

# Ebony Roots, Northern Soil



Ebony Roots, Northern Soil:  
Perspectives on Blackness in Canada

Edited by

Charmaine A. Nelson

**CAMBRIDGE**  
**SCHOLARS**  

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Ebony Roots, Northern Soil:  
Perspectives on Blackness in Canada,  
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This book first published 2010

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-2564-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2564-1

To Black Canadians  
Past, Present and Future



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements .....   | x   |
| Introduction .....   | 1   |
| Charmaine A. Nelson  |     |
| <b>Part I - Call and Response: Analysing <i>Ebony Roots</i></b>  |     |
| Chapter One: Panel #1 Response: Visual Culture and Institutions.....   | 38  |
| Inside Out: Production and Reception in Canadian Cultural Institutions<br>Charmaine A. Nelson                                    |     |
| Chapter Two: Panel #2 Response: Popular Culture.....   | 54  |
| Identity, Capitalism and the Mainstream: Towards a Critical Practice<br>of Black Canadian Popular Culture<br>Charmaine A. Nelson |     |
| Chapter Three: Panel #3 Response: Institutional Racism.....  | 81  |
| Visible Minorities, Invisible Racism: Racism and Academic Institutions<br>Yumna Siddiqi  |     |
| Chapter Four: Panel #4 Response: Nation, Politics, Belonging .....   | 106 |
| Out of Northwhere: Nation, Politics and Belonging<br>Jenny Burman  |     |
| Chapter Five: Panel #5 Response: Cultural Production, Media<br>and Representation .....  | 123 |
| Theorizing Canadian Blackness: Place and Cultural Production<br>of the Black Diaspora<br>Kai Mah                                 |     |

**Part II - From the Personal to the Collective: Practicing History and Narrative as Social Critique**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Six .....   | 142 |
| Ignoring the Pool: De-Mystifying Race in Canada through Practice<br>Anthony Stewart |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Seven.....  | 167 |
| The Question of the Question is the Foreigner: The Spectre of Blackness<br>and the Economy of Hospitality in Canada<br>Awad Ibrahim |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Eight.....                      | 187 |
| Our Disappointments<br>Dolores Sandoval |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Nine.....   | 206 |
| All Roads Led to Montreal: Black Power and the Black Radical<br>Tradition in Canada<br>David Austin |     |

**Part III – Multi-Culturing Blackness: Questions of Identity, Difference and Belonging**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Chapter Ten .....  | 238 |
| Towards a Methodology for Reading Hip Hop in Canada<br>Rinaldo Walcott |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Eleven .....  | 254 |
| ‘Connect the T.dots’—Remix Multiculturalism: After Caribbean-<br>Canadian, Social Possibilities for Living Difference<br>Mark V. Campbell |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Twelve .....  | 277 |
| (Up)Rooting Claims to Legitimacy: Blackness and the Canadian<br>National Imaginary in Djanet Sears’s <i>Adventures of a Black Girl<br/>in Search of God</i> and Afua Cooper’s <i>Negro Cemeteries</i><br>Sharon Morgan Beckford |     |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Chapter Thirteen .....  | 297 |
| <i>Keeping it Real: Blacks and Multiculturalism - The Search<br/>for Recognition and Authenticity in Canada</i><br>Cecil Foster |     |
| Contributors .....  | 322 |

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book could not have been completed without the dedication and support of many people. Born out of a Black Canadian Studies conference convened at McGill University, Montreal on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2005, my inspiration has been the presenters, many of whom have graciously contributed their written works to this volume. I also solicited additional chapters from scholars who work in the field of Black Canadian Studies and Postcolonial Studies and I am grateful for their contributions.

The first thanks must go to Karin Bourgeois who, in her capacity as the head Administrator of the Department of Art History and Communication Studies, became an enthusiastic and indispensable collaborator. Without Karin, I simply would not have been able to navigate the dense bureaucracy of the university. I am grateful for her dedication and her countless contributions to the conference. I also was blessed to have a capable team of dedicated undergraduate students who worked on the initial conference as a part of an undergraduate Art History course at McGill University. These students are: Miriam Aronowicz, Rachel Cohen, Amina D’Oherly, Eowynne Feeney-Scott, Tae Kohara, Jillian Lapedus, Clara Lapiner, Jessica Litwin, Lydia Medeiros, Kiera Ormut-Fleishman, Beza Seife, Rebecca Streiman and Cymantia Thomas. The success of the conference was directly owed to their intelligence, professionalism and commitment. I would also like to thank Rachelle Dickenson, a graduate Research Assistant who worked literally day and night on the conference and assisted in every aspect of the planning and organization. Rachelle and Amina D’Oherly were the two students who were with me from the start, working on this project from the summer of 2004. Both were indispensable. I would also like to thank two other graduate Research Assistants, Ruth Burns and Samantha Burton, for their valuable contributions and hard work in the days leading up to the conference and during the actual event.

The conference was also possible because of the considerable efforts of many student volunteers including: Amy Gajaria, Brianne Howard, Grace Johnstone, Cynthia Morgan, Jia Zhao, Jolene Pozniak and Anna Carastathis. The *Ebony Roots* film festival was also created in order to raise much-needed funds for the conference. I would like to thank the project manager Kai Mah who oversaw an excellent team of students that

included: Kiera Ormut-Fleishman, Lydia Medeiros and Christina Finger. Kai also served as the respondent for panel five, “Cultural Production, Media and Representation” and did all manner of other essential tasks which aided me beyond measure throughout the course of the organization of the conference. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to him for his support and commitment to the project. The conference itself would not have been a success and may not have had an audience at all, without Peter Anthony Holder. On many occasions Peter graciously welcomed me onto his radio and television programs so that I might spread the word about the event. Peter, thanks a million!

