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Struggling toward Identity in George Elliott Clarke's *The Motorcyclist*

DAVID CREELMAN

I N 2005, GEORGE ELLIOTT CLARKE'S FATHER, William Lloyd Clarke, passed away. Among his papers was an unpublished diary; the volume was "the only part of his estate he expressly willed" to his literary son.¹ In the same year that George Elliott Clarke published his first novel, *George and Rue*, to wide critical acclaim, a new and even more personal story started to emerge from the diary. Whereas *George and Rue* explored the tragic lives of Clarke's cousins and protested powerfully against the forces of racism in the 1930s and 1940s, the diary recounted life in Nova Scotia's Black communities in the late 1950s and early 1960s and chronicled William's experiences as a young man during the year leading up to the author's birth (Clarke, *Motorcyclist* ix). As Clarke notes in the preface to his second novel, *The Motorcyclist* is "neither biography nor history," but "the novel is faithful to the truths in W.L.C.'s *Diary*": "I have rendered the . . . subtleties explicit and fleshed out its abbreviated episodes. I have also guessed at some motivations and invented others, just as I have willfully altered names and redacted characters. I have also exaggerated or minimized real-life flaws and virtues" (ix-x). Whereas *George and Rue* plumbs a family history and moves the reader to examine how the structures of racism bend us all toward loss, destruction, and despair, *The Motorcyclist* depicts, as personal journals often do, a sometimes troubling, sometimes illuminating journey toward self-knowledge and identity. In *The Motorcyclist*, Clarke not only continues to explore the complex matrices of oppression that form as power struggles around race, class, and gender intersect but also examines how a determined, reflective search for an authentic identity and connection can provide a tentative way forward.

The novel that emerges from Clarke's recreation of his father's journal spans the year between May 1959 and April 1960 and tells the story of Carl Black, a young Black man from Halifax. Carl is intelligent, artistic, and ambitious as he resists the restraints imposed on him by a society that perceives him only through the lens of race, class, and

gender. On the surface, Carl seems to play by society's rules. He has "no high school diploma," but he is "lawyerly eloquent," holds a coveted job as a "linen and equipment checker for the Canadian National Railway," reads widely from the canon of Western literature, and is a "stalwart African Baptist" youth leader (Clarke, *Motorcyclist* 35, 12). Beneath these attributes, a much more unconventional personality is at work. Carl longs "to advance . . . to recreate the Self," and his desire to break free from religious hypocrisy, middle-class familial expectations, and a racist social structure are all distilled in his ownership of a motorcycle named Liz II, "the first brand new BMW in Nova Scotia. A shining, purring thing! The machine enthrones him: black prince of the roads" (10-11). Carl uses his motorcycle literally and figuratively to navigate and escape the confines of his society; he becomes, at least in the first part of the novel, a hypermasculine and increasingly rebellious figure who forcefully resists the norms in Halifax and beds a host of sexual partners from across the social strata. Part Jack Kerouac, part Don Juan, Carl's sexual conquests and artistic endeavours merge in his attempt to "classif[y] himself as the most incongruous — most conspicuously debonair — Negro in all of Nova Scotia" (13). Indeed, to represent fully Carl's determination to break and escape from social norms, Clarke employs the conventions of the picaresque novel, particularly in the first half of *The Motorcyclist*, to provide some structure and form to his adventures and his transgressive character.

The picaresque novel is one of the oldest prose narrative forms, dating back to the Renaissance and the emergence of the early modern, individualized subject position. Carl Black reproduces both the benign and the unsettling conventions of the picaresque protagonist. The "picaroon was a trouble-maker, one who wanted to transgress his social position and find another, a more satisfactory one in terms of living conditions. . . . To find such a better social standing, the picaroon had to be very attentive to what was happening around him, so, even unwillingly, he became a social commentator" (Tomoiağă 19). As a rogue who violates social norms, the picaroon is "at the margins of society, either by birth, or by social-economic-political accident," but his violations are never so severe as to recast him into the role of villain or anti-hero (Tomoiağă 21). Indeed, as an outsider who violates society's norms, the picaroon criticizes the community, and thus the picaresque lends itself to satire, the form that motivates the reader to consider the need for broad social reforms. This element is of particular importance

to Clarke, interested not just in documenting the forces that confine Carl but also in resisting that oppression. The broad strokes typical of the picaresque are thus appealing since “the picaroon is not the critic of just one aspect of society. . . . [H]e is able to present a social panorama of his age” (Tomoiağă 22). Yet the picaresque is not a neutral form. Anne Cruz asserts that the picaresque genre tends to “privilege the masculine gender of its protagonists, and the male-centered plot of these canonical novels is . . . evidenced” by the hero’s “maternal abandonment” and a series of “failed amorous relations with women” (7). Clarke thus adopts a form that allows him to shape Carl’s independent nature and critique the wider racist society, but it is a form that replicates and reinforces repressive patriarchal and sexist norms. This produces a series of unsettling tensions in *The Motorcyclist*.

