

**BLACK STAR RISING: MAXINE TYNES**  
**By SARAH CHARLESWORTH**

**BLACK STAR RISING: MAXINE TYNES**

**By**

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## Abstract

Maxine Tynes is a Black Nova Scotian writer who writes from a deeply personal place. Her heritage and her community play an integral part in her writing, for it is through the exploration of her community and her community's relationship to the world that her role as a poet/activist is defined. Her strong Black feminist sentiments establish her writing as part of an important Black women's intellectual tradition. Chapter One deals with the poetry's relationship with the Canadian community and the historical roots of Black Nova Scotia as the method of understanding the many "isms" discussed by Tynes. I have also included a discussion of the critical reviews of Tynes's work. Chapter Two concentrates on the creation of a Black and female centered paradigm as a method for empowerment. Also, Tynes's role as an activist is explored in detail, in particular her dedication to Black women's process of self-definition against the oppressive prevailing discourses, such as the negation of the ideology of the beautiful. The final chapter deals with the reaffirmation of Black women through community; that is, I look at how Tynes values her community's ability to be self-sufficient despite the obstacles they face as Black Nova Scotian women. I have undertaken this discussion by looking at the concept of classism as it pertains to domestic workers. In the tradition of Black feminism Tynes re-values the relationships between Black women. In particular, the poetry honors the

bonds between women through the positive treatment of sisterhood and motherhood. I conclude by looking at the way in which Maxine Tynes ignores international boundaries by extending her discussion of struggle to the global political arena. Maxine Tynes is a proactive poet who works for positive change for those who are marginalised, both within and outside of her community.

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Like any major production this has been a team effort. The players have come in many forms, from the people who fueled me with their ignorance--to the friends and family who supported me with their knowledge. Thank-you to everyone who participated.

I am grateful to all of the Black men and women who made it possible for me to get an education with dignity. Finally, thank you Maxine Tynes, for relentlessly fighting for my interests, and for reminding me it's not over.

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## The “Worldwide Introduction” of Maxine Tynes

Many times I was asked: “Sarah what are you writing your thesis about?”  
And each time I answered: “Maxine Tynes, a Black Nova Scotian poet!”  
Then came the responses...

“Oh a Black writer. No offense, but hasn’t that been done to death?”

[looking confused] “Ohhhh, Tynes!”

“Very interesting. I really enjoyed Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.”

“Sorry, I have never heard of her.”

“Don’t know her.”

“Who?”

“Who?”

“Who did you say?”

“Let me ask you Sarah...if she is unknown, what is the point to your thesis?”

“Oh a *Black* poet.”

After a summer spent seeing the bewilderment on people’s faces at the very mention of Maxine Tynes, I cannot resist the temptation to begin my thesis with the word “Welcome!” First, I must admit that I have not included all of the feedback I encountered. If I were to document the responses I received from Black friends, they would read: “Congratulations,” “Excellent” and “It’s about time somebody wrote about us!” Overwhelmingly, I got positive, knowing responses from Black people and negative or confused feedback from white friends. This in itself is a good indication of the obstacles facing Black poetry in Canada. Yet, by

far the greatest hurdle is that not one person outside my university could recognize the name Maxine Tynes, and even within the university knowledge of her work is scarce. The message is clear--Maxine Tynes needs greater exposure.



*Day by day Black women have to keep reminding Canadian society that they are here, and that they have every right to be here and to participate fully in the political, economic, and social spheres of society (Simms 37).*

This quotation from Glenda Simms is an accurate summary of the problem of recognition which I faced in undertaking the study of a Black female artist. I have come to understand that part of the surprise and bewilderment on the faces of many of my friends was due to their discomfort surrounding my qualification of Tynes as a “Black” poet; whereas, others were simply challenging my choice of a Black artist. For example, the friend who snickered, “hasn’t that been done to death,” was unable to name even one Black Canadian writer. Nevertheless, I am still very proud to be a Black woman contributing to the scholarship about the work of another Black woman. For me there is a sense of completion that I derive from having the opportunity to present this work to others, so this is the most appropriate place for me to begin.

In Canada, the decision to study the work of Maxine Tynes or any other writer of colour is politically significant. There is an unspoken understanding that you are undertaking something “different” or unusual. It is absurd that, as a Black

woman, I am questioned about my commitment to Black literature. Yet, when I am studying white literature I am not challenged about the racial implications.

Dionne Brand is acutely aware of this phenomenon. As a Black artist she is also subjected to bizarre questions about race, as this anecdote demonstrates:

An interviewer on the CBC asks me: “Isn’t it a burden to have to write about being Black?” What else would I write about? What would be more important? Since these things are inseparable, and I do not wish to be separated from them, I take the responsibility of defending them. I have choice in this. (Brand Bread 13)

I raise these issues as a way of grounding this thesis in the political context from which it will be written. Like Brand “I do not wish to be separated from” my subject position.

Maxine Tynes strongly asserts her own subject position as a Black Nova Scotian woman, and the need to identify the social implications behind her interactions with the world. Her four published works include: Borrowed Beauty (1987), Woman Talking Woman (1990), The Door of My Heart (1993), and a book for children Save The World For Me (1991). Grace Jefferies, a grade twelve student at Cole Harbour High School, describes Tynes as “a combination of a woman, teacher, and poet.” She goes on to say: “her life is shaped by the pride and passion of her own strongly held beliefs and an absolute commitment to her personal politics” (Jefferies 2). Grace’s accuracy easily surpasses many of the critics who only focus on Tynes’s Nova Scotian origins. Tynes’s academic background reads: “Ms. Tynes graduated from Dartmouth High School, and went



on to receive a B.A. and a B.Ed from Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. She is currently teaching at Auburn Drive High School after teaching English and Black Literature at Cole Harbour District High School” (Jefferies 2). It is also essential to recognize that her upbringing in Dartmouth, and her Loyalist roots, are an important determining factor in her writing.

I first encountered Maxine Tynes’s writing in a University Feminism class. She was included in a class anthology. My own heritage as a Black Canadian immigrant with British and West Indian roots piqued my interest in her work, partially because my knowledge of Black Canadians was sketchy. I was primarily fascinated by Tynes’s roots as a Black Canadian. Her presence was an affirmation of my “belonging” in Canada. I understood her poetry on a more intimate level than any of the other Canadian works I was currently studying. I connected with Tynes because she seemed to share my voice; that is, I was comforted by her Black feminist sentiment. As a result, having the opportunity to explore this work in detail I began with the questions that I still had: What are the dimensions of this work? What are the factors that brought it into being? What are the social implications behind its existence? The answers to all of these questions were provided by a chorus of Black feminist voices, including Maxine Tynes’s. Consequently, I am approaching this work within the framework of Black feminism, as a Black feminist critic. Barbara Smith in “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” has provided the principles that a Black feminist critic should use:

Beginning with a primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and Black and female identity are inextricably elements in Black women's writing...work from the assumption that Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition....[And have an understanding that] Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have been obliged to share....The Black feminist critic would be constantly aware of the political implications of her work and would assert the connections between it and the political situation of all Black women. (Smith "Toward" 163-164)

I have used this framework in my approach to Maxine Tynes. As a result, my analysis is grounded in the ideas of other Black women in an effort to support the community from which I write. Smith urges Black women to: "look first for precedents and insights and interpretation within the works of other Black women....[to] think and write out of [your] own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of white/male literary thought upon the precious materials of Black women's art" (Smith "Toward" 164).

In my attempt to mirror the principle of being "highly innovative," and in reflection of the spirit of Tynes's writing, I have deviated from tradition by using the personal voice, my own cultural experience and other non-traditional methods of analysis.

This approach is liberating for, by dismissing the insistence on academic discourse, new opportunities for analysis are created. For example, approaching Maxine Tynes from a purely academic standpoint silences an important aspect of her work: her contributions to the Black feminist struggle. The strictly academic approach highlights the poetical but overlooks the activist qualities in this poetry. According to Patricia Hill Collins in Black

Feminist Thought: “Assuming new angles of vision on the definitions of who can be a Black woman intellectual and on what constitutes Black feminist thought suggests that much of the Black women’s intellectual tradition has been embedded in institutional locations other than the academy” (Collins 15). This is very much the case with Maxine Tynes’s poetry. Her poetry contributes to the voices of the Black intellectual tradition by creating a new Black and female-centered paradigm. She defies the boundaries of traditional poetic discourse and chooses instead to write out of the spirit of a personal and community identity. Therefore, any exploration of her craft must include an understanding of her identity.



When I first undertook this project I intended to use only secondary sources which pertained to Black Canadian writing. However, I quickly discovered that this was going to be impossible. For example, while researching Black Canadian poetry the following situation opened my eyes to the difficulty of accessing the available scholarship. After a long and frustrating search I discovered that there is no “African Canadian” or “Black Canadian” subject heading in my university library. All of the information on Black Canadian writing is classified under the subject heading “African-American.” When I questioned this categorization the reference librarian did not understand my concern. She simply pointed out that there was probably not enough information available to warrant an entire “Black Canadian” subject heading. I find it discouraging that in Canada we can more easily access the work of Black Americans. Unfortunately, this is indicative of the

way in which African-American concerns often overshadow African Canadian issues within Canada.

The difficulty of accessing Black Canadian research is matched by the lack of available material. The United States are far more advanced in their contributions to the analysis and production of Black literature. I am angered by the lack of support, financial or otherwise, that seems to be available for Black Canadian work. So I must begin with a disclaimer and an explanation about my research methods. Although I have used Black American research to support my conclusions about Maxine Tynes, I wish to clarify that “understanding the Black reality in Canada must start with the recognition that Canada’s Black population is unique and that it certainly isn’t a carbon copy of the African-American population south of the border” (Foster 13). This point must be made for, “too often, the rest of Canada tries to treat Canadian Blacks as if they were an offshoot from what they see on television in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago or Detroit. There is an important difference” (Foster 13).

However, we cannot deny that there is an important connection between African-Canadian and African-American culture. For example, Nova Scotia has been influenced by the prominence of Black American society. According to Donald Clairmont and Dennis Magill, in Nova Scotian Blacks: An Historical and Structural Overview: “Many Nova Scotian Blacks over the past few years have looked to American Blacks for their identity and for strategies of overcoming poverty and marginality” (Clairmont Historical 138). This connection also extends to the literary world: “Black leaders in Nova Scotia



now depend considerably upon American Black magazines and newspapers and American Black authors for ideas and interpretations about the white-dominated societies in which they live” (Clairmont Historical 140). However, Clairmont and Magill are careful to make the distinction that “Nova Scotian Blacks do not equate their social conditions to those experienced by American Blacks, but they do see many similarities and feel much less isolated than formerly” (Clairmont Historical 90). The connection with Black Americans is feasible because of the common bond of oppression: “All African-American women, share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent. This commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristic themes will be prominent in a Black women’s standpoint” (Collins 22). Thus I am leery of walking this fine line between American and Canadian discourse, though I find comfort in the American references in Maxine Tynes’s poetry, such as the tribute to Zora Neale Hurston (“Zora In My Heart” The Door of My Heart 94). However, I hope that in a few years a thesis such as this will be possible using more Canadian content.



Having begun with the concept of a unified Black identity I need to include the scholarship of Coomi S. Vevaina, who wrote: “The interesting thing about Black women writers in Canada is that they employ such a wide variety of styles, tones and techniques that they stubbornly defy unitary categorization” (Vevaina 269). Maxine Tynes is no exception to this rule; her work is ambitious in its thematic and political concerns. Her poetry has been criticized for its simplicity, yet a close examination of the content creates

a new appreciation for the complexity of this work.

I have begun with a detailed look at the background of the poetry, starting with a survey of the Canadian political climate which Maxine Tynes's writing must compete in. This led me to question the origins of the oppressive and racist undercurrents in Nova Scotia and Canada. Accordingly, the next section presents an in-depth record of Black Nova Scotian history and Maxine Tynes's treatment of her heritage. I have concluded Chapter One with a brief look at the problems with the critical reviews of Tynes's work. Chapter Two concentrates on Tynes's ability to demand and contribute to the creation of a new Black and female paradigm, with her strong Black feminist conviction and her dedication to using poetry as a form of political activism. This activism manifests itself through self-definition against the oppressive prevailing discourses, such as the negation of the ideology of the beautiful. This reaffirmation of Blackness culminates in the use of community in all four collections. The third chapter looks at how Tynes values her community's ability to be self-reliant, despite the obstacles they face as Black Nova Scotian women. I have analyzed Tynes's call for an understanding of multiple oppression, using her discussion of classism as it pertains to Black domestic workers. Her intimate portrayal of their story allows the reader to understand the double vision of oppressed women. In addition, this poetry affirms the relationships between Black women by honoring the bond of sisterhood and motherhood. What is the end result? Growing out of the community solidarity in the poetry is a commitment to seeing the global implications of a united struggle.

Exploring this poetry is synonymous with a journey, because of the far reaching implication of Tynes's unique poetic voice. As a reader you are asked to re-evaluate your world view in order to understand the political implications of this poetry. Tynes invites her reader to share her own process of discovery: "To seek, to test and to test the thrust, the parry of thought and word and ism and image. Together" ("The Poet as Whole Body Camera" The Door of My Heart 5). I also approach this work not as an expert, but rather as a participant in this process. I invite you to do the same.

