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## The Poet As Whole-Body Camera: Maxine Tynes and the Pluralities of Otherness

As gendered and racial subjects, black women speak/write in multiple voices—not all simultaneously or with equal weight, but with various and changing degrees of intensity, privileging one parole and then another. One discovers in these writings a kind of internal dialogue reflecting an intrasubjective engagement with the intersubjective aspects of self, a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing identity with the social aspects of self (“the other[s] in ourselves”). It is this subjective plurality (rather than the notion of the cohesive or fractured subject) that, finally, allows the black woman to become an expressive site for a dialectics/dialogics of identity and difference.<sup>1</sup>

**H**OW DO A WRITER AND HER READERS reconcile art with political activism? the competing demands, opportunities and values of “high” and “low” cultures? the conflicting desires and imperatives of multiple coexisting categories of otherness within one writer and her texts? These are some of the questions that arise as one reads the works of Maxine Tynes and thinks about their

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<sup>1</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition,” *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990) 137.

reception in Nova Scotia and beyond. Tynes is a strong Canadian presence in the contemporary North American flowering of black female creativity she herself describes as “Black Star Rising” in her most recent book of poems and stories, *The Door of My Heart* (1993). Her publications to date, including her two earlier collections, *Borrowed Beauty* (1987) and *Woman Talking Woman* (1990), plus a volume of poetry for children, *Save The World For Me* (1991), have made Tynes one of the most successful writers in the current Renaissance of Black Nova Scotian culture. *Borrowed Beauty* achieved the rare feat (for a first book of poems) of becoming a best seller in the Maritime region, leading to a cover story on Tynes in the magazine *Atlantic Insight*,<sup>2</sup> and a CBC film version of the short story, “In Service II.” Tynes is also well known on the West Coast, where she has given numerous readings. The appeal of her poetry to widely differing audiences in Nova Scotia and across Canada has been intensified by the vibrant force of personality that transforms her readings into performances: “she swims and pushes out to me / through strokes of pigment / she is big and bigger than me in life,” Tynes writes of this public personality in “The Portrait Speaks and Soars and Flares in Big Colour.”<sup>3</sup> The strength of the oral tradition in Tynes’ poetry and her commitment to a poetics of activism and inclusion amply justify one of her most notable honours to date: the title of Milton Acorn People’s Poet of Canada, awarded for *Borrowed Beauty* in 1988. This award resulted in cross-country media coverage, which continued with the appearance of *Woman Talking Woman* two years later—another best seller among collections of poetry. Yet, despite this high public profile, Tynes has remained largely invisible in academic literary discourse.

What accounts for such a dramatic gap between public visibility and critical recognition? In part, it seems to spring from a lingering scepticism of writers who are poets to the people, even

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<sup>2</sup> Sharon Fraser, “Taking the Measure of Maxine,” *Atlantic Insight* Sept. 1987: 16–18.

<sup>3</sup> *Woman Talking Woman* (Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1990) 77. Subsequent citations from Tynes, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from this volume or from the following: *Borrowed Beauty* (Porters Lake, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1987); *The Door of My Heart* (Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1993); and *Save the World for Me* (Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1991).

in an academic establishment rushing to institutionalize 'cultural studies.' That novelists can simultaneously be good writers and popular successes is now no longer questioned. Constructions of poetical canons have, on the contrary, remained more elitist.<sup>4</sup> Yet genre alone does not suffice to explain the striking discrepancy between Tynes' profile as a 'People's Poet' and her reception by academics and literary critics. Gender, race and class seem to be substantially more significant factors in her case, as in the case of other similarly situated writers. As Barbara Christian points out, black women writers have particularly suffered from the sharp distinctions

between the high world of lit crit books, journals, and conferences, the middle world of classrooms and graduate students, and the low world of bookstores, kitchens, communities, and creative writers:

*In the high world:* Discourse, theory, the canon, the body, the boys (preferably Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault) before the girls; linguistics, the authority of the critic, the exclusion of creative writings.

*In the middle world:* Reading the texts, sometimes of creative writers; negotiating between advancement and appreciation; tropes, research, discourse; now I understand my mother; narrative strategies. What does it mean? The race for theory.

*In the low world:* Stories, poems, plays. The language of the folk ... I sure know what she's talking about. I don't want to hear that. Her words move me. That poem changed my life.<sup>5</sup>

The sales of Tynes' books reveal the extent to which, in the "low world" of communities and bookstores, readers say, "Her words move me" or "I sure know what she's talking about." To a lesser

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<sup>4</sup> See Elisa Kay Sparks, "Old Father Nile: T.S. Eliot and Harold Bloom on the Creative Process as Spontaneous Generation," *Engendering the Word: Feminist Essays in Psychosexual Poetics*, ed. Temma F. Berg et al. (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989) 52.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Christian, "The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism," *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* 51.

extent, her poems have also filtered into the “middle world” of the classroom, in anthologies such as *Other Voices* (1985), *Celebrating Canadian Women* (1989) and *Fire on the Water* (1992). But in the “high world” of journals and academic conferences—including the feminist “high world” in which Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous supplement Lacan, Derrida and Foucault—Tynes remains absent.

In “Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity,” Michele Wallace develops a metaphor that illumines the systemic erasure of black feminist creativity in the hegemonic discourse Christian describes. Exploring the “precarious dialectic of a creative project that is forced to be ‘other’ to the creativity of white women and black men, who are ‘other’ themselves,” Wallace observes that, for many black women artists, “media visibility” remains unaccompanied by theoretical analysis and critical recognition.<sup>6</sup> Even those who study the “dense accumulation” of black feminist creativity find it difficult to apprehend it as “a continuous and coherent discourse,” because “what most people see of the black woman is a void, a black hole that appears empty, not full.” Black holes are “unimaginably dense stars” that convert energy into mass, squeezing all objects to zero volume. “Physicists now believe black holes may give access to other dimensions,” Wallace emphasizes (54–55). But outsiders see “black feminist creativity as a dark hole from which nothing worthwhile can emerge” because of the “the unrelenting logic of dualism, or polar oppositions—such as black and white, good and evil, male and female” that maintains the dominant culture. As Wallace points out, “If you happen to have more than one feature disqualifying you from participation in the dominant discourse—if you are black and a woman, and perhaps lesbian and poor, as well—and you insist on writing about it, you’re in danger of not making any sense because you are attempting speech from the dangerously unstable posture of the ‘other’ of the ‘other’” (60).

