

Anna Minerva Henderson

An Afro-New Brunswick Response to Canadian (Modernist) Poetry

FOR ANNA MINERVA HENDERSON (1887-1987)¹

A native of Saint John, New Brunswick, Anna Minerva Henderson worked in Ottawa for many years as a civil servant, but took time to publish her poetry in *Canadian Poetry Magazine* in 1937 and 1939 as well as in an anthology, *Harvesting: Contemporary Canadian Poetry, 1918-1938* (1938), edited by Ethel Hume Bennett. At age 80, in celebration, perhaps, of the Canadian Centennial year as well as of her own fine age, she published her chapbook, *Citadel* (1967),² which thus became the first collection of poems by an African-Canadian woman. Even so, in her poetry, Henderson strikes a “raceless”—almost bloodless—stance, addressing her auditors as just another British-descended, Anglophile, Loyalist New Brunswicker; that is to say, she writes like an *assimilada*. Henderson’s poetry avoids, save for two surreptitious moments, any statement of racial surveillance, and her verse is centred on the presumably white Anglo “Home” of New Brunswick and her fidelity to the white-run British Empire and its “daughter,” the equally Caucasian-dominated Dominion of Canada. However, identity is always complicatedly complex: Henderson may participate, at a remove, in the often “colourless” African-American women’s writing of the Harlem Renaissance, not to mention the *race-evasive* poetry of English Canadian verse. Nevertheless, read closely, Henderson may be “blacker” than she first appears.

Is She or Isn’t She?

Born in 1887, Anna Minerva Henderson, a literate black woman in Saint John, New Brunswick, lived in a milieu where ideas from the trans-Atlantic

African Diaspora washed ashore, delivered by itinerant preachers and politicized sailors. Perhaps, then, she perused copies of the once-Saint John-based, African-Canadian lawyer Abraham Beverley Walker's eleven-month-lived, five-issue journal, *Neith*, or a copy of his 1890 speech, *The Negro Problem; or, the Philosophy of Race Development from a Canadian Viewpoint*. In this address, Walker (1851-1909) urged all Negroes to make "periodical visits to Great Britain and Ireland," the centres of civilization, where there was no racial prejudice, and he felt that all should emulate the virtues of English gentlemen, who are "a chosen people who cling to [God's] right hand" (Winks 398). But if Henderson did read Walker, it was not for his Pan-Africanism, but for his Anglo-Saxonism.

One can only guess about Henderson's familiarity with African-American women poets like Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1753-84) and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911), or, for that matter, the most famous African-American poet of her time, Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), revered for his Negro dialect verses about plantation life.³ His *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1898) and *Lyrics of the Hearthside* (1899) would have turned up in even Saint John homes, for, a century ago, as one scholar declares, Dunbar was "the most popular poet—black or white—in the United States" (Bruce 57). African-Canadian readers in New Brunswick would surely have possessed copies of Dunbar's works, as would those European-Canadian readers fascinated by his half-comic, half-sentimental depictions of "Dixie." But whatever her acquaintance with African-American poets, Henderson must have known Anglo-Canadian ones, especially such revered voices as Charles G.D. Roberts (1860-1944) and Bliss Carman (1861-1929).

Thanks to the labours of African-Canadian scholar Adrienne Shadd,⁴ we know that Henderson obtained a teacher's certificate, taught school in Nova Scotia, and then, in 1912, at age 25, was hired into the federal civil service after writing an entrance test and earning the third highest grade in the Dominion (3). Henderson started out as a stenographer in the Dominion Lands Branch of the Department of the Interior, but, by 1938, was working as "the principal clerk in the Immigration Branch, Department of Mines and Resources" (Shadd 3). While in Ottawa, she wrote a column for the *Ottawa Citizen* titled "The Colyum" or "Just Among Ourselves" (Shadd 3). By the time she was 50, Henderson was actively publishing her verse in little magazines. The bio note attending her publication of her sonnet, "Parliament Hill, Ottawa," in *Canadian Poetry Magazine* (edited by E.J. Pratt) in 1937, allows only that she is unmarried ("Miss") and "a civil servant of Ottawa"

(“News” 63). A year later, when this poem is reprinted in *New Harvesting: Contemporary Canadian Poetry, 1918-1938*, edited by Ethel Hume Bennett, the “Biographical Notes” remain laconic: “Anna M. Henderson, of Ottawa, has published verse in periodicals and magazines” (194). (An enterprising scholar will have to scour all of English-Canada’s century-ago little magazines to find Henderson’s poems.) When Henderson self-publishes *Citadel*, a slim booklet of 31 pages, in Fredericton in 1967, at age 80, she does not offer us either a “collected” or a “selected” poems. Indeed, one of her best poems, “Parliament Hill, Ottawa,” is missing from the collection. The latest dated poem in the book is from the winter of 1965 (30) and the earliest refers to 18 May, 1947 (9). Yet, some of the poems appeared before 1947. This fact indicates that *Citadel* is a crafted chapbook focused on Saint John’s cityscape and history, the British connection, faith, and the strife between artist and critic: it is neither a hodge-podge of musings nor a select batch of the author’s “best.”

