

## The Black Woman Native Speaking Subject: Reflections of a Black Female Professor in Canada

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**Abstract:** This paper interweaves literary and feminist theories alongside personal life stories to demonstrate the collapse of the boundaries of the personal and the intellectual in the pedagogical practices of Black female professors. The paper suggests that acknowledging the precariousness of performing one's Blackness in university classrooms presents new possibilities for shared learning.

**Keywords:** Blacks in Canada; Caribbean diaspora; gender representations

This article offers a self-reflexive analysis of my position as a Black, Jamaican, Canadian, woman professor, teaching courses about the African Diaspora in the Americas in Toronto, Canada. As a diasporic city, Toronto functions as an important crossroads of Black cultures from the Caribbean, the Horn of Africa and West Africa, the United States and Europe, challenging assumptions of a homogenizing Blackness and complicating questions of national be/longing. In this article, I draw on my own shifting geographical and class positions as a Black woman born into the Jamaican working class, and now teaching and researching in one of Canada's largest universities, as an important perspective from which to reflect on Canada's relationship to its raced, classed, and gendered subjects. I frame this intertextual conversation about Black women's complex location in the nation and academy around three sets of narratives that detail my own lived experiences in diaspora—stories of arrival, being, and becoming. These stories interweave my personal biography with feminist and literary theory. Tracing my historical trajectory from Jamaica to Canada as a graduate student and later a university professor, I use these journeys as a theoretical lens through which to examine the function of Caribbean women's fiction in the articulation of diaspora dislocation. The article acknowledges, in particular, the ways in which the Jamaican writer Erna Brodber and Trinidadian-Canadian Dionne Brand have helped to shape my understanding of my location in the world by providing the critical, poetic, and theoretical language I need to make sense of my multiple and evolving positions in Canadian society.

As a reflection on anti-racist pedagogy, this paper also argues that being Black and female and Caribbean in Canadian university classrooms—spaces of whiteness

and male authority—represents a distinct kind of precariousness, a vulnerability this article models deliberately in its risky exposure of an individual Black woman through the retelling of her personal and communal histories.

Second- and third-wave feminists, including anti-racist feminists, have consistently identified the retelling of personal stories as a critical component of feminist research methodology in that such stories carry meaning beyond the individual narrator and play an important role in the critique of political and social relationships (Combahee River Collective 1978; Cotterill and Letherby 1993; Fine 1992; Hanisch 2000; Lorde 1984; MacKinnon 1983). Cotterill and Letherby (1993), for example, insist that “all research contains elements of autobiography and biography, both intellectual and personal” (68). Magda Lewis (2005) further explains that “it is not the idiosyncratic aspects of a story that make it interesting and, more importantly, relevant, but rather the fact that all personal experiences have their genesis in the ideologies and practices that drive the larger political, social and economic structures” (Lewis, under “On Being Startled”). Rather than existing as “pure or special knowledge,” individual experiences, then, arise from and are produced within political relations (Swan 2008, 390). “The social,” Swan (2008) argues, “is not collapsed into the self but rather the self is a social and historic event” (396). Understood in this way, personal reflection can allow for moments of powerful intervention, in which critical reflection takes the form of “speaking with experience and speaking with the self in ways that point to our social location, positioning and classed resources” (396). Indeed, according to Lewis (2005), “a retrospective is not a bad idea so long as we understand that the power of looking back lies in the way it helps us understand the present and possibly imagine a future with more clarity” (Lewis, under “Conceptual Framework”).

I understand my own acts of retelling and of retrospection as both critical reflection and commitment to preserving Black women’s presences

in those spaces where they are most threatened—where their bodies and voices seem most out of place. “If you want to remain,” bell hooks argues in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), “you’ve got, in a sense, to remember yourself—because to remember yourself is to see yourself always as a body in a system that has not become accustomed to your presence or to your physicality” (135). To remember myself within the context of a shared history with other Black women in Jamaica and racialized immigrants in Canada is to insist on my and our right “to remain” in a collective consciousness on which our presence is still being written. Despite the danger involved in the remembering, it is the hope of this article that going to the place of our fear in ways that are self-reflexive and honest will offer an opportunity for intervention in our shared learning about ourselves (as women, Black people, immigrants, university teachers, and students) and the world.

