

# The Political Economy of 'Race' and Class in Canada's Caribbean Diaspora

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## ABSTRACT

While there are over 500,000 people in Canada who claim Caribbean origins or descent, they do not automatically constitute a Caribbean 'community' or a Caribbean diaspora. The Caribbean diaspora in Canada, often confused with something called a "black diaspora," is smaller, more homogeneous in class terms, more racialized and more concentrated in certain neighborhoods. Because of the advantages that accrue to capital from having a pliable workforce that will eagerly accept low wages and less than ideal working conditions, it is important to have a diaspora to which capital can go in times of labor need; at the same time, given their powerlessness, the flexibility of such a workforce guarantees that such workers can be easily dismissed during economic downswings. In all of this "race," racism and racialization play a key role, and came to a head when community leaders and parents were successful in launching a black-focused school in Toronto. At the end of the day, however, the class affiliation of members of the diaspora is clearly distinct from that of the more economically successful and occupationally mobile Caribbean-Canadians, whose social class, educational and residential locations separate them from their diasporic countrymen and countrywomen.

**JEL Codes:** P16

**Key Words:** political economy of race; social class; racialization; diaspora

## INTRODUCTION

In broad strokes, this article adopts a political economy approach to discussing the related phenomena of immigration, assimilation and accommodation in Canada, and focuses on the debate over a politics and economics of liberation that pit "race" against class. The approach is political in that it understands these processes as tied to differential power considerations and struggles for autonomy, whether individually or as groups, and it is economic in that the reasons behind immigration are largely driven by peoples' decisions to better themselves materially in the areas of employment, education, housing and general well-being. The political economy approach adopted here deals with the historical and contemporary processes of Caribbean migration to Canada, the differential acceptance of the latter, the establishment of a Caribbean diaspora in Canada, and the ways in which politics and economics condition the political and economic shape and content of that diaspora.

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As a capitalist society and economy, both the government of Canada and its various economic institutions are most keen to secure a cheap and pliable work force—one that is sufficiently desperate to work for low wages, even under conditions that are not optimal. The twin notions of “race” and ethnicity are undeniable when seeking to explain the experiences of many Caribbean immigrants, who attempt to negotiate the complex processes of assimilation and accommodation to the wider society. As a society that comprises mainly white Europeans, it is no great shock to discover Canada is also a racist society (Satzewich, 1991; Henry, 1994; Henry and Tator, 2000; Satzewich and Liodakis, 2007; Cahis, 2005; James, 2010) in which black people or people of color have historically been disadvantaged. But while prejudice and discrimination may be understood as personal preferences of individual Canadians, there is also a more structural appreciation of these phenomena as they operate in the society at large.

As an economic system based on competition for cheap labor, raw materials, and access to markets, producers are locked in a life and death struggle that often minimizes the importance of the human factor as testified to by the historical exploits of capital (African slavery, East Indian and Asian indentureship, child labor, legal and illegal migrant labor, sweat shop labor, and so on). I focus on the first of these: cheap labor. As one of the surest means of gaining the upper hand in competition is for owners to be able to secure a cheap labor force, and given in analyzing the political economy of social inequality under capitalism “race” is a reliable means of cheapening labor (Allahar & Côté, 1998), the factors of “race” and ethnicity will be singled out for attention.

For economic reasons tied to histories of colonialism, slavery, indentureship, capitalism, imperialism, and today, globalization, many modern, dependent-capitalist Caribbean countries find themselves struggling to control their own national resources, while also having to deal with the scars of empire: class inequality, personal and institutional racism, a cultural inferiority complex, a sense of statist inefficacy, and corruption at various levels of government (Dupuy, 1991, p. 75; Allahar, 2004a, p. 113). It is in this context Caribbean migration to Canada may be understood. Just as slavery and indentureship are examples of how “race” was used to cheapen labor in the colonial era, the racial legacies of Empire contribute today to the lived immigrant reality in the countries of advanced capitalism, where “race,” ethnicity and national origin continue to

be used as social markers that target Caribbean immigrants as cheap, pliable and expendable labor. This speaks to the notion of the split labor market wherein racism divides the working class into better-paid (white) and poorly-paid (black) sectors (Bonacich, 1972 and 1976; Bonacich and Modell, 1980; Allahaar, 1996).

However, while it is possible to speak of Caribbean immigrants as “black” or “of color,” it is not as easy to essentialize them as belonging to the same class. So in the Canadian context, the political economy of immigration and assimilation has differential impacts on working-class Caribbean immigrants and their middle-class regional compatriots. And this is where the present essay seeks to problematize the idea of the diaspora as it speaks to Canada’s Caribbean population. Not all Caribbean people in Canada will belong to the diaspora. To flesh out this claim I examine the Black-Focused School in Toronto as an empirical example of a racialized immigrant group that fights back against racism and marginalization in an attempt to secure a positive, future space for their children and grandchildren. I make a case for the Caribbean diaspora as a living, breathing, thinking and moving entity, one with a reflexive sense of itself and a geographic location in neighborhoods that are homogeneous in class terms.

In the Caribbean diaspora, members have shared concerns for the welfare of their children and grandchildren, and recognize education as a means to mobility in an advanced capitalist country. When diasporic community leaders and parents decided the existing school system was not serving their children adequately, they moved to establish the Black-Focused School as a space in which their children could get a proper education, develop an appreciation of their history, and cultivate a healthy sense of self-respect. But any such struggle following strict race lines is fated to failure, for class solidarity across “race” is the best guarantee against wider institutional racism, exploitation and marginalization. Given the history of “race” and racism in colonial and post-colonial societies, and owing to the racialization of popular consciousness of many Caribbean peoples both in the Caribbean and in Canada, the class appeal is not easily accepted by members of the diasporic community in question, especially where there are ethnic entrepreneurs who actively stir up “race” consciousness and who stand to gain from the racialization of peoples’ understandings of their daily situations.

Canada is a liberal democratic, capitalist country in which social inequality is portrayed as normal and natural, but at the same time the dominant institutions cannot be too blatant in the exclusion and denial of opportunities to some immigrants while enhancing those of others. The twin ideologies of liberalism and individualism are invoked and come to play a key role in controlling the perceptions of the public, so the official Canadian policy of multiculturalism was devised to tell immigrants that they too were equal parts of the society. But as a capitalist society where social inequality is a structural feature of the wider economy and polity, and also as a society in which systemic racism is an acknowledged reality, the ideology of multiculturalism clashes with the lived racism experienced by working-class immigrants of color, and it is in this context that leaders of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada have based calls for the creation of a Black-Focused School. This is where the political economy approach to social inequality, specifically inequalities of "race" and class, is paired with the political economy of assimilation and accommodation to explain the realities of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada. The question to be decided is whether the "race"-based solution is preferred over one that privileges "class." So let us specify the Caribbean in question.

## **THE CARIBBEAN CONNECTION**

Depending on one's definition, the Caribbean includes anywhere between twenty-something to fifty-something independent and semi-independent countries that include Haiti, the poorest country of the western hemisphere, and Barbados and The Bahamas, two relatively prosperous countries. It includes resource-rich (oil and natural gas) Trinidad, and resource-poor Cayenne (French Guyana) and Montserrat. In-between one could find an array of mono-crop, single resource, economically dependent countries, which are generally described as being in the Third World, or more euphemistically, in the "developing world." Most rely on natural endowments of sun, sea and sand to promote North American and Western European tourism as the main economic and social drivers, but that too comes with high social, cultural and economic costs.

