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Literaturen/Kulturen – Literatures/Cultures – Littératures/Cultures

Herausgegeben von Klaus-Dieter Ertler und Wolfgang Klooß

Christian J. Krampe

The Past is Present

The African-Canadian Experience
in Lawrence Hill's Fiction

11



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*"Begin at the beginning," the King said,
very gravely, "and go on till you come to
the end: then stop."*

(Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland)

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Abbreviations used for Lawrence Hill's primary works:

SGT: *Some Great Thing*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1992.

AKB: *Any Known Blood*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1997.

BBSJ: *Black Berry, Sweet Juice. On Being Black and White in Canada*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2001.

BN: *The Book of Negroes*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 2007.

1. Introduction

It is difficult enough to figure out what it means to be Canadian, let alone African Canadian. (Clarke 1998, 98)

In his article on Lawrence Hill's second novel, *Any Known Blood* (1997), Winfried Siemerling asserts: "Our most post-identitarian moments and movements notwithstanding, identities are hardly a matter of the past." (2004, 30) As I shall argue in this study, issues of identity might well be a matter of the past – yet this past is still vividly present. In exploring the constructions of collective memory in Lawrence Hill's historical fiction, issues of identity are conceptualized as a selection and representation of memories from a contemporary perspective to create what Lois Zamora (1997) has termed a 'usable past'. More precisely, the constructions of collective memory in Hill's writing represent a counter-hegemonic version of a usable past which amends mainstream Canadian constructions. In this endeavor, Hill is in fact emblematic of the vast majority of African-Canadian literature. As the epigraph above suggests, the proverbial preoccupation of Canadian literature with questions of identity – whether they are framed in terms of who/where, here/there, national/regional, or colonial/postcolonial¹ – is mirrored, in fact even intensified, in Black Canadian literature. Evidently,

1 Cf. for instance Frye 1965 and 1976 (here: 2003a and 2003b); Atwood 1972; Robertson 1973; Metcalf 1988; Klooß 1992 and 1994; Davey 1993; Gross 1994 and 1995; Staines 1998; Godard 2000; Moss 2003b; Morris 2004; Brydon 2002 and 2007 (incorporating an explicit African-Canadian perspective); Kuester 2008. With the exception of Atwood 1972, Metcalf 1988 and Davey 1993, all of the studies mentioned here are essay-length papers and may thus serve as points of departure. Unsurprisingly, most scholars suggest that the most fruitful approach to identity can (best/only) be found through *their* lens, be that postcolonialism, gender or ethnic studies, a thematic approach or indeed any given conceptual framework; cf. for instance Robertson 1973, 81 (emphasis added): "The discussion of identity is not dead nor will it die until identity can be defined within its *true* context, that of commonwealth literature." In recent scholarship, one of the prevailing views holds that identity has indeed remained one of Canadian literature's key topics and one of literary criticism's favorite subjects, yet both are embedded in more diverse contexts: "By a curious logic of history the Canadian identity question so dear to the cultural nationalists is

definitions of identity do not take place on a *tabula rasa* but are revisions of existing notions. For Black Canadians, the revisionist moment is augmented by the fact that for centuries, African-Canadians have largely *been* defined. On his urge to reclaim the power over identifications, Hill states:

Identity is fluid and is evidently evolving. Initially other people tried to tell us [Blacks] who we were and tried to brand us with their own views of who we were. We have spent a few centuries trying to climb out from under that and to assert how we see ourselves. [...] Part of it is reclaiming one's identity and rejecting imposed definitions. (Hill 2006, 145)

In this thesis, I set out to provide an analysis of the reasons, the modes and the ways in which Hill is “reclaiming one’s identity and rejecting imposed definitions” in his fictions. Hegemonic definitions largely rest, as many Black Canadian writers have consistently claimed,² on three faulty assumptions, or rather lopsided perceptions. The first notion is the false supposition that, in contrast to the United States, African slavery never existed in Canada. In a 1995 poll, 83% of Canadians did not know that slavery indeed existed in what was to become their nation (cf. Clarke 1998, 103). On the contrary, it is maintained, Canada has proven to be a safe haven for American slaves, the north star promising freedom under British protection. The second assumption is that those Blacks coming to the True North found there racial equality and socioeconomic prospects. Black Loyalists, for instance, who sided with the British Empire in the American Revolutionary War, were granted not only freedom, but equality and economic opportunity fostered by land grants – at least this is what British officials promised. This allegedly benevolent nature is then extended into the present and underlies the third belief: Canada is, by virtue as much as by proof of its multicultural make-up and policy, a nation virtually free from the malignant racism purportedly dominating race relations south of the border. “In Canada, the party line goes, there are no racists save those who watch too much American television.” (Clarke 1998, 101)

Based on historical misperceptions and misrepresentations, a view of Canadian race matters thus prevails which underplays the hardships faced by Black Canadians both past and present, while simultaneously promoting the notion of a Canaanesque nation north of the 49th parallel.

In Canada, the prevailing view suggests, nobody has doors slammed in their faces because of the colour of their skin, for Canada has the potential to be one big, comfortable home for all people fortunate to live within its boundaries. [...] No, the prevailing view argues, minority groups have no reason to whine or complain. Not in Canada, not in the place that had been

still the central question in the new wave of multicultural novels, though questions of identity have become more complicated.” (Kröller 2004, 209) Martin Kuester agrees, arguing that even though there has been a widening of foci to include more diverse centers of attention, the “question of Canadian identity and its survival certainly remains one of the central themes of English-Canadian literature until the present.” (2008, 311)

- 2 Cf. for instance Clarke 1998, 101 and 103; 1999, 7; 2006a, 5f.; Compton 2001, 27; Cooper 2004, ii; Foster 1996, 31f.; Hill 2006, 143; Moynagh 2005b, 17; Walker 1982, 6 and 19.

the terminus of the Underground Railroad for American Blacks fleeing slavery. (Foster 1996, 31f.)

In his historical fictions, Lawrence Hill sets out to correct the flawed constructions professed by, as Foster phrases it, the “prevailing view”. Fiction, in Hill’s estimation, has a “major social function” (2006, 132) in this regard. It may serve as a repository of memories repressed in hegemonic discourse and hence contribute to the ways in which groups define themselves and/or are defined by others:

I am interested among other things in exploring fascinating and important elements of the Black Canadian experience and exploring them dramatically. [...] I feel that revealing dramatic moments in our lives is one way of showing people who we are. (Hill 2006, 135)

Questions of the veracity of widely held assumptions and the (self-) definitions based on these assumptions have long dominated Black Canadian literature. As such, Hill’s fiction can be considered representative of a vast majority of works. African-Canadian authors have regularly pitted their version of the Black experience in Canada against mainstream constructions (which are, as a matter of fact, often based in part on the writings of Black North Americans themselves, such as the slave narrative, whose influence will be discussed *in extenso* in the course of this study). Consider, for instance, Priscilla Stewart’s poem “A Voice From the Oppressed to the Friends of Humanity” (1858) which Wayde Compton reprints in *Bluesprint: Black British Columbian Literature and Orature* (2001):

[...]
God bless the Queen’s majesty,
Her scepter and her throne,
she looked on us with sympathy,
And offered us a home

Far better breathe Canadian air,
Where all are free and well,
Than live in slavery’s atmosphere
And wear the chains of hell.

The contrast between Canada and the US established here in terms of heaven vs. hell has fed the Canadian imagination. Likewise, the slave narratives corroborate the dichotomy found in Stewart’s poem by structuring the African slaves’ escape to (what would later on become) Canada in terms of one of their key leitmotifs, the biblical Exodus. In Lawrence Hill’s fiction as much as in African-Canadian literature in general, this dichotomy is questioned. In fact, there is frequently an outright reversal of the common notion that Blacks found – and continue to find – their ‘Promised Land’ in Canada. Commenting on the ‘Exodus’ of refugees and fugitive slaves to Canada, Walter Borden (1992) for instance counters the view held in Stewart’s poem:

The Hebrew Children

[...]
 Ham's descendants
 shouted HALLELUYAH,
 Caught a train
 And travelled
 To the Warden of the North
 Who counted heads,
 Heaved a sigh,
 And told them:
 Go, and make potatoes
 Out of rocks!

