

National Roots and Diasporic Routes: Tracing the Flying African Myth in Canada

by

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## Abstract

This thesis analyzes the presence and progression of the Flying African Myth in Canada—a myth which originally reflected the desires for escape and cross-Atlantic return shared by generations of Black slaves throughout the Americas. While related West African themes of *spirit* flight and human *transformation* do suggest a historic relationship, it was only in the New World that *human* powers of flight emerged. Thus, a new mythology sprung from the desires to transcend the bonds of slavery and return to an African home. However, despite being well documented as Pan-American, this myth has gone largely uninvestigated in its Canadian context thus far—an omission which follows an extensive pattern of Black cultural erasure in Canada as well as the exclusion of Canada in much Black diasporic scholarship. These absences lead to my exploration of the unique circumstances in Canada that continue to influence this myth, including the constant "struggle against erasure" and the "fragile coalition of identities" that constitute the Black diaspora in Canada, as well as federal legislation that protects the nation's self-image as a multicultural "mosaic." I argue not only that the myth exists more extensively in Canadian oral and written literatures than may be expected, but that the myth may be alternately interpreted as a method of preserving Canadian national roots as well as navigating Black diasporic routes. I suggest that these two opposing functions of the myth, to pronounce both fixity and fluidity, reflect the tendencies of critics George Elliott Clarke and Rinaldo Walcott to articulate differing approaches to Black identity and culture in Canada. This thesis also embraces the aims set forth in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, demonstrating how the image of human flight further challenges the oppressive ideologies of Western modernity as well as reimagines the possibilities and implications of the Black diaspora. Indeed, the myth has literally contributed to the formation of the Black diaspora in that it is a cultural artefact shared throughout the Americas and associated with the desire for African return. But the myth also offers a means by which to reconceptualise the structure of the Black diaspora. That is, as the medium of flight, the sky offers an alternative, though equally flexible and more ubiquitous, space for locating the Black diaspora beyond the Atlantic basin. Moreover, the notions of impossibility, immateriality, and imagination which are embraced by this myth circumvent Gilroy's implicit affirmation of individualism, rationalism, physical mobility, as well as static and bounded geographic space—elements which compromise his productive critique of nationalisms, ethnic essentialisms, and particularly of modernity.

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## Introduction

This thesis analyzes the presence and progression of the Flying African Myth in Canada— a myth which, despite being well documented as Pan-American, has gone largely uninvestigated in its Canadian context thus far. The basic thematic and narrative components of the myth, as well as a brief history of its inception in the Americas, are presented in Chapter One. This chapter reviews much of the preceding research on this myth which focuses on its iterations throughout Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latin, and United States locations. This chapter thus provides a foundation of knowledge about the myth which illuminates the importance and implications of a Canadian literary intervention into this body of research. That is, engaging in this intervention responds to issues of Black cultural erasure in Canada and attends to the absence of any systematic consideration of this myth north of the United States— ultimately challenging any sense that either Blacks in Canada or Canada as a part of the Black diaspora are merely peripheral. This overview in Chapter One thus enables a productive exploration of Canadian versions in Chapter Three— a comparative approach which demonstrates how the myth's major transformations across time and place reveal particular manifestations of both diasporic longing as well as desires for national belonging.

In Chapter Two I investigate the causes and consequences of neglecting Canadian versions of the Flying African Myth, arguing that this scholarly omission follows an extensive pattern of Black cultural erasure. This absence leads to my consideration of the unique circumstances in Canada that continue to influence this myth, such as the constant "struggle against erasure" and the "fragile coalition of

identities” that constitute the Black diaspora<sup>1</sup> in Canada, as well as federal legislation that protects the nation’s self-image as a multicultural “mosaic.” Throughout this chapter I engage with the differing critical methodologies of Black Canadian scholars such as George Elliott Clarke’s “nativism”<sup>2</sup> and Rinaldo Walcott’s deterritorialization. In Walcott’s use of the term, “nativism” is primarily concerned with the fight for inclusion in Canadian society and the commemoration of Canadian Black history for the purposes of building a Black national presence. Deterritorialization, on the other hand, focuses on building transnational and diasporic relationships, reimagining Black cultural identity independently from the nation-state paradigm. These approaches are further situated within a larger discussion of nationality, transnationality, and diasporic affiliation from scholars including Benedict Anderson, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy.

In particular, Paul Gilroy’s ground-breaking intervention into Diaspora Studies, developed throughout his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, offers a broader and more elastic range of possibilities for understanding Black diasporic formation than those frameworks which place Africa at the centre and origin. Fundamentally constructing a critique of Western modernity along with the concomitant “national, nationalistic, and ethnically absolute paradigms of

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<sup>1</sup> George Elliott Clarke, *Eyeing the North Star : Directions in African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> In common parlance, the term “nativism” suggests xenophobia and hostile opposition to the internalization of ostensibly foreign cultures and peoples, or at the very least a favoured status for a nation’s established inhabitants. As will be dealt with in greater detail later in this thesis, George Elliott Clarke and Rinaldo Walcott have engaged in heated debate about race and immigration at various points in their careers. It is thus possible that Walcott uses the term “nativism” to rhetorically exaggerate Clarke’s position. In some instances I repeat Walcott’s term throughout this thesis, not in an inflammatory sense to suggest that Clarke is in fact xenophobic, but rather to follow through with Walcott’s own contrasts between their differing perspectives. I have in all cases enclosed this term in quotation marks to emphasize the uncertainty of its meaning.

cultural criticism,”<sup>3</sup> Gilroy favours “those hidden expressions [of Black diasporic culture], both residual and emergent, that attempt to be global or outer-national in nature.”<sup>4</sup> He re-examines “the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory”<sup>5</sup> by tracing the Black Atlantic as a space that continues to be shaped by cultural and commodity exchange, a process that he symbolizes through the image of the (slave) ship. Gilroy importantly emphasizes “that in contrast to seeing identity as tied to ‘roots and rootedness’ we might more productively see ‘identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes.’”<sup>6</sup>

Despite Gilroy’s significant contributions which reveal the transnationalism of Black diasporic culture, I outline four inconsistencies with the form and focus of his analysis that impede his productive critique of Western modernity. As Heather Smyth has noted, “Gilroy himself anticipated this need for a reorientation of diaspora theory.”<sup>7</sup> Chapter Two of this thesis thus embraces the aims set forth in *The Black Atlantic*, challenging the oppressive ideologies of Western modernity and reimagining the possibilities and implications of the Black diaspora.

Chapter Three compares and contrasts close readings of the myth throughout Canada along with those that arise elsewhere, mapping the changes which occur across national and cultural borders. The primary differences that are explored include whether or not a given example draws upon the long and significant history of the myth to commemorate the past, affirms a sense of racial or social progress, and figures

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Heather Smyth, “The Black Atlantic Meets the Black Pacific: Multimodality in Kamau Brathwaite and Wayde Compton,” *Callaloo* 37, no. 2 (2014): 389.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

national belonging as a remedy to cultural erasure. This chapter synthesises and evaluates the conclusions reached in the previous two through the use of specific examples that are from or about Canada. This section reveals how the myth functions with differing purposes and effects across various locations— sometimes contributing to the project of nation building and at other times exploring diasporic networks. I argue not only that the myth exists more extensively in Canadian oral and written literatures than may be expected, but that the myth may be alternately interpreted as a method of preserving Canadian national roots as well as navigating Black diasporic routes. I suggest that these two opposing functions of the myth, to pronounce both fixity and fluidity, reflect the tendencies of George Elliott Clarke and Rinaldo Walcott to articulate differing approaches to Black identity and culture in Canada. That is, Black Canada has been described as a “fragile coalition of identities” precisely because of the diverse geographical, historical, social, cultural, linguistic, and economic factors that have shaped its development. The consequences of these factors can be observed by comparing and contrasting variations of the Flying African Myth in Canada. This chapter also builds upon Gilroy’s analysis, demonstrating how the Flying African Myth can attend to the four main inconsistencies with the form and focus of *The Black Atlantic* that I outline in Chapter Two. The image of flight conveyed by the Flying African Myth offers an extension to Gilroy’s image of the ship. This alternative image allows for a formulation of the Black diaspora that embraces the notions of impossibility, immateriality, and imagination that circumvent Gilroy’s implicit affirmation of individualism, rationalism, physical mobility, as well as static and bounded geographic space.



The themes, concepts, and events discussed throughout this thesis belong to a very specific history of transatlantic slavery and Pan-American racial violence. In particular, the Flying African Myth has navigated the struggle and achievements of Blacks who continue to experience the reverberations of these injustices throughout the New World. Significantly, control over who becomes literate and what becomes legible has been a primary tool for establishing these racial inequities—a means by which to disempower enslaved peoples, disenfranchise Black voters, and exclude immigrants coming from non-English-speaking countries. Moreover, the largely disembodied nature of the written word continues to conceal the differences and disparities of race in much academic research. I feel it important in writing this thesis, therefore, to clarify that I cannot claim the Flying African Myth to be a reflection of my experiences or those of my racial antecedents. Nevertheless, as a person who “live[s] on the cumulative hurt of others”<sup>8</sup> by occupying the land wherein this suffering has been inflicted, it is also necessary for me— along with others in a similar position— to confront this history of racial violence and its likely future articulations. I am, as Zadie Smith states in *White Teeth*, “involved”<sup>9</sup> or, as Dionne Brand states in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, “implicated”<sup>10</sup> in the conditions which necessitated the development and dissemination of the Flying African Myth. Ultimately then, I agree with Rinaldo Walcott’s assertion that

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<sup>8</sup> Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001), 82.

<sup>9</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2000), 363. Smith states forgivingly that “Involved is neither good nor bad. It is just a consequence of living, a consequence of occupation and immigration, or empires and expansion, of living in each other’s pockets... one becomes involved and it is a long trek back to becoming uninvolved.”

<sup>10</sup> Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001), 166. Describing how she felt when witnessing a coup in Grenada that she narrowly escaped, Brand asks “What happens if you stand in a moment like this? Your own body must die, too, I suppose. Even if you do not know. Aren’t we all implicated in each other? In any moment like this we must die, too. I was that body draping the cliff.”

through such work “the university can play an important role” in the “struggle for a genuine multicultural citizenry in Canada.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?: Writing Black Canada*, 2nd rev. ed. (Toronto, Ont.: Insomniac Press, 2003), 64. Walcott writes at length about the current limitations and hypocrisies of this multicultural rhetoric, but remains optimistic about the beneficial possibilities of multiculturalism if genuinely achieved.

## Chapter 1

The Flying African Myth has traditionally reflected the desires for freedom and cross-Atlantic return shared by generations of African descendants who have inherited the trauma of forced displacement and enslavement throughout the Americas. Throughout its many variations, this myth encapsulates a story of collective resistance and ancestral homeland longing. Stories about New World slaves who could escape slavery by flying back to Africa have permeated Black popular culture and sacred ritual. Examples can be found in the folktales and legends of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, as well as versions from the twentieth-century that arise in film and literary motifs instead.<sup>12</sup> Most of the African slaves who were sent to the Americas came from Central Africa and Senegambia, known in the transatlantic slave trade as the Slave Coast. Despite the great ethnic diversity throughout this area, there were many shared ontological beliefs, particularly amongst similar language groups such as the Bantu-speaking peoples.<sup>13</sup> These shared beliefs outlasted the horrendous circumstances of the Atlantic crossing, known as the Middle Passage, and “became established in the Americas through syncretic religions such as Obeah, Santeria, Candomblé and Voodoo.”<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, many of the folktales associated with these neo-African cultures reveal that human flight “represented the hope, unity, and courage of African slaves who

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<sup>12</sup> Angelita Reyes, "Flying Africans," in *Africa and the Americas : Culture, Politics, and History : A Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard M. Juang and Noelle Anne Morrissette, *Transatlantic Relations* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 479.

<sup>13</sup> "Flying Africans," in *Africa and the Americas : Culture, Politics, and History : A Multidisciplinary Encyclopedia*, ed. Richard M. Juang and Noelle Anne Morrissette, *Transatlantic Relations* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 480.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

could 'rise into the air' and escape back to the homeland in Africa."<sup>15</sup> While more recent versions have often abandoned this teleology of homeland return or avoided reference to slavery, focusing instead on the struggles for socio-economic ascension or self-determination, the theme of freedom in all its forms remains one of the most salient features of this myth.

After enduring the Middle Passage, enslaved Africans realized that the sea posed the greatest geographical barrier to freedom.<sup>16</sup> For example, in the translated lyrics of the Carriacou song "Oyo, Mama, Bel Louise" the singer proclaims, "We shall go to Africa [but]... The sea bars me."<sup>17</sup> Because the sea was a vast and formidable obstacle facing all slaves in the New World, airborne flight became the most common method of representing homeward escape throughout their folklore.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in traditional versions, the sea forms a vital component of this myth, often portrayed as an adversary equal to the slave master. The significance of sea imagery is evinced by the symbolic movements in one of the Big Drum dances of the Carriacou peoples:

In the frank physicality of the dance, the image of Esu Elegba [the personification of death and the protector of travelers, also known as Legba] permeates the spiritual as well as the social domains of the ring, and it is through the metaphor of Esu that dance enables the transcendence of the physical sea barrier... the crowd joins in the imagery

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<sup>15</sup> "Flying Africans," 481.

<sup>16</sup> However, Meredith Gadsby makes the point that because "air and sea are [now] easily navigated, the boundaries between African diaspora peoples and continental territories have become more legal and bureaucratic than physical. They are imaginatively porous, passing cultural information back and forth over land and sea with ease." Thus, one of the primary transformations that may be noted in more recent versions of the myth is the replacement of sea imagery with other allusions to borders and bureaucracy (in particular, see the literature of Dionne Brand and Wayde Compton as discussed in Chapter Three). Meredith Gadsby, *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 37.

<sup>17</sup> Lorna McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1998), 57.

<sup>18</sup> "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," *New West Indian Guide* 64, no. 1/2 (1990): 29-30.

of flight... the fascination with homeland, [and] the revival of ancestral connectedness.<sup>19</sup>

McDaniel's description reveals how flight serves as one of the primary solutions for the multiple struggles that have been imposed upon enslaved Africans and their descendants. That is, while the image of human flight originated from a need to rise above the sea, through its connotations with movement and magic it has come to express a "relationship with the [African] past and... adoration of another [spiritual] world."<sup>20</sup> The image of flight has been woven into so many of these sacred rituals and artistic practices that were carried over to the New World from Africa, that the Flying African Myth works to maintain cultural links with an African past at the same time as it imagines a means for physically escaping across the Atlantic. McDaniel thus concludes that, although the sea physically restrained the enslaved Africans, it "never shackled their imaginations" and in fact inspired a whole mythology of flight that came to reconfigure myriad experiences of suffering.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly the image of flight enabled enslaved Africans to maintain connections—whether imaginative or physical—with the African homeland, but the sea bears significance to this myth in other ways as well. For example, the myth reframed the suicides of those captured Africans who threw themselves off slave ships. Rather than imagining such fatal leaps as suicidal, "This logical and defiant act of rebellion actualized the return to Africa."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, this particular interpretation of the myth as a "lament of mass suicide" has led many researchers to locate the historical origins of this

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<sup>19</sup> *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 123-24.

<sup>20</sup> *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," 32.

myth in the 1803 slave uprising at Igbo Landing in Dunbar Creek, St. Simons Island. The Igbo peoples in particular “seemed to suffer extreme homeland longing” and this condition created the vast mythology known as the Flying Africans which permeates both traditional lore and colonial records.<sup>23</sup> Gentle Andrews, once the “old head” culture bearer in Carriacou, relates his version of “Igbo landing” as follows: “The Africans who were brought here did not like it. They just walked to the sea. They all began to sing as they spread their arms. A few rose to the sky. Only those who did not eat salt left the ground. The Africans flew home.”<sup>24</sup> In 1793 the English politician Bryan Edwards articulated an alternate explanation for a similar event: “timidity and despondency of mind; [and a] depression of spirits... [give Igbos] an air of softness and submission... which [causes] them frequently to so seek, in a voluntary death, a refuge from their melancholy reflections.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, according to the Flying African Myth, the Igbo people collectively flew or walked out upon the water towards Africa. However, colonial records purport that due to their weak dispositions the enslaved Igbo people walked out into the sea, wishing to be drowned rather than live in bondage.<sup>26</sup>

These contradictory accounts from individuals with very distinct cultural and historical relations to similar incidents should make any researcher of the Flying Africans wary of imposing assumptions about the veracity of this myth. Nonetheless, it is important to note that for many uprooted Africans, such as for the Azande, Kanuri, Igbo, and Hausa, suicide was a forbidden and shameful act. Similarly, in Nigeria, the Tiv

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<sup>23</sup> *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 1-2.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 56.

