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### 'SYMPOSIA' IN THE DRAMA OF TREY ANTHONY AND LOUISE DELISLE

FOR JOAN MENDES<sup>1</sup>

Scholars recognize that African-Canadian literature is polyphonic, multicultural, and, in a word, diverse, thanks to its origins in the migration of black intellectuals and artists from the Caribbean, the United States, Africa, Europe, and South America, over three centuries, to colonial and (post-) modern Canada. One example of the profoundly divergent orientations among African-Canadian writers is provided by the plays of Louise Delisle and Trey Anthony. Delisle is an Africadian (African-Nova Scotian) playwright whose Canadian genealogy stretches back two hundred years. Significantly, her work in theatre has been regional, amateurish, and concerned with excavating the Africadian history of her environs. None of her work has enjoyed professional staging. In contrast, Anthony is a first-generation immigrant, based in Toronto, whose play, *da Kink in my hair*, has been an internationally successful major stage play and now a television sitcom, treating black women's experiences in a contemporary, urban setting. Delisle and Anthony could hardly be more different. Yet, this paper argues, their settings—kitchens and beauty parlours—replicate a shared black experience that transcends very real cultural, historical, and geographical cleavages.

*Les spécialistes s'entendent pour dire que la littérature afro-canadienne est polyphonique, multiculturelle et, en un mot, diverse. Cela est dû à ses origines, qui remontent à la migration d'artistes et d'intellectuels noirs venus des Caraïbes, des États-Unis, d'Afrique, d'Europe et d'Amérique du Sud pendant trois siècles, pour s'installer dans un Canada colonial et (post)moderne. La profonde divergence des orientations adoptées par les écrivains afro-canadiens est manifeste lorsque nous examinons l'œuvre des dramaturges Louise Delisle et Trey Anthony. Delisle est une dramaturge africadienne (africaine et néo-écossaise) dont la famille est présente au Canada depuis deux siècles. Fait révélateur, sa contribution théâtrale est régionale et amateur, et elle cherche à mettre au jour l'histoire africadienne de ses environs. L'œuvre de Delisle n'a jamais fait l'objet d'une produc-*

tion professionnelle. Par contraste, *anthony* est une immigrante de première génération basée à Toronto; sa pièce *da Kink in my hair*, qui met en scène les expériences de femmes noires contemporaines en milieu urbain, a connu un très grand succès à l'échelle internationale et fait maintenant l'objet d'un sitcom télévisé. On pourrait difficilement trouver deux artistes plus disparates. Et pourtant, fait valoir Clarke, les lieux que mettent en scène ces deux dramaturges—les cuisines et les salons de coiffure—reproduisent une expérience partagée par les gens de race noire et qui transcende des clivages culturels, historiques et géographiques très concrets.



## Opening

African-Canadian writers and their critics celebrate, mutually, the literature's vibrant multiculturalism, and rightly so. Excitingly, African-Canadian literature is the child of a kind of African United Nations, an assembly of artists from every corner of the African—or Negro—Diaspora, gathered in Canada. In her introduction to *African-Canadian Theatre* (2005), Maureen Moynagh sees, “much of contemporary African-Canadian experience is shaped by the ties that African Canadians continue to have with other nations in the Americas and in Africa” (xvi). She also realizes, “African-Canadian theatrical practice is informed by the theatrical traditions and dramatic canons of African America, of the Caribbean, of Africa, and of Black Britain, which are themselves in constant intercultural dialogue with one another and with European and Euro-American theatrical models” (xii).

