

**Reading the Body Racial in Black Canadian/Black Scottish Non-Fiction:
Dorothy Mills-Proctor and Jackie Kay.¹**

This paper offers a comparative assessment of two works of non-fiction and their various engagements with ontological and emotional dimensions of mixed-race subjectivities: the essay “Born Again Indian” (2010) by Canadian writer Dorothy Mills-Proctor will be contrasted with Scottish writer Jackie Kay’s autobiography *Red Dust Road* (2011). The two writers share a biracial background (Proctor black and Native; Kay black and white), as well as writing from the double displacement that comes from being women in a postcolonial context; therefore, both texts reveal similar representations of the function of the body as a signifier of race. The contingency inherent to racial attributions is exploited by these authors to create new readings of their racialised bodies and thus resist and redress colonial legacies of racism. Establishing a transatlantic dialogue between these authors and their coming to terms with (mixed-)race policies within the different spaces they write from will throw light on some of the tendencies and directions that black Canadian writings are currently taking.

Black Canadian literature is a complex cosmology. Charting its streets, turns and crossroads one must always be aware of bypasses, parallel dimensions, of every detail in the map, mindful that its elements extend and stretch beyond what lies in front of the eyes. Black Canada is contained in a large geography and covers a long history, and a great deal of attention is required to assess the trajectories and directions that its cultures and literatures are currently taking. This paper is an attempt to trace some of the lines of this overwhelming map by putting two autobiographical works in transatlantic conversation: the essay “Born Again Indian” (2010), by Canadian writer Dorothy Mills-Proctor, and *Red Dust Road* (2011), by Scottish author Jackie Kay. The purpose of this comparison is twofold. On the one hand, as both writers are of mixed-race descent, it will contribute to expand on narratives of mixed identities. African diaspora discourses tend to focus exclusively on blackness, and the nuances of biraciality are often neglected. For this reason, an approach to literature that deals closely with two ancestries is very important in the study of the African diaspora. On the other hand, bringing the Scottish and the Canadian contexts together under the same analysis will

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confer an international perspective on black Canadian literature. The points of contact (and the gaps) between these texts offer a prolific exploration of the multiple political, cultural, and personal strategies that these two black writers on both sides of the Atlantic adopt in non-fictional autobiographies. I will be paying especial attention to the role of the body as site for racial contestation. I argue that the construction of the body as a signifier of race is crucial in the articulation of mixed-race identities. The flexibility of racial ascription means that the subjects' own reading of their bodies is an essential tool in processes of resistance against and reconfiguration of colonial, racist legacies.

In his ground-breaking *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), Paul Gilroy proposes the Atlantic as a unit of analytical reference, as a geographical and cultural framework in which to place and study the African diaspora (1993, 15). This has become one of the most relevant texts in the field of diaspora studies, mainly owing to the de-centralization and plural relocation of the diasporic experience, which was often considered unidirectional. Moreover, it seeks to replace the essentializing notion of a collective diasporic identity with more productive multifocal dialectics of culture and politics within the intricate networks of the African diaspora. His work is valuable because it debunks the constraints of both ethnic essentialism and the indistinctness of an endless dispersion and individual or group disengagement. However, despite the influence and value of these critical courses, it is essential to remark that Canada is largely absent from the geo-political contexts that participate in the black Atlantic. As George Elliott Clarke has noted, “[t]o open Paul Gilroy’s signal work . . . is to confront, yet again, the blunt irrelevance of Canada to most gestures of diasporic inclusiveness. . . . Canada, as subject space, is patently absent. He never registers it as a site of New World African enslavement, immigration, emigration, anti-racist struggle, and cultural imagination” (2002, 8-9). The territory of Canada is not read as “black” in Gilroy’s imagination of the African diaspora², neither geographically, nor in historical, political or cultural terms. In displacing the United States as the main cultural stage towards which black identity gravitates, he opens the possibility to multiple routes of identification; he also closes the doors to acknowledging spaces of blackness beyond the 49th parallel. It has been the concern of various critics in the last decades, nationally and internationally, to reinstate black in the

² Interestingly, a similar lapse occurs with Scotland, whose “role tends to be diluted into the label ‘British’ in the bibliography of the Black Atlantic” (Rodríguez 2015, 115).

Canadian, and black Canada in the black Atlantic (George Elliott Clarke 2002, 2012; Wayde Compton 2010; Winfried Siemerling 2015; among others). By analysing the work of Mills-Proctor in juxtaposition to that of Kay, and as part of the unit called the African diaspora, one of the aims of this paper is to vindicate the legitimacy of Canada and Scotland as black spaces. Establishing connections between these writers within a pan-Atlantic system of cultural and historical referents is a fertile zone of comparison. One of the reasons for this is that Canada and Scotland share certain ambiguities regarding the constructions of their national consciousness.

