

IDENTITIES ON THE MOVE: OF CULTURAL FISSURES AND FUSIONS IN BLACK CANADIAN LITERATURE¹

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Yuh think Canada sweet?

(Makeda Silvera)

... cette terre de passage.

(Émile Ollivier)

When'd they ever be free to relax and easily be?

(George Elliott Clarke)

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a new world order characterized by mobility, rhizomic histories, and increasing fluxes of objects, persons, ideas, ideologies, messages, images, and products that are constituted by and constituting a complex network of conjunctive and disjunctive relations. This post/transnational state of the world determined by migration, transitoriness, exile, and diaspora—"imagined communities" beyond common origins, local traditions, and geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders—creates

fractal cultural forms of belonging that undermine the notion of homogeneous nations and autonomous subjects. Current migration flows constitute new forms of diaspora that transform fixed borders of nation-states into permeable borderlands where people and fragments of diverse cultures meet and relate in conflicting and harmonious ways. In African diaspora studies, the term "diaspora" links the scattered peoples of African descent through a shared history of subjugation and resistance. In problematizing diaspora as a theoretical concept, Avtar Brah contends that *diaspora space* is "the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes." As such, it constitutes a crossroads "'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous." That is to say, this space "includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (180-81). In this essay, I use the term New World African diaspora as a transcultural space of interstitial belonging, cutting across diverse ethnoracial, gendered, and geographical border(land)s. Constituted by a variety of shifting, ambiguous places (multi-locality), this diasporic space is home to an identity characterized by a transcultural consciousness.

What is Canada's place in the New World African diaspora space? How does black Canadianness figure in this space? These two fundamental questions, which I will examine through contemporary black Canadian literature, raise a host of other questions: what is black Canadianness? How is black Canadian identity constituted, produced and lived in a multicultural society characterized by what Michael Adams calls "compromise, harmony, and equality,"² and Patrick Imbert "consensual disagreement"? How do black Canadians cope with an existence within and between geographical, cultural, and psychological borders when identity-based forms of oppression such as racism and sexism embedded in the multiple performative axes of power relations deny or delimit the negotiation and comprehension of the diverse identifications constituting cultural identity? How does cultural difference designate the other? How are the border(land)s of this difference constituted, maintained and/or deconstructed? How do black Canadian writers develop conceptions of wholeness and cohesion out of the cultural and identitarian ruins of what Glissant calls schizophrenic "nonhistory"? (62). What are the images that translate this identity (re)construction and what is the role of memory in this process? If the decolonization of self necessarily signifies the creation of home places within language—the reconstruction of the broken balance between the self and the world—then what has to be problematized is the type of mimicry creating this home place or dissolving it into a deferred desire for home. What are the characteristics of this home place/desire for home? While it is impossible to address all these issues in the following sections, I will examine some of their key aspects in select works by Marlene Nourbese Philip, Dionne Brand, Austin Clarke, Makeda Silvera, Émile Ollivier, and Dany Laferrière. First, let me briefly focus on the pan-American African diaspora space.

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THE AFRICAN DIASPORA SPACE OF THE AMERICAS

The African diaspora space is one of the inter-American contact zones par excellence. From the period of the transatlantic slave trade, colonization and plantation system to the present, this space has been subjected to the mixture of cultures and identities. Dispersal, displacement, and dispossession, these quintessential aspects of the African diaspora experience, constitute a complex borderland where identities are on the move. In their problematization of cultural in-betweenness, African diaspora writers in the Americas point to an apocalyptic history as the source of their characters' identity crisis and errantry. The result of the Atlantic slave trade and its aftermath is that New World Africans define their identity and subject position between different geographical locations and signifying systems. This hybridity, as Homi Bhabha has pointed out, produces cultural ambivalence because of the continuing latent impact of the imperial value system on colonial subjects. Dionne Brand has recently

44 described this interstitial state of mind and existence as follows: "To live in the Black Diaspora is [...] to live as a fiction—a creation of empires, and also self-creation. It is to be a being living inside and outside of herself" (*Map* 18). This diasporic life is characterized by a "sense in the mind of not being here or there, of no way out or in. [...] Caught between the two we live in the Diaspora, in the sea in between" (*Map* 20). For Brand, the African diaspora subject's liminal episteme and existence has been caused by a three-dimensional rupture: "a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being" that "was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography" (*Map* 5). She calls this fissured "creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora [...] the Door of No Return, a place emptied of beginnings" (*Map* 5-6). An interstitial place that has multiplied into lived and imagined non-places throughout the diaspora where the missing sedimentation of history casts fractal beams of memory. Brand describes the haunting, shadowy presence-as-absence of this interstitial *Dasein* as a "consciousness" (*Map* 25) whose "cognitive schema is captivity" (*Map* 29). If the mind and body of black diaspora subjects were and continue to be constituted within a labyrinth of languages, images and values imposed and determined by the experience of slavery, the plantation system, and different forms of neocolonization, then the continuity between ethos, worldview and language cannot be established and/or is suspended and identity has no home: it drifts in betweenness propelled by a desire for home. This identity crisis as imposed cultural and ethnoracial mobility between errantry and rootedness produces split egos, or, according to Fanon, "individuals without an anchor, without horizon, without color, state and roots—a race of angels" (170). Therefore, home, "the capacity to create in one's own i-image" (Philip, *She* 15), to reimagine one's self and the world through one's own eyes, is one of the key issues in pan-American black literature.

