

## **Transnational Cultures, Transcultural Nations: The Contribution of Women Writers of Afro-Caribbean Origin to Multicultural Canada<sup>1</sup>**

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*We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present  
and to the future.*

Frederick Douglass,  
*An Address Delivered in Rochester,  
New York, on 5 July 1852*

### **The Canadian Nation in the making**

Until well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Canada was still heavily burdened with the task of outlining the contours of a national culture distinct from those of the so-called “Founding Nations.” In the field of literature, for instance, works seminal for the configuration of a national literary imaginary and canon were being published as late as 1971 in the case of Northrop Frye’s *The Bush Gardens: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (a compilation of articles written between 1943 and 1969), and 1972 in that of Margaret Atwood’s *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*.

After more than four decades, Canada has not overcome the need to imagine itself as a nation. Janice Kulik Keefer has emphasized the Mosaic’s perennial “need to keep nationalism enthroned in [its] collective psyche” (293), an obsession whose cause is manifold. To begin with, there is an obvious need of defence against the menace of becoming a cultural-cum-economic colony of its overpowering neighbour. But to this and other reasons,<sup>2</sup> a most powerful one must be added: the unremitting flux of immigration Canada has absorbed throughout the centuries. If, as Benedict Anderson posited, nations are imagined communities, Homi Bhabha crucially remarked the central role of migrants in imagining the nation. And it needs to be borne in mind that Canada is the country receiving the largest number of immigrants. Noting that the cultural configuration of Canada (as of any other nation-state, for that matter) is purely contingent, Stefano Harney also points out the capital role immigrants play in this configuration: “There is no constant idea of Canada but that of the

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<sup>2</sup> Among these are the huge extension of the territory, the federal political organization, and the long-standing preponderance of Regionalism which may be seen as a consequence of the previous. See Mandel and Taras 1988.

collective and individual image of it in the minds of the people who have come to it. Ethnic groups are not in another's country in Canada; they are in their own" (Harney 134).

It would be congratulatory that such a statement might go unquestioned after several decades of Multicultural Policies in the country, policies which are accompanied by an enabling legal frame for newcomers.<sup>3</sup> Yet it remains unclear to what extent immigrants and, by extension, members of ethnic minorities, especially visible minorities and particularly Blacks, may feel truly part of the Canadian nation and find themselves, as Canadians, completely at ease. If we look at the writings of a specific group, that of Black women of Afro-Caribbean origin, we realise that, if much has been accomplished in building the path to a truly Multicultural Canadian Nation, it has been through the hard effort of those newcomers, most often against the odds. And, crucially, that much remains to be done for the Canadian Nation to be really all-inclusive in ethnic terms for a vast number of Canadians.

### **Women writers of Afro-Caribbean Origin in Canada: Finding a Voice of Their Own**

While traditionally the bulk of black immigrants into Canada came from the United States, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially from the 1960s on, most black newcomers are of Caribbean origin (Milan and Tran 4).<sup>4</sup> The release of quota restrictions to racially marked immigration coincided with new restrictions in immigration policies in both Britain and the USA, while several British colonies in the Caribbean won their independence by the same period (Parry, Sherlock and Maingot; Mintz). Most Caribbean islands had a strong tradition of emigration, and many of their citizens, disappointed with inadequate national policies and endemic corruption and poverty, chose Canada as the place to start afresh.

Now, as James Clifford reminds us, while "diasporic experiences are always gendered [...] there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact" (258, quoted in Zackodnik 163). It is important to emphasize that Afro-Caribbean women in Canada have experienced realities not necessarily similar, and often deeply divergent, from those of Afro-Caribbean men. Women writers of this collective have therefore set out to imagining a Canadian nation of their

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<sup>3</sup> Sabine Milz (2000) recalls that "the conception of the Canadian nation-state is constructed politically, based on the ... concept of *jus soli*", *jus soli* being defined as "the law of citizenship according to soil and parentage, which adjudges its immigrants the right of Canadian citizenship".