## Chapter One--Qualifying Blackness: A Look at Political and Historical Context

On entering the Toronto Reference Library this morning, I just missed stepping on a picture of Maxine Tynes. This caused me to stop suddenly with my mouth agape. I was stunned. My surprise stemmed from my recent discovery that references to Maxine Tynes's work are difficult to find even in the most comprehensive libraries, so my shock at having discovered a picture and a copy of her poem "Africville" simply lying around is not surprising. I bent down and picked up the display and I was delighted to see the work of other Black Canadian poets such as Lillian Allen and George Elliott Clarke. As it was July, I proudly thought to myself, "It is not even Black History month!" However, my triumph was short lived. When I showed the fallen display to the librarian she pointed out that I was reading the wrong side of the poster. The side of the poster which included Maxine Tynes had been recycled from Black History month. The side I was supposed to see boasted colourful Union Jacks and a collection of British poetry. Somehow I cannot help but see this incident as symbolic of the condition of Black poetry in Canada. In the Canadian literary community Black poetry seems to be always relegated to the background, brought out for special occasions. So I sighed with disappointment when I realized that Maxine Tynes's proud Black face and brilliant poem would be hidden behind



the display until next Black History month. But in my heart I am proud that Maxine Tynes's smiling face was there at all. For a brief moment, as a Black Canadian woman, I saw a mirror of myself and I felt proud.



*Women are always looking into mirrors....We're looking at ourselves; looking for ourselves....For people of colour, for Black people, for this Black woman in particular, the search is the same, but different. We are constantly looking for who we are. So many of the signals have been lost, historically and culturally along the way.*

*(Maxine Tynes "Mirrors" Borrowed Beauty 7).*

If there is an pertinent place to begin with Maxine Tynes it is here, with her search for and affirmation of her identity as a Black Nova Scotian woman. This search is ultimately a process which situates the reader in the centre of an intense struggle between colonial idealism, on one hand, and Black realism on the other. The above quotation, sampled from the introduction to Tynes's first collection, Borrowed Beauty (1987), marks the beginning of the lengthy exploration of Black culture and identity which is the foundation for Tynes's poetic career. Her ability to re-define the role of history and sociology<sup>1</sup> in her writing makes her work revolutionary. That is, Tynes treats reality not merely as a poetic or inspirational tool, but rather as a structure for creative political

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1

I am defining "sociology" as "the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society" (Oxford). In relation to Maxine Tynes's work the society frequently under study is the Black Nova Scotian community.

expression. This political content in her work ensures that the political climate into which the work is received is relevant. All four collections of poetry are engaged in a dialogue with the political institutions that affect marginalised communities; therefore, in this chapter I will look at some of the major problems for Black women in Canada, thus providing the groundwork for what Tynes is writing about and against.

I have taken a fair amount of space to address the historical roots of Black Nova Scotians and Maxine Tynes's treatment of her history. There is a broad range of characteristics that can be used to define Tynes's poetry; however, few features are as important as the poetry's relationship to fiction, history and sociology. It is essential to recognise that in Maxine Tynes's work these three categories do not operate at the expense of each other, but rather co-exist to create a multidimensional account of the Black Nova Scotian experience. Consequently, this Black story easily makes the transition between fiction and non-fiction. Maxine Tynes draws our attention to the fallacy of the ultimate truth, and by doing so, she focuses the reader's attention on the subjective nature of history. On the most basic level, this is accomplished through the application of a new conscious storyteller--the Black Nova Scotian Woman. I conclude this chapter with a brief look at the critic's perspective on Tynes's poetry. This brings the chapter full circle with a return to the nature of oppression in the Canadian literary world.



*Tell me what this country is  
 this Canada  
 this nation of same and different...  
 Tell me what this country feels  
 this Canada  
 this nation of together and separate...  
 ("This Canada" Save the World For Me 42)*

Historically, Canada has enjoyed a good reputation for its humanity toward Black people. A large part of this image has been sustained from the days of the Underground Railroad through Canada's fame as the free country. However, as a greater number of Black people are given the opportunity to speak about their experiences in Canada this innocent reputation is being harshly disputed. Cecil Foster has recently published a book called A Place Called Heaven: The Meaning of Being Black in Canada in which he argues that Canada's status as a safe haven is powerful, for there is a strong reluctance to validate the minority voices that criticise Canada:

No, the prevailing view argues, minority groups have no reason to whine or complain. Not in Canada, not in the place that had been the terminus of freedom for the Underground Railroad for American Blacks fleeing slavery....Unfortunately, the prevailing view provides no real answers to the questions associated with what it is really like to be Black in Canada. (Foster 32)

Maxine Tynes is one of many Black people who articulate what Black life is like in a country dominated by whiteness and thus challenges the image of "Canada."

What is up for scrutiny is the common perception of the Canadian image: "When most people in the wider society think of Canada, they automatically assume

white” (Foster 29). To say the least this perception of whiteness is very damaging for Black Canadians who are often rendered powerless by this exclusion. The damaging nature of this exclusion has manifested itself in the Black women’s community: “Black women in general are amongst the most marginalised women in Canada” (Simms 34). This translates into everyday difficulties concerning individual liberty. For instance, the ability to express grievances and have them rectified is directly contingent on your ability to access authority. The reality which is explored extensively in Tynes’s poetry is that “Those who control the schools, media, and other cultural institutions of society prevail in establishing their viewpoint as superior to others....groups unequal in power are correspondingly unequal in their ability to make their standpoint known to themselves and others” (Collins 26). Black women suffer from what I call the “white establishment” the network of institutions which operate on a standard of whiteness, by only considering the needs and desires of the white community.

Glenda Simms accurately identifies the problem when she states: “The contemporary experiences of Black women in Canada demonstrate the unique challenges facing women of the diaspora living in white societies. Marginalised socially, economically, culturally, and politically they must forge a new consciousness from fractured identities” (Simms 33). This is a hard pill to swallow



for most white Canadians who “believe that the society is fundamentally just, and [who] believe that their history is justified” (Brand Bread 151). Although Black Nova Scotians have been in Canada for many generations, they still struggle with fractured identities. That is, white Canadians and a great number of Black West Indian immigrants do not appreciate their Canadian heritage. Explaining this problem of an identity of migrancy which is attributed to Black people, Dionne Brand wittily remarks that in Canada Blacks are considered as “the thin/ mixture of just come and don’t exist” (as qtd in Vevaina 264). I believe that it is more difficult for white Canadians to embrace Black Canadian identity than Black West Indian identity, because the acceptance of Black Canadians necessitates the surrendering of power. White Canadians must admit that they do not have a monopoly on Canadian heritage and culture. Accepting the identity claims of women like Maxine Tynes means that Black people are no longer easily denigrated to the category of immigrant. Instead white Canada must make room for their ownership. But Maxine Tynes’s poetry enters a Canada that is not yet willing to make room for her voice, a Canada she correctly labels “this nation of together and separate” (“This Canada” Save The World For Me 42).



Any in-depth research into the history of Black Nova Scotians reveals two

disturbing trends--the noticeable lack of available research about Nova Scotia and, with the accessible research, the repetition of words synonymous with oppression. These trends are very revealing because they point to both sides of the Black Nova Scotian dilemma: in particular, as documented by Tynes, the struggle against marginality and the silence surrounding this struggle. Black Nova Scotians are faced with the disturbing reality that "With a few exceptions, only in recent years have scholars interested themselves in the settlement and historical development of Blacks in Nova Scotia" (Clairmont Relocation 36). In addition, Black Nova Scotians have also become discouraged with the quality of research that is being done: "Black people feel that they have been 'studied' or researched far too much with little effective attention being given to their legitimate concerns about oppression and neglect" (Clairmont Historical 4). Also Black women in particular, "get turned off because there are few social scientists who are trained to translate and write clearly and passionately of their lives" (Omolade 112). Women like Maxine Tynes present one solution to this problem, because as a poet and a Black Nova Scotian, Maxine Tynes speaks to us from the interior of this struggle. Therefore, her writing is an important record of her community's struggles and triumphs.

Most Canadians, both Black and White, are ignorant of the role that

Canada played during slavery: "Blacks...have been in Canada since the beginning. But how much do we know about their struggle for equality, dignity, and respect? How much do we know about Canada's own colour line and what Blacks have done to overcome it?" (Alexander 33). Maxine Tynes's words at the start of Borrowed Beauty reflect the inability of Blacks to easily access the specifics of their history: "I cannot possibly say to you that I am a woman decedent from the people of the plains--the Serengeti, of Kenya, of Ghana, the Gambia or of Zaire--the heartland. I can only look to the vast expanse of Africa, that Black mother continent, and say, that is who and what and where I am" ("Mirrors" 8). Tynes's recognition of her own missing history is a small reflection of the collective history of her Black peers who have had a difficult history in Nova Scotia. Yet despite the turmoil involved in the integration and inclusion of Blacks into Nova Scotia, this group has been all but ignored by historians and the Canadian mainstream. As a result, most Canadians just do not know about Nova Scotian history. The difficulty surrounding Black Nova Scotian history has been partially a result of two main factors--classism and racism:

Blacks have been poorer than the average white Nova Scotian who, in turn, over the past hundred years has been poorer than the average Canadian. Throughout their settlement in Nova Scotia, Blacks have had to carry a special burden, the burden of the white man's prejudice, discrimination and oppression. The result is that Nova Scotian Blacks became marginal people in a relatively

depressed region. Marginality denotes here a lack of influence in societal decision making and a low degree of participation in the mainstream or political or economic life. (Clairmont Relocation 37)

In the eyes of many Canadians, Canada was simply perceived to be a safe haven for free slaves. The history of Nova Scotian Blacks, as a history of exclusion, harshly disrupts this ideal picture. The correction of this misconception is essential, for "it is impossible to understand either the contemporary socio-economic conditions of Black Nova Scotians...without recognizing that Nova Scotia was at one time a 'slave society'" (Clairmont Relocation 37). Our reluctance as Canadians to recognize our mistreatment of Blacks means that important information is overlooked. For example, few Canadians know that: "not long ago 'Coloured Town,' 'Cape Negro,' and 'Nigger Harbour' appeared as road signs on the Canadian landscape. These signs demarcated the 'place' for Blacks in Canada" (Alexander 19). These omissions prevent our full acknowledgement of the realities of the daily slave conditions that existed for Blacks. Yet, on the most basic level, "the groundwork for the subordination of the Black people was laid by the early existence of a slave society" (Clairmont Relocation 38). Although the institution of slavery in Canada did not thrive to the extent that it did in the United States, in Nova Scotia in particular "slavery was never instituted by statute...yet slavery was practised in Halifax a year after the city was founded and, over the



next five decades, it was not uncommon in other parts of the province" (Clairmont Historical 37). Yet, Nova Scotia was not unique. Unbeknownst to most Canadians "from 1628 to 1783 almost all Black people in Canada were slaves" (Alexander 39). Unfortunately, this reality is most often hidden behind Canada's reputation as a safehaven for Blacks.

The limited research that is available about the history of Blacks in Nova Scotia focuses on the major patterns of migration of Black Nova Scotians: "The first major migration of Blacks into Nova Scotia took place during, and immediately after the American Revolution. About ten percent of the Loyalists who fled north were Black, of these, a large minority remained as slaves of their white Loyalist masters" (Clairmont Historical 9). But not all of these Blacks were slaves: "It has been estimated that some 3,000 Blacks were 'free,' most of them being freed explicitly by the British as an inducement to leave their revolutionary masters" (Clairmont Historical 9). The living conditions of the "free" Loyalists would not prove to be much better than those of the slaves. However, the expectations of the Black Loyalists arriving in Nova Scotia were high:

[they] believed they were coming to a land where they could exercise their liberty and establish themselves...Not only did the Black Loyalist expect to move freely, they expected to receive the government grants of land and provisions promised to all Loyalists regardless of colour. Rarely were their expectations met. (Hamilton 21)

Because the Loyalists did not receive the land promised to them, integration problems became serious:

Loyalist immigrants outnumbered the resident population of Nova Scotia and the problems of settling and supplying so many people were so great that many white settlers, too, experienced wretched deprivation. Predictably, though, deprivation among the Blacks was more intensive and more extensive (Clairmont Historical 11).

As a result of these problems "a number of Blacks were forced, in order to survive, to sell themselves or their children into slavery or long-term indenture" (Clairmont Historical 11).

The situation for Blacks in Nova Scotia was bleak. The words of Tynes's poem "Black Heritage Photos: Nova Scotia Archives" reflect the economic deprivation that would become familiar to the Black population: "Whose Black Loyalist shack?" (Borrowed Beauty 41). The Black community sentiment at the time was marked by the instances of mass migration from Nova Scotia: "In 1792, when the agents of the Sierra Leone company came recruiting among the Blacks of the province, 1,200 accepted his company's offer and sailed to Africa" (Clairmont Historical 12). The next major migration occurred during the war of 1812 when the British once again offered freedom to any slave who would join the British: "Thus in 1815, another 2,000 free Blacks arrived in Nova Scotia in anticipation of freedom, land and wages" (Clairmont Historical 13). However, Clairmont and

Magill note that these Blacks received a slightly better reception.