According to cultural critic Rinaldo Walcott, "[t]here exists in Canada at least three different black configurations of belonging: a long black presence dating back to the founding of the colony including slavery and escapes from slavery; a discontinuous

and continuous Caribbean presence since the early 1800s; and recent continental African migrations" (*Black* 137). One of Walcott's basic arguments is that what links these configurations is a national/cultural un-belonging as "not-quite-citizens" (*Black* 134). In his words, "we are an absented presence always under erasure" (*Black* 27). Translated into cultural and existential in-betweenness as visible invisibility by an official (multicultural) discourse that homogenizes diversity into (the heritage of) difference between the two founding peoples and the rest and thereby interpellates diversity into sameness, black Canadians share an un-homely home—a home that is *unheimlich* in that it "complicates what Canada is" (Walcott, *Rude* 35).

In *Odysseys Home*, Africadian writer and critic George Elliot Clarke inscribes this ethnocultural complexity in a post-colonial framework. In view of the heterogeneous and "kaleidoscopic nature of African-Canadian identity" (69), Black Canadians "constitute an *archipelago* of blackness" (48) whose culture is "as fraught with indefinability as Canada itself" (40). According to Clarke, the diverse strings constituting the multicultural Canadian tapestry are all tinged with post-colonial colours, establishing its difference from and/or challenging the cultural dominance of the other (74). Wondering "whether the 'Canadian' half of the epithet 'African-Canadian'" has a geographic or identitarian meaning, Clarke asks: "Is it possible to think of the hyphen as an ampersand, or is it really a double-edged minus sign?" (40). As the following discussion of black Canadian writers will illustrate, the varied nature of Canadian blackness makes possible a reading of the hyphen as a transcultural bond that holds the two halves of the epithet 'African-Canadian' in a tension-laden relationship.

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MARLENE NOURBESE PHILIP'S MNEMONIC I-IMAGES

How is it possible to deal with a physical, cultural and linguistic gang rape that began in the past and continues in the present? I contend that New World diasporic writers of African descent tackle this task by means of language and memory. For Marlene Nourbese Philip, "the African artist from the Caribbean and the New World must [...] create in, while giving name to, her own i-image—and in so doing eventually heal the word wounded by the dislocation and imbalance of the word/i-image equation." She asserts that this "can only be done by consciously restructuring, reshaping, and, if necessary, destroying the language. When that equation is balanced and unity of word and i-image is once again present, then ... will we have made the language our own" (*She* 21). In other words, the language of the (neo)colonial oppressor, an alien house, has to be "signified upon" (Gates) in order to become a homely home. Home in language, then, is one of the most crucial means to re-member the broken fragments of a shattered identity violated in the fetid holds of ships, the algae-covered depth of Atlantic waters, the *hot thing* of the plantation system, the nomadism of maroon existence, the distortions of official discourse, and the various forms of post-abolition racism and sexism. Exploding (neo)colonial discursive practices does not simply

mean to hyphenize signs (Derrida) or create what Bhabha has termed a “third place.” This double-writing of signs through rupture, according to Philip’s “Discourse on the Logic of Language,” is not enough. Philip’s linguistic resistance is a gendered *transwriting* embedded in sexuality, an anthropophagous blow job: “Slip mouth over the syllable; moisten with tongue the word. Suck Slide Play Caress Blow—Love it, but if the word gags, does not nourish, bite it off—at its source—Spit it out Start again” (*She* 69). Actually, what Philip’s *wordlingus* practices is transculturation, a signifying that “smash[es]/the in-the-beginning word” (*She* 71) by using parts of its signifier/signified and excreting others. This transcultural deformation of the sign at the crossroads of intercultural contact, characterized by sexuality and violence embedded in the multi-axial (neo)coloniality of power relations, disrupts as it fuses, links as it separates, transforming the “multi” into the “trans”: a double writing that links contradictory elements in a conflicting, uneasy dialogical structure and thereby produces what Pamela Mordecai has termed a “prismatic vision”, namely “the impulse to pluralities” in which “[a] thing turns into something else and at the same time retains its identity and intactness” (viii).

Cultural, historical and identitarian remapping through discourse as critical answer to epistemic and physical gang rape is based on memory.³ For many black writers throughout the diaspora, memory, the selective process of encoding and decoding images through remembrance and forgetting, has been a means of healing: a multilayered site from which to create homes out of homelessness, to re-member the fragments of broken identities in order to resist subalternization. Transferred from the individual lived experience of African ancestors to collective imagination, memory emphasizes the discontinuity between the lived and the remembered, imagined past (Morrison; Bethel). Thus, at the heart of *lieux de mémoire* is not historical truth but rather versions of the past generated and sustained by invented memory: a process of oral and written re-imagination. Based on and yet simultaneously distanced from lived memory, imagined memory as re-vision has been the basic means of re-creating a shattered self and the world through one’s own eyes.

