BEING BLACK

ESSAYS BY ALTHEA PRINCE

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For Mrs. Gwendolyn Johnston;
and in loving memory of her husband, Leonard Oscar Johnston,
and their daughter, Christine Harriet Johnston.

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Preface

I feel myself writing from where I stand, where I sit, where I live, where I walk, where I laugh, where I dance, where I declare myself as who I am in this Toronto-life. That is how this collection feels for me. Sometimes I feel the need to declare myself within the writing. Other times, I enjoy walking with other people's voices, writing how I feel them onto the page.

Each essay comes from the same central place from which I do life. They are my walk from that centre: the ways that I feel the ground and make my way from one understanding of a thing to another.

Clifton Joseph's introduction is joyful to me, for it allows a time in Toronto-life to take shape. A vague murmuring turns into a once-forgotten melody. I thank him for this most valuable contribution to the work.

Althea Prince

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Recollections

A Seventees Black RAP

By Clifton Joseph

This is about a kind/of/blackness of the 1970s; about how that blackness came to be; about how some young west indian immigrants in the high/schools journeyed to that blackness; how it influenced their political styles & activities; how it affected their being/ness in the society; what that blackness was/ & how it influenced the head/space & identity of a generation.

The essays in this book look at being Black in canada. This rap is designed to complement the book with a break/down of a Black coming/of/being in the 1970s sparked by events in toronto's high schools.

April 10, 1973, just after 10 p.m. Looking out the window of the airplane circling the toronto sky/line towards its airport landing, I was in wide-eyed/wonderment: I had never seen so much lights in my life. The entire city/below was illuminated. Big lights were shining bright as far as the eyes could see. Just the idea of so many lights being on at the same time any/where, any/time was a mind/blower.

"Air Canada, Ca-na-daaaaaa! Come and see what you've been missing!" Sandwiched between my father and my younger brother, I couldnt help remembering the catchy chorus of the Air Canada commercial I'd/heard every morning on the radio growing up in antigua in the early seventees. I didnt think that i would someday take/uP the inviting offer, but it was no sur-

prise when it finally happened: my step/mother was living in canada for years and had flown back & forth. In 1970 my older brother & sister went to live with her in toronto. My father spent the summer there in 1972; and finally the rest of us were on the plane, landing at Toronto International Airport, excited & expectant.

That night was a satisfyingly exhaustive blur of a long car ride on the highway and city streets, a happy reunion with my family, kentucky fried chicken dinner & the smell of palmolive soap in the bathroom, capped by the disappointing realisation after fiddling with the radio, "Daddy I cant find (Antigua radio station) ZDK on the radio..."

My step/mother was working, my father had a job lined/uP, my older brother was working & taking night/school-classes & my sister was in high/school. And since me & my brother had come at the end of the school/year, like babes in toyland, we had the next/months-of-days to explore our neighbourhood and the city.

When I finally got to high/school in September, 1973, I was glad/glad/glad to find out that I wasn't the only new kid/on/the/block new/comer. Bloor Collegiate's population was dominated by immigrants, some born here, some recent, including poles, germans, italians, greeks, macedonians, maltese, philipinos, south americans & less than a dozen Blacks, evenly split between canadian & west indian-born. That Black population tripled to over fifty from all over the west indies: antigua, st. kitts, st. vincent, trinidad & tobago, jamaica, barbados, and guyana. Although coming from the region, it was the first time I was meeting anybody from most of these islands. And like myself, most of them were not "Black" where they came from. In my case, I didnt learn any/thing about being Black as an idea/concept/consciousness (in/school) in antigua. Yes, I learnt about the slaves and the slave trade but that didnt seem to be relative to me... I wasn't learning any/thing Black (but british & european-history, mostly). Blackness was a concept we'd soon be pushed to understand.

It wasnt going to be a(ny) walk in the park. In school &/in the society, generally, we were constantly reminded of our accents; were chastised as "niggers," "spearchuckers," & such (words & con/cepts most of us had never heard in the west indies); and were subjected/to stereo-typical/exoticism (at the time jamaica was the only place in the west indies that white folks seemed to know so they'd (all-ways) ask you where you were from. you'd tell'em/then they'd say: "where in jamaica is that?")

Among the problems we faced at the time was "streaming," as it came to be called, where the majority of west indian students were routinely channelled into technical/vocational schools; and those of us who ended/uP in the higher level schools, being put in lower grades. A/lot of us were doing work we'd done years b/4, work we werent even yet doing in our classes. We knew there was some kind of injustice going on. Just talking to the people from the rest of the west indies at my school we'd know the situation — a bunch of us were in grades way/below our abilities. The system looked like it had no idea what 2/do with us when we got here.

In my case I was assessed by the Ministry of Education as being at a grade nine level, but after months of boredom I took my antiguan Physics and Chemistry notebooks to my science teacher to check/out. He told me he was teaching that work to his grade eleven & twelve students. I then approached the Guidance Department which worked out a combined grade eleven & twelve placement but that was squashed by the vice/principal who put me in grade ten.

Getting our parents involved was like "pulling teeth." They were generally reluctant to "rock the boat" and still had that west indian respect & reverence for teachers and the educational system in which the teacher was always right. It became clear that there wasnt go'n be much help there.

We also realised that we didnt know (about) each other. It was the first time I was meeting people from many of the islands. I didnt even know much of the history of antigua, except for an endless stream of european conquest dates, wars,

and treaties. But we heard rumblings about a so-called feud between trinidadians and jamaicans, who were not supposed to like each other. There were "small island" jokes ("I hear the roads in antigua are so narrow, the dogs have to wag their tails up & down") and other islandisms. It was clear we didnt see ourselves as one west indian people. Instinctively we knew we had to do something: we wanted some action.

So that lead us to commingle together and the idea of this club/came up, and the club, the West Indian Students Association (WISA), was set/up in no time and we were there every once a week. We had our meetings & learning about each/other & other caribbean islands and cultures — somebody from st.kitts would come & do a report on that island — we'd bring in some sugarcakes, ackee & saltfish & mangoes, pelau, roti & so/on, like a west indian "show & tell." We took part as a group in school cultural activities, and we'd bring in people from community organisations to talk about their works, about racism and discrimination in the society, and other issues of/the/day.

WISA provided a space for us to hang/out, play dominoes, draughts, cards & music, be amongst each other, and learn; where we wouldnt have to be concerned about our accents or loud laughing. Some white teachers and students didnt like it but the club flourished. Then we found out that WISA wasnt the only one, that there were plenty other west indian/Black clubs all across the toronto school system, doing the things we were doing and providing the same function. We discovered each other and exchanged ideas and started doing things together.

In late/1974 all of the groups met at the Harriet Tubman Centre in west central toronto and merged into the Reunited African Peoples (RAP) representing nineteen Black/west indian clubs and a nearly two hundred-strong membership/list. We were ecstatic. The atmosphere was electric. We now had one big organisation to push/our/politics.

We were a politicized grouping of student/activists, athletes, those looking for a place to hang/out, street-wise players &

partiers, and people who were just dissatisfied with not seeing enough blackness in school and in the society, generally. We werent "Black" where we came from in the west indies, but in toronto we had to confront the fact that we were seen as "Black," and had to check/out for ourselves what this blackness was.

The philosophy and politics of "Black Power," still so powerful even in its wane, impacted our own consciousness and our views of the world and what political aspirations and commitment were about. We set up study groups on Black and radical history and politics (reading walter rodney, clr james, angela davis, black panthers, the revolutionary struggles in africa, amilcar cabral, frantz fanon, communism, socialism, pan-africanism...); we set/up a committee that went to school/clubs to spread RAP's message; a cultural group that produced plays, poems, and dances that toured schools and community centres; a track club that nurtured athletic talent and took part in competitions; took trips out of town; and had lots of parties.

And really & truly, the party was a major socialiser of this generation. It was one of the places that gave us the most space to be(come), where we were most free. And where/ever there was a party going/down, to us, that was the place to/be. From our own school celebrations to "get/downs" at other schools (like TL Kennedy in misssisauga; Central Commerce down/town; L'Amoreaux's all-time-popular jams/in/the/east) to the plentiful house-parties & music/shows.

It was a time of disco, bell/bottoms, platform shoes, high-heel('d) sneakers; the heyday of funk & soul; the heat of calypso & caribana-jump/uP; bob marley and the wailers were leading the international charge of reggae & rasta-/farianism; and jazz, blues & gospel were vying for our attention. We revelled in it all. In any one month you could change from being "Disco Donald" to "Slick Soul-D" to "Irie-D." Malcolm X called for a "revolution of the mind" and Parliament Funkadelic sang "Free your mind and your ass will follow," and we listened to them both in a defiant mix of party & politics.

One of the big things that happened as RAP formed: a white racist sniper at don mills and sheppard looked out of his high-rise with a high-powered gun and said he was going to shoot the first nigger he saw. It turned out to be sixteen year old michael habbib, walking by. A number of us went to the funeral. We were talking & learning about all the politics and here was a situation where some white canadian racist sniper picks up a gun, looks out his veranda, and shoots. That had a major impact on the group, cos it could have been any one of us, dig. Its randomness really helped to solidify in our head/space that the society, with all of its talk about mr. trudeau & liberalism; and from our parents — be a good boy now — all of the conservative blackness, all the codifications of restraint — it wasn't happening. We werent buying it. We realised that any one of us could be killed and nothing might come out of it. That really helped increase our activity.

At the time we felt we had to get involved in the schools & in-to the headspace of the Black students in the schools, by providing alternative information and history. &/things started to happen as we got more involved. There was the killing of buddy evans at the flying disco on king street and of albert johnson, in his own house, in front of his young daughter. After that... we were all involved in a lot of those demonstrations... the annual african liberation day march was a big, big time for us... we'd go down there and line up & jump in the march and shout/out slogans.

We believed in action and became more involved in community organisations like the Black Education Project, the Harriet Tubman Centre, and BYCAP. We used to go down to the UNIA hall on college street to hear speakers from groups fighting racism in america, neo-colonialism in the west indies, and colonialism and imperialism in africa. That's where I saw rosie douglas's big blue Lincoln Town Car and his bodyguard warren hart's gun imprint under his jacket. We raised cash and collected clothes and supplies for the "Help Liberate Zimbabwe Campaign."

The whole concept for those of us steeped in the general black politics was that you had to be politically "conscious," had to be scholarly too, had to be up on the theory, history & practise (who are you supporting in angola? there are 3/4 revolutionary groups in these individual african countries so who are you with?: mpla, flna, or unita? & U/had/2b-able to defend yr shht.) You had to know your blackness and if you were just into the (out/ward) style of blackness with some historical dates, dashikis, and afros, you'd be labelled a "back/ward cultural nationalist", one of the worst names to be called then.

So this 70s generation lapped/uP all of that kind/a thing thru a sense of involvement, thru a sense of curiousity & thru a sense/of/love. Love for those various scattered/splintered strains of International/BLACK-ness (its culture, politics & history). Plus a/lot-of-us were yearning for a definition & instinctive-ly, we knew that the definition of west indian was not enough. That's what our older brothers & sisters & parents embraced. We knew we were not black/americans, even though we imitated them in dress, speech & pop-ular culture. We knew we were not africans, classic, from the continent; but we had friends from the continent, knew the history & struggles of its different peoples & areas.

The spirit for the RAP people continued after high school. Many of us ended up at york university where we extended some of that politics cos it didnt end there — in 77/78/79 — for a lot of people. By 1980 we were already a year/year-and-a-half or two at york or u of t. Again, we spent a lot of time out/side of the school activities, whether into third world politics, nicaragua, the sandanistas, or ayatollah khomeni and the Islamic Revolution — anybody who was anti-imperialist. The decolonisation(s) of southern africa were still happening, the panafricanist thing was still happening... but now at university, it was the idea of the third world that had a major political impact.

And in some ways the african canadian props almost came last. We went to Black history world-wide to find out that this country has had a tremendous connection to the rest of the

Black world internationally and historically... the maroons coming here from jamaica; the trips back to africa, to sierra leone and to liberia; the black loyalists coming from america; the fugitive slaves; west indians coming here at the turn of the century and going into the mines of cape breton; and so on...

Yeah, i got to deal with the african canadian thing. Of course we all used to get that phone call... somebody saying the blk canadians trying to kick out dudley, emergency meeting down at the UNIA, got to make it... jump on the bus & u/gone, lets go rescue dudley laws again... we were cocky at the time saying to Black canadians, the attitude was "well, what have u/all done? the man is here doing all of this kinda stuff, yeah, u/all been here for how long? what have u/all done? in fact, how come u/all aint doing something now?" At the time we perceived Black canadians to be more accepting and more passive in relation to whats going on in the society. we were arrogant, arrogant & cocky to think that we could ask, "what have u/done?"

The thing was that we didnt know, up to that point, what actually had been done. It was later on we had to search out and find out/about things like mr. brathwaite and the whole campaign waged in the 1950s against the "little black sambo" book. We had a similar campaign at our school and a number of schools had their different campaigns. Ours at Bloor Collegiate was against "to kill a mockingbird." We didn't want to read the shit because we weren't reading anything positive about Black folks so we definitely didn't want to see them shucking & jiving, minstrelling, and all of that... So we were arrogant and dismissive in some cases, based on ignorance of the actual history.

What we didnt know and had to find out was that there were pockets of radicalism that u had 2/search out: like lenny johnston and the third world bookstore; the whole history of the black porters... and that there were actual people we could deal with who were in the midst of things and were not the so-called "docile Black canadian." We had to learn that the history is always there to be found/out-about, to learn, and to make; that

like the essays in this book, there are areas of our history that need to be researched, recorded, and reclaimed.

Today the majority of the population in the greater toronto area is so/called "coloured," with the Black/African/Caribbean making the third largest group. Toronto's Black population is made up of people from all over the world, with different religions, cultures, histories, and politics. What we choose/as/glues to solidify our identity is crucial to how we will survive in Toronto's concrete jungle. The seventees head/space would make a dynamite/template.

"Solid"

"Dig!"

"Right/ON!"

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Part 1
Being Black

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Racism Revisited

Being Black In Toronto In The 1960s

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I arrived at Toronto International Airport (now Pearson International Airport) full of hope, with a zest for living, and a belief in the wonders that life has to offer. This attitude tends, sadly, to be the preserve of the young and naive.

It was September, 1965, and I had come to Toronto from a small-small Caribbean island (108 square miles) which then had a predominantly Black population of 77,000. Antiguan society possessed, as did all Caribbean countries, a bias for light skin and Caucasian features. In my particular experience, this bias had not included blatant racism or discrimination against my dark skin. From such experiences, a naive twenty-year old might have developed the thick skin needed to field the blows of racism and discrimination which I later encountered in Toronto. These blows occurred from the day I arrived in Toronto, my land of milk and honey. I truly believed that myth, and my awakening was rude, swift, and vicious.

At the airport, I was met by my sister and a small welcoming party of her friends from other Caribbean countries. She had come here from England as a trained nurse a year earlier and had already secured a job and a place for us to live.

There were smiles and handshakes with her friends and then we repaired to an airport coffee shop for some refreshment before making the long drive to my sister's downtown apartment.

I sat chatting happily. I was excited, exuberant, and com-

pletely at ease with myself. Slowly, it became apparent to me that we were attracting attention from the other people in the coffee shop. I could not understand what the problem was, as we were merely having soft drinks and snacks. We were being stared at as if we had contravened some hallowed social convention. I asked my sister and her friends the reason we were attracting so much negative attention. The explanation was incredible to me: "It's because we are Black."

My sister went on to explain that she believed that because there were not many Black people in Toronto, white people tended to stare at the few they saw. She also told me that she had had the same experience when she first went to live in England, but that after a while, white people had grown accustomed to seeing Black people and had stopped their rude (and sometimes hostile) gawking. I grew quite uncomfortable as we sat in the coffee shop, and it was a relief to me when we finally left.

As I settled into living in Toronto, it became clear that my skin colour was a problem for many whites in the city. The manifestations of this fact were not always subtle, and although they rarely took the form of the blatant red-neck behaviour which my 'brothers' and 'sisters' were experiencing south of the Canadian border, I took (and still take) no comfort in that. Racism is racism is racism, and whether it is subtle or blatant, it has the same effect: it eats away at the soul of the victim and the perpetrator in equal measure. This decay may not be apparent in the case of the perpetrator, but I now know that to do harm to someone, one must of necessity destroy a part of oneself in the process.

Examples of racism in Toronto in the 1960s as I experienced it were numerous and affected all aspects of my life. Some months later, when I decided to live in my own space, racism made my attempt at independence quite a struggle. I clearly remember being told by a landlady that she could not rent a room to me because I would have to share the bathroom with "a white girl."

Acting out of the same naiveté with which I had stepped off

the plane at Toronto International Airport, I assured the landlady that that was alright with me, as I had nothing against sharing the bathroom with a white girl. I figured I was a girl, she was a girl, so what was the problem? Why would the landlady think that I would object?

The landlady was undaunted. She reiterated that she could not permit me to use the same bathroom as a white girl. I was not altogether stupid. It finally penetrated my consciousness that I was being told that my skin colour made me an undesirable person; someone with whom a white girl would not wish to share a bathroom.

Another absurdity that I recall was being told by a prospective employer that he liked us "coloured girls" because we always had such nice smiles and thick lips. He liked thick lips. In fact, he said that he did not trust people with thin lips. I looked at his lips. They were very thin. According to his method of determining trustworthiness, he would have miserably failed his own test.

Even as simple a thing as walking in the street posed a hazard to me, as it did to many other Black women at that time. I was propositioned in the street — as were other Black women whom I knew — by white men who were sometimes old enough to be my father. I could not understand why I was being taken for a prostitute by these men. They behaved as if a Black woman standing at the bus stop, or walking on the street, even in the middle of the day, was automatically advertising herself for sale.

Some men followed Black women along the street in their cars, making offers of money for sex. One day, a man drove around the block three times, offering me money to have sex with him. I knew I was being propositioned. For some reason, my skin colour made some white men think that I was sexually attractive at best and a prostitute at worst. The situation conjured up in my mind images I had read by Edgar Mittleholzer, the Guyanese writer. His brilliant novels have included critiques of the subject of the lust of white men for Black women. As a result of these experiences, I felt for a long time very

uncomfortable in my own skin.

The Black cultural revolution had not yet taken place; its dim echoes were only just beginning to penetrate Toronto. I was an Antiguan girl whose historical understanding consisted of a rudimentary knowledge of the British Empire and the Commonwealth, according to the demands of my school curriculum. The components of this mis-education — the jingoism that claimed that the sun never sets on the British empire, the focus on British history and culture, and the exclusion of an interpreteation of world history which includes an analysis of imperialism and its twin racism, and my socialisation in general — had given me an unhealthy respect for the British and for the colonies they had created in the 'New World.' Canada had been one of those colonies; and with all of the smug superiority of a British colonial subject, I had chosen Canada over the United States as the place in which I wished to live. The United States, according to my history books, had been created out of "a dangerous rebellion."

Nothing in my experience or education provided me with an answer to the question of why some white men saw me and all other Black women in this sexual way. And I did not know how to find out what I needed to know. My introduction to the issue of race as a political situation had hitherto been confined to the intellectual experience of reading Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth.*

Then one day I saw a Black man being interviewed on television. He spoke about the racism that whites perpetrated against Black people in the United States and he put it in historical perspective. He cited, as an example of this heinous crime of racism, the white man's preoccupation with the Black woman as a sexual object. The hair on the back of my neck tingled. That man's name was Malcolm X.

Another day, I heard a speech by Elijah Mohammed, the leader of the Nation of Islam in the United States. Although I could not identify with the religious dogma that he preached, I understood his feelings of outrage about the way racism belittles

Black people by eating away at their soul.

I started to search for and read whatever I could put my hands on, to learn more and more about this most devastating experience of racism that I was going through on a very personal level. The things that Malcolm X and Elijah Mohammed had spoken about were happening in the United States, but the experiences I was having in Canada were similar. I could not escape the resonance; it made a din in my ears, similar to that of the crash of a bomb dropping in cotton-wool, silent. From the United States (the country my textbooks had scornfully decried as spawned by a "dangerous rebellion"), came the language, analysis, and praxis of another rebellion. The Black Power Movement was gaining momentum in North America, and eventually, touching the entire African Diaspora.