Talking about Canada and Scotland has been a controversial point in criticism stemming from both contexts. For different reasons these countries have been referred to as “postcolonial,” and in each case, this label has been repeatedly rejected or challenged. This is because these societies do not seem to present the, for some, *sine qua non* conditions of oppression and discrimination in relation to an imperial power that can be encountered in the most paradigmatic postcolonial contexts. It is, for example, hard to apply notions of postcolonial abuse of power from England *against* the white settler population of Canada and its cultural and political development. A peculiar circle of authority and subordination is created within the British Empire, whereby England, Scotland and Canada participate in a hierarchy that results in ambiguous (post)colonial relationships. In Canada, a colonizer/colonized ambivalence stems in part from the interpretation of the settler collective in inferior or subaltern terms from the metropolis. The settler colonizer has been seen to enact certain aspects that pervade in colonized societies such as the use of mimicry to maintain a position of correlation to the imperial centre (Lawson 2004, 156). As Katie Pickles repeatedly argues in *Female Imperialism and National Identity*, institutional agents of imperialism “constructed a hegemonic Anglo-Canadian identity that was based upon mimicking Britain” (2002, 168-169). From their colonizer/colonized position, white settlers copied and reproduced cultural, political and historical narratives from the British center (in the case of Anglo-Celtic Canada) and presented them as authentic and hegemonic to themselves and to the colonized population. Also, Canada arguably occupies a colonized position in what can be called a neocolonial relationship with its powerful southern neighbour, the United States. Likewise, Scotland maintains a marginal position in relation to its own dominant, southern neighbour, England, both in political and cultural terms (Cowan 1999, 67). Historically, Highland cultural practices, the clan system and the Gaelic

language were suppressed for decades after the eighteenth-century Jacobite risings, a harsh period that culminated in the violent Highland Clearances. Celts were considered an inferior and barbaric race, a process of alienation that came from within Scotland itself too, from the Lowlands. The Anglicization of the Lowlands and the subsequent internal displacement of Celticity in cultural and racial terms adds to the ambivalence of Scottish identity. Interestingly, Berthold Schoene compares the paradoxical situation of the Lowlands with that of Canada:

. . . the Lowlanders' historical complicity in English imperialism, as well as their ensuing contemporary postcolonial predicament, conspicuously reflects that of the white settler colonies of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, who now likewise find themselves in a double-bind situation of being at once erstwhile coloniser and contemporary (post-) colonised. (1998, 59)

As will be later discussed, it is important to conceive Canada and Scotland as postcolonial, not only because this ambivalence emphasizes similarities between their socio-political structures, but also because this asymmetry in power and autonomy is replicated within each nation, with similar outcomes, in relations to ethnicities other than white. Bearing this ambivalence in mind adds a linking dimension between these contexts when the focus is placed on their societies' roles as dominant. It complicates the binary self/other when it comes to the negotiation of racial difference, as will be reflected in the analysis of the texts.

Canada is currently read, largely, as a multicultural nation that has been able to easily and civilly accommodate the multiple ethnic groups that conform its population. This general, broadly accepted conception, which is supported by the official policy of Multiculturalism adopted in 1988 with the passing of the Multiculturalism Act, obscures the historical implementation of racist practices. One of the most salient acts of ethnic marginalisation has been and is Canada's behaviour to its Indigenous populations. Even today, Indigenous peoples remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in Canadian society. They bear a legacy of territorial appropriation and subsequent confinement to reservations. Much emphasis has been made on the fact that historically, colonisation in Canada was less violent than in other parts of the Empire, as most of the taking of territories was effected through the signing of treaties. However, episodes like the rebellion of Louis Riel (see Shackleton 2007, 84); and accounts like Dorothy Mills Proctor's, among many others, attest to the assaults suffered by Native peoples.

Moreover, politics of assimilation were continually applied on Indigenous groups. These included residential schools where children were often brutally abused (Stanton 2011). In all, First Nations Peoples in Canada have been deprived of rights, their culture has often been neglected or erased, and their advancement in society has been severely hindered due to processes of racialisation and ethnic marginalisation. This is, however, not the only example of white dominance in a society that is now defined in terms of its acceptance of multiculturalism. In terms of immigration, policies were very restricted during the first three quarters of the twentieth century, excluding even white groups from Eastern Europe. Later, immigrant officers encouraged the arrival of “superior stock” migrants, that is, people from European ethnicities, while others were not considered desirable as potential Canadian citizens. These strict selective procedures, which limited the arrival of almost all non-European migrants, were occasionally disregarded in order to bring immigrants into the country as labour force, such as the hiring of West Indian blacks to work in Cape Breton mines during the First World War (Mensah 2002, 70). Later, with the labour force shortage prompted by the Second World War, measures were once again loosened in order to admit the much needed cheap labour (Elabor-Idemudia 2005, 64). Canada’s racist past is also reflected in the historical treatment of its black population. Whenever their presence was acknowledged at all, it was usually in the deployment of segregationist practices. Critics such as Rinaldo Walcott (2001), George Elliott Clarke (2002), or Wayde Compton (2010), among others, have emphasised the deeply damaging, systemic erasure of cultural, as well as physical manifestations of blackness in Canada. The contemporary construction of Canada as a signifier for tolerance, civility and the acceptance of plurality may be closely related to its above-mentioned position as (neo)colony of the United States. As scholars have argued, the emphasis on a prejudice-free society has been part, to a certain extent, of a political and cultural strategy to juxtapose Canada against the overt racism practiced in the US (see Pabst 2006, 119; McKittrick 2006; Bakan 2008).

