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# Caribbean Pop Culture in Canada; Or, the Impossibility of Belonging to the Nation

Rinaldo Walcott

Deborah Cox, one of the current divas of rhythm and blues music, is a black Canadian. Such a statement about Cox is clearly not transparent in that it does not say much about her or Canada. Cox, whose parents are from Guyana, grew up in Canada listening to various African American musics played at home. Cox spent her formative years working the Toronto music scene and eventually had to give up on Canada to secure the kind of pop culture stardom that she currently enjoys. She was recently featured on one of Canada's leading news magazines, *Macleans*, as "Canada's Queen of R&B".<sup>1</sup> Cox is also featured as a model for one of Canada's leading clothing companies, Roots Canada, and numerous entertainment shows have done televisual and radio segments on her career. The dynamics of Cox's move to the United States are deeply implicated in her newfound fame at home in Canada. This belonging to Canada and not, lodged between Guyana and the United States, is a symptomatic condition of Canadian blackness. As a symbol, Cox represents the networks of black

1 Susan Oh, *Macleans* 112, no. 19, 19 July 1999, 38–40.

diasporic realities, desires and the circulation of “black” artefacts, which constitute a connective web of diasporic identifications, hopes, disappointments and desires. But Cox’s success in the United States might be understood in relation to some important tensions concerning Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada and the question of belonging to the nation.<sup>2</sup> In effect, her success raises difficult questions concerning the slippery language of popular culture and national belonging when questions of blackness enter the conversation. These questions become even more pointed when the terrain of popular culture is explored.

In “What Is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” Stuart Hall cautions against the installation of a singular notion of black popular culture. Hall writes: “By definition, black popular culture is a contradictory space. It is a site of strategic contestation.”<sup>3</sup> Hall’s comments are apt for popular culture in Canada for many reasons. I will only note a few here. The contradiction that Caribbean equals black in Canada; that black popular culture in Canada is mainly a copy or version of African American popular culture; and, finally, that Canada as a nation does not have a “native” popular culture are only some of the most obvious reasons why “popular culture is a contradictory space” in Canada. Because of the above contradictions, in the Canadian context popular culture and what it signifies always remain a site of “strategic contestation”. I offer here a reading of popular culture in Canada, referencing its Caribbean/black genealogy, but I could as well offer a reading which references its African American trace. But, as we shall see, to offer a reading that is exclusive to either trace is a problem that refuses to go away without asserting the inherent contradictions. In fact, Hall’s insights are a useful caution once more. He writes that

in black popular culture, strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms at all. Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagements across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of

2 In this article I move back and forth between the terms “black popular culture” and “Caribbean popular culture”. While I am fully aware of the multicultural nature of the Caribbean region in Canada as I suggest later in this essay black and Caribbean collapse into each other. While I am not supporting this conceptual problem, I will nonetheless shift back and forth to highlight what I believe to be a major tension in thinking about how black/Caribbean people can belong to Canada. In this instance the naming here is not in accord with the nation state’s collapse of black/Caribbean but rather with my attempt to further unsettle exactly who the subject of black/Caribbean Canadian citizenry might be.

3 D. Morley and K. Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), 470.

recoding and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying. Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base.<sup>4</sup>

His comments speak accurately to Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada, and I attempt to demonstrate the pleasurable impurity of Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada below.

**Rinaldo  
Walcott**

To think Caribbean popular culture in Canada is to think the simultaneity of the conceptual terrain and the problematics of the discourse of heritage and the discourse of the popular. It is often claimed that Canada does not have a popular culture.<sup>5</sup> While the view of a non-existent popular culture in Canada has been recently contested in the anthology *Pop Can* and in the earlier *Mondo Canuck*, such contestations are recent to discussions of popular culture in Canada.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, given the scepticism which accords Canadian popular culture generally, we must be mindful of what exactly is meant by Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada and the problem of such a category. However, I want to make a radical proposal and suggest that Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada can be and is only produced by those first- and second-generation descendants of the pre- and post-independent Caribbean migrations to Canada. In fact, this is why Deborah Cox can emerge as a diaspora musical figure not unlike the numerous black British forerunners of the 1980s, such as Soul II Soul or Maxi Priest. These post-1960s children of migrants have begun to articulate a belonging to Canada that allows for a cultural expressivity that is both uniquely theirs and simultaneously in conversation with a wide array of cultural expressivity of the black diaspora. Therefore, Caribbean popular culture in Canada is lodged between the continuing relations of Canadian proximity to the United States and, simultaneously, an imagined and real relation to the region of the Caribbean constituted through and via the memories, histories and desires of largely post-independent Caribbean migrants and their first- and second-generation offspring. The tension here is that the Caribbean in Canada can be as easily accessed through

