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In the Presence of Absence: Invisibility, Black Canadian History, and Melinda Mollineaux's Pinhole Photography

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Abstract: In the official history of Canada, alternative Black narratives often erase the complexities of Black Canadian experiences. This article examines the pinhole photographic work of Canadian artist Melinda Mollineaux, *Cadboro Bay: Index to an Incomplete History*, to discuss Mollineaux's performative act of commemorating the forgotten place of Cadboro Bay, where Black people gathered to celebrate Emancipation Day in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The photographs in the series act as material reminders of this artist's attempt to resurrect public memories of a time and place that are intimately tied to slavery and the diasporic movement of Black people. In so doing, the article discusses the dynamics of presence and absence and the significance of what is *not* seen in Mollineaux's pictures. This article features online (<http://www.cjc-online.ca>) photographs of Melinda Mollineaux's pinhole photography.

Résumé : Au sein de l'histoire officielle du Canada, les récits alternatifs des Noirs passent souvent sous silence la complexité de l'expérience canadienne Noire. Cette étude examine l'oeuvre photographique de l'artiste canadienne Melinda Mollineaux, intitulée *Cadboro Bay : Index to an Incomplete History*. Le but de cette analyse est de considérer la pratique performative de Mollineaux qui commémore le site oublié de Cadboro Bay, un endroit où certains membres de la communauté Noire se sont rassemblés pour célébrer Emancipation Day à la fin du 19e et au début du 20e siècles. Cette série de photos sert de rappel physique des gestes posés par l'artiste afin de remémorer une époque et un lieu qui sont intimement liés à l'esclavagisme et à la dispersion du peuple de race noire. Conséquemment, cet article analyse la dynamique de présence et d'absence ainsi que la signification de ce qui ne trouve pas place dans les photos de Mollineaux. Cet article inclut des photos de l'exposition de Melinda Mollineaux Pinhole Photography disponibles sur le site web de la revue : <http://www.cjc-online.ca>.

Keywords: Photography; Black Canadians

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To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.

—Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

Over the past 25 years, Black Canadian artists such as Stella Fakiyesi, Melinda Mollineaux, Michael Chambers, and Buseje Bailey have used photography to re-present, re-imagine, and re-inscribe the Black body into the Canadian cultural imaginary. Their artworks have served to disrupt dominant notions about who produces visual culture in Canada, and under what conditions, by calling attention to the invisibility of Black persons as subjects within Canadian cultural discourses. Their artistic practices have sparked discussions about the making of Black Canadian identities as they emerge and re-emerge out of conditions of colonialism, oppression, and the movement of bodies in the diaspora that ensued with the beginnings of slavery (Cooper, 2006; Winks, 2000).

This artistic and cultural activity has occurred in tandem with a growing literature on Black Canadian histories that challenges notions of a homogeneous and inclusive Canadian public sphere. In the introduction to *Black Like Who?* (2003), Rinaldo Walcott raises a key point about the position of the Black Canadian engagement within the Canadian state and with multiculturalism. Multicultural policies, as Walcott argues, are posited on a fictitious notion that the presence of Black people in Canada is a relatively recent phenomenon dating back to post-World War II. Within this discourse, Canada's Black population is characterized as having "origins" in the Caribbean and Africa. As such, Blacks in Canada are described as perennial newcomers. The discourse and practice of state multiculturalism, as recent scholarship indicates, often underlines the systemic exclusion of Black people and other racialized groups from full participation in Canadian society (see Gagnon, 2000; Gutman, 1994; Kymlicka, 1995; Parekh, 2000). As Walcott writes:

It is crucial that recent black migrants not imagine themselves situated in a discourse that denies a longer existence of blackness in this country. Such a position is an ethical one whereby the recent black migrant must refuse the seductiveness of a multicultural discourse, which strategically denies a longer black presence in this country. (Walcott, 2003, p. 14)

Walcott points out that although Canadian multiculturalism policy purports to enable the participation of "Others" in the nation, Canada continues to reproduce itself "on a particular narrative of black invisibility" (Walcott, 2003, p. 18).

