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At Home In Blackness: How I Became Black

Abstract

I became and have remained Black in Canada by interacting with Blacks. Altercasting (the “push” from the larger society) moved me into interacting intentionally with Blacks, interacting with Blacks helped make me Black by immersing me in the Black experience, and studying Blacks helped anchor me within the Black community by giving me an understanding of what it means to be Black. In this paper, which is based on autoethnography, I offer a brief overview of the concept of Blackness in Canada and then I discuss the key ways in which my Black identity was developed and is sustained. The key mechanisms discussed are altercasting, interacting with Blacks, and studying the Black community.

Keywords

Altercasting; Autoethnography; Black; Blackness; Church; Community; Identity, and Interaction

I became Black in Canada by interacting with fellow Blacks.¹ I had never thought of myself as Black but within two years of 1978 when I moved from Nigeria to Canada I realized that to live in and successfully identify myself with Canada I had to identify myself with a race; specifically, I realized the importance of identifying myself as Black. In my birth country of Nigeria it is family connections that matter: one is identified in terms of the region, language, or religion of one's family. In Nigeria I am a Southerner, an Isoko man, and a Christian; my skin color is of no real social significance. While what we refer to as “black” in North America is the default skin color in Nigeria, those who do not have black skins are not seen as inferior. In sharp contrast to Nigeria, Canada's popular imagination considers Canada's default race to be White and considers true Canadians to be White and non-Whites to be inferior (Fleras and Elliott 1992: 234-243). The initial reason for my involvement in the Black community was not so much a pull from within the community as a push into it—an experience that is not unique to me since immigrants are ethnicized and raced in Canada (James 2003: 29). In any case, interacting with fellow Blacks was critical in my feeling at home in the 400-year old 783,000-plus strong Black community of Canada.²

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Qualitative Analysis Conference in Waterloo, Ontario in April 2009.

² Blacks have been present in Canada since at least 1605 (Williams, 1983:445) and Blacks comprise

I knew I was becoming Black when, beginning in spring 1980, I found myself becoming emotionally connected to fellow Blacks irrespective of their national, religious, and other ties. Ultimately, my immersion into the Canadian Black community was virtually guaranteed by my marriage, since August 1985, to a Canadian-born Black woman with whom I have two sons and one daughter. My wife Faridat was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba and spent her formative years at Pilgrim Baptist Church--Winnipeg's oldest Black church--where her maternal grandparents and other members of her extended family attended. I am at home in Blackness because Blackness represents for me a "cognitive environment in which I can undertake the routines of daily life" and through which I find my identity well mediated (Rapport and Dawson 1998: 9).

Methods

This paper is based on autoethnography, a qualitative research technique in which researchers "use their own experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions" (Holt 2003: 2). Autoethnographers place the self within a social context and focus on the connection between the self and the personal (Berg 2007: 180, Reed-Danahay 1997). Autoethnography involves the use of a variety of data sources to describe, understand, and explain aspects of social life with which the researcher has "deep familiarity" that is achieved through participation (Berg 2007: 172-179).

In addition to the use of archival materials, my study of the Black community was based on the six major approaches employed by Gans ([1962] 1982: 397-398) in his study of Italian immigrants in Boston's West End: use of community facilities; attendance at community events; informal visiting with community members; "formal and informal interviewing of community functionaries"; "use of informants"; and observation. I made efforts to ensure that both observations and interviews were representative of events and views existing in the Black community. To this end, I employed three types of sampling predominantly: quota, snowball, and deviant cases.³ Most of the data for this paper come from fieldwork done in Hamilton, Ontario from 1989 to 1991 and participant observational studies in the cities of Edmonton, Calgary, Winnipeg, Hamilton, Toronto, and Montreal from 1992 to 2009.

Blackness

Blackness is ambiguous, partly because the Black population is not a monolith⁴.

about 2.5% of Canada's total population of about 31 million (Statistics Canada, 2009).

³ McCall and Simmons (1969: 64-67) have discussed these three types of sampling, which they consider to be ideally suited to field research. Basically, quota sampling occurs when one consciously investigates events or persons representing the various categories that comprise one's unit of analysis. For its part, snowball sampling occurs when one solicits from those being studied others who are considered to be suited for the investigation at hand. Finally, deviant case sampling occurs when one makes conscious attempts to search for and study events or persons that do not fit into the ordinary pattern.

⁴ A testament to the ambiguity of blackness can be seen in the "It's a Black Thing, You Wouldn't Understand" slogan printed on t-shirts worn by some Blacks. Very interesting personal accounts illustrating the ambiguities of blackness are posted on the internet by the Experience Project at <http://www.experienceproject.com/stories/Must-Confess/623475>. I witnessed an occasion in which a White man confronted a Black man about what, the White man reasoned, were the unnecessary divisions between Blacks and "progressive Whites" that result from a belief in that slogan. When the Black

For example, contrary to what one would expect based on popular depictions of Blacks, Nelson Mandela, a major cultural icon who is Black, admits that he has a "keen interest in European classical music—specifically, the music of Handel and Tchaikovsky (ANC.org.za/people/mandela.html). For his part, Louis Farrakhan, an American-based Black nationalist and leader of the Nation of Islam is a trained concert violinist who, after more than four decades of abstaining from publicly playing the violin, performed Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn's violin concerto in E minor (http://www.experiencefestival.com/a/Louis_Farrakhan/id/517802). Furthermore, not all Blacks can or even like to dance, sing, or play basketball. What then is Blackness and how does one know that one is Black?