Before I examine *Citadel*, however, “Parliament Hill, Ottawa,” in its 1937 appearance, demands attention as an example of Henderson’s general approach to poetry. A Shakespearean sonnet, its Ottawa setting and its form cannot help but recall Archibald Lampman (1861-99), the first major European poet of the capital. Irrefutable resemblances couple Henderson’s sonnet to Lampman’s Petrarchan version, “In the City” (1900). Henderson is more descriptive than is Lampman—perhaps a result of the Modernist influence on her Victorianism—but both give us the vision of a voyeur watching a city’s features alter within the flaming pall of dusk. The most striking similarity between the two poems is their unfolding Transcendentalist philosophy. Lampman’s sonnet is a mass of abstractions, especially in the second quatrain’s enumeration of the qualities of the city: “The mysteries and the memories of its years, / Its victors and fair women, all the life, / The joy, the power, the passion, and the strife, / Its sighs of hand-locked lovers, and its tears” (375). In contrast, Walker delivers what Lampman delivers in his better poems, I mean, vibrant details: “the young moon swings, a slender, golden arc / Above the town; and yellow street lamps glow / Like crocuses against the purple dark” (51). In such lines, Henderson demonstrates her mastery of Lampman *and* her apparent mastery of the tenets of imagism.⁵ Unfortunately, her whole sonnet is not as vivid as these lines (though the description of the sun as “a departing conqueror” is notable), but where she displaces Lampman with images worthy of Amy Lowell (1874-1925), or Isabella Valancy Crawford (1850-87), or her contemporary,

Marjorie Pickthall (1883-1922), she achieves writing of power. (In its appearance in *Contemporary Canadian Poetry*, "Parliament Hill, Ottawa," attracts an accompanying drawing by J. M. Donald.)

Of course, in Henderson as in Lampman, *race* is an evacuated subject, one present only in its absence.⁶ But Henderson cannot be read as straightforwardly as Lampman here. According to Maureen Honey, editor of *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (1989), "Poetry was the preferred form of most Afro-American women writers during the 1920s" (1), the period of the African-American arts revival, centred in New York City, and often titled the Harlem Renaissance. Still, these women writers seemed to conform to a "genteel school of "raceless" literature, having largely confined themselves to the realm of private experience and the natural world. Known primarily for their lyrical, pastoral verse, [they] have been judged as imitating European traditions" (2).⁷ Clearly, Henderson may be claimed for this camp. Shadd explains that, by "Adopting a 'raceless, genderless' public discourse, Henderson was merely playing by the standard rhetorical rules deemed appropriate to the creation of great art" (16). However, in defence of these writers and their aesthetic, Honey observes, their "poetry uses the landscape of nature and romantic love to affirm the humanity of women rendered invisible by the dominant culture" (3) and their use of classical poetic forms such as "the sonnet, the ode, the elegy" (6) reflected their sense that such modes were "politically neutral vehicles through which Black culture could be made visible" (7). Honey points out further that Harlem Renaissance generation writers "saw no contradiction between social activism and the production of nonracial literature because the two were fused in their minds: artistic achievement moved the race upward" (5).⁸

One may speculate that Henderson felt delicious *frissons* in seeing her poems—those of a New Brunswick "Negress" (the term some would have used to describe her)—appearing in a magazine edited by E.J. Pratt, along with an essay by Lorne Pierce, the literary editor of Toronto's Ryerson Press, and poems by Arthur Stringer, and the then-young Ralph Gustafson ("Contents" [3]).⁹ One may imagine she enjoyed some small thrill of vengeful subversion by appearing in a major Canadian anthology alongside luminaries like Charles Bruce, Robert Finch, Dorothy Livesay, Pratt, Sir Charles G.D. Roberts, Duncan Campbell Scott, F.R. Scott, and A.J.M. Smith, all the makers of a modern English-Canadian verse tradition ("Contents" 1938 [xiii-xvii]). Here was one are(n)a where Henderson could seize a veiled equality. Remember the African-American radical intellectual W.E.B. Du

Bois's own exaltation in the democratic essence of literature: "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm-in-arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls" (139).

