(RE)THINKING MY '-NESS':
DIASPORA CARIBBEAN BLACKS IN THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

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(Re)thinking my '-ness' is meant to signify the semantic difficulties posed by the nomenclature "Caribbean culture" for some diaspora blacks in the Canadian context. The brackets in '(Re)thinking' denote the gap, geographical, historical and epistemological, which impede, limit and restrict my access and participation in Caribbean culture. These brackets *bracket* me from my '-ness': my black-*ness*, my Caribbean-*ness*, my Canadian-*ness*. Furthermore, the hyphen in '-ness' is another marker, a grammatical and ontological marker, of my alienation from a *Caribbean*-ness displaced through migration and a *Canadian*-ness into which I cannot fully assimilate. My cultural and racial identity is held together by a fragile and tenuous hyphen that upon (re)thinking exposes the ruptures and discontinuity of the black Caribbean diaspora in the Canadian landscape.

The position that will be advanced in this paper is that Caribbean cultural identity in Canada is a site of crisis that is always becoming, fracturing and transforming: it is a temporal, contingent and historical space. Stuart Hall also advances a similar position. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" he argues, "cultural identities are points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture" (395). Significantly, Hall continues that black Caribbean cultural identities are framed by opposing vectors. On the one hand, by similarity and continuity in which cultural identity is understood "in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self," hiding inside the many other, one superficial or artificially imposed "selves," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (393). And on the other hand, Caribbean cultural identity is constituted by difference and rupture; that is, "what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity: the peoples dragged into slavery, transportation, colonisation, migration, came predominantly from Africa" (395). Extending out of Hall's recognition of similarity and difference, my focus is on another rupture and transportation. In order to test the position that Caribbean cultural identity is a fragmented, discontinuous and historical space, I analyze, what I term *presence Caribbean* to see if it is alive and well, under erasure, and/or if in Canada *presence Caribbean* is spearheading a new and emergent cultural identity.

Presence Caribbean has remained a strong and dynamic force for diaspora blacks in Canada, particularly for first generation immigrants. For instance, many first generation black Caribbean immigrants in Canada maintained land and business investments "back home," that is, in the country of their birth (Henry 46-47). In addition, the founding in Canada of Caribbean social organizations, the opening of retail establishments, inaugurating social events like the annual parade *Caribana*, and even residing in a community with a high concentration of Caribbean immigrants created a sense of continuity with 'back home.' Frances Henry's study of the Caribbean diaspora in Toronto, Canada cites a respondent, who quite clearly reveals the strong presence the Caribbean continues to have for him. As a child he lived in a predominantly white suburb in Toronto; he describes the effect his trip into larger Caribbean demographic areas in Toronto had on him:

> It's the first place my mom brought me to cut my hair. It's
> like a little Jamaica. It reminds me of Jamaica. It's a black
> community down there . . . you hear their music, you can
> actually see the Jamaica in the people. (48-49)

Jamaica has a real and vibrant meaning for this respondent; Jamaica was 'in the people' and in the music heard in the streets. Importantly, this articulation of cultural identity is grounded in both race and cultural expressions. This black community is constituted in similarity; it is within the space of common blackness and ethnicity that the idea of home is produced. However, *presence Caribbean* is not a fixed and continuous signifier guaranteed by the presence of black skin. As a historically contingent manifestation transplanted in the new world through migration, *presence Caribbean* is besieged by the ravages of time.

The sense of 'back home,' that is, of a home somewhere other than Canada is not accessible and open to all diaspora Caribbean blacks, particularly second-generation immigrants and those born in the Caribbean but socialized in Canada. The conceptualization of home then can become a slippery and contradictory space of cultural identification. Even for the respondent above, who articulated a sense of home in the black community, home is *actually* somewhere else, not in Jamaica, but in a new and constructed socio-cultural environment. Importantly, this new space, this new home, is founded on economic success and prosperity. It is in the thriving marketplace of commerce and the exchange of goods and services that this new *Jamaica* is constituted. Caribbean cultural identity is being displaced from the signifier "black" onto some other socio-cultural category.