Then God stopped
 Gabbing
 With the Angels
 Long enough to promise
 Deep investigation into

Segregated schools,
 And land titles,
 And housing,
 And equal opportunity
 In general;
 And threatened
 Every kind of social action.

Last I heard, God was at
 The Lieutenant Governor's
 Garden Party
 Telling people
 It was nice
 To see the coloured population
 Represented,
 And yes, He was preparing
 A paper on
 Discrimination!

Can I hear an AMEN?

In a plain and highly accessible way, Borden summarizes the African-Canadian experience while focusing on its disillusioning quality. When African slaves ("Ham's descendants") left the slave-ridden United States via the Underground Railroad ("caught a train") or as Black Loyalists ("the Warden of the North" indicates Halifax, the capital of Nova Scotia, where most of the Black Loyalists were headed), they expected a Promised Land. What they found instead was disenchanting, to say the least ("Go, and make potatoes / Out of rocks!"). Going through a chronological list of segregation, racial inequality, inadequate living conditions and the like, Borden delineates Black Canadian history, culminating in the complacent, bureaucratic responses of today's multicultural Canada.

Evidently, Hill's approach to African-Canadian history is rather more complex than the rendition offered by Borden in a single poem. Hill does, however, likewise deal with the issues mentioned above: in his three novels published to date, Hill touches on most major aspects of African-Canadian history – from the late 18th to the late 20th century. It is a history which seems to have been largely neglected by mainstream Canadian discourse, a void many African-Canadian writers set out to fill. Hill himself is very explicit about the goal of saving, through fiction, parts of the Canadian history which are on the verge of being forgotten or have already been removed from view:

We still have probably twenty-five million Canadians who know extraordinarily little about the Black experience in the world and the Black experience here in Canada. The fact of the matter is that it is a fascinating history and I don't care to have it forgotten. The novel is one way to accomplish that." (Hill 2006, 143)

The aim of mending what is perceived as a pitted and unbalanced mainstream understanding of course is didactic in purpose as much as it is sociopolitical in effect. Issues of agenda setting and discourse formation are part of his writing's larger contexts. A theoretical framework to fruitfully approach these contexts can be found in conceptions of collective memory. Originally devised by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s, collective memory theory has been modified and tailored to serve as a powerful tool in the analysis of the nexus between literature, memory, identity and sociopolitical practice.³ Taking advantage of the refined corpus of studies and models available by now, I will make use of a slightly adapted version to supplement and guide the following analyses, thus replacing the more pragmatic terminology ('history', 'forgetting', etc.) employed so far.

Obviously, the following chapters will hence provide a significantly more nuanced picture than the one offered by contrasting Stewart's "A Voice from the Oppressed to the Friends of Humanity" with Borden's "The Hebrew Children" – just as Hill himself of course proceeds in considerably more complex ways, yet without losing track of the general argument also illustrated by Borden. Amending what is taken to be an absence due to involuntary ignorance and/or willful neglect, an important part of Canadian constructions of identity, viz. the "Black Tile in the Mosaic" (Winks 1997, 470), has to be (re-) inserted. In order to do so, Hill reveals the supposed misconceptions *and*, importantly, provides an alternative conception. It will be a major concern of this study to delineate the ways in which Hill both reveals/refutes the lopsided model and offers/implements a counter-model.⁴

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- 3 As Birgit Neumann rightly observes, Canadian literature has extensively dealt with the connection of memory and identity: "Dass zahlreiche dieser Werke [referring to a list of six novels] mit dem General Governor's Award [sic], Kanadas wichtigstem Literaturpreis, ausgezeichnet worden sind, zeigt, dass die Themen Erinnerung und Identität in Kanada zu einem Kulturthema ersten Ranges avanciert sind: [...]" (Neumann 2005, 10) Incidentally, however, only one (instead of the 'numerous' suggested) out of the six novels she lists has indeed received the Governor General's Award. Yet, in regard to African-Canadian literature, there has in fact been a significant increase in critical acclaim; accordingly, Hill remarks that "it's wonderful to see how African Canadian literature has exploded in recent years. Just look at the awards!" (Hill 2006, 133) In fact, Black Canadian involvement in the Governor General's Award (jury members and/or finalists) has risen from zero before 1990 to 34 until 2007 alone. See the appendix for a diagram of African-Canadian jury members, finalists and winners of the Governor General's Award, the Giller Prize and CBC's Canada Reads between 1990 and 2007. Revealingly, Black Canadian poetry has largely dominated critical reception here as well.
 - 4 It should have become obvious by now that, strictly speaking, qualifiers like "supposed", "alleged" or "perceived" ought to be added to most remarks pertaining to the "perceived" lopsided constructions of identity. This is not only impractical but superfluous. Though I often tend to agree with Hill's assessments as well as with points made by other African-Canadian authors (such as cited above), I strive to *describe* a stance while not necessarily *taking* one. While there is no such thing as a disinterested theory or fully objective scholarship, I am not pursuing a political or even ideological agenda here.

(Con-) Texts

Two out of the three novels Lawrence Hill has published to date will be at the center of interest in the literary analyses provided in chapters four, five and six of this thesis. Hill's first novel, *Some Great Thing* (1992) will be used comparatively (for instance in section 6.2.1., "Authorship"), yet there will be no separate chapter dedicated to Hill's debut as it is largely concerned with contemporary matters, such as Francophone minority rights in Manitoba, whereas the two works dealt with in depth here can unanimously be classified as historical writing – the main interest here. Comments on other fictional works by African-Canadian authors, e.g. George Elliott Clarke's libretto *Beatrice Chancy* (1999), his novel *George and Rue* (2005), or Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* (2002)⁵ will be interspersed throughout this study. Moreover, (references to) poems will be used to illustrate certain points on occasion, thus underlining the pervasiveness of certain issues in African-Canadian literature irrespective of its concrete genre.⁶

In terms of secondary literature, there is a significant chasm between studies focusing on social or cultural aspects in general and literature in particular. As for the first category, a substantial number of works exist.⁷ These surveys usually take the form of collections, often including one or two essays on literature as well, but largely concentrating on other issues. In terms of studies dedicated to African-Canadian literature specifically, their number is far more limited (back in 1997, Peter Hudson for instance went so far as proclaiming a "critical wasteland for African Canadian literature"; 5). The situation has improved, partly by sidestepping

5 For some authors and scholars, first names will be used in addition to last names in order to avoid confusion (e.g. Austin / George Elliott Clarke, Aleida / Jan Assmann).

6 The research interest leading to the present thesis in fact originated in African-Canadian poetry. Based on an annotated bibliography of more than seventy-five poems concerned with the collective memory of slavery and/or genealogy, many of the working hypotheses informing this study have actually been derived from an exploration of Black Canadian poetry. It should be noted that the present study is limited to an Anglophone African-Canadian context alone; the claims made here thus apply to Black Canadian literature *in English* exclusively.

7 A provisional and partial (pun intended) list includes early collections such as Dionne Brand's *Rivers Have Sources* (1986; some titles in this list are abbreviated) or *Bread out of Stone* (1994; her latest non-fiction collection *A Map to the Door of no Return*, 2002), *We're Rooted Here* by Peggy Bristow et al. (1994), Marlene NourbeSe Philip's influential *Frontiers* (1992) as well as her (lesser known) *Showing Grit* (1993). Also by Philip: *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (1997). Cecil Foster's *A Place Called Heaven* (1996) is among the first key collections *not* to be authored/edited by African-Canadian *women* writers. Foster, who is also a novelist, followed his 1996 essays with *Where Race Doesn't Matter* (2005) and *Blackness and Modernity* (2007). Althea Prince's *Being Black* (2001) combines minor elaborations on the literary scene with essays of a more general nature. *Talking about Identity* (2001), though not being limited to Black Canada, offers some useful articles, including "Zebra", by Lawrence Hill. Rinaldo Walcott's *Rude* (2000) and *Black Like Who?* (2nd ed., 2003) comprise thoughts on literature to a certain extent, but not primarily; the same applies to collections by Charmaine and Camille Nelson (*Racism, Eh?*, 2004) or David Divine (*Multiple Lenses*, 2007).

established venues such as mainstream literary magazines, essay collections and monographs (of which there exist next to none).⁸ Instead, introductions to several anthologies provide a good source of information, e.g. George Elliott Clarke's various collections (1991, 1992a, 1997, 2008a), Janet Sears's anthology of African-Canadian drama (2000/2003), Donna Bailey Nurse's collection *Revival* (2006b), or Wayde Compton's *Bluesprint* (2001).

