FINDING A PLACE IN THE SUN:
YOUNG BLACK WOMEN NEGOTIATE THEIR IDENTITIES IN
OPPOSITIONAL SPACES

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a journey into the lives of several women who participated in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant. As young Black women, these women struggle to survive in Canada where Whiteness is normative. As a result of their race, class, and gender, they are positioned as not Canadian. In resistance, they seek to create a sense of belonging.

There has been much theorizing about 'beauty' pageants and pageantry in all of its forms. Some of the existing materials have argued that pageants are a space where women are subjected to sexist objectification, as well, a space where women gain access to economic rewards. The subjects of this thesis participated in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant (1997 and 1998), in an attempt to create a sense of belonging. This study focuses on the identity making processes of young Black women in Canada.
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CHAPTER ONE

Identity As Socially Produced

In the summer of 1998 I was a contestant in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant. This pageant was held in Toronto and anyone who was of Trinidadian descent could become a contestant. The producers of the pageant promoted it as a showcase of culture, creativity and intelligence. There was no swimsuit competition, and contestants were asked to write an essay which would be judged as part of the competition. My decision to become a contestant in the pageant was motivated by several factors (At the time, my reservations were regarding my academic reputation. What would my colleagues say? I soon got over this and entered). First, the winner’s prizes included a trip to Trinidad and $1000.00. Second, I saw this pageant as different because it was not supposed to be the stereotypical showcase of bodies. Upon reflection of the experience, I become aware of yet a third reason for my participation: the pageant identified me with Trinidad and Tobago, the country of my mother’s origin. What I investigate here is why this identification to Trinidad and Tobago was so important. What problem does identifying with Trinidad and Tobago solve? Or does it really solve anything at all? In essence, I begin this thesis with some questions about identity formation of young Black women like myself.

Identifying with Trinidad and Tobago appears to solve the problem of not belonging anywhere. Despite the fact that I was born and raised in Canada, I do not feel Canadian. In 1970 my mother arrived in Canada from Trinidad and Tobago. Although her intentions were vague, she quickly obtained a job which she kept for twenty-two years. My father, who immigrated to Canada from Nigeria at about the same time as my mother, furthered his education as he intended. I was born in Toronto in 1975, and my parents remained married for four years after my birth.
before seeking a divorce. Although my mother and I were working class, I was exposed to music and dance classes. I did well in primary school which I attended on the east side of Toronto. Being labelled ‘different’ has always been a part of my life. Not only as a ‘Black’ person in Canada, but as the child of a Nigerian, I was also seen as ‘different’ by ‘Black’ people in Toronto who for the most part are Caribbean. Even during my pageant experience, I felt self-conscious about my cultural make up. All of the other contestants had two Trinidadian parents, and my first and last name immediately identified me as the exception.

After my mother’s remarriage to a Trinidadian man, I recall being surrounded by Trinidadian culture. Not only was my home full of references to Trinidad as ‘home’, but outside of my home I was connected to Trinidad through participation in activities such as Trinidadian folk dance class, ‘Kiddies Carnival’ at Caribana, and frequent visits to Trinidad. My Nigerian name exposed me to both White and Black peers as ‘different’. I remember this period of time as being very complex because although my parents were divorced, I saw my father on a regular basis. During these visits, my father actively shared his Yoruba culture with me. In addition to negotiating a Trinidadian culture in my home, I found myself negotiating an even more unfamiliar Nigerian culture.

All throughout my public school education, I had to deal with people’s questions about who I am. There were those questions which stemmed from my dark skin, and those which stemmed from my non-anglo name. While I did not identify questions about my ‘difference’ as racism in the early days of elementary school, I did immediately identify racism when I moved to Mississauga from Scarborough in the middle of seventh grade. At a very young age, my father began involving me in discussions about what was happening in the world. He would video tape documentaries about racism, the American South, and slavery. As he was very involved in anti-
racist activism in Toronto, I particularly remember attending meetings about apartheid. It was not until I moved to Mississauga however, that I experienced racism personally. It was the first time I remember feeling the need for emotional support. The other Black kids at the school whom I sought out for friendship were all of Caribbean descent, and I eagerly joined their clique where I found familiarity and acceptance.

I suppose the militant spirit that my father was trying to instil in me found an expression in junior high school. I became the spokesperson for anti-racism. I wrote articles for the school paper, and I brought audio videotapes about racism to those teachers that would entertain them. Racism continued to shape my experience in high school. As anti-racism was a cause to which I was dedicated, I founded and chaired an anti-racism education organization called ‘Unity’. Along with involvement in other clubs and groups in the school, I became the school’s first ‘Black’ Student’s Council President. At that point, there had been such an influx of people of colour moving into that part of Mississauga from various communities that it created sudden changes in the school that appeared to be happening too quickly. The reaction of some of the more settled community members was hostile; and they were passing their attitudes on to their children, who in turn brought the attitudes to the school. Creating ‘Unity’ and becoming School President were my ways of exercising my agency within the school. I relied very heavily on the other ‘Black’ students in the school for support, who for the most part, were second generation Caribbean Canadians like myself. Few were of African parentage, and few were born outside of Canada. Through our commonalities, we came together and developed a ‘community’ of resistance within the school.

In the community outside of the school, I involved myself in several politically driven initiatives that were ‘Black’ youth identified. I found this to be an opportunity to network with
others and further my awareness of what was happening in the larger community. Though the nature of my activism changed during my undergraduate years, I remained active. Due to many factors, I experienced extreme alienation while obtaining my undergraduate degree at McMaster University. Not only was the material being taught in the Sociology department and other departments often offensive, but the campus itself was a sea of white faces on the backdrop of a castle like setting. As neither of these made me comfortable, I quickly joined the community of ‘Black’ students who could, for the most part, be found at the African Caribbean Association. Before long, I was on the executive of the association and found myself concentrating on maintaining unity among the African Caribbean students while providing a space for ‘us’ to be. Reflecting on those times, it occurs to me that perhaps my activism to promote unity and provide a space for ‘us’ was connected to my own need to be an ‘us’, and to keep a space for myself under a Caribbean label.

Although leaving McMaster University and coming to OISE, University of Toronto was a welcome change in my academic career, the importance of belonging to an ‘us’ did not change for me. When I think back to primary school, grades one through six, I do not remember thinking about racism, and I do not remember seeking out children who were Black or of colour. What I do remember is that as racism became evident to me, I would seek out other people who looked like me, and who were having similar experiences. In many ways the ‘communities’ of resistance that we developed in the schools were in response to the racism that we experienced. Our responses to racism went further to include our longing for a place away from here; a place we called ‘home’. As children of Caribbean immigrants, we became conscious of our ‘roots’. Among our families, there was new found interest in things connected to ‘home’. Within our in-school ‘communities’ we tried to recreate what went on in our homes, and in this way we resisted.
Thinking about this project has made me realize that at home and in the community at-large, I actively seek identification with whatever will identify me with Trinidad and Tobago, through, for example, attending Caribana and returning to Trinidad for Carnival. I believe that this is my response to life here in Canada as a ‘Black’ woman. My attempt to seek the Caribbean is complicated by certain factors, one being that Canada is technically my home.

I strongly believe that the importance of belonging has been underestimated. As evidenced in their response to this hostile environment, our elders, first generation Caribbean Canadians, know the value of belonging. For the purpose of survival, they create a sense of belonging by building a bridge between their ‘residence’ here, and their ‘home’ in the Caribbean (Bobb Smith 1998:5). For them, ‘home’ is a place where they find validation for who they are. Being able to build that bridge between home and residence is a creative response to the violence they endure here and a way to ensure survival. But what about my generation? What moves do we make to ensure survival? What options are available?

Many of us for whom Canada is home, have opted to seek an alternate ‘home’. In my case, that home is Trinidad and Tobago. Because Trinidad and Tobago has never actually been my ‘home’, I create an imagined Trinidad and Tobago that meets my need for belonging. Creating an imagined Trinidad and Tobago is my creative response to the violence of racism and sexism that I face in Canada. Through this imagining, I manage to survive. The Trinidad and Tobago that I imagine embraces me despite the fact that I was not born there. The Trinidad and Tobago that I imagine is free of discrimination, sexism and classism. It is paradise; it is my place in the sun; it is home.

In this thesis, I want to consider how the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant was, for the contestants as second generation Caribbean Canadian women, a creative move toward
finding belonging amidst this hostile Canadian environment. Through the themes identity and resistance, I explore our stories to come to an understanding of how we negotiate our identities in this oppositional space. How do we find belonging, particularly when the systems of domination determine the moves that we may make?

In this thesis, I explore the narratives of six women who are second generation Trinidadians in Canada, and who participated in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant. To begin the journey of this thesis, I face the challenge of interpreting the subjects’ narratives. In this chapter, I approach this challenge by aligning myself with the perspective that identities are socially produced. My interpretation and analysis of the narratives must take into account the social and historical contexts that produce the experiences of second generation Caribbean women in Canada.

In Chapter Two I will discuss Canada, the nation, and make the argument that Whiteness is normative in Canada and that this is the context in which the subjects of this study exist. In addition, I will argue that this environment is one in which racism positions them as not belonging to Canada; as the ‘Other’.

In Chapter Three, using the school system as a context, I will focus on the identity making processes that the women use, and their struggle to find belonging. This chapter is divided into two parts. In Part One, I will consider the experiences of people of colour within the school system. In Part Two, I will consider the strategies used by the subjects to resist their experiences of marginality and find belonging.

In Chapter Four I discuss the subjects’ participation in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant. It is my contention that the subjects’ participation in the pageant was an act of resistance. It is also my contention that their participation was a creative move on their part to
obtain a sense of belonging and acquire status. What I will focus on in Chapter Four, is the subjects' experiences in attempting to use the pageant as a way to find belonging; what they hoped to find, versus what they actually experienced. Finally, I will conclude the thesis here by reiterating the main points raised, and by discussing the educational implications of this work.

In order to provide a context for interpreting the narratives of second generation Caribbean women in Canada, the remainder of this chapter will be a review of literature pertaining to how identities and experiences are socially produced.

The essence of my argument in exploring the complexities of socially produced identities is two-fold. First, I argue that our identities are predetermined by social and historical processes. That is, past events and circumstances shape the lives of Caribbean women in Canada. Second, as an act of resistance often in response to domination, we find agency to re-invent ourselves within our socially produced identities.

For the purpose of this thesis, I am coming from the perspective that identities are constructed. Because identities are constructed, the narratives of the subjects of this thesis are not a-historical; they are not a-political. Rather, they are produced by a set of historical and social processes. For example, the racism, sexism, and classism of patriarchy mar the history of Caribbean women in Canada.

To substantiate the claim that identities and therefore narratives, are socially produced, I will begin by providing an explanation of identity. Following an explanation of identity, I will be drawing on the literature of theorists whose work illuminates the point that identities are socially constructed, contested, shifting, and negotiated.

Identity is a concept which, according to Paul Gilroy (1997),
provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity is formed (301).

In this thesis, I align myself with the position of Gilroy, Hall and others, that identities are socially constructed and relational. Feelings of identity and exclusiveness are not natural or spontaneous (Gilroy 1997:303), however, they are nevertheless felt as real. To argue that identities are socially produced is not to argue that identity is not something that has concrete and material effects in people’s lives. To say that identity is socially produced is essentially to say that it exists as a result of human relations. Gilroy refers to Rousseau, who argues that our identities are social phenomena. According to Rousseau, as cited in Gilroy (1997),

Work must be done, institutions built, customs and usages devised to produce that particularity and the feelings of identity and exclusiveness which bind people together, though these are so often experienced as though they were either natural and spontaneous or the products of an automatic tradition (303).

Furthermore, while identity provides a way of understanding the interplay between our individual, subjective experiences and the social settings within which we are formed, identity also serves as a marker of inclusion and exclusion. Gilroy (1997) supports this point by arguing that,

...identity can help us to comprehend the formation of that fateful pronoun ‘we’ and to reckon with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it cannot but help to create. This may be one of the most troubling aspects of all: the fact that the formation of every ‘we’ must leave out or exclude a ‘they’, that identities depend on the marking of difference (302).

The points of entry into a shared identity and bonding occurs on the basis of, “…national, ‘racial’, ethnic, regional, [and] local” ties, “and yet, identity is always particular, as much about difference as about shared belonging” (ibid.:301). In this way, identity is a problematic concept. As Bobb Smith points out, it is problematic because, “…on the one hand, the systems and symbols for defining introduce difference; while on the other hand, identity does not unify as there
are always points of contestations and contradictions that have to be negotiated” (1998:53).

Bobb Smith talks about the contestations and contradictions of identity within the context of Caribbean ‘immigrant’ women in Canada - women who could be the mothers or grandmothers of the subjects of this thesis.

It is my hypothesis that the production of ‘feelings of identity and exclusiveness’, as mentioned by Rousseau, are a part of the experiences of second generation Caribbean women in Canada. Throughout my exploration of their lives, I will uncover such feelings in this thesis and by doing so I lend support to Bobb Smith’s contention that processes of identity-formation and identification are contentious.

Stuart Hall’s work (1994, 1996, 1997) contributes to the argument that experience and identities are socially and historically produced. In fact, Hall argues that identity itself should be thought of as a ‘production’ - that is always in the process and always constituted within representation (1994:392). Identities, Hall argues, “… are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (394).

Representation has had a major role to play in the way we have come to identify ourselves as ‘Other’ in relation to the dominant group. It is “the social process of making sense within all available signifying systems; speech, writing, print and video” (Kelly 1998:52). This process of representation, “becomes implicated in defining the “us” and the “them” in society (Kelly 1998: 52). Kelly explains that,

...representation and reality are concepts that determine and are determined by each other. People do not act or view the world in a certain way because they are Black, women or working class; they do so because they are raced, gendered, and classed and because their experiences are constructed socially both by themselves and by others (Kelly 1998: 52).
What Kelly points out here is that identity is a doubling or combining of how we identify, and how we are identified. In this way, identity has a double meaning.

Colonial advertisements and modern day media have presented us with images through which we have derived meaning about who is dominant and who is ‘Other’ (Hall 1997). What is significant about the roles of representation and meaning is that not only has the dominant group defined people of colour as inferior, but they have had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’. Hall states:

It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge’, not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm. That is the lesson - the sombre majesty - of Fanon’s insight into the colonising experience in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Hall 1994:395).

Hall goes on to explain that it is not only in Said’s ‘Orientalist’ sense that we were constructed as different and ‘Other’ within the categories of knowledge of the West, but, that the West has the power to control *how* we know, and what we know of ourselves. Every regime of representation, Hall writes, “is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet ‘power/knowledge’” (ibid.:394-395). What Foucault suggests in his work on ‘power/knowledge’ also entails self-knowledge. He suggest that the discourses through which we come to know ourselves are also dominated by the West, so that there is not only domination from without, but also from within. How we become invested in knowing ourselves is prescribed by the West.