I was not alone in this experience in Toronto. There was much conversation and anger among Black women and Black men concerning the reactions of white people to members of our race. There were many heated discussions about the insults that we all endured at work, on public transportation, from store clerks, from landlords, from passers-by on the street, and in schools (for those who had children in the school system).

The problem of the streaming of Black children into high school technical programs was a harsh reality that Black parents faced in 1960s Toronto. Indeed, this is still an issue for the Black community. For Black people newly arrived from the Caribbean, this issue required that they rethink their relationship with their children's teachers. People from the Caribbean were shaped in a cultural milieu that demanded that the responsibility for the child's education be left up to the discretion of the school teacher. It took some time for these parents to realise that in Canada they had to make their presence felt within the school system to ensure that their children benefited fully from it.

This is a reality with which Canadian parents were more fully cognisant. But for newly-arrived parents from Caribbean countries, this would have constituted interference in the educational system and would have been resented by the teacher.

In Caribbean countries, where the teacher was entrusted with the educational nurturing of the child, parents rarely interfered. Working class parents in particular were unlikely to make their presence felt in the school. Their time was taken up with eking out a living in adverse economic conditions. In Canada, there was even less time for things like parent/teacher meetings and committees.

Our feelings about being second-class citizens in our new adopted country were vented in circles where there was trust, support and camaraderie. We met at house parties, in Caribbean night-clubs which sprang up around the city, and at community events. We formed bonds of friendship which helped somewhat to heal the wounds of racism.

Black men complained about being stopped several times a night by policemen who refused to believe that they owned the cars they were driving. Only those who had dilapidated 'jalopies' could expect to escape having their right to ownership challenged. I remember a Jamaican friend who had just bought a spanking new red Camaro being outraged because he had been stopped by a police cruiser in his neighbourhood while driving to work (he worked nights). Not until he had produced a certificate of ownership was he allowed to get back into his car and drive away. He had not been stopped for a traffic violation, but on suspicion of being in a well-to-do neighbourhood, possibly with the intent to commit a crime and/or steal the car which he was driving. No statement was made by the policeman to suggest he did not believe that my friend was in the neighbourhood for a legitimate reason, or that he did not own the car. However, the attitude of the policeman, and the fact that he stopped my friend at all, clearly indicated scepticism, or at least the raising of a question.

My friend was understandably angry. He had worked hard and had just bought the Camaro and a house in that 'nice' neighbourhood, as fruits of his labour. Like any immigrant, he was trying to upgrade his standard of living and he was insulted at the implicit scepticism of the policeman. He also knew that

none of his white neighbours had ever been stopped while driving to work in that same neighbourhood; nor had they ever been asked to produce proof of ownership of their car, without having committed a traffic offence.

Our experiences created a sense of insecurity around several issues. We realised that we did not know the law, and needed to know it fast! We also realised that we needed to develop a collective consciousness about the police and about our rights as residents in Canada. In short, we needed to move out of our positions as passive 'aliens' to become knowledgeable residents of Canada, aware of all the civil rights afforded us. We did, after all, live here; and even though we kept on telling ourselves that we were "going back home," it was clear that while we lived here we needed to take some decisive steps to ensure our survival in this new 'home.'

This kind of collective consciousness went into the development of after-school tutoring programs (The Black Education Project), cultural programs (the Afro-Caribbean Theatre Workshop; the Chissemba Chiyuka Dancers; the Harriet Tubman Programme; the Black Library; the Afro-American Progressive Association), and lobbying for anti-racist school curricula and other social and political action.

In addition, many of us made connections with long-established African Canadians, the majority of whom had been immigrants here since the 1920s. We also got to know Black people who were native to Canada (at least as 'native' as some whites were.) These people provided us with loving care and nurturing, and taught us much about how to survive in Toronto, politically and psychologically.

In my particular experience, Lenny and Gwen Johnston acted as my surrogate parents when I became friends with their children. They hosted a regular Sunday brunch in their home for many of us while we were attending university with their daughter Christine. At those brunches, the Johnstons talked to us about life in Canada, about Pan-Africanism, and a new vision of world history. This vision located us as part of an

African Diaspora which had a mission at hand.

While Black people who had lived in Toronto had always taken community action — in some instances, for up to five generations — the swelling of the Black community by a large influx of Black people from the Caribbean, Africa, and the U.S., brought a new sense of urgency to the work to be done. The late 1960s and the early 1970s saw unprecedented social action and development in our community. The expansion of Canada's economy in this period, and the opening up of its immigration policies, brought an accompanying increase in the African Canadian population. Many Black nurses came to Canada from England during this period, and many Black women from the Caribbean entered Canada as domestic workers. In addition, the Vietnam War had precipitated the arrival of African American men who were boycotting the U.S. Draft. Most of them came to Toronto.

I have not always stayed in Toronto. I have made forays into other cities on the North American continent and other continents as well; but always, it seems, I return to Toronto. Like many people who made their way here from every corner of the earth, it has become home. It is a second home, and in some instances, a primary home. Home should be nurturing to me. Home should be a place where I will want to hang my hat, keep my feet warm, relax, feel good. Home should not be a place where I am afraid to let my children go downtown for fear that some racist will attack them.

Home should be a place where the young can feel young and free. Home cannot feel like home for a youngster when he is regarded with suspicion by every store-owner because he is young, male, and Black. Criminals, after all, come in all shades, shapes, sizes, ages, and sexes. Just the other day, there was a major heist by a shoplifter who was female, middle-aged, and white! I feel quite certain that store-owners do not now look with suspicion at all middle-aged white women who enter their stores.

Today, more than ever, my ruminations flash back to the kinds of headlines about Black people that used to rule the day

in the 1960s. Inflammatory statements by racists made good headlines, in terms of the sale of newspapers, but they did not make for good community spirit. As a society, Toronto needs to take a hard look at what is happening here and assess it in light of what we have been and what we can continue to grow into. Aiming high requires that we place our city's race relations within the wider context of world peace.

Attitudes towards race and race relations will be the final arbiter of the development of the Toronto community. Clearly, there is a need for Toronto to ensure that as it takes giant growth-leaps spatially and demographically, it also takes corresponding giant steps in conscious human relations development and in anti-racist education and socialisation.

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Stop Calling Us "Slaves"

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I write from my heart as an African woman, born and raised until age twenty in Antigua, the Caribbean. Since leaving Antigua in 1965, I have lived in three societies, all of which exist under white cultural hegemony: Toronto, Canada; Baltimore, United States of America; and London, England. I write from the experience of living in these societies as an African woman, carrying the whole race on my shoulders. This state of being is as much a substantive part of my social reality as the body I own. It is from within my social reality and, *in particular, from within my body*, that I write this essay.

A part of the baggage I have accumulated in the lived experience in three white-dominated societies is the weight of the word "slave." Living in these societies, it seems to come with the race...filling up the space for the definition of my ancestors...taking me over...making me "slave"! no matter what I do..."slave"! no matter who I say I am..."slave"! no matter what other words I use to define myself..."slave"! no matter what other actions I carry out in this other time, in this day and age.

Now, today, I state that I am an African woman who is releasing the word "slave"! For it is merely the expression of a relationship which my ancestors forcibly entered into and experienced at the hands of, to quote my mother, "the white people." And I note here, but will return to it later, that my mother never referred to "the white people" as "the slave-owners,"

nor did she refer to the African people as "the slaves."

I think that the issue of the slaves deeply affects the psyche of African people in the Diaspora. Recently, when I delivered a version of this essay to a largely African audience, the response was palpable. Many young adults and older men and women (who, to use the Antiguan way of saying it, "have some good age"), spoke of the feelings of shame they experience when "the slaves" are spoken of in the academy. For the heinous crimes committed against African peoples are not analysed and brought to light. Hence, there is no salvation for the psyche of a people brought to their knees and placed in the *condition* of slavery. They told of having to assert themselves, so as not to feel powerless and weak, when their ancestors are referred to as "the slaves." This is a *given* with which they grapple in classroom discussions about the making of the 'New World.' They feel that other racial and ethnic groups hear themselves defined as who they are: whites, Chinese, Indians, Caribs, Arawaks. African people, on the other hand, are merely referred to as "the slaves."[1]

At that same panel discussion, parents expressed the need to respond to their children's angst. They felt that it was important for them to be able to discuss the *condition* of slavery without feeling such a great sense of shame. Their children need to know who they are so that they can reclaim themselves in the curriculum. The term "the slaves" as the name for their ancestors effectively silences them.

The very word "slave" conjures up for me a spectre that is a robust and close-close memory. I am after all, 'fresh out of slavery.' In my way of counting memory, 1998 is not so far from 1868, the year of the final abolition of slavery.[2] My father was born in 1899 and his grandmother had lived life in the *condition* of slavery. So writing and speaking about this is a kind of journey for me: a journey of reclamation, of retrieval. I embrace it and undertake it (or "overtake," to state it in a Rastafari re-shaping of the action, first claimed in the re-shaping of the word). I see the writing of this essay as a part of my personal

commitment to struggle, marronage,[3] resistance, and revolt.

So in my journeying, I say that it bothers me that my African ancestors, whose own journey to the 'New World' took place in captivity, are referred to only as "the slaves." The reference appears everywhere: in the culture, in the academy, in the cultural hegemony in which I do life. Whenever I hear it, read it, or almost say it myself, I must stop short and address it. I do so even if, at the time, the appropriate place for raising the issue of the slaves is only in my own mind.

"Africans!" I assert, as if my assertion, the figurative stamping of my foot, (or even stamping my foot literally), will change things. I think it can and does, because I remember what it took for African peoples to declare that they did not want to be called "coloured" or "Negro" any more. That action was a stamping of the foot and it took place at all levels of society.

When you want to override a bad file on a computer disc, you can simply reformat the disk. That is what my journeying in this essay is about: reformatting the language disk altogether. I do so believing that the very stamping of my foot asserts "African" over the word "slave." It is an act to reclaim my ancestors' African selves, overriding the concept of exchanging their race definition for the word "slave."

The word "slave" is, after all, merely a common noun, used to describe a state of being in the material constructs of the world. Certainly, it is not descriptive of who my ancestors deemed themselves to be, as a people. I see immense implications in this. If I blindly accept and use the term "slave" or "the slaves," I am missing links that could help me to connect with my ancestral memory. Some of that memory (and I always like Toni Morrison's term "rememory" to describe this reclamation)... some of that rememory contains the very capacity to stamp my foot. So when I stamp my foot, I reclaim and connect (and re-connect) with my ancestors' African selves. For their selfhood has been allowed to slide into the belly of the word "slave." And it hangs me up in there psychologically with them.

With the use of that small yet large-large word, "slave," gone

is my ancestry from the universe! And with it has gone my capacity to sustain a connection, carry out an invocation of its awesome power: the power that enabled Africans to resist enslavement, and by resisting, survive.

No one stops, every time they use the word "slave," to add qualifiers to the definition. Nor does anyone stop to explain that "slave" is the *condition* and not the *race*. Clearly, that would be clumsy and unwieldy. Just as I reject and override "coloured" and "Negro" by stamping my foot, I reject and override "slave." I also reject and override the term "ex-slave," demanding of myself the creativity to construct a passage through this journey of language. Other words that would come under examination are: "slave culture," "slave society," and "slave children"... in other words, all areas where "slave" is used instead of African. There is no place for argument, in my view, when it comes to my claiming my racial definition. That cannot be a matter that is up for debate.

I see it is an act of marronage to refuse to accept this piece of plantocracy which still imposes itself on me. At first, that refusal takes place in my head. I am encouraged that recently, a colleague, Afua Cooper, organised a panel discussion at the University of Toronto entitled "Talking About Slavery." At the panel, a discussion took place about the use of the word "slave." I see that in itself as an act of marronnage. For it presents a challenge to academics, students and professors alike, to explore issues concerning the location of the word "slave" within the politics of language. I think that continuing to use the planter's economic and social relationship with my people to define *them* and by extension, *me* and everyone like *me*, has become the norm. I see this daily, in my lived experience, and not just in schools and universities.

Once, years ago, a white co-worker said to me, "I worked like a slave today. Oops, sorry Althea!" Shock rippled through me. When I gathered myself together — the self that I like to call my Bolans Village-Antigua-reclaimed-from-my-mother-self — I asked: "Why are you apologising to me?" He looked puzzled. I

was also puzzled. My response was from my gut. I had not worked it out in my head then, but I knew that he used "slave" as a misnomer for my ancestors, and for my race as a whole, always and forevermore. And I did not like it one bit. There was no 'S' on my forehead.

In graduate school in Baltimore, a Nigerian colleague, seeking to be insulting, told me one day that African-Caribbean people ought to be ashamed that they were the descendants of slaves. I retorted that I thought it was much more shameful - and that he ought to feel ashamed — that his people had sold my people into slavery. I hasten to add that this was in 1973. At that time I had read only a little about the realities of the movement of African peoples to the 'New World.' In retrospect, I think that, like my Nigerian colleague, I demonstrated that a little knowledge is a bad thing. But I mention it here to underscore the observation that the word "slave" has become internalised as a shameful thing. In my view, the shame is more appropriately located in the laps of some white people, as the descendants of the people who initiated and participated in such a heinous crime against humanity. It is also clear that some African people were also engaged in the capture and sale of humans. There is shared blame and shared shame. Shame by itself, however, is not a legitimate form of social action; redress is a much more appropriate act at this time in our history.

Today, I write of African people who were enslaved in the 'New World' in many different ways; but I never just write the word "slave" or "the slaves" when I can write something like "enslaved Africans," or simply "Africans" or "African people." It is worth the extra effort to me. For in carrying out the tangible overriding of a non-racial category, I feel as if I am doing some sort of cleansing, some shedding of damaging psychological baggage.

When I reclaim my race by name, I embrace much more than the name: I reclaim the *real* Africa in me, connected to those who went before me, those who enabled my being here. I think that it is appropriate to acknowledge these people by call-

ing them by their rightful name: "Africans." In my view, that is their race definition. I believe that their having enabled my being here came out of their retention of who they were as Africans. That is a thing worthy of celebration. And I would be delighted to honour them and thank them every year on dates that make sense, in terms of our history.

The practise of denying a people their ancestry amounts to psychological bullying. In other words, it asserts that 'might makes right,' even in terms of deciding how people are to be defined and categorised. A powerful white elite which refers to the economic-class of its forebears as "the slave owners" over and over again, is sending a clear message. At the level at which language penetrates the consciousness of whites, these are powerful affirmations. Just so too, it penetrates the consciousness of Blacks. There is much work to be done.

I always felt sure that no one would refer to Toussaint L'Ouverture (the leader of the Haitian Revolution of 1791) as a "slave." And King Court of Antigua, who with his comrade, Tom Boy, developed a masterful plan to eliminate slavery on that island by killing all of the white people while they were attending the governor's ball... no one would refer to them as "the slaves," would they? And what of Jamaican Maroon warrior Queen Mother Nanny? Do we think of her as a "slave" too? Therefore it is a disappointment that in C.L.R. James's definitive work on the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, he refers to the revolutionaries who carried out that most successful African peoples' revolt against slavery in the New World as "the African slaves."[4]

A recent edition of *Ebony* magazine announced an art exhibition in the United States which included some paintings of Toussaint L'Ouverture. And sure enough, there it was again: "Toussaint L'Ouverture... the Haitian slave who liberated his island-nation is featured in the 41-panel Toussaint L'Ouverture series." Here though, he is "Haitian" as well as "slave."

But then, thankfully, there is my late mother, and all like her. She was a storyteller and she referred in her stories to the peri-

od of captivity which her ancestors endured in Antigua as "slavery-days." She spoke of her "generation," which is the Antiguan term for one's extended family and ancestors; she never used the word "slave." For the *collectivity*, she said: "the people." She did not even have the problem with which I am grappling: her people are her "generation" and the African population is "the people." She referred to the planter class as "the white people," never the "slave-owners."

I was humbled before this truth when I saw it late-late in my life. I remember that during my neophyte Black Power days, I went to Antigua on a holiday and dared to try to put my mother straight about who she was. "You are African" I told her, my passion bristling in my well-picked out Afro'd hair and my African clothes. My mother, unlike me, had spent her formative years in the psychologically affirming environment of Bolans Village, Antigua, and had never lived anywhere but in a predominantly African society in several Caribbean islands.

"That is *your* business," she said. Then she added proudly: "I am a West Indian," barely raising her voice and not even gracing me with a look.[5] Then she drew herself up to her most regal stance and said: "In fact, I am a born Antiguan from Bolans Village." That was all she said, yet I realised that I had received the simplest and best treatment of history, identity, and demography that I had ever heard. I understood then that the reason the issue of my African self was a burning concern for me was because I lived in Canada, in a white cultural hegemony. It had never been an issue for my mother, given the *particular* within which she *did life*.

Indeed, it was *my* business, in a way that it had not needed to be *hers*. For *she* had not immigrated to Canada as *I* had. *She* had not had to define herself within the cultural hegemony of the Other, as *I* was in the process of doing. *She* did not have to endure the word "slave" like a brand on her forehead in a sea of whiteness. There was no "S" on *her* forehead! Speaking from within a world which did not include this issue, her African self was a given. She could afford then, to locate herself within her

particular ethnicity and geography. She had no need to highlight a pan-African sensibility. It was submerged in the simple term "the people."

"Slave" she was not, nor were her "generation" for that matter. To her, they were "born" West Indians, Antiguans, from Bolans Village, some of "the people," different from and in opposition to "the white people." And "slavery-days" was a *historical moment* in their lives. They forged an identity based on who they knew themselves to be. Even today, I see nothing slave-like in that identity.

In Toronto, I watch a beautifully crafted historical vignette on television. It chronicles Harriet Tubman's power and courage, rescuing African people from enslavement in the American South. 'Good food for the souls of Black folk,' I think. Then it comes: the voice-over says that the "slaves" travelled on the Underground Railroad to safety in Canada. I shout "Africans!" at the television screen, as if anyone can hear me. I think of the irony of the symbolism: the futility of hurling words at the television set and of the insidious nature of the word "slave." I think of how simply and quickly the nature of the African is submerged into this amorphous, inglorious word, "slave," and how this word has come to have the implicit code "African" submerged in it.

I ask myself, 'What happened to the African selves of these *African* people who had travelled on the Underground Railroad?' It was African people, manifesting collective action, who carried out such a dangerous journey. Their behaviour was entirely unlike that of "slaves."

I keep uppermost in my mind that "slave" refers to a *thing, chattel, livestock.* African people's resistance to slavery shows that they never collectively accepted white people's definition of them as chattel. They never exchanged their ancestry, nor their sense of who they were, for the persona of "slave." Revolts against plantation slavery show us that.

Story tells us that too. For in African people's early Story, we see the revolutionary and subversive reconstructing of the self

in the hegemony of the plantation system. It is clear in Story that African people did not take possession of the definition of "slave," except in ironic usage. They did not include it in the epistemological underpinnings of their lives. Their attention to "slave" was only in the definition of the relationship in the plantation system between the two production units: the owners of the production machinery (the plantation owners, or the white people) and the people whose labour ran the machinery (the Africans, or "the people," as my mother referred to them). The very reconstruction of power that is present in African people's Story tells us that they had existentially reclaimed their organic mind, overriding the position in which the *condition* of slavery had located them.

They showed too, in the way they 'did life,' that they had an identity which was forged by *them*, in *their* mould. This was not a "slave" identity, but an African identity. This identity is what provided the fuel for journeying on the "railroads" out of slavery, be they "underground," above ground, by sea, or in the mind.

Language is everything. When I write stories about African children in Antigua which are set during slavery-days, I do not call the children "slaves," or worse yet, "slave-children." This is not because I seek to deny the *historical moment* of slavery, but because my concern is with the children's dreams, hopes, fears, and joys as human beings. I am concerned to present the lived experiences of *African* human beings, albeit located within the objective realities of the *condition* of slavery. The *condition of slavery* is the thing that they transcend in my stories, in order to connect with their humanity and their African and Antiguan selves.

