Waste and hygiene are important themes that carry on into the rest

of Clarke's Toronto Trilogy. In *Storm of Fortune*, for instance, Boysie takes a cleaning job at a Baptist church but is fired when the toilet overflows after he empties a dustpan into the same toilet bowl where he relieved himself of his diarrhea. The narrator states that Boysie quickly dumped the contents of the dustpan into the same bowl because "Time was now released against him" (208). Again, waste is incongruent with forward-moving Time and prevents the black subject from fully participating in the linearity of modernity. The reclamation of excrement and the queering of Time in *The Meeting Point* instead function to challenge the teleology of progress. The "missy-missy" men, holding hands, reappear near the end of the novel, without their dogs, on the night that Bernice witnesses two policemen waiting for Brigitte's West Indian lover, whom Bernice believes is Boysie but is actually Henry, to emerge from the German maid's house. Knowing that the black man inside Brigitte's home is about to be punished by the cops for his act of miscegenation, Bernice anticipates the inevitable violence to come. The queer couple's appearance on the street is described in the novel as a break in this suspense-filled portion of the narrative, as "the street returns to its violence and silence" (340) when the two men are out of sight. Gary Kinsman comments that homosexuality was constructed as a national security threat in Canada during the 1950s and early 1960s, and that the 1952 Immigration Act prohibiting "homosexuals" from immigrating was connected to "security" concerns around homosexuality's association with communism and criminality (137-38). The ending of *The Meeting Point* challenges the discourses that associate homosexuality with a threat to national security, as it is the queer couple that embodies a temporal pause in the plot's inevitable movement toward bloodshed, their appearance stalling the violence and silence.

Johannes Fabian argues that the discipline of anthropology creates its object — its Other — through the "denial of coevalness," which he defines as "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of the anthropological discourse" (31). The gay men in *The Meeting Point* are placed in a temporality that is outside of the Time of the pristine Forest Hill neighbourhood, yet the denial of their coevalness is potentially subversive. Their appearance near the end of the novel illustrates a pause in the teleology, in the linear movement, of violence as history against black subjects in this affluent pocket of Toronto. While the nar-

rative suspension marked by their emergence is problematic because the queer black “gentlemen” are relegated to a “to come” that cannot exist in the present, the denial of the men’s coevalness with Time in Forest Hill opens up a resistant alternative to the well-known tale of the black man being punished for “contaminating” female whiteness. Moreover, this interruption in the storyline also represents a moment of potential coalition and recognition. The narrator notes that the men look up at Bernice’s window as they do each time they pass, but Bernice “holds her head out of sight” as she also does each time they walk by (340). Once again, the novel provides a glimpse of connection and kinship through the discourse of contagion and almost simultaneously disturbs that bond with the very structures that quarantine such infectious possibilities.

In 2012, the same year that Ottawa announced its cuts to healthcare coverage for refugee claimants and protected persons under the IFHP, the federal government also requested that the staff at Citizenship and Immigration Canada investigate ways to limit refugees with “health problems,” such as trauma from torture and “developmental delay,” from entering the country (Shingler). The government’s push to include trauma within the category of national health concerns to justify the exclusion of immigrants is telling in that it reveals how the notion of public health is hinged on a fear of the contagiousness of memory. The colonial and imperial residue that stains the fictive streets and homes of *The Meeting Point* exposes the novel’s readers to a “journey of love . . . pain and violence” (193-94), in which histories and memories of displacement are intertwined contagions that dislocate subjects from unstable homelands and unite them over racial divides in fleeting moments. Thus, these meeting points in Clarke’s novel reveal how the immigrant experience in Canada is infected with the past, plagued by the future, and exposed to the transmittable potential of the present.

NOTES

¹ I use the term *modern* to denote a concept of the nation that is hinged on teleological notions of progress and, thus, positions European and North American countries as temporally and culturally “ahead” of others.

² See Clarke’s *Storm of Fortune*, in which Bernice reveals to Dots that she asked Brigitte to help abort Estelle’s baby. Dots’s angry response to Bernice for “bringing a foreign body in

a . . . black-woman secret” (21) reveals how the German domestic is figured as a contaminant in the intimate sphere of the black pregnant body.

³ I use “Time” instead of “time” to acknowledge that the concept is, and has historically been, a political project. My use of the capitalization is informed by Johannes Fabian’s critical text, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, in which he writes, “Time . . . is a carrier of significance, a form through which we define the content of relations between the Self and the Other” (ix), and argues that there is a “Politics of Time” (x).

