THE CASE OF AFRODIAISPORIC CULTURES IN CANADA

Mark V. Campbell
Blackness in Canada has, for the past four centuries, been imagined and reproduced in dominant discourse as a coherent homogenous group. Many observers, authors and historians have failed to notice that exiled Jamaican Maroons in Nova Scotia were not the same as Black Loyalists, or that "Afro-Caribbean" and "African-American" were not synonymous in Toronto at the turn of the 20th century. To centre the African Diaspora in Canada is to engage spatial and ideological struggle around what it might mean to be Canadian-and African-descended.

Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora is a cross-Canada exhibition that showcases the breadth and diversity of works from locations in the African Diaspora. Curated by Andrea Fatona with assistance from Deanna Bowen, this exhibition is a didactic conversation that creates dialogue around issues that Canadian institutions have failed to progressively address, specifically Blackness and its diverse components. At stake in the possibility of such a discussion is the myriad of rhetoric that tries to distinguish Canada from its Southern neighbour. An articulated diversity within the category "Black Canadian," holds the potential to disrupt the idea of a homogenous body of people saved by America's British neighbours to the North.

Fatona's exhibition criss-crosses the country to both converse with spaces of Black presence hundreds of years old and enter spaces where Blackness is imagined not to exist. The exhibit opened at the Thames Art Gallery in Chatham, Ontario, an important terminus of the Underground Railroad and settlement of free Black populations. It moved next to Halifax, Nova Scotia, another historic location of Black Canadians inscribed with centuries of diverse populations from Jamaica, America's 13 colonies, Grenada, Barbados and Sierra Leone returnees. The Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa, Ontario became the next stop of the tour, followed by an opening in Sherbrooke, Quebec. The Yukon Arts Centre in Whitehorse will round out the national movements of the exhibition in the summer of 2008. This final location is noteworthy, an action that speaks back to section 38 of Canada's 1910 Immigration Policy, which detailed certain populations as "unsuited" for climes of the North. In fact, had the Laurier government been re-elected in 1911, its proposed prohibition of the entrance of Black people into Canada might have made Fatona's exhibit impossible and this review unimaginable.

Given such a context, Reading the Image is a challenge to audiences to develop new reading practices that situate Black diasporic individuals as central rather than peripheral and as agents rather than subjects. This re-reading of our contemporary moment presents a litany of diasporic utterances that clearly demarcate the boundaries of nation as permeable while centering Black diasporic subjectivity.

With pieces from Trinidadian Christopher Cozier, Scotland's Maud Sulter and Canadians Deanna Bowen and Michael Fernandes, Fatona facilitates a "Black transnational dialogue" interested in articulating the "décalage" of the Black diaspora. This dialogue is as much about space and spatial practices as it is about representation. For example, Cozier's Once You Have Bread and Wheels You Good to Go (2006) speaks to the ways in which the Trinidadian economy is overdetermined by its geopolitical positioning in the Caribbean basin, so that capitalism becomes the only available path of "development" in a post-Maurice Bishop Caribbean. Cozier intervenes in what has become the most normalized way of addressing the nefarious mobility of money under the rubric of "development" in a globalized world.

From critiques of capital to the silence of fear that Michael Fernandes captures in his blackboard installation, Fatona's curatorial strategy disturbs our normative understandings of the processes and realities that circumscribe rather than overdetermine our current existence. Themes such as hybridity, fear, capital and patriarchy intersect each of these pieces and connect the artists' works to some of the larger discursive frames within which the complexities of Afrodiaporic life lay. Importantly, the works do not simply disrupt a carefully constructed social reality; they are pieces that utilize the Black Diaspora as a resource to propose alternative readings of our contemporary social moment. They are bound neither to a static rendition of blackness nor to a specific geography. Rather, what the works of Cozier, Bowen, Fernandes and Sulter present are expressions whose disruptive power lies in a poetics that refuses to negate itself along the lines of our dominant regime of Western thought.
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Martiniquian poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant’s notion of a “Poetics of Relation” opens up a space for reconsidering “Black” art in relation to other kinds of readings through an understanding of the always-implicated Other. In Canada, the Other is the non-French or non-British Canadian, the one who sits outside the language of “two solitudes” but who, at this moment of exclusion, makes possible the very language of these solitudes and enables a policy of multiculturalism. Poetics, here, refers not only to a form of enunciation but to a counter-hegemonic act of representation interested in freeing us from the control of Western notions of seeing and knowing, as actions indebted to the eye and the rational subject, respectively.