The documentation of the Afro-Caribbean diaspora in Canada relies heavily on evidence collected from Jamaican immigrants. In 1992 Statistics Canada published a report identifying that 37.9% of the Caribbean population in Canada are of Jamaican origin (Henry 28). However, Jamaican is not a paradigm for Caribbean cultural identity in Canada. The remaining 62% of the black population come from somewhere other than Jamaica. It is also important to note that even though the majority are immigrants from the Caribbean, there is a strong and vital voice emanating from a small black population in Canada's Atlantic provinces. This black Arcadian population is the descendants of freed and run away American slaves, who settled in Atlantic Canada in the late eighteenth century. Most significantly, perhaps, to the formation of diaspora Caribbean cultural identity is the city of Toronto itself. The majority of black Caribbean immigrants settle in Toronto. Ten percent of Toronto's population are black and fifty percent are of a visible minority. The United Nations has identified Toronto as the most racially and ethnically diverse city in the world. In addition, most people in Canada are from somewhere else, and this is especially true of Toronto because it is the city of choice for new immigrants, many of whom come to Canada to improve their standard of living, and in search of better economic and educational opportunities. Cultural encounters in Toronto are not limited to black and white peoples, but comprise a myriad of other nationalities, ethnicities and races, living together in what at least appears to be relative peace and harmony. Irish-Canadians, Italian-Canadian, Scottish-Canadians are quite common cultural designations even amongst those who can trace their ancestry in Canada back numerous generations. Thus, constitutive of the Canadian cultural identity itself are the experiences of migration, displacement, alienation and incorporation.

Cultural transformations in the black diaspora in Canada are dependent more on economic class than on skin colour. Henry maintains that the "main determinant of class in the Caribbean is skin colour and related racial features; there is a gradation from white to near-white, to brown, and finally to the black-skinned lower class" (268). Though transplanted through migration, these class divisions are being transformed by the "traditional class determinants of North American society" (268). Thus, Henry argues that education, income and occupation and not racial characteristics are the new determinants of social class and cultural identity in Canada. Henry's position that education, income and occupation are the new determinant of cultural identity is not without limits. She does caution that complete incorporation of Caribbean blacks into the dominant culture is compromised by the existence of white racism. However, she fails to address that even for the most successfully incorporated black Canadians, and those whose relations with the dominant culture are in the absence of overt manifestations of discrimination and racism, there is sense and awareness of being the 'Other.' Thus, new determinants should not be understood to have displaced more traditional Caribbean cultural divisions. Rather, a complex and still emerging symbiosis exists. Education, income and occupation are coupled with racial characteristics in the production of cultural identity in Canada. This distinction is crucial to the analysis of the transformations of Caribbean cultural identity in the black diaspora. Within the black community there are fundamentally two social classes in Canada: the middle and lower classes. There is a direct correlation between cultural identity and social class. The middle class experiences a sense of greater incorporation into Canadian culture than the lower class; consequently, cultural identity

constituted by race and the sense of 'back home' is most under erasure for the black middle class (Henry 268-269).

Equally as fundamental, this sense of 'back home' is also threatened with erasure for second-generation diaspora Caribbean blacks. This second-generation is more fully socialized into Canadian socio-cultural life. Furthermore, its exposure and greater incorporation in the cultural practices, customs and institutions of the dominant culture result in the creation of an uneasy and contradictory space (Henry 251). The more successful the incorporation of blacks into the dominant culture, however, the greater the fragmentation of their racial and cultural identity (Allen 271).

Henry exposes the materiality of cultural identities in her observation that second generation Caribbean youths, "like many immigrants, construct their personal and cultural identities instrumentally. They want to be able to choose whichever identity suits them best for particular situations" (251). Like any other marketable commodity, cultural and racial identities are exchangeable and negotiable. Henry continues: "Sometimes it may be more beneficial to be Canadian, while at other times they want the freedom to express their Caribbean identity" (251). This condition of dual identities can potentially rupture cultural cohesiveness. That is, it is more difficult and complex to assume an essential and natural cultural grounding. Hall's identification, cited above, of 'one' shared and collective 'true self' or, in other words, an essentialized identity, becomes more elusive and cannot be easily isolated. Furthermore, there is a definite sense that a 'shared history and ancestry,' which all Caribbean blacks 'hold in common,' are historical and thus subject to mutability and decay.