An irony is inherent in this narrative. On the one hand, Black Canadians are outsiders, as this prevailing multicultural narrative obliterates the history and long presence of Blacks in Canada, differentiates between "Western" and "non-Western" cultures, and allows for Anglo and French cultures to maintain their hegemonic positions vis-à-vis "Other" Canadians. On the other hand, Black people exist within the nation, and indeed they are often figured as an immediate internal threat in media depictions. This logic positions Black people both as

absence and as excess within narratives of nation. For these reasons, Walcott calls for accounts of Blackness that historicize past and present engagements.

Scholars such as Katherine McKittrick (2000), Paul Gilroy (1993), and Houston Baker (1994) argue that Black diasporic sensibilities and aesthetics cannot simply place the Black subject back into a narrative of nation without transforming that very narrative or questioning the legitimacy of its foundation. Black diasporic sensibilities and aesthetics must be mapped onto other locations, or places of belonging. For example, theorists on Caribbean creolization—the process of transculturation—have astutely pointed out that the Caribbean and its cultural diversity must be thought about within the context of racism, migration, slavery, and post-slavery associated with empire. Black Canadian sensibilities and aesthetics are formed through a process of transculturation and are about webs of connections to other places—the United States, England, the Caribbean, Africa. Diasporic subjectivity is grounded in the specificity of this place called Canada, yet gestures to locations and histories in the metropole *and* at the periphery.

I am interested, in general, in how Black Canadian artists use formal aesthetic strategies to communicate Black Canadian collective experiences of belonging to, and being alienated from, the Canadian nation. Artists of Caribbean heritage such as Melinda Mollineaux, Michelle Mohabeer, Donna James, and Clement Virgo, to name a few, produce artworks that cannot be discretely translated and fixed into the category of Caribbean. The Caribbean surfaces in the metaphors used, but these are re-combined with features and signs that inscribe the place, the space—present and past—of Canada. As in the works of Isaac Julien, these artists invoke another perspective. They move across geographical space and re-combine cultural space and syntaxes. They are self-consciously in conversation with European modernism, art movements, and politics—the politics of sexuality, gender, class, location, migration—and they also invert European conventions. These artists express what an “After Caribbean” culture, aesthetics, and politics might look like, to quote Rinaldo Walcott.¹ The art produced out of this Caribbean heritage expresses what Stuart Hall calls a second phase of creolization: the first phase is informed by the sensibilities and aesthetics of the transcultured Caribbean; the second is produced within the metropole (Hall, 2003). They infuse perspectives that mess up the imaginaries of the present spaces we negotiate in our migrations and travels. These works radically depart from notions of purity of culture and self and are open to engaging with new cultural differences—assimilating some aspects of the new and rejecting others. They take up questions of presence, translation, and interpretation that are in excess of what the official multicultural narratives tell.

Cadboro Bay

It is in this context that the pinhole photographic work of Canadian artist Melinda Mollineaux, entitled *Cadboro Bay: Index to an Incomplete History*, is relevant. *Cadboro Bay* visually foregrounds the absence of subjectivity and the invisibility of Black bodies in the making of Canadian identities.² In the exhibition Mollineaux juxtaposes six present-day photographs depicting the landscape of

Cadboro Bay—a site on Vancouver Island where Black folks held Emancipation Day picnics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—with poetic texts. The challenge in discussing the *Cadboro Bay* photographs lies in the need to denaturalize and then redeploy the category of Blackness to “re-frame” the centrality of vision within this broader framework of perceiving Black diasporic subjects.

Mollineaux’s installation viscerally, and performatively, forces the spectator to negotiate the erasure of visual evidence of Blackness from official historical narratives by effectively portraying absence using the otherworldly aesthetic of pinhole photography. In combination with her writings, which invoke the textual traces of lost voices, Mollineaux’s installation sets up the conditions in which we may witness and enter into the presence of absence. Mollineaux’s insistence on visually leaving the Black body *out of the frame* closes the shutter on any attempt to objectify the Black body through a domineering and objectifying gaze.