<sup>26</sup> *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 59.

peoples thought suicide more ethically reprehensible than murder.<sup>27</sup> Among the enslaved Africans, “mythologizing or encoding the act” ritualistically cleansed the deceased so that “the individual’s soul could find peace in the spirit world and not roam in various ‘shape-shifting’ forms among the living.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, extant oral history reveals that “the enslaved Africans who arrived in the Americas during the early centuries of slavery frequently dismissed, denied, or concealed suicide by engaging the myth of flying.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, flight had begun to explain the death and exile of community leaders as it had similarly done for enslaved people centuries before.<sup>30</sup> Evidently, whether suicidal, homicidal, or due to natural causes, “The transplanted African often believed that at death his spirit would take flight, crossing the ocean, to join his brotherhood and ancestors. The flight of repatriation for enslaved people seemed to include the crossing of water and tracing in reverse the route of the Middle Passage.”<sup>31</sup>

Beyond these connections between death and cross-Atlantic flight, the sea’s significance to this myth is further revealed in the Southern United States and Caribbean through shared beliefs about the function of salt. The oceanic salinity of the Middle Passage compounded with aversions to the salty slave diets of the New World and to the salt used in Catholic baptismal ceremonies<sup>32</sup>, reinforcing the notion that salt

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<sup>27</sup> Reyes, "Flying Africans," 480-81.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. The predominantly Christian masters, who wished to preserve their slaves from such unwanted instances of death, ultimately corroborated these beliefs about the immorality of suicide in the New World. Disturbingly, the Flying African Myth was also redeployed by these slave masters to explain the sudden disappearances and secret murders of their slaves.

<sup>30</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 159.

<sup>31</sup> *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 56.

<sup>32</sup> Reyes, "Flying Africans," 481.

consumption<sup>33</sup> reflects a submission to colonial domination and prohibits the capacity for flight.<sup>34</sup> Beliefs about the effects of salt on magical powers have long been commonplace throughout European and ancient West African folklore. In the traditions of both areas, salt is often thought to deter witchcraft or prevent human flight and shape-shifting.<sup>35,36</sup> Thus, abstinence from salt has been commonly thought to enhance “shamanistic powers and [enable] magico-religious practices” within neo-African cultures of the New World.<sup>37</sup> In other variants of this myth, it is by rapidly spinning that the body lightens and takes off into flight. For example, in “the Creole dance, the Hallecord ... [the] dancer spreads her ‘wings’ and soars” in circles throughout the ring of spectators.<sup>38</sup> McDaniel explains that through these communal rituals enslaved Africans “sang to mediate the confusion found in their new powerless position, drummed to find solutions to the multiple layers of social conflict, and danced to define a personal system of flight.”<sup>39</sup> Like abstinence from salt, dance provided a means for preserving African culture in the New World and established a network of shared beliefs and collective memory throughout the Americas.

However, in other—generally more northerly<sup>40</sup>—versions, flight is precipitated by “song... magical words... [or] code words” that have been forgotten along with African languages.<sup>41</sup> For example, in Virginia Hamilton’s illustrated children’s book, *The People*

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<sup>33</sup> This is why the I-tal diet of the Rastafari movement prohibits the addition of salt to any and all dishes. Gadsby, *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*, 27.

<sup>34</sup> McDaniel, “The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas,” 30.

<sup>35</sup> Reyes, “Flying Africans,” 481.

<sup>36</sup> McDaniel, “The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas,” 36.

<sup>37</sup> Reyes, “Flying Africans,” 481.

<sup>38</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 81.

<sup>39</sup> *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 170.

<sup>40</sup> Wendy W. Walters, “‘One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air’: The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness,” *MELUS* 22, no. 3 (1997): 13.

<sup>41</sup> McDaniel, “The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas,” 28.



*Could Fly*, the words “Kum kunka yali kum tambe” are chanted.<sup>42</sup> Alternatively, in Alice McGill’s illustrated children’s book, *Way Up and Over Everything*, the words are “Ndiseh Fe! Ndiseh Fe!”<sup>43</sup> In the Georgia Writer’s Project, *Drums and Shadow*, Prince Sneed describes the use of magical words as follows:

‘Muh gran say ole man Waldburg down on St. Catherine own some slabs wut wuzn climatize an he wuk um hahd an one day dey wuz hoein in duh fiel an duh dribuh come out an two ub um wuz unuh a tree in duh shade, an duh hoes wuz wukin by demsef. Duh dribuh say “Wut dis?” an dey say, “Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum kunka yali kum kunka tambe,” quick like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye.<sup>44</sup>

Often these versions will include a heroic African who flies across the Atlantic to teach the Creoles these forgotten words and return collectively to the African homeland. Thus, the myth became a way of memorializing the past in order to look with shared hope for freedom in the future. Yet the tragic irony of this shared hope is that, for the myth’s very inception and continuation, some slaves must inevitably be left behind to witness and tell the story.

Indeed, the myth is as much about the loss of flight and the impossibility of return as it is about the continual desire for this freedom. An early written account of this folktale from the Gullah people of the Georgia Sea Islands<sup>45</sup> explains that “Once all Africans could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions, their wings were taken away.”<sup>46</sup> Yet while the myth “appears to be about the African” it expresses “at

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<sup>42</sup> Virginia Hamilton, Leo Dillon, and Diane Dillon, *The People Could Fly : American Black Folktales*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1985), 169-70.

<sup>43</sup> Alice McGill and Jude Daly, *Way up and over Everything* (Boston Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Cited in Wendy W. Walters, “One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air’: The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness,” *MELUS* 22, no. 3 (1997): 10.

<sup>45</sup> Reyes, “Flying Africans,” 481.

<sup>46</sup> Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, *The Book of Negro Folklore* (New York,: Dodd, Mead, 1958), 62.

least as much about [the Creole]: a story that explains why they must remain."<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly, representations of human flight are extremely rare within West African mythology, leading many to consider this myth unique to areas of the Black diaspora with a history of established slavery. While I have discussed the related West African themes of *spirit* flight and human *transformation*, which do suggest a historic relationship, it was only in the New World that this tradition incorporated *human* powers of flight.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Lorna McDaniel explains that "The Flying Africans' myth... recites the African struggle for freedom in the New World and reflects Black affect and need."<sup>49</sup> A new mythology sprung from the desire to transcend the bonds of slavery and return to an African or heavenly home, but the very development of this myth demonstrates the violent cultural fissures that further separated those in the New World from their African roots.

While absent in West Africa, throughout the Americas the myth is as pervasive and wide-ranging as the theme of flight would itself suggest and has been "revitalized by numerous contemporary writers into legends of liberation, empowerment, and freedom."<sup>50</sup> It may be found in the work songs of slaves, gospel songs, blues, hip hop, children's stories, poems, Rastafarian dietary restrictions, and I would suggest even the iconic Air Jordan basketball campaign. The myth is prevalent in many pieces of contemporary long fiction, particularly in the work of Black female novelists— such as Maryse Condé (in *Segu*), Jamaica Kincaid (in *Annie John*), Simone Schwarz-Bart (in

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<sup>47</sup> Olivia Smith Storey, "Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans," (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), par. 32.

<sup>48</sup> McDaniel, "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," 28.

<sup>49</sup> "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," 36.

<sup>50</sup> Reyes, "Flying Africans," 481.

*Between two Worlds* and *The Bridge of Beyond*), and Toni Morrison (in *Song of Solomon*) — who allude to bodily displacement and flight in ways that commemorate an African homeland or prophesise collective escape. The myth is also evident in the poetry of Robert Hayden (in “Middle Passage” and “O Daedalus, Fly Away Home”) and Langston Hughes (in “Flight,” “Angels Wings,” and “Freedom Seeker”) among others. Julie Dash’s film *Daughters of the Dust*, Wendell Logan’s orchestral piece based on the events at Igbo Landing, and University of Pennsylvania’s art exhibit “High Flying” have re-imagined the tradition of cross-Atlantic flight through sound and performance. McDaniel further notes that “The Christian vision of heavenly ascent permeates the spiritual and hymnody of the black church... and from these songs, gospel, popular, reggae, and rap musicians revive the message.”<sup>51</sup> Some examples include “I’ll Fly from Here” (Mavis Staples), “I Believe I Can Fly” (R. Kelly), “Rasta Man Chant” (Bob Marley), “I’ll Be Missing You” (Puff Daddy)<sup>52</sup>, and “Black Boy Fly” (Kendrick Lamar). As a result of such wide variation in form and context, this myth is being transmitted to ever larger audiences.<sup>53</sup>

The strategies with which these audiences are interpreting this myth have also been changing, particularly in North America since the beginning and middle of the twentieth century. While the myth is still remembered in Georgia, South Carolina, Brazil, and the Caribbean more generally by elders who express the actualization of flight with conviction<sup>54</sup>, the myth has largely been understood symbolically in the northern United

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<sup>51</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 3-4.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid; “The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas,” 29.

States and Canada. It is significant that this shift in interpreting the myth from a matter of fact to a metaphor can be traced along geographical and historical lines. In "From Escape to Ascension: The Effects of Aviation Technology on the Flying African Myth," I suggest that this phenomenon can be explained by the development of aviation technology between the First and Second World Wars in the United States. The myth's relatively recent aversion to aircraft in these northern regions may signify a rejection of the Western institutions of science and technology that have in many respects delegitimized such mythologies as sources of information and cultural fact. Consequently, writers and storytellers in the United States have often readapted the tradition of the Flying African Myth to variously express a *rejection* of cross-Atlantic return, a *distrust* of aircraft technology, or have focused on the barriers to socio-economic ascension *within* the nation. But what unites all of these transformations is the redirection of desire from the collective memories of an African homeland to resolving the internal struggles of the United States. Similarly, in Canada, where most of the documented versions of this myth are relatively recent, examples alternately express the desires to belong to the nation and to connect with other parts of the Black diaspora. Thus, the myth has been undergoing several transformations across time and space in terms of how it deploys notions of nationality and locality, as well as the epistemological frameworks it constructs and elicits.

As audiences and interpretive strategies have been changing, so too have the types of storytellers. While transcribed and written accounts have always represented a broad range of ages and genders, the myth has been predominantly passed on orally by female elders who have been expected to take responsibility as culture bearers in

their communities. Consequently, as Walters indicates, our interpretations of this myth have to be tempered by our awareness of who is telling the story and through which medium it is being told: "Flying is clearly a very powerful act, and the difference[s] between... tales may simply reflect the common move by males to reserve such power for themselves, in conjunction with the responsive move by females to claim the power... through other women's histories."<sup>55</sup> However, despite this traditional imbalance in gender and age, contemporary versions are transmitted by a broader range of individuals and more have begun to figure women in flight.

Likewise, children have often been responsible for transmitting, and have also been frequently figured within, variations of this myth. For example, a Surinam legend speaks of a young boy named Sjaki who receives a potion from a witch that puts him to sleep. He has a fantastic dream that she transforms him into a bird so that he can fly away with the escaped slaves who have temporarily returned to visit their descendants on the anniversary of the nation's July 1<sup>st</sup> 1863 abolition of slavery. However, when Sjaki discovers the Flying Africans about to leap off a cliff, he learns that their children have secretly added salt to their food which prevents them from leaving.<sup>56</sup> Janice Liddell's illustrated children's book *Imani and the Flying Africans* tells a similar story about a boy who dreams he has been kidnapped and must learn to fly in order to escape.<sup>57</sup> Faith Ringgold's illustrated children's book *Tar Beach* also speaks to the imaginative powers of children's dreams, recounting the life of a young girl named

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<sup>55</sup> Walters, "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 12.

<sup>56</sup> Meredith Gadsby, *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 21-22.

<sup>57</sup> Janice Liddell and Linda Nickens, *Imani and the Flying Africans*, 1 vols. (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994).

Cassie Louise Lightfoot who comes to possess the objects of the city that she flies over at night.<sup>58</sup> So too, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* reveals that "The role of children in bearing this legend in their circular song-games is [especially] important."<sup>59</sup> The role of children in bearing this myth is also revealed in children's stories like Alice McGill's *Way Up and Over Everything*<sup>60</sup> and Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly*<sup>61</sup> which express the imperative for children to continue the myth's legacy. The range of individuals who recount and are represented by this myth, including men and women of all ages, demonstrates the significance of the Flying Africans to the project of "building transformative New World communities"<sup>62</sup>— whether that be local, national, or diasporic.

As with the myth's other variations— its range in form, imagery, genre, type of storyteller and audience, location, and era— it also figures many different modes of flight. More recent versions from the United States such as Ralph Ellison's "Flying Home,"<sup>63</sup> Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* explore the bellicosity between Western technology and African American mythology by depicting airplanes that crash or lead to inevitable disappointments. McDaniel also notes that in the United States, "The blues, more than any other song genre, projects the veiled but common metaphor of physical flight in the recurrent train imagery to represent social

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<sup>58</sup> Faith Ringgold, *Tar Beach*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991).

<sup>59</sup> Walters, "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 17. Emphasis mine.

<sup>60</sup> McGill and Daly, *Way up and over Everything*.

<sup>61</sup> Virginia Hamilton, Leo Dillon, and Diane Dillon, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf : Distributed by Random House, 1985).

<sup>62</sup> Gadsby, *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> Ralph Ellison and John F. Callahan, *Flying Home and Other Stories*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1996).

escape.”<sup>64</sup> Versions from Trinidad occasionally describe “people levitating with corn cobs tucked under their armpits” and other tales from Guyana depict “the journey within a gobi— a gourd.”<sup>65</sup> In Miguel Barnet’s *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, the Cuban storyteller Esteban Montejo portrays “the wandering of the soul as being like that of a snail that leaves its shell” to go into an infinite series of other ones.<sup>66</sup> Elsewhere in this text Montejo states that enslaved Africans “fastened a chain to their waists which was full of magic. That was where their power came from.”<sup>67</sup> A Saramacan legend “tells of the practice of obeah or magic to enable walking on water and a parrot feather, properly prepared with supernatural powers, to actualize flight.”<sup>68</sup> Even those examples that deal solely with the historical incident at Igbo Landing variously suggest “that the Igbos walked on the water, flew over the water, or were engulfed by the sea in their efforts to achieve freedom.... [thus] the tales take on individualistic characteristics and particularized structural imagery in each mode of flight.”<sup>69</sup> While many scholars note that it is specifically the image of unaided *human* flight that distinguishes the myth from other folktales in Africa, these wide variations in depicted modes of flight have developed as a result of changing contexts across time and location throughout the Americas.

Such wide variation in depicted modes of flight has led to some difficulty with recognizing, categorizing, and cataloging specific examples. Storey explains that this difficulty is largely due to linguistic variations, cultural hybridizations, and historical alterations that have contributed to the myth’s production:

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<sup>64</sup> McDaniel, "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," 33.

<sup>65</sup> *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 57.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Cited in Walters, "One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 13.

<sup>68</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 57.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Because it exists in multiple languages of the Diaspora, because it overlaps with other images of flight (Icarus, the phoenix, or angels), because individual speakers and various cultural traditions have creatively engaged with its meanings, because spoken forms are less visible than printed ones and finally because it has continued beyond its origins in the predicament of a slave economy, the [Flying African Myth] in its entirety is ultimately beyond the grasp of both the scholar and the participant.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, there is no static and prescriptive definition that would ascertain with certainty whether or not any particular example should be included in an investigation of this myth. In order to construct an archive for my own analysis in Chapter Three that is large enough to allow for an effective critique of *The Black Atlantic*, I have thus approached the Flying African Myth quite broadly. In particular, I include images of animal transformation and aircraft flight that may be considered more contentious and less conventional. Nevertheless, there is enough precedent established by these older versions throughout all of the Americas to qualify the inclusion of examples that figure African descendants achieving freedom through alternative modes of flight.

Such variability has also led to some uncertainty about whether the Flying Africans exist separately from other mythologies of flight. Indeed, Storey has suggested “a certain inevitability to the trope,” arguing that the actions of fleeing and flying are both connotatively and etymologically linked through the English language. She states, “the past participles of the two verbs are frequently confused (‘fled’ and ‘flew’), and flee was once a noun meaning flight.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in Carriacou, the words “flight” and “thief” are homophones as, in English, to “lift” something is also to steal. This resemblance has

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<sup>70</sup> Olivia Smith Storey, "Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 5, no. 3 (2004): par. 3.

