“Because it’s different when you cross that border”:

Examining Black Canadian Maleness in the Era of Black Lives Matter

by

MICHELLE DEBIQUE

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Social and Applied Sciences in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
In
Intercultural and International Communication

Royal Roads University
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Supervisor: Dr. David Black
July 2016

MICHELLE DEBIQUE, 2016
COMMITTEE APPROVAL

The members of Michelle DeBique’s Thesis Committee certify that they have read the thesis titled “Because it’s different when you cross that border”: Examining Black Canadian Maleness in the Era of Black Lives Matter and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Intercultural and International Communication:

Dr. Julia Jahansoozi, Professor [signature on file]
School of Communication & Culture
Royal Roads University

Final approval and acceptance of this thesis is contingent upon submission of the final copy of the thesis to Royal Roads University. The thesis supervisor confirms to have read this thesis and recommends that it be accepted as fulfilling the thesis requirements:

Dr. David Black, Professor [signature on file]
School of Communication & Culture
Royal Roads University
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Abstract

The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement has brought greater salience to the conceptualization of Black maleness and inspired a broader rethinking of Black maleness in relation to the North American society in general. Discussions regarding Canadian Blackness are often hampered by the country’s proximity to and influence from the United States, often neglectful in acknowledging the specific components of each country that make their respective cultures unique. Ethnographic research on a cross-section of Canadian Black men explores the manner with which race and gender intersect and illuminate the contradictions of social progress while also revealing the marked disconnection between the constructs of masculinity imposed upon these men externally by the wider white-majority society and their own individual interpretations of masculinity. This fresh consideration of the longstanding issue that is the representation, understanding, and treatment of Black men albeit in a Canadian milieu unearths the need to cultivate a new Black masculinity, one that allows Black men to be the architects of their identities as opposed to inhabitants of a social structure and is responsive to what it means to be a Black male in Canada.
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Examining Black Canadian Maleness in the Era of Black Lives Matter

Introduction:

Society has long been preoccupied with social categories. That is, it has long been fixated on finding ways to organize both human diversity and complexity into a knowable taxonomy that can be administered by government, stratified by capital, represented in media, and experienced as if real in everyday life. In many ways, these categories, with a particular emphasis on their constructed nature, have been developed to inform the way in which we understand the world we live in and perceive the people we live in the world with. For example, social science and even public opinion more broadly have come to see gender as a construct, and as something that should be understood as being about far more than just one’s genitalia. Viewing dimensions of human identity as socially constructed categories, often with a significant performative element, has freed our understanding of who people are and how they are organized from unwanted essentialism (i.e., the habit of viewing identity as the product of ahistorical “essences” that statically determine what it means to be a particular gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.), and elevated our consciousness of the human condition in general.

However and despite these gains, we have learned that many of the defining categories we both use ourselves and are defined within have often been developed using problematic logic and are subject to prejudices that seem to derive from an earlier and more regressive time. While genuine progress has been achieved in Western society as this relates to women, LGBT people, and those with disabilities, it’s in the realm of race—perhaps our most vexatious and stubborn category—where attitudes still seem attached to an earlier and on bad days even antebellum time. In particular, the anachronistic character of race falls as a burden on young Black men, who still
experience vilification in popular culture, suspicion in everyday life, and undue persecution in the criminal justice system to a degree that is arguably greater, with a character that is more angry, frightened and forceful, and in a manner that is more clearly necessary to the status quo than that experienced by young Black women. That is to say, when racial and gender bias intersect, as they do with young Black men, the varying speeds with which social progress touches on the elements of identity and demographic groups differentially is revealed, and a true social contradiction is illuminated. The case of young Black men, as a special case and point of view into such intersections, demonstrates that social progress is at best conditional and uneven in its reach, and it is to this much-aggrieved and salient part of the Black community that this paper gives special attention.

Not since the onset of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s or the provocative beginnings of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s has society been as gripped by issues involving the Black community as it is today. Society has become particularly transfixed by the Black community’s increased mobilization across North America. At the forefront of discussions regarding this trend is “Black Lives Matter.” Once best known as a widely-circulated hashtag, Black Lives Matter now exists as a “bona fide political organization” (Garber, 2015). Organizers of the movement have been reluctant to create an agenda with a prioritized list of issues they intend to address, an openness which for many is seen as one of its greatest strengths. Nonetheless, Black Lives Matter’s most widely-recognized areas of focus have been the problematic social construction of the Black male identity (Benjamin, Constantine, Richardson, & Wilson, 1998; Carol & Frances, 2006; Curtis-Boles & Roberts-Douglass, 2013; Davis & Hunter, 1994; Greif, Hrabowski & Maton, 1998; Higgins, 2010, hooks, 2004; Hopkinson &
Moore, 2006; Macleod & Schneiderman, 1994), and the desire to subvert what has been described as the “institutional decimation of Black males” (Davis & Hunter, 1994).

The tragic and untimely death of Trayvon Martin, a teenaged Black male fatally shot during an altercation in Florida with a neighborhood vigilante, as well as several high-profile cases (Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York City, among others), served to spur the unrest within the Black community that inspired Black Lives Matter (Blow, 2015; Craen & Wing, 2015; Hutchinson, 2015; Marino, 2015; Stuckley, 2015; Tatum, 2015). In looking at the movement through the lens of Black maleness specifically, we see a very specific contradiction. Society aims to tell us that gender should not determine the trajectory of your life—gender should not be destiny—and that maleness in a world long dominated by men is associated with numerous privileges (Bowleg, Malebranche, Teti, Tschann, 2013, p.26). However, when applying this notion to Black men, we recognize that their maleness makes them increasingly susceptible to discrimination, prejudice and social interactions that are steeped in tension, conflict and brutality—factors leading to encounters between society and Black masculinity that are sometimes fatal.

The United States has certainly been at the forefront of these discussions and also is home to the Black Lives Matter movement. However, in the wake of several problematic incidents involving Black men and law enforcement officials in Toronto, notably the shooting deaths of Andrew Loku and Jermaine Carby during what should have been routine police responses, it is no wonder that this Canadian city serves as the location of the movement’s sole non-American chapter. These tragic events, as paired with the introduction of the controversial practice of “carding” served to light “a fuse under the city’s elite” (Houpt, 2015).
Previously known as either “intervention” or “street checks”, carding is a practice undertaken by Canadian police wherein details pertaining to an individual’s name, age and race is compiled during “routine” stops or questioning. Critics have classified the practice of carding as both a violation of Charter rights and demonstrative of racial discrimination as it has been revealed that the vast majority of those stopped by the police for “the sake of engagement” were Black Canadian males (MacLellan, 2015). The fallout from the disproportionate representation of Black men in this highly problematic practice has served to disrupt Toronto’s reputation as one of the most culturally harmonious cities in the world.

Conversations about Canadian Blackness are often hampered by the country’s proximity to and influence from the United States (Walcott, 1996:2003, p.33). While the identities of Black Canadian males and African-American males seem to mirror each other in many ways, there are specific components of their respective cultures that make their experiences diverge. Canada, of course, has its own history with slavery; the first Black slave, a young boy by the name of Olivier Le Jeune, was brought to New France in 1628 (Black History Canada, 2008). However, a large majority of Canada’s Black population are comprised of both immigrants who arrived to the country post-1960 and their descendants. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of African Americans are “long settled ‘native(s)” who are themselves the descendants of slaves (Attewall, Dunn and Kasinitz, 2010, p. 475) captured and transported between 1501 and 1860 through the “Middle Passage” for purchase or exchange. As noted Black Canadian scholar Rinaldo Walcott asserts, not all Black Diaspora people can or do belong to their national spaces in the same way (1999, p.5). This divergence, and hence the different ways in which the Black Lives Matter movement and messages are made to signify in their respective national contexts, invites inquiry into how Black Canadian men are experiencing this renewed attention to race and gender and
how they are making sense of their identities in this social climate. This paper aspires to therefore examine Black Canadian maleness in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement. It does so both because Black maleness has new salience because of the movement, and because the movement has helped inspire a broader rethinking of Black maleness in relation to North American society in general. It is this fresh consideration of the longstanding issue that is the representation, understanding, and treatment of Black men, albeit in a Canadian milieu, this study intends to be part of. This study was designed to explore how a country so positively defined by its ability to maintain social harmony amongst its diverse population, an ability given formal definition through the policy and ideology of multiculturalism, is navigating this transformative moment in history by examining the views and experiences of a sub-set of the population that is arguably the country’s most racialized.

