

“Mama, I’m Walking to Canada:” Black Geopolitics and Invisible Empires

Naomi Pabst

My title, as you may recognize, is a line from Alice Walker’s canonical one-page vignette in which she defines “womanist.” This of course comes out of her collection of essays *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens* and is also anthologized in many women’s studies and black studies compilations. In Walker’s articulation of it, womanism is code for black feminism and as such encapsulates the basic tenets of a political and theoretical orientation that contends with race and gender simultaneously. More interesting for my purposes here, however, is that in this passage, one of Walker’s metaphors for resistance, rebellion, and empowerment takes the form of an emboldened female declaring, “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me” (1983:xi). “Mama’s” reply, “it wouldn’t be the first time,” denotes a long legacy of black American – female and male – freedom struggles, struggles against myriad forms of racial domination the magnitude of which can hardly be overstated (1983:xi). Walker’s nod to Canada also suggests, rightly, that the U.S.’s neighbor to the north holds a special place within a genealogy of African American political projects and freedom struggles.

At the same time, in Walker’s fleeting reference, Canada’s significance is symbolic, symbolic of freedom for African Americans. Canada as a symbol of liberation elides the fact of Canada as a geographical location, a place with a black population that is itself negotiating myriad forms of oppression that overlap with, but do not replicate American ones. People have challenged Walker’s “womanist” formulation, its side-stepping the “f” word (the “f” word being “feminism”), its spiritual undertones, its exceptionalist positing of black women. If it is becoming more prevalent in small academic circles to query, troping Stuart Hall, “what is this ‘black,’” what is this oft-hailed signifier, it remains an inadequately explored trajectory (1993:21). Even less developed, however, is the overlapping question of “*where* is this black,” despite the growing popularity of academic constructions of “diaspora.”

This essay foregrounds this question of “*where*,” it examines the relationship between black subjectivity and *geopolitics* as one transhistorical

manifestation of globalization. As I use the term here, geopolitics is about the proverbial cultural studies homonym of “routes” and “roots.” It is about identity in relation to “place,” with place signifying dwelling and movement. It references where we’re from, where we’re at, where we’ve been, and where we’re going, as individuals and as members of multiple categories of belonging. Geopolitics, as the word implies, is also about politics, interactions of privilege and disadvantage, the intricate set of power relations embedded within the places, the ways, and the reasons we dwell and move, individually and collectively. Within this rubric of geopolitics, I will address the relevance of the Canadian scene to diasporic and American racial discourses. My essay is not about black Canada in a bounded sense. It is rather a scholarly meandering to and fro, in and out of Canada, a walk to Canada that attempts to realize the brash threats of Alice Walker’s womanist persona.

The path to and in black Canada is well worn if unwieldy, and knowledge of it has been subjugated. This coterminous existence and erasure is replicated within two dominant conceptions about blackness in Canada, which would seem to contradict one another: One is that there are no black people there, and the second, that Canada was the terminus of the underground railroad. And it was the terminus only in a manner of speaking, as most escaped slaves remained in the U.S., and for those who did opt for Canada, the term “underground” was a misnomer in an abolitionist context in which escape routes were unhidden and public.

The history of offering asylum to American fugitive slaves is but one of Canada’s many relevant appearances within even the most conservative African American Studies canon. Canada was perceived by various African Americans as a prospective homeland. Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Martin Delaney, for instance, advocated mass flight to Canada as a lesser of evils context for African Americans, yet were nevertheless cognizant of the existence of racism in Canada, mindful of the fact that, in Delaney’s words, “the Canadas are no place of safety for...colored people” (1968:176). Mary Ann Shadd Cary, a charismatic nineteenth century figure who has important implications for contemporary black feminism, spent fifteen years in Canada and took out Canadian citizenship before eventually returning to live in the United States. And her friend, Martin Delaney, made Chatham, Ontario his home from 1856 through 1859. In fact, Delaney wrote his only novel *Blake* while involved in the bustling anti-slavery activity north of the 49th parallel. Richard Wright spent a few months in

Quebec, Jackie Robinson started his professional baseball career in Montreal, and the likes of A. Philip Randolph and Marcus Garvey advanced their political agendas in Canada.

The literal possibility of “walking to Canada” – which Josiah Henson and Harriet Tubman did repeatedly (both lived in Canada West, now Ontario) – underscores the presence and the proximity of the U.S.’s neighbor to the north. What also draws me to Canada, academically, is its status as an overdeveloped nation and its formal appellation, “cultural mosaic.” Canada has officially institutionalized a policy of “multiculturalism,” yet despite that, racism sets the terms of Canadian existence. Journalist Margaret Cannon has applied the term “invisible empire” to the vagaries of Canadian racism, hailing at once its strength and formidability, but also its subtlety, its “invisibility” as it were. Racism in Canada is pervasive, empire-like in its reach and power, yet prone to disavowal, and this “invisible empire” has, in the past and present, displaced, othered, and discriminated against black Canadians.

