BLACK CANADAS: RETHINKING CANADIAN AND DIASPORIC CULTURAL STUDIES[1]

Diana Brydon
University of Western Ontario

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the diasporic discursive structures arising from what Paul Gilroy has termed "the black Atlantic" are compelling a reciprocal rethinking of both Canadian and diasporic cultural studies and the place of the nation within them. It surveys contemporary work by prominent black Canadian literary theorists and creative writers to analyse the challenges they pose to commonsense notions of racial and national identities, concluding that such border work redefines, rather than abandons, the category of nation.

KEYWORDS: Black Canadas; Black Diaspora; Contemporary Canadian Literature, literary theory, cultural studies, multiculturalism.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo propone que las estructuras discursivas diaspóricas de lo que Paul Gilroy ha llamado "el Atlántico negro" están provocando un replanteamiento tanto de los estudios canadienses como de los estudios culturales y del lugar de la nación dentro de ellos. Se analiza la producción literaria, crítica y teórica de autores/as canadienses negros/as y se subrayan los desafíos que aquella plantea a las nociones tradicionales de identidad racial y nacional, concluyendo que este tipo de trabajos fronterizos tiende a redefinir, más que a abandonar, la categoría de "nación."

PALABRAS CLAVE: Canadá(s) negro(s), diáspora negra, literatura canadiense contemporánea, teoría literaria, estudios culturales, multiculturalismo.

[1] An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the AEDEAN conference in León, Spain, and in truncated form, as a seminar at the Centro de Estudios Canadienses, Universidad de La Laguna, in December 1999. I am grateful to my hosts and the audiences in both locations for their hospitality and their commentary. In particular, Pilar Cuder, Eva Darias Beautell, and Esther Sánchez-Pardo have proved a constant source of inspiration and challenge.

Adrienne Shadd is a fifth generation Canadian who finds that her blackness often confuses questioners about the nature of her identity. She argues that "the very concept of a "Black" or "African" Canadian is —in the public perception— a contradiction in terms" (Shadd 10). Like most black Canadian writers and intellectuals, she writes to eliminate that sense of contradiction and to claim —and shape— a specifically Canadian identity that acknowledges blackness as belonging, and contributing, to the nation. In "destabilizing the terms" by which Canadian identity is "conceived and performed" (Gikandi 24), these writers necessitate a parallel reshaping of Canadian studies itself to accommodate these changes in identity-claims and their formations. Their work puts pressure on some of the foundational assumptions of Canadian studies as a discipline: forcing attention to the origins of modernity in slavery and colonialism, to the disruptions that diasporic identifications bring to normative models of national identity, and to the inadequacies of a multiculturalism that assumes that black identities may simply be added to a national mosaic without challenging the assumptions on which it rests. Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* has been fundamental in reshaping the terms in which such issues are discussed.[2] Canadian inflections of black diasporic experience are being shaped through a series of internal dialogues within this disparate community that are themselves involved in conversation with British, Caribbean, and U.S.-based diasporic discourses as well as with dominant Canadian constructions of feminism, nationalism and regionalism. These are the debates that frame this paper.

Handel Kashope Wright has argued persuasively for troubling the assumed origin of Cultural Studies in Birmingham, England, by locating an alternative source for the field in the work begun by Ngugi wa Thiong'o and colleagues at the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre in Limuru, Kenya, in 1977. His interest in complicating this history of origins lies in the possibilities such a project releases for expanding future trajectories. My interest here is in following one such trajectory through the routes currently traveled by the theorizing of black Canadas. Studies such as *Challenging Racism in the Arts: Case Studies of Controversy and Conflict*, edited by Carol Tator, Frances Henry, and Winston Mattis, testify to the "struggles over cultural representation" (4) that currently animate the Canadian scene, arguing that "discourse on race and racism converges with questions about national and cultural identity, and with democratic liberal values such as freedom of expression, truth, individualism, and tolerance" (5). This paper provides a partial and preliminary mapping of the contributions that black Canadas are making to the illumination of these questions.

---

[2] See Brydon ("Re-Routing"), for a fuller discussion of these relations.

1. GRAMMARS, MODELS AND MODALS

> "a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong / now shape this twang, falsettos of whip and air / rudiment this grammar" Dionne Brand, "No Language is Neutral" (23)

Dionne Brand's long poem, "No Language is Neutral," shows "how the relations of slavery, of brutality, but also of silence, of distance, of loss, begin to shape the language" that she speaks and writes. Brand argues that there's "a new grammar... being made in this" (Daurio 38). Rinaldo Walcott's 1997 study, *Black Like Who? Writing* Black* Canada* picks up Brand's notion of a new grammar for black Canadas. Walcott describes his book as an attempt "to articulate some grammars for thinking Canadian blackness" (XIII). This paper reviews some of the characteristics of these contemporary investigations into the deep structures of national and racial identities in Canada to consider their implications for Canadian, border and diasporic cultural studies.

