

“Mostly with White Girls”: Settlement, Spatiality, and Emergent Interracial Sexualities in a Canadian Prairie City

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Abstract

In Winnipeg, a midsize city in the Canadian Prairies undergoing social and demographical transformations, male African newcomer youth face challenges in their settlement experiences relating to conflicting and heterogeneous norms around sexuality, sex, and dating. With its diverse population, the city is a space in which both racialization of blackness occurs and “multicultural” ethno-racial diversity is imagined. In this spatiality of youths’ everyday lives, interracial sexuality emerges as transgression. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with heterosexual male youth from sixteen to twenty-five years of age who have recently emigrated from various African countries, we examine how interracial sexuality was constituted through what our interlocutors said and did. We trace and analyze how sexual transgression associated with the desirability and taboo of white femininity was played out through social-spatial networks and practices within the changing urban landscape. The formation of sexuality within global, transnational, and urban contexts of settlement is not simply a matter of global forces affecting the local or local affecting the global. By ethnographically situating interracial sexuality in a diverse urban locale where migrant youth are navigating multiple boundaries of race, nation, and sexuality in the transformation of their identities and subjectivities, we offer one story of how interracial sexualities are constituted in a specific time and place. Within Canada, newly arrived immigrant and refugee African young men are mired in the histories of taboo over sexual relations with white women while being key actors in transformations of heterosexuality, masculinity, blackness, and whiteness occurring through immigration and settlement processes. [Sexuality; Race and Space; Interracial Sexuality; Immigrant Youth; African Youth; Urban Youth Subculture; White Femininity]

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Introduction

On a cold night in January 2010, bitter even for a Canadian Prairie winter, several young men enlivened an otherwise sterile meeting room in an education resource center in downtown Winnipeg. They joked amongst themselves, familiar with one other through local social networks—high schools, the mall, a central park,

housing complexes, cafés, bars, and nightclubs. While the pizza and cash had been an attraction on a sub-zero evening, the research topic also grabbed their attention. Like us, the middle-aged anthropologists—a second-generation white settler woman and an immigrant Argentine-Canadian woman—the intersecting issues of immigration, sexuality, and urban youth culture were of interest to them. The young men sitting around the table that night seemed pleased to have found themselves living in a city with such diversity, offering what they perceived to be an unimaginable variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds for sexual and intimate relations. Yet, as we learnt, interracial sexuality was not a simple matter for the young men as they negotiated cultural prescriptions for endogamous sexuality¹ simultaneously with navigating new urban spaces, where the borders of whiteness, blackness, femininities, and masculinities were negotiated in everyday sociality, including sex, romance, and intimacy.

Alain,² an eighteen-year-old from the Congo, explained how he and his male friends saw themselves placed in a position where they needed to, in his words, “break the rules”—rules dictated by their parents and communities regarding sexual relations. While expected to abide by their family’s traditions and wait to marry a woman from within their own culture, they went ahead to forge sexual lives and subjectivities and, in doing so, took advantage of the local urban demographics.³ While cultural rules prohibited both premarital sex and exogamy, the male youth expressed sexual desire for, in Alain’s words, “different cultures.” As Alain explained, while the youths’ reference to “different cultures” referred broadly to non-African cultures, in his words, “it was mostly white girls”: “We break the rules mostly with white girls.” In our ensuing fieldwork over the next five years, it became apparent that for many African male youth living in a Canadian city that held for them a “multicultural” urban imaginary, the category of “white girls” held a particular imaginary of interracial transgression and the act of desiring a white girlfriend was very common.⁴

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Rather than accept interracial sexuality as a given, instead we look at how interracial sexuality was constituted through what our interlocutors said and did. Romantic and sexual desire directed toward white femininity arose within a changing urban landscape where young African migrants were not merely “arriving to” or “adapting to” a receiving country (Matus 2012) but were active subjects in the racialization of sexuality. In this article, we explore the idea that attraction to—and the imaginary of—an idealized white Euro-Canadian heterosexual femininity was emergent within spaces of settlement. We focus on two such spaces: downtown and the home. We situate sexuality and interracial desire as it pertains to racialized urban youth who were figuring out many aspects of settlement that linked to sexuality, including newfound geographical mobility and leisure time.

Urban Youth Spaces, Immigration, and Sexuality

Scholarship on foreign-born African youth in Canada has examined migration as it affects identity and processes of racialization (Ibrahim 2006; Anisef and Kilbride 2003; Creese 2013; Tettey and Pupilampu 2005; Dlamini and Anucha 2009; Dei and James 1998; Kusow 2006; Zaami 2015). We extend this body of scholarship by making an argument that sexuality, romance, dating, and sexual desire matter insofar as sexual subjectivities are formulated, negotiated, and played out in African youths' migration and post-settlement experiences (Fubara-Manuel 2017). This is an important argument because, even though anthropologists and other scholars assert how centrally the "age of migration" is "implicated in the construction, regulation, and reworking of sexual identities, politics, and cultures" (Luibhéid 2008, 169), youth have been under-examined and under-theorized as key players (Boehm et al. 2010, 5). When given attention, immigrant youth tend to be regarded as always already in a state of arriving—not only arriving to adulthood but to a "host country," that is, to "an already defined place" (Matus 2012, 209). These apparent states of deficit and arrival construct immigrant youth as "at-risk" and treat them as subjects needing to "adapt" to a dominant culture, as though the receiving/host country is a static "container ready to be filled" (Matus 2012, 209). Instead, we aim to emplace migrant youth squarely within processes of migration and settlement as individuals who are remaking spaces and crossing multiple borders of inclusion/exclusion at the same time as they are subjected to regimes of control (Brettell 2015; Fassin 2011) and who are, we add, sexual actors.