Contrary to Canada’s national narrative and contrary to underground railroad mythology, there were two centuries of black slavery in Canada, if on a smaller scale and in a different form than that which emerged in the southern United States. Some scholars have noted that the existence of slavery in Canada is constantly being re-discovered, then re-forgotten, forever re-subsumed by the dominant narrative of Canada as a haven for fugitive slaves. Moreover, while Canada may have come to oppose slavery, it was not an anti-racist context. Escaped slaves were welcomed into Canada not just for benevolence’s sake, but as cheap labor. After emancipation in the United States, Canadians encouraged blacks to relocate to the United States. And after emancipation many blacks voluntarily left Canada for the U.S., not only to return to kin who remained in the U.S., but also to flee Canadian racism. At the same time, African Americans continued to migrate to Canada even after emancipation seeking opportunities routinely denied to blacks in the United States. For black people, the U.S./Canada border has been extremely porous.

If racism in Canada, historically and in the present, can be considered an “invisible empire,” at once ignored and endowed we could, at the same time, extend Margaret Cannon’s metaphor to Canada itself. Canada, as a nation, can be considered something of an “invisible empire” as a huge geographical space, a nation with privilege, an uncentral yet certifiable member of the overdeveloped world. A case could also be made for the applicability of the term

“invisible empire” to the erasure of Canada within discourses on blackness. Again, the terms “invisible” and “empire,” taken together, eschew victimology, insist on simultaneous privilege and disadvantage, and note patterns of exclusion and their consequences.

To exemplify this, I turn to another familiar instance of black border-crossing between the U.S. and Canada. The first meeting of W.E.B. Du Bois’ Niagara Movement, which later became the N.A.A.C.P., was held in Fort Erie, Ontario in 1905. The symbolic significance of the venue in light of Canada’s role in African American history has been widely acknowledged. The meeting was, however, supposed to be held in Buffalo and was only relocated to Fort Erie as a result of exclusion from accommodations, a form of American racial discrimination that underscored the importance of developing this sort of civil rights organization. At the same time, as scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott and the late Robin Winks have pointed out, black Canadians were denied the opportunity to participate. As Walcott puts it: “The fact that many of the ‘Canadian’ blacks who would have gladly participated in the inaugural meeting were born in America, or were immediate descendants of African American slaves who had escaped to Canada, makes this exclusion interesting” (1997:19). The exclusion is interesting, though Walcott does not note how it corresponds with other omissions based on gender, class, and status. Gayatri Spivak’s by now over-invoked, but I think still useful term “strategic essentialism” hails the ultimate impossibility of *not* closing ranks, the impossibility of engaging in infinitely inclusive political struggles. She also deems this arbitrary, unavoidable closure a grave problem.

These over-invocations of Spivak’s concept have most often been employed to justify rather than problematize exceptionalist claims. And indeed, as Spivak emphasizes, that does raise serious problems. For instance, because the participants in the Niagara Movement were fighting a closure of ranks by white Americans, one might expect their own political project to be more, rather than less, inclusive. And again, those black Canadians who were denied the opportunity to join the Niagara Movement were connected to African America by way of geographical origins as well as cultural and political affinities. That these Canadian blacks had direct ties to black America means theirs was a transnational subjectivity, one with multiple reference points, one that exceeded national borders. The disavowal of transnational overlap implied by the moment of black Canadian exclusion from an African American political project,

even as Canada was being touted as a symbolic site of freedom for African Americans, is revealing. It points to the inadvertent ways that hierarchies and patterns of exclusion are re-inscribed within counter-hegemonic projects, the ways that discourses and political agendas sometimes unwittingly reify that which they oppose. This matters for contemporary black studies and for academic constructions of a black diaspora. If diaspora gestures to simultaneous difference and sameness among a transnational circuitry of subjects partially descended from Africa, it is also about geopolitical power differentials, erasures, and on-going renderings of invisibility.

