

Katherine McKittrick

“Their Blood Is There, and They Can’t Throw It Out”: Honouring Black Canadian Geographies

Introduction: Blood-Mappings

The primary title of this paper, “Their blood is there, and they can’t throw it out,” was a comment made by Yvonne Wilson during the protest against the renaming of Negro Creek Road in Holland Township, Ontario (Lane-Moore and Chadwick 1995:A1).¹ My focus in this paper reflects Wilson’s comment, which invokes the ways black Canadian geographies are inflected with both absence and presence. Wilson’s assertion of a blood-presence, coupled with her disclosure of an impending name-place erasure, suggests that the geography of Negro Creek Road holds in it a unique, but troubled, mapping of Ontario and Canada. In name and underneath the nation, across the landscape of Holland Township, an unexpected and unknown blood-presence is made visible. It is this visibility, resting on impending or forced erasure, which demonstrates how black geographies in Canada are produced: narratives of erasure—concealing black places, demolishing ‘unfit’ communities, re-memorializing bloodless, black-less, roads—enmesh Wilson’s comment with racialized geographical struggles. These tensions, between community and preservation, absence and erasure, scatter the Canadian landscape, illustrating that places, in this case both Holland Township and the nation, are inflected with unexpected, unacknowledged, historical maps.

The renaming of Negro Creek Road, like other attempts to destroy and ‘throw out’ black geographies, invites certain questions about how Canada is spatially produced. Specifically, discarding and rewriting geography according to racial, white dominant

hierarchies, also asks for an exploration of what is beneath and beyond existing geopolitical landscapes. This means acknowledging not only the past-present existence of Negro Creek Road, Africville (Halifax), the Durham Road Cemetery, and other geographical erasures and mappings; it also demands a reading of how identity and place are mutually constructed when geography, and the production of space, are uneven and perpetuate inequalities (Peake and Ray 2001:184).

Rather than beginning with what Doreen Massey (1994:146) has called a “different era”—a time when “places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities”—I argue that black Canadian geographies are permanently linked to the Canadian landscape, both historically and presently. This connection between “black” in/and “Canada” advances two recognizable geographic processes: the domination of Canadian lands and peoples through white and European geo-political meanings, and the rupture of these geo-political meanings by the longstanding and recent places occupied by black communities in Canada (*cf.* Walcott 1997:35–51).² Beginning with blackness in/and Canada not only underscores the tensions between geographical erasure and existence—something/someone is *there/here* to erase; something/someone is *there/here* erasing—it also reflects the ways geography materially structures, marks and spatializes difference. The spatialization of difference works to regulate the ways multiple identities occupy, or do not occupy, space. Gender, race, class, and sexuality are experienced geographically through the ways communities develop, infrastructure is erected, and sites such as ghettos, workplaces, homes, entertainment venues, are sustained and eradicated. Geography, which maps inclusion, exclusion, borders and regions, ostensibly regulates identities in that it is used to rationally organize (and make rational) the outer world and its inhabitants (Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Jackson 1994).

However, geographies of domination and rupture reveal how the broader geographical imaginary of “Canada,” as rational, white and cohesive, is necessarily contested (Peake and Ray 2001:180–181). As theorists of the black diaspora have noted, black geographies, while materially situating identities in specific regulatory and racialized time-space locations, are also necessarily troubled by the uncertain situatedness of blackness (Gilroy 1993; Walcott 1997; Brand 2001). This means that the racialized terms of nationhood, belonging, geography, and citizenship—those discourses and experiences which attach identity to place, and vice versa—are terms which are not fully experienced by several communities. Black narratives of un-belonging, non-citizenship, and elsewhere not only rupture the homogeneity of nation-space by asserting blackness in/and Canada, they also stretch and reconfigure the meaning of unsatisfactory, racial, geographical boundaries. Black authors and critics diversely explode the apparent seamlessness of “Canada” as well as the inter-connective geographies of Canada and “elsewhere.” George Elliot Clarke, for example, writes “[a]s a child, I became African-American,” (Clarke 1997b:xi) and unsettles this black U.S.-black Canadian imaginary by insisting on an established blackness in/and Canada (Clarke 1997b:xi–xxvii). With nation and not, Clarke writes black Canada as counter to and inside the nation. Cecil Foster explains that “[a] sign of our arrival will be when we feel accepted in the boardrooms of businesses and the backrooms of politics, when we are on the front benches in Parliament and when our kids can dream the same dreams as any