Most of Canada's 783,000 or so contemporary Blacks are of Caribbean origins and immigrated to Canada only after the introduction in 1967 of the "point system" immigration policy that allowed the non-sponsored immigration of skilled persons regardless of national origins (Brym and Lie 2009: 215; Macionis and Gerber, 2008: 361-362). Accordingly, issues such as Black identity are not yet fully crystallized in the experiences of many local Blacks. Indeed, there are no physical aspects of lifestyles ("material culture") that differentiate Blacks, as a group, from the larger society; in general, the manifestations of material culture among Canadian Blacks reflect national, social class, and religious cleavages. Thus, for example, old-line Black Canadians tend to be similar to members of the larger society in terms of their worldviews (Cryderman 1986: 131; Driedger 1989: 43). Nevertheless, as Brym and Lie (2009) note,

black Canadians still tend to interact little with white Canadians of European descent, especially in their intimate relations....Like the aftermath of expulsion and conquest, the aftermath of slavery—prejudice, discrimination, disadvantage, and segregation—continues to act as a barrier to assimilation. (p. 217)

I contend that, at least in North America, the so-called racial group is often only a type of ethnic group which is itself a type of social group (Isajiw 1979). In these terms, blackness, like ethnicity, may be defined in terms of four major ideal-typical inter-related characteristics that are manifested at both the individual and group levels. Barth (1969:10-11) defines an ethnic group as a category of people that "(1) is largely biologically self-perpetuating, (2) shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in forms, (3) makes up a field of communication and interaction, (4) has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order." So-called racial groups can be included among Canadian ethnic groups due to "the fact that the physical marks are superficial, not necessarily borne by all members of the group, and modifiable by interbreeding, and that there is not complete consensus as to what groups are "non-white" or "visible" in Canadian society" (Burnet and Palmer 1988: 7).

The categorization of "racial" groups as ethnic groups is based on the fact that there are no biological, genetic, or other scientific bases for placing human populations into classificatory schemes, all so-called races being only socially created phenomena (Bolaria and Li 1988:13-25; Hughes and Kallen 1976: 80-84; Isajiw 1979; Satzewich

man insisted that the slogan was a valid assessment of the issues, the White man asked what there was about the Black experience that White people could not understand. While walking away from the White man, the Black man responded as follows: "The fact that you ask that question shows that you don't understand."

1990: 253). Fleras and Elliott (2007: 34) note that "The completion of the Human Genome Project in 2000 revealed what many had expected: Human beings belong to a single biological species (*Homo sapiens*) within a larger grouping or genus (*Homo*). Humans as a species are 99.9 percent genetically identical with just 0.1 percent of genetic material accounting for human diversity."

Race is a crucial factor in understanding ethnicity at least partly because it is one of the central foci of ethnic identification (Weber 1978: 379-398). According to Weber (1978: 386), "Almost any kind of similarity or contrast of physical type and of habits can induce the belief that affinity or disaffinity exists between groups that attract or repel each other." Similarly, Isaacs (1975: 46) argued that "body" is the most important of the six components of ethnic identification--body, name, language, history and origins, religion, and nationality--which he examined. He notes that physical features are crucial because, in general, unlike the other components of ethnic identity, biological characteristics cannot be readily altered.

In addition to possessing the relevant phenotypes (that is, readily observable characteristics such as skin color and body build), to be Black in Canada one has to maintain interaction with fellow Blacks. It is significant that Blacks are protective of aspects of culture, such as music and style, which are important mechanisms of boundary maintenance among Blacks (Kelly 1998: 62). Phenotypical features can account for the matters of biological perpetuation and distinguishable membership while interaction not only raises the consciousness of group members but also helps in the transmission of subcultural values. It is interaction with fellow Blacks that account for curious subcultural traits such as the centrality of hair care and hair salons among North American Blacks (Talbot 1984). In short, since interaction tends to produce and sustain group identification (Shaffir 1974: 47), it is necessary to interact with Blacks in order to be Black.

Altercasting and my Journey into Blackness

The quest for Blackness was not something that I desired; indeed, like Austin Clarke in his book "Growing Up Stupid Under the Union Jack", I did not see myself as in any way connected or even connectable to the Black community. The initial trigger for my journey into Blackness was external to me and to the Black community; it was the result of altercasting—experiencing others act in ways that place constraints and limits on one's capacity to "make a role and preserve a valued conception of self" (Hewitt 2007: 167).

The altercasting or othering of Blacks occurs both on a regular basis and, every now and then, in major crises. W.E.B. Dubois' (1903/2004) notion of "double consciousness" vividly expresses the universal experience of all categories of Blacks in North America—a feeling of being under constant scrutiny (Kelly 1998). But most middle class Canadian Blacks rarely experience blatant racism; instead, the norm for middle class Blacks is persistent subtle forms of racism (Fleras and Elliott 2007). For me, a constant evidence of subtle, invidious altercasting presents itself in the question, "Where are you from?"