<sup>71</sup> "Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 5, no. 3 (2004): par. 19.



often been manipulated by storytellers to resist the colonial notion that runaway slaves were stolen property.<sup>72</sup> Certainly the significance of flight is almost universal, and human flight is particularly central to much European folklore and Judaeo-Christian belief.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, "Flight, [in the Black diaspora], functions not merely as an individual or 'universal' symbol of transcendence, but as a collective symbol [or tool] of resistance by a specific group within a socio-historical context."<sup>74</sup> That is, themes of flight in European mythology also generally signify freedom and transcendence, but only on an individual or universal level. In contrast, the Flying African Myth "is a symbol not simply of humanity's collective unconscious and desire to fly, but of the collective resistance of those in the diaspora to a system which denied their humanity."<sup>75</sup> The Flying African Myth thus functions as a dynamic tool of Black unification and social resistance that is grounded in a history of slavery, and to that degree it is unique.

The distinctiveness of the Flying African Myth is most apparent in its function as a technology of resistance and as a historiographical tool that reconfigures the collective memory of enslavement. Olivia Smith Storey argues that through the Flying African myth "language... functions as technology— a means of applying knowledge to effect material change."<sup>76</sup> She further states that cultural "knowledge applied through an act of language functions as a tool or weapon. The African knows it can equal or surpass the tools and weapons of Western technology."<sup>77</sup> Even when the myth is expressed through

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<sup>72</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*.

<sup>73</sup> "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas " *New West Indian Guide* 64, no. 1 (1990): 36.

<sup>74</sup> Gay Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," *MELUS* 16, no. 1 (1989-1990): 21.

<sup>75</sup> "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," *MELUS* 16, no. 1 (1989-1990): 31.

<sup>76</sup> Storey, "Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans," par. 13.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

song, dance, and ritual, it functions as a linguistic technology; for, as McDaniel argues, these forms of the myth “should be understood as signifying ‘languages’ that, because of the nature of slave society, store deeply controlled desires and covert interactions.”<sup>78</sup> Understanding how these languages function as technologies “permits us to encounter individual and social choices of the song owners and illuminate the responses of people to bondage.”<sup>79</sup> Walters argues similarly that “the Flying Africans could be seen as part of the ‘hidden transcript’ of disempowered groups. This hidden transcript is what is spoken outside the earshot of power holders, and it can also be ‘the privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident, subversive discourse.’”<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the myth is in some ways “a reaction to a linear Western scientific mode of inquiry which would deny that people could fly.”<sup>81</sup> Moreover, by recalling the lost African homeland and helping to forge New World communities, this myth became “a way of resisting and surviving the trauma” of forced displacement and enslavement.<sup>82</sup> So too, versions of the myth from Negro Spirituals and oral folklore “are thought to have been used secretly and with alternative meanings to alert and direct the bands of enslaved people in escape plots.”<sup>83</sup> Ultimately then, the myth has posed alternative epistemological frameworks and has been an important tool for solidifying community, processes which in and of themselves initiate resistance and recovery. But storytellers have also used the myth as a tool for

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<sup>78</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 4-5.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Walters, "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 11.

<sup>81</sup> "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 14.

<sup>82</sup> Dominique Aurélie, "Crossing Troubled Seas: The Metaphor of Flight in Caribbean Literature," (Manioc: Common Documentation Service of the University of the West Indies and Guyana, 2007), 1.

<sup>83</sup> McDaniel, "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," 34.

escape more literally, manipulating the language of their persecutors into a secret code through devices such as allegory and symbolism.

Moreover, while "The tale is[...] a segment of history[...] founded upon factual experience,"<sup>84</sup> it also performs "an act of historical recovery."<sup>85</sup> As Wendy W. Walters affirms, the verbal reiteration of this myth through family and community "involved... revising hegemonic versions of history. As versions of superlative heroic resistance to the condition of enslavement, these stories cut across a recorded history which would deny such heroism."<sup>86</sup> For example, the myth provides an alternative account of the events at Igbo Landing, emphasizing the power of enslaved Africans to escape bondage in contrast to the colonial documents which cited mass suicide. It is imperative that we see this "'use' of the past, this incorporating of cultural memory into literature is essentially forward looking, and in this way it is a crucial part of culture building."<sup>87</sup> Storey argues that although "the special experience that inspired the secret dreams of revolt and freedom [were established] within the slave context,"<sup>88</sup> the myth "retains a creative vitality that goes well beyond its point of origin."<sup>89</sup> It continues to generate "new meanings despite such fundamental changes as the abolition of slavery, independence from colonialism, and the civil rights movement."<sup>90</sup> Many of the contemporary Canadian examples that I consider in Chapter Three utilize the myth's long tradition to challenge those dominant historical accounts that neglect Canada's Black presence. At times

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<sup>84</sup> *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Aurélia, "Crossing Troubled Seas: The Metaphor of Flight in Caribbean Literature," 4.

<sup>86</sup> Walters, "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 14.

<sup>87</sup> "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 23.

<sup>88</sup> McDaniel, "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," 38.

<sup>89</sup> Storey, "Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans," par. 7.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

these examples commemorate those slaves who escaped through the Underground Railroad, or at others they recall moments of bodily and cultural erasure such as the execution of Marie-Joseph Angélique in Montréal and the destruction of Africville in Nova Scotia.

The myth thus varies in its form, in the breadth of its storytellers and audience, in its represented modes of flight, as well as in its function as both technology of resistance and tool for historiographical revision. Moreover, the myth is truly pan-American, with examples that extend from Argentina to the southern regions of Canada. As has been discussed, the Flying African myth emerged “from many different African ethnicities that converged in the Americas during the momentum of transatlantic slavery.”<sup>91</sup> Given such breadth of influence and interpretation, it is undoubtedly astounding that “all the shores touched by the Atlantic slave trade produce a collective mythology”<sup>92</sup> irrespective of the subtle variations between borders. However, as McDaniel points out, “the several settings of the myth [throughout the Americas]... allow for double or triple meanings<sup>93</sup>, making any definition “similar to trying to confine a polymorph.”<sup>94</sup> Mindful of this, Walters offers an analysis of the myth situated “in its more widespread Pan-American context” so as to “enable a wider notion of diasporic consciousness in addition to seeing fruitful connections within American literary history.”<sup>95</sup> By studying this myth transnationally and transhistorically, contrasting those elements of the myth that significantly vary with those that uniformly remain the same,

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<sup>91</sup> Reyes, "Flying Africans," 481.

<sup>92</sup> Walters, "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 4.

<sup>93</sup> McDaniel, "The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas," 38.

<sup>94</sup> Storey, "Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans," par. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Walters, "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 5.

we can interpret how the myth functions within particular contexts. For example, the previous overview of the myth throughout the Caribbean, South America, and the United States, provides a useful foundation for understanding the significance of those trends and anomalies which can be observed when the myth is deployed from various parts of Canada.

While this transnational and transhistorical focus poses the potential threat of homogenizing cultural difference, Walters states that such a comparative methodology “recognizes, rather than universalizes,” structural similarities within folklore scholarship.<sup>96</sup> She further explains that the “emphasis on shared experiences of enslavement is not... meant to gloss over the very different historical facts of those particular enslavements.”<sup>97</sup> Rather, the myth’s widespread distribution “implies a depth of cultural sharing among Africans throughout the diaspora, a unified experience, [and] a profound longing for Africa.”<sup>98</sup> Similarly, McDaniel argues that “The theme of human aerial flight permeates the mythology of Black America... embracing generations to testify to the depth of the cosmological and conscious projection of systems of flight escape and homeland return.”<sup>99</sup> It is precisely the great cultural and historical diversity throughout the Black Americas which highlights the significance of those similarities laying at the core of all the myth’s widespread permutations— similarities that fundamentally reveal the collective traumas suffered as a result of enduring the injustices of slavery and racial oppression.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> “One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air’: The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness,” 6.

<sup>98</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou: Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 2.

<sup>99</sup> “The Flying Africans: Extent and Strength of the Myth in the Americas,” 28.

The myth thus functions as a tool of political resistance, confirming diasporic connections that offer an alternative to oppressive nation-state paradigms which have been formed on the backs of enslaved and colonized peoples. A comparative methodology is particularly appropriate for approaching such a myth since it allows for a remapping of the Americas, revealing a deeper and more comprehensive history of New World colonization that forges “a counter-hegemonic literary historiography.”<sup>100</sup> That is, this methodology “calls into question previous definitions of ‘American’ literature and even asks us to question and redefine our notion of what is meant by the term America itself.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, while the storytellers’ “actions can be seen to revise slave histories and folk heroic celebration, the critics’ actions revise literary history as based on geopolitical boundaries and definitions that are rapidly becoming obsolete.”<sup>102</sup> Locating the myth in Canada allows for a disentangling of the often equivocated terms “continental Americas” and “United States of America” by demonstrating how language, story, and culture vary across nations or regions, but the myth also challenges the hegemony of nation-state borders to control cultural and commodity exchange.

While my analysis of this myth engages in a comparative methodology that is transnational and transhistorical in focus, my archive of Canadian versions remains limited to literature. One of the primary reasons for this focus is the lack of Black Canadian folklore that has been transcribed and published. Until the mid-1940s only one book of this kind existed, Arthur Huff Fauset’s *Folklore from Nova Scotia*. To this day, so few exist that searching for transcriptions or recordings of the Flying African

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<sup>100</sup> Walters, “One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air’: The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness,” 5.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

Myth in Canada has proved futile.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, “in Canadian literature as a whole one can observe a blurring of the boundaries between ‘folk’ and literary culture, not just in an author’s inclusion of traditional folk material but in the mixing of voices, discourses, and cultural fields.”<sup>104</sup> In particular, George Elliott Clarke argues that texts from Black writers in Canada are “double-voiced” because they have been influenced by both White and Black texts, but also because they include “modes of figuration lifted from the black vernacular tradition”<sup>105</sup>, often incorporating myths and folktales like the Flying Africans. Clarke argues further that the double-voice of Black Canadian literature has been produced due to the nation’s history of marginality. Black literature in Canada resists “the fugues of racial erasure indulged in by mainstream [...] critics.”<sup>106</sup> My focus on essays, poetry, and novels thus enables me to discover and highlight the ways in which Blacks have been marginalised, and have exerted their writing against this marginality, in Canada by complicating the very distinctions between the “vernacular” and “literary.”

Focusing on how Canadian literature has incorporated these vernacular traditions also reveals significant insights about the ways national and ethnic identities are often constructed. Freake and Carpenter argue that contemporary post-colonial societies tend to prefer writers who are “participant observers” to their own cultures and develop their own voices rather than appropriate the experiences of others. They compare this favoured writer to a “self-reflexive ethnographer” who sets boundaries for,

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<sup>103</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, *American Folklore : An Encyclopedia*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (New York: Garland Pub., 1996), 236. This dearth of published or archived material also corroborates George Elliott Clarke’s claims about the obscurity of Black history in Canadian popular and academic discourses.

<sup>104</sup> Douglas; Carpenter Freake, Carole Henderson, "Folklore and Literature: Canadian Contexts," *Ethnologies* 21, no. 1 (1999).

<sup>105</sup> George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 74.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

as well as binds together, their own cultural identity. Folklore, they suggest, "is invaluable for this task; indeed, its function as boundary maintenance device is inherent in the very nature of the process and products of oral tradition, and it is this quality that the written texts often seek to acquire by their absorption of folk material."<sup>107</sup> While folklore demarcates and solidifies the identities of subgroups, written literature makes the experiences of these subgroups accessible to the wider social milieu. As Freake and Carpenter put this, "When folk material is drawn into the literary realm, it becomes accessible to other groups and can bridge the spaces between cultures, so that a local identity becomes part of a larger composite culture."<sup>108</sup> Thus, when folklore is absorbed into literature, the final product simultaneously reaffirms the differences between subgroups while also linking these various subgroups into a community of wider readers.

This double task of inclusion and exclusion that the literary manifestation of folklore performs has a particularly central role in the development of various "imagined communities" such as nations and diaspora networks. While much of the theory behind the meaning and construction of imagined communities is outlined with more detail in Chapter Two, it is important to note Freake and Carpenter's argument that "In Canada [...] the lore of ethnic groups [...] has become especially attractive in the postmodern situation of dissolving, threatened or [...] hyperinflated national identities. [...] ethnic consciousness is often developed in an attempt to thwart the power of [the ravenous economic and state] systems."<sup>109</sup> But while they maintain that the folk literature of ethnic

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<sup>107</sup> Freake, "Folklore and Literature: Canadian Contexts."

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



groups often challenges the economic and state systems of Canada, Freaque and Carpenter also maintain that this hybrid form “has been the most obvious way to claim a special Canadian identity.”<sup>110</sup> That is, Canada’s self-image as a multicultural “mosaic”— a policy reflected in federal legislation— is also achieved through the inclusionary-exclusionary effects of folk literature which extends knowledge of ethnic difference across the nation’s subcultures. Writing about texts that incorporate vernacular language and tales, Clarke argues that “Close readings of African-Canadian literature can spotlight [...] the manner in which post-colonial theory can be applied to ever-smaller units of ‘mass’ identity.”<sup>111</sup> I follow Clarke’s lead by focusing on the literary manifestations of the Flying African Myth in Canada, revealing how this hybrid form reconfirms ethnic difference in order to formulate larger identities such as nations or diasporic networks.

However, despite the popular movement to frame this myth in its Pan-American context, Canadian literature has gone largely unexamined thus far. This omission follows a now well documented pattern of Black cultural erasure in Canada— the destruction of historic sites such as Africville by the government, mainstream media that conflates Blackness with newness, and a history of institutionalized slavery that goes systematically neglected in public schools. Fortunately, George Elliott Clarke (among others) challenges this account of history, explaining that “African slavery was a hemisphere-long practice, from Quebec to Argentina.”<sup>112</sup> He argues that this practice effectively ended in Nova Scotia, “thanks to the influx of three thousand Black Loyalists

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, 74.

<sup>112</sup> *Beatrice Chancy* (Victoria, B.C.; Custer, WA: Polestar, 1999), 7.

in 1783. The presence of a large body of free blacks in the province ensured that runaway slaves would enjoy some shelter from pursuers"<sup>113</sup>, contributing to Canada's growing significance within the Underground Railroad.<sup>114</sup> The Black Refugees, as they came to be known, comprised the next major exodus from the United States to Maritime Canada following the War of 1812. During the time between the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) and the end of the American Civil War (1865), "tens of thousands of others found asylum in Montréal, southern Ontario, and even Saltspring Island, British Columbia."<sup>115</sup> Clarke concludes that Black Canada developed out of "the struggle to extinguish slavery— both in British North America (where it had 'withered away' by the early 1800s, while still remaining legal) and the United States— and to secure a free 'homeland' for blacks"<sup>116</sup> He thus likens Canada to "a kind of inchoate, New World version of Liberia, the African 'Canaan' or 'free state' organized by anti-slavery African Americans."<sup>117</sup>

Other significant Black migrations to Canada that Clarke discusses include the Prairie settlers who arrived from the United States at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>118</sup>, some of those seeking asylum from the Vietnam War draft in the United States<sup>119</sup>, as

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<sup>113</sup> *Beatrice Chancy* (Victoria, B.C.; Custer, WA: Polestar, 1999), 7-8.

<sup>114</sup> Clarke notes the significance of the fact that, for those "Anglo Africans" who came as free persons as opposed to the chattel of white Loyalists, they "did so because they rejected a Revolution waged to secure a theoretically egalitarian society which still promised to oppress people of African (and First Nations) ancestry." George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 73.

<sup>115</sup> Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, 73.

<sup>116</sup> *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, 73-74.

<sup>117</sup> *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, 74.

<sup>118</sup> In the draft introduction, titled "Facing History," for Afua Cooper's "Hanging of Angélique," George Elliott Clarke states that Canada largely ignores "the contributions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Black settlers who cleared and tilled parts of this land until 'official' settlers arrived from Ireland and England and claimed title." George Elliott Clarke, "Facing History," (Toronto: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, nd), coll 558: box 79: file 10.

