"Caught between the devil and the deep white sea":

BLACK CANADA'S DIASPORIC DYS-FUNK-TION

ABSTRACT

This essay examines black Canada's frustration with several recent attempts to set up culturally appropriate and relevant broadcasting programs. With no network yet servicing Canada's black population of nearly 600,000, Theresa Runstedtler argues that black Canadians often felt lost in Canada's "deep white sea" and overshadowed by black America. Many of the recent controversies over the character and direction of Black Canadian culture have involved dispute over music as black Canada has struggled to maintain an identity unique from its southern neighbour.

In 1997, after six years of transnational lobbying involving African Americans and black Canadians, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) announced its approval of a broadcast license for the American-owned network, Black Entertainment Television (BET).[1] It was truly a historic day, or so we thought, as young people of colour throughout Canada cheered at the news. We would no longer have to rely on MuchMusic's half-hour of *RapCity* and the smattering of shows on campus radio as our sole sources of black music and urban culture. At the time, Robert L. Johnson, the CEO and chairman of BET, proclaimed, "Toronto is one of the most culturally diverse cities in North America, and we think we could do well here."[2] Reports in the Toronto press assured that Johnson's plans included the possibility of shooting programming in Canada, along with potential co-investment in a 24-hour jazz channel and radio station. Coming in the wake of the CRTC's controversial decision to grant 99.1 FM to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), rather than to the black-owned Milestone Group's proposal for an urban music station, Johnson's optimism and seeming commitment to expanding diversity on the Canadian airwaves was a refreshing change to our white-washed media status quo.[3]

However, by 2001, the initial buoyancy over BET had already begun to sink. Had BET executives simply bamboozled the black Canadian public by playing to its desperate starvation for any sprinkling of colour in the media? Writing in the *Globe and Mail* under the headline, "Not Black Like Me," journalist Vernon Clement Jones argued, "Black Entertainment Television came to Canada vowing to showcase black culture. But disillusioned viewers say what it delivered was mainly nasty stereotypes and explicit videos. Where, they wonder, is the Canadian content?"[4] Yet, Jones's public lament was still tempered by his recognition of the precarious place of black culture in Canada. He pondered, "I can't help wondering why, if black Canadians are so offended by BET, only one or two have complained to the CRTC." Ironically, Jones's breakthrough moment on this question came during a fitness class at his local gym. Amidst a crowd of "happy white faces" sweating to the sounds of Britney Spears, Jones realized, "[W]here else but BET are black Canadians going to get some black music? Now that's what you call being *caught between the devil and the deep white sea.*"[5]

Ever since I can remember, this pattern of competing sentiments – the frustration of *invisibility* within Canada's 'deep white sea' and the fear of *invasion* at the hands of the American media 'devil' – have pervaded black Canadian discussions of popular culture. The on-the-ground realities of black Canada's love-hate relationship with black America, with its simmering tensions of sameness/difference and affinity/revulsion, exemplify many of the theoretical complexities of diaspora that continue to confound scholars of the black Atlantic. As Rinaldo Walcott has suggested, black Canada, with its diverse population of multiple colonial pasts, along with its geographic proximity to the United States, provides "a matrix for the contestations that are currently taking place in black diasporic studies."[6]

In particular, many recent controversies over the character and direction of black Canadian culture have involved disputes over music, highlighting a sense of 'diasporic dys-funk-tion' with our southern neighbours.

It is worth noting that even though the case of black Canada exemplifies the transnational/intercultural perspectives of black Atlantic theory, it has been surprisingly absent from contemporary discussions of the diaspora. In addition to the overshadowing effect of its more powerful American neighbour, Canada's reputation as the 'Great White North' has contributed to this rhetorical deletion.

THERESA RUNSTEDTLER

Theresa Runstedtler (York U. 1998) is currently a PhD candidate finishing a joint degree in African American Studies and History at Yale University. Her research interests include the intersection of race, gender, and resistance in popular culture; transnational Black history encompassing English, French, and Spanish destinations; multiracial and multicultural histories; the history of empire and globalization; and Black Canada.