Another important group of Blacks lodged temporarily in Nova Scotia: "In 1796 some 550 Maroons deported from Jamaica were settled on the lands vacated by the Black Loyalists at Preston...in 1880 virtually all the Maroons were shipped off to Sierra Leone" (Clairmont Historical 13). The Blacks who remained in Nova Scotia struggled to survive, for, the land ownership situation in the Black community was dire. They were only given "licences of occupation" rather than full land grants. The full grants promised by the government not only took twenty five years to arrive, but also "Their licences allowed all the rights of property save those of sale or conveyance" (Clairmont Historical 13). Therefore, the Blacks of Nova Scotia became immobilised. In 1842 the government finally allowed for true grants for the refugee Blacks at Preston, but the land was still barren. One of the most telling examples of the stigmatization of Blacks occurred in 1850:

As early as March 1850 the Nova Scotia house of Assembly presented a resolution to the governor, requesting him to prevent further introduction of Black settlers into this province; among the grounds on which they justified the resolution was the argument that "the Negroes and mulattoes were improper to be mixed in general society with the White inhabitants." (Clairmont Historical 15)

This would be the last major influx of Black immigrants into Nova Scotia. It is important to recognize that Blacks have deep roots in Nova Scotia that contradict

the label of migrant so often given to Black Canadians<sup>2</sup>.



*Who controls the past...controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.*

*(Orwell 34)*

*A people do not throw their genius away...if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists, scholars, and witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children...if necessary bone by bone.*

*(Walker qtd. in Collins 5: 92)*

Because Maxine Tynes would normally be considered an imaginative writer, the question emerges "Why is it necessary to understand her culture in order to understand her poetry?" Maxine Tynes's poetry consciously documents the meeting point between art and life within the specific context of Black Nova Scotian culture. Working in the field of Black literature, critics like Stephen Henderson (Understanding the New Black Poetry) clarify the connection between life and art that is often at the heart of Black writing:

Art, of course, including literature, does not exist in a vacuum, and reflects--and helps to shape--the lives of those who produce it. It is able to do these things, moreover, because of the special heightening and refining experience that is characteristic of art. Literature, accordingly, is the verbal organization of experience into

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This stigmatisation is discussed by Himani Bannerji in Returning the Gaze: "The perception of Black people as existing in a state of migrancy further contributes to this construction which legitimizes the racist underpinnings of Canadian society" (220).



beautiful forms, but what is meant by "beautiful" and by "forms" is to a significant degree dependent upon a people's way of life, their needs, their aspirations, their history--in short, their culture. (Henderson 4)

Tynes operates not merely as a storyteller in her poetry, but as a voice that records history from the Black perspective<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, her role as historian necessitates a clear understanding of the history she is telling. In the words of Sylvia Hamilton "To understand the lives of Black women in Nova Scotia, one must begin by learning something about their people and their environment" (Hamilton 14).

The history in all three collections comes very much from a personal perspective. That is, Tynes acts as the conscious filter of the story of Black Nova Scotians. Accordingly, the introduction to The Door of My Heart reads: "These are the poems that punctuate my life. They are the lens, the shutter, the eye of this whole-body camera that I am...I snap up shots/thoughts/images everywhere. I take the measure of all pain and pleasure, of your life and mine" ("The Poet as Whole Body Camera" 5). Tynes is the medium for a message that is necessarily tainted by the teller. Her subject position, which is immediately brought to the audience's attention in the introduction to the first

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I do acknowledge that Tynes's writing operates within an imaginative framework; however, her numerous attempts to record historical events cannot be easily dismissed. Each collection contains many poems dedicated to recovering a distinctly Black past. For example, "Crazy Luce" in Borrowed Beauty, "This Dartmouth At Alderney Gate, 1990" in The Door of My Heart.

collection, "I am (at least) a fourth generation Black Canadian" (Borrowed Beauty), proudly declares Tynes's strong racial and national ties. This dedication to history has been occasionally noted by the critics. For example, the review of this collection that was published in the Atlantic Advocate read: "Although not history as such, there is a dimension of history in Maxine Tynes's Borrowed Beauty....These poems are a celebration of what history has done to make a lot of women and Blacks much more human and sensitive" (52). Although this reviewer professes a disappointing sentiment by failing to acknowledge how Blacks and women have become more sensitive than, the concept that Tynes presents a celebration of history is important. However, this must be qualified by the understanding that Tynes is celebrating the retelling of history through a Black and woman-centred voice. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, her writing serves a practical pedagogical function for her audience, or in the words of another reviewer, Anne Rayner: "her poems are often public declarations of social and political injustice or celebrations of the Black Nova Scotian community" (138).

After reading the work of Barbara Omolade I believe Tynes plays the role of the griot historian who fills in "history's blank pages/....the blurred and nebulous facts" ("Black Teacher: To This World, To My Students" Borrowed Beauty 43). According to Omolade

The Black women griot-historian must wrestle herself free of the demons of the discipline of history which deny her. Eventually she

must break the fetters of the academy and its shadow on Black women's thought. She must retrace the steps of our people, allowing the capacity of her dreams and her struggle to guide her through the raw material and data of our history. She must embrace the men and women of the past who push their voices into her body and mind, ignoring time and death to do so (Omolade 110).

Similar to the griot historian described here, Tynes recovers non-traditional role models of her community and brings these women out of the shadow left by historians.

Heidi Safia Mirza writes:

In the past and depending on who held the pen, Black women have almost exclusively been portrayed in terms of negative and regressive stereotypes: 'Sapphire,' the overbearing, domineering matriarch; 'Aunt Jemima,' the homely, loyal mammy; 'Jezebel,' the erotic sensual temptress. Now Black women are themselves in the forefront of reclaiming their own womanhood, and the arena where their invisibility and misrepresentation is played out is the novel. (Mirza 146)

Tynes's historical work, like the work of many Black novelists, stands in sharp contradiction to the history told by the history books about the Nova Scotian region and Canada in general. Maxine Tynes now stands as an example of a woman who will bring to national attention the history of women like Edith Clayton, the last of the Black basket weavers in Nova Scotia. Clayton is a woman who struggles for her craft to survive:

Edith Clayton  
brown basket lady  
from years past  
shoppers carrying finely crafted bits of you  
home with them...  
(Borrowed Beauty 38)

Like historical documentation, poetry can act as a permanent record of an event.

Therefore, by using the poetic form Tynes momentarily arrests history and allows the reader to reconsider the historical moment as she tells it. I see this as almost a correction of the history books which tell a biased story. So, once again we see the pedagogical process at work as poems like this bring to the forefront the question "how much do we really know about Black Canadians?" Many major moments of Black history are not adequately addressed by the Canadian media and academia. In the face of these omissions Maxine Tynes successfully captures these moments in history from a Black perspective. This is her re-documentation process.

Nowhere is this procedure of reworking history in order to reflect the story of Black women more evident than in Tynes's use of the occasional poem. For example, the introduction to *Crazy Luce* reads:

For Lucy Mitchell, who died a one-hundred-year-ole Black woman in 1910. She was known most of her adult life as "Crazy Luce," because of eccentric dress and behaviour in the streets. But she surely was somebody's sweet child once, and probably wanted to be somebodies lover, friend, wife and mama. (Borrowed Beauty 34)

Tynes encounters the myth of this woman, Crazy Luce, "frozen in the Nova Scotia archives," and in this poem Tynes breathes life into Lucy Mitchell and allows the audience to witness the intimate side of this woman who is documented negatively as a crazy person. Thus, Crazy Luce becomes rewritten and rediscovered. And what is recaptured is



the positive side of her personality--her Blackness, her femaleness and her humanity.

What is the relationship between Tynes's choice of form and her historical and social subject matter? The decision to use a poetic form to explore sociological and historical issues is beneficial in numerous ways. In particular, the movement away from traditional methods of exploring Black Nova Scotia highlights the unique perspective in Tynes's poetry. Tynes is able to communicate with her reader in creative and multidimensional ways, because she is not confined to traditional standards of "good" history. According to Henderson, the choice of poetry to introduce political ideology is an important tradition in Black writing. Unlike academic discourse, which is often far removed from the people of the Black community, poetry allows for greater accessibility. Even within the literary arena the success of this medium has been documented in the Black American community: "During the sixties few novels by Afro-American women were published; rather, poetry and drama dominated the literature, perhaps because of the immediacy of these forms and the conviction that literature should be as accessible as possible to Black communities" (Christian 178).

Henderson's work, which was written in the seventies, qualifies a new Black movement which has redirected the identity message back towards the Black community, a movement which is different in "its attempt *to* speak directly to Black people *about themselves* in order to move them toward self-knowledge and collective freedom"

(Henderson 16). This is the main goal of Tynes's poetry; however, through her poetic process, her message has the potential to find a wider audience.

One of the most serious problems for Blacks has been the struggle against the stereotype of Black people as innately inferior. Dr. Bridglal Pachai in his text Beneath The Clouds of The Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotian Blacks remarks on how Blacks in Nova Scotia have been historically alienated: Nova Scotian Blacks "were labelled as primitive, backward, lazy, incompetent, barbaric, irreligious, and unworthy members of the humane race" (Pachai vii). Although this stigmatization has relaxed over time, it is significant that this was the starting ground for the integration of Blacks into Nova Scotian society. In contrast to this, Tynes allows the reader to access the positive side of this history. In particular, her writings about the pride inherent in the ability of the people to survive shift the emphasis away from the desolate tone of the history books in order to recognize the triumphs of her people. The focus of her work rests on the process of day to day survival, for on the most basic level "Black cultural adaptation in Nova Scotia has been preoccupied, necessarily, with the problem of survival" (Clairmont Historical 119). For example her poem "Black Song Nova Scotia" from Woman Talking Woman (63) has echoes of a freedom song:

We are Africville and Preston,  
 North and East  
 We are Portia White singing to a long-ago king  
 We are Edith Clayton weaving the basketsong of life

Black and old with history  
 and strong with the new imperative.  
 We are Graham Jarvis bleeding on the road in Weymouth Falls.  
 We are here and not here  
 We are gone but never leave  
 We have voice and heart and wisdom  
 We are here.  
 We are here.  
 We are here.

The repetition of the final words "We are here" operates as a proud affirmation of survival. In addition, the survey of positive role models as coupled with tragic historical figures serves as the palate from which Tynes paints a rich picture of Nova Scotian heritage. The stress here is being placed on the holistic nature of Black experience, rather than just the negative aspects of the history of the people. Black people in Canada and the United States also look to their African heritage as a tool for unification. As an icon for survival and a dignified past Africa symbolises community strength. Accordingly, Maxine Tynes's direct references to Africa focus the reader's attention towards the interconnectedness of Black Canadians who are united through their African origins. For example, this is demonstrated through her poem "Africa in the World:"

I am Africa in the world.  
 I cast my shadow long and Black and everywhere  
 and green is my flag of the earth  
 and *red is the bloodline from here to there;*  
 it is said that *you all share the beat of my blood.*  
 A powerful legacy.  
 (Woman Talking Woman 56) [my italics]

The powerful legacy described by Tynes is drawn from the process of looking back to their African roots as Black Canadians. Therefore, this process of interaction between Tynes as one Black individual, and the Black listener as another, is the building of a legacy through the creation of a society. So it is easy to see how this process becomes a source of unity for a community constantly facing the threat of division because of the absence of a documented past.



The history of Black Nova Scotians cannot be discussed without conjuring up the name "Africville": "Until the heavy immigration of West Indians in recent decades, Nova Scotia was considered to have been the major centre of the Black experience in Canada. Of all the Nova Scotian Black communities Africville has undoubtedly been the best known" (The Spirit of Africville 36). For the people the connection between the story of Africville and Black Nova Scotian culture is immediate: "the experience of Africville is an integral part of the Black experience in Nova Scotia" (The Spirit of Africville 106). Maxine Tynes has an intimate relationship with Africville. Although she was not raised in that particular Black community, as a Black Nova Scotian she did grow up with the spirit of Africville. This is reflected in her poem "Africville Spirit"

I am Maxine Tynes.  
I am not from Africville, born and bred.  
But Tynes is a Black Community name  
and I am from this community;

this Maritime, Halifax, down home Nova Scotia Black community.  
 And so as a kid growing up in Dartmouth  
 in the Black four or five generations Tynes  
 homestead of my parents Joe Tynes and Ada Maxwell Tynes  
 I grew up knowing about Africville and hearing of Africville through the  
 family talks and from the Africville friends of my own folks. (Woman  
 Talking Woman 60)

Her assertion that it is important to recognize Black community moves her reader to see how the process of understanding a local experience like Africville is the initial step in coming to terms with the Black experience in Canada.