In his work entitled, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall (1994) makes the point that, “[w]e all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, *positioned*” (392). While Hall stresses the idea that we are ‘positioned’, he also recognizes that there is agency in positioning ourselves within the narratives of the past.
Black diasporic peoples reclaim their ‘personhood’ by positioning themselves within the narratives of the past, through black popular culture. Hall’s work on black popular culture (1996) speaks to the social and historical context that creates the cultural hybridity within the diasporic identity. Using the repertoires of black popular culture as an example, Hall explains that the performative spaces of Blacks were “over-determined from at least two directions: they were partly determined from their inheritances; but they were also critically determined by the diasporic conditions in which the connections were forged” (471). Out of the mixture of their European exposure and their African heritage, Black diasporic peoples have developed “linguistic innovations in rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien social space, heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing and talking, and a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie and community” (471).

In an essay entitled Black Hair/Style Politics, Kobena Mercer (1990) supports Hall’s point regarding the social and historical context within which the symbols of black popular culture have been conceived. Speaking particularly about ‘Black’ hairstyles (i.e. the Afro and Dreadlocks), Mercer argues against their being perceived as natural and African:

Both these hair-styles were never just natural, waiting to be found: they were stylistically cultivated and politically constructed in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness (254).

According to Mercer, the Afro and Dreadlocks are two examples of culturally and historically specific symbols of black popular culture. These hairstyles are not naturally and/or authentically African. Rather, they are developed in the African diaspora as creative responses to oppression.

In support of Mercer’s arguments, Hall suggests that what we call ‘Black culture’ is the outcome of a history in which Blacks have been positioned. Our cultural forms and experiences
are not the result of our ‘essence’ as Black people. Instead, they are the result of how we are positioned, coupled with how we have chosen to exist. As Hall states:

The moment the signifier ‘black’ is torn from its historical, cultural, and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category, we valorize, by inversion, the very ground of the racism we are trying to deconstruct (1996:472).

The notion of the ‘Other’ has been useful for providing some explanation of the process that leads to individuals claiming a Black identity. According to Hall, we develop meanings through the contrast between ourselves and the ‘Other’. With reference to Blackness, Hall explains that, “we know what black means,... not because there is some essence of ‘blackness’ but because we can contrast it with its opposite - white” (1997:234). The boundaries that mark the differences between White and Black are not based on concrete, physical differences among people. Instead, they are symbolic and do not always sufficiently define individuals. Hall’s argument here, that the identity boundaries are symbolic, explains how people of various origins, skin colours, and cultures can all claim the same racial, or cultural identity - Black. The claim is not based on a concrete marker of inclusion or exclusion, but a symbolic marker that is evidenced by what one is not.

While I would agree with Hall that the boundaries marking the difference between Black and White are not concrete and do not sufficiently define individuals, it is important to note that there are very real historical processes and present day experiences shared by those who claim ‘Black’ as their identity. Their experiences include: skin colour and language based discrimination in housing, employment, and the education system, and a lack of access to economic resources.

Hall makes another point about the notion of symbolic categories. Referencing Mary Douglas, Hall explains that:
what really disturbs cultural order is when things turn up in the wrong category; or when things fail to fit any category - such as a substance like mercury, which is a metal but also a liquid, or a social group like mixed-race _mulattoes_ who are neither 'white' nor 'black' but float ambiguously in some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy in-between (1997:236).

The women that I will be bringing to life in the pages of this thesis disturb the cultural order. On the one hand, they face the complexities of a Black identity in Toronto, with its changing symbols and markers of inclusion and exclusion. On the other hand, they face the challenge that comes with attempting to claim an identity in a neo-colonial environment. The subjects find that in various social contexts, the categories that they claim become disrupted. They are forced then to claim new categories, despite the fact that the categories available to them do not reflect all of who they are. They occupy an hybrid zone for which there is no category defined by the dominant group. The choices available to them include: inserting themselves into existing categories that do not include all of who they are; forging a new identity, which would involve enduring social consequences; or choosing the ‘I am a human being’ argument, the pretense that identity is not social, but individual.

It is useful at this point to introduce the work of Avtar Brah (1996). In _Cartographies of Diaspora_, Brah picks up the discussion of disrupted identities and the challenge of being forced to rename and reclaim an identity. Using a reflection upon her own life experiences, Brah deconstructs the Asian identity. In her life, Avtar Brah has lived in four of the world’s five continents. Taking the reader through each time frame and geographic location of her life, Brah recounts how each experience labelled her and/or altered the way that she could identify herself. Beginning with her ‘roots’, Brah explains that she was born in Panjab and grew up in Uganda. She recalls being asked by an American whether she considers herself an African or an Indian.
Wondering why she could not be both, she responded: “I am a Ugandan of Indian descent” (1996:3). Regarding this encounter with the American man who questioned her, Brah explains:

But of course, he could not see that I could be both [Indian and African]. The body in front of him was already inscribed within the gendered social relations of the colonial sandwich. I could not just ‘be’. I had to name an identity, no matter that this naming rendered invisible all the other identities - of gender, caste, religion, linguistic group, generation... (ibid.:3).

To be an inscribed body in the ‘colonial sandwich’, as Brah experienced, is to regularly deny, and ignore parts of oneself, in order to claim (as we are forced to) one of the few available categories.

During the Civil Rights Movement and the days of student protest, Brah moved to the USA to attend the University of California at Davis. She recalls that the people of colour who were not born in the USA were labelled foreign students. Specifically as a South Asian at the time, Brah, and others like her were constructed as non-European Others.

After moving to Britain at the time of a wave of Indian immigration from the ex-British colonies, Brah experienced for the first time being called a ‘Paki’. Brah explains:

I was no longer a foreign student, a visitor on a temporary sojourn. Rather, I was now constituted within the discourse of ‘Paki’ as a racialised insider/outsider, a post-colonial subject constructed and marked by everyday practices at the heart of the metropolis (1996:9).

Despite the fact that her sense of self was secure when she entered Britain, Brah claims that she was outraged, mortified and, “temporarily silenced by this racist onslaught”(ibid.).

Brah’s use of the phrase ‘temporarily silenced’ is rather significant here because it speaks to the pattern of oppression that she experienced in each location. In each space she experiences a form of silencing when her identity is disrupted by the dominant group. What is also common in each of the locations of Brah’s experiences is that relations of power, which were being acted out, were inscribed by colonialism and continue to define which categories are available to be claimed.
by which bodies. The process of recovering from having one's identity disrupted and continually re-defining who one is while trying to maintain Asian-ness, is a testament to the ongoing violence of colonialism. At the will of the colonizer, the inhabitants of the colonies could be re-located, and find their identities ignored and redefined.

Asians are deconstructed by Brah as people who come out of a “... historical entanglement of a multitude of biographies” (1996:1). Brah gives proof to this statement by recounting her own life, in each of the neo-colonial spaces that she describes, where her identity is disrupted by encounters with the dominant group and she is ‘de-named’ and re-named. Brah relates the experiences of Asians to those of African-Caribbeans. In the hostile neo-colonial spaces (i.e. Britain and USA), Asians, like Africans, found resistance and therefore survival in claiming a shared, politically based identity. In this regard, Brah refers to the use of the term ‘Black’ to refer to African-Caribbeans and South Asians in post-war Britain. Brah explains how African-Caribbean and South Asian people, commonly described as ‘coloured people’, migrated to Britain during the post-war period. Once there they occupied broadly similar structural positions as workers by performing predominantly unskilled or semi-skilled jobs on the lowest rungs of the economy. (1996:96). The term ‘coloured people’ was a colonial code for a relationship of domination and subordination between the coloniser and the colonised. As Brah explains:

The African-Caribbean and Asian groups experienced the racialisation of their gendered class positioning through a racism which foregrounded their ‘non-whiteness’ as a common thematic within the discourse of ‘coloured people’ (1996:97).

The response of the African-Caribbean and Asian population to being labelled ‘coloured people’, was to adopt the politically based identity ‘Black’, in a move of resistance and solidarity. As Brah explains,
The concept of ‘black’ now emerges in Britain as a specifically political term embracing African-Caribbeans and South Asian peoples. It constitutes a political subject inscribing politics of resistance against colour-centred racisms (ibid.).

Paul Gilroy (1993, 1997) makes a point that is similar to that of Avtar Brah, regarding identities that are forged in resistance to the disruption that comes with living in the diaspora. Gilroy argues that identity, despite and partly because of its constructed-ness and the agency this affords, has great significance in the lives of diasporic peoples for whom,

[d]iscovering, possessing and then taking pride in an exclusive identity seems to afford a means to acquire certainty about who one is and where one fits, about the claims of community and the limits of social obligation, in conditions of rapid and bewildering change (1997:312).

Brah (1996) describes the ‘rapid and bewildering change’ that she experienced in each of the neo-colonial spaces that she lived in throughout the world. Her experience of having to re-name and re-claim who she was in each space is the experience that, Gilroy (1993) argues, can be resisted by the possession of a diasporic identity such as ‘Black’. While recognizing that identity can create inclusion and exclusion, Gilroy encourages the use of identity as a tool to bring people together. Providing further support for the notion that experience and identities are socially produced, Gilroy essentially argues that diasporic identities are forged as a means for survival.

Henceforth, in the context of this thesis, to claim an identity is, an act of resistance. Resistance, according to Yvonne Bobb Smith,

is to be understood as specific positive responses to everyday life experiences that includes oppressions. It is a historical legacy through which people have learnt to accommodate or to reject discursive practices and systems (1998:173).

In an essay entitled “Race and the Production of Identity in the Schooling Experiences of African-Canadian Youth”, Dei (1997) argues that claiming an identity is a political act which speaks to the notion that individuals have the agency to produce their identities and/or reinvent
themselves. In his essay, Dei focuses on youths’ varying articulations of ‘... both being
‘Black/African’... and becoming ‘Black/African’ (conceived as a politically aware relation to a
taken-on racialized identity)” (241). Like Brah and Gilroy, Dei argues that “to claim an identity,
rather than passively accept one, is a political act which involves one’s self and others” (ibid.).
Dei affirms the notion that to forge and claim an identity is to act in resistance. According to Dei:

> The reinvention of the self and group consciousness on the part of dominated groups is a
response to entrenched relations of social and political domination (242).

With respect to Black Canadian youth, Dei describes the agency that they show in claiming a
shared identity in resistance to the marginality that they experience in the school system. Dei
explains that in resistance to the marginality that emerges from the impact of White normativity,

> ... African-Canadian youth draw on a shared common history of oppression as a source
for political and social action grounded in reconstructions of their social identities (243).

In the context of the Canadian school system, Dei found that Black students attempt to formulate
‘Black Unity’. To deal with the alienation within the schools, the students,

> ...cultivate the political ideology of a unified Blackness contextualized in a shared African
identity or Africanness ... students make the conscious choice to hang out with other
Black students, regardless of whether or not they are friends, because ‘We’re Black’, ‘We
all understand each other’ and ‘We have the same experiences’. Blackness is seen as an
experience which is felt and understood, and which unites individuals (249).

In his analysis of Black-Canadian high school students, Dei emphasizes the agency that is
shown by the students to produce and perform identities that will foster their survival in the
school and the larger society.

> In my thesis, I locate the subjects through their experiences from childhood socialization,
through their schooling, and to their experiences as contestants in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago
Canada Pageant. Exploring identity as socially produced in the literature review has provided me
with a framework through which to analyze the narratives of the subjects. An interpretation of
the narrated experiences of second generation Caribbean women in Canada, that does not consider the historical and social production of those experiences, serves to reinstate the racist notion that as Black women, we are one-dimensional. Ignoring the social and historical context within which our experience is constituted erases the depth of our experiences and erases the possibility that as young Black women, our experiences may vary.

In keeping with the arguments of Gilroy, Hall, Brah, and others, the challenge for me as a researcher is to interpret the narrated experiences of my subjects while being mindful of the conditions of existence conferred upon them as women of colour in Canada, as 'Black' women in Canada, and as second generation Caribbean women in Canada. In Chapter Two, I discuss Canada, the nation, in order to provide a description of the environment within which the young Black women of this study exist.
CHAPTER TWO

The ‘True North’ and Black Bodies

In this chapter, I intend to discuss the ways in which Canada has been constructed as a White normative society, and the ways that White normativity is sustained here. By doing this, I will provide a description of the environment within which second generation Caribbean women in Canada survive.

Despite the popular notion that Canada is a multi-ethnic and multicultural society, Canada is a nation that is dominated historically, and intellectually by White Eurocentric culture. It is a society where “Europe is used as the universal in terms of values, culture and knowledge creation” (Kelly 1998:7). Canada is not however, a naturally White space. Instead the notion that Canada is a White normative society, is an imagined construct. This claim, is not to suggest that the Whiteness of Canada is not experienced materially. There are material structures in place in Canada, such as immigration laws and multiculturalism, which sustain the normativity of Whiteness in Canada.

Dei (1997) borrows Frankenburg’s (1993) characterization of Whiteness as a “location of structural advantage and race privilege; as a ‘standpoint’ from which the dominant (Whites) view themselves and society; and as a set of ‘unmarked and unnamed’ cultural and political practices” (243). The normativity of Whiteness, Dei explains, “allows social, political and economic benefits to accrue to groups and individuals even as the practice is conveniently denied” (ibid.).

In their essay entitled, The Fractious Politics of a Settler Society: Canada, Stasiulis and Jhappan (1995) speak to the constructed-ness of White normativity in Canada. They argue that Canada has its roots as a ‘white settler society’, and that this construct
... refers to the intentions of colonial administrators to build in Canada an ‘overseas extension’ or replica of British society (97).

Throughout their work, Stasuulis and Jhappan argue that this ‘white settler society’ construct is sustained and expressed, through Canadian “laws, political institutions, immigration and settlement policies” (ibid.:96).

Hegemonic Canadian identity is White, English, securely middle-class, and patriarchal. Rob Shields (1991) suggests the dimensions of this identity as it can be traced in national mythologies. Examining central Canadian myths of Canada as a northern and snowy land, Shields writes:

[T]he myth of the ‘True North Strong and Free’ has been appropriated as one symbol of specific Canadian nationalistic discourse which, although not completely hegemonic, attempts to reconcile regional viewpoints. This myth resides within an oppositional spatialisation whereby Southerners construe the North as a counter-balance to the civilised world of the Southern cities yet the core of their own, personal, Canadian identity (Shields 1991:163).

