“Other/ed” Kinds of Blackness: An Afro diasporic Versioning of Black Canada

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Abstract: For centuries Canada has been home to several overlapping diasporas partially consisting of African Americans refugees, exiled Maroons, Black Loyalists, and many others migrant groups from various African diasporas. Accordingly, the possibility of ‘a’ Black Canadian identity remains illusive, due in part to continual influxes of members of the African diaspora into Canada. The rigidity of a single unifying identity and the seemingly porous nature of national boundaries urges us to move towards a conceptual shift that refuses to seek a unifying discursive identity position. Importantly, black identity politics in Canada have benefited from the rise of Continental African voices in Canadian hip hop music. One of the goals of this paper is to expand the conceptual terrain of overlapping African diasporas illuminated by Continental African hip hoppers in Canada. Thus, both the lyrical innovations and geopolitical orientations of artists like Shad and K’Naan highlight the overlapping nature African diasporas in Canada, opening new ways to think more expansively about Black Canadian identity as Afro diasporic identity. Importantly, the main contribution of this paper is to mobilize versioning as a conceptual tool that remixes our contemporary notions of Black Canada to highlight some of the ways in which we might trouble (or update) blackness in Canada, particularly paying attention to the kinds of identity interventions made possible by newcomer East African populations within Canada’s diaspora space.

Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law the hidden network that determine the way they confront one another, and also which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.

(Foucault 1970: xxi)

Black Canada does not exist, at least not in a singular homogenous form. Black Canadians exist and Blacks in Canada exist; yet Black peoples living in Canada fail to satisfy the narrow criteria of a ‘nation’. A shared language, culture or politic, or even a certain kind of
ideological stability, are some of the criteria by which one defines a nation. From Hayti in 1804 to post-9/11 Canada, ‘nation’ as an ideological tool has consistently failed to capture the varied experiences of African diasporic populations. This is to say that a bounded and unified nation/territory cannot account for the heterogeneity of Black histories and contemporary experiences. Within this limited understanding of nation, Black Canada exists most fervently as a mechanism of ‘order’, a rhetorical and ideological strategy utilized by various camps of scholars, activists and politicians as needed. Black Canada acts as a marker (that can only be temporal) that attempts to capture a heterogeneous blackness, for the purposes of conceptualizing, defending and mobilizing people of African descent in Canada. Significantly, the work Black Canada does is to ‘order’ the heterogeneities of blackness in Canada into a useful package capable of navigating a world more comfortable with sameness rather than difference. Black Canada abides by the terms of nation, which necessarily obscures the very transnational, multi-local ways in which Afro diasporic people live in, beyond and between nation as a concept and nation as lived reality.

In an attempt to expand the conceptual terrain of the idea of Black Canada, the first half of this essay takes up ways in which we might imagine and articulate the heterogeneity of Black Canadian life. The tools used to begin this conversation are from the sonic innovations located within the African diaspora; more specifically this essay mines the potential of versioning, a soundsystem invention from Jamaica’s early years of indigenous music. The intention of this theoretical move is deliberate; it is an attempt to find new tools, begin from unsuspecting spaces to challenge the ways in which European systems of thought dominate our imagination and our intellectual explorations.

Furthering how Afrosonic innovations might be useful, this article explores the theoretical relevance of two relatively new hip hop artists in Canada, K’naan and Shad K. These two artists were born in Somalia and Kenya respectively and were either partially or fully raised in Canada. Through their lyrics, videos and interviews K’naan and Shad’s subjective identifications through their art encourages us to critically engage with the potential of Afro diasporic as a conceptual tool and allows for our common understandings of blackness in Canada to fully engage its polyphonic reverberations and echoes. Methodologically, this essay’s textual and discursive analysis of both lyrics and images in hip hop culture gesture at the excesses of diasporic blackness and the deterritorialized desires of those for whom the rigidity of a fixed notion like Black Canada is limiting and thus continually disrupted.

Importantly, this paper moves through two significant theoretical interventions. First, the term Afro diasporic is employed and utilized as a conceptual tool to capture the fluidity of identities in the African Diaspora. Secondly, and equally as
important is the centrality of thinking through Afrosonic life as theoretical tools to conceptualize our present discursive and geopolitical moment. The final section of this essay offers a contemporary example of how hip-hop culture’s intertextual and hybrid maneuvers suggests the plausibility of Black Canadas, a temporary version of Black Canada consisting of overlapping African diasporas (Lewis 1995). By turning to hip hop culture this final section is able to enter a Black public sphere were the slipperiness of flexible ethnoscapes demonstrate the varied velocities and versions by which we might imagine Black Canadas, and the polyphonic nature of heterogeneity.