Tynes read at the Africville Mount St. Vincent University's Seaton Auditorium in November 1989. Her collection Woman Talking Woman includes three poems dedicated to the discussion of Africville: "Africville Spirit," "Africville is my Name" and "Africville." Given the amount of space dedicated to Africville in her poetry it is clear that Tynes uses Africville, like Africa, as a symbol of community solidarity:

AFRICVILLE

We are Africville...  
 I am Africville  
 says a woman, child, man at the homestead site.  
 This park is green; but  
 Black, so Black with community.  
 I talk Africville  
 to you  
 and to you  
 until it is both you and me...  
 (Woman Talking Woman 62)

She treats Africville as an icon for the soul of Black Canadians. Also the treatment of



Africville as a language in "I talk Africville," is an indication of her use of Africville as a common means of identification and communication for Black Nova Scotians. Therefore, Africville becomes an important key for unlocking the Black Nova Scotian experience for the reader of Tynes's poetry. In addition, nationally "Africville had become well-known as a Black ghetto, as an illustration of how Canada handles the 'race problem'" (Clairmont Relocation 3). The people of Africville formed a cluster community in response to their marginalisation by the greater white community. Although Africville functioned like a cocoon or a safehaven for Blacks, it could not protect itself from the attacks of White Nova Scotia.

The literature about Africville is surrounded by the question "Why?" Many Canadians are still confused by the scandal of Africville. The generations of families that continue to call Africville home are still asking "Why did they do that to the people?" (Remember Africville). Yet the question in the minds of many whites before the destruction of Africville was "Why don't they do something about that community?" A report entitled The Condition of the Negroes of Halifax City, Nova Scotia reads: "But in its way [Africville] is a source of embarrassment to Haligonians" (6). However, like the government officials who decided on the destruction of Africville, the authors of this report failed to include the rights of the citizens of Nova Scotia in their definition of the desires of Haligonians. The greatest reason given for the relocation was the living

conditions that the Africville residents endured. Although the people of Africville were portrayed as the instigators of the poor condition of their neighbourhood, in reality the city was predominantly to blame for the condition of Africville:

Although the city collected taxes from Africville Residents, their community lacked the essential services--paved roads, running water, and sewers--that tax dollars are supposed to provide. Repeat petitions to install such services fell upon deaf ears. Two alternatives existed, one was to improve living conditions in the community. The other was to demolish the community and relocate its people. (Remember Africville)

Despite the hardships of living without essential city services, the people of Africville did not want to leave. Their sense of community pride was strong. In videos that chronicle the lives of Africville residents, children repeatedly speak about their understanding of the community structure which involved a strong church and a dedication to your neighbours. The residents of Africville created their own establishments: "whenever they had control they created institutions that nurtured the community" (Hymn to Freedom). However, the decision to relocate fell outside of the reach of the Black community. Without the ability to yield strong political pressure, the Black community fell victim to the advice of outside experts. One member of the community, Terry Dixon, expressed his frustration: "We couldn't fight, then again we have nothing to fight with" (Remember Africville). For the residents of Africville it would all boil down to these life-changing words: "we the members of the city council choose relocation over all other alternatives" (Remember

Africville). The land that Africville stood on was deemed to be valuable--too valuable for a "Black ghetto."

It is safe to say that the Blacks of Africville did not benefit from the relocation. This is often the case: "relocation has tended to benefit socially elite groups more than the relocates; indeed some writers have viewed contemporary relocation as a race or class struggle" (Clairmont Relocation 3). The relocation procedure damaged the people's sense of identity. Many residents claimed that the elderly people in the community suffered the worst: "we lost five years minimum off the lives of our loved ones because of the move" (Remember Africville). Yet through cultural rejuvenation efforts, like the poetry of Maxine Tynes, the spirit of Africville is strong. It has developed through a polarization of the Black and white communities. The need for a concrete unifying factor was created by the physical destruction of Africville: "Africville lives on as an indictment against racism, as a critique of technocratic, imposed approaches to social change, and as a celebration of community and the human spirit" (The Spirit of Africville 76).



I began this thesis knowing that I was composing the only substantial writing on the work of Maxine Tynes. I find this very disappointing. When I am able to easily access writing by Canadians on a number of American and other foreign poets, I feel discouraged that a Canadian poet like Tynes, who has been writing since the eighties and represents

such an important component of our population, has remained virtually ignored by critics and academic institutions alike. As I mentioned earlier, I was introduced to Maxine Tynes through a feminism university class during my undergraduate studies. Her work was included as part of the curriculum on the marginalisation of the working class. My own connection with the poetry was echoed by many of my classmates who found her work accessible and poignant. Since that time, people I have shared this poetry with have enjoyed it immensely. In fact, a few of the works (“Reach Out and Touch,” and “For Tea and Not For Service”) brought tears to the eyes of more than one friend. All of these reactions left me confused about the lack of reception this work has received from the critical community. However, during my research for this paper one short morning spent reading all of the available critical reviews cleared up my confusion. I quickly began to understand the barriers facing this poetry.



*I'm an artist in this country/ let me dance/ or sing my song....  
I'm an artist in this country/ hear my voice.  
("In This Country" The Door of My Heart 66)*

Maxine Tynes received the Milton Acorn People's Poet of Canada award for 1988. This recognition as community writer is appropriate because Tynes remains adamant about her work's accessibility. Ironically it is her strength in this area which costs Tynes the recognition she deserves in the critical arena. The very tools which make her work



accessible have been used to dismiss her poetry as simplistic and unsophisticated, labels which have historically led to banishment from literary circles. To put it crudely: “to be simple is to be bad.” This equation has been devastating to many minority writers, who refuse to conform to the standards of “good” poetry as outlined by the white-dominated literary community, choosing instead to satisfy the needs of their communities. As a result, when many Black writers are acknowledged by critics their work is subjected to unrelated criteria. But simply getting any critical attention can be difficult: “The mishandling of Black women writers by whites is paralleled more often by their not being handled at all” (Smith “Toward” 161). Tynes work continues to be both abused and ignored by critics. This is very problematic. Critical attention is often the attention which is needed to increase the circulation and consumption of a text. As Barbara Smith explains: “For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered” (Smith “Toward” 159). Tynes’s intentions are to produce writing which is both accessible to, and a reflection of, the community from which she writes--Black Nova Scotia. I would think that even a brief examination of her work would clearly indicate this objective, yet a survey of the sparse critical attention (mainly in the form of reviews) clearly indicates that Tynes’s intentions are usually disregarded.

Tynes’s poetic technique, however, holds few surprises: whatever her subject matter, she continues to use a style that relies on



repetition, both phrasing and of language, 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. ( Rayner 138)

“Even the classic Tynes technique of repeating words and phrases, as in song, is weak, almost as if the words were repeated for lack of anything else to say” (Moulton-Barrett 130).

What these writers are essentially critiquing is Maxine Tynes’s participation in the Black feminist “conviction that literature should be accessible as possible to Black communities” (Christian 178). One method of achieving this accessibility is by using oral techniques which have historically been important in the Black community. For instance, this style of writing often involves the limited use of figurative language and the use of repetition, like the African call and response technique. This sort of critical attention categorizes Maxine Tynes’s style as faulty without accurately considering her artistic intentions. Both of these reviews reveal the manner in which traditional Black techniques are devalued and dismissed by the white critical community. The two reviewers overlook the origins of the very techniques they criticize and the intended audience of the work. Clearly, there is little or no understanding of the community heritage involved in this work. Anne Rayner does make a rather arrogant attempt at recognizing that Tynes’s poetry might have a specific audience (rather than herself) in mind; she states, “Tynes must decide whether her intention is to speak to her community or to share that community’s experience with those outside it” (138). I wonder how often this critic makes this demand

of white poets. Comments like this one are rarely directed towards white writers whose community is considered “mainstream.” I would like the opportunity to ask: “What are the criteria for writing for those outside of your community?” In the same breath, Rayner notes that “[Tynes’s] poems are often public declarations of social and political injustice or celebrations of the Black Nova Scotian community” (138), yet she seems to ignore this in her overall approach. I suggest that a more enlightened look at this poetry might have commented on Tynes’s ability to successfully engage Black techniques. Perhaps a Black woman reviewing this work would be pleased with Tynes’s agenda of communicating with her community through a style that is both familiar and honors the traditions that are important to Black women. The message here is clear; in order to compete you must adopt the style of the dominant ideology.

Of all of the reviews I encountered the following drew the most personal response:

Tynes is a poeticized writer but us not a poet yet; her writing deals overwhelmingly with the consciousness of what it means to be Black in a predominantly white society. Unfortunately, she does not present the Black experience in emotionally charged situations that might engage the reader’s sympathy; her anecdotes tend to be superficially described....as if it is written to be read before a group of politically like-minded people, but not in front of an audience who know anything about poetry. (Morrissey 146)

This review written by Stephen Morrissey in Canadian Literature is another example of the power structures which act to suppress the marginal voice. Morrissey focuses his review on Tynes’s ability to effectively portray the Black “experience” to a white audience. I

immediately think of the words of Dionne Brand: “White work,...is never questioned for its portrayal of ‘the white experience’” (Brand Bread 159). The elitism operating in this review is appalling. The indication that because Tynes’s writing focuses on the communication of political messages, she fails to live up to some higher order definition of good poetry seems archaic. Yet I realize I am in the minority. I also find the concept that Tynes needs to present the Black experience in emotionally charged situations that might engage the reader’s sympathy disappointing. I wonder if Morrissey would prefer it if Maxine Tynes wrote more dramatic “action packed” Black stories like the ones we daily encounter on television? Would he be surprised to know that as a Black woman, I am very sympathetic to the poems in Borrowed Beauty? Obviously, Morrissey did not anticipate me in his audience for this review, for I do not to fall into his either/or dichotomy, because I am both “politically like minded” and I have the skills to identify good poetry. Incredibly, he ends his review with this statement: “Tynes is a writer with something important to say; however, she needs to be more lucid in the articulation of her message.” Once again I hear the words of Dionne Brand echoing in my head: “The same ‘commonsense’ racist ideology questions the production of any cultural work by artists of color then dismisses or anoints it--and with far more dismissal than anointment” (Brand Bread 159).

Barbara Christianson in her book Black Feminist Criticism articulates what I

believe to be the main problem with these critics. They need to consider that writing has “got its own workings. At least you need to understand the workings before you can say whether it’s done well, which is not the same, I think as whether you like it or not”

(Christian xv). Most of the reviews do not come to a detailed understanding of the work, opting instead to simply apply existing structures. Perhaps the very nature of the review belies the idea that you should have a background in what you are reviewing. For white writers this is not such a serious problem, for they are most often being reviewed by people who share their ideology and experience. For Maxine Tynes, however, she will have a difficult time escaping the persistent demands that she should appeal to the universal (read white audience). Most of the reviews, even the positive ones, fall into the trap of working from the premise that the poetry must be accessible to whites to be good/justified. Is this the current definition of marketability? The Atlantic Advocate Read: “There is an excitement in Tynes’s evocation that goes far beyond the Blacks. It is an attribute to people like Christopher Pratt; it is a recognition of places like Annapolis Royal; and it is an expression of life--love as we all see it” (52). Aside from shuddering at the use of the term ‘the Blacks,’ I wonder who is included in the pronoun “we?” Is there an unwritten rule that you need to be included to enjoy poetry or find its merit? The final words of a fairly positive review written by Anne Burke about Borrowed Beauty sum up the overall sentiment of the critics I read: “After this first book of poetry I would like

Tynes to pursue more challenging material” (Burke). I wonder, what could be more challenging than being a Black woman writing in the white literary world? I hope that soon Canadian critics will come to see that Maxine Tynes’s poetry is valuable because it shatters the elite ideology of progress. Tynes’s dedication to her community demonstrates that there is progression in staying exactly where you are.



## Chapter Two--A New Paradigm: Challenging the Definitions of Poet

*Reclaiming the Black feminist intellectual tradition involves much more than developing Black feminist analyses using standard epistemological criteria. It also involves challenging the very definitions of intellectual discourse. (Collins 15)*

*Then, as I often do, I look into my poet's soul to find there the route to self and personhood, both Black and female. That looking is not a lament but the greatest of joys.  
(“Mirrors” Borrowed Beauty 8)*

It is clear that the Black Canadian female poet faces many obstacles. Ironically, some of the greatest barriers are the existing standards in the literary world. Black feminists like Mary Helen Washington continue to cry: “Obviously we will have to learn to read the Afro-American literary tradition in new ways, for continuing to use the old way is impossible” (Washington 39). If Black women are to compete in the Canadian and American literary landscape, new methods of analysis must be created which will decolonize the imagination by: “seeing the contradictions in the ideologies an[d] open[ing] them up for demystification” (Collins 93). Black feminists are actively engaged in this process of demystification and the formation of a new paradigm that will work to reclaim the Black feminist intellectual tradition.

The creation of a new Black female centered paradigm involves the dismissal of

many of the traditional boundaries which are used to suppress the voice of Black female artists, thereby shifting the dominant paradigm from an exclusive ideology to an inclusive one. Barbara Omolade is a good example of a writer who actively undertakes this exile. In her introduction to her book The Rising Song of African-American Women she declares her intentions: "I am deliberately setting aside traditional scholarly boundaries and language because they tend to restrict rather than illuminate knowledge about Black women. The many levels of Black women's oppression and power require a scholarly approach with flexibility and breadth" (Omolade xvii). I have also attempted to mirror this concept in my approach to this poetry in the interests of gaining new insight into Maxine Tynes's work.