The black or African diaspora is a contested category that has been defined in myriad ways running the gamut from Afrocentric to Pan-African to postmodern in orientation. In none of these formulations is diaspora a pretentious internationalism or an abstract “vision” as some have dismissed it as being. It is rather a cartography that takes blackness to be a local and global phenomenon, influenced, indeed constituted, by long-standing interactions of dwelling and movement. While the forms of and motivations for black movement have been diverse, my walking metaphor underscores the history of on-foot, overland, literally on the ground, back and forth human traffic across the U.S. and Canada border – human traffic whose affiliations, both real and imagined, included not only those two but also other geographical sites. Transnational articulations of black subjectivity also render nonsensical an invocation of an absolutist black experience, within a U.S. context and elsewhere. The more compelling diasporic castings of blackness are about neither nostalgia for lost origins nor the claiming of an unruptured link to an invented homeland. Stuart Hall, for instance, advocates rather for a sense of a dispersed, multiply situated subjectivity that foregrounds that identity is not a matter of “essence or purity,” and recognizes “heterogeneity and diversity...transformation and difference” (1994:401-2). Such a contention with alterity is possible even while retaining at the fore the serious political considerations and varying issues of domination that confront black people globally.

While blacks are dispersed transnationally, there is a certain centrality, as some scholars have noted, of African American sign production to global black standards. This is primarily a function of globalization and American imperialism, and in noting this global prominence, I mean not to apportion blame, guilt, or innocence, nor to oversimplify what are obviously complex

matters. First of all, African American sign production is far from uniform. American definitions of blackness are, and have always been, disparate and debated. Not only is American black subjectivity contested terrain, but differently rendered across space and time. Moreover, in arguing for combined local and global analyses of culture and power, Arjun Appadurai is persuasive in his oft-hailed reminder that an over-emphasis on Americana as a circulating commodity can downplay the extent to which “the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images, but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (1994:327). Here we should also note Appadurai’s related caveat that when global subjects encounter Americana, whatever cultural forms are incorporated are also customized, adapted according to the specificities of their new location.

But the status of the United States as a dominant world power nevertheless renders it, in ways unrivalled and unreciprocal, a source of “global cultural production and circulation” (Hall 1993:21). By extension, blacks outside the U.S. are often on some level in contention with black America, whether they wish it or not. As many have noted, black subjects globally are impacted by African American political and civil rights struggles, as well as by other widely circulating African American discursive technologies and cultural forms, such as literature, scholarship, music, dance, fashion, and so on. This is especially the case in nearby Canada even though Canada is almost always overlooked within the writings that make this type of argument.

A number of popular sayings in Canada speak to the U.S.’s impact. One is “when the U.S. sneezes, Canada catches pneumonia,” another talks about what it’s like to sleep next to an elephant. This suggests a significance of U.S. affairs to Canadians, a sense of contingency that is not mutual. Similarly, but also differently, black Canada is in contention with black America – in ways generally more apparent for those north of the border. The fact that these categories overlap as a result of proximity, porous borders, and historical ties is one reason. That observation is meant also as a qualification that my employment of terms like “black Canada” and “black America” is strategic and mindful of hybridity, interstitiality, and overlap.

Aside from proximity and historical ties, Canada’s institutionalized multiculturalism emphasizes national origin and heritage and encourages the celebration of cultural difference, at least in government designated allowable manifestations. As Chris Mullard has put it in a widely cited quote, Canada’s

multiculturalism is basically about the three s's – "saris, samosas, and steel bands," and it is certainly not about the three r's – "resistance, rebellion, rejection" (quoted in Mackey 1999:66). Canada's heritage project, its "multiculturalism," as it is sometimes called pejoratively, espouses color-blindness, and yet constitutes itself as the "great white north." What arises, then, is a brand of disavowed racism, in which black people are perceived as "cultural" rather than "racial" others. This then translates into blacks often being treated as literal foreigners, aliens within Canada's national boundaries. "Where are you *from* from?" or "What island are you from?" are often encountered questions for Canadian blacks, who may themselves make such inquiries of other blacks. It is significant that the majority of black Canadians claim as part of their legacy voluntary migration during the post-World War II era, but it is also the case that Canada traces its black presence to the early 1600s. Black people are not new to the Canadian scene, contrary to popular Canadian belief. A dub poem by Lillian Allen sums up one general motif well when the black Canadian persona is constantly greeted with the proclamation:

Oh beautiful tropical beach
With coconut tree and rum
Why did you leave there?
Why on earth did you come? (1986:74)