Toussaint, wonderful revolutionary that he was, understood this method. The Haitian Revolution was carried out by African people who transcended the psychology of "slave" to act on the desire to be free, to be human, to reject the *condition* of slavery. This was the same thing that the poor white people had done two years earlier in France, the country which owned San Domingue.

So concerning the issue of the slaves: I tell African youth

who have their close ancestral memory in the "New World," (that is: the Caribbean and/or North America), that we are of African descent. They are the descendants of African people who lived a period of their history in enslavement. Their persona is comprised of a complex set of parts (and they become more complex as world culture becomes a reality), created within a predominantly African view of the world. That is not up for debate. That is a *given*. It is who I say I am.

It is those composite parts, struck within that predominantly African view of the world, that I see in my make-up. I see nothing slave-like in my view of the world, nor in my identity; except perhaps in a ferocious commitment to achieving equal access to life chances for African people. And this commitment is a political response to the *condition* of slavery and the *institution* of slavery and its aftermath. It is not a racial or ethnic definition of my ancestral memory.

I want to reach for a deeper understanding of all that is encompassed in what my mother meant when she said "That is *your* business!" I see the issue of "the slaves" as a part of *my* business. I am aware that redress — in the context of all forms of the physical and psychological genocide of any people, and in particular, African peoples — takes time and energy. I must add that it is not necessary that we create myths to dispel the first myths. All that is necessary is that we decide to take the heart and the time to tell the recorded truth. And then we must speak it in all spaces where learning takes place. This is an act of humanity, not political expediency. It is everyone's work, not just that of African peoples.

I look at the Greeks as an example of a people who experienced slavery and who have not had their identity sublimated in the word "slave."[6] They are not forevermore, generation after generation, doomed to be referred to as the descendants of "the slaves." They are, however, credited with a number of intellectual achievements... and even some borrowed from Africa. In my view, this is a telling example of the politics of language and cultural hegemony.

I am encouraged by African people's capacity to re-invent themselves, using their own terms of reference. After all, we *do* know who we are. I believe that it is liberating to carry out these kinds of archaeological digs into the psyche: a journeying, a renewal, a reasoning. Even if all that is accomplished is the generation of epistemological libations for the souls of Black people, it is enough.

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Part 2
Institutions

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Black Like I And I

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In November 1998, a symposium was held at York University to discuss a centre for the study of Black cultures in Canada. Unfortunately, this symposium coincided and clashed with a Caribbean Religions Project Conference, which had attracted delegates from around the world.

The headline on the front page of the York University Faculty Gazette screamed at me: "Black Canadian Studies the Focus of Symposium." A flier for the Symposium said that the focus was: "The Work To Be Done."

I was reminded of Kamau Brathwaite's observation that Black people like to repeat history.[1] I was thrown back to 1969 when I was one of six Black students at York. There were few courses which included the Black world and there were four Black professors. By 1973 when I graduated, there were over two hundred of us and the Black faculty had swelled to ten.

This handful of students and faculty established a Black presence at York in several important ways. Then, 'the work to be done' was building and maintaining *community*. This included the establishment of an African Studies Programme, and a Caribbean Studies Programme, the creation of a Black People's Movement, embracing students, support staff and faculty, and the creation of a counter-calendar, which evaluated faculty and courses specifically in terms of their treatment of race and African peoples.

There was a sense that this was only the beginning, as we were starry-eyed idealists who believed in *permanent revolution.*

Twenty-five years later, I sat, uninvited, in a room in Atkinson College, listening to people speak as if nothing had taken place! There was no discussion of strengthening the two current programmes which deal with Black people and how they could be incorporated into this entre or the tudy of Black ultures in Canada. The symposium appeared to be starting from scratch. I felt a sense of despair: we were continuing to ignore and therefore repeat history. How soon we forget that the way forward ought always to include some consideration of the past. It ought to be a commonplace by now that in order to fully embrace the gift of the present, we need to have a sense of the past.

Why were those who had been around York University for such a long time not included on the panel? I had not even had the courtesy, like my colleagues, of an e-mail note inviting me to attend. As the only Black woman teaching at York (not including a Black woman at Osgoode Law School), I had not even been apprised of the idea of creating a centre for Black Studies. Yet, I am Black and my academic work is on African-Canadian fiction.

I understand that a centre for Black Studies had been under discussion for two years, yet it was outlined in the York Gazette by a lone white faculty member. What, I wondered, had stopped the continuum of community, so diligently created during those early years at York? As I listened to post-modernist visions of the work to be done, I felt the notion of blackness as intellectual inquiry slip to some ethereal dimension. By the time I heard a presentation by a Black graduate student at York, I was seriously concerned. He decried the efforts of people of his father's generation for having focused on acquiring mainstream accolades, for having had their "eye on the prize." Yet that generation's efforts produced the programmes that now make places like York palatable for his generation. His comments, like many others at this gathering, suggested that nothing had gone before. This is so far from the truth that it defies the imagination.

I felt as a blessing the voice of another Black graduate student. He encouraged Black people to acquire academic excellence and to push for more appointments of Black faculty. He also suggested that the study of Black Canadians ought to be included in the curriculum. Another speaker gave a heartfelt paper about the need to recognise the non-fiction writing of African-Canadians. She cautioned that the exclusionary nature of the white canon ignores this writing. I appreciated it when a visiting writer/professor of African-Caribbean background voiced his concern about multiculturalism. However, multiculturalism is something that African Canadians (including those in the academy) have long put to rest, buried, and sung hymns over. I could not blame him for not knowing this (he resides in the U.S.), but someone ought to have told him so that he could have been spared re-inventing this wheel.

I write now, seeking to locate the Black presence and community at York University within some larger historical context than that which I observed and heard at the Symposium. My comments will not cover the whole event over in a blanket of praise and glory. I am documenting and not praise-making. For it is not the lack of recognition of events and people that is my concern. I write about a part of our history that is largely unrecorded.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw unprecedented community work in Toronto. Black students from York University, the University of Toronto, and Ryerson Polytechnical Institution contributed much time and energy to this work. The already-established African Canadian community and the African Canadian faculty provided leadership and historical grounding.

Horace Campbell, a former York University student and, at the time, a graduate student at the University of Toronto, is to be credited with the creation of the Black Students' Union at the University of Toronto and the Black People's Movement at York University. He also initiated the Transitional Year Programme at the University of Toronto and the Black Education Project, an after-school tutoring programme for

African Canadian children. Selwyn Henry, who was then a student at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, worked with him in the design and implementation of this latter project.

The African Canadian faculty, people like Selwyn Ryan, Keith Ellis, and Ato Sekyi-Otu, enabled all of this work. Some of them also volunteered as tutors. Years later, an African Canadian Faculty member, Dr. Fred Case, initiated and brought into being the Caribbean Studies Programme at the University of Toronto.

Always, the objective of the African Canadian faculty was the inclusion of African peoples in the curriculum. This was true at both Toronto-area universities and in other social and educational institutions in the community.

As students, we saw ourselves charged, as did the African Canadian faculty, with a political mission and responsibility for *community*. Hence, our work moved outside of the academy to include the tutoring of African Canadian children, as well as the running of a Summer Day Camp. At its highest point, The Black Education Project took over two hundred children on trips to the African-Canadian communities in Chatham and North Buxton, and to a Nation of Islam Mosque in Buffalo. We also visited African Canadian parents in their homes and African Canadian Pastors and Ministers in their churches.

Although the echoes of the Black Power Movement in the U.S. were only dimly heard in Toronto, members of the Black Panther Party were brought to speak at York University. Other speakers included Rocky Jones, Kamau Brathwaite, C.L.R. James, Stokeley Carmichael, Paule Marshall, and Andrew Salkey. We focused on our situation as Black people who were *doing life* in a white cultural hegemony. Pan-Africanism was the wider, global context for the building of *community* and making spaces for us in the academy and in the society. Marches and demonstrations about the atrocities perpetrated against African peoples were a regular part of our lives. We made links with similar struggles internationally and throughout Canada.

I view the Congress of Black Writers held in Montreal in

1968 as a precursor to this period. In attendance were people who had either already carried out, or would later initiate, social change. Among the list of attendees, speakers, and organisers were: Stokeley Carmichael, Rosie Douglas, C.L.R. James, Miriam Makeba, Alfie Roberts, and Walter Rodney.

The Congress was a defining moment in the political education of many young African Canadian people. My consciousness, awakened by Malcolm X and the Black Muslims, was informed by the unending and unerring wisdom of C.L.R. James, coupled with the fire that leapt from Stokeley's tongue. Walter Rodney's work on Africa and on the Rastafari, are legendary tomes.[2]

Stokeley Carmichael urged us to attend universities, even though they were run by 'the man' and to "get A's!" A number of us left that conference with our hair no longer straightened and our minds charged with the fire of revolution. We also set about acquiring academic excellence. It was no surprise that we pushed the European-centred curriculum to yield to include us. My generation also bonded with the Elders of the African-Canadian community who nurtured and cared for us, intellectually, spiritually, and physically.

The African American Progressive Association was an early part of our political education. So too was The Universal African Improvement Association (then U.N.I.A.), also called "The Marcus Garvey Organisation." Here I witnessed the African-Canadian concept of *community* at work.

The Home Service Association under the guidance and leadership of Elders in the African-Canadian community was another place of respite. We returned to these organisations and African-Canadian Elders again and again, battle-worn from facing down racism in our daily lives. And they would pass on wisdom and lick our wounds into healing, so that we could go forward again.

So we went to university. We saw ourselves as agents of change. We did not notice that we were makers of history. We made a pact not to attend our graduations, nor did we allow our-

selves to be photographed to adorn the hallowed white halls of our academic experience. That experience had been fraught with struggles over curriculum, agency, and a host of issues swirling in the bed of overt and covert racism.

Certainly, we were young and naive enough not to think that our lives would be interesting to anyone: not even to ourselves. We were also suspicious of the media. So we did what was to be done, simply because it was there to be done.

This has meant, however, that twenty-five years later, a whole body of work is being interpreted without a sense of historical consciousness. African Canadian academics are thus described in an article in *NOW Magazine*, as people who "wield little political clout in shaping the African-Canadian agenda."

The article also contains a quote from an African Canadian academic, who states: "Their (African Canadian academics) roles in the 60s centred around fighting racism, naturally, but that's changing."[3] This interpretation of the way things were and are sounds as if "racism" is some bogey man whose threat has been outlived. In my view, the bogey man has simply gone underground and undercover.

What serves me best now is the memory of African Canadian academics' sense of collective responsibility for "the work to be done." The faculty did nothing individually, nor in a vacuum. As students, we did nothing individually, nor in a vacuum. We did nothing without consulting and reasoning with each other about putting the best political foot forward. We certainly did not, nor did the African Canadian faculty, give over the announcement of our work into the hands of a lone white colleague; no matter how much we might have respected her/him. We had white allies, but that is what they were: allies, and not designers and/or announcers of our struggle and of our intellectual vision.

In addition, carrying out a symposium without the voices and presence of the Elders in the community (and by community here, I refer to the York University African Canadian faculty community in particular) is another abomination which

cannot go unnoticed. And with my renewed understanding of the mis-interpretation and mis-use of history, nor should it go unrecorded.

I think that it is fortunate that George Elliott Clarke (a senior scholar of African-Canadian history and culture), did not attend the symposium. It was announced that he cancelled because of another engagement in Montreal. His presence would have lent credibility to the whole venture. That, in my view, would have been sad. For I have no doubt that his would have been a strong, clear voice on "the work to be done," located within a wider Canadian and even North American landscape.

I say without shame that I wallowed in my discontent. I did not wish to settle for others *shaping* us, speaking *about* us, *for* us, as if we have no voice. None of the speakers had been engaged in the development of African Canadian *community* at York University. The venture had no centre. The venture had no heart. The venture had no historical sensibility. When, I wondered, would "things fall apart"?

In my view, "the work to be done" can only be seriously contemplated by working with that which is already known and established. The alternative is to leap from the edge of a precipice, saying: "Look Ma! No hands!" In any venture, you must first know and take stock of *the ground*; unless you intend to have an *adventure*.

An important historical fact is that African Canadian academics have taken their public intellectual roles seriously. They have consistently taken and continue to take an active part in shaping the African-Canadian agenda. Their strength lies in their commitment to academic excellence and to continuity of community. It strikes me then as a given that any discussion about a centre for Black Studies needs to respect, by inclusion, the African Canadian faculty.

A discussion about inclusiveness versus ghettoisation is crucial, given that the *community* has worked so hard and long for inclusiveness. There is, after all, a *community* in whose name all of this is being done. It seems to me that such a discussion

amongst us would have been a precursor to any Symposium which speaks of a centre for Black Studies as a 'given.' Without this, there is a lack of historical consciousness, and thus, a lack of continuity — the backbone of any venture.

Describing the earlier generation's work as "fighting racism" cannot simply be left dangling on a page. That "fight" included the opening up of spaces, allowing for the increased appointment of African Canadian faculty. The African Canadian faculty also continue to impact on the design, content, and delivery of curriculum. Their work has a direct correlation with the increase in the numbers of African Canadian students in the university and important shifts in the curriculum. And this work is by no means done.

The *issue* might have been racism, but the result is that "the African-Canadian agenda" has been impacted on strongly by African Canadian academics. They also continue to work as public intellectuals, albeit, without fanfare.

And so I am left with these things. It would have been a good idea to first hold in-house *community* meetings among the African Canadian faculty at York and the African Canadian student body as a whole. Having been a contract faculty member since 1992, and not having been invited to any such meetings, I can only conclude that they have never occurred. And if they have occurred and I was not invited to them, then things are even worse than I think they are.

It is a travesty of respect for our *community*, that the single voice on this topic on the front page of the York faculty *Gazette* was that of a white faculty member. I wonder how Jewish Studies or India Studies would 'fly,' if I were to have been the lone voice in the *Gazette*, outlining a major thrust in the study of their people? I feel sure that even if I had been teaching a course about them, someone would ask me to respect their *community* and their people.

In my view, 'blackness' is being treated as an 'object' in the construction of hegemony. The future appears to be shaped from outside of us, from within the bland context of things

being "different now." They do not seem so different to me. I am still having to write about the danger of being colonised. It feels disgraceful to have the study of African-Canadians handed over on a platter to the service of an agenda in which all of us are not participating. It is as if the collective voice, by exclusion, is herded to the rear.

Thankfully, I do not feel the need to be silent in the service of the tyranny of 'blackness.' Black is not an ideology; it is the colour of skin. So when 'blackness' is being "shaped," I ask: "whose blackness, in what historical context, in whose eyes, and to what end?" I need to know these things. And I use "I" not in its singular subject version, but with the inclusivity of "I and I." Our Rastafari brethren and sistren have come to "overstand" in their "livity," all that is contained therein.[4]

After all is said and done, nothing has changed. "I and I" still having to shout down Babylon, no matter in what colour and shape it presents itself.

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Black History Month

Or, Have-Black-History-Month-Kit-Will-Travel

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Many self-respecting African Canadian educators, artists, parents, and children - many of us have participated in it: the 'Great Canadian Multicultural Myth,' first called "Black History Week," then later, "Black History Month," and sometimes "African History Month." We do it in the name of community and history, for our children, for ourselves, and for our society. We want to see our faces, hear our voices, read our words, and speak them. We want our children to do those things too.

We seize opportunities to share who we are, explore where we came from, and discuss where we are going. Black History Week was a time when such a space would be opened. Black History Month showed progress, some people thought, even though it is the coldest and shortest month of the year: twenty-eight whole days (and twenty-nine in each leap year).

So, during this shortest, coldest month of the year, many of us educators and artists traverse the land bringing "Black History Month" to schools, libraries, community centres, churches, and universities - anywhere and everywhere.

How do we transport Black history with such agility? It's sort of "Have-Black-History-Month-Kit-Will-Travel;" and travel we do. One February, I wore out a pair of boots and a pair of running shoes. But we press on, because it's all we've got; and didn't our parents teach us not to fly in the face of our good?

Once, it was suggested that instead of reading from my

children's book, that I read a story from a collection of Anansi stories collected in Haiti by someone with an eastern-European-sort-of-name.[1] The librarian who thrust the book at me mumbled something about none of the children being Black and that all children were able to understand Anansi. She also mumbled that they were going to have "difficulty" with my children's book.

I did not reach out my hand for the questionable Anansi collection. I had been brought to the school as a children's author and was ready to read from one of my books, which was set in nineteenth-century Antigua. As had been pre-arranged with the principal, the children had already read the book. From somewhere in the depths of my soul, I found my mother's Bolans-Village-Antigua-power. I opened my briefcase, took out my own books and asked politely, "Where shall I sit for the storytelling session?"

I won the unspoken battle. I list it among my personal struggles for a more inclusive cultural vision. I should add that the storytelling session went extremely well. Not only did the children have no trouble with the book, they asked if I could tell them another story. Their teachers also invited me to come back for next year's Black History Month. I agreed, smiling. Inside, my weary heart thought, "When will it end?"

I tell this little tale to dramatise the point that the Black-History-Month-Kit demands great flexibility. Given the opportunity, teachers and librarians can, at will, dictate their own vision of Black History Month.

Clearly, the history of African Canadian peoples needs to be dealt with in the schools. A special month is not the way. An inclusive curriculum is not only desirable, but clamours to be developed. It feels sometimes as if we are in a bind. For if we continue to enable the *ghettoised* version of our history as a people, allowing it to be relegated to one month, then we are complicit in the perpetuation of a hegemony that denies our existence. Yet if we do not take this Black History Month crumb that is offered, we may find that our children, and all children

for that matter, have no access to even this *ghettoised* version of the history of African peoples.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian political activist and theorist, writing while in prison between 1929 and his death in 1937, used the term *egemonia* (hegemony) to describe the pervasive cultural domination exerted by a ruling power bloc.[2] In Gramsci's view, domination is exercised through popular consensus-building as well as by physical coercion (or threat of it). This is especially so in advanced capitalist countries where education, the media, law, and mass culture take on this role. Gramsci also argued that in order to challenge existing power relations, oppressed groups need to struggle on the cultural level as well as on the economic and political levels. The dominant "consensus" needs to be challenged by the building of an inclusive counter-hegemonic ideology, which reflects more honestly the experiences of the majority. African Canadians' historical reality would then surface and be included in the overall vision that determines the history curriculum.

The fact that the history of African peoples is hardly included in school curricula is an example of how cultural hegemony operates in the Canadian school system. I say these things in as bold a way as I can, for I observe that to be heard we sometimes have to be blunt.

I would like to illustrate the notion of cultural hegemony by using the metaphor of a giant umbrella which reaches over us. We languish under the guise of this "multicultural" umbrella and we suffer. For multiculturalism suggests equality in the plurality of cultures that exist in Canada, and thus serves as the mechanism under which some groups in the society are denied access to real power. In this case, we are looking at the unequal distribution of power as it is manifested in that most important social institution: the school. The umbrella, disguised as shelter, is actually a control mechanism. Nothing is exempt. All the way through the school system, up to and including the last year of high school, Black children do not find themselves and their people in the curriculum.

Groups seeking shelter under this kind of oppressive umbrella soon find that there is no shelter. What is to be had under the seeming shelter of the umbrella is in fact oppressive cultural hegemony. History = their history. That is, the historical interpretation of the dominant group. In the context of this discussion, Black history = Have-Black-History-Month-Kit-Will-Travel.

If we accept Gramsci's notion of "hegemony" we recognise that there is a meaningful distinction to be made between "hegemony" and "direct domination." Subordinate groups can be oppressed through coercive cultural policies and practices just as effectively as by such state mechanisms as the police and the army. To challenge the dominant order, oppressed groups need to come to an understanding of themselves, their past, and their social and political rights. They need to do this by creating an inclusive, counter-hegemonic culture.