Another interviewee in Henry's text reveals that Caribbean cultural identity is fragmented, and like the Roman god Janus faces in two opposite directions. In social relations with white Canadians, she says, they

> think you are always like this all the time. They don't realize the unrevealed side of yourself – your alternate personality – this side you adopt living here, your Canadian self. Like you are two personalities, two cultures. You show the adopted self. (257)

Identity can be assumed; it can be selected and fashioned. In social relations with white society, it is suggested that the repression of the *presence Caribbean* is required for successful incorporation into the Canadian culture. Significantly, this repression is an option, and is one of many personas available to put on and take off at will, as one would a hat or a coat. To deal with institutional and personal racism and discrimination in Canada requires a certain theatricality and self-fashioning. Arguably, theatricality and self-fashioning are constitutive practices of all identify formations, and not limited solely to dealing with racism and discrimination. They are strategies that can allow for successful negotiations of the material conditions in any given society. Thus, theatricality and self-fashioning can be sources of power and strength. However, they can also lead to identity fragmentation, displacement and alienation. Another respondent in Henry's survey discloses that the assuming of a cultural identity in the black Diaspora is more analogous to a one-way street that closes off the possibility of a u-turn or return to the other, alternative cultural identity.

The following Caribbean born respondent could not relate to some of her fellow Caribbean students raised in Canada. These students although of Caribbean parentage are foreign. She relates that

> When I compare myself with Black Canadian children growing up with 'White' identities, I find it is who we perceive ourselves to be; that Blackness is not so much even a sense of skin, but how you can identify yourself culturally with people. (258)

The idea is conveyed that in the absence of a recognizable identification with black Caribbean culture, the category 'black subject' is erased. Second generation black Caribbean students are characterized as foreign, having 'white' identities. Perhaps in recognition that black cultural identity is threatened with disappearance, some diaspora

blacks choose to incorporate themselves firmly within Caribbean black cultural practices and only within same-race relationships. But there are those who choose to insert themselves into the dominant culture and to discard all identification with a Caribbean cultural identity. This is not an unfamiliar scenario, and was identified most pronouncedly by Franz Fanon in the seminal text <u>Black Skin, White Masks</u> as the inner expropriation of a white racist cultural identity. But is there a point where separation from the cultural identity of your ancestors is more oblique than Fanon's analysis reveals, and manifests itself out of identity transformations in a cultural hybridity? That is, at what point can Caribbean cultural identity no longer simply be assumed or discarded at will without putting Caribbean cultural identity under erasure?

I would like to share at this point a personal anecdote of my cultural erasure. Recently a French-Canadian related a few cities in the United States where his white fiancée, I will call her Mary, would not live because there are too many *of those people*, that is, blacks. My husband explained his friend's *faux pas*, arguing that upon meeting me people see my *black*-ness, which is forgotten after getting to know me. What my husband does not realize is the semantic difficulties his postulation presents. That is, the erasure of my *black*-ness allows for my integration into the Canadian landscape, but demands in recompense the disappearance of my Caribbean cultural identity. The paradox is I am asked to share in the very ideologies that sequester me, alienate me, and that – let's be frank – hate me. I have so perfected my *Canadian*-ness that I script my absence and erasure. What is most interesting is that my assumption of Canadian-ness is in the absence of any outward or conscious negotiations between Canadian and Caribbean cultural identities. Outside from a few cultural foods in my childhood home, my socialization was similar to that of many Canadians. The Beatles and Mozart were equally as prevalent in my parents' home as Bob Marley and Nat King Cole. I was raised with the understanding that my Caribbean-ness is an aspect of my historicity, as are my birth and my sex. I have come to believe that there is a significant difference between my sex and gender, for instance, and that they are not analogous terms. What was thrust upon me through this experience was that, unlike race and gender, I had failed to put cultural identity under as rigorous an interrogation. Race, gender and cultural identities are historically contingent. Race, gender and cultural identities are always being negotiated; and, more importantly, they are political spaces. Thus, the phenomenon of cultural invisibility in the black diaspora in Canada is arguably historically contingent. This experience is arguably not unique to me, and is far more complicated and complex than the choice of which cultural space to occupy. I stand at cultural crossroads, and a choice is being demanded of me. My possible choices of ways to be are arguably unique to the Canadian experience. But any choice made between my cultural ancestry, my incorporation into Canadian culture, and forging a hybrid cultural identity is not without risk and consequences. Another anecdote will again be fruitful.