What links diverse New World African creative works is the recovery of the split psyche through creativity based on memory; that is, the reconstruction process of the alienated psyche is based on the creative affirmation of the colonial trauma and existential crisis. Marlene Nourbese Philip, in her novel *Harriet’s Daughter*, re-creates the trauma of the African holocaust in the Americas through a game invented by her protagonist, Margaret. Inspired by Harriet Tubman—the legendary slave conductor on the Underground Railroad, who, after escaping from slavery herself, went down south “nineteen times” in order to guide “more than three hundred slaves” up to the northern United States and Canada (Franklin 194)—Margaret and her friends restage this Railroad from slavery to freedom in the streets of Toronto. Divided into slave catchers and fugitives, these teenagers enact their collective memory in the 1980s by means of what Eduardo Galeano has recently called a “*mémoire vivante*” (92), a living memory as “social practice” that translates present “*lieux de mémoire*”

into a lived “*milieu de mémoire*” (Nora 9). Not only are relevant questions raised by Margaret and her friends while planning and enacting the game, such as, “Can slaves be white?” (Philip, *Daughter* 64), but each time they play the game new issues come up, such as in the following section:

Pina Francesconi had been picked as a slave, but she said she had to babysit her little brother Sandro on Saturdays. She wanted to bring him with her but he was only seven years old. I thought he was too little, but another girl, Maria, [...] said she wasn’t going to play unless Pina could play. Someone else added that slaves used to take their children with them when they ran away—so we all agreed that Pina’s brother would be the youngest of ten slaves. (70)

Strife concerning who is a catcher and who is a slave, who was caught and who escaped, and especially the parents’ reaction to the game when some of the players begin to have nightmares, reveals further shades of an identity crisis that has not been resolved since the Middle Passage and the plantation system:

I was in the office the day the Browns came to school to complain. Their families, they said, were descended from Maroons *on both sides*; the Maroons had fought to be free and fought again to keep that freedom. They didn’t want their daughter, Pat, being called a slave, by no one. They had never been slaves! Never! (83)

When obliged by the school and their parents to end the game, the teenagers shout “Long live the Underground Railroad” (88): cultural resistance in the making. Caught between an educational system that imposes an ideologically filtered knowledge fraught with gaps and parents tangled up in their racialized *Dasein* between the Caribbean and Canada, Margaret alias Harriet and her friends act upon their dreams; that is, they use memory to imagine how the past must have been and translate this dream-memory into their daily activities in the present. In so doing, they revise their subject positions in Canadian society through agency, transforming “double-consciousness” (Du Bois) into double vision. This is not only the past in the (present) making but also cultural resistance in the making, since this specific subaltern agency is a form of consciousness-raising (Freire) that contains the possibility of future sociocultural transformation.⁴

Moreover, this episode problematizes two interrelated issues in the experience of New World Africans, namely mobility and in-betweenness, both physical and epistemic; that is, the broken and re-membered relationship between the individual and his/her place/body/mind. By mining the site of memory, Philip re-creates place out of dis-place-ments as a crossroads of geographical, historical, ethnocultural, gendered, and social identifications, forces, and practices which coalesce and/or collide in the process of producing identity. Displacement, a quintessential characteristic of the African diaspora experience, connotes loss and empowerment in that it always implies replacement. People of African descent have roamed the space of the Americas (and elsewhere) in search of a place-as-home. One of the principal tasks for Philip, living in Canada, a nation with “no tradition of writing which was in any way

receptive to the African writer" (*Genealogy* 71), is to create a (literary) sense of belonging, what Robert Stepto has memorably called a "symbolic geography."⁵ Philip, like other pan-American black writers, creates this dynamic relationship between individual and place through a three-dimensional process: an appropriation of historical, mental/bodily and discursive space. In the process, Canada becomes an inhabited discursive place-as-home, a spatiotemporal crossroads of the Americas, where a sense of belonging can be forged. This is a sense of belonging, however, that does not fit in with the traditional sense of national identity since it transcends national borders, involving at least two different cultural epistemes. The shuttling between these epistemes/nations/cultures with Canada at the hub, transforms this nation into a diaspora space-as-place where transculturation and "flexible citizenship" (Ong) are the main characteristics of trans-culture challenging homogeneity. Thus, Philip supplements both Brand's vision of diasporic in-betweenness as schizo-walks and Radhakrishnan's description of the diasporic location as one of "painful, incommensurable simultaneity [...] that promises neither transcendence nor return" (175) in that she demonstrates through her characters' agency how subaltern dis-place-ment can be transformed into re-placement. Since this move from deterritorialization to reterritorialization is an ongoing process within multi-culture that transforms identity, space and place, I want to call it trans-placement: a type of placement that dislocates Canada's "multi" into the "trans" of cultural translation. If, as Nada Elia has recently stated, "Africana women novelists are mediators [...] functioning liminally" (151), then Philip, located on the interlocking hyphen between Afro-Caribbean-Canadian, is a transcultural mediator of the tension-laden bonds that hold these spaces, places, cultures, epistemes, and identities together.

