Intersecting Oppressions in Urban Montreal:

A Hip Hop Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Following the realization, in the 1990s, that Canada's legal solutions for discrimination share little with the day-to-day reality of racialized minorities, a Canadian brand of critical race theory has emerged. Nevertheless, Peter Flegel argues that much work remains to be done, particularly in terms of developing an experiential and contextual approach to diversity. Tools to achieve this goal are already available. An emerging Hip Hop culture, for instance, provides policy-makers and law-makers with invaluable information about an increased sense of hopelessness among Montreal's Black youth, as well as about potential remedies to the intersectional discrimination they face.

Since the 1990s, Canada has experienced a shift in the ways in which cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity has been addressed in research, policy, and jurisprudence. The "postmodernist turn" in academic circles has brought challenges to notions of universalism, cultural homogeneity, and totality in favor of notions of contextualization, particularity, and hybridity. Similarly, the idea of a unitary subject has been displaced by that of a highly fragmented and socially embedded self, caught between competing claims arising from multiple identities (Clement 1996; Laclau and Mouffe 1998; West 1999).

These changes have had a significant impact on the legal profession. Inspired by the emergence and growing popularity of American *critical race theory,* Canadian legal practitioners who specialize in human rights and anti-racism jurisprudence have begun developing new tools to better address the complexities of discrimination in a pluralistic society (Delgado 2000). The emergence of a *Canadian* brand of critical race theory in the 1990s, primarily in Ontario and British Colombia, highlighted the growing sense among Canadians, particularly people of colour, that legal approaches to race, ethnicity and other identity-markers were not dealing adequately with the ways in which discrimination was *experienced* by racialized minorities. Many pointed to the tendency within traditional anti-racism and human rights approaches to compartmentalize oppressions rather than to recognize the extent to which they are interconnected, as a major shortcoming in these approaches (Aylward 1999; OHRC 2001).

Key to this conceptual and methodological shift was the emergence of the *intersectional* approach to diversity. While intersectionality recognizes the existence of oppressions, it departs from traditional approaches by focusing on the ways in which different oppressions intersect and on the unique identities and social conditions that emerge from these intersections (Delgado 2000; Caldwell 2000). In its discussion paper "An Intersectional Approach to Discrimination: Addressing Multiple Grounds in Human Rights Claims," the Ontario Human Rights Commissions explains:

> Intersectional oppression arises out of the combination of various oppressions which, together, produce something unique and distinctive from any one form of discrimination standing alone. An intersectional approach takes into account the historical, social, and political context and recognizes the unique experience of the individual based on the intersection of many groups (2001).

In Canada, the intersectional approach to discrimination is beginning to influence human rights jurisprudence, public policy, and civil society. In 1999 in *Law v. Canada,* for example, the Supreme Court concluded that Canadians could use the equality provision in the Charter (s. 15(1)) to claim discrimination based on an intersection of enunciated and analogous grounds. The purpose of s. 15(1), the nature and situation of the claimant(s), and the social, legal and political history of the ways in which Canadian society has treated marginalized groups should all come into play when determining whether a claim based on intersecting grounds can be presented in court. The Supreme Court pointed out:

There is no reason in principle, therefore, why a discrimination claim positing an intersection of grounds cannot be understood as analogous to or as a synthesis of, the grounds listed in s. 15(1) (Cited in OHRC 2001).

The Canadian government's domestic and foreign policy has also been affected by these developments. During domestic preparations for the UN World Conference Against Racism and debates at the World Conference in South Africa, for

example, the Canadian government sought to address the ways in which different forms of oppressions intersect within the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action. Canada's controversial and ill-fated attempt to include "sexual orientation" in the list of "related forms of discrimination" testifies to the country's commitment to addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

Canadian NGOs have also been quite active strategizing around race and other identity markers such as gender, sexual orientation and physical or mental handicap. Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (EGALE), for example, has organized several conferences and related activities that deal with issues of intersectionality and has recently created a "diversity coordinator" position in order to ensure that the organization better addresses this new approach to diversity.