Its collective racial fictions have tended to position both blackness and racial discrimination outside the national consciousness, making cross-border and outer-national identifications with the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa the dominant characteristic of black Canadian culture.[7] Indeed, this historical amnesia has resulted in the woeful lack of black culture, history, and general discussions of race in mainstream Canadian society, from school curriculum to the media to public culture. It is hardly surprising that many black Canadians have turned to the Atlantic World, and particularly to black America, in search of much-needed cultural resources – even if the shoe does not quite fit.

Black Like What? BET and the Problem of Transnational Black Solidarity

With no network yet servicing Canada's black population of nearly 600,000, the viability of BET north of the border looked like a no-brainer.[8] Yet, as the controversies surrounding the introduction of BET illustrate, despite black Canada's proximity to and porous borders with the political, economic, and mass cultural powerhouse of the United States, local conditions had shaped its hybrid milieu as more than just a mere imitation of black America. From the start, Gail Scala, the editor of Toronto's *Jamaica Weekly Gleaner,* had doubts about the fit between BET's mandate and black Canada's demographic and cultural realities. In particular, Scala wondered what the potential effects of "BET's homogenous vision of black America" would have on "the more diverse Canadian audience." As Scala characterized it, "The black population in the U.S. is so much older and more blended than ours in Canada, they are Americans first and foremost."[9] Moreover, she predicted that the national tradition of multiculturalism and its celebration of the multiplicity of black Canadian cultures would further complicate BET's attempt to import its uniform template of blackness and ghetto style.

With no network yet servicing Canada's black population of nearly 600,000, the viability of BET north of the border looked like a no-brainer.[8] Yet, as the controversies surrounding the introduction of BET illustrate, despite black Canada's proximity to and porous borders with the political, economic, and mass cultural powerhouse of the United States, local conditions had shaped its hybrid milieu as more than just a mere imitation of black America.

The American network's mixed reception in Toronto's mainly Caribbean and African immigrant community points to the need to place diasporic exchange, dispute, and negotiation at the crest of the next wave of black Atlantic scholarship. BET's exemption from Canadian Content regulations and its consequent lack of programming related to black Canadian culture and politics sparked discontent.[10] In a 2001 interview with Brooke Gladstone, the host of NPR's *On the Media,* CBC journalist Clifton Joseph encapsulated the sense of betrayal that many black Canadians felt:

> [T]he other thing is we hardly see any of our Canadian entertainers profiled. They, they actually treat us like — the ugly stepbrothers! We were hoping for more black solidarity tell you the truth and – it seems to me that it's pretty duplicitous for them to come to this country – Canada – canvas us for our assistance – and then after they get it, dash us away like we don't even matter![11]

Expressions like Joseph's were, in many ways, a recognition of black Canada's seeming powerlessness to apply market pressure on the network's programming choices as such a tiny minority of its audience.

Some black Canadian commentators sought to differentiate themselves from their southern neighbours in publicly denouncing the pathological state of black American culture and society. Their scathing remarks stemmed from their dissatisfaction over BET's strategy of using materialistic and misogynistic music videos to fill roughly 65 percent of its broadcast schedule.

While the critiques levelled by these black Canadian professionals likely did not reflect the larger reception of the network across class and age, their remarks remain telling in a number of ways. After all, how seamlessly does the American industry of black ghetto images actually fit into the Canadian environment? Statistics suggest that while black Canadians do tend to live in metropolitan areas and be clustered in lower-income zones, they are much less likely than their American counterparts to reside in segregated, inner-city communities of vast public housing projects. Rather, cities like Toronto are characterized by a more scattered, suburbanized pattern of black poverty.[12] However, even with the obvious ethnic and geographical differences of blackness in Canada, it is hardly productive to retreat into a kind of protective nationalism that locates negative racial stereotypes outside of the black Canadian experience. Canadians of all backgrounds are constantly inundated with American images that undoubtedly influence local racial politics. At the same time, black American scholars can no longer deny the hegemony of popular culture, political discourse, and academic production flowing out of United States and its real impact in other ports of the black Atlantic.

Canadian Milestone or Watered-down American? FLOW 93.5 FM

Promising to bring a more relevant media forum to Toronto's diverse population, five members of the city's

black community – Denham Jolly, Zanana Akande, Carl Redhead, Reynold Austin, and Tony Davy – formed Milestone Radio in 1988, making their first application for a CRTC license to run an urban station. After three applications and 12 years of community struggle involving thousands of letters and volunteer hours, the Milestone Group finally won the rights to 93.5 FM.[13] Despite the exciting possibilities of having a black Canadian-owned radio station, the story of Milestone follows much the same trajectory as the declining optimism over BET. FLOW's own difficulties in pleasing the black Canadian public further illustrate the problems of participating in a transnational cultural exchange in which one party not only dominates the financial side of the industry, but also guards its position as the gatekeeper of black 'authenticity.'