As regards the preparation of this book, I must also thank my Research Assistants, Emma Doubt and Katya Isayev for their hard work. To the staff at Cambridge Scholars Press, I express my sincere gratitude and deep appreciation for your support, enthusiasm and belief in this book. Thank you for welcoming this project!

I also recognize and salute the countless people who have laboured, mainly in isolation for years, making important contributions to the fields of Black Canadian Studies and Canadian Studies. Many of these scholars and thinkers have made these contributions without any proper recognition of their often unprecedented and brilliant contributions to multiple fields, without the support of institutions (academic or otherwise), without proper funding or even without a network of like-minded, accessible and supportive peers. Yet without them, we the current generation of scholars, producers, workers and thinkers, like those who gathered in February 2005 and those who have gathered our thoughts to share in this book, would not have been possible. To the earlier generations, I thank you for your tireless efforts and for making my scholarship and this project possible!

I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to my father, Maxwell Barrington Nelson, for his ceaseless support and insightful advice throughout the entire course of the conference and the production of this book. He not only attended the first ERNS conference (there were eventually two), but was an irreplaceable and enthusiastic participant on the panel on *Institutional Racism*. The narrative my father shared with those gathered (recounted in part in Chapter Three, “Visible Minorities, Invisible Racism: Racism and Academic Institutions” by Yumna Siddiqi) is one that has and will continue to inspire me. Thanks for providing such a great example Dad!

And lastly, I would like to thank the generations of black Canadians themselves, from those whose ancestry is centuries-long to those who have recently just arrived. It is your engagement with, reformulation and even disruption of the national narratives of Canada and Canadian culture which

have inspired me to do this work. Thanks for the inspiration!

—Charmaine A. Nelson  
Montreal, October 2009

## INTRODUCTION

CHARMAINE A. NELSON

The evolution of this anthology is directly owed to a conference of the same name which took place at McGill University (Montreal, Canada) on the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2005. Indeed it is, in part, the written legacy of two such events. While I convened the first *Ebony Roots* conference for Black History Month in order to provide a platform for scholarly and professional engagement around key themes of relevance to black Canadians, the latter incarnation on 4 April 2007, *Ebony Roots: Bi-Centenary Symposium* was held to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the abolition of the British Slave Trade, by Act of Parliament in 1807. The organization and reception of both events have come to inform my thinking around the current state of Black Canadian Studies and what is needed, individually, institutionally and collectively for change, growth and transformation to occur. But equally, my opinions have been transformed about the zones - cultural, political and social - outside of academia.

The title *Ebony Roots, Northern Soil* or ERNS, came to me in a moment of word play with one of my then MA Art History students, Rachelle Dickenson, who had committed herself to the project from its inception in the summer of 2004. Ebony of course is a word that can stand in for and become interchangeable with the colour black. But it is also a specific hard dark wood of a tropical tree found in Africa and Asia of which the distinctly black heartwood has been prized for musical instruments, furniture, ornament and other objects for millennia.<sup>1</sup> The idea of blackness and black bodies as beautiful, precious and valuable in our uniqueness is one that stands in defiance of the western colonial legacy of our degrading and stereotypical representation at the hands of others, mainly whites. As for the second word in the title, roots are the unseen life-sustaining system of a plant or tree, that which keeps it anchored and nourished. The word also refers to one's history and legacy, and for many, recalls Alex Hailey's groundbreaking novel of 1976 and television mini-series of 1977 about American slavery. But roots also reminded me of the lyrics of the song "Roots, Rock, Reggae" when Robert Nesta Marley sang of "dis ya reggae music" in his jubilant anthem: "Feel like dancing, dance 'cause we are free

“/ Feel like dancing, come dance with me.” The celebration of freedom from the bondage of Trans Atlantic Slavery is something which links many blacks across our nation and across various locations of the Black Diaspora. It is an attachment to the legacy of slavery, which we have lived to know about, only because of the survival, strength, and perseverance of our ancestors.

The term root is also an interesting and provocative symbol when taken up within the context of Black Canadian histories. The disavowal of Black Canadian historical and contemporary presence within Canadian national narratives is often performed through an erasure which rests upon the idealization of the white or Euro-Canadian as the ideal citizen, something that goes hand in hand with denying blacks, people of colour and even Native citizens the right to claim rootedness in this place we call Canada. In this regard, the idea of Canadian roots or heritage dominantly assumes a white racial position, a colonial derivative of a settler colony ideology. Within this context, the black or ebony root in Canada is a provocative and transgressive symbol.

However, my idea of roots or rootedness is not exclusively for those who would lay claim to an ancestral legacy of a certain duration; this is not a numbers game after all. Rather, following Jill Casid, I would argue that, “The seemingly impossible rootless root would appear to hold the promise of combining tactical mobility and planting.”<sup>2</sup> And thus while African-Canadians, their ancestral roots connected to the free and enslaved black populations in Canada over generations, have the option of laying claim to national belonging through their historical presence within Canada, I would argue that to buy into the idea of historical presence as the only legitimate way for one to be/become Canadian is to accept and to contribute to a limited colonial logic which privileges certain forms of geographical emplacement over mobilities, trajectories and other types of engagement with place. It is also to dismiss and minimize the countless contributions and histories of a myriad of black Canadians who are more recent immigrants. These conferences and this book, profess to explore other ways of thinking about what it means to be black in Canada and how black populations, in thinking through our relationship to our nation state, provide new avenues for interaction, contestation and negotiation both within and outside of its geographical, social, political and cultural structures. So although the title *Ebony Roots*, calls up the idea of *plantation* as a traditional sign of presence and belonging - the act of planting and the soil or earth as home, source of nutrition and protection - I would never profess to say that a tree that has taken root over one hundred years has any more right to life than one that has been rooted for

