Diaspora?

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L'auteure explore sa réaction au terme « Diaspora » et comment cette expression l'a touchée en tant qu' une enfant bi-raciale adoptée par des parents de race blanche vivant dans un environnement urbain au Canada. Elle examine la manière utilisée par sa mère adoptive qui, pour l'aider à se rapprocher de ses ancêtres, lui faisait adopter le modèle noir américain (USA).

How does a Bi-racial woman of francophone heritage, adopted and raised in Toronto locate herself in Diaspora? It's difficult to pronounce and is locked into an academic culture that keeps many women out.

I was born in Toronto, in 1961, the child of a white woman and a Black man, and placed immediately in a Ukrainian foster home where I learned to speak that language. Black—and big for my age by two—I was classified as a hard-to-place child, which meant that I did not belong, did not fit into the traditional structure of Toronto families. When my adoptive parents found me they were, among other things, and in no particular order, white, middle class, loving, and an ex-nun and ex-priest. Our family grew to ten with two homegrown white children, five Black adopteds, and an eastern European boy with a physical disability. I was the only Black-Bi-racial female amongst them: the oldest, and from the beginning, I felt that I did not belong, was somehow displaced, even among others who did not belong.

When I read the call for submissions for this journal, I didn't really get the "Diaspora" thing and how it might apply to me. How does a Bi-racial woman of francophone heritage, born, adopted and raised in Toronto locate herself in Diaspora? It's a difficult word to pronounce and is locked into an academic culture and understanding that keeps many women out. How does it apply to me? As a Bi-racial woman, I don't seem to fit into any of the historical, political or dictionary definitions—and so I am again displaced, not a member, not fitting. Even in Diaspora.

My mother was criticized for adopting a Bi-racial child at a time of great debate about the issue of Black children raised in white homes. She was committed to ensuring that I had and maintained a Black identity. The problem was her main focus seemed to be Black culture that was male, romanticized and American—and during the civil rights movement. Although there is a rich Black history in Canada, it wasn't that accessible to a "proper" white woman living in downtown Toronto. If you were a Bi-racial girl raised by white adoptive parents in the '60s and '70s you ended up having to create your own identity.

Through the Third Word Bookstore my mother accessed members of the Black community and one day brought home my first Afropic. I thank those folks every day for ending the miserable headaches I suffered at the end of the white people's comb that had been raked through my hair for years. I don't know if this experience brings me closer to understanding Diaspora, but it did mean no more headaches by 1969.

But the group most relevant to my adopted mother's own experience, were the Black U.S. draft-dodgers and their families who came from a particular type of Black America that was middle-class and relatively affluent. They lived and hung out in Rochedale—the Toronto hippy commune. They came from families that worked in the media, were teachers, ran small businesses, and held positions of some power. For her, at that time, all roads to my Black identity, all media, music, and mainstream representation, led to the United States. (Of course this might have had something to do with the unconfirmed entry on my adoption papers, which read: Father- Black American.) So there I was, a Black /Biracial girl born in Toronto, but with a Black American identity. Is that Diaspora?

I must have been 13. My mother was pursuing a degree at Howard University where she met this guy named Bob Bishop who was involved in a Black radio station in Little Rock Arkansas. She arranged for me to visit with his family in the U.S. to shape my Black identity, and I was shipped off to spend a summer with people I had never met, in order to be with Black People. It was an absolutely terrifying time. I didn't know where I was. I had never seen armed guards in shopping centers. I had never been in an all Black environment or seen people wearing curlers in the supermarket. There were bullet holes in the walls

and I didn't understand the concept. For the first time in my life and outside of anything I had ever seen or read it was all-Black everything, all the time, 24/7. Scary stuff for a little girl from Toronto; quite foreign, nothing I could relate to. And the women were odd; they were big people. Back home I was the big one, the overweight one, and suddenly I'm surrounded by large women, laughing and easygoing. I also didn't get the hair thing—the curlers and scarves. My mother was an ex-nun. Everything was cut and trimmed, wash and wear. Suddenly I was exposed to different food and dress and hairstyles. And the vanity—the American self-confidence! Everyone saying hello to me and I'm thinking, "Why are you saying hello? I'm not allowed to talk to you." I was not familiar with the "always acknowledge your own people" etiquette.

I couldn't even figure out the television, there were so many channels. We weren't allowed TV—we read books. Dressed up men hung around outside stores and in their big cars; I didn't get it. It didn't feel right. I had never seen so many Black people—and they were supposedly my people! I felt like I didn't fit there either, something was wrong with me again. Here I was with "my people" and I was an adolescent nervous wreck. Was this Diaspora?

One night I found myself on a riverboat on the Mississippi with my summer family and their friends, all very elegant, well dressed, obviously successful, and all Black. I felt so out of place. I was looking for crocodiles and snakes, in a state of hyper vigilance and fear. I'm on the bloody Mississippi for god's sake and I'm thinking, "What the hell, how did I get here?" Everyone laughing, celebrating and I am out of place. Again.

The ending came when the Bishops, my summer family, decided to introduce me to some people closer to my age and invited a young man over to meet me. The set-up was that he would take me to a local school dance. We were talking about things, nervous the way you are at that age, and he showed me the flyer for the dance. When he hesitated over the wording I made some comment like, "What's up, can't you read?" He left and everything seemed okay, but then he didn't come back and I was left waiting in my party clothes. Stood up.

Mr. Bishop suggested that I had insulted the boy—offended him, by implying that he couldn't read. It was another failure on my part, another way I did not fit into being Black. I became despondent, and they had to send me home. When I look back, I understand that most likely the boy could not read, and that my innocent surprise at that, *my* foreign culture, *my* accent, *my* difference as a Canadian girl who did not live in her skin, were other factors at play that summer.