Altercasting: An Encounter in Halifax, Nova Scotia

The major crisis moment in my journey into becoming Black occurred in Halifax, Nova Scotia about twenty months after my arrival in Canada. Throughout my stay in

Halifax – August 1979 to April 1980 – I struggled with my love for both Canada and Nigeria. I could not see how my identifying with one nation would not undermine my identifying with the other. In my mind, the question of national identity was a zero-sum game: if one was a true Nigerian, one could not at the same time be a true Canadian. I enjoyed Canada's material comforts and its "peace, order and good government" but I missed Nigeria's personal touch—Nigeria's "gemeinschaft." I was torn between Nigeria and Canada; I was a marginal man.

Although I felt at home in Halifax and, essentially, saw myself as a Haligonian, I did not feel connected to the local Black community. I felt comfortable with and connected to the few Black people at church and at Dalhousie University where I was an undergraduate, but I did not think of myself as a Black person. I saw myself as a Christian, a man, a Nigerian, a Dalhousie University student, and so on but I did not see myself as Black. Moreover, I did not think anybody could mistake me for a Black Nova Scotian. In my mind, it was obvious to everyone that I was an African university student.

Nothing happened to challenge the view I held of myself, until a few hours before I left Halifax for a return trip to Winnipeg at the end of the 1979/80 academic year. Although it was spring I wore my winter parka for three reasons: it was rather cold, I had a slight cold, and I did not have any other coat to wear.

After taking my two suitcases to the train station in downtown Halifax, I went to a shopping mall to buy a few souvenirs of Nova Scotia for my friends in Winnipeg. My aim was to purchase a few small items such as collectible silver spoons. I picked up a number of items and went to the front of the store to pay for my purchases. After collecting all the items from me, the cashier asked me what I considered a routine question: "Is that everything." My response to the cashier's question was also a routine one: "Yes." The cashier collected my payment, gave me some change, bagged my purchase, smiled at me and said "Thank you."

To my utter surprise as soon as I walked out of the store two mall security officers confronted me and informed me that they had been summoned by a cashier in the souvenir store and needed to search me in order to determine whether I had stolen any goods. I assured the officers that I had not stolen anything and yielded to their search. I stood in the very busy hallway of the mall and passersby watched as I removed my coat and as the officers frisked me, searched all my pockets.

When the security officers did not find any evidence of stolen goods, they apologized profusely and went with me to the cashier to explain what had happened. Once inside the store, I returned my purchases and asked the cashier why she thought I had shoplifted. Her response surprised me: "lots of young Black guys shoplift in this mall and I've never seen a Black guy buy souvenirs." I explained to the cashier that I was an African student at Dalhousie and that I bought the souvenirs because I was moving out of the province. She apologized profusely and indicated that she too was a Dalhousie student and that had she had any inclination that I was a university student or an African she would not have activated a button behind her desk to summon the mall security guards.

The fact that a young university student mistook me for a native-born Black Canadian surprised me. I had assumed that it was obvious to everybody that I was an African; I thought it was obvious that I was not Black. The incidence at the Halifax mall sent me on a journey of identity transformation. The incidence made me realize that, in spite of my subjective feelings, I was objectively a Black man in Canada—that in spite of my feelings and wishes, my master status in Canada was "Black". I moved to Halifax in August, 1979 viewing myself essentially in terms of my religious and national identities and left the city in late April, 1980 seriously considering the

possibility that my physical features may be paramount in some people's assessments of my personhood. I realized that I could not be a Haligonian in an unqualified way; I certainly could not be a mainstream Canadian in any way. At the same time, I realized that I could readily become Black; that is, I could readily form the self-schema of "Black" by adopting the relevant social identity—because both my name and my skin color mark me out as "Black". According to Michener and DeLamater (2004: 87), "Whether a person identifies with a social category in which one can claim membership depends on how easily one can be identified as a member of that group, for example, by name or skin color."

Altercasting: An Encounter in Red Deer, Alberta

My experience in Halifax was a rather blatant case. Subsequent possible cases were so subtle that it's difficult to tell whether or not the behaviors were racially motivated. One possibly ambiguous case was the occasion on October 13, 2007 in which my wife, our 11 year old daughter and I were all asked to leave a volleyball tournament game at a Roman Catholic high school in Red Deer, Alberta by a woman named Sherry Schulzke who claimed to be the chief tournament organizer. My offer to pay the nominal admission fee at the end of the game, which was in less than two minutes, was rejected—in spite of the fact that my son's team was scheduled to play a second game after the lunch break.

My wife, daughter, and I left the stands and watched the rest of the game (whose outcome was not in doubt) from the foyer close to the gym entrance--joined by friends who were also visiting Red Deer from Edmonton. While chatting in the foyer Mrs. Schulzke, who had not even bothered to introduce herself, confronted us with the words, "I asked you to leave. What are you still doing here." I reminded her that we were outside the gym and then told her that, like the other parents around us, we were waiting to chat with an athlete—in our case, our 17 year-old son. After lunch my wife, daughter, and I returned to the gym, paid for the pass and watched the second game.