ten.<sup>3</sup>

My organization of the first ERNS conference started with a hope. What I had hoped was that the event would be a catalyst for change and transformation, for greater inclusivity (racial, sexual and otherwise), and for greater dialogue within academia and in general. In order to truly represent Canadian diversity, the first ERNS included not only black Canadian participants, but also people from a wide racial, ethnic and national make-up. This insistence upon dialogue across various racial positions as well as from inside and outside of our nation was meant to provoke discussion and debate, to highlight distinctions in practice and histories and to promote networking and dialogue across broader fields and areas of study. At the most basic level, I used the event to bring together many of the wonderful, dedicated and brilliant people whose scholarship, work or lived experiences were significant within the realms of Black Studies, Canadian Studies and critical race scholarship.

It is significant to note, that because Canada lacks an official national infrastructure of Black or African-Canadian Studies programs, that many of the scholars assembled, worked (and continue to work) largely in isolation within academic contexts which were often hostile to them both in terms of their identities and in terms of their scholarship. In contestation of this absence, I see these conferences and this book as defiant statements of our continuing black presence in Canada and following Rinaldo Walcott, I concur that, “The writing of blackness in Canada, then, might begin with a belief that something important happens here.”<sup>4</sup>

## Organizing the Conference

As I had stated by way of introduction at the conference in 2005, “I was truly passionate about a large scale, ambitious event at McGill University to celebrate Black History Month.” But I was equally able to replace the word *passionate* with the word *apprehensive*. Part of my apprehension came from the fact that I was only recently hired at McGill University in July 2003 and quickly became aware of the powerful bureaucracy that made even small tasks exercises in navigating mounds of red tape. Thankfully, with the aid of my colleague, collaborator and friend Karin Bourgeois, we were able to cut our way through most of it. I was also apprehensive about the standard lack of support and under-investment in certain areas of Canadian universities, mainly the Arts and Fine Arts, which I saw as pivotal facets of the event.

Sadly, many of my initial worries were justified. When I commenced the organization of the initial conference, I had always planned on

publishing a book. However, I had naively not initially foreseen the extent to which my own experiences with the actual planning and orchestration of the conference would intersect powerfully with the central conference theme of institutional racism. It is because of the nature of my frequent confrontations with racism that I subsequently decided to write about my perception of these experiences, not to problematically “out” my white colleagues<sup>5</sup> at my dominantly white university, but because it is within the darkness of secrecy and silence around the issues of the very real difference of experiences of black faculty in Canadian and other western universities, that the insidious abuses of institutional racism and the detrimental and often damaging effects are able to thrive.<sup>6</sup>

Trying to secure funding for the event, both internal and external to the university, took up an extraordinary amount of my time and energy as well as that of my research assistant. The unscripted nature of the conference, one that functioned through panelists dialoguing as opposed to reading prepared essays, was meant to deliver real and spontaneous engagement over the two days, not only between the panelists, but with the audience as well.<sup>7</sup> Each of the five panels went for ninety minutes with twenty to thirty minutes built in at the end for audience questions, discussion and comments.

My search for internal funding was revelatory. What was revealed was that support often comes and is equally withheld from the most unlikely of places. While the Deans of Science and Medicine generously gave a sizeable sum each, a high administrative office on campus responded quite negatively, offering only a portion of an already modest sum up front with the rest “to be delivered at the successful completion of the conference.” The e-mail exchange that ensued demonstrated the extent to which the very structures and the administration were utterly oblivious to the presence, relevance and importance of black populations at the university and within the broader communities of Montreal and Canada. Furthermore, their reliance on a white-defined idea of success (which was never communicated and arguably impossible to measure) was dubious and served to further enforce normative understandings of achievement. So how was the dominantly white upper administration at McGill going to define and measure the success of a Black History Month event? Since I was not charging an entrance fee, they certainly couldn’t judge it on funds accrued, or could they? Would my conference’s success be judged on how many people turned out to hear the panels? If so, the administration would certainly have had no way of gauging this since none of them, save one, actually attended the event.<sup>8</sup>

In a similarly telling turn of events, the Black Students Network gave more money than the chair of my own department or the McGill Institute

for the Study of Canada.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps the worst element of the event came in a backlash that took place mere days after the conference. Still basking in the glow of the stunning success of the event, I was relaxed and calm when I was called to my departmental chair's office to discuss the conference. Remember now, that I was a junior faculty member, the only black professor in the department (and one of few in the entire Faculty of Arts and university for that matter), untenured and at McGill for less than two years. The chair, at the time a senior white professor in the department, was visibly upset and started to question me about a number of letters they claimed they were receiving in reference to my work and the success of the conference. To paraphrase: "What were all these letters?" that people were writing *on my behalf* and "had I put them up to it?" because if so, "I wasn't doing myself any favours." Taken aback by the tone and line of questioning, I responded honestly, that I had no idea what they were talking about and began to piece together the story that they were relating.

In the aftermath of the conference, the audience members, including students, people from outside of the McGill community and perhaps participants, had spontaneously started to write to the chair of my department, praising me for my hard work in mounting the event and expressing how much they had appreciated the forum and the rare opportunities that it had provided for them as individuals and collectively as a racially marginalized community that felt dominantly excluded from the university and often from Canadian academia more generally. They had also emphasized what they saw as my value to the department and to the university, stating their views that I should be retained, tenured and promoted.