Michael Fernandes’ Room of Fears (2006) is a pedagogical piece that gestures at the relationship between anonymity, fear and learning. In a participatory call-and-response fashion, Fernandes gathers people’s emailed articulations of their fears and inscribes them on three rectangular blackboards that form an enclosed box-like space. Room of Fears surrounds its viewer in perfectly neat cursive handwriting, reminiscent of a third-grade schoolteacher, which haunts with a reality that rests silently within our subconscious. The piece elucidates the relationships between human emotion and pedagogic practice, presenting its audience with a didactic rendering of our earliest formal practices of reading, and considering the very source of what motivates people to inscribe their fears on others. Fernandes’ piece positions its viewer to consider how fear and its reproduction allow for the internal festering of unwarranted assumptions that structure individual and social actions. An individual’s conduct is dually related to her internalized fears and pleasures combined with what is allowable in a given society. Just as the desire for pleasure induces people to act in a certain way, fear also contributes to an individual’s conduct. The internalized and subconscious fear of the Black African has significantly structured the making of the Western world.
For example, we need look no further than the blackface portrayal of African-American men by white actors in D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In this film, white women are portrayed as victims of predatory black(faced) men. The patriarchal fear of emasculation through the rape of one’s “female property” is inscribed on the body of Black men. Such a film demonstrates how fear (however ill-informed) makes certain kinds of actions possible; unfortunately, these fears led to a massive number of lynchings of young Black men.

A surface reading of *Room of Fears* offers no easy or obvious relationship to Black Diasporic culture. If we recall that learning to read was a contraband activity for Black people in the Southern United States and bring this into conversation with the alarming rates at which Black students are pushed-out of the schools, a picture of the connection between power and schooling becomes clear. Undoubtedly, the body is at the centre of this piece, a Black body that structures other meaning-making activities, especially fear-driven action such as the discriminatory Zero Tolerance policies that have violated the human rights of many black students. It is precisely this, the unspoken fear, fear of the Other, fear of the Black body, upon which white fears and whiteness are inscribed. From D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* to Toronto District School Board’s Zero Tolerance Policy and Safe Schools Act, Blackness especially that of black males has become the body upon which (dis)junctive writings of fear have traditionally taken place. Taken together, the hundreds of fears that comprise Fernandes’ project facilitate an entrance into a crushing anxiety-filled space, decorated with fears written in white chalk on a black surface; fears that offer no escape, that are cursively inscribed with a frightening precision (rather than accuracy).

Rather than focusing on our internalized fears and subconscious, Christopher Cozier’s work targets an externalized, manufactured component of the western subject: the consumer. Cozier’s project *Available in All Leading Stores* (2006) consists of ink, a rubber stamp and foldable cardboard boxes. Cozier invites his audience to fold a cube-shaped box and use the stamp to designate the box as a commodity with a huge capitalized boldered title: FEAR. As the rubber-stamped labels evidence the commodity’s “made in the USA” origins, *Available in All Leading Stores* illuminates the connections between manufactured fear and capital’s expansion. Trinidad burgeoning oil economy, alongside the criminal phenomenon of kidnapping, makes “fear” a central component of the country’s drive towards capitalist expansion. Personal security companies and ransom monies are but two small instances where the increased circulation of capital tears its ugly head cloaked in shadowy mask of fear. Post-9/11 anti-terrorist activity largely instigated by the United States has not ignored the Muslim Trinidadian, as the reach of America’s bloodied disaster-capitalism-soaked tentacles enter the Caribbean basin to make Muslim Trinidadians a target (even
Reading the Image presents us with a way of reading that centres Black folk not only as objects of the Western gaze but also as practitioners of a politics of representation that is inclusive of the diversity within the category, “Black.”

when they are in the diaspora). Crozier piece allows for its audience to assemble a portable, and possibly saleable, cardboard box of fear, 30 ounces in weight. Small, light and moveable, these 7.5 cm³ boxes, whose origin and quantity is determined by the audience, appear to be an invitation to become agents who can negotiate (or trade) fear for something other than victimhood. As a participatory piece, Available in All Leading Stores refuses to let us off the hook for our implication in the processes that sometimes make our lives and the lives of others unlivable.

