Teaching Black Canada(s) Across Borders: Insights from the Caribbean and United States

Amoaba Gooden and Charmaine Crawford

Amoaba Gooden, Department of Pan-African Studies, Kent State University
agooden@kent.edu

Charmaine Crawford, Institute of Gender and Development Studies: Nita Barrow Unit, University of West Indies at Cavehill, Barbados
charms_cc@yahoo.ca

Abstract This article offers two unique and overlapping perspectives that explore the challenges and practices faced when teaching and researching Canada from the Caribbean and the United States. Acknowledging that curriculum, which ontologically and epistemologically influences the norms and values of the learning environment, is not a neutral document (Ross 2001, 1) the authors focus on how they enact curricula outside of Canada to discuss issues of rights and diversity as well as to challenge hegemonic narratives of white Canadian nation-building and historiography and ideas of Canada as a benevolent nation-state. Specifically, the authors examine (1) the ways in which assumptions about power and privilege play out in the classroom by either reinforcing or challenging established North/South relations; (2) how the black Canadian experience can be used to disrupt the U.S. black nationalist discourse and allow for an elaboration of the black or African Diaspora; (3) how dominant notions of gender, race and sexuality are articulated differently outside a Canadian landscape; and (4) Canadian-Caribbean relations when it comes to teaching and learning across borders through student exchange programmes.

At the G-20 Summit in Pittsburgh on September 25, 2009, Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared that Canadians: "... have no history of colonialism. So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers but none of the things that threaten or bother them" (Ljungren np). This racial erasure or “white washing” of Canadian history makes it difficult to discuss, let alone historicize, the past and present racial, ethnic and cultural inequalities that emerged out of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French and British colonization and led to the systematic importation, domination, exploitation and oppression of African, First Nations and other people of colour living inside and outside the Canadian nation. Hegemonic nationalist discourses, whether purported by politicians like Mr. Harper, by the media or by the general public, construct the Canadian experience as a celebration of diversity in which differences appear to be genuinely embraced by many. This idea of a benevolent, tolerant Canada effectively minimizes and/or negates altogether the roles that historic colonization and racism have played in shaping social norms and institutions in Canada, whether in politics, employment, the criminal justice system, or education. Accordingly, through “acts of symbolic and physical displacement, official Canadian cultural discourses orchestrate and limit” how ‘otherness’ can be rhetorically presented in Canada (Harris 367). If the ‘otherness’ or the ‘othering’ of non-white groups has a historical, political and even
corporeal significance in relation to how black Canadians are delegitimized as second-class citizens, then it is only reasonable to question how knowledge is produced, transferred and taught about black Canadian experience across, and beyond, Canadian borders.

This article offers two unique and overlapping perspectives that explore the challenges and practices we face as scholars when teaching and researching Canada from the Caribbean and the United States. Acknowledging that curriculum, which ontologically and epistemologically influences the norms and values of the learning environment, is not neutral (Ross 1), we discuss how we enact curricula outside of Canada to engage students in issues of rights and diversity and encourage them to challenge the hegemonic narratives of white Canadian nation-building, historiography and ideas of Canada as a benevolent nation-state. Specifically, we examine three aspects of our teaching: one, assumptions of power and privilege and how these ideas play out in the classroom by either reinforcing or challenging established North/South relations; two, how we use the black Canadian experience to disrupt U.S. black nationalist discourse and allow for an elaboration of the black or African diaspora; and three, the ways in which dominant notions of gender, race and class are articulated differently outside a Canadian landscape and the impact this has on Canadian-Caribbean relations when it comes to teaching and learning across borders. This discussion is informed by our own unique perspectives: while we are both Caribbean-born and raised in Canada, one of us now teaches in the Caribbean while the other is based in the United States.

**Transnational Black Feminist Epistemologies and Pedagogies**

As educators employing transnational/black feminist pedagogies in different places, there is this constant sense of contesting linear modes of knowing and belonging. We understand our realities as being mediated by many different entry points that are simultaneous and sometimes spontaneous within, and also beyond, nations and borders. In other words, we acknowledge that who we are impacts what we bring to the classroom and therefore the kind of questions we ask our students. Carney, Sligh et al (2012) state that, “as a strategy of allowing a multiplicity of feminisms inside and outside the classroom, transnational feminism focuses on the intersections of gender, race, sexuality and oppression within and beyond borders of the nation-state. It demonstrates to students that patriarchy [and], in a variety of modalities, operates within a world system forged by the ties of global capital, colonialism and economic exploitation” (136).