Brand based her title, "No Language is Neutral," on a line from a poem by Derek Walcott, but she used it to deviate from Walcott's meaning. Derek Walcott's *Midsummer* claims: "no language is neutral / the green oak of English is a murmurous cathedral / where some take umbrage and some take peace / but all help to widen its shade" (Walcott 506; quoted by Brand in Daurio, 37).[3] Brand explains that "the English language that he wants to claim is not the same one that I want to claim. The one that I want contains the resistances to how that language was made, because that language was made through imperialism, through the oppression of women" (Daurio 37). As Susan Gingell notes: "If Brand and Walcott agree that the rot of Empire remains though the men of Empire are gone, they part company over the issue of whether time heals the ills and injuries Empire brought to and inflicted on the Caribbean" (49). For Brand, time heals nothing. The past survives in the very grammars of the present and human action is necessary to initiate healing.

Similar recognitions shape the very different poetics of Jamaican-born Lillian Allen and Trinidadian-Canadian poets Claire Harris and Marlene Nourbese Philip. Much critical attention has been paid to Marlene Nourbese Philip's articulation of the "anguish that is English" ("Discourse" 56). Whereas Philip fragments and proliferates English into demotic forms of a "nation language" (Brathwaite 13) that derives from the Caribbean, Claire Harris refines and prunes, making it her mission to "take the word and cleanse it" (Williamson 122). Rehabilitating the language means exploring "the reality of Canadian society... which," Harris says, "I must free to include me" (Williamson 122; ellipsis in original). This rhetoric reverses the patronizing language of Canadian multiculturalism, which assumes that whiteness

[3] For a fuller analysis of Brand's reworking of Walcott, see Gingell.

retains a power of recognition and inclusion that might graciously confer subjectivity and citizenship upon those it continues to name as its others.[4] As these poets wrench language into the shape of their world (Williamson 125), it is our task as readers and critics, whatever our own location within these social dynamics, to listen, to see, and to learn that new grammar and the fresh perspectives it offers. In *Here is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada*, Peter Dickinson finds in Brand's work a suggestion that a politics of location must also "be accompanied by an ethics of listening" (157). What might such an ethics entail?

Rinaldo Walcott describes Canadian blackness as "a bubbling brew of desires for elsewhere, disappointments in the nation and the pleasures of exile —even for those who have resided here for many generations" (XIII). By echoing George Lamming's classic Caribbean "report on one man's way of seeing" (Lamming 13, 56) —*The Pleasures of Exile*— in his choice of phrasing here, Walcott implies that a postcolonial diasporic consciousness informs even the experiences of African-Canadians who have lived in the country for generations. Lamming's book explains that "to be colonial is to be in a state of exile" (Lamming 229). For Walcott, Lamming's recognition of the colonial as exile describes the normative Canadian experience (whether black or white) as well as that of the Caribbean. Walcott argues that, even though it is clear that African-Canadians have been excluded from hegemonic histories of Canada and of its cultural self-representations, it is also the case that through the shared experience of colonial exile African-Canadians have their own way in to understanding the general colonial malaise that characterizes the dominant English Canadian culture.

This is an emphasis that George Elliott Clarke, who lays claims to a black Canadian tradition going back to 1605, is less willing to accept. If Walcott follows Lamming in investigating the paradoxical "pleasures of exile," then Clarke insists on asserting a deep-rooted belonging that persists, despite its erasure from the landscape of white Canadian perceptions. Clarke has edited two volumes of an anthology of black Nova Scotian writing, called *Fire on the Water*, documenting the rootedness of African Canadians within the Canadian place. Instead of the paradoxes of colonial exile, and its ambivalent explorations of belonging as detailed by the anglophone Lamming, Clarke adapts the francophone Caribbean Edouard Glissant's description of "*Antillanite*," as "an *archipelago* of blackness." This archipelago structures an identity parallel to *Antillanite* that Clarke calls "African Canadianite" ("Contesting"27). Clarke locates this archipelago, not within Glissant's diasporic Caribbean nor within Lamming's articulation of a "special relationship to the word, colonialism" (Lamming 35), but within "the contested space between the Euro-Canadian reluctance to accept an African presence and the African-American

[4] For a fuller analysis of dominant Canadian rhetorics of multiculturalism, see Bannerji, Kamboureli, Gagnon, Miki.

insistence on reading Canadian blackness as merely a lighter shade of its own" ("Contesting"12).

For Clarke, then, the contested space is located within North American continental mappings. For Walcott, these continental contestations are embraced, rather than merely complemented, by the black Atlantic, and the colonial discursive structures it engenders. Where Walcott seeks a Canadian grammar of black within international circuits of blackness, Clarke describes what he terms a modal blackness that resists the models proffered by black studies within the United States while continuing to accept their primacy as an origin from which the Canadian modes are described as *virages*, or detours ("Contesting" 42). (Clarke has the habit of peppering his work with French, perhaps as a way of indicating Canadian difference from the United States and reminding readers that black Canadas span anglophone and francophone cultures.) The implications of these divergent situatings of black Canadas and their discontents are important, but for now I wish to focus on where these analyses converge.

