



## **Note Towards What it Might Mean to Be Black in Canada**

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Recently on a train ride to Ottawa, I received yet another phone call from CBC national radio, a request to appear and speak to their listeners about the KKK and black face costumes at the Campbellford, Legion hall this past Halloween. I was pleased, that in that instance I would still be on the train at the time of the program, and so I could say no to them without having to lie. However, once I got to Ottawa and walked passed the Oscar Peterson statue and memorial I regretted that I did not do the interview. Some of you might recall that just before Peterson died he had been experiencing significant racial harassment in his Mississauga neighborhood. At one point he was so outraged by the harassment that he threatened to go live in Barbados (a strange choice, but one nonetheless). I recall this story of Peterson's harassment because each time white racist behavior is exposed in the Canadian context it is treated as though it is an aberration, unusual and just does not make sense to the national space of Canada. A kind of national amnesia occurs instantly.

But what is clear is that indeed the opposite is in fact true: Canada, its very foundations, its very institution as a nation, are indeed racist. If we begin from that sobering idea different ways of encountering and making sense of racism in Canada, especially anti-black racism become clearer and are not greeted as a kind of surprise. From the desecrated slave cemetery called Nigger Rock in Saint Armand, Quebec, to the desecrated cemeteries of Priceville, Grey County Ontario, to the segregated poverty in North Preston, Nova Scotia, to the destruction of Africville, to the disappearance of Hogan's Alley in Vancouver, to the re-appropriation of Little Burgundy in Montreal, to those "deemed unsuitable" to emigrate to the Prairies – Canada has a long and enduring history of anti-black racism. From Angelique's act of rebellion by burning down what is now Old Montreal, to Susana Moodie's mention of a lynching in her *Roughing it in the Bush*, to Viola Desmond's refusal to be refused entry into a cinema because of her race, to Black students refusal of racism at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia), in Canada – Black people have been both victim and they have resisted being victimized. Such is part of what it means to be Black here. Each of those stories

tells us that Black people have a long and intimate history to this colonial space we call Canada. It is a paradoxical history, a confusing history, and a history of subordination and resistance and seduction to being subordinated. It is indeed complicated. But it is also, incredibly, a history of active resistance too.

The meaning of being Black in Canada is part of a global history of blackness and European racial theories and racism that are rooted in Canada. It is a history in which struggles over the Black body marks the last five hundred plus years. Black people have gone from human to less than human, to nonhuman to resisting our/their dehumanization, to using our/their less than human experience to renew claims of freedom, democracy, religion, and indeed justice. Black people have been at the forefront of helping all humans to think differently about what it means to live in the global mess unleashed by Columbus's voyages in a post-1492 world. We can only make sense of Black Canadian-ness in the context of such a global history, a history whose effects and affects are still urgently felt today. Canada, as we have come to call it, is an intricate part of this global history and thus Black people in Canada are wrapped up in and understood in that global racial context.

So what does it mean to be Black in Canada then, especially contemporary Canada? This is a difficult question to answer, but let me suggest one response. All who are of African descent become Black when they enter the Atlantic zone, when they enter Canada. That Canada's understanding and relationship to those people we call Black is founded in Europe's invention of the nigger/savage paradigm or negro/native complex is important to reckon with intellectually and culturally and therefore politically. Today I will focus on only part of that dyad the nigger/negro part.

The nigger had to be invented, it was indeed a necessity; and the nigger is now a global phenomena. Founded in Europe's initial attempt to rule the globe, the nigger was Europe's monstrous invention meant to justify the enslavement of Africans, and after enslavement their collective global subordination. Black people emerged as a resistance to that subordination. The monstrous body of the nigger has been with us since, and even when black people struggle to come into humanhood we are often offered and perceived as a lesser kind of human, a different genre of the species. Our difference gets marked by skin, hair, lips and genitals; then by place; then by sex and sexuality; then by poverty and crime; then by disease and death. If you do not believe me let us remember here the recent attempt to take Caster Semenya out of the human family as both a historical reference to our monstrous bodies and our present condition as genetics and DNA comes to haunt us now. Law, policy, biology, medicine, professionals, name a modern category of management, it all rained down on Semenya. Semenya is just one recent instance of the spectacular attempts of the

continuing story of our barely human status. And when it is not the visibility of our bodies that make us less than human, it is what is inside – our families, our loose sexuality, our inherent criminality and so on. The story of Black peoples struggles to become human, to practice our humanity is an ongoing struggle; we are always trying to “achieve our humanity”. This struggle to be human is part of what it means to be Black Canadian, to be a Black Canadian in contemporary Canada means that such global history haunts us and shapes who we are – now, in the present.