The poem's persona is associated, synecdochically, with exotic landscapes, warm, tropical places quite the opposite of Canada's icy climes. This state of affairs reverses conditions in the U.S. wherein immigrant blackness is overshadowed by particular discourses and dominant narratives of African Americanness. For instance, the conditions for blackness in Canada would stand in contradistinction to, say, Mary Waters' (1999) assessment of U.S. immigrant identity being subsumed under race in *Black Identities*. What also arises in Canada is a notion of blackness as an American phenomenon. Blackness is seen as American, while Canada's foremost national bond, according to countless polls, is a collective sense of self as *un-American*. When the most notorious "invisible empire," the Ku Klux Klan, was established in Canada in the 1920s, anti-Americanness was part of its platform. This would seem to underscore Appadurai's notion of the ways American imports are adapted in their new contexts. In fact, Canadian Klaverns emphasized that they had "no connection

to the Klan in the United States...and no right to bear the blame for what the Klan in the United States might be doing” (Winks 1997:323). Among Canadians with un-Klan-like sensibilities, Canada’s much publicized and much celebrated history of offering asylum to escaped slaves lends itself to widespread Canadian self-perceptions as anti-racist, especially relative to the overtly racist U.S. And yet, the notion of blacks having asylum in Canada, being tolerated but not really belonging, endures.

Canada’s institutionalized multiculturalism is deliberately designed as a would-be superior antidote to the American melting pot and its implications of a cultural homogeneity that is managed through forms of racial and cultural exclusion. And yet, this same multiculturalism fosters perceptions of blacks as having non-Canadian origins, a form of displacement, alienation, and expatriation (or repatriation) from the imagined community that is Canada. In the US this type of association is uncommon for blacks and more common for, say, Asian Americans, who are often treated as recent immigrants, for instance, complimented on their English, even if their Americanness extends back many generations.

If black Canadians are cast out of authentic Canadianness, they are similarly cast out of discourses of blackness. Walker’s nod to Canada in her definition of “womanism” suggests its special place within a genealogy of African America, a special place which, like the Africa in Afrocentricity, is symbolic of freedom for African Americans. Womanism then, in Walker’s definition, articulates a politics of race and gender that does not incorporate geopolitics. Black American feminists have been exemplary at cultivating intersectional analyses of race, class, gender, and sexuality and my own scholarship – including this attempt to write geopolitics into that very equation – is indebted to some of those enunciations.

Valerie Smith writes astutely of the interaction and unfixity of race, class, gender, and sexuality in her book *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings*. Others, as diverse in orientation as the Cohambee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and bell hooks, have incorporated gender specificities into traditional masculinist constructions of black identity and black progress, and have problematized the privileging of black male oppression as more grave and urgent than that affecting black females. Works by Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Essex Hemphill, Rhonda Williams, and Marlon Riggs critique homophobia and heterosexist

discrimination in generalized and racialized terms, and also address the issue of being cast out of blackness, from a narrow, but widespread notion of blackness as rigidly coded “straight.” Marlon Riggs’ film *Black Is...Black Ain’t* is a riveting exploration of the many ways in which black identity is regulated and policed by black people in detrimental ways. One of the film’s most poignant moments comes when Riggs, a gay black man, queries, “When the people sang their freedom songs, do you think they also sang them for you?”

It is the same logic that has prompted some to note that blackness, unqualified, is often coded as American. Anthropologist Michel Rolph Trouillot, for instance, conjectures that “the U.S. monopoly on both blackness and racism [is] itself a racist plot” (1995:71). The politics of place, the issue of geopolitics, is every bit as consequential an aspect of identity as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Here the title of Akasha Gloria Hull’s ground-breaking 1980s anthology is suggestive: *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* signifies that “blacks” unqualified tend to be men, and “women” unqualified tend to be white. Other volumes that affirm this logic are *Black Feminist Thought*, *Homegirls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, and the early 1970s compilation, *The Black Woman*. Again, incisive texts, particularly within their respective historical contexts, whose titles usefully hail the interaction of race and gender. But even in light of the global circulation of these texts, the fact that “all the blacks are American” goes unqualified. Non-American black discursive interventions are far fewer and have titles like “black *British* feminism;” “Afro-German Women Speak Out;” “Writing Black Canada,” and “Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America” (italics added). The recent anthology, *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, published in 2001, commendably juxtaposes race and gender. But the text notes neither its situatedness within a U.S. context, nor its especial relevance to that context, and it features only American contributors.

My point here is not merely about the politics of inclusion. Rinaldo Walcott says it well when he insists that it is enough that “black Canadas exist and will continue to do so” (1997:17). But it is worth noting the consequential fall-out for those transnational black subjects within and outside of the U.S. context who become black “others,” inauthentic and inappropriate blacks, in the wake of circulating ideologies of African Americanness that unintentionally set a standard for blackness locally and globally. Canadians, for example, read black American discourses to the same extent that Americans do, a result of American

primacy in publishing and other mechanisms of knowledge dissemination. And in terms of black Canadian identity formation, African American discourses named simply as “black” assist in establishing tropes, themes, and models that elide the specificities of the Canadian context.