For despite disagreements of emphasis and orientation, both Clarke and Walcott claim that "[i]t is time that scholars began to recognize this Canadianness [that is a black Canadianness] rather than presume that it does not exist" (Clarke, "Contesting" 42). They direct this call to all Canadianists, and as a white Canadian I am responding to this challenge, while recognizing that my own orientations and experiences of black Canadas necessarily differ from theirs. Black communities need to negotiate among themselves to determine what constitutes their definitions of blackness, but all Canadians are involved in recognizing black Canadas and the ways they are altering definitions of Canadian identity. Like Clarke and Walcott, I see black Canadians negotiating a very particular set of postcolonial problems: figuring out their relations to the Canadian state and the Canadian land, to Canada's official national imaginary and the multitude of challenges to that orthodoxy, and all amidst the crossfire of the dominant diasporic influences from the United States, the Caribbean, and Britain. To be part of the black diaspora in Canada entails working through specific relations to history and place, ambivalently utopic expectations of Canada, ambivalently nostalgic longings for Africa, and the discursive and psychic obstructions to clear seeing created by what Dionne Brand so memorably characterizes as "that constant veil over the eyes, the blood-stained blind of race and sex" (*No Language is Neutral* 27). Access to understanding of the bodily experiences of race and sex, therefore, is always mediated by the blood-stained heritage of history and the veils of cultural representation created by specific social circumstances.

Manthia Diawara defines blackness "as a modernist metadiscourse on the condition of black peoples in the West and in areas under Western domination. Blackness is a compelling performance against the logic of slavery and colonialism by those people whose destinies have been inextricably linked to the advancement of the West, and who, therefore, have to learn the expressive techniques of modernity —writing, music, Christianity, industrialization— in order to become uncolonizable" (Diawara 291). This blackness, in turn, is then challenged "in the hands of its postcolonial and postmodern subjects" (291). What happens to this modernist

metadiscourse in Canada? How is it articulated? How is blackness performed in what many still see as "the Great White North"?

First of all, Diawara's definition of blackness seems generally confirmed by the commentary of black Canadian writers. Afrocentrism, particularly in its stronger versions gaining ascendancy in the United States, seems uncongenial to these Canadian intellectuals. Perhaps this explains why African Canadian writers are not mentioned in Stephen Howe's book, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes*. Some sociologists and educational thinkers are proposing a move toward an Afrocentric or black-focussed curriculum in Canada, but it is not always clear exactly what is meant by Afrocentric in these contexts. Carl E. James, for example, suggests that "African-centred education… would provide African students with a perspective of education and themselves that is grounded in African values" (321). He concludes, however, that "[s]uch an education need not be exclusionary, for all students can benefit from critically examining what has been presented to them as representative of minority groups' experiences, and that of Blacks in particular' (321). He does not distinguish between Black and African in his article, nor does he define either term.

In *The Pleasures of Exile*, Barbadian George Lamming argues that "to be black, in the West Indies, is to be poor; whereas to be black (rich or poor) in an American context is to be a traditional target for specific punishments" (31). Canada is different again: how different, to what degree and in what ways, is a matter for discussion. George Elliott Clarke suggests an irresistible hypothesis for starting the investigation: "in Canada few *know* what blackness is and ...in the United States few have any doubt" ("Contesting"19). He quips that if the issue in the United States is race, then in Canada it is erasure (*Eyeing* xviii). History and custom have created different legacies around blackness, different requirements for its performance, different ways of inhabiting the castle of one's skin, in these different geographical and political locations. To be black in Canada is to be denied the West Indian and American certainties of expectations around blackness, while knowing that both these alternatives remain as potential models or as traps. As Rinaldo Walcott's title, *Black Like Who?* suggests, multiple models for blackness complicate the possibilities for racial performance and expectations in Canada. While he is obviously playing on the title of an American white journalist's recorded trip in blackface through the American South in the 1960s, his title suggests the problematic reference of any generalizing attempt to characterize (or appropriate) blackness in the Canadian context.

Black Canadas are multiply constituted in ways that defy easy categorizations. Some African-Canadian communities (Africadian in George Elliott Clarke's naming) trace their roots back to the earliest settlers, or to the United Empire Loyalists and escaped slaves reaching the end of the underground railway from the United States south of the border. Others are immigrants from the anglophone, francophone or Hispanic Caribbean, a migration that quickened after the Second World War but a heritage that may also go back generations. Still others are immigrants and refugees who have come directly from all parts of Africa. What, if anything, do such communities have in common? This is a question that African diasporic studies

must address, yet the classic text of this emergent discipline, Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, mentions Canada briefly only three times. Similarly, Gina Dent's *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace* (1992) sets up its debate amongst American and British critics only. Such a failure to "see" Canada even extends to texts that focus on areas that for many Canadians have shaped Canadian identity for the past twenty years, such as multiculturalism.[5]

