Diaspora, Citizenship and Challenging the Myth of the Nation

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For black women writers, the concept of the diaspora can be employed as a creative, transformative attempt to name black women's experiences as part of a larger shared collective.

African Diaspora Studies currently occupies an important place within the academy, expanding and even challenging, the earlier revisionary discourses of African American, Ethnic and Postcolonial Studies, in a continuing attempt to contest the production and construction of knowledge and power. The usefulness of the concept of the diaspora lies, precisely, in its ability to offer new ways of thinking about and articulating difference within and across nation-states. In the context of the Americas, where black communities have been marked by histories of forced migration and cultural and political marginalization, and where the struggle for citizenship has been ongoing, the concept of the diaspora has, indeed, come to constitute part of a necessary, if sometimes contested, narrative of resistance. By opening up discussions beyond provincial and national borders and by encouraging a cross-national perspective that can engage the histories of Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas, the concept of the diaspora in its most amorphous and transgressive terms offers "New World" blacks a way of confronting and critically rewriting their experiences of racism, fragmentation, and nationlessness.

As an African Jamaican who migrated to Canada first to do graduate research and subsequently decided to recognize Toronto as "home," and whose immediate and extended families now live in New York and Vancouver, not Kingston, I self-identify as a child of the diaspora and accept the ways in which the diaspora has come to inform in important ways my own understanding of self and (un)belonging. I am, indeed, bound up in multiple places and spaces. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the notion of the diaspora has also come to animate my research and has pushed the boundaries of that research further and further outward in an ongoing attempt to understand black women’s lives as they are experienced and articulated in various and multiple ways/places/spaces. My stories, out of necessity, like the stories of the black women writers whose work I study, cross borders and connect an entire continent.

Black women writers in the Americas are engaged consciously or unconsciously in cross-border, transgressive dialogue. In opening up the critical spaces that recognize and value women’s differences as well as their similarities, black women writers complicate and enhance discussions about identities, race, ethnicity, gender, colour, class, geography and sexuality. This cross-cultural dialogue situates the black fictional writers of this hemisphere within a shared diasporic literary tradition that connects their work across borders both thematically and structurally. Mairuth Sarsfield’s No Crystal Stair (1997) and Makeda Silvera’s The Heart Does Not Bend (2002) are two novels by African Canadian women that engage this critical cross-cultural dialogue in an attempt to examine the experiences of blackness in specifically gendered diasporic spaces. In inserting black women’s experiences as a necessary lens through which to read the African diaspora, these novels contest racist, patriarchal and nationalist narratives that seek to fix black identities in rigid categories defined by particular understandings of “race,” “nation” and “sexuality.”

Carole Boyce Davies, in Black Women, Writing and Identity (1994), articulates the notion of a migratory subjectivity, which offers an explicitly gendered concept of the diaspora, useful in our understanding of black women writers like Sarsfield and Silvera. "Migrations of the subject," Boyce Davies explains:

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refers to the many locations of Black women's writing, but also to the Black female subject refusing to be subjugated. Black female subjectivity then can be conceived not primarily in terms of domination, subordination or "subalternization" but in terms of slipperiness, elsewhereness. Migratory subjects suggest that Black women's writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times constantly eluding the terms of the discussion.... In the same way as diaspora assumes expansiveness and elsewhereness, migrations of the Black female subject pursue the path of movement outside the terms of dominant discourses. (36-7)

For black women writers, then, the concept of the diaspora can be employed both as a creative, transformative attempt to name and relocate black women's experiences as part of a larger shared collective, and also as the contestation of the hegemonic patriarchal control of geographical, political, and cultural borders. The maintenance of these well-policed borders has been long understood as essential in fixing marginalized identities, in keeping them contained and restricted. Black women and blacks in general and "third world" polities have been the primary targets of this kind of border control. Within North America, "first world" countries like Canada and the United States, therefore, read migratory subjectivities as undesirable and dictate in many ways the shape, formation and political positioning of the African diaspora to ensure its continued marginalization. The realities of disconnectedness, fragmentation, and homelessness encoded within the diaspora experience often also encourage people of African descent to rely on their own constructions of black identities guarded within equally rigid notions of identity, nation, and belonging. These constructions can come to constitute other kinds of oppressive, totalizing narratives. Black women writers, therefore, have to be engaged in various acts of healing, trespass, and resistance. They speak each other's lives across borders and cultures as a necessary way of putting the dismembered, dislocated parts of themselves back together and as a way of building coalition. But at the same time they are also involved in the dangerous double task of challenging white, complicated Canadian context are forced to reconfigure the boundaries of the academy by contesting the dominant positioning of African America as a totalizing signifier of black identities in the Americas. Black women's writings in the Americas also critically engage Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993), which has come to dominate much of the recent discussion about African diasporic identities. While Gilroy has been consistently critical of nationalist discourses and occasionally employs gender in support of his critique of ethnic absolutism, his work has not seriously taken gender into account. In Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line (2000), Gilroy argues correctly that the problems of an authoritarian nationalist narrative is often most dangerous in the con-

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hegemonic, political power as well as black male nationalist discourse, both of which are obsessed with patrolling borders.