Insofar as youth immigrants have resettled in Canada from their homes of origin, often via intermediary countries, the connection of sexuality with globalization is pertinent. Following theories of global sexualities, we wrestle with the ontological status of sexuality—in that sexualities do not simply "pre-exist globalization" as a local sexuality "somehow transformed . . . by the global," but neither is sexuality something that "only emerges with globalization" (Moore 2012, 11). In our analysis, sexuality and race ever so closely intersect such that blackness and whiteness, rather than fixed aspects of sexual subjectivity, are animated within erotic desire and heterosexual "orientation" by imaginaries of difference in a specific time and place. Boellstorff argues that "sexuality is an emergent intersectional aftereffect" in the context of globalization, meaning that the effects of global processes on local sexualities are complex and involve "multiple discourses—including race, gender, class, nation and religion" rather than a "monodiscursive frame [that assumes] that there is a 'sexuality discourse' that 'globalises'" (2012, 178). Interracial desire and sexuality, thus, can be traced to multiple discourses and embodied practices. With these theoretical underpinnings in mind,

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we ask: Where and when does attraction to Euro-Canadian femininity and whiteness come about?²⁵ For whom does whiteness matter as a sexual transgression, and how does whiteness as a sexual transgression also take on other meanings?

Methodology

Our account and analysis is based on a mixed-method ethnographic project spanning five years (2010–15), including an initial pilot study utilizing focus groups followed by ethnographic interviews, oral histories, participant observation, and other data collection strategies. Our methodology evolved over time, always with an eye out for ways to be ethnographic, by which we mean “a commitment to grounded exploration and analysis of people’s lives and the ‘irreducibility of human experience’” (Alexander 2006, 400). Following the initial focus groups, we sought to get outside of the sterile education space that felt unfamiliar to many of the youth participating in our research, and to situate ourselves more closely in their social worlds—such as in cafés, restaurants, bars, and the downtown shopping mall, as well as in inner-city programs—and in roles that were nonintrusive and yet not covert.

Using a team community-based approach, we involved African youth as peer researchers, members of the African community as research coordinators, and an African graduate student from the University of Manitoba as a student researcher, alongside non-African university researchers, student researchers, research assistants, and community organization partners. The lead author is a white, middle-aged Canadian anthropology professor; the second author, an Argentine-Canadian, is a graduate student; and the third author is a graduate student who came to Canada from Kenya as a refugee claimant more than a decade ago. Most other team members were immigrants in their twenties or thirties from Nigeria, Ghana, the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and the Sudan.

African newcomer youth (teenagers and young adults) were the main participants. Eighty youth were involved in the research as focus group members, interviewees, and key informants, including cisgender men, cisgender women, and one transgender woman. Their ages ranged from sixteen to twenty-five. Socioeconomic and religious backgrounds as well as migration trajectories to Canada as asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants, and international students also varied. The heterogeneous cohort included participants from the Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mauritius, Rwanda, the Congo, Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. At the time of the research, most interlocutors lived or had previously lived in the downtown area of Winnipeg. Many had come to Canada under refugee assistance or sponsorship, arriving from refugee camps or neighborhoods in cities such as Kampala, Nairobi, or Khartoum. Some were immigrants whose families had business ties to local African communities. Others were university students. While several participants identified as lesbian, gay, and/or

queer, heterosexuality predominated. Here, we focus on the heterosexual teen boys and young men in our research.

The research process followed the broad principles at the intersection of critical ethnography—“engagement with the broader local and global political contexts and realities of ‘race’” (Alexander 2006, 402)—and urban youth studies, primarily concerned with disrupting stereotypes about urban youth, particularly marginalized and seemingly “deviant” youth, while “remaining open and honest about their lives” (Dimitriadis 2008, 76).

Context of Settlement: A Racialized Inner City

On a worldwide scale, “migration has made urban spaces increasingly diverse” (Ghorayshi 2010, 134). Canada, where immigration is a “demographic and economic imperative” (Ghorayshi 2010, 136), boasts the highest proportion of foreign-born populations amongst G8 countries.⁶ The number of immigrants from Africa in the five-year period from 2006 to 2011 rose by 10 percent from the previous five years, with Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, and Edmonton home to nearly 95 percent of the country’s total immigrant population (Creese 2013). With a population of 714,635, Winnipeg is one of Canada’s most ethnically diverse cities and ranked sixth nationally for numbers of recent immigrants—which, per capita, are almost as many as in Edmonton, a city with double the population.⁷

Since the 1990s, Winnipeg has seen a steady increase in African immigrants and refugees, with high numbers of youth, and has been rapidly changing: Ethiopian restaurants, Habasha grocery stores, and an array of settlement services have appeared, to name only a few such transformations. To paraphrase a Sudanese research team member, “On any given day you can go to Central Park and see Sierra Leoneans, Ethiopians, Eritreans, Somalis . . . people together with their fellow Africans” (Mubarak Mohamed, personal communication). The downtown shopping mall and shisha joints are popular meeting places for African youth. African bars and nightclubs change ownership and locations in response to changing leisure and consumption patterns of the youth population.