<sup>119</sup> Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, 29.

well as more recent Caribbean and African refugees and expatriates. These continuous waves of Black runaways, refugees, and migrants<sup>120</sup> has led to what George Elliott Clarke calls the “fragile coalition of identities,” contributing to the variability in form and function of the myth throughout Canada. Nonetheless, the complexity of Black Canada’s history and culture has been largely ignored because “Canadians prefer to understand themselves [as] a nation of good, Nordic, ‘pure,’ mainly white folks” in a “land of ‘Peace, Order, and Good Government’ [...] where racism was not and is not tolerated.”<sup>121</sup> Due to omissions such as these in Canada, the title of Clarke’s seminal critique of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* asks, “Must All Blackness Be American?” Chapter Three of this thesis responds to this question by locating the Flying African Myth in its Canadian context. Canada’s history of slavery, the migration of slaves from the United States through the Underground Railroad, and more recent afro-Caribbean and afro-Latin immigrations suggest not only that the myth exists in Canada, but that it may function with even greater variety and flexibility than elsewhere. That is, the constant “struggle against erasure” and the “fragile coalition of identities” that constitute the Black Canadian diaspora<sup>122</sup> have led the myth to function alternately as a narrative of cross-Atlantic escape, a means of preserving Black cultural heritage within the Canadian national consciousness, or a pervasively shared memory that forms diasporic connections. Thus, in Canada, the myth has (in)formed both roots and routes for Black

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<sup>120</sup> Dionne Brand also struggles for the appropriate terms in *A Map to the Door of No Return*, concluding that “Language can be deceptive.” I list three possible terms here to describe some of the different types of Black arrivals into Canada, but these are perhaps not entirely accurate or exhaustive. Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 21.

<sup>121</sup> George Elliott Clarke, “Facing History,” (Toronto: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, nd), coll 558: box 79: file 10.

<sup>122</sup> Clarke, *Eyeing the North Star : Directions in African-Canadian Literature*, xviii.

cultural identity. Indeed, Clarke emphasizes the significance of flight in Black Canada—“slavery, struggle, and flight” are, as he states, “mine.”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> *Eyeing the North Star : Directions in African-Canadian Literature*, xi.

## Chapter 2

The following chapter surveys some seminal theories of nation and diaspora in order to establish a context through which to explore how the Flying African Myth has contributed to the formation of both kinds of “imagined community.” Since the first portion of Chapter Three focuses on these questions within a Canadian context, the current chapter begins by putting critics George Elliott Clarke, Rinaldo Walcott, and Wayde Compton into dialogue. Through these exchanges, Canada emerges as a nation of particular significance for the purposes of comparing national and diasporic formations due to its identification as “multicultural” and its status as a “post-colonial” settler nation-state. I then consider how these concepts have been influenced by several pieces of scholarship that extend beyond the Canadian context, including the work of Benedict Anderson, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy. This wider overview of a few major texts in Diaspora Studies provides a foundation from which to raise several concerns about how these terms have been developed and deployed, focusing particularly on the limitations of Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. The Flying African Myth is subsequently outlined as a means of furthering and reformulating Gilroy’s arguments— avoiding what appears to be his emphasis on individualism, physical movement, actual or bounded geographic space, and what can be historically or rationally accessed.

However, before considering how the conceptual frameworks of nation and diaspora have altered over time and have been differently deployed in a Canadian context, it is important to provide some conventional definitions that will help ground

these arguments. Given the ever expanding applications of these terms, Kevin Kenny attempts to distinguish *diasporas*<sup>124</sup> from other travelling cultures and global networks, stating that “diaspora tends to have greater explanatory power when applied to forms of involuntary migration [whereby] migrants or their descendants in one country continue to involve themselves economically, politically, or culturally in the affairs of their homeland.”<sup>125</sup> Although this “connectedness often involves the idea of return to a homeland, [whether literal or metaphorical,] the idea of diaspora carries its greatest explanatory power [...] when it involves communication [...] among various overseas communities of common origin.”<sup>126</sup> Thus, according to conventional definitions, *diaspora* explains the involuntary migrations of people from common origin whose persistent settlements throughout several destinations become the nodes in a network of cultural and commodity exchange whereby their “connections assume a multipolar rather than a unilinear form.”<sup>127</sup>

Kenny emphasizes that diaspora is simultaneously a category of analysis and a category of practice, thus “Any scholarly conception of diaspora needs to be congruent with the everyday experiences of these people.”<sup>128</sup> For this reason, and because the

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<sup>124</sup> Kenny also gives a brief etymology of the term, explaining that the ancient Greek noun *diasporá* generally had destructive or negative connotations and emerged from proto-Indo-European roots meaning to spread or scatter. When the word was taken up to relate the various dispersals throughout Jewish history, “Displacement, exile, and longing for a homeland” became central features of diasporic culture. By the twentieth century, the meaning of *diaspora* extended to include “the involuntary dispersal of other populations, especially Armenians and people of African descent.” The term no longer had resolute connections to one particular race, religion, or place of ethnic origin. However, the term still “carries particular claims about human suffering, salvation, and the direction of history” and includes notions of “exile, connectivity, and return.” Kevin Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2, 1, 6.

<sup>125</sup> Kevin Kenny, *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction*, 14.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

term has become so multivalent, Kenny suggests asking “not what a diaspora ‘is’ but how the term is used and how it produces meaning.”<sup>129</sup> This approach avoids “constructing typologies that [are] arbitrary, partial, or excessively broad”<sup>130</sup>, and focuses instead on the experiences of “fragmentation, hybridity, and double consciousness” common throughout diasporic cultures. Although Kenny argues that this approach is particularly powerful when analysing forms of cultural representation such as literature, he also warns that it depends upon the people of a diaspora leaving evidence of their common experiences “in words, images, or material culture.”<sup>131</sup> Unfortunately though, because many of these dispersed people “throughout history were poor and barely literate, the written evidence that has survived about them was produced for the most part by elites.”<sup>132</sup> Indeed, the second portion of this chapter considers how studying vernacular culture like the Flying African Myth, even when absorbed into the literary realm, can largely circumvent a dependence on the perspective of elites while still embracing this less rigid understanding of diaspora.

Related to the development of diasporas have been the formations of nations, nationalisms, and nation-states which, argue critics James Clifford and Paul Gilroy, are inherently challenged when conceptions of diaspora cultures are *unfettered* by an emphasis on geographic origin. Clifford still recognizes that many diasporas remain rooted in notions of ethnic or national origin and thus notes that there may be diasporic nationalisms. However, “‘Nation’ and ‘nation-state’ are not identical”<sup>133</sup> because

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<sup>129</sup> *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction*, 12.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 251.

“national cultural identities are not necessarily coterminous with state borders.”<sup>134</sup> It is thus essential to disentangle these notions before moving on to consider how they have been differently deployed in a Black Canadian context and recently reformulated by scholars elsewhere. Traditional definitions of *nation*, whether stateless or not, “included several elements, such as a sharing by the inhabitants of a self-perceived common culture and history, an attachment to a particular territory” and a desire for autonomy.<sup>135</sup> While scholars disagree about whether nations are ancient constructs or products of modernity, it is much more certain that “The modern nation-state is a relatively recent historical invention.”<sup>136</sup> To clarify this distinction, a nation-state is “a political apparatus and a symbolic form” which has “a temporal dimension in that political structures endure and change while the symbolic and discursive dimensions of national identity narrate and create the idea of origins, continuity and tradition.” Ultimately, the nation-state is a political concept which “refers to an administrative apparatus deemed to have sovereignty over a specific space or territory [and] can be seen to have three critical functions: namely, external defence, internal surveillance and the maintenance of citizenship rights.”<sup>137</sup> As will be demonstrated more clearly through close readings of the Flying African Myth in Chapter Three, the multi-faceted processes of globalization may “be compromising four critical aspects of the modern nation-state: namely its competence, form, autonomy and legitimacy.”<sup>138</sup> A Pan-American myth such as the Flying Africans, which has been developing since globalization’s beginnings in

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<sup>134</sup> "Nation-State," in *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (Sage UK, 2004), np.

<sup>135</sup> "Stateless Nation," in *Topic Pages* (Credo Reference Publisher Contributors, 2014), np.

<sup>136</sup> "Nation-State," np.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.



colonialism and transatlantic slavery, fundamentally points to the ways in which communities are built through, between, and above nation-states without recourse to bureaucracy or legislation.

However, if one of this thesis's primary purposes is to extend Gilroy's theory of the Black diaspora so as to further his critique against nationalisms and ethnic essentialisms, then my focus on the myth's existence in Canada may seem contradictory. It is true that this acknowledgement— and potential affirmation— of national boundaries leads to problematic exclusions, but these exclusions are both necessary and strategic. They are necessary because a study such as this must always be organised around some body of literature and may never provide an exhaustive account of Black diasporic culture. Moreover, they are strategic for the following four reasons: 1) This focus on Canadian versions of the myth picks up on observations that Canada becomes eclipsed in Gilroy's analysis due to his equivocation between the continental and national definitions of "America." While Gilroy states that he wants to shift away from narratives of Black experience that remain rooted in the United States, his breadth in diasporic focus narrows when he primarily discusses the biographies of Blacks who traveled between the United States and Britain. This narrow focus follows a now well documented problem regarding the erasure of Canada in Black diasporic discourses, including the current literature surrounding the Flying African Myth. 2) This focus on Canadian versions of the myth responds to the concomitant issue of Black cultural erasure in Canada. It demonstrates that the myth exists in Canada, reminding us of a now largely forgotten history of slavery; it also reveals the complexity and diversity of Black Canada, evidenced by its function to establish national roots as well

as diasporic routes. 3) This focus on Canadian versions of the myth allows for a productive investigation into the nation's multicultural imaginary, demonstrating the ways in which diasporic discourses and identifications can be absorbed by the nation and are thus not intrinsically subversive. 4) Similarly, though perhaps conversely, this focus on Canadian versions of the myth enables us to uncover how large and totalising conceptions of diaspora connections may not be the only ways to critique the nation-state paradigm. Rather, we might think locally within a nation like Canada about the ways in which subcultures, and rifts or divergences between subcultures, create extra-national spaces or methods of belonging. Because Canada has had several continuous waves of transported and runaway slaves, immigrants, and refugees from various other parts of the Black diaspora, it offers a particularly suitable terrain for considering this micro-focused critique of nationalism.

The ongoing dialogue between scholars Rinaldo Walcott and George Elliott Clarke on the subject of Black identity and culture in Canada has at times been particularly confrontational. While they both tend to agree about many of the problems that face Black Canadians, Clarke's "nativism" and Walcott's deterritorialization offer dramatically different solutions. According to Walcott, "what sits behind [Clarke's "nativism"] is an impossible desire to belong to the nation. A nation that forms him, but a nation that cannot imagine him within its own formative narratives."<sup>139</sup> Contrasting himself with Clarke, Walcott focuses on "diaspora networks and connectedness as opposed to an explicit national address... in a deterritorialized strategy that is consciously aware of the ground of the nation from which it speaks."<sup>140</sup> To demonstrate

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<sup>139</sup> Walcott, *Black Like Who? : Writing Black Canada*, 16.

<sup>140</sup> *Black Like Who? : Writing Black Canada*, 15.

this point of difference, Walcott notes that throughout most of his creative and critical writings, Clarke attempts to rectify the societal imbalances and historical erasures that render Blacks in Canada peripheral to the nation's organizing narratives. He relies on cataloging events, documents, and names in order to achieve these ends— not to undermine the foundations of the nation-state paradigm but so as to integrate Blacks into the Canadian national consciousness. As will be demonstrated more clearly in the second half of this chapter, Walcott's perspective is much more sympathetic to Paul Gilroy's, and his methodology is more theoretical in focus than Clarke's propensity to catalogue and preserve.

Nevertheless, Clarke's concern for archives and careful attention to forgotten histories in Canada does not preclude him from also exhibiting diasporic sensibilities. For example, he claims that "It's not a big jump from the Antilles to Nova Scotia. Indeed, Jamaican maroon troops came here in 1796, lived in Preston, worked on citadel Hill, then left for Sierra Leone in 1800."<sup>141</sup> Clarke's scholarship remains acutely aware of the ways in which exchanges occur across the Black diaspora, but challenges what he perceives as a United States cultural imperialism by centring Canada as an important node through which these various connections are established. Indeed, Clarke distinguishes Black culture in these two nations, stating that "here, one's ethnicity, national origin, home, root, culture still continue to have some prominence, and some importance, so one may easily identify oneself as being Somalian or Ethiopian or Trinidadian, as opposed to being

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<sup>141</sup> George Elliott Clarke, "Black Citizenship from the West Indies to the East Coast," ed. Claudia Pinsent (Toronto: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, nd), coll 558: box 79: file 34.

Canadian, or as opposed to being African Canadian."<sup>142</sup> Thus, according to Clarke, Blacks in Canada retain connections with other regions of the Black diaspora to a greater extent than in the United States.

On the other hand, current critical models for understanding the Black diaspora are overwhelmingly influenced by the predicaments faced in the United States or, in some cases, Africa and the United Kingdom. Clarke remains wary of the assumptions implicit in such models which may not recognize the particular circumstances in Black Canada. In an interview with Wayde Compton and Kevin McNeilly, Clarke says, "Afrocentrism in Canada has to be lived intellectually, spiritually, psychologically, but it can't be lived politically, not in the ways it can be in the United States [where there are] blacks in numbers: in particular places, they can control the political network."<sup>143</sup> Thus, methods of engaging in diasporic relations should also be understood contextually; different approaches to the Black diaspora are regionally and nationally unique. Elsewhere, Clarke is sensitive enough to the variations across regional and personal identities to note that not all people ostensibly labelled "Black" in the United States would necessarily consider themselves "Black" in Canada.<sup>144</sup> Thus, like Wayde Compton, Clarke avoids using American models in Canada because of "the pseudo-colonial relationship we have with the Yankee leviathan."<sup>145</sup> Compton clarifies that although "the black Diaspora, at its best,

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<sup>142</sup> George Elliott Clarke; Wayde Compton; Kevin McNeilly, "The Crime of Poetry: George Elliott Clarke in Conversation with Wayde Compton and Kevin Mcneilly," *Pacific Affairs: The University of British Columbia*, no. 182 (2004): 4.

<sup>143</sup> "The Crime of Poetry: George Elliott Clarke in Conversation with Wayde Compton and Kevin Mcneilly," *Pacific Affairs: The University of British Columbia*, no. 182 (2004): 5.

<sup>144</sup> "The Crime of Poetry: George Elliott Clarke in Conversation with Wayde Compton and Kevin Mcneilly," 4. Clarke tells us that in census data from 1991 43% of so-called "Black Canadians" did not self-identify as Black.

<sup>145</sup> Wayde Compton, "The Diaspora's Upper Left-Hand Margin: Octopus and Callaloo," *Callaloo* 30, no. 3 (2007): 794.

can serve as an alternative international line of communication, one that undermines the state-to-state relations that arc above us, [...] this is not a given.”<sup>146</sup> The distinctiveness of Black culture in Canada, and the uncertainty of who constitutes or is constituted as Black in Canada, raises questions about “whether products and ideas imported from black America are the voices of cousins or just part of a general U.S. cultural imperialism.”<sup>147</sup> For these reasons, both Clarke and Compton engage in diasporic imaginings and communications while still employing other regional, provincial, and national models for community building.

For his own part, Rinaldo Walcott is perhaps less focused on newness and less uninterested in the Canadian context than Clarke has at times suggested. Indeed, Walcott clarifies that “the politics and sensibility of diaspora could work well to invent traditions that brought [pre-Confederation and recent migrant Blacks] into conversation. It is crucial that recent black migrants not imagine themselves situated in a discourse that denies a longer existence of blackness in this country.”<sup>148</sup> He also locates Black Canada in particular as “a matrix for the contestations that are currently taking place in black diasporic studies” because, as with Clarke, he notes the various waves of Black arrival into this country and concludes that “the multiplicities of blackness in Canada collide in ways that are instructive for current diasporic theorizing.”<sup>149</sup> Thus, Walcott’s emphasis on the Black diaspora does not mean that he is necessarily ignorant of the unique conditions facing Blacks in Canada. Indeed, he takes particular issue with several policies legislated by the Canadian government, warning that “the official

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Walcott, *Black Like Who? : Writing Black Canada*, 14.