With these more general concerns in mind, and using an ethnographic approach as its principal research method, this study more specifically aims to explore the socialization, practices, conditions, challenges, and general nature of identity formation among a cross-section of 12 Black Canadian men living in Toronto. The research questions that thus offer a mandate to and animate this paper are as follows: Is there a definition of “Canadian-ness” that is unique to Canadian Black men living in Toronto? How are the socialization, practices, conditions, challenges, and general nature of identity formation of Canadian Black men living Toronto affected by their racialization? How do notions of “fear” affect the lives of Canadian Black men living in Toronto? And ultimately, how may an enhanced understanding of the lived experiences of Black Canadian Black men living in Toronto serve to better inform the social construction of their identity, and allow them more self-determination and creative control over that identity?
These research questions are then the predicate for the following thesis statement, one that represents a crystallization of insights and discoveries that run throughout this paper. For the Black Canadian men in this research sample, race and gender intersect in ways that prove disruptive to their personal safety, their happiness and success, and indeed their very existential integrity as people. As they are confronted by prevailing definitions of masculinity that are both normatively white and that interpret Black masculinity as threatening, criminal and even monstrous, these men are left feeling a marked disconnection between their individual interpretations of masculinity and the constructs of masculinity imposed upon them externally by the wider white-majority society. Left uncertain with how to perceive a significant component of themselves, that being their masculinity, these men are also left uncertain among their Black Canadian male peers and the larger Black community. Against and apart from these unwelcome external influences, what is needed is a new Black masculinity, one that is responsive to what it means to be a Black male in Canada and relative to the African-American discourses that often drift across the border that separates Canada from the United States. It should be a new masculinity that allows Black Canadian men the freedom—both from outward mainstream definition and from representations within the Black community itself-- to make themselves. This new Black masculinity should allow Black men to be the architects of their identities as opposed to inhabitants of a social structure that to paraphrase Karl Marx and as Black men know only too well from Black history and the challenges of the racialized present, not one of their own making.

**Literature Review**

As integral to this study as the participants themselves are the contexts, organizations, and identity-related variables that shape both their lived experiences as well as their worldviews.
For the purposes of this literature review, those contexts, organizations, and variables are three-fold: (1) the history and culture of the Black community in Toronto, with particular emphasis on the majority Afro-Caribbean population within that community; (2) the Black Lives Matter movement and its Toronto chapter; (3) and Black Canadian masculinity. The relationship between these three layers is one marked by disjuncture, and these three layers warrant some further elaboration here before each is addressed separately and the terms of this disjuncture better revealed in the review.

A disproportionate number of the study sample are second-generation Canadians born to their first-generation Afro-Caribbean immigrant parents. As such, unpacking Canada’s immigration history and the experiences of the Caribbean Diaspora is imperative in understanding how these historical, ethnic and racial contours have influenced the socialization of the men featured in this study. Furthermore, among the several triumphs the Black Lives Matter movement has achieved in its short time span, arguably its most significant has been the manner with which it illuminated the immensely under-acknowledged racial tensions existing in Toronto, particularly between Black men and law enforcement. Here we see how the evolution of Black Lives Matter has truly affected race relations on an international scale. Social constructs related to Black masculinity remain at the forefront of current discussions regarding the issues affecting the Black community as a whole. Black masculinity is deeply complex and its nature is “not monolithic” (Taylor, 2008, p. vi). As such, a deep dive into the constituent parts of this highly charged identity is vital for understanding the lived experiences of Canadian Black men during the era of Black Lives Matter.

The study of both race and gender often yield results that are richly textured, complex and multi-layered. As such, solid analysis demands for a multidisciplinary approach. To
appropriately frame the discussion of my research study findings, this section will conclude with a brief overview of the core teachings and central themes related to both intersectionality and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Both theories will be employed as the central theoretical frameworks through which the findings of my research study will be presented.

The History of Immigration in Canada and the Afro-Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto:

Multiculturalism serves as one of the most integral components of the Canadian identity (Garcea, 2006). Much of the country’s political culture and social philosophies are steeped in multicultural ethos that place emphasis on preserving and perpetuating a variety of cultures and the promotion of both “cross-cultural understanding” and “cultural coexistence”. Canada was officially considered to be a multicultural society following the introduction of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988 (Gilkes, 2007, p.15) however, multiculturalism as an official government policy has been in existence since the early 1970s when the country’s leading political figures aimed to “cultivate a national identity” that would resonate with all Canadians, beyond just those from British or French descent (Uberoi, 2009, p. 809). The Multiculturalism policy aimed to do less for the categorization of people into “groups based on ethnicity, place of birth… or (the) colour of their skin” and more to demonstrate the importance of inclusion and equality (Young, 2001).

Multiculturalism in Canada is generally held to have two related meanings: (1) an acknowledgement and endorsement of Canada’s ethnic diversity and its importance to Canadian national identity; and (2), an attitude and principle of equality and tolerance as regards the co-existence of Canada’s ethnic groups, be these First Nations, the early French and British settlers, or subsequent waves of immigration from Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Caribbean.
(Burnet and Driedger, 2011). Over the course of several years, the country has continued to receive global recognition for being thought of as one of the most racially and ethnically tolerant in the world (Gilkes, 2007, p.18). The City of Toronto is often positioned as the nation’s shining example of both this perceived social tolerance and the embodiment of multiculturalism in its truest form. Few cities in the world have been more dramatically altered by immigration than Toronto (Gilkes, 2007, p.18); with half of Toronto’s population born outside of Canada (City of Toronto, 2016), the city’s rich tapestry of culture truly reflects the diverse backgrounds of its inhabitants.

Arguably more than any other ethnic group, Black people are written out and written into a nation’s history conditionally (Walcott, 2003;1996, p.23). While there are several generations of Black Canadians dating to the 17th and 18th centuries, among the first including African slaves arriving to the country with their white owners, a significant portion of the country’s Black population are more recent immigrants with one of their top ancestral origins being Caribbean (Statistics Canada, 2016). Today, the Afro-Caribbean population is among Canada’s fastest growing (StatsCan, 2016); however, the country’s receptiveness to the community has almost always been tinged with apprehension. Prior to 1962, Canada’s immigration policies were openly discriminatory (Branker, 2016). The Immigration Act in its initial form sought to recruit immigrants in order to support labour market needs in Canada; however, the Act retained the right to reject people on the grounds of “nationality, geographic origin (and) peculiarity of custom” (Heron, 2001, p. 31). An explicit prohibition on Black immigrants from the Caribbean was only lifted in 1955 when the Canadian government admitted a group of 100 domestic workers on an experimental basis, permitted to work in Canada for just one year (Gilkes, 2007, p.17).
Over a decade would pass after the ban was lifted before real reform on immigration policy in Canada would be realized. As a means of improving its international image and establishing itself as a leader in world affairs, Canada would pass legislation in 1967 to establish a points system that shifted towards a preference of immigrants that possessed specific skills, language abilities, education levels and occupations (Heron, 2001, p. 32). This newly developed system of evaluation proved challenging to satisfy for a large number of people from the Caribbean (Gilkes, 2007, p.17). Very few Caribbean applicants qualified for citizenship under the newly enacted points system and those that did viewed themselves as part of a special and elite group, largely seen as “the cream of the crop” within the community (Gilkes, 2007, p.11).

Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau has been largely credited for inspiring the marked shift in immigration policy that allowed for the country’s greatest and most significant influx of Caribbean immigrants. Steadfast in his advocacy of human rights, Trudeau also famously fought to distinguish Canada’s identity from the United States in terms of the respective countries’ stances on immigration and cultural integration (Gilkes, 2007, p.15). That is, and the clichéd metaphors notwithstanding, Canada’s policy preferred a “mosaic” — official accommodation of ethnic variety and its preservation within the larger national framework — while the U.S. tended toward a more assimilationist “melting pot.” During Trudeau’s political career, reforms to the Immigration Act would serve to grant human rights amnesty to illegal immigrants, remove all remaining traces of racial and ethnic discrimination in the policy, and allow for the reunification of families separated by the constraints of the immigration process (Heron, 2001, p. 31).