ambitious white Canadian” (1996:320). M. Nourbese Philip explains Canada on slightly different terms: “For the black writer there has been, until very recently, nothing to follow, join or ever resist. One is, therefore, constantly forced to uncover, discover and recover one’s own rootedness in ‘place’ which oftentimes does not embrace Canada” (1997:72). The characters in Andrew Moodie’s *Riot*—which takes place in “A House in Toronto, 1992” clarifies how black Canadian geographies are rooted and rootless, elsewhere and here, experiential and material: each character’s immediate geographical location (Toronto, a “house,” Canada) is troubled by other—specific and unspecific—geo-political attachments (Halifax, Ottawa, Uganda, Jamaica, Vancouver, Montreal, Los Angeles).³

As Rinaldo Walcott (2001) has argued, to become and belong in Canada, and to become and belong as black in Canada, involves understanding black selves as lodged between the material landscapes of the Canadian nation and various other regions and communities, including the USA, the UK, and specific Caribbean locations. Walcott continues, however, that the tensions between identity and place are tied to “a willful attempt to make a black presence absent” in Canada (Walcott 2001:128). Black geographies, then, offer a series of experiential geographies and narratives, as well as material places, which displace and fracture normalized place-meanings. The points of rupture discussed here—black Canadian geographies—clarify how race and racism structure and limit black lives and places, as well as the way black identities and places continually emerge despite spatial domination.

These geographical tensions reveal how place and space are processes rather than unchanging homogeneous locations: identity, community, place, history, and the self all trouble how the environment, from the local to the global, is experienced and perceived contextually (Keith and Pile 1993; Massey 1994; McDowell 1994; Gregory 1994). Material places of inclusion and exclusion are therefore evidence of what is beneath and beyond the landscape: black selves, in seemingly normalized spaces and places, extend their geographic possibilities and meanings. The immediacy of material location, as it is lived, forces a re-presentation of the terms in which materiality is actually understood. Places beneath and beyond, furthermore, invite the consideration of what Toni Morrison has called “stark absences (1973:134).” While the “real” landscape—what is seen, negotiated and charted—gives a materiality to how place is lived and experienced, stark absences invite less tangible geographies. Stark absences clarify erasure, examine emptiness through presence, and force inclusions and exclusions to intersect. Stark absences, furthermore, insert the self, identity and difference into landscapes which are normalized, thus forcing alternative, sometimes unrecognizable geographies into the foreground. Interpretations of what used to be there/here, charts of imagination and memory, not only make absences stark, they also contradict homogeneity by re-expressing how erasures are worked out beyond and beneath the landscape by subordinated peoples and their knowledges (Glissant 1989:11). Thus, black Canadian geographies cannot be “thrown out” because geographical processes ensure past-present, contested, and contextual possibilities that are invoked by the differing ways space is produced and lived. More clearly, the blood is still there but blood-visibility depends on perspective, imagination, and contextual geo-political struggles.

Map

In his essay “Honouring African-Canadian Geography: Mapping Black Presence in Atlantic Canada,” George Elliot Clarke (1997a) briefly traces the long history of black communities in Canada. By citing folklore, narratives, histories, songs, novels, and events that delineate the long and meaningful presence of African-Canadians, Clarke maps the history of black men and women in Canada. Clarke’s intention is to rethink African-Canadian geography so that it is not understood as recent and urban, but long and endured. The “countrified” black spaces of Canada, Clarke asserts, need to be addressed (1997a:37). The geographies of farming communities, Africville, slave presences, and fugitive slave territories are drawn on by Clarke and challenge not only the presumed and axiomatic white Canadian landscape, but also more recent (roughly post-WWII) black geographies produced by men and women who migrated to Canadian urban centres from the Caribbean, Africa, and elsewhere. “The impressionistic canvas of African-Canadian geography,” Clarke explains, “should put to rest the Big Lie that African presence in Canada is both recent and urban. It is neither” (1997a:38).