Continuing with his interrogation of capitalist expansion, the multimedia installation Once You Have Bread and Wheels You Good to Go (2006) features a load of white bread on a makeshift four-wheel cart. Three carts of mobile bread are connected by a long piece of red rope and rest atop a projection of a world map that simulates the ease of capital’s mobility in the colonial and post-colonial worlds. Bread, as vernacular for money and as central to European social life since the Industrial Revolution, serves a number of purposes in this piece. As a way to think about Trinidad’s relationship to modernity via capitalism, bread highlights our everyday implication in capitalist processes through consumption. The mobility of the bread on Cozier’s cart gestures towards the very dubious machinations by which free and unfree African, Indian and Chinese bodies were forced, deceived and lured to travel to both the Caribbean and Canada. The ability to move and the requirement to keep on moving in the diaspora are intimately tied to our ability to consume. The labour Diasporas necessitated by the completion of the Panama canal, the Cuban sugar industry’s intensification and Southern American and Ontario seasonal fruit-picking programs gesture to the centrality of mobility and consumption in the lives of Caribbean peoples. In Cozier’s piece, Diaspora becomes a tool with which to survive, manipulate and
critique one’s conditions, even within the clutches of late capital in the West.

The late Maud Sulter’s *Les Bijoux* (2002) along with Deanna Bowen’s *Truthseer* (2005) provide critiques of two of history’s most intimate partners: patriarchy and the Church. Bowen uses an 18-minute video loop to recast the biblical battle of David and Goliath. Her version does not feature two men in a testosterone-filled epic battle, but rather two Asian twins who trouble the power and gender inscriptions of the story. The doubleness represented by the twins can be read as both a condition similar to W.E.B. DuBois’ double consciousness, and an attempt to bring the yin and the yang into the meta-narrative of the Church’s univocal historical position. Bowen’s own less-than-ideal history with the Christian Church is represented in the continuously interrupted video narrative. In the video, we witness symbols and objects such as chromosomes and a gun, being drawn onto the video screen, at times directly on top of an woman’s heads and faces. Curiously, Bowen’s work displaces the figure of the black woman, forcing viewers to wrestle with her narrative rather than fixate on her appearance.

Fixate is the best way to describe what Sulter’s serious eyes, in her nine self-portraits in *Les Bijoux*, do to their viewer. In this piece, Sulter embodies the historical figure of Jeanne Duval, a mulatta woman known to be the lover of French poet Charles Baudelaire. In two of these portraits, Sulter as Duval looks away from the viewer, her neck laced with pearls. She is adorned by five different necklaces in the nine portraits and four different dresses highlighting Duval’s material comfort.

From seducing to serious to solemn, the portraits of *Les Bijoux* rehumanize and make agents out of the Black female. In two of the portraits we do not see Baudelaire’s “maitresse des maitresses” (mistress of mistresses), but Jeanne Duval decidedly refusing eye contact with her audience. In two other portraits, Sulter stares directly at us as she vigorously pulls at her necklace as if it were a noose, eyes wide open as if to soak in the last moment of light before the onset of the darkness of death. In this historical rewriting, the Sulter/Duval remix provides us with another version of Jeanne Duval with shorter hair than she was known to have; a defiant refusal of the “good hair” notion that men like Baudelaire openly
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Notes:
3. Maud Suter unfortunately left this world on February 27, 2008.
5. Baudelaire describes her as such in his poem “Le Balcon/The Balcony” ca. 1856.