Diversity, thy name is African Canada. Only here can a Nigerian writer, say Ken Wiwa, be placed in dialogue with a Jamaican one, perhaps Rachel Manley, then both set in conversation with a native Albertan writer, maybe, Suzette Mayr, or even a Québec-based Francophone one, namely, Gérard Étienne. Such juxtapositions are the norm, for they are our reality. Every African-Canadian literary anthology, for instance, numbers contributors whose roots are global and who may hold multiple passports. Thus, each anthology offers a roll call of Canadian provinces, US states, and Caribbean and African nations, as well as a few ‘shout-outs’ to Europe, South America, and Asia. Even, the history of African-Canadian literature is complicated by its fanatical internationalism. For instance, the first published play in English is Trinidad-born Lennox Brown's *The Captive* (1965), published in Ottawa, but the first play in French is one by Franck Fouché, *Un*

*fauteuil dans un crâne* (1957), published originally in Haiti. While readers of these writers and texts may instinctively discover commonalities, or be asked to do so in essays for courses in African-Canadian literature, the impertinent question may still be asked, “What do these writers and texts have in common beyond the ‘Canadian’ designation (one which they may reject)?”

I think this question acquires acute meaning in reference to drama, for it may seem ridiculous to ask a largely West Indian-derived audience in Toronto to applaud a rustic story set in historical Nova Scotia, or, alternatively, to ask an African-American-derived audience of Saskatchewan settler heritage to laud a contemporary, urban ‘rap’ set among the immigrant high-rises of big city suburbs. Yet, the problem I posit is irritatingly facetious: George Boyd’s play about the destruction of historic Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia, *Consecrated Ground* (1996), has played Toronto (2004) as well as Halifax (1998), while Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997), has gone to New York City (2003) and Halifax (2004) as well as to Stratford, Ontario (2006). Of course, many other examples of such crossover appeal may be cited. (Consider the appearance of Walter Borden’s ‘psycho-drama’ *Tightrope Time* [1986] in Amsterdam [1985] and in Montreal [2005].) However, I think more is being demonstrated here than the oneness of ‘black’ experience or the ability of ‘black’ theatregoers—like any audience—to make imaginative leaps into another cultural experience.

Rather, I think our dramas make use of the device of the ‘symposia,’ fairly perpetually, to stage anatomies of communities and their final reunification (if comic) or disintegration (if tragic). Certainly, this device enjoys wide usage, from the situating of nearly one dozen personalities in the brain of the Host in Borden’s *Tightrope Time*, to the presentation of sundry kitchen, doorstep, and living-room scenes in Sears’s *Harlem Duet*, to the living-room, bedroom and kitchen scenes in Andrew Moodie’s *Riot* (1997), and to the similar scenes in M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Coups and Calypsos* (1996, 2001). The effect of these deployments is to allow us to appreciate the psychological fragmentation wrought by racism and homophobia in Borden; to underline the split between Billie and Othello, but also the reunification between Billie and Canada (her father), in *Harlem Duet*; to represent the multicultural reality of the black household in *Riot*; and to expose the ambivalent connections between the married, but estranged, African-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian couple in *Coups and Calypsos*.

I use the Greek words *symposium* and *symposia* (the plural version) in the classic *Concise Oxford Dictionary* sense: to refer to

“a drinking-party with conversation, especially following a banquet, or to the holding of philosophical or other friendly discussion or a set of contributions on one subject from various authors and points of view at a meeting or in a magazine” (1083). Lurking behind my usage is, naturally, the ghost of the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, and his book, *The Symposium*, in which the philosophical hero, Socrates, participates in a wine-assisted discussion of love.

In this paper, I want to apply my understanding of the symposium (and symposia) to two contrasting playwrights: trey anthony, who is urban, Caribbean-descended, and based in Toronto, and Louise Delisle, a playwright whose roots go back to the African-American / ‘Black Loyalist’ arrival in British colonial Nova Scotia in 1783. (Indeed, Delisle still lives in Shelburne.) While these authors are—superficially—starkly divergent, their respective plays, anthony’s *da Kink in my hair: voices of black womyn* (2005) and Delisle’s *The Days of Evan* (2005) and *Winnie’s Elephant* (2005)—utilize symposia. In anthony, philosophical conversations unfold in a hair salon, while, in Delisle, kitchens and courtrooms are the sites of contestation. In the end, anthony’s symposium unites contemporary black women, teaching them to better understand each other’s struggles and to support each other, while Delisle’s symposia seek to educate her audience in African-North-American history (a narrative of oppression and survival) and, specifically, the strength of black women. Both anthony and Delisle undertake projects of outreach and uplift, plus community reunification. Their settings bridge aesthetic and cultural differences.