The hotels, the airlines that transport the tourists, the food and drinks consumed, car rental companies, entertainment and clothing businesses, and an endless variety of

related amenities are all owned by Canadians and other foreign interests.<sup>1</sup> Canada is the biggest supplier of tourists to Cuba, and its banks (TD, Royal Bank, Scotia Bank) and mortgage and insurance companies (Manulife, Sun Life, Crown Life, RBC Life), are very dominant in the daily financial lives of most Caribbean people. Along with this, Canadians cannot ignore historic links between Canada and the Caribbean that pre-date the arrival of significant numbers of Caribbean peoples to Canada. Canada and the Caribbean share a long history of (unequal) commercial and economic exchange (rum for salted cod fish), political and military collaboration, and friendly cultural and personal contact. Many current and former Caribbean leaders were educated at Canadian universities, and there are Canadian professors and students who can be found on the campuses of various Caribbean universities, just as there are many first and later generation Caribbean professors and students who are teaching and learning at Canadian universities. In all of this, what remains is that Canada has long romanticized and exoticized the Caribbean, and the Caribbean has reciprocated by entertaining unrealistically over-inflated expectations of Canada. What follows, then, is an assessment of what happens when these two (Caribbean and Canada) come together.

### **CARIBBEAN-CANADIANS: A DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE<sup>2</sup>**

According to the most recent Canadian Census (2001), Canadians of Caribbean-origin represent almost 2% of the overall population. In raw numbers, this was somewhere slightly over half a million (503,800), making this population, as a sub-set of non-European immigrants in Canada, second only to the South Asian-Canadian community, which registered 963,200 members. And whereas the overall Canadian population grew by only 4% between 1996-2001, the Caribbean-Canadian population grew by almost 3

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<sup>1</sup> This does not include tourist demands for sex, illegal drugs, black market items (endangered animals, black coral, etc.) and related activities that impact the local community, socially and economically.

<sup>2</sup> All the data in this section are taken from *The Caribbean Community in Canada*. Statistics Canada reports that were last modified on July 16, 2007. For details on all statistics reported see <http://74.125.95.132/search?q=cache:http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-621-x/2007007/t/4123240-eng.htm>. Retrieved on 10/26/2009.

times that number at 11% (Statistics Canada 2007). Of the groups reported on in the 2001 census the most numerous were Jamaicans (42%) followed by Haitians (16%), and West Indians (12%). Guyanese and Trinidadians were both at 10%, while 5% of respondents said they were Barbadians. Of those claiming to be Caribbean-Canadian, 55% were foreign-born, and of those the majority (28%) confirmed they had been living in Canada for 10 years, while 25% percent had arrived in Canada between 1981-1990, and only 16% had come in the 1960s and earlier.

Of Caribbean-Canadians, the overwhelming majority live in the provinces of Ontario (69%) and Quebec (22%). The Caribbean community in Canada is relatively young with 27% of them under age 15, while the corresponding percentage for the overall population was a mere 19%. In this group, women outnumber men by a slight margin of 54% to 51%, and most Caribbean-Canadians are conversant in either of the official languages: English (76%) and French (9%), while 15% reported they were bilingual. As an overall population Caribbean-Canadians are overwhelmingly Christian and are less keen on marriage, 37% vs. 50% for the national average, but at the same time only 6% live in common law arrangements, compared to 10% for the rest of the population.

On educational matters, Caribbean-Canadians are a mixed bag. Earlier migrants from the 1960s and 1970s are quite likely to have graduated from high school and often have significant post-secondary educational qualifications (Plaza, 2004, pp. 99-102), and even though less likely than other Canadians to hold a university degree (12% vs. 15%), they are more likely to hold a community college diploma (20% vs. 15%). It is particularly telling that while 23% of Caribbean-Canadian women hold community college diplomas, compared to just 17% of their female Canadian counterparts, they are nevertheless significantly more likely to be low income earners: 27.9% were low income earners compared to all other women in Canada who stand at 17.7% of the low earners. While young Caribbean-Canadians are considerably more likely than other young Canadians to be attending school (68% vs. 57%), they are more likely to be unemployed, and if employed, more likely to earn lower incomes (Table 1).

As popular racist sentiment holds certain immigrant ethnic groups, particularly Caribbeans, are more likely to be on welfare, it is important to note census statistics do not bear this out. Table 2 shows 66% of Caribbean-Canadians were employed, while

the figure for all Canadians was 62%, and Table 3 reveals 11% of the income of Caribbean-Canadians is derived from government transfer programs, but the figure is slightly higher for all Canadians (12%). While 82% of Caribbean-Canadians claimed they feel a strong sense of belonging to Canada, 41% of this group also reported:

They had experienced discrimination or unfair treatment based on their ethnicity, race, religion, language or accent in the past five years, or since they arrived in Canada. As well, 89% of those who had experienced discrimination said that they felt it was based on their race or skin colour (Statistics Canada. *The Caribbean Community in Canada*, p. 7).

**Table 1**  
**Summary Table: Caribbean-Canadians Compared to the Total Population**

	Caribbean origin			Canada Total Population		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
Total population in thousands	233	271.1	504	14564	15075	29639
% change 1996-2001	11.4	11.2	11.3	3.7	4.1	3.9
% immigrant	51.2	57.9	54.8	18	18.7	18.4
% citizens	86.9	87.2	87.1	94.9	94.5	94.7
Language						
% speak English/French	99.7	99.4	99.6	98.8	98.2	98.4
% speak non-official language at home	3.1	3.4	3.3	9.6	9.9	9.7
Age Distribution						
% less than 15 years	29.3	24.8	26.9	20.2	18.6	19.4
% aged 25-44	30.1	32.2	31.2	30.4	30.6	30.5
% aged 65+	4.6	6.4	5.6	10.9	13.4	12.2
Family Status						
% lone parents	3.6	22.3	13.9	2.1	8.7	5.5
% living alone	9.7	10.4	10	11.3	13.7	12.5
% seniors living alone	17.2	27	23.2	16.8	38.3	28.9
Education, Employment and Income						
% with university degree	12.3	11.7	12	16	14.9	15.4
% employed	69.5	63.8	66.4	67.2	56.1	61.5
unemployment rate	9.1	9.5	9.3	7.6	7.2	7.4
% with low income	23.7	27.9	26	14.7	17.7	16.2

Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Canada. Date modified: 2007/08/16.

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of the Population Employed: by Age Group and Sex, 2001**

	Caribbean Community			Total Canadian Population		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
age group	Percentages					
15-24	47.2	51.4	49.3	56.1	55.6	55.9
25-44	84.9	76.7	80.4	85.6	75.2	80.3
45-64	79.6	70.9	74.6	74.8	60.8	67.7
65 & over	14.7	6.2	9.5	13	4.8	8.4
Total	69.5	63.8	66.4	67.2	56.1	61.5

Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Canada. Date modified: 2007/08/16.

**Table 3**  
**Average Incomes of the Caribbean Community and Overall Canadian Population: by Age Group and Sex, 2000**

	Caribbean Community			Total Canadian Population		
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total
age group	Dollars					
15-24	9635	9197	9407	11273	9046	10182
25-44	33531	26119	29444	40450	26306	33308
45-64	39067	27435	32502	46955	26767	37026
65 & over	26070	17745	20944	30775	19461	24437
Total	29840	22842	25959	36865	22885	29769

Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Canada. Date modified: 2007/08/16.