With Black women's writing this new focus is essential, for "Survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined" (Collins 6 ). Therefore, as I have stated earlier, the value of their work will only be highlighted by reinventing the concept of "good art." Without the formation of a new paradigm which includes an appreciation of the use of art or "functional art," the work of many Black women like Maxine Tynes is easily devalued:

African-American women not commonly certified as intellectuals by academic institutions have long functioned as *intellectuals by representing the interests of Black women as a group and fostering Black feminist thought*. Without tapping these so-called non-

traditional sources, much of the Black women's intellectual tradition would remain "not known and hence not believed in. (Williams qtd. in Collins: 15) [my emphasis]

This chapter will look at Maxine Tynes's participation in the Black intellectual tradition, and her status as a Black feminist. I wish to demonstrate how as an activist Tynes uses a Black paradigm to shape her poetry into art which values Black women's lives. In particular, there is an important emphasis on the process of self-definition, through the negation of dominant definitions of the "Black woman." Therefore, my understanding of the new paradigm grows out of my reading experience of Maxine Tynes's "route to self and personhood" (Borrowed Beauty 8).



### **Zora In My Heart**

*In praise of African-American literary woman--pioneer Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)*

Carrying Zora in my heart  
 makes me bigger than I am  
 my poet's soul  
 a monument  
 to her  
 that woman hero  
 pioneer spirit in flight

This poem from The Door of My Heart identifies the Black intellectual tradition and validates its necessity. In combination with the preceding poem, "Black Star Rising," Tynes identifies the way in which Hurston is a "pioneer" for Black intellectual thought, and as a result, Tynes leads her reader to acknowledge the growth of a tradition. This

concept of tradition is cemented by Tynes's gratitude to Alice Walker for discovering Hurston. The introduction boldly states "With thanks to Alice Walker for finding Zora Neale Hurston again" (93). Operating as "functional art" the poem works to recover Hurston and her peers by validating her position as a Black female intellectual despite her location outside of the academy.

How to thank you, Alice Walker  
 for finding that trail to Zora  
 gone cold  
*with pedantic and other eyes elsewhere*  
*on literary giants Black and white*  
 male/female  
 old and new

(Maxine Tynes 93) [my italics]

The proud tone of the poem means that Tynes is able, through the acknowledgment of the tradition, to simultaneously elevate the status of both herself and Hurston. That is, her "poet's soul" is essentially a tribute to the Black female literary tradition as created by writers like Hurston. Tynes appears to be aware of the feminist conclusion that: "Musicians, vocalists, poets, writers, and other artists constitute another group of Black women intellectuals who have aimed to interpret Black women's experiences" (Collins 15). Tynes also brilliantly recovers more obscure Black women into the Black intellectual tradition such as Lucy Mitchell and Edith Clayton: "This painstaking process of collecting the ideas and actions of 'thrown away' Black women...has revealed one important discovery. Black women intellectuals have laid a vital analytical foundation



for a distinctive standpoint on self, community and society, and in doing so, created a Black women's intellectual tradition" (Collins 5). Tynes skillfully manipulates the "old boys school" tradition of white males who use lineage as a method of establishing "literary genius." Instead of aligning herself with other white artists who, in the academy can essentially bestow greatness upon an artist through association, Tynes creates a new paradigm using the Black writers who have been shunned by the academy. Therefore, she simultaneously demystifies the existing structure and creates a new model which validates Black women.



*Womanist. From Womanish A Black feminist or feminist of colour....wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. A woman who loves other women, sexually, and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility...and women's strength. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves folk. Loves herself. Regardless.*

*(Walker xi).*

Maxine Tynes's poetic voice can be easily classified as womanist, for the spirit of Walker's words are mirrored in all four collections. In Maxine Tynes's pursuit of empowering the members of her community she not only delineates a Black female intellectual tradition, but she also defines herself as a Black feminist. Tynes articulates her political ideology in a tangible form and by doing so contributes to the Black feminist



struggle, for her work has the potential to change Black women's consciousness. Barbara Smith believes that the action of making Black feminism tangible is vital: "It is absolutely crucial that we make our visions real in permanent form so that we can be even more effective and reach many more people" (Smith "Some" 265). Tynes's commitment to making her work accessible shows that Maxine Tynes knows that politics in the form of accessible poetry has the capability of reaching a large audience. Therefore her commitment to "rais[ing] the flag on the personhood and on the imperative of feminist womanist" ("This Poet as Whole Body Camera" The Door of My Heart 5), is critical for Black women.



*But you federal minister/you make these cuts/ you don't consult/  
you go too far/ and the P.M. who wants to be/some U.S. star/puts  
us on the free trade table/to please some global whim/in response  
to our cries/he says: "sink or swim."*

*("In This Country" The Door of My Heart 5)*

For me one of the most enjoyable aspects of reading Tynes's poetry is her manner of facing issues head on. I suppose, because I share her ideals, I feel a sense of comfort at seeing them articulated in print. Like most feminists Tynes certainly does not hesitate to use her medium to candidly address political institutions. I believe that this tone of defiance is empowering for Black women like myself. bell hooks is straightforward about saying "If women always seek to avoid confrontation, to always be 'safe,' we may never

experience any revolutionary change, any transformation, individually or collectively” (hooks Margin 64). The struggle that Black women must undertake simply to be heard means that our voices need to be loud. Maxine Tynes embraces this concept. This combination of art and activism is what helps to make this poetry strong.

Since the existing concepts of intellectual work are not effective for Black women, as part of the new paradigm, intellectual work is redefined to include activism: “Black women intellectuals are engaged in the struggle to re-conceptualize all dimensions of the dialectic of oppression and activism as it applies to African-American women” (Collins 13). Therefore, the activist is now welcomed into the sphere of the intellectual, and as a result, traditional hierarchical academic values begin to break down. Although the activist seems like a simple concept, reviewing the reception to Tynes’s work indicates that there is a reluctance to accept the activist as the intellectual in the white community. This problem is documented by Collins:

Producing intellectual work is generally not attributed to Black women artists and political activists. Such women are typically thought of as nonintellectual and nonscholarly, classifications that create a false dichotomy between scholarship and activism, between thinking and doing. Examining the ideas and actions of these excluded groups reveals a world in which behavior is a statement of

philosophy and in which a vibrant, both/and, scholar/activist tradition remains intact. (Collins 15)

This is an accurate definition of the world created in Tynes's poetry, where the connection between art and activism is concrete and vital to the role of the artist.

Earlier I briefly touched on the concept of functional art. In order to explore this in more detail you must also understand the role of the Black feminist poet as an activist. Her art is a form of political activism in so much as her subject matter addresses the political concerns of her community. This differs from the idea of art for art's sake. Historically, this merger between art and activism occurred for many reasons, one of the reasons being that as Black women we have been "denied positions as scholars and writers which allow us to emphasize purely theoretical concerns" (Collins 29). The result is that "Very different kinds of 'thought' and 'theories' emerge when abstract thought is joined with concrete action" (Collins 29). Tynes's poetry reflects this merger of action and theory and, as a result, her work features an emotional attachment to the subject matter which makes the experience of reading and writing intensely personal. Take for example, "What's Wrong With This Picture?" a poem which attacks the under-representation of Black people in the media:

After thirty-five years of/watching television/ t.v./the tube/ the box/I  
still can't see myself/I look hard and often/and everywhere/on every  
blue and flickering screen  
I stay up round the clock/aiming and clicking the remote/in cycles

of networks and/channels/ tracking the elusive Black face on  
 screen/coming up empty/and snowblind in the night  
 The little white kids form the playground/are the big white  
 kids/who mouth and smile out/my global news/who map and chart  
 my weather.../The little white kids are/minding the t.v. store/ my  
 local evening news/never comes to me in Blackface (The Door of  
 My Heart 41)

In so much as this poem was written to directly address a serious problem for the members of the Black community, its words can clearly be defined as political activism. This tradition of joining scholarship and activism has begun to be recognized in the “theoretical writing” of many Black writers, but it is slow to be acknowledged in the poetic world. Dionne Brand expresses her own frustration in attempting to get recognition in Canada for the relationship between poetry and politics. In retaliation she defines her own tradition: “My tradition says that your speech must be relevant, charged, politically conscious, memorable. It must peruse human freedom” (Brand Bread 167).

Accordingly, Tynes is able to use her poetic voice as a tool for liberation. Using poetry she takes an active stance against modes of oppression and engages in the pursuit of freedom. There is a strong Black woman’s literary tradition in Canada which supports this kind of work. Coomi S Vevaina observes this in her study of Black Canadian women’s writing: “[Canadian] writers are in fact ‘righters’ for they see their work as a legitimate way of participating in the struggle for a better society. By writing from a proactive rather than reactive position, most Black women writers refuse to respond to the



colonizers” (Vevaina 260).



*This woman walks the world/ my path is broad and narrow.../I take the steps of woman, man and woman and man together...my eyes sweep wide this velvet-brown vision. Through this eye darkly, I take the measure of this woman in this world” (“This Woman” Woman Talking Woman 27 ) [my emphasis]*

For many Black women the power of self-definition is essential for survival. The act of declaring an identity is a political act. As a result, the subject of finding a voice to express a self-defined standpoint is a core theme in Black feminist thought. Maxine Tynes repeatedly uses this focus throughout all three adult collections as a method of empowerment. The process of self- definition is synonymous with regaining control “Because self-definition is key to individual and group empowerment, using an epistemology that cedes the power of self-definition to other groups...in essence perpetuates Black women’s subordination” (Collins 34). For example, often in her process of self-definition Tynes uses the icon of Africa to heal a fragmented identity: “I am Africa in the World/I cast my shadow long and wide and Black and everywhere.../I talk Africa/ I walk her rhythm and her strength./ I shout Africa when I give you my profile.../I am Africa in the world” (“African in the World” Woman Talking Woman 67). Africa works as a unifying device by creating a single powerful identity which can be accessible to many Black people. According to Patricia Hill Collins, this is an effective tool: “The



specialized thought of contemporary Black feminist writers and scholars should be able to draw on the long-standing Afrocentric tradition of struggle in order to produce ‘progressive art’” (Collins 103).

Through the use of her personal voice Maxine Tynes communicates the need for women to attain self understanding. The introduction to Borrowed Beauty, for example, establishes the need for Black women’s self-determination. Tynes says: “we as a people have lost many tangible, documented traces of who we are” (“Mirrors” Borrowed Beauty 7). It is this search for a lost heritage and the reclaiming of identity which dominates Tynes’s poetry. In her own words: “my poems, my poetry are like mirrors reflecting back in great or subtle beams and shafts of light and words and images that are womanly and Black and Brown and tan and full of the joy and pride in femaleness and in Black womanhood that I am” (“Mirrors” Borrowed Beauty 8). There is a meaningful link between her identity and her poetry. Tynes teaches self-definition by example. Her powerful and joyful claims of her identity as a Black woman have the potential to provoke the same response in her female readers. At least, this was my response, probably because powerful self-affirmation for Black women is uncommon.

However, Tynes does not ignore the process of self-definition. “Mirrors,” (as quoted earlier) reflects the movement from a fragmented identity to a unified self. This is a logical point of departure for Tynes’s writing. This is supported by Collins who writes:

“Why this theme of self-definition should preoccupy African-American women is not surprising. Black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other” (Collins 94). It is this movement from “sighing over or not quite believing what they’ve seen in the mirror” to “having found a center and a self-acceptance and identity in this Black and woman’s skin that I so joyfully wear” (“Mirrors” Borrowed Beauty 7), which permeates the collection. Tynes implies that without the ability to define yourself as a Black woman you will be lost. Therefore, the process of self-definition grants individual and collective power to Black women: “When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women’s self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women’s power as human subjects” (Collins 106 ).

Hence, the return of the control to Black women is the first step to liberation. The first step in gaining this control is recognizing that we have the power to do so. Elizabeth Janeway in Powers of the Weak strongly articulates the power of self-definition: “One of the most significant forms of power held by the weak is “the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful” (qtd. in hooks Margin 90). bell

hooks agrees strongly with this idea: “The suggestion that women must obtain power before they can effectively resist sexism is rooted in the false assumption that women have no power. Women, even the most oppressed among us, do exercise some power. These powers can be used to advance the feminist struggle” (hooks Margin 90). Tynes demonstrates several ways of accessing this power. For instance, by configuring a powerful image of Black womanhood, Tynes presents a voice of experience which debunks stereotypes by exposing their falsity. Her proud declaration “I take measure of this woman in this world” removes the authority from the dominant discourse which has so harshly defined Black women, using “the nexus of negative stereotypical images” which “has been fundamental to Black women’s oppression” (Collins 7).