<sup>4</sup> In the last decades, also, the number of black immigrants who come directly from African countries has increased notably.

own, one which certainly shares some preoccupations with that of their male counterparts, but which often diverges from, and even collides with it.<sup>5</sup>

To begin with, in Canada black women have traditionally been relegated to the domestic sphere, since with few and remarkable exceptions, they have traditionally worked there as home servants. In this connection, it is pertinent to mention the Domestic Scheme, started in the mid 1950s. With this program, as writers like Dionne Brand (1991) and Makeda Silvera (1983) have documented and illustrated in two works which recollect the experiences of black women workers in Canada throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the shortage of domestic labour force was solved when hundreds of women were imported from the Caribbean to Canada to work as domestic employees. Although most of these Caribbean women were scarcely above the level of literacy, many were educated, but were forced to work as domestics for one year to gain admittance in Canada (Winks 439 *et passim*). As Brand and Silvera remind us, they would literally be abused by their employers: no freedom of movement once in the new country (the workers had no choice of their workplace, it was assigned to them beforehand and they could not leave it for at least twelve whole months), 18 hours-work a day for often ridiculous salaries, only one afternoon free per week, frequent psychological and sexual harassment by employers, etc.

The Domestic Scheme is the direct antecedent to that generation of Caribbean women who arrived in Canada in the late 1960s. Like their forerunners, most of these newcomers were uneducated and immediately hijacked into domestic work. But along with them came a number of women who, already educated in Caribbean Secondary and Tertiary institutions based upon the colonial, mostly British, education scheme, pursued further studies in Canada and started off as professionals in segments like education or health. Some of them would initiate a literary career that has led them to win recognition both in Canada and abroad, especially in the case of Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip, and Dionne Brand, who have distinguished themselves mostly as poets and cultural critics. Along with these, other remarkable women in this group are dub poet Lillian Allen, historian Afua Cooper, publisher Makeda Silvera or sociologist Althea Prince. All of them landed in Canada between 1965 and 1970, and besides their later commitment to a highly politically engaged writing, what these women have in common is their socio-political activism, each in her particular professional field. Afua Cooper, for instance, has published several scholarly works which recuperate and invigorate the history of black women in Canada, whereas Makeda Silvera co-founded in 1985 the publishing house *Sister Vision: Black Women and Women of Colour's Press*, which has done much to promote this traditionally marginalised literature.

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<sup>5</sup> Several articles in Dionne Brand's compilation *Bread Out of Stone* point out the divergence in both political agendas, notably "Brownman, Tiger." and "Nothing of Egypt." (Brand 1994: 57-76 and 77-88).

As Brand's and Silvera's aforementioned titles suggest, these women writers have shown a strong interest in tracing their ancestry as black and as Afro-Caribbean women in Canada. As Canadian intellectuals virtually pioneer in their kind,<sup>6</sup> they have seen themselves primarily burdened with the need to remove the stereotypes and social stigmas attached to them as black women, while at the same time wishing to vindicate and dignify the social roles that black women were compelled to fulfil in their country of adoption. To this difficulty, we may add the scarcity of a Canadian Black female literary tradition which could serve as a basis for these writers' literary undertaking (Clarke 1996: xi-xxviii). Notwithstanding the extraordinary effort this adds to the demanding process of imagining a nation (the Canada of the Afro-Caribbean-Canadian woman writer) and its fitting literary representations, the dilemma of (the lack of) tradition is happily resolved as follows by Tobagonian Marlene Nourbese Philip:

Working in Canada as an Afrosporic writer, I am very aware of the absence of a tradition of Black writing as it exists in England or the U.S. The great Canadian void either swallows you whole, or you come out the other side the stronger for it ("Who's Listening?" 45),

thus acknowledging the fact that Canada has offered Black woman writers the opportunity to start off from a white page and in a way enhanced their creative freedom.

As a consequence, Caribbean women have superimposed their Caribbean literary education and writing skills on the Canadian socio-cultural landscape. Nourbese Philip's essay "Who's Listening?" discusses issues of audience, expectations and reception of the work of racial minority writers in Canada, and starts with an illuminating allusion to the European/African schizophrenia characteristic of Afro-West Indian cultures they have brought about with them:

Male, white and Oxford-educated, he stands over my right shoulder; she is old, Black and wise and stands over my left shoulder—two archetypal figures symbolizing the two traditions that permeate my work. He—we shall call him John-from-Sussex—represents the white colonial tradition, the substance of any colonial education. Abiswa, as we shall call the other figure, represents the African-Caribbean context which, as typical of any colonial education, was ignored. She is also representative of a certain collective race memory of the African. (26-7)

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<sup>6</sup> A notable exception would be the black Canadian intellectual Mary Ann Shadd, who as George Elliot Clarke notes was the first African-Canadian woman to write a major text, *Condition of Coloured People*, in 1849 (Clarke 1997: xiv).