Afrodiasporic: A New Starting Point
The term ‘Afrodiasporic’ is a useful adjective that attempts to make sense of the conditions of African populations and their descendants dispersed worldwide. A number of scholars have taken up the term Afrodiasporic, but the conditions of its use and what it attempts to signal remain for the most part ambiguous and under theorized. For example, music and youth are sometimes described as Afrodiasporic, with emphasis placed on sounds or practices (to the detriment of thinking about the ideas and conditions that nurture such Afrodiasporic musics or youth practices). For cultural and diaspora theorists the term Afrodiasporic operates as a mechanism to help them arrive at clear understandings of the materiality of diaspora life.

By combining the prefix ‘Afro’ with the adjective ‘diasporic’, this term attempts to push past the new margins and blind spots of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic (1993). One particular blind spot of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic that comes to mind is Black Canada. While numerous scholars have highlighted the complexities involved in diasporic populations, the prefix Afro helps orient our thinking into specific realms that highlight the African inheritances that structure the lived realities of contemporary Afrodiasporic populations. For example, we can argue that many diasporic populations express ‘homing desires’ or specific notions about the nature of home (Zhang 2004). For Afrodiasporic populations such concerns are exacerbated by traumas such as slavery or confinement, both historical and contemporary, and on both sides of the Atlantic (Sudbury 2004). Afro figures deeply into how Black diasporic peoples conduct themselves vis-à-vis other diasporic populations. The prefix Afro also heightens our awareness of deep inheritances of African oral traditions which better highlight some of the cultural expressions (i.e. dub poetry) present in the ‘new world’ but significantly indebted to the old world. Afrodiasporic also attempts to capture the experiences of Nigerians in China, an area not covered in Black Atlantic theorizing. What if the kinds of cultural practices we find amongst Nigerians in China are not solely ‘indebted’ to the Caribbean for diasporic tools, where then does our Black Atlantic analysis move? Maybe the trauma of the Black Atlantic loses importance while the kind of aesthetic practices and strategies
expressed by Nigerians in China can provide insight into Afrodiasporic life. If we move past the trauma, exile or confinement and downplay the Black Atlantic’s centrality, we may be able to better grasp patterns of aesthetic practices or strategies that can substantially illuminate the cultural ingenuity and resilience of Afrodiasporic life. Afrodiasporic as a conceptual tool can, while certainly acknowledging its Caribbean content, generously turn to other practices and aesthetics to highlight some of the strategies these populations take up that may speak to histories of post-literate orality or yearnings that seek new forms of humanity in the future.

Given the theoretical flexibility and yield of Afrodiasporic, it is employed throughout this paper the term to describe various Black peoples in Canada and the African diaspora gesturing towards the fracture and dispersal that characterizes much of the Black populations in Canada and beyond, but does not leave out Africa as an important sign of inheritance and powerful stimuli of the imagination (Tettey 2005).

Blackness in Canada and Black Canadas

Blackness in Canada sits at the intersection of the hegemonic construction of the nation, the reality of a doubly diasporized peoples and the necessity of rhetorical and ideological mechanisms of mobilization. The idea of nation, as constructed by European thought, is an organizing tool that constructs homogeneity out of social difference. Diasporas continually disrupt the idea of the nation, importing and strategically utilizing resources from elsewhere to inform one’s present situation. Black Canada is an idea that rests on an imaginary unity, taking its cues from the European conception of nation. The various Black diasporas that call Canada home continually challenge the assumed unity of nation, and the possibility of unity based on the social construction of race. It is the most recent east African diasporas in Canada that have reinserted klanship, lineage and the emphasis of ethnic particularity over blackness and nationality (think Oromos) into the ways we might reimagine a discursive and conceptual shift from Black Canada to a more polyphonic concept. Because Black Canada encompasses an ideal of unity inherited from the idea of the nation, the other realities of Black diasporas—a diversity of languages, religions and customs continually disrupt and disorder the unifying mechanisms attempted by the idea of Black Canada. It is a relational (and therefore generous) notion of self that diverse Afrodiasporic populations employ to find ways in which to secure blackness as a space of subjecthood.

However, although Black Canada as an idea has its short-comings, we cannot simply throw it out the window. Politically, from within, Black Canada as an idea has served as weaponry in important battles. Importantly though, to arrive at a more clear understanding of Afrodiasporic populations in Canada a
lexical shift is demanded. This shift might take the form of a flexible and plural notion of Black Canadas, an idea that encompasses flux that reflects the lived reality of being Afrodisporic in Canada and connects the varieties of Black folks to an array of Afrodisporas.