In presenting a counter-narrative to black male nationalist and other discourses, black women writers are often also forced to challenge the canonical boundaries established within the academy. Mairuth Sarsfield and Makeda Silvera, for example, who are both writing from within an often ignored and deeply trol it exerts over women's lives and bodies:

Gender differences become extremely important in nation-building activity because they are a sign of an irresistible natural hierarchy that belongs at the center of civic life. The unholy forces of nationalist biopolitics intersect on the bodies of women charged with the reproduction of absolute ethnic dif-
tours of the African diaspora and the
ties or explore the particular conse-
quences for black women who, of
necessity, constitute an important
part of his Black Atlantic.

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American/Africana Studies, black
women writers in the Americas not
only argue that it is essential to locate
women within any discussion of Af-
rican American experiences, but also
facilitate other points of entry into
the discussion through black Canada,
the Caribbean and Latin America.
Gilroy’s three points of entry—Black
Britain, the United States and the
Caribbean—most notably excludes
and silences black Canada and black
communities in Latin America. By
opening up these otherwise silenced
spaces, black women insist that the
potential for healing is wider and
more expansive—can take place both
inside and outside of communities or
across multiple communities.

The novels by Mairuth Sarsfield
and Makeda Silvera selected for this
study help to demonstrate how black
women writers speak to and across
their communities and challenge
dominant discourses of exclusion es-
pecially as those discourses influence
debates about identity and engage
questions of (un)belonging. Sars-
field’s *No Crystal Stair* (1997) and
Silvera’s *The Heart Does Not Bend*
(2002) explore the problems encoded
within “first world” and eurocentric
purity and argues for a more far-
reaching coalition. This need for ex-
ansioned coalition, she seems to argue,
is essential within the context of
Montréal and Canada, which bring
together willingly or unwillingly
multiple migratory subjectivities.
Sarsfield, thus, constructs 1940s
Montreal very much as a diasporic
city in which many diasporas con-
verge—African, Asian, Caribbean,
European and Jewish—and are made
to consciously reckon with each other
as they all attempt to work out indi-
vidual understandings of Canada as
both homeplace and site of exile. By
weaving a complexly interrelated
community of blacks and non-blacks,
all contending with the tensions, dis-
appointments, and pleasures of be-
longing and belonging, Sarsfield
constructs Canadianness as an inter-
ally complex relationship and proc-
ess of becoming and places blackness
within that complexity.

It is important that Sarsfield lo-
cates her discussion of the problem-
atic of nation and identity against the
background of the Second World
War. In times of war and national
crisis, such as that occasioned by
post-September 11 events globally,
national borders become exaggerated
and national allegiance is not only
desirable but also ruthlessly de-
manded. In the novel, it is within this
context of both national desire and
exclusion that blacks attempt to de-
fine themselves as part of the re-
quired Canadian nation. While they
recognize and admit their allegiance
to the Canadian and British states
through their service in the war and
other initiatives, they also understand
the ways in which they are constructed
as existing outside of any official dis-
course of citizenship and nationhood.

This is depicted most dramatically
during the summer the Willow chil-
dren spend with a white missionary
family in a small farming commu-
nity. Outside of Montreal’s urban
center, the children are immediately
constructed as non-Canadian, as Af-
rican. The children are, then, made
to perform a particular and exter-
nally fixed black identity that writes continental Africa as heathen, savage and fearful. The children obligingly perform this understanding and expectation of their blackness by threatening to eat the white children with whom they come into contact. That their action is not recognized as play but accepted as “truth,” marks the extent to which their presence disrupts the tidy notion of Canadianness as it is understood by this small white community.

Within the novel, the black community’s exclusion from the nation and its desire to belong are problematized even further by the ongoing tensions between British and French Canada. Because the community strongly identifies with British Canada, within Montreal it is, therefore, doubly marginalized. Occupying an ambivalent political and geographical position in Quebec, which will later become the center of the nation’s debate about the effectiveness of Canada’s multicultural policy, the black community exposes the deep-rooted contradictions in the attempts to articulate a cohesive Canadian nation. The black community is made to exist both inside and outside of Canada’s nation(s). The community, then, is an insider/outside traitor.

In articulating black Canadianness as a site of multiple identities and multiple entries, Sarsfield further remaps the North American terrain by collapsing the physical border between Canada and the United States and the cultural border between black Canada and African America. She identifies Montreal as an important locus of black cultural activity that brings into the city from New York African American artists, performers and athletes like Langston Hughes, Sammy Davis Jr., Redd Foxx, and Joe Louis often to feed on Oscar Peterson’s homegrown Montreal jazz. Cultural debates about the merits of Peterson’s style and how much it is influenced, or not, by Duke Ellington’s are less an attempt at cultural authenticity and more a recognition of a shared community. The elite African American community that resides in Montreal is increasingly forced to rework its own relationship both to Canada and the United States. It is the railroad, historically the primary source of black migratory movements, which facilitates the novel’s cross-cultural exchanges.