In my view, the Gramscian concept of hegemony is useful for African people living in Canada. I want to suggest that we challenge the hegemonic 'umbrella' by constructing a counter-hegemonic culture in the schools. We can do this, in part, through insisting on the creation and utilisation of an inclusive curriculum which enables us to read about us, speak about us, and hear our own words in what is taught to children. Not just our children, but all children.

Again, here is a point made by Gramsci about the emergence of a new *transformative* cultural vision, a new potential "hegemony" created from below, which is useful for this discussion. He writes:

> it must be stressed that the political development of the concept of hegemony represents a great philosophical advance as well as a politico-practical one. For it necessarily supposes an intellectual unity and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense and has become, if only within narrow limits, a critical conception.[3]

I am suggesting a marriage between theory and praxis. Any step taken theoretically must have a matching step made in the practical realm of 'the real;' in this case, the school. We understand, theoretically and philosophically, the need to have wholeness in school curricula. It is not only African Canadian children who get cheated by a curriculum in which they are not included. All children suffer from this distorted interpretation of history. Clearly, a curriculum which adequately includes African peoples would enhance the intellectual understanding of all children who participate in the educational process. This is simple common sense, requiring no large-scale treatise. However, with the umbrella principle in full operation, it is necessary for us, as African Canadian intellectuals, to spell out the problems for our children and for all children that are created by a one-dimensional curriculum.

Children are in the process of 'becoming.' If we accept this, we understand that to facilitate that process, education and educators have a responsibility to provide whole concepts and not partial concepts, whole 'stories' and not one-dimensional 'stories,' whole history and not partial history. Again, I refer to Gramsci:

> man's nature is "history"... if history is given the meaning of "becoming" in a concordia discors which does not destroy unity but contains within itself grounds for a possible unity. Therefore 'human nature' is not to be found in any one particular man but in the whole history of mankind (and the fact that we naturally use the word "kind" is significant), while in each single individual are found characteristics of other individuals.[4]

We can forgive Gramsci his use of the words "man" and "men" to signify human beings, writing as he was before the advent of feminism. We can move beyond this to hear the ways in which his words resonate with the business of history and epistemology and pedagogy. The historical development of peoples of the

world, their differences, their similarities, their relationships with each other over time, are all important conceptual understandings to which children need access.

In order not to repeat historical mistakes, historical atrocities, historical oppression, and historical crimes of peoples' inhumanity to other peoples, it is important to break this down into "common-a-garden-talk" so children can understand the rhythm of world historical events. It is necessary for children to understand why Europe carved up Africa. The spread and greed of European capitalism, complete with the criminal activity of annexing others' land, people, and resources — all of this will be understood by children if it is taught with an enlightened humanistic commitment to historical truth.

It is necessary also for children to know that Africans resisted their domination. This truth is embodied in people like Queen Nzinga of Angola, who spearheaded her army against the invading Portuguese; the market women of Nigeria who waged 'The Women's War' against British colonial government agents; and Chaka, king of the Zulu, who received the British with outrage, coupled with brilliant and effective tactics of war and resistance against his people's domination. It is similarly important for children in Canada to know that African people's resistance to their enslavement in eighteenth-century Jamaica brought the first large numbers of Africans to Nova Scotia.

The list is never-ending. So much truth is covered under the umbrella's smothering hegemony, that to redefine it, to mend it, requires the skill and dexterity of an Antiguan patchwork-maker. I speak here not of multicultural 'ethnic' demonstrations, but rather, of a conscious, conscientious inclusive curriculum. The Antiguan patchwork does not ghettoise any piece of fabric, relegating it to an obscure corner; rather, it ensures that all pieces of fabric have full display, because they are all parts of the whole design.

This kind of story-making, this kind of wholeness of history, would, in fact, be liberating for all of us in Canadian society. For we would see ourselves adequately portrayed in the fabric of

society. The careful logic with which the Antiguan patchwork is created would be represented by the epistemological underpinnings of the curriculum. The pedagogical method is the enabling mechanism, much like the thread and the border which hold the patchwork together.

Sometimes, the Black History Month Kit makes me shake with fear and trembling, afraid for us all as human beings. I have listened to distortions of Martin Luther King as an icon of all that we need to do, hear, and say. I watch Malcolm X being ignored by the status quo because of his early rhetoric, taken out of its historical context, and detached from his later and much more radical political theory that understood class consciousness to be an issue for all races. The danger in this theoretical position is that it has the capacity of uniting the under-classes of American (and Canadian) society. Children need to be taught about King, Malcolm, Mahatma Ghandi, Fidel Castro, and Che Geuvara in the same breath, representing as they do, different responses to the same oppression. Understanding these political theorists and political actors could have far-reaching implications for all children. The decision about what constitutes a hero or heroine, and how he or she is interpreted and presented to children, is again made through the lens of the dominant group, operating out of the powerful position of having control over the fabric of the umbrella.

Hence, the librarian could dare to suggest that an Anansi story would be more acceptable to the children than a story set in nineteenth-century Antigua. Even Black History Month receives censorship, for its truth is not always palatable to the dominant group. Martin Luther King is presented as a hero and Malcolm X is not. Taken to its logical conclusion, this makes a parody of the whole notion of "Black History."

One day, I overheard a white child sing "Oh Canada, we stand on God for thee" instead of "We stand on guard for thee." I smiled inwardly. I have never forgotten that childish voice, raised in a high-pitched treble, reaffirming what we, springing as we do from Fanon's hordes of wretched masses, experience as

reality. For to deny people their real place in historical recounting, in story-making, is indeed to "stand on God."

I am reminded of that child's voice, too, whenever I hear adult voices saying, "If you don't like it here, then leave." Usually these voices are suggesting that if what people see in the weave of the umbrella is not to their liking, they ought to go back to "wherever they came from." For history = the history of the dominant group and African Canadian people ought to be grateful for the twenty-eight day crumbs of Black History Month. Historical distortion and exclusion are responsible for some people thinking that "here" is their preserve. I have never heard First Nations peoples ask anyone to leave — not even their oppressors, let alone other oppressed groups in the society.

Sometimes Black History Month activities are so confusing that the children themselves question their authenticity. Once as I was being introduced and waited for my turn to speak, a white teacher explained that Black people were taking this time to praise their kings and queens, their heroes and heroines. "They want their children to have a sense of Black pride," she said.

One bright little Black girl raised her hand and asked, "What is Black pride?" I was so glad that she had asked the question that I wanted to give her what Antiguans call "a big hug-up." I had no intention of speaking about 'Black pride.' In fact, I was going to tell the children an Anansi story from Bolans Village, Antigua. This particular story had been one of my early lessons in fractions, on being fair, about having integrity, and a whole host of things. None of these things were, however, about 'Black pride.' I introduced to those little children an African epistemology and an African cosmology. At no point and at no time did I speak of this nebulous thing called 'Black pride.'

I do not by any means wish to deny kings and queens their place in history. We have indeed had our share of these high-ranking people. But they are unlikely to have been the source from which we all spring. Further, what kind of class consciousness is it to teach children that to be somebody, one has to have been descended from a king and/or a queen?

These things need to be taught, not as isolated incidents in Black Heritage classes and Black History Months, distorted as icons of something called 'Black pride.' Rather, they need to be taught as parts of a whole, parts of world history. In Gramscian terms, as "links in the chain of historical development." When my daughter dared to ask for this interpretation of her people to be included for intellectual balance, her high school history teacher referred to historians who wrote such things as "a few quacks." The African experience as one of the "links in the chain of historical development" was not, in his view, a historical truth. This truth will never surface in ghettoised Black History Month Kits, just as it will not surface in the kind of curriculum which refers to Africans in the New World simply as "the slaves."

This brings me to a discussion of how the teaching of distorted history, or history isolated into a series of interpreted pieces of information, can effectively distort a peoples' whole existence. I refer to the notion of 'the slaves.' It is a non-inclusive curriculum which relegates African peoples in the New World to the category of 'the slaves.' Gone is their '*Africanness*,' gone is their cultural persona, gone is their '*rootedness*' in African soil and African race definition. All gone into the great void of 'the slaves.' For without a world historical perspective, the definition of these uprooted people is left to the interpreted piece of information that describes them only in terms of their relation to their oppressors. Saying that they had been the children of kings and queens does not wipe out the words: 'the slaves.' Historical truth alone will do that. An inclusive curriculum, dedicated to exploring the broad spectrum of world events, would of necessity continuously refer to African peoples as what and who they were and are: "African peoples." It is only to their oppressors that they were 'the slaves.' To themselves, they were and are African people.

Black History Month Kits simply cannot redress these historical distortions in one fell swoop. Twenty-eight days is not sufficient time to rewrite history. Hence, psychological *band-aid* sto-

ries of the slaves' journey on the Underground Railroad to freedom in Canada will fail every time to empower our children. Pretending that Black History Month is able to redress historical atrocities and provide succour for the souls of African Canadians is an act that the schools can no longer be allowed to practice. This is simply another multicultural myth which gives validity to the hegemony represented by the dominant class.

I am reminded that the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, passed in 1988, contains within it a clause which promises to "encourage and assist the social, cultural, economic, and political institutions of Canada to be both respectful and inclusive of Canada's multicultural character." We are not, after all, asking for anything extraordinary. It is our due. It is also common sense and wisdom.

Frantz Fanon made a similar point in *The Wretched of The Earth*. Like Gramsci, Fanon uses male-biased language, but his political analysis has significance for us. He reminds us that the way forward is a question of

> starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity.[5]

It is a fitting note on which to end.

Contextualising Cultural Festivals

Toronto's Caribana

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The word "culture" conjures up different meanings when viewed from different intellectual perspectives. Regardless of how one defines the term, it is clear that culture is created by human beings as a means of defining themselves in their particular worlds. To artists, it becomes important to have their internal dialogue externalised, so that there can be a response from other beings with whom they live and interact.

Seen within this context, a cultural festival can be a mechanism for intense social, spiritual, and political action. A cultural festival carried out in such a pleasant, joyful, self-affirming set of circumstances, can be taken as a metaphorical flower, full of fruit-bearing seeds. These seeds will germinate, creating a garden from which a plentiful harvest can be expected.

This essay is concerned then with the metaphor of the cultural festival as a flower filled with seeds that germinate at will in well-chosen soil. The efficacy of the seeds, the possibility of germination, and the richness of the soil are all equally important. For as few seeds as possible can be allowed to fall on barren ground. The whole process is of necessity highly dependent on those who sow the seeds, as the planting and harvesting cannot be casual exercises.

The sowers of the seeds are those artists who harness the power of the cultural festival and put it to the service of the community. They need to exercise great skill, immaculate tim-

ing, and expansive love. This will ensure that the seeds fall on fertile ground, germinate, and come to harvest.

If I were to begin this essay at a logical place, I would have opened with a discussion of the role of the artist, rather than the role of those who disseminate art. But because my task is to discuss the role of cultural festivals, I spoke first of those who work at bringing artistic creations into play in society. It is clear that if we speak from the position of the metaphoric flower spreading fruit-bearing seeds, then the artist as creator of seeds, needs to be given attention.

It is important also to discuss the milieu within which the artist creates art. Specifically, I am concerned with providing some opening for a discussion of cultural festivals which come out of the African Canadian community. It is with the echoes of the last steel-band notes and pieces of tinsel of Caribana that I carry out this exercise. It is essential to critique Caribana, not as an end in itself, but as an analytical example. Such a critique may help us to analyse Caribana's usefulness within the wider context of Canadian society in general and the Toronto community in particular.

The fact that Caribana is constructed within a distinctly Trinidadian cultural tradition is a given with which we grapple. Removed from the context of their cultural milieu, the artistic creations move through the streets of Toronto and leave as they arrived: suddenly, as objects laid out for public consumption.

I am suggesting that there is a *neutralisation* which happens to African Canadian culture during the Caribana experience. The unreflecting adoption of things frozen in time, taken out of one society and relocated in another, creates the illusion that we are what we portray during the festival. For we are handed, and we perpetuate, the illusion that the artistic *objects*, the festival *itself*, is the sum total of the conversation that we wish to have with ourselves and with our fellow citizens. The state of the consciousness of the African Canadian community is thus not reflected in the cultural festival. For clearly, that consciousness is rooted not only in the Trinidad carnival. The African

Canadian population does not have its roots solely in Trinidad. At Caribana, African Canadians may be left with the sense that their ethnicity has been misrepresented, or 'ripped off.'

I am describing a cultural festival which is self-consciously carnival as opposed to being self-consciously African Canadian. A consciously carnival cultural festival sits *neutralised*, *reified*, and ultimately *fetishised*. Theodor Adorno makes the point that when culture becomes *neutralised* and *reified*, it also becomes idolised.[1] In the Caribana context, this idolatry creates a carnival mind that holds fast to certain static ways of conducting dialogues in art with the community. The flag or standard must be waved, the cape must be in place, and the rum drunk, for one to have properly participated in Caribana. I would argue that a large segment of the population is unwilling, if not incapable, of relating to these idolised components of the festival.

Some may suggest that a carnival ought to be left as just that, a *carnival*. However, like sports, like music, like writing, like any outpouring from the soul, a cultural festival does not come into being without a social context. Like any other human endeavour, and especially *artistic* endeavour, a cultural festival comes from some *self-consciousness*. It is the creators of the festival who decide what that *self-consciousness* is going to be. In short, the carnival does not just *happen*.

Of course, having said that, I am faced with the fact that having made the case against reification, it is dangerous ground on which I now discuss the usefulness of cultural festivals. For just as it is possible to abuse the culture by putting it to the service of nostalgia and idolatry, it could be just as dangerous to put a cultural festival to the service of something as vital as a community's self-definition. It is possible to resort to a kind of vulgar reductionism and pragmatism whereby the cultural festival could be relegated to political platforms which better belong at community rallies. Still, allowing culture to have authenticity is possible and immensely desirable.

The Caribana experience leaves a distinct impression on both the African Canadian community and the wider community.

The impression is solely the effect of the artistic work (and the festival as a whole) on the viewer/participant, and does not speak from the *interior* force that impels us forward. Indeed, there is a distinct lack of forward movement, a definite lack of dialogue between the onlookers and the participants, about things beyond the festival itself. Given the fact that the festival itself consists largely of costumes displayed on the street, dancing on the street, and singing on the street, this is understandable.

I am speaking then of the need for a cultural festival which contains a system of references beyond the carnival itself. This will enable African Canadians to converse through art, with each other, and with their fellow citizens. The cultural festival could then become a way of carrying out dialogue about the concept of African Canadian life — the way we *do life*. This would be *real* art, about real people, living here and now.

It is instructive to note that a large group of African Canadian youth have taken to boycotting Caribana, stating that they do not find themselves culturally in the festival. These young people conduct their own cultural festival (during the same weekend as Caribana), within their own cultural milieu. *Their* festival gives recognition to the cultural roots of some of their parents, but acknowledges their own specific cultural creations. *Their* gatherings include "rap sessions" in which they explore situations with which they grapple daily, presented in artistic mediums. They also include dances, poetry readings, and performances by singers and by hip-hop artists. Clearly, these youth have come to accept that there is no dynamic place for them within the Caribana cultural festival as it is now conducted. The carnival culture, presenting itself as it does in a *neutralised* and ready-made fashion, makes it of little worth to these youth.

Long after the last "tin-pan" has sounded, long after the garbage truck has swept the streets clean again (some people refer to it as "the last float") what will resonate in the hearts of African Canadians? What will remain as a memory of the dialogue with our fellow citizens?

Clarissa Pinkola Estes reminds us that humans are not truly animated until the soul gives birth to the spirit.[2] Placed within the context of a cultural festival, this reminder carries great weight. For the desire to be "truly animated" sounds like what the youth who boycott Caribana are seeking. Perhaps they do not feel *replenished*; perhaps too, they do not find within Caribana anything that fills them up with a plan for the *empowerment* needed to enact any newly found wisdom.

The *trivialisation* of the cultural festival leaves this group, and I would posit many other groups, longing for something authentic that touches their heart. This authenticity is an *organic* yearning that takes place in the heart, even though it may not be able to articulate, in concrete terms, that which it seeks. Writer and educator Claire Harris addresses this yearning in an essay, "Why Do I Write?" Harris wrestles to the ground the myth "that the South and its people are not integral to modern Western civilisation."[3] She goes on to discuss the need to openly embrace African artistic sensibilities as a part of the collective whole:

> Like most artists of the [African] Diaspora, I present what reality can be seen in a mirror: we have always been here; we have always been centre. "Here," of course, stands for the eternal present. You are what you are because we are... [My] work is an attempt to transform, however tentatively, those interests into art, and so, in the words of the Sartre of 1945, "disclose the world and offer it as a task to the generosity of the read er"... In the end, I suppose, I'm an artist seeking questions in the last decade of the twentieth century. African in the West, one writes an individual vision of a splintered world to a splintered culture, and writes, one hopes, poetry.[4]

It is this kind of insight that is needed in cultural festivals, so that the *object* itself is not divorced from the *subject*. This would

mean that the cultural festival (the object), would be imbued with the heart of the subject (the people), and would be reflective of their lived experiences.

The classic Marxist analysis of art that is produced under capitalism strikes disturbing chords with Caribana. Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez' analysis of this kind of art sounds uncomfortably like what I am describing. He states:

> The existence of this trivial art which leaves man on the periphery is...undeniable; it is characterized by an artfully facile language which corresponds to its lack of human depth; a language which can be understood and communicated all the more extensively the more superficial and hollow its content and the more banal, impoverished, and feeble its means of expression.[5]

Now, in the Toronto Caribana context, it is clear that there are many people who participate in and enjoy what Sanchez Vazquez refers to as "trivial art." Indeed, people pour into Toronto by the tens of thousands each year to participate in/or watch this art. Sanchez Vazquez suggests that these "spectators" share the alienated world of those who created the "trivial art" and that they would reject a different kind of artistic product. If he is correct, to whom can we turn to construct a new kind of cultural festival? Who among us is sufficiently free from alienation, that we can define and give shape to a cultural festival which will contain our vision of the world, our manifestation of how we *do life*?

First, we need an opening for dialogue about cultural festivals in general and the Toronto festival in particular. This opening needs as much input from as wide a cross-section of the African Canadian community as possible. The dialogue would be a developmental thing. For as it stands, there is a signal lack of sufficient *voices* giving input to how the festival ought to be done. The voice of youth is pointedly missing from the architectural plan of Caribana and it is the youth, after all, who will

inherit the festival.

The bridges needed to link the people with the cultural festival must be carefully and constructively built. The seeds for planting must be carefully selected for their fertility as well as for their artistic merit. Art need not be turned into an explicit political forum. Art can, however, be consciously created from within the essence-core of the community, so that a human dialogue can be established across the boundaries of the diverse African Canadian community. This kind of cultural festival would provide a vitality that would transcend the socio-historical context of Caribana and open a dialogue about the *here and now*, the lived experience of the African Canadian population.

Sometimes, there is fear of stepping outside of the tried and seemingly true method. Innovation requires risk-taking. The Caribana Committee is a beleaguered committee, fighting each year for financial backing from the City, defending itself against its critics in the African Canadian community and the public at large. This is hardly the climate in which innovation is born. Interestingly, it is my belief that should the festival change to embrace the living language of its constituents — the heart of African Canadians — its financial crises would likely be resolved. For it would engage African Canadians, not as viewers, but as participants, contributing their collective energy and attention to the success of the festival.

The cultural festival then would not be presented as a commodity, a thing, a material object, in and of itself, but would be a place where a wider cross-section of African Canadians' truths — their stories — get told. It certainly would challenge the frozen-in-time nature of a cultural festival as a time to "carry banner," in the words of a friend's amusing pun on the word Caribana.

Clearly, I am suggesting that there is a role for the collective experience of African Canadians in the creation, definition, and implementation of a cultural festival. There is something to be said too for the dialogue that is possible with non-African Canadian fellow citizens through a cultural festival. The dia-

logue needs to be centred on what it means to be human and African in the objective realities of Toronto, Canada, the world. Of course, this dialogue would be constructed through the medium of art.