Hence, our role as educators in teaching about Black Canada from the Caribbean and the U. S. is to encourage learning on multiple levels, while using our power in the classroom “in the interest of democratic life” (Rodrigues et al 97). Alexander reminds us that feminists teach everywhere and in multiple spaces, even in “makeshift classrooms” (8). She finds value in teaching about the spiritual, sexual and sacred as a liberatory exercise rooted in cultural resistance, especially for women and men of African descent. Therefore, our post-colonial and diasporic realities disrupt any fixity of our positions in time and space. This can be liberating as well as demanding, because there is a constant positioning within varying struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism and the like within divergent colonial and post-colonial, and modern and post-modern, modalities within globalization.

In discussing black feminist knowledge and transversal politics, Hill-Collins notes that “despite the tensions between sameness (race/gender intersections) and difference (class, citizenship, sexuality and age) which distinguish the experiences of black women in the Caribbean, the United States, Africa, Latin America, and Europe, it is important that women of African descent remain differentially placed within an overarching transnational content characterized by a global gendered apartheid” (249). So while we find it necessary to pay attention to the similarities of the global black experiences, we also consider the specificity of differences within
these experiences. Paying attention to particularities allows us to call attention to power differences within and among various global black communities as well as between other communities of colour (Mohanty 516). In situating the classroom discourse around these facts we are then able to discuss the interlocking system of imperialism, capitalism and patriarchy (Hill-Collins 273; Mohanty 509). For instance, race and class are interlocking variables that affect the type of illnesses that disproportionately impact the health (cardiovascular, for example) of black people in Canada and the United States as well as their accessibility to affordable healthcare (Mikkonen and Raphael 47).

Canada and the Geopolitics of Power and Privilege: Problematizing Established North/South Relations

“Canada’s expansion of capital into the Caribbean, Africa and Latin America ... has intensified during recent period due to amplified neoliberal global capitalism” (Gordon 2010).

Through a geopolitical matrix of domination, Canada is often regarded as a secondary world power that helps with missions of peace and stability across the globe as compared to its militarized dominant southern neighbour, the United States. What is often left out of this narrative is Canada’s asymmetrical neo-colonial relationship with some Caribbean and Latin American nations. Myriam J.A Chancy (1997) points out that those who work at constructing Canada’s image project the notion of Canada as accepting, open and non-racist throughout the world. Relative to Americans, Canadians have long enjoyed their country’s international reputation of generosity when it comes to people of colour. Tales of Canada as a ‘haven’ for those in search of refuge are told as though they represent normal, everyday, un-pathological acts of a healthy, humanitarian Canadian culture. This emergence of Canada’s benevolent image can be traced back to the 1700s and the passing of the 1793 anti-slavery bill, legislation which limited the enslavement of people of African descent. However, contrary to popular belief, this act did not ban slavery but instead left the slave-owning legislators unaffected and only freed the children of enslaved Africans—and then only after they reached the age of 25. The passages of this bill set the course for an ideological split between a free Canada and a slave-holding, oppressive United States.

In addition to the above, the passing by the United States Congress of the notorious Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833, and narratives of the time such as A North-Side View of Slavery and Mary Ann Shadd Cary’s 1852 article, Plea For Emigration or Notes of Canada West, all supported this notion of Canada as a haven by comparing the living and social conditions of enslaved Africans living in the southern United States with those of free Africans living in Canada. Such narratives told black Americans that white Canadians were not racist, but were merely indifferent to blacks. As blacks, both free and slaves alike, heard or read about the “Promised Land” they imagined a potential “haven” north of the border (see Bramble 1988; Drew 1854; Shadd 1852; Alexander and Avis Glaze 1996; Hill 1984).Constructions such as these allowed Canada “to enjoy a reputation of generosity and political neutrality said to be unparalleled elsewhere in the Western hemisphere” (Chancy 97).