Toronto in the late 1960s was a city dominated by a white Anglo-Saxon majority, many descendants of earlier British settlers (Trotman, 2005, p. 185). By the end of 1970s, however, the
city streets began to take on a less homogenous appearance as immigrants from non-traditional countries of origin in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East began to appear. Coming from a region where socio-economic class has greater influence on social mobility than race, Afro-Caribbeans’ socialization in their new country would prove challenging, as these Black immigrants had to adjust to a reality where racism was all-too prevalent (Gilkes, 2007, p.59-63). While pre-Confederation Upper Canada (now Ontario) had a long-standing reputation as a safe haven for African-Americans fleeing slavery, Canada was still “less than welcoming” to its newest Afro-Caribbean citizens (Trotman, 2005, p. 186).

Afro-Caribbean immigrants would also be compelled to learn how to navigate the more individualistic culture that Canada represented, one that emphasized financial security, autonomy and emotional independence. This directly contrasted with the collectivist culture common in the Afro-Caribbean societies that advanced emotional dependence, group solidarity and a “we consciousness” (Chioneso, 2008, p. 70). Due to a lack of adequate protection by provincial labour legislation and little knowledge of their rights, many within this subculture of “new Canadians” endured experiences of exploitation, racial bigotry and marginalization (Branker, 2016), resulting in the diasporic conditions that served to produce a community of people living in the contradictory space of belonging and not belonging (Walcott, 2003;1996, p.22).

These experiences would undoubtedly shape the manner in which members of the Caribbean Diaspora would educate the children that would eventually be born to them as second-generation Canadians. Parents, of course, help to direct the enculturation and inculcation of their children (Jacobson, Juarez & Smith, 2011, p. 1195). As a response to the greater likelihood that Black children will be directly affected by racial discrimination and instances of racial micro-aggression, Black parents in particular also provide their children with racially specific “training
(and) racial socialization to foster the development of special skills for coping with racism” (Jacobson, Juarez & Smith, 2011; see also Thomas & Speight, 1999; Thorton, 1997). To be Black in Canada is to have this double-consciousness of one’s self as both citizen and yet, in racial terms, “alien” or “Other” too. The constitution of the individual, cultural and national identity of this sub-culture of second-generation Canadians therefore continues to be an amalgamation of these intersecting and conflicting variables. While their birth right affords them the privilege to claim their “Canadian identity and citizenship with fervour” (Trotman, 2005, p. 193), the challenges their parents face in trying to do the same continues to be a source of confusion and personal conflict.

While a large number of Canadians believe that they share a high degree of shared values with Americans, one of the largest distinctions between both countries is the “traditional dichotomy [that] has Canada refer[ing] to itself as a mosaic that favours integration in its approach to cultural diversity” (Jedwab, 2002, p.19). That said, reception of the Afro-Caribbean people was lukewarm at best, but in the city of Toronto, their influence is an integral part of the city’s cultural identity. The annual street carnival parade, locally referred to as Caribana, serves as a poignant expression of Caribbean pride, unity, and identity (Trotter, 2006, p.181). The Jamaican jerk chicken, as well as the Trinidadian and Guyanese roti, are food items that have brought spice to the menus of urban Canada and are indeed signifiers of the Caribbean (Trotter, 2006, p.181).

Even the very particular slang and vocal patterns of the city’s urban set bear Caribbean influence, possessing traces of various island dialects’ accents, speech practices, and registers (Trotter, 2006, p.180). One of the city’s most famous residents, the rapper Drake, is often credited for popularizing the city’s signature dialect, adopting “his beloved roadman patois”
(Roazen, 2016) in several of his biggest hits, though the Carribbean community is one he is only peripherally related to. It has become increasingly difficult to put a hard stop on where Caribbean culture ends and Toronto’s culture begins. The two are almost intrinsically linked due to the manner with which second-generation Canadians have kept the culture of their parents alive. Another key point of distinction demarcating African-Americans from their Black Canadian counterparts is that the latter tend to see themselves as almost equal parts Canadian and Caribbean.

**Black Lives Matter--Toronto:**

While Black Lives Matter has evolved far beyond its humble beginnings as a Twitter hashtag, the movement will always be intrinsically linked to the digital space. Arguably, the names Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner could not have commanded the social consciousness of Black communities across the world but for the astronomical reach of social media. Social media—such as the so-called “Black Twitter” network of Black people creating and distributing information about the community--shared the stories of how these male Black bodies were gravely “destroyed” (Coates, 2015), and did so void of the filtration and “whitesplaining” that is commonplace in traditional media. #BlackLivesMatter illuminated discussions regarding the continued vilification of Black men in a way never seen before, bridging entire cities, nations and eventually countries, as illustrated through the movement’s growth in Toronto. In the interest of accurately describing the focus of the Black Lives Matters movement, it is important to note that Black women are routinely targeted in the same manner as men, though in distinctly gendered ways. Their interactions with law enforcement officials likewise involve racial profiling and questionably justified police stops, but also include sexual harassment and sexual assault (Asoka, 2015, p.54).
The August 2014 killing of Michael Brown by a Missouri police officer was a generative moment for Black Lives Matter in the U.S., and by sympathetic extension, the Toronto chapter. The city of Ferguson, Missouri erupted in November of that same year following the decision by a St. Louis County grand jury not to charge Officer Darren Wilson in the death of Brown (Johnson, 2016). The images of Michael Brown, a graduation photo featuring his cherubic face framed by a cap and gown as juxtaposed against those of his lifeless body lying in the street, were shared countless times over social media. They seared into the minds of a number of Toronto-based activists including Rodney Diverlus, Pascale Diverlus, Sandy Hudson and Janaya Khan (Johnson, 2016; Warren, 2016). These organizers would leverage the real-time capabilities of a social media campaign to organize like-minded Torontonians for a protest rally outside the city's U.S. Consulate office, hoping for the best in terms of attendance (Johnson, 2016). What they would receive by way of participation would be hundreds of supporters who would descend upon Toronto’s streets (Russel l, 2014). Within weeks of the November rally, these Toronto-based organizers would engage the United States-based Black Lives Matter founders in a conference call to discuss their plans and formally secure permission to use the Black Lives Matter moniker (Johnson 2016). Shortly thereafter Black Lives Matter--Toronto would be solidified, serving as Canada’s only official chapter (Smith, 2015).

Much like their American counterparts, Black Lives Matter--Toronto directs its attention primarily to the experiences of Black men while aiming to shape the public’s understanding of what constitutes police brutality, where it occurs, and how to address it (Asoka, 2015, p.54). Organizers also aim to raise pointed questions regarding the values and practices within police forces, the courts and prisons, in addition to those broader Canadian race-related laws and policies, which they believe cumulatively have contributed to the systematic devaluation of
Black lives (Altman, 2015). The Black Lives Matter movement is decidedly “in your face” (Johnson, 2016), a departure from the widely-held perception of Toronto’s citizens as more docile and diplomatic. Their efforts are impassioned, driven by the guiding principle that “discomfort can bring change,” (Altman, 2015) while forcing the public to acknowledge that racism persists in multicultural 21st century Toronto.