As early as six months after FLOW went on the air in March 2001 with the sounds of Bob Marley's "Roots, Rock, and Reggae," black Canadians began wondering if Milestone Radio had any real intention of following through on its pledge to "to bring a unique Canadian urban music mix… and give a voice to the Black Community."[14] As journalist Susana Ferreira noted, in choosing Marley's song, FLOW's management appeared to be broadcasting its commitment to "the wide base of its mandate, not just for popular, mainstream hip-hop and R&B, but also digging into the roots of the African, Afro-American, and Caribbean forms of music."[15] However, was it all just a bunch of hot airwaves? Not only did FLOW seem to have abandoned its initial vision of catering to the musical diversity of Toronto's black community and supporting local artists, but it also seemed to mimic the apolitical, "cookie-cutter" formula of black American commercial radio by avoiding any controversial race-related topics. Yet, FLOW management countered that it was simply supplying an existing demand. As Milestone spokesperson Nicole Jolly contended, "People have to remember that we are a commercial radio station, which means our goal is to have as large a cumulative audience as possible."[16] With the advent of FLOW, many local urban artists had predicted increased exposure and sales since Canadian Content rules would require the station to fill its daily schedule with 35 percent Canadian music.[17] However, the continued problems facing Canadian hip hop exemplified the fundamental tension between the local and the transnational in shaping collective tastes in the marketplace. Radio airplay on FLOW did not prove to be a panacea. Some industry insiders argued that there was still no money in Canadian hip hop because of simple demographics. As Halifax deejay Jesse Dangerously put it, "Rap is like handgun deaths – it's just something that goes on more in the U.S."[18]

Nevertheless, this very admission points to an even more fundamental problem underlying the cultural politics of urban music in the 'Great White North.' With the influence of BET and other American gatekeepers of hip hop style, rap music has become so synonymous with U.S. ghettoes and gang culture that black Canadian artists have difficulty gaining 'authenticity' on either side of the border. Thus, many of the central "problematiks" that frustrate scholars of the black diaspora – uneven exchange, the flattening out or standardization of discourses, the reduction of real complexities, and the silencing of whole groups – are in fact, the very same dilemmas facing everyday people.

As these two cases of 'diasporic dys-funk-tion' illustrate, black Atlantic scholars must shift their focus to the process of diaspora. In understanding the dynamics of transnational racial formation and the possibilities for constructive political coalitions, examining the often difficult negotiation of differences is just as crucial as uncovering the multiple points of black similarity and solidarity. Both the trade of racialized culture and the development of a workable black internationalism are not immune from the global realities of capital and power, nor are they independent of local-global tensions. While black Canada's 'predicament' is not just a simple case of African-Americanization, it does reveal the silencing and frustrations of an asymmetrical relationship with the U.S. pop cultural machine and the U.S. academic establishment. In turn, the recognition that black America plays multiple rhetorical functions in Canada's racial dialogue, as a kindred spirit that brings the comforting warmth of diversity to the Great White North and also an example of the worst aspects of black pathology, can provide a starting point for understanding the dynamics of exchange in other black Atlantic ports. Neither the retreat into defensive nationalisms that simply reinforce master narratives, nor the wilful ignorance of the realities of cultural hegemony can help advance our theories of diaspora. In this way, Black Cultural Studies needs to cultivate a more substantial conversation with scholars of globalization. Understanding the flow of racial formations and how they affect the libratory possibilities of the black Atlantic represents the next wave.

In turn, the recognition that black America plays multiple rhetorical functions in Canada's racial dialogue, as a kindred spirit that brings the comforting warmth of diversity to the Great White North and also an example of the worst aspects of black pathology, can provide a starting point for understanding the dynamics of exchange in other black Atlantic ports.