As Michael Eldridge points out, "[i]t's easy to overlook Canada as a stable or autonomous province of the overdeveloped world... As a distinct segment of *Afro*-America, Canada is even more invisible..." (171). In other words, Canada is barely visible even as a border zone. George Elliott Clarke contests Eldridge's assumption that Canada may be subsumed as a segment of Afro-America, while agreeing that African-Canadian distinctiveness is often perceived as invisible. Whereas Eldridge's essay proposes to "rescue" Canada from what he calls "the edge of the diasporic map" (171), Clarke and Walcott redraw the map, suggesting that far from being marginal to contemporary debates, "black Canadas," in Walcott's words, "are a matrix for the contestations that are currently taking place in black diasporic studies." In other words, Clarke and Walcott appear to be employing the language of border studies to maintain and redefine a nationalist discourse. Yet their claims to black belonging in a redefined Canadian nation differ significantly. Whereas Clarke upholds borders as demarcators of difference, Walcott celebrates the porosity of the border. In arguing that "the multiplicities of blackness in Canada collide in ways that are instructive for current diasporic theorizing" (29), Walcott finds Eldridge and Clarke's annoyance at black Canadian exclusion from black studies and from Canadian studies an ultimately "uninteresting question" (27). More interesting for him are the questions that arise when that erasure is noticed: "What might black studies not bear to hear? Or, what might black cultural studies allow us to hear? And in the name of what political project will that hearing be accomplished?" (27). In other words, what cultural work are we involved in when we shift the borders of inquiry from the nation to diaspora, from racial representations to racialized performances and the cultural production of race within specific locations?

The titles of several recent Canadian books addressing these issues reveal different priorities in orientation that reflect the changing place of blackness in the Canadian imaginary over the past few decades. Liz Cronwell's *One Out of Many: A Collection of Writings by 21 Black Women in Ontario* (1975) and Ayanna Black's *Voices: Canadian Writers of African Descent* (1992) stress diversity. Yet each reflects the priorities of its decade in the state management of difference, with the earlier anthology subsuming the many into one and the later anthology maintaining plurality. Lorris Elliott's anthology, *Other Voices: Writings by Blacks in Canada* (1985)

[5] See Hesse, for a discussion that places these terms within a transatlantic dialogue exclusively conducted between the United States and Britain.

reflects its genesis in the 1980s by accepting an additive model of multiculturalism that is still officially operative although almost uniformly rejected within the communities themselves. Arnold Harrichand Itwaru and Natasha Ksonzek's *Closed Entrances: Canadian Culture and Imperialism* (1994) reflects a new militancy of the 1990s, attacking the logic of othering that effectively maintains a white status quo by marginalising so-called "non-whites" under the guise of including them as "others" within a still dominant white hegemony. Cecil Foster's *A Place Called Heaven: The Meaning of Being Black in Canada* (1996) analyses the irony of his title and asks how, and whether, that promise of a better life, once associated with Canada, can be redeemed for his community. *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature* (1997), an anthology edited by George Elliott Clarke, also confronts the disappointed hopes of those descendents of slaves who were directed to "follow the North Star to Canaan-land" (*Eyeing* XXV).

Clarke's argument in his introduction to this collection treads a careful line between insisting on the individuality of each African-Canadian voice, and their radically disparate ideological commitments, while also recognizing certain historical commonalities. He describes African-Canadian literature as "a patchwork quilt of voices" (Clarke, *Eyeing* XIII) and suggests that the "mosaic aspect of Canadian 'blackness' produces a palette of discourses" (XVIII). Again, spatial models reinforce his recognition of the separateness of individual black communities, although in this essay he concludes that a commonality of African-Canadian experience is rooted in histories of "forced relocation," "coerced labour," "the struggle against economic discrimination" and "the articulation of cultural links to Africa" (XIX). His search for linkages between African and Caribbean Canadians leads him to list both the "Middle Passage" and immigration under the category of "forced relocation," and slavery and domestic/agricultural labour schemes under that of "coerced labour." While there is value in recognizing the structural continuities between such different historical experiences, it is also necessary to articulate their differences in degree and human impact. When these apparent commonalities are examined more closely, they may in fact identify some of the huge gaps between, for example, the Trinidadian and Somalian immigrant communities. For the Trinidadian who has never known Africa, except through an Anglocentric schooling that named Africa as a source of shame, and the Somalian who grew up there, knowing it as home, the gap is enormous. Yet even for immigrants from the same society, relations to these histories are determined by education, gender, sexual orientation, and class, and may therefore reveal more fractures than continuities.

2. MAKING HUMANITY, OWNING THE WORLD

> "Each sentence realized or / dreamed jumps like a pulse with history and takes a / side." Dionne Brand, "No Language is Neutral" (34).

