

# **Anna Minerva Henderson's Citadel and Gloria Ann Wesley's To My Someday Child: A Close Reading of Two Maritime Voices**

David Creelman

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Anna Minerva Henderson's *Citadel*  
and Gloria Ann Wesley's  
*To My Someday Child*:  
A Close Reading of Two Maritime Voices

DAVID CREELMAN

IN THE LATE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S, two volumes of poetry appeared eight years apart. Read by few and missed by reviewers, these two collections marked distinct moments in the evolution of Black Maritime literature. One was reserved, contained, and careful in its exploration of injustice and advocacy for change. The other was brash in its protest and insistent on reform. Together the two books reflect the significant changes under way in the lives of Black Maritimers in the decades following the Second World War. In 1967, Anna Minerva Henderson published *Citadel*, a collection of highly polished verse that captures the best of her eighty-year struggle against marginalization. Reflective and observant, Henderson's tempered work advocates for change and seeks to advance the rights of individuals and groups who have been marginalized by assumptions about gender or race. In 1975, twenty-six-year-old Gloria Ann Wesley published *To My Someday Child*, a collection that employs a direct voice to move Black experiences into the foreground of literary expression. Wesley had no access to or knowledge of Henderson's slim volume when she published her collection. Encouraged by contemporary reforms in public policy, her advocacy is more pronounced as her free-verse lyrics document a significant shift in the Maritime cultural and political landscape. In these two collections, both Henderson and Wesley emerge from racialized communities, speak to the experience of being Black in the Maritimes, and trail-blaze what George Elliott Clarke identified as the "Africadian Literary Renaissance."<sup>1</sup> Although neither is yet widely known for her first collection, each broke new ground, and their texts deserve the close attention, indeed the close readings, that will allow their work to be more fully appreciated.

Although the practice of close reading has been sidelined as a critical approach, there are occasions when the close study of texts helps to illuminate the main issues that concern the poets, helps to introduce unknown works to a wider audience, and helps readers more fully to appreciate experiences similar to or different from their own. For J.W. Phelan, “close analysis” suggests “loosening, unravelling or an investigation of the parts having disassembled the whole. . . . [It is] the ability to make connections, marshal material in an orderly way, spot a pattern, spell out an implication, identify a possibility, draw a distinction. . . . [It is] the ability to recognize a fresh perspective, recognize a new set of questions” (87). Such a methodology is particularly helpful when exploring the literary texts that convey times, cultures, racialized perspectives, class experiences, or gender identities different from our own. In *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Paula Moya argues that it is through individual literary texts “that authors most meaningfully communicate with their readers . . . and . . . that literature is a sensitive indicator of the ideological underpinnings of human experience” (8):

A work of literature never represents society as it really is, but rather filters through a literary form the hopes, dreams, illusions, and (sometimes faulty or partial) knowledge of the author about that social world. And because authors are cultural beings, their hopes, dreams, illusions, and bodies of knowledge are not unique to themselves. . . . Instead, those hopes and dreams engage — sometimes positively, sometimes negatively — the pervasive socio-cultural ideas of the society within which an author lives. A work of literature is thus a creative linguistic engagement, in the form of an oral or written artifact, with the historically-situated cultural and political tensions expressed at the level of individual experience. (8-9)

Because literary artifacts are encoded with the tensions of their age and communicate the troubled dynamics of their time, “a close reading of a work of literature can . . . serve as an excavation of, and a meditation on, the pervasive sociocultural ideas — such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality — of the social worlds” (9). Attending closely to the structures, allusions, rhetoric, and figures of a text helps the reader to encounter, at least in part, “particularly rich contexts for learning about the interactions, institutions, and ideas that create and maintain different forms

of inequality” (52). In this way, a close study of the poetry of Henderson and Wesley conveys exactly what kind of work writers undertake when they are the first in their communities to bear witness, through poetry, to their experiences.

## I

According to George Elliott Clarke, Anna Minerva Henderson, born in 1887, was right “to consider herself the only publishing Black poet in Canada during most of her life” (“Anna” 46n19). That Henderson should emerge as an innovator and literary pioneer makes sense given her background and her willingness to step out of traditional roles. Although few details of her personal life have survived, some material has been recovered by scholar Adrienne Shadd and by New Brunswick historian-researcher Vivian Wright, and it affords us insights into some aspects of her life.<sup>2</sup> The second of three daughters, Henderson was born to parents committed to social reform and community engagement. Her father, William R. Henderson, served in the Union Navy during the American Civil War, was wounded, and after immigrating to New Brunswick worked as a barber in Saint John until his death, by accident, at the age of forty-nine in 1893 (Wright 1). Anna’s mother, Henrietta Leake, was born in Kingsclear, York County, New Brunswick, attended normal school in Fredericton, taught school in Nova Scotia before her marriage, and returned to teaching in Saint John’s North End, when widowed, in order to raise her three daughters (Wright 1). At a time when the completion of secondary education was not the norm, Anna, like her mother and her sister Mable, graduated from high school, attended normal school, and became a teacher. She worked as a teacher for two years in Nova Scotia (Wright 2), but, frustrated by the fact that she was “only allowed to teach in a Black community,” she left the classroom, studied at a business college, scored the third highest mark on the federal civil service exam, and in 1912 became the “first black [sic] to be permanently employed in the Federal Civil Service” (Wright 2). The year is of interest given that less than a year earlier, on 12 August 1911, Sir Wilfrid Laurier’s government created Order-in-Council PC 1911-1324, barring from the nation “any immigrants belonging to the Negro race, which is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada” (Schwinghamer 3). Although the order-in-council was intended specifically to block the entrance of Black farmers during