It is not the absolute size but the scale that matters in contextualizing Winnipeg as a city for/of immigrants. Linked to the wider state policies of neoliberalism and governance of immigration, the pattern of African immigrants settling in the inner city to access social housing or low-rent apartments within their first year in Canada (Carter, Polevyshok, and Osborne 2009) is significant to our research. Geographers point out “a relationship between refugee housing circumstances and their re-settlement and integration into a host society” (Carter, Polevyshok, and Osborne 2009, 306). With regard to the youth who participated in our research, we contend that living in the inner city as newly arriving

teens or young adults from African countries created a milieu and socio-spatiality that directly affected their formation of networks and sexual practices, both within that first year and in subsequent years after those ties were formed.

The inner core of Winnipeg is infamously represented as an “African ghetto,” where African newcomers are seen to have recently displaced Aboriginal residents. Characterized by difference, diversity, fragmentation, and poverty, it is constructed as dangerous, poor, rundown, and not very safe or desirable for living (Ghorayshi 2010, 137).⁸ Publicly imagined as a “negative disruption of the Canadian landscape,” residential geographies of “Black” immigrants from the Caribbean or Africa are viewed quite differently than white neighborhoods that are actually deeply racially segregated (Peake and Ray 2001, 180). As we will show, the African youth inhabiting this space were affected by such negative imagery of the inner city that was their home, and their embodied presence shaped the racialized geography of the inner city.

For African newcomer youth, these urban spaces consisted of multiple boundaries to be navigated and negotiated. Alex, a quiet, nervous interlocutor who was seventeen years old when he emigrated to Canada from Kenya with his auntie, faced many troubles in figuring out where he could walk downtown without feeling threatened by non-Africans, especially Aboriginal youth.⁹ As he told his story of needing to watch his back and to learn to read the ethno-physical landscape (e.g., the territorial aspect of which groups claimed which spaces), his understanding of inner-city Winnipeg challenged notions of a unified, homogeneous “African” “ghetto.” Instead, he experienced the downtown area as comprising multiple racialized territories. For many of our interlocutors, places like the central park, where Africans clustered in nationally based groups, were sites of interethnic, intergenerational conflict. The gossip and judgment directed toward them and their life decisions—including who they dated and slept with—was best avoided.

Despite widely shared concerns about the safety of the downtown area, its socializing opportunities were a strong pull for youth. The inner city held positive meanings, related to cosmopolitanism and the excitement of new sociality with other African and non-African youth. It was the space where friends rented cheap apartments that served as hangout and hookup places, where “bad girls” of various backgrounds and racial identities congregated to spend time and have fun with African guys, and where, as students in Canadian schools for the first time, they met peers from unfamiliar ethno-racial groups, particularly white Canadian youth of European ancestry.

Blackness and Whiteness in Canada

Within their first days in Winnipeg, Dany and his family were taken to a department store and shown by an immigrant services agency how to buy necessities for Canadian living. This angered Dany because of how it reproduced stereotypes of African immigrants as poor, uneducated, and universally inept in cold climates, thereby animating subjectivities of “blackness” and “Africanness” for his family members in the local context of settlement (Creese 2013, 162). Although during their first winter, his family could not apprehend the extreme cold temperatures, eventually winter became Dany’s favorite season. The snow melting in late spring signalled for him the dreaded hot Prairie summer. He joked about his preference for winter—challenging preexisting conceptions of Africanness that surfaced in his new life in Canada. In that initial arrival period, the days of waiting for a settlement worker to assist with housing, and the assimilation inherent to the settlement processes such as the shopping excursions, are social relations through which being an African “migratory body” becomes racialized and “translated by the other” (Ibrahim 2006, 86). For Dany, his family was newly situated as African—and Black—through these encounters in and with Canada.

Dany’s story illuminates the disjuncture that “exists between how black immigrants understand blackness in their own homeland and how it is defined in North America” (Kusow 2006, 534). While Canada has a different history than the United States with respect to slavery—the predominance of its Black population coming from the Caribbean rather than Africa, and also multicultural policies rather than assimilationist—it shares a similar skin-color-based classification system wherein “any person with any visible African characteristics” is seen as Black (Kusow 2006, 538, 539). In socio-legal terms, Black is the overarching category subsumed under Canada’s “visible minority” designation.¹⁰ In practice, Black becomes the overdetermining category of difference based on a politics of visibility—“appearing to be ‘Black’”—that enfolds Caribbean, African, foreign- and Canadian-born, into blackness, which is blind to and erases realities of being Somali, Oromo, or any other identifications that matter and are significant to youth in their lives prior to settling in Canada (Ibrahim 2006, 85). As Ibrahim contends, youth emigrating from African countries “are faced with a social imaginary upon settling in Canada in which they are already Black . . . finding themselves in a racially conscious society that ‘asks’ them to racially fit in” (2006, 90).

Our interlocutors tended not see themselves as Black before settling in Canada. Many did not identify expressly as Black, preferring “African” along with a familial national origin, such as Eritrea, no matter which country they were born in, for self-identification. Youth protested the common misidentifications as Jamaican or Haitian that often occurred. Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Oromo youths disassociated themselves from “Black Africans,” who in their eyes were Nigerians, Kenyans, and other

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West Africans. Resisting the homogeneous category of Black African in which they were routinely circumscribed in Canada, some identified instead as *Habasha*, defined by Habecker as a “non-black ethno-racial category that emphasizes Semitic origins” (2012, 1200). Somali youth, too, distanced themselves from the North American color-based racial category of Black Africanness (Kusow 2006). These few examples indicate how skin color and racial identity are far more complicated than the North American white-black binary. “Black(ness) as a social, cultural and historical construction has powerful meanings” in Canadian society (Dei and James 1998, 93)—and shaped in complex ways the emergent racialized subjectivities of youth who saw themselves as African, Habasha, Oromo, Somali, Nigerian, Ugandan, and so forth. Despite nuanced self-identifications, they were called upon to be “Black” within myriad embodied encounters in their everyday lives, including their intimate relations, desires, and fantasies.