Clarke’s forthright negation of recent and urban blackness, and his map of historical black geographies, are interesting for three reasons. First, the author notes a geographical hierarchy based on sequential histories: those black women and men who were “here first,” since Canadian settlement commenced, and the generations that followed these specific communities, have carved out the “real” black Canadian spaces. Consequently, these “real” black spaces not only deny other recent geographies, they also suggest a linear history that reproduces a number of contained and nostalgic black Canadian pockets/sites. Second, and equally significant, Clarke’s map of black Canada verifies blackness through the ways “difference” in Canada is continually dismissed, segregated, and violently uprooted. Many of the longstanding African-Canadian geographies Clarke discusses are also erased through demolition (Africville), secrecy (early black Halifax), out-migrations (Prince Edward Island), racial violence, and national forgetfulness. The oppositional geographies Clarke outlines—the “real,” contained, historical spaces and national/provincial negations of these spaces—demonstrate the implicit paradox of black Canadian geographies. The tensions between absence and presence shape how Clarke’s map is produced by looking back into the national memories, and memory lapses, of blackness.

Finally, although Clarke cites the brutal segregational tactics imposed on black men and women—in particular the demolition of Africville—he fails to acknowledge that these kinds of racist tactics hinder the meaning of being black in Canada and reinscribe an ambivalent sense of belonging for many black folks. The oppositional spaces Clarke presents invoke a strange kind of romanticism: rural black homelands—historically situated and embedded with a rugged Canadian-ness—in (eastern?) Canada that, despite racism, segregation, violence, offer a pristine map back to authentic, or “real,” African-Canadian identities. While singing “Canada ... this land is my land” (Clarke 1997a:38), Clarke disavows those who feel unattached to the nation-land as well as those who arrived in Canada after 1945, or those folks from various backgrounds and histories who moved to urban centres such as Toronto prior to 1945 and have remained there.

The map provided by Clarke is curious because it is based on containment and riddled with an anti-urban sentiment. If African-Canadian geography is understood this way, and rests on denying black social differences and heterogeneity, the meanings that are invested in place—such as power, resistance, community and connection—are undermined. Thus, the mutual construction of identity and place are reduced to stasis: identity processes and geographical complexities disappear. Clarke’s map is about, in fact, displacement: displacing those who live in Toronto, those who are “urban,” those who arrived during or after the Caribbean Domestic Scheme, those who are uncomfortably situated in the nation-state, those who migrate from rural regions to urban centres, those who seek out and chart a vast black Canada from urban, western, Caribbean, or black U.S. vantage points. I strongly agree with Clarke that black Canadian geographies (and black geographies in general) need to be addressed, mapped and rethought; however, the spatialization of blackness in/and Canada can speak to multiple black histories, geographies, and narratives, without dislodging differently located black communities.

If, as Clarke contends, we need to reclaim the “African odyssey in Canada” and embrace the “folkways” of black histories (1997a:38), we need to address the contradictoriness of blackness within the Canadian landscape: identities that are urban/rural simultaneously; communities that are elsewhere (remembering, imagining, travelling) and here at the same time; narratives that stake claim to the landscape, rewrite Canada, and share differences; geographies that are violently disrupted and/or negated but hauntingly present; migrations and locations that confuse the meaning of the nation; material, imagined, and ambivalent senses of place. Black geographies cannot be understood solely in the terms outlined by Clarke because stark absences, material locations and places underneath and beyond the immediate landscape are always in relation to, often produced by, what Barnor Hesse describes as “writing, signifying, testifying, reasoning, organizing, demonstrating, and campaigning” (1993:166) against social and geographic domination. Hesse’s observation notes the “changing same” (Jones 1963) of geography from a black perspective, suggesting that identities necessarily struggle over how domination and experience as socio-spatial contradictions are negotiated. Black geographies are not, as Clarke suggests, simply archival pinpoints on a map: black Canadian spaces and places speak to each other in ways that gesture to various historical, political, and social geographies inside and outside the Canadian nation-state, and inside and outside multiple black Canadian geographical locales.