While it has been argued that Blacks in Canada are connected through the experience of racism (Winks 1971; Henry 1981), racism does not over determine, nor can it solely account for the constitutive differences amongst Afrodisporic peoples in Canada. The geopolitics of space, the colonial residue of class and the routes of diaspora fragment diverse Afrodisporic populations in Canada, demanding we reconcile our reality to better conceptualize our existence. With this in mind I mobilize the language of diaspora, not only to help us get past “the nation thing” (Walcott 2003) but to also capture the tensions of home and elsewhere, stasis and movement and to utilize the potential interventional work that a diasporic sensibility can foster. Importantly, diasporic identities are, as Stuart Hall reminds us, “those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Hall 1996). A Black Canada comprised of a variety of African diasporas then is a site of identity renewal actively engaged in various processes of reconstitution and revision.

Afrodisporic Canadian as a concept captures the geopolitics of space, the terror of colonialism and the movement of Africans to and within the west since the late 1500s; it is not solely a response to racism. The lexical and conceptual shift suggested here, from Black to Afrodisporic, is interested in capturing the politics of space, the continuing terrorism of neocolonialism and the innovative routework of Afrodisporic populations. There is, as Katherine McKittrick has recently highlighted, a creative tension between movement and stasis in Black diaspora discourses (McKittrick 2002). Afrodisporic as a concept perfectly captures this tension. The movement, the ‘routework’ implied in notions of diaspora alongside the root, the sedentariness implied in the prefix Afro, foster a tension that pushes the applicability of ‘place’ and explores the antecedent movement. This tension forces and fosters the innovation of systems of thought and material mechanisms (think music) that oscillate and adapt to specific circumstances, much like Baraka’s notion of the “changing same” (Baraka 1967). So that place, which we can understand as the present, the apparent, remains in a conversation with changing trajectories; root and route are inextricably tied in producing meaning. These trajectories or routes, expressed by Baraka in one example as the Blues, Jazz and R&B, expose their sameness in root, their ‘changing same’ reality (Baraka 1967). Gilroy’s notion of roots and routes, alongside Baraka’s ‘changing same’ notion both work to identify how difference within sameness operates.

The realities of our postmodern present are ones that have been captured by Arjun Appadurai’s notion of flows
An ethnoscape according to Appadurai is a “landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world we live”, such as tourists or immigrants. Of particular interest is his notion of ethnoscape as the slippery “landscape of group identity” that ethnographers must be attentive to the field (Appadurai 1996). Ethnoscapes are slippery slopes where identities can no longer masquerade as a coherent and unchanging entity.

For my work, ethnoscape highlights the fluctuating identity politics and ethnic particularities diverse Black populations must maneuver in a ‘multicultural’ Canada and learn to become Black. Black Canadas, then to return to this notion, are the continual and temporal intersections of various ethnoscapes, of ethnically or religiously particular Afrodiasporic groups in Canada. The collision between digital media, diasporic desire and the imagination produce ethnoscapes that stand in contrast to diasporic communities whose similarities may be as extensive as their differences. Digital media and technologies facilitate articulations and utterances of diasporic sentiments and subjectivities, making clear linguistic, generational and ethnic specificities that form the basis of the versions of blackness that constitute Black Canadas.

The media saturation of today, evidenced by the growing popularity of media convergences (Jenkins 2004) and oppositional culture jamming (Carducci 2006) continues to remind us that there is no homogenous, unfragmented reality. Similarly, the populations that might be categorized as part of Black Canada exist in no uniformity, nor in isolation from the “electro-modernity” (Miller 2004) that fragments reality. Various electronic technologies complicate and disrupt many of the conventional ways we might think about Afrodiasporic life particularly within the west, where these electronic technologies oversaturate the marketplace.

The challenge then of thinking about the fragmented and intersecting ethnic particularities amongst Afrodiasporic populations in Canada is to find relationships or spaces of commonality within the heterogeneity of these populations. To meet this challenge this article works through a concept from within the sonic particularities of Afrodiasporic histories. Specifically, I turn to Jamaica’s soundsystem culture for two reasons. Jamaican soundsystem culture has been foundational in the development of both hip-hop and drum & bass, with hip hop being one of the most popular musics in the western world. Secondly, Jamaican soundsystem culture birthed internationally influential reggae music and contributed to not just various technical developments but also the expanded role of the disc jockey within nightclub culture such that records became open source, creative and participatory entities. The intention here is not to homogenize nor to Jamaicanize blackness as often happens in Toronto’s Afrodiasporic communities, but rather to examine influential Afrosonic cultures for their discursive potentialities.
Sound systems were mobile discotheques that were inexpensive replacements for bands in late 1950s and early 1960s Jamaica (Chude-Sokei 1994; Dalton 2004; Bradley 2000). The soundsystem has been understood as “one of the Black diaspora’s most enduring and frequently unacknowledged cultural institutions” (Chude-Sokei 1994:96 fn#4). Within soundsystem culture, versioning was a technique Selectahs utilized to garner the participation of dancehall patrons. The technique involved playing the instrumental version of a very popular song and having the audience sing the words directly after the original version was played (Dalton 2004:217). Ruddy Redwood is credited with being one of the first soundsystems in Jamaica to experiment with this creative participatory practice, he explains:

I start playin’… I put on “On the Beach” and I said, I’m gonna turn this place into a studio’, and I switch over from the singing part to the version part, cut down the sound and, man, you could hear the dance floor rail, man – everybody was singing (Dalton 2004: 217).

Versioning is also the process whereby an original song is reproduced in a slightly altered different key, arrangement or wording. Cultural theorist, Dick Hebdige, in his important study of Caribbean musics, Cut N’ Mix, explained versioning as “different kinds of quotations.” In this process, an original version of a song “take on a new life and a new meaning in a fresh context” (Hebdige 1987:14). “Versioning” then, is the act of taking an instrumental track and providing one’s unique take on the record. Versioning occurs when an emcee/toaster alters the original elements of a song; in essence it is an act of signifyin’ according to Henry Louis Gates (1986) literary analysis. Usually there are specific elements of a song that are kept in the newly signified creation, such as a melody or key, which exist in the new creation alongside altered words tempo or instrumentation.

Jacque Derrida’s notion of difference is useful in helping us understand versioning as he claims difference to be a “‘weave’ of similarities and differences that refuse to separate into fixed binary oppositions” (Hall on Derrida 1972; Hall 2000). Thus, all versions are a mixture of similarities and differences, new and old elements in a soundscape. In Ruddy Redwood’s example cited earlier, in the “weave of similarities and differences” in his sonic innovation, the producer/consumer binary is refused and reformulated in a participatory fashion. So the meaning created in each new version is inscribed within a system of references, playing upon prior meanings while building its current meaning through excessive referencing to prior versions. Versioning, as the active insertion of difference into the original or known, is an openly democratic practice that dislodges the authority of the ‘original’ source music and espouses an alterity that is enjoyed by dancehall patrons. The concept of versioning
illuminates the foundational antiphonic nature of Afro diasporic musics and extends how we might imagine the concept of doubleness at the heart of DuBois’ double consciousness (1903). Versioning, when deployed discursively, helps us think about the ways in which Afro diasporic peoples in Canada continually refuse, accept, negotiate and/or reject numerous homogenizing calls into a Black subjecthood refusing fixed binaries of homogenized blackness.

Black Canadas as a collection of versions then is an important starting point, as explicit and intentional insertions of difference into an originary and homogenizing narrative of Black unity—built on the narrative of nation, the narrative of the Canadian nation-state. Afro diasporic is a b-side instrumental version Black Canada, void of a dominant narrative, under utilized or engaged yet open to a multiplicity of diasporic realities. Black Canadas versions Black Canada by inserting social difference and ethnic particularity into the narrative of Black unity, by inserting a polyphonic chorus of identities and ethnicities indebted to numerous diasporas. Consequently, this article contends that Black Canada exists as a number of fragmented temporalities in various ethno and culturescapes, influenced by a “smiling Canadian racism” and mediated by the mediascapes that crisscross our present. By conceptualizing and reading the overlapping diasporas that comprise Black Canadas through the language of the version we become attuned to how Black Canada as a unifying process of ‘order’ is disrupted by the syncopation of ethnic and racial temporalities that characterize Afro diasporic life in Canada.

Working from these two usages, I understand the various layers and ethnicities of the Afro diaspora in Canada as various versions of Black Canada. From Jamaican Maroons to Somali refugees, Canada has been home to various continuous and discontinuous flows of Afro diasporic populations. These flows have been subject to conflict, friction and collision, allowing for no linear or neat conception of Blackness to emerge in Canada. Thus, this article is concerned with the overlapping nature of the heterogeneous Black diasporas in Canada, paying attention to the populations of Afro diasporic people who present themselves as ‘already here’. These populations, such as Black Nova Scotians and Ontario descendants of the Underground Railway do not get read as diasporic subjects, nor do they necessarily utilize the language of diaspora, but they do influence the ways in which incoming Black diasporas in Canada are positioned in the nation and assertively position themselves in transnational ways. At times, the struggles of the latest wave of immigrant Black populations get articulated without overt references to those Black populations that faced similar difficulties in the 1800s and early 1900s.