Tynes’s discovery of identity may occur in the first person but, in keeping with Black feminist principles, the power of self-definition is far-reaching because it operates as progressive community activism. Tynes’s dismissal of the stereotypical images of Black women empowers the Black female readers to follow suite: “By disbelieving, one will be led toward doubting prescribed codes of behavior, and as one begins to act in ways that can deviate from the norm in any degree, it becomes clear that in fact there is not just one right way to handle or understand events” (Janeway as qtd in hooks Margin 90). The final result of this self-focus is “an unburdening, uncovering the most vulnerable parts of ourselves, uncovering beauty, possibility” (Brand Bread 23). Let me return again to

“Crazy Luce.” This is a wonderful example of Tynes’s revaluing alternate ways of being:

did you laugh with no teeth?/Did you roll/flash white eye?/Did you shimmy-shuffle/body/bum wave...  
generations earlier,/in white, white, whiter skin, and man-body/you would have been an artful and/cherished player on some bard’s boards.../in my time you would be Diana Ross, Moms Mabley, Pearl Bailey/sequins, Broadway, Johnny Carson, *Ebony Magazine* fine (Borrowed Beauty 34)

This poem honors Lucy Mitchell’s unique identity, thereby negating the single definition of appropriate feminine behavior. In this poetry, power is redefined as the connection between woman and identity, woman and humanity. Historically, this process is common within the Black community:

Within African-American extended families and communities, Black women fashioned an independent standpoint about the meaning of Black womanhood. These self-definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups (Collins 11)

This independent standpoint helps to shape the world view of Black women and aid in the sustenance of the Black intellectual tradition: “According to bell hooks, ‘it is impossible for Black female intellectuals to blossom if we do not have a core belief in ourselves, in the value of our work, and a corresponding affirmation from the world around us that can sustain and nurture’” (Omolade 117). Tynes provides not only a core belief in herself and the members of her community, but also the “corresponding affirmation” for her Black female readers.





*Being real and whole and bodyful;  
turning pages,  
greeting women who are flat and  
glossy, magazine-slim...*  
(*"Being" Woman Talking Woman 30*)

Black women continue to be exploited by society's conception of "beautiful women." Glenda Simms describes "The Beautiful" as "a vicious circle of victimization and alienation, abetted by the superimposition of corrosive series of values of desirability and beauty that are damaging to Black women" (Simms 35). Simms appropriately names this phenomenon the "Tyranny of Beauty." I think that this accurately describes the "socio-cultural syndrome that teaches all women that it is preferable to be ill, malnourished, obsessed or dead rather than be considered ugly or undesirable" (Simms 35). It is now commonly accepted that the standards of beauty in Canada and the United States have been damaging to the female population. However, on an individual basis the results are often devastating:

This imposed [stereotypical] identity manifests itself most strongly on a personal level and has profound impact on the way Black women experience their sexuality, perceive their body, relate to the question "who am I?", connect to their self-esteem, their self-hatred, their conflict with the mainstream paradigm, their internal fight with the mirror, and their resulting shattered identity.  
(Galvan 49)

So the Tyranny of Beauty is an important political issue for Black women, which needs



attention.

When Tynes begins her very first book of poetry with the image of looking into mirrors she opens the discussion about the Tyranny of Beauty: “women are always looking into mirrors, looking for a mirror, or thinking about, *regretting, sighing over or not quite believing* what they’ve seen in the mirror” (“Mirrors” Borrowed Beauty 7 ) [my emphasis]. Tynes explores the roots of this sense of dissatisfaction with the image in the mirror, by arguing that the absence of realistic images in the media perpetuate the tyranny of beauty and self-doubt for women. This is illustrated through the search for affirmation of identity in “Being.” In this poem the magazine women are portrayed as a fantasy “with rainbow magazine eyes” and “hands spread like wings” (Woman Talking Woman 30) Tynes removes the power of the models by trivializing them, by making them into fantastic birdlike creatures. However, the issue under discussion is anything but trivial. This is very much a case of art imitating life. Eku Omosupe, another artist of colour, wrote a poem called “In Magazines (I Found Specimens of the Beautiful)” which eerily echoes Tynes poem: “I looked for myself/between the covers of seventeen/Vogue/Cosmopolitan/among blue eyes, blonde hair, white skin, thin bodies, this is beauty./I hated this shroud of Blackness/that makes me invisible/a negative print/some other one’s nightmare.” (Omosupe 169). It is not a coincidence that these two poems both reflect the same problem, they both “display the numerous...emotionally costly pathways to beauty,[and] to

the myth of True Love and Desirability, which lead ultimately to self-rejection, self-hatred and ultimately a lack of self-esteem” (Simms 36). Black women have identified the problem of the beauty myth as a target for activism, and as a result this has been a primary topic of exploration in Black writing: “Black feminist critic Claudia Tate (1983, xxiii) reports that the issue of self-esteem is so primary in the writing of Black women that it deserves special attention. Tate claims that what the writers seem to be saying is that ‘women must assume responsibility for strengthening their self-esteem by learning to love and appreciate themselves’” (as qtd in Collins 107).

Tynes takes up this responsibility in all four collections by positioning self love as a weapon against the beauty myth. For example, in “Being,” and “The Politics of Knees and Skirting” the poetic voice observes the beauty myth from a distance, and the positive emphasis is placed on the beauty of the full-bodied woman, as opposed to the thin woman who conforms to the beauty myth.

And now/some sylph-like ingenue/slipping by/her enigmatic micro-  
mini/a flag and a traffic light/her legs/powerful and charged with the  
light of androgyny/carry her on and on/ past my stares and silent,  
silent cheering and wondering/just when she too will feel her legs all  
up and down/will read new dimensions in her mirror/ will call for  
elastic/more; the more/will sigh with contentment as the fabric falls  
and falls lower/lower still./When knees become a mystery.  
(The Door of My Heart 22)

In this poem weight becomes associated with wisdom, or an understanding that this other woman will eventually come to. This new ideology works to undermine the “Tyranny of

Beauty” in two ways: the first being the association of the beauty myth with immaturity, and the second is the connection Tynes makes between androgyny and conforming to the beauty myth. These two are connected by the implication that the speaker is more womanly. However, Tynes does not completely degrade the other woman’s body type. The suggestion of the power that accompanies the successful achievement of the beauty myth does not go unnoticed, as she describes her as “powerful and charged.”

Although this poem is free of the markings of race, Tynes does not ignore the fact that race is a complicating factor in the beauty myth: “The inerasable physical characteristics of race have long determined the status and opportunities of Black women in the United States [and Canada]” (King 300). For Black women the “Tyranny of Beauty” becomes even more oppressive with the added factor of what Mary-Helen Washington calls “the intimidation of colour” (as qtd in Simms 35). In the words of Glenda Simms: “within Black groups, this tyranny of beauty is further complicated by the added factor of racist values concerning what is beautiful in a woman” (Simms 35). As a result Black women have been shunned by the dominant culture and consistently relegated to the position of other: “Black women have never been socialized to be women in the way that the dominant class and culture define women. The images and prescriptions of femininity which structure white women’s lives structure Black women’s lives in contradiction to their lived experience and in contradiction to white images of those Black

experiences” (Brand “Working” 237). So the Black feminist learns early on to excuse herself from the tyranny of beauty for self-preservation. The traditional model of femininity--long haired, blue eyed, blonde--is an impossible objective. However, for Black women this does not rule out the destructive nature of these ideals.

Tynes explores the damaging quality of these ideals in “Talk That Talk,”(The Door of My Heart 77) Kari, the protagonist is persecuted by her co-workers because of her appearance. The most important element of this story is that her appearance is strongly associated with her Blackness:

the prized corn-rows jumped up and declared themselves to be braided Black hair. Nation hair. Black magic....Kari wandered one hand idly over her head, finding reassurance in the tight and ordered rows and rows of plaits....Kari shook her head. She reveled in the movement that action set off. Her braids moving in concert; the Black curtain of plaits settling back into the landscape of her head (The Door of My Heart 71).

In Tynes’s usual style she uses the story format as a political protest. We follow the progression of Kari through this story and her difficulty with the attack on her identity that she is forced to undergo at work. Tynes allows us to see the inside perspective on Kari’s feelings about her hair. To the white people in her office her hair is merely in a particular style, but for Kari her braids are a symbol of her Afrocentric consciousness. Her hair is her spirit. This story is speaking out against: “another factor that limits Black women’s access to work...their ‘appearance’, which is dictated as acceptable or non-acceptable



according to norms set by white aesthetics” (Galvan 50 ). This is a serious problem for Black women, “it cannot be overemphasized how strongly this concept of beauty negatively affects the self-perception of Black women” (Galvan 50). The reality is that the traditional self-rejection occurring on the part of white women who must face the tyranny of beauty is multiplied with Black women: “This self rejection is multiplied a million times when those very specific physical features that define the Black woman’s unique ethnic reality and basic identity are not in sync with the dominant concept or values about beauty” (Simms 36 ). However, in the world of Tynes’s poetry, the dominant images of beauty are rejected and in their place comes the re-valuing of all things Black, like Black skin which has been used to devalue Black women for generations, but which is associated with pride: “Let’s just be dark,” “this velvet brown vision,” and finally “My skin shouts Africa!” For example, the collection’s title poem, “Borrowed Beauty,” demonstrates the Black women’s progression from hiding their beauty to loving their Afrocentric standards: “we’ve come full circle/from turban/headed women (hiding cornrows).../To precious, time-driven ‘dos/to free-form Afros/nocturnal braids escaping into/beautiful, /magical,/free-flying cloud Afros..../This is no borrowed beauty,/this is home” (42) The distinction between the cornrows hiding in the parenthesis, to the escaping nocturnal braids shows the freedom from the beauty myth. Maxine Tynes uses her standpoint to reject the tyranny of beauty and instead preach self-definition.





Maxine Tynes creates a revolutionary space in her writing. For the Black female reader it is a safe space, because there is a Black feminist looking out for our concerns.

So what is the nature of this safe space? Essentially it is a Black feminist location:

This space is not only safe--it forms a prime location for resisting objectification as the Other. In this space Black women “observe the feminine images of the ‘larger’ culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical Black female role models in their own community”.  
(O’Neale as qtd in Collins 95: 139)

So, this space becomes the location of resistance which is dominated by new standards of acceptability.

### Chapter Three--Womanquest: The Expansion of Community

*reaching out and  
reaching in  
to all the women  
that we are  
that we could be.  
What of the Woman  
who is Black, and reaching?  
("Womanquest" Borrowed Beauty 25)*

As a Black writer Maxine Tynes holds a significant position of power within her community. Because of her ability to draw attention to her community's needs, Tynes can create solidarity and hope for her Black readers. This position as a community leader is best honored by a dedication to "telling it like it is." In other words, by accurately describing the circumstances surrounding Black existence Tynes shares her power with her readers:

Black women novelists, poets, activists, dramatists, artists, singers and dancers use their ancestral voices, serve them, and allow them to become a medium for "brutal honesty" about the Black experience. Their honesty and passions enable their readers, in turn, to use the Black experience as an explication of the struggle of the human spirit to be free. (Omolade 110 )

In this chapter I want to create an awareness about Tynes's ability to explore the intricacies of her community--for example, her tribute to the self-reliance of Black women, whom she credits with resisting multiple forms of oppression. Following this theme, I have also focused on the significant treatment of working class women in the poetry. Finally, I have ended with the discussion of sisters and mothers--the women of Tynes's community.



The totality of Maxine Tynes's collections allows for the creation of a community voice. Because of the inclusion of multiple voices from similar standpoints, the reader begins to gain a sense of the community's ideals and aspirations. Yet all of this community vision is centered around the individual perspective. Here again we see the articulation of Black feminist principles concerning the individual: "you have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups" (Alexis DeVeaux as qtd in Collins 104:54). The individual is the initial site of resistance, yet the individual remains connected to the concept of building community. For Maxine Tynes this community vision is centered in the space of her particular community in Nova Scotia. This is not unusual, for many Black writers portray the Black female identity as rooted in community: "Typically tied to children and/or community, fictional Black women characters [often] search for self-definition within

close geographical boundaries”(Collins 105). Therefore, the women in Tynes’s writing often reflect the women of her community. For example, Tynes mimics the intimate nature of the Black working class women’s world. This comes to fruition through praise of Black female relationships. This is fairly common: “among Black women writers, relationships within family and community, between men and women, and among women are treated as complex and significant” (Tate as qtd in Collins 98:92 ). Maxine Tynes writes out of the community as a member. She is like one voice in a chorus that suddenly sings a solo. So she does not write as a voyeur or explorer. Her position is not the choir master, or the conductor, or the audience; rather, she is a small part of a community.

This idea of sharing a group consciousness is very much a part of this poetry as a tangible form of empowerment. As noted by Collins: “Individual African-American women have long displayed varying types of consciousness regarding our shared angle of vision. By aggregating and articulating these individual expressions of consciousness, a collective, focused group consciousness becomes possible” (Collins 26). The history behind this group cohesiveness in literature is the key to understanding the importance of this shared expression:

The first significant Afro-American literature took place within the context of a social movement....the poet was seen as having a responsibility to her racial community, as well as to her own sensibility *and* the discussion of the condition of women was seen as an integral aspect of Black thought and expression rather than separate from it.” (Christian 121)

Maxine Tynes upholds this responsibility with care, by continuing to be dedicated to the double role of the poet as a conscious Black woman.