Part 3
Writing

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Seeking Wholeness In African-Caribbean Voice

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The coming West Indies novelists will show the clash between the native temperament, environment, and this doctrine from a sterner clime.[1]

— C.L.R. James

I search in this essay to make a road-map to and through what I elect to call 'Elder Voice Lineage.' I do so by walking the ground of social and political theorist C.L.R. James and the voices of two women writers from the Caribbean: Jamaica Kincaid and Merle Hodge. I also discuss my own children's series which is set in Antigua during the nineteenth century. bell hooks and Audre Lorde provide a useful comparative theoretical framework for James.

C.L.R. James discusses the search for Caribbean writers and calypsonians whose work can be considered 'authentic.' He posits that the authentic voice is liberating, in that it speaks with the wholeness of a Caribbean world-view. I see the search for Elder Voice Lineage as analagous to James' search for wholeness.

Creating the road-map to Elder Voice Lineage is a dynamic process. There are no pat prescriptions for doing so, for this road-map is in *the doing*, and the *harvesting* of *the doing* is cumulative. By its very name, Elder Voice Lineage rejects the foolishness of starting anew. It presents its inheritors with a task: that being to receive their inheritance. Having received it, what will they do with it? To whom do they owe it? On whose

behalf do they receive it and what are the accompanying responsibilities?

Recognition of the existence of voice lineage means that *the whole* is the basis of Black people's 'Story,' their voice, and their world-view. Black people's continuance as a people is dependent on *the wholeness* of 'The Story' being passed on. It is also reliant on 'The Story' being received by new storytellers. It is just as necessary for the experience of the new storytellers to impact on 'The Story' being told. Wholeness is inclusive of their voice too.

It is this wholeness that James claims to look for and attempts to rescue within the work of Caribbean artists. In the Jamesian reading of Caribbean society, wholeness lends 'The Story' authenticity. If he is right, then the *authentic* within the work of some Caribbean writers will reveal the *inauthentic* as the existence of a fractured self.

James is confident that wholeness will come to be given more 'voice' in the literature from the region. He shows that the inculcation of British hegemony created the danger of losing 'the real self' as it became submerged under what he calls 'the code' of British culture.

I believe it is important to note that even as he makes a case for wholeness and authenticity, James ironically presents a fractured view of the very people whom he seeks to rescue. For he excludes from his discussion the 'voice' of women and the 'voice' of Caribbean people of East Indian descent. Even though he discusses the work of one Indian novelist, he does so without examining whether or not the fact that this writer *is* Indian has anything to do with his capacity to find his authentic voice. The equation of authenticity and 'wholeness' requires further clarification, given the fact that Indians make up just under fifty percent of the population in Trinidad, and just over fifty percent of the population in Guyana. James's sample of writers was drawn from Trinidad and Guyana.

The exclusion of women from James's discussion of authenticity is as serious as the exclusion of Indians, for women are the

overwhelming majority in all Caribbean populations. It is interesting to note too, that there were at least two women calypsonians who had wide popular support at the time that James presented his discussion of the work of calypsonians.[2] He chose, however, to focus primarily on the work of The Mighty Sparrow.

James can only be described as a product of his time. His particular socialisation meant the exclusion of women's voices from both the oral and written culture. To be fair to him, it should be remembered that his Caribbean *particular* included the political vision of the united forces of Indian and African workers.[3] However, this political vision is not reflected in his selection and treatment of the literature in the search for authenticity.

In a semi-autobiographical work, James uses cricket as a metaphor for the inculcation of hegemony.[4] He shows that his upbringing was identical to that of an English boy's, with the added dimension of African Caribbean culture. Young James makes a choice to adopt "the [British] code," sublimating his *African-Caribbeanness* along the way. He writes retrospectively about his socialisation and its juxtaposition with his authentic voice, stating that the things he did not notice and took for granted were "the solid British middle class, Puritanism incarnate, of the middle of the nineteenth century."[5] He points out that set against this British Puritanism is the Caribbean Creole culture which manifests behaviour that is quite the opposite of the imposed culture.

Any discussion of wholeness and authenticity clearly demands the inclusion of women. I will examine whether or not the work of three women writers manifests the authenticity for which James searches so diligently in the work of male writers and male calypsonians. Applying the Jamesian notion of authenticity to the work of African Caribbean women writers opens up a discussion of ways to read James as a theorist of Caribbean epistemology.

Writing within the particular context of a white, patriarchal, United States of America, Audre Lorde forges Afro-centric

feminist theory. She makes the point that the African American woman's voice is a vibrant part of the equation of wholeness of American society. She suggests that failure to allow and use the voice of one part of the equation is to operate within a fractured framework. As she puts it:

> as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hid den sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes.[6]

Lorde makes a case for the power that women carry, whereas James's focus is on Caribbean people in general. However, the parallels can be clearly drawn between the possibilities Lorde sees in the inheritance of African Woman Lineage within the context of white patriarchal domination and those which James discusses in terms of Caribbean Elder Lineage. Lorde continues:

> I believe that women carry within themselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches [intellectual and emotional] so necessary for survival...our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action.[7]

She suggests that the language will be able to be shared, because it will consciously contain those elements that enable all of the group's members to understand it. In Lorde's view, the voice of the 'Black Mother' brings wholeness for Black women and for the wider society. This missing part of the wholeness is carefully constructed by the voice of the Elder, in the work of the three writers discussed in this essay.

In my own series of children's stories, I seek to release the voice of the Elder woman and Elder man as major sources of African 'survival-wisdom,' in a system of plantation slavery in Antigua. Embodied in Mother Sillah, an Elder woman, and Papa Biggis, an Elder man, Elder Voice Lineage is shared through the telling of 'The Story.'

Mother Sillah teaches ways of birthing, healing, praying, planting, growing, living, loving, and learning. Cosmology creation, procreation, and subterfuge are her special areas of knowledge; she takes great pains to impart them to the people on the estate and to the children in particular.

It is revealed to the reader that Mother Sillah's knowledge of 'The Story' enables her to *know* things others do not. She *knows* for instance, when the large-scale slave revolt has been betrayed and seeks to put her knowledge into the hands of the leaders of the revolt.

Finally, she gives her pronouncement on life to a young inheritor of 'The Story':

> Is just so it is wid life chile...what you put in, you going get back out. It don't matter how bad it seems; if you put in good tings, you get good tings out of it. Look and see how dis leaf perfeck, perfeck. All you put is one little seed in dat dutty ground an' you get big tree with perfeck leaf. Eh chile, you see how it go, you see how de earth is plentiful?[8]

Mother Sillah makes sure that people understand the connection between the spirit world and the physical world as a 'living' connection. She cautions:

> You not suppose to wear other people tings. Not good for you spirit. Each person leave some of dey feelings in dey tings chile. Only use you own tings, or if somebody you close to offer you someting, or unless somebody you care 'bout dead and leave you someting. Den dey spirit

> an' yours link up between death an' life an' is all right, but only if is somebody you close to, who you love an' who love you. Otherwise it can have bad link-up between death an' life too.[9]

In another story, *How The Mosquito Got Its Sting*, Mother Sillah speaks to two girls about the precious value of freedom. Commenting on the mosquito's desire for freedom, she says: "all living creatures like to be free, mosquito is no different."[10] Mother Sillah is working to create authenticity for the African Antiguan, a part of whose reality includes enslavement. "All living creatures" includes the children and the entire African population in Antigua.

Whereas the Elder woman taught the children about woman power, the Elder man, Papa Biggis, speaks of perseverance, courage, discipline, metamorphosis, and physical survival. This adequately complements the woman-focus of Mother Sillah.

Papa Biggis tells his version of 'The Story,' which contains some of the physical tools of survival. He tells a fable to a group of children on a sugar estate about a star who decided to tumble down to the earth and do nothing but spend all of his time lying down. His decision to plummet to the earth is based on a desire to avoid the onerous task of walking up and down across the sky every night. Soon, he loses his shine and when the rainy season comes, is washed way to the sea, along with the debris on the footpath.

Papa Biggis seeks in his fable to give the children hope, even those who wish to avoid the work of the estate. For the star undergoes a metamorphosis and is able to survive in the sea by becoming a star-fish. The message is clear: the way to triumph over the possibility of annihilation is to manage the objective realities of the environment in a way that ensures survival.

Like Mother Sillah, Papa Biggis adds to 'The Story' his own, individual act of rebellion. He gives the children more food than they are supposed to receive, allows them to take long rests, and nurtures their spirit with Elder love and kindness. Through him,

the author has an opportunity to make sense of the realities of the survival of the African in the Caribbean. The image of the obsequious 'male slave' saying 'yassuh,' 'no suh,' 'thank you suh,' is transformed by the characterisation of Papa Biggis. The old image of docility is contradicted by the realities of survival of the Spirit and consciousness of the African.

The African is further rescued in 'The Story' by the description of the situation of the man who is detailed to whip Mother Sillah. He is depicted as being reluctant in the role. He finds himself faced with a dilemma: to disobey the order will bring him punishment, and still not relieve Mother Sillah of her blows. He finds a way to survive through the ordeal and still help Mother Sillah:

> Mother Sillah got lashes for sending the warning, but the man they put to beat her wouldn't hit her hard. He could not disobey the overseer or he would have received lashes himself, but he made sure that the old woman whom he so respected didn't suffer too much.[11]

'The Story' does not exist in a cultural vacuum; it is dynamic and reflects the environment and historical period in which its tellers choose to locate it. In her novel of childhood, *Crick Crack Monkey*, Merle Hodge demonstrates the voice of Elder women working its teaching magic in the socialisation of a young girl in Trinidad in the late 1940s through to the 1960s.

The Elder women impart wisdom and knowledge to the children during food preparation. Sometimes, they use a proliferation of proverbs to pass on 'The Story' to the children:

> Who ask
> don't get
> Who don't ask
> don't want
> Who don't want
> don't get

Who don't get
don't care [12]

The fatalism in that maxim is not lost on the children. They find other proverbs and sayings more rational and useful as life lessons: "Them that walketh in the paths of corruption will live to ketch dey arse. Teachings against gluttony are given simply: "Stuff yu guts today an' eat the stones of the wilderness tomorrow."[13]

Not all tellings of 'The Story' are done through formal proverbs and maxims. Tee, the main character, experiences Ma's awakening each day. It brings her understanding of Ma's relationship with the physical world:

> Ma awoke every morning with a groan quickly routed by a brief loud cheups [a sound made by sucking her teeth]... The cheups with which Ma greeted the day expressed her essential attitude before the whole experience — what yu mus' beat-up youself for? In the face of the distasteful and unavoidable, the unexpected and irreversible... Ma sucked her teeth and turned her back.

'The Story' includes the excitement caused by rain: it cleanses and purifies at the same time that it brings grief. For there are leaks in the house and there are clothes which have been hung out to dry just before the rain comes. If the rain falls heavily enough, there will be joy at the sharing of a trip to observe how nature has swelled the river. Hodge's account of this experience shows Ma's method of telling some parts of 'The Story':

> when the rain had stopped we dressed up in Grampa's old jackets and went out with Ma to look at the river. This was like a ritual following upon the rain — she had to go and see the river. We walked behind her squelching joyously in the new puddles and mud... If the river came down every week Ma's rapture would

be quite as new.

'Eh!' she exclaimed, and then fell back into her trance. Then a little later on 'Eh!' shaking her head from side to side. 'Well yes, well yes!' We stood around her in an unlikely silence like spattered acolytes in our jumble-sale clothes, in the bright air hanging out crisp and taut to dry, and the river ploughing off with the dirt and everything drenched and bowing and satisfied and resting before the world started up again from the beginning.[15]

Clearly Ma has found a way of sharing with the children the communion she feels with nature, a connection with the spirit world.

Hodge continues to show throughout the novel that the telling of 'The Story' by the Elder woman is a lineage that is complex and powerful. She moves the reader through the upbringing of Tee by three Elder women: Auntie Beatrice, Tantie, and Ma. Each Elder woman's telling of 'The Story' is different, but Hodge creates a synthesis. She accomplishes a presentation of an experience of the African Trinidadian Elder woman's voice of a particular period in that country's social history.

Tee grapples with a fracturing duality as she moves between the pretentiousness of the middle class and the vibrancy and authenticity of the realism of the working class. 'The Story' for her straddles both socio-economic spheres, but it is with Ma that she receives more wholeness. Ma's telling of 'The Story' is spiritually nurturing, yet not limited to the private realm. She passes on important lessons of inter-relationship, creation and transformation, embodiment and survival.

For Jamaica Kincaid, 'The Story' is told in a way its receiver finds oppressive. The complexities and the tensions between the child and the teller of 'The Story,' (the child's mother) are unbearable to the child. Before the break in the bond of love between them, the child accepted the prescriptions for life which she inherited from her mother. For example, in *Annie*

John the links between the spirit world and the physical world are clearly defined as they are in my children's series and in Hodge's novel:

> I was afraid of the dead, as was everyone I knew. We were afraid of the dead because we never could tell when they might show up again. Sometimes they showed up in a dream, because they usually only brought a warning, and in any case, you wake up from a dream. But sometimes they would show up standing under a tree just as you were passing by. Then they might follow you home, and even though they might not be able to come into your house, they might wait for you and follow you wherever you went; in that case, they would never give up until you joined them. My mother knew of many people who had died in such a way.[16]

In her mother's telling of 'The Story,' the malevolence of the spirit-world can be combatted by several methods. Kincaid recounts one method which the child experiences with the mother and which utilises both herbal and psycho-spiritual means.

Eventually, the girl leaves Antigua, but takes with her the kernel of 'The Story' told her by her mother. She seeks to build on it, constructing for herself a more dynamic version of it, grounded in the physical realities she experiences. Her construction contains a re-evaluation of her mother's telling of 'The Story.' As she prepares to leave the island, she makes conscious choices about what things she will keep and which ones she will leave behind. She holds some things in a treasured place in her heart, but others she consciously determines will be discarded. The magical practices of her mother are not among her treasures.

So begins for the girl the editing, the re-shaping, and the continuance of 'The Story:'

> I bathed quickly in some warm bark water that my mother had prepared for me. I put on my underclothes — all of them white and all of them smelling funny. Along with my earrings, my neck chain, and my bracelets, all made of gold from British Guiana, my underclothes had been sent to my mother's obeah woman, and whatever she had done to my jewelry and under-clothes would help protect me from evil spirits and every kind of misfortune. The things I never wanted to see or hear or do again now made up at least three weeks' worth of grocery lists. I placed a mark against obeah women, jewelry and white under-clothes.[17]

In a later work of Kincaid's, *Lucy*, the main character seeks to construct a social reality in which she is comfortable. She moves beyond a rite of passage to the next step which Lorde refers to as "the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom."[18]

For Kincaid, the step from receiving 'The Story' to charting the new language takes time. This is the process that Lorde embraces as "the dream and vision... the skeleton architecture of our lives...the foundations for a future of change... a bridge across our fears of what has never been before... action in the now.[19]

In *Lucy*, Kincaid demonstrates the need for reconstructing reality, the charting of the new road map. She takes the reader through her character's processing something as mundane and yet as important as a change in the weather, having moved from Antigua to New England. 'The Story' received in Antigua had not included differences in weather: it had fit 'The Island' and had included a relationship with the physical environment as well as the metaphysical one.

Kincaid describes the charting of the new road map as the main character comes to terms, not just with her new physical location, but also with an entirely alien cultural hegemony and

reality. The realisation dawns that this new reality is more than just about differences in weather. This new reality is about knowing and not knowing, being and not being. As Kincaid concludes: "I...felt that I wanted to be back where I came from. I understood it, I knew where I stood there."[20]

Anger at the British cultural hegemony washes over Lucy when she recalls a poem about daffodils, a flower that is foreign to the Caribbean:

> I remembered an old poem I had been made to memorize when I was ten years old and a pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School. I had been made to memorize it, verse after verse, and then had recited the whole poem to an auditorium full of parents, teachers, and my fellow pupils. After I was done, everybody stood up and applauded with an enthusiasm that surprised me, and later they told me how nicely I had pronounced every word, how I had placed just the right amount of special emphasis in places where that was needed, and how proud the poet, now long dead, would have been to hear his words ringing out of my mouth. I was then at the height of my two-facedness: that is, outside I seemed one way, inside I was another; outside false, inside true. And so I made pleasant little noises that showed both modesty and appreciation, but inside I was making a vow to erase from my mind, line by line, every word of that poem.[21]

She tells her white American employer who has taken her to see a field of daffodils, "Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?"[22] Her strong resentment, rather than her continued acceptance of this imposition, is the character's first step toward reclaiming the self. The subjugated self is seeking to reunite with the authentic self. There is a clear step taken by the writer to recover the past in

such a way that healing takes place.

Like Lorde and James, bell hooks suggests that the process of telling 'The Story' is the method by which an authenticating experience can take place. Hooks describes it "symbolically [as] a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. [23] The telling of the individual, personal 'Story' is bell hooks' focus. However, she makes the connection between the personal, the collective, and the importance of telling the collective 'Story'. She goes on to describe the act of telling 'The Story' as "liberating."[24]

The work of the three women writers I have examined is liberating, individual, and personal. They tell 'The Story' from varied perspectives. Each writer has received 'The Story' and has undertaken the task of passing it on, adding her own interpretation and her own experience. All three are alike in that they provide both the storytellers and the receivers of 'The Story' with material for the construction of an authentic world-view.

C.L.R. James's description of what constitutes writing within an authentic framework adequately fits the work of these three Caribbean women writers. Their use of language, the content of their work, and the undertaking itself, demonstrate that quality which James in "The Birth of a Nation" describes as "people in charge of their own reality."[25] Or perhaps he would have described them, as he did two male African Caribbean writers, Michael Anthony and Earl Lovelace: "native and national in a sense that the previous generation is not."[26]

James searched diligently among male Caribbean writers and calypsonians for what exists quite abundantly in the work of Caribbean women writers and women calypsonians. It is useful to note here that the work of several other Caribbean women writers and women calypsonians arguably contains the qualities which James suggests make a work 'authentic.' By excluding them, his discussion of authenticity and wholeness begins with a part of the equation missing. For it is difficult to conceive of wholeness without the voice of such large numbers of writers

from such large segments of the population of the region.

Writing Thru Race

The Conference

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This is a tale I wish to tell from where I stand, in this time, in this place I call home. I observe that in the title essay of this book, I assert that "Home...should be nurturing to me. Home should be a place where I will want to hang my hat, keep my feet warm, relax, feel good."

This tale is about "home," about Canada. It is a tale of how a group of writers of colour, working under the auspices of The Writers' Union of Canada (TWUC), found themselves at the centre of a Federal Government debacle: the government's rescinding of funds ($22,500) for the 1994 Writers Union Conference titled "Writing Thru Race." The fact that this withdrawal came just two weeks before the date of the conference was bad enough. What is even more outrageous, and still seems preposterous, is the reason the government rescinded the already promised funds. The conference was deemed to be racist because some of the planned workshops were designed to allow writers of colour to meet together. Let me be clear: writers of colour would be the only people who could register for and attend these particular workshops. Other panel discussions, readings, and plenary sessions were open to the general public.

The decision to withdraw the funds came as a result of media *hype*, led by the *Globe and Mail* and moved up-tempo by the *Toronto Star*; it was then transformed into a Canadian-style media frenzy on television and in other print media. Along

with all of this attention, panel discussions on voice and cultural appropriation surfaced throughout the country.

Over a two-year period (1992 - 1994), the issues which drew media attention were, first, writers' of colour objection to and action against voice and cultural appropriation (read: *cultural imperialism*), and, second, that some white writers took umbrage with the fact that some of the conference workshops would only be open to writers of colour.

The Writers Union had been 'gendered,' but now it was being 'racialised.' Interestingly, in this 'racialisation,' gender was transcended. Now it mattered not whether you were male or female, but what mattered was your race. For unity of purpose (in this first initiative, at any rate), was now being based solely on race by writers of colour. There was within the Union a caucus for several different interest groups. However, this was the first time that there was a caucus of writers based on race.