DANY LAFERRIÈRE'S SEXUAL DANCES AND TRANCES

How does the identitarian/cultural reconstruction through this three-dimensional appropriation of space figure in Dany Laferrière's texts? Moving between places, spaces, and cultures in search of belonging, his characters dance on the transcultural hyphen linking and separating Canada, the United States, and Haiti. Laferrière exploded on the Canadian literary scene in 1985 with the publication of *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*. A Canadian hipster novel, this text-as-horn is blown through short, Hemingway-like sentences, translating Ezra Pound's thesis that language should conform to machine efficiency: a jam session characterized by imagistic rhapsodies of sexual and philosophical vibrations. In bird-like flights, Laferrière's narrator-protagonist shambles after Charlie Parker, mad to live, mad to talk and mad to compose, driven by the naked desire to redeem an apocalyptic history of black male annihilation through sexual intercourse with white women: "je veux baiser son inconscient. [...] JE VEUX BAISER SON IDENTITÉ. Pousser le débat racial jusque dans ses entrailles" (74). The act of writing becomes synonymous with

the act of musing on the sexual relationship between black men and white women in racialized Montreal of the 1980s. I contend that these fictionalized sexual encounters constitute a highly gendered attempt at translating "double-conscience" into double vision at the crossroads of transcultural Canada. In his definition of double consciousness, Du Bois describes the negative impact racism has on African American identity. Seeing oneself and the world through the eyes of the Other, he argues, is tantamount to a split ego resulting from an internalization of the imago of the black subject, the Other (simultaneously abject and desired) constructed by the dominant discourse. According to Fanon, the internalization of the values, forms and practices of the dominant culture produces "aberrations of affect", such as favouring whiteness over blackness. Being of a psychological and existential nature, these aberrations implode and change the personality of black people. He argues that their existential dimensions can be found in a "zone of nonbeing" that they open within the psyche. For Fanon, this zone as existential deviation of the ego is "an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born"; that is, a zone where the ego collapses and may be reborn. A rebirth he describes as "the liberation of the black man from himself" (8); in other words, a double vision. What interests me in terms of Laferrière's text is precisely this interface where the ego's collapse (double conscience) and rebirth (double vision) meet and create the individual's fractal identity.

In *Comment faire l'amour*, this psychological interface of ego destruction and reconstruction, whose chronotope is a time-space continuum characterized by the condensation of different times and spaces, links oppressor/colonizer and oppressed/colonized in an ongoing violent and schizophrenic embrace:

Nègre out. Go home Nigger. [...] *Hasta la vista*, Negro. Last call, Colored. Retourne à la brousse, p'tit Nègre. Faites-vous hara-kiri là où vous savez. Regarde, maman, dit la Jeune Blanche, regarde le Nègre Coupé. Un bon Nègre, lui répond le père, est un Nègre sans couilles. Bon, bref, telle est la situation en ce début des années 80 marquées d'une pierre noire dans l'histoire de la Civilisation Nègre. [...] LA VENGEANCE NÈGRE ET LA MAUVAISE CONSCIENCE BLANCHE AU LIT [...] LA HAINE DANS L'ACTE SEXUEL EST PLUS EFFICACE QUE L'AMOUR (17-19).

What connects the chapters thematically is what links the different phases of subalternization from the plantation system to the sex tourism and push-and-pull migration system of late glocal capitalism: violence; aggression; cannibalism; the ambivalence of desire and abjection (racism, sexism, exotism), exploitation and hostility. Laferrière, not unlike Eldridge Cleaver,⁶ focuses on the hub of this experience: the human body—skins glistening in black and white—dancing on the hyphen between the private and the public spheres. Whereas the plantation machine and its chattel industry of human breeding deprived New World Blacks of this private space to varying degrees, and the post-slavery emancipation system limited it drastically, both creating an othering in-between space, Laferrière's double glance from the place of the Other and the place of the othered signifies on this space through parody and

pastiche. As such, this written glance inverts the perspective of the othering process within this space, but does not change the nature of the space. That is to say, emancipated into the othering practice, Laferrière uses the tools bequeathed to him by the master in order to deform/invert the mastery of the master. In the process, a history experienced as “nonhistory” (Glissant 62) becomes, according to the narrator, “L’HISTOIRE” that “NOUS SERT D’APHRODISIAQUE” (97). Alter-domination and/or resistance-as-mimicry in the making? In light of the narrator’s desire for white upper-class women students and what he imagines these students longing for, namely his black male body, can domination of the other/Other (body) be a form of consciousness-raising that redeems an apocalyptic history into a present-future betterment?