To further exemplify this, a number of black American feminists have problematized Gerda Lerner’s status as a white scholar who is unduly, in their opinion touted as a pioneer in black women’s studies, a reputation that resulted from her book *Black Women in White America*. In “The Occult of the True Black Woman,” for instance, Ann du Cille writes that despite prevailing misconceptions of Lerner as the “first” to compile “a book length study devoted to African American women,” she was “by no means the first” (1996:89). She also critiques Lerner for having purported in that compilation to “let black women speak for themselves.” While these are salient critical interventions, American black feminists have not tended to inquire into matters of which “black women” in which “white America.” A couple of Canadian friends I told about my research on black Canada laughed as they recalled being assigned Lerner’s *Black Women in White America* as university students in the eighties. They were amused in hindsight at the extent to which the book obscured the specifics of their Canadian and black diasporic heritages, even though at the time, they and their black peers relied heavily on the volume in their racial identity construction during their college years. This tale bespeaks a type of North American black heterogeneity that is not always portrayed within discourses of blackness, and points also to a disavowal of the ways in which processes of racial formation, even if reflexively counter-hegemonic, are in part extensions of nationhood.

George Elliot Clarke, a noted black Canadian writer, tropes Du Bois’ famous representation of his induction into racial consciousness, the instance in the early pages of *The Souls of Black Folk* when his classmate refuses, out of hand, to exchange visiting-cards with him. As a result, the young Du Bois first realizes he is different from his childhood peers. But George Elliot Clarke’s initiation into a consciously black identity is doubly mediated when at age four in Nova Scotia he is met with racial epithets. In Clarke’s early childhood consciousness of race, he considers himself “African American,” an identification that later in life transforms into a more reflexive African *Canadian* identity, a subjectivity that remains in dialogue with and informed by African Americanness, but that more accurately marks his geographical and ideological

placement within Canada. In my illustration of this process of self-definition, George Elliot Clarke is not meant to stand in for black Canada as a whole. While his experience is not unique, it is also not necessarily the norm, as black Canadian social locations vary tremendously and there is no dominant narrative of blackness in Canada. Other black Nova Scotians of American descent would loudly reject a claiming of these origins. In joining the call for reparations, for instance, Halifax blacks, mostly descended from the U.S., are seeking compensation from the Canadian, not the American government, on the grounds of Canada's disavowed history of slavery. What is revelatory about George Elliot Clarke's story is how in a predominantly white, racially integrated Canadian context, when a person inevitably bumps up against his or her racial *différance*, one readily available model of black identity is an explicitly American one, albeit rarely named as such.

The unwitting influence of African American sign production on perceptions of blackness outside of U.S. borders combined with widespread Canadian ignorance about race played a central role in a custody case that was settled in the fall of 2001 by Canada's Supreme Court. For the two years until it was resolved, this widely covered media event functioned as a Western Canadian equivalent to the Elian Gonzalez saga in the U.S. The case was the topic of a conference at York University in Toronto, where academics from multiple disciplines debated issues of race, color, belonging, and the lawful kinship of a young boy, Elijah Edwards. Elijah, four years old at the time of the Supreme Court verdict, was born in Vancouver to a white Canadian mother and a black American father. The Supreme Court awarded custody to the mother, stating that in its decision, "race was not an important consideration." This ruling overturned an earlier one by British Columbia's lower Court, which had granted sole custody to Elijah's father, Theodore "Blue" Edwards, a former professional basketball player for the NBA team, the Vancouver Grizzlies.

While the case raised difficult dilemmas along inseparable lines of race, color, class, nation, gender, sexuality, and kinship, the lower court unanimously held that they based their ruling on the importance of the child's being raised in a black rather than white context. Even more importantly for my purposes here, the court questioned whether Canada had a black community, per se, and suggested that as a member of an American family, the child could access a more authentic black experience than he could in Canada. Technically, custody was awarded to "the black American community" more than to the child's

father, who was established by that same court as a man with “character flaws,” a man less committed to the son than the mother, and a man who has been on the road for the past nine years living “a glamorous life in which he frequently indulged in extramarital sex” (quoted in Wattie 2000:1). The father was awarded custody because, as the court put it, “in a part of the world where the black population is proportionately greater than it is here...Elijah would in this event have a greater chance of achieving a sense of cultural belonging and identity” (quoted in Wattie 2000:2).