If Honey's perception is right, that African-American women poets of the 1920s signaled their concerns regarding race and racism obliquely, chose deliberately to use the standard forms of the British canon to demonstrate their intellectual equality to whites, and wrote lyric poetry "because it transported both poet and reader to a place where women could feel safe, unbound, and powerful" (14), there is every reason to suspect that Henderson penned her verses in a similar mode for similar reasons. Honey agrees with scholar Michael Cooke that "self-veiling [was] a major stage in the development of Afro-American literature, one that occurred in the early part of the century and extended through the 1920s" (17). In her poetry, too, the reclusive Henderson, so sparing in her issuance of autobiographical details, and almost never hinting at *race*, is also "self-veiling." Shadd believes Henderson typified "The 'I am Black but we will pretend I am not and that I am like everybody else in every way' approach . . . a typically Black Canadian coping mechanism" (19). But the poetry itself, as Shadd agrees, sings a different song. Indeed, Henderson's "racelessness" may represent black deception of the clearest sort. *Citadel*, Henderson's slim booklet of 22 poems, uncovers her strategy of invisible visibility.

In "Market Slip," a poem consisting of two Shakespearean sonnets, each subtitled with the date of 18 May, but indicating 1783 and 1947 respectively, the poet celebrates the landing, at Saint John, New Brunswick, of British American Loyalists fleeing the just-established Great Republic. Neither sonnet refers to *race*; it is possible to treat the whole poem as a simple anthem. The sonnet titled "May 18, 1783," praises those who, "Voyaging . . . came at last to land / Here in this sheltered inlet of the bay, / Curved like the hollow of a mighty hand." (9). The speaker, standing on a pier near the Saint John City Market, marvels at the site of the historic landfall, off the Bay of Fundy, in a "hollow" prepared, apparently, by divinity. But one line troubles this easy reading of the sonnet. Henderson describes the archetypal, pilgrim Loyalist as possessing "The cherished dream of freedom as his goal," and the immediate sense here is that the speaker values British constitutional monarchy over rude Yankee Republicanism. But such a reading, while valid for a patriotic ode, relies too much on an elaborate, poli-sci distinction between the virtues of King and Country and those of "We the People."

Henderson's line makes better sense if it is understood as referring to Black Loyalists, who truly were, in abandoning the still-slaveholding United States, electing to enjoy physical liberty within a hierarchically organized monarchy over experiencing continued enslavement within a violent, white supremacist democracy. Indeed, the British promise of land and liberty for African Americans who rallied to its flag did not have to be extended to the Crown's white supporters. They knew that, win or lose, they would keep their slaves (euphemistically termed "servants") and gain prime land tracts, wherever the British flag continued to fly. The concluding trio of lines in "May 18, 1783," drops the third-person-plural and third-person-singular pronouns ("they" and "his") of the rest of the sonnet to assume a dramatic, second-person-singular address:

You took the challenge of the woods and seas
And captured in a single classic phrase
The moving story of those valiant days. (9)

These lines could refer to Loyalists, black and white. Yet, whatever the valour of government-assisted white Loyalist settlers, the valour of the poorly provisioned, landless, despised, and ignored black brethren must have been greater still.¹⁰

Henderson's second-sonnet part of "Market Slip" is headed with the date of "18 May, 1947," marking the 164th anniversary of the Loyalist landing in Saint John. It is an atypical anniversary date, unless one notes that 1947 marked Henderson's sixtieth year of life.¹¹ It seems she desires, in the poem, to connect the Loyalist birth of New Brunswick (the colony was formally sundered from Nova Scotia in 1784 so that Saint John River Loyalist settlers would not "be governed from Halifax [Spray 16]) and its growth with her own life experience. Shadd notes that Henderson "retired from the civil service in 1945 and returned to Saint John, where she worked for three years as a stenographer in the law firm of Fairweather and Stephenson" (4). Presuming that the firm's offices were near the City Market and thus the waterfront, Henderson may have had occasion to visit the market slip and feel inspired to pen her paean. Certainly, in honouring the Loyalist—and Black Loyalist—arrival, she also honours her own ancestry and successes.¹²

In her fine analysis of "Market Slip," Shadd emphasizes "1783 is a pivotal year in Canadian Black history. In that year, almost three thousand Blacks—10 percent of all Loyalists—sailed to Nova Scotian shores (which at the time included New Brunswick) in search of freedom. With this migration, the first free African communities in North America were forged" (6).

Interpreting the second sonnet, Shadd explains, “Henderson makes the point here that just as African migrants from America sought freedom on these shores over two hundred years ago, so have hundreds of thousands of European immigrants sought peace and freedom during and after World War II” (7). I also suspect that lines promising newcomers, “Tempered in the New World’s alembic,” will “build a future of broader vision,” permitting Canada to attain “The beauty . . . of freedom and of power” (9), hints that Canada, in 1947, possesses a restricted social vision. Thus, in the first poem of *Citadel*, Henderson gestures toward immigration and multiculturalism as policies that will serve to liberalize Canada, even racially. Shadd holds that “Only the tone of hope and optimism itself [in the poem], and the plea that Canada live up to its image as a place of opportunity for all people is suggestive that Canada was not [in Henderson’s mind] all that it could be” (8).

