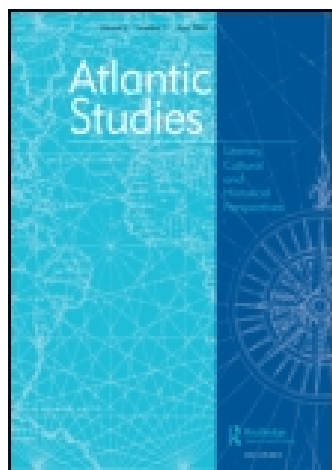


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# TRANSFORMING CARIBBEAN AND CANADIAN IDENTITY

## Contesting Claims for Toronto's Caribana

David V. Trotman

*This paper discusses the attempts by peoples of Caribbean origin resident in Toronto, Canada, to use a version of the transplanted Trinidad Carnival as a mechanism for creating an ethnic identity in a multicultural metropolitan society. The contesting claims to the "ownership" of this cultural product forms the backdrop against which a younger generation of Canadian-born children of Caribbean immigrants also work out their own relationship to Canadian society.*

KEYWORDS: Caribbean; immigration; Trinidad carnival; Caribana; cultural identity; multicultural Canada

### Introduction

Each year, in the period preceding the first Monday of August, the Toronto-based Caribbean Cultural Committee (CCC), acting in the name of an imagined entity called the "Caribbean community," stages a week-long festival of cultural events. The celebration brings an estimated two million visitors to the city streets and it is reported to garner 200 million dollars to the provincial and city coffers. The spectators and participants are drawn not only from Canada but also from the Caribbean, Europe, and the United States. The centerpiece of this festival is a street carnival parade called Caribana, a name for which the Committee holds the copyright. However, copyright is merely legal ownership; the festival has numerous other claimants for its intellectual and ideological paternity. Those of Trinidad origin see this as their finest cultural export, an activity that signifies their cultural existence as a nation and that allows them to distinguish themselves from other peoples of the Caribbean. Others have offered it as an example of the cultural hybridity of the Caribbean and evidence of something defined as "Caribbean culture." Since many of the spectators and participants are Caribbean immigrants to North America, the festival acts as a kind of homecoming for the carnival loving Caribbean Diaspora. Therefore, for the Canadians of Caribbean origin the festival is a valuable chip to be played in the Canadian multicultural lottery. Those more concerned with making political returns have declared Caribana to be the flagship of a community that is usually undefined and have sought to make political careers from their association with the festival—a barely disguised effort to set themselves up as the equivalent of the American ward bosses who could deliver bloc votes from distinct ethnic communities. Caribana has been claimed by the African cultural nationalists as evidence of African cultural creativity. They demand that their claim of



**FIGURE 1**

Multiethnic pride expressed in Caribana by both masqueraders and audience. Photographs by author. Courtesy of Clayton Phillips.

paternity be recognized, using this claim to advocate the idea of a Black community as part of the politics of race which comes with that ethno-cultural position (Figure 1).

In short, there has been no end to the number of those who use Caribana to make claims for a Caribbean community, a Black community, or even sometimes an Afro-Canadian community and the identities that are constructed and performed for those imagined communities. Caribana has proven to be a very problematic space on which to perform these various contending identities.

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA) is the preferred Canadian destination for settlement of immigrants from the Caribbean and the birthplace of a growing population of peoples of Caribbean parentage, with the overwhelming majority from the Anglo-Caribbean. According to *Statistics Canada* 1992, the Caribbean-born population was 309,585 with Jamaica accounting for 37.9%, Guyana for 24.4% and Trinidad and Tobago holding the third spot with 18%. The bulk of this Caribbean population lived in the major metropolitan centers of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. In an earlier census, 1986, the Toronto Metropolitan Area was listed as having some 135,055 residents with the Caribbean as their place of birth. The 1998 returns indicated a marked increase with the Caribbean-born population listed at 216,430, with 46,330 of these being recent arrivals. Although a number of other Canadian cities boast Caribbean populations and some of them host Caribana-style Carnival festivals, it is Toronto and its Caribana, which is the most prominent. While these figures tell the story of the steady growth of a group of people claiming origin in a number of territories, they in no way necessarily indicate the existence of an easily definable and coherent community.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The scholarly literature on Caribbean peoples in Canada and in Toronto in particular is slim but growing; the popular literature is much more extensive. For a bibliography up to 1985 but with numerous entries not relevant to its subject, see Anderson, *Caribbean Orientations*. See also Anderson, *Caribbean Immigrants*. For a recent comprehensive ethnography, see Henry, *The Caribbean Diaspora*. See also Foster, *A Place Called Heaven*.



**FIGURE 2**

Caribana participants put finishing touches to their costume before the parade. Courtesy of Clayton Phillips.

The immigrants from the Caribbean are widely dispersed in the GTA. There is no geographically identified location, which could be called “Little Caribbean” in a city which boasts a China Town, a Little Italy, a Little Greece, and a Little Portugal, with the attendant residential concentrations, ethnic control of commerce and street names in the languages of the ethnic group. There are two city blocks in the North West Corner known as the Eglinton Strip which is a commercial strip of barber shops, record stores, groceries and a number of eateries (not full scale restaurants)—all predominantly Jamaican—which is often touted as the heart of the Caribbean community. Some Caribbean-born residents live in the residential areas surrounding the strip but they are not numerically dominant. In the extreme western and northeastern ends of the GTA, there are also large concentrations of Caribbean residents. Many of these concentrations have been created by the existence of government-assisted housing projects where those members of the Caribbean working class and its growing underclass who are dependent on Government welfare subsidies find affordable housing. Caribbean middle-income earners and professionals are distributed throughout the GTA in areas where their economic circumstances as well as a favorable real estate and mortgage market have afforded them owner-occupied residences (Figure 2).