Black Lives Matter made its debut in Toronto in April 2014 with a vigil. It has since grown to encapsulate several escalating tactics, including interrupting a Toronto Police Services Board meeting, engaging Toronto Mayor John Tory to share a list of the chapter’s “specific demands,” and staging the takeover of one of the city’s busiest freeways (Smith 2015). In April 2016, organizers set up a two-week encampment in front of Toronto’s police headquarters in protest of the shooting deaths of Jermaine Carby and Andrew Loku (Gray, 2016). Both cases involved the escalation of routine police responses, as mentioned earlier in this paper, though Andrew Loku’s case was particularly troubling. Loku was a Sudanese immigrant with mental health issues. Following a public disturbance and armed with just a hammer, he was fatally shot in a confrontation with Toronto police. Following the public call for further inquiry, the city’s Special Investigations Unit would deem that the “range of justifiable force” was not exceeded (Jones and Leslie, 2016). Black Lives Matter--Toronto pushed for the release of the names of the officers involved in both the cases of Loku and Carby, reaching out to both the Unit and provincial leaders to discuss their deaths (Jones and Leslie, 2016). After failing to receive a response, protestors erected a “tent city” outside of the police headquarters. They eventually took their efforts to both Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne’s personal residence (Jones and Leslie, 2016), as well as to the steps of the legislature—actions that earned them a meeting with the Premier (Gray, 2015).
Many Americans, weaned on tales of how 20th-century civil rights leaders used nonviolent resistance, criticize today’s advocates for their “extreme” tactics and accuse them of inciting violence (Sebastian, 2015). The same sentiment has indeed been a part of discourse surrounding the efforts of Black Lives Matter--Toronto. While the city may remain divided on the tone of their efforts, the magnitude of their successes cannot be denied. The organization’s short-term wins include keeping public attention on the issue of police shootings, and prompting the Toronto City Council to pass a motion calling for the province to review both policing and the Special Investigations Unit through an “anti-black racism lens” (Gray, 2015). Organizers also serve as part of the vanguard addressing the controversial practice of “carding” (Johnson, 2016). Black Lives Matter can also be credited for forcing the city to backtrack on its decision to reduce the popular summer cultural festival Afrofest from its two days to one after alleged noise violations (Johnson, 2016).

While certainly born and shaped by the experiences of African Americans, Black Lives Matter--Toronto made the movement decidedly their own. Operating on different sides of the border, both movements work in tandem to address the issues, practices and events that are unique to their specific environments. While it is important to continue to remain sensitive to what makes African-Americans and Black Canadians distinct sub-cultures, the efforts of Black Lives Matter across that border testify to how members of these distinct communities identifying with the movement found common cause and worked together to affect social change.

**Black Masculinity and Conceptions of Self-Identity:**

The Black male, as represented in North American culture and dating to the antebellum period of slavery, has long been a source of fear, intrigue and pathos in white majority culture.
He has been constructed as dangerous, unbridled and worthy of subordination (Curtis-Boles & Roberts-Douglass, 2013; Mackey, 2010; Macleod & Schneiderman, 1994). While the modern Black male has indeed been emancipated in the legal sense, he continues to struggle to define the man he thinks he should be, the man he wants to be, and the man that will not draw scrutiny, hostility, or violence from the police or the public at large (Curtis-Boles & Roberts-Douglass, 2013; Davis & Hunter, 1994; Higgins, 2010; hooks, 2004; Howard, 2012).

Ethnographic research has demonstrated how the pressure to meet dominant European standards of manhood paired with the persistently unflattering depictions of Black men in popular culture as “gangbangers,” promiscuous and absentee fathers, serves to make the development of self-identity within Black men a stressful process (Curtis-Boles & Roberts-Douglass, 2013; Davis & Hunter, 1994; Mahalik, Pierre & Wan, 2006; Silver, 2008). Many men describe their fear at regularly being seen as conforming to these tropes of Black maleness (Silver, 2008), amid a larger white majority context where they must define themselves against often negative media imagery and cultural stereotypes. They do so in relation to actual individuals of various races and ethnicities, and within institutional and more informal social settings; in both Black maleness is often read as an especially charged and provocative identity.

**Theoretical Overview:**

There are considerable gaps in understanding how the multiple intersecting social identities of Black men can “reveal interlocking systems of privilege and oppression” (Bowleg, Malebranche, Teti, Tschann, 2013, p.26). Society continues to engage in the often unproductive tendency of viewing the social identities of race and gender as mutually exclusive categories (Crenshaw, 2001, p.57); however, when brought together, as in this paper on maleness and race
in the Black community, they require their own distinct analysis. The study of different elements of identity as they relate to each other, and the forms of discrimination that attend on them in an individual or group, is captured by the concept known as “intersectionality,” one associated with American law professor and Critical Race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw’s groundwork lead to the provocation of new thoughts and questions (Bowleg, Malebranche, Teti, Tschann, 2013, p.26) that served to challenge dominant conceptions of discrimination that positioned subordination as a disadvantage that occurred along a single categorical axis (Crenshaw, 2001, p. 57).

Intersectional analysis is incredibly pertinent to identity research (Nelson, Stahl & Wallace, 2015, p. 177) as it offers a theoretical framework that acknowledges the complex layers and textures of social identity, asserting that multiple social identities such as race, ethnicity and gender “intersect at the individual level of experience” (Bowleg, Malebranche, Teti, Tschann, 2013, p.26). The roots of this theoretical framework are grounded in Black feminist theory. Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality originally as a means of describing how Black women were excluded in white feminist discourse, seeking through the theory to bring Black women into feminist discourse more effectively by conjoining race with gender (Bowleg, Malebranche, Teti, Tschann, 2013, p.26).

It is rare to find studies that frame Black men in intersectional terms (Carbado, 2013, p.818) however, intersectionality informed language is needed to accurately describe the experiences of Black men at the intersection of racial and gender discrimination (Bowleg, Malebranche, Teti, Tschann, 2013, p.31). Further, a lack of appropriate language to describe the micro and macro level experiences of Black men at the intersection of race and gender
specifically serves to facilitate the invisibility of Black men’s lives in social and behavioural theory, research and interventions (Bowleg, Malebranche, Teti, Tschann, 2013, p.31).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used in this project because of its value in exploring the self and the national identity of participants, particularly as these discourses interplay with their racial identity. CDA is associated with a number of theorists—Norman Fairclough being a major formative source of key CDA tenets—but its utility in exploring discourse about race is notably attached to Dutch communication scholar Teun van Dijk. In Van Dijk’s view, Critical Discourse Analysis has the double aim of providing a systematic theoretical account of written and spoken discourse, as well as exploring the relationship of such discourses to their larger cognitive, social and cultural contexts (p. 96). CDA considers both the syntactic structure of sentences as well as word order in the analysis of texts, be they written or spoken. In this view, “word order can express the role and prominence of underlying meanings” (Van Dijk, p.103).

The Study

Methodology:

Ethnography has a long and well-established history, particularly in qualitative research, and “encapsulates a large variety of research activities and perspectives” (Serrant-Green, 2007). As it is my aim to examine the lived experiences of Canadian Black men in an evolving and dynamic urban Toronto environment, this study is best supported by a theoretical framework—that is, ethnography--that allows one to understand parts of the world as they are experienced and understood by the people who “live them out” (Cook & Crang, 2007). Ethnography is an immersive methodology, concerned to document through observation and participation on the researcher’s part a reality as it is experienced by subjects; it can combine, as does this project,
interviews with observation and with analysis of relevant print or web-based documents. It should be said, by way of caveat, that the purpose of this study is not to produce an objective account of reality (Pink, 2007). Rather, the aim is to offer an experience of reality that is “loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced” (Pink, 2007).

Data Collection:

The data obtained for this study was taken from a series of semi-structured interviews with 12 Toronto-based young Black men between the ages of 25 to 41. This particular age range of Black men was chosen as I believed them to be most directly interested, engaged and affected by the Black Lives Matter movement.

As a first step in any ethnography, it is important to develop relationships within the community in which one is interested (Cook & Crang, 2007). With this in mind, my initial attempts at recruitment began by reaching out to the organizers of Black Lives Matter--Toronto to inform them about my research, and to ask them to suggest any individuals within the group they felt would be interested in participating. I also reached out to the Macaulay Child Development Centre’s “More Than a Haircut” program, an organization designed to facilitate conversations with Black Canadian fathers of African or Afro-Caribbean descent. I chose this latter organization in particular because of its focus on issues related to masculinity and the influence of fatherhood on Black males. I hoped that an organization interested in Black fatherhood would include individuals willing and open to discuss in depth these issues relating to Black Canadian maleness in the time of Black Lives Matter.
After garnering initial interest from a recognized figure peripherally associated with Black Lives Matters--Toronto, attempts at scheduling an interview went unreturned. I wish to acknowledge that these initial conversations coincided with a particularly active time for the organization, most notably the group’s demonstrations regarding the deaths of Andrew Loku and Jermaine Carby. Upon connecting with the Macaulay Child Development Centre’s “More Than a Haircut” program, I was informed that group was taking a hiatus with plans to resume activity during the summer 2016. During this exchange, I shared details of my research study with a representative from the program in hopes they could identify any particular members from the group who might have interest in participating. This inquiry remains without response.