A difference emerges here between Canada and Scotland in that the latter has not (or at least not very conspicuously) started to promote a political discourse in favour of multiculturalism and ethnic plurality. Historically, Scottish nationalism has been articulated around different narratives and myths, often driven by the necessity to ascertain a distinctive identity that would demarcate the nation within the overarching and absorbing category of British identity. Again, the postcolonial context plays an

important role in acts of racial marginalisation and the conception of hierarchies. In comparative terms, it is in Scotland that a process of double colonisation of racial minorities can be more clearly observed. Cairns Craig, describing the Scottish experience of discrimination, establishes a parallelism between a form of dialectal marginalization and marginalization based on skin colour: “It is not by our colour, of course, that we have stood to be recognised as incomplete within the British context, it is by the colour of our vowels” (quoted in Rodríguez 2005, 221). This margins-centre structure translates into a double discrimination of the ethnic minority subject in Scotland. As Carla Rodríguez points out, expanding on Craig’s ideas, “[t]he ‘colour of our vowels’ is just one more of the elements that contributes to the spiral of discrimination in which these subjects are involved, a discrimination that keeps them outside the national norm as well as outside the identity norm of ethnic minorities” (my translation from the original; 2005: 222). Blacks in Scotland, like other minorities, have to face invisibility within a discourse of national identity that is fundamentally white (and masculine); moreover, given Scotland’s own position outside the British canon, they encounter a second level of exclusion from the imagination of a collective British identity. Even today, when narratives of globalization pervade, “it remains to be ascertained as to where ethnic and racial minorities, sometimes dubbed the ‘new Scots’, might come to rest in debates about nationalist politics, identity and contemporary nationhood more broadly” (Meer 2015, 1480). It could be said that, in recent times, Canada presents a series of political schemes that are more clearly and more successfully oriented towards the integration of plurality. Meanwhile, Scotland has practiced a form of closed, exclusionist nationalism largely influenced by its concern with gaining autonomy from England. There have been, however, some recent approaches to acceptance (Meer 2015, 1485-1486), especially since devolution in 1997 (Macdonald 2010, 83). Still, while Multiculturalism policies should be directed towards the eradication of hierarchies between ethnic groups, it has been repeatedly pointed out that, in fact, these ideologies often place “white” as the norm, whereas non-white ethnicities must be accommodated around that centre (see Mensah 2002, 227; Ramraj 2003: 375).

Defining the backgrounds of Mills-Proctor’s and Kay’s autobiographies as postcolonial spaces dominated by a white majority is essential to approach readings of the racialised body. These should include readings from hegemonic narratives and those

coming from the subject's self-articulation. The alienation experienced by black people in colonial orders has been thoroughly described by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon's perspectives are relevant to the discussions undergone in this paper, as his work draws attention to the inscription of racial difference in the body and uncovers the psychological imprint of reading racial distinctiveness as inferior:

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. [...] A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world – such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world – definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world. (2008, 83)

Within the colonial context of racial subjugation that Fanon presents, awareness of corporeal difference read as an anomaly results in an inferiority complex and a subsequent negation of the body as the vessel of that differentiation. George Yancy explains that “whiteness deems itself un-raced and universal” (2016, 246). In contrast, the black body is marked, it stands out. The mark of difference is borne on the skin, hair, physical constitution. This distinctiveness of the body is inescapable inasmuch as it is visible. The autobiographical texts analysed in this paper reflect the central role that the body and its visible difference assumes in processes of identity construction. Reading race in their own terms, Kay and Mills-Proctor shift from the third-person perspective described by Fanon to a compelling, empowering first-person perspective. The authors constantly refer to and react against received notions of difference; they denounce and overstep the limits of alterity imposed from dominant hierarchies of race. “Born Again Indian” is a blunt and tough account of the at times traumatic journey the author undergoes when acknowledging her biraciality, a mixture of Native and black, within a discriminatory (post)colonial context. Born in a black community in Nova Scotia, Proctor narrates her coming to terms with the other half of her ancestry, which is seen in her family (and her community) as a shameful secret to be ignored or forgotten. People of Red and black ancestry often choose, Proctor explains, to self-identify as part white rather than part Native, because, as it was commonly said in her family, “[i]t's bad enough being black” (2010, 90). Jackie Kay's autobiography is, comparatively, more novelistic, in the sense that her narrative style contrasts with Mills-Proctor