4 Ibid., 471.

5 See D.H. Flaherty and F.E. Manning, eds., *The Beaver Bites Back: American Popular Culture in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

6 L. van Luven and P. Walton, eds., *Pop Can: Popular Culture in Canada* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall, Allyn and Bacon Canada, 1999); G. Pevere and G. Dymond, eds., *Mondo Canuck: A Canadian Pop Culture Odyssey* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice Hall, 1996).

New York or Miami as it is directly from the region via Trinidad, Jamaica or Barbados, to name a few. So then, any useful discussion of Caribbean popular culture in Canada is fixed between the transmigration of cultural artefacts, practices and peoples throughout the United States, Britain and the Anglo-Caribbean region (although in Quebec the French Caribbean is of particular import) and other outposts of Caribbean circulation, recirculation and production. Therefore, to think Caribbean/black popular culture in postcolonial Canada is to think what David Scott recently called the problem-space of postcoloniality.<sup>7</sup> By this he means to signal not a tangible materiality as such but, rather, the much more malleable and crucially central problem of the discursive utterances that impact both materiality and, importantly, the arena of politics. In Canada multicultural and heritage discourses and their effects shape this problem-space. In the Canadian context, the unravelling of popular cultural politics has a profound impact for the unravelling of the politics of nation building and citizenship. Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada most readily speaks to and is inflected by this politics of nation building and citizenship.

In the Canadian context, the circulation of Caribbean and African American popular culture is almost inevitably remodelled along local concerns and contexts, but it still always leads somewhere else. This “elsewhereness” is conditioned by both an imagined diaspora collective history and the demand of the nation state for black people to belong elsewhere as well. In effect, I will be suggesting that Caribbean popular culture in Canada has to be read for its excess as much as it has to be read for its local inflections. Whether we are speaking of rap, calypso, reggae, dancehall, carnival, films or theatre (in particular Jamaican comedy), popular cultural forms are remade in Canada to fit the local and nationally local context. This article investigates the side of black popular culture in Canada that makes reference to, cites and utters a Caribbean genealogy and then something more. I suggest that Canadian nation-state policy, in particular official multiculturalism and its heritage discourse, informs how Caribbean/black popular culture is produced, circulated and utters its genealogies of relation within and against the nation. Moving away from the politics of Caribbean/black representation in the Canadian contexts in terms of the inclusion/exclusion debate, I instead look to the relations of representation that allow for reading for the ways in which diasporic sensibilities might be etched into the politics of Caribbean/black Canadian popular cultural production. I want to suggest

7 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

that Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada might be generously read as situated between the difficult dynamics of nation-state regulation, discipline and governmentality and, at the same time, a diasporic deterritorialized desire.

I am asserting that Caribbean/black popular cultural works in Canada are crucially engaged in a politic of how to belong to the nation-state as not-quite-citizens and, simultaneously, how to desire beyond the too rigid confines of nation-state governmentality – a governmentality reflected in official versions of multiculturalism that attempt to produce a linear discourse of heritage, which always leads to outside the nation's borders for its Caribbean/black citizens. When the narratives of the nation state lead one outside the borders of the nation, the tensions of belonging, of not-being-quite-citizen, are significantly different from when a diasporic sensibility produces an elsewhere. This article is centrally concerned with this question of diasporic consciousness and sensibilities. The heritage discourse of the nation-state, which is steeped in static, transparent discourses of cultural artefact, is simultaneously relevant to my argument and to why folks choose an elsewhere as well. That other elsewhere is conditioned by a partial refusal of nation-state ethnic governmentality.