Upon entering the gallery one is confronted by a scattering of six large-format, sepia-toned, untitled, macro landscape photographs of Cadboro Bay mounted upon steely blue concave-shaped aluminum frames. On the eastern wall of the gallery hangs a sepia-toned image (five feet square) accompanied by two short paragraphs of text. A second large landscape photograph hangs delicately on a sunset orange-coloured wall. Four smaller (2½ feet square) close-up images of grasses and wildflowers are ordered in a line along the western wall. There is something mysterious about these soft focused images. At first there seems to be nothing in the photographs except for autumn leaves strewn about on dampened sand, driftwood precariously perched between hanging vines, menacing shadows on the sand of a sleepy bay, and wildflowers. On closer inspection of these photographic images, graphite inscriptions—square, circular, and diamond-shaped symbols similar to those found on maps—become apparent. The symbols invoke Mollineaux’s presence in the locale of Cadboro Bay, but more importantly they map a particular Canadian Black history onto that landscape.

The poetic text, meticulously and painstakingly written onto the wall in graphite, accompanies the photograph of one of the larger beach scenes. This photograph of an unknown, obscure place, without representations of people, is supplemented by Mollineaux’s *imaginings* of “mundane moments” or “everyday experiences” of individuals at an Emancipation Day picnic:

John Craven Jones predicted rain. J. J. Moore spoke in tongues. Elizabeth Leonard realised her betrayal. Rebecca Gibbs tended fires. Sarah Jane Douglas Moses knew she would leave. Willis Bond gave libations. Samuel Booth wanted more. Emma Stark laughed to tears. Samuel Ramsay who usually worked feverishly fell asleep. Pricilla Stewart gathered shells for no reason. Nancy Alexander tended to children. Samuel Ringo listened to birdsongs. Nathan Pointer resurrected himself. Fortune Richard scanned the horizon. Sarah Lester dreamed in music. Mifflin Wistar Gibbs’ bones ached. Mary Lowe Barnswell knew ecstasy. Stephen Whitley folded the surface. Cornelius Charity discerned a truth.

As Mollineaux has written, she developed her semi-fictional narratives about Black Canadian communities on Vancouver Island from her research into the

sketchy records held at the British Columbia Provincial Archives (see Mollineaux, n.d.).

The photographs of Cadboro Bay do not overtly depict Black subjects at a picnic. Instead, Mollineaux brings the Black subject into our purview by providing us with these poetic texts that inscribe the names, desires, everyday actions, and dreams of the individuals who may have gathered to collectively celebrate the day of freedom. Mollineaux's semi-fictive texts convey the embodied reaction to an experience, captured in phrases such as "Emma Stark laughed to tears," thus rendering into words, through fiction, the interior intimate space of these absent subjects. This cacophony of Black voices is of those whose stories remain "incomplete" within the annals of history. The texts allude to stories that are distinct from the official heroic narratives of the history of British Columbia and Canada, and in this way they give voice and draw our attention to both an individual and a collective performance of remembrance.

Since 1834, Emancipation Day celebrations have been held by Black people around the world. The colonial project of settlement and expansion, its institution of slavery, and technologies of racism very much depended on violence and the subordination of the Black bodies, so this day of freedom and recognition of personhood is much celebrated and revered in places where there are significant numbers of Black people. In this case, many of the Blacks who settled in BC came from the free state of California in the 1800s (see Bertley, 1977). Every August 1 commemorates the official ending of slavery in all British territories, including Canada. In this sense the picnics were a remembrance of exclusion across time and space. Although the institution of slavery did not exist in British Columbia, racism did. In British Columbia, for example, this exclusion and erasure took the form of legal segregation. In the late 1800s Black men were not allowed to join the Victoria fire brigade or British Columbia militia (see Kilian, 1978), and as late as the 1950s, Blacks were banned from public swimming pools in Vancouver. The *Cadboro Bay* photographs emerge out of this specific colonial history that *constitutes* and is *constitutive of* the Black body within the social and cultural landscape.