As a woman and a writer who is black, female, “feminist, womanist,” “able/dis/abled” (*The Door of My Heart* 5), popularly successful, and working-class in origin, Tynes embodies the culturally “unstable” situation of the “other” of the “other.” It is not sur-

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<sup>6</sup> Michele Wallace, “Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity,” *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* 53.



prising, then, that much of the achievement of this Nova Scotian “black star rising” seems to have disappeared into the “black hole” Wallace describes. Indeed, in Tynes’ case, this disappearance has been doubly likely to occur because, as an African Canadian writer, she is marginalized by the hegemony of African American critical discourse that Wallace and Christian themselves represent (which ironically functions as a “high world” in Canadian and Third World contexts). In addition, as a Nova Scotian writer with strong regional roots, she is marginalized within a Canadian cultural hegemony that operates from sites of power in central Canada. In “Contesting a Model Blackness,” George Elliott Clarke speaks eloquently to the ways in which “African American scholars have tended to regard African Canadians as failed versions of African Americans,” or have “simply erased the existence of a separate culture in Canada,” citing comments by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others.<sup>7</sup> If, as Canadian historian James Walker pointed out, “Blacks were ... an ‘invisible’ minority” for white Canadians, “living a separate existence,” it is equally true that, as André Alexis observes, “Canada is *often* invisible in American writing,” and “black Canada even more so” (cited in Clarke 9–10). And black Canadians living in the Maritimes, as opposed to Toronto or Montreal, have an even greater tendency to disappear in the “high world” of the American or African American or central Canadian academy (like Nova Scotia itself on some American airlines destination maps).

In what follows, I consider how the relative invisibility of Tynes’ writings in the “high” world of academic theory and analysis arises from the ways in which it embodies or enacts a multiple dialectic of otherness to those in current and emerging sites of power (including the site in which I write this essay as a white able-bodied feminist critic with a tenured appointment). More importantly, I hope to show that these same dimensions of her writing also give rise to its particular strength: the poetics of inclusion embodied in the plurality of perspectives she writes from and for, including the perspectives of those marginalized by ability, class, and age, as well as by race and gender. Enoch Padolsky points out

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<sup>7</sup> George Elliott Clarke, “Contesting a Model Blackness: A Meditation on African-Canadian African-Americanism, or the Structures of African Canadianité,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 63 (Spring 1998): 8–9.

that pluralism is a characteristic feature of Canadian inter-racial and inter-ethnic relations, in contrast to the “binary racial division” that tends to operate in American contexts between “White” and “non-White.”<sup>8</sup> One of the few critics to consider Tynes in a mainstream Canadian literature journal, Padolsky also comments briefly on the ways in which her poems express an “overtly pluralistic vision,” adding that in *The Door of My Heart* “a ‘plural’ view of the world has no trouble accompanying a focus on ‘Blackness’ and ‘race’” (140). Like Padolsky, although at greater length, I will examine Tynes’ pluralism. But a closer examination of her writings suggests that this pluralist vision is not without its tensions, either among the various dimensions of “otherness” that Tynes embodies, or in the ambivalence her poems actually express about “opening the door” of her heart to the many different communities who claim her as spokesperson.

In “Speaking in Tongues,” the essay I take my epigraph from, May Gwendolyn Henderson offers a theoretical framework that illumines the paradoxical combination of a multiple experience of otherness and a poetics of pluralism that we encounter in Tynes’ writings:

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women’s writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the “other(s),” but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity. The interlocutory character of black women’s writings is, thus, not only a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or “generalized Other,” but a dialogue with the aspects of “otherness” within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman, as not only the “Other” of the Same, but also as the “other” of the “other(s)” implies ... a relationship of difference and identification with the “other(s).”<sup>9</sup>

In theorizing the subjectivity that results from this “complex situatedness,” Henderson fuses a Bakhtinian model of discourse as

<sup>8</sup> Enoch Padolsky, “Ethnicity and Race: Canadian Minority Writing at a Crossroads,” *Journal of Canadian Writing* 31 (1996): 131.

<sup>9</sup> Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues” 118.

“primarily adversarial, ... characterized by contestation with others,” with Gadamer’s model of communication through a “language of consensus, communication, and even identification.” The black woman’s multifaceted subjectivity is expressed not only in a multiple “dialogic of differences,” but also in a “dialectic of identity with those aspects of self shared with others” (118–19). Hence Audre Lorde’s famous claim to her readers, which Henderson takes as one of her epigraphs: “I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself.” If Wallace’s paradigm of the “black hole” helps to explain the invisibility of Tynes’ black feminist creativity in academic literary discourse, Henderson’s model of black female subjectivity helps to explain why this “black hole” is “full” rather than “empty” in Tynes’ case, as in the case of other similarly situated writers. The black hole, in short, is not a gap but an aperture, a door to other dimensions. Or, to adopt Tynes’ metaphor in the prelude to *The Door of My Heart*, the poetic eye/I of the black woman writer is a “Whole-Body Camera.”

In defining herself as a “Whole-Body Camera” in the opening, signature poem of *The Door of My Heart*, Tynes articulates the poetics that underlies her exploration of suppressed others, and the others of others, in both the body itself and in the larger ‘body-politic.’ This poetics emerges in Tynes’ first two volumes, but only in her third is it made explicit and issued as a manifesto. In her first volume, *Borrowed Beauty*, Tynes opens with a metaphor very different from the “whole-body” camera. In a layered prelude entitled “Mirrors,” the poet first appears as a woman seeking the image of her own identity from the position of someone other, who is other to the other in her black femininity. Beginning with a description of women always looking into mirrors, she goes on to introduce herself as a woman lamenting her “lost heritage,” looking into the doubly displaced “mirror of the map” of Africa. For Tynes, her own art becomes the source of her identity through poems “like mirrors reflecting back ... shafts of light and words” that are “womanly and Black and brown and tan,” full of the “Black womanhood that I am” (8). In *The Door of My Heart*, the poet begins not in the position of the other of the other, searching for a sustainable sense of self through the mirror of her art, but as a subject whose gaze

contains and constitutes the multiplicity of others that is herself and her world. Here her poems are introduced as “the lens, the shutter, the eye of this whole-body camera that I am.”

Henderson’s model of black female subjectivity suggests that this crucial transformation is brought about by Tynes’ “complex situatedness” as a writer, a conclusion supported by the subject matter of her first two collections of poetry and stories. Both *Borrowed Beauty* and *Woman Talking Woman* focus principally on Tynes’ position and experience as a Nova Scotia black, and as a woman who is also a “feminist/womanist.” In the first volume, the focus on black identity tends to predominate; in the second, the emphasis on deconstructing and reconstructing female identity is most pronounced. Despite these variations in emphasis, however, black and feminist aesthetics tend to be interfused in Tynes’ writing. In both there is a focus on naming, on finding a voice and a heritage, and on exploring the fissures and filaments of identity. In both, the subversive potential of anger, laughter and sexual energy as responses to white/male power and privilege is legitimized and celebrated. And in both, as the “Mirrors” prelude to *Borrowed Beauty* suggests, there is an intense concern with the ways in which the black and/or female body has been written, imaged and read by dominant discourses. This concern extends, in *The Door of My Heart*, to the ways in which the bodies of the “able/dis/abled” are written and read by those who are “Looking, Always Looking,” impaling the “foot that flaps and hesitates” with their “stares” (31). Such controlling stares are countered by the camera-eyed poet’s representation of the “legions of Rolling Thunder Titans demanding place and accessibility agenda” (5), and by the representation, for the first time in her writing career, of her “signature limp and gait” (31), the result of a childhood attack of polio. For the first time, in short, the “whole-body” of Tynes as a black, female, physically challenged poet has written of the “other” within the very body of the “other of the other.” This circumstance in itself may help to account for the transformation from looking into mirrors in the opening of *Borrowed Beauty* to looking out of camera that is not merely a detached cerebral eye/I of watching, but an entity that perceives through the heart and the “whole-body” of bone, flesh, nerve, and the alien yet familiar “nerve-dead body-part” Tynes identifies most explicitly in the moving, double-edged “Iron Love”:

Mid-coitus  
 reaching up  
 I climb the railed headboard of my  
 century-old brass and iron bed  
 to roll closer and closer  
 to my able-bodied lover.  
 I think of a rating scale  
 of kudos for a lover who will  
 pick up, lift, shift lifeless legs and feet  
 some nerve-dead body-part whatever  
 with blase grace and sweet and tender care ... (27)

Not surprisingly, given the evolution in Tynes' subjectivity reflected in the metaphoric shift from looking into mirrors to looking out at the world through a "whole-body camera," *The Door of My Heart* is the strongest of her collections to date, incorporating a compelling sequence of poems on the experience of being disabled, as well as works on a wide range of other subjects. The poems about the "able/dis/abled" in this collection have made her a leading spokeswoman for yet another community of "others," a profile reflected in a cover story in the April 1994 issue of *Ability Network: Canada's Cross Disability Magazine* (Tynes "Raising the Flag"), and in the increasing demand for Tynes as a speaker and reader at conferences on disability. Will this facet of Tynes' achievement and activism lead to greater visibility of her works among literary critics and academics? This question can be better answered when we consider the reception of aspects of Tynes' otherness articulated in her first two volumes: her black and her feminist perspectives and politics.

Anne Rayner's brief review of Tynes' *Woman Talking Woman* in *Canadian Literature*, one of the few critical assessments to appear in a major literary quarterly, is a revealing example of the suppression of both Tynes' black and her feminist/womanist aesthetics in the "high world" of "lit crit books, journals and conferences." Rayner acknowledges Tynes' "public declarations of social and political injustice or celebrations of the Black Nova Scotia community"—but only in order to condemn her poetic technique. The technique of *Woman Talking Woman*, like that of *Borrowed Beauty*, "holds few surprises," according to Rayner:

[Tynes] continues to use a style that relies on repetition, especially litanies of such abstractions as "woman," "Black," "pride," and "community," and the chanting of names, places, and tribes in the "Black Power Nova Scotia" poems. She often uses the idiom of political activism, especially feminism and black and native resistance (the omission of articles, the loading of nouns as modifiers), and of popular culture .... These strategies are all legacies of an oral tradition, and I suspect their success depends upon Tynes' presence and speaking voice for its power: the absence of narrative, detail or description, of extended figures or complex syntax renders the poems rather substanceless on the page.<sup>10</sup>

What is most troubling about Rayner's critique of Tynes is the way in which she first translates "political activism" into an "idiom," then monologically merges "feminism and black and native resistance" together, as if all employed the same idiom. Then, in an extraordinary and syntactically confusing parenthesis, she implies that either this "idiom" or "feminism, black and native resistance" themselves are a mere matter of minor grammatical (and possibly deviant?) forms: "the omission of articles, the loading of nouns as modifiers." Finally, she implies a connection that remains unexplained between the "idiom" of feminist, black and native activism and the idiom of "popular culture." Significantly, however, the only passage she cites from *Woman Talking Woman* (a passage from "Heart Undone" 54) exemplifies the latter, presumably the "idiom" Rayner herself is most familiar with.

Since Rayner actually mentions Tynes' "celebrations of the Black Nova Scotia community," her elision of the writer's black aesthetic is more immediately obvious than her suppression of Tynes' feminism. Ironically, in providing a decontextualized catalogue of Tynes' reliance on "repetition" and "abstractions," Rayner's own writing exhibits the very defects that she ascribes to Tynes' poetry. In the process, her critical assessment perpetuates the cultural erasure of black history and experience that Tynes' writing sets out to counteract. Gone is "Portia White singing to a long-ago king"; gone is

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Rayner, "Introspection," *Canadian Literature* 135 (Winter 1992): 138-39.

“Edith Clayton weaving the basketsong of life”; gone is “Graham Jarvis bleeding on the road in Weymouth Falls,” a figure that haunts George Elliott Clarke’s poetry as well as Tynes’. Gone are Tynes’ particularized litanies of the names of Africville’s “First Black Settlers: William Brown, John Brown, Thomas Brown,” the names of Africville residents, and the name of “Africville” itself, which appears in three titles in the “Black Song Nova Scotia” section of *Woman Talking Woman* and echoes throughout the other poems in the section. “If you don’t know my name, then you don’t know your own,” James Baldwin said in a passage Tynes uses as an epigraph for “Africville Is My Name,” a poem in which she speaks in the unrealized potential of the infinitive form used by William Blake in the opening to “Auguries of Innocence”:

To own one’s community.  
 To voice its name with history and with pride.  
 To map that community with a litany of community names.  
 To raise the profile of that community,  
 again and again.  
 To etch Africville into the Past, the Present, and relentlessly  
 into the Future.  
 To sing, to say, to shout the names of Africville like a map,  
 like a litany, like a hymn and a battle-cry,  
 like a flag and a constitution,  
 like a banner of the Africville that was, that is,  
 that always will be .... (61)

The community of Africville in north-end Halifax was bulldozed to the ground after the city officials, who placed their dump next to the community, denied the settlement essential services, and then claimed that living conditions there were unsanitary. Rayner uses a pen, not a bulldozer. But in erasing the name of even “Africville” itself from Tynes’ text, in turning this particular community into an unspecified “name” that is meaninglessly repeated, in ignoring the careful ordering of Tynes’ characteristic series of similes (instanced in the progression from a name “like a map” to a name like “a flag and a constitution”), Rayner’s review continues the razing the bulldozers began. As for the careful and intricate connections Tynes sequentially builds between Africa, Africville and her own identity

as a Nova Scotia black woman who “walks the Diaspora” (*Woman Talking Woman* 66), these are indirectly acknowledged only in Rayner’s dismissive mention of Tynes’ “chanting of ... tribes.”

Rayner’s suppression of the womanist aesthetic that pervades *Woman Talking Woman*—most visibly in its poems on “sister sibling memories / and rivalries” (“All the Sisters” 9), on Winnie Mandela (“Life Up In Flames” 10), on the Montreal massacre (“For the Montreal Fourteen” 11–12) and on “Take Back the Night” marches (“Nightsong” 13–14)—is even more totalizing than her suppression of Tynes’ black aesthetic. Splitting Tynes’ love poems off from her more overtly political feminist poems, she constructs her as a naïve and artless personal poet (much as nineteenth-century reviewers constructed women poets generally). Tynes’ love poems, Rayner suggests, are “so nakedly unguarded that one feels a certain voyeuristic discomfiture upon reading them”(138). This statement reveals more about Rayner than Tynes, and one wonders how much it reflects an ideologically grounded response to the female sexuality Tynes openly expresses with as much zest as the black lesbian singer Faith Nolan does in her ballads and blues songs. Consider, for instance, the sensuous vitality of “crazy” Luce’s “wiggle shuckjive dance,” her “warm mossy woman smell,” or the “cool sweet blue-black jazz-dance / of love” in “Love-Route” (*Borrowed Beauty* 35, 52). Not all of Tynes’ love poems in *Borrowed Beauty* and *Woman Talking Woman* are among her most successful works. At times, her deliberate use of plain language and the idioms and allusions of popular culture seem to slip into the banal, as in “Love, They Said” (*Woman Talking Woman* 49). But even in this instance, it might be argued that the lovers’ shared litany of each other’s features (“Hands, / he said. / Your hands / Your eyes / Your smile, he said / Skin, / she said. ...”) captures a phase of infatuated passion most people have experienced (even if we are not always prepared to confess it).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Alfred Tennyson captures the phase I have in mind in the apparently tautological lyric in *Maud*, “Go not, happy day,” in which the poem’s protagonist dwells obsessively on the “rosy” cheeks and mouth of the woman he adores, repeating “rosy” like an incantation. The lyric was ridiculed by Victorian critics, but in context it can be seen as constituting one phase in the study of the passions Tennyson was presenting in *Maud*. See *Maud*, Part I, Section XVII.