The increase of immigrants to Canada from virtually every part of the world, in particular from those areas traditionally designated as “The Third World,” therefore, including all of those from the ancestral homelands of the Caribbean population, has made the Caribbean-born immigrant and their Canadian-born descendants less distinctive in Toronto. Color of skin and other phenotypes that may have been distinguishing characteristics in an earlier period no longer hold as identifiers for those of Caribbean origin. The original markers are ineffectual and the Afro-Caribbean person disappears in the increasing number of immigrants from continental Africa, in much the same way as his or her Indo-Caribbean compatriots who struggle to distinguish themselves from the huge



**FIGURE 3**

Caribana is a family event, unifying multiple generations and backgrounds. Courtesy of Clayton Phillips.

population of immigrants from the Asian sub-continent and its sub-regions.<sup>2</sup> Nor does a common religion provide a distinguishing feature of the community. The dominant religious persuasion is Christianity but Caribbean Christians are not identified with any one Christian denomination, as say the Italians and Portuguese identify with Catholicism. There are significant minorities of Hindus and Muslims in the Caribbean community but they share their beliefs with fellow religionists from the sub-continent and the rest of the Islamic world. It is only the African-influenced but Caribbean-created religions of Spiritual Baptists, Pocomania and Orisha (or Shango), which constitute a distinguishing religious practice but which remain the religious choice of a minority in the Caribbean population of Toronto.<sup>3</sup>

The identifiers are few but important. The Jamaican patty and jerk chicken and the Trinidadian and Guyanese roti are food items that have brought spice to the menus of urban Canada and are identifiers of the Caribbean. Aside from cuisine and culinary habits, peoples of the Caribbean in Toronto are also distinguishable by language practice. English is the common first language and its Caribbean variants of different island dialects and accents set the community apart and act as a distinguishing feature of the Caribbean population. While discerning insiders may be able to immediately distinguish between the various island dialects and perhaps even recognize urban/rural or even ethnic peculiarities, to the untutored outsider they all sound alike, with “musical” and “lilting” being the most charitable labels applied to Caribbean accents, speech practices, and registers.

Finally and perhaps most decisively, the spectacular performance known as Caribana has become a significant identifier for peoples of Caribbean origin in Canada. The musical sounds and ensembles, the dances, and the practices of costumed individuals and bands

<sup>2</sup> On the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora in Toronto see Gopie, “The Next Indo-Caribbean Generation in Canada”; Singh, “The Invention of Ethnicity”; Premdas, “Diaspora and its Discontents.”

<sup>3</sup> On the Spiritual Baptists in Toronto, see the unpublished dissertation by Duncan, “This Spot of Ground.”

which together make up Caribana and the assumed Caribbean penchant for that combination of performance practices is considered the most distinguishing characteristic attached to and claimed by the Caribbean community in Canada. The annual Caribana Festival has been utilized as the mechanism for, and touted as the expression of, Caribbean pride, unity, and identity (Figure 3).

### The Elusive Caribbean Identity

There was very little in the past of the Caribbean to foster both national as well as a regional identity. With its indigenous populations radically reduced (and at best marginalized, if not ignored) it is the descendants of the numerically small voluntary immigrants and the numerically large involuntary migrants who are the major actors in the creation of Caribbean national identities. The colonial system wreaked havoc with ethnic identities not only for the enslaved majority but also for the enslaving minority. This latter at least had some notion and continuing association with a metropolitan centre which they needed and encouraged for a variety of obvious and practical reasons. In fact, their struggle was to attempt to resist the way in which those of their homeland recognized them as other, colonials—white to be sure, but other nonetheless. Indeed, their desperate effort to hold on to skin color as a badge of distinction was almost in direct proportion to the way in which they were inexorably becoming Caribbean creoles, recognized by others if denied by themselves.

For the enslaved majority the colonial process also created havoc with the construction of ethnic identity. The process of slavery and colonialism transformed these heterogeneous arrivals of diverse ethnicities and nationalities from Africa into first slave—a unit of labor—and then hastened their homogenization into African and their descendants into Afro-Caribbean. The homogenizing tendencies of enslavement slowly but inevitably forced the emergence of a new ethnic identity and cultural practice reflective of their new environment and conditions despite conscious efforts to maintain old ethnic identities. The dislocated Africans and their descendants created new ethnic identities, inevitably borrowing heavily from reconstructed versions and memories from their African cultural repertoire. The end of the constant flow of arrivals from Africa—between British abolition in 1807 and the last arrivals to Cuba in 1863—cut the umbilical cord that joined them with the continent and interrupted the continued and obvious identification with Africa. Social pressures of the post-slavery, colonial (or in the case of Haiti, neo-colonial) experience emphasized and encouraged a negative relationship with Africa and things African. The political movements and changes of the 20th century, including the “Back to Africa” movement of Marcus Mosiah Garvey in the 1920’s; the emergence of the Rastafarian movement in the 1930’s; the regaining of political independence of a number of African countries beginning with Ghana in 1957; intellectual and cultural movements such as negritude; and the backwash of the American Black Power movement, succeeded in rehabilitating the image of Africa among the popular Caribbean masses of African origin and facilitated the acceptance of the hyphenated nomenclature.

Among the other ethnic groups in the region, all of whom were later-day arrivals to this region stamped by the founding Euro-Afro duet, were the Syrian-Lebanese, the Portuguese, the Chinese, and the East Indians. They were inserted into a situation where color of skin, race and imputed cultural attributes determined one’s position in the social

hierarchy, influenced one's access to social and material goods and chances of social and economic mobility, and informed one's perception of self and definition of the other. They too helped to shape the emerging social order and its perceptions of identity as much as they were shaped by it. Those whose pigmentation placed them in the top positions tended over time, and facilitated by intermarriage, to surrender separate ethnic identity and opt for membership in the amorphous but socially powerful category "white" or, more specifically in the case of Trinidad, French Creole. Because of a combination of specific conditions—including officially supported group arrival as a designated ethnic category, a long period of residential and occupational isolation and specialization, distinct patterns of language, religion, dress and other distinguishing cultural attributes—the East Indians were prevented from easy absorption into any of the already identified groupings, including the Euro-Afro Creole culture. Therefore, they had a problematic relationship with what was emerging as the measure used for determining national identity.