the period when the Prairies were opened to settlers from Northern and Central Europe, and though the order “does not appear to have been invoked officially and the ban was not written into the Immigration Act, . . . the ordinance remain[ed] an important indication of the government’s desire” to exclude people of African descent from Canada (Schwinghamer 3). Henderson’s successful entry into the federal system, at the very moment when the government was trying actively to limit African American immigration and participation in Canadian society, points to the racialized contexts in which Henderson worked and the professional abilities that she must have possessed. She had a thirty-three-year career in public service, working first as “a stenographer in the Dominion Land Branch of the Department of the Interior” and later as the “principal clerk in the Immigration Branch [of the] Department of Mines and Resources” (Clarke, “Anna” 33). Drawing from the work of Shadd, Clarke notes that Henderson was committed to literary interests; “while in Ottawa she wrote a column for the *Ottawa Citizen*,” and, by “the time she was 50, Henderson was actively publishing her verse in little magazines,” including *Canadian Poetry Magazine* (“Anna” 33). Her work as a poet continued into the later stages of her life. As the Second World War ended, Henderson “retired from the Civil Service . . . and returned to Saint John, where she worked for three years as a stenographer” in the law office of Fairweather and Stevenson, before moving to Washington, DC, where she was employed “as a secretary at the American University” (Wright 2). In 1965 or 1966, Henderson returned to Fredericton and lived with her retired sister, and in 1967, her eightieth year, she “self-published *Citadel*, a slim booklet of 31 pages” containing twenty-two poems (Clarke, “Anna” 34). With the publication of her chapbook, she became the first African Canadian woman to publish a volume of poetry “in her native country” (Clarke, “Anna” 46).

Looking at *Citadel* with an eye on its structure and form, it initially appears to employ a traditional and even conservative voice. Thirteen of the twenty-two poems are sonnets or pairs of sonnets, and all but three rely on some form of rhythmic or rhyming pattern. Divided into two parts, the collection also seems initially to be cautious in both its form and its content. Part One contains eight poems, seven of which follow the form of the Shakespearean sonnet, and is introduced with an epigraph from Alfred Noyes’s “A Garment of Praise,” which sounds a nostalgic note claiming that “the fields that gave us birth draw us with sweetness, never to be forgotten, back through the dark” (7). Following

that sentiment, the poems in Part One memorialize traditional places in Saint John, including “Market Slip” (9), “The Old Burying Ground” (11), “King Square” (12), and “A Garden Remembered” (15), and they are reflective in tone as the persona recalls and celebrates key places or traits of her birthplace. These poems, many of which are descriptive meditations on urban and garden spaces, act as poetic validations of her skill and sensitive eye, leaving more engaging issues to the second section. In Part Two, Henderson shifts her attention from places to people and either creates brief portraits of individuals or records the thoughts of the persona as she positions herself as a poet in and observer of the world. In this second section, the form becomes more varied, and only six of the fourteen pieces are sonnets, but as with the earlier poems the subject matter seems, at least initially, to be conventional; Henderson focuses on local “history, British [cultural] connections, faith, and the strife between artist and critic” (Clarke, “Anna” 34). Most of the time, the lyrics speak about ideas and sentiments that do not seem to be controversial or stridently explore issues related to social justice or the imbalances of power within Saint John or the larger region.

That Henderson should choose to speak formally and thematically within the dominant discourse, in both parts of her chapbook, is not surprising. In his study *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker notes that early African American writers intentionally worked within established conventions. Advocates within the Black community, such as editor and anthologist Alain Locke, were

never of the opinion that Western standards in art were anything other than adequate goals for high Afro-American cultural achievement. And the revelation of the Afro-American . . . artistic accomplishment . . . mandated, in his view, [a] willingness on the part of Black spokespersons to aspire toward such standards . . . If the younger generation was to proffer “artistic” gifts, such gifts had first to be recognized as “artistic” by Western, formal, standards. (85-86)

In his article on Henderson, Clarke, the primary critic of her work, draws from Baker, noting that the pressure to align with established literary conventions was more powerful for “African-American women poets of the 1920s, [who] signalled their concerns regarding race and racism obliquely, [and] chose deliberately to use the standard forms of the British canon to demonstrate their intellectual equality to whites”

(“Anna” 36). Even a poem in *Citadel* that seems to invite politics onto the page, such as the sonnet “Parliament Hill, Ottawa” (21), addresses the “life that throngs the street,” the citizen’s “dreams and triumphs and defeat,” but explores these diverse human experiences as significant only because they can be neutralized as they are “woven in the carillon’s refrain / . . . lifted through the starlight clear and high / [and] flung, transformed, a song against the sky!” (ll. 9-14).<sup>3</sup>

However, as important as Clarke’s and Shadd’s investigations have been in bringing attention to Henderson’s work, Clarke, in particular, undervalues the advocacy work performed in Part Two of *Citadel*. In the opening of his article, Clarke notes that “Henderson strikes a ‘raceless’ — almost bloodless — stance. . . . [S]he writes like an assimilada . . . [and] avoids, save for two surreptitious moments, any statement of racial surveillance” (“Anna” 32). Clarke then counters this position by claiming that “Henderson may be ‘blacker’ than she first appears,” and in the course of his excellent article he focuses primarily on the poems in Part One and recovers the “potential *black* inklings in Henderson’s otherwise race-erased verse” (“Anna” 32, 38). Indeed, only in two poems, “Prayer Meeting” and “Crow and Critic,” does Henderson (according to Clarke) attend more explicitly to Black concerns. However, if she does occasionally sidestep the political, the poems in Part Two attend more persistently than Clarke has appreciated to the experiences and suffering of marginalized people. There is a broad thematic unity in *Citadel* as Henderson celebrates individual agency in the face of adversity. In her poems, she regularly protests imbalances of power in a society dedicated to the status quo, and she celebrates agents of change who seek greater freedom in the realms of gender and race. In this way, Henderson advances a position of advocacy more consistently and explicitly than has been noted. Indeed, to appreciate fully the subtle yet persistent ways in which she works as an advocate, we need to attend closely to the language, allusions, and structures of her work. Although such close attention to the poems is strongly reminiscent of the old-fashioned practice of close reading, far from replicating the apolitical and ahistorical methodologies of the New Critics, careful attention to language reveals just how persistently Henderson advances her call for the liberation and empowerment of the socially and politically displaced.

