

At the Scene of the Crossroads, 'Somewhere in this Silvered City:'¹

Diasporic Public Spheres in Toronto

Jenny Burman

Bus rides

In their introduction to the edited collection *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*, Gibson and Watson emphasize that they approach the city not as kin of the *flâneurs* of yore, but as tourists on a bus with tinted glass speeding down the expressway, making occasional pit stops, flashing past recognized and incomprehensible scenes (1995, 2). I am seeking a site-specific metaphor for ethnographic research on diasporic public spheres, defined here as dispersed collectivities oriented toward the same former dwelling-place, which members have been compelled or forced to leave behind. The public-ness is less to indicate the presentation of self or 'community' than the engagement with other public spheres and contact with local and transnational affiliates. Diasporic communities' transnational character qualifies any momentary focus on local boundaries, but since they are always in situ, in dialogue with a locale, the city scene might be a useful way to 'place' the sphere. Something about the notion of a cultural diaspora (Cohen 1997) helps set the scene of Jamaican and Caribbean diasporic public spheres in Toronto, given their overlap with what are loosely called 'youth culture' and 'urban culture.' Perhaps whatever intangible quality accounts for their desirability and cultural currency makes these spheres particularly open to the possibilities of engagement, affinity, identification—and on the B-side, the assault of appropriation.

An image/bodily experience by which this research might be inspired is the Eglinton West bus during summer rush hour. Eglinton Road West has a stretch, roughly between Marlee Avenue and Emerdale Road—starting after the 13 Division police station and ending before the Prospect Cemetery—with a heavy concentration of Jamaican and other Caribbean small businesses and residences. It is sometimes called 'Little Jamaica,' but Yon writes, "in circles where the implications of Jamaican hegemony are resisted, it is know quite simply as 'the Strip'" (1995, 489). This bus is no Scenicruiser; it doesn't mimic the sensory deprivation tank of the air-conditioned car (Pine fresh, easy listening, sun visors). The Toronto Transit Commission route 32B, C or D follows a schedule, more or less, but these are the erratic FS hours, Frequent Service, and in construction season traffic jams make movement even less predictable (there are two seasons in

Toronto, the old joke goes, winter and construction). From the window, a bus traveller—or, incongruously in this instance, ‘Rocket Rider’—catches fleeting glimpses of signs, or stuck at a light gets a voyeuristic moment looking at a corner scene (a Rastafarian reasoning session, an onlooker might dream, although it’s inaudible—Lillian Allen’s hilarious ‘Rasta in Court,’ which starts along here with a Rasta on his bike running into a cop, comes to mind). A collection of fragments—Port Royal restaurant, Sugar and Spice, Wisdom’s, Gus’s Tropical Foods (the sign reader might feel a tug of nostalgia for a ‘tropics’ s/he has never known), RAPID REMITTANCE, Natural Touch hair design—another flash of green/black/yellow, the colours of the Jamaican flag. Horns honk, Tre Stelle trucks block the road (there are many Italian businesses on this strip too), dance-hall growls from Treasure Isle Records—smells like curry, then Pizza Pizza, then jerk, always with an exhaust undercurrent. All this inflected by the packed bus’ crush of bodies, commingling sweat on upper arm slicks, the sound of patois, the accents of the Canadian-born, the patois of the Canadian-born (adopted consciously, a gesture of affinity). The rider could get off at this point to walk the last few blocks among fellow walkers and objects (piles, barrels, racks of stuff spilling out on the sidewalk).² This may be ‘Caribbeanness’ or ‘Jamaicanness’ to an extent, not a stable thing but a collaboratively produced heat-warped mirage, sold and consumed, spoken and moved, seen, heard and tasted. To a passer-by who is not addressed, it is apprehended in fragments, taken in through all the senses but in no real way ‘understood’ for ethnographic translation.

The actors, symbols, and practices making the scene both inhabit and indicate the particular locale and gesture toward another place, assuming or drawing out a common thread of desire (whatever it may feel like in its nuances, intensity, ambivalence) and addressing a participant with extra-textual knowledge, from the book-learnable (flag colours) to the sensual and embodied (taste, olfactory triggers). The language of scenes works insofar as diasporic public spheres involve the theatricality of what we think of as ethnicity. They stage the scene of another place, but at the same time create the scene of intertextuality—through, for instance, codes addressing the boundary between inside and outside, belonging and unbelonging. Ethnicity, like ‘race’ and ‘culture’ to varying degrees, is as Fredric Jameson writes about culture, “an objective mirage that arises out of the relationship between at least two groups” (qtd. in Bennett 1998, 2). The objective mirage of ethnicity in Toronto is a collaborative production—top-down through popular representation, ethnic associations, and the exigencies of multiculturalism policy, but bottom-up through the sedimented habits and practices of everyday life, including ways of remembering other places—invoked consciously and often perpetuated subconsciously by all city residents. Treating ethnicity as relational knowl-

edge (Kamboureli 2000, 161) avoids counterproductive discussions of 'cultural retention' (Henry 1994; Cohen 1997) and its sometimes unstated opposite, assimilation.

