



## IMMIGRANTS IDENTITY IN AUSTIN CLARKE'S *THE ORIGIN OF WAVES*

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**Article History: Received:** 12.05.2023

**Revised:** 25.05.2023

**Accepted:** 05.06.2023

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how different types of memory affect immigrants' identity in diasporas, the research looks at how traumatic events impact diasporic subjects' identities in a host country. *The Origin of Waves*, a 1997 novel by Barbados-born Canadian novelist Austin Clarke, which the author closely examines, demonstrates the significance of homeland experience for the development of immigrant identity as life in a new setting plays out against the memory of a previous environment. When the experience is traumatised, it complicates and makes integration into a new place more challenging.

**Keywords:** origin, trauma, nostalgic, narrative, cultural, colonial, immigrant, homeland

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### **Introduction**

In *The Origin of Waves*, Clarke shows how his fictional characters navigate identification in Canada, where they are guests, as well as in their own Barbados. As Stuart Hall suggests in his article "Negotiating Caribbean Identities," "the stories which cultures tell themselves about whom they are and where they come from" (3) are the best places to explore when defining people. The manufacture of identity is the focus of *The Origin of Waves*. The narration of the past is the foundation for the creation of identity. The cultural identities that are at work in Clarke's book represent the shared historical and cultural experiences of the Caribbean as well as the cultural norms that underlie various imposed selves. The characters confront their Caribbean experience as part of the process of

developing their identities through narration; this is just one stage of the process. The entire narrative turns into a story of immigrant identity as Clarke introduces two key metaphors—the conch-shell and the inner tube—whose complicated connotations represent various facets of Caribbean origin. the rupture that diasporic Caribbean people feel when they freely or involuntarily leave their country of origin. In a host country, the rupture causes feelings of trauma and longing.

The *Origin of Waves*' story is built on two immigration-related tales that John and Tim share. They start talking about their experiences as immigrants in North America and as young children in Barbados after running into each other on Christmas Eve in Toronto fifty years after emigrating. Their memories-based stories have a healing impact. John is a prosperous

psychiatrist in the US, but it feels like he's lost out on life. Tim is retired and has been battling his loneliness in the present and loneliness from his past as an immigrant. They head to a neighbouring bar and spend the evening fabricating a story to bridge the gap between their history and present. Tim and John are inescapably involved in creating a narrative-based thread of meaning that allows them to know and grasp who and what they are in the present, given their location in time and space in their host nation. Through their current narration, the characters' recollections of their former homes remain as a sort of mental imprint. Our consciousness is bound together by a narrative of memory, as many philosophers have argued, including St. Augustine, Sigmund Freud, and Antonio Damasio (6-7). Walder also uses the neurosurgeon Damasio as an example, who "resorts to the vocabulary of narrative fiction" in order to define a somewhat stable self (7).

The story brings the self to life, or to put it more creatively and imaginatively, as renowned Canadian author Robert Kroetsch puts it in his book *Creation*, "the fiction makes us real" (60). In the work, John and Tim use both narrative and painful memories. The method John and Tim describe their painful experience after being uprooted from their home country is through traumatising tale. Through their memories, Barbados continues to exist as a kind of romanticised past, the paradise they left behind. Their relationship with themselves and the outside world is shattered by the painful occurrence of being cut off from the area (43). Tim seems to be struggling because of the tragedy; he struggles to connect with others and feels terribly alone. He is unable to reconstitute his identity after losing Lang, the Chinese woman he was in love with. He has the chance during his talk with John to explain the narrative and convey it, as well as to piece together his own identity from the scattered pieces of his fragmented memory. Another method of "regaining lost

cognitive and emotional capacities" is illustrated by Tim's narrative (45). In addition to being distressing, Tim and John's memories of their time in Barbados also reflect colonial values. They take pride in their upbringing in Britain and their interests at home and abroad. Tim and John's beliefs were ingrained in them by Barbados' British educational system. Tim draws on his memories of his time in school with John even though he is unaware of "anything like colonialism" (18), hardly realising that he is acting "as colonial[s], sitting on that sand, staring at waves that washed assertive and sullen strangers ashore, as if they were born like us, in the island, as if they were born here, to rule over us, here" (19).

Tim's ideal house is based on the water colour painting he saw in John's mother's room, "Home Sweet Home," which was created by an Englishman and depicted "an English farmhouse with a thatched roof" (144). John describes his workplace in the United States as having "nice telephones, those old-fashioned ones from England in the nineteenth century, like the ones you see in books, or in murder movies with Sherlock Holmes and Dickens, stuff you come across in a library book," in a similar spirit (73). Even though the British principles Tim and John learned in Barbados had an impact on both of their identities, they approach their colonial upbringings in different ways. Tim still has a stronger attachment to British lifestyle norms and colonial traditions, as evidenced by his opinions of his headmaster in particular. John, on the other hand, moves between several lifestyles while residing in various North American and European nations. His accents, which he utilises to mimic American or English accents or just his "wide and flat" Barbadian accent, show this volatility clearly (166). Cultural memory, which emerges from the fundamentally relational structure of the self, is another sort of memory used in the book. Tim, in contrast to John, is committed to his immigrant neighbourhood in

Toronto, which brings back strong feelings of loneliness and evokes vivid memories of being an immigrant.