The African and the European literary traditions, then, remain at the core of the writing we are referring to, while gradually they have been permeated by a specifically Canadian texture.

### **Denouncing Racism**

Starting off from a virtual literary void and a traditionally disadvantaged position in social terms, the foremost entry in the political agenda of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian writers is the fight against racism. Black Canadians are not a homogeneous group: while as we have seen some arrived only a few decades ago, others have lived there for generations, and originally came from different places (Milan and Tran; Mannette). In spite of this historical reality, to the present, any variables contributing in making up a sense of identity –origin, class, gender, sexuality and age are the most prominent– often merge into that of race (Brand, *No Burden* 11-13). Why is this so? Because of visibility: black people are marked as different in a still predominantly white society. Rinaldo Walcott is one of the many black writers and critics who point out that racism –particularly against blacks– has pervaded and pervades Canadian culture. He summarises the situation thus: “blackness in Canada is situated on a continuum of invisible to hyper-visible,” and he recalls the “attempts by Canadian state institutions and official narratives to render blackness outside, while simultaneously attempting to contain blackness through discourses of Canadian benevolence” (Walcott 39). Canadian racism, thus, is particularly ambivalent, remarkably subtle although deeply ingrained in the national ethos (see Nourbese Philip, “Disturbing the Peace”). To add up to the problem, Canadians appear to be especially keen in denying their racist assumptions and practices, and tend to address the issue with patent self-indulgence. In 1990, black scholar and activist Rosemary Brown remarked: “If I were to write a book about Canada and its people, the title would be: ‘Let’s Pretend, Let’s Deny’” (168). More recently, Marlene Nourbese Philip put it more aggressively: “Canadians are often careful to hide their racism. Having mastered the hypocrisy of their erstwhile masters, the English, they dress up their racism in politeness and niceness” (*A Genealogy* 134). My contention, then, is that besides the more obvious fact of having a common origin in Africa, being a target of racism is on the basis of the sense of community for Black diasporic communities in the Western world, as it is in Canada. Significantly, despite the plurality of origin and ethnicity of the people, the label Visible Minorities remains highly operative in the political and sociological landscape of Canada.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Visible minorities concentrate in specific urban areas of the country, particularly Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. As for the rest, especially rural areas and smaller towns and cities, Canada remains predominantly white in terms of skin colour. It should be mentioned here that those who travelled from other climes (the Indian subcontinent and China, for instance) to become part of the Canadian nation, often face issues and situations not dissimilar to those articulated here.

While in order to fight racism it is important to deter the idea of a homogeneous Black Canada, it is also important to recognise that black people have significantly contributed to building Canadian history. Yet, Trinidad-born poet based in Calgary since 1966 Claire Harris denounces that

after two hundred years of black settlement, an air of disbelief still surrounds the term 'Black Canadian.' As a result, seventh generation Canadians are asked by people who arrived in Canada during the post-war years, where they really "come from" ("Working" 71),

regardless of the fact, again, that black people have lived in Canada since the earliest moments of European colonisation, that is, since its very stirrings as a nation (1971).

### **Dissent and Self-Statement**

The fight against racism, though, has to be understood as a manifestation of a wider wish to fight oppression in all its incarnations. Thus, the writing of Afro-Caribbean women in Canada was termed as "a grammar of dissent" by some critic (Morrell). If we follow this direction, that is, the notion that this writing works "against the grain" or as dissent, other fronts these women have resolved to cover must be acknowledged, such as the fight against male oppression (Claire Harris being the most concerned with what we could baptize as a "diasporic feminism");<sup>8</sup> the fight against social inequalities both in Canada and abroad; and, finally, the fight against homophobia –a central issue in the works of Dionne Brand and Makeda Silvera.<sup>9</sup>