Lillian Allen offers a familial model for understanding her multiple identifications as black Canadian, but a model of the family that implicitly challenges

notions of the "organic, natural, racial family" (Gilroy, "Family" 310) offered by certain vocal segments of the African-American community. Allen explains: "Africa is like my grandmother, Jamaica is like my mother, and Canada is like my partner... It can't be a conflict. It's just that I have all this richness and they all have something special and they are all a part of me and I have begun to figure how they fit in my life" (Dawes 84). It's a description where the crisis of black masculinity does not seem to be an issue. Claire Harris provides a different answer to the vexed question of where the black citizen is from. When asked where she was born, Harris (born in Trinidad but resident in Canada for the last thirty years) replied: "I don't think it matters where you were born —I think it matters to whom you were born" (Sanders & Mukherjee 26). Paul Gilroy's excitement at Rakim's putdown of essentialist claims of origin— "it ain't where you're from, it's where you're at" ("Family"311) —is here given a further twist. Class and racial identifications may be more important, from a diasporic perspective, than national or racial origins.

Harris, Allen, and Brand, despite their important differences, see history as a complex heritage to be negotiated rather than providing an authenticating or essentialized identity. The urgency of an engaged critique energizes their work. Brand explains: "I believe that history, and the history of the people I come from, is important, and that it is important to rewrite that history in a way that saves our humanity. Black people and women have to make their humanity every goddamed day, because every day we are faced with the unmaking of us" (Daurio 34). Similarly, Harris believes that African poetry in the diaspora

> is written out of a subconscious dialogue that's constantly running through our minds... a continuing engagement with a society that in all its manifestations still wants to convince us that we're less than others...We must constantly be on our guard, even as we sleep, anything else is *death*. It is this war which we must win, and from which there is no ease, that marks our poetry. (Sanders & Mukherjee 36).

She concludes: "I think for a Black person writing in Canada the important contribution is our awareness through our history that this civilization is a danger to all of us. It's a danger to the planet... What Africans in the diaspora *know* is that anything that can be done to one human being can be done to you. So what happens to anyone of us can happen to all of us" (Sanders & Mukherjee 36-37). "Where the Sky is a Pitiful Tent" is probably Harris's best known enactment of this belief. A powerful poem that imaginatively enters the struggles of Rigoberta Menchu's family and compatriots in Guatamala, it asks "[i]f in this poem you scream who will hear you / though you say *no one should cry out in vain"* (25). The poem challenges Canadian complacency and insists that each reader or listener carries responsibility for what happens in the world.

Lillian Allen adopts a similar ethic but a different poetic mode for conveying it. Claiming roots in the folk poetry of Louise Bennett, popularly known as "Miss Lou," in the reggae of Bob Marley, and the dub of Oku Onuoru, Allen explains that "[d]ub poets are activists and writers coming out of that post-colonialist movement, influenced by the Black Power anti-imperialist movement and the poli-

tics of daily engagement, who brought that energy and those principles to their work" (Dawes 79). Her "One Poem Town" insists, through irony and signifying on the "cowboys and Indians" colonial tradition of the western, that Canada is not the one poem town of white monologue but a polyphony of questioning and contending voices. The poem ends with a white challenge to black claims of a permanent Canadian belonging: "and you're not here to stay / Are you" (Allen, *Women* 117)?[6] The echo of this loaded question leads on the tape into the fiery lament, "Why Do We Have to Fight." This question is rhetorical. Allen knows why her people have to fight but she turns her complaint into an assertion of black and underclass entitlement: "why do we have to fight for a place to live / this is the society that our toil has built / what would it take to make / a home a right" (Allen, *Women* 93). In "I Fight Back" she takes on the debilitating stereotypes of immigrant black identity: "I came to Canada / found the doors of opportunity / well guarded" (Allen, *Women* 139). In her latest collection, *Psychic Unrest*, she shifts tactics. No longer knocking at a guarded door, the persona of "In These Canadian Bones" confidently proclaims her hybrid identity and its claims on the landscape of the national culture : "In these Canadian bones / where Africa landed / and Jamaica bubble / inna reggae redstripe / and calypso proddings of culture / We are creating this very landscape / we walk on" (Allen, *Psychic* 65).

These writers start from the premise that they are an integral part of Canada and Canada is an integral part of the world. Such claims implicitly alter the official view of Canada as essentially divided between the founding French and English facts, with an array of other cultures merely supplementing that reality. Cecil Foster suggests that from the black point of view, Quebec and the rest of Canada are not so different: mistreatment of blacks and other minorities links Quebecois and anglophone Canada in a shared identity uncomfortable to all sides in the referendum debates (Foster 311).