<sup>149</sup> *Black Like Who? : Writing Black Canada*, 40.

sanctioning of identity politics supported by the state, through its legislated multicultural policy, places issues of difference and connectedness in a different relation and configuration. Nation-state influence can (re)direct the potential political possibilities of meaningful diasporic conversations.”<sup>150</sup> For example, Canada’s policies dangerously “render newness and recentness [of a Black presence] more valuable to the national narrative of multicultural theology.”<sup>151</sup> Thus, while Walcott embraces Black diasporic theorizing and practice as alternatives to the nation-state with greater alacrity than Clarke, he too remains wary of the potential dangers and limitations of this discourse by suggesting that Canadian legislation has absorbed such diasporic and multicultural frameworks for cross-purposes, thereby nullifying the subversive potential of these extra-national affiliations.<sup>152</sup>

These impassioned debates in Canadian criticism about the virtues and deficiencies of both national and diasporic affiliation attest to the powerful opposition between these two types of cultural formation more generally. At his most confrontational, Clarke has called Walcott “a capital candidate for the charge of treason”<sup>153</sup>— dubbing Walcott’s perspective “perverse,” “unexamined,” a kind of “*très facile* black nationalism and Pan-Africanism[...] which is, treacherously (if not simply lazily), never defined.”<sup>154</sup> Walcott has retaliated, stating that “Clarke’s analysis is rife with the rhetoric of blaming the immigrant. Under any other context its proper name

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> *Black Like Who? : Writing Black Canada*, 18.

<sup>152</sup> The initial logic behind multiculturalism said immigrant rather than diasporic. The widening usage of the term “diaspora” for nearly all forms of immigration is perhaps one indication of the ways in which diasporic affiliations are being appropriated by popular and political discourse to bolster support for Canada as a strong, inclusive, and flexible nation-state.

<sup>153</sup> Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*, 188.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

would be prejudice or ethnocentrism or xenophobia.”<sup>155</sup> In *Black Like Who?* Walcott outlines their primary differences in methodology, aim, and archive. Where Clarke attempts to catalogue and preserve Blackness in Canada, Walcott theorizes race and diaspora. Where Clarke hopes for a full integration and representation of Blackness into the Canadian imaginary, Walcott wishes to extend cultural connections across the Black diaspora. Where Clarke focuses on a rural and rooted Black Canada, Walcott considers urban spaces and extra-national forms of movement. But for all of their differences in approach, Clarke and Walcott both recognize that Blacks in Canada face many of the same problems<sup>156</sup> including a constant “struggle against erasure” and the sense of belonging to a “fragile coalition of identities.”<sup>157</sup>

In order to put the debates of these Canadian critics into a wider context, it is important to outline some of the major transformations in the theories of nation and diaspora that have influenced their perspectives. While traditional definitions of these terms are offered at the beginning of this chapter, scholars including Benedict Anderson, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy have subsequently developed other meanings and applications. For example, the conditions necessary for citizens to understand themselves as connected members of a nation have been greatly contested amongst cultural theorists. In his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson summarizes three of the primary paradoxes surrounding conventional understandings of the nation as follows:

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<sup>155</sup> Walcott, *Black Like Who? : Writing Black Canada*, 18.

<sup>156</sup> Much of the history and current realities of these problems facing Blacks in Canada are covered at the end of Chapter One in this thesis, but for more detailed explanations of these inequities and erasures see much of George Elliott Clarke's work (particularly his *Odysseys Home: Mapping African-Canadian Literature*).

<sup>157</sup> Clarke, *Eyeing the North Star : Directions in African-Canadian Literature*, xviii.

(1) The objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists. (2) The formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept... vs. the irremediable particularity of its concrete manifestations... (3) The 'political' power of nationalisms vs. their philosophical poverty and even incoherence.<sup>158</sup>

In response to these paradoxes, he argues that nations are a type of "imagined political community," that are thought to be "both inherently limited and sovereign."<sup>159</sup> He presents the *imaginary* component of this definition as an explanation for how members maintain a sense of communal belonging despite the impossibility of ever knowing or meeting all of the population with whom they share a national identity.

In order to explain the emergence of this particular form of imagined political community, Anderson demonstrates how the development of "print-capitalism" led to the increased accessibility and standardization of language use.<sup>160</sup> Anderson provides three main reasons for why it thus became increasingly easy for members of these language communities to share a sense of national identity. Firstly, the unification of printed languages has meant that literature communicates solely with an imagined community of readers, necessarily excluding some people and including others. That is, this imagined community of readers supposedly shares certain textual expectations, belief systems, and cultural backgrounds. Secondly, the vernacular language of these

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<sup>158</sup> Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 4-5. Anderson clarifies this last point when he notes that "unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers" but rather developed out of a series of interconnecting historical forces. In this regard, Anderson aims to adequately explain the anomaly of nationalism and nations as products of modernity. He argues that "nations and nationalisms are cultural artefacts of a particular kind" in contrast to Marxist and liberal theories which have tended to use the language of "phenomena."

<sup>159</sup> *Imagined Communities : Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

<sup>160</sup> Because Anderson is a "historicist" or "modernist" with regards to nations and nationalism, he believes these cultural artefacts developed out of modernity in order to achieve political and economic ends. This perspective opposes primordialism which argues that nations are ancient constructs.



communities became ever more fixed by the authority of the printed language, thereby excluding those who could not make sense of its official codes and rules. Thirdly, such exclusions have led to nodes of power congregating around these language communities whose members benefit in the exchange of ideas and influence.<sup>161</sup>

While Anderson does not intend to provide a qualitative critique of the nation-state paradigm, his analysis allows us better insight into the particular structures of violence that this form of imagined political community can extend. That is, according to Anderson, nations are organised around exclusion, power, and the control of both knowledge and communication. Moreover, attaching these national identities to a bounded territory through powerful institutional support potentially increases these dangers of exclusion and oppression. Nation-states may thus lead to the equivocation of identity (race, religion, ability, ethnicity, and so forth) with territory such that certain groups are not fully recognized as citizens. Nonetheless, Anderson's theory of print-capitalism also suggests the ways in which other forms of imagined political community, including diaspora cultures, may challenge the hegemony of nation-states through recourse to vernacular histories in folklore and mythology.<sup>162</sup>

In his book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford outlines various definitions and difficulties surrounding the term "diaspora."

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<sup>161</sup> Walcott, *Black Like Who? : Writing Black Canada*, 116.

<sup>162</sup> While Walcott acknowledges that Anderson's account is useful for understanding how nations—particularly those within Europe—imagine themselves during early state formation, he suggests that the model becomes less appropriate when considering those nation-states that were established after colonial encounters. He explains that "For these places the politics of language use and its relation to state formation is often played out between the twin forces of internal strife and, more importantly, local class antagonism and neo-colonial or imperialistic practices." Walcott thus suggests that the uniqueness of a country like Canada—which is an officially bilingual, immigration-based, post-colonial, settler nation-state—requires us to re-examine Anderson's theory, and particularly to refigure the function of language in the production of national consciousness. Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who? : Writing Black Canada*, 2nd rev. ed. (Toronto, Ont.: Insomniac Press, 2003), 117.

Differentiating diasporas from other types of “contact zone,” Clifford first suggests that “Diasporas usually presuppose longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future. Diasporas also connect multiple communities of a dispersed population.”<sup>163</sup> He also adds that an important feature of any diaspora is a strong mythology of remembering or returning to a collective homeland and a correlating sense of alienation in the new country.<sup>164</sup> Paraphrasing William Safran, Clifford provides a more detailed metrics for the conventional definition of diaspora as “[E]xpatriate minority communities”:

(1) that are dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places; (2) that maintain a “memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland”; (3) that “believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host country”; (4) that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right; (5) that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and (6) whose consciousness and solidarity as a group are “importantly defined” by this continuing relationship with the homeland.<sup>165</sup>

However, despite offering this detailed metrics for defining diaspora, Clifford warns his readers that depending too much upon the characteristics of an “ideal type” may be a dangerous practice, as certain groups may then be unproductively categorized according to whether they are perceived as more or less diasporic. Clifford is also intent to suggest that, throughout their histories, cultures will likely vary in the levels of their diasporism. This variation depends “on changing possibilities—obstacles, openings, antagonisms, and

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<sup>163</sup> Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 246. While Clifford speaks of a constitutive taboo on return, he also maintains that, for traditional understandings of diaspora, the desire for homeland return remains formative. For many, it is this ongoing connection with homeland that distinguishes diasporic and immigrant subject.

<sup>164</sup> *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 247.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

connections—in their host countries and transnationally.”<sup>166</sup> In particular, he notes that most of the points numbered in Safran’s definition of diaspora focus on the real or symbolic attachments to an original homeland, and argues that this emphasis excludes other decentered and lateral connections that may contribute to the formation of diaspora cultures. Instead, “a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important as the projection of a specific origin.”<sup>167</sup> That is, unlike those definitions offered by Safran and explained by Kenny, Clifford argues for a new understanding of diaspora that focuses on connections between variously dispersed communities that are not necessarily mediated through the real or symbolic homeland.

According to Clifford though, Diaspora cultures challenge assimilationist national ideologies, whether or not the national narrative emphasizes common origins or a history of immigration, because they continue to “maintain important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland *or* a dispersed community located elsewhere.”<sup>168</sup> This then is the important distinction that Clifford makes between immigrants and diaspora subjects—the former have a greater capacity and tendency to assimilate. Fundamentally, diaspora cultures are shaped by the collective traumas that have resulted from forced displacement, enslavement, exile, or other forms of violent loss, and are sustained by ongoing experiences of alienation and structural prejudice in their host countries. Clifford argues that these realities make it impossible for diaspora cultures to merge into the national community and thus, “Positive articulations of diaspora identity reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state.”<sup>169</sup> Ultimately Clifford maintains

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<sup>166</sup> *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 249.

<sup>167</sup> *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 250.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 250-51.

that diasporas challenge the simple one-to-one correspondence between identity and territory that both autochthonous and nationalist formations assert, but focuses most upon the productive critique of the nation-state that diaspora cultures offer.

Clifford makes this claim for how diasporas are necessarily subversive to the nation-state paradigm despite the fact that other critics have frequently argued for the ways in which diasporas reaffirm both national boundaries and nationalist identifications. For instance, Latha Varadarajan argues, "Far from being agents embodying the emergence of a 'pre-' or 'post-' national order, diasporas are playing a critical role in reinscribing both nationalisms and the nation-state structure itself."<sup>170</sup> She suggests this phenomenon is due to the ways in which diaspora cultures rely on notions of territorial origin and a sense of belonging to a specific or exclusive community. Furthermore, because members of diaspora cultures are never fully incorporated into the social fabric of their host countries—necessitating citizenship documents and other bureaucratic sanctions—the legitimacy of the nation-state becomes even more trenchantly established.<sup>171</sup> However, Clifford importantly distinguishes between "nationalist critical longing, and nostalgic or eschatological visions" on the one hand, and projects of "actual nation building— with the help of armies, schools, police, and mass media" on the other.<sup>172</sup> Thus, diasporic subjects may project a sense of national belonging or succumb to the structural forces of the nation-state, but they are not necessarily responsible for the existence of those systems directly. For example, diasporic subjects may pay taxes to the government, enroll their children in

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<sup>170</sup> Latha Varadarajan, *The Domestic Abroad: Diasporas in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 36.

<sup>171</sup> *The Domestic Abroad: Diasporas in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 36-37.

<sup>172</sup> Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 251.

public schools, or even be required to enter federal prisons, but this does not mean that they actually support the machinery behind these institutions.

In many ways, Clifford's overview of Diaspora Studies and his defence of a definition that exceeds a reliance on notions of geographic origin is indebted to the various contributions of Paul Gilroy to the field, most particularly in his book *The Black Atlantic*. Instead of the traditional model of diaspora, which assumes that cultural connections are established through a common place of origin, Gilroy outlines the Black Atlantic as a more fluid space for transnational cultural construction that privileges hybridity and movement.<sup>173</sup> He thus approaches the Atlantic as "one single, complex unit of analysis" to propose "an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective."<sup>174</sup> By emphasizing the transnational configuration of Black intellectual and artistic history, Gilroy challenges the prominent tendency to locate authentic Black identity in either the United States or a remembered African homeland. This emphasis on transnational exchange enables Gilroy to reject the nation-state paradigm and cultural nationalisms in general. He describes the aims and influences of his project more generally as follows:

The history of the black Atlantic[...] continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people—not only as commodities but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship—provides a means to reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory. They all emerge from it with special clarity if we contrast the national, nationalistic, and ethnically absolute paradigms of cultural criticism to be found in England and America with those hidden expressions, both residual and emergent, that attempt to be global or outer-national in nature.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 19.

<sup>174</sup> *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 15.

<sup>175</sup> *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 16.

By challenging these national or nationalistic paradigms of cultural criticism through a focus on transnational exchange, Gilroy endeavours to eschew all forms of ethnic absolutism. Fundamental to this manoeuvre is the notion of an anti-anti-essentialist “changing same.”<sup>176</sup> That is, Gilroy’s analysis does not assert an all-encompassing diasporic homogeneity, but instead considers the fluctuating similarities and differences between the particular regional cultures that compose the Black Atlantic as a metaculture.

The reasons why Gilroy is so determined to construct a notion of diaspora that manages to challenge all forms of nationalism and ethnic essentialism are because of the particular psychological and physical violence that these ideologies have exerted upon Blacks in the West. He argues that the paradoxical position of being simultaneously a part of and apart from nation-state formations has had “a special place in the intellectual history of blacks in the west [and poses]... a familiar problem which points towards the core dynamic of racial oppression as well as the fundamental antimony of diaspora blacks.”<sup>177</sup> He suggests that W.E.B Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, what Richard Wright describes as “the dreadful objectivity,” attempts the best-known resolution of this paradox. Du Bois describes this phenomenon in his seminal book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, as follows:

[T]he Negro is... born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world— a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts,

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<sup>176</sup> *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 101.

<sup>177</sup> *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 30.

two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>178</sup>

Gilroy emphasizes that Du Bois remains ambivalent in his description of double consciousness; at times it appears to be a gift and at others a violent and humiliating affliction. Gilroy extends this ambivalence in his own analysis, and Du Bois's notion of double consciousness thus provides Gilroy with a precedent in Black cultural criticism for developing his own theories of hybridity and movement through the reconfigured space of the Black Atlantic. Ultimately, double consciousness reflects the experience of being Black in the West on an individual level as the Black Atlantic locates cultural development on a diasporic level.

By being attuned to the ways in which cultural, ethnic, or racial identities maintain continuity while also changing throughout space and time, Gilroy avoids the typical binary that constrains critics to align themselves with either an essentialist or an anti-essentialist perspective. Gilroy further claims that both of these opposing views are in fact different types of essentialism, which he calls the ontological essentialist perspective and the strategic essentialist (pluralist) perspective of racial identity formation.<sup>179</sup> The former often presents itself as “a brute pan-Africanism” which is unreceptive to the actual lived experiences of most Black people.<sup>180</sup> The latter, because it “affirms blackness as an open signifier... [and] race itself as a social and cultural construction,” cannot effectively respond to the persistence of racialized forms of

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<sup>178</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, NY: Cosimo, 2007), 2. For a version of this experience articulated by Trinidadian-Torontonian writer, Dionne Brand, see as follows: “Through the BBC broadcasts we were inhabited by British consciousness. We were also inhabited by an unknown self. The African. This duality was fought every day from the time one woke up to the time one fell asleep.” Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 17.

<sup>179</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 31.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

power.<sup>181</sup> Thus, when Gilroy suggests that diaspora cultures exhibit an anti-anti-essentialist “changing same,” emphasizing fluidity and hybridity, he refutes the assumption by some that diasporas must necessarily reaffirm nationalist ideologies. However, he is also providing a means for critics to free themselves from an unproductive binary in which one must choose a perspective that either cannot reflect common lived experience or cannot take account of ongoing structural prejudice.

Explaining the predominance of these two forms of essentialism, Gilroy argues that, due to its European underpinnings, modern Black political culture has focused more on how identity is formed through roots and rootedness and less on understanding identity as “a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes.”<sup>182</sup> He shifts this focus through the chronotope<sup>183</sup> of the ship to demonstrate how both cultural and commodity exchange between Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, and Europe have connected the Black diaspora since the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade. The image of the ship is appropriate for its connotations with movement, exchange, and fluidity both within and outside nation state borders. It also recalls the slave ships of the middle passage, arguably the foundational event of both Western and Black diasporic modernity.<sup>184</sup> Thus, Gilroy's illustration of the (slave) ship reveals the exchanges that have been taking place in the Atlantic basin since the beginning of modernity, emphasizing a long history of transnational routes over those narratives of progress and assimilation that remain rooted in particular

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<sup>181</sup> *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 32. Gilroy may be thinking of Stuart Hall in particular here, whose talk “Race, the empty signifier” encapsulates this perspective of race and racial difference as non-essential social constructions.

<sup>182</sup> *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 19.