To the extent that educational attainment and employment are connected (Table 1), we may see where the above claims of discrimination and racism are not entirely unfounded. For whereas both men and women in the Caribbean community were more likely than their Canadian counterparts to be employed, their employment is notably in low status areas that are notorious for low pay and high alienation (Plaza, 2004, pp.



100-101). Indeed, Vic Satzewich focuses on the contributions of Caribbean women who work as household domestics and men who work as seasonal agricultural workers as among the most powerless and wretchedly-paid in the country (1991, pp. 129-180). Further, in the areas of health care and manufacturing, the 2001 census reported that 9% of Caribbean-Canadians were employed in these areas while the figure for other Canadians taken as a whole was a mere 5%. And their comparatively high levels of educational achievement notwithstanding, Caribbean-Canadians are also strikingly under-represented in management jobs (6% vs. 10% of the overall population). Controlling for age, and again, their higher school enrolment figures aside, 19% of young Caribbean-Canadians between the ages of 15-24 were unemployed compared to 14% of all young Canadians.

## **DEFINING DIASPORA**

To begin to discuss the Caribbean diaspora in Canada, operational definitions of key terms are important. And to contextualize the point of departure of my argument I will venture the concern with diasporas today has grown in direct response to “globalization” and its displacing of thousands of traditional communities of people worldwide. Understood very generally as a “home away from home,” a diaspora is constituted by peoples who migrated from their countries or places of origin either voluntarily, in search of economic opportunities, or involuntarily, as in the case of refugees, who leave home principally for political reasons, or young children who have no choice but to accompany their parents. But whether dealing with economic migrants or political refugees, we cannot overlook the fact that often the people in question are fleeing economic hardships that stem from neoliberalism and its policies that ravage whole communities, and political repression exercised by tyrants and dictators that leading Western countries such as Canada are often responsible for creating and maintaining.

My first task is to define precisely what I mean by “the Caribbean,” and more importantly, what I understand by the term “diaspora.” This is not an uncomplicated notion, and it assumes great importance given the key role immigrant communities or

neighborhoods and their ethno-national diasporas have come to play in contemporary international relations; specifically in the area of multiculturalism where Canada is a world leader. We can say at the outset the Caribbean community in Canada is not really a community; it does not share a common *zeitgeist*, and like any other immigrant population, the Caribbean population in Canada is anything but homogeneous.

To zero in on the Caribbean diaspora, then, and as suggested by its very title, the "Caribbean" can be a geographic location, or in the language of the travel agent, a vacation destination. That destination is understood broadly to include all countries that have at least one shore washed by the waters of the Caribbean Sea. So in broad terms, the Caribbean diaspora has English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, French-speaking and Dutch-speaking components (Allahar, 2005c). We will be focused on the first of these.

Beyond the travel and tourism definition, and because diasporas are also defined by the languages they speak, diasporic linguistic and dialect expressions will reflect times of arrival of various generations as well as distinct countries of origin. Cuban Spanish and Dominican Spanish are different from Madrid Spanish, Haitian Creole French is different from Paris French, Brazilian Portuguese is different from Lisbon Portuguese, not to mention the case of Jamaican English and Canadian English. As living languages are constantly evolving, it goes without saying language or dialect alone is not enough to define a diaspora. Is the French creole-speaking Haitian community in Montréal a Haitian diaspora or a French diaspora twice-removed? It depends on what defines a Haitian and a Frenchman. While France colonized Haiti, while their histories and politics are closely intertwined, and while the roots of their languages are the same, their histories as well as their ethnic, racial and cultural compositions are different. What informs the identity of a black Haitian in Montréal? Is it the homeland of Haiti? The colonial mother called France? The "true" motherland of Africa? Or, will this person discard all of these and assert plainly "I am a Canadian"?

The cultures of Haiti, France, Africa and Canada are different. And while "culture" is a centrally defining feature of any diaspora, language is also commonly understood to be a defining feature of culture. For it is common to think of cultural groups as language groups, of diasporas as speaking a certain language, and hence we uncritically and unadvisedly use a term such as "English-speaking Caribbean diaspora" without having

to problematize the highly differentiated community to which it refers. I raise this issue merely as a caution because, given limitations of space, I am unable to develop this critique. So, I will treat the term as unproblematic and will focus principally on the English-speaking Caribbean diaspora in Canada, recognizing fully that there are many other Caribbean diasporas (Spanish-speaking, French-speaking, Dutch-speaking).

Diasporas are living, moving, breathing, maneuvering and growing entities; constantly in flux and always lying dialectically somewhere between being and becoming. They comprise voluntary and involuntary migrants (refugees); people seeking to escape economic hardship or fleeing political repression; and even young people who have no choice in the decision to migrate, but are simply carried along by their parents. But diasporas also have a temporal dimension and require a critical mass of people. Thus a diaspora may have a set longevity as in the case of the Irish diaspora in Toronto. While Irish Canadians are still there, one does not think of them as belonging to a diaspora. This is where the “temporal” factor becomes relevant, for after a certain period of time elapses members of a given diaspora will tend to blend into the mainstream and move on and out of the diaspora. To survive, the diaspora needs constantly to be replenished with new, unincorporated or unassimilated immigrants.

Given the foregoing from the perspective of the English-speaking Caribbean, is there a Caribbean diaspora or, is it really a creolized African/Indian/Chinese/Syrian/European diaspora *twice removed*? For, depending on the answer, the Caribbean diaspora in Canada may not exist. In philosophical terms, which myths of descent and belonging serve most to animate the identities of those who comprise diasporic communities? In the modern era where the politics of identity have captured the world stage, the presence of African-descended actors on that world stage has served to define both the English-speaking Caribbean and its diaspora (in Canada and elsewhere) as a “black” space. In the process the voices of the Indian, Chinese, European and Syrian minorities in both the Caribbean and its diasporas, minorities that have lived for many generations in the Caribbean, are either silenced or erased (Trotman 1991:393-394).

Back in the Caribbean where the more visibly African-descended population is numerically in the majority, other voices are drowned out; and this is so even though the

process of creolization has served to render these supposed African, Asian and European origins culturally anachronistic. When we speak of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada, it is the black ethnic and cultural expression of that community that is most likely conjured up in people's minds (Hall, 1994, p. 393; Woodall, 2007, p. 121). If the notion of a "Caribbean diaspora" is difficult to define and defend, just think of the even greater challenge presented when one speaks uncritically of the "black" community or the "black" diaspora in Canada.

When one migrates and becomes part of a diaspora, two identity processes are at work. The first is the identity one is *assigned* by the mainstream or host society, and the second is the identity one *asserts* for oneself (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998, pp. 81-85), and, depending on the power forces at play, one may overshadow the other. Presuming the Caribbean immigrant is able to assert his or her identity, which is it? Is it a national identity (we are Jamaicans or Barbadians), an ethnic identity (we are African-Trinidadians and Indo-Guyanese), a linguistic identity (we are English-speaking), a more explicitly political identity (we are Third World or ex-colonial subjects), or a regional identity (we are all West Indians)? The ethnic and so-called racial element in diasporic communities or neighborhoods is simultaneously political and "situational" (Plaza, 2006, pp. 207-209) for like other ethnic immigrant groups, second- and third-generation Caribbean youths in particular seek to:

construct their personal and cultural identities instrumentally. They want to be able to choose whichever identity suits them best for particular situations.... Sometimes, it may be more beneficial to be Canadian, while at other times they want the freedom to express their Caribbean identity (Henry, 1994, p. 251).