By calling me to their office, I felt that the chair's intent was to force me to defend the conference, and ironically to explain and justify its *success*. Furthermore, I was to defend why *these people* were calling uniformly for my tenure and promotion in pointing out my obvious value to the university. To my mind the chair's reaction, one of incredulity and anger, hinged upon several racist ideas. The first was that the people who were writing to them were black, people of colour or Native and therefore not suitably well-positioned or objective enough to provide an accurate reading of my abilities and contributions to the university, never mind my suitability for tenure and promotion. Second, the assumption that I must have "put them up to this" was based upon a stereotype of black criminality, an assumption which served to delegitimize my hard work and contributions to the university and the overwhelming (as defined by the chair) praise that ensued. Somehow, the meeting began with the

assumption that I was personally behind the letter-writing campaign. The overall sentiment was that the letters were a part of some covert campaign that I had orchestrated in some underhanded attempt to win favour with my colleagues. And finally, the chair's inability to comprehend how transformative, unique and special the experience had been for so many was both a product of their white privilege, their ability to see themselves everyday in multiple and heterogenous ways within their discipline, within the university and within academia generally and their ability to ignore the fact that as a black female professor, I and others like me, did not share that same experience of racial dominance and security. Their actions were informed by their utter lack of knowledge (their literal ignorance) of the field of Black Studies and Black Canadian Studies and the vacuum of institutional support that exists within the Canadian context. I should obviously add to this that this person did not engage me as their equal or as their respected colleague or at least did not address me as such on that day. These factors contributed to an inability to acknowledge the immensity of the moment as forum, as network, as milestone, within the specific context of prolific black, of colour and Native absence at McGill University and within Canadian academia generally.

As the meeting continued, I was aggressively called to identify and define the difference of my conference from others that had been organized by colleagues in the department, since as they put it "other people around here do conferences too you know!" So my collegiality was also then in question, despite the fact that I was in frequent attendance at these other events and conferences and did much administrative service for my department and the university at large (again while a junior, untenured professor).

How exactly was I to explain why some of my colleagues' events did not garner the same grassroots response, an outpouring of excitement and enthusiasm from within and outside of the university? If it is not already obvious at this point, I should mention that the chair had not attended any of the conference panels. I directed their attention to all of the letters they had claimed to have received and asked them to assess why the people writing were so enthusiastic and grateful for the event. I also asked them to recall the ways in which I had already demonstrated my collegiality, which they had no right to challenge. And finally I expressed to them that I felt my success with the conference was something that they should be celebrating and something for which I should receive praise and not criticism.

What I learned (or learned again) was several things. The first lesson was about the limits of a cross-racial solidarity and support within

academia. I also learned not to ever expect praise or support from white colleagues, even when your work and accomplishments obviously merit them and benefit the image of your department and university. Although I was certainly aware of the fact that the failure of ERNS would have cost me in terms of the politics of the institution, I was, perhaps naively, not prepared to catch fall out on the basis of its extraordinary success. My dressing down by my colleague also entailed the tried and true racist maneuver of “putting the black person in their place”, that is always already below the white person. Their dismay and aggression showed me that, in no uncertain terms, I had no business being a star in my department. Their comparison of my conference with those of my colleagues was designed to engender in me a feeling of having over-reached and over-stepped my boundaries, which for me was a way of telling me to stay in my “appropriate” place.

My next lesson came several years later as I was preparing my tenure dossier for submission in the fall of 2006. When I asked the new chair, also white, to examine my departmental file and to provide me with copies of these many letters of support which had been sent to the department in the aftermath of my conference, they informed me that no such letters could be found. When I directed the query to the former chair who had confirmed receiving the “many letters” in the context of the meeting I have described above, they claimed that they did not know what I was referring to and could not recall anything about them. I would describe the misplacing of these letters as a form of racist treachery that is all too common against black, Native and people of colour faculty in academia. At some point, the letters which someone might have deemed to be inappropriate and subjective in their praise, had been destroyed or removed from my file. Meanwhile, it is likely that problematic letters from some racist white students were assuredly given a more permanent place therein.<sup>10</sup> The problem then for faculty of colour who are usually in the minority, is how to insulate ourselves from such obviously biased, hostile and subjective assessment.

### **Managing the Conference**

To say that the conference was a dynamic, engaged and provocative event may be an understatement. The three hundred plus seater auditorium that we booked for the conference was veritably packed for the entire duration of the event. The responses from the audiences were tremendous and truly marked the bridging of multiple academic and lay publics and communities. In this regard then, my initial desire to “welcome the outside

to the inside” and to “challenge the way that the inside does business” was achieved. However, there were flare-ups, of temper or of personality which disturbingly marked what I would call a break down of the *politics of solidarity* in various strategic ways. It is interesting to me that these flare-ups came from what I would have deemed unexpected places in the context of this conference with its platforms of black solidarity, racial inclusivity and sex/gender/sexual equality. These disputes, directed at me, came from two main camps, the first, from black male participants and the second from non-black female ones. In the first cases, the eruptions all actualized around black male participants seeking to marginalize my contribution or claiming control over the event in ways which contested my authority to manage and direct the event that I had organized.