Dissent is also perceived in the treatment of language and of history. As regards language, these writers have repeatedly voiced the insufficiency of Standard English for their literary quest, while claiming the need to make use of Caribbean creoles along with Standard English to express more faithfully their hybrid, trans-cultural identities.<sup>10</sup> This voicing has often taken theoretical shape (in essays like Claire Harris's "Working With/Out a Net," or Marlene Nourbese Philip's "Making the House Our Own: Colonized Language and the Civil War of Words," among others), but most

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<sup>8</sup> Among others, the miscellaneous poem "Nude on a Pale Staircase," from the collection *Fables from the Women's Quarters*, is illustrative of this concern (Harris 1984: 9-19).

<sup>9</sup> Makeda Silvera is the editor of a groundbreaking anthology of black lesbian writing: *Piece of My Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology* (1991).

<sup>10</sup> For the concept of cultural hybridity, see Bhabha 1992. As for the notion of transculturality, I refer here to the notion coined by Wolfgang Welsch, which refers to "cultural fertilization at several levels, from the macro-level of society –whose cultural forms take more and more different, complex and hybrid internal shapes—to the micro-level of individual experience, where personal and cultural identities do not completely coincide with civil or national identities, but are instead marked by multiple cultural connections" (Brancato 2004: 2; my translation).

interestingly they have put their theories and claims into practice in their writing. The dissenting character of their linguistic venture has also been repeatedly noted by critics.<sup>11</sup> Equally salient is their contestation of history as written by the white/patriarchal powers, which they attempt to redress by veering it into accounts more faithful to their own experience, both personal and ancestral, as black women. An evocative illustration of this penchant is the poetic novel by Nourbese Philip *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence* (1991), where the historical figure of Jonathan Livingstone and the whole occurrence of the African colonisation are reinterpreted under a harshly critical light, poetic in tone but ruthless in its implications and conclusions.<sup>12</sup> Denise deCaires Narain refers to this work as

[the attempt] to read and re-present the familiar representation and of the black woman (“worded over” by David Livingstone’s grand narrative of discovery and conquest), through the “travelogue” of a solitary black woman. She exploits metaphors for writing ... in which patriarchal word power, particularly that associated with the written word, is predicated upon woman’s invisibility and silence, exploring the “logic” of this metaphor fully and using exaggeration to undermine *his* power and empower *her* silence. (208)

Notwithstanding these discontents, the writing of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women will be more faithfully read in a positive light, as self-affirmation and a will to create systems of thought and literary representations which are not mere response or reaction to the negative inscriptions society projects onto their authors. In this sense, these texts have been variously analysed focusing on different aspects, which most often turn around the contiguous notions of place and home and others so connected to these as displacement, exile, belonging, or the sense of (un)homeliness.<sup>13</sup> One can argue that the same set of fundamental questions lies beneath all these critical readings: How do writers (women in this particular case) who have experienced such a significant number of geographical and cultural dislocations manage to come to terms with their daily geographical and cultural locations? Do they ever manage to overcome continuous traumas of departure and alienation? If they do, then, how? What world picture turns out of their ever marginal experiences? Answers to these questions vary according to authors and readings, yet I shall argue that the outcome of the whole process is not a gloomy sense of unbelonging (“home is no place,” contestably deduces Carol Morrell in her analysis), but rather the opposite, a joyous feeling of “home-is-all-around-ness.” Claire Harris has synthesized this idea with strength and clarity: “That the diaspora has made the world ‘home’ is our good fortune” (“Poets in Limbo” 125).

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<sup>11</sup> This deep concern with language is also noted by Carol Morrell in her introduction to the referred anthology *A Grammar of Dissent*. See also Vevaina 1995 and 1996.

<sup>12</sup> A critical piece which focuses on language and offers a useful insight into *An Odyssey of Silence* is Jones 2004. As opposed to my interpretation, Jones reads the novel as essentially conciliatory.