According to Shields, at the core of the imagined Canadian identity is the myth of the ‘True North Strong and Free’. “This ‘True North’ is a masculine-gendered, liminal zone of rites de passage and re-creative freedom and escape” (ibid.). The imagined vision of the ‘True North’, is a white vision. It is a vision that does not include the presence of colour or people of colour. As Shields explains:

For most English-speaking Canadians the ‘North’ is not just a factual geographical region but also an imaginary zone; a frontier, a wilderness, an empty ‘space’ which seen from Southern Canada is white, blank (1991:165).

This ‘white zone’, is used as the landscape upon which the Canadian identity is imagined. The ‘True North’ is a patriarchal space, as Shields describes it as a masculine gendered zone. The White Canadian male’s ability to conquer this harsh masculine space stands as proof of his superiority. Shields goes on to say that Canadians have “inherited the notion that being a northern
nation not only endowed them with a tradition but also guaranteed their racial supremacy” (178).

In an essay entitled, *White Like Canada*, George Elliott Clarke (1998) writes:

No matter that a black man, Matthew Henson, discovered Canada’s spiritual heart, the North Pole. The presence of people of colour is whitewashed from these Canadian modernist landscapes (108).

Not only are people of colour whitewashed from the Northern landscapes, but as Clarke so aptly puts it, “as happens so often in the Great White North, racism was made to disappear” (ibid.:109).

The suppression of the historical presence of Blacks in Canada, enables Canadians to identify with such rhetoric as the ‘True North’. One rather explicit method of constructing Canada as a White space, is the rather active way that the “state administrative apparatus” (Walcott 1995:58) attempts to render the presence of Blackness in Canada, both historically and presently, minimal. Threatened by the exposure of the history of Black Canadians’ contributions to the development of this country, and slavery in Canada, the presence of Black people in Canada, as early as the 1600s is suppressed in Canadian national rhetoric. But how is this suppression of Blackness in Canada carried out by the Canadian state? In answer to this question, Kelly (1998) and Walcott (1995) argue a similar point. According to Kelly, Blacks in Canada are “conceptualized as a phenomenon from the United States that has crept north or emigrated from Africa” (1998:52). Walcott’s argument is that the Canadian state attempts to render Blackness in Canada invisible by its constant referencing of African Americans when questions of race become important here (1995:59). He argues that, Black cultural forms such as ‘rap’ music and dub poetry are not accepted as Canadian and are considered a U.S. phenomenon.

Walcott argues that because of the diasporic experience, where Black people for example, are able to connect across borders and waters to a collective; a sense of peoplehood, Black people in Canada threaten the boundaries of the Canadian identity because they “do not manifest the
characteristics”, of their “category”, in the ways prescribed by the state (Walcott 1995:59). Walcott suggests then, that Black cultural expressions are not characteristics that have been prescribed by the state, and are therefore problematic for the national image. Black cultural expressions themselves threaten the imagined Canadian identity because of the stories of racial oppression that are often told in cultural expressions such as rap, blues, or reggae music. According to Walcott, both dub poetry and rap music are positioned as not constituting “Canadian-ness” because of the “disruption and contestation that both forms cause for the category Canadian” (1995:59-60). In other words, Black expressive cultural practices in Canada such as rap and dub poetry, reconfigure and (re)make the boundaries and borders of Canada and Canadian-ness as contested spaces (ibid.:60).

Another means of suppressing the presence of Africans in Canada is to exclude the presence of Black people from the ‘pages’ of Canadian history. The exclusion of non-white minorities from the pages of Canadian history serves a rather useful purpose for the dominant group. Kelly argues that,

"[t]he way in which maps of meanings are constructed often relates to the way that groups are included or excluded from a nation’s history. Control over representation of the past can be used to achieve compliance with the aims and interests of those who exert power in the name of the state (37)."

Kelly’s statement suggests that control over representation in the form of history is a powerful tool for the maintenance of a dominant position. This sort of control can create precisely the type of images that can help solidify one’s position of dominance.

In an enlightened collection of essays by Black Canadian women, Peggy Bristow et al., argue that their history as Black women has been omitted from school curricula and history books. They take on the challenge of writing and acknowledging the extensive history of Black
women in Canada, so that their contributions to Canadian society will be known. In the introduction, the authors argue that the omission of their experiences from Canadian history is sustained by certain factors.

We agreed that these omissions are part and parcel of the endemic racism that fuels the Canadian intellectual tradition. The vision of Canada as an entire culture of Anglo and/or Franco existence is narrow and inaccurate (Bristow et al. 1994:8).

The contributing writers of the collection of African Canadian women’s history, argue without hesitation that the past of Black people in Canada, has in fact been hidden deliberately. They write:

Blacks in Canada have a past that has been hidden or eradicated, just as racism has been deliberately denied as an organizing element in how Canada is constituted (3).

One outcome of the deliberate denial of an African presence in Canada, is the marginality experienced by Blacks with regard to their status as members of the Canadian community. White normativity has the power to label Black Canadians eternally not Canadian, despite the fact that we are born here. For Black youth in Canada, “the process of growing up in a White-dominated society can be seen as a process of being othered--of being put outside of the dominant group” (Kelly 1998: 7). As African-Canadian essayist, Nourbese Philip explains:

Being born elsewhere, having [been] fashioned in a different culture, some of us may always feel “othered,” but then there are those - our children, nephews, nieces, grandchildren - born here, who are as Canadian as snow and ice, and yet, merely because of their darker skins, are made to feel “othered” (Philip 1992: 16).

To use the term imagined appears to underestimate the reality of the Canadian experience. Not only has this imagining served the dominant group by solidifying their position, but it is evident by the above narrative, that it has also solidified the position of the subordinate group. The following narrative (my own narrative) describes the experience of being subjected to the knowledge that one is Other.
I definitely feel like an outsider in terms of being Canadian. I'm born here and I don't necessarily feel like I represent the all Canadian, whatever image... And in that way I've clung to the things that I know that are cultural; that are of a different place and culture. Like my mom's birth origin being Trinidadian I think is something that I've clung to, to have a culture (Interview no.6. 28 October 1998).

The representation of Canadian national history is an idealization whereby the past is sanitized and packaged in a way “appropriate to national ideology” (Kelly 1998:37).

The sanitized Canadian national history gives way to an idealized Canadian identity that is constructed and performed by the Canadian state and its citizens. The idealization of Canadian identity is predicated on the notion that Canada is not like the United States; it is better.

Significantly, race is central to why Canada is better. As George Elliot Clarke succinctly put it,

The most significant difference between Canada and the U.S. is, finally, that America has a race problem. In Canada, the party line goes, there are no racists save those who watch too much American television (Clarke 1998:100-101).

It is through the dominance of such notions as ‘Canada unlike the U.S., does not have a race problem’, that Canadians are able to imagine an identity that includes innocence and tolerance. Canadians, Kelly writes, are able to

...appear more racially innocent—comparison with the U.S. provides a hiding place for racism in Canadian society. Issues of racism that have reached the surface of Canadian society have often been blamed on un-Canadian attitudes in an effort to distance Canadian society from any complicity in racism (1998:41).

Historical accounts of racism in Canada can be denied and omitted from the dominant discourse, through the notion that racism exists only in the U.S. In place of these accounts is the ever popular idea that Canadians are not capable of brutality because of their innocence and their ‘imperialist-saviour’ mentality. As Sherene Razack argues,

In the Canadian context, the imperialist as saviour of Third World peoples is an important construct in nation building. Canadians define themselves as unimplicated in the genocide of Native peoples or the enslavement of African peoples, a position of innocence that is especially appealing because it enables Canadians to imagine themselves as the
peacekeepers of the world, as living in a country that welcomes immigrants and as having few imperialist pretensions (1998:89).

According to Jennifer Kelly (1998) and Rinaldo Walcott (1995), certain symbols "such as the Underground Railway, protection of the Lion's paw and the guiding North Star came to indicate that the Canadian state was a haven for African Canadians fleeing the U.S" (Kelly 1998:37).

Recent state narratives of Canadian history on television retell the story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad as one of the most significant relationships that Canada has had with enslaved black people in the Americas, clearly positing Canada's racial forgetfulness and lack of remembrance around slavery here. The fact that many African Americans "escaped" to the North (Canada) and settled in "freedom" in Canada does not absolve the nation of its slave holding past (Walcott 1995:77).

In the retelling of the story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, these commercial vignettes titled A Part of Our Heritage, inaccurately portray White Canadians as being responsible for the safe arrival of Black Americans. While there were some Quaker individuals who helped the Underground Railroad, Black Americans were never welcome additions to the Canadian society.

White Canada's faith in its innocence is evident in its "cheerful reading" (Clarke 1998:103) of Canadian history. "Canadians do not believe that they have committed any sins for which they should atone. If anything, they are self-righteous in maintaining their innocence" (ibid.:102).

Indeed, as the Civil Liberties Association reported in 1995, the majority of graduating high school students in Metropolitan Toronto had little knowledge about Canada's history regarding civil rights abuses. Most students were unaware of past discriminatory practices such as the rejection of immigration applications on the basis of race, the legalized slavery of Blacks and Aboriginals and the internment of Japanese people during the Second World War (Kelly 1998:37).

Through the imagined Canadian identity, the maintenance of a White Canada has been actively pursued. In order to maintain the imagined Canadian identity, the Canadian State has
created several material structures. I intend in this section, to consider two of these material structures: multiculturalism and immigration.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is widely accepted by academics and policy-makers as a liberal policy that enables racial minorities to preserve their own "heritage and distinctiveness" (Li 1990:12). However several critical theorists (e.g. Ng, Bannerji) point out that Canada’s “commitment to cultural pluralism was more a strategy to appease non-white minorities than a genuine commitment to altering Canada’s status quo” (Handa 1997:195). Bannerji explains:

Visible minorities, because they are less or inauthentic political subjects, can enter politics mainly on the ground of multiculturalism. They can redress any social injustice only limitedly, if at all. No significant political effectiveness on a national scale is expected from them (1996:123).

The policy of multiculturalism was, according to Handa, upon its conception, a policy that upheld the dominance of the European culture, therefore defining Whiteness as normative in Canada. As Handa notes, The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1969, put the case baldly:

...[a]lthough we should not overlook Canada’s ‘cultural diversity,’ this should be done keeping in mind that there are two dominant cultures, French and English (193).

Upon reviewing the government’s account of the steps leading to Canada’s official adoption of Multiculturalism which took place in 1971, Handa argues that it becomes clear that the policy was predicated on the following:

[A]n interest in national unity; that the idea of unity is dependent on a singular national identity; and that while there is an acknowledgement of cultural diversity, it is only, at most, conceptualized within a duality (194).

The policy of Multiculturalism was constructed to conceive of cultural diversity within the dual frame of the French and English. There have been certain outcomes of having this dual frame.
One is the institutionalization of two “official languages,” - English and French. Carl James argues that this has resulted in “the duality of institutions, and has fostered a state of mind throughout Canada that has influenced the way in which ethnic minority groups are treated” (1995:13). Through multiculturalism then, non-White citizens are confined to the fringes of Canadian society. The notion of duality regarding Canada’s cultural diversity, leaves racial minority Canadians outside of the frame of Canadian-ness (English or French) and therefore ‘different’, and positions Whiteness inside as normative. In effect, policies of Multiculturalism have “created a fragmented identity for “Canada,” and … this fragmentation is hierarchically organized, producing insiders and outsiders” (Handa 1997:187). In Canada, the ‘insiders’ are people of Anglo-European descent; White people. Therefore, to be non-White in Canada is to be an ‘outsider’. The point should be emphasized here, that not only has multiculturalism sustained White normativity because of the way it centres Whiteness and positions non-Whites on the margins, but, the policy has generally not been embraced by Canadian citizens. Stasiulis and Jhappan (1995) explain:

Since the mid-1980s, popular and elite opinion on multiculturalism has become increasingly negative and developed into a virtual assault on the existence of the policy and its assumptions (123).

The daily reality is that despite the official and legal policy of Multiculturalism, “Anglo identity continues to dominate as the cultural norm in Canada and to be synonymous with Canadian national identity” (Handa 1997:196).

I turn now to a discussion about the role of immigration as a structure that sustains White normativity in Canada. Stasiulis and Jhappan speak to the link between multiculturalism and immigration.
The inextricable link of multiculturalism to immigration (the source for diversity) also means that the growing hostility to multiculturalism since the mid-1980s expresses the abhorrence of many white Canadians to the predominantly third world origins of most immigrant newcomers (1995:124).

The deliberate positioning of Whiteness as normative and dominant is evident in the history of Canada’s immigration policy.

That Canadian society was constructed as White was not accidental. From 1900 to 1962 the desire to maintain a White European majority was realized through controlling immigration to ensure that preference was given to Anglo-Celtic stock. In other words, immigration was used to construct Canada as a White society, dominated primarily by those of European origins and built upon the values and lived experiences of that group (Kelly 1998:36).

It is evident in the literature that in fact Canadian immigration practices worked to control the flow and ensure that the right ‘stock’ immigrated, both before and after the period of 1900 to 1962.

Immigration control is a process through which relations of power are performed. Sherene Razack (1998) explains that,

[b]order control is, … an encounter between the powerful and the powerless, and the powerful are always from the First World and mostly white, while the powerless are from the Third World and nearly always racialized or ethnicized (88).

Historically, in Canada, the powerful (white people), exerted their power through selectivity. During the nation-building period in Canada, between 1880 and 1920 (Ng 1993), the government based its immigrant selections of two types of nation building. One was the development of infrastructure. The goal was to attract those that could contribute to the development of either the physical, or economic infrastructure of the country. This type of nation building involved:

...developing the infrastructure for economic growth (such as building a nation wide transportation system) and developing the national system of manufacturing and national markets, as well as intensifying agricultural production and resource exploitation. This aspect of nation building was dominated by men (Ng 1993: 55).
The second type of nation building was the creation of the human nation: the building of a population base and communities. For this purpose, ‘lady reformers’, who referred to themselves as ‘Empire Builders’, worked to organize the immigration of single working-class women from Europe to be servants and wives (Ng 1993:55).

Their aim was to build strong communities in the Dominion of which everyone could be proud. “Canada was to be a British country, founded upon the moral, patriotic and racial influence (and unpaid labour) of British wives and mothers in Canadian homes (55).

The vision of the Canadian nation is of

... a nation emerging from the gradual accretion of the right kinds of peoples, who acquire their national identity by living in Canada and contributing to a Canadian way of life (Smith 1993:52).

In Canada, immigration policy “is the very tool of nation building” (Smith 1993:53).

Through a focus on selectivity and exclusivity, Canadian immigration policy aims to build the nation as White. Yet the nation relies on non-White labour. Throughout the twentieth century, there have been several examples of how immigration policies were used to ensure a White Canada. Smith (1993) focuses on the work of Avery (1988) which shows that:

The Canadian consensus seems to have been that Orientals and Blacks were unassimilable. Their future in this country, to the extent that they were thought to have one at all, was that of the most grinding labour. These “undesirable” immigrants were therefore limited by a series of legal and administrative measures, implemented on the assumption that those “who were culturally or racially inferior and incapable of being assimilated either culturally or biologically would have to be excluded” (Smith 1993:55).