### **trey anthony**

In her “Forward” to *da Kink in my hair: voices of black womyn*, Djanet Sears notices that anthony’s “incredible ensemble of Black women’s voices” and “powerful use of the personal narrative stylistically links her work to an African oral tradition that has survived and still thrives in the African Diaspora in spite of a separation of four centuries and a vast ocean” (iii). Moreover, anthony’s choice of setting—“a Caribbean Canadian hairdressing salon” (iii)—carries “enormous resonance for Black women” for their hair styles offer personal and political affirmations as well as revelations of their individual identities and experiences (iii). Sears states, “one might begin to see hair as a metaphor for not only our history, but for present-day psyches” (iii). Thus, “the hairdresser is the closest thing to a head doctor we ever (voluntarily) encounter” (iv); she is also a “therapist” (iv). “In presenting a hairdressing salon as a place

of transformation,” then, Sears feels, “*da Kink in my hair* requires that we let the [women’s] stories wash over us; detangling the knots of denial and confusion; locking the multiple curls and twists of our identities in an act of self acceptance” (“Forward” iv). Althea Prince, in “If you want to know a Black woman, touch her hair,” her introductory essay to a 2003 anthology publication of anthony’s play, also focuses on anthony’s “gift for using Jamaican language and Standard English with powerful effectiveness,” her Diasporic practice of highlighting the “orality of the tradition of telling Story [*sic*],” and her setting of the play in a hair salon where “there are African women touching hands to hair: African women talking about hair, revealing feelings about race, gender, sexuality, beauty, and power” (Prince 259). For Prince, as for Sears, anthony’s beauty salon is a “power centre” (Prince 260) and “a space where narratives have freedom of voice” (Prince 261). Both critics allow us an anthony who brings together “African women of Caribbean origins” (Prince 259) in a setting that allows for consciousness raising and healing transformation. These terms of reference may be shifted slightly, however, to configure anthony’s play as a symposium. The hairdressing salon becomes, in this regard, a *salon*, in the French sense, a site of conversation and debate (even if, herein, food and drink are absent). I will also propose that anthony’s hairdressing salon is really an extension of, a secularization of, Black Christian expressive traditions connected to the church and to the experience of testifying or bearing witness.

The subtitle of anthony’s play alerts us to pay strict attention to the “*voices of black womyn*.” But there is a tension in the phrase, “black womyn,” one referenced by orthography and played out in the drama itself. What I mean here is that “black” is conjoined with, but also pitted against, “womyn,” a word whose spelling omits *men*. This ploy emphasizes that *da Kink* means to articulate black women’s “countless joys and [...] woes” (Sears, “Forward” iv). The spelling of *womyn* evinces Anthony’s feminist stance, and this ideology is readily apparent in the play. Yet, *black*, as a modifier, gestures toward a Pan-Africanist and even black cultural nationalist position, one also available to any attentive reader. It is no accident, then, that the political tension between blackness and womanhood is resolved in the play’s conclusion, where Nia delivers a monologue detailing how her now-deceased mother never liked “anything too black” (56), including her own daughter. This emotive moment ends, “Maybe at the funeral I’ll cry. Because I’m wearing a black dress, a black hat, black shoes, black stocking all black. All black. Mom, I’m wearing all black! Mom could you just

look at me! I'm wearing all black [...] I've been wearing black all my life" (57). After Nia presents this—effectively black cultural nationalist—speech, the stage directions tell us, "*All the [other black] women characters enter individually and state proudly, 'I've been wearing black all my life'*" (57). Next follow a "healing song," a "healing ceremony," and a dance that offers Nia "*pride, self-identity, comfort, love, and joy of being a black woman. The women dance a celebratory dance*" (57). Novelette, the owner of the hairdresser salon, the keeper and divulger of secrets, and a kind of *orisha*-psychologist, then enters, smiles "*proudly*" at the other women, "*and proudly states,*"