Few Canadians recognize that the contemporary image of Canada postulated through the media by the Canadian government is a myth, because Canada, while known for its humanitarianism, equal rights, and social welfarism, continues to be an imperial power that is an active member of the Group of Eight (G-8). In this forum of the world's most industrialized economies, Canada consistently ranks in the top 10-12 investors (see Gordon 2010). Mohanty’s reworking of Arif Dirlik’s conceptualization of a North/South dynamic is helpful in understanding how nations such as Canada and the United States represent the North, while the Caribbean, Africa and Latin America represent the South. As Mohanty reminds us, the concept of North and
South is a “metaphorical rather than geographical distinction, where North refers to the pathways of transnational capital and South to the marginalized poor of the world regardless of geographical distinction” (Mohanty 505). In teaching about the North/South operative, we juxtaposed it against the quality of life for most blacks who live in the North (i.e. Canada and the U.S) who often have a better quality of life compare to blacks who live in the South (i.e. Caribbean, Latin America and Africa). Yet, within these Northern places, when compared to whites, people of African descent and Indigenous populations suffer from economic and political marginalization.

In teaching Canada, we explore the geopolitics of power and privilege and their impact on people of African descent and people of colour, both locally and internationally. For example, we explore Canadian insurgency in Afghanistan and Canada’s participation in the kidnapping and expulsion of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti, in addition to its aggressive foreign policy based on the interest of the ruling class. Canada’s expansion of capital into the Caribbean, Africa and Latin America, particularly in banking and mining, has recently intensified due to amplified neoliberal global capitalism (see Gordon 2010; Smith 2015). Two of the largest banks in the Caribbean region, for example, include Scotiabank and the Royal Bank. The financial preponderance that Canada has in the region may make it difficult for local capital to emerge and fully develop. A “Caribbean Program” is administered through Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, which maps out Canada’s economic partnership with The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in promoting sustainable economic growth in the region through typical neo-liberal measures. “Canada-CARICOM trade has more than doubled over the past decade, from $1.0 billion to $2.5 billion” (CIDA 1). However, through typical neo-liberal measures, the economies of CARICOM countries continue to struggle under the weight of debt, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), unemployment and undiversified contracted markets. At the same time, the Canadian state and corporate institutions have found ways to increase their investment and profit margin in the region.

Teaching about this positioning of Canada is particularly important because it counters the idea of a benevolent and multicultural Canada that precludes racism. American students rarely think of Canada, and if asked to, they can barely express how and what they think of Canada. For some, words such as “nice,” “clean,” and/or “safe,” come to mind. This is the benign and harmless image of Canada that is often promulgated across the globe. In teaching Canada, we find the need to spend some time unraveling Canada’s carefully constructed image of a non-imperialist, peace-keeping country. Todd Gordon’s book, Imperialist Canada (2010), is useful in the classroom as it provides a structure for discussion on the ways in which Canada operates as an imperial and colonial power in its empire-building initiatives. Students are shown examples of Canada’s disinvestment in local communities, such as in Africville in Halifax, N.S., the Jane and Finch Corridor in Toronto, O.N., and the oppressive treatment of Canadians of colour and First Nations peoples by depriving them of land and resources. In addition, students are given examples of how Canadian-based multinational corporations also sustain unequal and exploitative relations in places such as the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa.

In taking up the North/South discourse in the U.S., it is important that African American students think through what their relationship is to blacks in other places. In utilizing the North/South treatise in teaching, students are given the opportunity to reflect on their social positions in relation to power and privilege and also consider how their geographical dominance impacts blacks in other parts of the world. Blacks in Canada and the United States, as citizens of the epicenters of capitalist power, benefit from the international affluence, power and privilege of the nation state, even though they are politically marginalized communities within these nations. Students are asked to consider how they may encounter marginalization similar to what blacks face in other places.
Since education has also been a vehicle through which Canada has promoted its dominant nationalistic interests, it is imperative that students are given the opportunity to explore its hegemonic impact. The institutionalization of Canadian missionary education was purposefully racist and sexist in its aim to supposedly civilize non-white men and women through Eurocentric patriarchal religious ideologies and practices. First Nations populations have not fully recovered from the institutionalized violence perpetrated against them residential schools that devalued their worth and Indigenous knowledge. In the Caribbean, different Christian denominations sought to save, convert and educate black people by implanting Enlightenment gender ideology that reinforced asymmetrical gender relations between men and women. The curriculum for young men was intended to prepare them for their so-called rightful role as breadwinners and leaders of society through the fields of technology, science, engineering, law and medicine, whereas young women were streamed into subjects such as needlework, drawing and music in order to make them good wives and homemakers (Moore and Johnson 138). More recently, Canadian influence on education in the Caribbean has been seen through development agencies funding post-secondary initiative in curriculum development, democratization and governance and technology.