Popular cultural identifications and practices can be political and often are conscious and unconscious political practices. It is in the realm of the political that a Caribbean/black popular culture might be said to exist in Canada. I am not trying to make a case for popular culture as inherently political; rather, I am speaking to particular choices that verge towards a possible politics. Such a claim nonetheless has to be understood in light of the impossibility of Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada. But because Caribbean/black popular culture in Canada is impossible, its possibility announces itself in the realm of the political: the Caribbean as an imagined space is utilized and mobilized in the service of a wide array of discursive moves constituted in the service of the politics of belonging to Canada. This politics is no doubt a confrontational politics. For Caribbean/black migrants and their descendants, the problem of belonging to Canada is a significant and confrontational one.

## DISCOURSE OF HERITAGE

In Canada the discourse of heritage is central to how those who are not the founding peoples of the nation mark their belonging to the nation. This discourse of heritage, which is under-theorized in critiques of Canadian multiculturalism, functions as one

of the most important points of governmentality of Canadian national identities. The politics of naming, in a very specific way, is central to the governmentality of heritage as it frames exactly how one officially belongs to the nation. This belonging is central to the im/possibility of Caribbean popular culture in Canada. Blackness in Canada is largely imagined as black Caribbean and therefore belies longer black histories in Canada. Caribbean in Canada then, is really a pseudonym for blackness. The trope of the Caribbean in Canada denies many of the complexities of Caribbeanness and therefore belies complex understandings of the place. The debate concerning Caribana is a good example of this tension.

In the Canadian context, some forces would have us believe that carnival is a purely African-derived form, “creolized” but still the property of people of African descent. I would shift the emphasis in such an argument to argue for Caribana as a continuing creole form conditioned by everyday life in Canada, the complex historical past of the multicultural Caribbean and Canadian governmental incursions. In this sense, while the festival has a strong Caribbean trace – “a Black and East Indian or South Asian trace” – it is uniquely Canadian. Its relation to Canadian multicultural discourses of heritage is undeniable and thus makes it a product of Canadian sensibility. Caribana is, in fact, a good example of how blackness becomes Canadianized, all the while pointing outside the national boundaries – a diaspora cultural expression. Caribana was initially a gift to Canada by its Caribbean migrants, those who are the parents of the second generation who are articulating a different kind of belonging. The gift of Caribana is a doubled gift: as it brings Caribbean culture to Canada, it simultaneously positions the Caribbean as outside Canada. This position of outside means that, ultimately, an understanding of the Canadian nation exists where blackness is not possible as a constituent element.<sup>8</sup>

Canadian rapper Maestro offers an interesting way of reading Canada. He asserts that Canada often represents itself like “Certs widout the retsin” – in translation, the “coloured” core is always missing. The long and now broken silence in St Armand, Quebec, concerning the slave cemetery almost ploughed over, which the locals call “nigger rock”; the destruction of Africville in Nova Scotia; the demolition of Hogan’s

8 See, for example, A. Gallauger, “Constructing Caribbean Culture in Toronto: The Representation of Caribana”, in *The Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada, In the Hood*, ed. A. Ruprecht and C. Taiana (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995); C. Foster and C. Schwarz, *Caribana, the Greatest Celebration* (Toronto: Ballantine, 1995); M. Nourbese Philip, “African Roots and Continuities: Race, Space and the Poetics of Moving”, in *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 1997); R. Espinet, “Caribana: A Diasporic Dub”, *Fuse Magazine*, 122, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 18–25.

Alley in Vancouver in the 1960s;<sup>9</sup> in Ontario, the changing of the name of Negro Creek Road to Moggie Road in 1996 all suggest a wilful attempt to make a black presence absent. These moments are complex ones because they occasion what we might term the “absented presence”<sup>10</sup> of black evidences in Canada. I am interested in the “speculative relations” of these moments because they allow us to understand the nation and how we therefore understand the “national” discourse of “two founding peoples” and the role of official multiculturalism. I am interested in attending to the space between the official discourse of multiculturalism and its popular or common-sense utterances. While scholars have been careful to point out that official multiculturalism is different from popular understandings of it, I believe that both official and popular forms leak into each other and rely upon each other for their constitution. When members of Parliament agitate against funding multiculturalism, their argument often has very little to do with the inadequacies of official multiculturalism and more to do with an appeal to popular interpretations of multiculturalism, often read as immigrant services. A certain discursive formation is made between the two versions. Since black people are imagined as always from elsewhere, they are implicated in the fictional financial costs of multiculturalism.