I've been wearing black all my life.  
Blessings. (57)

The blessing here is acceptance of oneself as a black woman. That the last word of the play is "Blessings" (57) signals, however, that this hairdresser salon represents a displacement for formal worship structures, which tend to be both patriarchal and Eurocentric, *especially* if Christian in any official sense. This ending also signifies that the *salon* we have just witnessed, one wherein fourteen women have testified about experiences of suicidal alienation; loss of a child to police violence; incestuous rape; poverty and labour; senior citizen sexuality; traitorous black men; the *angst* of lesbian identity; and the problem of the "hussy" (6) is also a psychological clinic and a magic, spiritual temple.

anthony's ending also boldly replays the conclusion of African-American playwright Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1977), a play (or 'choreopoem') with which anthony, like ahdri zinha mandiela before her, must be well acquainted. And for good reason: Shange's work was the first major American drama to give voice to the lives of black girls and women, staging a poetry-reciting septet of dancers named for rainbow colours. In a previous article, "Contesting a Model Blackness" (2002), I point out the following difference between Mandiela and Shange:

While Shange's play concludes—like a traditional comedy—with the 'marrying together' of a pacific, unified, female community chanting the mantra of 'i found god in myself / & i loved her / I loved her fiercely' (67), Mandiela's [dark diaspora ... in dub (1991)] ends with a flourish of Pan-Africanist utterances.... (55)

Moreover, as I also opined in 2002, “Mandiela follows her idol, Shange, in utilizing the black female body as emblem, but for nationalist and Pan-Africanist, not universalist and feminist, purposes” (54). Intriguingly, but not unexpectedly, anthony follows mandiela in choosing to stress *particular* (Afro-Caribbean, Torontonion) black womanhood as opposed to following Shange in asserting a universalist feminism. In other words, anthony’s play is ideologically conservative—because it is nationalist, while Shange voices a typical, American, small-l liberal universalism. Shange’s play calls for a union of all women (her “colored girls” *can* also be Caucasian and Asian) in its conclusion, but anthony’s work demands the unification of all “*black womyn*.” There is a difference between these two positions, and it is underlined by the treatment of white women as sexual competitors, as Lady Two indicates: “I wonder if Bo Derek had to pat her head. Being that she was the first woman to ever wear braids” (41). Lady Three recalls, “A brother once said to me, ‘baby, I wouldn’t usually give you the time of day, but you’re kinna pretty for a dark skin girl’” (39). anthony’s break with the feminist unity that Shange preaches, may reflect the greater political empowerment of black women in the United States than in Canada.<sup>2</sup> anthony’s conclusion may also point to the need, here, in Canada, for black women to group together in distinctive cities and regions, foregoing the national and even international reach of similar organization in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Strikingly and honourably, anthony does not pay homage only to Shange (and, by implication, mandiela), but also to her sister African-Canadian playwright, Djanet Sears. Certainly, the character Shawnette’s abandonment by a black man who “use [*sic*] to play with that kink in my hair when it was all sweaty and damp” (9), but who breaks his promises to her of marriage, home, and children (9) so that he can take up with a woman with a “college education” (11), echoes *Harlem Duet*. The tragic plot of Sears’s play depends upon Othello’s abandonment of Billie so he can further his academic career by marrying a white woman.

anthony’s symposium does not depend only upon the voicing of *specific* black women’s concerns and issues, via partial exploitation of intertexts with other black women-authored works,<sup>4</sup> but also on the *styles* of speech. One strength of the symposium concept is that it manufactures unity—even when a discussion is an argument—by allowing diverse speakers to express their views. While most of anthony’s women speak versions of Standard English or so-called Black English (that is to say, African-Canadian English with its African-American borrowings), Novelette slides

into a form of Caribbean demotic (48). But it is Stacey-Anne, the child-speaker, immigrant to Canada from Jamaica, and incest-victim (oppressed by her stepfather), who possesses the richest voice:

And mi no want to go back [to Jamaica] now! And mi na want to mek him mad. So Mr. Brown happy when him touch mi and him want mi to touch him too... and when him inside me it hurt... but mi don't say nothing to mek him mad. (*begins to beat her leg, mimicking the rhythm of sex*) So when him inside a mi, mi just think 'bout [among other things. . .] Granny dancing with mi [. . .] when Mr. Brown send her the money [from Canada]. By the time Mr. Brown finish. (*beat*) Granny still a dance inna mi head... (51).