In the opinion of some, a meeting which did not include white writers was 'beyond the pale.' When news of the unrest within the Union was leaked to the press, Toronto never had it so good. Racial hostility among writers! What a fantastic hotbed of politics, all carried out by the pen! This chapter, spanning two years, has come to be regarded by some as one of the high-points in the life of The Writers' Union of Canada. That is not my claim, nor is it my concern. I simply wish to look at the events as a writer of colour, from inside the belly of the experience.

Writers of colour, though small in number in the Union's membership, had taken a first step forward. As a result they got all of the hot coals of the dominant culture heaped onto their heads.

In meetings of Parliament, the Reform Party described the upcoming Writing Thru Race conference as 'cultural apartheid.' Its Members also claimed that the organisers of the conference (the Racial Minority Writers Committee (RMWC) on behalf of TWUC), were 're-inventing apartheid.' Two weeks before the commencement of the conference, the government withdrew all

funding and support. It bent to submit to the critics' claim that the conference was racist. Yet the government never explained why it had decided to fund the conference in the first place.

As each upcoming Annual General Meeting drew closer, both in 1992 and in 1993, the belly of the Union seemed to be tied up in knots. The media deluge, led vociferously by the print media, amounted to as much of a frenzy as ever gets stirred up in Canada. Writers of colour were sprayed with venom. We held onto our dignity and righteous indignation...and righteous it was too! We were determined to transcend the onslaught of racist attacks that came from all quarters. Most importantly, we did so in order to ensure that this historic and important meeting between writers of colour took place.

It was a telling time. Those at the forefront of this suddenly-arrived-struggle were attacked where they stood. Instead of being felled, they carried motions forward and had them resolved by a House that sat as divided as any Parliamentary session. I heard mutterings that "*they are a tribe*." I thought of tribal wars, in Europe, in Asia, in Africa, in China, and how they had escalated into veritable blood-baths. Sometimes, all that carried forward these wars was a tide of emotion, unworthy of the participants, let alone a whole country. I had already lived through tribal wars in Antigua. Then, colour was used too: it was Party colour, red and blue. Red was in, blue was not. I belonged to a 'blue' family.

I remembered too how a friend of German origin had asserted soon after seeing the movie, *Schindler's List*: "My father speaks of how he suffered too! It is not all one-sided!" And I recalled how I had worked to love her still, despite her joining her father in appropriating the suffering of the Jews in the Holocaust.

I was struck by two aspects of this experience: here was another *tribe* in motion, fighting a war based on race. And here was the dominant group in the *tribe* appropriating the language of those who had always fought this war.

My jangling silver bracelets with their ancient West African

tribal markings (not even recognised as that any more given their transmigration and transfiguration all rooted in imperialism), seemed to raise their pitch as I listened to this acrimonious, virulent, high-wire-tension Annual General Meeting of TWUC. I heard the bracelets' jangling as background music to my life and to the 'noise' of the voices of protest. Of late, these voices had come to be raised in ire against writers of colour for wanting to address cultural imperialism and for wanting to meet by themselves. The conference designed to discuss how writers of colour would look after themselves in their *lived* experience had become a minefield! Several white writers and the media had interpreted this desire to meet privately to mean: "without white writers." What they did not realize is that there is a difference: writers of colour wished to meet *together*; they were not seeking to meet *without* anyone! The focus was on their *togetherness*, not on *exclusion* of others.

Soon it became clear that the issue boiled down to dissatisfaction with the fact that in the name of the Union, government funding was to be provided for the conference.

To the accompaniment of my bracelets' music, I gave voice to the irony that this whole experience was reminiscent of the days of plantation slavery in the so-called 'New World.' Then, African people were not allowed to meet in large numbers. They were also denied use of the drum, their coded means of communicating, both literally and spiritually. African people in Canada had also experienced suppression of movement and 'voice.' So too had Native people, as well as Japanese and Chinese citizens of Canada. And now, the 'right to assemble' was again being threatened. This time, it was the end of the twentieth century and the threat arrived couched in the appropriated language of so-called "people of colour."

Several white writers spoke with passion against the motion put forward by the RMWC on voice and cultural appropriation. They spoke of feeling that they were being censored. I saw this state of affairs, then and now, as similar to a children's game of marbles. If one child has all of the marbles, he or she will not

easily relinquish them when the rules of the game are suddenly being changed. This change was especially threatening because it demanded that folks had to get up off some of the marbles. My bracelets' unspoken music behind the words made good harmony with 'equality' and the 'redistribution of power.'

I listened to several white writers speak of claiming membership in one minority group or another. I remember one white writer speaking in a tear-filled voice of being from Eastern Europe and feeling that she was a member of 'a minority.' She was serious. Some others reached for humour. The trivialising did not quite 'get over;' but it came close to making a joke of things that reeked of time past and *herstories* and *histories* lived under similar umbrellas.

The objective of the conference was, in our view, to find a way to begin to discuss equality and the redistribution of power. This was only threatening to people who refused to recognise that equality demanded that those who had unequal access to 'voice' in the cultural landscape needed to have a dialogue amongst themselves. This had to be done before any effective dialogue with white writers could be carried out.

Racism, ethnocentrism, and all of the other 'isms' which have been hurled for centuries at *downpressed* people of colour, were now being volleyed at them again.[1] This time, however, people of colour were accused of carrying out the heinous crimes which whites had carried out against them for centuries. Humanity, it was implied, was threatened with oppression. White humanity was threatened by "re-inventors of apartheid," (who happened to be people 'of colour'). It was one of the most ironic displays of voice appropriation that I had ever seen!

And so the twin-devils of racism and apartheid were brought out, given air and media attention as they were hurled at the very recipients of these forms of oppression. It was an onslaught that threatened to behead the *Davids* for seeking redress within the *Goliath* Tribe...a tribe now widened to include the whole country. Of course, that widened context had always been implied. It was not the Union which was going to be the topic

of discussion, but Canada and the experience of writers of colour within it.

Panel discussions held throughout the country on voice and cultural appropriation served to shift the focus away from the real topic of discussion. This had the effect of creating the impression that the RMWC's objective was merely about voice and cultural appropriation; and wanting to meet without white writers.

I saw this as a means of trivialising the main objectives of the RMWC. These objectives were: to create a space for the voices of writers of colour to be heard on their deepest intentions; the inclusion of their voices in the wider cultural landscape of Canada; critical social, political, and economic issues surrounding being a writer of colour in Canadian society; and racism in the arts in general and writing in particular.

Flames lit within the Union fanned out into society through the unrelenting print and television media. It was an up-close-and-personal-bonfire. The effigies being bandied about were sometimes hardly veiled. Writers of colour found themselves collectively (and sometimes individually) vilified in one forum or another. Some were *private and confidential*; many were rude, scathing and offensive.

In January, 1994, Philip Marchand of the *Toronto Star* recounted the feelings of some white writers within the Union on the issues at hand. At the same time, he took some 'pot-shots' at the demands for equity by writers of colour. This was done after two TWUC AGMs, where motions on representation on arts juries and other places of access to public funds had been ratified. Marchand writes criticising the Canada Council's practise of having one artist of colour on each of its juries:

> No matter how you do the mathematics, this vastly over-represents the presence of writers of non-European descent among Canadian writers as a whole. Take a look at any annual general meeting of the Writers Union of Canada and you will not find anything like 25 per cent of its membership being non-white.

> And yet the Union has passed resolutions, formulated by its Racial Minority Writers Committee, urging the Council to do exactly what it has been doing. Few of its members are happy about these resolutions, but even fewer have the courage to speak out against them at meetings.
>
> The "writers of color" pushing these resolutions are not of the stature of, say, Thomas King, Rohinton Mistry or Thomson Highway, but marginal, highly politicized writers. Serious writers rarely have the time for this kind of politicking.
>
> But writers of color who do push for greater representation on Canada Council juries can hardly be blamed, either.[2]

He goes on to describe the process of seeking to make the Canada Council's juries representational, as "an intricate and demanding exercise, like planning a menu for a dinner of health food fanatics." His language suggests that regional representation, genre representation, and gender balance were already onerous tasks. Race representation looms as the last piece of tofu on this "menu for a dinner of health food fanatics." He concludes: "And now they (juries) must include a writer of color or a native Canadian, or both."

I say: Indeed, yes! And so they ought, if they are going to continue to claim to represent all of Canada! What the Canada Council has embraced, Marchand vilifies as the result of the interference of people who could not be "serious writers." For he declares in the same article: "Serious writers rarely have the time for this kind of politicking." So it would seem that in his view, "serious writers" exist in a vacuum of cultural, social, political, and economic life.

I now need to explain that I joined The Writers' Union of Canada in 1991. I was already a member of the Racial Minority Writers' Committee, having joined it earlier as a non-TWUC member. The RMWC was created and chaired by Lenore

Keeshig-Tobias and had been established by a unanimous vote at TWUC's 1990 AGM. The Committee was geographically and racially representative, with four TWUC members and two non-members. Its mandate was to carry out an exploratory dialogue on writing and publishing with racial minority writers who were not yet members of the Union.

The RMWC created a database of writers of colour and convened a Planning Session in Geneva Park, Ontario, in May, 1992. Two hundred and fifty writers of colour were contacted and sixty-two of them attended the Planning Session.

It was at this Planning Session that the fateful 'Writing Thru Race' conference was suggested. The conference was designed to bring writers of colour throughout the country together, in order to continue the dialogue begun by the small group at the Planning Session.

Like the design of the conference, the workshops of the Planning Session were open only to writers of colour. The readings and dinner which opened the event took place in Toronto and were open to all members of TWUC. It was clear, however, (given the murmuring about isolation and exclusion which had begun to surface confidentially and publicly), that things did not bode well for the future. After all, in other struggles for equality, both in Canada and all over the world, it had been demonstrated that people did not give up being privileged without a murmur.

It became increasingly clear just who were the supporters of equality among the white writers in the Union. Many white writers supported the work of the RMWC. The list is long with white writers who contributed to the emergency funds to meet the short-fall created by the government's withdrawal of funds for the conference. Several white writers worked as volunteers on the conference; and their complete and demonstrated commitment to equality is what I choose to remember most from the experience. Their presence stated that it was, after all, a conference to see to the forward movement of all of us. This was not a people-of-colour-step-forward. On the contrary, it was a

country-of-Canada-move to reclaim its humanity.

Over this two-year period, I would look into people's eyes to find out who they were. I could see that this was not *my tribe*, not by any stretch of the imagination; but I felt committed to changing that. After all, I had a teenage daughter who had already declared herself a writer. Lord knows on several occasions I wanted to run from this tribe which made my heart ache and my bones weary.

The tension was palpable at the AGMs in 1992 and in 1993. I longed for the sound of my bracelets, but the surrounding noise of the hostilities was too high; they were drowned out. Instead, I clung to my father's wise words regarding the healing capacity of aloes. They kept me afloat and I thought of them often.

The RMWC reported on the Planning Session to the Union's 1992 AGM. At this meeting, it also brought forward a motion which came out of the Planning Session and which spoke strongly against sanctioning (more appropriately, "refusing to bless") 'cultural appropriation.' Many white members of the Union supported the idea of the motion, and many others were prepared to fight what some considered censorship. In the end, the report was watered down by the inclusion of some qualifiers, agreed upon by the RMWC. We were not ecstatic, but we all felt it was a first step with which we could live. We were ragged at the end of it all... and we were few in number. We later came under fire from many writers of colour for allowing this change in the motion. This came especially from those who had attended the Planning Session.

I think all of the members of the Committee understood this feeling of disappointment; but I can only say: "you had to be there; it is rough being lone voices crying in the wilderness! It was better to gain something, rather than lose everything."

I pose the following rhetorical questions: "Why were so many white writers, the media, and large segments of white society, so upset about our raising the ethics and exploitation surrounding voice and cultural appropriation? And why were they so upset one year later when we decided to meet by our-

selves?" It seemed clear to me that we had simply taken the Canadian multiculturalism policy at its word and were seeking to speak with each other under a wider umbrella of race. For obvious reasons, the umbrella could not be widened to include white writers, given that we were meeting to discuss who we were as writers of colour.

Another rhetorical dialogue that comes to mind is: "What would white writers have done in our workshops? Sat and taken notes? Stay quiet while we got down to the business of talking amongst us? Interrupt and slow down the process with the need for explanations of racism? Or worse yet, *object* to our claims of racism? Ask to be taught about our lives? Just exactly what would white writers have done in the workshops focusing on where we found ourselves as writers of colour?"

The mind boggles at the ridiculous nature of the objections by white writers at not being invited to attend. Equally ridiculous are the claims of "re-inventing apartheid" made by the Reform Party.

I answer my own rhetorical questions by suggesting that the RMWC had clearly done something that was unacceptable to the dominant culture in our country: it had appropriated the 'racialisation' that is normally the preserve of those in places of dominance in the country. These were the very categories which had been used to establish oppressive implicit and explicit social contracts within Canada's cultural, legal, political, and educational systems. It was multiculturalism's cultural, legal, political, and educational systems which had explicitly and implicitly constituted us as members of "racial minority" groups. Our bodies were simply taking action from the place to which we had been relegated in society.

Our reason for using these "racial minority" categories was to discuss urgent issues before us as writers of colour. We were, in short, doing the work that members of any self-respecting writers' union ought to do. For that, I applauded the leadership of TWUC for the foresight to 'go the extra mile.' The following is my segment of the report to the 1992 AGM, held on June 3,

1992, in which I speak about my father's use of aloes:

I am going to speak of the texture...the fabric ...the cloth used to sew the Planning Session together.

Let me begin by sharing with you an experience. My father was my primary care-giver and whenever I had a sore, he would bandage it with pieces of the aloes (aloe vera) plant. Within a week or two, the whole sore would be gone; the aloes would have drawn out all of the sickness and healed it. My father never used *band-aids*.

May 21 to 24, 1992 is etched in my memory as a significant moment in history. It was a time when people — writers who are representative of the peoples of Canada — came together to talk about their contribution to the wholeness of our country. It is interesting to note that although we were to have had racial minority writers only attending, as it turned out, there were two Caucasian writers at the Planning Session. One of them was a loving, gentle man; the other brought a kind of disturbing negative energy into our midst. We managed it nonetheless, and gave him love. So indeed, inadvertently, all of the races of Canada were represented at the Planning Session.

There are two things I think it is important to point out that we did *not* do: 1) We did *not* whine about our lot in life, although it was the contextual framework of our deliberations, and 2) We did *not* celebrate separation. We *did* do some fairly important things. We spoke with love of our country (that is, of course, Canada). We spoke of The Writers' Union of Canada and the importance of sustaining it as representative of all of us. We spoke about us, to us, and created lines of harmony among us. We renewed our commitment to telling ourselves, our children, our neighbours' children and our neighbours — in short, our fel-

low Canadians — stories about us, in print, orally, and through any other available medium. We cried — some times healing tears, often times tears of learning and realisation. Our tears felt like the soothing balm of the aloes plant of my childhood. We laughed — a lot. And we played. (Sometimes as adults we forget how to play). Most notably, we played "musical chairs:" an experience which turned many an august writer and scholar into an aggressive, hip-bumping participant, determined to be the one who got the last chair.

There was determination to work together with all the storytellers of Canada - and we were not speak ing of that nebulous *band-aid* called "multicultural ism." We were speaking of anti-racism and humanitarianism — that is to say: equality, recognition of people's dignity, and complete, equal distribution of power. That, after all, is real love. Anything else means some thing else, and we did not spend time on what we did *not* envision. We spent all of our time on our vision for Canada, for our children, and for their children, and their children's children...in short, our vision for all of our descendants.

It was a fruitful, momentous, historic, unprecedented time.

I wish to go on record as applauding this vision ary action of The Writers' Union of Canada for having enabled such a gathering. The participants understood and appreciated the proactive nature of such a decision. And now to return to the metaphor with which I began — that of the aloes plant and the *band-aid*. Indeed, it is wonderful to see an organisation employing the aloes plant instead of a *band-aid*, for aloes heals the whole sore, while a *band-aid* merely temporarily prevents it from oozing. End.

One might ask: "And what became of it?"

"What indeed?"

Even though all of that took place over a two-year period, I think of it as "the days that TWUC *really* became integrated." And yet, that was not the mission of the writers of colour, nor that of the RMWC. However, that became our condition if not our mission. It was thrust upon us. We were suddenly the battering ram against several doors of racism in Canadian society: publishing; The Writers' Union of Canada; Arts Councils; the schools. It seemed to me that accolades were in order for the hard work done to bring the voices of writers of colour into the *tribe*. Instead, the whole of society seemed to be up in arms against our right to own our own voice and culture and our right to assemble privately.

The Collective which grew out of the Planning Session expressed a heartfelt desire to effect change as early as possible in the education of the young - as early as Kindergarten and Day-care. We also resolved to mentor young writers. Membership in the Union was a commitment to which we agreed as well. We saw it as a vehicle for effecting the changes we envisioned for our country. And in the end, driven by the media and the fiasco in Parliament, the focus became 'representation' and 'exclusion from workshops.' Separated from the *real* issue of *imperialism* and its twin *inequality*, things boiled down to sound crass: i.e. just an attempt to keep stories to oneself and wanting to meet without whites.

The concern was and still is: what kind of children are we growing when so many of the voices of the peoples of Canada are left out of 'the mix?' That was the concern of TWUC when it began the journey to wholeness, aloes in tow.

Although we did not sit comfortably with the name of the Racial Minority Writers Committee, we were most at ease with the title for the conference. The category 'racial minority' was so clearly related to our relationship with the dominant 'other,' that we sought in vain for some politically more acceptable name. In the end, we decided that the fullness of time would bring more vision. We thus settled into the widened 'minority' pool of 'racial

minority.' It felt odd, this shifting of one's group identification, but it was a small matter, compared to the strength and insight we would gain from the collective perspective.

This meant, however, that the highly legitimate concerns of the writers of colour got side-tracked by the way in which race identification 'strikes-out' in Canada. The conference became such a hot-bed of controversy that it threatened to deny writers of colour the very sanctuary they had intended to create. Roy Miki, then the chairperson, worked with other writers of colour in Vancouver and in all of the other provinces, to bring the conference to fruition.

We met. Given the lack of funds, many of us stayed four-in-a-room. We did readings; we held discussions and created what turned out to be a most incredible network of writers of colour. The fact that posters for the conference were smeared or ripped down throughout Vancouver was treated as a small blip on the horizon. There were murmurs of other acts of threat and sabotage, but such things only served to give us a clearer sense of just what had been stirred up.

It is my view that one of the successes of the Racial Minority Writers Committee is that it brought racism, imperialism, and inequity to the *front and centre* of the dominant discourse on culture in Canada. Now no one can any longer pretend that 'all is well.' For two years, we had a steady diet of the two-headed sore of imperialism and racism, oozing its sickness for public viewing.

The *band-aids* did not effect a healing. The situation still begs for the application of aloes.

Part 4
Envoi

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Talking To A Six/Eight Drum

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I am talking this talk, not at all about the Caribbean, but with the sea, palm fronds, and voices raised in lyrical sadness and in laughter, just there... present... no seam between them and me. There is a constant drum in the back and fore... grounding it in my particular idiom... impacted by doing life here in Canada... though not in exile. I have never felt "exiled"... not even a self-imposed exile explains my being in this-here-country. I just living here... right ya; grounded; rooted right ya; right ya-so-so, as my sisters did write in a book with the title: *We're Rooted Here And They Can't Pull Us Up.*[1]

I was thinking the other day that it is no wonder I did not write much during my recent four-year sojourn in Antigua. It would have been hard to write with politics blaring, so much sufferation, and nuff boderation; sun beating down; voices calling; steel-band pounding; feet dancing; and the laughing; and the loving; and the hail-up! All done in good-good time; just as you need it and feel like you missing it. I told myself that it was too hard to write 'in spite of.'

Yet now I write 'in spite of.' I feel as if I am writing at the side of the road, next to the beach, where I used to jog every day.

I recall that soon after I had jogged for some few months by me'self, the people-them begin worry 'bout me. Them summon my older man-family and leave him with a caution: "You family from Canada crazy-crazy... running every day, morning, and

evening on Fort James Beach. Is what she running from Bra?" And he, unsure... wanting to be careful, rises to the occasion and makes a special visit to me... official-like... so that I dropped everything and regarded him with quiet.