<sup>183</sup> This is a term developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” to describe methods of representing time and space linguistically/discursively.

<sup>184</sup> Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 4.



nation-states. So too, the (slave) ship recalls the violence that has been required for modernity to emerge, and makes clear why the Black diaspora has significantly defined itself against the attendant ideologies of this historical movement.

To support his assertion that modernity emerged out of the transatlantic slave-trade and colonial expansion more generally, Gilroy demonstrates the ways in which Western Enlightenment ideologies have been used to both justify African enslavement and delegitimize Black intellectual and artistic practices. By evoking the terror of slavery as a fundamental and formative aspect of modernity, Gilroy contests those explanations— prominent throughout economic, Marxist, and analytic philosophical theory— which assume that the modern world developed out of purely European contexts and ideals. Cultural memories of slavery have thus been mobilized by many Black intellectuals in order to critique the Western Enlightenment project's assumptions of historical progress, rationalism, and racial difference. Following this tradition, Gilroy proposes that the Black Atlantic— with its history of slavery, as well as its networks of Black intellectual and artistic production— emerges as the counter-culture to Western modernity and an alternative cultural formation to the oppressive structure of the nation-state. However, despite this emphasis on the historical implications of transatlantic slavery, Gilroy avoids a theory of diaspora that focuses solely on linear connections between an African homeland and the rest of the Atlantic basin. Instead, he pushes beyond the Middle Passage to engage with more positive moments of intellectual and artistic exchange between the various dispersed communities of the Black diaspora.

The Flying African Myth provides a useful means for furthering and refiguring Gilroy's notions of diaspora and particularly the Black Atlantic. It remains true that

Gilroy's theories are useful for challenging the residual or emergent nationalisms and ethnic essentialisms within Black diaspora discourses. However, four inconsistencies that arise due to the form and focus of his analysis reveal his own investment in some of the very facets of modernity that he intends to oppose. Firstly, Gilroy demonstrates a devotion to the biographies of an elite intellectual and artistic class. This focus on biography reaffirms the very same kind of individualism that has been championed throughout modernity at the expense of collective resistance. As one such example of collective resistance, the Black diaspora cannot be adequately explained by an archive and methodology that remains largely individualistic. Secondly, Gilroy maintains a reliance upon what can be historically and rationally accessed, as opposed to other methods of argumentation that make use of imaginative recovery or mythology, to explain Black cultural formation. Problematically, these epistemologies are at the very centre of modernity and the Western Enlightenment project. Both of these two aforementioned inconsistencies are evidenced by the unevenness in Gilroy's chapter breakdown. Five out of six focus on the biographies of prominent male intellectuals and artists while one is dedicated to the production of music, which can be viewed at least partially as a form of commodity exchange. Thirdly, while some of his examples do consider the sharing of ideas, texts, and music, Gilroy predominantly focuses on physical and bodily movement within the diaspora. This demonstrates his tacit agreement with modernity's gendered and ableist exclusions, largely ignoring how stasis or disembodied linkages are also vital components for the maintenance of diaspora cultures.<sup>185</sup> Fourthly, Gilroy offers a definition of diaspora that continues to

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<sup>185</sup> The emphasis on physical movement also betrays an uncomfortable similarity to those other colonial languages of "progress," "advancement," and "expansion."

depend upon an actual and bounded geographic space— which, while transnational, in many ways still works to reaffirm the nation-state paradigm and physical borderlands in general.

The Flying African Myth offers a means for extending Gilroy's theory of Black diasporic culture by responding to these four inconsistencies. By focusing on the presence and progression of this particular myth across national and cultural borders we can take on the spirit of Gilroy's Black Atlantic to wage even further criticisms of nationalism, ethnic essentialism, and particularly modernity. The project of further engaging with Gilroy's critique is important because, as he explains persuasively, these constructs have developed in tandem with racial violence and remain incapable of describing the experiences of hybridity and fluidity within the Black diaspora.

### Chapter 3

The following chapter analyzes several examples of the Flying African Myth in Black Canadian literature. The purpose of this analysis is twofold: 1) it responds to some of the previously noted problems of Black cultural erasure in Canada by demonstrating that the myth exists north of the United States, while also attending to how the myth's function in relation to diaspora changes across geographical and cultural borders; 2) it extends Paul Gilroy's project of rethinking the elements of diaspora culture by supplementing his image of the ship with the image of flight. The first portion of this chapter, therefore, develops several close readings of the myth in Black Canadian literature. This portion of the chapter is structured according to what I previously outlined as the two opposing philosophies of George Elliott Clarke and Rinaldo Walcott, demonstrating how the myth can both preserve Canadian national roots while also navigating Black diasporic routes. The second portion of this chapter picks up on those close readings that reveal a desire to reach beyond the nation-state paradigm, investigating more broadly how the Flying African Myth— both within and outside Canada— may embrace and extend the formulation of diaspora that Gilroy outlines in *The Black Atlantic*.

For the purposes of defending the claim that the Flying African Myth does in fact exist in Canada, it is important to note that many of the examples I have located directly and deliberately exemplify the more conventional characteristics of this myth. For example, Christian Campbell's poem "From Dover to Accra" makes explicit reference to the myth when the speaker describes those slaves in Barbados who flew back to Africa.

So too, George Elliott Clarke's poem "Homage to the Beloved Country" expresses the desire to fly with one's love on wings of corn, an image that directly corresponds to the Trinidadian versions of the Flying African Myth that recount "people levitating with corn cobs tucked under their armpits."<sup>186</sup> An explicit— if brief— reference to the Flying African Myth is made in Dionne Brand's novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, wherein the narrator states that a map does not collect "the stories of those escaped from Venezuela walking over the waters like Jesus Christ."<sup>187</sup> Although this account does not include images of human flight, stories of slaves walking upon water towards Africa are frequently included within the larger tradition of the myth because they respond to the same issues of oceanic obstruction, escape from slavery, and African return. The myth also structures Brand's narrative *In Another Place, Not Here* where suicide and flight are figured as one and the same. Before describing how her lover Verlia leapt from a cliff in flight, Elizete expresses her own desire to enact the Flying African Myth. She explains, "I will wear a black skirt, shapely like a wing and down to my toes. I will fly to Maracaibo in it and you will see nothing of me but my black eyes in my black face and my black skirt swirling over thick living vine. I dream of flying in my skirt to Maracaibo."<sup>188</sup> The poetry of David Woods and Delvina E Bernard could also be considered more conventional examples of the myth since their images of human flight are consistently associated with the prospect of collective freedom or with the memories of those who escaped from slavery.

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<sup>186</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 57.

<sup>187</sup> Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, 1st American ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 52.

<sup>188</sup> *In Another Place, Not Here*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1996), 12.

Although the Flying African Myth has gone largely unexamined in Canada thus far, these particular examples reveal the indisputable existence of the myth in Canadian literature. I have suggested that this scholarly omission follows a now well documented pattern of Black cultural erasure in Canada as well as the exclusion of Canadian literature in current scholarship surrounding this myth. However, both Dionne Brand and Leslie C. Sanders discuss the myth in their critical writings. In her introduction to *Fierce Departures*, Leslie C. Sanders argues that the Flying African Myth directly informs Dionne Brand's images of flight, noting that "slaves flying back to Africa people the folklore of the enslaved of the Caribbean and North America."<sup>189</sup> She also asserts that the sky, as a part of "nature, [is] implacable and without volition, [and thereby] brings relief from the harm that is willed and results from human action."<sup>190</sup> Sanders links these two points with the final observation that, for slaves in the New World, "Only sky encompassed both their place of bondage and their homeland," concluding that the "[S]ky was a doorway' for slaves longing for freedom."<sup>191</sup> In *A Map to the Door of No Return* Brand considers the myth at length herself, affirming that "Stories of Africans flying home to Africa or walking home on the ocean floor abound in continental America and the archipelago. Africans born in Africa were said to know how to fly. If when they arrived in the Americas [...] they did not eat salt, they could fly back home."<sup>192</sup> She gives several examples of the myth, discussing Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, as well as the story of an enslaved woman "called Gang Gang Sarah who walked up the hill at

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<sup>189</sup> Leslie C Sanders, *Fierce Departures: The Poetry of Dionne Brand*, Laurier Poetry Series (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), xii.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 43.

Moriah [...] and flew all the way back to Africa,”<sup>193</sup> and concludes with a family anecdote in which one of her relatives may have tried to return to Africa by walking into the sea.<sup>194</sup> Brand ultimately says that “One may not call these ways [of reaching the Door of No Return] practical but they certainly suggest a mastery of way-finding. So much so that no known map is necessary, nor any known methods of conveyance. Except escaping the body.”<sup>195</sup> Thus, while there has not been any systematic investigation of the myth in Canadian literary criticism, there have been a few scholars who have recognized the numerous iterations of the myth throughout Canada.

Another example of this myth in Canada comes from George Elliott Clarke's poem “Homage to the Beloved Country.” The mode of flight described in this poem follows those Trinidadian versions that recount “people levitating with corn cobs tucked under their armpits.”<sup>196</sup> That is, the speaker expresses a desire for “a saviour not nailed down/ to a cruciform of certainty, / and to fly my love on wings of corn/ over a sky of meadow.”<sup>197</sup> The poem represents the conflicted position of having one's “love” for the nation not fully accepted. Indeed, the speaker regretfully considers “how a dream of freedom can be twisted into dust/ by a narrow and naked land.”<sup>198</sup> However, in “Homage

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<sup>193</sup> This account seems to have directly influenced Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*; for, a character named Adela living near Moriah disappears by walking “out of Nowhere.” The language of this extract is notable, for she is said to “part the envious darkness with her foot. She climb the silk cotton tree up there and fly all the way back to Africa.” This novel thus serves as one further example of the myth in Canadian literature. Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*, 1st ed. (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1996), 23.

<sup>194</sup> *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 43-44.

<sup>195</sup> *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 44. This understanding of the myth as a way of finding origins, and the necessity of escaping the body to do so, is particularly important for this chapter's later discussion of Gilroy. The Flying African Myth is offered as an alternative form of movement throughout the Black diaspora which remains disembodied and not bound by geographic space.

<sup>196</sup> McDaniel, *The Big Drum Ritual of Carriacou : Praisesongs in Rememory of Flight*, 57.

<sup>197</sup> George Elliott Clarke, *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile : Fugitive Poems, 1978-1993* (Lawrencetown Beach, N.S.: Pottersfield Press, 1994), 78.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

to the Beloved Country,” the “tragedy” of not fully belonging to the nation can be remedied through flight, as the poem ends with the optimistic hope that “the fat years follow these thin.”<sup>199</sup> Clarke’s image of flight in this poem, then, does not signify methods of escape from the nation, nor does it provide a means to reimagine diasporic connections. Rather, flight represents the dream for freedom within Canada that was first figured during American slavery with the creation of the Underground Railroad. Still, the similarity of Clarke’s title to Alan Paton’s liberal anti-South African apartheid book, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, suggests that he maintains a sense of broader Black collectivity while also asserting his love for Canada.

As with Clarke’s fraught affirmation of Canada as the “beloved country,” several other examples of the myth in Africadian literature emphasize this desire to belong to the nation. In particular, a number of versions emphasize the freedom which has been achieved in the Canadian Maritimes, a trend evident in the poetry of Delvina E Bernard and David Woods. For example, in Bernard’s song “Inkululeko Iyeza” (meaning “Freedom is Coming” in Zulu) she states, “*by and by, the burdens that we bear/ will take wings in flight, as we lay down to rest.*”<sup>200</sup> The link Bernard draws between the images of laying down to rest and burdens taking wings in flight, demonstrates her appropriation of the Flying African Myth for distinctly Canadian nationalist purposes. Indeed, the physical bodies of those descended from slavery are figured as laying down to rest whereas it is their “burdens” that are envisioned as flying away. This adaptation of the myth reveals a developmental narrative which establishes Canada as the post-slavery

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

<sup>200</sup> *Fire on the Water : An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Porters Lake, N.S., Canada: Pottersfield Press, 1992), 131.



land of freedom and security. Notably, Bernard does not use the myth in Gilroydian fashion to rework a Black diasporic geography. Neither does she use the myth in its more traditional sense to articulate desires for escape and cross-Atlantic return. Rather, Bernard draws on the myth's long history—evidenced in part by the incorporation of the traditionally African Zulu language<sup>201</sup>— so as to pronounce the permanency of Black Canada, optimistically favouring physical and emotional rest over perpetual movement.

Like Bernard, Woods's poetry makes nostalgic use of the Flying African Myth in order to pay tribute to the collective suffering in African American history. These poems also encourage the developmental narrative that emphasizes how the labour, love, defiance, and courage of African slaves and their descendants contributed to social progress throughout the Americas. For example, the diligent men and women in his poem "Lumière" successfully break from their chains and lift into flight. While the poem could reflect a perception of progress throughout the New World, perhaps the French title "Lumière" finds more resonance within Canada's constitutionally bilingual context. Reading the poem with this national focus reveals that, like Bernard, Woods paradoxically uses the image of flight in order to represent the sense of security and rootedness that has been ostensibly achieved in Black Canada. For, in his poem

"Lumière," Woods writes the following:

Praise men and women  
who were slaves,  
Praise their toil and their lovemaking,  
Praise their defiance and their shameful  
servitude,  
Praise when they bled from whip-wounds,  
And when in courage

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<sup>201</sup> Nonetheless, like Clarke's reference to Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Bernard's incorporation of the Zulu language also affirms a sense of broader Black collectivity.

They lifted tired feet into flight.<sup>202</sup>

The repetition of the word “praise” throughout the first four lines indicates the commemorative nature of this poem. Indeed, praise songs are one of the most widely used and long-held poetic forms in African heritage. So too, the shift in the last line from images of servitude and suffering to those of lightness and flight reveals the poem’s affirmative message. Although Bernard’s song ends with the image of bodily rest and Wood’s poem ends with the image of human flight, both engage in a historical project which uses the myth, to incorporate Black history into the Canadian national consciousness, to commemorate traditional narratives such as the Flying African Myth, and to endorse the notion of social progress that explains their geographic rootedness in Canada.

This use of the Flying African Myth to develop a commemorative and affirmative historical project is evident in other examples of Woods’s poetry as well. For instance, the title of his poem “On Becoming” suggests a developmental narrative whereby Blacks received greater autonomy and recognition in Canada. So too, the phrase “no longer” which is repeated throughout this poem emphasizes the distinctions between a past of slavery and a secure present in which Blacks have now settled in “a free place.” This message is evident in the formal construction of the poem as well. For, the speaker declares,

No longer enslaved  
or held by indenture  
No longer negated  
or obscured in the dark

But bold

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<sup>202</sup> David A. Woods, *Native Song: Poetry and Paintings*, 2nd ed. (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Pub., 2008), 7.

Of new order

Ascending to flight

[...] Owner of black wings.<sup>203</sup>

These last four stanzas invoking the theme of flight are made visually distinct from the rest of the poem by their shorter length and by their alternating indented lines, giving the effect of quickened movement such that the reader seems to ascend with the poem to the promised land of freedom. This uplifting overtone towards the end of the poem, along with the developmental title “On Becoming,” as well as the references to a past of slavery and negation, indicate Woods’s historical optimism. That is, Woods embraces the Flying African Myth for its historical significance throughout the Black Americas. He does not use the myth to reconceptualise present diasporic connections so much as to commemorate what he views as a linear progression from slavery in the past to social ascension and identity formation in what has now become a “free place.” While he does not reference Canada overtly in this poem, the dedication to Harriet Tubman on the following page reflects Woods’s larger project of incorporating Black history into the Canadian national consciousness.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> *Native Song: Poetry and Paintings*, 2nd ed. (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Pub., 2008), 8.

<sup>204</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of Woods’s poetry that incorporates the Flying African Myth. For example, in his poem “Bidii (The Flight)”, Woods writes, “Memory...Sun/ A free place without chains/ That embraces the man inside/ And like a pair of wings—/ Lifts his imagination into the skies.” What becomes interesting about Woods’s use of the myth in this poem is how both the victims and perpetrators of enslavement are figured as birds, a connection further established by both being italicized and contained in parentheses. In describing the figure of the victim, Woods writes, “(A black bird surmounts the sky,/ Sees its murdered beauty—/ And issues a loud, despondent cry).” In describing the figure of the perpetrator, Woods writes, “(you are the vulture/ With steel claws and fiery eyes/ Tearing at my flesh—/ Raping me of innocence— And keeping me chained/ in a prison of lies).” This avian connection between perpetrator and victim indicates that for Woods flight on its own is insufficient for freedom. Rather, the capacity for flight is only valuable when it ushers in a sense of national belonging or a physical place of refuge. Similarly, the symbol of flight is only valuable as a piece of folkloric tradition that traces the roots of cultural heritage in a home that, while “free”, continually threatens erasure. David A. Woods, *Native Song: Poetry and Paintings*, 2nd ed. (Halifax, NS: Nimbus Pub., 2008), 6.