Maps

In negating “other” black geographies—those that are, as he explains, more urban and recent—Clarke turns off conversations that crisscross black Canadian spaces, such as exchanges between recent and older black communities, or dialogues between Windsor, Ontario; Halifax, Nova Scotia; Owen Sound, Ontario; Vancouver, British Columbia; and Toronto, Ontario. The black geographical exchanges Clarke denies can be found in numerous black locations across the nation: in dance halls, print media, museums, homes, libraries, critical dialogues. The Black Cultural Centre in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, which houses and historicizes several past, present, and

cross-national black experiences, is just one example of how a specific, seemingly contained, place is made meaningful by invoking disparate connections in order to undermine and map an absented presence. Note, for example, the geographies implicit in the following birth places, keeping in mind that the Black Cultural Centre has suggested that *all of* these figures are concurrently important to black Canadian history, black Nova Scotian history, and African history: Mary Anne Shadd Cary (born in Wilmington, Delaware), Portia White (born in Halifax, Nova Scotia), Harry Jerome (born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan), Marcus Garvey (born in St. Anns, Jamaica), Elijah McCoy (born in Colchester, Ontario).

These historical narratives and figures are brought into the present via the actual space of the Black Cultural Centre and those who visit this location. Recent and historical geographies—of elsewhere and/or across the nation—can be drawn on to construct a past-present moment and geographies that are psychic, remembered, lived and material. The geographical experiences of these historical figures were not, furthermore, limited to their place of birth. For example, Shadd Cary lived and worked in both Canada and the U.S.; Garvey, via the United Negro Improvement Association, was active in the U.S., Canada, and Britain; White performed in the U.S., Canada, and Europe; Jerome moved to Vancouver and was educated in the U.S.; McCoy's invention—the McCoy lubricator—was a device used worldwide, and this product carried his name on global travels. There are too many questions implicit in these diverse geographies to list. Who was Portia White's audience and how was her work/music marketed? Was the product name "McCoy" understood as "black" worldwide? How did the spread of this product shape McCoy's local and global sense of place? In what ways did Mary Anne Shadd Cary, as a woman providing print culture, *The Provincial Freeman*, to American and Canadian black folks, envision the meaning of nation, Canada, and the United States? (cf. Walcott 2000b; Gilroy 1993; Massey 1994:146–173; McClintock 1995:207–231; Clifford 1992). The meanings of geography, identity, and place are revealed as both bordered and borderless, resting on local-outer-national tensions. Even though these varying places and histories are contained within a clearly defined geographical locale—within the walls of the cultural centre and/or Dartmouth—minds, imaginations, travels, legacies, and histories (of the visitors, the cultural centre's administration, the historical figures, and so on) prohibit containment.

Toronto's now defunct *Spear: The Magazine of Truth and Soul*, similarly, revealed black conversations between Halifax, Toronto, Montreal, several Caribbean locations, and rural Ontario. These conversations, like those invoked by other black cultural centres, black museums, and other, under-acknowledged black locations, situate black communities and identities firmly within the Canadian nation-state:⁴ neighbourhoods, residences, towns, and longstanding presences undoubtedly mark the where and how of black geographies. This suggests that those "other," more recent and urban black geographies, which Clarke problematically expunges from Canada, in fact assist in exposing deep and unpredictable connections, in that place is invested with meanings that exceed fixed, homogeneous communities: urban-rural-diasporas, past-present routes, force the black material and imaginary maps into a textured, and rich connective spatial politic.