This unique speech prefaces the only actual poem in a work steeped in poetic prose. The *vers libre* lyric, “in honour of belief,” is, strictly speaking, a dub poem, and thus accents the Jamaicanness of Stacey-Anne. The lyric furthers the symposium aspect of *‘da Kink in my hair* because it is not by anthony, but by “d’bi.young a jamaican born and raised dub poet” (51). Hence, to integrate Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women’s experiences in a single story, anthony not only makes use of intertexts from Shange (Mandiela) and Sears, but also grants Young actual space and voice within the published play.<sup>5</sup>

(Another observation to make about this Jamaican specificity in the play is that it offers a direct critique of Canada and of white racism and black male sexism. Arguably, in fact, this demotic space yields the most traditional black feminist critique of racialized, Canadian ‘First World-ism’ and phallocentrism. In Jamaica, given its relative poverty, Stacey-Anne shared a bed with her Granny and her sister Carrie [50]. In Canada—in “foreign” [49]—Stacey-Anne enjoys the luxury of having her own room—“for mi and mi alone” [50]. But this sign of prosperity makes her available to the sexual assaults of her stepfather, whose socio-economic power allows him to salve his conscience by sending money to his mother-in-law. His paternal rule and his relative wealth, plus his invitation to his wife’s children to immigrate to Canada, mark him as a sub-contractor of Canadian economic imperialism and sexual enslavement of black and brown girl and women immigrants by way of roles as domestics, nannies, and low-wage workers. Akin to this oppression is the psychological corrosion effected by the girl-child’s equation of whiteness with desirability: “So when him [Mr. Brown’s] inside a mi, mi just think 'bout Carrie [my sister’s] three new Barbie [dolls],



Carrie teacher with her yellow hair, mi and Carrie laughing when we a eat McDonald french fries, and mi licking the snow offa mi lip” [51].<sup>6</sup> I suspect one is meant to understand here that the violation of incest is of a piece with the perverse—for Jamaican immigrants—interest in Barbie dolls, yellow hair, Big Business fast-food, and chilling snow.) Indeed, it is the turn to Jamaican ‘nation-language’ or patois that permits us to see Canada as racially and sexually oppressive, psychologically destructive, and wintry.

*da Kink in my hair*, through placing its congress of black women in a beauty salon, foregrounding diversity of expression, incorporating a non-authorial poem, and utilizing borrowings from other African-American and African-Canadian texts, stages a symposium, but one whose patron saint is Marcus Garvey, not Betty Friedan.<sup>7</sup> Its explicit evocation of black cultural nationalism brands this text as *defensively* African Canadian.

### Louise Delisle

In *Back Talk: Plays of Black Experience* (2005), Louise Delisle turns in a sestet of plays, all anchored in history, specifically Black Nova Scotian—or Africadian<sup>8</sup>—history. Her work could not be more unlike that of anthony, who is assuredly more polished, with experience in television acting, screenwriting, and stage producing, and with award nominations to boot (anthony 60). In contrast, Delisle’s plays have all been only locally and amateurishly produced, never staged beyond her native Shelburne and Shelburne County, Nova Scotia. Their diction is rural and, *ahem*, homely, and the plots are often fairy-tale-like, utilizing magic events and ghostly apparitions. In my introduction to Delisle’s book, I provide this statement of her interest in symposia:

To read Delisle’s plays is to be sat right down on the front stoop or around the kitchen table of Africadian fact. She puts us there, centre stage, right in the midst of the country-and-town reality of The People philosophizin, drinkin, singin, prayin, quiltin, laughin, gamblin, churchgoin, runnin [i.e. ‘cheating on’ a lover or committing adultery], braidin hair, lovin, workin, fightin, talking back to cops an [sic] such, and just keepin on keepin on. . . .