Tim is solely connected to the happenings in his local surroundings since he is unable to relate to other individuals. These connections serve as an illustration of the impact of cultural memory. When Tim and his fellow immigrants encounter the same existential annihilation of the place they call home in the foreign country, cultural memory gives existence to people and the world for both of them: "And the snow has hidden all colour and life from the street, and the Christmas colours of green and red, silver and gold, from store and windows; and I am alone, and I can see nobody, and nobody can see me. There are only shapes; the shapes of people I hear ahead of me" (21–22). This chapter demonstrates Tim's absence of interpersonal relationships and the nothingness that Christmas may cause in immigrants, despite their continued efforts to develop their diasporic selves. S. J. Brison emphasises that those who are traumatised experience nothingness in her essay "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self" and provides various examples of Holocaust survivors (43–47). Tim is imprisoned in his home, which still has a two-year-old Christmas tree that divides the world into the inside and the outside and rejects the passage of time. As he kills wood-ants that pose a threat to the house's foundation and cause it to collapse, he sits in his chair admiring the patterns in the carpet. Tim uses a can of Black Flag to kill the black ants. Tim's identity is represented by the words "Black Flag," which are written "on the can in enormous white capital letters" (92) while white capital letters speak for the dominance of the white society he lives in. Tim isolates himself from the outside world due to his withdrawal, which suggests that he is unable to communicate in the host nation. He travels to Lake Ontario every day on foot down Yonge Street. The daily stroll brings back pleasant recollections of his

moments spent with John at the beach and colours his perception of the city with his immigrant feelings of alienation and loneliness. I leave my house at the same time every day at the same place, regardless of the weather, and I walk down Yonge Street straight toward the Lake, back up Yonge Street from the Lake, and then return to my house. As I stroll the streets and observe people going by, I occasionally try to grin with them. The passage draws attention to Tim's lack of visibility in the big city.

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John has dated various ladies over his life. As a result, his relationship to his native nation is more characterised by feelings of nostalgia than by Tim's sense of loss and annihilation. John adapts to many cultures and ways of life while cohabitating with women of various ethnic backgrounds (Italian, French, and German), which broadens his identity in a global sense. Clarke uses humour to describe John. His interactions with women are his top priority. Additionally, John places great value on the notion of having a family and belonging to a family; these are the bonds that he values. Tim questions whether all 10

of John's children—from three different women—are his. John travelled to Toronto to see his wife and child who were both admitted to Sick Children's Hospital. John is of the opinion that "every man have a family! ", in contrast to Tim who has no family and cannot properly relate to women. Even if the family is terrible (62). Tim's issue is finally identified by John as they speak, and John then asks Tim a crucial question to address his loneliness and immigrant condition: what kind of women does Tim like? John, a psychiatrist, thinks that his lack of sexual stimulation is the root of his loneliness. Tim is unable to provide a response. Tim is reminded by John that all he really requires is company: "All. You. Godamn need. Is. Female companionship" (113). By raising concerns about the significance of the past, geography, and interpersonal connections as well as nostalgic sentiments for the creation of the diasporic self, Clarke challenges the idea of fixity. To put it another way, he uses the memories of the past experience and place to cultivate a favourable environment for the development of the flexible identity.

Because John makes up stories, Tim's immigrant situation is less severe than John's. His account about life in the States is one of the Promised Land, where he has realised his ideal of success as a professional, as a husband and man, and as a parent who takes care of his kids and wives: He even starts his story as "a bed o'roses" (74). "I am an Amurcan. A Yankee. You seen my gold credit cards, when I showed you my family, didn't you? A man can live there" (74). Tim starts to question John's story's veracity as he listens to it. He observes that John uses "an honest, native, broad and flat Barbadian accent" (166), with no indication of the French, Italian, or German he claimed to speak, and that "the language he has kept from the nations he visited is not a real, not a true language" (166). Tim is perplexed because of this: "I am starting to question how much of his discourse he expects me to believe, how

much he expects me to trust, out of all his stories which have me smiling and sad. But I'm aware that he wants me to believe in each of them. We are both aware of how memories and truths fade with time (166). Tim is making the point that a past incident recounted in the present is no longer truthful; time is the enemy of memory and truth. The presentness of memory, according to certain theorists, "implies that "the past is adopted" as part of the present (as object of its narrative activity)" (Bal 15), and as a result, has a problematic function in conveying the truth.