In one case a senior scholar, who had arrived only in time for his participation on the final panel (and skipped the preceding other four) requested that I play a DVD to further explain and explore the issues that he wished to raise. When I explained that no such additional audio-visual platforms were being extended to any of the other panelists in the interest of preserving a sense of equality of participation and true dialogue as well as time for audience interaction, his request then escalated to a demand. By the end, when I attempted to close the conference, the man was literally shouting at me from his seat beside me, demanding that I play his DVD, as I spoke at the podium, wrapping up the event.

In another case, after I directed the panel chair to close the session after a specific number of questions in order to stick to the tight schedule (we had to vacate the building, for which we had paid rental, cleaning and even ventilation fees, by a precise time) and ensure that the final panel would be given its fair share of time, another male panelist publicly challenged me, turning to the audience as he stated “I think we should just take as many questions as possible.” Instantly he positioned himself as democratic hero of the people/audience and me as dictatorial usurper of free speech within the context of a conference in which significant amounts of the audience indicated a desire to air their concerns and pose questions to the panels. It is interesting to me that although this was panel four of five, and the man in question could have taken an opportunity the previous night or the same morning to pose his objections to my organization and management of the conference in private, he had chosen instead to do it in a publicly problematic and dismissive way.

For me his disruption also signalled a common theme that emerged again and again over the course of the two days and five panels, the amount of effort that it takes, the determination, fortitude and energy to create change that transforms these problematic institutions and sites of

black exploitation and oppression. It can be isolating, draining, thankless work. As such it is interesting as regards the absence of other forums like ERNS to note how few people, despite all of their good intentions, actually take the lead to do the hard work and *produce* these forums for others to interact and exchange, as opposed to just showing up and speaking, a much easier task. It is disturbing to me that the vast majority of the folks who level the criticisms, are usually those who have not themselves done the leg work to build the networks and host the events at which others can congregate. To this end, and counter to this participant's call for endless questions, I stated, "we will all certainly adhere to *your* rules when you convene a conference at *your* university and invite us there to participate." I am still waiting for my invitation.

Much like the previous examples, the third example of black male dispute came on the morning of the second day. It was a reaction to a comment I had made after the Popular Culture panel at the end of the first night, in response to the issue of the limits of institutionalization. I had offered that the focus, from both audience and participants on two of the panelists as people who were positioned inside of dominant mainstream Canadian popular cultural institutions, was unjust in its elision of the problem of the limits of institutional possibility for these men. I compared their positions to my own as an untenured professor at McGill, a situation in which, a black junior, female faculty member might not feel fully able to make all of the changes and advance all of the causes that she wished to pre-tenure, as compared to post; the very real repercussions of losing one's job and livelihood, looming over one's decisions about strategic interventions.

To this statement one panelist, recalling my comment the next day, charged that "if you can't do anything now, you won't be able to do anything after you are tenured" and your scholarship, then co-opted by the institution, "will mean not a damn thing to the people that matter." This comment turned on several problematic assumptions, the first that there were only certain sure-fire modes of producing critical scholarship that "made a difference" and furthermore that all modes were equally susceptible to the racist scrutiny and censure of the white academic institution and therefore would have fallen into my category of more provocative, transgressive and dangerous practices (those most capable of costing you your job). Finally his comment assumed that the only black communities worth targeting were those located outside of academia or that the academic is somehow not a member of non-academic communities.

What was particularly problematic for me was the way in which the panelist's reading of my comment, which was to a large extent in defense

of several panelists who I had felt were unjustly isolated and made the targets of a certain type of strategic blame on the second panel, was actually a deliberate misreading. At the end of the session and before questions I spoke in defense of myself stating that my comment had obviously been part “tongue in cheek” and that regardless, I was “obviously someone who was” although untenured “already engaged in *the work* as seen in the creation of the very forum through which I had invited” all of them “to bad mouth my university which is paying my salary”.

That my research to this point had been precisely aimed at multiple audiences and communities, academic, museum, lay public etc. that *mattered* and had also included the organization of and contributions to conferences, speakers series, workshops and exhibitions, was either lost on, or unknown to this panelist. The actions, reactions and behaviours of these three black male panelists, to me, spoke to the residue of a black chauvinism, the sexual and gender politics of intra-black community building and the unwillingness to challenge the types of black masculinities that were dependant upon a marginalized black female presence. As for me and how it felt to be on the receiving end of those exchanges in the context of a year’s labour and struggle to welcome the participants and audiences (and within the broader context of an absence of such forums) I can say that it felt like a breach of trust, and a betrayal of my identity as a black woman. For two of the panelists, their attempts, through strong arm tactics, to take over the conference and to dictate the terms of engagement, demonstrated a desire to adhere to their specific needs and egos, regardless of the conditions of the organizational framework (of which they would have known nothing) or of the time slotted for their fellow participants.

The dispute from the non-black female participants actualized over the issue of the video recording of the proceedings. To be fair, I contacted the participants by e-mail rather late, mere days before the event, to notify them that they would be asked to sign a waiver allowing for their session to be videotaped for preservation in the university archive and for the proceedings to be broadcast in a live webcast. To be honest I had naively assumed that the response would be an overwhelming “of course”, especially given the rarity of such forums and their scarcity on a national scale and stage. To my dismay I received two strong dissenting messages, both from non-black female participants who challenged the recording on the basis of their unwillingness to go “on the record” within the context of sensitive political discussions. It was alarming to me, that as Walcott ably articulated in the e-mail exchange that ensued, that people who were

willing to sit up in public and talk about issues like institutional racism were not willing to go on the record about it in a permanent way; that people wanted to scrape out a private space for a much-needed public debate.