essayistic text. Personal experience is narrated in an accessible story-like style, traumas and tense situations placated by the overall humorous tone of the text. Like her well-known poetry collection, *The Adoption Papers* (1994), *Red Dust Road* deals with the exploration of genealogy and origins. Kay, a black woman adopted by a white Scottish couple, becomes familiar with non-belonging from an early age, and describes her search for and her first encounters with her birth parents, a white Highlander woman and a black Nigerian man.

Through the autobiographical textualization of the body racial, Mills-Proctor and Kay give voice to the mixed-race female experience. Most importantly, they inhabit a space of hybridity and disrupt the seemingly fixed binary “black vs white” that sustains discourses and practices of discrimination. Their narratives problematise the opposition self/other that delimits agency, authority and belonging. Interestingly, Mills-Proctor and Kay introduce the same referent of identification at different points in their narratives: Mills-Proctor complains that “The only Indians I could relate to were in the movies, that is to say Hollywood Indians who were played by white or Mexican actors. As for the Mexican actors, they might have been Red/Black also” (67). At the beginning of her memoir, Kay recounts an episode from her childhood that echoes Mills-Proctor’s thoughts: “I am seven years old. My mum, my brother and I have just watched a cowboy and Indian film. I’m sad because the Indians have lost again, and I wanted them to win. It suddenly occurs to me that the Indians are the same colour as me and my mum is not the same colour as me” (12). These passages draw attention to the authors’ self-consciousness in their respective backgrounds: Mills-Proctor’s Native features are conspicuous within her black community, and likewise, Kay’s black features stand out within her white family. However, this allusion also demonstrates the contingency of racial ascription and appropriation. In the case of Mills-Proctor’s story, the Indians she sees on TV are played by white, Mexican, or even part Indian and part black actors. In the Hollywood film industry, these ethnicities are interpreted as Indian. Labelling those actors as “Indians,” when in fact they may be not, shows the malleability of racial discourses. This ambiguity works for Kay in the form of opposition. Being black, she sees the need to relate to the image of the Indian as a child. The body of the Indian is articulated as different from white, just as the black body is read as opposed to the white body. In different ways, then, the Hollywood Indian works for both of them as an available cultural referent with which they identify because their appearance marks

them as different from those around them in their social contexts, but as equal to the racially ambiguous Indian. This episode also emphasises the racialisation of the body as an ambiguous, flexible social construction.

In Stuart Hall's terms, the body is not merely an indicator of race but a *signifier* of race. "The body," Hall discusses, "is constructed by, shaped and reshaped by the intersection of a series of disciplinary discursive practices" (1996, 11). In this sense, the body is not only a physically neutral canvas; it is a space where discourse and ideology are inscribed and made visible. This inflection works on a political level in terms of inclusion and exclusion. It creates an illusion of sameness and neutrality in hegemonic collectives that are read as unmarked, while bodies read as different are placed outside that collective identity. In the body, racial identity is constructed in terms of inferiority and exclusion within discourses of dominance and oppression. Visible physical differences are not just markers of race, but, most importantly they convey a meaning, they function as signifiers of race. Critics such as Kwame Appiah or Joseph Mensah have pointed out that, as demonstrated by modern genetics, "'race' has a limited scientific value in classifying people into population groups" since "the differences *between* the 'races' are far smaller than those *within* them" (Mensah 2002, 12). Race is now regarded a social construction, rather than a biological truth, as Appiah indicates. Despite this, "ethnoracial categories continue to be politically significant, and racial identities still shape many people's political affiliations" (Appiah 2015, 7). Therefore, while the constraints of biological determinism might have been (at least in theory) eliminated, the body as signifier keeps defining the subject as "racial." This premise ultimately highlights the fact that racial categories are fundamentally social constructs. As George Yancy puts it, "the body's meaning – whether phenotypically white or black – its ontology, its modalities of aesthetic performance, its comportment, its 'raciated' reproduction, is in constant contestation" (2005, 216). The messages inscribed in the body are contingent on perspective, historical and geographical context and political positioning. From this it can be concluded that race, as collectively constructed meaning, is not fixed, and in its malleability it may transformed or deconstructed. Therefore, while it permits the ascription of meaning from dominant societies to perceived minorities, this ambivalence may also be used by displaced collectives to reconstruct their identity in more productive ways. As is the case of Mills-Proctor and

Kay, mixed-race subjects problematise and negotiate racial exclusions that come from this hierarchy.