50 The narrator-writer’s musing over his sexual happenings through writing works like the Freudian unconscious—its most basic dynamic being that of the return of the repressed in response to disavowal—and the site of this work is enunciation. Thus, if according to Laferrière, “history serves” blacks in the diaspora as “aphrodisiac” since the repressed desire of both blacks and whites can now be acted upon, then what returns to the surface of post-colonial modernity, makes its conscious presence felt, is its colonial unconscious. Moreover, this return of the disavowed colonial unconscious haunting the post-colonial present seems to stifle feelings and sensibilities: “IL N’YA PAS DE FEMMES ICI, IL Y A DES BLANCHES ET DES NÈGRES, C’EST TOUT” (122). Culture, imbued with the lived experience of racism in Montreal of the 1980s and the imagined experience of colonization, becomes a specific kind of power-knowledge. The orgasmic explosions of the post-colonial present on the level of enunciation, overlaid by its colonial past, reveal the crossing of race and gender as discursive and social constructs of the power relations characterizing culture. *Comment faire l’amour*, then, does not only describe that but also why “les Nègres ont soif” (149). This thirst haunting male identity makes its presence felt as racial/sexual/gendered/ cultural difference accompanied by the discourse of its negation. The gap of disjunction within discourse (the return of the colonial repressed), empowered by disavowal provides the hyphen-as-place by means of which Laferrière seeks to re-create the broken relation between word, ethos and worldview. This text, then, is post-colonial precisely because it translates a disavowed colonial past into the present through the discursive gap of contemporary culture.

At the same time, it is neo-colonial because its narrator reconstructs his identity based on the absence of black women. Suzette Mayr concludes that “by the end of the book black women are where they started: without a body, an independent voice, or their own chance at ‘nuclear’ sex with a partner of their own choice” (43). The act of silencing black women through what George Elliott Clarke (*Odysseys* 172) has called “a hymn of sexual vengeance against white women,” seen in the context of a black male’s attempt at reconstructing his shattered ego, could be interpreted in at least three ways. First, according to Mayr and Clarke, as a sexist/racialized ego collapse. Second, as an ambivalent act of mimicry that entails possibilities of ego rebirth.

Third, as a *conscious* effort to exteriorize the repressed in response to disavowal: to act upon the emasculating effect of the past (slavery) and the present (racism) through both direct contact with one of its main sources, namely white women, and parodic translation of this experience into writing. In this case, Vieux’s collapsed ego is not reconstructed, but in *liminal* search of rebirth. Ego rebirth in this “zone of nonbeing”, according to Fanon, requires the support of positive interpersonal relations. Since these relations do not exist, I want to argue, drawing on Victor Turner’s concept of liminality, that Vieux’s attempt at ego rebirth constitutes an intermediate stage in the process of identity construction.⁷ In the following section, I want to briefly move to *Vers le Sud*, a novel in which Laferrière conveys another angle of this issue.

Whereas *Comment faire l’amour* is set in Canada, the setting of *Vers le Sud* is Haiti. Being fun and male ego building in the former, the body dance between blacks and whites in the latter is part of contemporary sex tourism/migration. In postmodern times of ever-increasing mobility, the percentage of women and minors sold or driven by necessity into the sex business is on the rise. Those without money to move, wait for those who come, willing to dance to the rhythms of desire. An ambassador surrounded by Haitian girls whom he “helps” to get entry visas to the Northern “paradise,” middle-aged white women in search of young black male flesh and foreign (mostly white) investors (who squeeze local ones into bankruptcy) planning and constructing the necessary infrastructure for this lucrative business people the scenario of *Vers le Sud*: A business and a world in which “le pouvoir, l’argent [...] le sexe,” this “trio infernal [...] mène les hommes” (17), leading to what William Harris has recently described as “the brutalization of everyday place and person by conquistadorial legacies” (263). Albert, a Haitian head waiter, summarizes the situation as follows: “Autrefois, il y avait une morale. Aujourd’hui, je regarde autour de moi et je vois que tout s’écroule” (162). “Et l’amour?” asks one of the male prostitutes, giving voice to one of the principal questions framing the plot. By laying bare the motives of those engaged in sexual dances and trances, Laferrière reveals that whereas those in search of body adventure do so out of greed, boredom, and desire (the exotic shiver in the dull routine of daily life), the ones who submit to the rules of the game do so in order to survive. I want to argue that this is more than *intercultural* contact. The give-and-take exchange within the body contact zone changes emotions and habits and thus recreates subjectivities and identities within hierarchical patterns of power relations. By supplementing “sex in the snow” through sex on the beach, Laferrière translates the “inter” and the “multi” into the “trans” of neocolonial cultural body talk and writes Canada into the continent’s southern hemisphere and fluxes of sex tourism.

DIONNE BRAND, ÉMILE OLLIVIER, AUSTIN CLARKE AND MAKEDA SILVERA: UN-HOMELY BE-LONGING

Brand's creative works focus upon mobility within and across the Canadian borders of the black diaspora space. Her characters seem to be on schizo-walks trying to negotiate their trans-identities between places and cultures: a diasporic space where (neo)colonial forms and practices of subjugation, such as racism and sexism, stifle identity (re)construction.

Brand's first novel, *In Another Place, Not Here*, deals with a multilayered politics of location: geographical locations and locations in (and by) history, colour, gender, sex, and body. By linking these locations, Brand creates a tension-laden double space between two places, Toronto and Grenada, and two Afro-Caribbean women, Elizete and Verlia. This space is framed by a present which evokes the Caribbean history of the Middle Passage, slavery, the plantation system, and resistance to colonization.