Who can play the ethnic card, and when does she or he choose to do so? These rhetorical questions speak directly to the political economy of ethno-national and racial identity.

## **DIASPORAS AS CLASSED PHENOMENA**

But though rhetorical, and above all else, we need to separate a "diaspora" from a statistical population aggregate. As in the Marxian terms that identify a *class in itself* and

a *class for itself* (Allahar, 2005a, p. 6), a statistical population aggregate shares little other than the fact that the members are all from a given country, or perhaps from a specific ethnic group in a given county. They have no automatic consciousness of themselves as a unified political body and make no discrete or concerted demands on their host government as such a body. A diaspora, on the other hand, has a certain measure of cultural cohesiveness and solidarity; it has a consciousness of self and may even be said to have a purpose. As we shall see below in the context of the Black-Focused School, it develops social institutions, generates leaders, and may think and act collectively about any number of social issues such as community schools, jobs, police profiling, racism, and safe neighborhoods. More concretely, we may have a Guyanese population in Canada, but not all members of that population will properly belong to the Guyanese diaspora or the Guyanese community; not all will invoke their Guyanese links and explore the advantages that Guyanese social capital may have to offer. For obvious reasons such Guyanese cannot meaningfully be said to belong to the Guyanese diaspora. And in this specific case the question of “unity” or “community” is further compounded by the fact that back in Guyana the two main population groups (the African-descended and the Indian-descended) are heavily racialized by one another and deeply mistrusting of one another. What, then, does this mean for any talk of a Guyanese diaspora in Canada?

This reflection suggests another important feature of a diaspora. To my mind there is a very close connection between diasporic communities and social class. And in the specific context of the Caribbean population in Canada, those from the higher social classes, who are more occupationally and residentially mobile, will be less likely to identify with, or belong to the diaspora. For as post-colonial subjects we must acknowledge that while “the colonial project engendered class divisions in the ranks of the colonized, it has also traditionally provided the native elite with the education, and bi-cultural sophistication to resist colonialism” (Farred, 1996, p. 45). This is also tied to cultural capital and the fact middle- and upper-classes of Caribbean immigrants are better placed to handle challenges of displacement or migration. So I would hypothesize the Guyanese referred to in the above observation, who are not self-identified with the

diasporic community, are likely to be more educated, more affluent, more assimilated and more mobile than those who do self-identify with the Guyanese diaspora proper.

This hypothesis, however, is equally applicable to any class differentiated immigrant community, a point that is compellingly made by Grant Farred in relation to Stuart Hall, the prominent, Jamaican public intellectual, who won a scholarship and moved to Britain in the 1950s and became a leading figure in the New Left movement there. The idea is that due to his accumulated cultural capital, and as a celebrated *middle-class* intellectual and activist, Hall could not quite fit in to the black Caribbean diaspora in Britain: "The place the immigrants were crafting for themselves in the metropolis was, however, substantially different from that of a middle class Kingstonian scholarship boy." For that boy, who was potentially part of two communities, one intellectual and the other diasporic, "was separated by class from the one with which he shared a racial affinity.... Although the Caribbean immigrants were a presence in English life in 1958, they were a community with which Hall could only align in crisis" (1994, p. 39).

Closely related we may say diasporas tend to have clear residential or geographical locations, hence my reference to communities and their neighborhoods, e.g., the Jane-Finch area in Toronto. Speaking of the Caribbean diaspora in England, Stuart Hall points to the development of a "West Indian consciousness" reflected in the "colonisation of certain streets, neighbourhoods, cafes and pubs, the growth of revivalist churches" (Hall, 1978, p. 351) and so on. In Canada, many middle-class Trinidadian-, Jamaican- and Guyanese-Canadians etc., will participate in spectacles such as Caribana and sometimes eat out at a roti or jerk pork restaurant, or attend a calypso or reggae concert. But they do not "live" in, or properly belong to the diaspora; once the meal or the concert is over they return to their ethnically-mixed, middle-class, suburban homes and neighborhoods where their friendship circles, and the values, beliefs and attitudes attending their daily round of activities are decidedly non-Caribbean. They are better seen as event-specific Caribbean people, whose recollections of their pasts are heavily informed by a nostalgic sense of "home," who are educationally, occupationally, financially, residentially and culturally well on the way to being assimilated.

Those who belong properly to the diaspora, on the other hand, will have on-going, face-to-face contact with fellow Caribbeans, will meet them at the bus stop and at work,

will see one another while walking the streets of the neighborhood, at church or while grocery shopping, will be part of Caribbean community organizing, whether for social or political events, and will be more likely in close touch with the latest stories as they develop “back home.” As Carl James noted, the term *diaspora* “implies the retention of an identity associated with the homeland in some way” (2010, p. 284). For those who are organically linked to the diaspora, the debate around the “need” for black focused schools or the charges of “police racial profiling” of black Caribbean youth will be more heated than one might encounter in the homes of their mobile, middle-class suburban compatriots, whose children attend more mainstream schools, and who, even if they are “black,” are far less likely to be the targets of racial profiling.

Of those who migrate, then, who is most likely to become part of a diaspora and who is not? As I have suggested, and speaking in broad strokes of the brush, it is a matter of class and “class identity.” Given the political economy of social inequality and the racial divisions characterizing Caribbean societies, where color and “race” were often safe proxy indicators of social class (Mintz, 1981, p. 6; Lewis, 1985, p. 237), it is possible to speak of a black, English-speaking Caribbean diaspora made up principally of *working-class*, Caribbean-Canadians. This does not mean that all working-class black, Caribbean-Canadians must live in the areas that are designated as “diasporic neighborhoods,” but rather it speaks broadly to tendencies and observable patterns. For the diasporic community is a crucial site where social capital networks are either formed or activated. When that community becomes “institutionally complete” (Breton, 1964) it is often more culturally exclusive and mutually self-interacting, and is seen to develop its own ethnic groceries, ethnic churches, ethnic lawyers and immigration consultants, ethnic real estate and travel agents, ethnic newspapers where word-of-mouth is a great source of information about jobs, schools, baby sitters, available housing and so on.

Diasporic communities become veritable “homes away from home” and give members a sense of security and belonging that is very important to those who feel most vulnerable in a social setting that appears to lock them out. This is why they seek to recreate “home” in the cultural sense and celebrate familiar foods, accents, music, dances and styles of dress, as well as behaviors, attitudes, values, customs and the

like. In Canada, unable to defend themselves as effectively and as efficiently as their better educated middle-class compatriots, who possess greater cultural capital and who can negotiate their ways in the new society with greater ease, the working- and lower-class members of the diaspora seek strength in numbers and feel reassured when familiarity of home sights, home sounds, home voices and home smells tell them all is ok. Venturing out of the familiar confines of the diasporic community is always a gamble. It runs the risk of being culturally exposed, of being politically disarmed, of being socially rejected, of being physically threatened.