Articulating the discourse around power and privilege leverages the work of multiple scholars such as Thobani (2007), Alexander (1997) and Mohanty (2003) in critiquing nations such as Canada and the United States as regimes in which there is increasingly a proliferation of poor people of colour and First Nations peoples who are oppressed and/or face genocide. In addition, this approach allows us to link the everyday Canadian gendered and racialized context to the “larger, transnational political and economic structures and ideologies of capitalism,” imperialism and patriarchy (Mohanty 504).

**Disrupting U.S. Exceptionalism in the American Classroom**

*Reflections of Amoaba’s Teaching Experience*

“Black Canada barely appears on the itineraries of African Diaspora and Pan-African thought” (Hudson and Kamugisha 3).

As a professor working within the U.S. border, I continuously confront the exclusion of the African Canadian experience within Black Studies. This erasure forces me to confront the power-knowledge nexus expressed through a black male heteronormative nationalist discourse, particularly when it comes to issues around race, gender, sexual politics, sexual orientation, language and geographical locations as important to the empirical and political dimensions on how blackness is positioned. Attending to the geographical specificities of black intellectual production (Hudson and Kamugisha 6), I share with students the long list of Canada’s activists and intellectuals such as Angela Robertson, Rinaldo Walcott, M. NourbeSe Philip, George Elliott Clarke, Dionne Brand, Afua Cooper, Clifton Joseph, Makeda Silvera, Althea Prince and Norman “Otis” Richmond, not as additions to a U.S.-based black radical tradition, but integrated into the African diasporic framework. Students are able to think of multiple black radical tradition(s) as intersecting and organically emerging from black people’s experiences based on geographic specificities.

While acknowledging that Black Studies emerged out of a U.S.-based race and cultural hegemony, I draw students’ attention to a position of Black Studies within a global political and economic framework dominated by the “First World” status of the United States. Students learn that while there are similarities with the African diaspora, there is not a common Black Studies project as each geographical region of the globe faces unique challenges based on the historical legacies of slavery and colonialism. In critiquing the application of a U.S.-based theoretical framework on Black Canada and the rest of the African diaspora, I teach that the historical roots of Black Studies are in the Civil Rights and
Student Movement in the United States, while noting the dearth of a parallel intellectual movement in Canada. I remind students that Canada has no Black Studies program or department, and the social construction of race in Canada encumbers the viability of Black Studies as a discipline.

In teaching Black Canada, I have developed a number of courses including the African Caribbean Transnational Experience and Gender and Sexuality in Africa and the African Diaspora. In all of my courses, students learn of the legacy of Canadian-born black populations, descendants of African-Americans who migrated to Canada as slaves, freed people, and loyalists. Students learn of the experiences of these populations alongside the history of Caribbean and African migrants to Canada. I speak to Canada’s long history of slavery and struggle, which is often missing from textbooks about North America in general and about the African diaspora and slavery in particular. I teach students that the marginalization and exclusion of First Nations peoples, African Canadians and other racialized peoples demonstrate that imperialism remains embedded with institutions of higher learning—and that yet, in Canada and abroad, Canadian multicultural policy is assumed to preclude racism.

Teaching difference among African diasporic identity in the U.S offers me the opportunity to speak to the complexities and nuances of the African Canadian experience. As others have pointed out, in Canada, race is “subsumed under the banner of anti-racism, multiculturalism, or a diluted, pan-ethnic configuration of diaspora studies” (Hudson and Kamugisha, 2014, 7). Crawford, Flynn and Gooden (2013) posit that the way that blackness is identified and named in Canada is contingent on such things as time of “settlement, sense of belonging, migratory factors and cultural connections to a perceived homeland” (p.8). Teaching about blackness means that I teach about multiculturalism, which is situated as an expression of white Canada’s power and control and subsequent subjugation and exclusion of First Nations, blacks and other citizens of colour. Such discussions offer students the opportunity to think about the Canadian landscape and issues around national identity as a post-colonial site of contested engagements between different racial and ethnic groups instead of it being, simply, based on the hegemonic experience of white Canadians.