More importantly, like many of Tynes' poems, "Love, They Said" plays dialogically against the more conflicted love poems that surround it in *Woman Talking Woman*: poems in which the apparent simplicity of the language opens up into a complex exploration of romantic relationships and of the popular culture that inflects them at every turn. In "Disarmed and Disbelieving," for example, which opens with "and James Taylor is singing 'ain't it good you've got a friend,'" the lies of lovers to each other—a man seducing, a woman becoming "a virgin again" for seduction—enact a dance of wary circling passion:

when midnight never ends  
 when I am the violin eaten by the horse of Chagall  
 when you are the violin and I am the horse  
 when we are the end and the beginning  
 and the beginning again and again and again  
 when the beginning is my canvas. (53)

In "Disarmed and Disbelieving," as in "Control" (17), we see Tynes negotiating the dilemma woman writers from Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Brontë to Marge Piercy and Alice Walker have addressed: how to balance the expression of desire with the control essential to a woman's autonomy. "Control" also indicates that for Tynes, as for Audre Lorde, the female erotic can be a subversive force against "feeling harnessed" underneath "controlled moustache hair / licked and fingered just so."

Such elements in Tynes' writing reveal how much she is at one with the new generation of American women poets who, in Alicia Ostriker's words, are "stealing the language." Like many of these poets, Tynes makes the "quest for autonomous self-definition" a project in her poetry,<sup>12</sup> although unlike some white middle-class poets who focus chiefly on their autonomy as individuals, Tynes' sense of self is as inseparable from her sense of community as Nikki Giovanni's or June Jordan's is. Like poets such as Audre Lorde, Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, Tynes often makes the female body and its "muted parts" her text.<sup>13</sup> "Being" for her, in the poem of that title, is "Being real and whole and bodyful / with big

<sup>12</sup> Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1986) 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 92.

hips and belly,” in the constant presence of images of women who are “magazine-slim” with “breasts of perfect no-size,” “hips to match,” and “feet that perch and point” while the women attached to them “slip across a glossy page / full of staples and designer fantasy” (*Woman Talking Woman* 30). Tynes also celebrates the emancipatory force of body-ful black female laughter and anger. In the short story “For Tea And Not For Service” in *Woman Talking Woman*, the “bellowing” “trademark head-thrown-back laugh” of Dora, an “in-service” black woman, marks her ribald (and angry) mockery of her white employer when she is out of uniform at the Cheapside Market (85, 87). “Strong women,” as Audre Lorde says, “know the taste / of their own hatred”;<sup>14</sup> but they also know the taste of their own laughter, and sometimes the two tastes are inseparable on the tongue. Ostriker, who emphasizes the anger more than the laughter, documents the rage that manifests itself in women’s poetry of the sixties, seventies and eighties like a “volcanic return of the repressed.”<sup>15</sup> Such anger is a strongly felt presence in some of Tynes’ poems—most visibly in the biting critique of “Those Men Who Prey on Women”—“who mark their prey by gender / and by the tissue of flesh / and of purse strings” (*The Door of My Heart* 16). But anger is a less pervasive element in Tynes’ writing than laughter, and typically it is expressed as much against racist, classist and able-bodied hegemonies as against those based on gender.

These other dimensions of Tynes’ inclusive poetics are often overlooked by white female academics drawn to her poems for their expression of feminist activism. In two complementary moves, either such women typically focus on Tynes’ gender to the exclusion of race, or they convert her into a spokeswoman for all ‘victimized’ black women or women of colour, overlooking her strong concern with issues such as class. In short, they tend to approach Tynes either as a black WOMAN writ large, or as a woman of COLOUR writ large. The limitations of this approach became very visible in an exchange between Tynes and a women’s faculty organization at Dalhousie University concerning her position on the Board of Governors during the early 1990s—when she was the first and only African Canadian member of the Board. In this exchange Tynes, somewhat wearily, found herself having to remind

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Ostriker, *Stealing the Language* 126.

<sup>15</sup> *Stealing the Language* 127.

members of the organization (including myself) that she provided a voice for a number of constituencies on the Board, not just women of colour. To judge by my own example, white feminist literary critics have also been inclined to marginalize Tynes as a writer even as they applaud her social activism. That is, they have often called upon her to speak as a representative woman or minority woman at various women's events; they may even teach occasional works by her. But they have been slow to approach this 'People's Poet' as they approach canonized writers: that is, to give sustained attention to Tynes' writing in the context of literary traditions or literary theory. In other words, they (I) have unconsciously observed the distinctions between the "high," "middle" and "low" worlds that Christian describes.

Significantly, it has been the African Canadian male writer and literary critic, George Elliott Clarke (someone who himself moves between these worlds), who has most energetically initiated discourse on Tynes' poetry within the academy. Only after teaching some of Tynes' poems in Clarke's groundbreaking anthology, *Fire on the Water*, did I begin to recognize their craft and complexity and the rich tradition of Black Nova Scotian writing they participate in. Clarke includes some of Tynes' finest poems in *Fire on the Water*, among them "The Call To Tea" from *Woman Talking Woman* (69–70), representing an incident in the life of Portia White, an internationally renowned black operatic singer from Nova Scotia. With deft, economical strokes, Tynes sets the scene and the narrative situation in which "Miss W—" is not invited, but "called" to tea by the reigning ladies of 1940s Halifax:

The call to tea  
 a solid knell of the social register  
 in old Halifax  
 silk moire  
 dank velvet  
 crepe and lace splayed across settee  
 mahogany and divan  
 the shadow of servers  
 invisible in stiff black stuff  
 laying table  
 just so, with the delicacy of  
 cucumber, tea-cake and scone

on porcelain and silver  
 filigree of lacy oak leaf shadow  
 through a southend Halifax window  
 To be so owned and distanced  
 to be called to tea  
 to have opened that dark and silver throat  
 and poured sweet amber liquid  
 upon the crowned heads of England  
 and of Europe and left them wanting;  
 to have New York and great Carnegie  
 glittering and applauding behind and  
 around and ever after that dusky  
 dusky throat ....