Delisle’s writing of Africadian vernacular be her specialty. Her characters ‘come down’ and ‘come over,’ ‘get out of here’ and ‘get home’; they ‘tom fool’ and say, ‘I say,’ ‘landsakes,’ ‘my goodness,’ ‘now,’ and ‘dear’: the true sound of Black Nova Scotia, y’all. (“Foreword” 7-9)

To read Delisle is to engage dramas seemingly old-fashioned, homespun, and unsophisticated. (The unsympathetic reader may even term them “crude.”) Even so, her setting of her plays in kitchens, bedrooms, living rooms, as well as public streets and courtrooms, renders them a series of symposia.

A better title for Delisle’s *The Days of Evan* is *The Last Days of Evan*. The play treats a true event, the execution in Nova Scotia, for the first-degree shotgun slaying of his half-brother, of a poor black man, Everett Farmer, in 1937. Delisle changes names and elaborates on the facts. Still, her play is both a reconstruction of, and a reflection on, the case of Farmer, who became the last capital criminal to be hanged in Nova Scotia. His real-life end is excellent material for drama, for Farmer was not so much hanged as lynched—after a trial conducted in an afternoon and a conviction based on racial stereotypes and a judicial refusal to apply the lesser (and more accurate) charge of manslaughter. No serious effort was made to spare Farmer’s life, even though the killing happened after much drinking and argument and an alleged death threat uttered by the victim, a notorious bully and acquitted killer.<sup>9</sup> These circumstances should have led either to Farmer’s acquittal or his conviction on the non-capital charge of manslaughter. Instead, he was frog-marched to the gallows.

Delisle’s play offers several symposia, negative and positive. In one, Evan and Mack have a violent series of alcohol-fuelled disputes that end in Mack’s death; in another, an investigation and a trial, both predetermined and prejudiced, unfold. In the final symposium, Evan’s widow, Susan, and Anna Wilson, her live-in landlady, form an implicitly political union to raise and protect the eight children Susan bore to Evan.

Delisle’s “*play opens in a small kitchen with a stove, table and four chairs, a lamp on the table, a rocking chair, and a full wood box*” (“Days” 36). Two scenes later, in I.iii, on July 1<sup>st</sup>—Dominion Day<sup>10</sup>—1937, this setting is the one in which a bloody row erupts. Here the drinking-party element of a classic symposium becomes the occasion for rapacious rage, while the Dominion Day holiday—a metaphor for Canada—is revealed to be a time of riot and vengeance (the true impulses of the Canadian people). The following exchanges among Evan, his wife Susan, and his half-brother Mack set the stage for the slaying:

MACK. (*Sitting down at the table.*) Come, sit on old Mack’s lap, Susan, and see what a real man feels like, honey. Because like I said, your pretty ass is going to be mine tonight.

SUSAN. You're disgusting, Mack.

MACK. Let me start with a kiss right now.

EVAN. You son of a bitch! (*Mack grabs hold of Susan's hand and pulls her onto his knees and he tries to kiss her. Evan jumps up.*) Let go of my wife, fool! Get the hell out of my house! I told you once and I'm not going to tell you again. (46)

Instead of leaving, however, Mack makes further threats to rape Susan. When she refuses to serve him food and says that she's going to bed, Mack replies, "You go right ahead, dear, and I will be right up to join you, okay. And when I get there we'll both be cookin, baby" (47). This statement intensifies the now-physical dispute between Mack and Evan, culminating in Mack's homicidal declaration, "I am going to kill the three of you [Evan, Susan, and their oldest son]. And then I'm gonna feed you all to them starvin mangy dogs out back" (48). Now Evan grabs a shotgun from his oldest boy, Donald, and shoots Mack as the latter tries to brain him with a glass bottle.