Carl is born in 1936 — a decade after Rue Hamilton — and his childhood and adolescence are depicted in an extended chapter entitled “Determinations I.” From the outset of *The Motorcyclist*, it is clear that Clarke is reproducing one of the standard tropes of the picaresque. Carl is marginalized by his birth to an unconventional mother, Victoria Waters, who had “90 per cent high school grades” and the ability to “backtalk in five languages,” but she could not “bow her head to Dalhousie University or . . . Wellesley College” (55). Frustrated by segregation and rigid social roles, Victoria abandons the narrow role of the “well-bred” woman that she is expected to play as “a minister’s daughter,” and instead she indulges her “yen for Coloured veterans” and has “her five sons by five different Negroes” (54-55). Since only one of these children, Carl, is the outcome of a legitimate (i.e., married) union, Victoria’s father, the prominent “African Baptist pastor,” “Rev. Dr. Capt. Waters,” is humiliated by her public fall from grace and essentially banishes his transgressive daughter in the role of a laundress; he “install[s] Victoria and her four sons² in the [rat-infested] barn behind the house” (56). She “desired, merely, to be able to be — and love — as she wished,” but instead she labours “as a laundress through the Great Depression, World War II, and the dawn of the Cold War” (57). From the outset, Carl recognizes his marginal position in society and “blamed his mother — he blamed women — for blighting the family’s pseudo-heraldic Honour” (56). His sexist and even misogynous response is aligned with picaresque traditions, for he criticizes his mother, indeed women broadly, for being motivated either by “economic motives” or by their “lust or vanity” (Cruz 10).

As a boy, Carl understands that, if his mother's choices are partly responsible for his impoverished position, the hardships in his life are even more clearly caused by the racist attitudes and structures that define Halifax. The young Carl "did feel grateful that he was in Canada, in Nova Scotia and not in the Ku Klux Klan-crabby South where Negroes could be bludgeoned for sport," but he is nonetheless deeply aware that all aspects of his life are shaped and confined by the racist ideologies that have anchored his province's culture from its earliest days (Clarke, *Motorcyclist* 44). Classrooms in Halifax are better funded than those in rural communities, but they are not egalitarian. Carl and his brothers attend local schools, but they are "more boxing ring than playground," and when they walk home the "playful Coloureds" are targeted by "three older white boys" who "stooped to pick up stones and fling em at the 'Niggers'!" (50, 47). Encouraged to drop out, Black citizens are automatically pushed to the economic margins of society. When Victoria leverages her sexuality and wins greater security as the mistress of the "highest-ranking secular Coloured in Nova Scotia," Mr. Grantley Beardsley, she uses her influence to try to improve Carl's station (62). Carl's economic options are limited to being a sign painter until Beardsley arranges to have him "hired at the CNR train station — a plum post" (64). But though the economic life of the family improves, they are still compelled to live in the segregated neighbourhood of Africville and take jobs that offer no opportunity for advancement. Carl's "post" depends on his willingness to "launder white folk's sheets, shine their shoes, get called 'George,' or 'boy,' or 'Tom' or, yes, 'nigger'" (65). Within the Africadian community, the strains of enduring life in a racist society tend to create as much friction as cooperation between vulnerable people.³ Religion, anchored in the Africville Baptist Church, is supposed to support the community as a whole, but Victoria's father promotes judgmental and exclusionary practices that polarize rather than support adherents. Economic success should provide Carl with some measure of comfort, but men who are jealous of his youth start rumours about his sexual exploits and "dub Carl uppity" (78). Extreme incidents of domestic violence are witnessed within the community, but eventually "everyone learned the sign of the fist," and concerned neighbours are hesitant to call the authorities because when they arrive the "cops shot up everyone who was poor" (82-83). Clarke creates a full social and historical context to trace the forces that have influenced Nova Scotia's Black community, and Carl concludes that those who long to emerge as complex and real-

ized individuals must adopt the stance of a rebel if they hope to resist the narrow roles that culture prescribes for them. Ligia Tomoiagă argues that the picaroon responds to confinement by seeking new vistas, and “his only response to this hostile world is to travel, to wander from one place to another, alone, unattached, isolated, and, very often, confused” (22). Certainly, this is the template that Clarke employs in *The Motorcyclist* as Carl adopts the persona of a motorcyclist who views his machine as a practical and symbolic vehicle for a different self: “Aboard that machine, he imagines that he’s Jesse Owens, streaking always to *Victory*, with style, with panache. . . . *Liberation* is going, floating, flying; i.e. feeling actually free” (86). Having shaped Carl along the lines of a picaresque protagonist, Clarke then explores how he uses his sexuality to conquer a variety of young women and both assert himself in his society and cross increasingly risky economic, sexual, and racial barriers.