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In “becoming Black” through processes of settlement, an embodied knowledge of whiteness also materialized (Dei and James 1998). Youths’ understandings of whiteness were emergent, depending upon social-spatial relations as well as migration trajectories and childhood backgrounds. Some youth had not seen white people before coming to Canada; some had been instructed by their parents about what to expect from white society in Canada; some had had no idea about Canada except for what they had seen on television, which were often depictions of United States culture. Canada was commonly imagined to be a country of wealth and consumption—where all Canadians have “nice cars” and “homes with front porches and fenced yards,” as one interlocutor put it. Youth talked about white Canadian society as an experience of culture shock, particularly with regard to Canadian sexual norms, where kissing and hugging openly in public and public talk about sex and sexuality were unfamiliar and shocking. In this sense, whiteness as “a culturally normative space” (Frankenberg 1993) became connected to a border crossing of corporeal and sexual boundaries in these unfamiliar urban spaces, expressive of white-dominant Canadian society and, therefore, simultaneously normative and sexually amoral.

Encounters and Emplacement

The Commons—a multi-story brick apartment block located a short walk from the park, social services, and shops and money transfer offices catering to African clientele—is home to many recent immigrants and refugees. A bustling shopping mall complete with the Canadian icon of coffee shops, Tim Hortons, is also nearby. Many of the youth who participated in our research lived at the Commons. In their first months, they spent much time in the neighborhood, attending school, homework clubs, or programs at various immigrant organizations.

They also spent a great deal of newfound leisure time in the mall and its environs, especially when arriving during the harsh Prairie winter. While the everyday social worlds of newcomer youth residing in the Commons were culturally diverse, as it housed families from many different African backgrounds, the mall represented another degree of diversity altogether. Alain had encouraged us, the anthropologists, to spend time at the mall in order to see for ourselves what many of the youth participating in our research articulated as a quintessential multicultural Canadian space of ethnic and racial diversity and, more specifically, where social interactions between African male youth and African and non-African female youth were readily visible.¹¹ Youth told stories about their first experiences in Canada of witnessing public displays of affection at the mall. A community researcher explained how the quasi-public space of commerce and ethno-racial diversity represented a heady potential for romantic and sexual relations with women from many different backgrounds that had overwhelmed, challenged, confused, and excited African young men in his social networks.

A nineteen-year-old from Sierra Leone, Kofi, conveyed his perspective about the inner city as a new terrain of encounter:

In Winnipeg, you have all of these cultures, you know. There is not just one culture. Every time you date a girl, an African girl, you are going to feel more that you are in an “African relationship” and then if you are dating a white girl, it’s a totally different thing. I guess it’s not one type of dating, it’s “multicultural.” Like I said, back home is going to be Black girls, right? And when you get here, all these kinds of cultures, “different flavours,” you know?¹²

While objectionable in that women are denigrated in the reference to “different flavours,” this expression captures the common lived-and-felt sense of encounter presented within the inner city. Thobani describes how immigrants are acutely aware of the heterogeneity of the Canadian population under multiculturalism, such that “having been made the embodiment of this diversity by the dominant culture, they live out this diversity in their daily lives and become acutely sensitive to the differences between themselves and the various other groups collapsed into the categories immigrant, refugee, and visible minorities” (2009, 161). In the downtown spaces where our research participants spent their early days of settlement, such as the mall, sexuality was performed and played out through masculinized consumption and leisure. In this new cultural landscape, “white girls” were situated by the male youth as subjects of romantic and erotic desire and, also, white femininity took shape as a category of difference, albeit a very ambiguous category. Also objectionable is how “African girls” are objectified and treated as if homogeneous. Yet, Kofi’s point cogently underscores the racial boundaries that he and others were drawing in their narratives about living downtown and both embodying and encountering difference and unfamiliarity in their everyday lives.

Hindi was fifteen and had just finished his first year in a Canadian high school when we interviewed him. For him, it had been logical to explore a relationship with a local girl born in the Prairies, since back in Sierra Leone people of European descent had not been very visible to him in the town where he had spent his childhood. Hindi explained,

Since we [African immigrants] are surrounded by mostly white people, you think, “Oh, why not, I will just go for white girls instead of Blacks.” Just the same [is] how Sierra Leone is all Black. You also want to try and do something different. When you date them, it actually is a different kind of perspective.

“Something different” referenced racial difference, although nation and race were inextricable, since in their minds Canadianness was tied to whiteness. The opportunity to meet and date a white Canadian-born young woman happened at various particular locales that were culturally heterogeneous spaces, such as high schools or the downtown shopping mall.

Downtown was thus a space where encounters with white Canadian women as well as other non-African women were possible within a landscape of diversity that youth experienced as new and that shocked them and puzzled them in terms of figuring out codes of decorum and physicality. “White girls” were regarded by Kofi, Hindi, Alain, and others as a highly sought-after and idealized femininity within these “ethnosexual frontiers”—that is, zones where racial, ethnic, and national boundaries were negotiated and regulated in everyday relations of intimacy and desire (Donnan and Magowan 2010, 115).