Smith identifies the two justifications for racial exclusion regarding immigration. “One focuses on the (lack of) suitability and adaptability of non-white immigrants to Canadian ways of life” (1997:186). The other is revealed in “debates about racial and gene pool contamination” (ibid.).

For example, Blacks were at one time, excluded from immigration because of the cold Canadian
winters. Canada was said to be climatically unsuitable for them "and climatic unsuitability was a statutory reason for barring non-whites until as late as 1953" (Smith 1993:55).

As part of seeing Blacks as a different species, immigration authorities excluded them on the spurious basis that they would not be able to stand the cold climate in Canada. The plausibility of this rationale depends on one's acceptance of the race theory that Blacks are biologically inferior and less adaptable to their environment (Kelly 1998:39).

Rob Shields (1991) describes the rhetoric of the Canadian elite regarding immigration and Canada's cold climate. The rhetoric, according to Shields was that Black people were not biologically suited to withstand Canadian winters. Shields explains that the rhetoric linked racial superiority to exposure to northern winters. As well, masculinity was said to be strengthened through the endurance of Canadian weather. Quoting from an 1869 Toronto Globe newspaper article that promoted this rhetoric, Shields writes:

... bracing northern winters... preserve us from the effeminacy which naturally steals over the most vigorous races when long under the relaxing influence of tropical or even generally mild and genial skies (178).

Borrowing from the work of Page (1986), Shields refers to this type of reasoning as 'cold weather determinism', which reinforced "... a sense of northern, imperial, destiny for Canada" (178).

In her analysis of Canada's immigration history, Susan Smith (1993) argues that Canada's policy has moved from a period of Anglo-conformity in the early twentieth century, to a period where capital is of importance. Smith argues that Canada is presently at a point where the largest concern is on capital and entrepreneurial possibilities, rather than race. Smith does not consider how a policy based on capital might have similar effects of excluding Third World peoples. Speaking in past tense, Smith explains:
... of all groups, ... Canada preferred British immigrants, because it was argued, it is easier to transplant immigrants into “similar soil” (1993:55).

Despite the technical changes to the immigration laws and the existence of multiculturalism policy, ‘British stock’ is still preferred by the Canadian state. It is within this space where Whiteness is normative and therefore dominant, that the subjects of this work—young Black women—must survive. What these women experience in this White normative space, is a sense of not belonging. The women interviewed really speak to this notion of not belonging and the contradictory nature of their national identities. It was evident in the narratives of the women interviewed, that they generally did not feel that they belonged in Canadian society. Before developing this argument with the help of their narratives, I think it is appropriate here to give a brief profile of who these women are. To respect their confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms to refer to the subjects.

As mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis, this research is the result of my participation in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant of 1998. Eleven young women competed in this pageant and over the course of four months, we developed relationships. For the purpose of this research, six subjects were interviewed, including myself. I chose the other five women because of the variety of perspectives they brought to negotiating a Trinidadian identity in the Canadian context. I conducted open ended interviews lasting between one hour and one and a half hours. I asked the subjects about their lives, beginning with their childhood, to their schooling, and finally to the pageant experience (the appendix contains the interview guide).

Rachel was born in Trinidad, and has only been in Canada since 1995. She is twenty-two years old, and a student of Travel and Tourism at a private college in Toronto. Rachel is the only subject interviewed who was born in Trinidad. In Toronto’s west end, Rachel lives with her Afro-
Trinidadian mother and step-father, and her sister and brother. Serena is a nineteen year old student who at the time of the interview, had recently entered university. She was born in Canada and lives with her Afro-Trinidadian mother, step-father, and young brother, just north of Toronto. Amanda is a twenty-two year old university student who is of mixed race-Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian. She lives east of Toronto with her mother and older sister. Renee is a twenty-three year old university student who won the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada title in 1997. She lives in the north end of Mississauga, with her Afro-Trinidadian mother and siblings. Peggy is a twenty-six year old university student, who is also of mixed race, Afro-Trinidadian mother and White Canadian father. She lives with her mother and brother, just east of Toronto’s downtown core. Along with Renee, Peggy participated in the pageant in 1997. Finally, I have included myself in this research because like the other subjects, with the exception of Rachel, I am a second generation Trinidadian woman who is negotiating my identities in Canada. At the time of the interview I was twenty-three years old and in my second year of graduate school. I live in Mississauga, with my Afro-Trinidadian mother, step-father, and siblings. My biological father is Nigerian, and is presently living in the United States.

The way that the subjects identify themselves is significant because through their words, one can get a sense of how they feel about where they belong. Renee identified herself in this way:

[I identify myself as] Black because on the visible outside, yes I am a Black woman. So, that’s how I automatically identify myself... as being Black. I identify myself as being Trinidadian, just... I just have this... okay you’re gonna laugh, but I have this little thing. My father is a hundred percent Trinidadian, my mother is a hundred percent Trinidadian, and if you add them up and divide them by two you’re gonna get one hundred percent. So I call myself one hundred percent Trinidadian, with a Canadian effect to it (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).
Amanda also identified herself primarily as being Trinidadian. She explains:

I identify as Trinidadian because again, that’s my culture and that’s the unique part of me and I’m proud to be of Trinidadian heritage. So people come and ask me, ‘where are you from?’ Trinidad. I don’t even say Canada (Interview no. 4. 20 October 1998).

Both Renee and Amanda seem to identify primarily with Trinidad. Renee mentions Canadian-ness as merely having ‘an effect’ on her Trinidadian-ness. In my own narrative I express more directly, my own feeling of not belonging to Canada.

K: …I identify as Black in every space, and the reason I say every space is I find sometimes for some people it changes. Depends on where you are… you might identify as something else. But I identify as Black all the time and I guess even as a person of West Indian descent or Caribbean descent, I’ve always been one of the darkest of the people around…

I: What does Black mean?

K: Good question. For me, in that sense, at that moment, I’m talking literally about pigmentation of my skin.

I: So you’re the same colour as your sweater then?

K: No. Okay, I don’t know…

I: That’s one of the reasons…

K: No well just in that moment. I guess politically, it has a political meaning for me. It’s a way that all people… I wanna say that all people that face a certain type of oppression, are referred to in a certain way, can identify as Black. Or it’s a Black experience that you’re having. … as African-Canadians, because you know, no matter how you cut it I was born here,… It’s kind of like being African-American, cause you know, you have roots yes, but this is it, this is where you were born… and this makes you that. So I’m an African-Canadian… And sometimes I’ll even identify as a Trinidadian Canadian, or I do identify with Trinidadian-ness… As I said, politically its like you’re Black. In a Canadian political context you’re African-Canadian and in … an environment of colour, or an understanding context, or a West Indian surrounding, you’re Trinidadian Canadian, or you recognize yourself as Trinidadian. (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

The interviewer was able to help me clarify what I was trying to express.

I: In other words, you have a concept of Canadian-ness, just that you were born in Canada? Or there’s a Canadian-ness that goes with these, that cause you to hyphenate, African and Canadian? Do you see what I’m saying?
There must be a Canadian-ness that is looking at you somewhere, coming out somewhere...

K: Right, why I would hyphenate. Why I'm not just African, or Trinidadian... See perhaps if it was left for me and I didn’t have anything to bounce this so called Trinidadian-ness or African-ness off of, I wouldn't know any better, and I'd be like, 'yeah, I am Trinidadian, and I am African. But having an African Dad, a Trinidadian mother, I see painfully, it is painfully obvious to me that I am not anything near the actual Trinidadian person, or the actual African person. I am in fact hyphenated. (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

This last statement of my narrative that ‘I am in fact hyphenated’, speaks to my feelings of not belonging, not just to Canada, but anywhere. I raise the issue that not only do I not feel belonging to Canada, but I also feel unable to claim belonging to Nigeria, or Trinidad, my parents’ origins.

What is evident from each of the narratives is that we are complex individuals, who even find ourselves to be complex. I say this because of the detailed explanations that we gave with regard to who we are. Attached to our self-definitions were explanations, and at best, attempts to rationalize and qualify our identity claims. What is most significant however, is that for us (young Black women), Canada does not feel like home.

Canada is a nation in which Whiteness is normative. It is a space in which those who are not White, are positioned as marginal and not Canadian. For Black people in Canada, we have learned how to identify ourselves based on a system of cultural representation that has shown us, implicitly and explicitly, what the boundaries of our claims to Canadian-ness could be. Despite the fact that the boundaries of Canadian-ness are undefined, it is evidenced in the narratives of the interviewees that the boundaries are experienced. In this racist environment, the subjects learn that they do not belong. In thinking through this issue of belonging, I wish to consider a couple of factors other than racism in Canada, that may contribute to the subjects’ feelings of not
belonging. From the profiles of the women, one commonality among them is that they are all without their biological fathers. Some have step-fathers in their homes, but none of them have their biological fathers with them. The mainstream Canadian family, like the nation, is patriarchal. To be without one’s father therefore, is to be outside of the norm. The women could experience further marginalization in the Canadian society because of the absence of their fathers. Along with the absence of the subjects’ fathers, I wish to raise the issue of their class locations and propose that this may further position them as not belonging, in Canada. From some of the narratives that will be revealed in Chapter Three and Four, I infer that the subjects are primarily of the working class or lower middle-class. While I did not discuss their class locations with them directly, I make this inference because of what the subjects identified as their motivation for participating in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant. The subject expressed that the scholarship award of $1000.00 and a trip to Trinidad and Tobago was what motivated them to participate. Let me restate here, that I am merely raising these issues as considerations for what may contribute to the subjects’ feelings of not belonging.

In Chapter Three, using the social setting of the school system, I consider how young Black women resist racism in Canada by seeking belonging. I use the school system as the context for the discussion because it is both a space in which the White normativity of Canada is reflected, and where the identity making processes of young Black women can be identified. In Chapter Three, I will consider some of the ways that the women resist by seeking belonging, and in Chapter Four I will consider their attempt to create belonging (i.e. their participation in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant).
CHAPTER THREE

Finding Belonging

In this chapter I will discuss the experiences of second generation Caribbean women in Canada, using the social setting of the school system as a context for the discussion. I enter this discussion from the perspective that Whiteness is normative in Canada, and therefore, it is normative in the school system. I use the school system as the context for this discussion because that is where the identity making processes of the subjects are evident. The school according to the narratives, is a space in which the subjects’ struggle to find belonging is played out. I wish to consider how the subjects negotiate their identities in this White normative setting, and how resistance is implicated in their negotiation. I also wish to consider what options for survival they have and what the role of Trinidad and Tobago might be in their resistance strategies.

This chapter will be divided into two parts. In Part One, I discuss the school system and the experiences of people of colour within it, paying close attention to three aspects of the schooling experience: curriculum, streaming and representation.

In Part Two, I make the argument that marginalized students of colour respond to the school system with resistance. I then consider the choices for resistance available to young Black women in the school system and discuss the negotiations that they make for survival.

**Part One: The School System**

I chose the school system as a context for this discussion of the negotiations of identities made by young Black women for several reasons. Firstly, each of the six subjects of this research attended high school in the Greater Toronto Area. Secondly, the school system plays an important role in society. Dei (1993) summarizes the role of schools:
Schools are part of the institutional structures sanctioned by society and the state. The public school system has historically served the material, political and ideological interests of the state and the capitalist social formation. The public school setting is a site for the production and reproduction of the ideological hegemony of the state, as well as the political and economic interests of modern capital (49).

For example, Black students are being socialized into roles associated with lower levels of achievement (Phinney and Rotheram-Borus 1987; Henry et al. 1995), partly due to the fact that "...schools are organized to reproduce a highly racialized and gendered status quo" (Razack 1995:69). Thirdly, the context of the school is useful because identity, and identity formation are linked to schooling (Dei 1997:31, 247). In a study of Black students in Edmonton, Alberta, Jennifer Kelly (1998) argues that the school is one of a number of sites of identity formation and learning (123). The importance of school for identity formation is encapsulated by Philip Wexler (1992):

The main thing about schools is that they are one of the few remaining public interactional spaces in which people are still engaged with each other in the reciprocal, through an organizationally patterned labour of producing meaning - indeed the core meaning of self identity (cited in Kelly 1998:123).

However, the school system is also the site in which ‘self identity’, as mentioned by Wexler, is contested and contradicted. The narratives of the subjects of this thesis illustrate that what they experience in the school system is not a simple answer as to who they are or who they should be. Rather, in the oppositional space of the school, the subjects experience the complexities and contradictions of identity.

The Schooling Experience

Visible minority students are exposed to discriminatory educational practices which, like a multitude of timeless voices, tells them loudly or softly that they are intellectually, emotionally, physically and morally inferior. (Thornhill, 1984:3 in Henry et al. 1995:173)
Canada has a rather extensive history of overt racism in the school system. Beginning with the "brutal and oppressive treatment of Aboriginal children in residential schools in many provinces" (Henry et al., 1995:174), visible minorities in Canada continue to experience both covert and overt forms of racism in the school system. Over the past two decades, several research studies have documented racism in the education system. A report by the Nova Scotia Advisory Group (1992) points out that minorities, particularly Black students, have been unable to develop their full potential:

Unfortunately, the educational history of Black Nova Scotia is characterized by a legacy of institutionalized racism. This continues to be demonstrated by exclusion, insensitivity, cultural genocide, stereotyping, discrimination and segregation...

There remains no provincial race relations policy in the area of education; disproportionately few Black teachers; insufficient references to the Black experience in the curricula; and the undermining of the self-esteem of the Black child... (Report, 1991:5 in Henry et al. 1995:175).

In Ontario, the Stephen Lewis Report (1992) concluded that what was found to be the refrain of the Black students, was the refrain of all students:

Where are the courses in Black history? Where are the visible minority teachers? Why are there so few role models? Why do our guidance counsellors know so little of different cultural backgrounds? Why are the racist incidents and epithets tolerated? Why are minority students streamed? Why do they discourage us from university? Where are we going to find jobs? What's the use of having an education if there's no employment? How long does it take to change the curriculum so that we're part of it? (Henry et al. 1995:175-176).

In Quebec, Thornhill describes the significance and impact of racism in education:

Pretending to be colour-blind in the face of hardships encountered by Asian, Native and Black youngsters and professing not to perceive any difference in treatment, is still tantamount to sidestepping the problem... Visible minority students are exposed to discriminatory educational practices which, like a multitude of timeless voices, tells them loudly or softly that they are intellectually, emotionally, physically and morally inferior (Henry et al. 1995:176).
In a background study done by Patricia Daenzer (1992) for the Four-Level Government/African Canadian Community Working Group, she found that:

... the educational process contributes to the reinforcement of racism in two fundamental, related ways: it assaults Black identity and it negates the right of Blacks to participate as full citizens in Canadian society... African-Canadian students feel that they have inherited a legacy of social marginalization. They enter the school system as “undesirables” (ibid.).