While individual papers on Black Canadian literature have slowly begun to make their way into literary magazines as well, special editions still offer the greatest wealth of useful articles (e.g. *Westcoast* 22, 1997 or *Canadian Literature* 182, 2004). H. Nigel Thomas's valuable *Why We Write* (2006) assembles interviews with fifteen African-Canadian writers. Likewise, Donna Bailey Nurse's *What's a Black Critic to do?* (2003) not only offers almost two dozen very brief profiles of African-Canadian writers and an equal number of short reviews but half a dozen interviews with Black Canadian Writers as well. By now, African-Canadian literature has also secured a spot in most literary histories (cf. for a German context e.g. Lutz 2005 or the brief comments in Banita 2008). The one volume still dominating the literary scene, however, is George Elliott Clarke's 2002 *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* [2002a]. By reversing the ratio of cultural/social and literary studies found in other collections, Clarke's assemblage of essays published between 1991 and 2001 provides the most comprehensive view on African-Canadian literature to date. Moreover, the "Africana Canadiana" bibliography annexed to Clarke's own extensive writings offers an encompassing list of Black Canadian publications from 1785 onwards; Clarke has thus created an indispensable means for any scholarly research in the field.

Structure

The present study is structured into four main parts: after an introduction to the theoretical framework and a short survey of African-Canadian history, a chapter on the theoretical underpinnings of Lawrence Hill's fiction is provided before the in-depth literary analyses, which constitute the bulk of this thesis, are presented.

In chapter two, "Theoretical Framework", a brief examination of the developments in the field of theorizing collective memory (going from the 1920s models by Maurice Halbwachs through contemporary theories by Aleida and Jan Assmann) is followed by a description of the working model employed in this study. This chapter is largely of a synoptic nature; I will not be concerned with developing new theoretical concepts but with adapting

8 One of the reasons for engaging in this study is the existing lack of scholarship in the field. *African-Canadian Theatre*, edited by Maureen Moynagh (2005a), provides a useful, though short, introduction to the genre of drama; G. E. Clarke's writings are wide in scope and substantially cover African literature (poetry in particular). In a majority of further studies, female African-Canadian poets figure most prominently, e.g. Dionne Brand, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, and Claire Harris. As for Hill's *Any Known Blood*, only some short pieces have been published (cf. the respective chapter of this thesis as well as Harris 2004), while for the hugely successful *The Book of Negroes*, no detailed studies are available to date.

existing ones to the given literary field. Consequently, the working model used here comprises modifications and alterations, but no novel conceptions *per se*.

Chapter three, “The Black Presence in Canada”, consists of an outline of the history of Blacks in Canada, focusing on two aspects particularly salient for the discussion of Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* and *Any Known Blood*: the history of slavery in Canada as well as refugee and fugitive slaves arriving from the US either on the Underground Railroad to Ontario or as Black Loyalists sailing to Nova Scotia. As the primary interest lies in the historical dimension itself, there will be no extensive discussion of the contemporary Black presence in Canada (see on this aspect e.g. the collections listed in footnote 7). A bare minimum of historical background is necessary, however, to assess the historical veracity of the two novels discussed in depth in chapters five and six.

A general introduction to Lawrence Hill’s oeuvre is provided in chapter four, supplemented by some very brief remarks on his biography. Since Hill has included extensive autobiographical details in *Black Berry*, *Sweet Juice*, it is superfluous to comment at length on his life here. Interdependencies between his biography and his fictional writing will be pointed out, however, in the respective analyses. As Hill uses the term ‘faction’ to describe his own writing, a brief survey of this term in literary criticism is given, followed by an examination of the ways in which Hill conceives of this notion. Hill’s writing (in fact, there is a slight focus on *The Book of Negroes* in this section, while both *Any Known Blood* and fictions by other authors are included as well) is subsequently compared to the criteria identifying historiographic metafiction as conceptualized by Linda Hutcheon. The aim of this comparison is to clarify the mode/s in which Hill writes; in how far, for instance, do Hill and other African-Canadian writers share historiographic metafiction’s questioning stance regarding the possibility of a ‘truthful’ rendition of history? The criteria of a further generic category, Barbara Foley’s documentary novel, are then applied to Hill’s fictions in order to find out whether Foley’s model might possibly offer a more fruitful explanation of Hill’s mode of writing. In the course of the generic analysis, it will become clear *how* and *why* Hill writes in the mode he calls faction.

The *what*, i.e. the actual content of Hill’s fictions, will be examined more closely in chapters five and six. In fact, both chapters are structured in a parallel way, both offering a deductive approach to *The Book of Negroes* and *Any Known Blood*, respectively. After commenting on the (narrative) structure of the novels and briefly summarizing their plots (“Preliminaries”), chapters five and six both proceed with a section on “Narrative, Memory, Authenticity”. In these sections, I will look at the way memories are, narratively, presented in the two novels.

For *The Book of Negroes*, the decisive structuring device will be a comparison with the (Neo-) slave narrative. By defining three basic aspects (composition, content, goals), I will examine in how far Hill complies to the mold of the classic fugitive slave narrative, where he diverges and why he does so. For *Any Known Blood*, the section “Narrative, Memory, Authenticity” is mainly concerned with the ways in which Hill provides ‘fictional authenticity’ for his narrative; questions of the archive, of fictionality, written and (or *versus*?) oral history,

reliability and the passing on of memories (over generations as well as in fiction) are addressed here.

The third main section in both chapters deals with “Movements”, indicating not only the actual movements of the respective novels’ protagonists but the changes in memory constructions Hill’s novels promote. In line with the deductive approach of chapters five and six, these sections concretize what has been examined in the preceding chapters: having established the *why* and the *how*, these discussions provide the *what*, i.e. they focus on the concrete (memory) constructions provided by Hill. Close readings of key aspects of both novels reveal the alternative collective memory suggested to amend the perceived misrepresentations. In regard to *The Book of Negroes*, such issues as the (forgotten) history of Canadian slavery and indenture are dealt with; the traumatic Middle Passage is considered, and, serving as a conclusion of sorts, the Canadian perspective is examined: has Canada indeed been the Canaan for ‘freed’ slaves it is so consistently taken for? For *Any Known Blood*, in turn, the major issues arise out of its dual structure as a Canadian/US-American intergenerational tale. First dealing with its embedded slave narrative, the novel’s take on the Cane family’s migrations back and forth across the 49th parallel is considered as a construction offering new perspectives on the porous nature of this boundary. Importantly, however, these movements are also read as a stringent and forceful comment on the differences in terms of the two North American nations’ approaches towards race both past and present. What emerges from the discussions provided in chapters five and six is thus an account and an explanation of the collective memory construction offered by Hill’s novels; a construction, I claim, which may serve as a corrective for lopsided hegemonic memory constructions and as such is representative of a forceful general trend in African-Canadian literature as a whole.

Following a general conclusion (chapter seven) and the list of works cited (chapter eight), the last chapter consists of an appendix comprising two interviews: the first one with Lawrence Hill, conducted shortly after the publication of *The Book of Negroes* in 2007, the second one with George Elliott Clarke, conducted in 2004.⁹

9 While the latter conversation indeed took place quite a while ago (seven years prior to the writing of this study) and was in fact conducted while I was pursuing a different trajectory of this project, I believe Clarke’s comments are both as topical and as noteworthy today as they were in 2004.