In disrupting a U.S exceptionalism discourse in and outside of the classroom by way of superimposing Canada and/or the Caribbean onto intellectual conversations about the African diaspora, I am “attentive to the micro politics of context and struggle and the macro politics of global economic and political systems and process.” (Mohanty 501). My teaching pays attention to power differences within and among various communities. In essence, this creates an academic environment that supports the intellectual development of students, as it asks them to use a post-disciplinary lens to pay particular attention to the ways in which race, gender, sexualities, class, culture and geographic location intersect to impact the life chances of Africans in the diaspora. I support Hudson and Kamugisha’s point that Black Canada has much to teach the world. The utilizations of insights from the black Canadian experiences can result in a renewed need for a rethinking of a grand theory of the African diaspora that is comparative, international and translocal. African Canadian collective action for example, articulates transnationalism, Pan-Africanism, and a diaspora sensibility that can be applied to other parts of the African diaspora. Additional lessons can also be learned from the black Canadian conception of identity. Black Canadian identity is heterogeneous, encompassing national, transnational and diasporic components. Qualified because it is differentiated across ethnicity, culture, language and national origin, black Canadian identity moves beyond the singularity of identity as two or more identities or cultures come together or collide, through a creolized process, to form a particularized hyphenated existence (e.g. African-Canadian, black Nova Scotian, Jamaican-Canadian, Ghanaian-Canadian etc.), which arguably is what being Canadian is all about (Crawford, Flynn and Gooden, 2012).
The Obscurity of the Black Canadian Experience in the Caribbean
Reflections of Charmaine’s Teaching Experience

Teaching about Black Canada at a university in the Caribbean has meant I have to re-think how I discuss race and racism in the classroom. I realize that some of my Caribbean students’ perspectives on Canada are drawn from their experiences or what they have heard about cultural diversity and Caribbean immigrant relocations in Toronto. Media focus on the American politics of race relations, racism, and the African American experience, especially within the Obama presidency, has occluded black Canadian experience in many ways. Racial politics in Canada is often not seen as exciting and impactful compared to popular discourse in the U.S. Discussions of race and culture, especially related to the black Canadian experience, often get lost under the façade of development discourse that highlights the transformative aspects of foreign intervention through the transfer of knowledge, technology, finances and the like, while local concerns about dubious trade agreements and sovereignty infringements are overlooked. Caribbean feminist scholars (Barritteau 37; Parpart et al 51; Tang Nain and Bailey xx; Antrobus 67) have rightfully critiqued top/down development planning and policies that overlook gender disparities in relation to how women and men are unequally positioned and treated within employment, family, the state and political leadership.

In teaching transnational and black feminist perspectives in the Caribbean, I am aware of the different ways that students process information and construct knowledge about race and racism when it comes to how black women and men have been historically dehumanized and disadvantaged as a result of European racist patriarchal colonialism and the aftermath of that in the Caribbean. While critical pedagogies emphasize the importance of utilizing the experiential knowledge of students in the teaching and learning process, encouraging students to share their ‘voices’ has to be carefully facilitated to ensure that racial, cultural, gender and sexual stereotypes are not reproduced and the re-victimization of individuals does not take place. While participatory engagement is encouraged in class, I do not single out individuals to speak on behalf of their social identity or background. Instead, I employ different pedagogical strategies to stimulate discussion by drawing on scenarios and popular culture to foster critical thinking. I also use technology through film, music and images to illustrate or highlight key concepts or ideas. In discussing race and identity in the classroom, black and white students may express their viewpoints differently in attempting to articulate and make sense of racial inequality, power and privilege in their lives. Donadey notes that “the concept of voice becomes particularly problematic in two specific instances: “when the student of color finds a voice and then gets told repeatedly that the voice distracts from the issues, and when the voice white students find is a racist one (or more generally one that reproduces ideologies of dominance” (215). Therefore, I am interested in the ways in which some students may use their ‘voice’, sometimes uncritically, to discuss race and/or racism, generally, as well as to assert or maintain power over others in the classroom.