The main point I wish to make in sharing this story is that its outcome illuminates the troubling ways that issues of black authenticity play out in relation to interraciality, widespread Canadian ignorance about race, and African America’s inadvertent international influence. The lower court’s decision was on one level a deportation of a black subject to the United States, to a country seen by some within Canada as more natural and more suitable for blacks. This of course is reminiscent of concerted efforts of the colonization movement in the 1800s which attempted to relocate U.S. American blacks to West Africa, seen as a more natural and suitable location for blacks than the New World. Without erasing the many nuances of the Elijah case, we can also observe how it reifies Canadian histories of racism that took the form of encouraging blacks to relocate to the U.S. after emancipation. It also recalls the barring, in the first half of the twentieth century, of black immigration into Canada on the grounds of a purported unsuitability for the Canadian climate.

The British Columbia court’s interpretation of the ways that race, culture, and nation merge points to the urgency of a widespread recognition of the vicissitudes of blackness and whiteness in Canada, as they converge and diverge. Some of these vicissitudes include an active repression of black cultural contributions to the Canadian social and discursive landscape, and active anti-black discrimination, historically and in the present. American racial discourses often point to disproportionate black victimization along institutional lines, including lack of access to quality education, lack of adequate, affordable healthcare, and continuing de facto segregation. Canadians, on the other hand, tend to boast (in many instances, quite literally) a more socialized political and economic system than the U.S., with less disparate class divides, quality and equally funded public schools, affordable, universal health care, and virtually no segregated neighborhoods. None of this, however, translates into equal opportunity or an anti-racist context for Canadian blacks. While Canada

appears to be a context in which “the conditions for procuring ‘freedom’ [are] ...evident” (Walcott 1997:21), it is also a place where, to borrow Frantz Fanon’s words, “an existential deviation” has been forced upon black people.

Writer George Elliot Clarke describes contemporary Canadian racism as including:

the shooting downs, in cold blood, of unarmed black men by white cops; the pitiless exploitations and denials of black women; the persistent erasure of our presence; the channeling of black youth into dead-end classes and brain-dead jobs; the soft-spoken white supremacist assumptions that result in our impoverishment, our invisibility, our suffering, our deaths (Walcott 1997:xx)

This sort of maltreatment is similar to that which occurs in the U.S., which underscores obvious national overlaps. But despite sharing certain manifestations of racial oppression, black Canada is not a replica of black America and nor does racism in Canada replicate the U.S.’s. For despite Canada’s considerable history of anti-black racism, the black/white binary is not the primary racial formula in Canada, nor has anti-black racism been institutionalized in the way and to the extent that it has been in the U.S. Canada, once again, is, by governmental design, multicultural, a mosaic of varying ethnic, cultural, regional, and linguistic constituencies, and its black collectivity fissures along similar lines, preempting the possibility of and in most cases the desire for racial solidarity, and preventing the emergence of a dominant narrative of Canadian blackness.

Scholarly examinations of blackness in transnational perspective, most notably within the British context, have fruitfully influenced conceptualizations of blackness within and outside of the American context. Stephen Small holds in tension simultaneous difference and sameness between the U.S. and Britain throughout his book, *Racialised Barriers: The Black Experience in the United States and England*. In that volume, he defends the utility of a comparative approach to black cultural contexts, as “many benefits would accrue to those involved in attempts to combat racialized inequality” (1994:179). Feminist scholar Susan Friedman takes the argument in favor of transnational comparativism even further, noting how it enables

a kind of categorical “travel” that denaturalizes “home,” bringing to visibility many of the cultural constructions we take for granted as “natural.” Sharp juxtapositions of different locations often produce startling illuminations, bringing into focus the significance of geopolitical mediations of other axes of difference. Comparativism and the “glocalization” of a transnational methodology are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, these practices complement each other as constitutive parts of geopolitical thinking (1999:114).

Transnational comparisons, for instance juxtaposing Canada and the U.S., and noting both differences and similarities, can shed light on the nuances of black subjectivity in both places. Developing geopolitical thinking would also include studying localities other than our own, and taking seriously external or outside opinions about our particular social and geographical locations (yes, often plural), while attempting to deconstruct binaries of “self” and “other,” and avoiding locational parochialism (Friedman 1999:130-1).

The stakes in negotiating the geopolitical axis of black subjectivity are apparent in the fiction and critical reception of Haitian-Canadian writer Dany Laferrière. Laferrière, though scarcely heard of in the U.S., is better known in Canada, and a household name in Francophone Canada and France. Because his writing addresses a number of the political and theoretical considerations that I have outlined throughout this essay, its short remainder will engage two of his fictional works and some critical responses to them. Each text features black displacement in the form of transnational border-crossing, though one is set in Montreal, Quebec, and the other features a road-trip throughout the United States undertaken by a black Haitian-Canadian protagonist. This latter book can be loosely classified as travel writing, though it defies categorization within a genre, just as its author, Laferrière similarly defies absolute categorization of any kind. The text is, at once, a novel, a set of riffs, a series of loosely related vignettes, and a scathingly humorous and artfully offensive social commentary. The author believes in the power of a provocative title, though this book’s title, *Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex?*, is quickly revealed as having slightly more to do with shock value than with the book’s actual content. The book is above all a set of “field notes” taken throughout the road-trip, a series of musings about race, class, gender, sex, and fame as they pertain to blackness in the U.S.

