Diaspora, Citizenship and
Challenging the Myth of the Nation

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L'auteure utilise les travaux de deux écrivaines afro-canadiennes, et de Makeda Silvera qui donnent une lecture sexuée de la diaspora africaine et qui lancent un défi aux assomptions courantes des études afro-américaines et de l'Atlantique noire. Elle affirme que les littératures noires au Canada ont plusieurs voix, recoupent la nation, la langue, la race et de sexe et de ce fait, dérangent les compréhensions des identités noires du Canada en donnant à lire que ces identités culturelles et nationales s'entrecroisent et quelquefois même sont compétitives.

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.

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.

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, cross-cultural 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 Crystsal 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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in African Canadian Women's Literature

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

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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 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 control 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-

> ference and the continuance of blood lines. (127)

Gilroy does not, however, go on to interrogate the implications of this requisite subjugation of gender within the construction of national identities or explore the particular consequences for black women who, of necessity, constitute an important part of his Black Atlantic.

In critically redefining the contours of the African diaspora and the sanctified boundaries of African American/Africana Studies, black women writers in the Americas not only argue that it is essential to locate women within any discussion of African 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.

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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 especially as those discourses influence debates about identity and engage questions of (un)belonging. Sarsfield's *No Crystal Stair* (1997) and Silvera's *The Heart Does Not Bend* (2002) explore the problems encoded within "first world" and eurocentric notions of the Canadian nation and offer alternative understandings of Canadian identities. In so doing, they offer a critical insider/outsider perspective that initiates a crucial dialogue between Canada, the Caribbean and African America. As a lesbian writer, Silvera goes even further than Sarsfield by challenging not only questions of race, ethnicity and geography, but by linking the question of sexuality to the question of national politics.

Mairuth Sarsfield, born and raised in Montreal, offers in her novel, *No Crystal Stair*, an important reconfiguring of the Canadian and North American landscapes by bringing together multiple black identities in 1940s Montreal and inscribing them as essential to an understanding of what it means to be Canadian, American and black. The tightly interwoven black community around which the novel revolves is made up of blacks pulled from historically located Canadian communities in Nova Scotia, Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec, as well as blacks drawn from across the Americas, continental Africa, and black Britain. In fact, the female characters in Sarsfield's novel often occupy multiple cultural spaces and geographical identities: Trinidadian-Chinese-Canadian; Bajan-Russian-British-Canadian; African-American-Canadian, etc. The novel insists that there are multiple historical experiences implicated in what it means to be black, Canadian and women. By allowing her female characters multiple ethnicities and by making them inhabit multiple and sometimes contesting identities, Sarsfield challenges the notions of national and cultural borders and purity and argues for a more far-reaching coalition. This need for expansive coalition, she seems to argue, is essential within the context of Montreal 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 converge—African, Asian, Caribbean, European and Jewish—and are made to consciously reckon with each other as they all attempt to work out individual 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, disappointments, and pleasures of belonging and unbelonging, Sarsfield constructs Canadianness as an internally complex relationship and process of becoming and places blackness within that complexity.

It is important that Sarsfield locates her discussion of the problematic of nation and identity against the background of the Second World War. In times of war and national crises, such as that occasioned by post-September 11 events globally, national borders become exaggerated and national allegiance is not only desirable but also ruthlessly demanded. In the novel, it is within this context of both national desire and exclusion that blacks attempt to define themselves as part of the required 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 discourse of citizenship and nationhood. This is depicted most dramatically during the summer the Willow children spend with a white missionary family in a small farming community. Outside of Montreal's urban center, the children are immediately constructed as non-Canadian, as African. 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/ outsider 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—North America is more than the United States; it's a shared geographic, historical and cultural space. Like George Elliott Clarke argues, "Canada is an American space that warps Americanité" (49). Discussions about black Canada allow us to explore not only Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness offered in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), but also discussions about poly-consciousness. Black literatures in Canada, like Sarsfield's *No Crystal Stair*, are poly vocal, speaking across continent, region, nation, language, ethnicity and history. The novel's anxiety are born out of what Clarke describes as a desire to name African Canadianité 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.

Makeda Silvera's *The Heart Does Not Bend*, like Sarsfield's novel, assumes an important diasporic frame. Set in Jamaica, Canada and the United States, the novel charts the loves and failures of five generations of Jamaicans dispersed across the Americas. In this novel, however, Silvera takes her critique of the nation even further by situating her protagonist as isolated and marginalized not only within Canadian but also within Jamaican society. Silvera refuses to write the lost "homeland" as a romantic, even desired space. Both Canada and Jamaica are implicated in different but equally significant forms of patriarchal, nationalist and exclusionary narratives. By positioning her protagonist as an insider/outsider within both Jamaica and Canada, Silvera engages a critical dialogue with both nations.

In her exploration of the discourse of the "nation" articulated in Jamaican nationalist politics, Silvera is most critical of the constructions of sexuality and masculinity as they reside within fixed, uncompromising understandings of heterosexuality and hypermasculintiy. Within the novel, Uncle Mikey and Molly attempt to define themselves in ways that are not endorsed by the Jamaican national community and, as a result, threaten the fragility of that community and are marked as hostile outsiders. Jacqui Alexander in her article, "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-

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> 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-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is 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 "battokrisy," 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 walk and holler 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 discourse 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 Jamaicanness. 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. Mek 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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GABRIELE D.R. GUENTHER

In a manner fantastic

On forest nights like these, in Karuizawa,
our father'd take us deep into the heart
of lightning. Bolts drove
black handwriting into the grass, pines
exploded, birds steamed
like fresh dung

far from mother's scream
statuesque above the veranda
amid the laughter
of fire on the leaves, and smoke ringing the stone
heads of the journey gods
that lined the eve of our girlhoods – bright
offerings of tangerines and rice
punctuating the road
the would lead to all things before us
as yet perfect and slate-naked and clinging like the nubile
scent of rain to the scar of darkness
silvering overhead

while we, in socks and little hats, scarves
gleaming like swords on our chests, lengthened
like an idea that never quite returns
undamaged after thunder's
spoken and, in a manner
fantastic, ear and eye are chipped wide open.

Gabriele D. R. Guenther's poems have appeared in numerous U.S., Canadian and British journals and anthologies such as the Chicago Review, Praire Schooner, Plainsongs, Malahat Review, Stand Magazine *and many more. She is a translator specializing in the subtitling of French, German, Dutch and Japanese films, as well as a painter. She currently divides her time between Amsterdam and Vancouver where she works on a cross-over project.*