Henderson’s broad call in *Citadel* for resistance to forms of corruption and social oppression begins with the first poem in Part Two, entitled “Prayer” (18). It is a tribute to hardship as a test of virtue. The

poem's epigraph, taken from Milton's pamphlet *Areopagitica* (1644), calls for the free expression of ideas and asserts that we should not "praise a fugitive and cloister'd virtue . . . that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race" (l. 18). Written in the form of a Miltonic sonnet that uses a Petrarchan rhyme scheme but eliminates the turn between the octave and the sestet, Henderson prays to God that her path through life not be easy, "smoothed," or "blazed" (ll. 2-3). Instead, like the Christian-humanist revolutionary of the English Civil War, she asks for hardships and seeks to test her "virtue" and "strength" amid "life's turmoil" and face the "dust and heat of conflict" (ll. 5-8). What Henderson is really calling for are opportunities to fight for "the truth that triumphs over pain," and her claim that she "crave[s] a spirit singing to the lashing rain" employs the diction of those who suffer but ultimately win refined wisdom (ll. 9,12). For her, the victory of such moments is a private experience since the "lifted heart . . . never knows defeat" (l. 13). In this context, her prayer that God will "help me to be strong!" and "make me brave" is a call to endure suffering, knowing that it will produce a tempered strength and perhaps lead to social progress (l. 14). The epigraph from Milton is important in this context, for *Areopagitica* argues that, unless individuals struggle amid the free expression of ideas, they cannot attain insight, and the broader commonwealth cannot "manage and set forth new positions to the world" (Milton 1023). The opening of Part Two calls for the individual to seek the good and the right and to trust that the sacrifices made to advance those causes will be rewarded. Henderson is not explicit about the political or social causes that need to be defended, and, given the enduring legacy of racial prejudice and segregation across Canada, her decision to code her message makes sense. Even so, the option of non-engagement is dismissed, and the persona insists on heroic striving for change.

In the subsequent poems of Part Two, these general calls to do the right thing become more specific. Several poems focus particularly on gender and encourage women to assert their will even if powerful men and society in general contest their power. In the poem "Departure" (25), Henderson captures a brief cryptic moment as a woman dismisses a man from her life. No explanation is given for why "he left" (l. 1). Indeed, the woman smiles "[i]n a casual way" when he leaves, and she keeps her distress secret: "[H]e never knew / What her heart longed to say" (ll. 3-4). Her emotional pain deepens when she senses "the long years / and her heart's bitter lack," and she records that she will "remem-



ber forever / The great hall clock, / . . . the eternal tick-tock” (ll. 9-16). But whatever her heart says, her will withstands it, and she asserts that the mind and reason should govern such moments: “But she knew it was best / That he should not come back” (ll. 11-12). In the absence of any rationale, Henderson requires that the reader simply accept the persona’s decision, and thus a woman’s will is valorized ahead of all the public expectations and the emotional leanings that constitute the typical expectations of women in a patriarchal society.

A more personal commemoration of feminine power and strength is found in “The Lacemaker” (24), one of the most autobiographical poems in *Citadel*. The ten-line poem is conventional in form: two interlocking quatrains of iambic pentameter employ an ABBA rhyme scheme before closing with a couplet. The contrasts in the poem are sharply drawn. “Springtime” has arrived, and the natural world is full of life and promise: “A little laughing tree / New leaved and April-fragrant after rain / Tossed dancing shadows through the window-pane” (ll. 1-3). However, though nature’s renewing beauty uplifts the wider world, the inner life of the Lacemaker is pierced by the “sweetness of the robin’s note” and then overwhelmed by sorrow as “she bowed her head upon the window-sill” (ll. 7-8). At first, the poem seems to be Victorian in its tribute to a suffering woman who sees nature’s beauty, is overcome by the “singing memories” that “awoke and died,” and then is grieved by “The shining dreams of youth that Life denied” (ll. 8-10). Indeed, Henderson seems to be invoking nineteenth-century images and patterns as if to retain bygone patriarchal structures, and Tennysonian echoes are heard as a weaving woman, Shallot-like, recognizes that her desires have been denied and that she has not, or cannot, take up life’s true promise. “The Lacemaker” thus seems, at first, to be a tragic victim and a figure of pathos as her “slim hands fluttered to her throat” (l. 7). But the poem resonates differently when we know that Henderson’s mother, Henrietta (Leake) Henderson, was “well known for her fine lace and needlework and had won prizes when she exhibited them” (Wright 1). If Henderson is writing about her mother, then the poem is less about abstract suffering and the victimization of women and more an empathetic tribute to a person whose “shining dreams” of life ended after her husband’s death left her to raise her three young daughters on her own. In that context, “The shining dreams of youth that Life denied” point to the fortitude and strength of a young widow who, despite tragedy, successfully returned to her work as a teacher, raised her daughters,

and still created lacework of beauty — her “cobweb tracery / of fairy stitches” (ll. 4-5). The speaker of the poem, the persona who stands in for daughter Anna, shows a deep respect for that sacrifice, and “The Lacemaker” in this context is less a Victorian victim than a fully realized woman whose strength is honoured by the child whom she raised.

Although Henderson advocates the agency of women, she also, in cautious ways, attempts to oppose racism and celebrate the Maritime Black experience. Clarke notes that, though *Citadel* does not draw attention to itself as a Black text and adopts a “strategy of invisible visibility,” Henderson is “blacker” than she first appears to be (“Anna” 36, 32). As “a *black* poet with *universal* content and . . . a *raceless* poet with *black* subtext,” Henderson writes both the reflective pieces in the opening and the later, more personal material with a Black inflection that signals her commitment to a racialized community (47). For example, Clarke, following Shadd, argues that *Citadel* “seems almost unabashedly ‘black’ in tone and subject” in the comic poem “Prayer-Meeting” (40). In that poem, parishioner Sister Susie Gray and the Deacon have “quarreled,” and she has vowed that “She’d never listen to his voice / Though she ‘should be struck dead’” (ll. 22-23). In the midst of a wintertime “Revival,” in a “brightly lighted meeting-house” (l. 5), when the Deacon “kneels to pray,” Susie marches “Out in the storm and bang[s] the door / With a resounding thud” (ll. 17-18), only to find herself enduring “the stinging powdered ice / That swirled in drifts” (ll. 11-12) and “the wild gust[s] of snow” (l. 34). Aware of her discomfort, the canny Deacon “prayed and prayed” (l. 25), and he tests her resolution with his prolonged “masterpiece in prayer” (l. 32). The comic conflict between the angry woman and vengeful man facing off under the banner of Christian charity allows a “night of seeming tragedy / [to] bec[o]me a standing joke” (ll. 39-40). This poem explores the dynamics of a small rural church and had its origins, according to a letter that Henderson wrote to historian Robin Winks, in “her experience teaching school ‘in a “colored Baptist community” in Nova Scotia at the age of nineteen (which would have been in 1906) and attend[ing] a revival meeting in the Baptist church’” (Shadd 11; qtd. in Clarke, “Anna” 40). Whatever the efficacy of evangelical doctrines of grace, Henderson writes out of a broader humanism that both admires the fiery personality of the strong-willed sister and celebrates the neighbours who gather and with “comradeship and singing / eased the daily load of care” (ll. 7-8). Indeed, Henderson’s poem foregrounds the individual