Furthermore, I want to make apparent the ambivalence of black citizenship that state-sponsored multicultural policy constructs for black people in the nation. Official multiculturalism both inaugurates the demolition of black evidences, such as the ones above, and simultaneously allows for imagining blackness in Canada as a recent phenomenon. The discourse of heritage is crucial to such a project. The Multiculturalism Act states that “multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity”. But embedded in the act is a “double move” whereby the Official Languages Act works to place outside the Multiculturalism Act English and French Canada. Thus the heritage of English and French Canada begins and ends in Canada. The “double moves” of multicultural discourse and policy has much to do with how we understand the intersecting discourses of history, origins, descent, ancestors and genealogy. Thus multiculturalism in Canada speaks to an attempt to make the “origins” of the nation pure, even if only for a fleeting fictive moment, since “the contingency of

9 Peter Hudson, “Disappearing Histories of the Black Pacific: Contemporary Black Art in Vancouver”, *Mix Magazine* 22, no. 3 (Winter 1996–97): 48–51.

10 Jimmie Durham, “Cowboys And . . .”, *Third Text*, no. 12 (Autumn 1990): 5–20.



origins” is always revealed.<sup>11</sup> In a sense, then, part of the double move is to always acknowledge the contaminants within but in proscribed ways. The idea of multiculturalism as caught up in a discourse of origins is not original, for the discourse of heritage is a discourse of origins. Yet, I want to focus not on the origins of the invention of the Other in multicultural discourse but, rather, on the concealments of multicultural discourse. For black peoples, those concealments violently cover over a much longer history of relation to the nation. As Toni Morrison puts it in another context, “the silence became an unbearable violence” when blackness is considered in “national origins” as a concealment.<sup>12</sup> A concealment, however, that is always a disruptive return.

What follows, then, questions the twin discourses of origins and heritage in multiculturalism. The restrictive borders of the modern nation state remain an impediment to individual and collective desires. In terms of black people, diasporic discourses remain an important avenue for making sense of the self beyond the confines of the nation. To make the link between the destruction of black evidences that call into question the idea of “two founding peoples” and to read that evidence as “the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity” of blackness in Canada, strikes at the heart of multicultural discourse.<sup>13</sup> For there exist in Canada at least three different black configurations of potential belonging: a long black presence dating back to the founding of the colony; a discontinuous and continuous Caribbean presence since the early 1800s; and recent continental African migrations. We are faced with the question: What “origins” are concealed by the discourse and policies of multiculturalism? The absented presence of Native Canadians becomes starkly evident. For my purposes, I want to focus on the absented presence of black Canadians. The official stories of the Canadian nation leave glaring absences, which call attention to the mess of making the nation. Both Native and black absented presences loom large in the nationalist handbook, George Grant’s *Lament for a Nation*.<sup>14</sup> While the obvious Other in Grant’s thesis is the United States, his insistence on marking out and staking out “[t]he two original peoples” is an incitement for thinking otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

11 Gayatri Spivak, “Scattered Speculations on the Question of Culture Studies”, in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 261.

12 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 22–23.

13 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1989), 4.

14 George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995).

15 *Ibid.*, 40.

In *Lament*, Grant articulates a historical continuity of the Canadian nation which makes it different from the United States, and to do that he must make Canada homogenous and pure. Given such, sadness and anger constitute his argument concerning the loss of Canada to continentalism. Any notion of diaspora is therefore immediately a problem for Grantian discourses. Delineating the “origins” of the nation is crucial to Grant’s argument and all contaminants are removed so that the purity of the Canadian spirit and mind is made evident and different from that of the United States. Locked in a contentious binarism, Grant is unable to address the messy elements of Canadian nationalism and can only seek to rescue the nation from a US-dominated continentalism. Grant is useful for thinking about multiculturalism in Canada because his work seems to best exemplify how the fictitious “origins” of nations work to make invisible large numbers of its not-quite-citizens. This work of making the nation pure is only possible by tracing its genealogy backward to a clearly defined origin. But as Spivak informs us “Euroamerican origins and foundations are also secured by the places where an ‘origin’ is violently instituted”.<sup>16</sup> In the case of Canada, and in fact all settler colonies, the work of constructing ancestry is always fraught with the denial of a much more messy history. Multiculturalism as nation-state narrative organizes a relation to belonging where belonging becomes an ethnic static performance so that “some remain outside [its] constantive/performative ruse”, as Spivak puts it.<sup>17</sup> That is, English and French Canada continue to change while others fictitiously remain the same. For such to occur, the nation must be constituted through what Elizabeth Young-Bruehl would call “the anatomy of prejudices”.<sup>18</sup>