My initial response to the photographs in the *Cadboro Bay* series and the absence they presented was a visceral one. My experience was somewhat hallucinatory, and I felt as if the focal point of each photograph pulled me into its vortex and demanded that I hold my attention within undulating depths of fields. Ironically, the longer I stayed in the presence of the images, the more the soft edges of the photographs became easier to bring into a comfortable focus. I experienced a movement between space and time. I heard multiple conversations but the faces of the speakers remained out of sight. The narratives running alongside the images as text provided me with other possibilities for imagining Blackness within the Canadian context. The text coupled with the pinhole images is suggestive of another world: the fragile or dispensable space that Black bodies and narratives currently occupy in this country. The photographs in the *Cadboro Bay* series, much like the official narratives of Canada, are almost devoid of bodies or material evidence of Blackness.

Pinhole photography

In order to understand the material and affective nature of the photographs in the *Cadboro Bay* exhibition, a cursory discussion on pinhole photography is needed. Pinhole photography is a method of capturing images onto light sensitive paper without use of a refractory lens. The principle underlying pinhole photography is identical to that of the camera obscura.

The camera obscura, literally “dark room”, is a device that makes use of an optical phenomenon in which light rays reverse themselves when they pass through a small aperture. At its most basic, light rays pass through a tiny hole and recreate themselves upside down on a screen that is placed parallel to the hole. As camera obscura technology improved in the 16th century, camera obscuras became portable boxes which incorporated lenses and mirrors, so that the image was reflected onto a viewing surface which was visible outside the box. Portable camera obscuras were used as aids for draughtsmen and painters. The camera obscura became the prototype for the modern day camera, invented in the first half of the 19th century, which uses light sensitive papers and films in order to preserve the image that is projected. (Schwartz, 2003)

There is an affective power to pinhole photography that lies in its “other-worldly aesthetics.” The process is lens-less and the image that re-presents the external world is soft focused in much the same way the eye and brain are reputed to perceive the world. What I see in this work is the deployment of an “old” technology to (re)present the external world in much the same way as the eye does, and by virtue of its technical parameters, pinhole photography has the ability to extend the imagination and to sharpen the blurred spaces.

In a recent article entitled *All That Remains: The Art of Slow Photography*, photographer and writer Mandelbrot, also known as Stephen Osborne, aptly describes the act of seeing as an activity that interweaves the past with the present. He states: “In ‘real’ life we ‘see’ only in the after-moment, where the image, the glimpse, adheres: the face in the crowd, the pattern of a garment, gone and then remembered almost instantly in the vanishing moment, perhaps even an extended moment, grasped as having just been perceived” (Osborne, 2003, p. 50). The pinhole image is focused in the centre and progressively blurs outwards to the periphery; depth of field is infinite. Movement, when using such an image-making technology, cannot be fixed. In other words, pinhole technology contains and re-presents the world in a slightly dreamlike state that demands that the viewer move imaginatively between multiple perceptions of time.

Rather than producing an image with crisp neat edges, capturing a fleeting moment in time, pinhole photographs, as poetically described by Osborne, are

more like blotters soaking up light, and time; in them the moment is extended, stretched out. In slow photography, Then and Now engage our perception in turn, like the vase that looks like two faces and then a vase again. Slow photography reveals another aspect of the optical unconscious: the duration of things; time stretched out. (2003, p. 54)

In this technical sense, the photographs in the *Cadboro Bay* series are not merely snapshots of time and space but are material reminders, mementos, of

Mollineaux's conscious insertion of her own Black body into the imagined picnic taking place in the space of Cadboro Bay. These photographs, and the process of pinhole photography, capture a place as experienced over moments in time or over a duration of time.

In an e-mail correspondence with Mollineaux, she explained her process of taking the photographs and its profound connection to the body in a highly local set of conditions.