The struggle for a national identity had to compete with the enormously powerful social cleavages created by the demands of the slave-based colonial enterprise. Both slavery and post-emancipation colonialism encouraged and often rewarded individualism at the expense of group or collective effort. Slave rebellions, the heroic efforts of the successful Haitian revolution notwithstanding, floundered on the centrifugal tendencies of the system. Largely they were successful only to the extent that they were able to exploit the cracks in the ruling class and less so as they failed to overcome their own debilitating divisions. In the colonial period, the ability of the colonial rulers to exploit these fissures and to utilize a divide and rule strategy considerably slowed the anti-colonial struggle.

Born out of an anti-colonial sentiment, national identity in the Caribbean has a strong color and racist bias. This was inevitable given the nature of colonial rule with its origins in racial domination and its dependence for its maintenance on the continued existence of a hierarchy of race and color. The anti-colonial movements by necessity had to contain a strong racist component as the colonials simultaneously fought for both racial vindication and political liberation. If the enemy was colonialism then that enemy had a white face and its internal collaborators and allies wore white masks, however dark their skins or obviously Caribbean their accents. In the post-Independence period, the struggle was to contain and eliminate the virus of racism that had been let loose this tendency in the anti-colonial mobilization. In the meantime, nascent nationalism was being formed and influenced by a notion that the nation was black. White fright and flight from the Caribbean in the post-independence years almost mirrored a similar phenomenon in the post-emancipation period, a response to this palpable feeling of displacement and dislocation. The rise to political power of a predominantly Afro-Caribbean ruling class who perceived that their own political survival depended on the manipulation of these underlying racial fears and aspirations did much to encourage fright, flight, and apprehension about national identity.

In countries like Trinidad, which had a larger multiethnic and multiracial composition than most of the other Eastern Caribbean countries, this was even more problematic for the construction of national identity and the role of cultural institutions in the making of that identity. Despite the claims of its political leaders to the contrary, in multiracial Trinidad, it is a nationalism from which many Indo-Trinidadians claim to feel excluded and in which Euro-Trinidadians and other non-Afro Trinidadians claim only tenuous inclusion. The nationalist movement that negotiated political independence for the country was largely seen as a proto-Black Power movement despite its leaders' often-articulated

commitment to the anti-racist and multiracial principles of the Bandung Conference. Yet Trinidad's first major uprising against neo-colonialism, which came barely eight years after Independence, has the curious reputation of being mobilized around cries of Black Power against a government which considered itself Black and was led by Eric Williams, one of the major, internationally recognized of the post-World War II anti-colonial movement. Nevertheless, this Afro-focused definition of nationalism is now being strenuously challenged and the Trinidad Carnival, the accepted progenitor of Caribana, is one of the major sites of contestation.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, immigrants to Canada traveled with this problematic and contested sense of identity and injected it into the debates over Caribana.

The struggle for a sense of a regional identity is even more problematic and, despite the persistent proclamations of the politicians, even more delayed. The archipelago was divided by its European intruders as the Papal Bull of 1494 and the Treaty of Tordesillas (which first gave absolute sovereignty to the Spanish Crown) was repudiated by the French, the English and the Dutch, who all wanted their share of Adam's will. The subsequent balkanization of the archipelago by European struggles for Caribbean real estate is reflected in the linguistic plurality that characterizes the region. The diversity of European cultural traits sitting on a predominantly African base, which is also a characteristic of the region, is a legacy of this first seminal formative era. Each colony's participation as separate producers for the world sugar market under the economic direction and military protection of their respective European metropolises did not facilitate intra-regional cooperation. All lines of communication led from the colonies to the different European capitals. The intra-regional movement of goods and peoples, though it certainly existed, was often contraband and, though in defiance of imperial edict, was more often than not merely in response to urgently felt needs to fill gaps created by imperial deficiencies. The struggles for political independence since the Haitian Revolution have been a staggered process waged for and achieving individual insular liberation rather than the freedom of the region from colonial rule. Although the region, some notable exceptions notwithstanding, is free from formal, political, extra-regional connections, this was achieved without the simultaneous forging of a regional consciousness.

There was very little which encouraged integration over time and which sent deep roots of commonality into a soil, which historically had only produced division. The territories of the Anglo-Caribbean have had their historical experience with attempts at forging regional unity. In the 19th century, there were two federal structures, a loose one for the Windward Islands, and the more established Leeward Islands Federation of 1870–1940, which served to combine the administrations of Antigua, St Kitts-Nevis-Anguilla, Montserrat, Dominica, and The British Virgin Islands. Although long lasting, this was a federal structure designed for the convenient administration of colonies suffering from a declining sugar industry. It did not further the cause of regional integration or a sense of regional identity even within its limited geographical jurisdiction. The same ethos of bureaucratic contrivance and administrative convenience would motivate and inform the West Indian Federation of 1958–1962. This too exhibited a narrowness of vision reflected in its structure and scope, which doomed it from birth to an early death. The idea of

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Carnival as a major site of contestation see Liverpool, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*; Ryan, *The Jhandi and the Cross*; Munasinghe, *Callaloo or Tossed Salad?*; Smart and Nehusi, *Ah Come Back Home*; Allahar and Zavitz, "Racial Politics."



federation had been gaining ground among some of the region's politicians and political activists since the 1930s and it was seen as a way of achieving autonomy within the British Empire parallel to the Dominion Status of Australia, Canada, and South Africa. It was received by the mass of the populations as an imposed structure from outside in and from top down.<sup>5</sup>

The decision of a referendum in Jamaica to withdraw from the Federation spelt the end of the experiment. The consequences of that referendum are immortalized in the aphorism of Trinidad's Eric Williams that one from ten leaves nought, and the consequent anguish is captured in Sparrow's classic calypso on the issue. The Federation died a premature death and the region morphed into separate independences, with Jamaica and Trinidad to be the first of the Anglo-Caribbean territories to become independent in 1962. Since the 17th century, Jamaica had been the jewel in the Anglo-Caribbean crown. However, it had always had its back turned to its southern neighbors and its gaze steadfastly focused on England. In the 20th century, it fell to the seductions of its neighboring suitor, the United States, only to be penalized for its attempt at socialism and its support for the ostracized Cuba. Trinidad to the south, with its peculiar history of late plantation development under Spanish control, French cultural dominance, and only latterly English jurisdiction, also became politically independent in 1962. It had a mixed population and was perhaps the most culturally un-British of the Caribbean territories. It was controlled by a fiercely anti-colonial administration that—although a leading advocate of regionalism—firmly refused to become the dumping ground of rejected British responsibilities by becoming the leading actor in a Jamaica-less Federation of the remaining islands. The other islands of the eastern Caribbean, including Barbados, lurched between various anemic projects of regional cooperation but all, with the exception of Montserrat, which opted for a continued association with Britain, eventually went their economically poor but politically independent ways. Though never part of the federal venture, mainland Guyana became independent in 1966. It would remain mired in a debilitating racial conflict, impoverished by the repercussions of ventures into a misconceived socialism and stagnated by corrupt administration.