In Canada’s case, multiculturalism organizes at least one way in which the anatomy of prejudices is legitimated. In particular, the evidences that come to represent one’s place in the nation are constituted through a particular narrative of history. The use of the document or legislation for imagining others in the nation is central to the multicultural discursive formation. The documentary effects of multiculturalism, embedded in national legislation, are, as Michel Foucault states, the “collective consciousness that made use of material documents to refresh its memory”.<sup>19</sup> In Canada this produces an origin of the nation that is predicated upon the duality that Grant identifies as “French and Catholic, British and Protestant,

16 Spivak, “Scattered Speculations”, 262.

17 Ibid., 267.

18 Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *The Anatomy of Prejudices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

19 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 7.

united precariously in their desire not to be a part of the great Republic; but their reasons were quite different”.<sup>20</sup> In that one textual strategy, Grant grounds the national formation within the discourse of “two founding peoples”. The multicultural policy and act support and legislate such a dual position of the founding of the colony and nation. For example, Robert L. Stanfield, leader of the Opposition at the time of the reading of the Multicultural Policy, which preceded the act of 1988, replied to Trudeau’s announcement by stating that “the emphasis we have given multiculturalism in no way constitutes an attack on the basic duality of our country”. This fiction of the nation means that a kind of “interpretive decipherment”<sup>21</sup> is necessary to question the documentation of the nation. All the material and discursive practices congeal around the repetition of a particular “origin” that cannot admit to Others. It is thus the work of the Multiculturalism Act and, in the case of Native peoples, the Indian Act, through which the Others are made adjunct to the nation as not-quite-citizens. Such a designation is dependent upon a “migrant ethnicity”<sup>22</sup> where “national” belonging is paradoxically placed outside the nation – that is the function of official multicultural policy.

The centrality of “origins” to multicultural discourse and to the double moves of “national” belonging is couched in the discourse of heritage. The seductive discourse of heritage sets up the criteria for thinking genealogy, for thinking ancestry and for mapping a relation to the nation which leads some of us outside of it. The discourse of heritage suggest the possibility of an “origin of identity” and with it a community. In order to achieve our belonging, our “origins” must be exposed, their transparency made apparent and evident. Multiculturalism as document must be deciphered as a project, which reinstates the status quo ruling order of governance. Black popular culture plays with this doubleness to secure a number of tenuous relations beyond the reach of the nation.

The reliance of multiculturalism on a recourse to our “heritable” differences is an attempt to make us all the same by making us different. Clearly, these moments do not reference a recent “migrant ethnicity”. Thus, when the act states that “the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance . . .” their culture is protected, another double move of the policy is revealed. Which cultures are preserved? And how is “preserved” to be understood in light of Negro Creek Road, the aftermath of

20 Grant, *Lament for a Nation*, 40.

21 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 11.

22 Spivak, “Scattered Speculations”, 273.

Africville, Hogans Alley and the current debate around “nigger rock”? Black popular culture circumvents the official notion of preservation discourses and practices by cutting and pasting, citing and referencing multiple points of “origin”.

Culture is not something that can be preserved or conserved. Multiculturalism offers two kinds of positions: reverence and conservation/preservation of culture. Such positions are deeply implicated in identity politics. Sacred temples of culture are fabricated and used to conceal our various “cross-cultural resonance”.<sup>23</sup> Us/Them positions are articulated, and imagined communities attempt to make pure and uncontaminated their “heritable traits”. Yet cross-cultural resonances continually return to question how we deploy origins and heritage as foundations for identity claims. Black popular culture in Canada best reveals this problem of conservation and preservation though its multiple and shifting reference points filtered through national-local inflections.