Each of these reports have found that where the education of people of colour in Canada is concerned, “something is terribly wrong” (Henry et al. 1995:176).

In looking more closely at how the school system reproduces White normativity, therefore marginalizing students of colour, I will discuss three components of the system: the curriculum, streaming, and teacher representation.

**Curriculum**

Black students are not seeing themselves, nor their communities reflected in the system (James and Brathwaite 1996:50). The dilemma for Black students is that they are, “... excluded from the center of the system but... are, at the same time, subjected to the same cultural goals as those persons whose group membership confers on them greater access to the valued social goals” (Fordham 1982:5). These students not only find it difficult to identify with the curriculum but also, “resist attempts at forced assimilation that negate their individual and collective identities” (Dei 1997:247).

For the purpose of this discussion about curriculum, I wish to divide ‘curriculum’ into two parts: the formal and hidden curriculum. I will begin with a discussion of the hidden curriculum, paying particular attention to the work of Apple (1990) who explains what I call the ‘curriculum experience’. The hidden curriculum, according to Henry et al. (1995),

...embraces the social and cultural environment of the school and is formed by personal, professional, and organizational assumptions, values, and norms of those working in it. It
is often through the school’s hidden curriculum that the hegemony or racism is experienced and through which Black pupils become marginalized (180).

According to Apple (1990), the hidden curriculum can be defined as "those norms and values that are implicitly, but effectively taught in schools and that are usually not talked about in teachers’ statements about academic outcomes" (in Lawson 1998:27). In her work entitled, *Texts Culture and Anti-Colonial Education: Emerging Jamaican Identity in the Period of Independence 1962-1997*, Erica Lawson points out that Apple’s definition of the hidden curriculum suggests that curriculum is,
much broader than the formal agenda that outlines the specific subjects that students are expected to learn. Rather, curriculum embodies institutional practices, how the school itself is structured, whose pictures are on the school walls, what types of books are in the library, what the teachers look like and the class background from which they come, who works in the cafeteria and janitorial services, and who occupies the highest positions of power in the structure of the school (Lawson 1998:27).

This is what I refer to by the term ‘curriculum experience’. I take up this notion because it allows me to name the *entire* schooling experience, and it suggests that upon entry into a schooling institution, one is being taught. Dei (1996) refers to the ‘Deep Curriculum’ in a very similar way. Each of the bodies within the school, engaged in their various performances, are reproducing relations of power that exist in the larger society. The images and the performances that students are exposed to and participate in, within the walls of the institution, not just in the classrooms, is the ‘curriculum experience’. It is that which engages the students in the process of reproducing Whiteness as normative. The curriculum, as it refers to every image—the janitors, the principal, the pictures on the walls—is therefore a tool for the reproduction of Whiteness, and of Blackness as the ‘Other’ of White.

Some manifestations of the hidden curriculum can be identified as part of the ‘curriculum experience’. In their definition of the ‘hidden curriculum’, Henry et al. (1995:180) include:
school calendars (in their choice of which holidays are celebrated and which are ignored),
concerts and festivals, bulletin-board and hallway displays, school libraries, school clubs,
and the kinds of behaviours tolerated (e.g. racial harassment).

It is difficult to pinpoint concrete ‘evidence’ of the hidden curriculum. This makes claims
that racism structures the hidden curriculum difficult to prove, and difficult to correct. The
negative impact of the daily practices that comprise the hidden curriculum can be seen, however,
in the forging of what I call ‘in-school communities’, by marginalized students. The purpose of
the ‘in-school community’, is to provide a ‘space’ where the marginalized students may be at the
‘centre’, and escape the marginality that they experience among the dominant group in the school.
These ‘in-school communities’ are communities in resistance to the marginality that is
experienced. What they are resisting by forming these communities, is the normativity of
Whiteness that is the agenda of the hidden curriculum, but as I have argued, this agenda is hidden.
It is rarely identified by teachers or students as an agenda. Rather, students experience the hidden
curriculum and may or may not be able to identify some of its manifestations. Because the hidden
curriculum is not identified by the students or the teachers, students that form these ‘in-school
communities’ are often pathologized as having disruptive, or anti-social behaviour that stems from
their family, their class, or their race. The invisibility of the hidden curriculum leaves students
unable to prove that in fact their actions are in response to marginality. This is one of the dangers
of the hidden curriculum, and one of the manifestations of its reproduction of Whiteness.

The formal curriculum consists of the,
content and the process of instruction, which are shaped by the selection of educational
materials such as books and teaching aids. The formal curriculum also embraces teaching
practice and evaluation procedures, including assessment and placement practices (Henry
The content of the formal curriculum is of most concern: What is taught, and therefore affirmed, and what is omitted and therefore disaffirmed. Henry et al. (1995), cite Daenzer (1992) who argues that, "the assault on racial-minority students' identity is the direct consequence of bias and exclusion in the curriculum content" (179). The reproduction of knowledge in the classroom, according to Daenzer and others, "perpetuates racist thinking among both White students and their teachers" (ibid.).

Racism in the curriculum is found in all areas of study, and it manifests itself in various ways. The perspectives of non-Western theorists, novelists, and poets are generally omitted from the curriculum, which is Eurocentric. For example, the history curriculum,

often exhibits a dominant-culture bias that expresses itself in the way history texts are written. There is an unwillingness to look beyond the study of British, American, or European history... History in its textbook form is frequently nothing more than a representation of tradition; and tradition... is "always selected and thus presents us with a system of values disguised as a natural and transcendent process of cultural development" (Henry et al. 1995:179).

The agenda of the dominant group, is made invisible through a curriculum that naturalizes the process of reproducing Whiteness as normative, by teaching that which is known as tradition, but is rightly identified by Henry et al.(1995), as a 'selected system of values'. The 'selected system of values' are the values of the Anglo-European culture and is otherwise known as the 'Canon'. Also, with regard to the history curriculum, the history of people of colour begins when whites "discover" them. The Eurocentrism and racism within the formal curriculum serves as support for the hegemony by reinforcing the idea that there is an hierarchy of cultures, where Anglo-European culture—for example, "The Western legal system, democratic forms of government, and a capitalist economy—is considered the best in the world" (Henry et al. 1995:179).
The damaging affects of the formal curriculum also involve the ways in which teachers present material. For example the reading of such ‘classic’ texts as Huckleberry Finn and The Merchant of Venice is most often without any preparatory work for the racism found in them. Toni Morrison (1993) argues that if these ‘classics’ have to be studied, they should be examined critically so that the construction of racialization within them is recognized. Morrison explains:

[W]e need studies of the technical ways in which an Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce the invention and implication of whiteness. We need studies that analyze the strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters (1993:52).

Even the notion that there are ‘classics’ is a testament to which groups have the power to have their views legitimized in the school curriculum.

The role of curriculum in the development of identity is significant. Most students, Dei writes, are engaged in “individual and collective struggles to make identification with the school system, in terms of classroom teaching, the learning materials, and the general school environment” (1997:245). In their struggle to make identification with the school system, students of colour find themselves marginalized.

**Streaming**

Streaming refers to the process of placing students at varying levels of education, through a process of assessment and placement. At the secondary level, students are divided into three programs: basic or technical and vocational, general-level, and advanced or university entrance programs.

Critics of streaming argue that the assessment and placement procedures are “riddled with racial, cultural, and linguistic biases” (Henry et al. 1995:182). It is my contention that in fact, these assessment procedures are prepared from the perspective that Whiteness is normative, and
that assessment procedures for streaming serve to reproduce the dominance and normativity of Whiteness.

As a result of the streaming process there are, "a significant number of Black Caribbean students in the lower-level programs" (ibid.). In fact, "[s]tudies in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia show that disproportionate numbers of Black, Aboriginal, and poor students are directed away from programs that lead to higher education" (Henry et al. 1995:182).

Dionne Brand (1993) argues this point as well. Brand explains that in Toronto,

[m]any young Blacks, women and men, can be found in lower stream high schools around the city. In commercial and vocational high schools... there are large numbers of young Black women who are studying typing, office practices, shorthand, and computer fundamentals. They can also be found in community colleges in the community worker and nursing aide programmes (225).

Brand also makes the point that there are many Black women in sports such as track and field, which is evidence of the "prescribed social locations where Blacks are allowed to excel (ibid.).

With regard to the role of teachers in how students are streamed, one subject I interviewed expressed a lack of trust of the teachers and counsellors at the high school she attended. When asked what she would change about the school system if she could, Serena had the following to say:

[If I could] I would change the fact that there’s not enough Black teachers in the school system. I would change some of the stereotypes that the school system has about people’s academic chance. The fact that a lot of Black males, they don’t think should have a chance to go to university, when they do. So they steer them into the general stream of courses so even if they want to go to university they’ve lost their option, when same White kids, same level mentally are taking um... they’re taking advanced courses throughout, getting barely fifties, but still they have the opportunity to go to university when they’re ready. So I think that’s very terrible. The guidance department, the guidance counsellors have to go to some sort of counselling and realize what they’re doing, ‘cause I don’t think they realize what they’re doing (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1998).
Serena points out that there is inequity in streaming because Black students and White students are being streamed differently, based on the same level of academic performance. She identifies that the personal biases of guidance counsellors and teachers are embedded in the 'procedures' for assessment.

Peggy spoke about her personal experience with the system of streaming in the schools, and how teacher biases and perceptions affected her. Peggy's Trinidadian accent and 'immigrant' status (despite the fact that she was Canadian born), made her a target for low streaming. She describes her experience of returning to Canada and attending school, after being in Trinidad for eleven years.

P: When I came here, I had to deal with that [not fitting in, and an 'odd' accent] any ways because, yeah because when I came here um... then I had to deal with the fact that I had a Trinidadian accent and um... no one understood what I was saying which was funny. I mean even the teachers didn't understand my brother and myself and they wanted us to take ESL [English as a Second Language] courses and all this kind of thing and uh... again I had to deal with ignorance on the part of Canadians here, because they figured...

I: So what happened?

P: Well they figured that um... the educational system in Trinidad is inferior which in fact it is not because the British system over there is much more advanced. And when I came here they figured that I wasn't well educated so they sent me into um... You know how in high school you have your general and your advanced? They put me in the general and in grade nine, when I was really in, more like grade ten, grade eleven, kind of educational level. But they put me according to my age at the general level. But when I did the courses, I was getting ninety this and one hundred and that, 'cause I'd done this stuff already (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

Despite the fact that Peggy had been educated by the British colonial system that was used in Trinidad, she was still subjected to the racialization of her non-Anglo accent which despite her academic performance, branded her inferior. Despite her excellent academic performance, Peggy was not placed into the advanced stream until her mother furiously fought the school's authorities to have Peggy properly placed. Peggy explains:
She [Peggy’s mother] complained and she huffed and puffed at them and told them that I’m not being challenged. I’ve already done this kind of work. ‘Whether you think that she’s um… you know she didn’t get it or not, she’s not being challenged. She doesn’t get nineties. She wasn’t getting nineties in Trinidad, so something must be wrong’. So they put me in advanced. They ended up putting me in advanced and that, yeah… that dropped my grades a bit of course because it was more challenging, more, and what not. But I just, they just left it at that. So basically, I guess if anything my education kind of stagnated if anything there, because I wasn’t really being challenged to do things (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

The ‘assessment procedure’ for streaming has not been clearly defined. Is it a test? Is it a particular moment? Is it both? The fact that the ‘procedure’ appears to be a culmination of things is troubling because it becomes difficult to pin it down and critique it. The idea of an assessment procedure for streaming is itself problematic because there is no such thing as an objective assessment procedure, particularly in this instance where such procedures rely on the interpretation of behaviours or test scores. In fact, the very practice of streaming—dividing students into very arbitrary and consequential categories—is problematic, no matter what procedures are used. The consistency with which certain types of people are targeted are victimized by streaming practices is evident in their lack of representation at the post-secondary level. Serena spoke directly to the fact that at the post-secondary level of education, Black students are missing. Serena explains:

…the one change between university and my two other schools was that before, I was always the majority, and now I’m a minority and its very evident… It doesn’t bother me, but I wonder why is it that there isn’t more people like me at this level and that’s what really bothers me. ‘Cause I know they have the ability to do it (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1998).

**Staff Representation**

Let me begin by going back to a statement made by Serena that I referenced in the previous section: “[If I could] I would change the fact that there’s not enough Black teachers in the school system” (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1998).
After making this statement, Serena immediately went on to discuss the stereotypes of teachers that stream students into low academic levels, despite their abilities. Serena seems to make a connection between the lack of Black teachers in the school system and the fact that stereotypes prevail about the academic abilities of students. A group of Black students interviewed by Dei (1997), for his work on identity production in the schooling experiences of Black students, made a similar point. Dei writes:

Generally, students make a direct connection between the problem of students disengagement and the dearth of representation of Black role models in the school system. Students desire to be taught by more Black and racial-minority teachers, yet readily concur that Black teachers would not necessarily make a major difference in the classroom without other fundamental changes to the educational system (248).

While students recognize that the presence of Black teachers will not erase the marginality that they experience, there seems to be an issue of trust, whereby Black students, due to their experiences, do not trust the judgements and decisions of teachers and guidance counsellors, who for the most part are White. Serena recalls an incident that occurred between a White guidance counsellor and a Black student in her high school.

I remember uh... this is when I was in OAC, this girl in grade nine, 'cause now grade nine is de-streamed so you have to choose your courses after grade nine whether you want to go to advanced, general, or basic, and um... she said to me, [that] she took advanced math, and she went to this guidance counsellor, and the guidance counsellor said to her, 'you can't handle advanced math, take general, take general'. And I turned around and said to her, 'how can you tell her she can't take advanced math, she should take advanced'. And she turned around and said to me, 'you hush your mouth, you don't know anything better'. And I took that so offensively because I thought to myself, instead of her saying you can try it out and if you find its too difficult you can change, she's automatically pushing her to go one way and like the girl wasn't smart enough to know what she was doing, and I was like oh my goodness they couldn't try that with me, 'cause they knew they couldn’t push me around like that. But not everybody has that kind of... you know what I mean? (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1998).

Students who are unaware of institutional racism within the schools, and how teachers and guidance counsellors are implicated in it, become victims of a system that in theory is supposed to
act in their best interest. Serena refers to a grade nine student who was being instructed to choose a general level stream, without having experienced the advanced level stream. According to Serena, the guidance counsellor would not be able to influence her academic decisions that way because of her awareness of the fact that guidance counsellors do not always act in the best interests of Black students and the fact that students who do not take advanced courses can not apply to the Canadian universities. Serena was also aware that White students were not directed to the lower streams as often as Black students, as she pointed out in her previous narrative.