52 In order to examine how Brand (un)writes Canada's national borders into the New World black diaspora space, let me focus on two scenes that are emblematic for the two Caribbean women's experience in Toronto.

As an illegal post-colonial migrant worker in Toronto, Elizete shares with her colonial slave relatives an out-of-place feeling and an inability to express her emotions. Drifting through the maze of streets and houses as an illegal "woman from nowhere" (49) in search of work and a place to stay, Elizete is unable to name this new environment. Toronto "resisted knowing. When she tried calling it something, the words would not come.... Her names would not do for this place" (69-70). Elizete's speechlessness, her inability to develop a sense of belonging, has to be seen in connection with the specific muteness of the city itself: "concrete-grained deserts" characterized by isolation, loneliness and distrust; spaces with "many rooms but no place to live" (63); rooms stifling the screams of the victims of racial discrimination, sexual oppression, and economic exploitation. Brand describes Toronto as a nightmarish borderland where Caribbean migrants lose their identity (speech, behaviour, worldview and ethos) in exchange for material benefits, where ruthless sweatshop owners exploit illegal workers and coloured women continue to be tossed by the waves of a predominantly white male power structure. In one of the most striking images of the novel, Brand voices her strident criticism of a patriarchal order, which, as she writes elsewhere, was and still is "built on slavery" (*Sans Souci* 140):

A man you don't know bends you against a wall, a wall in a room, your room. He says this is the procedure, he says you have no rights here, he says I can make it easier for you if I want, you could get sent back. His dick searches your womb. He says you girls are all the same, whores, sluts, you'll do anything. His dick is a machete, a knife, [...], all the killing things found in a tool shed. [...] He shakes the blood off his knife and leaves. This time they searched her skin, this time they found nothing and took it, too. Elizete, [...] spread-eagled against the immense white wall, the continent. (*Another Place* 89)

Unlike Elizete, Verlia has family living in Canada and attends school in Toronto. Like Elizete, Verlia's claim of Toronto's urban space-as-place is ultimately doomed to failure since she cannot come to grips with her split psyche caught between locations in a racialized, homophobic society. Aware of her psychic dissociation, she thinks that "[h]ere is a hole in a wall opening to the sea and you...she cannot recognize anything after that...she cannot remember why you...she is standing at a corner called Bathurst and Bloor looking into a store window, looking back from the sea" (198). Mapping the rhythm of Verlia's mind haunted by memory through stream-of-consciousness writing, Brand describes a woman who becomes conscious of her gradual "disappear[ance]" as she drifts through a city space unable to remember her name.

Whereas in *Another Place* home places within this unhomely space of neocolonial in-betweenness can emerge through female bonding, in *What We All Long For* these home places are destroyed by ethnoracial boundaries. In one passage, Oku, a black Canadian, walks the streets of Toronto at night when suddenly a cruiser stops next to him, two cops jump out, search him and take him to the notorious 52 Division. He is released only four hours later for lack of charges. Similar to Verlia in *Another Place*, Oku temporarily disappears: "Whenever he encountered them he simply lifted his arms in a crucifix, gave up his will and surrendered to the stigmata." In order to deal with "the ordinary and brutal shit waiting for men like him in the city" Oku "cultivate[s] the persona of the cool poet." However, this does not help him overcome the hatred and bitterness spawned by police violence and racism. To him, living in Toronto is like being "in prison, although the bars [are] invisible" (165-66). In the city's highly racialized environment, to be white means to be "safe" and "in control"; to be black means to be "out of control," always on the run (176-77). Other than in the United States of the 1950s, when a Jim Crow and KKK apparatus kept "This Nigger-Boy [Girl] Running" (Ellison 26), in Toronto at the beginning of the XXI century, many members of diverse ethnic groups are unable to join "regular Canadian life" (and thus are kept running) since they do not belong to "the required race" (Brand, *Long For* 47). Canada, then, like the rest of the Americas, keeps blacks running... against white walls.

53 In his novel *La Brûlerie*, Émile Ollivier focuses on the theme that suffuses his entire oeuvre, namely, exile, an existence between spaces, places, times and cultures. Unlike *Passages*, where the plot is structured through the characters' physical journeys, in *La Brûlerie* readers accompany the narrator's mental journeys. Sitting on the terrace of a café in Montreal's Côte-des-Neiges district, he muses over the constant flow of passers-by as a symbol of both an anonymous life in Montreal, "cette terre de passage," and the cultural in-betweenness of the Haitian diaspora, "ces person-nages anonymes au coeur de l'anonymat, transparents et visibles au sein d'un monde invisible" (12). Thus, right from the beginning we are confronted not with a mosaic of multicultural cohabitation but rather with the slippery transcultural liminality (which is not an empty place) of intercultural existence. "[D]es naufragés [...] voués à l'errance" (70-71), unable to "trouver l'osmose, la symbiose heureuse" (123) between

their past experience, the lived present and the desired future, these (im)migrants move from one displacement to the next within a “société qui a peur de tout ce qui est différent” (142).