An interracial couple of my acquaintance lives in a fast-growing community just outside of Toronto. My girlfriend once told me that Peter, her black husband, wanted to move away from *those people*. He would actually live further away from *those people*, but his profession requires that he be close to the business centre. Fanon's assertion that the inner expropriation of racist cultural identity is crippling and deforming may accurately address this phenomenon, and in which case Peter has internalized Mary's racism. However, even with the validity of Fanon's interpretation, it is not enough.

Ania Loomba draws out the limitations of Fanon's position, arguing that all colonial situations cannot be extrapolated onto Fanon's model of the colonial encounter:

> Fanon traced patterns through various individual neuroses in order to generalise about his colonised subject, 'the black man', 'the Negro.' But such a figure ought not to become a paradigm for the colonial condition. . . . Colonised subjects are, after all, simultaneously moulded by class and gender considerations. Also, the split between 'black skins' and 'white masks' is differentially experienced in various colonial and postcolonial societies. We cannot forge a template of *a* split colonised subject and then

apply it to *all* colonised subjects. (150)

Loomba seizes on the historical specificity and the discontinuity of the colonial condition. The colonial and the postcolonial conditions are not essentialized and ahistorical spaces that transcend the mutability of temporality. Hall discloses the historical contingency of the revolutions and the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s which gave birth to, for instance, Barbadian-ness or Jamaican-ness when he argues that in the 1940s and 1950s, although everyone in his acquaintance were shades of brown and black, no one referred to themselves as "African" (399). This '-ness' in Jamaican-ness is constituted by new revolutionary cultural practices in the nineteen-sixties and seventies through which alternative cultural identities were produced. If Raymond William's identification of residual, dominant and emergent cultural forces existing contemporaneously in any given social formation is correct, then Peter's rejection of his Caribbean identity might be an emergent cultural manifestation rather than a psychosis, although it is decidedly racist. Fanon's assertion may not fully capture the socio-historical specificities of the black Diaspora in the Canadian context. Peter's rejection signals the renegotiation and perhaps the potential disappearance of Caribbean cultural identity in Canada itself. Peter's racism may be an extreme case, but the space was already opened for disappearance by the Janus structure of Caribbean cultural identity. From the recognition of the instrumentality of cultural identity, that is, that cultural identity can be selected and put aside at will, the path is also opened to close off the option of return. Cultural identity in the black diaspora could become a one-way street, leading either to, or away from full incorporation of Canadian white cultural identity.

The "leading edge of change lies in the intersections and interstices of . . . [h]ybrid spaces created" (Kapchan and Strong 245). The edges, the spaces of intersection, are the sites of danger and crisis; it is here that new cultural formations emerge that can potentially transform the socio-cultural structure. It is in these spaces that Peter and Mary are brought into theoretical and linguistic proximity. Peter and Mary occupy different racial and gendered spaces, but there is similarity between them in terms of class, education and economics. Hall's recognition of similarity and difference in Caribbean cultural identities has mutated and expanded beyond the boundaries of an essentialized subjectivity and a shared history and ancestry. Peter, for instance, is forging a new cultural identity founded on difference from his Caribbean heritage and similarity with Canadian culture. Furthermore, Peter and Mary occupy similar cultural and linguistic spaces. They speak a similar language; they both contemptuously refer to black people as *those people.* And in a very real sense, *those people* conflate the designation of race and class, that is, those people are both poor and black. Most crucially, the space of home is central to both Peter and Mary's linguistic utterances. It is on the idea of home that I wish to close.

