

Conversation

On Black Canadian Media Studies: A Conversation with Cheryl Thompson

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Introduction

On February 17, 2022, the *Canadian Journal of Communication* met with Cheryl Thompson (2021) via Zoom to discuss her latest book, *Uncle: Race, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Loyalty*, and the possibilities of a Black Canadian media studies. Dr. Thompson is a professor in the School of Performance in X University,¹ Toronto, Canada, and author of *Beauty in a Box: Detangling the Roots of Canada's Black Beauty Culture*. She has published articles in *Emergent Feminisms: Challenging a Post-Feminist Media Culture*, the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, *Canadian Journal of History Annales canadiennes d'histoire (CJH/ACH)*, and *Feminist Media Studies*. She has also published in *The Conversation*, *Toronto Star*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Spacing*, *Herizons*, *Halifax Coast*, and *Rabble.ca*. Thompson grew up in Scarborough and currently resides in Toronto. She is working on a book that addresses Canada's history of blackface.

The conversation has been edited for clarity and length.

Chris Russill (CR): Cheryl, your work deals with a wide range of media and cultural productions, including literature, music, theatre, vaudeville, advertising, consumer brands, radio, television, sport, beauty, and probably eight other things I have not mentioned (Thompson, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c)! It strikes me as distinctive in the variety of media you bring together, but also for the larger contexts and continuities you trace, especially with respect to the sense of transnationalism your work encourages. Often, the story of transnationalism starts too late in the day, as a twentieth-century story of globalization and the transmediations that accompany that, but your work reflects the wider histories of the

Black Atlantic and includes transatlantic slavery, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism.

At the same time, your accounts of media and culture never reflect a static or reified sense of history, but illustrate a constant sense of revision, adaptation, negotiation, and syncretism, if that's a description you would accept. It certainly challenges the reification and exclusions of Canadian culture, as I read your work, and puts those aspects of culture in this wider context. And, of course, I've completely left out your journalism work, your freelance writing, your public engagement. I don't know if this is a description you see yourself in, so maybe I can start by asking how you situate or contextualize your work.

Cheryl Thompson (CT): Yeah, I mean, it's so hard to say because I guess I'm one of those people who doesn't exclude anything. I don't try to think, "Is this my field?" which is a response that academics often have. First, I think in terms of time, so if someone comes to me with some idea and it's in the breadth of what I know, within the range of 1850s until today, which already seems like a very expansive time to be working with.

Once that's cleared up, I look at culture and the way we look at our world today. You know, you don't just watch television. You're reading something. You are also consuming film. Culture is very diverse. And yet for some reason, whenever we want to go back in history, suddenly we become very monolithic in terms of how we think of that experience through media. We just want to use one lens or one medium to explain the times. So, for example, often when print scholars will go back into, say, the 1920s and they look at the type of journalism that was coming out of the twenties and talk about the newspaper as if that was the only thing that was influencing people in the 1920s, or as if the world was literate. If you make this assumption, you're actually reinforcing a kind of white supremacist frame to think about the world, because who would have had access to these newspapers, and who would have been literate? We're really talking about primarily white working and upper-middle class to upper-class men of a certain ilk and white women.

For me, I try to get out of the monolithic lens in terms of how I think about media. And then I also think that because I have this breadth of understanding of history, it helps to avoid cherry picking a specific moment as being everything in terms of how we want to view the past. And I say that as I'm thinking about the civil rights movement, for example, the way we now reflect on that era. So really, I would say from 1955 and the Montgomery bus boycott through to, let's say, the summer of 1968, which was when a lot of violence and things happened. During that 13-year period, a lot of people remember it as consuming people's lives, like everybody was thinking about it. They weren't. There's a lot of media coverage of that time and there are flashpoints. But the everyday person who

was alive, say, in 1956, they were not consumed with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and what was going on. They were just living life. They [would have heard stories] about the civil rights movement, obviously. But, nonetheless, they were still engaged in their relatively insular lives. I always try to look at history in that duality between the publicized events and the things that we as historians or people who do cultural histories can go back and find. It's easy for me to find out, for example, what was going on in 1963 if I just go through a newspaper archive, and starting on January 1, 1963, read every single headline or front page for the entire year. I could feel like, okay, this is what was going on in 1963.