Laferrière's protagonist is clearly an unveiled alter ego of Laferrière himself, though I will continue to refer to "the protagonist" as such, so as not to conflate the author and his fictionalized self-depiction. Throughout the narrative, the protagonist occupies the position of an "inappropriate" or "inappropriated other" – Trinh Minh-ha's term for the perennial "insider/outsider" or "other-within" social location. This is so in that Laferrière emphasizes the protagonist's simultaneous difference and sameness, his insider and outsider status in relation to U.S. blackness and Americanness. The story begins with the protagonist being asked by an American publishing interest to embark on the road-trip throughout the United States and document his observations. In a spoof of America's wealth, the road-trip is funded by "the Ford Foundation, and the Getty Foundation, the Mellon and the Morgan and the Rockefeller Foundations" (1994:12). Before accepting the assignment, the protagonist asks, "why don't they get a real American black?" (1994:11), which from the outset raises the issues of racial authenticity and alterity.

Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex? excavates ethnicity, transnationality, class, gender, and sexuality as they intersect with geopolitics. Moreover, Laferrière's reliance on such literary devices as humor, farce, irony, paradox, contradiction, satire, parody, and antagonism double as cultural polemics, or "freedom tropes." We can, and perhaps should, legitimately question at whose expense his scathing humor is employed. For instance, one of the reasons I gravitated toward critically engaging his work in the first place is because it begs for a feminist analysis of the ways he portrays white women and black women, respectively, when he portrays black women at all. And yet, his text is an assertion of freedom, a creative insubordination, that takes the form of impiety, a refusal to enact what some might consider to be categorical imperatives, a refusal to enact the role of an "appropriate black subject." Moreover, the humor suggests a pattern of laughing to keep from crying, as it were, for the perpetual laughter in the face of adversity does not entirely mask a weariness and despair. Laferrière's is an ambivalent, impious, yet politically charged representation of a Haitian-Canadian's misadventures in American and African American social contexts respectively.

During the road-trip, the protagonist confronts select Americanisms. According to his observations, "America is an overfed infant. And Americans live as if no one else existed on the continent. On the planet...Each of their movements seems absolutely new, as if they weren't connected to the human

chain. They are unique...the world is like a baby's rattle in their hands. They break it; they fix it...They are gods. And their blacks are demi-gods" (1994:15). The protagonist also makes a series of assessments, some celebratory, even worshipful, some not, about a selection of specific African American "demi-gods," ranging from Spike Lee, to Ice Cuba, Miles Davis, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Billie Holiday.

The protagonist also attributes to the U.S. shocking class divides that are clearly racially marked. Yet he also perceives overly-rigid black/white binaristic constructions of race and racism, perceptions of power as an issue of A-over-B, an obsession with "success" and the "American dream," as well as rigid policing of black identity engaged in by some of the black people he meets. One of these self-appointed black identity policemen is a Nigerian immigrant cab driver, who himself fails to fit into his own rigorously defended, essentialist definition of blackness. By making and voicing such loaded observations as these throughout his U.S. road-trip, Laferrière's protagonist is repeatedly greeted, within the U.S., as a race traitor. The vehemence of this charge of "sell-out" is only magnified within the text when the protagonist is revealed as having authored the 1987 novel *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*. The protagonist learns that in the United States, more so than anywhere else, the text's very title is sufficiently off-putting to warrant constant charges of his being a race traitor. The Haitian-Canadian protagonist in turn questions whether one can sell out of blackness, or rather out of African-Americanness as it were, if one never bought in, if one is, to begin with, in it but not of it. That is to say that even as the cultural signifiers and categorical imperatives associated with African-Americanness are unfamiliar to the protagonist, he is expected to conform to them and deemed a sell-out when he does not.

Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex, then, is a spin on the American national landscape in general, including anti-black oppression by whites, but more so the regulation of black identity by blacks. Alternatively, *How to Make Love to a Negro*, Laferrière's first novel, is about the constant indignities heaped upon a black Haitian-Canadian immigrant named "man" and his Senegalese-Canadian roommate, "Bouba," in the predominantly white context of Montreal, Quebec. It eschews depictions of pure victims or oppressors, opting instead to represent more ambiguously and complicatedly the layerings of everyday life in Montreal during two summer months. Another central component of the plot is

the writing of a novel within the novel, as Man, the protagonist attempts to document his escapades in literary form.