## Stories of Arrival

I came to Canada in my early twenties as a graduate student with a Canadian Commonwealth scholarship that funded most of my education for an MA and then PhD in English. My schooling in Jamaica had provided me with a solidly British education at one of the country’s top all-girl schools and the University of the West Indies, Mona (UWI). I had been trained in the arts, in literature, and the major European languages to take my place as a respectable, accomplished, polished, somebody’s wife, and member of the Jamaican middle class. The deep irony in all of this was that I was not born into the Jamaican middle classes. My family was very poor. I remember sitting through many high school classes hungry, and in the evenings when there was no electricity I studied deep into the night with a kerosene lamp. But, I was also what we call in Jamaica “bright.” That and my complete investment in the process of education allowed my facilitation across the Jamaican class lines and eventually on to a first-class flight to Canada.

My education at the University of the West Indies

had already, however, begun to unravel the hypocrisy of the Jamaican class system as well as de-romanticize my British education. It was at UWI that I was first introduced to the formal study of Caribbean Literature and to two writers: the historian and poet Kamau Brathwaite (after whom I later named my son) and Erna Brodber, a historian, sociologist, and anthropologist who also writes fiction. These writers transformed my thinking about literature, the Caribbean, and myself.

I arrived in Canada in the early 1990s, unsure of the future but armed with a copy of Broder's first novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* (1980). I knew I was going to study this novel; I wasn't sure how. One of the first courses I selected as a graduate student at York University was a course in Postcolonial Caribbean Literature, but the course had only one Caribbean woman writer on its reading list, and it was not Brodber. Neither my professor nor any of the students in the class had ever heard of her. I must have been braver than I realized because I insisted that *Jane and Louisa* be added to the course. Moreover, I volunteered to lead its discussion, taking on the role of cultural, linguistic, and literary interpreter as a first-year MA student in a class that included upper-level PhDs. My experiences as a graduate student brought into sharp focus what it meant to be a Black/African Jamaican woman living in Canada. My increasing exposure to Black women's fiction—the works of Brodber, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Dionne Brand—and to Black feminist theory became lifelines for me. This was no longer just about getting an education to make something of oneself; this was about finding myself, about making sense of my precarious and shifting realities in a country I was only beginning to understand.

Erna Brodber's work had particular meaning in this process not only because she is Jamaican but because of her approach to literature: not as art-for-art's sake but as recovery of Black people's beings. As a historian, sociologist, and social anthropologist, Erna Brodber sees her fiction as an extension of a larger

project of the recovery of African people's fragmented histories. Problematizing her own position as both participant and observer in her research about Black Caribbean peoples, Brodber discovered that she had to challenge the academic discourse and practice of the disciplines in which she was trained to make sense of her relationship with the communities in which she laboured:

I felt that my examination of Jamaican society could not be written from the standpoint of the objective outside observer communicating to disinterested scholars. It had to incorporate my "I" and to be presented in such a way that the social workers I was training saw their own "I" in the work, making this culture-in-personality study a personal and possibly transforming work. (Brodber 1990, 166)

Brodber sees her role as an applied anthropologist who can write meaningful narratives about Jamaican peoples' beings and cultural presences that can ultimately lead to transformative social action and change. For her, there is little difference, in this regard, between the fiction she writes and the historical, sociological, and ethnographic data she gathers. In the same way that Brodber challenges the geographic, national, and cultural boundaries erected across the African diaspora, her Black female body as writing subject upsets the "sacred"—often patriarchal and racist—assumptions of academia and the literary canon. It was this understanding of Brodber's intellectual activism that illuminated my awareness of my own disruptive body as speaking subject in Canadian university classrooms and pushed me to explore practices of critical and transformative pedagogy.

## Stories of Being

Every September as I stand before a new set of two hundred students in Cultures of Resistance in the Americas, my largest undergraduate course, I am made aware of the power and limits of my Black female body as signifier and my voice as conveyor of

knowledge. My body and voice upset patriarchal and racist assumptions of academia, but because I am teaching something understood as Black Studies, my presence is also weirdly comforting. It reinforces stereotypical and racist assumptions about who has the right to speak in particular spaces about particular kinds of experiences. Malinda Smith et al. (2017) rightly identify the right to speak as a function of unconscious/implicit biases in Canadian classrooms where the voices and viewpoints of white male professors and students are generally privileged over all others (269-70). My university classrooms, constructed as special or unique minority spaces, therefore, are simultaneously valued and undervalued. On the one hand, I am incredibly aware of the power of my voice and presence. When a Black woman signals her desire to speak, everyone is afraid because they never know in any given moment who or what she will indict: racism, sexism, classism, child abuse, or police violence. Precisely, because there is so much pain scripted onto the Black female body, Black women's voices and bodies are always accusatory. On the other hand, that voice is allowed only within certain carefully demarcated spaces, often dismissed as irrelevant and tangential to the larger, more "serious" business of the academy. In this regard, the act of writing for Black women writers and the act of teaching/speaking for Black female professors is fraught with multiple dangers.