But that's the media story. Right? Then there's the other story that happens on an individual and a community level that you might not find in those kinds of legitimate sources. I have learned to also engage with other means of telling the story, which is going into archives, looking through personal diaries, finding images, often personal images in people's photo albums, that tell a different story than a headline you might read in a newspaper, for example. I describe my work as working at the intersections of media studies, visual culture, theatre, and performance. And at the root of it is the way history is produced. History doesn't happen. It's produced and it's produced in various forums, and it's produced through soft means and through hard means.

CR: I love this technique where you ask people to imagine what media might have felt like for people 50 or 100 years ago. It brings two things to mind when I hear you narrate both these recognized and informal histories. One, I think there's the way that our current understandings of connectivity and networks are mixed in or grafted on older networks, older patterns of transnational circulation, older infrastructures of transportation and communication. There are continuities to restore and think about. Two, there is the way nostalgia interrupts our sense of intergenerational history, a prominent theme of your book *Uncle: Race, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Loyalty* (Thompson, 2021). You just mentioned how "civil rights" is typically memorialized and packaged as a historical memory, and how divergent this is from what was going on in people's lives back in that moment. Nostalgia seems to play a significant role in popular understandings of history today.

CT: Absolutely. I mean, I think of the end of the Ava DuVernay (2014) film *Selma*, which I thought was a fairly accurate portrayal of the march on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, but what I didn't like is that every time there was a dramatic moment, whether it was the police confronting a group of Black protesters or even the moment when they marched, you hear John Legend singing that song "Glory." It is a hodgepodge of history, laid to a 2017 tracklist that we know was also up for a Grammy. It is concerning to me how contemporary music is put into these historical renderings in ways that filmmakers think is very stylistic and

current. But you're actually remapping history for people who have no memory of these events; you're retelling the story through this musical overlay. It was the same issue I had when they redid *The Great Gatsby* (Luhmann, 2013) and it was a hit. They were in the Cotton Club in 1925 and Jay-Z was playing? I thought, this is not what you need to do here.

If you go back to films of the early eighties, there was another moment. Maybe it started in the seventies with *Cabaret* (Fosse, 1972), where they were retelling a moment from 50 years before. These historical films in the seventies and eighties were retelling a time that people were still alive to remember, but they kept it true to the period. I think of *Goodfellas* (Scorsese, 1990), they were still playing the music of that time. It was true to the time. There's something about this century, the twenty-first century, and we seem to not want to do that as much. Instead, we want to create a remix of the past.

Obviously, a film adaptation is already a remix of something that actually happened in real life. But when you overlay it with contemporary music that would not have been played at that time, you're doing something else to remake history. You're turning history into a tableau that you can just stylistically craft into something. You use contemporary music to actually elevate the drama of the real-life drama that's happening. It adds a lot of effect in terms of the audience and our response. But what it does is change the truth. It becomes much harder for people to disconnect their sensory response to history from the actual reality of history. I can give you an example. When I mention *Selma*, instead of thinking you need to go and read some books about that time and find out what was going on in the newspaper archive, you think to yourself, I haven't seen DuVernay's (2014) film yet. So now that's what's passing for history. Meanwhile, film is a creative interpretation of history.

CR: Yes. I really appreciate the aspects of your book where you are revisiting the media culture you inhabited growing up and your surprise about the extent to which it is laden with racist stereotypes. You didn't really register or remember them until you went back and studied them later in life. The book, in this respect, asks what it means to inhabit such stereotypes from such a young age and engages with the complexity of having to inhabit, deflect, modify, and refuse such stereotypes when they are ubiquitous in media culture.

But, to stay with the theme of nostalgia and history for a minute, there is the way that ideas of childhood get mobilized to do this work. We are constantly invited to remember our childhood fondly. Your book talks about this nostalgia with respect to the racialization and naturalization of childhood that happens in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1981) and through its subsequent historical echoes. The white child is the site of innocence. The capacity to be the innocent and carefree child is connected to Black caregivers who are portrayed as benign and

kind and not concerned with their own needs or children. And, of course, there are others against whom this innocence is juxtaposed.