strength and resolve of the Deacon, Sister Susie, and the congregation, and Henderson pays tribute to the determination and tenacity of all the people who make up the region's Black community. "Prayer Meeting" chronicles and values the role played by the church in this marginalized community, yet the poem's critique of the church's power reveals Henderson's position within and apart from a "wider black community" (Clarke, "Anna" 40, 41).

Whereas "Prayer Meeting" observes the life of the Black community from an ironic and comic distance, "Crow and Critic" (28-29), the penultimate poem in *Citadel*, explores the more personal and private world of the individual artist and is "perhaps [Henderson's] most sophisticated statement about herself" (Clarke, "Anna" 41). One of only three poems written within the modernist conventions of free verse, "Crow and Critic" explores her ideas about the public role of poetry and the need for art to include all aspects of the wider society. The poem begins with a familiar celebration of winter's retreat and records the poet's pleasure that "spring moved in over night" (l. 5); nature's regenerative impulses can be found in the "patches of soft green" (l. 6) and the "air / laden with the fragrance of growing things" (ll. 8-9). Against the static vegetative world, Henderson includes the dynamism of a bird in flight: "Over the way a crow wheeled and circled" (l. 11). The contrast between the static and the dynamic is deepened when the poet notes that on this Sunday morning there are the sounds of a "Service being held" in the "old Lutheran Church" (ll. 16-17), to which the free-flying crow "Listened intently and — could it have been? — / With intelligence and enjoyment" (ll. 21-22). As the crow participates in, but also wryly stands apart from, the scene, we recognize that the persona uses it as an image of the poet. At this point, Clarke's analysis of the poem is helpful and worth reviewing in detail. The bird's import is increased when Henderson — in a metapoetic move that constitutes a "nod toward Post-Modernism" — becomes "self-conscious about [her] own artifice" (Clarke, "Anna" 41) and imagines in the poem a "[c]ritic [who] said: 'The Crow flapping seems to be / A digression. What does it really contribute / To the meaning of the poem?'" (ll. 26-28). In the tradition of lyric poetry, the black crow is a distraction, but for this poet the figure of a free outsider represents the creative heart of artistic experience. Indeed, if "the crow is read as a *familiar* of Henderson herself, then . . . she rehearses the rejection of Black writers by white critics who refuse to credit Blacks with faculties of intelligence and imagination, feel-

ing and subtlety” (Clarke, “Anna” 41). That Henderson celebrates her power as a “black-identified” poet becomes apparent as she refutes the critic’s objections by “appeal[ing] to the work of two Modernist poets to support her inclusiveness” (Clarke, “Anna” 42). Her first thought is to reject the exclusionary critic outright by quoting Archibald MacLeish’s seminal poem from 1926 “Ars Poetica,” with its imagist declaration “A poem should not mean, but be” (l. 29). But rather than evade the issue by arguing that poems do not have to mean, she argues for a more positivist position, adapting a claim from Dylan Thomas: “It was part of the picture / I saw from my window, so I put it in” (ll. 30-31). In this passage, Henderson plays with her audience as she quotes a canonized poet to authorize her desire to include a Black presence in her regenerative poem and signals her expertise in the field of contemporary arts. The passage that she quotes is not from one of his poems but from an interview that Thomas gave at the University of Utah in 1952 with Professor Brewster Ghiselin. The “encounter” was recorded by Marjorie Adix, whose article “Dylan Thomas: Memories and Appreciations” was first published in the second volume of Stephen Spender’s CIA-sponsored literary magazine *Encounters* in 1954. Adix’s account was republished in several monographs, including E.W. Tedlock’s *Dylan Thomas the Legend and the Poet* and John Malcolm Brinnin’s *A Casebook on Dylan Thomas*, both of which were published in 1960. It was perhaps through one of these books that Henderson encountered Thomas’s thoughts about including everyday experiences in his verse:

THOMAS. I wanted to write about the cliff and there was [a] crow flying above it, and that seemed a good place to begin, so I wrote about the crow. Yes, if I see a bird, I put it in whether it belongs or not.

GHISELIN. Do you leave it there?

THOMAS. If it is happy and at home in the poetry I do. But really, I should get a blind for my window. (Adix 287)

Thomas jokingly says that he should curtail his attraction to extraneous details and marginal impulses, but Henderson welcomes their inclusion, so her poem asserts, more strongly than modernists such as MacLeish or Thomas, that poetry needs to stretch beyond conventions and include differences in all forms. Whereas Thomas suggests that he needs to narrow his focus, Henderson hints that art needs to be inclusive and that she intends to open her verse to a wider variety of impulses than

the modernists who preceded her. This poem must have been written between 1961 and 1966, and as an experienced poet in her seventies Henderson was not only acknowledging her debt to modernist poets but also asserting that she would move beyond their self-imposed constrictions and their desire (from her perspective) not to invest in or be distracted by the wider world: “I am not, however, buying a blind / For my window,” she says (ll. 36-37). In “Crow and Critic,” Henderson not only asserts, as Clarke argued, that she is familiar with and fully immersed in the central currents of modernist poetics, but also states her intention to surpass them. In a profound way, she self-consciously defines and advances her role as a Black poet who insists that the elements previous writers marginalized or excluded will now feature prominently in her poems.