At the end of the second game, I approached the woman who had confronted me earlier that day. I first introduced myself as a professor from Edmonton and then asked her about her connection to the tournament. Perhaps she did not recognize me; in any case, she told me about her positions as teacher, volleyball coach, and tournament organizer and about how she recruits students and other volunteers to help her with the volleyball tournament. She then calmly wrote down her first and last names and her email address on a sheet of paper which she gave to me.

When I later asked both Mrs. Schulzke and the school principal, Mr. Greg Hall, in writing to explain to me why White people (including a White parent from my son's Edmonton-based team whose husband, a Black man, was absent) who did not pay the fee were not asked to leave both Mrs. Schulzke and Mr. Hall responded in writing that I was trying to dodge the issue. In one of the most ridiculous defenses I've ever read, Mrs. Schulzke wrote me a letter dated November 17, 2007 in which she told me about her volunteer activities at her local parish and about how she is "a teacher with over 20 year's experience." For his part, Mr. Hall acted in a rather schizophrenic manner. First, in response to a White friend of my wife's who had written to the principal to express her disgust at Mrs. Schulzke's behavior, Mr. Hall sent an email indicating that Mrs. Schulzke acted the way she did towards me because she assumed that I did not intend to pay the admission fee. A short time later, in response to my email asking why a White woman who did not pay the admission fee

was not even approached, Mr. Hall wrote me a letter dated November 17, 2007 acknowledging that "I understand that you may have walked into the gym and sat in the stands without realizing that payment was due" and then accusing me (without bothering to even hint at any evidence) of disruptive behavior. Mr. Hall also mentioned how his school had sponsored, supports and is very proud of the club "Students for International Friendship and Understanding (SIFI)." This club and founder, a student whose origin was India, has been acknowledged at the recent Harmony Award Banquet on October 24th, 2007 in Toronto.

The standard effect of encounters such as the ones I had in Halifax and in Red Deer is to remind Blacks such as me that no matter what our social status may be, there are Whites who see us only in terms of popular negative stereotypes. The written correspondences among Mrs. Schulzke, Mr. Hall, and me have been very useful tools in my classroom discussions and analyses of altercasting and of subtle forms racism. My students' conclusions about Mrs. Schulzke's behavior sometimes lead us to discussions of the distinctions between ignorance and racism; in particular, some of my students argue that Mrs. Schulzke's actions may reveal that she is ignorant and not that she is a racist. But consequences of actions do not invariably depend on actors' motives. In short, from my perspective, regardless of motives, the Red Deer school officials' actions had the effect of reminding me that I am an outsider. It is partly due to a desire to avoid being placed in a slot (and being asked ridiculous questions such as "When do you hope to return to your country?") that I enjoy the company of fellow Blacks.

Interaction: Black House Parties

Since social events offer opportunities for interaction and conversations, attending ethnic group functions is one of the major ways in which ethnic group identity is created and reinforced (Breton 1964: 193, Isajiw 1999: 194, and Driedger 2003: 125-126). Social interaction is an important vehicle through which both personal and group identities—"the categories people use to specify who they are and to locate themselves relative to other people" (Michener and DeLamater 1994: 88)—are socially created and sustained (Hewitt 2007: 182-184). In discussing the typical African-American experience, hooks (2004: 149) illustrates the importance of talk as follows:

Through the "talk story" and the telling of aphorisms, Sarah Oldham, my mother's mother, communicated her philosophy of being and living....Often these lectures focused on the notion of "difference" and "otherness"....In her mind, to be safe one had to "keep a distance."

One of the major opportunities I have for interacting informally with fellow Blacks is in functions such as House Parties—social events held in private homes. I have discovered that attending Black house parties offers me crucial opportunities to encounter some important aspects of the heartbeat of the Black community. Like Toennies' (1887/1963) *gemeinschaft*, Black house parties are characterized by fluid social structures and informal face-to-face interactions. Black house parties remind me of my ancestral homeland of Nigeria and also create a home for me in Canada by confronting me with an environment with which I am well accustomed. These parties have been for me a throwback to the simplicity of the life that I knew as a young boy and as a young adult in 1970's Nigeria; they have been islands of *gemeinschaft* in a cultural sea of *gesellschaft*.

The Black house party is a large-scale replica of Black family life, especially in areas such as music, visual media, and food. Furthermore, like the case in families, the socialization that occurs in house parties assumes the two major forms of active instruction and passive influence through music, food, and other aspects of the home environment. To be invited to a house party is to be invited to a private home: hosts typically display the newspapers and magazines they normally read, play "Black" music, and either play Black-oriented movies or tune their television sets to shows in which Blacks are shown in a favorable light.