A great deal of this paper has dealt with the oppression that Black women must face. Unfortunately, when dealing with the lives of Black women this is a necessary category of analysis. However, what Maxine Tynes eloquently demonstrates in her poetry is the spirit of Black women's survival. As mentioned in chapter one, the Black woman's ability to survive in the face of adversity should be celebrated. The reality is that "though often victimized, Blacks in Canada have rarely assumed a 'victim status'" (Alexander 7). I feel that this strength is brilliantly articulated by Glenda Simms:

Hopelessness could easily become the texture of the lives of many Black women. This, however is not the essential tempo of our lives and our aspirations. No matter what the hardships, our culture is a celebration of life based on the hope for a better life. For without hope we would not have survived the ravages of colonial history. Such hope is what is needed to shift into a new path of consciousness. (Simms 37)

This poetry celebrates the endurance of the women who had the determination to never stop hoping. Tynes incorporates this positive celebration of this spirit, and through her positive portrayal of the history of Black women she opens the door for a re-evaluation of their contributions. This draws attention to the reality that: "Whether by choice or circumstance, African-American Women have been self-reliant, and have encouraged one



another to value this vision of womanhood that clearly challenges prevailing notions of femininity” (Steady as qtd in Collins 109).

The work ethic that Black women have had to sustain to live has meant that “A Black woman’s survival depends on her ability to use all the economics, social, and cultural resources available to her from both the larger society and within her community” (King 298). So her skill has been in her ability to manipulate her environment while having faith in self-reliance<sup>4</sup>. How is this articulated in literature? “No matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, contemporary African-American Women writers place the power to save the self within the self” (Harris as qtd in Collins 111). We see this with Maxine Tynes; the poetic voice declares her subject position as a Black woman, and through the strong use of the first person she attributes the triumph of survival to the Black woman’s ability to speak out against prevailing stereotypes, all while validating her own experiences and those of other Black women. Once again this is linked to self-definition: “For Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to reject controlling images and integrate knowledge deemed personally important, usually

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4 I must clarify my use of self-reliance as a discerning feature of Black feminist ideology. If misread, the concept of self-reliance can be damaging to Black women. Barbara Smith speaks out against this danger:

An ability to cope under the worst conditions is not liberation, although our spiritual capacities have often made it look like a life....Underlying this myth is the assumption that Black women are towers of strength who neither feel nor need what other human beings do, either emotionally or materially. (Smith Some 256)

knowledge essential to Black women's survival" (Collins 95). Yet, in Tynes's collections there is a balance between the vulnerability of Black women and their strength. This important balance is usually missing from white literature's portrayal of Black women. We are used to seeing the difficulty of Black womanhood, but it is the pride in this poetry that is phenomenally different from the stereotypical images of Blacks.



One important component of the current Black feminist approach is the move away from a single concept of oppression. For example, Deborah K. King writes against the monist approach of most "liberation ideologies" where one particular domination is responsible for all major oppressions (King 299). This singular mind set works against Black women by simply highlighting one aspect of their lives while suppressing another. For example, many of Tynes's reviews only focused on how race was highlighted in the collection, without taking into consideration the discussions of sexism. But a survey of her work shows the interconnectedness of the "isms" in these collections is in keeping with Black feminist ideals. Black women must occupy many subject positions simultaneously, and therefore the methods of analysis must account for this multiplicity. bell hooks is critical of feminism's tendency to allow sexism to dominate; instead she suggests "Feminist theory would have much to offer if it showed women ways in which racism and sexism are immutably connected rather than pitting one struggle against the

other or blatantly dismissing racism” (hooks Margin 52).

Black feminists have reacted to this problem by developing theories which are able to encompass all types of oppression simultaneously: “The concept of the simultaneity of oppression is still the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality and one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought” (Smith “Some” 260). Based on the concept that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Smith “Some” 260) Black feminists work to gain recognition for ideas such as “multiple jeopardy.” As formulated by Deborah King, “multiple jeopardy” is an expansion of the “double jeopardy” concept first introduced in 1972 by Frances Beale. Placed in a simple equation, Multiple jeopardy is: racism x sexism x classism= multiple simultaneous oppressions (King 297). In all of her adult collections, Tynes simultaneously explores racism, sexism and classism, thus demonstrating multiple jeopardy at work. This holistic approach provides a practical example of the lived experience of the Black woman who survives daily in the web of multiple oppression. For example, “Raising the Heart of Woman” begins with a feminist standpoint: “for those women who are coming forward to stand centre stage in this country and who are reflecting us women back at twice our size!” However, in the second stanza Tynes includes a catalogue of multiple oppressions: 1) Sexism: “that is womanist and feminist,” 2) Classism: “that is backyard, pay-cheque, budget-cut, wage-freeze, unemployment, welfare line familiar,” and 3) Racism: “that

speaks in language that is woman and Black and aboriginal that is immigrant.” This is just one poem that reflects the spectrum of oppression that runs throughout all three collections. Tynes gives all forms of oppression front row treatment in an effort to present the interconnectedness of struggle.



*The renaissance and flowering of a Black female intelligentsia during the 1970s and 1980s is significant because those most silenced and impoverished by race and gender, and marginal to the intellectual arena, began to speak in the name of race and womanhood, using their own experiences and voices to explain and explore the human condition. (Omolade 120)*

This return to the voice of the Black woman has led to a new appreciation for the contributions of everyday experience to the Black feminist struggle:

One fundamental feature of this struggle for a self-defined standpoint involves tapping sources of everyday, unarticulated consciousness that have traditionally been denigrated in white, male-controlled institutions. For Black Women, the struggle involves embracing a consciousness that is simultaneously Afrocentric and feminist. (Collins 26)

By focusing on the importance of the everyday experience, a new appreciation is gained for the contributions of Black women to society. Feminist ideology “should clarify for women the powers they exercise daily and show them ways these powers can be used to resist sexist domination and exploitation....Recognition of that strength, that power, is a step women together can take towards liberation” (hooks Margin 93). Tynes takes this



step by focusing on the intricacies of the daily lives of her Black characters. Edith Clayton is brought into Black history by Maxine Tynes's ability to distinguish her everyday trade of basket weaving as a Black feminist activity:

Edith Clayton/brown basket lady/from years past/shoppers carrying  
finely crafted/ bits of you/home with them/good maple wood-  
woven in/stripped with ancient craft/brown hands-woven in/a piece  
of Preston woods-woven in/little-girl years of/ watching-woven in  
/the weaving at an old Black grandma's hands-woven in /to market,  
to market, to market/over an eclipse of years woven- in/long  
forgotten and home in Preston/now days/babies/baskets/heart and  
soul-woven in. (Borrowed Beauty 38)

Tynes's syntax mirrors the weaving process in which she is engaged in the documentation of history, in the same way that Edith is credited with weaving her history and the history of the community into her basket. Tynes also defines other Black women's trades as legendary. For example, poems which focus on the domestic work of Black women such as "In Service": "You rise with the dawn/leaving home and brown babies / behind you, in the days' early light / pulling coat and scarf close / avoiding the mirror / shrinking from the cold morning of / bus ride / to prestigious street corner" (Borrowed Beauty 11), define the everyday actions of community women as heroic. This is an important step because at this intimate level the true definition of the holistic experience of Black womanhood is exposed: "Black women's work and family experiences create the conditions whereby the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of Black womanhood become visible" (Collins 93). At this detailed level the reader can understand



the humanity and the true nature of the struggle for survival. This is the part beyond the mask which is imposed by white culture:

Beyond the mask in the ghetto of the Black women's community, in her family, and, more important, in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions--sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy...--by doing the things that 'normal' Black women do. (Sandra O-Neale qtd in Alexis 95)



*Labor, whether unpaid and coerced (as under slavery) or paid and necessary employment, has been a distinctive characteristic of Black women's social roles. It has earned us a small but significant degree of self-reliance and independence that has promoted egalitarian relations with Black men and active influence within the Black family and community (King 298).*

Maxine Tynes's contribution to the community's need for recognition of the daily manifestations of oppression is located in the poetry and stories dedicated to the domestic work of Black women. Tynes accurately identifies the need for recognition of class as one of the great "isms" leading to the oppression of Black women: "Historically, work outside the home has been a crucial site of Black women's oppression" (Brand "Working" 221). This has meant that in the past Black women: "have had to assume economically productive roles as well as retain domestic ones" (King 298). Black feminists continue to struggle for appreciation of the intimate relationship between classism and racism in Canada and America. Maxine Tynes's poetry pin points the reality that "class oppression is the largest component of Black women's subordinate status" (King 297). I understand

that raising the concept of classism always evokes a set of competing definitions of the term class. For clarification, I shall treat the concept of class in the same manner that Tynes does in her poetry, as a holistic concept. Rita Mae Brown in, "The Last Straw," describes class as:

much more than Marx's definition of relationship to the means of production. Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions about life. Your experience (determined by your class) validates these assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act. (as qtd in hooks Margin 3)

For Black women the promise of higher economic status has too often been an unattainable dream. Dionne Brand conducted a 1984 study of Black women in Toronto in which she points out that "Canadian Black women have always had to work as a condition of their race" (Simms 35). Still this problem does not get the attention necessary to change things. However, the intimate portrayal of the working class experience in these collections names the rarely heard story of Black women working class domestic workers.

The necessity of working has been coupled with the hardship of having to endure harsh labor, so "the question is not that of the right to work, [instead] it is centered on the kind of work available to [Black women]" (Simms 35). As a result Black women have suffered from both underemployment and ill-employment: "Black women wanted better-paying jobs, but they often had to settle for the jobs that were considered too hazardous,

dirty, or immoral for white women, and for which they were not fairly compensated” (King 309). In the past, Black women have had to endure some of the most horrific working conditions and this is still a problem in the Black community. By tapping into the historical roots of this problem Tynes produces a concrete record of the strength of the Black women who supported the Black family emotionally and economically. By providing their stories for contemporary Black women to use as a measure of the ability of the Black woman to survive adversity, Tynes taps into the power and influence of these women who endured for the sake of their family and community.

The domestic environment is an important element in the history of Black women: “Black women’s position in the political economy, particularly ghettoization in domestic work, comprised another contradictory location where economic and political subordination created the conditions for Black women’s resistance” (Collins 11). In the domestic world, once again we witness the cross-section of oppressions which work to keep Black women in their place. From this experience, however, Black women earned the ability to understand the position of their oppressors: “Domestic work allowed African-American women to see white elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from Black men and from these groups themselves” (Collins 11). So what Black women managed to gain was the much needed perspective of a marginalised group. This education proved to be vital to the ability to survive for the Black

community. Although the Black woman had to endure the lack of status that came with such a position, she was able to gain her own power through the knowledge of survival. However, this ability did not gain her any respect in the white community: "Poor and working class women did not become the role models for bourgeois white women because they were not seen by them as exercising forms of power valued in this society. In other words, their exercise of strength was not synonymous with economic power" (hooks Margins 87). However, the Black community has learned to value the power that Black women exhibited through their strength and endurance.

Maxine Tynes creates a distinct dichotomy between the white upper class and the Black working class in her two poems "In Service" and "For Tea and not for Service." This dichotomy involves a positive portrayal of the members of the working class and a negative portrayal of the members of the upper class, thereby inverting the usual order of things. This distinction manifests itself in feelings of alienation for the working class woman. That is, Tynes presents the working class woman as necessarily divided into two selves: the celebrated "at home" personality versus the oppressed "in service" personality; "Black women knew that they could never belong to their white 'families,' that they were economically exploited workers and thus would remain outsiders. The result was a curious outsider-within stance, a peculiar marginality that stimulated a special Black women's perspective" (Collins 11).



The Black woman in service is qualified by her ability to alter her normal behavior to accommodate the white community. Patricia Hill Collins includes the testimony of a Black woman in her book to elaborate upon this concept. Ella Surrey, an elderly Black woman domestic, eloquently summarizes the energy needed to maintain independent self-definitions: “We have always been the best actors in the world....I think that we are much more clever than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We’ve always had to live two lives--one for them and one for ourselves” (Gwaltney as qtd in Collins 91). This double life gains a face in the story “For Tea and Not For Service” with the character of Dora:

My, didn’t Dora look all crisp and Black and white....Bit quiet she was, though, here. None of that hearty head-back bellowing laugh of hers that just rang through the Cheapside Market on the week-end mornings. No bib “Hey, you-gal!” from Dora in this room. Just that efficient Black shadow coming and going (Woman Talking Woman 87).

In this story Celie is acutely aware of the difference in Dora’s behavior at the home of the Imperial Daughters. Dora erects the mantle of invisibility in order to survive. bell hooks describes one of the important features of being in service as the “mantle of invisibility”: “One mark of oppression was that Black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid, so that they could be better, less threatening servants” (hooks Looks 168). Because this story is told through the eyes of the Black woman, the reader is able to



gain a new personal understanding of the Black servant's position. Yet, Tynes does not leave out the dignity that the Black woman managed to maintain in the face of this adversity. Celie also remarks on the pride Dora emulated: Dora looked "Bigger somehow than how she looked to Celie at church. Anyway, didn't she just own this place, the way she moved in it? Better than Bird Browne-Thorne herself" (Woman Talking Woman 87). Tynes shifts the focus to the achievement of the domestic Black woman and praises her ability to survive. This is a realistic portrayal. In spite of the strains connected with domestic work, Judith Rollins (1985) asserts that the domestic workers she interviewed appeared to have retained a "remarkable sense of self-worth." They "skillfully deflect these psychological attacks on their personhood, their adulthood, their dignity, these attempts to lure them into accepting employers' definitions of them as inferior" (Collins 91).