Although this symposium degenerates into slurs, shouts, and a shotgun blast, one's sympathies must lay with Evan, for he does precisely what English common law and universal common sense suggest is appropriate: defend his wife and home against a murderous, rampaging bully. But this schema, the moral of many a fairy tale, is upset because Evan, as a black man, is not extended the same natural rights a white citizen may take for granted. Thus, his act of self-defence is blatantly re-inscribed as premeditated murder, and his conviction thereof dangles him from a noose. Thus, the symposium that precedes the courtroom scene (III.i) consists of four white-male interlocutors, whose conversation comprises a conspiracy:

MAN 1. We can't let this nigger get away with this, I tell you.

MAN 2. He is right. If they can murder their own, they will murder us.

MAN 3. Well, then, we best make today [the trial] count. Make a day they will all remember.

MAN 4. So we know we have to hang this nigger.

MAN 1. No such thing as a fair trial here today. Are we all in agreement then?

ALL FOUR MEN. Agreed. (56)

Given this decision, Evan's trial cannot be more than a zoo, a kangaroo court presided over by hyenas and Cheshire cats. The outcome—his execution—is mandatory.

Before he is hanged, though, Evan meets with Susan in his jail

cell, and this pathetic moment ends with Evan telling his soon-to-be-widowed wife, "I told you I would love you until the day I died" (68). Magically, at this moment, the jail cell evaporates in darkness, and Susan is suddenly at home, in her kitchen, with Anna Wilson (the landlady), on the night of Evan's execution. Indeed, "*Susan is sitting in the rocking-chair..., humming in the dim light...*" (68), and listening to Anna complain that "they would not even let you [Susan] be with him [Evan] on his last day on this earth" (68). This statement reveals that the just-witnessed jailhouse scene was either a dream or a supernatural occurrence. In any event, the women's conversation is interrupted by "*A loud rap... on the door*" (69) and a "Voice from outside" declaring, "We will kill you all before this is over! Do you hear that, niggers?" (69). The legal lynching of Evan is thus accompanied by white-sheet terrorism against his family (and likely other black people in the area). Importantly though, this threatened violation is resisted successfully by the elderly Anna, who hollers back, "You'd better haul yourself away from my door... It'll be the last steps you take, if you don't" (69). There is "*The sound of footsteps running away*" (69). Assuredly, since the interloper knows there has already been one shotgun killing on the premises, he is wise to hightail it before he becomes a candidate for a second such shooting. In a sense, Anna becomes, to quote the title of a 1969 novel by African-American writer Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*: the quiet Negro with a hidden gun. Significantly, however, it is an old black woman who is able to execute successful resistance to proposed white male violence. While Evan is only able to stop Mack by shooting him, thus bringing the forces of white law and 'disorder' to his door, Anna is able to scare off a white hooligan from her door by merely implying her possession of a weapon he has good reason to fear exists. The play ends with the implication that only black women can successfully defend home and hearth in a white, patriarchal society. One is invited to read Anna Wilson as a rural and homespun version of Angela Davis.

The term *spook* is relevant in this play for another reason, namely, Delisle's use of the Ghost of Evan. While III.ii—the last scene of the play—features Susan's mystical meeting with Evan in the jail cell, the play's second scene (I.ii) is a discussion between the Ghost of Evan and Susan, apparently occurring on the same day as his hanging and thus the meeting related in III.ii. The pair discuss their marriage and family life, but also talk about Mack. Susan terms Mack "an evil man. Pure evil" (42). But the Ghost of Evan admits, "Mack was the devil, but I was no angel either. Look at when I beat you and [our son] Donald, and got myself in trouble

with the law” (42). Susan replies, “Time’s short. Let’s not talk about the wrongdoings in our lives. I forgave you for the hits. Let’s think on the good times” (42). This ectoplasmic moment unifies the violence-sundered couple, and it precedes, rightly, the symposium that leads to the death of Mack.

But what is most important about this incident is that the apparition of the Ghost of Evan is implicitly related to the many (invisible) millions of ghosts of slaves, phantasms also generated by mass (social) white violence. I think “The Days of Evan” is, like all the other plays by Delisle, *haunted*, not by instances of individual injustice, but by the residue of slavery, coating social relations with white dominance and black subservience. The salient symposia in “The Days of Evan” are those where the effects of slavery—arbitrary violence (domestic and social), plus substance abuse (alcohol), plus poverty, plus constant threat of rape and murder (intra-communal and extra-communal)—are described or demonstrated, although the word *slavery* never appears in the text.