While one of the panelists assured me that their similar views with the other woman did not represent a conspiracy, I was intrigued (although also extremely flustered and exasperated, this being mere days before the actual event) that both of these non-black women who were to my mind, guests at a Black History Month event (invited because of their past displays of cross-racial solidarity and critical race practices) were willing to potentially disrupt part of an event which did not focus upon their own identity positions, in an effort to make a point about public and private utterances. I was also disturbed that they had, to my mind, obviously not factored in the importance of the filming of the event for black communities (inside and outside of McGill University), given the urgent need to leave traces of black scholarship and work in Canada, to build a legacy of the black presence and the future relevance of such recordings for research and teaching purposes. In the end, one panelist succumbed to the will of the majority and was taped with her fellow panelists, while the other dropped out of the event the night before, leaving me in a lurch; so much for sisterhood.<sup>11</sup>

## **Academic Infrastructures: Black Canadian Studies**

In contrast to the United States where African-American and Black Studies programs, departments and institutes have proliferated since the later half of the twentieth century,<sup>12</sup> there is a decided absence of Black or African-Canadian Studies programs in Canadian academia. This academic absence has a direct impact on when, where, how, and how much, black-focused Canadian scholarship can be delivered in Canadian universities. Rather than departments with designated staff, or programs that can provide degree requirements, Canada's paltry infrastructure of Black Canadian Studies usually takes the form of research centres or more insignificant or under-funded structures, many of which do not have stand-alone faculty or even access to significant knowledgeable faculty that they can borrow from elsewhere on campus on a regular basis. As such, while they have been exciting and impressive sites of academic conferences, public forums and even courses, they are not able to offer enough credits in a timely fashion to allow students the option of a degree specialization, a minor, major or honours degree in Black Canadian Studies.

According to Bobo, Hudley and Michel, in the American context,

“Black Studies, as a socially engaged field of scholarly inquiry, is the progeny of centuries of research that seeks to redress long-standing misconceptions of Black inferiority, African heritage, and cultural significance.”<sup>13</sup> But whereas Canada and Canadians share much of the same colonial histories and narratives, over an equally long time period, it is interesting to speculate on the absence of a similar tradition of black-specific programs of study and indeed, black-specific academic institutions here at home.<sup>14</sup> One obstacle has surely been the size of Canada itself. The geographical expanse of the nation is one that often prohibits national networking of the academic persuasion where much opportunity is tied to the restrictions of research and travel budgets. I have been to far too many regionally central “national” conferences based in Montreal, Toronto or Ottawa, where the lament is that “so and so would have/should have been here if only they had the means”.<sup>15</sup> The next factor is the way in which our historical and more contemporary national myths of race fabricate histories free of the violence and the exploitation of colonialism and how these disavowals promote the idea of a race-blind, multicultural Canada that needs no such thing as a Black Canadian Studies; since such a program, institute or department would surely be a site for the contestation of this very Eurocentric re-scripting of Canada’s colonial past. Thirdly, and perhaps most profoundly, the mounting of Black Canadian Studies across our nation would assuredly mean the employment of black Canadian professors, since it is we who are doing the scholarly and grassroots work in the relevant disciplines. But even a cursory glance at Canada’s university landscape will tell you clearly that Canadian universities and their dominant white, male, upper institutional administrative structures have no interest in and no proven commitment to the racial diversification of faculty in Canada.<sup>16</sup> Rather, blacks are amongst the most under-employed populations within academic Canada.<sup>17</sup>

But how do we then develop a critical mass in order to shift the tide and begin to agitate for the acknowledgement of our voices, stories, perspectives and histories within the academic institutions of our nation? For one thing, our battles cannot be wholly internal to academic institutions, which have a clever way of depoliticizing (through silencing and other forms of violence) the forces which would seek to question their authority. A grassroots movement is also necessary, one through which the social importance of this internal transformation is mapped. The battle for Black Studies in the USA had fundamental extra-academic goals for social justice embedded in the Civil Rights movements of the 1960’s. These profound strides, which constituted shifts in internal academic infrastructure were hard fought and the result of concentrated, political activism by black

students.<sup>18</sup>

In Canada, we have a similar history of political agitation for academic change. In January 1969, Sir George Williams University in Montreal, situated on what is now the downtown campus of Concordia University, saw the organized agitation of black students who united against the racist fixing of grades which saw black students deliberately marked down in their courses. Coming together in protest, the approximately four hundred students, fed up with the university's mishandling of their allegations, took over the computer lab on the ninth floor of the Henry Hall Building.<sup>19</sup> But unlike the USA where the initial agitation and activism resulted in a sweeping academic response which saw the building of a national infrastructure of Black Studies units across the country (over five hundred programs and departments between 1968 and 1975), no comparable national or even regional shift was introduced in Canada; and this despite the national media coverage that the protests commanded.

The other issue confronting Canadians within our existing programs is, what is their real material capacity for education in terms of professors, resources and curricular frameworks? In 2004 one hundred and forty of the four hundred Black Studies programs or departments in the USA offered undergraduate degrees, twenty-four M.A.'s and five Ph.D's.<sup>20</sup> Comparably, Canada has only a few Black or African-Canadian academic resources, none of which are constituted as departments with a significant level of designated, full-time faculty and zero degrees are offered.<sup>21</sup>

As in the USA, the shift towards the racial diversification of academic curriculum here at home, is an acknowledgement of the colonial histories of Canada and the ways in which normative knowledge is not at all objective and universal, but the product of mainly white male heterosexual professors whose investment in a specific and exclusive disciplinarity supports and sustains their individual and collective claims to be *the* purveyors of knowledge and truth within academia. Taken together the seemingly separate canons of Art History, Law, English, History, Philosophy, Medicine and Anthropology to name just a few, accrue, combining to create a white blanket of truth that cloaks all but the most savvy students' ability to see outside of and around the structures of its exclusive and privileged production.