An excerpt cannot do justice to “The Call To Tea.” From the imperial “call” of the poem’s title, to the imprisoning of the doubly invisible “shadow” of black “servers” within the “stiff black stuff” they wear as a badge of their servitude, to the strategic ambiguities of the repeated passive infinitives (“to be so owned”) and the double meaning of the singer’s “owned and distanced” throat, to the interconnected metaphors of the “sweet amber liquid” of tea and the powerful voice of “Miss W—,” to the sinister image of pursuing a “dusky throat,” to the final declaration by a south-end Halifax lady at the tea that she almost asked the singer to go down to the basement to “fetch a scuttle of coal,” the poem reveals the baselessness of Rayner’s charge that Tynes’ poems lack “narrative, detail or description” and “extended figures.” As Clarke observes, the poem is “a marvel to read” in its evocation of “the genteel apartheid of Classical Canadian racism” and “the dignity and artistry of White.”<sup>16</sup> Typically in Tynes’ poetry, it also maps the intersection of racial with class apartheid, in this respect inviting comparison with works such as Gwendolyn Brooks’ “Bronzeville Woman In A Red Hat.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> George Elliot Clarke, “An Unprejudiced View of Two Africanadian Poets,” *ARC* 27 (Autumn 1991): 77.

<sup>17</sup> There are many parallels between Tynes’ poetry and Brooks’ that I cannot address here. They are particularly apparent in the later, more polemical poems written by Brooks—in the pamphlet *to disembark* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1981), for example.

Through his work as an editor and reviewer, Clarke has played an important role in drawing attention to black female writers generally in Atlantic Canada. Volume 2 of *Fire on the Water* features the works of not only Tynes, but also Alfreda Smith, Gloria Wesley-Desmond, Sylvia Hamilton, Faith Nolan and Delvina Bernard. Nevertheless, in the case of Tynes at least, Clarke's critical assessments in articles and reviews are not without their own elisions.<sup>18</sup> He rightly emphasizes the importance of the oral tradition in the "demotic style" of her poetry, but he situates her use of this style and of the "prophetic voice" in the white male (and American) tradition of Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg ("An Unprejudiced View" 73–74). While one could not rule out either of these influences on Tynes, she herself identifies, as early models of poets who speak to and/or for the people, one British and two Canadian poets: Dylan Thomas, Alden Nowlan (an important influence on Tynes' choice of working-class and Maritime subjects) and Leonard Cohen.<sup>19</sup> From the publication of *Borrowed Beauty* on, however, Tynes testifies in her own writing to the tradition with which she most closely affiliates herself: not Ginsberg and Whitman, but a black "womanist" tradition of writers, singers, artists/artisans, and orators, including Nova Scotia "foremothers" such as Portia White, Edith Clayton, and "Crazy Luce"—an "eccentric" black woman who died in 1910, but who in another age might have been "Diana Ross, Moms Mabley, Pearl Bailey" (*Borrowed Beauty* 35); American black foremothers such as Sojourner Truth, Bessie Smith and Zora Neale Hurston; and contemporary black women writers like Alice Walker, Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde.

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<sup>18</sup> Nor are Clarke's relations with Tynes as a fellow writer without their tensions. She has been one of the most outspoken critics, for example, of Clarke's use of the term "Africadian" to describe the "Renaissance" in Black Nova Scotian culture. Such differences merit attention because, just as the Harlem Renaissance has been historically constructed as a more "homogenous historical moment" than it in fact was (Hazel V. Carby, "The Quicksands of Representation: Rethinking Black Cultural Politics," *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* 76–90), so there may be a danger of perceiving the current Black Nova Scotian cultural flowering as more homogenous than it in fact is.

<sup>19</sup> Leslie Smith, "A Chronicle of Life's Events," *The Nova Scotian* 19 Oct. 1987: 12–13.

Clarke clearly recognizes and praises the ways in which Tynes draws upon her Nova Scotian black foremothers, but otherwise he is inclined to emphasize her black aesthetic to the exclusion of her “feminist/womanist” aesthetic. In fact, Tynes’ overtly feminist poems sometimes draw strong criticism from Clarke in cases where he sees the quality of poetic utterance threatened by the imperatives of polemical purpose. Citing “The night is a shadow of male intentions / holding myth and fear” (*Woman Talking Woman* 13) from “Nightsong,” for example, he observes that such poems “make the right social statements but are still just propaganda.”<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere he criticizes Tynes’ poem “For the Montreal Fourteen . . .” for the “boorish generalities” of “every woman-want denied / devalued / belittled / ignored / unanswered” and the “cold-blooded propaganda” of its concluding reference to “this womanist body politic”:

We raise the heart and hands of sorrow  
   and of mourning  
   and of healing.  
 this womanist body politic.<sup>21</sup>

As I suggest below, Tynes’ strong desire to connect with a diverse community of women occasionally leads to a rhetorical blandness that diminishes the effect of some of her feminist poems. Yet few of her feminist readers would be likely to see the “womanist body politic” of “For the Montreal Fourteen” as “cold-blooded” propaganda. On the contrary, in the strategic use of Alice Walker’s term “womanist,” fusing her black and feminist aesthetics, and in her focus on inscriptions of the body in the “body politic,” Tynes here employs a metaphor that seems central to her poetic vision.

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<sup>20</sup> Clarke, “Books: A Black Renaissance,” *The Daily News Sunday Magazine* 13 Jan. 1991: 10.

<sup>21</sup> See Clarke, “An Unprejudiced View” 12. “How would it be possible to ‘raise the heart and hands . . . of healing this womanist body politic?’” Clarke asks, evidently reading the last lines of “For the Montreal Fourteen” as grammatically completing “healing.” The line spacing invites a different reading, however: one in which “this womanist body politic” stands in apposition to the first three lines in their entirety. In other words, the “this” refers back not only to the collective female “We,” but to all of the actions of “heart and hands” incorporated in “this womanist body politic.”

Clarke's elision or criticism of Tynes' polemical feminism, like white feminist academics' elision of her black or her class activism, underlines the difficulty of accommodating—simultaneously—all of the pluralities of otherness that readers encounter in a writer of such complex “situatedness.” As Henderson observes, “blindness to what Nancy Fraser describes as ‘the gender subtext’ can be just as occluding as blindness to the racial subtext in the work of black women writers.”<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the reader of Tynes' *The Door of My Heart* might be prompted to see in Henderson's own use of the common critical metaphor “blindness” an elision of still another even more repressed perspective: the perspective of the “able/dis/abled.”

One suspects that the difficulty critics experience in accommodating categories of otherness in a writer such as Tynes must also be experienced by Tynes herself, who sometimes must feel as if her “whole-body” and consciousness are populated by the warring “identity politics” that have emerged in the past two decades. Henderson points out in the passage I have taken as an epigraph that, if “black women speak/write in multiple voices,” they do not do so “simultaneously ... but with various and changing degrees of intensity, privileging one parole and then another,”<sup>23</sup> at one moment emphasizing a dialectic of identity, at another a dialogics of difference. The struggle among these different *paroles* may account for the strong and admirable drive for inclusion that seems, increasingly, to underly Tynes' poetics. In her credo, “I am Maxine Tynes,” the poet articulates her intense desire to reach out and touch ordinary people, black, white, all colours, female, male, all ages: “To see that wonder, that curious mix of fear and wonder becoming awareness of same and different ... I love that,”<sup>24</sup> she says to those readers who do not share her blackness, for example.