Although Shadd and I tease out potential *black* inklings in Henderson’s otherwise *race*-erased verse, the fact remains this sounding is not obvious. But Henderson’s subtlety is a strategy engaged by many early twentieth-century, African-American women poets. Honey claims that, for these poets, the “search for roots and identity led inward, moved backward to an imaginary Eden where sensitivity could survive and even flourish” (18). Honey cites Bernard Bell’s perception that Harlem Renaissance Romantic pastoral poetry “might best be understood as ancestralism, arising from a desire to reconcile the urban present with a rural past” (18). Arguably, the two sonnets of “Market Slip,” one singing of pioneers landing in a virginal-forested bay and the next praising the growth of a city, achieve this reconciliation. Shadd reports that Henderson’s barber-father, William, was likely a fugitive slave—that is to say, immigrant—from the United States (2), while her schoolteacher-mother, Henrietta, a New Brunswick native, had parental roots extending back, possibly, to the Black Loyalist colonialists (2). “Market Slip” allows Henderson to laud her ancestors abstractly, even as she praises explicitly the Loyalist, wood-and-water origin and immigration-propelled, urban growth of Saint John and Canada.¹³

Another Henderson sonnet, “The Old Burying Ground,” may refer, Shadd submits, to “the Black Settlement Burial Ground in Willow Grove, a one-time Black settlement on the outskirts of Saint John” (14). However, the poem speaks of “sloping walks with leafy shade” where “Old men on benches talk the hours away,” and where “the hallowed dead” have left “their legacy of faith and dreams / Forever graven on the city’s heart” (11). These details,

along with the play on *grave* and the placement of the cemetery at the “city’s heart,”¹⁴ establish, indubitably, that the poem’s setting is the Old Loyalist Burial Ground in central Saint John, uphill from the harbour, and overlooking both it and the market. But *race* may haunt the last image of the poem, where the delegating dead—“A paradox of life and death, . . . pass / As light and shadow drift across the grass” (11). Here the reader encounters explicit “ancestralism.” Too, one must remember Honey’s theory that, in black women’s poetry of the era that shaped Henderson, images of light and dark, day and night, white and black, and shadow and brilliance are frequently allegorical (8-17). Read in light of this perception, “The Old Burying Ground” becomes a site of ironic racial integration, where the spectres of white and black settlers, Loyalists and slaves, now free of all fleshly or worldly prejudices, drift fraternally in mingling “light and shadow” (11).

Henderson’s “Corner Grocery Store,” a poem in which her persona discovers a London shop that reminds her of a Saint John corner store she knew in childhood, asserts “Oceans do not divide us, but unite. / It was like coming home when all was said” (14). This poem seems a perfectly Anglophilic pronouncement. Yet, the “us” that “oceans” unite is not just Canada and Britain, or Canada, the United States of America (the poem opens with a reference to Boston), and Britain, or even the British Commonwealth: it is also Africa, Europe, Australia, Asia, and the Americas. Certainly, the London “grocery store” is a “counterpart” to one in Saint John, N.B., or in Boston, Mass., but, “with its goods from everywhere,” it provides “A jolly place to learn geography!” (14). The London shop is a locus of British imperialism (now translated into a global supply of consumer goods for “home” consumption) and of the world-wide extension of English civilization.¹⁵ Even if Henderson is ignorant of the role of African slavery in establishing the Anglo-Saxon imperium (an impossible supposition), her “home”—or the experience of finding a sense of “home” in a “borderless” store, whether in London, or Boston, or Canada, or Africa—is utterly the result of the forced migration of Africans and coerced migration of Asians and Europeans. Given that Britain once “ruled the waves” (and still more-or-less did so when the poem was written), it was under its blood-coloured banner (the British naval flag—or Red Ensign—Canada’s official flag until 1965) that the Arctic, Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans were, metaphorically, “united.” Henderson’s vision of “home” and “coming home” is far more complicated than it first appears. Her “us” refers to all who use English—the global language, one established by imperial (British) and semi-imperial (American) domination.¹⁶