All that was left of this adventure in regionalism was the University of the West Indies established in 1945, two boats—The Federal Maple and The Federal Palm<sup>6</sup>—and, of course, a West Indian cricket team which predated the Federation and which in the 1970s and early 1980s dominated a game introduced by the British colonialists but which the Caribbean cricketers so mastered that it did more for the fostering of regional pride and identity than anything any politician has ever done or said.<sup>7</sup>

The idea of a regional unity continued to exist at its worst in the vacuous pronouncements of politicians and the largely ineffectual machinations of regional bureaucrats and at its best in the work of the creative artists of the region who continue to

<sup>5</sup> On Federation, see Lewis, *The Growth of the Modern West Indies*.

<sup>6</sup> These boats were gifts from the Canadian government who experience with the CPR and the CNR, understood from their own the importance of strong and viable communications in fostering a sense of common national identity to counter the divisive possibilities created by distance over a large land mass or, as in the case of the Caribbean units, separation by large stretches of water.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see the articles in Beckles, *An Area of Conquest*; Beckles and Stoddart, *Liberation Cricket*; Beckles, *A Spirit of Dominance*.

espouse the vision of regional commonality and unity supported by some historians who—cognizant of the underlying commonality produced by a shared subterranean history—refuse to be blinded by the obvious contemporary surface diversity. Bitter memories and frustrated dreams remain among a segment of a generation who were either graduates of the University of the West Indies or resident in the metropolises at the time of the conception of the Federation. Their political coming of age spanned the conception and dissolution of the federal dream and therefore they became the most ardent advocates of regional unity. Members of this generation formed the founding cohort of the contemporary Caribbean community in Canada and who in their search for a common identity produced Caribana. If the West Indian Federation died in their old home, they attempted to resurrect at least its spirit in their new home of the Canadian confederation.

The bulk of the migrants in whose name they chose to speak arrived at a time when North America and the ex-colonial world were in turmoil and blackness as an ideology was informing the political socialization and identity of the black wretched of the earth. These immigrants came from an Anglo-Caribbean still immediately affected by the collapse of the Federation and in the early stage of toying with independence and its consequent insular identity. Their newfound pride in independence reinforced the historical insular tendencies of the region and presented a challenge to those advocating a regionalist perspective and identity.

These crisscrossing currents of unfulfilled regionalism, incipient insularism, and nascent ethnocentrism informed the creation of Caribana, colored the competing claims for paternity of the emerging festival, and influenced the struggle to appropriate the street carnival for identity formation. All of this found support in the host society, which seemed unconcerned with melting them into new Canadians but willing to consider them under the amorphous label of black immigrant. In fact, the host society encouraged the Caribbean tendency to what the sociologist Maingot has called a culture of play and multiple identifications.<sup>8</sup>

### The Host Society

Toronto in 1965 was still predominantly an Anglo-Saxon society, that is, the Anglo-Scottish still determined the social and cultural character of the society and dominated it politically. There were minor skirmishes between Protestants and Irish Catholics; anti-Jewish sentiment occasionally was felt; and the newcomers—no matter if they were Eastern European, Italian, or Portuguese—were culturally tolerated since their labor, particularly in the field of construction, was crucial to the post-World War II boom. However, to the predominantly Afro-Caribbean population these were all minor intra-group altercations of a family perceived as white: for whether they were older Anglo-Saxon or newcomer Europeans, the white dominance and orientation was quite clear. It was easier for a newcomer white camel to pass through the eye of the Anglo-Saxon needle—often through marriage—than the non-white newcomer was, however rich in culture, to enter the Anglo-Saxon heaven of Toronto.

Ontario has a well-deserved reputation as a haven in the nineteenth century for Afro-Americans escaping slavery. This was the northern-most terminus of the Under-

<sup>8</sup> See Maingot, "National Identity"; Yon, "Identity and Differences."

ground Railroad to which Josiah Henson and Harriet Tubman, guided by the North Star, escaped the unrelenting limitations on life imposed by an enslaving and racist America. It was indeed a haven, despite the legitimate complaints of those Afro-Americans who after the cessation of the Civil War in the United States found Canada a less than welcoming society, with the pattern of racial discrimination hardening throughout the closing decades of the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th century. The situation was the same in the eastern provinces for the descendants of the black loyalist refugees and the Jamaican Maroons who had been dumped there. Yet, despite this less than perfect history, Canada has been able to build a reputation as a welcoming society, reflected in her undoubtedly liberal refugee and immigration policy of the contemporary period.<sup>9</sup>

Immigrants from the Caribbean, especially Afro-Caribbeans, did not initially benefit from this Canadian policy of open immigration, which in the period between 1945 and 1967 welcomed immigrants from eastern and western Europe but severely limited those from the Caribbean. The immigrant community consisted largely of predominantly male students, who often converted their temporary status to permanent residence through marriage, and female domestic servants, many of whom used the strategy of temporary indentured service to circumvent a restrictive immigration policy. Many of these women also went on to professional training and careers after their domestic service.<sup>10</sup> In the early 1960s, in order to deal with a shortage of teachers in an expanding school-age population, Canada exploited the mutual Commonwealth heritage and recruited trained teachers from the Anglo-Caribbean. Until 1967, in comparison with other immigrant groups, the early Caribbean Community was highly literate, highly skilled, and highly trained. Given the British orientation of their cultural socialization, they were eminently positioned for easy absorption or assimilation into Canadian society. However, Afro- and Indo-Caribbean people would painfully realize that for them skin color was a barrier. In addition, language and other cultural attributes would frustrate the attempts of Euro-Caribbean immigrants at becoming invisible in a mass of whiteness.