Other poems in Part Two of *Citadel* celebrate groups of people previously disregarded by society who — through their own will, courage, and fortitude — have attained new status in the world. “Mount Mansfield, Vermont” (19) is a Shakespearean sonnet that recasts the climbing of the tallest mountain in the state (and the third tallest peak in the New England states) as an allegory of the social triumph of a group of people whom society has oppressed: “Up where the trail is lost against the sky / We climb exultant” (ll. 1-2). Not only has their ascent brought them “Beauty, majestic as a trumpet cry” (l. 3), and “singing happiness” (l. 5), but also, as they watch “A late moon rise over the one tall hill / Drenching the world in floods of silver light” (ll. 11-12), they realize that the light of their freedom is becoming evident in the shrouded valley that they left, where “dark in dreams below / Gleam here and there the twinkling lights” (ll. 13-14). If the exact nature of the freed people is underdefined in the sonnet, the title encourages the reader to decode the poem’s racial context. The name of any high mountain could have served Henderson’s purpose, but her choice of Mount Mansfield is significant, named as it is after William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield, the English justice who “on 22 June 1772 . . . handed down his long-awaited decision in the case of the runaway Negro slave, James Somersett” (Nadelhaft 193). As Jerome Nadelhaft notes in his article from 1966, “the Somersett decision quickly became an important influence on Americans; it was cited authoritatively in American courts, north and south, state and federal for fifty years,” and it helped to fuel the abolitionist movement in both England and America (193). Mount Mansfield was named after the town of Mansfield, at the base of the mountain, and though that township was later annexed

to the towns of Underhill and Stowe ("Mount Mansfield") the original designation was made in honour of the English earl's career as a renowned jurist. Given that Henderson worked both in the law office of Fairweather and Stevenson and as a secretary at the American University, and that she was a widely read individual, it seems to be highly plausible that her title references this abolitionist history. As such, her sonnet's depiction of a victorious ascent is a careful reference to the civil rights struggles of the 1950s-60s and celebrates the triumphs of free Black people who "know / That nevermore can" oppressors rule over them and "hold us captive through our days" (ll. 6-8). Henderson relies on her title to hint that the broad aesthetic of transcendence is linked to the more specific racialized experience of self-won freedom. That she should comment on the experiences of African Americans from her standpoint as a Black Maritime writer both confirms her engagement with the civil rights movements of her time and anticipates Wesley's similar determination to speak about the struggles of racialized American citizens as a way of commenting on Canadian contexts.

From the expression of collective strength in "Mount Mansfield, Vermont," Henderson moves to express the unique power of the individual who faces adversity in the Shakespearean sonnet "This Life." The first quatrain opens with a vision of a human being, as a creation of God, whose significance comes from that transcendental connection: "This life, this gift unsought, so strangely mine / . . . This fusion of the human and divine / That makes articulate the insensate clay" (ll. 1-4). In the second quatrain, Henderson quickly shifts to an existential mode as she wonders whether life is meaningless and perhaps not worth the tragic effort needed to endure its suffering: "Sometimes I've wondered if indeed 'twere best / Not to have lived . . . / The lamp unlighted and the wine unpoured" (ll. 5-8). In the end, meaning is found not in a priori, ontological certainties but in confronting the world in oppositional terms and forging an identity that resists oppressive surrounding forces. Henderson is determined to walk "alone / With hate and fear" and quell them with her "level steadfast gaze," and thus she is able to "claim my own" (ll. 9-11). By facing and defeating her opponents, she attains a sense of self that both echoes the divine and parodies the closing lines of the Protestant version of the Lord's Prayer: "Mine is the glory, and mine the power" (l. 12).<sup>4</sup> From this process of resistance, the poet finds "Serenity and strength," and ultimately that is the originating point of her creativity and art: "Their alchemy transmuting pain to song" (ll.

13-14). Again, it is not clear whether the hate and fear directed against her are caused by sexism or racism, but she is triumphant in highly individualized terms.

For many reasons, Henderson is a remarkable poet. First, there is the formal complexity of her work. She alludes to canonical and modern writers, and her control of traditional and modern prosody points to a high level of expertise. Second, as Shadd and Clarke point out, she traced the main currents of literature in the twentieth century and bent them to her own purposes as a Black Canadian woman writer. Third, there is her powerful voice of social advocacy as Henderson celebrates and advances individuals who dare to fight for and claim their rights in a Eurocentric society that otherwise would seek to disempower or marginalize them. As the product of a conventional educational system, and as a racialized woman who worked for years within the confines of the rigidly unified ideological perspective of Canadian society in the early modernist period, Henderson both masters the available literary traditions and uses them to critique the very systems in which she is embedded. Thus, a lively ironic and even parodic sensibility lets her speak within, to, and against the hegemonic forces that surrounded her for much of her life. Henderson was limited in the degree to which she could tackle the powerful injustices associated with being perceived as a racialized subject held by the ideologies of the time. It would fall to the next generation of poets to start from her position and push further as they participate in a vision of society that speaks more vigorously and uncompromisingly about the need to reform a racialized, unequal, and biased society.