The single poem in *Citadel* that seems almost unabashedly “black” in tone and subject is “Prayer-Meeting” (26-27). This ten-quatrain lyric narrates the decision of Sister Susie Gray to remain outside amid a blizzard, to avoid hearing the prayers of the deacon with whom she has just quarreled. As usual in Henderson, there are no direct references to *race* in the poem. However, some details in description and language conjure up images of black church folk. One notes the “brightly-lighted meeting-house” (26), the church or chapel so vital to rural black communities, an oasis of “comradeship and singing” (26), especially “down East” (27), where Africadians¹⁷ are isolated from the larger current of African-North American life. One reads that “from her seat and down the aisle, / Marched Sister Susie Gray” (26), and that one plain verb and noun sets before the mind’s eye a transplanted, “Southern” black woman, bustling, with mighty energy and powerful determination, through the church (an institution nominally mastered by black male preachers, but almost always, in reality, staffed and overseen by black women). Sister Susie’s name is not African, of course, but its quadruple appearance in the poem and its associations with African Diasporic communities,¹⁸ serve again to suggest the lyric’s black origin and intended destination. Henderson allows Susie only a fragment of speech—“Susie said / She’d never listen to his [the Deacon’s] voice / Though she ‘should be struck dead” (27)—and it cannot be described as Ebonics—or Black English—in any sense. Even so, just as one finds in other Henderson poems, the context deepens if the lyric is read *blackly*. In addition, if Henderson’s lines, “The tangy salt sea breeze down East / preserves a hardy folk” (27), are permitted to denote Afro-New Brunswickers (or Africadians) as much as they may denote any New Brunswick village, one accords black settlers the same courage and dignity automatically accorded white ones. (This “two-toned” reading jibes with those I grant “Market Slip” and “Pioneer.”) Finally, Shadd has found a letter Henderson addressed, on 19 November 1967, to historian Robin Winks (11). In the letter, Henderson reveals the genesis of “Prayer-Meeting” as having been 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):

Everyone went to revivals. I boarded in a house a good half mile from the main road, in a spot surrounded by evergreen trees and I was afraid to stay there alone at night, so went along too! (Qtd. in Shadd 11)

Shadd notes “Prayer-Meeting” is the only poem Henderson “mentions in her letters as being a direct reflection of the Black community” (12). Justly, Shadd wonders, “How many more [Henderson] poems are [really] about the Black Canadian experience?” (12)

“Prayer-Meeting” and its “back story” disclose Henderson’s actual *black* consciousness and her feelings of connection to a wider black community. Yet, her work had to find its place within what Québécois nationalist Henri Bourassa (1868-1952) terms “cette mer immense . . . saxonisant” (49)—or, in her case, a sea of bleach, that is to say, an Anglo-Saxon dye.

Henderson’s poem “Crow and Critic” (28-29) is perhaps her most sophisticated statement about herself. It is “A Portrait of the Poet as a (Closeted) Black Woman.” Moreover, in a gesture toward Modernism, it rejects rhyme and metre, and, in a nod toward Post-Modernism, it is self-conscious about its own artifice. The poem begins with the speaker describing the arrival of spring with “Patches of soft green” appearing “Between the red bricks of the street,” a sky “cloudlessly blue, and the air / Laden with the fragrance of growing things,” and seeming “all colour and light” (28). The sky—and the page—is intruded upon by a crow that “Contrary to the usual opinion of crows / . . . could be called beautiful” (28). Immediately, one may consider the crow a symbol for the poet herself, now an elderly black woman, but beautiful in her creative soul. The lyric continues, positioning the crow “On the steeple bell of the old Lutheran Church” from which “the singing / In great waves of glorious sound / Came to me in my window” (28). Enraptured by the scene and the sound, the speaker muses, “The crow, looking down with its head on one side / Listened intently and—could it have been?— / With intelligence and enjoyment” (28). If the crow is read as a *familiar* of Henderson herself, then, in three deft lines, she rehearses the rejection of black writers by white critics who refuse to credit blacks with faculties of intelligence and imagination, feeling and subtlety. Perhaps Henderson is even alluding to the *race*-blinded criticism that Thomas Jefferson offered African America’s first major poet Phillis Wheatley: “Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [*sic*]; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism” (140).¹⁹

This possibility is strengthened when one considers what feels like the second part of “Crow and Critic,” where the speaker defends the poem that resulted from her observations of the “Spring day at its best” and “what I saw from my window, / Including, of course, the crow” (29). Her defence is

necessitated by a critic who has charged, “The Crow flapping seems to be / A digression. What does it really contribute / To the meaning of the poem?” (29) In reply, Henderson’s persona states, “I might have quoted Archibald MacLeish²⁰ / ‘A poem should not mean, but be’” (29). Instead, the persona tells her critic: “It was part of the picture / I saw from my window, so I put it in” (29). In the name of spiritual wholeness, she must integrate her pleasures in God’s spring day, (white) Lutheran singing, and the behaviour of the savvy black crow (whose “feathers glistened and scintillated in the sun” [28]). The poet adds to her response to “The Critic” by noting that Welsh poet Dylan Thomas has included a crow in one of his poems: “I was glad it was part / Of the picture he saw from *his* window, / And that he, too, ‘Put it in’” (29). Finally, she writes, in seeming opposition to an assertion in the Thomas poem, “I am not, however, buying a blind / For my window” (29). As a black-identified black woman, Henderson has room for the crow in her Modernist poem, and appeals to the work of two Modernist poets to support her inclusiveness. Given that “Crow and Critic” follows immediately after “Prayer-Meeting,” one may hear here the poet’s Declaration of Independence, her own *Ars Poetica*:

I will write of blackness as spectrally or as opaquely or as clearly as I wish.
I will write wholly of the world as it appears to me.²¹

At least, this *black* reader wants to read this assertiveness into Henderson’s poem and into all of her poetry.²²

The careful reader of *Citadel* must recognize its ambitious, formal sweep. Henderson applies Miltonic Neoclassicism (likely under the sway of Wheatley) to her Shakespearean sonnets (see “Market Slip”), updates the organic imagery of the spiritual (see “Pioneer”), employs Wordsworthian Romanticism (see “The Old Burying Ground”), tackles Negro dialect verse by omitting dialect (see “Prayer-Meeting”), and reveals herself to be a wily and allusive Modernist in the ragged rhythms and Poundian (pugnacious) artiness of “Crow and Critic.” She tries on all of these forms in a slender—no, skinny—self-published chapbook. In her little offering, she attempts to replicate the entire African-American, Anglo-American, and Anglo-Canadian aspiration to rewrite British poetry in their—I mean, *our*—own terms. Her endeavour is daunting, but she is undaunted.

Henderson’s veiled references to blackness and her own cultural heritage are poignant in their opacity. Yet, she may still be deemed insufficiently subversive. While her verse is open to *black*-focused or Afrocentric readings, she is curiously silent about the presence of Others—Acadians, Francophones

in general (despite all her years in Ottawa), and Mi'kmaq and other First Nations peoples, not to mention other African peoples—in the Maritimes or in Canada. Then again, as Shadd opines, Henderson participates in an African-Canadian (and Canadian) tradition of masking *race*: “At a time when one did not wear one’s ‘Blackness’ on one’s sleeve, African-Canadians cultivated a ‘just people’ approach to manoeuvre through the unspoken but blatant daily affront to their humanity” (21).

Conclusion

Henderson’s intellectual career underscores the complex dilemmas of African-Canadian literature and culture. Henderson establishes that good Canadian “Negroes” can write verse of genteel civility. She assures her questioning readers that she (or *we*) will not smash teacups when invited, finally, to tea (utilizing the Saint John-based *Red Rose* brand of course). But she also wants to civilize British imperialism, to convert it into integrationist liberalism. Nevertheless, her voice is, even with its glaze of invisible *blackness*, accommodationist—or Booker T. Washington-like. Still, Henderson was a product of New Brunswick and its Atlantic orientation. She looks across that expanse to Britain (Big Mama to Canada, the United States, and the white-dominated Dominions, but also, via imperialism, to Africa, the Caribbean, and a good swath of the so-called Third World). To examine her thought is to verify that “blackness,” as an intellectual position, while always *regional* (i.e. its conceptualization is always based on one’s location), is never *provincial* (i.e. its conceptualization is always international). But one question persists: Why does Henderson fail to address other “Negro”—or Black or African—Canadians? I think the answer is, she was waiting for *us* to declare *ourselves*.

NOTES

- 1 This paper is excerpted from the W. Stewart MacNutt Memorial Lecture presented at the University of New Brunswick—Fredericton and Saint John, New Brunswick, on 17-18 November, 2004. I am grateful to my auditors for their helpful critiques and comments. I dedicate this essay to the memory of Anna Minerva Henderson, who deserves greater appreciation as a pioneer African-Canadian Modernist.
- 2 This biography and bibliography is drawn from Winks, *History*, 393n.6.
- 3 Adrienne Shadd cites a 1968 letter wherein Henderson tells her correspondent, “I have quite a number of good books and quite a collection on the Negro. . . . I am trying to dispose of my books as I have quite a collection—nearly 2000.” (qtd. in Shadd 9). Given this fact, Henderson was most likely acquainted with works by major “Negro” and American, British, and Canadian authors.