Because occupational mobility<sup>3</sup> draws later generations away from the diaspora, it is not uncommon to find that diasporic communities are most often stable working-class communities. So, by the second and third generations, diasporic English-speaking Caribbean people in Canada may be expected to drift away from the diasporic neighborhoods, and this is where the temporal dimension of diasporic living re-emerges, for by the second, and especially the third and later generations, when grandchildren and grandparents don't share the same ideas of what is culturally and historically real or important, when intermarriage with the mainstream occurs, the ties that bind a diasporic community together begin to become undone. This is also when occupationally mobile diasporic individuals can begin to leave behind the racial identities formed in the colonial and post-colonial contexts and may start to embrace the different opportunity structures afforded by metropolitan living. Thus, Woodall equates the Caribbean community in Canada with what she (and many others) sloppily calls in some places the "Black Diaspora" (2007, p. 124), and in others, the "black community" and writes:

Within the black community there are fundamentally two social classes in Canada: the middle and the lower classes. There is a direct correlation between cultural identity and social class. The middle class experiences a sense of greater incorporation into Canadian culture than the lower class; consequently, cultural identity constituted by race and a sense of "back home" is most under erasure for the black middle class (Woodall, 2007, pp. 121-122).

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<sup>3</sup> Class mobility in a capitalist society is not as common as one may think. Instead, casual observers and commentators often confuse occupational mobility *within* the working class, for example, with class mobility *out of* that class. So in Canada where children of diasporic parents may fare better economically than their parents, this is often measured in quantitative terms such as greater income and material possessions, and not qualitatively in terms of having more control over their jobs, working conditions, life chances and so on, that speak directly to the matter of class (Allahar and Côté, 1998, pp. 47-48).



Because enhanced educational and occupational opportunities are more available in an advanced capitalist country such as Canada, this makes for more open and mobile career options. As the educational achievements and economic mobility of the earlier generations increase, as marriage outside of the group becomes more common, individuals and families are likely to move to more integrated neighborhoods where diasporic sentiments are not as salient or as easily maintained. To survive, community leaders look to new immigrants, most likely of working- and lower-classes, to replenish the ranks, underscoring my point that diasporas are living, moving, breathing and growing entities. If they fail in those recruitment efforts, the diaspora is at risk of dying.

### **IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE DIASPORA**

In the context of the English-speaking Caribbean diaspora membership and belonging relate to the matter of “identity politics” (James and Shadd, 2001, p. 167; James, 2010, pp. 46-91) for what I am suggesting is along with all else that I have said, diasporas are also seen to have racial identities, and, as such, a diasporic identity is easily related to the notion of “soft primordialism” (Allahar, 1994, pp. 22-25), where a socially constructed, imagined cultural sense of belonging can assume the strength of blood ties and can come to inform political action. So, finding themselves in competitive situations where resources are scarce (jobs, housing, education, finances), diasporic Caribbean individuals could choose to “play the race card” if they think it would enhance their chances of getting a better shot at sharing in social goods. This point is wonderfully exemplified by Stuart Hall, who reflects on his childhood in Jamaica and speaks of the socially-manufactured nature of Jamaicans’ Africanness and the moment when they came to understand themselves in primordial African terms:

When I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s as a child in Kingston ... although almost everyone around me was some shade of brown or black (Africa speaks!), I never once heard a single person refer to themselves (sic) or to others as, in some way, or as having been at some time in the past, “African.” It was only in the 1970s that this Afro-Caribbean identity became historically available to the great majority of Jamaican people, at home and abroad. In this historic moment, Jamaicans discovered themselves to be “black” just as, in the same moment, they discovered themselves to be the sons and daughters of “slavery” (Hall, 1994, p. 398).

Primordial identity could be seen as "situational" and once in the hands of ethnic entrepreneurs (Allahar, 2004b) can have a decided impact on the politics of race as struggles among various diasporic communities over scarce resources become heated, and such identity can even affect the pace with which individual members of a diasporic community are assimilated into the mainstream of the host society. Woodall writes:

From the recognition of the instrumentality of cultural identity, that is, that cultural identity can be selected and put aside at will, the path is also opened *to close off the option of return*. Cultural identity in the black diaspora could become a one-way street, leading either to, or away from full incorporation of Canadian white cultural identity (Woodall, 2007, p. 124; my emphasis).

The reference to "closing off the option of return" is most pertinent to the sentiment conveyed in the powerfully suggestive title of Grant Farred's essay on the nature of immigrant nostalgia for the past, "You can go home again, you just can't stay" (1996).

This means the diasporic individual who closes off that option, and who is also not occupationally and residentially mobile, is likely to be confined to living the diasporic reality for a long time. And since the class stratified nature of Canada's capitalist society renders class mobility fairly limited, Caribbean blacks who are working-class are more likely than other Caribbeans to be part of the diaspora. As Robin Cohen noted:

A member's adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background (1997, p. ix).

This does not mean other ethnic Caribbeans are fluidly mobile and assimilated; rather, it suggests since the blacks are seen to define (constitute) the Caribbean diaspora in Canada, it is the blacks who are most visible and who come most readily to mind when we invoke "the Caribbean diaspora." Added to this, the racialization of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada (and elsewhere) gives a certain measure of power to the "blacks" in that community *vis-a-vis* the Indians, Chinese, Portuguese and other Caribbeans, to define the community. It is the blacks' definition of music, of dance, of food, of dress, of family, of politics and so on, that comes most commonly to represent the community in the eyes of both Caribbean insiders and non-Caribbean outsiders.

## **DIFFERENTIAL INCORPORATION**

The above considerations tie directly to questions of identity and belonging as they touch the Caribbean person in Canada. In both political economy and sociology, it addresses the “differential incorporation” of Caribbeans in Canadian economy and society, and that incorporation can take one of two forms: (a) assimilation, or (b) accommodation. Following Raymond Breton et al., “Incorporation in the larger society entails involvement in institutions, the construction of social ties, participation in socio-cultural activities, and, most important, equal access to the rewards that the economic and political system generate and distribute” (1990, p. 7). There are several factors that determine the pace at which different immigrant groups will assimilate or accommodate into the new society. In any discussion of immigrants and diasporas, and the Caribbeans in Canada are no exception, these are key concepts and must be defined.

To begin, then, “assimilation” presumes that one loses one’s cultural distinctiveness and, through a process of social, cultural, political and even biological blending, one becomes an undistinguishable fellow member of the mainstream. As may be imagined, among those who favor assimilation the process will be easier for the ones whose physical and phenotypical features most resemble the mainstream, so by the second and especially the third and later generations, as language and slang are acquired and as accents meld, they could easily “pass” without detection. On the other hand, for those who are physically different, e.g., blacks, Chinese, Indians, and who wish to assimilate and become phenotypically invisible, the challenges are greater and will take far longer to overcome (Plaza, 2006, p. 226). Speaking of Caribbean cultural diasporas Robin Cohen says it best when he notes:

Unlike (say) the case of Jews or Armenians, where superficial disappearance is possible in Europe and North America if exogamy occurs, in the case of those of African descent skin colour normally remains a marker for two, three or more generations – despite exogamy” (Cohen, 1997, p. 144).

Among Caribbean immigrants to Canada those who favor assimilation are the ones whose social class and corresponding social capital will permit them to move away from the diaspora and facilitate the formation of social alliances that enable an escape from

what they see as “the stigma” of being Caribbean. In the Caribbean-Canadian context, there is no better example of this malady than someone like Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian, Neil Bissoondath (1994), who has nothing but disdain for his Caribbean origins, and who, like his famous uncle, Vidia Naipaul, writes with total scorn about the Caribbean land (Trinidad) that nurtured them from birth and that continues to provide the central focus of their literary fiction. Desperately seeking acceptance by the white mainstream in Canada or England, these two are unmistakable in their self-hate and denial of their ethnic selves, and are most desirous of escaping the stigma referred to above.