A note on terminology

What's in a Name?

*I always thought I was Negro
till I was Coloured,
West Indian, till I was told
that Columbus was wrong
in thinking he was west of India –
that made me Caribbean.
And throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s,
I was sure I was Black.
Now Black is passé,
African de rigueur, [sic]
and me, a chameleon of labels.*

(Philip 1994)

Throughout this study, I will categorize people under certain labels, such as 'African-Canadian/s', 'Black Canadian/s', 'Black North American/s', 'Africadian/s', 'Black/s', 'White/s'. These categories will not mean a lot to some readers but will strongly reverberate with others. The latter may agree with my choice of terminology or protest that I am, either intentionally or out of neglect, lumping together a diverse set of people under a common label to which they might not even agree.¹⁰ On a deeper level, this question is an issue of colonial posture or postcolonial endeavor. It is also a comment on essentialism, nationalism, unity and diversity. In the following, I will plead to be *d'accord* with most of the contentions made by George Elliott Clarke in the introductory section of his essay collection *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*. He maintains that

[i]n all of these essays, I assume a modicum of *essentialism*, so that I am enabled – empowered – to discuss 'Africadian' and 'African-Canadian' literature with a fair (or black?) conviction that 'Africadians' and 'African Canadians' have *some* corporeal, 'real' existence. For, if these peoples do not have some coherency in the world, this book is so much nothing. (Clarke 2002a, 15)

Clarke, a noted scholar and seventh-generation Canadian, admits to a "modicum of *essentialism*" in order to be able to speak about a literary field delimited by its authors' race. The term 'race' itself is of course debatable (should it not have been superseded by 'ethnicity' or other more obviously theoretical concepts long ago?), yet to admit to essentialism is akin to sacri-

10 Cf. Tettey/Puplampu 2005, 6ff. for a thorough discussion of the matter. They distinguish four approaches toward a definition of 'African-Canadian', dismissing all except one as simplistic and/or misleading. What they arrive at, then, is a slightly unwieldy identification of the group to which they turn their attention: "first generation, Black, continental Africans who have immigrated in the last forty years and who have traceable genealogical links to the continent." (ibid., 12) It should be obvious that such an 'exact' definition is significantly too limiting for a study such as the present one. Nor do I agree with Cuder-Domínguez, who argues that "the term 'African Canadian' is thus an umbrella notion that fails to capture – indeed obscures – black-black difference while simultaneously (over?)emphasizing white-black difference." (2003, 70f.)

lege, particularly for someone “[s]chooled in post-colonial theory” such as Clarke (ibid., 13). After all, postcolonial theory is fundamentally concerned with challenging essentialisms and Manichean distinctions. Clarke indeed “hold[s] that African Canada is a conglomeration of many cultures, a spectrum of ethnicities” (ibid., 14), but admits that he “must be ‘essentialist’ enough to believe that an entity describable as ‘African Canada’ exists” (ibid.) in order to be able to depict a literature that is necessarily shaped by the writer’s “communal affiliation”, of which “no writer ever does *completely*” write independently (ibid.). The writers labeled by Clarke as “African(-)Canadian”, several of whom I will deal with *en passant* in this thesis, in fact come from a diverse background. Should not literary criticism take into account this diversity instead of glossing it over with a label such as “African-Canadian”? Or, worse, with a label such as “Black Canadian”, indicating an essentialist, racial collective? Yes, the background of writers such as Dionne Brand (who immigrated from Trinidad and Tobago in the 1960s and was raised in Toronto), mixed-race Lawrence Hill, whose parents came from the United States to Canada, and Clarke himself (a seventh-generation Canadian who grew up in the North End of Halifax) do merit differential treatment. But their oeuvres, to the extent that they reflect part of a common experience, allow us to deal with them as a collective.

In postcolonial terms, this approach could be filed under ‘strategic essentialism’: being aware of the terminology’s and the conception’s grave flaws, ‘race’ is accepted temporarily as a stable marker in order to make further theorization (or action) possible at all.¹¹ This notion does not grow out of any assumptions about the biological determinant of race. The mere coincidence of skin pigmentation of course cannot possibly determine the categorization of a literary syllabus. Race, that much is obvious, is useful as an analytical category only if taken as a socio-cultural concept. This is the reason why I capitalize the term ‘Black’: to signal its nature of being a construct, a theorem rather than a ‘given’ category. Consequently, I also capitalize the term ‘White’ – after all, if race is a social construct, then this certainly applies to all categories involved.¹²

11 Cf. Spivak 1996 (she devised the concept in the mid-1980s) and Hall 1996b; also cf. Adams 2001, 242; Barker 2004, 189; Gordon 2006, 19f.; Morton 2007, 126f.

12 I will use the terms ‘Black Canadian’, ‘African-Canadian’ or ‘Black’ interchangeably. This is often due to stylistic or other pragmatic reasons; if I were to describe Aminata Diallo, *The Book of Negroes*’ protagonist, other than ‘Black’, I would continually be facing questions such as, When did she become an ‘African American’? After the Middle Passage? How long does she need to have lived in Canada to be called an ‘African-Canadian’? A Year? Ten? Does she become simply an ‘African’ again when she temporarily returns to her native Africa? Or does she stay an African throughout, even though not having spent more than a mere fraction of her life there? Calling Aminata a ‘Black’ person, however, is indicative of her social position in a slave society while avoiding Gordian elaborations on the questions above. Note that I will use the hyphenated version ‘African-Canadian/s’ throughout as currently, the hyphen is used more often than not in the respective literature. Besides, I find the optical connective intriguing in terms of the notion’s underpinning. In contrast, in my spelling of ‘African American’ I will not make use of the hyphen, as this variant seems to be more acceptable at the moment. No distinctions of ‘mosaic’/‘salad bowl’ vs. ‘melting pot’ are implied in this decision. On occasion, I will also use the term ‘Africadian’, which has been coined by George Elliott Clarke by amalgamating ‘African’ and ‘Acadian’, hence basically designating Black Nova Scotians.

Skin color thus does not determine anything *per se*; it does, however, elicit certain social schemata, which have greatly varied over the course of time and have led to different collective experiences, as Clarke argues: “Yet, five centuries of Eurocentric imperialism have made it impossible for those of us descending from Africa [...] to act as if we are pure, raceless beings.” (ibid., 17) Clarke defines what Stuart Hall has called the “politically and culturally constructed” nature of race (cf. Clarke 2002a, 16; Hall 1996b, 166) as a set of shared *experiences, histories and cultures* (cf. Clarke’s basis: Hall 1996b, 169f.). These “particular experiences” (ibid.) today may consist of minor facets, such as authors being grouped as ‘Black Canadian writers’ or ‘African-Canadian authors’ on many bookshelves across Canadian bookstores and libraries. They do, however, also include major chunks, which encompass the experience of slavery,¹³ segregation and disillusionment, and which make up the collective memory of a group. “Five centuries of imperialism” have thus neither been forgotten nor superseded. Instead, they have left us with a category such as ‘African-Canadian’, a category which we might wish to deconstruct (‘decolonize’) one day – giving prominence to a notion Clarke cites D’Alfonso with: “in the end, it is the individual who will count most” (Clarke 2002a, 14) – but whose existence cannot be ‘wished away’ or replaced terminologically or analytically by notions of ethnicity or difference.¹⁴

In the course of this work, I will maintain that, on the contrary, African-Canadian authors insist on a certain amount of unity and on a certain sense of essentialism; again, in terms of the postcolonial project, this essentialism must be viewed as a strategic one, positioning the Black subject, viz. the cultural ‘Other’ in a predominantly White settler society, as a largely homogenized group involved in active struggle against a whitewashed hegemonic discourse. In an interview, George Elliott Clarke affirms the claim that a distinct level of homogenization or unity has to be established in order to be effective, and that this unity can largely be based on the shared history noted by Hall:

In Canada, there are so many things that divide us [African-Canadians] that we do have to lay claim to some kind of common history in order to have some grounds for unity. And so that common history does go through slavery, does go through colonialism, and of course the experience of racism today in Canada. So, partly, too, remembering of this trauma is, again, a way of building some intellectual unity among our very disparately originated communities. (Clarke, Appendix 320)

13 DuBois holds that “the physical bond [of race] is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; [...]” (1984, 117). For a discussion of the term ‘slave’ as a possible “misnomer” for African-Canadians’ ancestors, cf. Prince 2001, 39ff.