Along with the issue of trust, the presence of Black teachers in the school system, according to Dei’s (1997) findings, gives Black students a sense of pride and a sense of ability.

Further interrogation of the significance of Black teachers to African-Canadian students reveals a sense of wishing to belong to an environment in which students feel they are important, and with which they can identify because of prior shared experience (248). The presence of a Black teacher tells students that the teacher was able to overcome the challenges that arise out of being Black in a White normative space. The presence of the Black teacher teaches them that they can overcome the marginality they experience; it is possible (249). To see no Black people represented on the staff, tells a Black student that the people in power are White, and therefore, there is no place for a Black person there (Dei 1997:248). In this way, the normativity of Whiteness is supported by the lack of representation of people of colour in the school system.

In conclusion of Part One, it has been my intention to reveal that schools are active cultural sites that are not only engaged in the production and reproduction of knowledge, but also in the production and reproduction of social identities. Black students enter the schools and through such factors as the curriculum, the streaming process and the lack of Black staff representation, they learn to know themselves as Other, and to know Whiteness as normative. The
normativity of Whiteness within the system of the school itself, positions Black students as marginal, in a space that is theoretically organized around the assumption that all students are the same. The result: Black students are blamed and pathologized for their school performance, and their ‘group behaviour’. In Part Two, I will consider the response of Black female students to this experience of marginality. How do young Black women respond to being positioned as marginal by a school system, that, much like the greater society, reproduces the normativity of Whiteness?

Part Two

It is my contention that resistance is the response of young Black women to the marginality they experience in the school system, and that their resistance takes various forms. For the remainder of Chapter Three, I will look specifically at three forms of resistance that are taken up by Black students in the school system. They are: racelessness, inserting themselves into the existing oppositional narratives in their schools, and forging new narratives.

Resistance has historically been used by subordinate groups to subvert the efforts of those who wished to position them as marginal. It is not a new phenomenon. Yvonne Bobb Smith (1998), describes resistance in the following way:

Resistance is to be understood as specific positive responses to everyday life experiences that includes oppressions. It is a historical legacy through which people have learnt to accommodate or to reject discursive practices and systems (173).

Black people in Canada have historically used resistance as a means of survival. Through resistance, “[t]hey fought the marginalization and raced constructions perpetuated by mainstream White society” (Kelly 1998:34). For example, Black Canadians who were critical of segregated schooling during the mid 1800s used their newspapers, the Provincial Freeman and the Voice of the Fugitive, to express their discontent with the educational conditions available for Black
students (ibid.). Kelly makes reference to this statement made by newspaper editor, Mary Ann Shadd:

[T]he large and handsome school houses are erected for the children of Whites, but a single miserable contracted wooden building is set aside for the coloured taxpayers of the entire town (cited in Kelly 1998:34).

As is the case today, resistance among the early (1600s-1900s) Black Canadian communities was not homogenous. Kelly explains that the resistance was affected by certain factors, "such as whether they had entered Canada as "free" people or "slaves," as well as by their socio-economic background" (1998:34).

In Canada West (in the nineteenth century), there were two major resistance 'camps'. One was the communalist 'camp', the other was the integrationist 'camp'. The communalists believed that the path to equality with the White society, "lay in setting up separate communities that were self-sufficient and free of charity" (Kelly, 1998:34). This was a temporary strategy that would give the community time to establish itself so that when they did enter White society they would enter with "complete equality" (ibid.).

The integrationists believed that communities in which Blacks were geographically concentrated would only increase White prejudice. They felt that these separate communities would "imply that blacks belonged apart [from Whites]" (Kelly 1998:34). Separate communities would also deprive "the average white citizen of daily contact with blacks" (Walker 1980 cited in Kelly 1998:34).

Difference in approaches to resistance, like resistance itself, is not new, as is evidenced by Jennifer Kelly’s account of early (1800s) Black communities in Canada West. Both the integrationist camp and the communalist camp wanted to resist marginality for the Black
community, and they both wanted equality for Blacks in Canada, however, their methods for achieving equality differed.

Within the school system, the resistance strategies of Black students also differ. Some students feel that adopting a ‘raceless’ persona, and claiming that one is part of the ‘human race’, is the way to subvert marginality. Other students seek out the existing oppositional narrative within their school, and attempt to find belonging within that narrative. Finally, other students, after attempting to find belonging with the existing oppositional narrative, give up, and decide to forge their own narrative. In what follows I consider each of the three options in more detail. I recognize that the resistance options that I have identified here, do not represent all of the resistance options that are available to Black students in the school system, however I have selected these three forms of resistance as they are most relevant to the experiences of the women of my research sample.

Racelessness

Racelessness is a strategy, used by Black students, to resist the marginality that they experience in the school system. It is a strategy whereby one achieves success in the school system by appearing not to identify with ‘Blackness’ or ‘Black culture’. I borrow this notion of racelessness from Signithia Fordham (1988), whose work seeks to determine whether racelessness, as a tool for school success, is a pragmatic strategy or pyrrhic victory.

Upon entry into the school system, Black students experience a feeling of conflict between “making it”, and their group identification. According to Fordham (1988), the Black culture is organized around a “collectivist ethos”, while the school, is organized around an “individualistic ethos”. The problem is that in order to succeed in the school, one has to adopt the individualistic ethos because,
despite the growing acceptance of ethnicity and strong ethnic identification in the larger American society, school officials disapprove of a strong ethnic identity among Black adolescents (Fordham 1988:55).

The outcome of these contradictory messages is conflict and ambivalence for Black students who must negotiate between both the development of racial and ethnic identities, and performing well in school. By taking on "attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics" (Fordham 1988:58), that may not generally be attributed to Black people, students attempt to detach themselves from the negative perceptions of Black people, that are held by the school staff and administration. Racelessness is an attempt to not be seen as 'just like the rest of them'. It is a means of resisting the negative academic perceptions that are attached to being Black.

Signithia Fordham identifies 'fictive kinship' as the social identification and cultural frame of reference of Black people. Membership into 'fictive kinship' is not automatically given because of one's African descent or one's skin colour. Instead, membership with 'fictive kinship' is a choice and an agreement to adhere to the criteria of membership, which are defined by the group. "The collectivist ethos of the fictive-kinship system is challenged by the individual ethos of the dominant culture..." within the school (Fordham 1988:57). According to Fordham, the very act of attending school is "evidence of either a conscious or semiconscious rejection of the indigenous..." Black culture, as it requires some adherence to individualism (ibid.). In order to reinforce the fact that they are members of the fictive-kinship system, some students adhere to the 'rules' of the oppositional narrative (a resistance option that I will consider more thoroughly in the next section). Other students choose to minimize their affiliation with Black students, in an effort to improve their chances of succeeding in school. Essentially, these students seek to adopt a raceless persona in order to succeed in school (Fordham 1988:57).
Students that do use racelessness as a resistance strategy, do not necessarily use it at all times within the school. In this regard, Fordham says two rather significant things about racelessness: first, it can be used consciously or subconsciously (1988:57), second, some students only use it when necessary (Fordham 1988:60). The notion that students exercise some choice in when, where and how to use racelessness speaks to the agency that they do have, to strategize their resistance.

In the interviews that I conducted, I did not find that any of my subjects chose racelessness as a ‘full time’ method for dealing with marginality in the school system. They did not express having to ‘act White’ or not hang out with other Black students in order to do well academically. However, I can confidently make the claim that racelessness was employed at times, particularly by those subjects who had achieved academic success. Racelessness was used strategically to connect with teachers and administration in a way that fostered their success.

Reflecting upon my own experience in high school, I can recall the awareness that I had of how to speak to, and approach the staff, who were all White. I realize now that one of the factors that fostered my effectiveness with the staff was my awareness of the fact that they were uncomfortable with Black students. I do not remember exactly how I obtained this knowledge, but my educated guess tells me that I picked up what I knew through observation. Observing the reactions of staff members to various students was one way for me to strategize what my approach would be. I used racelessness to connect with the teachers and administration, in order to ensure my success. I ‘worked with the system’ to build a relationship with the staff members, who have labelled me, to this day, a ‘friend’ to the school. From the following narrative, it seems that I was not the only one who figured that success could be achieved by, ‘working with the system’. Serena explains:
In all my institutions of learning I've had White teachers... I learned how to I guess you'd say, work with the system so I did really, really well academically (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1988).

‘Working with the system’ refers to the negotiation that Black students face, of being high achievers without being social outcasts among their peers.

As a strategy for resisting marginality, racelessness is not without complexity. It is not simply employed without agency, as the consequences of racelessness are carefully weighed and negotiated by Black students.

As is the case with racelessness as a strategy of resistance, the two strategies that I will discuss in what follows are also multifaceted and complex. Further, each strategy connects or overlaps with the others. This is exemplified by the connection between racelessness and group affiliation. According to Fordham, Black students negotiate between racelessness for academic success, and affiliation with the oppositional narrative of the Black students as a collective.

**The Oppositional Narrative**

Another resistance strategy taken up by Black students is to insert themselves into an oppositional narrative. Oppositional narratives, within the context of this study, refer to the ‘culture’ that is in opposition to the dominant White normative ‘culture’ of the school. The oppositional narrative within the schools of the subjects that I interviewed is constructed as Blackness. Like racelessness, the oppositional narrative is not taken up without difficulty and negotiation. I intend to argue here that the subjects of this thesis, *attempt* to take up the oppositional narrative, which they identify as a Black identity, in the school system, and I intend to focus on the complexities and negotiations that they face in doing so.

Essentially, the subjects describe a series of instances in which they attempt to insert themselves into a Black identity, as it was constructed in their high schools (which could be
different in each setting). To understand how Black identity could be used in this way, it would be useful here to consider what Black identity is, and how it might work as an oppositional narrative for these young women.

Black identity is in large part, constructed around survival. It is a ‘performance’ that is fashioned in a way that ensures survival, achieved by “resisting and undermining dominant representations” (Walcott 1995:62). Black identity is not static, rather, it is active and changing. Therefore, according to Kelly (1998), it is questionable, “whether what it means to be Black can be known once and for all” (124).

While Black identity has been identified as a performance, and something that is constantly changing, Paul Gilroy speaks to the way that Blackness is lived and felt by those of us who are Black. Gilroy says that while Blackness is performative, “it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) sense of self” (1993:102). Gilroy recognizes that Blackness is lived as though it were natural and spontaneous, despite the fact that “it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires” (ibid.).

Black identity is a construction that is not uniform, but dependent on such factors as gender, religion, ethnicity, age, and class. Also of importance, particularly in the context of the school, “are the raced meanings and understandings that students bring from family, countries of origin, and the Black Diaspora” (Kelly 1998:120). Black identity then is fragmented; “it has a plurality of interlocking centres” (ibid.:121). Yet despite its fragmentation, there continues to be a Black identity to speak of. Both Stuart Hall, and Jennifer Kelly speak to the fact that despite the fragmentation of Blackness, we know what Blackness is. In Kelly’s (1998) study, her subjects argue that they recognize their Blackness through the commonality of their experience – they know what Blackness is because they share the experience of living in a White normative society
(6). Hall explains that we know what Black means, "not because there is some essence of 'blackness' but because we can contrast it with its opposite — White" (1997:234). Joan Scott refers to Hall who also speaks to the fact that a Black identity can be constructed in response to a political struggle. He makes the point that Black is an identity that has to be learned in certain moments. In Jamaica, according to Hall, that moment was the 1970s, when a Black identity was affixed to the politics of the time. (Hall 1982 in Scott 1992:33).

Black identity works as an oppositional narrative because it can be constructed to suit the resistance needs of Black students. This is not a homogenous or straightforward matter, however. The narratives of the women expose the complexities and contradictions that arise because of, I would argue, the performative nature of Blackness. The subjects' narratives show how inserting themselves into the oppositional narrative brought them face to face with difference and marginality. The source of this feeling of difference for the women I interviewed, was their Trinidadian or 'Other' heritage. They experienced difference because the majority of the Black students in the high schools that the subjects attended were either Jamaican born, or of Jamaican parentage. Wolseley W. Anderson’s analysis of immigration trends of the Caribbean, shows that between the late 1960s and the latter part of the 1980s, Jamaicans accounted for nearly 40% of all immigration from the Caribbean (1993:121). His analysis also shows that the majority of those immigrants settled in Southern Ontario between Toronto and Hamilton (ibid.:68). Jamaicans are clearly the 'dominant' group from the Caribbean in the part of Canada. Those students of Jamaican heritage drew on knowledge of and familiarity with Jamaica for their sense of style, language, and entertainment, to develop a Black identity that was similar to, but different from, their parents' 'culture'. The difference arises because sense of style, language, and entertainment are also influenced by their Diasporic identity and the hybridity of their cultural identity. For
students of Jamaican heritage, the fact that they represent the majority means that they are also the students who police the boundaries of the Black identity within the school.

At some point in high school each of the women I talked with, sought to insert themselves into the 'dominant' oppositional narrative. It was most often understood as seeking friends, but I articulated it as a need for solidarity.

K: ...in high school I think a lot of the time you call people your friends because like I went to a very White high school. It was like um... I think there was about 65-70 percent White [students] and it was very White in its ways, very White dominant type... There was a group of Black girls that were my friends, that I called my friends and I think it was because, I think a lot of it had to do with the struggle. Like you’re in this school, and you’re surrounded by these people and you feel alone. You feel like you need to have each other...

I: For survival?

K: For survival. Yeah (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

There seemed to be certain activities that were deemed ‘Black’ activities. The women speak about these activities as tools that they used to gain acceptance. For example, being a part of the school basketball team, offered more acceptance than playing soccer. Renee explains how this was the case for her.

[In] high school I did basketball, see I also... basketball was a part of me being accepted. But I wanted to play soccer, and I was the only Black girl on the soccer team (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

The language that Renee uses to describe her experience, positions her dilemma as being about acceptance. The goal for her at the time was to be accepted by the other Black students, for reasons that she does not articulate. Amanda also referred to a certain activity that was important to her identity during high school. She explains:

Well, in high school, like I said um... it was more of a social thing. So we used to do... We used to concentrate a lot on dancing. We used to do all the dancing. Step dancing, hip hop dancing, all kinds of dancing. We danced to calypso. We made up routines... So
that was basically my extra-curricular activity... My life, like in the first years of high school was concentrated on dancing, so the girls and I would practice like every time after school. We’d stay all ‘till seven, eight o’clock practising dancing. So we didn’t have time for anything else [laughing] (Interview no. 4, 20 October 1998).

In Jennifer Kelly’s (1998) work, the women in her sample also expressed the importance of dancing as an extra-curricular activity, particularly Step dancing. According to Kelly, Step dancing was equated with Black identity by her sample. Not only did Step dancing create a sense of cohesiveness, but for many students it was a reason to attend school, “especially when compared to the more static aspects of the formal curriculum” (91).