Accommodation, on the other hand, has to do with the extent to which an immigrant group is able to make a “home” for themselves in the new land without necessarily losing their cultural distinctiveness. This suggests “accommodation” is different from “assimilation,” and yields a different politics of being. In Canada, the Caribbean diaspora is a good case in point. Where they are able, members of the diaspora are often likely to pursue development of parallel institutions that minimize the need to interact with the mainstream. This is seen in the creation of ethnic neighborhoods with ethnic groceries that offer Caribbean fare; Caribbean restaurants; Caribbean barber shops and beauty salons; individuals who brand and market themselves as Caribbean real estate agents; consultants who offer legal services specifically adapted to needs of the Caribbean community; Caribbean churches that cater to a Caribbean clientele; and Caribbean ethnic entrepreneurs, who have gone to the point of successfully establishing so-called “black focused” schools (discussed below). Those who pursue integration via accommodation are keen to retain their culture and not necessarily to become blended or assimilated; theirs is a hyphenated Caribbean-Canadian, as opposed to a straight Canadian, identity. They are the greatest champions of Canadian multicultural policy, which permits them to retain the hyphen and their cultural distinctiveness while negotiating their lives in Canada; they can have their cake and eat it!

What does this mean for the nature and composition of the Caribbean diaspora and the incorporation of Caribbeans in Canada? Following Milton Gordon we know integration is a two-way street: “Two sets of ethnic boundaries are involved: those of the established groups in society and those of the groups that are seeking full membership and equal participation in it” (1964, p. 8). In playing out the two-way drama of

incorporation the main elements on either side are: (a) socio-cultural baggage immigrants bring with them, and (b) mainstream racism and exclusionary practices. As Dwaine Plaza has charged, the high incidence of poverty among Caribbean-origin families may be explained by “systemic and institutional barriers of racism” that are undeniable (2004, p. 98), confirming the earlier observation of Frances Henry:

some West Indian cultural behaviours and values hinder integration in the Canadian context and ... create barriers to total incorporation. At the same time, however, the boundaries established by the dominant group in Canadian society also prevent successful incorporation ... they deny equal access to the goods and resources of society (1994, p. 15).

In this view, the low rate of incorporation among Caribbeans in Canada is due to two factors: (a) “the maintenance of cultural patterns that impede mobility in Canada” (ibid), for it is felt that Canada’s *vertical mosaic* did not quite envision the types of immigrant groups with the types of cultural baggage that today characterize the bulk of new Canadians, and (b) the systemic racism ingrained in the dominant economic, political, educational etc., institutions that keeps them out.

In an instructively comparative sense, the findings of Mary Waters (2000) go counter to the idea ethnic and cultural retentions retard incorporation into the new society. In Canada incorporation is facilitated when immigrants and their second generation offspring assimilate and shed their “old ways” to adopt modern Canadian values, beliefs and attitudes, Waters studied Jamaicans, Trinidadians, Barbadians and Guyanese immigrants in New York and discovered the opposite was the case. For given the long history of slavery in the US and the subsequent racialization of blacks and continuing institutional racism against them, American blacks were stigmatized as “bad blacks” in comparison to Caribbean blacks who were seen as “good blacks,” who valued education, hard work and discipline, who emphasized strong parenting and respect for elders etc., in the home, and who exhibited deference to authority.

As a result Caribbean blacks in New York faced less discrimination than their U.S. counterparts and generally fared better in economic and occupational terms. By the second generation, however, as children of immigrants, especially those of lower social classes, assimilate and develop social networks and peer relations with non-immigrant,

American-born children, school performance suffered, which later impacted jobs, income and other socio-economic endeavors. In other words, they came to “resemble” the American-born blacks. Making the link with Canada, and speaking of the children of the diaspora, Satzewich and Liodakis affirm:

immigrant offspring of Caribbean descent may reject their parents' culture, which may emphasise education and work as mobility mechanisms; they tend to be absorbed into the inner-city racialized underclass and eventually end up living in poverty (Satzewich and Liodakis, 2007, p. 116).

To Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993) this downward slide by second and later generations of immigrant children is called “segmented” or “truncated” assimilation.

What this leaves is the second, above-noted element impeding incorporation: *racism*. An undeniable factor associated with the Caribbean presence in Canada concerns the reality of prejudice, discrimination and racism against them. Henry minces no words when she says “Racism is the single most important issue that members of this group encounter” and speaking directly to Breton et al. (1990) above, and their definition of incorporation, she adds “...people of Caribbean origin face employment, housing, and other forms of racial discrimination” (1994, p. 14, p. 15). Owing to systemic and widespread existence of racism, members of lower social classes are most vulnerable, and it is from the ranks of those classes the diaspora tends to draw the bulk of its membership since they are more likely to pursue the “accommodation” promised by multicultural policies and practices over “assimilation.” Sociologists observe, along with standard difficulties accompanying lower-class living in Canada's capitalistic society and economy, there are also anti-social issues of blue-collar crime, drugs, violence, racial profiling and family breakdown faced by individuals and families, and when a diasporic community is “raced” and “classed,” the challenges members face are all the more pressing. Invoking class differences, “some segments of the Caribbean community do not feel that they can subscribe to the perceived values of mainstream Canadian society nor participate in it. Moreover they feel equally alienated from the middle-class values and behaviors of their own ethnic community” (Henry, 1994, pp. 17-18).

Let us now examine one empirical feature of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada—one bringing together the issues of “race,” class and the political economy of incorporation:

the Black-Focused School, which is a defensive reaction to the systemic racism faced by diasporic members of the Caribbean community. The reaction is driven by certain ethnic entrepreneurs who have come forward to proffer solutions to the exclusion and marginalization of Caribbean youth, most of whom are seen to be black, and who live in the diaspora. And one of the solutions debated and implemented is the “black-focused school,” first pioneered 23 years ago in Toronto under the name “Afro-Caribbean Alternative Secondary School” (Wallace, 2009). Arguing Caribbean (sometimes referred to as “black”) youths<sup>4</sup> continue to be unfairly served by existing school curricula, parents and leaders of the community have renewed demands for the creation of such a school, which is expected to serve as a counter to the flawed Eurocentric curriculum that minimizes and diminishes “black” history and “black” accomplishments, ignores “black” role models, and leads “black” youth to develop low self-esteem and a general sense of inefficacy. But in assessing the debate that surrounds the establishment of the Black-Focused School, we must ask the key question of political economy: how are the *racing* and *classing* of Canada’s Caribbean diaspora useful to the wider economy and society?

## **BLACK-FOCUSED SCHOOL**

As many Caribbean and other black community leaders in Toronto charge that racism and the exclusive curriculum cause black students to drop out of school, one solution they have proffered is the creation of black-focused schools to meet the educational and emotional needs of black students, at least 55% of whom are Caribbean-born (Sibonney, 2007),<sup>5</sup> not to mention those born in the diaspora to Caribbean parents. One such leader, an executive officer for student and community equity in the Toronto School Board, asserted: “Racism does exist in society and therefore it will reflect itself within the school and the school system,” and this officer (Lloyd McKell) went on to add: “It matters to students if they see teachers that look like

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<sup>4</sup> In the Canadian public’s mind the Caribbean is generally cast as a “black” space, so the main social institutions generally treat the categories “Caribbean youth” and “black youth” as interchangeable.