Dionne Brand's short story "Train to Montreal" revises the stereotypes that once defined Canadian nationhood —the "two solitudes" of English Canada and Quebec— through recasting these supposedly monolithic identity-constructions as multiple, and through insisting on the validity of the embodied, black, female perceptions experienced by her unnamed central character. This character attends a concert in Toronto, negotiating her relationship with a Toronto man who cannot understand her complex identifications with jazz and the black traditions it represents, then takes the train to visit an old lover in Montreal who shares her interest in this music. But the journey is broken by her shattering experience of anti-French racism among anglophone schoolboys on the train, which is then mirrored in the misogynist racism directed against her by a white businessman as she leaves the train. The silent complicity of bystanders doubles the humiliation of the attack and

---

[6] For a fuller analysis of this poem, see Brydon, "One Poem Town?"

she arrives in Montreal distraught and embittered by her experience, furious at her own passivity and divided to the core by the violence of her experience: "Her arms, fingers, body felt far away from her, as a thing which she saw but did not. Sharp, glassy coldness in her throat as she turned to her lover, taking his mouth, to break the hardness of her lips. Kissing him to recover herself. She saw herself looking from a distance. The iciness of it still reached to her legs. Only anger now was close, at her mouth" (Brand, *Sans Souci* 28-29).

For Brand's character, the jazz piano as played by Taylor lays out the "blueprint" and plunges her into the "theorem" of black history, resistance and survival (Brand, *Sans Souci* 16). That history is a nightmare that remains a challenge to her sanity and a standard by which the rest of the world is judged and found wanting: "To plunge into the theorem was to go mad; if she never got out it was to go mad; but if she did, what was real and small and grasping, awaited" (16). When the man with her can feel and understand none of this, she spells it out in political terms: "The problem with you is that everything passed you by. I heard Malcolm. Angela went to jail. Now, all of it is in this little room and that is what you're listening to and you don't understand" (16). This experience is repeated when she finally meets her other man in Montreal: "Nothing had just happened to him as it had to her" (28). This line is repeated, stressing her isolation. Through conjuring the names of Malcolm X and Angela Davis, she invokes what some in Canada have seen as a "borrowed" blackness based on struggles in the United States, a history that speaks to Canadian and Caribbean blacks, a struggle they can adopt, through empathy, but a legacy that offers a blueprint or a theorem rather than a tradition growing out of the place where they are. Brand lays claim to that history through a gesture of solidarity while also insisting on claiming the specifics of Canadian place and traditions for the layers of her work. The germ for this story may be found in an anonymous personal narrative collected in the section devoted to "The Culture of Everyday" in the anthology, *Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots: Speaking of Racism*, compiled by Brand and Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta ("The Culture of Everyday" 16). In this early story, Brand has transformed a tale of helpless humiliation (as it appeared in the original oral testimony comprising a single paragraph) into an extended parable of resistance.

Brand says that "In each piece of work that I write, I really want to own the world. Not as an imperialist, but as someone who can speak of it and through it and for it" (Daurio 40). Alternative modes of owning —self, nation, history, experience, and language— lead to alternative modes of knowing and writing. Brand's "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater" enacts this process (*No Language is Neutral* 17-19). Brand's poetic persona describes the moment of her own interpellation as Black woman, implicated in African-American diasporic history, as she finds herself captivated, in "turning the leaves of a book," (19) by the eyes of an old Black woman in a photograph. The "pact of blood across a century" (19) enacted in this moment results from Mammy Prater's agency in owning herself and taking charge of how that self is presented through the photograph. Writing against the idiomatic English that describes photographers "taking" photographs, Brand describes Mammy Prater herself waiting for just the right moment "to take a photograph and put

those eyes in it" (17), eyes so powerful that they call to the poem's speaker from beyond the grave. Like all Brand's work, this poem counters images of black slaves as helpless and abject victims, but even more importantly, it seeks to change the relations of representation themselves. In redefining Mammy Prater as a subject who writes in her eyes "what her fingers could not script" (19) Brand dramatizes the eruption of historical memory into consciousness as a moment of charged physical intimacy. Mammy Prater's remade humanity enables the poet's speaker to remake her own, and to invite her readers to take on the same charge.[7]

3. SHORT-CIRCUITING THE OLD SYSTEMS OF POWER

> "Short circuit the whole of creation," did I say? That little gal's gonna break it up and build it back again, man. (Brodber 110)

Brand's "Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater" celebrates a gaze so powerful it could cross a century, burn from the printed page into the life of the reader, and cross the national border separating Canada from the United States to invoke a shared black history and a shared women's experience. Like Brand, Erna Brodber's Jamaican classic *Myal* asserts the redirective and reconnecting power of border crossings to remake the world. Grammars of black are not static but charged electrical circuits that carry power.

Grammars of black are also gendered, in ways that I have only been able to imply here. In *Masculine Migrations: Reading the Postcolonial Male in 'New Canadian Narratives'*, Daniel Coleman speculates that immigrant women writers (such as Allen, Brand, Harris and Philip) express "a kind of political certitude" (24) that is absent in the work of their male counterparts. He finds that the political commitments of black immigrant male narratives are "ambivalent at best" (24). While Coleman's conclusions hold true for the texts he studies, short stories by Austin Clarke and novellas by Dany Laferriere, their focus on the black immigrant experience as revealed in fiction illuminates only part of the terrain of black Canadas surveyed here. In his non-fictional commentary, Austin Clarke is as sure of his political positioning as these women writers are. Yet the very nature of their certitude is complex, nuanced and open, closer to a kind of Keatsian negative capability than to doctrinaire belief.