- 4 Adrienne Shadd (1954-) is a Toronto, Ontario, M.A. degree recipient in Sociology and an independent scholar of African-Canadian sociology, history, and literature. Her essay on Henderson, so central to my own, has been prepared for an academic essay collection on African-Canadian women.
- 5 In my use of the word *mastery*, I allude to African-American literary critic Houston Baker's argument that African-American literary Modernism utilized two strategies: 1) "mastery of form"—whereby the black writer establishes his or her equality to whites by working triumphantly with(in) a "European" form (arguably the practice of Henderson) and 2) "deformation of mastery"—whereby the black writer exploits his or her own cultural "voice" and "style," satirizing and subverting the "official"—white—"norm." See Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987).
- 6 Lampman is not any more blind to *race* than is Henderson—even if he does not repress his whiteness as much as she represses her blackness. In Lampman's poem, "At the Long Sault, 1660" (1898), French defenders, led by Daulac, stave off an Aboriginal attack upon the infant city of Sault Ste. Marie. In Lampman's eyes, the "Silent, white-faced" Europeans confront a plain "dark with the rush of the foe . . . the Iroquois horde" (83). Eventually vanquished by "the red men" who shout "triumph-songs" around "camp-fires" (a vision of savagery), Daulac and his men are transfigured into "lilies asleep in the forest" (84). Here Lampman speaks for white-settler supremacy.
- 7 See Note 5 and Baker's theories regarding black "mastery of form."
- 8 Again, Henderson seems to value "mastery of form" as a means of passively—I mean, intellectually—asserting her racial equality to Caucasian writers.
- 9 One must note, however, that when Earle Birney (1904-95) resigned from his editorship of the *Canadian Poetry Magazine*, in 1949, he condemned its sponsoring organization, The Canadian Authors Association, for supporting "standards of judgment . . . of the Victorian age only" (148). One must note, though, that such standards would have appealed to Henderson.
- 10 In his history, *The Blacks in New Brunswick* (1972), W.A. Spray states that "There were probably at least 500 Black slaves in the Saint John area in 1784" (16). These people enjoyed no rights. Spray tells us "A number of slave-owners' homes had rooms in the basement equipped with chains, which were used to confine slaves who had attempted to run away" (21). But even free, Black Loyalist settlers endured privation and much discrimination: they were excluded from voting "for many years and there are no records of when Black people were first allowed to vote" (34); "Blacks were unable to become freemen of the city" of Saint John, which meant they were not permitted to practice a trade or to open a business" (34-35); 3) "The free blacks had no spokesman in government and their pleas for aid were repeatedly rejected" (36). Illiterate and landless, many of these settlers elected to be removed to Sierra Leone in 1792. Those who remained in New Brunswick, plus the later Black Refugee arrivals from the War of 1812, were considered "little better than slaves" by the New Brunswick government (43). In 1836, the colonial government allotted "1,050 acres in the so called 'Black Refugee Tract' . . . to six *White men*," but only a mere "55 acres was considered to be sufficient for the Black settlers" (49). Spray's chapter on education verifies that black people, until well into the twentieth-century, received only sporadic and insufficient schooling, thus perpetuating their marginal, socio-economic status (52-61).

- 11 Anniversary dates were important for Henderson. She must have been aware, for instance, that, in 1967, she was publishing *Citadel*, not only in her eightieth year, but in the centennial year of the Dominion of Canada.
- 12 Henderson's poem "Pioneer" yields more evidence that the settlers and pioneers celebrated in the first sonnet of "Market Slip" are also black. In "Pioneer," the poet imagines this archetypal settler facing "The difficult, the danger-ridden" and "enemies" who strove "In vain . . . to ensnare him / With the 'yoke of iron / And the bands of brass'" (16). Again, as much as this poem may be read as pro-Loyalist propaganda, with the "enemies" cast as tyrannical Republican America, it just makes plainer sense read as a displaced slave spiritual. Here the pioneer is an ex-slave, who "Hurt, but undaunted, . . . pressed on" and "overcame" all obstacles, "And then his heart sang" (16). Even the poem's imagery replicates the elemental geography of the spiritual:

Levels and foothills
 In green and soft deception,
 Tested his strength. The mountain
 Took all of his strength and courage.
 . . . The air
 Grew clearer, keener, as he climbed,
 And when he reached the top,
 An instant's light revealed
 The world-road he had made. (16)

Anyone familiar with such spirituals as "Go Tell It on the Mountain," "Rise, Shine, for the Light Is A-Coming," "Wade in the Water," and "Down by the Riverside" (all titles included in my anthology, *Fire on the Water*, vol. 1), just to name a few, will recognize the resemblance between their Biblical and topographical images and those Henderson employs. Nevertheless, Henderson maintains the dual application of her poem to white settler and ex-slave by noting that the pioneer was "guided" by "light"—"The Merlin Gleam" (16). Her speaker implies the rough equality of both the white and black newcomer ("Adventure claimed him"), but also their mutual investment in Anglo-Christian mysticism. As in "Market Slip" (and "The Old Burying Ground" [11]) then, Henderson skillfully allows, "in Pioneer," a simultaneous black-and-white reading, while arguing for the Anglo-milieu equality of settler and (ex-)slave. Adrienne Shadd, in her trail-blazing paper on Henderson, says, of "Pioneer," "Here Henderson proclaims that the African-American fugitives to Canada are just as surely Canadian pioneers as the early French and English explorers or later European settlers who continue to command centre stage in our official historical drama" (15).