The contestations and challenges over the body as a signifier of race which Yancy alludes to adopt an even more complex dimension in the ambivalence of the mixed-race body. Yancy seems to imagine “white” (oppressor and perpetrator) and “black” (victim and subjacent) exist as categories which are drastically disconnected and hermetically sealed from each other. Studies in biraciality demonstrate that races, precisely owing to the imagined and constructed bases of the concept of racial identity, are not detached and unalterable units of meaning. The semiotics of opposition that separate black from white are altered when the mixed-race body is considered. A critic dealing with the constructed nature of race and who specifically applies it to mix-race politics is Canadian scholar and artist Wayde Compton. In his *After Canaan* (2010), he partially focuses on the interpretations that racially ambivalent groups are at times subjected to. He particularly discusses the terminology that is used to refer to black bodies when they do not perform as expected in white-dominated contexts. He denounces that the expression “passing for,” commonly alluding to a person’s physical appearance that is problematic to classify (according, at least, to Western standards), incurs in the misconception of placing the interpreted body in a position of full agency. As Compton explains, using this expression implies “that racial misperception is always the fault of the object” which makes “the *viewed* responsible for what the *viewer* sees” (2010, 23). In this sense, to attribute agency to the object of racial misinterpretation helps to reinforce “prejudices already in play against mixed-race people, who are often seen as inherently destabilizing, ambivalent, or disloyal by definition” (Compton, 23). It is for these reasons that he proposes the use of “pheneticizing” instead of the idiom “passing for.” As such, “passing for” should be employed when an individual consciously decides to be “deliberately deceptive or subversive and intentionally adopts another ancestry” (24). This distinction points to the fundamental difference between, on the one hand, processes of racial assignation and, on the other, processes of racial self-definition. Mills-Proctor’s and Kay’s texts contain examples of lived experiences in which the distinction between “passing” and “pheneticizing” is put into practice on different levels. The writers’ awareness of the interstices and points of contact between corporeality and race, and their strategies to negotiate hybridity, which may include that

of “passing,” need to be qualified and put into dialogue with broader national (non)identifications.

In her autobiographical essay, Mills-Proctor narrates her body as the manifestation of her hitherto secluded Native identity. The physical presence of her genetically marked Indigenous inheritance chases her and transpires through her blackness even at times when she is determined to ignore and reject this ancestry. This internalized rejection, this broken identification, is the result, she argues, of colonial practices and impositions in Canada. “Born Again Indian” straightforwardly denounces that Canadian society, institutions and policies operate on a hierarchy of race in which “white” is indisputably at the top. In spite of the undeniable achievements of Multiculturalism in recent times, there is a history of oppression that this essay seeks to expose and portray from a first-person perspective. The text highlights as well the psychological consequences that living under such a disposition has on non-white citizens. The erasure of the body racial that Fanon condemns, and which results from processes of alterisation within white supremacies, can be observed in Mills-Proctor’s denial to identify as Native. Like blacks, Native peoples have been historically discriminated and have been located outside Canadian society, both in physical and discursive terms. The reticence that black people have shown to acknowledge their Native ancestry comes from inherited notions of racism, from a “deep-seated shame shaped by many of the white settlers (colonists)” (2010, 45), who often favoured blacks over Indigenous peoples. Thus, Nova Scotia emerges as a space where colonisation has deeply affected inter-racial relations. Mills-Proctor explains: “In Nova Scotia, as in most territories, your racial identity depended upon what side of the blanket you fell. In other words, if you looked more Aboriginal than Black, even while living in the black community” (2010, 47); which again indicates how complexion pervades over cultural or even familial elements in determining race. Immersed in this structure of segregation and racial antagonism, the protagonist initially distances herself from the Native community and rejects the identity connotations, individual and collective, that openly belonging to that group would have. However, her appearance links her inescapably to the Aboriginal peoples of Nova Scotia. She describes herself as follows: “I am a light-skinned Black Indian woman, and, as a child, I had long black hair” (2010, 55). These features prompted questioning throughout her life: “I was being asked by Cree people, what my band, clan and tribe was? I was asked by Blood, Blackfoot and Piegan what

reservation did I come from?” She repeatedly reacts to people who accurately read her as part Native by denying her alignment with these groups; and she explicitly mentions her consistent awareness of her body as “betrayed” of this ancestry: “The hair I thought, ‘it must be the hair’” (64).