## THE PROBLEM OF BELONGING

Central to the problem of heritage is therefore the problem of belonging. Belonging is about how we live in the present and about how we make our presence felt in a time or moment that can never be synchronous. Belonging is therefore about time and temporality. But belonging can and is often only understood belatedly, especially belonging to nation-state spaces. Belonging, then, is really just an afterthought, sutured into narratives of blood, land, tribe and more multifarious discourses such as generations and citizenship. Belonging is a taken for granted strategy of modern nation states, intended to foreclose crucial and critical questions concerning national and state arrangements. Belonging is therefore a site for the contestation of the ethical reordering of the nation state, especially in instances where official multicultural policies must attempt to cover over the mess of history.

Consequently, belonging is also for black diaspora people (and other diasporas as well) a project of ethical political positionality within nations. Following Homi Bhabha we might understand belonging, especially as it is related to the nation states of North America, as “the historically and temporally disjunct positions that minorities

23 Wilson Harris, “In the Name of Liberty”, *Third Text*, no. 11 (Summer 1990): 7–15.

occupy ambivalently within nation's space".<sup>24</sup> Bhabha is concerned here with the manner in which the nation states that emerged in the post-Columbus voyages positioned "racial minorities" on the margins of the national polity and eventually had to find ways to better accommodate them in the postcolonial era. Official multiculturalism is an outgrowth of this accommodation.

The postcolonial period has brought with it the break up of any monolithic notion of the "racial minority", and it is in part a crisis of heterogeneity that the postcolonial nation states of both the North and the South must contend with. Therefore, the "disjunct positions" of which Bhabha writes are the antagonisms of history, genealogy, different political positions and expressions and a host of other conditions that produce the fissures that make blackness heterogeneous. This heterogeneity is often elided by nation-state practices, but sometimes the nation state asserts heterogeneity in fleeting moments of crisis when heterogeneity might be useful to stall or abort any attempt to rearrange national concerns. The contradiction of (post)modern national arrangements is the state's ability to recoup both heterogeneity and its opposite in ways that seek to reaffirm long-held practices of exclusion and marginalization. In fact, state policies such as multiculturalism and immigration policies skilfully move between discourses of heterogeneity and monolithic notions of otherness to assert various forms of coercive state power.

In the North American context, one of the most coercive forms of state power are the rules upon which citizenship is based. This is especially so for racial, sexual and gendered minorities. In the specific case of racialized minorities, their not-quite-citizenship places them in a situation that either forces acquiescence to state power or resistance to it. How that resistance or acquiescence is framed and understood is always up for "interpretative decipherment". However, in the moment of postcoloniality the continuous return of the ex-colonials to the colonial motherlands, or their satellite colonies such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia, has been so unceasing that the not-quite-citizens have been framed in very limited and narrow ways within the (post)modern and postcolonial nation states of what is heuristically called the North. The central framing of this moment for those who Ato Sekyi-Otu terms "the diaspora of the cosmopolis"<sup>25</sup> has been through the language and discourse of immigration and its attendant pathologies of dislocation and alienation.

24 Homi Bhabha, "Liberalism and Minority Culture: Reflection on 'Culture's in Between'", in *Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity*, ed. D. Bennett (London: Routledge, 1998), 33.

25 Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 11.

The mapping of the immigrant experience in Canada has been largely done through the lens of the social sciences. In the case of black peoples it has been overwhelmingly sociological and anthropological.<sup>26</sup> My attempt is to modestly shift the field to questions of discursivity, textuality and the politics and relations of representations.

**Rinaldo  
Walcott**

## WHY POP CULTURE?

I turn to popular culture for thinking about black Canadian identities because it is at the level of the popular that the everyday is sometimes much more easily grasped. In the case of black popular culture in Canada the process of creolization is also much more visible and tangible. One recent image of the Dream Warriors, “two men of African descent and one of South Asian”, immediately complicates and makes much more complex black pop culture in North America. The Dream Warriors symbolically represent Caribbean/black complexity and thus disrupt national-local fictions of Caribbeanness/blackness in North America.