The synaesthetic experience of the bus ride may link metaphorically citizen-ethnographer and citizen-subject in this case. The occasioning desire of academic inquiry, especially into city life, is rooted in sensual pleasure or feeling (Stoller's *Sensuous Scholarship* and de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* are exemplary here), as are practices of diasporic remembrance (Toronto hiphop artist MC Collizhun serves Jamaican food at concerts and records in his own Jerk Chicken Studios).³ Much has been made of the erotics of city crowds, traditionally by white male scholars (e.g. Baudrillard's musings on US cities). Is it possible for a researcher to create a portrayal that registers alterity while disrupting exoticism? Street scene portraits and neighbourhood studies, like ethnography generally, give rise to several questions: Are such studies now anachronistic in that they construct a marginalized, spatially contained 'other' community (like Area Studies in a diasporic age)? As such, do they begin in and provoke fascination (a distancing technique distinguishable from the more engaged 'seduction' {Blum, this issue})? Does isolating ethnocultural enclaves prop up the idea of a mainstream—meaning white, Anglo—Toronto onto which immigrants are grafted? This idea persists partly because of the speed of the demographic upheaval since the late 1960s; but more than an understandable lag or slow paradigm shift is at play here—this is also the work of power maintenance. Many parties have a vested interest in perpetuating a normative notion of the mainstream, and vestiges of old Toronto are visible and not-so-visible everywhere. Nevertheless, the uncritical use of the concept of a mainstream is a hindrance to the refashioning of diasporic futures (Scott 1999).

There is no shortage of precedents for ethnographic portrayals of urban sub-cultures/sub-communities (Makabe 1998; Zucchi 1988; Thompson 1989; Kasher 1997). The 'part in a whole' approach, however, tends to homogenize the 'culture' in subculture, imagining sameness within difference. A category like 'the Jamaican community in Toronto' evokes a community based on consensus, hiding internal exclusions and productive dissensus, and of course suspending hybridity. Meanwhile, people obviously hold multiple attachments, and these are never automatic but determined in relation to (not just in reaction to) the exigencies of a specific 'problem-space' (Scott 1999). The question of a Jamaican diasporic public sphere or scene (the scene of diasporic remembrance, refashioning, and intertext) seems to leave more room for agency, through the choice inherent to 'affiliation,' and for dissensus.

The intention here is not to represent Jamaican-Torontonians, but to move toward theorizing a field of engagement: the shifting-sand streets



and mediascapes (Appadurai 1996) of diasporic Toronto. Encounters within and between diasporic communities and other public spheres, including a still powerful but declining numerically Anglocentric ‘mainstream,’ have reconstituted the city; it makes less and less sense to place them in a mutually exclusive relationship, as though there is a ‘Toronto’ independent of superimposed spheres. Dub poet Lillian Allen writes and performs:

In these Canadian bones
where Africa landed
and Jamaica bubble
inna reggae redstripe
and calypso proddings of culture
We are creating this very landscape we walk on (1999).

If we move with Allen, prodded by the thematic scope of her body of work, we see the resonance of ‘Jamaican,’ its scattershot signification culturally (especially through music) and politically. ‘Jamaican’ plays an undeniable role in Toronto’s and Canada’s discursive field if one is concerned about the racialization and criminalization of non-white Canadians, the protection of citizenship (i.e. the constitution of Canadianness) through the deportation of targeted groups like Afro-Caribbean women (the Seven Jamaican Mothers’ case in the 1970s {Chancy, 1997}) and men (deportation bill C44). But it remains important to foreground somehow the trouble inherent to representing difference. Look: that already seems to mean ‘same’ representing ‘different,’ leading us to the very heart of the ethnographer’s often-neglected problematic: who is the unspoken same—the addressee/reader?—and what is the genealogy of the construction of same/different?