<sup>5</sup> This author notes figures from the Toronto public school board for 2005-06 show 55 percent of Grade 10 students born in the English-speaking Caribbean and 32 percent born in Eastern Africa are at risk of dropping out because they have not completed enough credits to graduate on time.

them and they see a curriculum that reflects their own experiences” (quoted Robinson, 2007). The concern with founding an Afrocentric or black-focused school system is rooted in the claim Canadian society, in this specific case, Toronto society, is racist.<sup>6</sup> It does not treat blacks (as well as Natives and other visible minorities) equally, it views black children as future cheap labor, and the school system is used to prepare black youth psychologically and emotionally for menial and low paying jobs. In the words of Gregory Crichlow:

Poor black performance in school is a consequence of poor black performance in life. Canada is largely to blame, since the nation decided in the 1970s to limit the number of Caribbean students in favour of cheap [imported Caribbean] labour. Some of the cheap labour who arrived was considered trash even back in the Caribbean (as upper-class Caribbeans will attest – in private) and there is little cultural influence compelling them to change their violent, non-academic ways here (Crichlow, 2008).

This attempt at an objective or analytical assessment of the situation was drowned out by more emotional contributions to the debate as clearly captured by one member of the public who attended a meeting to discuss the establishment of such a school, and who felt it a necessary and long-overdue change:

Let's be real and honest here, the attitudes of some racists are that black kids are stupid, lazy, and lacking discipline. It is obvious to me the issues some black children are encountering go deeper and deal with the psychological [problems] such as alienation, hopelessness, worthlessness, and despair. (<http://orvilleloydouglas.wordpress.com/2008/01/30/its-official-toronto-board-of-education-agrees-to-open-black-focus-school/>).

Making the case the experience of black students is unique, she discusses those who will make comparative statements and point out:

the Asians and the white kids are adjusting and not having problems so why are some black kids struggling? The covert racists will use this rationalization as an excuse to maintain the state sponsored racist curriculum that is detrimental to black youth. Toronto has a racial hierarchy, and in this racist hierarchy blacks are demonized consistently in the Canadian media and society compared to Asians. The editors, managing editors, editor in chiefs (sic) of Canadian newspapers are whites and Asians (ibid).

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<sup>6</sup> According to Kingsley Eyiah, who wrote in the *Diasporian News*, the Afrocentric curriculum is needed “in order to make the school's curriculum more effective and relevant to the needs of the students and society at large,” thus, “the Africentric curriculum infuses into the existing Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum, the references and sources of knowledge which come from the experiences, culture and histories of people of African descent in Canada, Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States.”



Within the diaspora, feelings are informed by some dismal statistics, which reveal an over 50% school drop-out rate among black youth, especially male teens. Add that there are few black teachers, principals, vice principals, counselors etc., to be role models for black students. In this way of thinking the solution is to teach students about African history, African heroes, African writers, poets, artists, scientists, African achievements in sport, culture, science and politics, to validate their self-esteem.<sup>7</sup> Schools that are primarily staffed by black teachers, serving black students, and a school curriculum centered around black history and culture are supposed to help a greater number of black students graduate from high school. But do two wrongs make a right? If the existing curriculum is flawed for Eurocentric content, can the establishment of an equally narrow, separate and parallel Afrocentric curriculum be a remedy?

A prominent and outspoken member of Toronto's black community (George Dei) has charged a black-focused school would halt "the problem of black youth disengagement from school," and correct the problem of high drop-out rates among black students. Invoking the claim racism is rampant in the school system, Professor Dei wonders whether poor performance of black youth is due to discrimination against black students, or to the capitalist need for a constant supply of cheap labor. Speaking in support of the idea of such a school, Dei affirms:

A black-focused school challenges the conventional educational environment and stresses the principles of responsibility, interdependence, respect for elders, transparency, and accountability. The school seeks to centre the learner in her or his own culture, history, personal location and spiritual identity (*Toronto Star*, 4 February, 2005).

Without specifying where black history and culture end, and where white history and culture begin, the clear implication is that the black student in the existing Toronto school system cannot relate to the curriculum and finds that his or her culture, history, personal location, identity etc., are undervalued or totally ignored. Professor Dei continues his essentialization of "black":

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<sup>7</sup> The ethnic entrepreneurs who have led the call for the black-focused school system use the concept of "African" uncritically as a synonym for "black," just as some have used "black" as a synonym for "Caribbean." The homogenization of all Africans is thus a feature of this Afrocentric way of thinking.

A black-focused school is organized around communal principles and non-hierarchical structures. In making the totality of black-lived experience relevant to all parts of the curriculum, the school would foster the social, physical, spiritual, and academic development of students. In breaking down the separation between the formal school and the wider community, incorporating the family/home and the workplace, the school offers new and creative ways of thinking about knowledge, and then engaging students to use this knowledge to make positive social changes (quoted in Cahis, 2005).

Inside the diasporic community the debate over the black-focused school is full of emotion, which, as we know, can obscure rational discourse. The emotional response emphasizes "race" and creates the types of conditions out of which ethnic entrepreneurs spring (Allahar, 2004b). It emphasizes the undeniable suffering of blacks at the hands of racists and those who would use their phenotype and national origins as a means for subordinating, marginalizing and exploiting them. Thus, one commentator at a public meeting to debate the black-focused school challenged:

... The Toronto District School Board has a history of being racist against the Toronto black community and this is a fact. ... Black kids are being alienated by racist teachers, racist principals, a system that is a form of systematic racism. Teachers also have their own racist prejudices and biases against the black community. The real culprit is their apathetic attitude to the concerns of the black community. Why should black kids be subjected to reading Shakespeare? Who cares about Shakespeare? (<http://orvilleloydouglas.wordpress.com/2008/01/30/its-official-toronto-board-of-education-agrees-to-open-black-focus-school/>).

Among those who support the idea of the separate, black-focused school, the argument is that an "African-centered alternative school" with black teachers and role models is needed to help black youths stay engaged, and to graduate and become productive members of Canadian society. "The curriculum itself needs to address and look at areas that promote and teach our children about their culture and their history that has never been granted." [http://toronto.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20071109/balck\\_focused\\_schools\\_071109?hub=TorontoHome](http://toronto.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20071109/balck_focused_schools_071109?hub=TorontoHome).

Indeed, many parents were elated when the Toronto District School Board finally approved the idea of the school and one mother commented that: "Seeing themselves [Caribbean or black students] in the curriculum, in their instructors, is what's needed." ("Toronto school board approves black-focused school." *Maclean's Magazine*, Jan 30, 2008). Echoing similar sentiments and arguing against those who felt that such a

system of schooling would promote segregation and not incorporation, another parent observed that “It’s not about segregation. It’s about self-determination. And we can only have that when we are free to learn and free to think for ourselves,” while another stated simply that “young people learn in different places and need to have options” (Raina, 2008). To this one supportive and angry parent would add:

When children have teachers that are anti-racist that actually care about black kids they can achieve. My question is where the hell does the segregation argument emerge from? The term “segregation” is an explosive word. However, aren’t black kids being segregated and alienated anyway by a racist Toronto education system that is anti-black? Why is there such an imbalance in the number of black teachers teaching in the greater Toronto area? (<http://orvilleloydouglas.wordpress.com/2008/01/30/its-official-toronto-board-of-education-agrees-to-open-black-focus-school/>).

Finally on this point, there is the report from Amanda Robinson (2007) that speaks of one black student in Toronto who does not see the possibility for unity among all excluded and marginalized groups, and who “feels black history and culture aren’t being taught properly in school.” Robinson quotes this student as saying “Teachers teach about the Holocaust, they’ll teach about what happened to the Japanese, they’ll teach about the Indians, but they don’t necessarily teach about blacks and slavery.”