In this sense, black popular culture is a site for probing a range of black ethnicities, but it can also be a site for probing modes of femininity and masculinity, sexual politics, class relations and a host of other social, cultural and political positions. Popular culture analysis in this instance is the ground floor of black Canadian culture as articulated by a significant component of black Canadians who are attempting to express their belonging to the nation and something more in a rather self-assured manner. At this time the black popular cultural scene in Canada is a fertile ground for assessing and analysing the makings of a new and renewed black belonging to Canada.

I am not merely interested in the social science of migration, which charts immigrants and their ethnographic experiences as the source of belonging or not belonging. I am interested in the fissures that produce complex black positionalities and intra-black creole identities, as well as identifications, which are and often cannot be accounted for in the socio-logic of immigrant dislocation and alienation. Belonging is fundamentally about politics and its multifarious identifications – that is, ideas and

26 Anthropologists and sociologists such as Francis Henry, Agnes Calliste, George Dei, Carl James and Patrick Solomon have all done projects that pinpoint the ways in which racism impacts the lives of black Canadians. However, the entire configuration of ethnic studies and immigration studies contributes to this perception. Despite my critique of socio-logic, these are important projects. What is troubling is that socio-logic tends to find itself replayed in all manner of cultural analyses when it is sometimes quite inappropriate. Black life in Canada has mainly found itself in the academy through the lens of social sciences, but this is quickly beginning to change.

what those ideas say and mean for the present, past and present-future. These are political positions that animate how one belongs and also inform cultural concerns, questions and cultural reading practices and strategies, and, ultimately, ethnicity. These positions inform the different versions of black ethnicities. At stake here, then, is a kind of belonging that requires that we understand the political beyond the narrow confines of immigrant socio-logic construed through the politics of entrance and admittance.

One way of getting beyond the limitation of the immigrant narrative of sameness, displacement, alienation and its resulting “mistaken identities” of who the black Canadian is, is to take the route of thinking in terms of black ethnicities.<sup>27</sup> To do so, I would like to visit an article written by Stuart Hall in 1989 for a conference on black British cinema. Hall puts out a radical call concerning the “relations of representation”, which are different from but not unrelated to “[t]he struggle to come into representation”.<sup>28</sup> I would suggest that the struggle to come into representation for black Canadians is at this time not the most important source of contestation, since representation is happening at an unprecedented pace. However, I am not suggesting that adequate representation has occurred. Hall’s argument is attractive because he makes claims that are currently applicable to the black Canadian moment. The first is that “the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject” has arrived,<sup>29</sup> and, second, given the arrival of this moment, it is time that “[t]he new politics of representation . . . set in motion an ideological contestation around the term ethnicity”.<sup>30</sup> This ideological contestation around ethnicity has much to offer black Canadian studies and Canadian studies more generally.

Hall cautions us that we cannot allow “ethnicity” to remain an uncontested term of the colonizer, used to mark Others and deployed as an unmarked ethnicity for the colonizer in the service of the colonizer’s uncontested assertion of a natural, national belonging. In this regard, Hall reminds us that under Thatcherism, “Englishness” came to mark a particular kind of ethnicity for which there was no room for blackness; Englishness marked an ethno-nationalism. I would argue that in the midst of a weak

27 See Abigail Solomon-Godeau, “Mistaken Identities”, *Mistaken Identities Catalogue* (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, University of California, 1993). What is at issue here is when identities do not turn out to be what we assume them to be. The mistake is the assumption that we can know in advance particular identities.

28 Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities”, in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. D. Morley and K. Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 442. Originally published in *ICA Documents 7*, edited by Kobena Mercer.

29 *Ibid.*, 433.

30 *Ibid.*, 446.