14 “The fact is ‘black’ has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. [...] These are ‘imaginary communities’ – and not a bit less real because they are also symbolic.” (Hall 1996a, 116)

2. Theoretical Framework

Just as public or national myth can weigh heavily on private tradition and experience, it particularly threatens those of minorities. So the collective memories of minorities need continual active expression if they are to survive being absorbed or smothered by the historical traditions of the majority. (Samuel/Thompson 1990, 18)

It is not farfetched to claim that the term ‘collective memory’ – including its variations as ‘cultural memory’, ‘national memory’ or ‘group memory’ – has for several decades gained much prominence and is on the verge of becoming an inflationary ingredient of public discourse, particularly in mass media discourse.¹⁵ At the same time, research on the specific mechanisms, functions and malfunctions of memory, both individual and collective, has thrived. From the perspective of German-speaking academia, but by far not limited to it, the seminal work(s) of Aleida and Jan Assmann have greatly contributed to this surge in scholarly interest. Firmly based on Maurice Halbwachs and going through Aby Warburg, Pierre Nora, and others, Aleida and Jan Assmann have fine-tuned the concept of collective memory and made it available as an analytical tool in literary analysis. The particular merit of the theory of collective memory is its linking of the ever-present but more often than not slippery usage of ‘identity’ to psychological, socio-psychological, and sociological findings. The study of identity is thus substantiated by theoretical concepts based on science, not mere musing. This interdisciplinary approach enables a multi-faceted and mutually enhancing perspective on phenomena that might otherwise remain elusive. An inflationary term in publicized discourse, collective memory thus proves to be a valuable analytical tool. Accordingly, research on collective memory has become a well-established section of scholarly interest.

15 The weekly *TIME Magazine* alone has used the terms ‘collective’ or ‘cultural memory’ well over 1,200 times since 1924 – more than half of the instances have appeared within the last twenty years (cf. *TIME Magazine* archives at <<http://search.time.com>>).

2.1. Basic Principles of Collective Memory Theory: Maurice Halbwachs

2.1.1. Maurice Halbwachs's conception of collective memory

Theories of collective memory generally take their initial starting point in the works of Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). A student of Henri Bergson and Émile Durkheim, Halbwachs studied in France and Germany, taught at the Sorbonne, in Strasbourg and Chicago. Under the Nazi reign in Germany, he was deported to the KZ Buchenwald, where he died during the final period of World War II.¹⁶ Halbwachs sketches the ways in which individual memory/memories are affected and, indeed, shaped by their carriers' social surroundings. Still a methodological step away from declaring collective memory an externalized mode of memory, Halbwachs presents this basic assumption at the outset of *La mémoire collective* (which was, though unfinished, posthumously published in 1950) in what has become the quintessential and probably most-quoted metaphor for socially affected memories, the so-called 'walk through London'.¹⁷ In this passage, Halbwachs explains how the individual, when processing new information and new impressions, is guided by his or her friends and acquaintances – even though they are not physically present. Walking through London, Halbwachs tells us, he recalls seeing the architecture as if walking with his architect friend, visiting the museums as if accompanied by an artist friend, engaging in imaginary dialogues.¹⁸

Das bedeutet, daß wir in Wirklichkeit niemals allein sind. Es ist nicht notwendig, daß andere Menschen anwesend sind, die sich materiell von uns unterscheiden: denn wir tragen stets eine Anzahl unverwechselbarer Personen mit und in uns. (Halbwachs 1967, 2)

The impressions that Halbwachs collects are influenced by his social surroundings – friends, family, colleagues, what he calls the social milieu¹⁹ – even though one might deem his solitary walk through London an entirely individual experience. Halbwachs thus demonstrates that at a very early stage in the process of re-collection (the earliest possible stage, i.e.: the collection), our perception is influenced by others, causing our apparently individual memories to

16 For more extensive biographical information, cf. for example Halbwachs 1966, 11ff., Halbwachs 1967, VI ff., or the introduction to Halbwachs 1992.

17 Cf. J. Assmann 2005, 70ff.; Echterhoff 2005, 254f.; Echterhoff/Saar 2002, 19; Erll 2002; Erll 2004, 7f.; Erll 2005, 259; Hobi 1988, 27f.; Neumann 2005, 124f.; Nießeler 2006, 143f.

18 Halbwachs engages in what has later on been dubbed 'memory talk' in terms of how children in particular learn to structure their memories dialogically (cf. Welzer 2008, 96ff.; Markowitsch/Welzer 2005, 21; Neumann 2005, 57, and the essays in Schacter/Scarry 2001, Parts II and III, particularly Nelson, 266).

19 Halbwachs's expression *milieu* not only denotes social surroundings, but also represents the rough equivalent of later conceptions of 'memory groups' and 'memory cultures'. His *milieux* are astonishingly flexible in size: Though the immediate family is his prime example, he extends the scope of *milieux* up to the level of nation-state (cf. Halbwachs 1967, 35).

be shaped by social factors. Halbwachs thus assumes that there can be no such thing as a completely individual memory (except for dreams, cf. section 2.1.3., p. 31), as individuals will always employ certain modes of perception – selection, interpretation²⁰ – that are socially given. Encoding is thus a social phenomenon. The same holds true for the decoding process, viz. the actual act of remembering. In recalling events of the past, Halbwachs claims, we can rely on the memories of others; as they have had a hand in encoding the recollections, they are ‘present’ in the process of re-membering as well:

So gehören Begebenheiten und Kenntnisse, die wir uns am mühelosesten ins Gedächtnis zurückrufen, dem Gemeingut zumindest eines oder einiger Milieus an. In diesem Maße sind sie also ‘aller Welt’ zu eigen; und weil wir uns auf das Gedächtnis des anderen stützen können, sind wir jederzeit und wann immer wir wollen fähig, sie zurückzurufen. (Halbwachs 1967, 29)

It is through this social influence on the processes of en- and decoding that collective memory comes into being. The real novelty of Halbwachs’s concept, however, lies in the fact that he, in a subsequent step, sees collective memory as an externalized memory, detached from its individual carriers in principle, though not in biological actuality. Memories cannot be physically detached from their carriers; without a neuronal structure to provide a bio-physical storage device, memories are lost. However, collective memory is externalized in that it constitutes a collective, a pool of recollections that encompasses, but not conflates with, the individual memories: “Das kollektive Gedächtnis andererseits umfaßt die individuellen Gedächtnisse, aber verschmilzt nicht mit ihnen.” (Halbwachs 1967, 35) In contrast to the individual neurological memory, collective memory is thus conceptualized as an abstraction.²¹ Due to its conceptual, though not actual, detachment from individual neurological structures offered by human brains, collective memory – devised as an ‘interior dialogue’ with a particular social milieu – presents the individual with the possibility to integrate into his own recollection the memory of events he has not in fact witnessed in person: as Jan Assmann phrases it, only individuals ‘have’ memory, but it is always coined collectively (cf. J. Assmann 1992,

20 Halbwachs describes the process of perception/encoding as the use of “Instrumente, die durch die Worte und Vorstellungen gebildet werden, die das Individuum nicht erfunden und die es seinem Milieu entliehen hat” (Halbwachs 1967, 35; ‘instruments created by words and conceptions that the individual did not generate but copied from his *milieu*’); the collective framing of individual memory includes particular types of “Denk- und Erfahrungsströme” (Halbwachs 1967, 50), which shape the perception as well as the structure of the encoding and decoding of memories. In *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (*Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, Halbwachs 1966), Halbwachs describes what he later calls milieus as *cadres sociaux*, social framings, first referring to one’s social surroundings in terms of people, then slightly shifting focus to include what today is thought of as cognitive schemata. *Cadres sociaux* thus designate the social influences on people’s cognitive patterns by socially pre-formed cognitive structures such as modes of perception, of encoding or decoding/interpreting.