Yet for all this, Canada and Ontario in particular, was still in a sense—at least culturally—an open frontier on the verge of change. It was still possible for any incoming cohesive group with a critical mass to put a mark on the Canadian cultural space. The cohesiveness of the other immigrant groups, supported by a strong sense of cultural and national identity and reinforced by a pattern of settlement and residence, facilitated the emergence of ethnic enclaves, which enabled smaller versions of some aspects of their cultural heritage. Later this would be encouraged by the official federal preference for the cultural mosaic, which became enshrined in the government's policy of multiculturalism, distinct from the American melting pot. This policy and practice fosters respect for the ethno-cultural heritage of all participants in the society of immigrants—the indigenous First Nations and the founding Anglo-Franco duet notwithstanding. There is official support for those efforts at cultural preservation and pride where it is not inimical to the common good or at the expense of any one group. Moreover, the gradual emergence of a number of policies at the provincial level celebrates the diversity of the population and sees it as a strength and a building block rather than a debilitating stumbling block. This provincial attitude is reflected in the Ontario Human Rights Code, which—despite its bureaucratic flaws—has facilitated a climate of general ethnic tolerance. Furthermore, in

<sup>9</sup> See Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Henry, *Forgotten Canadians*; Walker, *The Black Loyalists*.

<sup>10</sup> Henry, "The West Indian Domestic Scheme in Canada"; and Silvera, *Silenced*.

their pursuit for recognition as a world-class city, the municipal administrations of Toronto have embraced the reality of multiculturalism and diversity as its public relations mantra in recent times.<sup>11</sup>

The period between 1965 and 1967 was an important juncture for the Caribbean community in the context of the development of the Caribana festival. In the first instance changes in federal Government policy on immigration, a reality to which many of that earlier generation had contributed by their political activism had widened both the size and range of the community.<sup>12</sup> The older restrictions were removed and greater numbers coming as individual immigrants or in the family-sponsored category swelled the numbers of the community. Moreover, large numbers of Caribbean immigrants who sought refuge from the growing racism in England formed a stream of second-phase Caribbean migrants who brought the experience of adjustment as immigrants in a white metropole.

By the time Caribbean immigrants started arriving in Ontario in large numbers, the historical black population was considerably reduced and resident largely in the rural provinces of southern Ontario. The city of Toronto itself had erased from its collective memory the existence of a city-based black population, including a black alderman and acting mayor of Toronto, and the black population itself seemed to have left little traces of its existence, save a number of black churches.<sup>13</sup> In a word, there was no publicly active black Toronto community (individual activists notwithstanding), at least not one like the Afro-American communities, with their long history of struggle and the undeniable stamp they have left on American culture, which Caribbean immigrants would meet in the cities of the United States. The field was open for the recent immigrants to Canada to give Toronto a Caribbean cultural presence which was also politically black.

Although there has been a long historical connection between Canada and the Caribbean shaped by their common, albeit unequal, membership in the British Empire, the flow has been essentially one way and the presence selective. The Canadian presence was particularly noticeable in the financial sectors (banking and insurance), in the mineral extractive industry (specifically bauxite in Jamaica) and the long-standing missionary efforts among the East Indian community of the Canadian Presbyterian Mission.

Quite apart from the difficulties caused by the almost impenetrable pre-1969 immigration barriers, Canada has never been culturally attractive to would-be Caribbean emigrants, and Canadian cultural life never fired their imagination or elicited imitation. Too cold, too clean, too policed, too white were the usual complaints. In the late 1950s, Lord Melody complained in his calypso "*Canada so cold*" (c. 1958) about wanting to escape the cold of Montreal notwithstanding the attractions of the French Canadian women. Sparrow revisited this theme in 1968 with his "*Carnival in Sixty-eight*" before singing "*Toronto Mas*" in 1972 in which Toronto is attractive only because of the existence of Caribana. Moreover, the absence of a Canadian cultural beachhead in the Caribbean to compete with

<sup>11</sup> All of the greetings from Government officials stress the importance of Caribana to the image of multiculturalism. The Premier of Ontario in his greetings in 1998 in *The Official Caribana 1998 Festival Guide* claimed that, "since its inception in 1967, this festival has symbolised our province's multicultural heritage" (7). For a blistering critique of multiculturalism, see Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions*.

<sup>12</sup> See Taylor "Darkening the Complexion of Canadian Society" and Armstrong, *Bromley*.

<sup>13</sup> Hubbard, *Against All Odds*. Henry, *Black Politics*; Hill, *A Black Man's Toronto*; Shadd et al., *The Underground Railroad*.

Hollywood made Canada less known and less attractive to Caribbean migrants. The quiet, serene harshness of the Canadian northern landscape as presented in films like *Nanook of the North* was no competition for Hollywood presentations of the urban United States. Despite an early program of calypsos by Lord Caresser on Canadian Radio, which was relayed to Trinidad, no calypso presence was established in Canada, as had been the case in the United States since at least the nineteen-thirties.<sup>14</sup> For Trinidadians in particular, the image of Canada could not compete with the existence of an American military presence on the island since 1944, and American military exploits were regularly presented as costumed portrayals during the carnival. At best, for the mass of working-class immigrants the Caribbean imagination of North America erased the official borders and divided the continent between culturally attractive and culturally bland. The Antiguan calypso singer Short Shirt erased the border when he captivated a Trinidad audience in 1977 with his "Tourist Leggo" in which he described a "pretty little Yankee tourist" who came down from Halifax – which is a Canadian city. The American accent long available to would-be Caribbean imitators through radio, screen, and phonograph has no equally recognizable and easily imitated Canadian equivalent. Those Caribbean immigrants who went to the United States were encouraged to imitate and assimilate; those who went to Canada were encouraged to remain true to their old selves—separate and distinct in a multicultural society.