In the interest of moving forward with my study, follow-ups with the identified groups were suspended and my attention was cast to men meeting the sample criteria but within my personal network of friends, acquaintances, and other contacts of both of these. Here, I wish to acknowledge my identity as a Black woman and second-generation Canadian, born to immigrant parents from St. Vincent and the Grenadines. I began by approaching eight men with whom I had previous social interaction to garner their interest in participating in this study. The remaining four participants were obtained through snowball sampling. In methodological discussions of qualitative research, “sampling...qualifies...as the least ‘sexy’ facet of qualitative research” however, “these procedures amount to crucial moments within the overall research design” (Noy, 2008, p. 328). By combining the use of theoretical and snowball sampling, in place of the random sampling trademark of statistical research, I was able to quickly obtain selective access to the group of people in which I was primarily concerned and who are living through the experiences I wished to learn about (Cook & Crang, 2007).
Upon receiving confirmation of their initial interest, each potential participant was sent a letter of invitation via email. I then arranged individual interviews with each participant, albeit with the exception of four men with whom I conducted a focus group. Through this secondary use of the focus group in lieu of a one-on-one interview, I sought to explore how the sharing of lived experience in a conversational group setting would condition different responses to often very personal questions relating to their experience of race and masculinity. Interview questions were designed with the purpose of gaining insight into how Black men living in Toronto exercise control over the meaning of Black maleness. In addition, the questions aimed to determine how these men think about their national Canadian identities as they engage with the dominant racialized discourse about them both within the Black community in Toronto and in a pluralistic Canadian society.

Careful consideration should be paid to when and where interviews take place, as “various facets of people’s identities are very much immersed in and between the different spaces and places of their lives” (Cook & Crang, 2007). As such, I allowed each participant to decide as to the best meeting place to conduct the interview. In the case of the one-on-one interviews, participants opted for causal settings such as coffee shops and cafes. As a means of accommodating a four-person focus group and interviewer, the session was conducted at the private residence of one of the participants. Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were asked to sign a letter of consent, a request with which each complied. Interviews were kept semi-structured and were recorded by both a tape recorder and hand-written notes. Follow-up questions were asked only when necessary to clarify responses that were unclear or required further expansion. One-on-one interviews were kept at a “user-friendly” (Cook & Crang, 2007) length of 60 to 90 minutes. The focus group session was conducted for period of 120 minutes.
Personal Background and Limitations:

As a Black woman there are a few things I know to be true about my community. I know the manner with which so many of us feel the fortitude of our enslaved ancestors running through our bodies like a steady current. I know the way so many of us describe tasting the very essence of our Blackness at the tips of our tongues every day, yet struggle with describing what it would feel like to grasp it between our fingertips. Our Blackness saddles us with a state of being that vacillates between the known and unknown. We have become well versed in the coping mechanisms required to navigate Black life, know how to ignore the unwanted attention paid to our customs, our hair, our bodies, our sexuality and our beliefs. Yet, we remain ill-equipped to confront a world that is alternatively fascinated, repulsed, and seduced by and afraid of our bodies and ourselves.

The lens through which I view the world and respond to the ideas, images and opinions imposed on my community from the white majority world are intrinsically linked to my self-identity as a Black woman. However, as affected as my life has been by several of the incredibly deep and enveloping relationships I share with Black men in my own life, I do not profess to fully know how these men must truly feel at their core. Black men and women share a strong connection due to our relationships, history and shared experiences, but our interactions are riddled with elements of discord. The men featured in this study opened up to me in ways that were unabashedly candid and honest. That admitted, I readily and wholeheartedly acknowledge my inability to fully give voice to their lives in a manner that pays full credence to what their lives comprehensively entail.
As Black women, the way we love our men is our trademark. It must be said that if it were not for this love, the Black Lives Matter movement would have never been created as, Black women serve as both the founders and spokespeople for both the Canadian and American-based chapters. That being said, we as women simultaneously function as their fiercest defenders and their harshest critics. In nearly each interview, Black men described Black women in these terms. They described me as an extension of the women in my community; we were steadfastly loyal in our devotion to them, but we nagged them, judged them unfairly and could be difficult to deal with. As such, I found myself wanting to almost disappear and exist only as a vessel through which information was sent and received.

In retrospect, there were several instances wherein I could have been bolder, probed more, perhaps challenged an answer or posed a follow-up question to fuel more dialogue. But I questioned myself in these moments. Ethnographers often assume various roles while conducting research with each role having significant implications on their level of integration into the group they wish to study (Bucerius, 2013, p. 691). I found myself engaging in a lot of “reflexivity” during my research which is the process of “looking inward and outward” while navigating the space between insider and outsider (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008, p. 10). While I shared the same racial and cultural identity as my participants, the distinct difference between our genders casted me as an outsider.

Gender categorization can often alter the behaviours of both the researcher and their participants (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008, p. 11). In an effort to keep myself as separate and apart from this study so as not to skew the results, I opted to always appear as neutral as possible. I didn’t want this study to be reflective of the dynamics between Black men and Black women, since I felt that this pattern was its own fascinating and important topic.
Rather, I simply wished to lift the veil off of the highly perplexing Black male identity that has confounded social discourse for so many years. Black men are as enigmatic a figure for me as a Black woman as they are to those outside of our community. As a Black woman, I too struggle to reconcile the conflicting constructs of the Black male identity. I too wish to separate him from what society tries to make me believe about him, understand what he feels, how he feels and why he does the things he does. I feel this particularly when the things he does hurt us as Black women, his own brothers and his own self.

It is my view that for far too long, our efforts to fully learn about this subset of the Canadian society have been riddled with speculation and heavy doses of American culture. There is not nearly enough of the academic scholarship or research truly required to arrive upon the understanding we wish to acquire. As such, the purpose of this research is to explore the minds of Canadian Black men in a manner that does not generalize or define, but rather enlightens. In other words, I wish to humanize a high-profile demographic cohort within Canadian society that is often de-humanized, marginalized and disenfranchised. I am careful here not to appropriate or clinically diagnose their identities. There is still much to be discovered. While it is my belief that this study discloses many powerful truths surrounding Canadian Black men, there is much more work left to be done.

Research Findings

Perceptions of Masculinity:

In discussing their descriptions of masculinity, my research participants used words such as “bold,” “strong,” “powerful,” and “rational,” but asserted that these descriptors could only be applied to understanding masculinity in a general sense. Each participant felt strongly that Black
masculinity was inherently more textured and complex than masculinity in other races. A sentiment shared by Cyril encapsulated the thoughts shared by nearly all participants; he noted, “[As Black men we have to consider] what does it mean to be a man and what does it mean to be Black and how do those two things converge upon each other?” For Black men, their “gender is constructed through their race, and their race constructed through their gender” (Ferber, 2007, p.15). To understand fully understand his experiences as a man, one must simultaneously consider his race and vice versa. As such, both categories are then considered to be intersectional and mutually constitutive (Ferber, 2007, p.15).

The Canadian Black men with whom this study is concerned believed that society viewed Black masculinity in the most extreme sense of each term. Many of the men described negotiating a social climate wherein they were expected to exhibit behaviour that was always funnelled through some schema of “hyper-ness.” In other words, Black men were perceived as “hypersexual,” “hyperviolent” and overall so “hypermasculine” that by extension, they are unable to socialize and live their lives like any other men, solely due to the colour of their skin.