CT: I think about Kanye West, for example. He is a perfect example. He is doing a lot of erratic things, but the white apparatus says, no, no, no, he's okay. And we say, oh, he's just an eccentric person. He isn't framed as a Black person. He's just an eccentric artist now because he's been validated by white institutions to behave in ways that sanction Black otherness. There's a white saviour complex that's also at the centre of what I try to talk about in the book. And conversely, the fear of a fully emancipated Black masculinity. I think there is a fear that a lot of people just never really tap into and think about. That then explains those figures that I talk about in the book and why they are and were what they are and were.

I think the way that I crafted a narrative in the book, it takes it out of me accusing people of anything, because I really don't accuse Bill Cosby or O.J. Simpson of being anything. I'm not accusing them of anything. I'm merely showing the reader how they were taken up in the dominant culture and given a microphone, and the ways in which they performed the role that they felt they needed to perform at a specific time in history. And how in the case of O.J. Simpson during the seventies, eighties, and nineties, there was a different O.J. in each decade based on the demands that were being put on him.

CR: The reference to Kayne reminds me of when he spoke out on live television during Hurricane Katrina, during the flooding of New Orleans. He was the first person I remember connecting the catastrophe to the invasion of Iraq, the media representation of Black people, and the police shootings during the flood. That's difficult to reconcile with the Kayne we have now.

CT: Well, because that Kanye West was speaking to Black community, the Kanye West of today is speaking for himself. He's not in dialogue anymore with community. He's just about himself. And I think that's what I show in the book, is that the way a lot of Black men have figured out to be successful in the Western world is to assume a hyper individualism that then presents them as sort of the big prize, the quote unquote "Negro" who made it through all the stuff and breaks the stereotype because they're so talented and they're at the pinnacle. Yet, that same person in every single case, you could pick any person in history who has done this, they are disconnected from Black community. They have no connections anymore to the collective, and they no longer even speak directly to the collective. Instead, they speak as if they're individuals and that's it.

That behaviour is a product of capitalism, that's really what *Uncle* (Thompson, 2021) is trying to say: all of these figures are products of capitalism and the impetus of capitalism to always encourage the achievement of individual suc-

cess that doesn't necessarily require you to uplift community, so there isn't really a collective thought. Because capitalism rewards individual achievement, why would a person think any other way? That's what I'm saying to you. The system itself feeds into you continually doing what you're doing, because the more you focus on yourself and the individual pursuit of whatever it is that you want to achieve, the more you're going to be rewarded, even in the face of your community seemingly suffering at your feet. You're going to turn a blind eye to that because you've achieved your success in life, and you're rewarded consistently for that achievement. And once you do get into that system of reward, the colour of your skin doesn't even seem to be your most pressing issue, if that makes sense. Which explains why a lot of these figures, once they do reach that level, they almost become apolitical in that they no longer have a thought about anything of importance to Black communities.

The perfect example of this thesis is the way that Black men and Black women, Black bodies are not permitted to be out of control. And that lack of being able to lose control then supports the politics of respectability. And then you wonder why Black women straighten their hair. You wonder why, you know, certain Black men are always in a suit, and you think that we're overdoing it and you don't understand that I can't have a hair out of place or else I'll be accused of not being well as a person. Whereas I think of the British prime minister, Boris Johnson: many hairs are out of place frequently, but it's not even a topic of discussion. It's not even a topic of critique. And I think to myself, if that's a Black body with that same presentation, people would be thinking that this person was unfit to lead. Even if they had all the great ideas, they would look at the appearance and say, nope, that's not a leader.

Black bodies are so controlled in terms of our corporeality that we are actually never really free. I mean, part of what the book is trying to say is that these conversations about freedom and emancipation, they're ongoing conversations because even in this contemporary world where someone like me is a professor and has a very high, you know, status in the community in terms of that title, in many ways I'm still as contained as I was when I was a student. Like the levels of containment are still the same. I can't just say whatever I want. I can't show up to meetings and act aggressively. It's not to say that I can't, but I have an awareness that if I do, there might be questions asked of me is what I am saying. Of course, we can do whatever we want. It's just in certain bodies, you get questioned when your behaviour seems to not match up with the person that they think you are—not who they expected you to be, but who they want you to be.