In contemporary Canada, an examination of hip hop music and culture is useful here because it displays the tensions of a diaspora space (Brah, 1996) as various artists from Antiguans
to Somalis articulate their diasporic sensibilities in Canada, mindful of the entanglements of being Afro-diasporic, as well as those that claim generations on Canadian soil. Hip hop is an apt tool for this investigation because it moves through a number of spheres and scapes and embodies a diasporic sensibility (Walcott, 1997), making it an apt tool to bring together various aspects of Afro-diasporic life in Canada.

Where You’re from and Where You’re at: The Overlapping Nature of Black Diasporas in Canada

Canada has been home to various Afro-diasporic populations for more than four hundred years, yet this centuries-old presence astonishes most people that call themselves Canadian. At no point in this country’s history have the Afro-diasporic populations been homogenous in language, ethnicity or national origin. Instead, various push factors have catapulted Afro-Caribbean, Continental Africans and African Americans populations into Canada from various parts of the world, from as far as Madagascar to as near as New England. The result has been and continues to be, a multilayered and multiethnic populations of Afro-diasporic individuals encompassed under the category Black Canadian. The notion of “overlapping diaspora,” to borrow a term used by Earl Lewis (1995), best describes Black Canadas, where a politics of difference highlights how various populations are differently positioned both within society and within Black diasporas in Canada. Thus, overlapping is utilized as an adjective to identify a range of diasporas from Afro-Caribbean retirees bent on returning ‘home’ (Nelson 2004; Plaza 2006) to Francophone youth in Ontario (Ibrahim 2004) or continental African youth in Alberta who access what they perceive to be a universal blackness via American media imperialism (Kelly 2004).

Unlike most other locations of blackness worldwide, state-sponsored multicultural ideology in Canada tries to discipline non-dominant identities in this country into neat manageable packages of culture that work to obscure race and its nefarious activities in peoples’ lives. This makes the multiple layers that comprise the Afro-diasporic Canadian experience uneven, and rife with inequities that are accentuated by disciplinary forms of Canadian racism and state-sponsored multiculturalism.

Two other populations of Afro-diasporic peoples, the exiled Jamaican Maroons and free African American populations, entered Canada on quite different terms. The Jamaican Maroons’ valiant and violent efforts to protect their freedom in cockpit country differ significantly from the nocturnal flight of many African Americans on the Underground railway or the escape with British Loyalists to a country not interested in war. The Loyalists lured into Canada by promises of land suggests these peoples wanted to stay in Canada to, at the very least, take advantage of the government’s offer of free land. For exiled Jamaican Maroons and free African Americans fleeing to
north of the 49th parallel, Canada was a temporary place of exile. The exiled Maroons held a very different spatial relationship to Canada; this land was punishment for rebellious Maroons but was an opportunity for African Americans. Canada as a geographic space meant very different things for Black Loyalist and Jamaican Maroons. For the doubly diasporized Maroons, they were forced into a ‘diaspora space’ in Nova Scotia where they had to contend with those Black populations already rooted in Canada (Lockett 1999). The inability or unwillingness of Maroons to think of themselves as Canadian was influenced by the cold reception provided by Black Nova Scotians and evidenced in their opting to move to Sierra Leone after less than a decade in Canada (Hinds 2001; Walker 1976).

Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia exerted a limited social capital embedded in their “already here” status over the incoming Maroons within the diaspora space of Maritime Canada (Brah, 1996). Black Loyalists knew the social and geographic terrain of their new home, they knew the language and had limited networks to obtain work. The Maroons, as a new Black diaspora in Nova Scotia, whose presence overlapped with the recently arrived former African-Americans, could not successfully navigate the social terrain. But the Jamaican Maroons held a different kind of influence as the British crown supposedly recognized them as a ‘sovereign nation’, and used this limited power to move themselves to Sierra Leone. In this overlapping diaspora space, blackness was not the glue that held together vastly different Afro diasporic groups. Racism, however real and rabid, did not help unite Maroons and Black Loyalists (contrary to Robin Wink’s analysis). Racism did not make Maroons and African Americans a homogenous Black community, it did not erase their ethnic particularity. The version of Black Canada we can extrapolate from the Maroons in the Nova Scotia episode is not one of a united front against racism but rather the collision of two struggling populations in which the varied circumstances of their diasporic routes interrupts a linear unified notion of blackness. The presence of the Maroons shifted the rhythm of blackness in Canada from an imagined and colonially projected homogeneity to accenting how the contingencies of space and diasporic routes version the concept of Black Canada to allow thinkable a notion rooted in the idea of multiplicity, an idea of Black Canadas.