The books *How to Make Love to a Negro* and *Why Must a Black Writer Write about Sex?* were published in English translation by Coach House Press, an Eastern Canadian publisher. Canadian reviewers, Francophone and Anglophone alike, evidence Margaret Cannon's notion of racism as an "invisible empire" within Canada, and evidence a shallow understanding of race and racism as centrally operative forces within Laferrière's writings. For example, Canadian reviewers might emphasize textual themes such as those one critic called "an eternal triangle of booze, broads, and books," and liken Laferrière's writing style to Henry Miller and Charles Bukowski's. Another reviewer focuses on the text's theme of sexual politics, noting especially the text's "humor, profundity, and ribaldry," all seemingly unracialized. Meanwhile, U.S. critics are more savvy in emphasizing the obvious centrality of race within Laferrière's writing, but in assessing his works they tend to ignore the geopolitical axis, the Haitian-Canadianness, writ fluidly, of the books. Instead, American critics interpellate Laferrière into a recognizably U.S. American blackness. For example, a glowing *Village Voice* review describes *How to Make Love to a Negro* as "a fresh version of Zora Neale Hurston's delectable self-revelation... a psychic tussle that resonates with the furious stuff in James Baldwin's essays, or Louis Armstrong's smiling trumpet, or Martin Luther King's oratory" (Wood 1989:47). Here Laferrière is compared only to American blacks.

There are, of course, overlaps and parallels between black diasporic cultures, a sameness in difference, or as some have called it, a "changing same." But what we see here once again is that aforementioned slippage of "black" and "American," and a reduction of the politics of place to the level of irrelevance, in this case Laferrière's Haitian-Canadian background and the Québécois setting of *How to Make Love to a Negro*. The *Village Voice* reviewer continues by suggesting that Laferrière's writerly sentiments "are true-to-life, confused, real *American* thoughts" (Wood 1989:47, italics added). Another scholar published an article in *Callaloo* that advocates for increased attention to Laferrière's works by American scholars, an admonition with which I would unhesitatingly ally myself. The essay, however, is entitled "Meet Dany Laferrière, American." The article does not clarify upon what grounds Laferrière is defined or redefined as an American. Perhaps it is Laferrière's Haitian background, as well as his links to the United States, and he does have tangible links to the United States. But

the temptation to translate “American” here into its larger signifier of “new World,” from its northern to southernmost tip, creates a bit of a glitch, as it ignores the fact that those north of the 49th parallel generally opt out of the contest for inclusion within the sign of Americanness. Yes, critiques abound in Canada about how problematic it is that United Statesians co-opted the term “American” for themselves, but statistically speaking, most of the imagined community that is Canada imagines itself first and foremost patently “un-American,” black Canadians not exempted.

We might call this a “geopolitical illiteracy” that is evidenced in the *Village Voice* and *Callaloo* articles on Laferrière. And these are not isolated incidents, but are rather symptomatic of a pervasive treatment of U.S. black culture as a general index for blackness, of a not uncommon elision of blackness and African Americanness. Even given the increasing currency of black diaspora paradigms in U.S. intellectual circles, there remains a limited fluency in the transnational circuitry of blackness as a major operative force within and outside of a U.S. context. I have engaged in this provisional analysis of the black Canadian scene as juxtaposed with select American and diasporic discourses of race and freedom, not because I see this particular project as the ultimate black studies mandate, or as African American Studies’ ultimate missing link. Nor is mine a call for increased virtuosity or expertise on specific sites of blackness scattered throughout the world, for never can we know enough to even pretend to understand them all. My concern is rather with the stakes in negotiating geopolitics in general, a call for increased reflexivity and awareness about the fields of power and patterns of exclusion that are embedded within the ways blackness is studied and represented.

My argument for the importance of geopolitics is very much about “the cultural politics of difference” in general, the ways in which, as Stuart Hall has put it, “questions of mobility and unity are now always questions of difference” (1987). If black subjectivity is mitigated by ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality, it is also mitigated by geopolitics. Diversely motivated and varying forms of transnational border-crossing shape the cultural, political, and ideological parameters of blackness. Just as the sign of blackness on a global scale is constituted by varying and overlapping national, ethnic, and cultural locations, blackness within U.S. borders is complex and differentiated. Contending comparatively with the local and the global then, taking seriously

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the geopolitical axis of subjectivity, can compel ever more discerning, efficacious articulations of blackness, wherever its location.

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