Despite the dangers inherent in the endeavours, the act of writing or speaking, of naming the self, are important acts of self-definition and self-healing for Black women in the Americas. As Audre Lorde explains, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect" (Lorde 1984, 56). If only out of this need to save the self, Black women, Lorde insists, "share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us" (43). Similarly, the act of teaching for and by Black women can be a critical "counter-hegemonic

act, a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (hooks 1994, 2). But because Black women's research and pedagogy can be both transgressive and liberatory, they are also acts of courage. The anguish that lies at the heart of writing, speaking, or performing an engaged pedagogy for Black women is precisely the knowing how to tell the deepest parts of ourselves.

When I stand in front of a classroom to talk about what it means to be Black or Caribbean in Canada, my body and the history that frames it necessarily betray me, enter the room before me, and position me always as a translator of cultural meaning (Brand 2001, 25). I am involved, whether I want to or not, in the project of translating my own embodied experiences within Canadian classrooms where those experiences have largely been erased. This knowledge raises many difficult questions. What happens when the professor is a Black woman native speaking subject? How does she detach herself from the physical and imaginative body she speaks in and is called on to translate? bell hooks (1994) argues that this intellectual detachment, this separation of the mind and body is actually impossible:

The arrangement of the body we are talking about deemphasizes the reality that professors are in the classroom to offer something of ourselves to the students. The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies. Significantly, those of us who are trying to critique biases in the classroom have been compelled to return to the body to speak about ourselves as subjects in history. We are all subjects in history. (1994, 139)

"Black experiences in any modern city or town," Dionne Brand agrees, "is a haunting. One enters a room and history follows; one enters a room and history precedes. History is already seated in the chair

in the empty room when one arrives” (Brand 2001, 25). To position my Black female imagined body as speaking subject in Canadian university classrooms, I argue then, demands that I account for who I am, how I come to occupy space. It is a deliberate and critical act of courage through which I seek to reshape and rework colonial, patriarchal knowledges, but also to complicate the telling and reading of Black women’s and my own stories, always aware that there is no end to the telling because the learning is ongoing; it is incomplete and it is shared. Accepting that I am, in fact, like Brodber insists, part of the polity being studied, rather than creating a space of authority and silence, allows me to encourage a learning space where students understand that mine is a particular story coming from a particular speaker out of a particular history, and that their voices add to the telling of that story and the shaping and reshaping of the knowledges that are shared.

But, if I want students to write their own stories about being in and in relation to the world, what might those stories say? More than anything else, I want my students to see beyond their own singular oppression to understand how oppressions intersect and that each student in a shared classroom brings her or his own struggles, histories, and stories to the texts we read and to our conversations. This kind of realization can actually be very difficult for students who have historically been silenced and minoritized, but find themselves in majority Black classrooms such as mine for the first time. Students enter these classes often focusing so much on “race” that they initially ignore the differences of class, gender, age, religion, sexuality, language, and nationality operating in the classroom. As Lorde cautions, it is tempting for those of us who stand outside of the parameters of power within our societies to identify one singular way in which we are different and to “assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions of difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing” (Lorde 1984, 116). It is important to me, therefore, that I encourage students to be sensitive to and self-

reflexive of the ways in which they may be perpetuating various forms of oppression. In their focus on their racialized identities, it is easy for students, for example, to erect and privilege hegemonic voices and positions (that may be disallowed elsewhere) and to re-inscribe notions about who is and is not authorized to speak. For this reason, I begin the class, *Cultures of Resistance*, each year by challenging my own and students’ understanding of race and cultural identities, as well as my own authority to speak. I believe very firmly, as Manning Marable argues, that it is “our ability to transcend racial chauvinism and inter-ethnic hatred and the old definitions of ‘race,’ to recognize the class commonalities and joint social-justice interests of all groups in the restructuring of . . . economy and social order,” that “will be key to constructing a nonracist democracy, transcending ancient walls of white violence, corporate power and class” (Marable 1995, 201). By understanding this, students are empowered ultimately to do what I hope they will, which is to transform the world. As Freire also insists, “The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy” must first allow the oppressed to “unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation” (Freire 2000, 54). “The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation,” he adds, “is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action” (66).