In accordance with the picaresque tradition, the plot governing the first part of *The Motorcyclist* is largely episodic as Carl pursues sexual relationships with four different women, each of whom represents for him an increasingly powerful transgression of the moral, class, and racial boundaries supposed to restrain his behaviour. “The episodes of the rogue’s progress are presented in a more or less chronological way and appear along the picaroon’s travel[s]” (Tomoiagă 22), and as Carl pursues a variety of women his story becomes, for a time, rather chaotic. Carl’s exploits seem to be random, his decisions guided more by desire than responsibility. As Adam Nayman has noted, “in lieu of a plot, Clarke offers up a series of linked vignettes in which Carl chases, and almost always successfully seduces, girls of different races and classes with a sensual enthusiasm that borders on the pathological.” As we would expect when dealing with a sexual picaroon, Carl’s motivations and behaviours are not respectful, kind, or egalitarian. Self-satisfaction motivates Carl, and his desire for sexual conquest means that he is willing to use the levers of power afforded to him by the patriarchal conventions of his time. He does not violently assault his sexual partners, but he certainly objectifies them, assumes a predatory stance toward them, imposes on them, and treats each woman as a means to his own ends. As Hanna Nicholls notes, “the women whom he beds, both black and white, are ultimately presented as triumphs and conquests that glorify his coveted status as a Lothario” (195). These serial “triumphs” thus deepen Clarke’s problematic replication of the “picaresque novel’s gender-inflected plot”

that threatens to bring “to the fore the misogynist attitudes expressed toward women” (Cruz 9).

The first woman whom Carl pursues is Muriel Dixon, a “maid in the leafy South End” who resides in “Halifax’s rat-infested North End” (Clarke, *Motorcyclist* 19-20). Poorly educated and economically limited, Muriel attracts Carl as an objectified, consumable version of womanhood: “A licorice-coloured woman, with a jutting, horizontal bosom, straight black hair, violet lips, and mocha-sweet eyes, Muriel defines Femininity” (20). The first of his sexual conquests, Muriel represents the beauty and sexuality that Carl seeks to possess and control, though he has no intention of forging a lasting relationship with her. In cold terms, he sees her as a lower-class entity whom he can use, not as a real person whose agency or interests must be acknowledged. For Carl, “Muriel is pliable, for she can’t demand . . . Respect. Muriel is fuckable: she’s a maid. . . . Carl swears no wife of his will be a maid” (115). Beginning with her, he tends to view women as “categorically objectified and held . . . to unrealistic standards in terms of their sexuality and femininity. He categorizes them based upon their race, class, and ability (or inability) to define what he sees as desirable femininity” (Nicholls 192). In some ways, Muriel functions in the first part of the text as a marker against which the subsequent relationships are compared.

Marina White, the second woman whom Carl encounters, represents a loftier challenge, for she is both feminine and committed to using education to ascend society’s class structure: “Marina’s university studies — in *Nursing* — will make her middle class” (Clarke, *Motorcyclist* 22). Marina understands the sexual politics of her society and resists any sexual connections that might limit her class mobility. The moments that afford the reader a clearer understanding of a woman’s perspective are the results of shifts in the narrator’s perspective, not of shifts in Carl’s sensitivity. A shift in focalization draws the reader closer to Marina and her understanding that her chastity can serve her ascent “into the middle class *if* she keeps Matthew — Mark — Luke — and John in mind, and models herself on The Virgin Mary” (31). Wisely, she is wary of men who seek to manipulate her, including “Leathereddown charmers like Carl [who] are fun, but not guys to fall for, unless a gal wanna be left in the lurch” (31). Her caution is warranted, for his thoughts betray his hypermasculine desire for her to be “hoochie-coochie nuff to please a truly gritty man. He wanted to grant her a ‘Phd’ — penis hard and deep — never mind that BSc!” (22). It is hard to imagine how Carl could be