In Essence

If the question, not the fact, of essence is part of the groundwork of the scene, an attendant issue is how ‘Jamaicanness’ is mobilized by different parties in the city, insiders and outsiders both (those who identify or affiliate and those who dis-identify). ‘Jamaicanness’ here is not a definable essence, nor does it indicate a stable original, especially in the case of second and third-generation Jamaican-Canadians.⁴ As with all examples of x-ness, its character shifts and morphs, rising or stooping to meet all kinds of occasions. Two examples (find them gravitating uncomfortably toward insider and outsider perspectives): 1. The Jamaican Canadian Association’s (JCA) mobilization of ‘Jamaican’ illustrates the way in which coalition politics are built right into the concept of an ‘ethnic’ organization. Its statement reads: “(The JCA) is a membership and social services

agency working to improve the quality of life for African Canadians, promote Black/Jamaican culture, fight racism, and work in partnership with others who share similar values and goals.”⁵ Here we have cross-ethnic, issue-based affinity and affiliation at the fore, which helps to loosen those terms from their resonance of blood ties. The JCA chooses to make anti-Black racism its central focus, in response to and in anticipation of settlement obstacles faced by Black immigrants in Toronto and in Canada generally. The statement performs something of a strategic homogenization of ‘Jamaican’—Chinese, Syrian, South Asian and British Jamaicans, who make up a small minority, are factored out—in the service of that focus. 2. After the robbery and shooting at the Just Desserts café in 1994, in which four Jamaican-born residents were charged with robbery and two among them with the murder of a White Canadian-born resident, media coverage was criticized heavily because of how it figured ‘Jamaicanness.’ Representations of the accused became central to an important debate about criminality and criminalization, racialization and media imagery. Critiques went beyond deconstructing stereotypes (in what has been called an ‘anatomy of racism’ approach), instead treating the relationship between the contextual representation of ethnicity, public opinion, police behaviour, immigration law and deportation practices.⁶ (Yes, this is an old song, the criminalization of Jamaicans, and there are many others playing, but in Toronto it cannot be ignored. See Pendry and Metivier’s film *Audry Smith: The Fight for Justice*, about the Jamaican tourist strip-searched publicly by Metro’s finest in 1996).



Remittance

Like all cities, Toronto is both a tangible, sensually apprehended here-and-now place to live and a nexus of global flows often only visible through residual traces or commodities; a local and global site, to use a now familiar dual lens. Thus, a street scene can never be presumed legible. If Toronto has one of the most cosmopolitan urban populations in the world, any conception of the city has to be informed by the countless pathways running in and out: financial (e.g. trade, offshore industry), political (informing immigration and refugee policy, multiculturalism programmes, etc...), interpersonal (family and other attachments of love and /or obligation). These imagined and practiced affiliations are enabled by electronic media such as television and the internet (Appadurai, 1996; Yon, 1995). Studies of diasporic public spheres should consider individual residents’ emotive investments in other places, whatever form these might take (migrant remittances, home-themed Toronto businesses, cooking practices) and how those affect lived experiences of Toronto,⁷ as well as more legible indices of civic participation and belonging to multiple locales (joining so-called ethnic associations like the Jamaican-Canadian

Association). With the aim of more nuanced research on the former, I will close with an argument for an expanded concept of remittance, making use of the term's nuances exceeding the act of sending: surrender, withdrawal, relief from, freedom. Money and goods sent are not extricable from a sense of responsibility, attachment, guilt and reparations, since individual migration is almost never the culmination of an individual process. I view remittances by diasporic agents through a distinction between nostalgia and yearning, as different kinds of connection to both an elsewhere and to the 'here' of diasporic dwelling-place.⁸ Remittances in the broadest sense should include diasporic cultural work: as this paper's title has it, staging the scene of a crossroads rather than recreating another place nostalgically.

Cultural remittances challenge the pedagogic and edificatory imperative of the kinds of display encouraged by official multiculturalism (Toronto's Panorama, for example), in part through multiple modes of address. What does it mean to continue to celebrate Jamaican Independence Day (as well as Emancipation Day for all Anglophone Caribbean Islands) in a diasporic site such as Toronto? This, a marker of the transition from colonial outpost to sovereign nation—one that has been left but not abandoned by so many—is not an 'ethnic celebration' addressed to some ill-defined Toronto mainstream. The Jamaica Day picnic is held at Keele Park, west of the Jamaicanized Eglinton West strip, and advertised primarily in Caribbean and Black newspapers (*Caribbean Camera*, *Share*, *Pride*). Caribana—a roughly coeval celebration—may be the quintessential diasporic scene, with its many modes of address. For funding purposes and for the sake of smooth relations with municipal government, the festival opens itself to a mainstream Toronto but does not rely on or necessarily address it. Such events draw their audiences transnationally, mainly from US diasporic sites. I argue elsewhere that Caribana's predominant trope is that of masquerade and its ethos is one of opacity, not transparency. While in many ways city regulations prevent it from being a properly carnivalesque, transgressive event, Caribana does upset conventions of multicultural spectatorship.⁹

In the end, maybe affiliation, remittance, nostalgia and yearning help to theorize the complex field of engagement of diasporic public spheres. As from a bus, yes, but stuck standing in a rush-hour crush (an instance when space and time bind each other acutely), with the windows open and the city spilling in. Depending on its post-Strip route, the 32 B, C or D loops through a residential area, then returns to Eglinton West, moving Eastward this time—reversing the order of fragments, completing its tight circuit, taking an endlessly repeated route that proves each time different.