I think so often that's why people say that in employment the employer tends to hire the person they like or the person they connect with, the person they can feel a sense of. And if you are a Black person up for a position, think

about how the impetus is on you to project an image of yourself that's going to be recognizable to the person who is interviewing you, who happens to be white, and that image is recognizable to them. What a coincidence.

CR: Your book historicizes this dynamic in such good ways. It illustrates the persistence of what you are discussing, but also the mutability and adaptability of these stereotypes, which you track across time and space. I love how you just seem to follow where Uncle Tom goes. The story starts in this piece of abolitionist fiction and is developed through some of the sentimental tropes of its literary form. But then it explodes in popularity and goes all over the place. It isn't contained to a specific medium or national formation.

I know some people assume Uncle Tom is an American book or a contribution to U.S. literature. But this seems like a retroactive way of categorizing it. You show how its cultural circulation materializes the transatlantic abolitionist politics of the time. It is in Europe and the U.K. It is in Canadian theatre, musicals, film, radio, and television. Canada is already there in the content as part of the plot because Eliza is escaping to Canada. And if you take Josiah Henson as the inspiration for Uncle Tom, then it is his settlement in Dresden, Ontario, that gets folded into things. And then, of course, the circulation of it up here in text, in theatre and advertisements, that kind of thing. There is even a museum in Dresden.

CT: Absolutely. Because, again, you know, one of the reasons why I start my book in the mid-to-late nineteenth century is because that's the moment, as you get closer to the twentieth century, Atlantic crossings, and the democratization of travel and tourism. So, really, before the 1850s or so, even the 1860s, unless you were really wealthy, you were very stationed in your local town, village, or whatever it was. There was a class distinction between who was wealthy and who wasn't. And so, as you get closer to the twentieth century, there is a large immigration wave that hits North America in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, people are crossing that big ocean in millions. Yes, there had been, of course, immigration from the Old World to the "New World" before the 1850s. But it really ramps up in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

For me, because I'm also a person that is very interested in stuff and things, because I have a lot of stuff and things like everyone else, I'm thinking of the stuff and things that people brought with them that cross-fertilized in the "New World." Say you met someone on the ship, and you had some things in common with them. Exchanges happened on that crossing. By the time you get to the "New World," you've actually already transformed because you learned something from a different country that you've never known, and somebody has something that you've given them from your country. And then you land in

the United States or Canada, and now you're living among people that you've never met before.

I gave a writing workshop recently where I told people, use your life as a canvas to write history. And I think in many ways I've sort of done that because I started my university career in the United States. I went to school in the States, I didn't start in Canada. And that was an eye-opening experience because I brought my Black Canadianness to a small town in Michigan. And no one in that small town in Michigan had ever met a Black Canadian. So, I was the representative for not just my country but also my subcategory within the country. And I remember introducing myself as what I really was, which was Jamaican, especially my Jamaican slang. I remember introducing it to African Americans who had never heard someone speak patois before.

So, a lot of the book is actually about me going back in history, and I'm imagining that same kind of cross-cultural exchange that I experienced in the nineties like someone experiencing it in 1910 or 1875 would have and thinking about the things they would have exchanged. Thinking about how, when you exchange things with people, how its more than just that. In terms of my own breadth of knowledge, I often go back to Homi Bhabha's (1994) *Location of Culture* and his thinking about a "third space," [because] that's exactly what was happening throughout the nineteenth century. There were all these third spaces happening and multiple relocations of culture from a homeland to a new land and then a cross-fertilization.