Stepping offers many of the elements that students would like to see in schoolwork. It enables students to work together, it is related to Black experience, it is active and students have a voice in its construction and development (ibid.).

Activities such as Step dancing and playing basketball have been used by Black female students as symbols of Black identity within the schools. However, some students are not able to participate in such activities. For example, Kelly found that there was fragmentation amongst the Black female students because some, due to their religious beliefs, did not dance to secular music and therefore could not participate in the Step dance team. This fragmentation was the result of difference amongst the group of women. The women of Trinidadian descent, who I spoke with, describe their experiences of being ‘different’ amongst their Black female peers, and describe what they attempt to do to subvert this difference. According to the stories I heard, there were certain moments in their high school experiences where the women were confronted by their peers because of their difference. The ability to speak and understand Jamaican patois was identified as one of the symbols used to police the Black identity within the high schools. One’s inability to speak patois was not understood as a cultural difference within Blackness. Instead, the label
‘white washed’ was applied to those who could not communicate in patois. Renee describes an incident that occurred between herself and one of her peers.

Then I had an incident in grade nine; a racial incident from a Black girl to me, and she said, ‘you’re white washed’. Meaning that I try to act white like I don’t find myself mixing with Black culture, which to me, I felt this was wrong. I do hang out with Black girls and stuff, but she said, ‘why can’t you talk patois?’ Patois is different in different cultures. Meaning she was speaking about her Jamaican patois. She was Jamaican, and I was like, ‘well I’m not Jamaican so I can’t speak that, I don’t understand it. That’s not how we speak where I’m from. We’re from Trinidad’. And she’s like, ‘well whatever, you’re white washed’ (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

What is evident from Renee’s narrative is that behaviours that did not fit with what was understood as Jamaican culture were considered to be White. When Renee explained to her peer that she was from Trinidad, where they did not speak the same kind of patois, her claim was dismissed and she remained ‘white washed’ in her peer’s eyes.

Along with speaking Jamaican patois, attending reggae dances was also a means of gaining acceptance into the oppositional narrative. Renee explains:

Before when I was younger in grade nine, I wanted to go to the Jamaican parties, the reggae parties and my family’s like, ‘don’t go to those parties, gun shot. You’re gonna get killed!’ (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

Social events such as reggae parties reinforce the recognition of ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’ in relation to Black identity. This interaction among Black peers, according to Kelly (1998), “helps to create that differentiation from others, while at the same time reinforcing a Black identity” (121-122). Renee’s narrative points to the importance of finding belonging amongst Jamaicans despite the warnings issued by her family. From her narrative, one would assume that Renee’s family attributed violence to Jamaican parties. Certainly this would complicate Renee’s negotiation of her identity and her ability to adapt to the Black identity in her school.
The women who are the subjects of this thesis found creative ways of subverting the difference between themselves and their peers. I rely heavily on Renee’s narrative here because of how detailed and honest she was about how she went about finding acceptance. Renee admitted to lying about her father’s country of origin.

I used to tell the girls, because I felt so unaccepted, oh yeah, my dad’s part Jamaican… (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

Renee contextualizes her need to be accepted by making reference to the small number of Black students that attended her high school.

‘Cause I felt I had to blend in. And at this point also, I must mention, when we were going into high school there was still like only… there’s [was] probably like twenty [white students] to one [Black student], which is a lot more Black people [than there were in junior high school]… All the girls were Jamaican. And I felt so left out so I just wanted to be accepted so bad that I actually lied… (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

Renee seems to have felt that seeking acceptance amongst the White students was neither a viable option for her, nor was it a particularly useful strategy. Her goal was to be accepted by the small group of Black girls who happened to identify with a culture, unlike Renee’s.

Along with activities and behaviours, physical symbols were also used to maintain the boundaries of the Black identity. Renee recounts an incident where the texture of her hair put her at risk of being labelled ‘white washed’.

I was somewhat accepted but I wouldn’t say it was because of… I would say it was because I was Black, as opposed to being um… Trinidadian. But then, also at this point I was receiving a lot of, ‘why is your hair like that? Why is your hair like that?’ You’ve never seen my hair when I wash it and just where it out, but its really curly. It’s not as nappyish… And then when I used to say I’m Trinidadian, ‘Oh yeah, a lot of Indians in Trinidad. Oh yeah, okay I see. Oh that’s how you have that hair’. Now at this point in time, I was being bruised emotionally by family and other people because they’re saying you’re not Black, you’re Paki. Not all my family came out with this kind of kinkyish hair, so they used to say, ‘you’re not Black, you’re Paki, you’re Paki, and it really used to hurt me… I was lost culturally… I was trying to fit in with those Jamaicans… ‘cause those are the ones who were in the area (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).
Renee, along with some of the other subjects, uncover that the Black identity that was performed in their schools did not define all of who they were. They sought acceptance into the oppositional narrative as a means of survival, however, this move of resistance is obviously fraught with complexity and contradictions. The subjects find that part of who they are is accepted and other parts of themselves are not.

The two women that I interviewed who had spent ten years or more being raised in Trinidad, talked about different experiences. Not only were they ‘Trinidadian immigrants’ and not Jamaican, but they were also not socialized within the same context. For them, developing friendships with their peers on any level was extremely difficult. Peggy describes her experience of attending a Toronto high school after spending eleven years in Trinidad and Tobago. She explains:

It took me quite a while before I started making friends or establishing a group of friends or whatever. About two years later... Um... but at the same time, I think people had a very hard time trying to relate to me because I was from a different culture (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

Peggy’s main obstacle to acceptance seemed to be her different cultural frame of reference.

Unlike the other Black women that she met in the high school, Peggy did not yet have the experience of being Black in a White society. Peggy was not yet aware of the racialization of language, and behaviour, and musical preference. She had no idea of the rules for taking part in the oppositional narrative. For Peggy, it was easier to develop relationships with other ‘immigrant’ students, and although she does not make reference to the Black students within the school, she does identify that the majority of the students were of Greek origin. Peggy explains:

... the majority of students were Greek, were of Greek origin. So they had their little thing going on and no one could ever enter. So that was that. Um... so I guess that’s why if anything the few friends I had were from Africa, or Asia, India, that kind of thing. Um... and then years later when I did started, when I did start meeting other people from
Trinidad, yes we had our own little thing. I hung out with them because I could relate to them, and other West Indians as well, any ways... Jamaicans and what not (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

Peggy realized that she was a minority amongst the Greek students in her school and so she turned to a group of students that she could relate to—other ‘immigrant’ students.

One of the most significant parts of Peggy’s narrative was when she was commenting on ‘Blacks here’, by which she meant, in Canada. She appears to separate herself from Black women in Canada, despite the fact that she is Canadian born. Peggy seemed at times, to be aggressively claiming her Canadian-ness, making a strong case for her biracial and bicultural identities. At other moments Peggy seemed to separate herself from other Black women in Canada, and was very critical of their behaviour.

... [A] lot of Black women here, they’re very materialistic. Um... they love... I uh,... At the risk of sounding stereotypical, they love gossip, they um... what is it? They love gossip... I notice [that] they’re very oppressed by the system. Or they’re romantically oppressed and what I mean by that is where you see with African Americans about how it’s the in thing to be, you know, to speak with some slang,... and White this and Black that... And I think um... Blacks here romanticize about that. You know. They enjoy, you know, being part of a gang, and you know, a clique and a group... And speaking a particular way, and thinking a certain way about women and men and how um... you know, men can sleep with however many women they want and, I just can’t stand that way of thinking. I’m sorry. Um... I don’t like how they live their lives here and I don’t like their way of thinking. So um, the very few women friends that I do have, they do have a sense of ambition, um... they always... um... they’re women that love to... they’re always willing to learn, open to new things. Um... reson... they’re responsible. They’re mature (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

Peggy’s criticisms have led me to wonder if such feelings prevented her from seeking acceptance from Black women in Canada. In fact a variety of things could be possible in Peggy’s case. Her feelings about Black women ‘here’ could stem from bitterness caused by being rejected because of her newcomer status or her biracial status, to name two possibilities. I can not say for sure what causes Peggy to feel as she does. She does show a lot of resistance to Blackness ‘here’ and
to the notion that a Black identity is to be claimed and performed in a preset fashion. Peggy describes one of the things that she is resisting in detail:

Well I am Black and White. Factually speaking that is what I am. Um... I would not say... I think I've approached a lot of Black people who wanted me to say that I am Black, but I, you know, ... and to me my opinion on that is that they figure well, um... why their explanation for that is that White people say that even if you have so much as a quarter [of] Black blood in you, even if the rest of you is white then you’re Black and you should say that. But excuse me. Why are we to follow what they may think of us? You know? Isn’t that the whole reason why we’re trying to hold our own identity and um... be strong individuals and what not. Why is it that we have to hold on to some things and then follow whatever they feel, um, however they feel they should categorize us? And um... regardless, I’m proud of being Black and White. That’s what I am. Why should I deny that? Um... no West Indian could ever say that they don’t have even so much as a tinge of European blood in them. Everyone is mixed. I may be more directly mixed, and it may seem more evident, but regardless, that’s what I am. Um... Canadian, I was born here. Um... yeah I was born here (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

Peggy’s narrative here, could be the result of her not having experienced being Black in a White society. She does not seem to want to adhere to the pressure from her peers to identify herself in the same ways that they do. Peggy’s response seems to be to highlight the fact that she is biracial.

The women’s narratives showed overwhelmingly that Black identity as the oppositional narrative of their high schools, is not unitary and highly complex. Their attempts to find belonging amongst their Black peers in high schools were met with resistance because as students of Trinidadian heritage, they were unlike the majority of Blacks. They found that the oppositional narrative, being organized around a very specific set of ‘rules’ of Blackness, represented very little of who they felt they were. In fact some found it necessary to lie about their father’s country of origin, or to become involved in sport activities they disliked, simply to achieve acceptance from those that policed the boundaries of Blackness. All of this is not to say that I do not recognize that there is bonding power in a shared culture and common ancestry. In fact, I would contend that the commonality of our ancestry is what most eludes us as we attempt to insert ourselves.
Being aware of that commonality, we attempt the insertion, completely unprepared for the experience of not being able to quite ‘fit’. Our inability to fit rests in the lack of fluidity of our constructed identities. In a space, such as the school, where identity is connected to resistance and survival, fluidity appears to the subjects and their peers, to be dangerous. Alarmed by our inability to fully insert ourselves, we either continue to make moves to create a ‘fit’, or we give up, and seek to form a ‘new’ narrative.

Forging a New Narrative

In response to their failed attempts to insert themselves into the existing oppositional narrative, the subjects of this thesis construct a notion of home in which they find belonging, and through which, they resist the marginality that they experience in Canada, and specifically, in the company of their Black peers in Canada. The ‘new’ narrative to which I refer, is constructed through a shared imagining of ‘home’. Home, as it pertains to my subjects, is a Trinidad and Tobago that is imagined in a way that provides them with a sense of belonging.

This new narrative, to which I refer, can be likened to a ‘space’. It is a space in which the subjects find acceptance, and it is a space in which the ‘rules’ of the Black identity are expanded to include them as second generation Trinidadian women in Canada. For Renee, finding a group of young women with which she could forge a ‘new’ narrative did not occur until she entered university where she was exposed to a broader selection of second generation Caribbean women. Renee explains:

When I went to university now, I ended up meeting a lot of Trinidadians. And I felt so accepted because I was really into calypso. As I told you, the girl that said I didn’t speak patois, she also mentioned little things about reggae and stuff. I didn’t dance to reggae and didn’t know much about it and... I just ended up meeting up with all these Trinidadian girls, so now I feel much more at ease culturally, and racially knowing I can say that I’m Black and these Trinidadian girls will understand what I mean when I say I’m Black and they won’t say ‘oh well because you have Indian in you and you’re doogla’.
They'll just identify me as Black. This is what I look like…(Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

The importance of being identified as Black is highlighted by Renee. Acceptance, according to Renee’s narrative, is essentially to be identified as Black regardless of one’s physical appearance, or musical preference. The new narrative, like the original oppositional narrative, is constructed around what is referred to as a Black identity, except that the ‘rules’ around skin complexion, hair texture, musical preference, and language, are expanded in this new narrative. Renee goes on to say that,

...being Indian or not, they [friends at university] just identify themselves as being Black. There’s an Indian girl, she identifies herself as being Black… ‘Cause when, the way we’re looking at it in terms of when you go to them and they say ‘Black or White?’ You can’t say in between. Right? Unless you’re White and Black. They ask you, ‘are you Black or White?’, if you look dark then you’re Black (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

In this new narrative, Black identity is claimed by people who are not necessarily of African descent. In the ‘space’ of the new narrative, the Black identity is not biological, rather it is predicated on a shared experience; the experience of being of Caribbean descent in Canada.

In Trinidad and Tobago, there exists a skin colour hierarchy, whereby Whiteness is dominant. This hierarchy was inscribed by colonialism, and is still evident in Trinidad and Tobago today. As with other regions of the world, colonialism may be over, but people continue to strive toward the mythic respectability that colonialism has taught. I make mention of Trinidad and Tobago’s colonial past in order to highlight the apparent change that occurs in the lives of people who might not identify with Blackness in the Caribbean, but do identify with it in Canada. Either, the individuals themselves change as a result of their experiences in Canada, where Whiteness is normative, or Black identity in Canada is constructed in a way that includes Caribbean peoples, despite their race. And of course, there is the possibility that both are true to some extent. In
Yvonne Bobb Smith’s (1998) work, she discusses the fact that in Canadian scholarship, Caribbean women are lumped into the essentialized category of ‘Black women’, where “[g]rades of skin, differing ethnicities, classes and sexualities all disappear…” (11). Can it not be argued then, that Caribbean, and second generation Caribbean women’s identifying with Blackness in Canada can be attributed to both, the agency of these women to form collectivities, and the defining power of the Canadian narrative where particular regions of the world, cultural practices, and dialects are racialized as Black?

The act of imagining ‘home’, according to Yvonne Bobb Smith (1998), “enables women to develop new identities in a foreign, hostile land” (141). In her work on agency and resistance as it is seen in the lives of first generation Caribbean women in Canada, Bobb Smith finds that the women of her research sample make reference to home. In theorizing around the connection between home and the identities of her subjects, Bobb Smith relies on the work of Carole Boyce Davies (1994) who discusses the notion of home as it is used by Afro-Caribbean/American women in their writings. According to Boyce Davies, ‘home’ is full of contradictions and contestations, where some women do not experience full belonging, yet, it is a “critical link in the articulation of identity” (cited in Bobb Smith 1998:141). Despite the contradictions and contestations that are a part of the notion of home, within the narratives collected by Bobb Smith, as with the narratives that I collected from my research sample, home is romanticized. This is the rather surprising similarity between the women of my sample and the women of Bobb Smith’s sample. Bobb Smith explains that regarding home, her subjects recall “an inclusionary culture, with no sense of racial divisiveness most of the time, and most of all the presence of communal living” (1998:186). Like Bobb Smith’s subjects, my subjects imagine Trinidad in much the same way. Most of my subjects had only visited Trinidad for relatively short periods of time; only two
of the subjects had lived in Trinidad for more than ten years. Regardless of the extent of their time in Trinidad, the subjects spoke highly of race relations and community in Trinidad.