Mills-Proctor’s mixed ancestry locates her as part of two races, black and Native, but her body is an example of the malleability of racial categories. As is the case with many mixed-race people (Kay’s narration also illustrates this phenomenon) the individual usually identifies more strongly with only one side of their ancestry. The reasons for these racial allegiances may vary. In the case of people of white and black descent, this identification may be less a matter of personal choice than of “a historical policy of segregation that defined as black those who had *any* degree of known African ancestry” (Compton 2010, 20). Whatever the reasons, the fact is that “mixed-race” is rarely embraced as a label of identification. For Mills-Proctor, identifying with her black roots means choosing the lesser of two evils in the face of a highly discriminating white hegemony. Even from the outside, she is read as either one or the other. As she writes: “In my childhood, I was called nigger and squaw by white people and it didn’t lessen the hurt to be identified with either black or Indian in such a hateful way” (55). In her narrative, however, she includes an escape from imposed fixed categories, a way out from the either/or and the celebratory adoption of a hybrid identity. As a signifier of race, the body may function as an inescapable frame; but because the signified is flexible and ambiguous, it also provides the possibility of choice, which Mills-Proctor occasionally exploits. While her anatomy evidences her biraciality, she tells how “having a light complexion helped me to move more freely among whites, therefore making my life more tolerable” (62). As a victim of racial marginalization and abuse, she strategically seeks to align with the white oppressor, very much in line with Fanon’s words “*turn white or disappear*” (emphasis in the original; 2008, 75). This is clearly an act of what Compton defines as passing: her consciously adopting a racial identity to which she is not connected. This shift in identification comes to demonstrate that the boundaries of race may become blurred in the body, and the need to re-articulate racial meaning in the face of marginalisation. Even more telling than this act of passing is the eventual acceptance of the author’s Native ancestry. Although she admits to having a crippling “fear of being exposed” as a Native (65), she gradually and arduously starts to welcome that other part of her ancestry that Canada’s postcolonial regime had buried.

This acknowledgement implies the possibility of subverting received meanings and readings of alterity and denigration. The text underscores that racial meaning is not fixed nor definitive and can be redressed and (re)appropriated. Her essay is aptly entitled “A Story of Self-Discovery of a Red-Black Woman and Her People:” she uses this writing to unfold her process of appropriation and reversal of the narratives that define her body, to discover a new self.

Kay’s memoir is another example of the flexibility and the multiple possibilities that race identification may offer. As has been previously outlined, it is essential to bear in mind that Scotland remains, even today, a resistant society to the acknowledgement of non-white Scottish forms of identity, to the extent that, as Carla Rodríguez illustrates, “many Scottish writers who did not fit canonical standards chose to establish a diaspora in other places where difference was better integrated than in Scotland” (my translation from the original; 2007, 172). This mindset contrasts with Canada, where multiculturalism is, at least on the surface, embraced and promoted. The very circumstances of Kay’s adoption are closely related to Scottish ideologies of conservatism during the 1960s: it would have been hard for her birth mother to raise a black child in a narrow-minded Highland town (her relationship with a black man being illicit in the first place). Moreover, it was the colour of her skin that facilitated her adoption, as not many families wanted a black child. Also, her adoptive parents had difficulties adopting because, as Communist activists, they did not conform to the standards of a desirable family either. It is into such background that Kay inscribes her experiences as an adopted child and the conflicts that emerge from her racial distinctiveness. Her phenotypical features function as a space of discontinuity in what could otherwise have been an unproblematic identification with her adoptive white family. Due to this over-visibility she describes, like Mills-Proctor, how she was often subjected to processes of interrogation that emphasized her non-belonging, an interrogation that she unintentionally replicates in her mind:

Every time somebody in your own country asks you where you are from; every time you indignantly reply “I’m from here,” you are subconsciously caught up in asking that question again and again of yourself, particularly when you are a child. Children have an intense need to belong and anything that marks them out as different from all the other children will then form a straggly queue of uneasy, queasy questions in their head. (2011: 38)

Red Dust Road narrates her coming to terms with these anxieties, part of which resides in answering those questions by looking for her biological parents.

For Kay, biological determinism plays a dual role; it is a source of contradiction. On the one hand, her work at large transmits a reaction against the notion “that the differences between peoples in language, moral affections, aesthetic attitudes or political ideology – those differences that most deeply affect us in our dealings with each other” (35) are biologically defined. She rejects the idea that her behaviour, her everyday performance, her culture, are conditioned by any genetic material she may carry. Like it did for Mills-Proctor, her body works as signifier for certain (often alienating) political and cultural readings. An example of the assumptions of how a black body should or should not be/act can be found in an episode when her family (including her also black brother) take a trip to the island of Mull during Kay’s childhood. The story is told from her mother’s point of view: “the local people gathered around you and your brother; they had obviously never seen anyone that looked like you, there was no harm in it, and they came up to me and said, Do they have the English? And I thought, Bloody cheek, most of you don’t have the English because a lot of them still only spoke Gaelic then” (114)³. Or again when, in Stirling a woman asks ““Are you from over America, dear?”” Kay reflects on how the woman fails to see beyond her skin colour: “She can’t hear my obviously Scottish accent because she can only see my face. If you have skin my colour, you must be a foreigner” (192). Outside of the normative national identity, black cannot be associated with Scottish. Even when Kay conveys one of the most straightforward manifestations of being Scottish, her body is seen as a more powerful signifier that denies her Scottishness.