## Meeting

History, specifically that of slavery, connects the works of Delisle and anthony—even though, in anthony, spectacularly, slavery is omitted from the autobiographies of its fourteen women speakers. Yet, slave history is the absent presence that haunts anthony’s work.<sup>11</sup> Read from this perspective, her play insists that her characters may enjoy no happy or balanced life unless and until they address the original subjugation of African ancestors. The bling-bling boys who bang-bang each other, or the police who shoot them; the international commercial arrangements that compel peoples from ‘emerging’ economies to migrate to the ‘overdeveloped’ ones; the quarrels over black beauty standards (“good” hair versus “bad,” “fros” versus “blonde wigs,” “dark” black skin versus “lighter”); and the desperate appeals to messianic religion or to apocalyptic politics (or, to apocalyptic religion and messianic politics): all must be heard as long-distance extensions to the symposia inaugurated by the trauma of slavery. When Nia talks about her love for “red ribbons” (56), once denied her by her mother who thought Nia “too black to wear red” (56), she exposes the painful, maternal Negrophobia inculcated by white supremacist culture. Yet, one must juxtapose against this sentiment the statement in Delisle’s play, “Winnie’s Elephant,” that “Back in Africa, that is how they captured all of us women, with the bright red dress. We’d run right on the slave ships to touch the dresses.

Then they stripped us naked and threw us below” (102). Later, this same character, Winnie, tells another black woman, “take this piece of red cloth and remember what vanity caused our people” (109). In both contexts, in Anthony and Delisle, the colour red carries resonance because of its associations with the oppressions—physical and psychological—of slavery.

To conclude, we must accept that what all African-Canadian drama has in common is the staging of arguments, conversations, debates, discussions, and other forms of verbal intercourse that return, again and again, to the great unspeakable subject of *our* Canadian history: slavery. In our plays, then, every kitchen and every beauty salon is both an African village and a slave ship. ❁

## NOTES

- 1 I dedicate this essay to an amazing African-Nova Scotian (Africadian) woman, namely, Joan Mendes (née Johnson), my powerfully outspoken, no-nonsense, straight-talking (maternal) aunt.
- 2 Yes, Her Excellency Michaëlle Jean was appointed Head of State of Canada in 2005; while Her Honour Mayanne Francis was appointed Head of State of Nova Scotia in 2006. However, while these honours must be celebrated, they are symbols of achievement, not of actual empowerment. Dr. Condoleeza Rice, the United States Secretary of State (2005-2009), possessed more *de facto* power than does The Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean.
- 3 I am keeping in mind the successes of the Congress of Black Women, while also wondering how much actual clout it wields on the national stage.
- 4 See not only the plays of Shange, Mandiela, and Sears, but also Julie Dash’s film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).
- 5 In concert with this practice, note the inclusion of percussionists and vocalists in the *de facto dramatis personae* (2).
- 6 This moment most likely refers to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), whose girl-child protagonist, a victim of paternal rape, desires to have blue eyes. Here is yet another African-American intertext in Anthony’s Afro-Caribbean-Canadian drama.
- 7 In her “Forward” Sears refers to the “great Marcus Garvey” and his “sentiment” that thinking blacks are “not endeavouring to remove the kinks from their hair; they are attempting to remove the kinks from their minds” (iv).
- 8 This word, my neologism, denotes African-Nova Scotians primarily, then African-Maritimers.
- 9 Please see Dean Jobb, *Shades of Justice* (1987), and Alan Hustak, *They Were Hanged* (1987), for more detailed examinations of the Farmer case.

- 10 Titled Canada Day by an Act of Parliament in 1981.
- 11 The 'African' Griot and a Goddess who inaugurate the play should be read as symbols of ancestry and heritage (3).

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