Versions of the myth outside Canada do not always parallel these positive representations of the Great *White North*, such as Ishmael Reed's more cynical *Flight to Canada*. In this novel Reed combines historical revisionism with the slave narrative form to tell the story of Raven Quickskill, a slave who escapes the antebellum South for Canada only to find such freedom illusory. Quickskill finds the segregation and inequality in Canada as unbearable as the circumstances of slavery from which he fled. Likewise, when he and his lover Quaw arrive in Canada, they meet another former slave named Carpenter who states, "I don't want anything to do with Canada. The sooner I'm out of here the better."<sup>205</sup> It is this cynical portrayal of Canada as a land of racial obscurity and *inequality* which leads Gay Wilentz to argue that Reed subverts the Flying African Myth—aligning the image of flight, not with its positive connotations of freedom and power, but with failure and loss.<sup>206</sup> Thus, unlike those Canadian poets I have considered thus far, Reed challenges the vision of Canada as a progressive land of equality and inclusion.

It is certainly also significant that Quickskill does not consider cross-Atlantic flight either, never dreaming of escaping or "returning" to Africa. In fact, Reed suggests through the character of Uncle Robin, another slave with an avian inspired name, that social ascension must now be achieved within the United States. Robin is a pseudo-"Uncle Tom" who tricks his master, Arthur Swille, into bequeathing him the estate. When Swille subsequently catches fire, Robin refuses to resuscitate him, feigning stupidity instead. "And to Uncle Robin," Swille's last will and testament reads, "I leave this

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<sup>205</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1998), 159.

<sup>206</sup> Gay Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," *MELUS* 16, no. 1 (1989): 26.

Castle, these hills and everything behind the gates of the Swille Virginia estate."<sup>207</sup>

Subsequently, Wilentz concludes that "It is consistent with Reed's middle-class vision for Black American life that he sees no African home to return to... the answer for Reed appears to be grounded in America and in forcing change within that context."<sup>208</sup> Thus, *Flight to Canada* makes use of the Flying African Myth, not to espouse a more traditional teleology of African return, nor does it attempt a more Gilroydian engagement with diasporic connections, and neither does it endorse the Canadian nationalist project evidenced by the earlier poems I have analysed in this chapter. Rather, it reveals an American exceptionalism that sets up the image of Canada as something like a straw man to limit any sense of opportunity or improvement outside of the United States.

Jamaican-Torontonian dub-poet Afua Cooper corroborates Reed's scepticism about the levels of freedom and equality in Canada when she asserts that "It's hard being Black in Canada. [...] There is such a denial of racism."<sup>209</sup> Her ambivalence towards Canada is further evident through her use of the Flying African Myth in "Confessions of a Woman Who Burnt Down a Town." This poem commemorates the last days of Marie-Joseph Angélique, a Black slave woman hanged in Montréal for arson.<sup>210</sup> Waiting for her execution, the poem's speaker contemplates,

outside the guard is waiting  
to take me to my hanging  
outside the guard is waiting to take me to my dying  
outside the guard in waiting to take me to my burning  
Soon I will be free from the prison of this island

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<sup>207</sup> Reed, *Flight to Canada*, 167.

<sup>208</sup> Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," 26.

<sup>209</sup> Valerie Mason-John and Kevan Anthony Cameron, *The Great Black North : Contemporary African Canadian Poetry* (Calgary: Frontenac House Poetry, 2013), 26.

<sup>210</sup> *The Great Black North : Contemporary African Canadian Poetry* (Calgary: Frontenac House Poetry, 2013), 259.

and I will fly and fly and fly

petit oiseau, s'envoler.<sup>211</sup>

Like Woods's poem "Lumière," Cooper's incorporation of both Canadian official languages may reflect a desire for rootedness to the nation. So too, her poem could be seen as an attempt to integrate Black history into the Canadian national consciousness, even if to criticize these instances of cultural and bodily erasure. Accordingly, the poem does not seem to engage with any kind of diasporic networking, and in fact seems to espouse a stronger sense of regionalism instead. Nonetheless, commemorating the defiant act of a woman who burnt down much of Montréal— as opposed to white settlers and pioneer builders— challenges the dominant rhetoric of progress and permanency touted by those engaged in a more nationalistic project. So too, this poem recalls earlier versions of the Flying African Myth that align images of human flight with suicide and martyrdom. As with these earlier versions, Cooper's poem does not suggest that these types of death and destruction are necessarily negative. Rather, such methods of self-destruction are imagined as viable possibilities for escaping the forced displacement, enslavement, and incarceration which have been prompted by the projects of colonialism and nation building in Canada.

With slightly less ambivalence than Cooper's poem, the Trinidadian-Torontonian poet Dionne Brand invokes flight not so much to praise national belonging or a new rootedness, but to recall the various histories of movement that have led to a politically defiant diasporic consciousness. For example, in her essay "Just Rain, Bacolet", Dionne Brand recounts her return to the island of Tobago. She states,

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<sup>211</sup> *The Great Black North : Contemporary African Canadian Poetry*, 29.

A long time ago I think I fled this place because flight is as strong as return; it is the same often. One is not the end of the other or the beginning of the next, and often when we go back all we can think of is flight. And in flight... But this time I wanted to stay. We wanted to stay. This ease we slip into leaves us stranded once we have to disappear again. The closer we get to home the more we disappear, contemplating immigration lines and police lines and bank lines and just bullshit lines.<sup>212</sup>

Brand's impatience with "bullshit lines" may also refer to the kinds of commemorative projects that concern Canadian poets such as Bernard, Woods, and Clarke, who attempt to locate Black Canadian identity within a linear history that progresses towards equality and inclusion while also preserving cultural heritage. Rather, for Brand, flight offers a less rigid, more diasporic framework for understanding racial and cultural identity. Flight is itself as strong as return, and the closer she gets to home the more she disappears. Indeed, the precise location of "home" is thrown into profound confusion as this term may refer to both Toronto and Tobago in equal measure at various times. In this sense, "home" becomes less of a physical location in Brand's writings and more of an imagined space, a state of mind, or an instrument for reconfiguring socio-political formations such as the nation-state. Dislodging "home" from any strict notion of physical location demonstrates one of the important ways that a consideration of flight imagery allows for an extension of Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*. Rather than depending upon the physical movements of ships between countries that have largely been established by colonialism, flight imagery can map the Black diaspora onto imagined spaces and complicate what are often assumed to be static geographies.

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<sup>212</sup> Clarke, *Eyeing the North Star: Directions in African-Canadian Literature*, 134.

Indeed, in her novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, Brand argues that maps should not be thought of as static and objective representations of the world, but rather as fluid and subjective. The novel's narrator states that "Maps are such subjective things, borders move all the time. There are encroachments and retreats... This map cannot note the great fluidity of maps, which is like the fluidity of air."<sup>213</sup> Brand's comparison between maps and air is particularly significant to the project of rethinking Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, extending the notion of diaspora from land and water into sky which is the medium of flight. The image of people flying in the sky maintains the sense of diasporic fluidity which is so central to Gilroy's image of the ship on water. However, the fluidity of air is perhaps even more appropriate for representing diasporic formation because it is more immaterial, more difficult to capture cartographically, and maintains stronger connotations with imagination and impossibility. That is, the Black diaspora has been maintained in large part through vernacular traditions, it is not necessarily geographically bound or fixed<sup>214</sup>, and it often resists the logic of Western rationalism which— as Gilroy argues— has contributed to racial oppression.

As a helpful illustration of these points, Brand discusses the immaterial, imagined, and impossible nature of Black diasporic experience elsewhere in her writings. She states that "places and those who inhabit them are indeed fictions. [...] The Door of No Return is of course no place at all but a metaphor for place. Ironically, or perhaps suitably, it is no one place but a collection of places." Thus, there are real

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<sup>213</sup> Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, 52.

<sup>214</sup> For example, Brand argues that the Door of No Return— which some believe to be the centre and origin of the Black diaspora— "is a place, real, imaginary and imagined." Such an understanding of African return as real, imaginary, imagined, and in a sense impossible, necessitates a formulation of the Black diaspora that attends to these immaterial— what Brand elsewhere calls "surreal" and "inexplicable"— spaces. Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 19.



and formative places in the Black diaspora that enter the realm of metaphor, and even collapse the notions of segregated or static geographic space. Brand continues, stating that the Door of No Return is “real [...] metaphoric [and] mythic to those of us scattered in the Americas today.”<sup>215</sup> She describes Black diasporic experience as having “one’s belonging lodged in a metaphor,” “inhabit[ing] a trope,” or being “a kind of fiction.”<sup>216</sup> And, she concludes that “To live in the Black Diaspora is [...] to be a being living inside and outside of herself.”<sup>217</sup> Black diasporic experience thus appears to be full of impossibility or contradiction, exists in immaterial spaces, and extends into the imagination. When Brand states that “This door is really the door of dreams. This existence in the Diaspora is like that— dreams from which one never wakes [...] a strand of stories which never come into being, which never coalesce”<sup>218</sup>, she is seeking “a cognitive schema”<sup>219</sup> for understanding the Black diaspora and for finding the Door of No Return. Ultimately, she concludes that “our cognitive schema is captivity.”<sup>220</sup> Thus, the thematic focus of the Flying African Myth on dreams and captivity offers a productive opportunity for furthering Gilroy’s analysis in order to trace the Black diaspora beyond bounded geographies and into imagined or immaterial spaces.

Wayde Compton’s “Legba, Landed” shares Brand’s detachment from linear histories and engages in a similar project of remapping “home” onto the sky. The theme of human flight in this poem suggests that arrivals are themselves less significant than methods of reimagining the strict borders that separate origins from destinations. It is

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<sup>215</sup> Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 18.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 28-29.

<sup>219</sup> *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 28.

<sup>220</sup> *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 29.

thus significant that the reference to Legba<sup>221</sup> in the title of this poem recalls “the gate-keeper Iwa of vodou that allows for passage between the material and spiritual worlds.”<sup>222</sup> This reference to the Yoruba spirit achieves a number of complex and contradictory effects. Firstly, it appears to uphold the teleology of homeland return evident in more conventional versions of the Flying African Myth by evoking the long-held beliefs and traditions of West Africa. Additionally, Legba’s role as the gate-keeper between the material and spiritual worlds parallels the role of customs agents who patrol Canada’s national borders. Yet, according to many accounts of the Flying African Myth, it is precisely this communion between the material and spiritual worlds that allows for escape from slavery through the power of human flight. Thus, Legba’s role for the construction of diaspora in this poem is uncertain. The inclusion of the following word “landed” in the poem’s title only contributes to this uncertainty. For, “landed” may reflect a rigid geography and rootedness to nation, but may also simply suggest a flight coming to rest. “Landed” also recalls the “landed immigrant,” a Canadian term for permanent residency, which refers to the liminal position of living permanently in a nation that is not one’s own.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> The reference to Legba is also significant as it identifies this poem as a very clear example of the Flying African Myth, reminiscent of the Big Drum dances performed by the Carriacou peoples which also invoke this spirit.

<sup>222</sup> Mason-John and Cameron, *The Great Black North: Contemporary African Canadian Poetry*, 259.

<sup>223</sup> The inclusion of a comma between the two words only confounds this indeterminacy in meaning. For, the comma partially separates the two words in time through a pause. However, because this comma functions as an ellipsis, it also brings the two words closer together through the removal of an intervening word. Depending upon how one reads the use of the comma, the two words will have differing relations to one another, revealing the power of borders (like commas) to both separate and integrate. Reconfiguring the various possible meanings of both words leads to a multiplicity of interpretations for this title— a fluidity and uncertainty which reflects the Gilroydian nature of the poem that follows.

The form and content of “Legba, Landed” further contributes to the ambiguity of this poem, constructing images of violence that complicate the relations of power and responsibility between perpetrator and victim. In this poem the speaker states,

I take to the night like a winged carrion.  
I am sweet to the stalker.  
Like an ibis, stems snapped  
like reeds, I fly above  
reptiles and annihil  
ation. Forever in flight against the sky.  
painted feathers brushing versus eternity.  
[...] lifting the race. Winged  
in flight  
without hope  
of landing. Canada  
geese band together  
to kill their crippled  
for fear of attracting  
stalkers to the flock.  
they peck.  
a mess of splintered feathers.  
hollowed bones.  
shattered limbs.  
frenzy toward the nest of night.  
death.  
no.  
rest.  
I am sweet to the prey.  
my only thought: I fly on,  
on, my sky home,  
home.<sup>224</sup>

The severing of words between lines and the shortness of each line reflects the violence of flight, as if the flying speaker is literally scattered between the various borders that crisscross a map. Indeed, the violence of the nation-state paradigm is made explicit by

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<sup>224</sup> Donna Bailey Nurse, *Revival : An Anthology of Black Canadian Writing* (Toronto, Ont.: McClelland & Stewart, 2006), 317-18.

the reference to Canada's band of geese that "kill their crippled/ for fear of attracting/ stalkers to the flock," figuring both prey and stalker as avian-like and united in violence. Compton makes no explicit reference to the history of slavery in this poem, and these images of violence likely refer to present racisms or to the "fragile coalition of identities" that constitute the Black diaspora in Canada, a community with such diversity that inner-antagonisms are perhaps inevitable. This concern with present inner-antagonisms, rather than a history of slavery, is significant because it demonstrates that— despite the ambiguity of the poem's title— he uses the Flying African Myth neither to express a teleology of homeland return nor to establish a narrative of national belonging. Rather, Compton uses the theme of flight to approach the continual struggles within Black Canada, following a Gilroydian sense of diaporic fluidity where one is forever in flight against the sky, even if such flight is inevitably violent and traumatic. Finally, as with Brand's "Just Rain, Bacolet," Compton displaces "home" from any physical location or notion of static geography when the speaker states, "I fly on, / on, my sky home, / home." This is important for extending Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, for it remaps the Black diaspora onto a somewhat immaterial and even imagined space that is not tethered to colonial conceptions of land or material ownership.

Although not as sympathetic to the project of building diaspora networks as Brand and Compton, George Elliott Clarke's poetry also works to construct spaces and places that extend beyond the bounded physical geographies which are accessible through Gilroy's image of the ship. In the introduction to his collection, *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile*, Clarke clarifies, "The place names that head each section refer to states of

mind, not actual geographies.”<sup>225</sup> Perhaps the most appropriate example of this practice is Clarke’s explanation for the term “Africadia” which comes from “Merging *Africa* and *Acadia* (a word which derives—like *Acadie*— from the Mi’kmaq suffix, *cadie*, which means ‘abounding in’), [and] signifies Black Nova Scotia, an African-American-founded ‘nation’ which has flourished for more than two centuries.”<sup>226</sup> Like Brand and Compton, Clarke is engaged in a project of poetic place making, merging various parts of the world with mythic locations through the form and etymologies of his language. However, where Brand and Compton generate this space to collapse static geographical boundaries and complicate linear histories into a more fluid conception of diaspora, Clarke participates in the creation of a Black nation in Canada— an Andersonian imagined community developed through the imagined spaces of his language. Ultimately, with differing methods and purposes, Brand, Compton, and Clarke rework the concept of “home,” which is so thematically central to the Flying African Myth, into a more open signifier that can stand in for various imagined spaces and places that signify freedom.<sup>227</sup>

Linked to this construction of imagined and immaterial space, the Flying African Myth also provides a means for picking up on Gilroy’s productive discussion of disembodied movements<sup>228</sup> when he considers how diasporic connections are formed (traveling texts, music, and ideas). As the primary metric for determining racial difference as well as the medium through which labour has been forced and pain

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<sup>225</sup> Clarke, *Lush Dreams, Blue Exile: Fugitive Poems, 1978-1993*, 6.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Evidenced by all of the writers discussed in this chapter, these various meanings for “home” can include Africa, the Caribbean, Canada, the notion of a past or origin, the afterlife, socio-economic ascension, political power, and artistic achievement.