any more explicit about his desire to subvert the class structures of his society by reinforcing his era's oppressive gender norms. In her article, Nicholls suggests that Carl's warped views are not sufficiently critiqued by Clarke, and when "this disapproval does not materialize . . . Carl's behavior seems to be normalized" (191). But Clarke does present Carl's views, fantasies, and actions as deeply problematic. Indeed, in these moments, Clarke critiques a society whose racism is so strong that it has warped the impulses of the protagonist, who feels that his only response to oppression in one area of his life is to become an oppressor in another arena. Marina is even more aware than Carl that one system of oppression, such as gender codes, can be used to control other domains, such as class or race: "Marina also knows — if Carl does not — that local Negroes feel threatened by a black woman who has more education than they, and will resort to Rape — to force motherhood upon their victim — to shame her into 'keeping her place'" (Clarke, *Motorcyclist* 33). Carl stops short of violent physical assault to control women, but he certainly employs other strategies of patriarchal domination to try to advance his class and racial status. As Carl himself acts as an oppressor, Clarke deepens the ironic critique of his position.

Laura "Blue Roses" States is the most grounded and self-reliant woman whom Carl encounters. Encumbered by a handicap, "she has a limp [and an] extra rubber piece on one heel," and she could "pass-for-white cream, but [her] dark sable eyes hint at her Negro cum Micmac mix" (90). Compared with Carl's tendency to feel insecure as he performs his role as rogue, she is self-confident, "deems *Sex* as healthy and healing," and emerges as a real individual (97). Laura is "a farm girl who can face the elements," maintains a sense of control, and hesitates to submit to Carl's charms, noting that "a man must not know a woman, or know all about her, too soon" (94). Like Marina, Laura is self-consciously upwardly mobile, and she confidently "knows she has options" (95). In racist Nova Scotia, she also recognizes that her light complexion gives her status, and she "asserts her superiority to most Coloured women, due to her cream complexion, her college reading . . . , her poise and eloquence" (95). Although Carl seems to desire Laura in part for her proximity to whiteness, she sees in his blackness "a match": that is, "a Negro with Grade Ten, a lustrous pedigree . . . , his own apartment, and a steady job" (97). Carl sleeps with and subsequently ignores Laura, but the narrator recognizes her merits and her intelligence, even as Carl dismisses her as "out of sight, out of mind" (167).

Carl's triumph as a transgressive picaroon is most apparent when he "begins to court a vanilla-ice-cream-complexion woman, Avril Phaedra Beauchamps, an American student, [a] Mississippian, studying nursing at Dalhousie" (98). Just as Avril is aware that her "yen for Coloured gents would be a death wish in the South," so too Carl understands that his desire to ascertain "just how deliriously evil a Caucasianess can be" (98-99) would result in death in the United States and could provoke violence in Nova Scotia. Carl knows that as a rebel he is using sex to break some of the strongest racial taboos instituted by slavery and post-slavery cultures across North America, and the narrator explicitly notes that in bedding Avril "his black lust is compounded — no saturated — with Negro Vengeance" (100). As a telling "combo of Nat Turner and Nat King Cole, simultaneously natty and dastard" (122), Carl again uses the masculine powers afforded to him by patriarchal systems to redress the imbalance of power constructed by racist social systems. The excitement generated by rebellion and augmented by the tendency of racism to objectify the other is felt by both of the partners. To Avril, Carl is a "case study Negro" (123), and the "ecstasy of sleeping with a Negro American (or Canuck) derives mostly from the frisson of putting to bed a taboo" (124). Similarly, he feels elevated by his simultaneous transgression/reinscription of racist stereotypes: "Going to meet Avril, Carl's step is jaunty; he swaggers. To hear a white woman . . . converse avidly with him about his pet topics (classical music, world politics, Art) and then go avariciously . . . to bed is miraculous" (128). Having used his sexuality to cross the last of Halifax's heterosexual taboos, Carl completes his trajectory as a rebel, though even as he crosses these boundaries he begins to sense that the process of using others for personal pleasure is not as simple and free of consequence as it first seemed.