### **Transnational Concerns: an Overview of Motifs**

As regards geographical and cultural contexts, Africa, the Caribbean and Canada are the three *loci* that naturally inform Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women's work. An overview of the role and articulation of these places in their literary production may be a key to enter the complexity of their imaginaries and political agendas.<sup>14</sup>

Africa, for them, appears as the mother continent, an imagined rather than a tangible place which nurtures the imagination and underlies any sense of identity. Birthplace for their ancestors, for contemporary black writers Africa is a place to be recovered, be it literally or in poetic terms. The "Back to Africa" literary trope is developed in the aforementioned novel by Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*. But apart from numerous metaphoric re-appropriations, Africa sometimes appears in a more realistic way, when these authors expose or denounce the political situations in different African countries. Nourbese Philip's early poetic works contain references to the material and political problems in Africa, in poems like "The News at Nine" or "Jongwe", among many (Thorns 30, 34). Lillian Allen's "Freedom is Azania (South Africa Must be Free)," from the collection *Women Do this Every Day*, is yet another example (106). From the same collection is the poem "I Am Africa," of eloquent title, which in emphasizing the sense of rhythm traceable in the African body and the sense of freedom conjured by this very name, synthesizes the ideal(ised) relationship between the poet and the mother continent: "I        feeeeeeeeeeeel music / my body carries the rhythms / of A F R I C A / sweet / rising crest of strength & laughter / Black souls swell with her song / FREEDOM, she sings / hear        her calling [...]." And the poem finishes: "*I and Africa are one*" (118).

Leaving Africa, and on the way the West Indies, the unforgiving trauma of slavery appears as the backdrop to any staging of black cultures in the New World. In her first collection of poems, Dionne Brand included a short poem about this poignant issue, "Slave Ship," whose brevity does not screen the everlasting pain aroused by the slave enterprise: "an iron ship / a long cruel ship, / a ship riveted / to an evil course, / a merciless crew, / human cargo / lashed to benches, / screams, curses, / whips, coffles, / ... / a song to die / a mute unanswerable / question, / why?" (*Heart Magic* 44). The historical sequence follows up explorations, in the work of these women, of slavery and the plantation. The infamous socio-economic system in the early colonial Caribbean, with its later legacy of discrimination in the shape of race and class inequalities in post-emancipation and, later on, post-

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance Chancy 1997.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of transnational cultures and their various manifestations, see Hannerz 1990.



colonial times, will also be recurrent topics in the literary research of our Canadian writers.<sup>15</sup> Being their birthplace, the Caribbean occupies for them a central position. Claire Harris has stated that whereas she spent some time in Africa because she wanted to learn about her ancestry, “[her] roots lie deep in the West Indies” (*Fables* 43), while Jamaican Olive Senior, who has spent much of her life in Canada and published her most outstanding works there, has stated: “I would describe myself as a conscious Caribbean person, even though I’m based somewhere else; my primary area of interest is still the Caribbean” (“Interview with Lisa Allen-Agostini 19”).<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, the political and economic ups and downs suffered in our days by the Caribbean islands are also a recurrent point of interest. Verlia, one of the main characters in Dionne Brand’s novel *In Another Place, Not Here* travels to a Caribbean country to take part in a revolution, and whereas the place remains unidentified in the text, it is possible to elucidate that it is Grenada, the island where a communist revolution was put down in 1983 with an invasion of US marines. During the communist period, Brand spent ten months on the island, an experience resulting in *Chronicles of the Hostile Sun*, Brand’s fourth book of poems, which constitutes a travelogue as well as an elegy for the loss of freedom meant by the US invasion.<sup>17</sup> The Caribbean is therefore, like Africa, a place of return, either material or just enacted by the imagination.

It is not by chance, therefore, that with no exception, the work of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women writers reflects what can be considered as traditional features of Caribbean women’s writing. These features include rhythm in narration, colour and sensory perception in language, and presence under many disguises of the ingrained Afro-Caribbean tradition of story-telling. They also make frequent reference to Caribbean myth and religious syncretism, and explore Caribbean social mores and hierarchies.<sup>18</sup> Along with these, we find features common to the writing of other diasporic Caribbean women, like –most especially– the honouring and celebration of the female body (the body of the African woman), and the vindication of female bonding and of female figures, both real and mythological. As regards real women, the role and condition of motherhood and of grand-motherhood are constantly tackled, as well as the relationship between mothers and daughters, daughters and grandmothers. Works with titles like Harris’ *Fables from the Women’s Quarters*, *Drawing Down a Daughter* or Suzette Mayr’s *The Widows* are representative. The acclaimed collection by Marlene Nourbese Philip *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, which procured this author

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<sup>15</sup> See Cooper 1992; Marlene Nourbese Philip 1997; Brand 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Senior is the only writer mentioned here who does not consider herself Canadian.