Among those who oppose the concept and reality of the black-focused or Afrocentric school, the most common claim was it would lead to segregation. Bearing in mind the controversial decision in the United States some 56 years ago (*Brown vs. the Board of Education*, 1954) to abolish school segregation and the failed philosophy of “separate but equal,” opponents are keen to point out that any form of apartheid in education is disastrous. But it is not clear-cut. For among the opponents there are some misgivings. When one school board trustee became aware in Toronto the requirement for students to have 16 credits by age 16 was not being met by over 50% of the black students,<sup>8</sup> he confessed: “I was brought up in the public system, a very multicultural system, and I think it’s important for young people to interact with other cultures. However, when I see those numbers, there’s a failure, a breach in the system. Something’s gone wrong”

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<sup>8</sup> According to Toronto District School Board figures, by age 16, more than half of black male teens at public schools haven’t earned the 16 credits required by the end of Grade 10. [http://toronto.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20071109/black\\_focused\\_schools\\_071109?hub=TorontoHome](http://toronto.ctv.ca/servlet/an/local/CTVNews/20071109/black_focused_schools_071109?hub=TorontoHome).

(Rushowy, 2007). One mother was less ambivalent: "students of all races should be taught together and that the emphasis should be on helping teachers engage the students." To this another adds: "This black school thing ... it ain't right." ("Toronto school board approves black-focused school." *Maclean's Magazine*, January 30, 2008).

While racism is real and cannot be denied, some are convinced white racism cannot be effectively combatted or eliminated by black racism (Seale, 1970, pp. 71-72; Allahar, 2005b, pp. 141-143). Not all blacks are identical or equal in social class terms, and not all will have the same economic and political interests. As one outspoken commentator who ties calls for the black-focused school to the black working-class has argued:

Blacks of many different origins and backgrounds make up just a fraction of Canada's working class, and it is this working class that must be united to change society. It is only with the participation of working people of all races, ethnicities, and genders that we can build a socialist society based on need and not greed. The struggle for Black liberation is inseparable from the liberation of the working class as a whole (Cahis, 2005).

Even if faced with racism, middle- and upper-class blacks are better equipped socially, educationally, occupationally, etc., than working-class and poor blacks, to deal with it. To combat racism, poverty, marginalization and exploitation, all of which are normal and natural features of a capitalist society and economy, blacks must count on the support of all other conscious ethnic groups and classes, and not be blinded by unfounded emotional appeals to some primordial and supposedly-homogeneous racial community. For outside of the so-called black community, outside of the Caribbean diasporic community, there are black Caribbean and other parents, educators and analysts who acknowledge the problems of racism and exploitation as real.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has addressed the Caribbean-Canadian immigrant population in Canada with a view to understanding racialization as it applies to that population. To do so it problematizes the very idea of the term "diaspora" and suggests that the Caribbean diaspora in Canada is both "raced" and "classed." Because Canada's economy and society are capitalist, any claims to having generalized social equality and level playing

fields within the wider system are more illusory than real. Access to cheap labor is key to the functioning of any competitive capitalist economy, and racism is a tried and tested way of cheapening labor. To this extent members of the Caribbean-Canadian diaspora are seen to play a key role as cheap, flexible and expendable labor that is integral to the overall economic prosperity and stability. In developing the argument concerning the relationship between “racism” as a technique to cheapen labor and have a diaspora that is “classed,” a crucial distinction between the Caribbean *population* and the Caribbean *diaspora*, must be made, as not all Caribbean immigrants belong to the diaspora.

In other words, while there are over 500,000 people in Canada who claim Caribbean origins or descent, they do not automatically constitute a Caribbean “community” or a Caribbean diaspora. The Caribbean diaspora in Canada is smaller, more homogeneous in class terms and more ethnically concentrated in certain neighborhoods. Because of advantages that accrue to capital from having a pliable workforce that eagerly accept low wages and less than ideal working conditions, it is important to have a diaspora to which capital can go in times of labor need; at the same time, given their powerlessness, the flexibility of such a workforce guarantees such workers can be easily dismissed during economic downturns.

Members of the Caribbean diaspora in Canada play a key part as cheap, powerless, expendable labor in the larger picture of Canada’s split labor market that divides workers by race or ethnicity, and they also have a strong presence in the dual labor market that relies heavily on Caribbean migrant workers to fill crucial low cost labor needs (Bonacich, 1976, 1980; Satzewich, 1991) when regular Canadian workers refuse to do certain jobs. This is where the establishment of the black-focused school can be seen as a response by the black community to combat the alienating and exploitive forces of capital that will use “race” as a means for cheapening labor. Contradictorily, such a school can be seen as ghettoizing the black or Caribbean diasporic student, affording him or her a lesser education, and rendering him or her less able to compete effectively for better jobs and livelihoods. Gregory Crichlow is most provocative when he declares: “No black student with serious post-secondary aspirations will want to submit an academic record showing graduation from the ‘ghetto school’” (Crichlow, 2008).

The class affiliation of members of the diaspora are clearly distinct from more economically successful and occupationally mobile Caribbean-Canadians, whose social, educational, and residential locations separate them from their diasporic countrymen and countrywomen. Those who comprise and energize the diaspora are those who feel economically and socially shut out of Canada's mainstream, and consequently they are the ones who comprise diasporic communities as they seek to develop parallel social institutions, and to retain their cultural values, beliefs and practices in defensive, communal solidarity with their fellows. Tied to this are the racism and chauvinism of the wider society that say clearly to them, "you do belong, but know your place."

The capitalist structure of Canada's leading institutions, and the pervasive ideologies of liberalism, individualism, consumerism and materialism, not to mention religion (Christianity), combine to convince these Caribbean-Canadians that theirs is a free, open, mobile society where hard work and a bit of luck are needed to "make it to the top." And as these ideologies become hegemonic and ingrained in the fabric of the culture, individual members of the diaspora see them almost as "second nature," buy into them and willingly consent to their stations in life. But there are always those who resist and in order to manage the potential for social disruption capital must distract and control their anger. And this is where the ideologies of multiculturalism and of "race" are useful to capital. For when members of the oppressed classes buy into the idea that "race" is real, when they organize themselves along lines of "race" consciousness, class awareness is muted and the working-class as a whole is weakened via in-fighting along racial lines; social control by capital is thus made more manageable.

Because science has told us there is no biological basis for assuming intelligence, morality, respect for law, etc., are genetically based, there are serious negative implications for using race as an explanation for any kind of poor performance, whether educational or other. Indeed, what is important is to understand the sources and causes of poverty, not biologically, but as socially conditioned, and for this the political economy approach that stresses class analysis is most instructive, for all different ethnic, national, language and religious groups are represented in the statistics on poverty. Thus, one critic has argued in the context of the high drop-out rates of students from the black community the "only thing that these students really have in common is poverty – and

that is something they have in common with working class youth of all races. The correlation between poverty and poor academic performance is well documented” (Cahis, 2005). And while not denying that “black history and culture are not properly represented in the education curriculum,” the idea is to fix the curriculum, not to establish a parallel one with its own lacunae:

What is lacking in our education system is an education in the struggles, triumphs, achievements and defeats of oppressed classes throughout history. This education can only benefit from the racial and ethnic diversity of our class. What is needed is not education based on race, but on class (ibid).

To do otherwise means that the unjust social order is guaranteed, capital is satisfied, the tapestry of Canada’s social fabric is enriched, and the mosaic is reinforced.

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