21 It must be added that Halbwachs himself did not subscribe to theories of neuronal storage of memories; in *Das Gedächtnis und seine Bedingungen* (1966, French original published in 1925), he explicitly dissociates himself from theories that would describe ‘processes in the brain’ (“Hirnprozesse”) in terms of neurological activity (Halbwachs 1966, 21f.).

36). The ability to participate in ‘second-hand experiences’ is one of the crucial (and, in terms of the literary analysis presented here, most fruitful) tenets of Halbwachs’s theory. In the following passage from *La mémoire collective* (Halbwachs 1967, 35), Halbwachs designates certain collective memories to a nation-state, arguing that he is able to share these memories via media transmission:

Im Laufe meines Lebens ist die nationale Gruppe, der ich angehöre, der Schauplatz einer bestimmten Anzahl von Ereignissen gewesen, von denen ich behaupte, daß ich mich an sie erinnere, die ich jedoch nur aus Zeitungen kenne oder durch die Zeugnisse jener, die unmittelbar in sie verwickelt gewesen sind. Sie nehmen im Gedächtnis der Nation einen bestimmten Raum ein. Aber ich habe ihnen nicht selbst beigewohnt. Wenn ich sie wiederaufleben lasse, bin ich genötigt, mich völlig auf das Gedächtnis anderer zu verlassen, das hier nicht das meine ergänzt oder verstärkt, sondern das die alleinige Quelle dessen ist, was ich mir von ihm gegenwärtigen will. (Halbwachs 1967, 35f.)

This particular section is of intense interest because of four elements Halbwachs introduces here: 1) A milieu such as a nation-state accumulates a collective memory that serves as a ‘pool’ for its individual members.²² 2) In order to participate in a particular collective memory, one does not need to have had the actual, first-hand factual experience. 3) Collective memory may be transmitted through media. Halbwachs explicitly names the two most significant media resources: oral and written transmission. The usefulness of this conception for literary studies should be obvious, as Halbwachs assigns to written texts the ability to transmit memories and to ‘pool’ these memories at certain levels of milieus.²³ Literature may thus serve as a reservoir of recollections that are actualized at the level of individual readers in an ‘as-if’ situation, ‘as if’ he had experienced these memories himself. 4) The term ‘reinvigorate’ already hints at a notion that is essential to Halbwachs’s entire conception: reconstruction.²⁴ The act of remembering is an actual re-remembering, an assembling anew in a possibly new shape. Memory thus ceases to be a faithful reproduction of neurological inscriptions on a

22 It needs to be emphasized, however, that Halbwachs indeed *focuses* on significantly smaller milieus such as the family, the working environment, social classes etc. Specifically, the groups situated at the level *between* person and nation-state are those with the most immediate impact on a person’s memory constructions (cf. Halbwachs 1967, 65).

23 It is interesting to note that literature is occasionally neglected as a medium of (collective) memory transmission even by those who use it; Afua Cooper, an African-Canadian scholar and author, for instance writes on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the Black presence in Canada: “How do we remember this 400-year history? What do we choose to remember? And how do we memorialize it? I would argue that there are at least two ways in which to do so. First, through the vehicle of public history: museums, exhibits, historic sites, and monuments, and websites; and second, through the medium of academic history: research, writing, publishing, and teaching.” (Cooper 2007, 11) Apparently, literature is subsumed here under “at least”.

24 As early as 1925, Halbwachs claims that memories are not ‘retained’, but ‘reconstructed, starting from the present’ rather than from the past itself (Halbwachs 1966, 22); as our perspective changes over time, ‘we may not claim that our memories have remained the same, even if they seem familiar’ (ibid., 126).

‘mental hard-drive’. Instead, the pure mimesis gives way to reconstruction, variation and *imaginatio*:

Wir haben es oft wiederholt: die Erinnerung ist in sehr weitem Maße eine Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit mit Hilfe von der Gegenwart entliehenen Gegebenheiten und wird im übrigen durch andere, zu früheren Zeiten unternommene Rekonstruktionen vorbereitet, aus denen das Bild von ehemals schon verändert hervorgegangen ist. (Halbwachs 1967, 55f.)

Of course, the reconstructive, creative and malleable character of memories is taken for granted in current scientific approaches. Halbwachs, however, must be credited with realizing for the first time that in addition to the variability of individual memory (which, through the mere fact of forgetfulness, has been commonplace experience), collective memory is a construct as well, governed by current conditions. The act of remembering is thus shaped to a large degree by recalling an individual’s or group’s present situation (cf. Halbwachs 1966, 126). In the literary analysis, this notion will play a salient role, as current needs (of political assertion, identity negotiations, agenda setting issues etc.) govern the ways in which the authors devise the memories they present. In addition to the constructiveness and the influence of the present on the construction of the past as we recall it, Halbwachs realized that the act of remembering is a recursive construction. Not only are memories modified in the act of en- and decoding; they are altered in the act of re-encoding as well, which is to say that in the process of remembering, a recollection is altered once more. Halbwachs thus postulates the influence of past reconstructions on present reconstructions. This reciprocity adds further layers of influences on memories, so that recollections receive what would in software programming be called a version history: an event, person, emotion etc. is added to the (collective) memory, being shaped by the social framework that exerts its influence through the socially conditioned modes of perception and encoding (version 1.0 of that memory). Upon recollection, the memory is altered again – shaped by the social framework as well as the current needs of the recalling person and/or his social surroundings²⁵ (version 1.1). By ‘updating’ the memory to version 1.1, the memory is altered and re-encoded in its altered form. Consequently, future recollections will draw on version 1.1 of this memory, reconstructing it anew and again adjust it to the given situation (version 1.2). A memory recalled many times thus undergoes a series of recursive changes, each modification being based upon the previous adaptation.

2.1.2. *Collective memory vs. historical memory*

Aus allem Vorausgegangenem geht hervor, daß das kollektive Gedächtnis nicht mit der Geschichte zu verwechseln ist [...]. Das bedeutet, daß die Geschichte im allgemeinen an dem Punkt beginnt, an dem die Tradition aufhört – in einem Augenblick, in dem das soziale Gedächtnis erlischt und sich zersetzt. (Halbwachs 1967, 66)

25 “Die Gruppen, denen ich zu den verschiedenen Epochen angehöre, sind nicht dieselben. Ich betrachte indessen die Vergangenheit aus ihrer Sicht.” (Halbwachs 1967, 59)

Halbwachs contrasts two modes of memory: Social or collective memory²⁶ and historical memory (or, in an alternative phrasing, ‘living and written history’, Halbwachs 1967, 50). While social memory is devised as a ‘continuous stream’ (ibid., 68) of memories passed down from eyewitnesses and transmitted as long as the group considers them to be of relevance, historical memory consists of ‘dead’ recollections devoid of a group of carriers (also cf. J. Assmann 1992, 44). Historical memory thus requires different media to be stored in, as it has left the collective memory and the individual neuronal structures offered by its group. Consequently, historical memory necessitates a reification, an objectification most often – but of course not exclusively – provided by written documents. It is self-evident that memories shared by a group do not necessitate reification; after all, these memories are ‘alive’ within their collective. Equally, social memory does not need to rely on specialists to manage their reservoir of memories, while historical memory has authorities, professionals, chroniclers, managers of its pools: historians, librarians, scholars. Furthermore, historical memory is not limited to a certain group, its thrust and audience are general ones. Collective memory, in contrast, is per Halbwachs’s definition restricted to one particular group, as ‘every collective memory has as its carrier a group limited in time and space’.²⁷