Each of the Black men interviewed described feeling a strong disassociation with what are prevailing normative views about who Black men are supposed to be and how they are expected to behave. They each appeared to enter into dialogue with this researcher with a desire to debunk these prevailing views with vehemence. Dion noted that, “In 2016, we [Black men] have changed so much”; this was a sentiment Lamarr agreed with, noting himself emphatically that “Black men are going to school and getting better jobs…[we’re] working hard!” Despite my efforts to construct a relatively uniform conception of the Canadian Black male identity in the early stages of this project, these men instead asserted that it was more important to illuminate their varying identities. “When you’re around Black men in Toronto…you get such a variety,”
Lamarr goes on to say. “[People] can’t base [their perceptions] of Black men just by what they read or see on TV.”

When interacting with non-Black peers outside of the community, many found that some questioned their “validity” as Black men, experiencing difficulty with reconciling their preconceived notions of what “real Black men” are versus the men they were interacting with in real time (Collazo, 2016). Ryan shares,

I have a Filipino friend and he told me “Man, I love you but, I need another Black friend. We watch all these (artsy) movies and you’re not punching anybody or cussing.” I feel like some people are disappointed. Like, I didn’t get the “Black experience” I was looking for from Ryan.

Veron furthers this sentiment by asserting that,

In working with kids, when I first started working with them, they would ask me questions like “How many fights have you gotten into?”, “How many people have you beaten up?”, “Have you ever had to kill anybody? They have this perception of what it is to see a large Black man in their presence.

The most legible Black male body—the one deemed most easily read and interpreted in non-Black society--is often thought to be a criminal body and/or a body in need of policing and containment (Neal, 2013, p.5). There are several factors that contribute to this ideologically default or “path of least resistance” reading of the Black male body. Using both the media and popular culture as examples, there is much evidence that the depiction of Black males tends to overemphasize criminality and failure, while their struggles and social contributions are
underemphasized (Tyree, Byerly & Hamilton, 2012, p. 469). Hip hop culture, an ensemble of music, fashion and imagery which Canadian Black men are significantly influenced by and associated with, reinforces this pattern through hip hop’s habit of over representing hypersexuality, criminality, pimp culture, drugs and irresponsible fathers in its varied texts. Such clichéd themes and stereotypes are frequently attached to Black maleness and to damaging effect (Byerly, Hamilton, Tyree, 2012, p. 469).

Many of the Black men in this study describe being directly influenced by these dominating tropes of Black maleness and at various phases of their lives, struggling with whether and how they might adhere to them. Veron notes, “[Growing up] listening to gangster rappers, I would ask myself ‘could I really live up to [their depictions of masculinity]?’.... I [didn’t] know if I could do that.” All participants noted how they separately arrived at their own self-directed “masculine” behaviours and definitions, striving for autonomous views of themselves that aimed to directly contradict the prevailing discourse given such sensational treatment and dangerous charisma in hip hop. This effort has not always been well received. Ryan noted,

I’ve been called soft, gay, white-washed--all these kind of things that come because of how I dress [and] things I’ve been into. I had to kind of figure out what it means to be a man on my own terms.

Michael echoes Ryan’s experience of having his sexuality questioned based upon his interests as well, stating that “When I was younger…I wanted to be an actor and people would be like ‘he’s definitely gay.’ I had to play that other side of masculinity like, a man can cry and that’s okay.”
These assertions raise another interesting component of Black masculinity. Not only is it very easily threatened, threats to Black masculinity nearly always include some form of challenge to a Black man’s sexual orientation. Heteronormative masculinity is essentially the only form of masculinity they are “allowed” to display without facing ridicule from their peers. While on a societal scale, heteronormative constructs of masculinity are shifting and becoming less reliant upon homophobic ideology (Dean, 2013, p. 554), there is an overarching perception within the Black community that “homosexuality is in direct opposition to the gender role expectation of Black men” (Grimmett and Amola, 2015, p. 237). Black men tend to establish “strongly aversive boundaries of distance” between themselves and “gay signifiers” in order to claim an unambiguous heterosexual status (Dean, 2013, p. 535). “Gay signifiers” is a broad term that when defined illuminates several problematic social constructs of homosexuality as a whole. However, in the context of this area of focus, it can be inferred that among Black men, something as simple as a style of dress or an interest in fine arts can be perceived as a “gay signifier” by his peers. In saying so, it must be acknowledged that it is largely the community itself that fosters this way of thinking and as well as, the negative association that is placed upon homosexuality overall. Several studies have shown the Black community tends to be more disapproving of homosexuality when directly compared to the opinions outside of the community (Dean, 2013, p. 538); if so, it can then be deduced that there is certainly a heteronormative pressure imposed upon the lives of Black men. While the same aversive view of gay signifiers can be viewed as a part of masculinity amongst several different races, it is particularly accentuated in the example of Black men. In many ways, to demonstrate a less conforming view of gender is often perceived as a betrayal to their Blackness. As their Blackness is often tethered to a strong defense of male gender roles, the reverse is also true which is largely
what contributes to their continued interaction with their masculinity at the “hyper” or most extreme level.

The relationship Black men have with their own sexuality is its own fascinating topic, one that cannot be fairly explored here. However, this rigidly defined conception of heteronormative behaviour is an important part of the Black male identity. For many years, members of Black community mobilized efforts to obtain the rights afforded to all people regardless of race. Yet, men within the Black community describe feeling pressure to avoid exhibiting behaviour that might be taken as gender non-conforming. As a coping mechanism and in sharp distinction to this conformity, the men in my sample continue to redefine masculinity in their own terms. As Donald asserts, “[Being] comfortable in your own skin [is] masculine to me.” This was the one area in which each of the men appeared to feel the most empowered. They wished to cultivate their own modern incarnation of Black masculinity, a new Black masculinity that they felt they needed to pass along to their children or other younger Black males in order to achieve real change. Jahvaun notes, “Masculinity shouldn’t be a ‘Black thing’. [As] a father, I’m trying to set a [new] example for my son.”

While intersectionality was initially used in a feminist context, its value in thinking through other intersections in identity—such as race and the male gender—has been acknowledged and validated (Carbado, 2013, p.814). Applying intersectionality in the context of Black masculinity also serves to highlight how Black men’s gender privilege ebbs and flows when it intersects with other historically devalued identities (Bowleg, Malebranche, Teti, Tschann, 2013, p.26). Lincoln commented, “[Black masculinity] is very different…because of history.” The history to which he refers is that of Black enslavement. In many ways, hypermasculinity can be seen as a direct derivative of the experiences Black men endured during
this era. African slaves were often evaluated for their maleness and understood in subhuman terms; they were viewed “as brick walls, good for hard labor… heavy lifting… [void of] emotions [and] ready to obey the orders of their master at any minute” (Collazo, 2016).

It is commonly thought that Black Canadians internalize the history of Black enslavement to a lesser degree than their African American counterparts. This is largely due to the popular misconception that there is no significant Canadian history of Black enslavement. We know that this in fact is not the case. Indeed, popular culture in both countries—think here of the 1977 blockbuster U.S. TV mini-series Roots or the 2013 Hollywood film 12 Years A Slave in the U.S., or Canadian novelist Lawrence Hill’s The Book of Negroes (aired as a CBC mini-series in 2015)—has shown an increased affinity for projects concerned to tell the history of Black enslavement. Thus, while the 300-year duration and extent of American slavery in addition to the post-Emancipation Jim Crow laws enforcing legal discrimination in the U.S. South mean that slavery and its associations with Black maleness take up more room in the African-American psyche than slavery does in the Canadian Black experience, the terror and injustice of being owned as property by one’s fellow human beings is still a significant aspect of the Black experience in Canada. As one of the female characters in The Book of Negroes says, “Some say that I was once uncommonly beautiful, but I wouldn’t wish beauty on any woman who has not her own freedom, and who chooses not the hands that claim her.”