<sup>228</sup> The myth also allows for a shift away from Gilroy’s heavier focus on physical movement.

elicited, the body continues to pose obstacles for many throughout the Black diaspora. When explaining the way to the Door of No Return, Brand affirms that one “needs no physical apparatus except the mind; the body is the prison. It is the body which makes the sign for sanction and regulation.”<sup>229</sup> Gadsby states similarly that “flight in the form of bodily death exists as resistant alternative to persecution— against all odds. The body symbolizes a prison over which the enslaved have little physical control. In this context, transcending enslavement must take the form of death, allowing the spirit to fly free.”<sup>230</sup> These accounts demonstrate the ways in which the physical body has held a particularly vexed position for many in the Black diaspora, suggesting that Gilroy's focus on physical and bodily movements should be supplemented more fully with other kinds of imaginative travel. However, emphasizing the importance of stasis for diaspora formation is particularly important when trying to attend to the gendered and ablest implications of a heavy focus on physical mobility. According to American studies, “the majority of fugitive slaves—as many as 80 per cent—were men between the ages of 16 and 35.”<sup>231</sup> As these statistics reveal, there were real practical obstacles for women, children, and the elderly to escape from slavery through the Underground Railroad. This bias in freedom of movement towards able-bodied men can also be observed in other cases of migration that made it easier for labourers, loyalist soldiers, or the formally educated to move throughout the diaspora. The correlation between able-bodied men and greater freedom of movement is also reflected in the particular biographies that Gilroy includes in his analysis— which makes no mention of any figure with mobility

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<sup>229</sup> Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, 45.

<sup>230</sup> Gadsby, *Sucking Salt: Caribbean Women Writers, Migration, and Survival*, 25.

<sup>231</sup> Adrienne Shadd in Peggy Bristow, *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up : Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 42.

impairment and, apart from Toni Morrison, neglects a serious consideration of female artists or thinkers.

However, because it has traditionally been disseminated orally, the Flying African Myth offers a means for filling in these gaps. That is, the myth has managed to travel across the Americas even while individual storytellers have often remained physically stationary.<sup>232</sup> The very spread of the myth across the Caribbean and Americas thus speaks to a form of narrative movement that exists separate from the physical movements of bodies. Moreover, while the myth fundamentally expresses the desire for escape, cross-Atlantic return, and self-determined mobility in general, it is also “a story that explains why [those who have been left behind] must remain” for the myth’s very continuance.<sup>233</sup> The Flying African Myth thus offers a method by which to think about the formation of diasporic networks that emphasizes physical stasis and the creation of disembodied linkages. The importance of stasis to the persistence and proliferation of this myth is also frequently reflected in its content, whereby flights of imagination often transport people out of their skins or physical locations. By opening up possibilities for imagined movement, the Flying African Myth exhibits the ways in which the diaspora has always been shaped by those incapable of, or indifferent to, physical mobility.

Dionne Brand’s *At the Full and Change of the Moon* demonstrates both how flight imagery can extend the Black diaspora into imagined spaces and how such spaces can be reached without a dependence on physical mobility. In particular, a secret and potentially imaginary settlement of runaway slaves known as Terre Bouillante is

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<sup>232</sup> While *The Black Atlantic* considers similar forms of cultural sharing which do not depend upon the physical movements of bodies, such as musical production, much of his analysis remains focused on the journeys of individuals across the Atlantic.

<sup>233</sup> Storey, "Flying Words: Contests of Orality and Literacy in the Trope of the Flying Africans," par. 32.

accessible only through magic and avian metamorphosis. In this novel, an escaped slave named Kamena attempts with great difficulty to find this mystical sanctuary. After pushing himself to exhaustion, Kamena collapses and feels himself transform into something birdlike<sup>234</sup>: “His blood singing in his ears sounded as sweet as sugar birds. They were flying close to his face, brushing his head, and he heard the beat and flutter of wings as incessant as the rain until he thought that it was his own heart, and his skin was covered with feathers and the silk of birds.”<sup>235</sup> Ultimately, it is only through this magical out-of-body communion with the birds that Kamena first discovers Terre Bouillante. Although Kamena believes himself to be in paradise, he leaves to collect a young girl named Bola who has been charged to his care, and he spends the remainder of his days trying to return once more. In other descriptions, Terre Bouillante resembles an imaginary space which Kamena travels to in his dreams: “Sometimes without moving a step he thought that he could feel Terre Bouillante close. Sometimes in his sleep he discovered a way and awoke fresh and happy only to find himself at Culebra Bay.”<sup>236</sup> Terre Bouillante emerges as an imaginary space where one can find refuge only through dreams or magical flight. Such a possibility suggests that the Black diaspora includes spaces that extend beyond the Atlantic and even beyond the limits of a physical geography.

Similarly, in his poem “Dover to Accra,” Christian Campbell’s explicit use of the Flying African Myth envisions the power of flight to collapse geographic distance and to

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<sup>234</sup> Kamena’s avian metamorphosis links him with the figure of the soucouyant in more traditional versions of this myth; for, as Aurélie argues, “The *soucouyan*[t]... should be considered, in a de-centering approach as a flying maroon who changes his body into that of a bird.” Dionne Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, 1st American ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 6.

<sup>235</sup> Brand, *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, 29.

<sup>236</sup> *At the Full and Change of the Moon*, 54-55.



transport individuals across imagined spaces. The speaker of this poem reminds readers of what Kamau Brathwaite said about Barbados— that it is the “most English/ of West Indian islands, but at the same time nearest, as the slaves fly, / to Africa.”<sup>237</sup> “Dover to Accra” suggests that it is through the power of human flight that geographies can be redefined, Barbados becoming nearer to Africa despite English cultural dominance. In fact, as the poem concludes, all three geographies— Accra Beach, England, and Africa— as well as our solar system at large, become conflated: “we will all swallow the sun whole on Accra/ Beach, near the hotel, in Little England, Little Africa.”<sup>238</sup> Thus, Campbell’s use of the Flying African Myth extends the power for human flight beyond simply envisioning cross-Atlantic escape from slavery. Rather, in Gilroydian form, Campbell eschews the teleology of African return. However, he reaches beyond Gilroy’s emphasis on physical mobility to embrace a geographic imaginary where the whole of the Black diaspora becomes collapsed into a single space.

The Flying African Myth thus extends Gilroy’s notion of diaspora into imagined spaces that are not bound by colonially determined nation-states, embracing disembodied movements and flights of imagination that are not reflected by his image of the ship. But the myth’s emphasis on imagination, immateriality, and impossibility also extend beyond Gilroy’s reliance upon what can be historically and rationally accessed. While historical accounts for the development of the Flying Africans certainly exist, the myth itself can be understood as an alternative form of collective memory that engages in an imaginative recovery of the past and a critique of Western rationalism. As

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<sup>237</sup> Christian Campbell, *Running the Dusk*, ed. Kwame Dawes (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

Dominique Aurélia argues, the Flying African Myth allows writers and storytellers “to restructure a past for their community” because, “before being transcribed or written, they were part of oral civilization[...] thus making a link between the sacred and the ‘historicized.’”<sup>239</sup> This uneasy link between the sacred and the historicized provides a vehicle by which to interrogate notions of truth and rationality. Walters argues similarly that those who spread the Flying African Myth “actively reinscribe veracity, the way they wrest the official historiography from its claims to accuracy.”<sup>240</sup> Cuban memoirist Estebán Montejo makes this “critique of hegemonic historiography” when he affirms that the flights of slaves were not instances of suicide as the official documents maintain. Significantly, Montejo claims to “know all this intimately, and it is true beyond a doubt.”<sup>241</sup> In fact, most of the early transcriptions of this myth come from those who believed in human flight with certainty and conviction, revealing the extent to which magic and spirituality have offered alternatives to Western rationality throughout the Black diaspora. In a similar fashion, Clarke’s “Homage to the Beloved Country” provides a critique of Western rationalism when the speaker associates the desire for “a saviour not nailed down/ to a cruciform of certainty” with the desire for flight.

Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* takes up this critique of empirical truth and rationality by offering the Flying African Myth as an alternative to Western technology. Morrison suggests that methods of flight that depend on technology also assume that truth is verifiable, physically contingent, and are ultimately derived from the Western perspective that produced transatlantic slavery and colonialism. She further reveals how

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<sup>239</sup> Aurélia, "Crossing Troubled Seas: The Metaphor of Flight in Caribbean Literature," 3.

<sup>240</sup> Walters, "One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair,/Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," 13.

<sup>241</sup> Cited in *ibid.*

this link between rationality and racial subjugation—a link Gilroy also emphasizes throughout *The Black Atlantic*—has contributed to deep psychological and social damage. For, when the novel's central character Macon "Milkman" Dead III "discovered, at four... that only birds and airplanes could fly— he lost all interest in himself."<sup>242</sup> Later, Milkman has "a warm dreamy sleep all about flying, about sailing high over the earth... not with arms stretched out like airplane wings... but floating, cruising, in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper."<sup>243</sup> Milkman thus reveals his desire to float freely without the aid of technology, and the narrator states similarly that Milkman's aunt Pilate "wouldn't set foot on an airplane,"<sup>244</sup> despite the homophonic resonances between her name and "pilot." Milkman later discovers that his grandfather flew back to Africa without the aid of aircraft, leading Wilentz to conclude that "Milkman... understands his potential and challenges the dominant culture which only allows you to fly through technology."<sup>245</sup> The final image of the novel is Milkman leaping into the air while engaged in hand-to-hand combat. The image is ambiguous since the novel ends before the moment that would determine whether or not Milkman took flight, reflecting the ambiguous position of the reader who must supply the image with an interpretation. Ultimately, the veracity-falsity binary, so central to Western conceptions of meaning and truth, is suspended along with Milkman.

Similarly, in Dionne Brand's long poem *Land to Light On*, the image of flight is regularly associated with uncertainty or contradiction. When describing Sundays in the

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<sup>242</sup> Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1987), 9.

<sup>243</sup> *Song of Solomon* (New York: Plume, 1987), 298.

<sup>244</sup> *Song of Solomon*, 334.

<sup>245</sup> Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," 30.

church yard, the speaker states, "I wanted to fly/ into their skins and I wanted to escape them."<sup>246</sup> While the Flying African Myth usually figures flight as the very mode of escape from slavery and incarceration, Brand *contrasts* flight with escape and embraces the resultant contradiction— a desire to simultaneously fly into and away from the very same individuals. However, what appears to be a contradiction actually reflects the speaker's complex experiences of racial subjugation, wanting both to have the Other's privileged position as well as to escape the damaging effects of that power differential. Brand's image of flight thus challenges Western rationality which views truth as objective and singular. Significantly, the image is particularly common to variants of the Flying African Myth which describe the ability of witches known as soucouyants to go unnoticed in human form by day and shed their bodies by night. They are thought to carefully hide their skins in a jar before transforming into a ball of fire and flying through the air.<sup>247</sup> Such an allusion recalls alternative epistemologies that challenge Western rationalism with accounts of magic and mysticism.

The Flying African Myth also eschews the individualism of Gilroy's analysis, which remains largely devoted to the biographies of an elite intellectual and artistic class. Because the production of mythology is always a collective process, the use of such myths by individual writers or storytellers reflects their own engagement with larger, and often vernacular, cultural narratives. What's more, according to Wilentz, "Historically, in Africa and the diaspora, women have been the heritage bearers; they have passed on the orature to the children."<sup>248</sup> She further argues that "Contemporary

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<sup>246</sup> Dionne Brand, *Land to Light On* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997), 66.

<sup>247</sup> Aurélia, "Crossing Troubled Seas: The Metaphor of Flight in Caribbean Literature," 4.

<sup>248</sup> Wilentz, "If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature," 28.

women writers, following a pattern from often undocumented African and African American women storytellers, aim to pass on cultural values and traditions—including tales and legends—to help build more integrated and healthier communities.”<sup>249</sup> Thus, by considering how such folktales have shaped Black diasporic formation, Gilroy’s analysis can be more fully attuned to the contributions of women. So too, because early versions of the myth were, as Wilentz notes, “undocumented” and anonymously transmitted, the individualism and intellectual elitism inherent in a heavy recourse to biography can also be avoided.

Due to this undocumented and anonymous nature of the myth’s early development and dissemination, it is difficult to find examples that demonstrate these points. One anonymous version has been attributed to Texas and subsequently documented in Abrahams’s collection *African American Folktales*, where it has been transcribed into a short story called “A Flying Fool.”<sup>250</sup> This story relates the experiences of a Black man who died and stole a pair of angel’s wings when he was denied entrance to heaven on account of his race. Another early account of this folktale from the Gullah people of the Georgia Sea Islands<sup>251</sup> was transcribed by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps in “All God’s Chillen Had Wings,” explaining that “Once all Africans could fly like birds; but owing to their many transgressions, their wings were taken away.”<sup>252</sup> Most of the early versions of this myth developed anonymously and were only subsequently documented or transcribed in this way.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, *African American Folktales : Stories from Black Traditions in the New World*, Pantheon Fairy Tale & Folklore Library (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 280.

<sup>251</sup> Reyes, “Flying Africans,” 481.

<sup>252</sup> Hughes and Bontemps, *The Book of Negro Folklore*, 62.

Moreover, in cases where the names of storytellers have been determined, they often refer to slaves, laborers, or average citizens. For example, in an interview conducted by the Georgia Writers' Project, an informant from Savannah named Jack Tattnell relates that "Lots of slaves what was brung over from Africa could fly. There was a crowd of them working in the field. They don't like it here and they think they go back to Africa. One by one they fly up in the air and all fly off and gone back to Africa."<sup>253</sup> Similarly, in Canada, an escaped slave from Washington DC relates how flight figured as a common explanation for the disappearance of other slaves: "Men would disappear all at once [...] how, I knew not. I really believed that they had some great flying machine to take them through the air."<sup>254</sup> While the Flying Africans have been taken up by literary elites such as Toni Morrison (in *Song of Solomon*), Ralph Ellison (in "Flying Home"), Paule Marshall (in *Praisesong for the Widow*), and Ishmael Reed (in *Flight to Canada*), the myth's larger development and dissemination points to the ways in which the Black diaspora has been formed by the often undocumented voices of storytellers.

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<sup>253</sup> Georgia Writers' Project. Savannah Unit., *Drums and Shadows : Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 108.

<sup>254</sup> Francis Henderson cited in Benjamin Drew, *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, Coles Canadiana Collection (Toronto: Coles Publishing Company, 1981), 159.

## Conclusions

Ultimately then, these examples indicate the existence of the Flying African myth throughout Canadian stage and page literature—from British Columbia, to Ontario, and Nova Scotia—despite the fact that the myth has gone largely unexamined in any systematic fashion in Canada thus far. I have suggested that this scholarly omission follows a now well documented pattern of Black cultural erasure in Canada—a reality that some of these examples self-consciously struggle against by emphasizing the myth's place in Canadian national history. Furthermore, the myth is alternately used as a method of preserving national roots as well as navigating diasporic routes, and these varying functions of the myth can be traced to the particular cultural and political orientations of the writers and locations from which they emerge. That is, the Africadian versions I have discussed often focus on the historical nature of the myth itself, commemorate the past events of Black Canada, and tend to depict the physical resting or settling of the African descendant in Canada. Alternatively, the versions I have discussed from elsewhere—largely from writers with a comparatively more recent presence in Canada—embrace flight itself as a way of being in the world, offering a framework for reimagining cultural identity and the nation-state paradigm. In these versions, flight is constant, often directionless, violent, inevitable, confusing, and the very thing that binds them together in a diasporic community with a past, present, and future of movement.

These examples of the Flying African Myth have also provided a means of extending Gilroy's formulation of the Black diaspora— embracing the notions of

impossibility, immateriality, and imagination that circumvent his implicit affirmation of individualism, rationalism, physical mobility, as well as static and bounded geographic space. That is, because the production of mythology is always a collective process, the use of such myths by individual writers or storytellers reflects their own engagement with larger cultural narratives. Focusing on a myth like the Flying Africans thus avoids the individualism inherent in a heavy recourse to biography. Moreover, while historical accounts for the development of the Flying African Myth certainly exist, the myth is itself an alternative form of shared memory that engages in an imaginative recovery of the past and a critique of Western rationalism. Furthermore, while the myth centrally figures the physical escape of New World slaves, it is also just as much about the rootedness of those who are left behind to tell the story. The spread of the myth across the Caribbean and Americas speaks to a form of narrative movement that exists separate from the physical movements of bodies. Finally, the myth reworks the concept of "home" into a more open signifier for various imagined spaces and places that represent freedom. This more fluid understanding of "home" allows the concept to remain a central feature in diasporic identification without it tethering diaspora subjects to actual or bounded geographic spaces.



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