A problem posed by this tenet, however, is the possibility of memory fossilization, i.e. the transformation of collective memory into historical memory whenever memories are deemed irrelevant by a certain group or their personal connection to these memories is broken. The latter case in Halbwachs’s conception imposes a temporal limit on the durability of collective memory: collective memories have a validity of well under a century – and often significantly less.²⁸ Jan Assmann, as will be discussed later on, modifies this tenet to arrive at a concept of ‘communicative memory’ that requires direct witnessing by at least a number of group members, after which a ‘floating gap’ severs the group from a memory; Assmann, however, includes the possibility of media transmission of collective memory beyond the existence of direct witnesses. In Halbwachs’s model, in contrast, collective memory withers away with the death of the witnesses. This notion contradicts earlier statements that allow for a media transmission of collective memory and thus circumvent the limitations of direct oral transmission by eyewitnesses.²⁹ Consequently, a modified version of Halbwachs’s conception

26 Halbwachs employs both terms, though “collective memory” is the prevalent one.

27 “Jedes kollektive Gedächtnis hat eine zeitlich und räumlich begrenzte Gruppe zum Träger.” (Halbwachs 1967, 73)

28 “Das kollektive Gedächtnis dagegen sieht die Gruppe von innen und während eines Zeitabschnitts, der die durchschnittliche Dauer des menschlichen Lebens nicht überschreitet, der sogar meist kürzer ist.” (Halbwachs 1967, 76)

29 Halbwachs is inconsistent in this regard. Having proclaimed the transformation of collective memory into historical memory after a time period of under a generation (Halbwachs 1967, 76), he acknowledges a ‘religious collective memory’ that goes back to ‘events far removed in time’, explicitly referring to Jesus on the biblical Mount of Olives (ibid., 159). In *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* (1966), ‘religious memory’ is set apart as an exception regarding the longevity and unchangeable nature of its memories (259ff.). *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte* (1941; Halbwachs 2003) comprises lengthy investigations into myths

must be applied to literary analyses lest it be restricted to the analysis of contemporary works (in its literal sense). It is largely the merit of Aleida and Jan Assmann to have overcome this impasse and to have incorporated the media aspects of collective memory in a way that renders it effective for literary analyses.

In other respects, Halbwachs's theory is applicable as it is – even though Halbwachs himself was surely unaware of some of its merits in regard to literary analyses. Concepts such as plurality of voices and polyphonic memories are compatible with his theory, as he acknowledges the existence of a plurality of memory groups ('memory cultures' in current terminology): "Es gibt in der Tat mehrere kollektive Gedächtnisse." (Halbwachs 1967, 71; also cf. A. Assmann 1999, 131) Halbwachs also unequivocally includes the possibility of sub- or counter-memories; instead of a monolithic national memory,³⁰ Halbwachs explicitly allows for competitive memory versions to exist within a (national) society. In the early 20th century, Halbwachs certainly did not have today's multicultural ethnic plurality in mind as he drafted his thoughts on competing memory versions, yet this aspect can easily be accommodated by his theoretical postulation that memory groups within a country may either assimilate into other memory groups or retain their distinct character;³¹ in the latter case, this subgroup's reactions will differ from that of other groups, as it has its own bases and modes of interpretation:

Auch das [erinnerte] Ereignis geschieht im Raum, und es kann sein, daß alle Gruppen es wahrnehmen. Wichtig aber ist *die Art*, in der sie es *interpretieren*, der *Sinn*, den sie ihm *geben*. (Halbwachs 1967, 108; emphases mine)

whose origins are removed by thousands of years, thus far exceeding the self-imposed one-lifetime frame. In *La mémoire collective*, however, the inconsistency resurfaces. Also cf. the contradiction (in *La mémoire collective*) between memories transmitted by newspapers but adopted into the personal memory under an 'as-if' situation (Halbwachs 1967, 35) and the contrasting unambiguous confrontation of 'written' and 'living' history (ibid., 50).

- 30 A level on which e.g. Pierre Nora later concentrated, cf. Nora 1997 (introductory); Lenger 2005; P. Schmidt 2004 provides a largely critical perspective.
- 31 "Ein Volk, das ein anderes besiegt, kann das besiegte sich angleichen; dann aber wird es selbst ein anderes Volk oder tritt zumindest in eine neue Phase seines Daseins ein. Wenn der besiegte dem Sieger nicht angeglichen wird, behält jedes der beiden Völker sein eigenes Nationalbewußtsein und reagiert verschiedenartig auf dieselben Ereignisse. Ebenso ist es aber innerhalb eines und desselben Landes, was die religiöse und politische Gesellschaft anbetrifft." (Halbwachs 1967, 109) There is – one is tempted to say: of course – no ethnic component to the subgroups mentioned by Halbwachs. We can safely assume, however, that ethnic and/or racial criteria may either be subsumed under the label of 'political' (taking into account the social constructedness of ethnicity/race) or added as a third category to the existing cleavages of 'political' and 'religious' groups. What Halbwachs – unwittingly – addresses in this paragraph is thus a controversial debate that centers on the question of immigrant societies being characterized as 'melting pots' (suggesting assimilation, "angleichen"), or 'mosaics' (wherein subgroups supposedly retain their distinct character, "eigenes Nationalbewußtsein behalten").

Memory groups (*milieux* in Halbwachs's original terminology) thus differ in their interpretation of events. This is the basis for conflicting memory versions, hegemonic and minority versions of history, the need for agenda-setting and re-negotiations of identity central to the literary analyses provided in chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis. It is of additional salience for later discussions of narrative modes (linear/coherent vs. divergent/incoherent) and postmodern approaches to the construction of the 'self' as a negotiation of discontinuous elements and fractured, competing versions of memory that it is *historical* memory that takes special notice of shifts and fissures in the fabric of memory – such as revolutions, reforms, wars. *Collective* memory, in contrast, seeks to construct coherent versions of the past and avoids the highlighting of structural breaches (cf. Halbwachs 1967, 99f.; 1966, 135f.).³²

Constructions of 'self' of course lead us back to the initial discussion of questions of identity. Collective memory – in analogy to individual memory and individual identity – is taken to be the basis for collective identities. There is no need to elaborate on the strong ties between memory and identity here, as they have been thoroughly discussed from various angles (cf. for instance J. Assmann 1988, Weber 2001). To state the obvious: Without memories, neither individuals nor groups may lay claim to a distinct identity. Groups are constructed by a feeling of closeness, likeness, of ties that bind it – and in opposition to 'others'. Regarding the ties that bind a group and bring a memory group into existence in the first place, Halbwachs states:

In dem Augenblick, in dem die Gruppe auf ihre Vergangenheit zurückblickt, fühlt sie wohl, daß sie dieselbe geblieben ist und wird sich ihrer zu jeder Zeit bewahrten Identität bewußt. (Halbwachs 1967, 74)

A group – strongly personified in this quotation – thus constructs a coherent identity based on the memories its members share.³³

32 “Die ‘Geschichte’ verfährt nach Halbwachs genau umgekehrt wie das kollektive Gedächtnis. Schaut dieses nur auf Ähnlichkeiten und Kontinuität, so nimmt jene nur Differenzen und Diskontinuitäten wahr.“ (J. Assmann 1992, 42)

33 The notion of coherence emphasized before and recurring in this quotation is a significant aspect of Halbwachs's conception (cf. for instance Halbwachs 1967, 114, where he speaks of ‘continuous milieus that have not changed and today are the same as yesterday’. Also cf. Halbwachs 1966, 382: memories are ‘deformed by reconstruction in order to offer greater coherence’). The tendency to ‘streamline’ the collective memory of a group contrasts with attempts to create counter-memories, divergent accounts of history and collective identity and thus leads us into the issue of agenda-setting: different memory versions – each aiming for cohesion and recognition – compete within a superordinate memory culture (cf. section 2.3., “Collective Memory: The Working Model”). Halbwachs himself did not focus on the possibility of competing memory versions of sub-groups, but his theoretical framework does account for these processes.

2.1.3. *Difficulties of Halbwachs's conception*

While the basic conception of collective memory as presented by Maurice Halbwachs may well serve as the basis of a theoretical framework employed in literary study, some aspects require further elaboration and clarification.