The exposure times I estimated depending on the weather (whether it was cloudy, overcast or sunny). In a way, I sort of became an intuitive light meter. The great thing about pinhole is that your own thinking and response to the environment replaces the strictly mechanical processes of a regular camera. (personal communication, 2003)

The artist's body acts as a measure that responds, in a corporeal manner, to the sensory stimuli that come from the external environment, for example, light, sound, smell. Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that "Man is the measure. In a literal sense, the human body is the measure of direction, location, and distance" (Tuan, 1977, p. 44). Mollineaux intentionally allows her body to linger and feel the space of Cadboro Bay so that knowledge acquired through the senses becomes the primary mode for reading and capturing the external world. Mollineaux's body, in its measuring capacity, augments and enables the formation of the image. The pinhole camera necessitates that the act of photographing is one in which time is experienced as duration and space as a palpable material object that is embodied. Her body acts as a measure of the physical qualities of the space such as light, as well as its proximity to other objects located in that place. In this way, Mollineaux's experiences and perceptions of time, light, and space mediate and shape the object of the images (the external world) as well as the images as objects.

Taking the photograph and visiting this particular site allow Mollineaux to engage in a transhistorical performance of sorts: a performance across time. As she explained in her e-mail:

I had a simple wooden box pinhole camera that holds 4x5 negatives. I mounted the camera on a tripod and exposed for between 10-25 seconds depending on the light conditions. For the most part, I simply wandered the beach thinking about the picnics and the people I had found in the course of archival research, speculating on potential sites/places and spaces that the picnics may have taken place . . . sort of like looking for a good picnic spot myself. (personal communication, 2003)

Mollineaux's body thus resides simultaneously in the past and the present, to construct a presence—her presence—that leaves its trace in this work. By situating herself on the beach in Cadboro Bay armed with her imaging technology and the knowledge of the landscape's specific past, Mollineaux (re)called history and (re)produces herself as an active subject in that site.

To make sense of Mollineaux's immersion into the space of Cadboro Bay, I turn to John Bannan, who picks these thematic relationship in his introduction to the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Bannan (1967) argues that the body exists in an intricate relationship to the material world and is central in the process of sig-

nification. He eloquently describes how acts of comprehension and meaning-making bring together past, present, and future for the embodied subject.

Things and the world are the body's correlates—the former, of its explicit activity and the latter, of its possibilities. The most profound comprehension of this intentionality as an act of signification is achieved by connecting it to the concept of time. Consciousness thus emerges as a present, generating and recapitulating its past and projecting itself toward a future. Consciousness is the dynamic possibility of situations, and the ultimate dimension of its giving of meaning is the deployment of past, present and future. (Bannan, 1967, p. 14)

In this phenomenological perspective on time, past, present, and future actively fuse in the “dynamic possibility of situations” and in the construction of meaning. To return to Mollineaux's practice, she is at once agent and instrument in the re-construction, re-narration, and making of history. Although her body is visually absent from the work, it continues to reside as a presence by virtue of the traces she leaves behind in the photograph. A connection is forged between Mollineaux's present experience of the site in which Black people gathered in the past so that future spectators may witness what she has recorded with her camera. Mollineaux's act of capturing images of Cadboro Bay presents, with precision, the “after-moments” of her specific acts of history-making/identity-making and Black people's collective histories.

The performative aspects of Mollineaux's pinhole photography and her use of poetic text or “graphic orality” make hyper-visible the absence of subjects in the photographs while de-privileging the visual as evidence. Mollineaux lingers in the space of Cadboro Bay to create and experience a place that she deems worthy of remembrance. This act of intentionally pausing or lingering in a space that is unmarked by the contingencies of time and history inscribes a personal and a Black collective value onto that space—a place for commemorating freedom. According to Tuan, “Space is transformed in to place as it acquires definition and meaning” (1977, p. 138). He goes on to state: “Place is a pause in movement. . . . The pause makes it possible for a locality to become the center of a felt value” (p. 138). In ascribing values of specific importance to Black people to the space of Cadboro Bay, Mollineaux actively transforms that space into a place—a place to be re-commemorated.