Home is the essential space of identity and cultural politics. Throughout this paper I circulated around black-*ness*, Caribbean-*ness* and Canadian-*ness*. It is in '–ness' that a space is opened to denote home. '-Ness' is a near homonym for 'nest,' as in the bird's nest. Both connote comfort, warmth, protection, safety, that is, in short 'home.' Home is a space to which return seem possible (Olwig 371-373). However, the hyphen I place before '-ness' signifies the gulf that separates me from constructing a home in the Caribbean or fully in Canada. The hyphen is to signal the promptings to go home with the full awareness that home as a site of original grounding is displaced and can never fully be recouped (Farred 34).

In the theorization of the black diaspora, the idea of the return is often thought of in terms of the country of one's birth. However, for those displaced through migration and socialized in a different culture, home can become a paradoxical and ambiguous ontological space. In a recent article in a major Toronto newspaper is the story of a man deported from Canada back to his native land. The story relates that because of recent "public pressure . . . to deport immigrants who commit crimes in Canada" (Nicholas Keung A2), Patrick McKenzie was ousted from Canada after spending twenty-five of his thirty-seven years here. It is reported that McKenzie was "scared to death" to return to his birthplace:

I don't know nobody down there. . . . It's not possible that I can even ask

for help from somebody. I might get into something that would cost my life.
I can't even think about (anything) that might be or could be some way of
survival. (A2)

His words were prophetic. Operating a store with his wife in his native land, he was
viciously murdered during a robbery. Deported primarily for robbery and breaking and
entering as a youthful offender, he survived less than two years in his native land. His
mother maintains that he "would always so proudly say, 'I'm Canadian.' He would never
say, 'I'm Jamaican.' Canadian always came out of his mouth first" (Keung, A2). The
paradox is not that Jamaica became a foreign location to him, but that his sister summed
up the return of his body for burial in Canada as a "homecoming". To the state, his home
is somewhere other than here, that is, Canada. Contrastingly, for McKenzie and his family,
home is somewhere other than there, that is, the place of his birth. At least theoretically,
McKenzie belonged neither here, nor there. Isolating a precise location to call home was
not possible for McKenzie, at least, ironically, until he died. The difficulty is not that
McKenzie identified so fully with Canadian culture, because not only was Canada the
country in which he was raised and lived, but also such an identification can be a
necessary and empowering strategy of survival and identity formation in the black
diaspora. McKenzie's family encapsulates the difficulty of cultural identity for Caribbean
blacks living outside of the Caribbean, who are "product[s] of Canada" (A2). For McKenzie
and many other diaspora Caribbean blacks, home is a bifurcated, slippery and imprecise
space that in the Canadian context can lead to alienation, displacement, fragmentation,
and in the case of McKenzie also of abandonment.

One final case study in Henry's text is fruitful. One of her respondents is a very fair,
racially mixed Antiguan black woman named Lara. Lara fears the erasure of her racial and
cultural identity in an interracial union. Henry writes that Lara, "laughingly maintains that
if she were to 'have somebody who is white, I'd be wiped out. There would be nothing
left!'" (93). Accordingly, she chooses to situate herself firmly within a black cultural
identity. As Lara goes on to reveal her fear of having a blond baby, she exposes the
nascent possibility of concrete racial and cultural erasure in the black diaspora in Canada.

I understand Lara's fear, and in part share in it. My husband is white and in all likelihood
any children we have will bear the physical markings of a mixed heritage. I am aware that
these children and their children and their children's children may marry partners that
racially and culturally will script my extinction, my annihilation. Any trace of my racial
existence and, equally as important, any trace of my ancestral relationship to Africa will
be erased. Mapping Lara onto Peter suggests that black Caribbean cultural identity in the
Canadian context is still being negotiated. Identity in the black diaspora is an unstable and
tenuous space of cultural identification. My focus here has been on theorizing and
situating diaspora Caribbean black culture in Canada as a site of crisis and fracture. It is
a historical and contingent space, and because cultural identity is always becoming a final
pronouncement cannot in the final analysis be written, at least not from a temporal being
anchored herself in history.

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ways in which Western fictions have superimposed such categorizes as the
'female' and the 'east' onto the historical Cleopatra such that she has
become a cultural icon of Western ideological and political mastery.

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