The gender courses that I teach at the undergraduate level are on a variety of topics, themes and social justice issues that include the historical moorings of racism and sexism under colonialism and the impact that this has on black Caribbean women; gender, migration, work and globalization; and the black Caribbean diaspora in Canada and sexual diversity in the Caribbean. The majority of my students are of African-Caribbean descent, but I usually have a handful of white exchange students from the United States and Canada during the academic year. Given the composition of my students, not surprisingly, contemporary discussions about race and racism and the politics of identity around “blackness” and “whiteness” are brought to the forefront in the classroom. While discussions on “blackness” in North America tend to be focused on the marginalization of black people within
white majority societies, “blackness” in the English-speaking Caribbean is articulated differently because black people and people of colour are in the majority due to the legacy of slavery and colonialism in the region. Therefore, discussions on race and racism are more nuanced, and are often times contested, amidst the acceptance or denial of racial/ethnic politics, racial admixture, racism and colour caste prejudice, and the call for reparatory justice for people of African descent.

Dealing with White Privilege in the Classroom

As part of a gender-training course, a co-taught programme by multiple instructors, I have instructed a module on Black Feminist Thought. In this session, I have examined the importance of black feminist and anti-racist feminist contributions in the United States and Canada in centering the lives and knowledge of black women in black history and culture. I have also discussed the significance of black feminist epistemological standpoints in addressing interlocking oppressions - race, sexism, classism, heterosexism and the like - which have been overlooked in both black masculinist nationalist and white feminist movements. I have utilized Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of difference to problematize how identities and social relations are normalized through dominant discourses—male, white, heterosexual, Christian and the like—whereby anything or anyone in opposition to, or different from, the established norm is devalued as ‘other.’ This results in difference being seen as a problem instead of being celebrated and used as a catalyst for change for more equitable social relations among individuals.

In addition, accounts of slavery, colonialism and racism usually resonate with black students. They may want to learn more about the collective experience of racial injustice and resistance that their ancestors had to endure, or their interest in the subject matter may simply be relevant to their current situation. But throughout the years of teaching this session on Black Feminist Thought, I have had mixed responses from white students who have participated in the session. Some students have been able to understand and articulate the relationship between anti-black racism, white privilege, and sexism and its negative impact on black women and men while others have remained uncomfortably silent when racial issues were discussed.

In one situation, a white Canadian student overtly expressed racially and culturally insensitive and prejudicial views in class about black people and people of colour. I was caught off guard when this occurred. Since I have been working and living in a society where there is a non-white majority, I have not had to deal outright with everyday racism and being belittled as a racial minority—something that many black people and people of colour in Canada and the U.S. are quite familiar with. This does not mean, however, that white privilege and racism do not exist in my current location: they exist in the preferential treatment that white tourists may receive in the service industry compared to black locals; they exist in the economic influence of a small white elite with limited redistribution to the rest of society; and they also exist in the way some white students may reproduce missionary tropes about saving backward black/Caribbean people. In dealing with the latter scenario in the classroom, I have had to challenge the ‘colonization’ of knowledge exported from the North (Canada), whereby black Caribbean experience was infantilized as not being progressive or evolved enough, especially related to how black women have been stereotyped as mammys, mules, whores and the like.

Dealing with racism in the classroom, whether it is overt or whether it is cloaked in nativist discourse, can be a pedagogical challenge when you encourage students to draw on their experiences with one hand while they integrate new knowledge with the other. Donadey notes that “When a ‘reconstructed racist’ —that is, someone who has been made aware of her/his racist assumptions but refuses to question them—monopolizes class time, thereby reinforcing domination, is it not the teacher’s responsibility to stop this process?” (215). I would have to
answer this question in the affirmative. An instructor should not ignore a student’s racist assumptions and domination of class time, because s/he would be complicit in reinforcing the very thing that s/he is advocating against. Ultimately, it does not set a good example for classroom dynamics and for challenging stigma and discrimination.

It is frustrating to deal with a white student who ignores what you have said about their cultural and/or racial insensitivity. As Donadey notes, when a white student acts as a “reconstructed racist,” especially when you think they should know better, s/he is exerting their white privilege in the classroom. When this occurs, a student engages in a kind of willful ignorance by minimizing or denying the historical and present-day systemic racism that black people encounter in Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere, when the facts about racial injustice are presented and/or reflected in personal experiences. Charles Mills, in examining systemic racism in the U.S., discusses how an epistemology of ignorance operates when white people, through cognition, culture, and code, adopt patterned practices that prevent them from seeing racial inequality in the society that they live in and how they might contribute to it. In the classroom, I have had to challenge racist assumptions about people of colour stealing jobs from white Canadians as well as comments about diversity having gone too far in violating the rights of white Canadians because of employment equity policies.