While the dialectic of inclusion often remains a dialectic in Tynes' poetry, held in a creative tension with the dialogics of dif-

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<sup>22</sup> Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues” 117.

<sup>23</sup> Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues” 137.

<sup>24</sup> *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, ed. George Elliott Clarke (Lawrencetwon Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1992) 2: 73.

ference, there are nevertheless occasions when the pursuit of a “multiple agenda” by the “whole-body” poet results in poems that become strangely homogenized through their very endorsement of diversity. Intriguingly, this blandness emerges in a poem about Canada, “In This Country” (*The Door of My Heart* 66–68), which suggests that it may be related to the larger dilemma Canadians collectively experience in forging a common identity out of multicultural diversity. Not surprisingly, the same problem, reflecting a similar dilemma, weakens some of Tynes’ feminist poems (bearing out, to a degree, Clarke’s criticisms in some instances, if not in others). For example, in “Raising the Heart of Women” (*The Door of My Heart* 13), Tynes calls for a “world view that is inclusionary” and a language that speaks for many diverse constituencies. Uncharacteristically, however, the syntax tends to dissolve in this poem, reflecting the strain to articulate what Adrienne Rich terms “the dream of a common language.” “Raising the Heart of Women” explicitly speaks to a “multiple agenda”:

To raise the heart of women  
 in that room  
 to raise the heart of women  
 in the fray  
 that is womanist and feminist  
 and humanist and full of accessibility, yours and mine  
 and a world view that is inclusionary  
 that is backyard, pay-cheque, budget-cut, wage-freeze,  
 unemployment, welfare line familiar;

That speaks in a language that is  
 unemployed, homeless, disabled, denied access, underpaid,  
 that is fighting for voice and place  
 that speaks in a language that is woman and Black  
 and Aboriginal  
 that is immigrant, that is Francophone  
 that is denied freedom of choice  
 that is working poor, that is over-taxed  
 that is full of this multiple agenda  
 and that is reaching, reaching for the light.



The reference of “that” in this poem—shifting from “a world view that is inclusionary” in the first stanza to “a language” in the second stanza, to a list of particular languages (“unemployed, homeless, ...”), to “voice and place,” embodies the complexities Tynes is trying to negotiate. As in Bakhtin’s thinking, language is conceived of as a social discourse inseparable from a “world view.” But the transformation of multiple discourses into a single language is much more characteristic of the focus on consensus and identification that Henderson finds in Gadamer’s model of communication, than in Bakhtin’s dialogical model.

“Raising the Heart of Women” is dedicated to “*those women who are coming forward to stand centre stage in this country and who are reflecting us women back at twice our size,*” and there is little doubt that it might generate a strong rhetorical effect, read at a political gathering, given Tynes’ power as a reader. But in general Tynes’ art seems most effective when her poems actually speak in the various distinct and/or overlapping discourses that “Raising the Heart of Women” merges into a single unrepresented “language.” Alternatively, Tynes often succeeds in bringing these discourses together without annihilating difference in poems that speak through compelling patterns of intersecting images, or through striking metaphors for shared oppression.

The sequence of three crow poems in *Woman Talking Woman* (35–37) is an interesting example of Tynes subtly using metaphors of voice and vision to create an original interplay of images that remain suggestive, yet hauntingly indefinite in meaning. Drawing on her experience at Dalhousie Board of Governors meetings, Tynes explores in her crow sequence the identity of excluded black “others” who define the white world they form an edge and end to. The sequence begins with a series of questions about the identity of “raucous crows”—“Crows calling beyond the conference room” at Dalhousie, where “Across the conference template,” those within (including Tynes herself, as her use of “we” suggests) “swoop and call to each other / without the bold and elastic courage / of those crows” beyond. Inside the conference room disembodied voices “palaver and swoop and dodge” in verbal acrobatics of “mission” and evasion. Outside the windows, the crows’ call is “black and bright and bold / with feathers and passion” in the “frigid air.” Are the crows “alter ego academe en wing?”

the poet asks. More pointedly and playfully, she asks, “Are they Henry Hicks in flight?” referring to a deceased past President of the university. Leaving such questions hanging (along with the whimsically satiric image of Henry Hicks reincarnated as a black crow), Tynes breaks off this first poem with the crows’ “bawdy free-fall through frozen, frozen sky.”

“Crow Poem #2” is a much shorter imagist fragment, in which she describes the crows now sitting “silently / Black puffs in the trees / Feathered punctuation / At the end of branches”—invisible to those who do not think to look for them. “Silent Crows,” the final poem in the sequence, is an elegy for the disappearance of the crows’ blackness as well as for their haunting, excluded “call and call” (an image suggestive of the antiphonal “calls” slaves once used to sustain their spirit in the face of constant subjugation):<sup>25</sup>

And now your feathered night-blackness is gone  
freeing branches to the light and  
to the weightlessness of day  
Without you,  
without your black punctuation  
the sky, the trees have no endpoint.  
My eyes dart and dart  
and, finding no crow-blackness,  
wait for the night.

Tynes never draws an explicit connection between the crows and the Nova Scotian black population that remained largely unrepresented within the walls of Dalhousie University in 1990 when *Woman Talking Woman* was published (as it still does nine years later). The spectre of ‘Jim Crow laws’ and their legacy of racial apartheid is not directly alluded to in this positive revisioning of “feathered night-blackness.” In fact, Tynes has stated that when she wrote this poem, she was really thinking only of the crows and their movement in the skies.<sup>26</sup> Because the “crows” are never re

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<sup>25</sup> Sherley Anne Williams movingly represents the antiphonal voices of these calls in her novel about slavery, *Dessa Rose* (1986; New York: Berkley Books, 1987), in the dark moments before a fugitive slave woman’s escape from a cellar prison (62–64).

<sup>26</sup> In conversation with me, after reading a draft of this essay.

duced to a particular symbolic significance in this sequence, their meaning cannot be contained—no more than the crows in flight can be contained themselves.

In other poems, like “Chameleon Silence” (*Borrowed Beauty* 66), Tynes’ black and feminist aesthetics merge as she articulates a “dialectic of identity” with an individual, anonymous Indian woman long gone, and with the unspoiled body of the earth this woman knew as her own:

I feel very Indian tonight  
 very Micmac  
     Kuakiutl  
     Huron  
 and Black  
 my tongue growing back 200, 500 years.  
 I speak in beauty  
 the truth of earth and sky  
 virgin breath of  
 who I am  
 what I feel

you don't hear the roots and leaves  
 of my words  
 hanging like black veins from my lips  
 you clip the hedge  
 and build a railway through the field and rock  
 and stream of my words  
 like your three-times gone granddaddy did  
 under this maple sky.

tonight this Black woman sleeps on  
 the blood-carpet of broken treaty-dreams of long ago.

But this is 1985.  
 And tonight I know,  
 like a maidenhead just gone  
 why, Indian woman,  
 you are me.