<sup>17</sup> See also, among others, the poems “Phyllis” and “Jackie”, from the collection *No Language Is Neutral* (Brand 1990: 8-11). These poems are dedicated to two Ministers of the People’s Revolutionary Government of Grenada 1979-1983, one assassinated back in 1983, the other still imprisoned in 1990.

<sup>18</sup> A very good illustration of these points is offered by Olive Senior’s short story “Discerner of Hearts” (Senior 1995: 1-37).

worldwide recognition, tackles all these topics. It is worth quoting a poem from an earlier collection, “This is my body, this is my blood,” where we witness nothing less than the birth of a revolution, an which ends with these lines: “Isis stood to her left / laughed in their faces – the boys in white that is / Ta-urt pregnant as a sow, / part crocodile, / part lion, / part hippo, / and all woman, / stood to her right and / belched her approval: / “For the Goddess’ sake push / Now / Give us all birth” (*Salmon Courage* 35). Female body, female bonding, female gods: the feminist message becomes foremost in the final sentence, to be read as the birth of a new consciousness. In “Photograph,” an early story by Dionne Brand, we attend the funeral of the protagonist child’s grandmother, and witness the deep sorrow felt by the household children at this loss. In the margins of this strong relationship between children and grandmother, the mother’s shadow appears. Virtually unknown to her offspring, she had migrated to northern lands. Her children do not have a name for her since “all the names we knew belonged to my grandmother. All [...] a sensual accumulation of loving words which talked about dependency, comfort, and endless wisdom” (in *Sans Souci* 75).

In these women’s writing, the vindication of historical women figures is also recurrent, as it happens in Marlene Nourbese Philip’s novel for teenagers *Harriet’s Daughter*, where the Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman is honoured,<sup>19</sup> or in Afua Cooper’s *The Hanging of Angelique*, which chronicles the story of a Canadian slave woman, Marie Joseph Angelique, who was hanged after being convicted of starting a fire that burned down part of Montreal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As for mythological female figures, we could mention “Byeri” (in *Salmon Courage* 39 et passim), a long poem which constitutes a prayer to this African goddess also entailing a harsh indictment on the marketing and reification of African cultures in the cultural industry of the New World.

Finally, the challenging constraint of the Afro-Caribbean two-folded literary tradition, African and European, has been transported to the Canadian literary landscape. Caribbean migrants, particularly women, did not feel welcome in their new environment. Not only was it the rash climate; more belittling was the indifference, often open derision, of Canadians. Another poem by Dionne Brand synthesizes very poignantly the feeling of bewilderment and alienation experienced by an “Afro West Indian Emigrant” (such is the poem’s title) on her arrival in the promised land: “I feel like a palm tree / at the corner of Bloor and Yonge / in a wild snow storm. / Scared, surprised, / trying desperately to appear unperplexed / put out, sun brown naked and a little embarrassed” (in *Fore Day Morning* 25). As for the kind of welcome Canadians will give her, we need not discuss again the issue of racism. It will better be illustrated by means of another poem, this time from Lillian Allen’s collection *I Fight Back*: “ITT ALCAN KAISER / Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce / privilege

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<sup>19</sup> To gauge the relevance of this historical figure, check the website of the Harriet Tubman Home in Auburn, New York: <http://www.nyhistory.com/harrietubman/home.htm>

names in my country / but I am illegal here / I came to Canada and found / the doors of opportunity well guarded” (19).

### **From Transnational Movements to Transcultural Realities**

While for analytical purposes it is interesting to revisit the places that inform the female Afro-Caribbean-Canadian imaginary and realities, it is important to emphasise that neither writing nor identities identify with any of these places in isolation, but, rather, that these writers manage to transcend all three: Africa, The Caribbean and Canada, and treat them as contiguous spheres. These universes are negotiated and transcended in diverse ways, giving origin to new and idiosyncratic cultural configurations. Dub poet Lillian Allen synthesises this idea with her characteristic strength:

It took me a while to realise that life doesn't have to be an either/or, that in fact we can embrace all of who we are. I am not Jamaican one minute and a woman another minute or Canadian another –I am all of these. It's a process of claiming a fuller self (qtd in McKoy).