He relates it, just as he has been told; not wanting to take responsibility for hurting my feelings. But I see a similar judgement in his eyes when he is telling me. It is written there: "I too think you crazy-crazy... See how you doing this and doing that." Things so unspeakable, that he cannot name them. His Good-Good-Book, full of women and causing pain and children born, like him, outside of that lock with which respectability weds desire. It looks no more virtuous than mine. But he is 'MAN.' And he didn't leave his whole life in one country and come back to Antigua where they did send him from in the first place. He not only born ya, he live ya! And me just come back ya.

In his eyes I discover that I am now a 'been-to!'

On top of all of that, I know in his mind he done add my politics to the equation. And even though Ah wasn't hiding it, I wasn't talking 'bout it with him. Cause it was my business. And besides, is Toronto me just come from; in that city, nobody cares. Well, if they did care, they wasn't saying, for a whole other different set of reasons. In Toronto, it does feel like nobody care whether you living right or wrong... not even if you living at all! Which bring me to talk 'bout how that is, living in this Canadian society in the middle of these people's cold ways.

Texas Rain and Toronto Snow
Letter to My Niece, Janis, in Austin, Texas

Me did say that is because oonoo inna Austin nuh used to this freezing rain, or rain fall and then freeze-up afterwards ... same result... me minna say that is because a'that make oonoo wasn't prepared... But see yah, them in Canada no better. Not me! As yuh see June gorn, me nar lie... me does start think 'bout this coldya. And by time August head round, while them peo-

ple in hurricane country Ah turn an'a twist fuh batten down from hurry AND from cane... me does Ah wonder where me did fling me gloves an me Winter hat, an me fur coat when Winter did end last time... And you know me always have one'a them... whether is real or the fake one... me make sure me have one'a them... When fur was in things, me had one boss fur coat... make outta racoon tails me dear... It did too pretty. But then all that correctness did come in the political runnings an' me did leave it in shame in the 'fur storage.'

But you nuh see we living far-far from nature... we have racoon tail fling 'round we... plenty-plenty racoon it musta did take fuh make one helluvva long-long coat... Me did look like say me belong in Hollywood in it...

Anyway, as Ah did begin say: you nuh see how we living much distance remove from the earth that we could fling racoon tail round we? But them days before the correctness did come in life runnings, me did start think 'bout which day me going get me fur coat out of storage at Eaton's. Then when the people start bloody-up people dem find wearing animal skins and sometimes does curse dem an' so... me decide say me really couldn't ah stand fuh have that happen to me. And too besiden, me agree with dem in a kinda way, although me think dem did go to the extreme with beating and cursing people.

So anyway, me just leave the coat inna Eaton's fur storage and to this day me nuh know what dem do with it! Me couldn't very well give it 'way, if me politics true-for-true. So me figure, make dem do what dem want with it. And you know, now that me think 'bout it, dem never write me after one or two Winter... me sure dem well sell it all now so an' make good profit. It only did cost a few dollars fuh store it... so dem couldn't claim say dem sell it fuh get dem money. But me cyarn complain, after all, ah me leave it give dem.

But to continue with the thing that make me begin talk this talk in the first place... Me ah wonder: if me coulda always 'member that these times going bring ice rink an ah have people skating up and down sidewalk in dem rubber-sole boots, how

these people who living in house year after year don't member say is time for stock up on the salt? Me nar put goat mouth on nobody, but me just ah say that is time fuh all the people dem for make the sidewalk a walkable place. Me tired skate down with me heart in me mouth, an ah wonder if me going make it to the end'a the sidewalk. Is too much really.

Stepping Out Into the Forwarding
Notes on Winter's First Snowfall in Toronto, 1998

Well, today I am going to do just that: step out into the forwarding and act as if nothing alarming is really eventuating. What a thing! The army, looking clean-clean, marching in a big room, in their green khaki; boots highly polished; their Commander-in-Chief (no, not Mel, but an elderly colonel-type, who looks like the last snow he hauled was when he made a snowman and the bully kicked it into his face), standing erect, chest puffed out as he inspected his men. You could almost hear him thinking: "I am master of all I survey."

The soldiers arrived first, with a good showing of two snow-shoes per man (snow-shoes! and little children are playing on the internet!). And who had called them in? He speaks vociferously about the snow, in pretty much the same way that Clinton speaks about Saddam. He warns all who would take him seriously, that the snow is going to be removed! As if anybody stopping him from moving it. Is who tell him not to plan better for heavy snow? Now he declares that tens of millions have already been spent; and people are saying as they are grounded by piles of snow: "Yeah, right!"

Nobody knows for sure, but nobody believes anything they're told any more... Noooo-body!

Interestingly, my head went to the fact that this man in his twilight years should not even be removing snow from his own drive-way. For men over fifty are forbidden from such activities, for fear that their heart will give out. An enterprising photog-

rapher ought to have staked out his house to see how his streets were faring. That is what is missing: 'politics Caribbean-style.' You gotta go and 'eye-witness' what folks are doing close-up... 'mole politics'... We good at it, yes! Perfected it up here too, where we been 'the spooks (sitting) by the door'... and we 'peep' things long before they happen. We have to make sure it don't rain pon we head.

We would have a good pocketful of pictures showing all of these guys in front of their homes... check out their streets ... see if their snow is piled up like ours. I'm not casting any aspersions, just missing another gossipy kind of politics... And somebody will likely sling mud my way saying, "If you miss it so much, why not go back to it?" Well, heck, I miss everything. I am always looking back. I miss Toronto the good, even... when you could not drink alcohol in your backyard, or on apartment balconies. It was like living in the middle of a set of contradictions. I like contradictions; they make life interesting; gets rid of some of that 'bland' to which Toronto used to be given.

And I would not dare write this to the newspapers for fear that I would be sued, or worse yet, threatened. And now, lest I resort to tabloid gossip... on to more serious matters.

A Certain Lack of 'Inclusivity'

You know, one of the big things that just does not get done, is 'inclusivity' in all schools, through to university. I am speaking not just of our history, but of First Nations peoples' history and First Nations peoples' 'Natural Science.' In fact, I am speaking of everybody's history and everybody's science and everybody's theory of knowledge.

Even though universities will have a programme of study in the sciences, nothing is included of the scientific knowledge of anyone but Europeans! This, in the face of having used First Nations peoples' scientific knowledge to survive here, in their country! In fact, this is a big argument against "Black Studies."

It is too late for ghettoised 'studies.' Canadian History, Art, and Culture must of necessity be inclusive of the history of all of its peoples. That would include all who created the country and continue to create it. And it must expand to include later arrivals in categories other than "immigrants."

Is no wonder the children them turn off school by the time them get to high school. Not all'a them, but plenty a'them ... enough for me to say: 'Something wrong!' Is a new millennium we heading for and something wrong in truth! Nobody want to admit that they making a mess with we children life in school. But the truth is, everybody know. Them just hoping that somehow, we will get boot-straps strong enough and long enough fuh pull we up to high heaven. Me nuh know wha'else fuh say!

If fooyou pickney them did go a'school every single day an' all you hear 'bout is how Columbus discover fooyou people them land, you nuh must feel stupid? After all, where you was when this Italian man walk up to you an' tell you say dem just discover fooyou land? Nuh you must think you ancestors an' them min fooley? And then if you know the truth, nuh you must feel vex so till you just decide say you might as well nuh bother learn nothing from them people? Not to mention, some ah the teachers them just talking bout fooyou people an'a call them "Indian?" And when it come to our people, all dem does call dem is "slave." Me never could talk without drop da-one-dey...it does make me too vex when all them have to say 'bout we is how we is "the descendants of slaves." Me ah warn yuh, my people don't have no big 'S' on them forehead. And me nar go leave that one till them stop call us "slave."

So now me want for talk little bit 'bout some other things me did mention early-up. You know, all dem things dem does say 'bout "immigrants"... how dem call all a'we "immigrants" unless we have white skin. When you have white skin, dem don't call you "immigrant." You see, you come from what them call "Third World Country" (me too hate that term). So long as you

come from Third World Country, you is a immigrant. And sometimes, you does be a criminal. And a drug dealer. And a dope addict. And a welfare bum.

In fact, even if you born right ya-so-so; so long as you skin black, them does like arkse you "Are you from Jamaica?" Them just assume we all is immigrant; and if you Black then you is Jamaican. So we never feel as if we really belong ya. Even me friend who is fifth generation Canadian does have to explain she'self all the time. Me tell she she shouldn't answer dem. She say, "How you mean?" Me say "Just nuh answer dem." She wonder what she would do if say is a person she work with... or whatever. Me tell her say me woulda still nuh answer them. Me does do white people that all the time... just stare dem down. Me nar lie. If you arkse me one stupid question, me nar answer you! An me nuh care if you think me crazy... you could go orn think me crazy. If you think me crazy, put you finger in me mouth... make me bite it orf give you. Too besiden, if you persist in arksing me stupidness, me would eventually bite orf you head. So then you woulda force fuh go library go find out say Black people live here before you come inna fooyou boat from Eastern Europe and England. Gwarn goo way from me... you ah give me headache! That is what me want dem fuh know. Me will quicker tell dem that, than answer; especially if me an all my generation come from Montreal, or Halifax, or Windsor, or Toronto and you a'arkse me where me come from: "Where you come from? Canada? And you mother and father come from here too? No? And dem did come over on one a'the 'Displaced Persons' boat? No?" By the time me done arkse all dem kinda stupid question, dem shoulda get the point and just nuh arkse me nothing 'bout if me come from Jamaica. Dem could make you wonder if dem had never hear 'bout Jamaica is where dem would think all'a we did come from? Even some African from Africa and some Indian from India does be arksing me the Jamaica question; like say dem nuh must know better than to act like white people.

So time fuh dem stop think that it have one big 'I' on we

forehead, say immigrant and one 'J' say by way of Jamaica. No, me nuh have no 'I' for immigrant, no 'J' for Jamaica, and no 'S' for slave! Gwarn go way from me before me bite orf you finger first and den you head! Regardless to where me come from, me is a crazy woman! That much is very true!

One Day, One Day

Chant: One day, one day
Refrain: Conka day
Chant: I met an old lady
Refrain: Conka day

She said: "Ah who you be? You is the pickney that Gerald have with Eleanor Glanville daughter, Dorothy? Ent you is a Prince?" I acknowledged my origins and waited to hear what else was going to come. 'Cause you know, when big people stop you on the street and trace you history in that way, you know you going hear some thing that dem have to say. You know that if you mother owe dem money, now is when they going talk 'bout it. If it is that you mother was good to dem, then you going hear 'bout that. An if by any chance, is a woman who used to dey-wid you father, you going hear 'bout that too; but that one you going hear 'bout in a roundabout way. She not going come right out an tell you: "Is me the woman that did dey-wid you father since before you born." Or: "Me dey-wid you father you know, an me ha' one pickney with he an'all...look just like you...same widow's peak, same way she bony an long-long, like electric lamp-post."

Oh no, nothing so lacking in subtlety. First she would say, "You father an me is friend." An' from the time you hear that, you know some ting or the other did go arn! Then she might hold you chin in she hand an' say, "Well, look how you look like you father. Same eye, same nose and you even have the same long hands like his!" By then, you done upset, cause you think-

ing if you should tell you mother 'bout this. First to begin with, you mother going arkse you how you come to make some woman you don't know hold up you face an examine you an' question you. Meantime, is she-self teach you to respect you elders, you know. So you in a dilemma...what to do? What you would really like to do is tell the woman to kiss you behind, that is just before you pull you face out she hand and throw she one big *choopse* in the bargain. That is how your mother tell you she used to deal with people when she was small.

But in truth and in fact, me done decide say my mother times was some kinda special time. She tell me 'bout all kinda things she get for do; how she move round the place, powerful an' strong an' does go an manners-up people. Me cyarn see no way that me woulda get for do that. First to begin with, she done teach all a'we that we suppose fuh decent and have manners, an' treat big people with respect. But same time, she does vex in truth when we allow people for arkse us all kinda question.

And where we does live, people always want to know all kinda thing 'bout we. Like them used to wonder which one name what, an' my mother does be vex when that happen. She does say, "Tell them you no have no name. Them too fast!" And me does just think to me'self that if me woulda say to Mrs. Sommers that me no have no name, me coulda just imagine what woulda happen to me. Cause Mrs. Sommers woulda come to foome Mother an' tell she say me was rude. You cyarn trust them big people, them funny an' them inconsistent.

Dat is what we did think as children an' we was right. Make me show you some example: now when I was growing up, we did use butter on we bread. Everybody did say that butter was good food, because it come from cow's milk. In fact, my grandmother did even make her own butter. Oh yes she did do that, right in Antigua! She would churn it an' churn it in a China bowl with a swizzle stick, an' after a time, it would turn to butter. Oh yes, that happen, right in Antigua-self. Anyway, so we did know that butter is a good food; it come from cow's milk an' everybody did know that cow's milk is good for you. Well nowadays,

them say that cow's milk bad for you, cause we don't have no enzyme to digest it an' it give you coal-es-trawl an' all a'that. So de butter itself not good for you. So dem say: use margarine, it mek from non-animal fat an' it bettah for you. So all a'we use margarine. Eh-eh! Next ting we know, them say, no, no, no, no! We make a mistake, margarine not good for you. It clog up you arr-trees; it bad for you heart. Stop use margarine!

So ah see-saw we on? Back an' forth, back an' forth. You know what me decide? Me use what me feel; me use what my mother did use, because she live until she ninety-two an them res' a' dead left right an' centre! Me eat how she eat, an me ah try fuh get exercise, the same way she did walk all 'bout the place, carry me with she, when me was little. Me figure, if she coulda live until she ninety-two who me shoulda follow? Them people yah? An them cyarn even decide what to put on them bread?

So back to talk 'bout what you going say if one a'you father woman an' them meet you in town an' talk to you... or when big people in general stop you an' start talk to you... You have to figure out how you going react by figuring out what is the relationship between the individual an' you parents. Cause it wouldn't do as I show, to be too sorfie-sorfie with one a'you father woman. You mother going vex with you; act as if you in league with you father an' his woman.

But if is one ah you mother friend, or one a'you father friend, then you have to behave very different. You going have to be nice-nice, an polite an' answer all a'them stupid question, "How is school?" An' you cyarn answer the truth: "It is awful. I hate my teacher; she is stupid; she can't spell; she is boring. She can't teach. I got a 'D' on my last test." Oh no, nothing like that! You have to lie! You say: "School is great! I like school. I have a nice teacher; her name is ----; I am at the top of my class." And you don't have to worry 'bout you parents being vex 'bout the lie, because them lying too. When them friend tell them that them meet you an' how well you doing in school, them an'all lying, saying how them children doing wonderful in school. Them nuh even arkse you nothing 'bout the lie, 'cause them shame

how them lying same way!

"Morning Peter!"... "Cabbage Ma'am!"

A man who was hard of hearing was selling in the market and he had a hearing aid, but he refused to wear it and never acknowledged that he had a hearing problem.

Well, one Saturday morning (it has to be a Saturday, as that was the only day that the market used to be open in those long-time days gone by)... one Saturday morning, a woman went to the market to shop and knowing the man, whose name was Peter, she sought him out. She did not just go to buy from him; she went intending to converse with him.

She said "'Morning Peter." ("Good" being implied before the "morning.") Peter responded: "Cabbage Ma'am." Near-daunted, the woman tried again to exchange pleasantries with Peter. She asked him "How are your wife and children?" Peter, himself near-daunted, replied: "Two pence and three pence a pound Ma'am."

The woman tried again (she had a lot of stamina!) "Please tell them I sent my regards." And Peter went through to the finish: "The potatoes are two pence a pound, Ma'am." The woman gave up and picked out a pound of cabbage and a pound of potatoes, saying "That is all I will buy today." Peter concluded roundly: "My wife and family are very well thank you."

I have decided to give the reader the background AFTER the piece... which is the way I do storytelling. That is the storytelling tradition in which I grew up, listening to stories from my mother and other old people. So, now that you have taken the story at face-value... the frame, structure, and location of the story follows.

All of the stories that my mother told had 'a moral of the tale'... even and including (one of her favourite phrases that) ... even and including real stories. Whenever one of her children demonstrated that they had not listened to her instructions (having gone off on a completely different tangent or

course, if they had been sent to retrieve something), she would say: "You behaving like Morning Peter/Cabbage Ma'am." And if there was anyone present who did not know the story (and sometimes even if there was not), we would soon be listening, once again to: "Morning Peter, Cabbage Ma'am".

I would wager that I heard that story at least ten times a year during childhood and on into my adult life! My mother's story-telling style was plain, straight...the facts. Her 'age' did story-telling to teach mores. In my view, it was seeking to escape the retelling of the stories that kept us in line. It would feel quite shameful to be told again and again, stories related to ethics, honesty, and thrift. It was a gentle nagging that penetrated the consciousness in a tortured process of repetition.

Sweet Talk/Fairy Tales/Damsels in Distress/Princesses/Princes/Frogs

It was a night to remember! He swept her into his arms, holding her in just the way she wanted him to... the way she needed. He whispered sweet *somethings* to her and then kissed the place where his lips had barely touched the skin of her earlobe. His sweet *somethings* went hurtling through her ear-drums to her heart, to her belly, to her toes, making them curl and uncurl. So delectable were the *somethings* that they slipped, like oil on an Italian kitchen floor, all the way through the open lines that connected with her soul. Love things, and home things, little, little, things, but big in the reaching... all the way to her heart-strings.

Ah so it does be when you in love you know. All you whole self involve wid this man that come inna you life one day, just land brapse right in you heart! An' he does know to heself that is so you feel. You know what Ah mean? He does know. An he does make out that he feel like that too. Is so them stay. But den he woulda do some reckless ting that show you that what you say you feel an what he feel a'two different tings.

Make me tell you how me know: if he does feel this big-big feeling for you, how come he coulda just move orn an go tell one next woman that he feel the same way 'bout she? So how one single man that no even have fooyou capacity fuh show he emotion, go manage fuh feel same way with more than one woman? Nuh somebody ah go suffer? Me just ah make sure ah nuh me!

Now some woman does like pretend that them cyarn see what going on... but not me. Me make sure me see everything; every single thing. Me nuh shut me eye dem, cause if me shut me eye, ah me self me ah fool. Me nar fool nobody else. So it nuh make no sense fuh pretend that me nuh know ah wha' ah go orn! Is only in fairy-tale that you does see ooman acting fooley an waiting for people fuh come rescue she. Not "people" nuh: man! In all the fairy-tale dem, the woman does be lying around, or sitting around, waiting fuh man fuh come rescue she. I am talking of course 'bout some famous fairy-tales which were all written by men.

That Cinderella girl sure had it easy... a fairy godmother, just waving a wand. I tell you. Then there was Rapunzel and seeing that not all ahweyah have long-hair, you can forget 'bout the Prince climbing up to carry out a rescue mission. Although these days, what with helicopters and the like, you might be all right with a message to him via a carrier pigeon.

Then there was Little Red Riding Hood, and depending on which version you favour, there came along a hunter with an axe who killed the big bad wolf. In my version, he too posed a threat: he had a weapon, he was a man, and he was alone with Lil' Double-R Hood until other adults showed up.

Now let's see. Who's left? Sleeping Beauty? Now there's a real live passive woman: sleeping her life away, waiting an' waiting for Mister Right fuh come rescue she. And what if he had not just kissed her awake, but had his way with her after he had woken her? Contravenes all that girls are taught these days: don't speak to strangers, let alone kiss them!

We haven't talked as yet about the princess who kissed the frog. Now here is a woman with low self esteem. Imagine kissing a warty ole frog? How hard up can a girl get?

Beauty and the Beast defies the imagination! 'He-beats-me-so-he-loves-me' syndrome happening here. This beast of a man kidnaps her, and she ends up falling in love with him? Then how come the world condemned Patty Hearst? The poor girl was following the lines of her favourite fairy tale, complete with looking after her captor!