Despite the work that is being undertaken on intersectionality, this approach to discrimination and identity has yet to gain full currency within federal multiculturalism policy, the judicial system, civil society and academia. In the continuing efforts to develop new research approaches and modify policy orientations, consideration should be given to understanding and addressing the ways in which intersectionality, as it relates to both identity politics *and* interlocking oppressions, is *experienced* by individuals from racialized communities. In other words, attention should be placed on understanding how people are directly affected by and come to terms with their structural positions, i.e. their location at the intersection of different forms of oppression. An *experiential* and contextual approach to diversity allows researchers and policy makers alike to better understand how members of traditionally disadvantaged groups are affected by and perceive the outcome of intersecting oppressions in Canada.

A key to undertaking this work is exploring, through the lens of an intersectional approach to oppression, how culture and art are used as media through which racialized individuals convey and express their identities and/or situation in Canadian society. In this, Hip Hop culture, a growing cultural and artistic movement in Canada, can be used as a means to explore how intersecting oppressions affect visible minorities in Canada. The case of Hip Hop culture in Montreal, Quebec, provides an interesting glimpse into the impact of class, race and age-based oppressions in the country.

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Hip Hop evolved out of the encounter and subsequent cultural métissage that occurred when young, urban New Yorkers created a new vibrant youth culture out of an amalgamation of African American, Jamaican and Afro-Latino musical and dance styles in the 1970s (Rivera 2003). Over the past decade, Hip Hop culture has grown in popularity throughout the world, as disenfranchised youth from various ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds have used the music to contest political, economic and social oppression in their respective countries. In France and Belgium, for example, Hip Hop has become a vehicle for youth of North and West African backgrounds contest racism, poverty and alienation in their neighborhoods. Artists such as MC Solaar and Assassin have contributed to making France the second largest Hip Hop market in the world (Aidi 2000).

In Canada, Hip Hop is turning into a full-fledged youth movement led primarily by Black youth but increasingly involving youth originating from East and South Asia, the Middle East, First Nations communities, and Europe. Organizations such as Montreal's Hip Hop 4Ever International Festival and Black Youth in Action, and Toronto's Block Headz are seeking to capitalize on the popularity of Hip Hop culture in order to develop spaces for critical reflection and political mobilization. Unfortunately, their efforts are regularly challenged and even hampered by an extremely lucrative strand of Hip Hop: "Gangster rap," which glorifies shootings, substance abuse, sexual assault, and homophobic attacks. Police services in Montreal and Toronto have noted with great concern the emerging ties between Gangster rap and organized crime. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Hip Hop can shed a light on the intersections of race, class, and age as they are experienced by Black (and other) youth in Canada.

One of the most eloquent examples comes from the latest album of leading Quebec rap artist, SP (Sans Pression) entitled: "Répliques aux offusqués" (Rebuttal to the Annoyed). In this candid and brutally honest album, SP exposes the challenges and realities faced by young, poor Black men in Montreal. Using a mixture of French, English, Ebonics, Haitian Creole and Québécois joual, the artist decries the increasing nihilism and gratuitous violence affecting Black youth in the city.

> *Dans le territoire hostile (c'est la mwen connin map mouri[1]) Les projectiles filent c'est pas chill (tout moun ap kouri[2]) / Backstab des fois, on dirait que je suis un habitant de la banlieue de Bagdad… Quelle sera la prochaine sentence la maximale? Le pire c'est que souvent c'est du black*

on black / Pour une chose aussi banale qu'un eye contact (Derrière mon sourire).