### Transplanting and Transforming a Festival

In 1967, in recognition of the national celebrations to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, a small group of Caribbean immigrants decided to apply for permission to parade on the streets of Toronto in a mini-carnival as their contribution to the celebrations.<sup>15</sup> Their original intentions and their composition were to have lasting effects. The original group was a microcosm of that earlier Caribbean immigrant population described before—recent graduates, professionals, and students. Some of them had been involved in the negotiations and advocacy that had brought changes to immigration policy and led to the establishment of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Their subsequent career trajectories—one is now a prominent lawyer and advocate in civil and human rights, another became a provincial judge, others had outstanding careers as leading members in both the private and public service spheres—are illustrative of their potential for social mobility, and surely their interest and concern was acceptance and assimilation into Canadian society.

The first venture was small and quite successful, given its aim and scope. Based on their initial success they formalized an organization, The Caribbean Cultural Committee (CCC), which would be responsible for staging this carnival as an annual event. The CCC was constituted as an open membership group with annual elections for a Board of

<sup>14</sup> See Rohlehr, *Calypso & Society*, 515. Despite major strides in recent years calypso like the steel band remains the neglected stepchild of the CCC. On calypso in Toronto, see Jones, "The Calypso Monarch of Canada Competition."

<sup>15</sup> For a description of that first venture, see Foster and Schwarz, *Caribana*; and Foster, *A Place Called Heaven*. It is often said that failure is an orphan but success has many parents. For a claim for an origin of the concept of Caribana at McGill University in Montreal in 1950, see Mascoll, "Slaves on 'Free Day'."

Directors. Moreover, it assumed as its mandate to be the spokespersons and advocates for Caribbean cultural interests with the direct intention of building a Caribbean Community Centre, in keeping with activities among other immigrant groups.

Although composed of immigrant members drawn from throughout the Anglo-Caribbean, the original committee was dominated by Trinidadians and members from some of the other eastern Caribbean islands. Jamaican participation was minimal. The Eastern Caribbean influence on the form and content of Toronto's Caribana was inevitable given, on the one hand, the composition of the organizing committee and, on the other hand, the fact that the form chosen, a street carnival, was more a reflection of the Eastern Caribbean cultural experience than of Jamaica's cultural history. In addition, the Trinidad dominance had much to do with the inescapable fact that Trinidad had a longer cultural tradition of street carnivals. With the exception of Dominica, Grenada, and St Lucia (with their Afro-French influence), the tradition of street carnivals in the other Eastern Caribbean islands of Antigua and Barbados (and the recent Jamaican experiments) is a newer 20th century import which has its origins more in tourist promotion programs than in an indigenous tradition. However, this Trinidadian influence on the form and content of the Caribana festival has generated controversy, first between Jamaica and the rest of the region and, then, within the Eastern Caribbean block—all of them complaining about the machinations of Trinidadian Mafiosi. Such suspicions and accusations often unleash petty island rivalries and spurious insular nationalism, which threatens the very fragile sense of, and opportunity for, Caribbean regional identity provided by the festival.

The pressures of racial and cultural discrimination, which continue to plague the efforts for the building of a multicultural society respectful of diversity, demanded and demand the umbrella of Caribbean unity, a unity often forged more by racial than cultural identification. Hence, some Caribbean people lay claims to Caribana on the grounds of race or, more precisely, racial patrimony. The attempts to use the festival to encourage regional unity based on race produced other problems and tensions. Claims to the origins of Carnival are often contested and fuelled more by political emotion than scholarly inquiry. The Trinidad Carnival, like its counterparts in Brazil and Rio, are products of the Atlantic World; that is, in its spirit, it reflects its multiple Old World origins, and in its expression, it reflects the commingling of cultures and the creation of "new" forms to suit the demands of the Atlantic experience. For however much Afro-nationalists may want to claim paternity for the original festival of the Trinidad carnival, they are often reminded it originally was a Euro-African creation to which other immigrant groups to Trinidad have contributed. In its contemporary manifestation it is truly a Trinidad national festival reflecting in a variety of ways the multiplicity of ethnic origins in that society.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, in Toronto the festival remains unrelentingly multiethnic, and similar Afro-nationalist claims for ownership cannot trump the fact that Caribbean peoples of all racial backgrounds have been integral to its development and have participated at all levels. More importantly, they share a collective emotional investment in the festival: they all feel pride in the accomplishments of the annual parade as strongly as they feel shamed by the annual revelation of the inadequacies of the usually Afro-dominated boards of management responsible for producing the festival.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> On the debate, see Allaha, "Racial Politics."

<sup>17</sup> For a claim of African roots and a rejection of European influence as well as a gratuitous invitation for all to participate, see Jacob, "The Roots of MAS."

It has not been easy to transfer this festival to Canadian soil, as the unpredictable Ontario summers often play tricks on a street spectacle that feeds on abundant sunshine and warm weather. More importantly, a similar transcultural institution in the host society which would act as a facilitator was absent. The small and fairly invisible, indigenous black community had no equivalent street festival and the other available models, such as the Irish community's St Patrick's Day or the Santa Claus Christmas Parade sponsored by one of the larger retail merchants, were much tamer street parades. The available legal framework (that is laws about the organization and permission for parades and the public use of alcohol) was not accommodating. Ontario was a virtually dry province and the city had very restrictive laws, verging on prohibition, which regulated the sale and use of alcohol. Carnival as a bacchanalian event assumes a liberal attitude towards drinking as many participants fuel their energies with the copious use of alcohol in order to facilitate the liberation of their spirits. There has been a constant running battle between the Toronto police and scores of participants and spectators over this issue.