And there's another thing I have noticed about these fairy-tales: there is the spectre of the wicked stepmother. The wicked stepmother got pissed off that the mirror said she was not as beautiful as her stepdaughter; so she cast a spell, putting the beauty to sleep. We're talking subliminal murder here.

Then there's the other wicked stepmother. She condemned Cinderella to the dog's life that we know she was leading before the fairy godmother intervened and led her to be rescued by the Prince. Now what I want to say is this: if there is a stepmother, clearly there was a man who married her. What was he thinking to make such a poor choice in a wife and stepmother for his daughter? How could he have married a woman who would so malign his daughter? And how come the story didn't talk 'bout that?

And always, it is a girl who is at the centre of these stories of abuse. The wolf could have easily eaten a little boy, just as Rumpelstilskin could have captured a boy. He could, after all, have been gay! Well, indeed, there was Hantzel accompanying Gretel; gotta give Jack his jacket. And speaking of 'Jack,' notice that when there was need for a heroic act, it was given to a boy, in *Jack And The Beanstalk.*

The fairy-tale is worse than any life construct I could dream up. The fairy-tale puts my power in the hands of the rescuer... always a 'he'... who can then decide to be benign or malevolent. And another thing, when I have had rescue missions carried out on my behalf, they have always been by women!

Beginning with being brought into the world. The man enabled, the woman carried out the action. Under-evolved as men are, they have managed to create a fallacy that they are strong, powerful leaders. Moreover, they have perpetuated the myth that they are the 'rescuers' of women. What creatures men are! They seem not to be destined to lead, and yet, have wrested the role from women!

Some of these objections I raise may explain why fairy tales and their modern-day equivalents (film scripts) depict men in this rescuing role. In life, there are few rescues being performed by men. Au contraire, men lead us into wars, create aggressive law enforcement agencies, and perpetrate heinous crimes against our persons - women, children, and even other men! So it is the carrying out of a perfect fantasy that turns up in fairy-tales that are fed to children.

In fact, women are the rescuers. Check it out: Mother Theresa and Princess Diana linked together as two icons of the rescuing personality. Princess Diana shamed her husband by showing him how to rescue. He in turn made her the princess in the tower. And she cut her hair, relying on cars and helicopters to carry out her own rescue. Took a helicopter to the arms of what appeared to be a man in a rescuing mode: her final chapter. And what did he do? Led her into grave danger!

Dissecting the Black Body to Advertise Products

Clearly, the manifestations of angels are culture-bound, even and including period-dress and religious beliefs of the time. I suspect that an angel in the mind of some people today might be wearing air-Jordans as a way of getting around! Michael Jordan flies, doesn't he? I cannot help myself; the modern period is a laughable period in which to do life. It has brought us advertising which presents a Black man as being able to fly!

When will we ever see him as a genius? For example, is he shown as the scientist discovering how they got the caramel in

the chocolate? No... he is MR. BIG! whose blown-up-huge face leaps out at you from the subway poster; giant feet, hands, shoulders, lips, head: "The HULK!" And so if you buy the chocolate, (especially women) you get to eat Mr. Big (or "SHACK," or "BRICK," or "FRIDGE," or is it "HOUSE"?) Same thing; not worth differentiating.

How many people, I wonder, have seen the commercial and now have this hulking image of Black men in their minds? This includes Black men, women, children, and of course, people of all other races as well. Then there are the Nike commercials which go a step further and dissect a Black man's body...an ear... lips... a foot... a hand.

"Trivial" is how these things are probably viewed by many people, even and including Black people. After all, the demonstrations against the Royal Ontario Museum and the North York Centre For the Performing Arts over much more serious matters, brought an uproar. I can only imagine what an uproar there would be if people decided to demonstrate against this dehumanising of the Black man in commercials. Who would care? Certainly not the Black men whose bodies are being dissected in the print media advertising. They have been paid much money for this symbolic mutilation.

Outside of the obvious sexual imagery, there is a note of savagery about the whole thing (people eating up bits of Black people). There is too the old sexualisation/eroticisation of Black people syndrome: "SHACK" or 'BRICK' or 'FRIDGE' or 'HOUSE' (I like that I think those nicknames are synonymous). Shack, Brick, Fridge, and House are so big and strong... they are also chocolate-coloured. Jump, skip, and hop to the notion that eating the chocolate will make you as big and strong and sexually potent as Shack/Brick/Fridge/House. If you are a woman... well, it might do some other things to you too.

I think it stinks to high heaven. Nobody could make me believe that this is not a subliminal cut! And no commercial will prompt me to eat that chocolate bar!

Black Folks Rescuing Themselves

About us Black folks: I understand how some may grieve about the state of the race. But when all is said and done, it is only yourself for whom you are responsible. So I am saying to myself: grow yourself; do not lament 'the state of the race,' because this can lead to bitterness. Black is not an ideology. It is pigment! So I forgive people for not being who I want them to be (including those of my brothers and sisters, other human beings who seem to have fallen off their life path), and move on. I remember that I too have teetered at the edge and have even fallen off from time to time.

Who am I to judge? I try to enjoy each situation and make sure that my eyes are turned on myself, in terms of growth. At least I can ensure the growth of one person! My growth will eventually touch a whole lot of folks... Black and otherwise, and it will enable the growth of others. I cannot afford to dissipate my energy in useless anger and railing about the fact that there is still so much work to be done.

An example: when some of us first stopped straightening our hair and wore what was then called an Afro, Black people used to point their fingers at us on the subway and on the buses and laugh. That was in 1968! Then we started braiding it — no extensions — in 1969, long before Bo Derek and a movie called *Ten* in which she appropriated African women's hair-braiding with beads. Again, Black folks used to laugh. After Bo Derek and the movie *Ten*, they were all wearing their hair in braids, using extensions. I am happy to record that I have been wearing my hair in little twists since 1994. *Then*, Black folks stared... today, these twists are the hep thing!

I am not suggesting that some of us are some kind of elite trend-setters; rather, I am simply stating that I have to live life in a way that makes sense to me. I also believe that I ought to do this, no matter how others react. So too must I allow others to do the same. I need not condone everything; but I can't fight everything and I certainly do not need to judge anything, even

a thing as simple as a hairstyle!

It is as inevitable as Winter turning into Spring that not everyone will approve of everything one does. There will always be a few people who are willing to go way out on a limb for what they believe in. That too is an inevitability. Our task is to make sure that we do not dissipate our energies trying to dictate how people ought to be. This is not a justification for being selfish, but rather, for self-interest. We will find that we have an enormous amount of energy for the good things: our work, our joy, our lives. Everything will flow into place much more easily when we are focused in the right way. And in the end, lives lived by example have great impact.

We have not come to the end of the tunnel, so we need to 'keep on keeping on.' I believe that there *is* light all the way along what we think of as 'the tunnel,' not just at the end of it. I also believe that we have to take our eyes off this perceived 'tunnel' and seek instead the light, so that it may fully illuminate the way. We will then see that the tunnel was an illusion.

On Antiguan Patch-work Making and Other Power-Centres

I feel the art of patchwork-making in the dexterity of fingers creating beauty out of material deprivation. Always, I have seen the patchwork as a work of art, originating out of necessity. For it was in the absence of the wherewithal to purchase 'coverlets,' that Antiguan women turned to scraps of cloth and created a work of art.

I see the patchwork as a metaphor for life: the design reflecting one's 'way of seeing'or world-view. The construction of the work resembles a similar method of constructing life: from scraps, from bits and pieces, from anything that can be salvaged and made into beauty. In the fingers of the seamstress (symbolic of the Antiguan woman, over time), the scraps, the bits and pieces, all of the things that can be salvaged, all these things make the patchwork come into being...Created from noth-

ing... brand new, fresh from the harvest... from among the cassie thorns... from the harshness of the plantation system, then the colonial system, then the post-colonial system. Still present as beautiful... from the nothing was created a thing of beauty... a work of art... a people!

What I envision is that soon, we will see an inquiry into the Antiguan patchwork... not a 'needlepoint' inquiry, by any means, (not to belittle those people who concentrate on basket-weaving and needlepoint and recipes and the like). Rather, I envision an examination of Antiguan patchwork-making as an art form possessing a philosophical expression of will. That 'will' is manifested in the beauty which the woman sees in the cast-offs, the scraps, the bits and pieces. Thus the woman hears something in those scraps of colour, in that mix of the different weaves of cloth. What she hears in that drum-beat urges her to create something within *that* frame of reference. The 'function-ality' of the patchwork cover is something she transcends. The lack and limitation of the system in which she survives, do not act as deterrents to her capacity to create beauty... to make life... to *do life*. It is sculpting with fabric, in the same way that she sculpts life with her hands, using the same methods, tools, and materials. This is some kind of power! It is a demonstration of continuance that flies in the face of genocide.

I use the patchwork metaphor in my fiction-writing and in my sociological writing. It is a concept with which I am quite enamoured and thrilled. It is as if I too have taken a scrap of cloth and am continuing the life metaphor. A strength. A secret hidden away in the folds of yards and yards of wholes, all created out of the scraps which others only offered because they had no use for them... did not want them... and so could finally be generous with something. And my hand clutches at it, grasps it and holds it aloft triumphantly, transformed, made into a covering, for warmth, for beauty, for love of life. It is a victory felt in my heart as the Antiguan patchwork warms my body.

The Crone In Time Brought To Light

Would that all good things would never end, but would stay, not frozen in time... rather, evolving along with time. If good things could flow to a fullness and with sufficient body, then one would even want to say that time has within itself a 'crone' period.

Would that growth would always build on what has been, instead of the 20th century trade-in mentality. As a child, I appreciated these things: the seasoned fish; the weathered shingles; the ancient silk-cot tree; the sinewy back of an Old One; the knotted, smoothed wood of the mahogany dining room table; its old, carved legs curved and wobbled, just a little, as if in harmony with its owners' bending, creaking legs; faces loved into old-age by the weather and still turned upward in acknowledgement and unspoken supplication; heads remembering to bow in deference and be respectful when embracing a full moon. Age shall not weary attention to memory. Crass modernity, eyes focused on money, is the real enemy. Everyone is engaged in the creation of everyone. I practice silence; it is the wise woman's magic wand. I use it as a mantra. It works.

Seeking a Conversation With Spirit

I think it is so much simpler to *do life* with help from Spirit.

There are no medals to be earned by aiming for some perfect world in which we have control over all aspects of our lives, by our selves. I am teaching that lesson to myself on several levels in several arenas and am quite sure that it applies to every single thing we do.

It is a good idea to look inside for every single thing that is bothering you. And if many things are bothering you, everyone does not need to hear what they are. This is my attempt to speak the truth to you as I see it, feel it, 'read' it. You can discard it... I won't be lurking in the wings to say "I told you so on such and such a date." And no thanks are in order if you don't

feel 'thank you' after reading this. I just feel that it would be a criminal act on my part not to say to you that you must love yourself sufficiently to seek to heal those things that bother you — INSIDE — where it counts! That healing inside will sort out everything, including and especially the resolution of whatever problem you are confronting. It is not going to come by magic, your feeling good... it is work... it brings pain sometimes... so cry! Tears help. And then continue living to face another day where you can create your good. Do not waste any more life at forks in the road. The road less travelled by still stands to be experienced. It is an internal path... it is not about what we accomplish in the material constructs that we create to try to make ourselves feel good.

When all is said and done, the jobs are still there: some of them are as oppressive as ever. And some of us are still somewhere inside them, trying to climb up out of this mountain of stuff that is supposed to make us feel like somebody. But our true self, *the real*, never gets attended to. Be *there* for yourself. The only person who needs to be there for you is *you*. Nobody else can really be there for you any more... not after you are grown. It is like that in the culture in which we all live. If we find someone who is always there for us, that is wonderful — but do not expect it, look for it diligently, and then get resentful when you do not find it. When someone you thought would be there for you was not even looking your way, shrug and forgive her or him for not being who you thought or expected them to be. Forgive yourself too for not seeing all that there was to see. You are, after all, a normal spiritual being engaged in a human experience, learning, gaining realisation and wisdom in this earth plane. Every single disappointment contains within it learning, realisation, and wisdom.

If we want to be loved, then we must love ourselves first. It is as simple as that. And how can we love ourselves best? By looking after ourselves from inside out. Begin somewhere. Ask the self: "How are you feeling?" Listen to the answer, accept the answer, and act on the information. If the self says, "I am well;

I am happy; I understand life and I am assured that I am travelling life's journey with wisdom and understanding," then you have no more spiritual work to do! You would then have reached the pinnacle of enlightenment and would not have needed to incarnate on this earth. Your presence here is to reach for that ultimate goal of absolute happiness, to be found in absolute enlightenment. It is continuous work, needing help from the Spirit.

If, however, the self answers that there are things not resting easy with the Spirit, then you have more questions to ask of your self. You will need to collect more information before deciding on a course of action. This does not mean that you will act in a rash manner, but rather, that you will be able to act with more information to guide your actions. You will be more in tune with how you are feeling and will be aware of how your thinking impacts on your life. You will also have a clearer idea about your innermost heart's desires.

Of course you are free to lie to yourself; but why would you want to waste time doing that when it has not worked? If it had, you would be happily engaged in the *doing* of life with energy, vitality, and joy! If you are, that is wonderful! That quest is the truth that your heart's desires will bring you. There is great joy in the journey itself. To embark on the journey, first, you must be truthful when you ask yourself the question: "How are you?"

Spring Finally Arrives

Sometimes it is the wind that speaks of things that ought to be noted in silence, as if to contradict the dictates of the silence of the drum. Missing the sounds that record what is taking place, echoes of emotions speaking louder than the cadence of voice. For the wind picks up the echoes, hears those things not said, speaks of the unspoken, heals the Spirit with time's cool fingers... lifting leaves that lay waiting for the rake... whips them into a swirling frenzy. For March winds had been too weakened

by rain to do more than make a neglected mound... moulting under 'bare-limbed' trees, hoping for a miracle.

A renewal takes place with the sun... a rejuvenation from inside the depths of the damp, and the soft, 'un-trod' soil, kept green, under all that brown. A miracle. A salvation. A rebirth. And now Spring can arrive at will. For the ground has been cleared, Spirit cheered, a kindness heard, a voice hearkened, a place made, the ground broken, the sod turned.

And now all is ready for the seeding.

So the nail-head bend; so the story end.

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Endnotes

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Stop Calling Us "Slaves"

1. I should point out that many First Nations people in Canada make another kind of case altogether, concerning hearing and reading about themselves as "the Indians." But more on Columbus' mistakes later.

2. While the official date of Emancipation is 1834, it was only in some islands that full and immediate manumission was granted. Others experienced an "Apprenticeship System" which lasted until 1866 in some colonies and until 1868 in others. I use 1868 as the date when all Africans in the New World were finally, officially, released from slavery. See Lewis in Works Cited.

3. The word 'marronage' is used in Caribbean scholarship to signify the spirit of 'petit marronage,' a term which grew out of the word 'maroon.' When the Spanish began their settlements in the sixteenth century on Hispaniola, they used the word 'maroon' to describe cattle which had gone wild and escaped from the plantations. The term was extended to refer to indigenous peoples, and to Africans who escaped from plantations and formed separate societies. Maroon societies existed for centuries in Jamaica, and for shorter periods in Brazil, Ecuador, and Saint-Domingue. Other forms of

resistance to enslavement were termed 'petit marronage.' These included: temporary absence from a plantation, resisting labour, defying a planter, destruction of property, and other acts representative of the personal conflict between African and planter on individual plantations. See Knight in Works Cited.

4. C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins*, New York: Vintage, 1963, 7.

5. The term 'West Indian' deserves scrutiny in this discussion of language, and the weight and power of words. Columbus, seeking to find his way to India, and realising that he was in the west and not the east, named the islands "the Indies." Later the Caribbean islands were referred to as "the West Indies" and its inhabitants were (and are often still) called "West Indians." Today, the term "Caribbean people" is used more frequently in the scholarship on the region. Reclaiming the geographic location of the region by name is, in my view, an act of marronage.

6. Slavery was a normal part of life in ancient Greece, and the enslaved were sometiimes other Greeks. Yet modern Greeks are not referred to as the descendants of slaves. See Finley in Works Cited.

Black Like I And I

1. I have heard Kamau Brathwaite speak on several occasions of the wastefulness of ignoring historical experiences, and thus repeating history. The last time I heard him speak on this topic was at York University in Toronto in 1978.

2. A selection of Rodney's works is listed in Works Cited. Rodney had been teaching at the University of the West

Indies in Jamaica, and was refused re-entry on leaving the Congress of Black Writers in Montreal. He was later executed in an ambush in his native Guyana, to which he had been deported.

3. Dalton Higgins, "Making It Happen," NOW Magazine, February 11-17, 1999, 21.

4. 'overstand' = understand in standard English; 'livity' = daily living/daily life... inclusive of philosophical and spiritual life.

Black History Month, Or, Have-Black-History-Month-Kit-Will-Travel

1. Anansi is a trickster spider who is the centre of stories which African people brought to the Caribbean with them from West Africa. There is much irony for me therefore, in an African person being offered Anansi stories collected by someone who is European. The issue of appropriation of culture, coupled with the underlying insult of denying the validity of my children's books, makes this incident stand out in my personal struggle for a more inclusive cultural vision.

2. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1971, 334-5.

3. Ibid.

4. Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince & Other Writings*. New York: International Publishers, 1967, 80.

5. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1963, 313.

Contextualising Cultural Festivals: Toronto's Caribana

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, London: Routledge, 1973, 301-302.

2. Clarissa Pinkola-Estes, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1992, 26.

3. Claire Harris, "Why Do I Write?" in *Grammars of Dissent*, Carol Morrell, ed., Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 1994, 30.

4. Harris, 33.

5. Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez, *Art and Society*, London: Merlin Press, 1973, 244.

Seeking Wholeness in African-Caribbean Voice

1. C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary*, London: Hutchinson, 1963, 49.

2. Calypso Rose and Singing Francine had mass appeal at that time in Trinidad and by my assessment, their work measures up to James's yardstick of authenticity and wholeness; however, this article confines itself to the work of three women writers.

3. When James returned to Trinidad in 1967, he devoted much of his political attention to uniting Indians and Africans, culminating in the formation of the Workers and Farmers Party.

4. James, 7.

5. Ibid, 48.

6. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider, Freedom*, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984, 37.

7. Ibid.

8. Althea (Prince) Trotman, *How the East-Pond Got Its Flowers*, Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1991, 8.

9. Ibid, 15.

10. Althea Prince, *How the Mosquito Got Its Sting*, unpublished manuscript, 15.

11. (Prince) Trotman, *How the East-Pond Got Its Flowers*, 7.

12. Merle Hodge, *Crick Crack Monkey*. Kingston, Jamaica: Heinemann, 1970, 15.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid, 16-17.

15. Ibid, 18.

16. Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*, New York: Penguin, 1983, 4.

17. Ibid, 134-135.

18. Lorde, 38.

19. Ibid.

20. Kincaid, 6.

21. Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1991, 18.

22. Ibid, 30.

23. bell hooks, *Talking Back—Thinking Feminist—Thinking Black*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1998, 58.

24. Ibid, 159.

25. C.L.R. James, "The Birth of a Nation," in *Contemporary Caribbean: A Sociological Reader*, Volume One, Susan Craig, ed., Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: The College Press, 1981, 35.

26. Ian Munro and Reinhard Sander, eds., *Kas-Kas: Interviews With Three Caribbean Writers In Texas—George Lamming, C.L.R. James, Wilson Harris*, Austin, TX: African & Afro-American Research Institute, The University of Texas at Austin, 1972, 30.

Writing Thru Race: The Conference

1. 'Downpressed' is a Rastafari word used instead of 'oppressed.'

2. Philip Marchand, "Canada Council Upsets Some Whites" in *Toronto Star*, January 26, 1994, Section D, D1.

Talking To A Sex/Eight Drum

1. Peggy Bristow, Afua Cooper, Dionne Brand, Linda Carty, Sylvia Hamilton, Adrienne Shadd, eds., *"We're Rooted Here And They Can't Pull Us Up": Essays In African Canadian Women's History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.

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