**How Does One Read Black Canadas?**

From varied geographic origins, to diverse mother tongues, to the manner in which Afro diasporic peoples entered Canada, overlapping and layered are two useful ways to characterize blackness in this nation. The overlapping and unevenness of blackness in Canada is demonstrated by the flows into and out of inaccurate racialized identities and nationalities that are at times prescribed by the government. For example, as the Canadian government refused to
acknowledge Eritreans entering Canada as an ethnic national before the victory of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), Ethiopian was an ethnic label forced onto (but not accepted by) Eritreans by a Canadian population unwise or unsympathetic to their political struggles (Sorenson 1990).

Today Black Canadas are culturally, linguistically and ethnically much more complex, encompassing more continental Africans with new sets of concerns. For some, Canada is imagined as a temporary home that is until one saves enough money for retirement or when the war ends at ‘home’ and new government enters power. Both the similarities and the differences between Afro-diasporic populations involve rivalries, conflict and pain. For example while Eritreans and Ethiopians are both from the horn of Africa, and they may be both fleeing war, a history of ethnic warfare and rivalry counterpoises what Canadians often mistake as sameness (Sorenson 2005). Although the multiple erasures of Black spaces in Canada, such as Nigger Rock, Hogan’s Alley or Africville and the homogenizing tendencies of popular media make life for Afro-diasporic individuals in Canada particularly difficult, counter publics keep alive pertinent and progressive debates around the nature of Black life in Canada.

A closer look at Somali-Canadian hip hop emcee/poet, K’Naan the Dusty Foot Philosopher, reveals how we might read Afro-diasporic life and Black Canadas as a remix, a paradigm shift in Black Canadian cultural identification. Born in Mogadishu, K’Naan Warsame migrated to New York City at age twelve and eventually settled in Toronto. K’Naan’s live shows have been in demand around the world, to the tune of 450 shows in two years (Honigmann 2007). As a member of the Somali community in Canada, K’Naan was invited by the Canadian Broadcast Corporation to speak on the removal of the Islamic Courts Union from power in Mogadishu in January 2007.

Although recognized by the radio show host as a “Somali rapper” who lives in Toronto, K’Naan’s visible and articulate presence speaks volumes of the Black diasporas as he is positioned by the broadcaster as a spokesperson for the Toronto Somali community (Galloway 2007). K’Naan has gained a reputation as an individual concerned with Somalia’s geopolitics and unconcerned with the braggadocio image branding characteristic of Western hip hop markets. K’Naan actively rejects African American rapper discourses around sampling and bling, instead defining himself as part of another culture, the Somali diaspora (Honigmann 2007). In his myspace descriptors he lists himself as playing folk music, a clear divergence from other hip hop artists’ self-naming practices. But K’Naan’s mastery of poetry, emceeing and performance places him at the pinnacle of hip hop culture, highlighting an inconsistency. His musical accolades span two continents and at least three countries. K’Naan, in rejecting a North American prescribed identity, as a ‘rapper,’ accentuates his Somali background to
obtain increased media attention to the plight of his former home and his unique artistic career. K’Naan’s transnational reach ideologically closes down a narrow and nationalistic Black Canada and Black America in favour of an Afrodiasporic identification that moves between national and cultural spaces.

Strategically, Black male rapper is an identity utilized for K’Naan’s political project—to reduce negative and stereotypical portrayals of Africa in the West. In various interviews and articles where attention is focused on K’Naan’s various musical achievements, K’Naan interjects his views on the geopolitics of clan-based systems in Mogadishu. At these moments, K’Naan interlaces three spheres with his concerns over the governing of Somalia. As an emcee in Canada, K’Naan has mastered many of the nuances of encoded Black popular culture, and offers no codes or apologies when critiquing the music industry when he states “I’m not an entertainer/I’ve never been a clown” (K’Naan 2007). His endorsement of the Islamic Courts Union, and his detailing of the clan based system in Somalia catapulted him into the Somali diasporic sphere, as he critiques both traditional clan systems of Somalia that are carried to Canada as well as the western vilification of Muslim governing systems.

In fact, K’Naan’s first release, “Soobax” exemplified how various spheres can and do overlap and intersect, presenting a dis-ordered version of blackness in Canada where hybridity and diaspora interrupt idealistic notions of unity. “Soobax” demonstrates that the “belonging” and “pride” in one’s ancestry that Canadian multiculturalism policy is interested in fostering is not a process that can work without a transnational framework. Similarly, neither the English nor French languages could convey the meaning K’Naan was interested accomplishing. K’Naan’s rhymes, in both Somali and English, allow him to enter in a transnational dialogue to address concerns such as security and ancestral pride. “Soobax” is an interesting b-side to some of hip hop’s standard conventions, such as hip hop’s hyperlocal identifications and at times overly materialistic concerns. Hip Hop culture and music, from the United States, to Cuba to France often focuses its concerns around local politics, especially battling oppression and social marginalization. K’Naan’s diasporic concerns around the corruption of Warlords in Somalia get articulated in a
local context as a North American released song, versioning the idea of hip hop’s hyperlocal identifications and inflections. By releasing this song in Canada, K’Naan’s “Soobax” versions existing ideas around Black Canada allowing for the accentuation and representation of Somalia’s geopolitical situation pushing for further inclusive conceptions of blackness in Canada.