Halbwachs's methodological approach, for instance, might be criticized for professing to be more empirical than it actually is. Scholars have pointed out Halbwachs's rootedness in the social and economic sciences (cf. his 1909 PhD thesis in the field of political economy and his 1913 professorial thesis in sociology) and his claim to empirical methods. Halbwachs himself, however, admits to an armchair philosophy approach in *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* ("indem wir entweder uns selbst prüfen oder andere darüber befragen", Halbwachs 1966, 362), yet he qualifies this approach by checking his findings against the experiences made by others ("Möglichkeit der Kontrolle der eigenen durch die Beobachtung der anderen," *ibid.*). Since the 1925 publication of the French original of *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, however, the basic assumptions of Halbwachs's theory have been corroborated by research in the fields of psychology, social psychology and sociology. Some qualifications have been made to the original theoretical construct, as Halbwachs tended, for example, to extend the collective dimension of memory into metaphorical depths.³⁴ Likewise, the offhand equation of personal and collective memory has been criticized by some scholars as lacking a scientific basis.³⁵ Where this is the case, efforts have been made to distinguish those parts that possess analogous forms from those that do not.

A further difficulty arises from Halbwachs's tendency to not clearly distinguish between *socially formed* memories and *externalized* memories. Later theorists have – the difficulties inherent in this distinction notwithstanding – defined the distinguishing features of socially formed individual memory and genuine collective memory more clearly.³⁶ Relying on Halbwachs's conception alone, one would run the risk of collectivizing the entire spectrum of memories, as Halbwachs's terminology is imprecise at times: his use of the term 'collective memory' occasionally refers to externalized as well as socially formed memory; the difficulty, of course, being that there is no such thing as a memory uninfluenced by the social environment, as Halbwachs himself repeatedly points out. Without clarification, there would consequently be no memory *except for* collective memory (the sole exemption from this rule

34 Cf. J. Assmann 1992, 36. In turn, Assmann demonstrates the difficulties of avoiding metaphorical uses by both criticizing the use of the term "Gruppendächtnis" (group memory) (*ibid.*) and simultaneously employing it himself (cf. J. Assmann 1992, 89).

35 This strand of criticism is hardly new; Halbwachs's contemporaries Bergson (his teacher) and Freud perceived memory as an altogether individual process; Marc Bloch (one of Halbwachs's colleagues in Strasbourg) explicitly rejected the collectivization of individual experiences (cf. Erl 2003, 158; J. Assmann 1992, 133).

36 Cf. for example Olick's useful distinction between "collected" and "collective memory" (Olick 1999), which will be employed in my working model as well (also cf. Neumann 2005, 53 and Erl 2005, 250f.).

would be dreams, which Halbwachs defines as the only truly individual memory that we can have, cf. the chapter “Der Traum und die Erinnerungsbilder”, Halbwachs 1966, 25ff.; also cf. J. Assmann 2005, 71f. and Hanke 2001, 58f.).

Another striking difficulty is posed by the fossilization of collective memory, viz. ‘living memory’ (Halbwachs 1967, 50), into historical memory. While Halbwachs is inconsistent on the issue, one line of argument would suggest that collective memory cannot be transmitted by media other than personal contact and oral transmission. Reification by encoding collective memories into other media – writing is Halbwachs’s obvious main choice here – will lead to the ‘death’ of memories, and no subsequent reviving is integrated into his conception. Again, later theorists have dealt with this issue at length, introducing a variety of modifications to straighten out this ‘flaw’.³⁷ The distinction of *Speicher-* vs. *Funktionsgedächtnis*, for instance (cf. A. Assmann 1999, 134), or Jan Assmann’s conception of a “floating gap” (J. Assmann 1992, 51) between communicative and cultural memory (cf. *ibid.*, 56) have been devised to deal with this problem. They facilitate studies of collective memory which are unrestricted by or modify Halbwachs’s one-lifetime limit and the polar opposition between historical and collective memory.

2.2. Contemporary Conceptions and Adaptations

2.2.1. Aleida and Jan Assmann

The conception of cultural memory (“kulturelles Gedächtnis”) devised, supplemented and refined by Aleida and particularly Jan Assmann is commonly identified as the most influential theoretical approach to collective memory in the German-speaking context (cf. Erll 2003, 171). Developing their conception in the late 1980s and largely basing it on the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, the Assmanns have since then produced a wealth of research on collective memory, both on its theoretical aspects and its application in diverse fields, including historical, archaeological and literary studies. Apart from extending the grounds of interoperability between collective memory theory and established scholarly and scientific disciplines, two main aspects distinguish Assmanns’ approach from Halbwachs’s, which otherwise largely functions as a template: first, Assmanns’ models include additional and/or diverging major divisions (cultural vs. communicative memory, *ars* vs. *vis* memory, functional vs. storage memory). Second, Aleida and Jan Assmann centrally stress the interconnectedness of memory and social identity, consequently focusing on the political aspects of collective memory even more explicitly than Halbwachs.

37 This, of course, is speaking strictly from a cultural, media and literary studies perspective, which is necessarily interested in the transmission of memories qua different media. Regarding the media transmission of (collective) memories, see in particular the *Media and Cultural Memory* series published by de Gruyter.

2.2.2. *Cultural memory and the nexus between memory, identity, and politics*

The distinction between cultural and communicative memory circumvents the difficulties posed by Halbwachs's partly ambiguous treatment of a conceived time limit for collective memory. In *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (1992), Jan Assmann explicates this subdivision of collective memory, which he had contoured in an earlier paper (J. Assmann 1988). Roughly speaking, communicative memory includes the contemporary experiences of a group, based on the everyday interaction and communication of its living members. As such, it is highly informal, requires neither specialists as its carriers nor media as its objectification, and is limited to a time span of three to four generations. Assmann links communicative memory and its study to concepts of oral history (cf. J. Assmann 1992, 51). Cultural memory, in contrast, relates to ancient (founding) myths and an absolute, distant past; it is highly formalized and ritualized and relies on rigidly fixed objectifications and as such requires specialists to preserve, reproduce, manage and 'perform' the memories.³⁸

Das *kulturelle* Gedächtnis richtet sich auf Fixpunkte in der Vergangenheit. [...] Vergangenheit gerinnt hier vielmehr zu symbolischen Figuren, an die sich die Erinnerung heftet. Die Vätergeschichten, Exodus, Wüstenwanderung, Landnahme, Exil sind etwa solche Erinnerungsfiguren [...]. Auch Mythen sind Erinnerungsfiguren: Der Unterschied zwischen Mythos und Geschichte wird hier hinfällig. Für das kulturelle Gedächtnis zählt nicht faktische, sondern nur erinnerte Geschichte. (J. Assmann 1992, 52, emphasis in the original)

These *Erinnerungsfiguren*, 'key memories' in lack of a better translation, prove to be a fruitful concept for literary studies. For the study of African-Canadian literature in particular, the existence of certain key memories dating back to the establishing of an African-Canadian community – thus in a sense a 'modern founding myth' – are valuable points of interest. As such, the analysis of key memories such as slavery, displacement, diaspora or disillusionment will play a major role in the analytical chapters of this study.

Jan Assmann's conception of a division of cultural and communicative memory has, however, been devised on the background of ancient history; as Jan Assmann's original academic field is Egyptology, the notion of cultural memory has been influenced by this time scale. Assmann assumes a flexible "floating gap" to separate communicative memory (three to four generations, or eighty to a hundred years) from cultural memory (a distant, mythological past) in terms of temporal distance (J. Assmann 1992, 52; he uses the English term "floating gap"; also cf. Niethammer 1995). In its initial designation, Jan Assmann's floating gap of

38 For a thorough discussion of the contents, forms, media, time structures and carriers of communicative and cultural memory, see *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (J. Assmann 1992; for a quick overview, see p. 56, where Assmann provides a table illustrating the basic characteristics). A concise treatment of the two modes of collective memory can be found in Erll 2003, 171f. Birgit Neumann provides a good discussion informed by a cultural studies perspective (Neumann 2005, part. 87f.).