### **Stories of Becoming**

I conclude this article by offering one story from my concrete position situated in Canada as a point from which we might begin to develop such a praxis of transformation. This is one of my many reflections about what it means to be a Black woman, alienated from continental Africa and physically removed from Jamaica, living in diaspora. This reflection again begins with Erna Brodber.

In the three summers of 2010 to 2012, I attended Emancipation celebrations in Woodside, St. Mary, the

small village in deep rural Jamaica in which Brodber lives. I found the reasoning sessions at Blackspace, the remembrance of the ancestors at Daddy Rock, the vigil and the reenactment, to be powerful performances of not only history, but also community. Woodside is not an ordinary village. It is a village set apart—in “mossy coverts, dim and cool”—mostly far away from the heat and troubles of Jamaica’s largest capital city, Kingston (Brodber 1980, 9). Its history is officially recorded, and farmers have been known to gather here for informal lectures in history, philosophy, and politics (Brodber 2004). While it is a village that is set apart, it is not parochial. The outside world routinely travels to Woodside from the United States, Canada, and Europe. Woodside, in fact, has for many years practiced a model of educo-tourism in which visitors stay in the homes of local villagers. As a kind of modern village, it is in many ways the creation of Brodber herself. As a scholar and respected Caribbean author, she has travelled across the African continent, taught in university classes in the United States, Britain, and at the University of the West Indies, and contributed to an impressive body of research. She has her feet, like the protagonist in her novel, *Louisiana* (1994), on the shores of the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa, joining her small village to the rest of the world. Miss Lixie, as the villagers call her, is both iconic and ordinary. One need only read her novels to get a sense of how much she has contributed to an understanding of Jamaican society, but there is nothing pretentious about her. I have seen her sit on a rock on a rural hillside with her “people” and eat roast plantain and saltfish.

I begin with this long description of Woodside because although I was born in Jamaica, I have no such place of my own. I have no village like Woodside or any other village for that matter. My grandmother, who had already escaped her own rural village and her first unhappy marriage to try life again, raised me in Kingston. For most of my life, she constituted the farthest reaches of my personal history. My skin colour—the throwback brown of

some long-lost ancestor—marked me as special in her eyes and worthy of particular care. I recognize the history out of which her colour prejudice emerged and the “privilege” it afforded me in a poor, working-class Black family, but I do not blame her for it. In many ways my grandmother saved my life. She cultivated in me a love of reading and gave me the freedom to live in my imagination. She died three months after I moved to Canada on my coveted Canadian Commonwealth Scholarship. She had not been sick. Everyone said she died of a broken heart. *Chagrin* is what Edwidge Danticat’s protagonist, Sophie, calls this dis-ease in Danticat’s novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994). I went home, a young woman in my early twenties, to bury the first love of my life and to cry. She was a casualty of my desire to move up in life.

In the intervening years that I have lived in Canada, I have come to think of myself as a child of diaspora. Like Dionne Brand explains in her memoir *Map to the Door of No Return* (2001), “I feel bereft. I feel abandoned . . . to city squares and windows and public spaces where I am on display and must make a display, like exotica” (211). I have long been disconnected from any discernible roots: “Marooned, tenantless, deserted. Desolation castaway, abandoned in the world. [We] was, is, wandered, wanders as spirits who dead cut, banished, seclude, refuse, shut the door, derelict, relinquished, apart” (Brand 2000, 213). I cannot help but think that if this describes my sense of reality, how much more it is reflective of my students who are largely second- and third-generation Caribbean and continental African immigrants in Canada: cut off from the Caribbean, cut off from Africa, cut off from even recent memories, homeless, villageless, nationless. What does it mean for these generations to live as Black people in Canada?