Mulroneyism, official multiculturalism (and we must remember that it became an act and moved from a policy under the Mulroney regime in his party's appeal to secure a minority vote) came to mark a particular kind of "Canadianness". Anglo- and Quebec-centred Canadianness was enshrined by their very absence from the official policy. They, in effect, became Canada's version of its ethno-nationalist self. Hall tells us that this kind of ethnicity does not represent itself as ethnicity because it is hegemonic.<sup>31</sup>

## POP CULTURE AND DIASPORA

In Canada musical groups and musicians such as Cox, Choclair, Dubmatique, Rascalz and others have produced and continue to produce a sound that situates them within a "sonic diaspora". This sound has echoes and traces to elsewhere but remains inflected by the locality of the Canadian contexts. For example, Maestro continually cites Canadian rock musicians in his music, and he continues his relation to Canadian rock with his sampling of the Guess Who's "These Eyes" on his track "Stick to Your Vision" on a recent album. On the other hand, on the Rascalz's most recent album they quote, in an interlude, Jimmy Cliff's character in *The Harder They Come* when he says that he will not work for ten dollars all his life when he knew he was going to make it. In both instances, Maestro and Rascalz comment on the relations of being a black Canadian. Rascalz makes use of Jimmy Cliff's words to both launch a critique and call to mind the exploitative nature of the music industry, and Maestro makes use of the Guess Who to insist not only on his staying power but also on his Canadianness. The title of both albums also echo, in signifying tones, larger transnational issues as well. Maestro's *Built to Last* restates the claim made earlier about his staying power and Rascalz's *Global Warning* not only announces their intention to break out globally as musicians but positions the entire album in relation to a range of global identifications.

This tenuous shift or play between the national and outernational is crucial to reading the emergent vernacular youth cultures of black Canada. Such tensions play themselves out in terms of musical tastes, styles and patterns. On any Canadian rap album it is not unusual for the performer to shift between recognizable African American-derived musical styles and sounds and Caribbean-derived styles and sounds.

31 Ibid., 447.



This is not a facile shift; it is, in fact, one of the conditions of being in black Canada. This shift speaks to the epistemology of Canadian black popular culture; it has a broader corollary for black Canadian identities more generally. But the shift can also be instantiated as unique to black Canadian sensibilities. It is, in fact, the evidence of a black Canadian creole utterance. This is a shift that only first- and second-generation black Canadians can make; it is their sensibility. It is a complex reworking of heritage and ethnicity conditioned by nation-state governmentality and by diaspora associations.

What this means for national belonging is that black Canadianness might not cite and repeat the normative and dominant narratives of the nation, but those narratives have very little room for blackness anyway. Rather, black Canadianness articulates a sense of self that requires a rethinking of national boundaries and citizenship. This rethinking never leaves behind its local context, however. For example Choclair's most recent album *Ice Cold* makes explicit reference to Canada by remaking the stereotype of an "ice cold" country into a marker for a Canadian hip hop that is red-hot, deft rhymes. He lounges in an armchair carved from ice. These are the ways in which black popular culture in Canada requires us to consider the tropes and metaphors of the white nation are being recast and blackened in the wake of an emergent black vernacular culture.

Currently in Canada there is what is being referred to in some quarters as a renaissance in black Canada culture. A claim of renaissance might be overstated. However, the context within which black Canadian writers such as Austin Clarke, Dionne Brand, Andre Alexis, Cecil Foster, Nourbese Philip, Claire Harris, Suzette Mayr, Wade Compton, Andrew Moodie, Djanet Sears and a host of others is a direct response to the fertile ambitions of black popular culture in Canada. If one of the ways in which the literary works of black Canada can be read is through a prism of redefining the nation – and, by so doing, situating blackness as central to it – a similar terrain is being displayed in the popular culture scene. In fact, I would suggest that popular culture is vital to any assumed literary renaissance. It might be argued that vernacular cultural practices drive the production of "high culture".

## CONCLUSION

As many of the aspects of the modern nations give way to new constructions of citizenship and belonging – forced through various migrations – the only thing useful about nations might be the terms of residence. In the Caribbean, the term "permanent

residency” has much meaning for many. It signals that one can live without being “alien” or “illegal” in the North Atlantic. But permanent residency not only signals the legal apparatus through which migrants become quasi-citizens in the North Atlantic; it also signals the desires of migrants to suture more ethically structured nations. Caribbean popular culture in Canada articulates a dual citizenship, but this is a deterritorialized citizenship – a sonic nation through which desire, disappointment, hope and possibility are experienced, wished for and uttered. But black popular culture in Canada does not facily give up its local contexts. Instead, it reinfects and rearticulates local contexts in relation to the outernational, forcing the recognition of a different kind of Canadianness.

**Rinaldo  
Walcott**