And out of that came certain types of performance, especially in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, that were highly laden with racism and xenophobia, and all of the racist stereotypes of ethnic groups that you can think of were often produced by those same people. And that's what fascinates me. It wasn't the "Anglo-Saxon Protestant" community that was reproducing these images, especially as it relates, for example, to blackface minstrelsy. It was newly arrived immigrants, Jewish immigrants, Italian immigrants who were reproducing and creating these images that the Anglo-Saxon Protestant-dominant culture consumed. They were the consumers of this almost exclusively, but the performers were the people who had just arrived. And for me, I find that fascinating—that's why I use the language of racial production, not anti-Black racism, because I believe that race is a production. It gets produced. And what I also believe in its production is that it is not always the dominant culture, as we like to think. It is often ethnic and racialized groups who realize they can benefit from reproducing race in their own communities, that it will actually help them in this society too. They will become recognizable to the dominant culture as a friend.

Through that complicated story, I realized that the book needed to address immigration and migration. I sought to intervene in the sleeping car porters' discussion by linking that to the historical Uncle Tom trope. There have obviously

been books written about the sleeping car porters, but I wasn't interested in the sleeping car porters. I was interested in the iconography of the porter and how that iconography was the reproduction of an Uncle Tom trope, and that it was also for their own survival that they had to do that. In that chapter, I really don't talk about specific porters. I don't get into their narrative because it doesn't matter to my thesis. Every time a Black man from around 1870 to the 1950s put on that uniform, they were assuming a certain type of public persona that was necessary for their survival, but it also was pleasing to the dominant culture to think of these men as so nice; this is what Black people are like.

We can juxtapose that with the dominant white culture asking, "Is this what Black people are like?" when buildings and cities were burning in 1968. They were wondering, "What is going on? I thought Black men were happy; they're always so happy on the train. Why are these people burning down their own communities? I take the train all the time and I see Black men, and they are always so cordial and nice." But this also meant that, collectively, white people were not understanding the imperative under a racist system for Black men to present like that in the public sphere. As Black people, we must be nice for our own survival because if we're not nice, the threat of violence is very real.

CR: Yeah. Yeah. There's so much here. This question of mobility seems especially important. The discussion of train car porters, which was the dominant system of mobility at that time, is really illuminating: the conditions necessary to access approved circuits of mobility, the way one must dress, comport oneself, and act in a certain way to access these jobs.

CT: I do talk about it in the book, how Hollywood films reinforce that same image, which was also the dominant image of Black men on screen throughout the forties.

CR: In Canada, it is such an obvious institutionalization of Jim Crow. Sarah Jane Mathieu's (2010) book on porters should be required reading for discussions of communication and transportation in our field. Your wider point about the conditions of mobility more generally is important too.

CT: That's right. And again, one of the things that we know about Jim Crow segregation was that even though it was law, it was policed or, excuse me, enacted on an ad hoc basis, meaning if we take the bus, the segregated buses, the white bus driver in the segregated South had the authority to decide where the segregated space was going to be. If it seemed like there were a lot of Black people in the bus, the bus driver would move the sign and make the segregated space smaller so that more white people could sit down. It wasn't something that was just standard. As a Black person living in the segregated South at that time, you really didn't know what to expect. Each time you left your house, you were

under the expectation that the rules were going to keep changing because every day they seemed to change. And I think that's a memory that a lot of white people don't have of segregation. Imagine living in a society and you literally never know what the rules are.

I think of one of the chapters in *Uncle* (Thompson, 2021) when I talk about Emmett Till, who had come from Chicago and travelled to the South. He didn't know what the rules were. He had no sense of them. And yet whites thought he was "too full of himself." On a psychic level, what happens when there's a belief that as a Black person, you can't be too confident?

That is the same mentality that gave rise to the Ku Klux Klan. That's why they were formed, because they felt as if the United States government, which was then the government of the North, was doing too much, too soon to emancipate, fully emancipate what was a newly emancipated population of Black people. They just felt they were getting too many freedoms that they "had not earned." The Klan formed literally as an anti-government group because they felt that the government wasn't doing what it needed to do to preserve white supremacy. And then at a certain point, the government decided to withdraw from the space completely and they left the Klan to do as they saw fit in the South. Understand that that has never changed. Hence, today, we call them militia groups. Mm hmm. It's the same root sense that the government's not going to do it. White people, primarily men, have to do it for themselves.