K’Naan’s heightened awareness of his own diasporic situated blackness in Toronto is paralleled by Shadrach Kabango (Shad), an emcee raised in London, Ontario of Rwandan parentage. Shad presents us with a very different set of concerns in his music, with his diasporic connections much more understated yet importantly utilized to combat the media’s portrayal of Black identity. In the lead track of his second album “Brother (Watching)” Shad vividly maps the narrow discursive terrain young Afro diasporic Canadian must navigate due to the exploitative capitalistic media that continually damage the self-identity of African youth with over-criminalized portrayals of Black youth. In the video, Shad and director Ed Gass-Donnelly poignantly refuse all the conventional clichés of rap videos, opting instead to force viewers to look directly at Shad, removing all distractions. Shad is encircled by blackness and the viewer is forced to confront the words Shad aptly rhymes. Shad deconstructs:

…but after a while, it sort of starts naggin at you/The crazed infatuation with blackness/That trash that gets viewed/And the fact that the tube only showed Blacks actin’ the fool/And I was watching...

Chorus:

…saturated with negative images and a limited range of possibilities is strange...
Shad’s local concerns around the representation of blackness in western media are expressed throughout the track stand in contrast to K’Naan’s very specific articulations of Mogadishu as home. By the end of Shad’s “Brother (Watching)” the listener is treated to the voices of Continental African parents detailing their hopes for their children (presumably in Canada). Shad’s battle with western media’s representation of blackness is aided by the perspectives of Continental African parents (Shad’s Parents) whose desires for their children to become “responsible citizens” or to “grow healthy” stand in stark contrast to the idea of a unified Black Canada defending itself from racism. This vocal segment is by no means representative, but it does allow us to elaborate the terms by which we might imagine blackness in Canada.

When Shad rhymes “and that narrow conception of what’s Black isn’t true”, his London raised, Kenyan born perspective on the reality of blackness in Canada suggests the possibility of Black Canada as an unstable conceptual reference point, not something entirely centered around racism or unity. The parents’ concerns as sampled in “Brother (Watching)” are focused on their children’s success, not necessarily on racial unity or racism. On this track we are treated to an intergenerational layering of social concerns for the well-being of Afro diasporic youth. The Elder’s dreams for their children in the west appear untainted by forms of racism, while Shad’s articulation of hope takes the form of a prescription of new Black activism;

So what the new Black activists do/For our freedom is just being them/Do what you’re passionate to/Not confined by a sense that you have to disprove/Any stereotypes, so-called facts to refute/Or match any image of Blackness/They've established as true...

While hybridity and creolization are important parts of any diaspora, they both fail to capture the ways in which K’Naan and Shad position themselves (self-defined and externally imposed) to achieve their goals; to intelligently shed light on the geopolitics of Somalia’s plight and to illuminate avenues by which Black youth in the Canadian context might reach self-actualization respectively. K’Naan’s refusal to subscribe to a notion of Black unity or a Black Canadian identity are connected to the outernational pull factors that characterize diasporic subjectivities. These pull factors, such as his concern for family members in Somalia, heighten the ways in which diaspora enters into negotiations of one’s social positioning and identity formation. Thus, K’Naan does not perform the rapper subjectivity to the detriment of Somali geopolitics, but he does utilize the public sphere provided to him as ‘rapper’ to articulate concerns about clanship politics both in Mogadishu and Toronto. Similarly, Shad’s heighten social consciousness around Black identity formation in Canada is not an overt ‘fight the power’ message Public Enemy reverberated throughout the hip hop world in 1989 (Morgan & Bennett, 2011). Rather, Shad articulates an agenda for the emancipation of blackness focused on self-empowerment and healthy identity
choices, not institutional action—quite likely a consequence of the set of relations in London, Ontario that structured the limits of Black activism in the 1980s and 1990s.

Embedded in Black public spheres are alternative worldviews, ‘othered’ strategies that help navigate the racisms and the longings of Afrodisaporic life. Some of these strategies or paradigms, suggestions or models riff, refashion or remix what is “already there,” such as static definitions of Canadian, or state-sponsored notions of culture. For example, some Eritrean parents rebuke their children who assimilate into American styles of dress and vernacular speech patterns. These parents do not want their children to “act Black.” Interestingly some of these children develop a Black pride/consciousness even though Black may have not been a category taken up in their (or their parents’) homeland.