Before Carl begins to sense the limits of being a rogue, the reader is given signs, in at least four areas, that the novel resists and undermines the picaresque forms that it employs and is uneasy about the misogyny and imbalance of power that the tradition invokes. Clarke begins to critique Carl's role as a picaroon long before that role is abandoned. First, and most importantly, the narrator of *The Motorcyclist* is not neutral. Picaresque novels typically feature a first-person narrator, an older version of the character who recounts his life story and ultimately is aligned with the younger character's perspective. In the many drafts of the novel written before 2013, Clarke experimented with the narration, starting with a first-person voice that closely echoed the diary

form, shifting to a second-person voice, and then returning to the first-person perspective. The problem had to do with achieving a sufficient distance from the character. This need for objectivity was identified by John Fraser, an emeritus professor of English from Dalhousie University, whom Clarke describes as “the model intellectual: inquisitive, liberal, thoughtful, adventurous. He is also my most correct critic” (*Directions Home* 207). Fraser read an early draft of the novel and, in an email dated 20 September 2010, commented on the need to work on this element: “It’s possible, of course, that you still haven’t got him quite distanced and figured out enough in your own mind, so that you’re partly being him-as-you. It’s perhaps not quite as clear as it might be that he’s partly under the eye of judgement, though sympathetically.”²⁴ By 2013, Clarke was employing a third-person narration that allowed him not only to focalize through Carl but also to step aside from his perspective to comment on his decisions. As Nayman notes, “Clarke injects some unexpected tension into what might have otherwise been a simple picaresque.” Thus, there is no doubt that Carl resists his culture’s racism by assuming a strong sexist and patriarchal role, but the narrator attends to the implications of his choices and notes that the women whom he is exploiting are doubly victimized. The narrator knows that Carl is underinformed about the historical racism that surrounds him and explicitly notes that, when “teen Carl began to fantasize pantingly about bedding pink ladies,” he did not fully understand that Black “Scotianers had survived two centuries as either dirt-cheap, dirt-poor labour for condescending whites, or they’d vamoosed — smartly — to the Boston States. . . . New Scotland is just a frosty, salt-spray South” (Clarke, *Motorcyclist* 48). As Carl absorbs his culture’s conviction that Black men can dominate Black women as a remedy for the suffering that society imposes on them, the narrator names this intersectional oppression explicitly: “Thus did Carl chew up the boiled-down misogyny of hard-boiled crime comics and Tijuana bibles. His dark-complected (and complex) sexism became his answer to redneck racism and blueblood classism” (80). He remains “oblivious to his treasons of Love (which are heartfelt),” but the narrator recognizes “his treacheries toward women” (167). In her article “‘All Cunt and No Conscience’: Female Sexuality and Representation of Misogyny in George Elliott Clarke’s *The Motorcyclist*,” Nicholls develops a thorough and convincing critique of Carl’s sexist and oppressive views of women. But she also argues that Carl represents Clarke’s perspective: “Clarke does nothing to challenge it, and instead readers are encouraged

to view Carl with a degree of sympathy given the oppression he faces" (203). Nicholls does not account for the degree to which the narrator and narrative forms cast Carl in an ironic and critical light; she asserts that "Clarke establishes an image of women and femininity that does not reflect the complexity or reality of women's experiences. Instead, his portrayal of women, femininity, and female sexuality is rooted in heteronormative and misogynistic representations" (189). In contrast to Nicholls, I would argue that the narrator identifies Carl's issues and, without condemning Carl as a villain, foregrounds the unfair prices being paid for his transgressions. The picaroon seeks freedom through sex, but Clarke's third-person narration was developed to suggest that this approach is not viable over the long term. Indeed, his ironic and critical third-person narrator foregrounds Carl's deep flaws and criticizes the misogyny embedded in Carl's hypermasculine version of civil rights.

Second, reservations about the picaresque are embedded in the novel's representations of the confined feminine in the text. Carl's childhood replication of his society's misogyny, embedded in his critique of his mother's unconventional sexual behaviour, is subverted by the narrator's careful attempts to contextualize her choices. The novel makes it clear that Victoria's sexuality cannot be contained within the rigid boundaries set by society and enforced by the male family members in her life. Victoria explicitly rejects attempts to control her body, and she pointedly refuses to "kowtow" and "buckle under the tantrums of black men who wanted them to be their slaves, so these guys could posture and pose as real — metaphorically white — men" (Clarke, *Motorcyclist* 56). She knows that her "decorated dad was as much a tyrant to her mom as the tavern brawlers were to their molls," and when he "perishe[s] of a heart attack when Carl is five" (56) the reader understands that deep veins of hypocrisy define his public and private lives. Similarly, when Carl, "at age seventeen," attempts to control his mother, limit the access of her lovers, and change "the locks" to her house, his puritanism is represented as ridiculous: "Carl thought he could govern now like a *Harem* eunuch, guarding entrée to Victoria's boudoir" (63). Comically, "this regime lasted one week," and his "prudish experiment ended when Victoria offered him the dignity of his own room" (63). Carl is easily bought off, and his offensive attempt to control his mother is parodied as an act of arrogance. The narrator is clearly critical of the self-serving men who attempt to control the women in their lives, and the text provides a careful record of how the restrictions on their sexuality harm

Victoria, her sister Pretty, and indeed the many vulnerable women in the text. The picaresque pattern is thus subverted even as it emerges in the first part of the novel.