These canons beget each other in the forms of classes devoted to specific texts, artists, styles, periods, cases, regions, objects and movements, frameworks that have historically and inevitably admitted black subjects only as objects of a white western gaze and investigation; the black as producer of history and knowledge, as agent of culture and politics, is only admitted as a token, as in the "special exception" week of class, the guest

lecture or, worse yet, the aside in the stream of the “real” lecture when the professor finally talks about the “others”; which is itself, the process and act of othering. When I advocate for a place within academia for a Black Canadian Studies, properly funded, properly distributed across Canada and capable, through proper hiring, funding and resources to provide full undergraduate and graduate degrees, it is with a knowledge that the diversification of teaching and learning demands that scholarship be accountable to various populations and reflect the lived diversity of the spaces that we occupy.<sup>22</sup> This advocacy in no way takes Canadian Studies off the hook for its endemic whiteness. Rather, the increased racial inclusivity of Canadian Studies and the creation of a serious Black Canadian Studies infrastructure must be seen as interconnected and necessary goals.

## **Theorizing Black Canada**

Twenty-first century Canada, as other parts of the west, is still in the grip of colonial racial ideologies, largely inherited from eighteenth and nineteenth-century human science discourses of race as a biological set of visual corporeal marks, traits and characteristics of bodies. And despite the many decolonization movements of the twentieth century, many Caribbean, Latin American and African nations are equally fixed to this imperial legacy. Although this anthology is not specifically about defining blackness, it does participate in fields of knowledge that accept blackness as a lived racial reality which has spawned a myriad of colonial disciplinary legacies (regardless of whether or not most scholars obviously dispute race as a biological category). The fact of the matter is, that for a person who is identified as black in Canada today, there are very real social, cultural, material and psychic repercussions (many, if not most, negative) that follow from that identification, whether the identification be internally or externally assigned. There are possibilities and limitations that the dominant white mainstream societies seek to attach to black bodies which we may or may not be able to wholly avoid, ignore or contest.

Part of the fight involves the fact that blacks have not only been represented for centuries from the outside, mainly by white people invested consciously or unconsciously in blackness as marginal, abject and “other” to their idealized whiteness, but also that they have been forced to consume these images and ideas, unavoidable due to their sheer pervasiveness in the western cultural imagination. And as consumers of these wholly compromised and often grotesque images of themselves,

have become damaged by them - as too have whites and other consumers. Blacks in Canada have been taught to see themselves through these limited colonial stereotypes and as such have difficulty, as with any marginalized group, in thinking themselves outside of this stereotypical archive. Blackness then as a racial identification or position within the diaspora and within the Canadian nation state must be addressed at multiple levels - as bodily marks, as cultural imagination, as social practice and as psychic or material experience.

For myself, my location as a Canadian born, black female of Jamaican descent, has come with a sense of double dislocation and multiple potential belongings which often have nothing to do with the geographical place name on my birth certificate, Toronto. As someone who has not yet been to Africa and as someone who was not raised in Jamaica, growing up in a two-parent Jamaican family in the extremely white suburban town of Whitby (40 minutes west by highway 401 to the biggest city in the country, Toronto), I lived with a sense of my own racial absence which I was only able to articulate much later in life. This absence came from living in a town and going to schools in which very few black, Native or people of colour students or teachers were ever present. That I felt my racial dislocation so keenly, despite profound parental engagement in my life and in the political arguments and discourses of the Caribbean and other forms of diasporic blackness, is a telling sign of the power of race and racism in Canadian societies.

My Jamaican culture was a product of my home life transmitted through my mother and father and interaction with extended family and community; mom's ackee and salt fish weekend breakfasts, dad's reggae-matic Saturday nights, the impromptu domino gatherings amongst my dad and his male friends, the Englishes ("Canadian", patois and in-between) that my family spoke and basement dance parties equipped with DJs (whichever "uncle" had a set of turntables and a second job as a selector at that stage). My first trip to Jamaica in my late teens was a revelation. The people, climate, food and music all felt like home, yet in many obvious ways, I was not from there and did not wholly speak like, walk like or behave like those born in the island nation; I was identified as *from abroad*. This trip made me realize that my life existed in some strange way, between the spaces of Canada and Jamaica and that I had been combining my two heritages, in a myriad of unspoken and unquestioned ways for years before this initial journey. This experience would, years later, lead to a liberation from place as a dominant means through which I define myself and my trajectories in life.

But this challenge of reconciling blackness with rootedness or a sense

of place has been a problem taken up by generations of black intellectuals from DuBois to Gilroy. W.E.B. DuBois coined the problem as one of double consciousness, the problem of being at once a Negro and an American in a racist nation state which denied black Americans the right to full citizenship.<sup>23</sup> We could just as easily transpose DuBois's framework onto Canada, back then and now, to ask, as many of the panelists at the ERNS conference did, what were and are the possibilities of being both black and Canadian?