- 13 A supplementary reading of "Market Slip" must acknowledge the ironies of its title. First, it may designate a wharf or dock as a "slip" from the market. But may it not also signal a 'runaway slave,' one who has given the (slave) market a "slip" (in the slang sense). Perhaps, too, "slip" represents a receipt—one acknowledging the poet's liberty.
- 14 Also present at Saint John's downtown "heart," as Henderson tells us in another sonnet, is King Square: "The heart of Saint John is King Square, laid out / Like the Union Jack . . ." ("King Square" 12). The square is adjacent to the Old Loyalist Burial Ground.
- 15 Note here that Henderson, as in "Market Slip," employs a site of commerce as the grounds for reflection on migration.
- 16 This poem may also be read as a statement of post-colonial equality. If visiting the corner grocery store on "a busy thoroughfare" in "London-town" was "like coming home

when all was said” (14), then “London-town” (and her use of this intimate and down-to-earth term is significant) is on a par with Saint John and Boston. Both of these smaller cities are its equals—and all are connected (and equalized) as well by the history of slavery and the struggle for freedom.

- 17 “Africadia” is my neologism for the piece of Canadian *terra firma* occupied originally by displaced African American ex-slaves and settlers, namely Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island—the “Black Maritimes,” in other words, and “Africadian” is my coinage for the people, their *essence*, and their being.
- 18 An Africadian elder in the community of Preston, Nova Scotia, bore the name, “Mom Suze,” circa the 1980s. Suzette Mayr, born in 1967, is an African-Canadian writer based in Calgary. Peter E. McKerrow’s *History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia* (1895) lists many marriages performed by African Baptist ministers, and one was of S. Robson to Susan Gibson, in Halifax, N.S., on 16 Aug. 1844 (Boyd 77), while another was of W. Rodgers to Sus. Bride on 2 July 1872 (Boyd 81). This testimony cannot establish that Henderson’s Susie Gray is black, but it should indicate that Susan and its derivations are not uncommon names in the African-Maritimes and elsewhere in the African Diaspora.
- 19 African-American literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. states that Wheatley has been attacked by “black and white critics alike for being the *rara avis* of a school of so-called [black—i.e. African-American] mockingbird poets...” (78). It is highly probable that Henderson knew of—and identified with—Wheatley. Like the African-American poet, Henderson was well-educated, well-read, deeply religious, and stood—as she may have felt—in the vulnerable, terrifying, and lonely position of being ‘the first’—Negro Canadian woman—to challenge presumed white supremacy in a European art form. Henderson’s self-consciousness of her relative uniqueness is revealed in a letter to American historian Robin W. Winks:

I am enclosing my chap-book “Citadel” published in August [1967]. It is difficult for Canadians to believe that a colored person—or negro, as the U.S. would call me—can write good poetry. I believe I’m the only one in Canada who has ever written a chap-book! (Qtd. in Shadd 9)

Henderson is partly incorrect in her assertion. The first poetry collections by African-Canadian men—Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) and Theodore Henry Shackelford (1888-1923)—appeared in the United States in 1911 and 1916-18 respectively. The US-born, but Canadian citizen Alma Norman (1930-) published a poetry collection in England in 1964. (See my article, “A Primer of African-Canadian Literature,” for further details.)

Nevertheless, for most of her life, Henderson was right to consider herself the only publishing black poet in Canada, and she was certainly the first to publish a chapbook *in* her native country.

- 20 MacLeish (1892-1982), an American poet, is best known for his much-anthologized poem, “Ars Poetica” (1926), which concludes, “A poem should not mean / But be” (493).
- 21 Maureen Honey asserts that early twentieth-century African-American poets saw no connection between “Western cultural domination” and “their adoption of European literary forms” (6). They “did not consider the models they followed [the sonnet, the ode, the elegy, et cetera] to be the province or reflection of the conqueror” (7). Like these poets, Henderson, I believe, viewed conventional poetic forms as “timeless and universal,” as “a common tongue, to which all might have access and by which all might be spiritually enlightened” (Honey 6). If “mastering” these forms “was a political act” (Honey 6),

especially for the descendants of abject slaves, then so could the “raceless” content of a *black* poet—a poet expected by white readers to be *race*-obsessed—be viewed as progressive, even radical. Henderson attempted, delicately, to do both: to be a *black* poet with *universal* content and to be a *raceless* poet with *black* subtext.

- 22 “It has become obvious that reading between the lines is an essential exercise in coming to a fuller understanding of Anna Minerva Henderson’s racial self” (Shadd 12-13).

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