## II

In interesting ways, the early life experiences of Gloria Ann Wesley, born in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, in 1948, were similar to those of Anna Minerva Henderson. Like Henderson, conventional family life was disrupted for Wesley when she was young. Living in Winnipeg as a youngster, she returned to Yarmouth with her father and her brother, Larry, and thereafter the children were cared for by their loving but strict grandmother (Wesley, Interview). Gloria absorbed her family's strong work ethic and became a gifted student. She flourished at Yarmouth High School, was president of the Student Council, editor of the school newspaper, and winner of both the Birks Medal for Academic Excellence

and an IODE Provincial Centennial Scholarship in 1968 (Wesley, *To* 42). Like Henderson, Wesley finished high school and pursued a career as a teacher, completing the two-year course of study at Truro's Nova Scotia Teachers College. Also like Henderson, upon graduation, Wesley found her job prospects limited to all-Black schools, initially taking a one-year contract to teach in Hammonds Plains in Hants County. Later she found greater opportunities in education, and she returned to Truro and then moved to New Glasgow, where she taught from 1972 to 1979: "I taught in New Glasgow for seven years and then down in Guysborough for quite a while, and then moved to Port Hawkesbury to the board office, [where] I was a social studies coordinator and race relations coordinator, and then I moved into guidance in Antigonish and then went back to teaching senior and junior high English" (Interview). Although Wesley found more opportunities in the field of education than Henderson, that does not mean that the playing field was equal. Wesley found, in the early years of her career, that she was subject to an unusually high level of supervision when, "during her probation year, the local school board superintendent seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time sitting in the back of her classroom, waiting for her to slip up" (DeMont). This surveillance — including reports that both her use of the word *cool* and her Afro were "inappropriate" — signalled the educational system's unease with racial diversity (Wesley, Interview). As the first Black teacher in an integrated school in New Glasgow, Wesley was also subject to other inequitable stresses. Although "white teachers seemed to be able to settle down in a school with a particular grade, Wesley spent her career moving from school to school, often to whichever one was thought to be having problems with its black students" (DeMont). "I was the only Black teacher, and whenever there needed to be a change, I was it" (Wesley, Interview). Whereas Henderson encountered obstacles to her career in 1912, by the early 1970s those barriers, though still present, were more porous, and Wesley remained in the Guysborough school system for the remainder of her thirty-two-year teaching career.

Aspects of Wesley's life may echo those of Henderson's life, but ultimately the work of the two poets was shaped by very different social and political contexts. Born a few years after the Second World War, Wesley grew up during a time when federal and provincial governments were passing early legislation to address the systemic racial, religious, and gender biases that dominated society. After the federal government



passed the Bill of Rights Appendix IV Protection of Civil Rights in 1947, signed the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, passed the Bill of Human Rights Appendix III in 1949, and adopted the Fair Employment Practices Act of 1955, provincial governments began to enact more specific bills to enforce the principles of equality in a variety of social contexts. Although Wesley was born in a province that practiced racial segregation in the workplace, government services, schools, and private institutions, a series of legislative reforms under Premier Robert Stanfield — including the Fair Accommodations Act of 1959, the Nova Scotia Human Rights Act of 1963, and the Human Rights Commission in 1967 — signalled a greater concern for the equality of racialized citizens.<sup>5</sup> Of course, passing legislation is very different from establishing real equality. The destruction of Africville in Halifax between 1964 and 1969, the contested location of landfills near Black neighbourhoods, the underfunding of public services in Black communities, the enduring problems with segregation in education and religious organizations, and the continued racial bias in the policing and judicial systems have affected the African Nova Scotian community from the 1960s to the present; for Wesley, though, as a child and adolescent, even the small legislative changes of the late 1950s and 1960s signalled that reform was being initiated. Her voice as a poet was given greater space than was afforded to Henderson.

For Wesley, the Yarmouth of that time was “a rather multicultural area. I grew up . . . where there were Jewish kids, Black kids, Native kids, white kids, French kids, English kids. . . . Yarmouth was very open” (Interview). Several of her teachers were encouraging: “[W]hen her grade seven class went on a field trip to the museum . . . and their teacher asked them to write about their trip . . ., the teacher chose three pieces to submit to the *Yarmouth Light* newspaper, and Wesley’s was one of them: ‘I’d always write little stories, but it wasn’t until I got to grade seven that I went, “Oh . . . mine are special”’” (Sawler). Another mentor emerged in high school when “my grade eleven teacher, Peter Eldridge, . . . validated my work; he would always have me read what I wrote to the class. He said, ‘You’ve got to run for the editor of the paper’” (Wesley, Interview). In a community that valued her voice and opinions, she remembers being influenced by the powerful civil rights movement: “It was the days of ‘Say it loud, I’m black and proud,’ and it was the days of Martin Luther King Jr., and we were on a mission” (Interview). Just as Henderson was “a product of New Brunswick and its Atlantic

orientation” in the early twentieth century (Clarke, “Anna” 43), so too did Wesley begin to write at a time when advocates of reform in local, provincial, national, and international spheres were starting to reform the structures of racism that marginalized vulnerable sectors of society. Wesley felt a direct and powerful tie to those social forces, and her work explicitly addresses issues of race in a way that Henderson masked.

Wesley’s ambition to move her voice into the public sphere found support. During her two years at the Truro Teachers College, Wesley became close friends with Burma Marshall, the foster daughter of Carrie Best, the renowned human rights activist, publisher, journalist, and broadcaster from New Glasgow (Sawler). At some point, while Wesley was visiting the Best family, either during her time in the Teachers College or when she was teaching elementary school in New Glasgow, Best learned about her poetic work and showed her poems, many of which were from her high school newspaper, to Dr. Leo Bertley (Sawler). Bertley had been hired as a history professor at Vanier College in 1970 (Héroux) and was the founder and main editor of Bilongo Publishers, which he ran out of his home in Pierrefonds, Quebec. In a period when small presses were flourishing but access to Black writers was still limited, Bertley produced, in 1975, Wesley’s *To My Someday Child*, a forty-page, limited edition volume of poems, printed by Vanier College Press. Before Shadd’s recovery of Henderson’s *Citadel*, Wesley was thought to have produced the first published book of poetry in Canada by a Black author, and she is still recognized as “the first black Nova Scotian to publish a poetry collection” (DeMont). *To My Someday Child* appeared without reviews or critical fanfare, but as Clarke notes the appearance of her book “launched the ‘Africadian Renaissance,’” and soon after a host of other publications, many by writers from the Black communities in and around Halifax, came onto the market (“Primer” 333).