Black house party conversations tend to be boisterous but good-natured. For instance, in 2008 many Black house party conversations included discussions about Barack Obama's run for the office of President of the United States. At a November 2008 house party in Edmonton held in honor of Obama's election the conversations were so heated that moderators and time-keepers were selected in order to give all in attendance the opportunity to speak their minds. At some point that evening, I mentioned in passing that, as important as Obama's victory was, it is likely that he was not the first US President of African heritage (DiversityInc 2007). The ensuing discussion was so heated that it continued via email over the next three days. The following is an excerpt from one of the emails I received:

I believe the question one should ask is - did these US Presidents acknowledge their African Ancestry and would they have been elected if they had? Given the bigotry of those days and time I am sure white Americans would have lynched those presidents if they ever find out that they had Black blood in them. No wonder one of the Presidents had to destroy all documents that may be used to prove that he is black or had black blood in him. The most important thing is that we live in a different world now where being black may no longer be an obstacle to aspiring to the highest office in America and hopefully in any part of the world. Time will tell. I believe Obama is the first who did not only claim that he is black but everybody acknowledged his blackness and that of his family – his wife, children, mother –in-law, brother-in-law etc. In that sense he is the first Black person to be elected President of the United States. None of those other Presidents claim to be black and we cannot make it for them.

The nature of conversations that occur at Black house parties makes these events fertile grounds for the renewal, formation, and development of friendships and, ultimately, group identification among Blacks. One factor that sustains ethnic identity is personal ties such as friendship networks; for "ethnic homogeneity of friendship networks" is vital for ethnic identity formation and retention (Weinfeld 1985: 74). Such is the importance of ethnic group friendships that individuals--including those who are second, third, and fourth generation North Americans--are more likely to choose close or intimate friends from within their own ethnic group than randomly from the larger society (Breton et. al. 1990: 56). I met almost all my Black friends at either Black parties or at Black churches; the connection between some of best Black friends, such as Ronald and Deridor Collier, and me straddled house parties, Black churches, and university life.

As important as interaction in Black house parties was in my development of a Black identity, I found that one needs to be at least a bit entrenched in the Black community before one receives invitations to attend these parties. The key area of the Black community in which entry was very easy for me was the Black church.

Interaction: The Black Church

When I returned to Winnipeg from Halifax in 1980 I immediately got involved in the institutional structure of Winnipeg's Black community by intentionally patronizing Black-owned businesses such as barber shops and provisionary stores and by watching Black-oriented TV shows. Given the fact that the first group with which I associated within 24 hours of my arrival in Canada in August 1978 was a Black church where Reverend Raymond Cornish pastored, I naturally returned to that particular group. I was so entrenched in the life of the church that I lived with one of the church's key families, the Barretts, for a number of months in 1980.

The Black church helped to meet my spiritual needs while anchoring me to the Black experience in North America. It was shortly after I returned to Winnipeg that Reverends Cornish and Allen, the pastors of the first Black church I attended in Canada, parted ways. Rev. Raymond Cornish teamed up with Rev. Errol Campbell, a relatively new immigrant from Jamaica, and started conducting services in a new location in downtown Winnipeg.

Rev. Campbell was an excellent preacher, administrator, and musician. His administrative skills were especially needed given the chaotic situation of the church, particularly after the breakup. One of the main ways Rev. Campbell helped to introduce stability to the struggling church was by inviting to the new church for preaching/teaching sessions Rev. Murray Blair, the head of the Jamaican district of the New Testament Church of God denomination with which the new church was affiliated. Rev. Campbell also requested that each individual make an unambiguous decision regarding commitment and involvement in the new church; there was no room for pew warmers.

Although I did not wish to side with Rev. Cornish as opposed to Rev. Allen, I liked the Cornish-Campbell team so much that I committed to the new church, as did the majority of the members of the Cornish-Allen congregation. Such was the vision of the pastors that this church of fewer than fifty members got involved in presenting a monthly half hour program on Videon Cable TV. I had a repertoire of about five songs that I felt comfortable singing and playing on my acoustic guitar. The fact that I sang one of these songs in church virtually every week did not prevent me from singing them on the TV program.

My association with the Cornish-Campbell team continued, and my involvement with the church's TV program intensified, after I moved to an apartment around Grant Avenue, across from Videon Cable Television studios and offices. This was the first time I rented accommodation outside of downtown Winnipeg. On Grant Avenue, I shared a one-bedroom apartment with a Nigerian-born student named Timothy Dabo, an education student at the University of Manitoba (U of M). Tim was one of the students on a Nigerian Federal Government Technical Scholarship Programme--the program under which many of my friends, such as Francis Achus-Got, Boniface Etuk, and Ohi Izirien, came to Canada in the late 1970s. Although Tim was from the predominantly Muslim area of northern Nigeria, he was a committed Christian who attended the local Christian Missionary Church. Tim was involved in an on-campus para-church organization known as The Navigators. I liked Tim's enthusiasm about attending Navigator Bible studies; I particularly liked the fact that Tim was always involved in systematic Bible studies with the Navigators. I was tempted to leave the Black church and attend mainstream churches like Tim and most of my other African-born friends. But I was convinced that the combination of InterVarsity and my Black church gave me enough spiritual nourishment.

To my amazement, the stability of the new Cornish-Campbell church lasted for only a few months; personal and other troubles in the lives of some of the church officers undermined the fragile unity of the new church. I decided to leave the New Testament Church of God and, indeed, Black churches in general. I decided I would visit Black churches but would not make any of them my home church. I visited two churches close to the University of Manitoba campus. I also investigated Calvary Temple (where some of my friends, such as Ohi Izirien and John Okosun, were regular attenders) and Elim Chapel (which is located across from the University of Winnipeg and had a significant population of university students).