In the next sections, we bring attention to the embodied material ways that dating or hooking up with white Canadian-born women emplaced our interlocutors in the landscape. In other words, where whiteness is the unmarked sameness and the naturalization of “Canadianness,” and “Black” youth are expected to make sense of their experiences in these spaces of unfamiliarity as being the different ones who have “arrived” in a “host country” (Matus 2012, 210), these male African newcomer youth saw themselves as inhabiting these spaces as subjects of/within multiculturalism. Although teachers were racist toward them and made them feel as outsiders and strangers relative to white youth and other immigrant groups at high schools, such as Filipino youth, the African newcomer youth expressed a sense of placement—along with displacement—in these everyday places. Dating whomever they wanted aligned with their desires to rightly experience sociability with different racial and cultural groups. We focus on two such locales for this dating: home and downtown.

White Girlfriends' Homes

For our research participants, “white girls” were attractive in part due to their apparent freedoms. Spending time in the family homes of white Canadian-born girlfriends was a freedom that impressed these youth. Born in Kenya before emigrating to Canada at age seven, Coby saw as an agreeable aspect of dominant youth sexual culture in Canada the ability to date a “white girl,” as he put it, “without having to introduce the girl to your clan.” Coby’s Christian family discouraged, if not forbade, him to bring a girlfriend home. In this sense, the residences and home environments of Euro-Canadian girlfriends or “friends with benefits” were social-spatial experiences that piqued the curiosity of Coby and other youth, which to them were constitutively “Canadian” spaces.

Raised by his Christian grandmother in Sierra Leone, Hindi moved to Canada to live with his father and his Sierra Leonean stepmother. Quiet and introspective, he soon formed a friendship with a Mennonite classmate,¹³ who became his girlfriend in a year-long relationship. While he had also had brief romantic relationships with two Sierra Leonean girls, as Hindi explained, “White girls have more freedom. They do not have to caution themselves around their family.” In contrast, back in Freetown, his home of origin, “dating stops at school and outside your house . . . If a girl came over, you’re going to get your ass whopped.” Even though his Mennonite girlfriend’s family was strict, he had felt free to spend time with her and was unfazed by her mother’s glances from the kitchen window when they walked to her house after school, glances that did not judge him or bar him from entering their home.

Dany had had a similar experience. When he was invited over to the family home of his Canadian-born girlfriend, that her parents had extended this hospitality to him was incredulous to him given he was romantically involved with their daughter. Our point here is not to convey exceptionalism about Canadian hospitality—racism was also experienced with the families of white girlfriends—but rather that interracial sexuality was played out within, and animated by, intimate spaces of domesticity. In other words, Dany interpreted the parents’ welcoming reception of him as a Black immigrant into their physical and social household through racialized difference: they saw him as Black just as he saw them as white. Homes were thus unexpected sites for the navigation of urban youth culture and, more specifically, flagged what youth regarded as distinctively white Canadian culture. Homes, in this sense, became a kind of frontier and site in the local production of interracial sexuality where Black African youth were key actors within and also subjects of multiculturalism.

Downtown Apartments, Transgressive Spaces

Sam had been living in Winnipeg for five years when we met him. Eritrean by heritage, he spent several years in Kenya before coming to Canada with his parents and younger siblings. As a single man in his twenties when he arrived in Winnipeg, he frequented the downtown night spots with friends, including other Eritreans. Sam's family lived in an outlying suburb where they had settled to avoid inner-city poverty and crime that relatives had cautioned them about. For Sam though, the city was an important space for fostering male camaraderie and heterosexual sexual relations and social networks. He spent much time downtown, immersed in a growing youth subculture that was transforming the urban landscape. Although not a large area, a few African-owned establishments and clubs marked out a "Black zone" by the bodies and actions of African youth occupying these spaces, which were contested by their parents and African communities as well as by the general public. Many of our interlocutors found downtown exhilarating due to the Africanized spaces that promised cosmopolitanism and diversity.

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Socializing opportunities available downtown were often associated with transgression. Sam liked to play pool and smoke shisha with other Eritreans and Ethiopians in the Ethiopian restaurant bars. An Eritrean friend who worked long hours in several jobs lent out his downtown apartment to Sam and his friends so that they could entertain women once the bars and clubs closed for the evening. Located close to the bars and clubs, in the apartment Sam and his friends could watch porn and chill with their girlfriends or hookups, providing a sexual space that allowed the men to avoid bringing women to both the family homes of Sam and his friends and the family homes of the women. For Sam, introducing any of the women he met downtown to his family was unthinkable, nor did he want to meet their families. While women from different racial and national identities were invited into this space, including Eritrean women, it was mostly white women he brought to his friend's apartment for the pursuit of sex outside of the prospects of (endogamous) marriage.

Distinctive here was how racialization of the nightlife leisure spaces played out and Sam's agentic role in that process: playing pool and smoking shisha in the spaces that Sam and his peers regarded as African; watching porn and having casual sex in a friend's apartment, where mostly, although not exclusively, "white girls" were guests. A space for sexual transgression, downtown was ideologically and geographically separate from the predominantly "white" suburbs where he lived with his family. The ethnosexual encounters with white Canadian women whom Sam and his friends regarded as sexually promiscuous seemed to be an "experience" in themselves. Masculinized mobility—that is, the gendered freedom to move from one locale to another associated with masculinity (from African spaces to white spaces, from spaces of consumption to private spaces of leisure)—and desires for interracial

sexuality were interlinked. African male youth regarded sexual encounters with white women as desirable outcomes of the physical and social mobility that these young men enjoyed. The downtown apartment provided the physical space for such encounters but was also a material-erotic space where interracial desire was aroused and interracial sexualities emerged through contingent social relations in which African immigrant young men, as the city's racialized African youth urban subculture, sought out sexual lives that were decidedly marked by difference and border crossing.