*Citadel* and *To My Someday Child* are very different books. Henderson’s chapbook collects a lifetime of work and contains carefully revised and sophisticated poems that respond to and fit within a powerful set of traditional and modernist conventions. Wesley’s volume emerged from the pen of a young writer beginning to explore the literary world. Her work is less formally sophisticated, and Wesley crafts her accessible, polemical poetry employing either free verse or divided rhyming couplets in mixed iambic and anapestic tetrameter. As one would expect in a volume that includes the apprenticeship work of an emerging writer, not all of the texts are successful. A few of the poems

follow rather clichéd patterns, as is the case with the poems about old age. “Time” (10) and “Imprisoned” (20) explore the futility and emptiness of old age, but they struggle to maintain an authentic tone. It is not surprising that a few of these weaker poems were included; for all of his strengths as a historian and publisher, Bertley did not claim expertise as a poet, and he did not catch all of the poems that could have been revised.

Wesley’s passion and intensity are more convincing in the eight poems that focus on yearning or sorrow evoked when the persona is drawn to a desirable other or compelling natural setting. Although poems such as “Sigh” (21) and “Happiness” (28) are highly romantic, “Anticipation” (9) is a stronger poem in which the reunion of lovers — the concluding moment in the lyric — is anticipated by a contrasting autumnal scene that provides a lovely depiction of loneliness without naming the experience:

Trees —  
 Unclothed, grey,  
 Stretched tall  
 Above my head  
 Leaves —  
 Brown, black  
 Quiet, Spongy  
 Beneath my feet. (ll. 10-17)

Wesley’s poems about desire have even more impact when the tone is sorrowful and the love is unrequited or disappointed. The best of these poems is “Interrupted Dream” (32), in which Wesley relies on her use of sensual imagery to depict rather than describe a scene and mood: “Look at the rain / Falling down . . . Blue Jays / With crusts are / Homeward bound” (ll. 5-9). The poem ends with the speaker’s dreams interrupted by a knock, but unlike some of the other texts this verse is left inconclusive and open to interpretation. Indeed, it is notable that the poems in *To My Someday Child* are most effective when Wesley curbs her impulse to explain and lets the imagery work on its own terms. Some of the most compelling poems focus on nature and bear little imprint of the persona’s tendency to draw a conclusion. “To the Dandelions” (17), “To the Wind” (23), and “The Sea at Night” (40) all dwell on the elemental forces of nature and therein capture and communicate the mood of the speaker in an evocative fashion. Wesley’s ability to capture, in turn, the

“Field of dandelions / Cropped with old age” (ll. 1-2), “the cold north wind / Blow in rebelliously / Through mounds of glistening snow” (ll. 1-3), and the sea waves pounding on the shore, “rocks — slippery, / Hanging with gellied / strings of dark / Brown seaweed” (ll. 11-14), all point to a descriptive ability that not only serves her poems well but also become one of her marked gifts as a prose writer when Wesley later writes her historical novels for young adults.

But ultimately *To My Someday Child* is an important Maritime text, not because it captures a young adult’s experiences of desire or affinity for nature, but because it was the first collection of poems by a Black Maritime author to move the experience of being Black explicitly into the foreground. Sixteen of the thirty-three poems in *To My Someday Child* protest social inequalities or advocate change. Of those sixteen poems, seven address general social or cultural issues, and nine directly explore the experiences of racialized individuals. Significantly, four of the poems opposing racism, “Shades of Black” (11-12), “For a Laugh” (14), “Brotherhood” (25), and “Tribute to Martin Luther King Jr.” (27), are framed within a context that explicitly references places, events, and people linked to the United States. That a Nova Scotian writer should explore Blackness by invoking a wider continental experience makes perfect sense given that the provincial context provided virtually no public articulation of what it meant to be Black in the Maritimes. By the time Wesley was in high school, her province, since the 1930s, had been fully committed to a cultural tourism project that elevated the white settler/folk, promoted antimodernism, resisted urban culture, and recreated Scottishness and Acadian cultures as the romanticized heart of the province to the exclusion of Indigenous and African Nova Scotian communities. The observation that Maritimers of African descent were not visible — indeed had been made invisible — is confirmed in Ian McKay and Robin Bates’s study of Nova Scotia’s public history, *In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*: “The construction of the Province of History was, in large measure, about the construction of the white races of Nova Scotia [viewed as] the properly historic peoples whose deeds moved history forward . . . and [were set in] implicit contrast to the non-historic, primitive peoples (Acadian, Mi’kmaq, Blacks) who are condemned to a perpetuity of pointless repetition” (378). In the opening essay of *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, Clarke recalls his child-

hood experience of cultural alienation when he became aware that in Nova Scotia his own community was never represented back to him:

Nothing in the province reflected me or mine save for the two dozen or so churches of the African United Baptist Association (AUBA). Official — tourist brochure — Nova Scotian culture consisted of kilted lasses doing Highland flings to ecstatic fiddle accompaniment, or of hardy stolid fishermen — or sailors — perishing amid the heaving Atlantic waves, or of “folkloric” Acadians pining for exiled “Evangeline” in their picturesque villages. (“Embarkation” 3)

In the midst of that carefully constructed silence, Wesley’s determination to speak about Black cultural experience necessitated engaging with representations that were visible across the wider culture, and in this sense being a Black writer in Yarmouth writing about Harlem was itself profoundly Maritime in character.

The four poems in *To My Someday Child* set in the United States explicitly reference American experience, but they echo the dynamics, if not the specific details, of Black life in Nova Scotia. The poems “Shades of Black” (11-12) and “Brotherhood” (25) sound similar notes about the Black experience in North America. Both poems note that contemporary disparities are rooted in the history of slavery. In “Brotherhood,” Wesley chronicles the hardships of slavery in the third stanza, noting that current inequalities are linked to earlier injustices: “Poor people, puppets, bodies without life. / Freedom at last, oh sweet, sweet liberty / But today, how much better off are we?” (ll. 16-18). In “Shades of Black,” this history is more detailed. Of the 150 lines in the poem, the first 67 lines, more than a third of the text, draw images from the past when “the black woman” was treated as an “instrument of / pleasure and the black man / as your unworthy animal” (ll. 34-37). Given that people of African heritage were enslaved in Canada from the earliest days of French and British colonization, that these practices intensified during the Loyalist migrations, and that slavery was banned only in 1834 by the British Parliament, Wesley’s imagery could be referencing as easily the Canadian context as the American context. Her reference to “one hundred years / of imaginary freedom” (ll. 66-67) seems to reference passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the American Constitution between 1865 and 1870, though the basic conditions of social degradation could apply to either historical context. “Shades of

Black” and “Brotherhood” extend their analyses of contemporary racism by criticizing economic disparities, in particular discrimination in the workforce and substandard housing conditions controlled by “blood-sucker” landlords, as well as the issue of segregation in social groups and churches. Both poems conclude with warnings that a solution needs to be found, or, as “Shades of Black” notes, “The whole structure will / Explode producing shades / Of deep depression.” (ll. 137-39). In the midst of Nova Scotia’s early days of desegregation, Wesley’s concerns are not just about the American context but also resonate with the Maritime experience.