54 This last statement strikes me as one of the most telling characteristics of our post/trans-ism times: a new type of racism based on cultural difference as cultural incompatibility resulting from different lifestyles and traditions. As Austin Clarke’s “Sometimes, a Motherless Child” or Makeda Silvera’s “Caribbean Chameleon” shockingly delineate, this “neo-racism” (Balibar) grows out of the fertile soil of old-time racism, such as racial/sexist/homophobic stigmatization. What links these two short stories is that the public space as unhomely border zone stifles any form of personal development that does not conform to the norms of the “required race.” While the problematic of race has been displaced from the realm of biology onto the realm of culture, culture “peut elle aussi fonctionner comme une nature, en particulier comme une façon d’enfermer *a priori* les individus et les groupes dans une généalogie, une détermination d’origine immuable et intangible” (Balibar 34). Culture is racialized/ethnicized in that “*Les cultures ‘différentes’ sont celles qui constituent des obstacles, ou qui sont instituées comme obstacles [...] à l’acquisition de la culture*” (Balibar 39). This return of the biological/racial/ethnic hierarchy within and through culture is linked to the theme of immigration and the border. Silvera’s “Caribbean Chameleon” delineates a legal immigrant’s home-coming after a vacation in Jamaica. A Canadian customs official asks her where she stayed during her holiday, whereupon she answers that rather than at her family’s house she preferred to stay at a hotel. Since this answer renders her suspicious in the eyes of the official, to whom all Jamaicans, in contrast to Canadians, are necessarily of a collective nature and low-wage workers rather than hotel guests, she is ordered to open her suitcase and finally to prepare for a body search. Jamaicans who think and act like Canadians do not fit the border agent’s cultural episteme; that is, Jamaicans can not be Canadians. That the border agent’s cultural order of knowledge is imbued with and determined by a racist and ethnically hierarchical belief system becomes clear when she orders the protesting woman to be arrested, yelling “‘TAKE HER AWAY. TAKE HER AWAY.’ Take this wild savage. Monster. Jungle beast. ‘AWAY. Arrest her for indecent exposure’” (12). In this sense, then, race/racism inscribes structures of hierarchical otherness in the ethnic tapestry of Canadian multi-culture.

This inscription can also be traced in Austin Clarke’s “Sometimes, a Motherless Child.” In contrast to Silvera, Clarke moves the racialization of culture from the border to the city of Toronto, thereby borderizing the multicultural nation-space. In one passage, three women and a young black Canadian, BJ, happen to share the elevator. The women stare at him, then “at the floor” (343). In the parking area, he gets out and moves slowly toward and then around his white BMW, looking at it before opening the door. The women, having watched him through the open elevator door, move up to the main floor and talk to the building’s superintendent, who then informs the police. This pivotal passage—it marks the beginning of BJ’s tragic death at the hands

of the Canadian police—translates the return of race in culture: for many segments of the population, young black adults and BMWs do not go together...other than on criminal lanes.

Otherness, whether cultural, racial, ethnic, or sexual, constitutes the interior alterity that marks the limit of the Canadian multicultural nation-state. Multicultural Canada, in other words, mothers some of her children and orphans others. That is, Canada is a nation unable to adequately translate its multicultural principles into social practice and misconceives its cultural identity. Calling the nation to live up to its promise, black writers reveal the lived fissures of Canada’s imagined/invented multicultural fusion. Or, in the words of Ollivier’s narrator in *La Brûlerie*: “Quel beau paradoxe! Nous faisons volontiers l’éloge de la mondialisation, nous célébrons *ad nauseam* la levée des frontières, nous appelons de tous nos vœux l’espace ouvert, le mélange des cultures, l’air du grand large; cependant, nous sommes incommodés par ces gens du voyage, ces hommes sans feu ni lieu” (153).

55

CONCLUDING REMARKS

How does the delineation of Canadian society by black Canadian writers go together with what Patrick Imbert calls Canada’s “capacity to *blend* cultural differences in daily social relationships” by means of which it “understands how to share its knowledge with others” (*Consensual* 36; my emphasis)? Imbert has argued that what characterizes Canada as a society is its “capacity to thrive on unresolved contradictions [...] to *connect* [...] opposite tendencies, in an efficient tension which allows for an original way to foster cultural, social and economic expansion” (10; my emphasis). Are we confronted here with trans-culture as a transitory moving through the maze of multiple juxtaposed cultures; with cultural liminality as diasporic oscillation between/across different cultural epistemes, the liminal passage from trans-culture to multi-culture? Or is multi-culture always necessarily a trans-culture in process?