Ioan Davies in “Theorizing Toronto” summarizes a number of theoretical conversations about the city circulating in the mid- to late-twentieth century: “Central features of these debates involved the notions of culture, communication, and the ‘character’ of the city, issues which have become

common to all cities in the process of transformation, but perhaps in the case of Toronto strikingly pertinent because of the national discussions within Canada of bilingualism and multiculturalism, of federalism and provincialism . . .” (Davies 2000, 15). While Davies rightly identifies multiculturalism as key to a national discourse of Canada, Black Canadian identities are absented from the Toronto his theorists describe. What is privileged, rather, are the city’s Scottish, English, Presbyterian, Catholic, and Anglican “roots” (18). Contests between the city’s “ideal” past preserved in memories of “Toronto the Good” or “Toronto the British” and the city’s technologically and architecturally changing future are fought only between its political elite—the “old” and cosmopolitan bourgeoisie (20-21). The problem for the “old” bourgeoisie is the fear “that a proud city with its Presbyterian and Anglican heritage was being dragged into the maelstrom of the ‘modern,’ with buildings and art that would change it beyond recognition” (20-21). In these debates, struggles over the city are really struggles over larger questions of origin, cultural authority, and class privilege fueled by a desire for a discernible hegemonic nationalism. In this sense, the notion of roots, as in origin and right of place, demarcates fixed boundaries of political and cultural power and class privilege. For Davies, the usefulness of these theories is in helping us demarcate the boundaries of “the habitable city,” as it is constructed “both in the imagination and in the everyday” (31). Toronto must be imagined, invented, before it can be inhabited.

What I find useful in Davies theories is precisely this idea that it is possible to construct, to imagine the boundaries of a habitable city, a city in which Black people might live. Hirmani Bannerji (2000) takes this further by envisaging the possibilities of a “habitable” Toronto in its “encroaching” diversity:

The possibilities for constructing a radically different Canada emerge only from those who have been ‘othered’ as the insider-outsiders of the nation. It is their standpoints which,

oppositionally politicized, can take us beyond the confines of gender and race and enable us to challenge class through a critical and liberating vision. . . . They serve to remind us of the Canada that could exist.” (Bannerji 2000, 81)

For Caribbean diasporic communities residing in Toronto, where, as Clifford notes, much of diaspora living “involves dwelling, maintaining communities, having collective homes away from home,” there is an imperative to construct, to invent, “alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity” that can “maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference” (Clifford 1997, 251). Is this kind of radical subversion possible for second- and third-generation Caribbean and African immigrants in Toronto? How do we move displaced Caribbean and African people from the margins into a “habitable” city where Black bodies can “live inside, with a difference”? M. NourbeSe Philip, a Trinidadian Canadian poet, succeeds precisely in subverting the meaning of the word margin, locating in it a more radical possibility, born out of the specific history of the Americas:

To think of ourselves as marginal or marginalized is to put us forever at the edge and not center stage. The word margin, however, has another meaning, which I prefer to think of when it is used as a descriptive term for managed peoples—it also means frontier. And when we think of ourselves as being on the frontier, our perspective immediately changes. Our position is no longer one in relation to the managers, but we now face outward, away from them, to the undiscovered space and place up ahead which we are about to discover. (Philip 1997, 300)

By contesting the historical terms of discovery and colonization in the Americas, Philip rewrites the perspective of the marginalized and the oppressed as essential, and not peripheral, to an entire region’s history and future.

It has been my goal in this article to register the varying and complex experiences of living as a Black Caribbean woman in diaspora. I embarked on its writing, terrified by how much it required me to reveal about myself, and the ways in which it would invariably leave me exposed and vulnerable. And yet, I decided that the memories it made me confront held meaning not only for me but for my students—many of whom belong to second or third generations of immigrant communities in Canada and are still trying to navigate the competing narratives of hope in education that their parents have sold to them and disillusion or distrust in a Canadian Dream. As someone who was born in urban Jamaica and who has lived in Canada for half of her life, I am awed by the sense of community in the village of Woodside—the surety of it—but I have come to embody in many ways a deep understanding of my own diasporic displacement. Like Brand's character, Eula, in *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (2000): "I would like a village where I might remain and not a village I would leave. A village with tin shacks and flame trees. A village like the one you used to tell us about, where great Mama Bola once lived. A village that I long for, with a light in a wooden house" (247). Brodber's ability to claim a village, to stand by an ancestral altar and name each person's line, in some cases as far back as Africa, lies outside of my own range of thinking about myself in history. Like Eula, I have no village to return to, no village "where I might remain" (Brand 2000, 247). As a naturalized Canadian citizen, I am involved self-consciously and out of necessity in a project of reimagining a more habitable Toronto (and Canada) where Black women can be more comfortably located. As an educator, I am committed to the exploration of Black people's multiple subjectivities, the recognition of our various crossings, and the honouring of the personal truths voiced at the crossroads of our interconnected lives. Our journeys will look different from each other's, as will our stories, but we have the potential to write an incredible narrative that just may transform the world.

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