"White Girl" Imaginary

I want my girlfriend to be like a white girl, I want my girlfriend to act like a white girl.

—Odol, from Somalia, in Canada two years (June 2011)

High schools, clubs, girlfriends' homes, and friends' downtown apartments became locales for ethnosexual encounters (Donnan and Magowan 2010)—where embodied knowledge of "Canadian" whiteness was acquired through the formation of heterosexual relationships with Euro-Canadian young women within everyday sociality in schooling, leisure, and camaraderie. These transgressive boundary crossings can be seen as locally specific emergences of interraciality and were linked to larger processes. Historically, normative femininity is embodied by European "white" heterosexual women (Deliofsky 2010, 103). What Fanon ([1952] 2008) called "the historical schema" of whiteness arising from colonialism and imperialism, dependent upon racism and notions of blackness for its reproduction, continues to underpin the racialization of femininity in Canada (Deliofsky 2010). Normative ("white") femininity is constructed and performed in myriad contexts and representations, such as media images of fashion, hair, and beauty (Deliofsky 2010). The hegemony of whiteness, where desirable femininity and thus power is "naturally" conferred to white women, works through unmarked normativity; yet, as a relational category, whiteness is a moving target, both invisible and changing over time. Located in a particular time and space, youth were thus active agents in shaping both white femininity and interracial sexuality.

The upward trend of visible minority populations in Canadian cities has shaped the constitution of white womanhood with respect to which groups are assigned to this category (Deliofsky 2010, 17, 34). In the early twentieth century, an influx of German and Russian immigrants challenged Anglo-Saxon/Celtic ideals of "white" (Carter 1997). More recently, the Habasha identity of Eritreans and Ethiopians living in Winnipeg further contests and historicizes the definition and authorization of whiteness. The broader issue regarding which women fit within the imaginary of normative femininity is salient to the reshaping, transmuting, and calling into question of white womanhood currently

underway in Canada. The youths' attractions to "white girls" were formed and negotiated within a sociocultural landscape shaped by: immigration and a particular moment of racial politics and racial identity formations; demographical changes in Winnipeg and Canada more broadly; and individual experiences of living for the first time in a white settler multicultural society and of everyday interactions with power and privilege associated with whiteness. Interraciality necessitated decoding as much as constructing white femininity.

The trope of "white women" is constructed along the lines of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, or personhood depending on "which mode of naming difference predominates in a given moment or place" (Frankenberg 1993, 11). In their narratives of desire for Euro-Canadian-born women, the youth did not ascribe physical characteristics or mention beauty or appearances. Instead, they identified personality characteristics and national attributes ("Canadianness") that underpinned their romantic and sexual attraction to white heterosexual femininity. More specifically, "white girls" signaled: personality traits such as being nice, fun, open, "chill," "cool," and understanding; attitudes toward dating and sexual relations such as being "daring," and "up for it"; and apparent capacities and knowledges, such as the ability to handle themselves regarding sexual and reproductive health (i.e., access to and willingness to use contraception and, when necessary, to access abortion). "White girls" was deployed as a kind of trope or imaginary in that the young men ascribed certain attributes to a largely undifferentiated racialized category (although Hindi's story about his Mennonite girlfriend illuminates some nuance).¹⁴

Yet, the deployment of "white girls" does more than recognize and call out the otherwise color-blindness of normative femininity; the youths' narratives also gesture toward "a mutable notion of race" that challenges the assumptions of an ontologically secure "race" (Nayak 2006, 419). One youth's assertion, "In Canada, girls are more outgoing, they can be more understanding," was shared amongst his peers, alluding to a contrast they regarded with non-Canadian women, and especially African women. Such racialized stereotyping suggests the way in which white Canadianness was understood relationally and fluidly through the young men's emergent blackness and heterosexual masculinities. "Canadian girls" were constructed as a different femininity compared to "African girls," as well as women from other local, Indigenous, and immigrant ethno-racial groups that make up Winnipeg's racially diverse urban demography.

Odol's remark, in the epigraph above, about wanting his Somali girlfriend to "be like a white girl," cogently reveals a mutable notion of race, or, as Nayak (2006, 419) has said, drawing from Fanon, "It transpires that whiteness or blackness is not attached to respective white and black bodies but rather that race signs are encoded into everyday practice." Odol's reference to the desirability of white femininity that is not attached to white bodies suggests the ways in which transgressive boundary crossing

was associated with interraciality for African male youth from their locations in multicultural urban spaces of resettlement, where whiteness was taking on new meanings and also offering newfound experiences—and yet was not fixed. Like many of our interlocutors, Odol articulated a desire to express sexuality seemingly made possible through whiteness, such that the characteristics that he and his friends had come to associate with white normative femininity were that which he desired, as outlined above, and not necessarily the skin color, fleshy body, ethnicity, or nationality of the actual person. Returning to Alain’s comment, appearing in the introduction, that he and his male friends saw themselves placed in a position where they needed to “break the rules” dictated by their parents and communities regarding sexual relations, the youth contested cultural norms that regulated their sexuality. One way they did so was by negotiating new boundaries of race and ethnicity as newcomers in a complexly diverse city.