Even after I stopped attending the Cornish-Campbell church on a regular basis I maintained my friendship with the pastors and many of the congregants. It was only after I left the church that a crucial thing dawned on me: most of my friends at the New Testament Church of God were black in terms of physical appearance but they did not seem to see themselves as Black—as fundamentally similar to native-born Blacks of North American heritage. For instance, although the Barretts, the friends with whom I first lived when I moved from Halifax to Winnipeg, had lived in England before moving to Canada, they were unavowedly Jamaican. The Barrett's Jamaican outlook was reflected in things such as their accents, speech patterns, and foods. Their involvement in the Church of God seemed to play a large role in helping them maintain their Jamaican identity.

The Barrett's situation was quite representative of that of the other members of the New Testament Church of God. Mrs. Barrett's younger brother Daswell MacLeod and his wife Evita were clearly Jamaican—as were the Cornishes. But did these people think of themselves as Black in the North American sense? I wondered if any of them had been forced, as I was in Halifax, to see themselves as essentially the same as native-born Blacks? Since I was not sure that my Caribbean and African friends in Winnipeg thought of themselves as Black, I decided to search elsewhere for information on what it meant to be Black.

In my mind, the most logical place to find out about and experience Canadian Black culture in Winnipeg was at the oldest Black church in the city: Pilgrim Baptist Church, which was founded in 1924. Up till the late 1960s when the introduction of the Point System immigration policy led to an influx of Caribbean Blacks to Winnipeg and other Canadian cities, Pilgrim Baptist Church was the central institution for Blacks in Winnipeg. The original core membership of Pilgrim Baptist was native-born Canadian Blacks, many of whom were from Nova Scotia.

Pilgrim Baptist Church was one of the Black churches that I seriously considered joining in spring 1980 when I returned to Winnipeg from my nine-month sojourn in Halifax. But loyalty to Pastor Cornish and to my friends at the Church of God as well as the structural limitation of travelling by public transit from my apartment to Pilgrim Baptist Church prevented me from attending the latter church on a regular basis. Walter Dorrington, my Nova Scotian-born friend at Pilgrim Baptist, was always happy to see me at his church; however, Walter did not have access to an automobile so he could not offer me rides. Walter was in charge of the youth choir at Pilgrim Baptist and there was no doubt that whatever he lacked in musical knowledge and/or ability he made up for with his enthusiasm.

Two curious things stood out for me about Pilgrim Baptist. First, the music was quite different from that in any church I had attended in the past. Although the church had only a few musical instruments, the singing reminded me of the music of Andrae Crouch, especially the "Live in Carnegie Hall" recording, I enjoyed so much while in Nigeria. I generally took my acoustic guitar along with me to Pilgrim Baptist and would join the church's guitarist, making sure that I did not play loud enough to

interfere with the music. Another major thing I noticed at Pilgrim Baptist was that many of the congregants greeted one another and visitors in a rather formal manner: everybody was Mr., Mrs., or Miss so-and-so. On one memorable day, I went to Pilgrim with a Black female university professor, a feminist who detested the idea of the title "Miss" being applied to anyone. The professor was visibly baffled when she introduced herself as Dr. so-and-so only to be promptly referred to as Miss so-and-so. It was always fun for me to watch some of the older congregants struggle with my last name, give up, and simply call me "Efa".

My friend Walter Dorrington went to the United States more frequently than anyone I knew. Most of his trips to the U.S. seemed to be in connection with music conferences; his other trips to the U.S. were less structured casual visits. I joined Walter and some members of Pilgrim Baptist for one very memorable visit to the Dakotas in the U.S. and enjoyed myself tremendously. Our weekend visit essentially involved eating, staying in a hotel, shopping, and attending a dynamic Black church. It was during this trip that I first discovered how costly it can be to feed teenage boys. I made the mistake of promising a teenage boy that I would treat him to whatever he wanted to have for breakfast. To my utter surprise, the boy had two helpings of the most expensive item on the menu: a large breakfast that included steaks and eggs.

My experiences in Black churches, especially Pilgrim Baptist Church, were to be expected for the Black church has historically been the central institution within the North American Black community (Frazier 1968; Lincoln 1984; Shreve 1983; Taylor, Thornton and Chatters 1987: 125-126). It is generally acknowledged that not only is the Black church largely the direct product of social segregation imposed by forces outside the Black community, but the Black church is the oldest and most fundamental institution in the North American Black community (Frazier 1968; Lincoln 1984 and Williams 1974). Winks (1971: 338-339) contends that Black churches emerged in Canada as a result of both factors external and those internal to the Black community. An important external factor is the fact that many White churches encouraged separation in order to please segments of the White population whom they believed would not condone integration. On the other hand, an important internal factor seems to be the fact that some Blacks preferred separate churches where they could deal with preachers who spoke in a vernacular they understood well (Winks *ibidem*: 338-339). The crucial role of the Black church has been aptly summarized as follows:

The Black man's pilgrimage in America was made less onerous because of his religion. His religion was the organizing principle around which his life was structured. His church was his school, his forum, his political arena, his social club, his art gallery, his conservatory of music. It was his lyceum and gymnasium as well as sanctorium. His religion was his fellowship with man, his audience with God. It was the peculiar sustaining force that gave him strength to endure when endurance gave no promise, and the courage to be creative in the face of his own dehumanization (Lincoln 1984).