Carnival is also not a spectator event. The Toronto authorities were accustomed to parades that moved along a clearly defined route lined with spectators who applauded at the passing parade and which began and ended at the announced time and in a logistically determined place so that the crowds could be dispersed and the streets promptly cleaned. The Trinidad carnival participants and participant-observers assume the right to total control of the city space in which moving bands of costumed masqueraders interact with family and friends along the route. Although they may not be costumed, they nevertheless feel it is their right to join the band and chip along to the music as they acknowledge friends and family, and renew acquaintances while performing rituals of bonding. This has been a nightmare for the police and no amount of familiarization visits to Trinidad (as their counterparts in England have done) seem able to bridge this gap between the metropolitan police's concern for surface order and the Caribbean carnival's capacity for ordered chaos. The Police have often found themselves in conflict with the spectators and they have periodically threatened to withhold permission to stage the parade—a right which they and not the city politicians have under their control. The use of barriers to separate spectators from masqueraders at the judging points and the deployment of mounted police as standard crowd control techniques—ironically in use in Trinidad—was supported by a CCC administration (Figure 4).<sup>18</sup>

This conflictual tug-of-war between the imported cultural tradition and the realities of the host society has given occasion for harsh exchanges between the authorities and the community and self-reflection on, among other things, the meaning of multiculturalism and diversity as well as Caribbean identity and the community's sense of its position in Canadian society. There has been some give and take on both sides. The removal of the parade from one of the central arteries of the city to a lakeside thoroughfare on its outskirts was originally seen as evidence that the city still did not see the Caribbean parade as an equal with, for example, the Irish St Patrick's Day parade, which has continued to be on a main street. Some commentators have read this as an attempt to hide and control "Black Bodies" which are seen as threatening and disturbing the conventional images of "Toronto the Good" and "Toronto the Clean." The move was justified by the CCC as part of the effort to make the event financially rewarding and a way of giving the CCC greater financial independence from state and private donations. Events

<sup>18</sup> "Caribana Head Defends Barricade Use."



**FIGURE 4**  
Streets of Toronto burst with Caribana participants and their fans. Courtesy of Clayton Phillips.

have proven that the decision of the CCC to approve the move was in fact a progressive step since the Caribana parade has outgrown the original city centre routes. To accommodate a spectator audience of 1.5 million, plus the masqueraders with their music trucks and steel bands on streets that were not designed for such events and which can just barely accommodate vehicular traffic, constituted a logistical nightmare. Even attempting to locate the Children's carnival along the Eglinton strip in the supposed heart of the Caribbean community is fraught with logistical nightmares. Yet while the shift from centre to outskirts would continue to provide conspiracy-inclined theorists with grist for their mill, the principal shareholders—the masqueraders and the spectators—appreciated the move. The rewards, however, are uneven: crowd control may have been achieved but the CCC's financial goals are still far from satisfied.<sup>19</sup>

There has been a continuous struggle to prevent sanitizing the parade. The festival is modeled after the Trinidad Carnival that, like its counterparts, the Carnival of Rio in Brazil and the Mardi Gras of New Orleans in Louisiana, has an international reputation for creative bacchanalia. The most notable missing aspect is the opening celebrations, called *Jouvay* (from the French *jour ouvert*) in the Trinidad version. This is, in some sense, an early morning re-creation of the origins of the Carnival in Trinidad among the enslaved communities.<sup>20</sup> *Jouvay* was and remains, perhaps the most Bakhtinian aspect of the Trinidad Carnival. Too many fundamental legal and cultural aspects of Toronto life would have to be changed before a Trinidad-type *Jouvay* would be possible. Like all good bacchanalia, the Trinidad carnival was traditionally an opportunity to “turn the world upside down” with its hidden and open scripts criticizing the social elites, an opportunity to laugh at and to pillory authority, and to expose their foibles as well as the inequities and

<sup>19</sup> On the struggle over space see Jackson, “The Politics of the Street”; Gallagher, “Constructing Caribbean Culture in Toronto”; Joseph, “Jump up and Beg”; Hernandez-Ramdwar, “De-coding Caribana.”

<sup>20</sup> For a description, see Walsh, “*Jouvay Mornin'.*”





**FIGURE 5**

The job of crowd control and street cleaning is daunting during Caribana. Courtesy of Clayton Phillips.

contradictions of colonial rule. It was also an opportunity for the society to hold a mirror up to itself and examine its virtues as well as its vices. There are still elements of this in the Trinidad carnival. However, the increase in the kind of escapist imaginative creations of some commercially oriented bands now requires another kind of explanatory framework to capture the nuances and the different forms of participation of not only locals, but also returning Trinidadians from abroad, as well as the increasing number of foreign-born participants.

None of this applies to the Toronto Caribana, despite its Trinidadian inspirations. What is more evident is the struggle for inclusion, the struggle for a place in the Canadian sun, the struggle for a community seeking recognition for its contributions to a multicultural nation. This is no world turned upside down; there is no hidden script. The face that is presented here must be a face without warts, a reinforcement of the status quo and a search for respectability. There is no social criticism except ironically by a small group of White Canadians who in traditional Trinidadian fashion have consistently used the parade to express their concerns with environmental issues, global concerns, and local politics. The Caribana presentations displayed by Caribbean masquerade producers are well constructed, aesthetically pleasing, extremely beautiful, and eye-catching; almost Disneyland-type presentations marked by an element of escapist imagination. This image is only occasionally undermined by the behavior of some participants who may be using the opportunity as a social valve to escape from the pressures of living in a metropolitan society in the early 21st century. However, this behavior almost immediately receives the disapproval of those from the Caribbean who believe that it brings shame and disgrace to them and derails their search for respectability and approval from other Canadians (Figure 5).

The element of nostalgia that marked the earlier years of Caribana is quickly disappearing because not only the generation that longed for their homeland is aging but also because increased contact with the Caribbean brought on by cheaper means of regular communication has reduced the feeling of isolation. Those same easier means of frequent and almost instant connection with the Caribbean has increased the Trinidadian



**FIGURE 6**

The many faces of Canadian identity performed as a part of Caribana. Courtesy of Clayton Phillips.

influence on the festival, while simultaneously it has also allowed for a proportionate element of invited participants of non-Trinidadian origin to be part of the festival, thereby supporting the reduction of inter-island rivalry. There is also greater intra-regional communication and interaction, especially among cultural producers and entertainers, than there was thirty years ago. Ironically, Trinidad's impact on those carnivals has also increased to such an extent that there is now sameness in all the products.