Racism and a white settler mentality are reinforced when a student exhibits white privilege and intolerance in the classroom. This mentality ultimately makes the learning process extremely uncomfortable for students of colour, which can in turn contribute to their re-victimization. A kind of epistemic injustice takes place when Caribbean students are given a one-sided or selective viewpoint on racial politics in Canada from a ‘white expert’, making it difficult for them to challenge what is presented. In discussing Canada as an imagined nation, Bannerji rightfully argues that “Canada” cannot be taken as a given. It is obviously a construction, a set of representations, embodying certain types of political and cultural communities and their operations. These communities were themselves constructed in agreement with certain ideas regarding skin colour, history, language (English/French), and other cultural signifiers—all of which may be subsumed under the ideological category “White” (24).

Based on Bannerji’s critique, ‘Canada’ is taken as representing the a priori rights of white Canadians when a white settler myth is supported. In challenging this, I am reminded of the piece “Unpacking White Privilege” by Peggy McIntosh that addresses whiteness, power and entitlement in society. As an educator, I believe that it is instructive for me to demystify how racism operates in Canada in overt and structural ways, especially for students who are not familiar with racial politics in Canada. I think that while in a participatory classroom setting it is important for students to have their voice, it is just as important for instructors to debunk opinions based on faulty premises and stereotypes. But this is a difficult task when you are dealing with social identities and experiential knowledge, because the subjective is presented as fact. Nonetheless, a counter-narrative to white privilege and anti-black racism is essential in critically examining race and racism in Canada and USA in the classroom.

Gender, Race and Migration

While some of my Caribbean students may not readily understand how Black Canada has been constructed in a marginal way in Canadian discourse, they seem to understand some of it when I teach about Caribbean migration to Canada. The image of the nice, clean—yet climatically cold—Canada is juxtaposed with a Canada where Caribbean people have to deal with being cultural and racial minorities within a new socio-cultural environment. Some students are surprised to learn that Canadian immigration policies were overtly discriminatory against blacks and people of colour prior to the 1960s, which forced many black Caribbean men and women to strategize around working and settling in Canada. Drawing on the work of Silvera (1989), I also focus on the
gendered and racialized dimensions of women’s work within global capitalism. My discussion of Caribbean domestics in Canada during the 1970s and after includes not only the struggles they faced with employment and immigration, but also their resistance against discrimination. I also interrogate African-Caribbean familial formations within a transnational context and further complicate this discussion with narratives of women migrating without their children (Crawford 325). This resonates with students because some of them may have experienced being raised by a guardian other than their biological mother or father. More importantly, my discussion of how some women face challenges in reuniting with their children, due to problems with immigration or not having the financial means to send for their children, provide further insights into the gendered, racialized and classed dimensions of migration which cannot simply be reduced to economics or maternal abandonment. While students have shared how their own stories of migration had affected them, by teaching Black Canada through a diasporic lens they are better able to understand how international labour within globalized processes operate along lines of gender, race and class in shaping black Caribbean immigrant experiences in Canada.

Gender, Race and Sexuality
Race is not the only position by which to understand the experiences of people of African descent

Both of us, in articulating the multiple experiences of Black Canada, remind students that race is not the only position by which to understand the life experiences of people of African descent because blackness is complex and its distinctions and reproductions matter (Wright 87). Crawford, Flynn and Gooden remind us that “the black Canadian experience cannot be explored in isolation of mutually constituted factors of gender, class, sexuality and other markers” and that much work needs to be done to incorporate sexuality into discussions of blackness (13). In the classroom, an examination of how black people have participated in constructing multiple identities and subjectivities in relation to how they are defined by society is critical in examining how blackness is constructed in Canada. We are careful not to reproduce black hetero-nationalistic narratives. Therefore, it is important to challenge androcentrism and heterosexism, as some perspectives of black Canadian social and political thought have overlooked or marginalized the voices and contributions of black women and/or black gay men and women. Teaching using collections such as Back to the Drawing Board: African-Canadian Feminisms (see Wane, Deliovsy, and Lawson 2002) and Theorizing Empowerment: Canadian Perspectives on Black Feminist Thought (see Massaquoi and Wane 2007) underscores how race, class, gender and to a certain extent sexuality operate as simultaneous oppressive forces. Additionally, using the works of scholars such as Silvera (1997) and Crichlow (201) who have explored same-sex relationships and the impact of homophobia on the lives of black gay men and women from a Caribbean diasporic perspective, demonstrates how black Canadians deal with the additional oppression that they encounter when confronted with racism in white gay organizations and spaces in Canada. In addition, such teaching highlights how Caribbean migrants construct, negotiate and name their same-gender desire despite the globalizing of Western normative and essentialist sexualities (Calliixte 128).