Putting aside the problematic concerns invoked in these claims to sexual transgression through whiteness, our main point is that immigrant youth are active subjects in the production of interracial sexuality, rather than passive subjects or youth “at risk” arriving to “an already defined place” (Matus 2012, 209). On the one hand, in making white femininity and womanhood such a key symbol of Black male heterosexual sexual transgression, youth appear to be bolstering the power accruing to whiteness. However, on the other hand, their acts might be regarded as racializing acts by explicitly naming whiteness, an otherwise unmarked category specific to a Canadian context of immigration, and implicitly critiquing any foundation or essence of “race.”

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Conclusion

In conceptualizing “whiteness” as an “enduring meta-narrative” in Canadian society, Peake and Ray articulate how it is not only in official policies but everyday geographies where whiteness is conveyed (2001, 180). Race is ignored in the naturalizing trick of normalizing white bodies in Canada. As Peake and Ray argue, “In such a system, whiteness is embodied and becomes desire in the shape of the normative human body” (2001, 181). Youths’ racialized subjectivities and their experiences of racism in multiple spaces were part of their stories to us, as they negotiated their presence, marginality, and visibility in relation to the national imaginary of “real” Canada, the “great white north” (Clarke 1997). We situate interracial sexuality within this context where African youth navigated the intersecting boundaries of race, nation, and sexuality in the transformation of their identities and personhood as newcomers/strangers. It is not the phenomenon per se of interracial sex amongst African young men and white Canadian-born young women that we wish to document. Instead we call attention to how desire was articulated through idioms of transgression and regulation that were ethnographically specific

instances of social-spatial practices through which “whiteness [became] desire” (Peake and Ray 2001). How were “white girls” imagined? Which women were interpreted and deemed “white”? How was erotic and sexual desire and heterosexual orientation animated by imaginaries and social relations of racial difference embodied and performed in specific spaces and places? We have explored these questions.

The hegemonic black-white racial binary, sketched out above, in conjunction with the diasporic social organization of race within African groups in Canada (Creese 2013; Kusow 2006; Dei and James 1998; Ibrahim 2006), is the edifice for contemporary attitudes about and practices of interracial sexuality. Historically within Canada, Black men were socially condemned for crossing the “racial line” in intimate relations with white women, such that interracial relationships were prohibited by custom, not law. This historical taboo against “interracial mixing” lingers (Kitossa and Deliovsky 2010). Immigration, globalization, and urbanization in Canada have led to rising numbers of people involved in interracial unions, whereby a celebratory stance of public “tolerance” exists simultaneously with ongoing regulation of interracial sexuality (Kitossa and Deliovsky 2010, 514). The history of white settler colonialism, the dominance and deepening of white supremacy, and the paradoxes of multiculturalism are shown to be the current conditions for the negative attitudes in particular toward Black men and white women, due to a “longer history of defamation in the Eurocentric cultural imaginary” (Kitossa and Deliovsky 2010, 517; Ray 2013; Fanon ([1952] 2008). These are the complex contexts wherein male African immigrant and refugee youth forge sexual lives and subjectivities.

Our analysis has focused on how youth were active subjects in urban transformations in Winnipeg. As Donnan and Magowan argue, “perceived differences of race, ethnicity, and nation influence reactions to sexual intimacy by encouraging the stimulation or suppression of inter-ethnic erotic desire” (2010, 115). The participants of our research, African youth who settled in a racialized inner city in Canada in the twenty-first century, were shaped by and simultaneously shaped the social-spatiality such that whiteness emerged as an idealized heterosexual femininity. This idealized heterosexual femininity was related to our participants’ own racialization as “Black” newcomers and the racism, exotification, and objectification they experienced in their everyday lives in schools, neighborhoods, homes, and leisure spaces. The formation and expression of interracial desire—directed at the ultimate desirability of “white girls” as romantic and sexual partners for dating, “friends with benefits,” and “hooking up”—was emergent and produced, in part, through male youths’ masculinized mobility in the city. In their relative freedom to move about downtown, they were incited to negotiate multiple borders as they experienced settlement and sought integration into Canadian society and urban life—borders that were physical (home, leisure, the city), social (friendships, “street” sociality, homosociality), and cultural (marriage expectations, norms of endogamy).

... Whiteness
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Our spatial focus has elucidated how new possibilities for encountering “white girls” in the downtown of Winnipeg, including youths’ spaces of leisure and home spaces, were entangled with racializing discourses. Such racializing discourses both mobilized new ideas and remobilized older ideas about and desires for white femininity. In highlighting our interlocutors’ situatedness in these spaces and discourses, we aim to show youth as key social actors in the transformations of sexuality occurring through globalization and transnational processes. As Ray has cogently suggested, “interracial sexualities are constituted through multiple histories,” therefore, “to take up only one of those histories is to tell only part of the story” (2013, 191). In telling one partial story of interracial sexuality, we acknowledge that our ethnography produces “race”—by locating it—even at the same time as it aims to dislocate race, and we also recognize the ethnographic and analytical work remaining to further challenge “the ontological security and stability of ‘race’” (Nayak 2006, 416).

Notes

Acknowledgments. The authors are grateful for the funding provided by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to carry out this research. A version of this paper was first presented at the Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meeting in Seattle in 2011, and has benefited from additional research and input along the way from colleagues, graduate students, community members, and research team collaborators including Selam Gheybrohannes, Mubarak Mohamed, Huruy Michael, Estella Marmah, Alison Odger, Winta Michaels, Yoko Fwamba, Oiza Atta, Robert Lorway, and Laura Bisaillon. We also acknowledge our partnership with the Winnipeg branch of the Manitoba Sexuality Education Resource Centre, the Immigration and Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba, and the Spence Neighbourhood Association. The research would not be possible without the generosity and willingness of the many youth and young adults who have participated in this project since 2010, spending their valuable time with us, for which we are most appreciative.