The "ethnic absolutism that currently dominates black political culture", identified by Paul Gilroy as an object of critique in *The Black Atlantic* (5), appears to hold little sway in black Canada's literary culture. As Peter Dickinson notes, contemporary cultural criticism often takes race to be "*the* one identity category

---

[7] For a fuller analysis of this poem, see Brydon, "Reading".

that defies performative description and theorization" (166). Such is seldom the case in the literary productions of black Canadas, where race becomes a subject for investigation and interrogation, although the dominant white reception of equity and full citizenship claims has often been either reactionary or blindly liberal in its inability to see beyond racial stereotypes. From this history of reaction, Roy Miki concludes:

> As the earlier rhetoric of a binary center (biculturalism) with its subordinate 'others' in the margins (multiculturalism) has exhausted its credibility, reactionary voices have arisen sounding the alarm of the country's cultural disintegration, often pointing fingers at minorities of colour as the cause. Indeed, the resistance of writers, cultural workers, and community activists of colour has created the possibility of explosive conflict with establishment institutions, making all the more urgent the need for terminology and theoretical speculations that avoid the pitfall of simply re-circulating the old systems of power. (Miki 107)

Black intellectuals, along with other peoples of colour, have been in the forefront of such a search for new ways of conceiving citizenship, both local and global. They are creating new kinds of national belonging and new modes of identification and community-building that short-circuit the old transmission lines of power. As Himani Bannerji writes in *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*, "[i]f one stands on the dark side of the nation in Canada everything looks different" (104). The tradition of diasporic intellectual thought in Canada needs to be understood as central to Canada's decolonization. As Marlene Nourbese Philip insists, "in a racist, sexist and classist society, the imagination, if left unexamined, can and does serve the ruling ideas of the time" ("Disappearing" 278). The collection of essays where this statement appears is prefaced by the following dedication: "For Canada, / in the effort of becoming a space / of true true be/longing."

Much of this innovative intellectual work locates its performative "opposition to hegemonic patriarchal and nationalist discourses" (Dickinson 164) in shifting and fluid locales, always, in Brand's words, "in another place, not here," implying the importance of utopic visions of worlds that people can create from those we have inherited. Thus their work often eludes nationalist classifications that would locate Canadianness in some concrete answer to Northrop Frye's famous question, "Where is here?" and prevents the easy elision of Canadianness, Europeanness and whiteness that implicitly informed many earlier attempts to answer Frye's question. In *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness*, Ian Angus agrees that Canadian national politics are currently "caught in cycles of denial" (228). Instead of playing the conquest of Quebec against the prior conquest of native peoples, as the federal government and popular opinion currently do, he suggests ceasing "to use conflicting claims for self-government to deny the claims to any one group" and instead, opening up "as many claims as there are for renegotiation" (Angus 228). Here is a policy initiative that could take seriously the productive cultural work of black Canadas. For as Dionne Brand reminds us: "What we are debating in the end is what a society sees, must find, as important to its psychic,

moral and human self." ("Notes" 178). Thus, although border theories, diasporic studies, and globalization pose different kinds of necessary challenges to "the idea that literature exists in a national framework" (Said 64), in Canada they are also forcing fundamental rethinkings of nation, belonging, and community, rather than leading toward any kind of simply conceived "postnational" world.

WORKS CITED

Allen, Lillian. *Women Do This Every Day*. Toronto: Women's, 1993.

— *Psychic Unrest*. Toronto: Insomniac, 1999.

Angus, Ian. *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness*. Montreal: McGill Queen's, 1997.

Bannerji, Himani. *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender.* Toronto: Canadian Scholars', 2000.

Black, Ayanna, ed. *Fiery Spirits*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1994.

— ed., *Voices: Canadian Writers of African Descent*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992.

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry.* London: New Beacon, 1984.

Brand, Dionne. *No Language is Neutral*. Toronto: Coach House, 1990.

— *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario 1920s to 1950s*. Toronto: Women's, 1991.

— "Notes for Writing Thru Race." *Bread Out of Stone*. Toronto: Coach House, 1994. 173-80.

— *Sans Souci and Other Stories*. Stratford: Williams-Wallace, 1988.

Brand, Dionne and Krisantha Sri Bhaggiyadatta, eds. *Rivers Have Sources, Trees Have Roots: Speaking of Racism*. Toronto: Cross Cultural Communication Centre, 1986.

Brodber, Erna. *Myal*. London: New Beacon, 1988.

Brydon, Diana. "'One Poem Town': Contemporary Canadian Cultural Debates." *Voices of Power: Co-operation and Conflict in English Language and Literature*. Ed. Marc Maufort and Jean-Pierre van Noppen. Liege: Belgian Association of Anglicists in Higher Education, 1997. 211-20.