But this struggle to be human has produced a Black radical tradition. It is a radical tradition in which Black people have changed the course of global history. But bring it closer to home, when Viola Desmond decided on that day in Nova Scotia to resist, she ignited a civil rights movement there and across Canada; when Black people organized to change immigration policy from the 1950s to the late 1960s it happened; when they again organized in the same period to change discrimination in housing, things did change; from the 1970s to the 1990s when Black people organized and resisted the Toronto police who were killing us with impunity the Civilian Complaints Commission was founded (it took Mike Harris in the 1990s to dismantle it) and now the police are shooting at us again; in the same period Black people and their allies got employment equity on the table (and we know what Harris did there too). Black people have been part of a radical tradition of social and cultural change in Canada since Champlain walked in this region of the globe and since then Black people have been involved in struggles for justice. Such a radical tradition is a part of what it means to be Black in Canada.

The claim I am making for a meaning of Black Canadian-ness that is part of a radical Black tradition should not be lost on why we are gathered here today – on World AIDS Day – the racialization and criminalization of HIV/AIDS transmission is bearing down on Black life in Canada. It is not coincidental that in a world that for the last five hundred years plus – one founded on clear principles meant to disadvantage Black people the world over – that HIV/AIDS is ravaging our communities. It is therefore not a surprise that the criminalization of a disease, of illness, of a virus has come to impact our communities in unprecedented ways. We should not be surprised. We should see this as yet another call to action. It is important to note that while the empirical evidence remains somewhat cloudy, we should also trust ourselves on the question of how we see and understand criminalization of HIV/AIDS impacting our communities – we need not be shy about what we know.

This brings me to some very tricky territory. For earlier when I suggested in passing that we are sometimes seduced into feeling like the history of the last five hundred years is now over, makes it difficult for us to sometimes account for our own specific interests in

regards to contemporary important questions and concerns of justice. On the issue of HIV/AIDS criminalization I want to say we must work carefully with our allies and those who fund our studies, events and even organizations. But let me be clear, Black peoples should develop their own positions on these questions, such a stance is crucially important. We know that while all might be at the same table and sitting in the same chairs that it does not mean all are having the same experiences. We are fully aware that great policies on paper, especially as far as the judiciary goes does not always translate into similar or equivalent treatment for us. In fact, there is much evidence in other areas to prove the opposite, especially when the justice system is involved. At some point Black HIV/AIDS organizations will have to take a stand on criminalization and it might, maybe it ought to be different from that of our allies since we must make that decision taking into account the full history of how the law works for Black people.

We know the law is unevenly applied and we cannot depend on a well-written policy, up for interpretation by a mostly white Canadian justice system that is already poised against us to act otherwise. We must discuss this clearly with our allies and let them decide how to support or not. But we must know for ourselves first. An important corollary to the concern with our allies is that the political determination of Black life cannot be brought to you by what we now in the community call “the funders”. Black political action cannot depend on funders; our lives can not be governed by agencies cut up into so many pieces – housing there, health here, policing over there, transportation there and so on. These are indeed life and death issues, but these are also issues that require us to honor our inheritances and to ask ourselves what will we leave behind? To echo Joseph Beam, will those behind us have to create everything from scratch again? Black self-determination requires something more than the dictates and the gaze of “the funders”.

No matter how you slice it the meaning of being Black in Canada calls to a history of a Black radical tradition, one that is intent on seeking justice here and over there. I therefore ask you: what happened to the Black radical tradition that dreamed a different world and acted to achieve it from slavery to civil rights to postcolonial conditions? “The funders” cannot bring dreams of self-determination to you – we have to seize those moments for ourselves. Dreams of that sort begin with the notion that as citizens of Canada, the nation must be as responsive to our claims, our demands, and our desires as to others. In essence the funding is indeed ours as contributors to the wealth of the nation. The Black radical tradition does not let our allies set the stage; we set our own stage and ask them to partake in ways that respect and honor their participation. We calculate the risks and ask our allies to take it with us. We act collectively to produce change and we act with a sense of justice that changes life for all. This my friends is

what I want you to think about today as we debate strategies for dealing with a long and enduring history of attempts to make our bodies monstrous and less than human and our refusal to just not go there. When will the history of the Black radical traditional call on us, require our bravery anew and our responsibility to leave a world different from the one we currently live in? When will being a Black Canadian begin to mean that we are indeed up to the challenge of determining our own futures?

Thank you.