As a writer who protests the social inequities generated by racism, Wesley argues that people must recognize that the process of racialization is ideological; they must resist the body of beliefs and assumptions that compel them to see others, and even themselves, as different. Wesley recognizes how Blackness is socially constructed, and she condemns that internalization of insecurity in the poem “Within One’s Self” (18):

Clouds of witchery  
 Hang high above  
 Your head, a gloomy  
 Wall of insulation blocks  
 You within yourself . . .  
 No Reasoning, no pleading  
 No respectability can  
 Show your finest colors.  
 They will remain black!  
 You will remain the  
 Villain. (ll. 16-28)

Wesley’s call for society not only to address economic disparities but also to change its ideological structures signals her interest in deep systemic reform. Although Henderson was able to tackle these issues only indirectly by employing a series of allusions, images, and symbols, Wesley brings the issues of racial justice directly to the table.

Of all the texts by Henderson and Wesley that I have examined here, if there is one poem that stands out as articulating a path forward, then it is the title poem, “To My Someday Child” (33). Dedicated to Wesley’s daughter, Teresa Marlene, born the year following Wesley’s completion of Teachers College (Interview), the poem is unique in its posi-

tive and pure celebration of Blackness. Although most of Henderson's and Wesley's work about Blackness speaks from a position of protest or advocacy, Wesley's poem to her daughter is simply a hymn to the child's beauty and the comfort to be found in their relationship:

My child —  
 How beautiful you are,  
 My black baby  
 With twinkling eyes,  
 And pudgy limb,  
 Cooing to the rhythm  
 Of a proud mother's heart. (ll. 1-7)

The child is described as “wee” (l. 8), “delicate” (l. 9), and “warm” (l. 10), and the maternal persona “rocks” (l. 15), “embraces” (l. 18), “kisses” (l. 19), and “whispers” (l. 24) to her “someday child” (l. 23) that she is loved. In collections that examine the oppressions under which Black Maritimers struggle, this simple love poem commemorates life's most primary experience. Wesley's reminder that “Mother loves you / Little one” (ll. 26-27) echoes with a wider conviction that all Black men and women are deeply loved, adored even, and of unquestionable value and importance. This poem, with its emphasis on hope, love, and connection, points to the path forward that would be explored by the wave of Africadian writers including George Boyd, George Elliott Clarke, Sylvia Hamilton, Charles Saunders, Maxine Tynes, David Woods, and Frederick Ward. All of these writers, who would publish actively in the 1980s and 1990s, respond to the racializing society by foregrounding the inherent value and worth of their being and identity as Black Maritimers. Wesley anticipates the conviction that blackness itself must be accepted, admired, defended, and celebrated. Most of the African Nova Scotian writers whose voices followed would not have read the collections published by Anna Minerva Henderson and Gloria Ann Wesley. The slim volumes of poetry considered here were published outside the mainstream and did not benefit from wide distribution. Nonetheless, as Paula Moya argues, “literature written by racial and cultural minorities can play a crucial role in the expansion of people's epistemic and emotional horizons” (58). Henderson's and Wesley's work raised some of the key concerns of racialized communities in the Maritimes, and their ultimately empowered and positive perspectives pointed, prophet-like, to

a future that other writers would inhabit and express. These two poets were the first to map out the paths that others would follow and extend.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the introduction to his 1991 anthology, *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, Clarke created the term “Africadian” (“a word ... minted from ‘Africa’ and ‘Acadia’”) to describe the distinct literature and culture created by Maritimers of African descent who have resided in the Maritimes since the earliest periods of settlement (9). He used the term “Africadian Renaissance” in his 1997 essay “The Birth and Rebirth of Africadian Literature” to denote the significant body of literature that emerged, starting in the late 1970s, from a host of Black Nova Scotian writers largely but not exclusively from central Nova Scotia. In his 2012 book, *No Directions Home: Approaches to African-Canadian Literature*, Clarke further clarified, partly in response to Paula Madden’s critique in her 2009 book *African Nova Scotian — Mi’kmaq Relations* that “the term itself derives from a Mi’kmaq suffix, *cadie*, which enacts recognition of Aboriginal primordiality, and also the truth of Black and Mi’kmaq metissage” (207). Wesley does not see herself reflected in Clarke’s term and prefers the term “African Nova Scotian,” but the signifier “Africadian” has gained wide scholarly use, and occasionally I will use it in this essay, particularly in reference to the literary productions of the late twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, a high school teacher and local historian in Saint John, recovered key details of Henderson’s life and background and provided copies of this information to Fernhill Cemetery, where Henderson’s remains rest.

<sup>3</sup> In his essay on Henderson, Clarke claims that, when Henderson self-published *Citadel*, one of her best poems, “Parliament Hill, Ottawa,” was missing from the collection, but in fact it is included in Part Two on page 21.

<sup>4</sup> “Parody” in this sense refers to Linda Hutcheon’s use of the term to refer to “repetition with critical difference” (6) as developed in *A Theory of Parody: The Teaching of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*.

<sup>5</sup> Information about these legislative reforms and bills can be found at [historyofrights.ca/archives/statutes-declarations/](http://historyofrights.ca/archives/statutes-declarations/) and at [humanrights.novascotia.ca/about/milestones-human-rights-nova-scotia](http://humanrights.novascotia.ca/about/milestones-human-rights-nova-scotia).

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