— "Reading Dionne Brand's Blues Spiritual for Mammy Prater." *Inside the Poem: Essays and Poems in Honour of Don Stephens*. Ed. W.H. New. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1992. 81-7.

— "Re-Routing the Black Atlantic" *Topia* 5 (Spring 2001): 94-100

Clarke, George Elliott. "Contesting a Model Blackness: A Meditation on African-Canadian African Americanism, or the Structures of African Canadianite." *Essays in Canadian Writing* 63 (Spring 1998): 1-55.

— ed. *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997.

— ed. *Fire on the Water: Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, vol. 1 (Early and Modern Writers 1785-1935) & 2 (Writers of the Renaissance). Lawrencetown Beach, N.S.: Pottersfield, 1991.

Coleman, Daniel. *Masculine Migrations: Reading the Postcolonial Male in 'New Canadian' Narratives*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998.

Cromwell, Liz, ed. *One out of Many: A Collection of Writings by 21 Black Women in Ontario.* Toronto: Wacacro, 1975.

Daurio, Beverley. "Writing It: Dionne Brand." *The Power To Bend Spoons: Interviews with Canadian Novelists*. Ed. Beverley Daurio. Toronto: Mercury, 1998. 31-41.

Dawes, Kwame. "360 Degrees Black: A Conversation with Lillian Allen." *West Coast Line* 31.1 (spring-Summer 1997). 78-91.

Dent, Gina, ed. *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*. Seattle: Bay, 1992.

Diawara, Manthia. "Afro-Kitsch." *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*. Ed. Gina Dent Seattle: Bay, 1992. 285-91.

Dickinson, Peter. *Here Is Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities and the Literatures of Canada*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999.

Eldridge, Michael. "Why Did You Leave There? Lillian Allen's Geography Lesson" *Diaspora* 3.2 (Fall 1994): 169-84.

Elliott, Lorris, ed. *Other Voices: Writings by Blacks in Canada*. Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1985.

Foster, Cecil. *A Place Called Heaven: The Meaning of Being Black in Canada*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996.

Gagnon, Monika Kin. *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture, and Canadian Art*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2000.

Gikandi, Simon. *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993.

— "It's a Family Affair." *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace*. Ed. Dent, Gina. Seattle: Bay, 1992. 303-16.

Gingell, Susan. "Returning to Come Forward: Dionne Brand Confronts Derek Walcott." *Journal of West Indian Literature in English*. 6.2 (May 1994): 43-54.

Harris, Claire. "Where the Sky Is a Pitiful Tent." *Fables From the Women's Quarters*. Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1984.

Hesse, Barnor, ed. *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions*. London: Zed, 2000.

Howe, Stephen. *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes*. London: Verso, 1998.

Itwaru, Arnold Harrichand and Natasha Ksonzek. *Closed Entrances: Canadian Culture and Imperialism*. Toronto: Tsar, 1994.

James, Carl E. "The Distorted Images of African Canadians: Impact, Implications, and Responses." *Globalization and Survival in the Black Diaspora: The New Urban Challenge.* Ed. Charles Green. Albany: State U of New York P, 1997. 307-30.

Kamboureli, Smaro. *Scandalous Bodies*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 2000.

LAMMING, George. *The Pleasures of Exile*. 1960; Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992.

MIKI, Roy. *Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing*. Toronto: Mercury, 1998.

PHILIP, Marlene Nourbese. "The Disappearing Debate: Or, How the Discussion of Racism Has Been Taken Over by the Censorship Issue." *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture*. Stratford: Mercury, 1992. 269-87.

— "Discourse on the Logic of Language" *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. Charlottetown: Ragweed, 1989. 55-9.

— *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Toronto: Mercury, 1997.

SAID, Edward W. "Globalizing Literary Study." *PMLA* 116.1 (January 2001): 64-8.

SANDERS, Leslie and Arun MUKHERJEE. "A Sense of Responsibility: An Interview with Claire Harris." *West Coast Line* 31.1 (spring-summer 1997): 26-37.

SHADD, Adrienne. "'Where Are You Really From?' Notes of an "Immigrant" from North Buxton, Ontario." *Talking About Difference: Encounters in Culture, Language and Identity*. Ed. Carl E. James and Adrienne Shadd. Toronto: Between The Lines, 1994. 9-16.

TATOR, Carol, Frances HENRY and Winston MATTIS, eds. *Challenging Racism in the Arts: Case Studies of Controversy and Conflict*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998.

WALCOTT, Derek. *Midsummer Collected Poems: 1948-1984.* New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1986. 469-510.

WALCOTT, Roderick. *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*. Toronto: Insomniac, 1997.

WILLIAMSON, Janice. "Claire Harris: '*I Dream of a New Naming...*'" *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers.* Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993.

WRIGHT, Handel Kashope. "Dare We De-Centre Birmingham? Troubling the 'Origin' and Trajectories of Cultural Studies." Unpublished paper delivered at the University of Guelph, 1998.