Notes

- 1 From Lillian Allen's poem "Unnatural Causes" (1993).
- 2 de Certeau writes, "History begins at ground level, with footsteps. They are the number, but a number that does not form a series. They cannot be counted because each unit is qualitative in nature: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesic appropriation" (1984, 129).
- 3 "MC Collizhun adds Jamaican flava to T-dot hiphop," by Matt Galloway, *NOW magazine*, Feb. 8–14, 2001.
- 4 That is not to say 'Jamaican'—or 'Italian,' or 'Anglo'—is a floating signifier, ready to be donned or discarded at will (this to anticipate a well-worn critical swipe); persistent institutional racism in Toronto—look no further than City Council's proportional misrepresentation—and in Canada makes sure of that. But I am interested in how the definition of Jamaican exceeds 'from Jamaica,' in dialogue with urban and national contexts. Clearly, notions of ethnic essence are vital on the political level (i.e. funding of ethnicity-based associations and festivals), and as importantly to this discussion, on the affective level: feeling, pleasure, imagination, hope. Paul Gilroy's discussion of 'anti-anti-essentialism' expresses the need to avoid the pitfalls of both essentialism (essential attributes determine the subject) and its knee-jerk opposition, which may overplay the role of free will and choice (1996, 102–3).
- 5 JCA leaflet, "Building to Serve: Working Together, Growing Together."
- 6 One example is the report published by the Church Council on Justice and Corrections ("Fear of Crime in Canada: Taking the Pulse of a Nation," for Department of Justice Canada, April 1995). Nairn and Montagu made the link to subsequent deportation practices: Bill C44, dubbed the Just Desserts Bill, targeted Afro-Caribbean men in Ontario (1999).
- 7 Makeda Silvera's *Silenced* (1989), a collection of oral histories of Caribbean domestic workers in Canada, is a classic example of such a study.
- 8 This is explored in more detail in my Ph.D. dissertation, *Economies of Nostalgia and Yearning: Travelling the route between Toronto and Jamaica* (York University, October, 2001).
- 9 Jenny Burman, "Masquerading Toronto through Caribana: Transnational carnival meets the sign 'Music ends here,'" *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, forthcoming.

Bibliography

- Allen, Lillian. 1999. *Psychic Unrest*. Toronto: Insomniac Press.
- Allen, Lillian. 1993. *Women Do This Every Day*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1988. *America*. London, New York: Verso.
- Bennett, David, ed. 1988. "Introduction." *Multicultural States: Rethinking difference and identity*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Chancy, Myriam J. A. 1997. *Searching for safe spaces : Afro-Caribbean women writers in exile*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Cohen, Robin. 1997. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Certeau, Michel de. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1996. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double-consciousness*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.



Henry, Frances. 1994. *The Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto: Learning to Live with Racism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kamboureli, Smaro. 2000. *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Kasher, Robert J. 1997. *Passport's guide to ethnic Toronto : a complete guide to the many faces & cultures of Toronto*. Lincolnwood, IL: Passport Books.

Kershen, Anne J., ed. 1997. *London, the promised land?: the migrant experience in a capital city*. Aldershot, Hants; Brookfield, VT: Avebury.

Makabe, Tomoko. 1998. *The Canadian Sansei*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Mirzoeff, N. ed. 2000. *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*. London and New York: Routledge.

Montagu, Masani, and John Nairn. 1999. CERLAC seminar series, York University.

Scott, David. 1999. *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Silvera, Makeda. 1989. *Silenced: talks with working class Caribbean women about their lives and struggles as domestic workers in Canada*. (1983). Toronto: Sister Vision.

Stoller, Paul. 1997. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Thompson, Richard H. 1989. *Toronto's Chinatown: The changing social organization of an ethnic community*. New York: AMS Press.

Watson, Sophie and K. Gibson, eds. 1995. *Postmodern Cities and Spaces*. Cambridge MA and Oxford: Blackwell.

Yon, Daniel. 1995. "Identity and Differences in the Caribbean Diaspora: Case study from Metropolitan Toronto." *The Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the hood*. Ed. A. Ruprecht and C. Taiana. Ottawa: Carleton University Press.

Zucchi, John. 1988. *Italians in Toronto: Development of a national identity, 1875-1935*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.