Photo: Joan Latchford

Back home, my mother continued to raise her teenage,

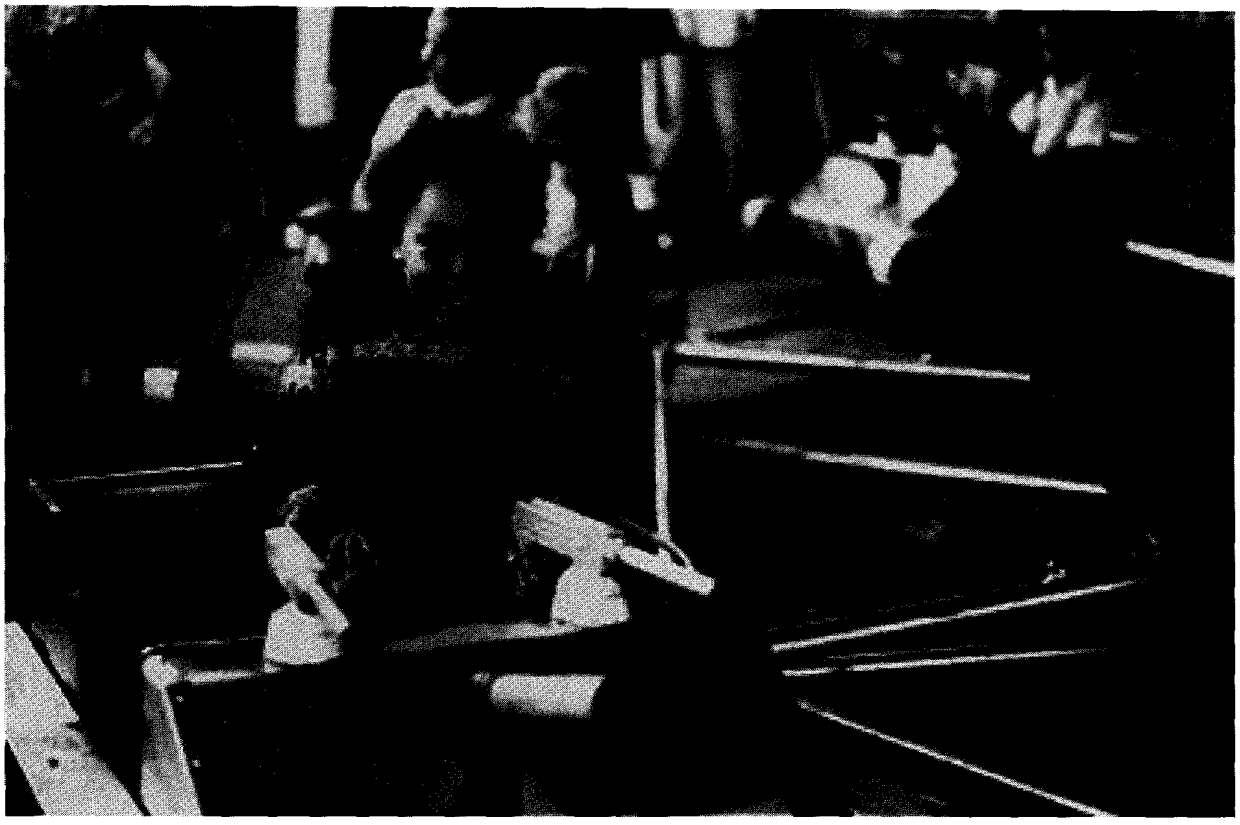

Photo: Joan Latchford

adopted Bi-racial child as a Black American in a white middle-class Canadian urban location. She loved and admired Black American music and exposed me to all the Jazz and R&B greats, to the writings of Black authors, militants, and to the great Black artisans.

Amidst this madness she hired Myrna to be our housekeeper and our Black role model. Myrna was a lovely woman, very warm, from Nova Scotia. She had a large family in Toronto living in Alexander Park who gathered at the Paramount Tavern on weekends to catch up on goings on from back home. She tried her best to offer guidance and assistance, but I didn't want her or anyone else telling me what to do—she wasn't my mother and by the time she came around I was fast approaching my hell-on-wheels stage. And along with Myrna came the Baptist church with their fundamental understanding of family as identity, family as everything. How was I supposed to fit into that? More not belonging.

My mother didn't or couldn't see the conflict that was shaping me, and when I rebelled, exploded, struck out, fought back, left home, she didn't know what to do. Hell, I didn't know what to do. I was the angriest of young women. This search for identity has been a long process. One that has broken my heart at times.

Now, at 42, I can say I am a Black woman of Bi-racial ancestry and I can own that. But it's been a hell of a journey. I still struggle with the language that defines my racial identity "half–caste," "mixed race," "half-breed," "mulatto," "Bi-racial." These words scatter me, halve me, disperse me. As in Diaspora. If you are the child I was, raised with loving parents from a different race, and in a very different time, there is a wide range of conflict and confusion to navigate. Now throw in sexuality. Is there room in Diaspora to be Lesbian, Queer, or Transgendered and Bi-racial? Perhaps it is necessary for us to redefine Diaspora, to stretch the word to make it bend and blend with the realities of so many children like myself. So many adult women like myself. Today I work with other women and their children who have been displaced by violence which has entered their lives; an additional barrier to overcome, a forced separation that is economic and affects a disproportionate number of Native, Black and immigrant women. With them, in this work, I have come closer to understanding my own separations, to see myself more clearly, to cherish and nurture the little girl who was sent away to be Black.

I still need to examine other women's experiences, to learn more, before I can honestly use the term Diaspora in relation to myself. But as a brilliant woman recently said to me, "It sounds like a beautiful woman's name."

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