But if you go back to Uncle Tom, and I get at this in the book, Uncle Tom pre-emancipation was not the same Uncle Tom post-emancipation. There was a different imperative in terms of how we saw this figure once there was a free Black population. That is the part in the book where it serves as a turning point where the reader is presented with a case for understanding that the Uncle Tom of Stowe's (1981) novel is actually dead, and a new Uncle Tom has arisen. The re-born Uncle Tom is who is still with us today.

CR: Yes, the book is so good on the adaptability of the Uncle Tom tropes or figures in different historical conditions. Can we return for a minute to this sense of surprise you mentioned about there being Black people in Canada? I'm reminded of Rinaldo Walcott's (1997) *Black Like Who?* and his discussion of the problematic relationship of Canada to the U.S. Most obviously, there are massive amounts of cultural production from the U.S. that not only circulate but push concerns about imperialism into a problematic sense of cultural nationalism that becomes obsessed with differentiating how Canada is different from America.

One thing I love is how he questions this nationalistic form of identification by reconnecting how the Caribbean and North America and Canada emerge historically within transatlantic circulations. I'm reminded of this point because on the cover of Walcott's (1997) book there is an image of the Niagara movement

meeting that took place in Canada. The photograph has the American side painted in. Walcott discusses this a bit to think about why Black Canadians weren't invited to the meeting. So, it seems there is a certain idea of nation that has long gotten in the way of the stories we tell.

CT: I'm trying to also say that. You know, when you are the neighbour to the largest consumer marketplace, especially for anything Black related in the world, it frames you in a very particular way. It's like Toni Morrison, when I was, you know, like 13 or 14, Toni Morrison changed my life. And I understood through her writing what it was like to grow up in Lorraine, Illinois. I wasn't even sure where that was. Do I understand the African American experience living in the Midwest in the 1930s and 1940s? No. And yet it resonated with me. For me, as someone located outside of America, consuming African American history and lineage, why did it resonate with me? Well, because I was also a Black girl living in a majority white space and going through many of the same things.

To me, one of the things that's been very helpful is to disconnect from the national narrative of citizenship. A lot of Black people who are non-academics feel the same way. Yes, I do show my Canadian passport when I travel, and obviously I was born in Canada, so I am Canadian, but I have no attachment to the identity that comes with Canadianness. I see myself as a citizen of the world, and I see myself as a citizen of the diaspora. I am just as much connected to my Jamaicanness as I long for my Africanness, more so than feeling like a proud Canadian, whatever that is. And I think that offends a lot of people because it's a position that seems very political. If you look around, folks might say, "Oh, but you're benefiting from this country and look what Canada has given you." I am very grateful for all of that, but it has nothing to do with my identity. Just because a country has been good to you and you've benefited from the country, it doesn't mean you have to make it part of your identity. It's just like being born into a family. And as you grow, you leave the house and you become an individual. Everything that happened to you in that family is probably not part of your identity. In fact, there are probably some things about that family that you want to leave behind and you don't want to take on as part of your identity. Everyone understands that analogy. For me, it's the same thing with citizenship.

I think a lot of Black Canadians share a lot in common with Black Britons in that sense. Most Black people in Britain either have Caribbean or African roots, and they have the Union Jack that they have to kind of grapple with. And I think we can see through sports, through art, through music, how they grapple with that tension, because it's a tension that can never be resolved; the mere presence of the Union Jack is a reminder of your own enslavement under that flag. It's a reminder of your subjugation every single day of your life. You're reminded that I, the monarchy, once enslaved you. Oh, and by the way, you're a

citizen now, so it's okay. I'm in Canada. Canada was a colony. So where can the Black subject actually find freedom? I think that's what Rinaldo (Walcott, 1997) is getting at. Where is the space for freedom when everything I've just said to you is connected to the same root? There's a national narrative and there's a national citizenship, and the root is the same. That's the reason the media was covering Barbados independence with such attention because this is now, with the exception of the Haitian revolution, only the second nation in the Caribbean to actually become economically free. And think about all those countries that make up the Caribbean and think about the time gap from the Haitian revolution till today.

CR: And of the persistent and intentional destabilizations of Haiti since then ...