As educators, the decisions about what content to teach, which materials to use, which discussions, assignments, and experiential learning activities to assign are reflective of how we want to direct the learning, thought, and action of students—and, we must admit, are influenced by our socio-political Canadian and Caribbean cultural assertiveness (Rodriguez et al 96-97). In that sense we use the classroom to identify urgent needs facing our disciplines of Gender and Africana Studies and use examples from our geographical locations to broaden student understandings of our disciplines and of Canada.

Within the context and content of the classroom discussions, assignments and reading materials, the power differentials that were
experienced in the classroom are salient as we seek to impart knowledge to our students as well as provide frameworks to assist them in “finding voice and gaining critical consciousness” about oppressive forces and ways to resist them (Rodrigues et al. 96). Hooks passionately professes, “education is a practice of freedom” (204). Some students resisted the idea of an oppressive Canada. However, as an extension of this principle, our role as educators is to encourage learning on multiple levels by assisting students to move beyond their current level, encourage them, and create a learning environment that supports a positive teacher-student relationship based on reciprocity and partnership.

We recognize that our authority in the classroom as teachers in making decisions about curriculum, materials, instruction, and classroom environment (Rodrigues et al. 97) has a direct impact on the educational success of our students, and we realize that this right granted to us is only as good as the approval or acceptance that we get from those whom we teach. Therefore, we approach power relations in the classroom as a dynamic negotiation between our students and ourselves. Critical thinking and dialogic engagements facilitate active learning among our students whereby they learn to identify, articulate, and problem-solve (Chow et al. 260) around some of the important issues facing our disciplines in Africana Studies and Gender and Development Studies. Our approach is aimed at probing the “silences, erasures, distortion and complexities surrounding the experiences of peoples of African descent” (Guy-Sheftall 11) while simultaneously interrogating unequal power relations between men and women.

Conclusion

Teaching Black Canada in the United States and the Caribbean by incorporating transnational black feminist perspectives has allowed us to consider how the black experience in Canada has been obfuscated by the plight of African-Americans on the one hand and the white settler mythology on the other. While dominant white discourse seeks to forget, or negate altogether, Canada’s colonial past and neo-colonial influence, the Black Canada experience, particularly since those subjectivities are pluralized and diasporized, offers a challenge to the racial erasure that minimizes how people of African descent in their multiplicities across gender, race, sexuality, culture, and nationality have resisted oppression as well as contributed to knowledge production and betterment of their communities. Moreover, our teaching, as a platform to engage in critical pedagogies, provides students with the tools to critically analyze how racial/racist politics are imbued in the history and culture of the Americas, how Canada is not an innocent bystander in establishing unequal North/South relations, and how these relations are maintained within global capitalism.

1 For issues faced by residents in the Black Creek (Jane-Finch Corridor) Toronto area see Access Alliance research bulletin at http://accessalliance.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/ISRH-Research-Bulletin-3-Neighbourhood_Discrimination-and-Health.pdf. The bulletin details the lack of services, unemployment and other socio-economic conditions that plague the area. Under the City of Toronto “equity score,” card, the area is considered the least livable of Toronto’s 140 neighbourhoods. This is based on 15 criteria such as employment, high school graduation rates, mortality, green space and walkability. See also http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2014/03/13/black_creek_neighbourhood_deemed_torontos_least_livable.html. For more information on Africville, see Africville Genealogical Society. The Spirit of Africville. Halifax: Formac Publishing, 1992.
2 Dalhousie University launched a Black Studies minor program Fall 2016.
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