Notes

1 Frances Cowley, "Black TV Finally Lands in Toronto," *Toronto Sun,* 24 January 1998.

2 Ibid.

3 Mitch Potter, "Picture this: Can Black Entertainment Television help fill radio void?" *Toronto Sun,* 18 October 1997.

[4] Vernon Clement Jones, "Not Black Like Me," *Globe and Mail,* 19 February 2001.

[5] Emphasis added, Ibid.

[6] Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada* (Toronto, 1997). 29.

[7] Popular understandings of black presence in Canada remain limited to two 'immigrant' tropes: the result of the nation's benevolent acceptance of American slaves from the Underground Railroad, and the more recent result of relocation from the Caribbean and Africa since World War II (Walcott 39, 44). In turn, since the 1970s, state-sponsored multiculturalism has served to erase the stains of slavery and discrimination from Canada's official history by promoting a mythology of ethnic tolerance, often set in opposition to America's violent story of racial prejudice. Eva Mackey, *House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (New York, 1999). 99. In reality, black Canadian history stretches back nearly 500 years. See Joseph Mensah, *Black Canadians: History, Experiences, Social Conditions* (Halifax, 2002), Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History,* 2nd ed. (Montreal; Kingston, 1997). By the end of the seventeenth century up to the early nineteenth century, black slaves were an accepted part of both British and French colonial life. In the late eighteenth century some 3,000 black Loyalists who served the British during the American Revolution made the Halifax area their home. See James Walker, *The Black loyalists: The search for a promised land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (London, 1976). The next wave of migration occurred after the War of 1812, when around 3,600 black people moved from the United States to Nova Scotia (Mensah 48). After the passage of the 1793 *Abolition Act* in Upper Canada, which granted freedom to runaway slaves, black American fugitives began crossing the border through the network of the Underground Railroad. By the 1850s, the number of black American fugitives to Canada soared, with settlements developing in Amherstburg, Buxton, St. Catherines, Windsor, London, and Chatham (Mensah 49-50). During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, black Americans also moved into Western Canada despite elaborate attempts by the Canadian government to bar them (Mensah 50). Also see Marie Sarah-Jane Mathieu, "Jim Crow Rides this Train: The Social and Political Impact of African American Sleeping Car Porters in Canada," (2001). With changes to Canadian immigration law in the late 1960s, black migration from the British and French Caribbean increased (Mensah 71). Since the 1980s, Africa has provided an additional surge of black Canadian immigration (Mensah 111-12).

[8] According to the 1996 Canadian census, the black population in Canada numbered 573,860, comprising the country's third largest visible minority population after the Chinese and South Asians, and constituting 2.01 per cent of the national population. As of 1996, just over 400,000 out of this total black population resided in the metropolitan areas of Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax. Mensah, *Black Canadians: History, Experiences, Social Conditions.* 53, 76, 79.

[9] Potter, "Picture this: Can Black Entertainment Television help fill radio void?"

[10] Even though the CRTC generally requires pay and specialty broadcasters to play a certain amount of Canadian programming or "Canadian Content," tailoring the number of hours according to each case, and making it a condition of license, they exempted BET from meeting any requirements. This allows BET to transmit a more-or-less direct feed from their U.S. studios into Canada.

[11] "BET Goes to Canada," *On the Media,* Brooke Gladstone, NPR, 24 February 2001.

[12] Mensah, *Black Canadians: History, Experiences, Social Conditions.* 82-83.

[13] For more on FLOW's path to licensing, see http://www.milestoneradio.com/history/milestone_story.htm.

[14] "93.5 – New all-Urban Music Radio Station for Toronto," 27 August 2000, http://www.maddflavz.com/news.htm#41 (August 2005).

[15] Susana Ferreira, "On the Air: After two years of Flow, had Canadian urban radio become a soul survivor or just another pop pretender?" 28 February 2003, http://www.exclaim.ca/index.asp?layid=22&csid=1&csid1=1424 (August 2005).

[16] Dalton Higgins, "Six Months of FLOW 93.5: Community Underwhelmed by Radio Station it Fought for Years to Get."

[17] According to Canada Heritage, the main factor in deciding if a work is "Canadian" is whether a sufficient proportion of the creative personnel (performer, composer, etc.) involved in a recording are Canadian. For more details on the requirements see, "Canadian Content Regulations," Winter 2001, http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/ac-ca/pubs/can-con/can_con.html (August 2005).

[18] Ibid.