Marlene Nourbese Phillip's novel *Harriet's Daughter*, already mentioned, is representative of the process of integration which appeals to the notion of transculturality as conceived by Wolfgang Welsch. As indicated elsewhere in this paper, Welsch used it to suggest that currently, important cultural phenomena cannot be broken down into dimensions of traditional cultures based in specific territories. Instead, for Welsch contemporary cultural forms are increasingly generated and communicated across various territories. In this sense, *Harriet's Daughter* reads as an eloquent sample of transcultural literature. To begin with, it is characteristically Caribbean in the choice of a teenager, Margaret, as protagonist and narrator.<sup>20</sup> But it is certainly Canadian, in its wish to foreground and validate the existence of Canadian black identities. The novel tells of this Torontonians's need to find her own way across the several labels inscribed on her by society: Black, female, of Caribbean ancestry. A girl of unusual courage and determination, Margaret will manage to overcome all the obstacles that hinder her development, especially sexism and white supremacy, both epitomised in the castrated and castrating figure of her father, Cuthbert. Margaret is an inventive youngster entirely conscious of her African ancestry, who praises Black skin and is keen to do a project on Rasta music her father forbids. In a fit of enthusiasm, after one of her Black Heritage classes Margaret devises and

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<sup>20</sup> Regarding the profusion of Caribbean female bildungsromans, see, among many, Kincaid 1997 and Hodge 1970.

proposes to her friends an original game: to reproduce in Toronto the historical Underground Railroad which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century transported Black people enslaved in the United States to freedom in Canada. For some months, a bunch of fascinated children of several races and cultures set out to re-enacting history in contemporary Toronto. Unfortunately they end up being discovered, and Margaret is severely punished. Yet eventually things turn out well, and with the help of her mother and of the cheery neighbour Mrs Billings, Margaret will even fulfill her wish to take her homesick friend Zulma back to the Caribbean. Summarily, then, Margaret will symbolically becomes a new Harriet Tubman, finding her own way out of oppression so as to become a self-sustained human being assertive of her skin colour, her sex, her nationality, and her multiple transcultural connections.<sup>21</sup> A passage from the very last pages seems to reproduce the Multicultural reality of Canada at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while foretelling something about the Canadian nation in the Third Millenium, where Multiculturalist politics should be made aware of the fluidity of cultures, or in other words, of the contemporary pervasiveness of transculturality. All her problems now solved, Margaret/Harriet dreams as follows:

I am sitting at a table shelling peas, pigeon peas, a huge mountain of pigeon peas. I try to climb this mountain but keep sliding back and back and laughing. To make the mountain smaller I begin to eat peas –the taste raw and sweet—yuck! I spit them out, and now they form themselves into little families all different colours: some a soft pearl-white, others clear lime-smelling green, some a dark and shiny brown, *others white and flecked with brown.* (*Harriet's Daughter* 148; my emphasis)

### **Conclusions: A Muticoloured Bowl of Transcultural Peas?**

Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women's writing is overtly political: "Whereas most art reflects of carries consciousness, my poetry began to create consciousness," claims Lillian Allen, quite immodestly but fairly enough to her work (19). The will to fight any type of discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, origin, class or sexual orientation dominates their agenda. Along with this, the will to create a literary tradition of their own, a tradition which follows the hitherto hidden threads of both Caribbean and Black Canadian women writing. Until recently, both traditions had been ignored or put aside by white –in the case of Canada— or white and male-centred –in the Caribbean— mainstream cultures. Allen, Brand, Cooper and all the others have set out to unveil and reassess these hidden traditions so as to use them as a point of departure for their own work.

Regarding their role in the Canadian Nation of our Millenium, and to quote Sabine Milz again,

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<sup>21</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of this novel, see Alonso-Breto 2007.