Third, reservation about the picaresque nature of the novel is sounded by the symbolism of the text. Carl's BMW motorcycle is a phallic symbol and key part of his identity as an adventurous young man, but from the outset the novel complicates this patriarchal symbol of freedom and self-determination. The opening pages, in second-person narration, sing a hymn to the "weird democracy [that] governs the highway" and the special status of bikers who are "the true lords of the freeway" (5, 6). But even as the novel begins, warnings are sounded that the "pavement is hard, serious," and if "you take it for granted" there might be a "cemetery at the end of it all" (3, 4). These reflections initially sound more poetic than prophetic, but in the middle of the novel Carl reveals that a friend of his has perished in an accident so grisly that "Only God could survey the scarlet-washed accident and identify the resurrection" (105). That this picaresque narrative has, as its central symbol of freedom, a vehicle that is also a recurring image of horrific death is an irony that strengthens throughout the novel. When Carl witnesses a second fatal crash late in the novel, he knows that his days as a rider, and therefore as a full picaroon, are drawing to an end. There are practical limits to rebellion, and as the novel unfolds the motorcycle itself emerges as an emblem of both freedom and death.

Fourth and finally, the very form of the picaresque novel, celebratory as it is of the rogue picaroon, is also ultimately aware of the inescapable power of the larger community. Bernhard Malkmus notes that, even in their moments of rebellion, picaroons confirm the enduring power of conventional structures:

Confidence tricksters — ranging from the coyote in Native American mythology to the Spanish picaro and the shape-shifter in American popular culture — highlight the internal structure of social systems by using and abusing their codes of trust. More often than not, the confidence man only seemingly transgresses boundaries, yet is in fact contained by the principles of the social and economic structure within which he operates; he capitalizes on loopholes in the organization of social trust within a given society and, by virtue of this engagement society, betrays his latent commitment to the very society whose rules he seems to evade and from whose premises he seems to be banned. (605-06)

At the beginning of the novel, Carl begins a series of relationships meant to display his power as a free Black man in the face of social expectations and biases meant to confine him. Clarke uses the satirical aspects of the picaresque, particularly in the first half of the novel, to draw attention to the many ideologies and social structures that limit the freedoms of Black Nova Scotians. However, given the realistic style of the text, and Clarke's interest in developing plot lines that follow the conventions of historicism and the principles of cause and effect, Carl's transgressions eventually begin to have impacts on the women around him. He gradually recognizes the effects of his choices, begins to feel a sense of responsibility, and even experiences remorse; he begins to move away from his role as a carefree picaroon. As Carl becomes less of a rogue, the novel itself begins to adopt the broader forms of comedy, particularly as it moves into its second phase.

The form of the picaresque, according to Northrop Frye, is part of the spectrum of comedy aligned closely with irony, satire, and — to adopt the Blakean language — the world of experience. The mythos of comedy, however, can also include more hopeful impulses, and Frye delineates the “variety of comic structures between the extremes of irony and romance” (177). *The Motorcyclist*, if strongly ironic in the first half, begins to adopt more hopeful comedic structures in the second half. As Frye broadly defines it in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, comedy is the form that “moves toward a happy ending,” and the normal response of the audience to a happy ending is “this should be” (167); indeed, “Happy endings do not impress us as true but as desirable” (179). Moreover, the element in comedy that audiences find particularly desirable is “the movement from . . . a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law, and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom” (169). In the second half of *The Motorcyclist*, Carl begins to reflect more deeply on his choices, starts to make decisions that help others, and ultimately begins to forgo the rough and potentially damaging freedom associated with being a rogue to grasp the more enduring freedom associated with less disruptive social roles. Applying Frye's terminology to Clarke's novel, one could say that during the picaresque phase of *The Motorcyclist*, “the demonic world is never far away,” and though the hero is simply able to flee from the corrupt world, Frye observes, he “does not transform the . . . society, but simply escapes or runs away from it leaving its structure as it was before” (180). As the comedy draws closer to the conventions of romance, the

hero becomes more of a participatory figure, and, unlikely as it seems, the leather-bound motorcyclist begins to invoke the conventions of fidelity, self-knowledge, fertility, and even marriage (183).