On the other hand, while she rejects the idea that identity is subordinated to nature, Kay still feels the need to meet her birth parents, to trace her biological origins. This contradiction is best illustrated by a poem in *The Adoption Papers*, in Chapter 8 “Generations:”

I have my parents who are not of the same tree

and you keep trying to make it matter,

³ This ironic statement comes to illustrate the aforementioned ambivalent position that Scotland occupies within Britain. They ask about the black children speaking English as a sign of “civilization,” while, judging by those same standards, Highland people would find themselves at the margins of “civilized Britain,” since most people did not speak English at the time.

the blood, the tie, the passing down
generations.
We all have our contradictions,
the ones with the mother's nose and father's eyes
have them;
the blood does not bind confusion,
yet I confess to my contradiction
I want to know my blood. (1994, 29)

Here, the persona, presumably Kay herself, debates the impulses she has as an adopted person to find her birth parents, despite denying at times that this will reveal any significant discovery: "If we think ourselves as puzzles, and our birth parents are part of that puzzle, do we think that finding our parents will answer the puzzle? Surely we are not so naïve?" (Kay 2011, 47). In *Red Dust Road*, Kay "attempts to negotiate and synthesise her dual heritage" (Tournay-Theodotou 2014, 15). It is indeed the story of her journey to locating her biological origins, and, like for Mills-Proctor, this process is an attempt to re-construct her identity on her own terms.

So far I have outlined the dilemmas and the particular struggles faced by these writers whose visibly mixed-race origins place them in a physical and/or psychological alienated position within white-dominated contexts. In their stories, and their journeys of self-discovery/recovery, both writers embody the strife "for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body, and spirit" (1989, 49) which bell hooks encourages among black women writers in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Mills-Proctor's self-discovery implies re-reading her own body in order to accept her Indigenous heritage, to come out of the "race closet" as she puts it (64). She needs to inscribe her own new meanings into her body and to reverse received interpretations of shame and inferiority. One of the ways in which she creates a challenging discourse to colonial notions of biraciality is by accessing what she calls "Blood Memory." It is an epistemology that does not conform to Western paradigms and is disconnected from biological determinism. "The phenomenon of Blood Memory," Proctor writes, cannot be studied, pulled apart, dissected or measured as is the custom of Anglo European

investigators. Blood Memory is in the spiritual core of our very being. . . . Blood Memory is how the ancestors communicate knowledge to the seekers of truth” (74, 75). This experience is very significant because it is a form of epistemology that emerges from Aboriginal culture and practices. It connects all Native peoples (past and present) in one collective consciousness. It takes the form of visions, which for her were recollections of memories buried in her unconscious, of time spent with her full-blooded Native aunt, a Mi’kmaq woman. Another event that brings her closer to her Native ancestry was receiving an Eagle Feather from two Cree elders, which is part of an honoured Indigenous tradition of gratitude and recognition. She declares this was an epiphanic moment: “That experience was my anointing and that’s when I became a Born-Again Indian” (86). This is also the ritual that triggers her search for knowledge: she devotes great part of her essay to the analysis of black and Indian relationships, particularly in Nova Scotia, but in other parts of Canada and the US as well. Mills-Proctor’s narratives of inclusion and acceptance restore her agency over her corporeality, hitherto misconstrued or misread, and she significantly describes means of racial (re)connection and identification that are independent from white ontologies. Furthermore, this re-construction extends from her own body to the body of the Canadian nation, thereby interweaving personal with political readings. She deems it essential that “Canadians [...] know our own history and exorcise the evil that lives in this country” (128). Proctor’s text functions, therefore, as a reversal of a racist national discourse, which is to be achieved through awareness of abuse and condemnation of downgrading readings of the body racial.

Kay’s story is, too, a quest for knowledge and, as it has been pointed out, it is a contradictory process, for she often questions the very necessity or relevance of knowing her birth family. At school, she receives limited, biased information about Africa. She learns that “African people lived in mud huts in appalling poverty, wore grass skirts and tribal make-up, had strange cuts in their faces to indicate their tribes, were primitive, unsophisticated” (39). According to European institutions and understandings, “African people were more like stories and myths than rational, logical human beings” (39). Besides, in her journey, expectation and reality clash. Her father’s reaction, for instance, is a deeply unsettling one: “I realize with a fresh horror that Jonathan is seeing me as the sin, me as impure, me the bastard, illegitimate. I am sitting here, evidence of his sinful past, but I am the sinner, the live embodiment of his sin” (6),

and he refuses to introduce her to his family (her half brothers and sister). Despite her disappointments, Kay decides to travel to her father's ancestral village to Ukpok, travelling by car rather than by plane. It is a transcendental journey by road which echoes the title of the memoir. Contradiction ensues once more in this episode as moments of identification are followed by moments of alienation. At some point she sees a resemblance between people's features and her own: "As we go further and further east, I notice the shapes of people's faces change to mirror the shape of my own" (210). But it is precisely in the village of Ukpok where she is faced with the other side of her corporeal duality:

I spent some of my childhood wishing I was white like the other kids and feeling like I stuck out in Scotland like a sore thumb; and now, in Nigeria I'm wishing I was black, and feeling like I stick out like a sore thumb. It's the first time in my life that I've properly understood what it means being mixed race. It's not a term I've ever embraced, and I've always felt more black than white; but now here suddenly in Nigeria, people are following me around Ukpok market and touching my skin and saying *Oyibo* and *Onye Ocha!* [meaning "white person"] I realize I want to be accepted. I want other Nigerians to see in my face that my father is an Igbo. (216)

Faced with this predicament, with more unwanted ambiguous readings of her body, it seems Kay gravitates towards an identity that combines both her Scottish and her African heritages, even establishing connections and parallels between them when she declares that "I want to talk to old Igbo people about their customs and beliefs and how they've changed over their lifetime; and then to do the same in the Scottish Highlands and Islands. It interests me that my father is from a village in eastern Nigeria and my mother from a small town in the eastern Highlands of Scotland" (217). Later, when she gets to meet her half-brother (her father's son) in a final scene of fraternal union that somehow compensates for the sour encounters with her father, she says that "My world feels like it has expanded accordion-fashion and music is coming out blaring through the stadium speakers, a high-life mixture of Celtic and African music" (275). Up until this point, it could be said that Kay, to a great extent drawn by social impositions and pressures, had identified mostly with her black ancestry. After this episode, however, she creates a more complex reading of her mixed-race self than the one ascribed to her body. In Tournay-Theodotou's words, Kay "moves from a mythical

connection to Africa and other metaphorical models of blackness to an integrated, multivalent subjectivity embracing both her Scottish and her African heritage” (2014, 19). The encounter in her father’s village, and her new relationship with her brother, open up new paths to embody and enact a hybrid identity.

George Elliott Clarke writes that “African-heritage peoples and the First Nations are intertwined prodigiously in Nova Scotia, even if both entities are ignorant of this reality (and history), and they have much in common, beginning with DNA and extending to cultural assertion” (2011, 401). Mills-Proctor’s essay works to expose a meaningful and harsh personal experience that reverberates on the foundations of not only Nova Scotian, but Canadian collective history. It visibilises and explores connections that have been buried by oppression and marginalization under a mask of tolerance. She subverts received meanings of race, re-inscribes definitions of non-white bodies as alien, inferior and even non-existent, and she does so by adopting traditions and systems of belief that depart from Western doctrines and criteria to claim the right to an autonomously constructed identity. The trans-oceanic dialogue between Mills-Proctor and Kay that is hereby established serves to set some basis for the study of biraciality and its representation. Despite showing obvious particularities and differences on various levels, these autobiographies are both politically charged personal accounts (Rodríguez 2005, 192-193). Canada and Scotland are located in the periphery of the African diaspora, geographically and narratively. These texts function to reverse the invisibility of blackness, confronting the impossibility of being black and Canadian/Scottish both within hegemonic national identities and within canonical discourses of the African diaspora. Furthermore, their experiences need to be read in the postcolonial framework that is often denied to these spaces. The interactions between the body and its position in society described in these works demonstrate that it is essential to delimit local/national context in political terms. In this sense, the impact of colonisation in Canada and Scotland has resulted in complex discriminatory practices and a position of double colonisation for non-white groups. These contexts reinforce and complement each other because they are white-dominated societies in which ethnic minorities struggle to belong. Reading these spaces as postcolonial is one step to reversing asymmetries of power and authority that result in exclusionist notions of national identity. Linda Peake and Brian Ray assert that “[a]t the heart of African-Canadian political struggles and challenges to liberal conceptions of rights and justice is

a desire to represent their experiences in ways that place them as producers of signification and not just signifiers” (2001, 184). The comparison between these two texts underscores this idea: both protagonists choose to finally inhabit liminality, to construct their own particular readings of race in their bodies and openly integrate their mixed-race origins. Theirs is a process of becoming that defeats fixed categories. While their strategies of identifications and journeys of self-discovery are different, they use their writing as a much needed resistance to readings of race that threaten to erase their presence (be it as a Red/black woman in Canada or as a black/white Scottish woman). Bell hooks maintains that “[s]peaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless – our beings defined and interpreted by others” (1989, 12). Mills-Proctor’s and Kay’s writings are the necessary re-readings of misinterpreted bodies.

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