CT: Ongoing attacks and the continual debt that Haiti is still paying to France that nobody wants to talk about. And so, I think to understand the Black subject in the twenty-first century is in many ways to finally free yourself from conversations about citizenship and nationhood. In my work, I don't really address issues of belonging anymore. That is a discussion that really resonated in the 1990s. The discussion now is about creation, like how do we create new identities? The more you are rooted in a place, the more you lose your immigrant story, the more you can actually start to feel differently about yourself, and yourself in relation to nation. You have to imagine a different future than what the immigrants who arrived here imagined for their future.

And I think that future is a deep, a profound sense of self that is separate from the collective nation identity, which is just as implicated in histories of slavery and your own subjugation as it is in Britain, as in France, as in Spain, as in Portugal, as in all of those countries. We celebrate the War of 1812, and at the time, Canada wasn't a country, nobody makes that distinction. I think part of what I was trying to get at in the book is also that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, you have a real concerted effort to try to establish a discourse of nationalism. And the twentieth century was the moment when Black nationalist and pan-Africanist discourses were being discussed for the first time, which leads us to this moment, in the twenty-first century, with ongoing debates about multiple "isms." I think I'm trying to tease out in the book how all of these movements are connected.

CR: I would like to read that book! I find myself thinking of the long duration of Black people in Canada and of how that goes unacknowledged in the kinds of attitudes you are pointing toward. It seems caught up in the assumption that Black people are recent migrants as opposed to being here before the English-French origin story of Canada got passed around. Your comments are also helpful in charting out that to reject, refuse, or complicate identification with Canada is not

just a negative gesture but also reflects the larger history in terms of how Canada came to be constituted in the first place. What happens if Canada is part of North America, is part of the Caribbean, and part of the Atlantic Ocean? And, so, the Caribbean is not something that arrives only when Canada is established. It is already a part of the becoming of the nation's story. Whether you look at ships out on the East Coast that are delivering commodities from slavery; whether you're looking at music and culture; whether you are looking at the Royal Bank of Canada in the Caribbean; whether you are looking at the foods and tastes, you know, what many of us have come to consume; whether you are thinking about anti-colonial politics. So, as Walcott teaches us, there's a history of how the Caribbean has been present in Canada for a long time.

CT: Well, yeah. I mean, it's like in *They Call Me George* (Foster, 2019), the book by Cecil Foster about the porters that came out in 2019. There was a delegation of Black Canadians who were of Caribbean descent who went to Ottawa in 1954, and who basically said, "We are British subjects, we are born in the Caribbean, we also have the Queen as our head of state, why are you preventing us from immigrating to Canada, as a British commonwealth country?" For whatever reason, their British subjectness did not count. And it was a shock. Because they're looking at it like, what is the difference between Caribbean colonies and the colony of Canada? What is the difference? The Queen is the monarch that you have on your money, just like us. The only difference was colour because everything else was ostensibly the same.

CR: Yes. This part of Canada's migration policies is awful. Certain people are very welcome to care for kids or support the agricultural industry or build and work the railroads. But when migration for work and residency inform aspirations to citizenship, then this country's policy is to look at people differently.

CT: Then you return to Uncle Tom, and the imperative to "dress the part," "have all the credentials," "be highly educated." You can't just come here and "be lazy," whatever that means. You have to come here and work and do all that stuff. It's not a coincidence that we still hear that same language being used today by some of our leaders about how we—racialized people—have to work hard, we can't just come here and take advantage.

What immigrant groups have you ever heard of immigrating to this part of the world to be lazy? I've never heard that story. You just can't. It's the nature of being an immigrant. You don't have anything. You must go out and get it. You don't have any rootedness in the country. The very nature of your immigrant status means you're constantly doing something hard. Now, does it mean that it's always legal? That's another conversation, because the history of the United States has told us that when a lot of ethnic groups first came, as depicted in the

film *Gangs of New York* (Scorsese, 2002), they got into illegal means to achieve success. And why was that? Because they were shut out of the legal means to earn a living. I think one of the things that I try to do in the book, just to wrap up this conversation, is that I always try to frame the relationship between the structure and individual actions. There's a symbiotic relationship between both. Someone doesn't just "act crazy." They're in a structural framework that either supports them or it doesn't. And then the individual must figure out a way to survive within that framework and some choose to acquiesce to the dominant culture's desire to see them as passive and as loyal. It's a choice. While others choose to resist and to protest and to be the archetype, the anti-Tom figure (e.g., Muhammad Ali), who was just going to tell you the exact truth: how they feel and think. And then you're just going to have to deal with that and figure out what to do with it.