The message being delivered to Tynes's readers is: "Class struggle is inextricably bound to the struggle to end racism" (hooks Margin 3). Tynes does not wish to separate these two isms but rather make the point that the Black women cannot discuss one without the other. This is based on the premise that "class structure in American [and Canadian] society has been shaped by the racial politic of white supremacy; it is only by analyzing racism and its function in capitalist society that a thorough understanding of class relationships can emerge" (hooks Margin 3 ).



*We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood.*

*(hooks Margin 43)*

In opposition to the dominant culture, which remains essentially male-centered, the Black women's paradigm is centered on women and their relationships. This sisterhood comes to represent a place of validation and thus results in the empowerment of women: "Black women's efforts to find a voice have occurred in at least three safe places. One location involves Black women's relationships with one another. In some cases, such as friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings among individuals" (Collins 96). In opposition to other institutions, "Black women's fiction...is the primary location where Black women's friendships are taken seriously" (Collins 97). The conscious formation of a sisterhood represents a reaffirmation of the positive qualities of Black female life and provides the needed structure for solidarity. This is an important moment of renegotiating the individual's relationship to the world, reinvesting positive qualities in their relationships with Black women and finally, reconstituting the self. This is the tradition of sisterhood which pervades a large quantity of Black women's writing: "Women talk to other women in this tradition, and their friendships with women--mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers--are vital to their growth and well being" (Washington 35). Tynes participates in this tradition of sisterhood by promoting "The ideas that Black women share with one another on an informal, daily

basis” (Collins 30). Tynes point to the value of the daily shared exchanges between Black women which are the foundation for Black feminism: “In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist” (Collins 97). We return to the focus on female relationships and how they help Black women to define their territory. What occurs in this space of sisterhood is the ability to communicate without the burden of having to appease the fears of the white community. Gillespie passionately describes the type of discussion as “woman talk: unedited, uncensored woman talk. Earthly sexual..other times a bearing of wounds and hurts that have been festering for too long: spiritual boils in need of lancing. Tears too long damned. Feelings of...frustration and rage. Unveiling of secret joys, forbidden pleasures, unresolved mysteries and hidden dreams” (13)

The spiritual or transcendental nature of this sisterhood is virtually inaccessible to outsiders, yet on the most basic level the sisterhood of this territory is grounded in the practical realm of survival: “The issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is an important one, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women’s lives” (Collins 98). The cohesion of the tradition of sisterhood is based on sharing:

One can write for a nameless, faceless audience, but the act of using one’s voice requires a listener. For African-American women the

listener most able to move beyond the invisibility created by objectification as the Other in order to see and hear the fully human Black woman is another Black woman. (Collins 98)

The collections of poetry are a space where Tynes writes to a specific exterior listener while simultaneously including an interior listener in her work. As a reader at times I feel like I am being confided in. For Black female readers, there is a sharing of womantalk and invitation to be part of the sisterhood.



It is only natural that with the creation of a female space mothers would become an important collective icon because: “The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women” (Collins 96). Mothers have been the backbone of the Black community because they shared the knowledge of survival: “generations of Black women’s creativity are contained in the philosophies handed down from grandmothers to mothers and granddaughters” (Brand Working 231) This matrilineal line is strong in the Black community. For example, Edith Clayton gained both her knowledge and her initiative to carry on her craft from her mother. Nova Scotia’s Black community honors the mothers who have defended them. For instance, “For the Moment,” a musical group, can be heard singing the words to their song “Black mother Black Daughter: “We are still standing--We are here still here standing at the shoreline, made it through some hard times Black mother Black daughter” (Black Mother Black Daughter). What is noticeable about



this song is the acceptance of the mother as a primary site of survival.

Maxine Tynes dedicates a few poems to her mother, such as “Now See You” in Borrowed Beauty, and the poems dealing with the death of her mother: “Death Watch” and “To Give Pause” in Woman Talking Woman. In her mother, Tynes sees the traces of her history: “I look at your nose,/so high and strong, for a Black woman;/the same nose of some noble African tribe. But where? Where?” (“Now I See You” Borrowed Beauty 48), and the signs for a universal womanhood: “Everything inconvenience women:/birth/and life, insisting itself on us each robust month” (“To Give Pause” Woman Talking Woman 16). The mother is honored in this poetry and exists as the extension of the dedication to sisterhood.



*To me feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men;...[it is] a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires (bell hooks as qtd in Collins 38).*

Tynes use of the concept of community is not limited to the Black community. Her inclusion of outside groups is indicative of her wish to use the Black woman and the Black community as a starting point for the reconfiguration of society. By doing this she joins a tradition of Black women who struggle to create a humanist vision, which unites oppressed groups. In this way, the power of identity is shared with these other groups as



they are included in the need for justice. By making the case for a universal battle, the need for change seems greater. For example, the focus on North American feminist issues such as in "Keeping the Peace" allows the reader to discover the connections between the smaller community of the Black woman and the greater feminist and environmental movement. By extension this works as universalizing tool. Maxine Tynes also participates in the Black feminist humanist tradition of addressing global issues: "This humanist vision is also reflected in the growing prominence of international issues and global concerns in the works of contemporary African-American women intellectuals" (Collins 39). Tynes uses her poetry to bridge the gap between Canadian women, and women who are struggling in their own country for justice. Many Black feminists have embraced this world view. For example, Glenda Simms notices this trend in her own work: "the intercontinental Black women's consciousness movement realizes that our individual and collective strength mandates crossing borders of many types, connecting, and nurturing our bonds to each other" (Simms 82). Maxine Tynes's extension of the community vision further defines the place of the Black woman as a global citizen.

An Intimate Conclusion to Maxine Tynes

*Show me a map of this country  
this Canada  
charted with a past that beckons and keeps us  
charted with rivers of hopes and dreams  
shaped by winds of change  
shaded with the faces of you and of us  
as we move toward new freedoms  
as we come into our own  
This Canada.*

*(“This Canada” Save the World for Me 42)*

The final stanza of “This Canada” poignantly shows Maxine Tynes’s dedication to Canada. Despite the difficulties she faces as a Black Nova Scotian woman she remains faithful to the hope for change. But, the strong political commentary about Canada in her collections sends a powerful message: change is needed. So through her art, Maxine Tynes takes a pro-active role in initiating change and she is successful in drawing attention to the political issues surrounding her creations and her craft. But is Canada ready for her politics? Coomi S. Vevaina an East Indian writer, advises from overseas that “Canada, for her own good, needs to heed the dissenting voices of diasporic writers from the margins” (274). Will we listen?



*One can postulate that a cultural revolution is necessary to eradicate the kind of racism that has existed in Nova Scotia”*

*(Clairmont 82)*

When I first sat down to read the history of Black Nova Scotia, I was excited about the prospect of reading about the triumphs of Black women and men. As noted earlier, I soon discovered that this pleasure would be reserved for Tynes's poetry. However, I did discover that my optimism would be satisfied with the discussion of the future in these historical texts. I was most intrigued by the discussion of the "New Black Consciousness Movement," a struggle which meets the demands of a cultural revolution:

A new Black consciousness seems to be emerging in Nova Scotia. The dimensions of this new cultural style include racial pride and identity, assertive confrontation-type responses to racism and marginality, the development of Black organizations expressly to effect social change, and the assimilation of the experience and model of American Blacks to the Nova Scotian context (*Clairmont Historical* 89). Blacks in Nova Scotia are beginning to assert themselves and to adopt an aggressive militant stance that is characteristic of the American Black power movement. (*Clairmont Historical* 90)

This is definitely the location of Maxine Tynes work. We should consider her value also in terms of her contribution to this local movement. She describes Black Nova Scotians as "strong with the new imperative" (*Black Song Nova Scotia*" Woman Talking Woman 63), and in doing so validates this movement. For me this is the way out of the dismal history of Black Nova Scotians and into the potential of the community. As Dionne Brand remarks, "more vibrant possibilities exist in the multitude of voices now emerging in this country. These voices see the imagination as transformative, as leading out of the

pessimism of colonial discourse, as making new narratives” (Brand Bread 168). As readers of her poetry we have the opportunity to participate in her narrative by allowing room for her voice:

It would be wrong not to acknowledge here the work of Black Canadian artists, past and present. Though not credited enough, the elevated resonances of your art, poetry, prose, storytelling, music, dance and films have been with us throughout. Mostly it is your determination to “put your stuff out there” and to establish your voice, which has provided inspiration. (Alexander 9)

Yet, in the tradition of many Black artists who have come before, Tynes will continue to claim her place on the Canadian landscape with or without the acknowledgment of the academy.



*Ici On Parle Egalite*

*here, inside this box of desks  
of chalk and dust and the ghost of countless poems  
and lessons  
here, we speak equality  
no bias of culture race or class  
to break the ebb and flow  
of word  
of thought  
of love of life  
so young, so new  
and burgeoning in its revolving door of  
youth and of discovery  
Ici On Parle Egalite*

*(The Door of My Heart 83)*

This vision of a space of equality and fairness is still simply a vision. However, as we have seen within these collections of poetry, Maxine Tynes strives to bring her readers into an intimate understanding of a new ideology. Through this effort she gains a free space for Black women, a space in which they are valued and thus, validated through the dismissal of oppressive standards. With almost an air of common sense Maxine Tynes says ‘if you want to know about us as Black women look at us the Black women.’ This kind of ideology is indispensable to the community. Patricia Hill Collins notes, “Black women’s ability to forge these individual, unarticulated, yet potentially powerful expressions of everyday consciousness into an articulated, self-defined, collective standpoint is key to Black women’s survival” (26). Tynes herself is faced with a staggering problem, how to articulate your problems in a system which actively works to silence you. The only place to begin is with the dismantling of the system. As a student I begin this dismantling with my acknowledgment of Tynes’s voice and my attempt to dismiss the “rules” of my discipline. Of course I can never be completely successful at this task, but if there is only one message that is taken from this thesis, I want it to be an understanding of the way Tynes shows us that the systems are biased. In particular I want to highlight the way she draws attention to this fact: “Black women’s exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite white male ideas and interests and



the corresponding suppression of Black women's ideas and interests in traditional scholarship and popular culture" (Scott, Higginbotham as qtd in Collins 7). I am always frustrated at the difficulty of getting this point acknowledged. As a Black woman it seems clear that the imbalance of Black content in university courses, book stores and libraries is sufficient evidence of the problem. And within the academy this inequality is serious:

If there comes a day when white scholars are forced by the systems that educate them to know as much about "the other" as scholars of colour are required to know about so-called dominant cultures, perhaps Black women will no longer be treated as consumable commodities. (du Cille 264)

Yet, in looking at this solution another problem is clear. Where will the material for this education come from? Black women are acutely aware of the problems with translation of their experience: "Black women get turned off because there are a few social scientists who are trained to translate and write clearly and passionately about their lives" (Omolade 111). As academics, if we ignore the intricacies of translating their experience, such as the need to refocus our method of analysis we will continue to perpetuate the system of oppression.

Maxine Tynes chooses her style effectively. I appreciate her honesty and conviction in addressing the concerns of the community. I feel the strength in words like "But you, federal minister.." and poems like "THOSE MEN WHO PREY ON WOMEN:"

THOSE MEN WHO STALK  
WHO FOLLOW

who prey upon women  
 we serve you notice  
 The kitchen is closed.  
 We are not on your menu.  
 (The Door Of My Heart 18)

Maxine Tynes displays the confrontational tone necessary for revolutionary change. We cannot forget that by actively resisting the institutions, Tynes becomes subject to the type of alienation we witnessed in her reviews. Yet, her contribution to Black feminism will not be measured by the critics or by the academy, but rather by Black women themselves. I agree with Barbara Smith who says, “One of the greatest gifts of Black feminism to ourselves has been to make it a little easier simply to *be* Black and female. A Black feminist analysis has enabled us to understand that we are not hated and abused because there is something wrong with us, but because our status and treatment is absolutely prescribed by the racist, misogynist system under which we live” (Smith “Home” 262 ). If there was no other value in this poetry, quite simply as a Black woman this is enough for me.



I would simply like to close with the voices of two Black women who are close to me. I asked them to record their reactions to the poem which is hopelessly dog-eared in my book: “Reach Out and Touch.” Despite all of my research, their comments are testimony of the value of this poetry:

baby girl, baby boy behind me on the bus  
reach out  
and touch the curly electric of my hair  
your fingers dipped in the  
brown skin magic of my neck  
to see if it comes off  
your mama  
slapping hands away  
hush-up of your questions  
and wondering out loud  
why it doesn't come off.  
I turn and smile for you,  
but you're already lost  
in the silence and the fear that motherlove wraps you in.  
I should have sat beside you  
snugged my big warm self up close  
held you while your mama juggled parcels.  
Then you would know it's ok.

(Borrowed Beauty 36).

*Stephanie: "[Tynes] wants to remind us that children are very innocent in the way they think...they are not born with opinions or ignorance, those things are acquired through experience and the people around them. She is inviting the child to feed her curiosity. It left me with the message that the onus is on us to break or prevent any fear/stereotype*

*through our interactions with people.”*

*Jenny: “This poem reminds me of the many times white mothers have reacted with unnecessary embarrassment to the child’s innocent curiosity of something new in their world—me a Black woman. This poem brings home the reality of a world which tries to make me invisible.”*

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