Trans-culture, the forever-in-the-making traverse of cultures, requires an in-between (mangrove) space⁸ that is both open and closed; a setting-as-crossroads with porous boundaries at once open to adjacent cultures by channels of transcultural flow and protected from assimilation. It has widely been argued that Canada has developed into such a cultural model of relation-identity. Cecil Foster in *Where Race Does Not Matter*, contends that Canada, “a beacon of peace” (51), is in the process of becoming a nation where race does not matter: a multicultural Canada where people from different nations and cultural contexts live together in harmony, constituting “a collection of diasporas, home to all the peoples of the world” (52-53). Yet, how does openness to others and otherness cohabit harmoniously (“blend”) with what Ollivier delineates as fear of otherness and Brand, Clarke, Silvera, Laferrière and Philip, among others, as outright racism and sexism in such a cultural model of “consensual disagreement”? Is it not exactly this unity-in-difference with the other that

the narrator in Ollivier's *La Brûlerie* evokes but is unable to experience in Canada: "Ne peut-on demeurer plusieurs [...] accueillir en nous la diversité qui en vérité nous constitue?" (130). Contemporary black Canadian creative works reveal and denounce a multicultural reality in which cultural difference is fissured into cultural separation rather than blended into cultural diversity. In other words, does Imbert's "consensual disagreement" (or "converging dissensus") do justice to visions/identities on the move, such as those of black cultures and autochthonous peoples, among others? Read through their prisms, do not cultural fissures, such as racism, sexism and other forms of violence preventing identity (re)construction explode cultural consensus/convergence? If according to Kumsa, "true Canadianness is something unreachable, something that remains beyond acquiring culture, paying taxes, and gaining citizenship," then what remains is a "longing in be-longing" and to belong (186, 196). If belonging as trans-national/trans-cultural *Dasein* within and between places/cultures/epistemes is to become lived reality, it is necessary to transform

56 difference-as-separation into diversity-as-relation: a Ca-na-di-an-ness with enough hyphenized cultural spaces so as to enable all voices to dance cheek to cheek, (dis) agreeing on matters in non-hierarchical ways and thus uttering/performing national Canada as trans-national Canadas. For the time being, in much of black Canadian writing, Canada is a space of be-longing rather than a home of belonging; a space where the transcultural dance on the hyphen materializes through what Walter has termed "transwriting," that is "a type of writing that moves through an interstitial space between and within borders, traverses existing cultural territories composed of multiple contact zones, and strives to go beyond, to change this cultural limbo" (*Narrative* 31).

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ENDNOTES

1. I am grateful to the Canadian Government for a Faculty Research Scholarship, which enabled me to examine more closely the relations between diverse black Canadian cultures and works.
2. Adams maintains that "Canada's history of multiculturalism and the pattern of development that led to its urbanism have rendered its three great cities as models of vibrant and peaceful multicultural coexistence throughout the world" (121). The absence of Canada's black cultures in his analysis sheds a contradictory light on this statement.
3. This critical remapping is yet another form of what the Cuban poet and thinker José Lezama Lima termed "contraconquista" (80). He used the term to express his vision of the Americas as a "espacio gnóstico" where the "espíritu invasor" (177) was incorporated into indigenous and interspersed with African cosmologies and cosmogonies and thereby transformed.
4. In the sense that the characters begin to consciously understand diverse aspects of their shared history and how these continue to influence their ethos and worldview. Furthermore, based on the experience of the Underground Railroad game Margaret and her friend, Zulma, begin to solve problems and thus actively shape their destinies.
5. According to Stepito (67), "a landscape becomes symbolic in literature when it is a region in time and space offering spatial expressions of social structures and ritual grounds on the one hand, and *communitas* and *genius loci* on the other." Two more recent texts creating this geography are George Elliott Clarke's *George & Rue* and Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angélique*. They differ from Philip's in that their authors retell the life-story of African Canadians who entered Canada's history as criminals: George and Rufus Hamilton for killing a taxi driver in 1949, and Marie-Joseph Angélique for setting a fire in Montreal in 1734. Whereas both Clarke's and Cooper's retelling is based on the mining of trial transcripts (institutional memory), Clarke also uses interviews with relatives of the Hamilton brothers as sites of memory. What links Philip, Clarke and Cooper in their difference, is that they employ storytelling to redefine history and culture through institutional, individual and collective memory. To re(-)member the past through a mixture of fact and imagination interrupts the linear narrative of the nation-state and makes room for multiple voices and perspectives. Memory in this context is not only a site to be mined but also a strategy toward reclaiming a distorted and/or suppressed past and remapping community.
6. It goes without saying that Laferrière in the 1980s benefits from the Civil Rights Movement's achievements in the 1960s and 1970s. The comparison is somewhat inappropriate since Cleaver's context in the US of the 1960s is radically different from Laferrière's in Canada of the 1980s. Whereas Cleaver wrote from prison in a nation mired in racial violence, Laferrière's autobiographic narrator, a Haitian migrant in search of the Canadian dream, is able to play the role of the exotic, intellectual *flâneur*, or rather, lover in a racially (and otherwise) conservative society that lacks the racial strife and ethnic ghettoization of its southern neighbour.
7. In *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Turner argues that liminality is not only a phase between states, but a state in itself, "a movement between fixed points," which accounts for its "ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling" nature (242). It "refer[s] to any condition outside or on the peripheries of everyday life" (47) and as "a sphere or domain of action or thought rather than a social modality" it "may imply solitude [...] the voluntary or involuntary withdrawal of an individual from a social matrix" as well as "alienation from [...] social existence" (52).
8. For the mangrove space as symbol of transcultural identity, see Walter (2006).