¹By *cultural prescriptions for endogamous sexuality* we refer loosely to rules for inter-group sexuality (i.e., dating, intimacies, erotics, and marriage) differentiated across ethnic, tribal, racial, and national groups in local African communities. *Endogamy* is a contested term within anthropology because it naturalizes boundaries and reproductive biologisms of marriage; for this reason, the problematic term captures the youths’ struggles against the boundedness and rigidity of proscriptions around dating and intimacies in their new lives in Canada and that they were transforming through geographical mobility. We were interested in the youths’ claims about rules regulating their sexuality, not about the actual practices of endogamy, although this information surfaced in our research.

²We use pseudonyms throughout this article.

³As noted later in this article, heterosexuality was predominant in our cohort and this article focuses on the heterosexual teen boys and young men in our research. Yet, as we have analyzed elsewhere, cultural prescriptions for endogamous sexuality nevertheless affect gay and queer African young men navigating rules around sexuality as newcomers to Canada (see Marmah 2017).

⁴In contrast to their heterosexual counterparts' desires for whiteness, queer African male youth can express a distaste for the hegemony of whiteness within local queer communities—another dynamic of power, race, sexuality, and immigration that we examine elsewhere (Fubara-Manuel 2017; Marmah 2017).

⁵Drawing on feminist anthropological scholarship (e.g., Durrington 2009; Frankenberg 1993; Low 2009), we understand whiteness to be a racial formation that changes spatially and temporally and confers race privilege and, thus, following Frankenberg (1993, 6), acts as “a site of dominance.” Recognizing that there is a danger within whiteness studies to uncritically produce a polarity with blackness studies (Durrington 2009, 3), we use an ethnographic account of a local specificity of whiteness and also its slippage to critically examine whiteness in settlement experiences in Winnipeg.

⁶See Statistics Canada (2013) for this and other statistics on immigration referred to in this paper.

⁷See City of Winnipeg (2011) for national census figures that track 21.4 percent of the city's total population as visible minorities, with Filipino being the largest group (36 percent), followed by South Asian (15 percent), and then Black (14 percent).

⁸Zaami (2015) examines a Toronto neighborhood constructed in similarly racialized terms that affects the social-spatial exclusion of Ghanaian immigrant youth.

⁹Winnipeg sits on the territorial lands of the Anishinabe and Metis Nation peoples. The inner city and North End are home to Canada's largest Aboriginal urban population, approximately 11 percent of the city population (Gyepi-Garbrah, Walker, and Garcea 2014). Rising numbers of African immigrants and refugees and other visible minorities have resulted in visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples constituting just under half of the inner-city population, with cohabitation marked by relations of tension and “layers of separation” (Ghorayashi 2010). A discussion of how common histories (colonization, racism, and socio-economic marginalization) have influenced a tense relationship between African newcomer and Aboriginal communities (see Gyepi-Garbrah, Walker, and Garcea 2014) is beyond the scope of this article, but it is an important dimension to our interlocutors' settlement experiences (including issues related to interracial sexualities between African young men and Aboriginal teen girls and women, and drug selling and gang rivalry between African and Aboriginal gangs).

¹⁰*Visible minority* is defined in federal discourses as “persons, other than Aboriginal persons, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Thobani 2009, 327n37).

¹¹Because the mall near the Commons was popular with racialized immigrants and had become taken over by low-end retail stores, it was widely denigrated as “a hangout” and “drug haven,” and therefore referred to in media accounts as “a wasteland, like a cancer on the downtown” (Toews 2015, 185). Efforts starting in the early 2000s to regulate youths’ presence in the mall included heavy security measures, which effectively drove youth into unsafe spaces like corners and stairwells for socializing and intimate liaisons, or to other private spaces in the city, such as friends’ apartments, as also discussed in this paper.

¹²Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism “furthered popular perceptions of the nation having made a successful transition from a white settler colony to a multiracial, multi-ethnic, liberal-democratic society . . . now [imagined] as welcoming ‘diverse’ immigrants and valuing their cultures” (Thobani 2009, 144). This notion of multicultural Canada was echoed by many youth participants, and demonstrates the role of the state in legitimizing certain (white) citizens as “exalted subjects” and nonwhite racialized others as “discrete racial, ethnic, and cultural groups existing within its territorial borders, yet outside the symbolic bounds of the nation” (Thobani 2009, 149). As Thobani points out, the idea of inclusion promised within multiculturalism in Canada is seductive to immigrants but at the same time suppresses the existence of racism under the guise of “tolerance” extended by the dominant white society. The quote from Kofi speaks clearly to this seduction.

¹³The Prairies are home to Mennonites, a Christian religious-cultural group of predominant Germanic ethnicity known for conservative values around marriage and sexuality. In Hindi’s eyes, as he became more aware of the nuances of Canadian ethno-racial identities, he recognized the significance of his Mennonite girlfriend’s regional identity that complicated his earlier perceptions of a homogeneous Canadian whiteness.

¹⁴We are not suggesting that the youths’ intimate relations with white Canadian women were devoid of emotion or were merely a means to access sex and exotic bodies. We certainly heard many stories from the youth about love and romance, as we did about conquest and exoticization.

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