Thirty-seven years later the baton has been passed to a new generation of youth who are finding new uses for Caribana in their struggle for acceptance in Canadian society. Often feeling the brunt of over-policing, unsympathetic educational authorities and confused parents, they have begun to reshape Caribana on the edges. They are frequently the offspring of mixed Caribbean marriages or marriages between Caribbean people and other Canadians. They claim Canadian identity and citizenship with fervor denied to or impossible for their parents. They see themselves as Canadian and many often vigorously reject the hyphenated immigrant label. Their networks and alliances go beyond the Caribbean and, despite the racist pressures they face, in many little ways they are struggling to transcend the stultifying pressures of race. They seek inclusion in the Caribana potpourri as embracingly as they are assured that hockey is theirs. They move between rap, hip-hop, reggae, and calypso as effortlessly as they have embraced the Jamaican patois as their lingua franca in defiance of those who have sought to demonize Jamaican youth and by extension all of them. They exult in the abundance of riches which their heritage has given them as much as they seek to have their contributions recognized and legitimized. The future is theirs. They will perform their identity on the Caribana stage and in the process transform the festival. Perhaps they will only be able to do so while dependent on the state, which has now become an important party of interest (Figure 6).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> On Caribbean youth in Toronto, see James, *Making It* and Henry, *The Caribbean Diaspora* (Ch. 6).

## Conclusion

The festival has been produced every year since 1967, despite the annual glitches and hiccups that always seem to threaten it. The organization, though slightly battered and bruised and showing numerous signs of structural deficiency, still exists. In that sense, one of the original goals has been met although its grand and admirable dream to build a Caribbean Cultural Centre is no nearer fruition than the day it was conceived. The rapid growth in the size of the community and its residential dispersal suggests a single centre is inadequate and impractical in any case. However, the festival and the organization continue to reflect all of the strengths and weaknesses and the virtues and vices of the community from which it springs. Its activities over the years provide a valuable mirror in which to view, complete with distortions, the tortuous struggle of those from the Caribbean region for a sense of regional identity.

Most CCC administrations are often plagued by Boards with fiscal incompetence, managerial ineptitude, and visionary deficiency trying to handle the numerous claims on their meager resources.<sup>22</sup> The poverty of management belies and is in no way commensurate with the richness of the cultural product on display each year. This is compounded by and often reflected in the annual internecine squabbles that reveal not disagreements over policy issues but the working out of too many overactive and oversized egos and ambitions on too narrow a stage. These squabbles have been decried by some as the unnecessary washing of the community's dirty linen in public; others have seen the publicity—especially in the mainstream press—as the result of racist minds always eager to highlight “black” incompetence. Those who object to this public scrutiny often complain that the inadequacies and squabbles of other ethnic organizations never receive this level of public exposure or censure in both the mainstream and their own community presses. CCC Boards (except the founding group and a few of the earlier Boards who worked on their own) seem unable to wean themselves away from state support and patronage, usually justifying this dependence on the festival's contribution to the province's summer tourism economy. The inability to create a sound independent financial base from the cultural efforts of the creative stakeholders of the festival has cast the CCC, and by extension the community, as perennially incompetent mendicants in the eyes of the public and the reputed community they claim to represent. The price of their continued dependency on public funds is the demand to be “transparent and accountable” and the opportunity for the state to be involved in the festival.<sup>23</sup>

The state has now emerged as a new claimant for Caribana. In previous years apart from providing funding, state involvement was restricted to greetings from the heads of different levels of government and representatives of some of the relevant government

<sup>22</sup> This is in no way intended as a slur on the numerous *individuals* who have served the CCC to the best of their abilities and who demonstrate their capabilities in their paid employment in the public service and private enterprise. My concern is with the collective weakness and not the individual strengths.

<sup>23</sup> The financial woes and the internal squabbling of the CCC can be gleaned from the perusal of both the community and mainstream press in *any* year. See McTair, “Caribana's Wasteful Ways”; Joseph, “Jump up and Beg”; Foster, *A Place Called Heaven*; Abbate, “Caribana Unfazed”; Abbate, “Torres” *Caribana Funding*; Auguste, “Caribana's profitable ways.” Rusk, “Briefing”; Silochan, “Enough Squabbling.” See also, Lewis, “Caribana . . . Then and Now.”

departments that were published in the official Caribana brochure or festival guide. Occasionally there was a band of T-shirt clad revelers of mostly workers and their families and friends sponsored by the Ontario Government. In 2002, the internal squabbling and incompetence of the CCC threatened to derail Caribana and prevent its presentation in its thirty-fifth year. In obvious recognition of the contribution which the festival has made to municipal and provincial coffers as well as the sterling contribution the festival has made to rescuing Canada from a reputation of blandness, the city authorities moved to save the festival. They agreed to provide financing if the organization representing the bandleaders and the actual producers of the costumed bands would produce the Street festival and the competition for the King and Queen of the Bands while the CCC would be left with other aspects of the Festival. Clearly recognizing their position as powerful arbitrators and knowing that since they paid the piper they could call the tune, they used their economic and political influence to focus on the street carnival, which is the heart of the festival. In short, they ordered and paid for the delivery of the pizza they wanted.

Finally, they renamed that year's parade festival. Previous CCC administrations had vigorously protected their rights to the name Caribana. They have been known in the past to prosecute vigorously those smalltime Caribbean entrepreneurs who dared to organize fetes and use the label Caribana on their promotional flyers. The city and the bandleaders had to concede to their ownership of the name and to call their 2002 presentations the Toronto International Carnival.<sup>24</sup> They understood (as did the participants who played and spectators who came in their usual numbers) that regardless of the name, the *thing* was important. That *thing* being the opportunity and the right to display their creativity and enjoy themselves as a bacchanalian expression of all of the underlying motives which drive them so to do every year. This level of state intervention has not been repeated since, but a precedent has been set and other kinds of interventions in the future are not inconceivable. The very success of the festival has now become part of its bag of problems. In addition, in an ironic way this incident has demonstrated that the search for Caribbean identity had become ultimately bound up in the Ontarian and Canadian search for identity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Rusk, "Caribana Renamed."

<sup>25</sup> On the changing and changed relationship between Toronto and Caribana, see Burman, "Masquerading Toronto through Caribana."

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