Every day stress montréalité une mort prématuré / Dans le territoire hostile c'est prêt à mourir prêt à tuer / La vie de la rue ç'a l'air de rien mais yo ! C'est grave / J'en connais plein qui n'ont jamais atteint mon age / C'est fucked up mais c'est des choses qui arrivent quotidiennement… T'as beau dire que ce sont des salauds / Le monde est capable de tout faire pour le cob[3] / C'est qui tu penses le mammifère le plus cruel du globe ? (Le plus cruel).

References to a "hostile territory" and to "Baghdad" highlight the extent to which many poor Black youth in Montreal feel as if they are living in a war-zone, where anyone can become a victim of senseless violence. The notion of a "stress montréalité" shows how violence and the resulting anxiety are not concentrated in one neighborhood but extend throughout the city. SP sees the crisis facing Black youth as being related primarily to the desire to consume and to accumulate wealth. In SP's song, *Le plus cruel,* he cites another source of anxiety and distress: racial profiling by law enforcement officers. He raps:

Je sais que c'est chaud dans le réseau, dans la rue, dans l'char, dans le bus même dans le métro / Les babis patrouillent le secteur, veulent savoir je fais quoi / Disent que je « fit » la description, pis que ça aurait pu être moi. (Le plus cruel).

This sarcastic "rhyme" highlights the contempt many Black youth have for police officers, some of whom target, harass and even beat youth because they are suspected of being criminals. The issue received considerable public attention in Montreal during the summer of 2003 when Black mothers launched a 750,000$ lawsuit against the Montreal police force on behalf of their children, and a women videotaped police officers telling young girls of Haitian descent to "go back to your country" (Otis-Dionne 2003).

To the average outsider, this very bleak perspective on life in Montreal contrasts with the peaceful, relatively affluent image of the city that most Canadians (including residents of the city) possess. While the analogy made between Montreal and Baghdad may be exaggerated, it does contain a kernel of truth: some Black youth living in the poor neighborhoods do fear for their lives. The intersectional approach to oppression provides some clues to understanding the vision expressed in SP's songs.

Many Black youth in Montreal live in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city where sports and other facilities and extra-curricular programs are very limited or, in some cases, inaccessible. Adequate housing is often a problem for youth who belong to large families that live in very small and occasionally dilapidated apartments. Adequate food and clothing is also a problem given that 57% and 66% of Black youth live below the poverty line (Torcyzner and Springer, 2001). Limited job opportunities for Black youth also contribute to high levels of poverty. Youth of all backgrounds who enter the labor market are often disadvantaged due to a lack of working experience and of seniority. For Black youth, who bear the brunt of discrimination based on age *and* race, the situation is worse: several studies have revealed disproportionately high levels of unemployment and racial discrimination in the workforce (Ibid.; Chicha-Pontbriand 1990; Pierre 2002).

With these disadvantages tied to lower socioeconomic status, age and racialized status, a sense of hopelessness and a desire to accumulate wealth has emerged and has been exploited by organized crime. According to police reports, biker gangs have begun using poor, Black youth to do their "dirty work" (Savigny forthcoming). This has led to an increase in violence among Black youth, seven of whom have died since May 2003 (Ibid). In this way, the rise in so-called "Black on Black" violence can be traced to specific social and economic factors that have led to some Black youth seeking employment in the criminal sector.

We are alerted to this sad reality through the songs of SP, and other local Hip Hop artists, who lament a breakdown in communal values, limited opportunities, discrimination and a rise in self-interest, nihilistic violence and avarice. From an intersectional perspective, fully understanding and addressing the "every day stress montréalité" requires looking at and developing strategies to tackle the disadvantages tied to race, age and social class in a manner that captures their interconnections. Thus, a national strategy to combat racism must not only involve individuals, organizations and institutions that focus on racism but should also implicate institutional and social actors that tackle other forms of discrimination such as poverty, gender bias, ageism and homophobia.

Notes

1 Translation from the Haitian Creole: "That's where I know I will die."

2 Translation from the Haitian Creole: "Everyone runs."

3 Haitian Creole for "money."