The core thematic moment in *The Motorcyclist* occurs a little past the halfway mark, two full months into Carl's adventures, after Carl has courted each of the four main women. In a moment of self-reflection, on 13 July, he articulates his central desire: a longing for as much freedom as his society will allow him. The fact that his manifesto concludes with a series of questions indicates that his objective of complete freedom might be difficult to attain and hints that the real task is to determine which path can give him the greatest liberty under the circumstances:

He's a Coloured man trying to negotiate a white world that wants him to be a safe, smiling servant, and black women who want him to be a respectable husband and a responsible father, raising clean children in a paid off house. But what if he wants to be an artist? To escape the railway? To live more like Picasso and less like a preacher? What if he doesn't want to be merely middle class, married, monogamous, and mortgaged? (168)

As a picaroon, Carl pursues the greatest freedom possible; as a member of the Halifax Black community, he gradually discovers that his desire for freedom competes with his longing for genuine connections, replete with obligations, to the women around him. Each of the women whom he courts in the first half of the novel encounters complications that start to have an impact on Carl, reminding him that he is not as completely free of encumbrances as he has supposed.

Late in the summer, Carl's first lover, Muriel, suffers a miscarriage. The pregnancy was not planned, and Carl might not even have been the father, but still he feels "that *subtraction*" as "a deep, sharp *crisis* because *Life* that he could have sponsored — or overseen — is gone" (174). Carl does not really want a relationship with Muriel, but neither does he want to be put out to the curb. When she recognizes and declares that she is a lesbian, he "feels kissed off" (188), oddly impotent, and distressed that his masculine identity is suddenly marginal. His relationship with Muriel is over, but his departure from her carries hints of regret. Carl's relationship with Marina, the "chaste" nursing student, is similarly problematic, for she reveals that she is pregnant by Leicester, a Jamaican medical student. Carl is upset less by Marina's sexuality than by his exclusion from her favours. His first reaction to her news is to

comment on a “delirious, stomach-churning stench” and to recognize that his “leather jacket feels tight, hot” (244). But his jealousy does not prevent him from helping Marina when her fiancé threatens to abandon her. Carl initiates a ruse to spur Leicester’s commitment, and though the young couple’s relationship ultimately fails Carl has moved from exploitative paramour to supportive friend. Even Avril inspires him to adopt a kind of protective stance. The young Mississippian proves to be a disappointment when she jilts Carl, preferring a new “Negro biker, Ervin Johnson, twenty-one,” even more “snag and snarl,” “gung-ho, gritty,” and “vulgar as a bugger and lewd as a prude” (203). Avril is drawn to Erv’s dark skin and hypermasculinity, and Carl is humiliated to the point that he works back channels to have his rival’s hours at CNR reduced. However, when this planned subsequent economic hardship drives Erv toward violent outbursts directed at Avril, Carl repents. He remembers that “Avril was good to — and for — him, validating his art, intellect, and aesthetics,” and he intervenes by calling his former lover with the promise that, “If Erv ever lays a finger on you again, I’ll sic the cops on the man” (215). Avril eventually flees Halifax and “returns to the landscape of banjo-serenaded lynchings,” where she can maintain control of the racial and gender norms that initially she hoped to challenge (215), but her flight does not erase the fact that Carl has risked betraying his own limited masculine code to give comfort to her.

In short, as much as we would expect his ideal of freedom to call Carl to the picaroon’s life of the artist and the abandonment of a “middle class, married, monogamous, and mortgaged” life, in the end he decides that such a rogue’s path is not for him. In the wake of his multiple romantic failures, Carl is tempted simply to abandon Halifax, flee Nova Scotia, and escape to New York, where Aunt Pretty, a renowned opera singer, has “secured him a contract, at three hundred dollars a week, to paint backdrop scenery for Broadway shows” (250). If Carl still intends to play the picaroon or emerge as a fully realized artist, like his aunt, then he is certainly given the opportunity to disconnect himself from all familial encumbrances and follow the code that “The vocation of an artist is to create *Art*” (251). It is at this moment that he receives a call from the mother of Laura States informing him that “your son is dying” (258). Carl is shocked. Up to this point, there has been no hint that his tryst with Laura resulted in a pregnancy, for she decided to keep it “private and Carl’s paternity secret,” and she intended to raise her son without Carl in “the embrace of her family home” (258-59).