Whether the lingering influence of North American slavery on these Black Canadian men and their formation as men is due to the resurgence of Black history discourse in the education system (as with Black History month), popular culture or a social consciousness of their own is not clear; however, what is evident is that Black Canadian men reflect upon this history in a very real and visceral way. Dion comments, “When you go from being sold to being free, there’s a
disconnection.” In this view, we make transparent a distinctive component of Canadian Black men and their identities. Their histories are peppered with several components: the history of their parents (largely Afro-Caribbean), the history of their nation being Canada, and the history of their people. Indeed they are shaped by the immigrant experiences of their parents but they are just as affected by the history of “the peculiar institution.” The brutalization of Black male bodies today reads analogously to the lynching of Black male bodies during the era of slavery. The prevailing images of Black men as dangerous and criminal today mirrors their construction as “beast-like” and savage during the era of slavery. They recognize the advances made, but still see where there is room for significant improvement. They are never far removed from these experiences. In this view, true freedom would be realized when they are fully emancipated from the burden of the problematic social construction of their identities.

In the exploration of their own ideas about Black masculinity, the men in this study also described how the practices and conditions of their own identity formation were changed by a national context that remains normatively “white.” Black men are only made to appear gender-normative when they are made to appear like gender-normative white men, something which gives them representational currency as sympathetic victims (Carbado, 2013, p. 818). In other words, Black men are recognized normatively as “male” when the model of masculinity that they follow is the white one, rather than a distinctly Black and yet still valid way of being men. This leaves Black men in a difficult position, confronted with very little space to be themselves given the vise-like nature of the double-sided construction of their maleness. On the white majority side of their consciousness, being “Black while male” is taken to be threatening, criminal, and sexually dangerous; on the Black side, as discussed earlier in this paper, refusing to be hypermasculine risks being subject to the homophobic censure of their fellow Black men.
So pervasively powerful are ideas about Black masculinity that even Black Canadian men that lack the swagger stereotypically identified with Black maleness are targeted. A Toronto-based writer and radio show host, Desmond Cole, penned a memoir in the popular periodical *Toronto Life* asserting that over the course of his adult life, he had been unjustly interrogated by the police over 50 times, simply because he is Black (Cole, 2015). Slight in size, polished in his speech and conservatively dressed, as a Canadian Black man Cole projected a law-abidingness and middle-class male respectability that arguably made his repeated and unwarranted interactions with law enforcement that much more upsetting to society as a whole. It is wholly possible that had his image been in line with the tropes that come from the white majority world, and that likewise trouble the construction of Black male identity from the inside as they are accepted and cultivated by Black men, the response might have been more than just insulting—it may have been violent.

As Jahvaun notes, “I may have the ‘look’ but I’m not ‘that guy’.” Black men are acutely aware of how their physicality, style of dress, and manner of speech influence the manner with which they are perceived by law enforcement and the public at large. Lincoln notes that, “Black masculinity scares the shit out of some people…the [idea] of Black masculinity is what is used to fuel political, economic and social trends…it drives policy.” In many ways, carding and other forms of racialized law enforcement and criminal justice practice are responses to an unspoken “crime”: that of being Black while male, and thus deviating from normative white standards of masculinity. In this context, Blackness and maleness are not mutually exclusive. Rather, their intersection directly appears to affect not only the manner in which these men were perceived, but also whether or not the negative experiences they encounter solely due to the intersection of their race and gender could ever be justified.
Self-Identification and Notions of Nationality:

The organization of word order proved of value in the discourse analysis of the participants’ statements. Several participants referenced the birthplaces of their parents as a means of self-identifying their nationality, using terms such as “Jamaican-Canadian” or describing themselves as “Canadian-born with [their parent’s birthplace] background.” The majority of participants gave their national identification as “Black Canadian.” Veron asserted that he preferred to use this term “because I’m proud of being Black and I’m proud of being Canadian.” This sentiment appeared to be one shared with most participants, as it did appear to exhibit an allegiance to their place of birth but also described feeling equally proud of their racial identity.

Eleven of the twelve participants were second-generation Canadians born to at least one parent that emigrated from various countries in the English-speaking West Indies; the twelfth was born of African parents. The English-speaking West Indies are represented by a string of islands in the western Atlantic that includes Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, among several others. While each of the aforementioned islands were represented in the sample group, there was certainly a strong Jamaican presence in both discussions and by the participants themselves. With both parents born in Jamaica, Donald notes, “The Jamaican influence is unique to Toronto…. Chinese, Indian, they’ll all have some kind of Jamaican in how they speak.” Ryan whose parents are from Barbados furthers this sentiment by noting that, “I know when I was in high school, I probably had a better Jamaican accent than
Bajan accent because all my friends were Jamaican and even the ones that weren’t were talking like they were Jamaican.”

Michael, who self-identified as “Jamaican-Canadian” references a “Jamaican swag” that has a “certain respect that comes along with it…the accent alone carries a level of strength.”

Ryan notes,

What does everyone want to be in high school? Cool! And who’s the coolest guy? A Jamaican! There was this guy in my high school…he told a teacher to “shut his bloodclot” and everyone was like, “yo, this guy’s a god!”

Participants described understanding their own national identities in a very similar manner as their parents. For those born in Canada, they noted various experiences in which they were made to feel as though they did not quite belong. Michael shares,

I remember as early as kindergarten, teachers asking me, “Michael, where are you from?”

Back then I’d say, Canada [or] Toronto and they would say “No, no…where are you from?” That’s when I knew they wanna know the background – what stickers are on the suitcases here?

While Western society certainly has given discussions of race and racism greater prominence in recent decades, there are still many people that believe discrimination against people of colour is a thing of the past. What has emerged in many social circles is discussion of what is called the “new racism.” The “new racism” is a term developed by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, and is used to describe “the belief in a colour-blind society wherein…the playing field has been levelled.” In this view, if people of colour experience difficulty in achieving the
successes that seem easily achievable by their white counterparts, it is believed that it is “the result of their own poor choices” in what is alleged to be a post-racial society in which race is not supposed to be an obstacle to an individual’s progress (Ferber, 2007). Participants describe a similarly designed social climate in the city of Toronto. As noted by Cyril,

> Culturally, the rhetoric of multiculturalism is much stronger in Toronto. The moral outrage of racism wouldn’t be as severe in cultures and communities where (multiculturalism) is taken for granted or normalized.

While they understand the privilege that is afforded with living in a city that places multiculturalism at the forefront of its identity, participants remain cognizant of the underpinnings of racism that are always lying under the surface of the country. Rayon posits that “Orangeville (Ontario) has the highest concentration of KKK members in all of Canada” and its proximity to Toronto serves to demonstrate that racial ideology is never too far away from the consciousness of the city’s inhabitants.

Racism in a putatively colour-blind and post-racial society is less overt than the explicit racism and legally enshrined inequality and Jim Crow-style segregation of the past (Ferber, 2007). In keeping with Toronto’s aim to position itself as an enlightened city free of overt discrimination, participants describe experiencing discrimination in covert ways. Cyril shares, “In Toronto, if you’re going to a night-time establishment with a group of Black men, you might be told it’s at capacity or they won’t allow you in…there are subtle ways [that] they won’t let you in.”
Most Black men within the community, in the view of this writer, would agree they’ve been “woke.” They understand how these covertly racist actions against them could be perceived as less harsh than what many of their African-American counterparts experience, but they sting just the same. On its surface, the city of Toronto appears inclusive, but these painful realities are indeed its worst-kept secret. Torontonians traditionally aim to project a “kumbaya attitude” as Robert describes it; despite these optics, he goes on to further assert that, the white community is actually “protective of their white privilege.” Discussions of social and racial injustice among Black men are encouraged, and even welcomed, as detailed coverage of both the police’s “carding” practices and mobilization from Black Lives Matter – Toronto dominate the headlines of the city’s newspapers and media outlets. But this high-profile coverage does not indicate acceptance. One need only to scan the comment section of a publication’s digital site or eavesdrop on a conversation at a local Tim Hortons to know that everyone is talking about these issues, but not exactly in complimentary ways.