In her novel, Sarsfield inscribes black Canada as a critical intervention into our understanding of African America by recognizing that blacks in Canada have a long, shared history with African Americans. When we take black Canada into account, Sarsfield insists, we are forced to redefine the boundaries of North America. In her exploration of the discourse of black Canadianness as a definable lived experience, and the need to construct an alternative African Americanism that can meet the cultural and psychological needs of black Canadians.

“Not Just (Any) Body Can be a Citizen,” discusses this relationship between sexuality and citizenship within a Caribbean context. Although policing the sexual (stigmatising and outlawing several kinds of non-procreative sex, particularly lesbian and gay sex and prostitution) has something to do with sex, it is also more than sex. Embedded here are powerful signifiers about appro-
priate sexuality, about the kind of sexuality that presumably imperils the nation and about the kind of sexuality that promotes citizenship. Not just (any) body can be a citizen any more, for some bodies have been marked by the state as non-productive of babies and economic gain. (6)

In Silvera’s novel, Mikey and Molly’s sexuality marks them as different and estranges them from wide participation within the family and national community. Mikey, who continues to live in Jamaica, is not only cut off from the family, but his right to function as a “normal” citizen within Jamaican society is challenged. His financial success is explained not in terms of his own talent, but in terms of his presumed allegiance to the ruling government’s batokrisy, a veiled critique of the prime minister’s “suspect” sexuality (228). Mikey, however, determinedly defends his position and right as a viable and productive citizen: “Mi not walking and begging on de streets. Me nuh wear tear-up clothes and mi nuh tief” (230). While homosexuality in a Jamaican context can, indeed, lead to madness, Mikey defends his sexual orientation by declaring his sanity and his business acumen. If financial success is a primary marker of masculinity and citizenship, then, Mikey argues, he is a better man than many.

In The Heart Does Not Bend, the intolerance toward homosexuality is expressed primarily through the discourses of fundamentalist Christianity, and the threat of male homophobic violence hovers just beneath the surface of the novel. It is this fear of violence that partially underlies Mama’s concern for her son. Rather than blaming the source of the violence, however, she blames her son for threatening the socially accepted code: “Ah telling yuh fi yuh own good, it nuh right to be so brawling.

If yuh a go do it, do it under cover. A danger yuh putting yuhself in.... Suppose man come in wid gun and machete fi kill unnu ass?” (65). Killing her son’s “ass” metaphorically and literally is the socially defined punishment for homosexuality that Mama does not question. It is her son’s responsibility, she argues, to confine his sexuality within the social boundaries prescribed by Jamaican society. As Barry Chevannes explains, homosexuals are tolerated only so long as they avoid “sexual indiscretions” and maintain “a curtain of privacy around their sexuality” (221). In other words, they are tolerated only under condition of silence, invisibility and sexual repression.

In challenging the sexual codes of Jamaican society and allowing her characters to cross socially accepted boundaries, Silvera may seem to be offering Canada and the United States as more tolerant alternatives for her protagonist. Having moved to Canada, we can assume that Molly will have more freedom to express her sexuality after her grandmother’s death—a kind of freedom Mikey will never have in Jamaica. Positioned, however, as part of a “morally decaying” North American metropole, Molly will still be dismissed by those at “home” as betraying her Jamaican-ness. She has, then, in cultural terms lost the right to Jamaican “citizenship.”

Yet Canada as new home/space offers its own problems of (un)belonging and homelessness, which are also critically examined in Silvera’s novel. The Heart Does Not Bend, as a diasporic novel, examines varying attempts to reconstitute Caribbean communities outside of the region. As Silvera’s characters move from Jamaica, to Canada, to the United States, abandoning failed relationships and seeking better economic opportunities, they search for a place to locate heart and self. Marginalized within Canada and the United States as permanent “non-citizens,” belonging to a “third world” elsewhere, they are shut away in claustrophobic apartment buildings that drain them of the will to survive. Like Mama’s hospital room, the “Promised Land” is prison, not heaven: “Molly, tek mi outa dis iron coffin. Tek me out, carry mi home. Meh mi dead in mi own bed” (4). Like many Caribbean immigrants, Mama returns to Jamaica to die, but cannot find her way home. For her, as for Molly, the problem with home is that, in reality, it exists only as a fleeting, tempting promise, always just out of reach. So Mama dies in the hospital room, not in her own bed, because it is impossible to recreate the lost memories of the house on Wigton Street.

As an insider/outsider to both Jamaica and Canada, Silvera, thus, challenges the concept of “home” as it is represented both in the lost nation in the Caribbean and in the new national space in Canada. She addresses, in fact, deep, critical questions of community and belonging. Her novel challenges not only the homogenizing norm of the westernized nuclear family entrenched in racist North American societies but insists on the need for a radical, sustaining definition of community and family that can transgress all national, racial and sexual boundaries, including those erected within the Caribbean.

Mairuth Sarsfield and Makeda Silvera challenge us to expand our understanding of community and nation. It is impossible, they argue, to articulate a singular black identity or even a singular female identity. They offer, instead, a complex range of cultures and experiences that writes blackness and gender as multiple and polyvalent signs. By rethinking the trajectory of the Americas, these black women writers offer new and specifically gendered ways of thinking about the African diaspora. Rather than closing down communication they broaden the terms of the debate(s).

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