But lest we get lazy and believe that this discussion is no longer relevant in our twenty-first-century world, I will share a story which highlights its continuing urgency. During a recent trip to Vancouver in May 2009 for a Black Canadian Studies workshop, I was travelling by sea bus from North Vancouver with a group of six thirty-something, highly educated black males when we were approached by an older white male employee. In a kindly inquisitive manner he asked us if we were the Jamaican migrant workers who he had recently seen on television. While I am fully aware of the fact that the sight of seven black people together in Vancouver, or British Columbia for that matter, is somewhat of a spectacle, what both perplexed and disturbed me is why this man could not imagine us to be Canadians like himself. We all looked at each other with secret smiles and a dose of fatigue. After two days in a Black Canadian Studies conference where several people had lamented the issue of race and belonging for blacks in Canada which usually actualized in the dreaded question "where are you from?", here we all were faced with a living example of our continuing displacement from the idealized body of the citizen.

One of my companions eventually spoke up, pointing to us individually and announcing our homes; Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver etc. What we didn't bother to say was that we were all highly educated professionals, four professors, a PhD candidate and librarian, another PhD candidate and a documentary filmmaker and cultural worker. The intersection of race and class was also assuredly at play in this exchange.

Years after DuBois, Paul Gilroy proposed another model, that of the Black Atlantic, through which black histories, cultures and societies could be explored, freed from the imperial logic of the nation as the only geographic model for cultural analysis. At the heart of Gilroy's model was an unhinging of bodies from their historical land-locked narratives, narratives that denied the relevance of trajectories, mobilities and movement in the formation of the Black Diaspora.<sup>24</sup>

As Robin D. G. Kelley has argued,

"The concept of the African diaspora, for all of its limitations, is

fundamental to the development of the 'Atlantic' as a unit of analysis (which, we should recognize, is not new but a product of imperial history). Indeed, we might just as easily talk about a 'Black Mediterranean' that is far more important in the Francophone and Italian worlds than in Britain."<sup>25</sup>

Kelley's insight extends also to the Indian Ocean, where much recent critical research has been produced.<sup>26</sup> In terms of a conceptualization of a blackness which is spatially located and yet mobile, we need to consider how individual and group histories contain departures and arrivals, as well as trajectories between nations and regions. This type of blackness draws on the strengths, cultural, linguistic and political of the diaspora and does not see itself as locked into dialogue with one land, one economy, one culture, or one political unit. For as Walcott has argued, "The terms of belonging within a context of diaspora sensibilities are fluid; they continually make and remake themselves within the contexts of specific nations."<sup>27</sup>

Because diaspora is defined both by geographies and the occupation of places and mobilities or forced trajectories between Africa and the colonized sites of European empire building, it allows for a discussion of Canadian blackness as located and locatable within the territory (material) and space (psychic) of nation, but it also allows for attention to the elsewhere, the external locations from whence we came and return to and the ways in which we transport these other places through cultural, social, political and psychic transmissions. Consider for instance, that many black Canadians are in a sense *doubly diasporized*, having their ethnic or cultural origins (in terms of birth or ancestral cultures) in other nations, but also as Canadians, sharing an experience of the heterogeneity of black Canada; in this sense many of us have occupied at least two former sites of empire. For example, many black Canadians of Caribbean ancestry have occupied both Caribbean and Canadian spaces and it is interesting to ask how our experiences of multiply-placed diasporic lives have been and are different from those black diasporics who claim longer histories of singular removal (i.e. African-Canadians or African-Americans) or from those blacks whose secondary trajectories of a more liberated mobility (as opposed to the forced migrations of slavery) ended in the seats of empire (like some black immigrants to Britain). Does the *double diaspora effect*, if you will, of many black Canadians create a further displacement from national narratives or further liberation from the burdens of national forms of naming and belonging? Does it provide greater obstacles to citizenship? Does it unbind us from nationally-defined identification? Does it result in a greater heterogeneity of cultural expression? Or does it created a two-

tiered longing for lost homelands?

But there is also the question of blackness and social justice, as in how this manifests in terms of issues of belonging or expulsion from national narratives and geographies and how blacks are often forced to occupy the margins. Is there a potential in black diaspora politics and naming that allows for a destabilization of the white Euro-Canadian centre and its hold on language, knowledge production and naming? As Walcott has argued,

“Diaspora sensibilities use the nation to make ethical claims and demands for social justice. Diaspora sensibilities speak to nations’ limitations and demand nations be remade in a constant and restless ethical search for home.”<sup>28</sup>

In this regard diaspora can transcend and cannot fully be contained by the mere geographically-bounded and limited state of nationhood. Since the diaspora is fundamentally transnational, the black diaspora and the Trans Atlantic (Trans Indian, Trans Pacific etc.) model together may offer blacks a strategy for the negotiation of the racial limits of the nation state.

## **What is this Moment?: Contemporary Visibilities and Invisibilities**

So what is this moment for black Canadians? Where are we now and where are we headed? How far have we come and how far do we have yet to go? And how will we measure our success? These questions all assume an underlying focus on issues of social justice, inclusion and belonging, of our shared desires for full access, unlimited possibilities and unrestricted potential within the Canadian nation state. This moment in many ways is one of hope for many black Canadians. Our hope is represented in Lawrence Hill’s 2007 Roger’s Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize and 2008 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize (Canada and Caribbean Region) wins for his *Book of Negroes*, in Austin Clarke’s 2002 Giller Prize win for *The Polished Hoe* and in the election and appointment of Quebec’s first black female MNA and Minister of Immigration and Cultural Communities, Yolande James in 2004 and 2007 respectively.<sup>29</sup> Our hope is represented in the appointment of our nation’s first black governor general, Michaëlle Jean in 2005,<sup>30</sup> and in the election, south of the border, of the first black (and person of colour) President, Barack Obama in the United States of America who the governor general met, in the course of Obama’s official state visit to Canada, on 19 February 2009 in Ottawa. This hope is embedded in the potent visual symbolism of what would have seemed up