Narrative memory is complicated by concerns of truth and falsity since it involves the reconstruction of past experiences that can be faked. Tim's narration turns into a fiction because the past doesn't exist the way he and John experienced it all those years ago. This is clear when he says: What I just told you may have been a dream or a fantasy. At my age, dreams and fiction are on par with reality. Something like having the power to make fantasies come true, like wishing to be with the Chinese woman. Maybe everything I just described is merely a "friction" of my imagination, as my mother would say. I use it to illuminate my daily loneliness, being bored. Nothing that wonderful has ever occurred to me in real life not even in a nightmare. (87) His life's reality has been fictionalised into a tale. It is a method of using memories to cure oneself. John does the opposite of Tim, who converts fiction into fact. The somewhat pretentious and exaggerated account of John in the text is pure fiction. John makes up the details of his immigration journey in order to impress Tim and cover up the monotony and mediocrity of his life back home. Tim cures himself through fiction, whilst John recreates himself through it.

At the very end of the book, when Tim gives John a hug and re-establishes a connection with another person, Tim begins to recover. Through recollection, Tim and John's actual or perceived connections to

their native countries represent both their African and European colonial heritages. Hybrid places and identities are the result of the network of transnational connections between many cultures and locations. As Hall argues, if identity is contingent on establishing origins, it is impossible to locate a single origin in the Caribbean (5). Caribbean cultures and identities are subjected to challenging processes of negotiation and transculturation as they migrate and settle in new places. Caribbean identity has already undergone a process of hybridization on the islands. Tim, who struggles with his identity as he adjusts to his new home in Toronto throughout the book, adds a new dimension to both himself and the area he calls home and pave the way for hybridization.

John swiftly relocates and settles into his new environment, forging a route toward a hybrid identity. As a result, the locations where these Caribbean people reside are double-diasporized: both at home and in a host country, where they are compelled to navigate social norms and legislation in a setting where they lack socioeconomic clout. Tim and John imagine fresh versions of their former homelands even if they are far from them. A sense of location as seen from a distance is criticised by Clarke, who questions the idea that distance confers objectivity. Tim is told by John that only after leaving an island or other location can one really judge its significance: "And anything surrounded by water is a place you really don't know the size of. Like you have to swim – way far from it, and then you would know the measurements of the place" (17). This text displays Clarke's propensity to view Barbados through the lens of Canada, but he also highlights how immigrants' ties to their home countries affect how they live in Canada. Tim and John's recollections of their first house transform into stories, but the location and the idea of home that they consider no longer exist, as John explains to Tim: "Man, there ain't no goddamn home back home" (70). The location also figures

into the story of home. Their views and talks lack a clear sense of time and place, bridging the divide between the diaspora and the host country as well as the homeland.

The representation of a text, the envisioned spatialization, and the two storylines shown in the novel give the sense of time and place in the text additional dimensions. Like the two major metaphors, the fictional location or environment depicted in the literature serves as a symbol that conveys several ideas. Tim and John desire to return to the Caribbean, where they once found their paradise, but that is no longer possible. In general, they yearn for the original house, which Kundera defines as, "the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return" (5) - Tim and John are compelled to recreate their past in the stories they write as a result of the text's powerful nostalgic sensations. Still, Clarke negotiates Caribbean identities in diaspora and demonstrates that by referencing the past and his characters' feelings of nostalgia for their native country "identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past, that is to say it is always about narrative, the stories which cultures tell themselves about who they are and what they came from" (5).

Similar to this, Wilson Harris describes hybridity in *The Womb of Space* as a fight within the self to break free from roots and heritage and to create the future while valuing variety over essentiality. In *The Origin of Waves*, Clarke challenges the idea that identity is fixed because the fixed self, strong ties to the past, and attachment to one's native land have little to do with how identity is created as a whole; rather, they are just a step in the process of developing a fluid diasporic identity. This truth is clear from Tim's progress toward a more flexible diasporic identity and a fresh understanding of the host-land. The novel's depiction of diasporic identity by Clarke serves as an example of how the fluid self, which Clarke demonstrates more explicitly

in his later works, develops from the diasporic self's diverse sources. Identity that breaks out from shared roots and bases itself on diversity produces hybridity as it shifts between several international levels. This fact is evident from Tim's development of a more adaptable diasporic identity and a new perspective on the host-land. The novel's representation of diasporic identity by Clarke serves as an illustration of how the fluid self, as Clarke more explicitly illustrates in his subsequent works, is derived from the varied origins of the diasporic self. As an identity swings between various international levels and breaks out from shared roots and bases itself on variety, hybridity is produced. The process of recovering from the trauma of separation from one's common ancestors is influenced by memories of the past and experiences from one's home country, which also represents a stage in the process of creating a flexible diasporic identity in the host nation.

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