Although immigration and multiculturalism are legal matters of Canadian national self-definition... and [are] accompanied by a governmental policy of Multiculturalism, the traditional understanding of national identity and canonical literature shows distinct signs of Anglo-Canadian and Franco-Canadian ethnocentrism.

This is not an over-pessimistic statement. In *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century*,<sup>22</sup> published in 1998, John Ralston Saul only accorded a triple cultural configuration to the nation: British, French and Native.<sup>23</sup> This consideration entails some progress regarding the long-standing myth of the two Founding Nations referred to in the introduction, since it restores First Nations a dignity and an agency in the configuration of the Canadian nation of which they were long deprived. Yet the whole work pays scarce or nil attention of the role of cultural groups other than these, in spite of presenting the Mosaic as “a perpetually incomplete experiment” (15), and as such more faithful to the idea of nation, continuously to be reinvented and “in permanent motion” (107) than to that of nation-state, a material concept where limits and territories are clear-cut and distinct from the outset. In the section “A Country of Minorities” Ralston Saul certainly acknowledges that “since the 18<sup>th</sup> century Canada has functioned as a confusion of minorities, *major and minor*” (123, my emphasis), yet it is a five-page section in a book of more than 500 pages referring to Canadian history, politics and culture.

After more than twenty-five years of Multicultural policies, and in spite of celebratory delusions, for many the Canadian nation remains notably monochrome. The authors approached in this paper keep repeating that the bias of ethnocentrism deters the perception of Afro-Caribbean-Canadians as normatively Canadian. Against this, these women writers defend adamantly their full Canadianness: “I carry a Canadian passport: I, therefore, am Canadian,” writes Nourbese Philip (“Echoes in a Stranger Land” 16). And they simply attest this fact through writing down their own experiences in Canada and as Canadians.

But to keep a reasonable degree of coherence, nations require perhaps some common memory, but certainly they need a set of myths and symbols that bind their people together, notwithstanding differences. Michael Smith suggests that

[i]t is of course possible to ‘invent,’ even manufacture, traditions as commodities to serve particular class or ethnic interests. But they will only survive and flourish as part of the

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<sup>22</sup> Note the reference, in this work’s title, to the English/French binomial.

<sup>23</sup> In this connection see especially the section “A Triangular Reality,” pp. 81-100.

national culture, if they can be made continuous with a much longer past that members of that community presume to constitute their 'heritage' (178).

Canada should eventually admit and come to celebrate that the nation's history and foundations, as well as its present, are plural and not merely double. It should be able to incorporate with conviction myths and also traditions still considered –if at all-- marginal to the national double-fold cluster of ideals, motifs, and symbols, both present and past. This should be the case with the “recently invented” (to paraphrase Smith) yet already mature tradition of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women's writing, embroidered in a Black Canadian History certainly as old as the country itself. By now, after the effort of many, women and men, in recent decades, Black Canadians feel the right to and the pride of Canadianness. Yet, for the Canadian Nation to be really all-embracing (and truly Multicultural), it is necessary that all Canadians feel that very same pride.

Perhaps, we have suggested, the notion of Multiculturalism, so extensively discussed in Canada and abroad, may be put along with, if not replaced by, that of Transculturality, more in tune with current individual and social configurations. Transculturality, though, should not be confused with the fact of transculturation as posited by Mary Louise Pratt, namely, “the process whereby marginal or subordinate groups can only ‘select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant culture’” (qtd in Patke 369). Rather, the experiences of Afro-Caribbean-Canadian women are essentially transcultural in so far as they draw from a plurality of cultures and imaginary landscapes at all levels (only some of them Canadian in the traditional sense), and transform all of those while they keep transforming themselves. Those experiences, as transmitted to us through the written word, bequeath to the Canadian nation more than originally reap from it, as they do not only benefit their protagonists. Actually, through fighting racism, sexism, homophobia and social inequalities, these women are managing to clear spaces in the social text that allow freer and richer notions of self, identity, belonging, community, nation(ality), and social performance for all Canadians.

If Canadian *mainstream* national culture manages to fully incorporate, not anymore as marginal phenomena, these transcultural realities, the new borders of the Canadian nation will happily exceed by thousands of miles the traditional, geographical ones. It is a matter of re-considering and integrating the past and the present so as to be able to walk into a better future.

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