Overlapping versions of Afrodisaporic life from both local and transnational sources present youth with many avenues and a variety of images from which to self-fashion their identities. They do not follow linear trajectories that flow from Immigrant to Canadian; rather they navigate through subjectivities such as Black, African or immigrant. These children learn to maneuver through the shifting temporalities of blackness in Canada’s public sphere. For example, Oromo youth are constantly read as only Ethiopian, their ethnic specificity is lost on most non-East African people. The result is that elements of one’s self-identification are stressed in certain situations, bent or localized to deal with their realities as they change daily as Kumsa (2005) notices with Oromo youth and Sorenson (1990) recognizes with Eritreans. Similarly, for some Afrodisaporic Francophone youth in Canada, imaginative performances of American hip hop culture allow these youth to flexibly enter into a urban Black ethnoscape as a strategy of belonging (Ibrahim 2004). Like K’Naan and Shad, Afrodisaporic youth learn how to negotiate their positioning by drawing on diverse transnational arrangements of blackness—versions of Afrodisaporic life—to make their lives and futures livable in the Canadian context.

“Contingencies make us what we are”

...we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another (Foucault 1986).

Afrodisaporic peoples in Canada demonstrate flexible ways in which they position themselves both within the nation and transnationally. In Canada, discursively rendered as ‘others’ and non-Canadian, Afrodisaporic populations demonstrate a remarkable diversity that exceed the nation’s current “objective mode of truth” (Wynter 1995). As Canada’s excess, overlapping African diasporas disrupt the governing logic of multiculturalism, revealing differing versions and conceptualizations...
of blackness and a unified Black Canada. The innovative ways in which Canada’s governing politics are exceeded allow us to ask important questions such as “What programs, paradigms or procedures can we extract from Afrosonic life to reconceptualize our understanding of the African diaspora Canada?” As well, “How can examples from Afrosonic innovations form discursive foundations that can articulate the various complexities of Afrodiasporic lives in Canada?”

Analyzing Afrodiasporic life in Canada through the sonic provides us with another ‘mode of truth.’ This ‘truth’ reveals that Afrodiasporic subjectivities, identities, and ethnicities never remain static, we “keep on movin’”, discursively in and out of various categories regardless of governmental projects and legislation (Walcott 1997). The versions of Black Canadas presented by the diversity of Afrodiasporic populations, and exemplified in the careers of Shad and K’Naan, highlight a mode of truth that directly contradicts homogenizing notions of nation. Black Canadas is the conceptual intersection of various flexible ethnoscapes while the idea of Black unity solely based on racism is constantly interrupted by the syncopation of these flexible Afrodiasporic ethnoscapes. It is the contingencies and slipperiness of Afrodiasporic identifications that reveal how the versioning of a homogenizing notion such as Black Canada produces other “modes of truth” about our contemporary condition.

The relationships between the temporal subjectivities, raced and otherized identities presents us with another logic for living our present. The contingencies that comprise shifting identifications and identities of Afrodiasporic life in Canada need not and do not follow the assumptions of enlightenment, or the fixed and stable language of nation. Throughout this article the suggestion has been that we use vestiges of the Afrosonic diaspora to rethink our present order. The shifting and temporal identities and subjectivities of Afrodiasporic Canada served as an object of my application of thinking through the sonic as a starting point of theoretical exploration.

By conceptually deploying the idea of the version this line of thinking refuses to discount Afrodiasporic expressive culture as solely entertainment designed for capitalist consumption. The ways in which Afrodiasporic youth continually disrupt a reactionary, unified and homogenous conception of Black Canada productively frustrate any attempts at which a specific order of blackness in Canada can be hegemonically deployed or exploited. The works of K’Naan and Shad are but two small moments of Afrodiasporic versioning that will hopefully contribute to more expansive and heterogeneous notions of blackness in Canada that challenge contemporary western society’s regimes of truth that fail to accurately capture other/ed approaches to living our present moment.
References


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Endnotes

1 Ethnicity is defined here as the shared characteristics of a social group which often include customs, beliefs, traditions and language.

2 The Selectah is the member of the soundsystem responsible for selecting and playing the records. Other members include the soundman, the owner and the DJ or toaster.

3 When recorded versioning is called a dub plate it is usually a promotional material used to support a particular soundsystem.

4 This title is borrowed from Del F. Cowie (2004), who sampled Eric B & Rakim’s “I know you got soul” in the title of his article in “T-Dot Griots: An Anthology of Toronto Story Tellers.”

5 Foucault, 1986, p. 46.