The pinhole technology employed in the *Cadboro Bay* project can be read as a metaphor for racism and its violent erasure of Black subjectivities in Canada. In the case of pinhole photography, the body is a central object/device that is used as a measure of light and distance in relation to the external world. In the creation of the pinhole photograph, the body acts as an important object/subject in much the same way that the body is the central object/subject upon which the effects of racism are registered. The body is also a salient marker or measure of quantities of Blackness or distance from Whiteness in the case of racism. Mollineaux's re-immersion in the space of Cadboro Bay and the sensation of movement through time are not simply aesthetic or experiential, but political. This insertion and

immersion resists “technologies of racism” that erase the Black body from political, social, economic, and cultural spaces in Canada.

In his essay “Photographies,” Jean Baudrillard discusses our desire to capture the external world through the medium of photography as a wish “to exhume its otherness buried beneath its alleged reality” (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 2). These landscape images coupled with the text “exhume” the spectre of racism and re-articulate the objects of racism in a subjective speaking mode. Mollineaux’s commemorative strategy re-inscribed Black speaking subjects and their subjectivities into the place of Cadboro Bay. At the same time it calls into question the notion of photographic images as evidence of the past, the confirmation of some truth as a purely visual experience.

Both Roland Barthes (1981) and Susan Sontag (1977) discuss the photograph in relation to its ability to act as proof of the existence of objects or a material reality. As Barthes states, “The photograph does not call up the past. The effect it produces upon me is not to restore what has been abolished (by space, by distance) but to attest that what I see indeed exists” (Barthes, 1981, p. 82). John Tagg vigorously critiques the status of the photograph as a medium for conveying what was and argues that it is through dominant discourse that the photograph comes to hold the salient position it holds vis-à-vis existence.

That a photograph can come to stand as *evidence*, for example, rests not on a natural or existential fact, but on a social, semiotic process, though this is not to suggest that evidential value is embedded in the print, in an abstract apparatus, or in a particular signifying strategy. (Tagg, 1988, p. 4)

As Tagg adds: “The very idea of what constitutes evidence has a history” (1988, p. 4). The photographs of Cadboro Bay function as representations of landscapes/objects and absent subjects as well as “the evidence of things not seen” (Alexander, 1995, p. 85)—colonial and neo-colonial relationships. In the absence of historical visual evidence of Black people on Cadboro Bay, the photographs and texts work together to bring three distinct time frames into focus by interweaving the textual and the visual. The inclusion of text allows for new meanings and identities to emerge out of the work. The *Cadboro Bay* photographs disturb Barthes and Sontag’s notions of photographs as objects of visual evidence “that what I see exists.” I would argue that it challenges a view of photography that privileges the visual over other forms of perception: perception is embodied and thus implicated in the construction of interior and external worlds. The *Cadboro Bay* photographs draw us in to witness this absence of evidence, which bespeaks a history of colonization and the struggle for freedom.

Feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver (2001) confronts questions about the making of meaning by those rendered subordinate and invisible by placing the other at the centre of scrutiny. She is critical of the trope of visibility within contemporary culture and theory that conflates visibility with empowerment. Oliver contends that the demand for recognition by the subordinated is a demand for visibility, which arises out of the pathos of oppression. Instead of using the trope of visibility, Oliver argues that the process of “witnessing” is psychically ameliora-

tive for those subjects rendered subordinate. Witnessing goes beyond vision and beyond passive forms of recognition invoked by the call for visibility. She believes that witnessing is crucial to the making of all subjectivities, but “oppression and subordination work to destroy the possibility of witnessing and thereby undermine subjectivity” (Oliver, 2001, p. 7). Oliver unravels how otherness is related at the subjective and intersubjective level, and why “bearing witness” is so crucial to the process of repairing the psychic and collective damage caused by centuries of oppression.