During the first two years after returning to Winnipeg from Halifax, I sought an environment that would meet both my spiritual needs and my intellectual needs within the context of Blackness. I wanted to experience an unadulterated Black-centered subculture. The local Black churches were quite helpful in satisfying my quest. But I desired more.

Studying the Black Community

As soon as I settled into my life as a graduate student at the University of Manitoba, I returned to a somewhat vigorous search for blackness. My office mate, Mike, was an American—a Vietnam War draft-dodger who held a B.A. degree from the University of Winnipeg. Mike and I got along very well. Mike informed me that he was very pleased to have a Black office mate since he grew up in a small town in the American mid-west where he did not have the opportunity of knowing any Black person.

Mike was unorthodox in many ways; he was certainly not average or typical. For example, since he did not like the idea of wearing seatbelts while driving, he bought an antique car that had no seatbelts and then obtained a special permit to drive his antique car without a seatbelt. He also once applied for employment with either the CIA or the FBI and later placed on a wall on his side of our shared office a letter to support his claim that his application for employment was not successful. Hardly anybody believed that Mike's application was unsuccessful; virtually every student who heard about Mike's application maintained that Mike was a spy.

Although Mike was a White man, I figured that his background as an American who was in his late teens during the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s gave him special insights into what it meant to be Black in North America. One day I informed Mike that I was curious about what distinguished Black Americans from other Americans, controlling for social class. Without hesitation, Mike told me that the answer to my question lay in the shared experiences of Blacks in North America and that the best way to gain insight into these experiences was by being immersed in traditionally Black American music such as Blues and Jazz.

I believed Mike so I decided to delve into why music was at the core of blackness. The most natural place for me to turn was to Dr. Larry Douglas, the only tenured Black professor I knew. I was the only student who was brave enough to register in Dr. Douglas's graduate course in Social Order so the professor and I met for about three hours weekly in his office. This was an excellent arrangement for me since it gave me the opportunity to be vulnerable with and confide in Dr. Douglas—a ripe environment for mentoring. One day I asked Dr. Douglas what he thought about Jazz and Blues music. My question gave Dr. Douglas the opportunity to explain to me that both Jazz and Blues songs typically have more than one meaning and that the readily evident meanings tend to be secondary ones. He indicated that, historically, members of the Black community understood the primary meanings of these songs while outsiders did not. In other words, music was, historically, a boundary marker for blackness. Asante (1990) summarized the importance of music in the life of North American Blacks:

Perhaps it is in music that we have seen our most authentic sign of continuity. Unquestionably the spirituals which are synonymous with elegant art, the blues which speak our essential pathos, and jazz which suggests all the intricate ways we create and communicate are the legacies of our epic memory. They represent a continuous linkage with the rituals and arrangements of West Africa. Because music sits astride our traditions it will monitor our future.

Since I love music and had an excellent stereo system, I started seeking out and listening to more Black American music. As odd as it now sounds to me, I could not tell the difference between Blues and Jazz music so I returned with my predicament to Mike, who happily gave me a few hints. After expressing his surprise, Mike gave me a few hints. I heeded Mike's advice and borrowed some records from

the main branch of the Winnipeg Public Library. I listened keenly to and enjoyed two songs in particular: B.B. King's blues classic "The thrill is gone" and a jazz song entitled "Mack the Knife."

Due to the influence of Mark, Professor Douglas, and other academics such as Professor Savannah Williams and Rocky Jones, the latter two of whom I met while at Dalhousie University, I started studying the question of blackness. I eventually wrote my University of Manitoba M.A. thesis on military interventions in Nigerian politics.

For my Ph.D. dissertation at McMaster University, I knew I had to deal even more squarely with the issue of blackness. I was not happy with various attempted topics, such as the problems of military disengagement in African politics and the Brain Drain of African countries. My final topic, on community building among Blacks in Hamilton, demanded that I participate within the Black community. Studying the Black community through participant observation became for me a key process of becoming Black. One of the few courses in which I enrolled at McMaster University was one on Qualitative Methods and the professor, Dr. William Shaffir, encouraged students to do field work on religious or other communities. My acquaintances at McMaster University, most of whom were White, were familiar with and directed me to only one local Black church: Stewart Memorial Church (SMC), which was founded in 1835 and is the city's oldest Black church. SMC's founder, Josiah Henson, is believed to be the Black man after whom the hero of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was based.

When I phoned the church office and indicated my intention to study a Black group in Hamilton, the assistant pastor, Reverend Robert Foster, expressed his interest in the work and offered me rides to and from the church. These trips were very beneficial for me since they offered me opportunities to interact informally with Rev. Foster who in turn used them as opportunities to introduce to me some of the neighborhoods where Black Hamiltonians once lived. My study of SMC launched me into a field research of Hamilton's Black community and, ultimately, helped to anchor me in the Black community. Basically, by doing field research within the Hamilton Black community I gained access to virtually every significant segment of the Black community.