**Constructs of Fear and Protection:**

The feeling of safety is one of society’s most universal and basic needs. We all crave the feeling of calm that comes alongside knowing that we are safe in our surroundings and protected by those that threaten our security. Despite what the sensationalization in film, television and popular culture may tell us, the perception of our greatest threats should not be racialized. While a modest degree of caution toward individuals we do not know or understand is prudent in everyday life, the popularized notion of “stranger danger” is an impediment to peaceable relations and understanding among people of different social categories. Despite Toronto being one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world, increasingly the “strangers” that are feared
have increasingly become not just those we do not know but those people that are “raced.” Whiteness studies, a body of scholarship that seeks to racialize whiteness and expose how and why it is implicated in the abiding structures of power, argues that the Western representation of race has constructed white people as the standard of humanity against which the conventionally racialized—be they Black, brown, red or yellow—are judged (Dyer, 2005, p.11). As long as much of the media and political system are within the control of white people and thus not demographically representative of Western society (Dyer, 2005, p.11), it is then no wonder how “fear of the Other” has served to incite an overarching level of anxiety and panic in relation to Black men in Canada.

Historically, the protection of White womanhood and fear of Black men who “dared to compete successfully with White men” were used to justify the prevailing dominant discourse that Black men were a threat to the social order (Bell, 1995, p.895), a sentiment that still prevails today. As such, Critical Race theorists like Derrick Bell disagree with the notion that “laws are or can be written from a neutral perspective.” Instead, in order to continue to reinforce the premise of whites’ protection from the marauding Other, the law “simultaneously and systematically privileges subjects who are white” while neutralizing people of colour (Bell, 1995, p.899-901).

While the contributing factors associated with society’s persistent image of Black men as inherently threatening have been discussed ad nauseam, little attention has been paid to the impact these perceptions have on Black men themselves. During the focus group discussions, Veron gave voice to this sentiment by asking what seemed to be a recurrent question: “There’s so much protection against the fear of the Black man…but who protects me?” It is indeed ironic to consider the fears of the men who are themselves the most feared; but among the men interviewed in this study, each had concerns about their own personal safety. Some described a
level of fear that is rooted in tensions amongst Black men in relation to each other. As Dion notes, “I’m fearful of Black men [because of] the crab in the bucket scenario. Put four of us in a room and we start to get envious.” This notion of competition and lurking envy amongst themselves can often manifest itself in detrimental ways. Violence towards and against one another is often the tragic and common result. This was a sentiment also shared by Nicholas who states “Sometimes…when you’re a Black male being approached by a group of young Black males, your own perception of what this could be is skewed.”

The city of Toronto has become increasingly concerned with gang activity and gun violence, particularly in the areas of the city most densely populated by Black people—such as the city’s west-end. It is difficult to determine if this concern is truly warranted. Majority group speakers have the ability to reproduce “white, Western group dominance by communicating stereotypes…and the reproduction of social, cultural or political hegemony” (Van Dijk, p.93). With the local media deeply influenced by dominant white discourse, the fears of a largely white elite have seemingly become the fears of the society over which it governs, permeating into the consciousness of the very racialized community it too often aims to criminalize. In other words, absorbing the message from society that people should fear the racialized and see them as “Other,” the racialized strangely are led to fear and become an “Other” to themselves.

While the fear of each other remains an underlying sentiment, perhaps the greatest fear these Black men describe is the fear they have of law enforcement. Between Black men living in the city of Toronto and law enforcement officials, there are no six degrees of separation. The Black interviewees readily recount instances of unjust provocation, detainment and brutality at the hands of the very individuals expected to protect them. In some cases, these occurrences were experienced by the men personally. In other case, they were experienced by close friends or
family members. Regardless of who was involved in the instances they share, the threat of it rattles them to their core. Rayon shares, “I haven’t had many brushes with the police that were unpleasant; however, that doesn’t mean they don’t exist. A friend of mine got his eye socket cracked from a boot to the face for ‘resisting arrest.’ The crime? He had a new BMW and they (the police) wanted to know how he got it.”

Jahvaun describes the roots of this contentious relationship between these men and law enforcement officials as an imbalance of power; he opines that “The cops have this ‘power’ and they feel like they can abuse it.... I feel like we have rights and the cops…they abuse our rights.” Robert believes it stems from “ignorance” but in the end, he and some of the other men are each less concerned with why the bad relationship with law enforcement exists, and rather simply wish to see the relationship improved. Lincoln notes that “It’s the fear of Black masculinity that drives over-policing.” It does not appear to matter how “Black” these men are. As Michael further notes, “I’m kind of fairer skin (but) when the po-po (police) see me on the street, they’re not differentiating the colour of the rainbow here.”

Conclusion

Summary and Recommendations:

At the core of my discussions with each of the Black men featured in this study was a desire for change. Not only did they wish to see more from themselves, they wished to see more from the city they called home. They wished to see Toronto acknowledge their issues in a manner that did not construct them simply as a stubborn stain on the city’s social fabric that needed to be scrubbed out. Rather, they wished to see themselves humanized by the addition of more texture and complexity to the construction of their identities. These men seemed fatigued
by their struggles, among them being navigating a society wherein they are simultaneously known and unknown. This hurt them. It frustrated them. It made them feel more than marginalized and disenfranchised. It made them feel powerless, which for a study concerned with masculinity is perhaps the most troubling result this yielded.

As I write this summary and conclusion, two Black men have just been killed by law enforcement officials in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota—the latter livestreamed to Facebook by his girlfriend as he died. To say that these events did not rattle my emotions and impair my own ability to work through what felt like a dense fog that blanketed my ability to look towards a more positive future, would be untrue. With this said, this study has served to open important conversations that need to be at the forefront of mapping out a way forward and as such, I wish to construct my recommendations in a manner that directly addresses the men this study is concerned with.

To my participants and Black men across Canada, I simply say, that while it is impossible to ignore the tragic and disheartening events occurring across both sides of the North American border, the greatest opportunity you have to effect change is on the side of the border upon which you stand. Your actions during this highly provocative time are being as closely monitored by those within the Black community as they are by those on the outside which makes your decisions here that much more important. You are undoubtedly saddled with a wide range of emotions perhaps most closely associated with feelings of hopelessness, anger and despair and these may in turn inspire you to react in ways that reflect these feelings.

This particular moment in time appears as perhaps the most opportune to reconstruct prevailing notions of Black maleness by demonstrating the new Black masculinity. One that betrays perceptions of Black men as irrational by demonstrating rationality. For those with
influence over younger generations, in particular, you now have the opportunity to provide these young people with a real time of example of how Black men prevail. I mean this even more for those among the sample group who spoke to their work within the Canadian education system as you more than most are in the position to influence a generation’s way of thinking – a powerful and impactful way to inspire real change. Instead of addressing the overrepresentation of Black men in conversations associated with the society’s most negative areas, this is also a fitting time to address the underrepresentation of Black males in city’s political structure, law enforcement organizations and public administration. Having greater visibility in these areas would serve as your greatest means of ensuring improvements can be implemented in society in a systematic manner. I am careful here not to indicate by any means that these efforts will be immediately successful or easy to realize. They will however, better serve your efforts to demonstrate to the Canadian society by and large, that you are capable of mobilizing in a manner that is intelligent and soundly-structured.

It is such a humbling experience to learn more about yourself—in my case here, as a Black Canadian woman researching Black Canadian men—through learning more about someone else. As a Black women I grew to learn so much more about myself than I ever could have imagined in speaking with these Black men, and not only due to our racial ties. We all steer our lives through the bubble of our self-identity. This bubble envelops us in a way that makes us complacent. In looking at the world through the eyes of 12 different men, with 12 unique views, I was enlightened. I think this experience could be true for any one individual who chooses to open the scope of their worldview to include the worldviews of others. It is ethnography’s capacity to function precisely in this manner—to offer an informed, self-critical, and organized
empathy for the lives of others-- that makes this research method and this area of study so inherently important.

I dedicate the concluding portion of my study to the Black men with whom it is concerned. It is my hope that it foster conversation that is not ultimately about them, but rather among them. I hope that in seeing their identities outlined here that even just one of them finds something wrong with my depiction, and it inspires him to “check” me, correct me or even prove me wrong. After all, what kind of Black woman would I be if after all the time I spent with these beautifully imperfect brothas, I didn’t successfully antagonize one or more into some sort of challenge? It’s what they told me they knew I wanted to do all along. I can finally admit to each of them now: they were right.
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