Being othered, oppressed, subordinated, or tortured affects a person at the level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent. Oppression and subordination render individuals or groups of people as other by objectifying them. Objectification undermines subjectivity: to put it simply, objects are not subjects. Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can repair damaged subjectivity by virtue of address-ability and response-ability. (Oliver, 2001, p. 7)

Oliver’s notions of address-ability and response-ability work on the metaphor of the oral, and communicative flow, with its implication of speaking, seeing, knowing subjects in the making, provides a way to think about the photographs in *Cadboro Bay*. Mollineaux presents the viewer with speaking Black subjects and demands that we as viewers stand and bear witness to Black subjectivity. Mollineaux demands that as viewers we replicate her own position with respect to this history. As we stand in front of photographs and read Mollineaux’s texts we do not see Blackness or Black subjects represented for us: we stand in the place of Blackness. Being confronted with a gap, and the absence of bodies in Mollineaux’s photographs, the spectator is forced to be actively present.

At first glance, the images evoke questions as to who, what, or where the referent is in the photograph. The interplay between the images and text created an in-between space in which the viewer experienced the intertwining of two systems of representation—one where the referent is absent and the other in which the subject speaks. In the absence of historical visual evidence in the archives, in our official histories, or in our textbooks of the participation of Black people in public life, in this case at a picnic on a beach, Mollineaux’s photographs and text stand in for and simulate what she imagines as existing in that space and place. The notion of situating these photographs within specific contexts and histories is particularly important because possibilities for “intertextual” understanding of the image emerge. Stuart Hall defines inter-textuality as an “accumulation of meaning across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being ‘read’ in the context of other images” (Hall, 1997, p. 232).

Mollineaux’s insertion of her own Black body in the photographic process, into this gap, performatively re-enacts one of the important rituals that constitute Black identity: the Emancipation Day picnic. As such, Mollineaux’s construction of the place and space of Cadboro Bay—based primarily in her *imaginings* and perhaps nostalgia—illuminates how the dominant narratives that shape the Canadian nation’s own “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) are contestable and

unstable constructs. The *Cadboro Bay* photographs highlight a tension brought about because of the lack of visual reflections of the Black self in the Canadian imaginary: between a desire to be reflected as autonomous beings fixed *through* and *in* history and new possibilities of Black self-narration and re-narration. Mollineaux's images rectify a dissonance experienced by many Black people in relation to their "presence" in Canada. Both the texts and the photographs present new ways of projecting Blackness into the external world, but more importantly, they (re)present a geographically specific Black Canadian performance, an imagined picnic, where shared identities come together. *Cadboro Bay* illuminates a traumatic past and celebrates the now through a performative commemoration of the forgotten place. It reminds viewers that the collective identity of the past and the present that *Cadboro Bay* (re)presents is based on complex identifications that are forged within the construct and operationalization of race.

Mollineaux's work illuminates the invisibility of Blackness, makes inter-diasporic connections, and presents multitonal articulations of Black Canadian subjectivities. Paradoxically, her pinhole photographs are contingent upon the body, her body, for their production at the same time as they are devoid of representations of bodies. Mollineaux resists explicitly placing Black bodies within the frame; instead, she productively engages with absence and provides traces of performances of Blackness. This, as I argue, is distinct from an aesthetic practice that hinges on the tropes of visibility and invisibility. By posing questions about the significance of what is *not* seen in the picture, absence provides an embodied, conceptual means to open up the possibility for other stories to be told.

Notes

1. *After Caribbean Canadian: Culture Remixed* was the title of a panel discussion organized by Rinaldo Walcott for the Caribbean Migrations: Negotiating Borders conference held at Ryerson University, July 18-22, 2005.
2. The photographs in the *Cadboro Bay* series were produced between 1997 and 1998. The *Cadboro Bay: Index to an Incomplete History* exhibition was held at Artspace Gallery, Peterborough, Ontario, from March 13 to May 1, 1999.

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