Spear was a Toronto-based magazine that ran from 1971–1987 and was published by Danny Gooding. *Spear* predominately focused on, but was not limited to, black history, education, fashion, popular culture, theatre, and local, international, and Canadian politics.⁵ *Spear* offered cross-national and outer-national conversations for the black community; the magazine's concerns were so diverse that its political motivations, agendas, and topics were, in my view, held together only by readership and a very complicated understanding of blackness and black spaces. First, blackness was conceptually and discursively about those men, women, and children of African descent and their possible common interests; the magazine claimed to “publish everything you want to know about Black.” Everything about “black,” although encompassing a wide range of spaces, places, communities and experiences, assumed a blanket commonality among those reading the magazine. Second, the magazine sought to Canadianize their analyses and outlook by offering “factual analyses and comments on events and issues relating to Blacks across the world ... from a Canadian perspective.”⁶ Finally, *Spear* complicated and fractured both blackness and Canadian-ness by initiating dialogues from across Canada and outside the nation-state. Letters to the editor came from Owen Sound, Halifax, Ottawa, various locations in the Caribbean, and Toronto; commentary included news about African nations, Nova Scotia, Canada, and Toronto; contributing writers lived in Barbados, Detroit, Toronto, and Halifax. This branching out, and opening up, of blackness, black identities and black experiences both recognized and moved away from North American-centred discourses thus illustrating discursive and material diaspora spatializations. The magazine, in fact, re-signified the meaning of several black spaces and places—it was purchased and read by varying communities, discarded and/or preserved, while materially and abstractly initiating conversations and imaginations.

Spear relied on dispersed stories and articles, from inside and outside the Canadian nation, to put forth both a comprehensive and complex idea of blackness in Canada. Paul Gilroy, in *The Black Atlantic*, suggests that the experiences of black men and women in the West are signified by subjugation, dispersal, imaginations, histories and the transmittance of competing and complementary intellectual traditions (Gilroy 1993:28). The experiences of black women and men in Canada are both displaced and grounded; subjugation, dispersal, imaginations, and intellectual traditions illustrate how the black community “fits into,” disrupts, and experiences Canadian-ness. The black diaspora illustrates how the politics of location—geographical, linguistic, and imaginary—is importantly rooted in a politics of (un)belonging: rooted, routed, and rootless geographic tensions.

These uncomfortable or ambiguous locations raised important issues for the black community during *Spear*'s publication. Questions about what belonging is, questions about elsewhere—the Caribbean, Africa, the United States, black communities in Toronto and other parts of Canada—were all raised. For example, “International Rap Up,” which examined Caribbean and African political issues, was set alongside critiques of black U.S. class struggles, Halifax community events, and letters from rural Ontario. *Spear* connected these Toronto, outer-Canadian and national locations, thus legitimizing a black Canada inflected with roots and routes. Marginalization, racism, and discrimination instigated a print counterculture that questioned and interrogated

the meaning of blackness in/and Canada. Articles and editorials critiqued and explored the Canadian nation by showing how black men and women were represented in the media, what kinds of black businesses were successful, where black men and women shopped, and how to overcome national/racist discourses such as immigration policies, housing, and education (Wills 1973:23–24; Stanton 1973:10; Stantionis 1975:5).

The disappointment in nation, the gazes/desires/places outside the nation, and the critical assessments all charted Canada according to (un)certain maps. *Spear* rarely, if at all, produced rhetoric about being a “real” Canadian; instead, the starting point was (un)belonging and understanding this via a Canadian perspective. Sheldon Taylor’s review of black history thus ends by suggesting that black men and women are not only “Canadian,” but “they have been influenced by the American, African, and West Indian Black, and now a new bond has been materialized” (1975:30). Taylor’s observations highlight a continuous black subject that is historically and geographically linked by dispersal.

The articles in *Spear* augmented Taylor’s observations. They drew on American, Caribbean and Canadian histories in order to situate black Canada/Toronto amongst the tensions between elsewhere and geographic specificity. Ghettoization in the Southern United States was likened to living conditions in Halifax; slavery and racism were presented as the keys to understanding the plight of black Canadian children; Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King were invoked to bolster a discussion of rental projects in Halifax (Wills 1973:23–24; Best 1975:18–21; Grant 1975:15). Arguably, Canadian blackness, because it is uncertain, diasporic, *and* rooted in the nation, provided the opportunity for black women and men to rethink histories and produce intertextual, rather than linear or contained, accounts of blackness. (Re)writing and reconfiguring Canada meant, therefore, not only imagining elsewhere, but pointing to material realities and living conditions that the Canadian nation fostered by asking the black community to un-belong.