I just think as much as we live in a world where we're trying to get rid of binaries, if you read the book, I have essentially created a binary out of the options for many Black men. Uncle Tom has been told in so many different ways. My book is not the final say on the topic. But I think it is an intervention into the topic that has allowed Canadians to see themselves reflected in a different way through this trope and all the products and the people that are connected to it.

CR: There are times, I think, where it helps to have a situation defined by a decision, not as the only way to describe or arrive at that situation historically but as a real-world realization that sometimes one needs to say yes or say no to certain things. I should also say that I found it very resonant with reading around double consciousness and with the need to reckon with that reality, whether it is via W.E.B. Du Bois or Frantz Fanon or Sylvia Wynter. I think the book is really powerful in showing how Black people arrive at such moments without starting with a theoretical account that you attempt to prove. It is another way into these things.

CT: I mean, the book reads exactly how I wrote it; I'm stumbling on things throughout a lot of the chapters. I was stumbling on artefacts. I remember stumbling on an article that ran in *Ebony* magazine in 1966 about Stokely Carmichael and finding a part in it about the civil rights movement that I'd never heard about (Rowan, 1966). It's like it had been buried. The way the Black press reported on some of these Black leaders, it was very critical. More critical than I think the collective memory has led us to believe. At the time, Black media was so important to the civil rights movement. It was telling a story that the dominant media were not telling.

CR: Last question. I'll pose it as a bit of a binary. Is there a Black media studies in Canada? Is it possible? Does it exist? What can it do? Okay, I guess those are the last four questions.

CT: I think the one thing I would say about that is that, you know, historically Black Canadian media has been framed as community media and ethnic media. It's been framed under the umbrella of ethnic community leaders. So that means it gets a certain level of funding and it just gets framed in a certain way. And what's always troubled me about it is how we define ethnic media. Often, it gets framed as non-English, non-French language media, which is okay, but Black media, historically in Canada, has been in both official languages. There's Francophone media and Black media in Québec, there's Anglophone Black media in English Canada. And yet we're fighting along the same lines as the non-French, non-English media because it's categorized as "ethnic."

In the twenty-first century, we must push back against that categorization. For example, Black Canadians have not been seen as culture makers. We've just been seen as people who live here, we don't make culture, and that's just not true. And I think having an awareness of that not being not true will happen in my lifetime, I would like to see a legit Black Canadian media outlet that is seen as legitimate news. And believe me, it's already happened. The question is, how do we make sure that those examples, one, are here for another generation, and two, get the attention they deserve?

CR: I remember hearing you speak of Patricia Hill Collins' (2009) idea of knowledge validation in this context.

CT: I remember that comment where I was saying that, you know, there is also what you get taught in school. Black Canadians are rarely taught about these things I've spoken about today. And I think that's where the knowledge validation process comes in. If Black Canadian media is not part of how you teach media in Canada, then it never gets seen as a legitimate area of inquiry that you should study. There are a lot of graduate students who never even think of studying what Black Canadians do, they wouldn't even know where to begin.

If you're not studying your own community and you're not writing about your own community, then eventually, yeah, it will cease to exist. And I think we're getting to the point where myself and a few others are saying, hey, no, don't do that. You really do need to start writing about and studying your community. For at least the last 50 years, there has been a corpus of Black Canadian storytellers that are in the pages of our media, some of which are now in archives, some of which are still available. There's a corpus telling a story that in many cases are stories that we don't remember anymore. And so that field to me is literally wide open, I'm waiting for someone, I don't know if it's going to be me, to be honest, I'm tired and have been writing a lot, but I am so ready to pass that torch to a different person because I think it's time. The moment is ripe for this kind of generational passing of the torch.

Note

1. Ryerson University is undergoing a renaming process as part of a commitment to Indigenous reconciliation.

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