⁴ Bernice and Dots develop a sexual relationship in *Storm of Fortune*, but the narrator dismisses this queer intimacy as “merely a sort of jerking-off of a deeper hunger” (90) that Bernice really has for Lonnie, her lover in Barbados.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Warwick. “Excremental Colonialism: Public Health and the Poetics of Pollution.” Bashford and Hooker 76-105.
- Bashford, Alison. “Foreign Bodies: Vaccination, Contagion and Colonialism in the Nineteenth Century.” Bashford and Hooker 39-60.
- Bashford, Alison, and Claire Hooker, eds. *Contagion: Historical and Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- . “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha.” Interview by Jonathan Rutherford. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990. 207-21. Print.
- Bucknor, Michael A. “‘Voices Under the Window’ of Representation: Austin Clarke’s Poetics of (Body)-Memory in *The Meeting Point*.” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 13.1-2 (2005): 141-75. Print.
- Canada. Citizenship and Immigration Canada. “Forging Our Legacy: Canadian Citizenship and Immigration, 1900-1977.” *Citizenship and Immigration Canada*. Government of Canada. 1 July 2006. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.
- . Citizenship and Immigration Canada. “Health Care: Refugees.” *Citizenship and Immigration Canada*. Government of Canada. 11 Oct. 2012. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.
- . Citizenship and Immigration Canada. “News Release: Reform of the Interim Federal Health Program Ensures Fairness, Protects Public Health and Safety.” *Citizenship and Immigration Canada*. Government of Canada. 25 Apr. 2012. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.
- . Dept. of Justice. *The Immigration Act*. [Ottawa]: Department of Justice, 1952. *Immigrant Voices*. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.
- . Dept. of Justice. *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. Statutes of Canada, c.27*. Department of Justice. 2001. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.
- . Public Health Agency of Canada. “A Brief History of HIV/AIDS in Canada.” *Public Health Agency of Canada*. Public Health Agency of Canada. 25 Sept. 2007. Web. 1 Dec. 2012.
- Casteel, Sarah Phillips. “Experiences of Arrival: Jewishness and Caribbean-Canadian Identity in Austin Clarke’s *The Meeting Point*.” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 14.1 (2005): 113-42. Print.
- Clarke, Austin. *The Bigger Light*. Boston: Little, 1975. Print.
- . *The Meeting Point*. 1967. Toronto: Vintage, 1998. Print.
- . *Storm of Fortune*. Boston: Little, 1973. Print.

- Fabian, Johannes. *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia UP, 1983. Print.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. 1967. New York: Grove, 1991. Print.
- Frembgen, Jürgen Wasim. "The Scorpion in Muslim Folklore." *Asian Folklore Studies* 63.1 (2004): 95-123. Print.
- Gilman, Sander L. "Plague in Germany, 1939/1989: Cultural Images of Race, Space, and Disease." *MLN* 104.5 (1989): 1142-71. Print.
- . "Sibling Incest, Madness, and the 'Jews.'" *Jewish Social Studies* 4.2 (1998): 157-79. Print.
- Henry, Frances. "The West Indian Domestic Scheme in Canada." *Social and Economic Studies* 17.1 (1968): 83-91. Print.
- Johnston, T. "The Canadian Black Population and Immigration." *Anthropos* 73.3-4 (1978): 588-92. Print.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. "Signifying Contamination: On Austin Clarke's *Nine Men Who Laughed*." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 57 (1995): 212-34. Print.
- Kinsman, Gary. "'Character Weaknesses' and 'Fruit Machines': Towards an Analysis of the Anti-Homosexuality Security Campaign in the Canadian Civil Service." *Labour/Le Travail* 35 (1995): 133-61. Print.
- Maher, Jane-Maree. "The Promiscuous Placenta: Crossing Over." Bashford and Hooker. 201-16.
- McKenzie, Kenneth. "Dante's References to Aesop." *Annual Reports of the Dante Society* 17 (1898): 1-14. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. 2nd ed. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. 83-102. Print.
- Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. Print.
- Reuter, Shelley Z. "The Genuine Jewish Type: Racial Ideology and Anti-Immigrationism in Early Medical Writing about Tay-Sachs Disease." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 31.3 (2006): 291-323. Print.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. "'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels." *Contemporary Literature* 31.3 (1990): 300-23. Print.
- Seidman, Steven. "Transfiguring Sexual Identity: AIDS and the Contemporary Construction of Homosexuality." *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 187-205. Print.
- Shildrick, Margrit. "Vulnerable Bodies and Ontological Contamination." Bashford and Hooker. 153-67.
- Shingler, Benjamin. "Ottawa Studied Limits on Accepting Refugees with 'High Needs' Health Problems, Documents Show." *The Globe and Mail*. The Globe and Mail Inc. 3 Sept. 2013. Web. 5 Sept. 2013.
- Stasiulis, Daiva, and Abigail B. Bakan. "Negotiating Citizenship: The Case of Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada." *Feminist Review* 57 (1997): 112-39. Print.
- Thompson, John Herd, and Morton Weinfeld. "Entry and Exit: Canadian Immigration Policy in Context." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 538 (1995): 185-98. Print.
- Weiss, Meira. "Signifying the Pandemics: Metaphors of AIDS, Cancer, and Heart Disease." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 11.4 (1997): 456-76. Print.