After completing my project on the SMC I found that I could not readily get away from studying the Black community. I had come to realize that most of the Blacks with whom I associated in Winnipeg and, indeed, in Halifax were first generation immigrants who saw themselves primarily in terms of their nationalities; in contrast, most of my new contacts in Hamilton were members of old-line Black families who saw themselves as single-nationality Canadians.

By the spring of 1987 I had begun thinking seriously about basing my dissertation on some aspect of Black religion in Hamilton. At the same time, however, a growing awareness of certain events affecting some local Blacks (for example, the Desmond McIntosh affair in which a local police officer tried to frame Mr. McIntosh), gradually served to shift my interest to the question of racial discrimination against Blacks in Hamilton. In an attempt to understand the matter of racism against Blacks in Hamilton, I spent the remainder of 1987 and all of 1988 attending meetings organized by various Black voluntary organizations in Hamilton.

By early 1989 my observations, interviews and other research endeavors were focused essentially on what turned out to be the final focus of my dissertation: identifying the social conditions and processes that underlie the formation and continuity of Black businesses, institutions, and voluntary organizations in Hamilton. Thus, I had to pay particular attention to social interaction among local Blacks, since interaction is the primary factor in group formation and persistence (Blumer 1957: 128). I found the new

research emphasis to be quite exciting particularly because it was congruent with my long-standing research interest in nation building, an area in which my M.A. thesis was based.⁵

I secured access to the older native-born Black Hamiltonians through participating in the worship services, Sunday School classes, and other activities of Stewart Memorial Church in the fall and winter of 1986. In general, although not all the older native-born Blacks attended SMC regularly, those members of this category of Blacks still residing in Hamilton either attend the SMC or attend no church at all. In any event, church members referred to their church as the "home base" for all old-line Black Hamiltonians; thus, for example, Ontario's then Lieutenant Governor, Lincoln Alexander, who had not attended the church regularly for a number of years, was still regarded as a member. Indeed, Lincoln Alexander's portrait was strategically placed near the pulpit.

Access to the other Black churches was also not problematic because I am a Christian, Black, and a guitarist (Kleinman 1980: 179-181, Lofland and Lofland [1971] 1984: 16-17).⁶ In addition, the fact that these churches were constantly in search of new members and adherents facilitated entry (Adler and Adler 1987: 16). In short, not only was I readily accepted into the study groups, but the fact that I am Black made it possible for me to blend readily into these groups—unlike the case with some field researchers (Gans [1962] 1982; Whyte [1943] 1981).

I casually discussed the question of Black community building with almost every Black resident of Hamilton I encountered between January 1989 and June 1990. The conversations with these Blacks—most of who were strangers that I met and conversed with in places such as fast food restaurants, summer festivals, house parties and churches—generally centered around specific current events in the Hamilton Black community. I typically conducted interviews at the interviewees' homes, although some were conducted at my home and yet others on the McMaster University campus. I interviewed each interviewee at least twice, the first session typically lasting between one and two hours. I used the second and subsequent sessions to solicit new information as they became necessary. In addition, the second and subsequent interview sessions were used to clarify statements made by the interviewees. In short, even the interview process helped to immerse me into the Black community.

Conclusion

It is significant that although Blacks have lived in Canada since at least the 17th century and the Black population has grown quite dramatically in the past four decades, intimate interactions between Blacks and Whites is limited (Brym and Lie 2009: 215-217). But Black Canadians regularly interact with one another in informal settings (Etoroma 1996: 196). These interactions, which occur in contexts such as house parties where conversations generally focus on issues such as food, music, and the Black experience, help to create and reinforce group identity among Blacks. Thus, social interactions provide opportunities for Blacks to learn how to become and/or remain Black in Canada. Although the most important boundary marker for the Black

⁵ Lofland and Lofland ([1971] 1984:8) note that the concerns sociologists take to doing social analyses often "arise from accidents of remote biography and personal history—of residence, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, past identities or experiences...and so forth."

⁶ Lofland and Lofland (1971/1984:8 and 16-17) note that access to study groups is facilitated in situations where researchers are committed and/or ascribed members of these groups. See also Shaffir, Stebbins, and Turowetz (1980:25 and 27).

community is skin color, other markers include speech patterns (accents and subjects of conversation), music, and food. While having Black roots is typically a necessary precondition for membership in the Black community, it is not a sufficient condition; one has to learn to be Black by being involved in "Black things"; that is by engaging in informal interactions with fellow Blacks.

Although I am proud to be Black, the initial impetus for my sojourn into blackness was external to me and to the Black community. The initial impetus for my quest for blackness was my experiences with altercasting. I have discovered that the Black community is a willing home for African-born and other Black immigrants. Fluid social structures and not being constantly under the gaze are some of the ways in which interacting with fellow Blacks remind me of the *gemeinschaft* settings of my youth and young adulthood in my Nigerian homeland. I enjoy Canada's material comforts and its "peace, order and good government" but I miss Nigeria's personal touch—Nigeria's "gemeinschaft." In Canada I experience civilization and its many discontents as compared to Nigeria's raw nobility. Subtle forms of racism pushed me into making deliberate efforts to interact with fellow Blacks and studying the Black community has been instrumental in anchoring me in the Black community.

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