He recognizes that, “to the mother’s credit, she has not tried to trap Carl, but has been eager to leave him free, while Laura gets on with her life (260).” When he visits his son in the hospital, Laura even “stays in another room” until he leaves to avoid the complications of contact with him (262). Within the terms of the structure of this comedy, she is the ideal female companion in that, more than any other woman in the novel, she leaves him alone to determine whether he wants to assume his role as a family man or depart and become an artist. In this condition of freedom, Carl realizes that he does want to forge a bond with others. He feels ashamed for ignoring Laura, and even more significantly he “sees his son” and “feels himself suddenly connected to genealogy.” He “sees himself in the boy’s smile” and begins to imagine that he might be able to remain with Laura and build the family that he himself always lacked (260). In the final pages of the novel, the resolution is tentative. Carl and Laura begin to talk about and navigate their options together, though when he rides his motorcycle back home he has not yet made a commitment. Such an open ending is not as ambiguous as it seems. The comedic gesture toward the happy and desirable ending of a romantic union is clear. Since the opening pages of the “Proviso,” the reader has known that the book is based upon Clarke’s father’s diary, that the diary “relates my father’s endeavours to secure *Love* and a sustaining and satisfying wage,” and that the novel will “sketch the . . . *black* comedies of coupling and their *personal* consequences” (ix-x). The fact that the novel was anchored in the diary itself is a testimony to some familial connection initiated and maintained over the years. Early drafts of the novel depict Carl and Laura’s wedding and honeymoon, and Clarke cut these rather overdetermined scenes from the final version. Given the final recognition that Carl wants to be linked to others — that he really longs to shift from being a rogue to being a father — the novel hardly needs to end with wedding bells for the reader to understand that this ambitious, talented, artistic hero has finally found a viable place inside his community. In Clarke’s first novel, the forces of social prejudice and tragic misjudgment keep George and Rue Hamilton from finding fulfillment. In *The Motorcyclist*, Carl’s maturation signals that there are ways of navigating the perils and prejudices of the modern world to allow some measure of self-fulfillment to emerge.

The final confirmation that Clarke intended the ending of *The Motorcyclist* to sound an optimistic note is evident from a second significant omission that he made in drafting the novel. In an early draft,

Clarke penned a preface entitled "Confession in Two Parts" to explain how his father's diary was the genesis of the novel. The preface apparently suited his purposes, for it appeared in most subsequent drafts and remained in almost the same form. This early preface included what is essentially a summary of the closing section of *The Motorcyclist*: "My mother's mother overwhelmed her, called my father to tell him to come see me before I expired. It was only then, upon visiting me on those premises, that my father chose to court my mother and propose a settled family life with her." This conclusive moment was eventually excised from the preface, but deleted as well was an even more telling observation: "Like most children, or like most sons, I felt a tension toward my father. I thanked him for his gifts to me of an interest in art, literature, politics, and travel. I cursed him for what I felt was his betrayal of my mother (who he divorced)."⁵ Clarke's memories of the demise of his parents' marriage survived in the prefaces to many subsequent drafts, but the exclusion of this detail from the published version demonstrates an authorial desire not to cast a pessimistic note over the text. The published version of *The Motorcyclist* encourages the reader to imagine a familial union at the conclusion. Clarke uses the comic upturn at the end of *The Motorcyclist* to quiet the rebellious, picaresque elements of the text and to emphasize the image of Carl's emergence as a connected and potentially secure Black man who has a good chance of finding an anchored home in his community. Clarke's stature as a writer is evident in part from his determination to depict in full and unblinking prose the complexities of Black life in the complex and oppressive power structures that characterized the Maritime region in the twentieth century. His gift as a writer is that Clarke also claims, in prophetic fashion, that a better and more certain future can still emerge.

NOTES

¹ Clarke, "The Motorcyclist Drafts," MS Collection 734, box 4, file 4:1, "Confession in Two Parts," 3. Thanks to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, which generously granted me access to the Clarke manuscript collections, and to Dr. George Elliott Clarke, who granted me permission to refer to and quote from these manuscripts in this article.

² Victoria has five sons over the course of her life, but she is "installed" in the barn after four have been born; the fifth comes later.

³ Clarke first used the word *Africadian* in reference to African Nova Scotians in 1993. It is "a word I have minted from 'Africa' and 'Acadia' (the old name for Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) . . . to denote the Black populations of the Maritimes and especially of

Nova Scotia. Other appellations — ‘Afro-Nova Scotian,’ ‘Black Nova Scotian,’ etc. — are unwieldy. Moreover, if Africadians constitute a state, let it be titled Africadia” (Clarke, “Confession” 9).

⁴ Clarke, “*The Motorcyclist Drafts*,” MS Collection 734, box 4, file 4:19, word-processed draft.

⁵ Clarke, “*The Motorcyclist Drafts*,” MS Collection 734, box 4, file 4:1, “Confession in Two Parts,” 4.

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