Mappings

One of the under-explored concepts George Elliot Clarke presents is the idea of black Canadian “folkways” (1997a:38). Rethinking Clarke’s map, and Canada, through folkways unravels black geography in/and Canada. Folkways suggests that geographic locations—past and present, rural and urban, elsewhere and here—are infused with memory, text, subjects, and social relations. This idea insists that formerly unutterable absences and geo-political locations are re-presented, expressed, and lived. Black Canada can therefore be conceptualized as routes and sites which carry with them multiple interpretations and cartographic possibilities: a blood-presence is invited to intervene, connect, and complicate disparate black Canadian communities. Black Canadian geographies, as spatializations and critiques of difference, material realities, geographic connections, should be understood as invested with multiple creative and discursive meanings. Recognizing blackness as always in, and part of, Canada, and locating the textured nature of stark absences and outer-national gestures, provides

continuous mappings rather than a singular map which may (dis)place, throw out, or constrain black Canada.

The production of space/place involves, then, both material and imaginary texts. Materialities and the subjective readings/imaginings of elsewhere intertwine to illustrate the different ways black Canadian spaces are simultaneously negated and affirmed. The loss and reinvention of space reflects disavowal, racialized geographies, and reoccupation, all of which take up space within existing and future black histories and geographies. Products, ideas, affirmations and negations exit and enter space on various levels which mutate linear time: histories are brought into the present, forgotten and revisited, depending on identity, location and accessibility. This fracturing of space/place involves looking back, ahead, and elsewhere; it is about continuously remaking blackness and revisiting, tolerating, and contesting unwelcome geo-political spaces. When Clarke asks, then, “where is the rue for Marie-Joseph Angélique,” (Clarke 1997a:38) the slave who set fire to most of Montreal in the 18th century, we must consider that her street is, perhaps, psychically located, hauntingly present, written across and beyond the nation via black intellectual histories and narratives. We must also consider that Angélique materially overturned Montreal and consequently revised the meaning of blackness, whiteness, and space in Canada. Her streetlessness and geographical absence underscore how black Canadian geographies are lived, experienced, and continually contravened. We should consider the material embeddedness of black geographies, the intentional negation of black histories, and the production of black spaces—all at once—and note that Angélique’s (absent/present) geographies are reproduced and reconsidered in various spaces across/outside Canada: urban, rural, recent, old.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank the anonymous referees for their thorough comments and John Mann for his generosity and interest in black Canadian spaces.
2. Here, although it is not my focus, I acknowledge the colonization of First Nations people and their lands.
3. Rinaldo Walcott (2000a) also briefly explores these geo-political connections in *Riot*.
4. Such as the black museum in Collingwood, Ontario, St. Noberts Art Centre in Manitoba, restaurants, Caribana, films, discussions of Caribbean domestic workers and their relationship to workplaces, homes, and diasporic place(s), the routes of migrant workers, novels, hair salons, record shops, and so on. See especially Brand (2001:110–111). See also Brand (1991); Silvera (1983); Foster (1996); Boyce Davies (1994); Bailey (1999).
5. Please note that primary source research was done at the Archives of Ontario which does not carry the full collection of *Spear*. This project is drawn on what early editions of the magazine were available, and roughly spans 1973–1975. For a more thorough discussion of *Spear* see Katherine McKittrick, “Pasts, Presences, and Politics: Black Women, *Spear* Magazine, and the Assertion of Here and Then,” (forthcoming).
6. The promotional advertisements for *Spear* magazine are consistent with the text discussed here and can be found in any issue. The excerpts referenced here were taken from *Spear* 3, no. 11 (1974): 4.

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