As the poet's "tongue" grows back through time, as breath and words become "roots and leaves," as that text of earth becomes a body and blood is spilled from its veins, Tynes conveys the desecration of the "virgin breath" of promise in "earth and sky" and the sense of violation she shares with the Indian woman raped and dispossessed on "the blood-carpet of broken treaty-dreams." It is not only the "black veins" of her words that connect Tynes to this unnamed Indian woman, but also her knowledge, expressed in "On Learning That I Might Have Indian Blood" (*Woman Talking Woman* 66–67), that her veins may literally carry the blood once spilled "under this maple sky." Yet in "Chameleon Silence" she makes no claim to this direct connection. Instead, she expresses her "dialectic of identity" through shared womanhood, through the "chameleon" medium of coloured skin blending into the background to survive, and through the silence enforced by a dominant culture that does not hear the Indian woman's words of "who I am / what I feel."

In *The Door of My Heart*, Tynes' poetics of inclusion expands to take in the suppressed "who I am" and "what I feel" of multiple others as, for the first time, the poet writes frankly of the repressed within her own body. "Open *The Door of My Heart* / walk through / dance through ... Open the door of my heart / let's both walk through" (14), she writes in the title poem of the collection, a poem written for a 1991 AIDS vigil. Yet the door to an open heart that Tynes offers in her third volume of poetry and stories is not a door opened without effort or cost. In the dialogical sequence of "Portrait Poems" and in the short story "Those Looks" in her second volume, *Woman Talking Woman*, Tynes reveals her misgivings about the invasion of privacy and consciousness that her high public profile and her identification with others entails: "I feel like a door permanently ajar," she cryptically confesses in the last of the "Portrait Poems," entitled "Against A Wall, Smiling" (78).

In *The Door of My Heart*, this note of wary defensiveness is gone, as Tynes writes of some of her most intimate experiences as an "able/dis/abled" person: her physical falls in public places, her complex response to people in wheelchairs, the bitter-sweet pleasures of "Iron Love," the inscriptions of her supporting handprints on her apartment walls. "I fall into my walls," she writes; "they keep and they hold me / and mark, hand over hand / my passage"

(35). Whereas in her earlier collections, Tynes veils references to her disability, emphasizing the way she takes the world in “strides” through her passion (*Woman Talking Woman* 20, 27), in *The Door Of My Heart* the effortless mobility evoked in “The Woman I Am In My Dreams” (25–26) coexists with the stumping, halting pace, “foot-thump-draggin’ along,” of the aptly titled “Gait Gait Gait Gait Gait” (30).

The double image of a “gait” that is simultaneously a barrier and a symbol of possibility is reproduced in the photographs of the volume, which speak to the accessibility agenda the poems articulate. The cover shot, for example, features Tynes dressed in vivid purple, framed against a heavy iron closed gate to Halifax’s Public Gardens, with her hat in hand, cane at rest in the other hand. The sequence on experiencing and overcoming disability, “Rolling Thunder Titans” (23–36), is prefaced by a more distanced black and white photograph of the poet, again with hat in hand, cane in the other hand, this time standing before steep steps in front of a closed heavy wooden door—a door with a very small window and wrought iron work in the shape of a key.

Other poetic sequences and photos in *The Door of My Heart* contribute to these door, gate/gait and (im)mobility motifs in oblique yet suggestive ways. The sequence “Through My Classroom Door,” reflecting Tynes’ experience as a teacher in a racially mixed high school in Dartmouth, addresses the barriers impeding disadvantaged young people—especially the “young pride of old Africa” among whom “too many stumble ... fall from hope.” The chains that impede these young blacks are invisible, yet nevertheless “coffles of old strike fear into / this new face and / heart of darkness” (89–90). The barriers Tynes’ black students confront have been added to by white educational administrators, who attempted to phase out a class in black literature a few years after Tynes and a colleague successfully established it in the mid seventies because, they said, it concentrated too much on one social group in a “multicultural” country.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “They still offer” the class, Tynes said to journalist Sharon Fraser in 1987. “They just place so many stipulations on it that few students sign up for it. Then, of course, they say that no one’s interested in it.” See Fraser, “Taking the Measure of Maxine” 17.

"Through My Classroom Door" is prefaced by a close-up of the poet in which her sceptical questioning eyes engage directly with the reader. This is Tynes as "whole-body camera" inviting readers to view Nova Scotian black youth and the society that surrounds them through the lens of her vision. A similar effect occurs in the close-up of face and torso framed against an iron gate prefacing the section entitled "The Cat's Eye on the World" (37–68). Appropriately, several poems in this section concern the conventional "gaze" that constructs the world, the media and artistic representations. "Exotic Bird" and "Graffiti Portrait" are counterpointed poems representing positive and negative impacts of the male gaze; "What's Wrong with this Picture?" satirizes media racism; and the powerful "Let There Be Sex / Let There Be Love / Let There Be Power / Let There Be Lies" probes the underlying complexities of both women and men manifested in the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas affair and the media circus it produced. "And so we are the chorus of / this everyman / this everywoman," Tynes writes,

this Anita and this Clarence  
 this woman and this man  
 this Pygmalion and Galatea  
 this Tristan and this Isolde  
 this Sampson and this Delilah  
 this woman and this man (*The Door of My Heart* 57)

As this sequence of analogies suggests—the mythological figure of Galatea treated as a love object by her male moulder Pygmalion, the mutually tragic couple of Tristan and Isolde, and the heroic Sampson victimized by the demonic Delialah—Tynes draws no conclusions about whether "this woman" or "this man" is to blame in "Let There Be Sex." One of her most complex explorations of the myths of contemporary mass culture, the poem explores what happens "when sex becomes love / when love becomes power / when power becomes a lie," and when (as in the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky affair), "the Fourth Estate is / the tribunal and crucible" (58).

"No Laughing Matter," another poem in the "Cat's Eye on the World" section of *The Door of My Heart*, condenses Tynes' experience of the controversy over Carrie Mae Weems' 1992 exhibit in

the Dalhousie Art Gallery, which divided black and white communities in the region among and within themselves. In the Weems show, entitled “No Laughing Matter,” the African American photographer Weems juxtaposed disturbing or haunting photographs of black women and men (one of a black man simply and gravely holding a watermelon) with racist “jokes” that appeared as captions, or embedded in the photographs. The same exhibition featured some of the poster art of the Guerilla Girls, the New York-based group of activists who wear guerilla masks and use their art to satirize the racism and sexism of the American art establishment, mounting campaigns against exhibitions featuring artists who are overwhelmingly white and male. The title of the Weems photography exhibition (and the context created by the associated Guerilla Girl exhibition) seemed to signal that Weems intended her show as a critique of racist humour. However, a protest was organized by some members of the Nova Scotian black community because the images, in their view, revived racist stereotypes (and also because they were distressed to see white members of the public actually laughing at the jokes that Weems had presented under the rubric, “No Laughing Matter”). In the public forum organized by the Art Gallery to help resolve the ensuing controversy, Tynes opposed those who said the Weems exhibit should be taken down. As her poem suggests, however, she did so with mixed feelings, given the systemic racism that both Weems and the Guerilla Girls satirized—recognizing that beneath the “jokes” of “No Laughing Matter” lay a bitter legacy of tears:

We stand in galleries  
 swallowing cubism and  
 landscapes whole  
  
 but at No Laughing Matter  
 we clutch our hearts  
 and our imperatives  
 and we laugh that  
 15 year-old-in-the-funeral-parlour laugh  
 while Carrie Mae Weems  
 and Guerilla Girls  
 laugh  
 and laugh  
 and weep from the walls (47)

Strategically, Tynes positions many of her poems of darker social commentary—like “No Laughing Matter”—in the “Cat’s Eye on the World” section, in the middle of *The Door of My Heart*. A lighter tone is struck in the opening section of the book, entitled “Cat on a Clothesline.” In the poem of the same title that opens this section, we encounter a fanciful, yet subtle development of the cat metaphor to address the difficulty of the act of communication Tynes invites her readers to participate in:

If I were a cat on a clothesline  
 I would do a  
 delicate cat’s paw balance  
 between your back pockets  
 a cat’s hair would separate me  
 from your most secret of secrets  
 me  
 that cat on the clothesline -  
 you  
 the hollow wind-body  
 filling each sleeve  
 bellied out in the paunch of every shirt

the cat on a clothesline  
 calculates her every move  
 cannot bridge the distance  
 from clothesline to heartbeat  
 is gathered  
 grey and black and taut  
 is launched in cat-flight  
 is gone (9)

Like Emily Dickinson and the many other women writers (Margaret Atwood and Marge Piercy among them) who have been drawn to the cat as a totemic image, Tynes turns to the domestic to find a wonderfully fresh metaphor for the act of poetic transcendence. As if to emphasize this transcendence, the photo prefacing “Cat on a Clothesline” represents the poet with a broad grin, seated on steps and holding onto her hat, as if about to rise into the air through the sheer energy she radiates. Behind her is a door, with a very large



window and a bright sunflower before it, matching the exuberant sunflower in her lapel. This is the “draggin-footed woman” who thumps along in “Gait Gait Gait Gait Gait” taking flight through the force of her poet’s eye and imagination, the photo implies.

The transcendence is momentary and limited, however, as it so often is in Dickinson’s poems. In “Cat on a Clothesline” the drive to connect with others confronts the recognition that the otherness of others always eludes even the poet’s imaginative leap. The suppositional desire for intimacy (“If I were ...”) acknowledges the actual gap between desire and distance. The cat finally “cannot bridge the distance / from clothesline to heartbeat.” “Cat on a Clothesline” thus provides an image of the writer that complicates the poetic persona Tynes creates elsewhere in *The Door of My Heart*. In this poem, the poet is a cat who appears and “is gone,” not a woman who opens the door of her heart to all who wish to enter it. Writer and reader/listener meet, if they meet at all, only in delicate dance on a clothesline that merges, for a moment, the “me” and the “you.”

In the “cat’s paw” balancing act of “Cat on a Clothesline,” and in the counterpoint between the image of this elusive cat and a woman whose heart is an open door, Tynes captures the constant tension between a “dialogic of difference” and a “dialectic of identity” that Henderson finds especially pronounced in the black woman writer. The same tension appears, refracted through the more sombre tones of an enigmatic dream, in the moving “Open Windows” (77–79). In this prose poem, the protagonist Felicia is haunted by a recurring dream of open windows inhabited by the uncanny presence of women—her mother, her auntie, a Micmac woman she has known in her childhood—and women talk, and women’s sighs, “the breath of their worries and their words warm on her neck.” Yet even here, the dialectic of identity is countered by the inescapable inscription of difference. The windows remain mysterious as Felicia realizes, “These are not her windows to open. And these are not her arms to push through the blue-black puzzle of beckoning night outside of them. These arms are heavy with everyone else’s bones and bloodstreams and heavy or taut or hanging blue black brown or nut brown woman skin.” The act of identification with another woman that Tynes had written of in her earlier poem, “Chameleon Silence,” now seems more baffling and difficult.

In “Open Windows” Tynes probes the pluralities of her own identity in portraying a protagonist who is overwhelmed by fear of, and desire for, the inalienably other women populating her consciousness. In “The Door of My Heart,” she opens her self to others. In “Cat on a Clothesline” she plays with the possibilities and the limitations of bridging the distance between the self and others. Collectively, the poems and stories in *The Door of My Heart* reveal Tynes growing as a writer as she becomes more at home with the pluralities of otherness that constitute her poetic identity and the identities of her diverse communities of readers. The shift from the metaphor of looking into “mirrors” in the preface of *Borrowed Beauty* to the metaphor of the poet herself as a “whole-body camera” is one sign of this growth. The deft playfulness and figurative indirection so evident in “Cat on a Clothesline” and in other poems in *The Door of My Heart* like “The Politics of Knees and Skirting” (21–22) is another sign. And the range of the works in *The Door of My Heart* is still another. One can only hope that this third volume will eventually begin to bring Tynes the critical recognition she deserves, well beyond the Maritimes, to accompany the public visibility she has already achieved. In the six years since *The Door of My Heart* was published, however, there has been little indication that literary critics beyond the Maritimes have started to penetrate the “black hole” into which Tynes’ achievement seems to have disappeared inside the academy.

Outside the academy, it is a different matter. Outside the academy, this ‘People’s Poet’ is certainly not holding her breath waiting for critical recognition. On the contrary, she is writing and reading to the many people in many places who love her poetry, in “low” worlds and “high” (the “highness” and “lowness” being a matter of perception, as the popular scornful use of the epithet “academic” suggests). And she is dreaming her dreams—even her dreams of fame. Tynes’ dreams indicate, nevertheless, that she is well aware of the way in which “black stars rising” disappear into “black holes,” even when they seem as highly visible to the public eye as Oprah. In “The Dream of Dogs and Presidents,” the final poem in the “Black Star Rising” section of *The Door of My Heart* and in the book itself, she wittily evokes the contradictions in the reception of black women artists that Michele Wallace so acutely analyses. In this “Dream of Dogs and Presidents,” the poet dreams

of a little dog “all tongue and ears /and happy wagging tail” that is just within her reach. The dog in Tynes’ dream fades “tongue first,” however—like the Cheshire cat in reverse—leaving in its wake “this big-haired man named Bill,” standing with “that big and boyish head a wag” together with the poet behind “some presidential shield.” “I wonder,” the poet asks,

does he mistake me for that  
 mother confessor to the world  
 with a name that starts with “O”?  
 or, much happier thought,  
 he likens Maxine to Maya  
 with inaugural tome in her future  
 now in her pop culture past (96)

Like all dreams, this one fades into the black hole of sleep, leaving the vestiges of its insights and its prophecies: “I surge to a rude awakening / to pluck feathers and sleepdust / from these eyes,” the poet writes. The pluralities of Tynes’ many eyes and I’s remain, along with the poems she describes in her preface as making up “this whole-body camera that I am.”



Unidentified girl in Africville. Photographer: Ted Grant, 1965. National Archives of Canada. Neg. no. PA170252.