While interviewing Renee, she explained that she would like to visit Trinidad more often than every four years. When I asked her why, this is what she had to say about Trinidad:

Its the life in Trinidad, its a lot more friendlier. The atmosphere is much different, it’s more of a love life, not a love life, but loving people, warm and welcoming. But I mean it’s always ideal for a vacation spot. That’s what it is. Ideal for a vacation spot. A chance to get away, be with your family. I’m very family oriented. I love to be around my family. So its a warm and welcoming place. You go out on the street, [and] everyone says hi. You know? (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

Renee describes Trinidad as a place where she can go to see family members and be amongst ‘warm and loving’ people. Trinidad represents to these women, a place where they can go to rejuvenate and strengthen their identities. Serena said this about Trinidad:

First of all that’s [Trinidad is] where all my family is. Second, I LOVE Trinidad, I love the way it feels, I love the way people are down there. And just to keep my identity stronger. I think it helps it (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1998).

Within the warmth and love that Trinidad provides, the subjects claim to find acceptance, particularly for their racial identities. Peggy, who is a racial mixture of White Canadian, and Black Trinidadian, had this to say:

It’s [a person’s complexion] not the main issue there because… well… I guess it’s a very, it’s a cultural mosaic. Everyone there is mixed with something. I mean half the time you can’t tell exactly what they’re made of. You know. Whereas with me here, um… it’s funny that they um… it’s funny that people would ask you where you’re from considering that this is a very um… this is a mosaic… it’s a multicultural society, and you’d figure by now everyone would realize whether you’re Indian, or Black, or Red or whatever you must be Canadian anyways. Immigrants have been coming here for years… hundreds of years (Interview no. 4. 20 October 1998).

Peggy expresses frustration around her experiences of not being assumed to be Canadian.

Essentially, Peggy is referring here to her inability to actually feel like a Canadian because of the way that her complexion situates her as a Black woman in Canada, and therefore, not Canadian.
Despite Canada’s stated commitment to multiculturalism, people of colour continue to be asked the infamous question: ‘Where are you really from? According to Peggy, in Trinidad people are simply accepted as Trinidadians, despite their complexion. Amanda recalled similar experiences of not being accepted in Canada by either White or Black people. Amanda explains her experience as a woman that is both Afro-Trinadian, and Indo-Trinadian:

Canadians, like White Canadians would seem me as Black right? So this is why I say, when they say, ‘Oh what are you?’, well obviously they’re seeing my skin colour so they’ll assume that I’m Black. Um... but to Black people, to other West Indians, they look at me and they can tell right away that I am mixed with something because of my hair. My hair is curly. They can tell that I’m mixed and um... they would say... some people would say ignorant comments like I’m ‘coolie’, because I have an Indian mix in me... So the easiest thing for me to say is that I’m mixed right? But it depends [on] the people I’m talking to. To White Canadians, I’ll just say that I’m Black. But if its people who know, who know the difference, I’ll say yeah, I’m mixed with Black and Indian (Interview no. 4. 20 October 1998).

Amanda explains here, the way that she goes about negotiating her identities in various spaces. The way that she identifies herself is dependent upon who she is talking to, and their understanding of ‘Black’ identities. Comparing Canada to Trinidad in a way that romanticized Trinidad, Amanda went on to say:

This [Canada] is my home, I can’t say anything really. I mean I’ve had experiences where um... people have called me ‘nigger’, called me... um, well Black people have also called me ‘coolie’, and all this kind of stuff, and I mean, I don’t appreciate it. I mean ‘cause if you were living in Trinidad you wouldn’t be hearing things like that. You know. ‘Cause everyone is like, all multicultural and it’s like one BIG happy family down there (Interview no. 4. 20 October 1998).

According to Amanda, Trinidad, unlike Canada, is a space in which race is insignificant because everyone is equally as racially mixed. Like Peggy, Amanda imagines a Trinidad where she does not stand out because she is unlike everyone else. Trinidad, according to both subjects, is a space in which people do not feel the need to racially insult others using words like ‘coolie’ and ‘nigger’, because everyone is ‘one BIG happy family down there’. Like Bobb Smith’s (1998)
subjects, in imagining, the women of my research recreate a Trinidad in which they find acceptance, and therefore, belonging.

As with the other forms of resistance taken up by the subjects of this thesis, the subjects do experience the contradictions of their imagining home. While these experiences were not relayed to me when I asked them direct questions about Trinidad, these stories did appear at other moments of the interviews. What these women express, is that despite their imagining Trinidad as an inclusionary space, they have had experiences where they felt different. Peggy recounts her schooling experience in Trinidad and how she was received by the other students.

Oh... Well I’m mixed... I’m half Canadian and half Trinidadian. Um... I would say that I was never really aware of my biracial background until I went to Trinidad and the kids started asking me if I’m adopted and what not because my mother is Black. So uh, they’d ask me if I was adopted and blah blah blah, and do I think I’m better than them because I’m from Canada. And all this kind of business. Just naïve little kids stuff. Um... it bothered me a bit but um... but basically I guess I realized if anything that it was um... it was just ignorance on their part... (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

As a result of Peggy’s difference, as a biracial Canadian in Trinidad, she was taunted by her peers who wondered why Peggy’s complexion varied so much from that of her mother. Her peers also felt that her ability to visit Canada as often as she did, meant that Peggy was ‘well off’, and that maybe she thought that she was better than they were. In the midst of recounting such stories about her schooling in Trinidad, Peggy continues to romanticize Trinidad and her experience there. Peggy goes on to say:

I had a great childhood [in Trinidad]. Lots of fun. Lots of adventures. ‘Cause when you’re living in Trinidad, you’re always outside playing with kids and the neighbourhoods and stuff like that. Um... school was great. Um... high school was great there too. Um... yeah lots of good friends... (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

At this point in the interview I felt the need to clarify with Peggy, what her schooling experience had been in Trinidad and Tobago with regard to her peers. In the previous narrative she
expresses that her peers questioned her and taunted her about who she was, but in her most recent narrative she speaks about all the fun she had playing with her peers. To clarify the situation, I asked Peggy what her response had been to her taunting peers, and how she was able to get to a point where she found ‘good friends’ as she stated. This was her response:

P: ... I guess I’ve always been a very um... I don’t know, I’ve had friends, okay I’ve had friends but I would say basically, I’m a very independent person, and I don’t need that many friends anyways, so um... I lost my train of thought. What was the question?

I: Well I guess I’m just asking, cause it sounded like initially it was hard to kind of get settled into the social environment [of Trinidad].

P: Yeah I guess. Um... People were trying to understand me. Cause when I first came there I had a Canadian accent. So, they thought that was very fascinating and what not, and um... and I did take trips to Canada while I was living there, and I’d come back with stuff from Canada which of course would be foreign to them, so they’d wonder if I was better than them... How did I take that? Um... I guess if anything I guess kids think that if um... if you travel a lot over there, if you go to Canada, that you must be rich and you’re special... (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

Peggy’s narrative is rife with contradictions. At certain moments she romanticizes Trinidad, saying that living there was ‘great’. At other moments Peggy describes her inability to be accepted by the other young women in Trinidad, and that her sense of independence is what got her through her time there. Returning to Canada, Peggy recalls, she did not find the acceptance that was missing in Trinidad. Because of the time she had spent in Trinidad, Peggy had acquired an accent.

But of course when I came here, I had to deal with that [not being accepted] any ways because, yeah because when I came here um... then I had to deal with the fact that I had a Trinidadian accent and um... no one understood what I was saying, which was funny (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

Peggy sums up her experience of not feeling as though she belongs anywhere when she explained:

Culturally I’m mixed. Yeah, culturally I’m mixed. Because if anything, anywhere I go, or anyone I meet they will ask me, ‘where are you from?’... And of course here you know, I’d say I’m Canadian and they’d say, ‘no but where are you from?’ Okay, Trinidad. I go
there [to Trinidad]... [And I am asked,] ‘Where are you from?’ (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

The subjects of this thesis imagine Trinidad and Tobago as a ‘home’ in which they find belonging and acceptance despite the complexities and contradictions of doing so. Bobb-Smith (1998), argues that home is a site of learning resistance (171), and that the collective resistance that is evidenced by her subjects “was only possible because home, despite its contradictions and contestations, is an educative education that provided Caribbean women with lessons of independence and resistance (iii). Bobb Smith describes this imagining as “building a bridge between one’s residence here in Canada, and one’s ‘home’ in Trinidad” (5). In my own home, my mother who is Trinidadian builds a bridge towards home by constantly speaking of ‘home’, frequent calls to my grandmother in Trinidad, and frequent trips ‘back home’. The subjects of this thesis have learned from their parents (specifically their mothers, as all biological fathers are absent), as I have, how to build a bridge towards ‘home’. As is the experience of their predecessors (the subjects in Bobb Smith’s work), the subjects of this thesis meet complexity and contradiction along this bridge. The response of these women is to become even more creative with their imagining and creation of belonging.

The practice of imagining home as an act of resistance, is learned by these subjects in their homes in Canada, and amongst their families. Despite the fact that my subjects’ real experiences in Trinidad and with Trinidadians, did not reflect the romantic ideas that they had expressed about Trinidad, the subjects continue to imagine ‘home’, only they become more creative with their moves to achieve acceptance and belonging.

In Chapter Three, I have used the context of the school system to discuss young Black women’s experiences of marginality in Canada, and their resistance methods. Using the narratives
of the subjects of this thesis, I have found that within each of their resistance methods there are contradictions and complexities that they must negotiate. The problem for the subjects is that the space within which they must negotiate is quite small. As young Black women in Canada, we are positioned by our race, class and gender, leaving us with very few choices for resistance. In Chapter Four, I will discuss the subjects’ participation in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant. I contend that the subjects’ participation in the pageant was a creative move on their part to create a bridge between their residence here in Canada, and their imagined home in the sun—Trinidad and Tobago.
CHAPTER FOUR

Finding A Place In The Sun:
The Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant

In this chapter, I will discuss the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada (MTTC) Pageant, and the participation of the interviewees. It is my contention that the interviewees’ participation was a creative move to ‘build a bridge’ between their residence in Canada and their imagined ‘home’ in Trinidad and Tobago. Their participation was also a strategy of resistance, and like those discussed in Chapter Three, it required negotiation. As was shown in Chapter Two and Three, these women experience a sense of not belonging because of the way that their race, class, and gender positions them in Canada, as not Canadian. The subjects are further marginalized by the available oppositional narrative which is too narrow a space to include them as second generation Trinidadian women. The pageant is essentially a confirmation of the ‘new narrative’, as discussed in Chapter Three. For example, the pageant’s title confirms that there can be a woman that is Trinidad and Tobago - Canada, which is essentially the basis of the new narrative. The MTTC Pageant confirms the existence of such women and the ability of the interviewees to become contestants, affirms their position within the ‘new narrative’.

To publicly obtain the title of Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada, is arguably the most significant motivating factor for the contestants, and I begin with this because I see it as the factor that initially attracted the women to the pageant. It is my contention that the pageant, and more specifically, the title of Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada, affirmed the identity that these women had imagined in order to foster their survival in Canada. In order to create this new narrative, the subjects imagine a utopian Trinidad and Tobago that accepts them despite their apparent differences. What I infer is that the women hoped that the pageant would be a means of
overcoming the complexity they faced in forging a new narrative. In Chapter Three, I highlighted the narratives of the contestants where they recall their experiences in Trinidad with people who tell them plainly that they are different. Despite these experiences of being labelled different, they continue to imagine Trinidad and Tobago in a way that ensures their survival in Canada. While obtaining the title of MTTC would define them as women who belong to the new narrative, participation in the pageant required that they perform their belonging to the Trinidad and Tobago that they imagined. What they discover through their pageant participation is that the performance is nearly impossible because the imagined Trinidad and Tobago does not exist; it is artificial. Not only are they asked to perform the Trinidad and Tobago of their imagination, but the entire pageant process necessitates a performance of a culturally fixed Trinidad and Tobago. How else does one perform a nation?

I will continue this chapter with a discussion of pageants and/or beauty contests, and what has previously been thought. I will then present an overview of the MTTC Pageant with regard to how it was promoted, the requirements of the contestants, and the prizes involved. Through an analysis of the contestants' narratives, I will then attempt to identify what and how the contestants negotiated throughout the pageant experience, and I enter this discussion with two questions. 1) What did these women expect to find and/or achieve through participation in the MTTC Pageant? 2) What did the women find and/or achieve and how did they feel about it? While I do not intend to answer these questions directly, I will be using them to frame my discussion.

**Pageants in the Twentieth Century**

Feminists have identified the sexist nature of pageants or beauty contests. Peggy Van Esterik (1996), explains that in North America, feminists who demonstrated against the Miss America contest in 1968, claimed that beauty pageants commoditize women and exploit them for
capitalist expansion through commercial endorsements and publicity appearances. "They protested on the grounds that the contest promoted an impossible image of ideal womanhood, and was complicit in the idea that all women - not only participants in beauty contests - are reducible to a set of bodily attributes" (Van Esterik 1996:204).

In the last 60-70 years, pageants have been used particularly by post-colonial nations, as a space in which to define identity and create a sense of 'peoplehood'. Further, pageants have come to be a space where colonialism and Eurocentrism are contested (see Natasha Barnes 1997:292). According to Cohen et al.:

The many beauty pageants and contests that proliferated during the 1930s and 1940s as part of decolonization and nationalism in the Third World gradually coalesced into regional contests during the years following World War II. South America, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean were leading areas (1996:5).

Pageantry according to Cohen et al., has also been used for nation-building outside of the post-colonial region. For example, in the United States, "beauty was recruited in the service of nation-building", hence the emergence of the Miss America Pageant in 1920 (ibid.:3-4). In an analysis of pageantry in the British Virgin Islands, where national identity is still being hotly debated, Cohen (1996) finds that, the national pageants that occur there are, "avenues for the selection of "national" representatives" (129), where local standards of "beauty, social and moral deportment, citizenship, talent and intelligence" (ibid.), are showcased.

Most recently, a small handful of researchers have identified pageants as spaces in which various negotiations are being made, such as that of power and identity. Beyond the feminist argument, they have identified the depth and complexity of pageantry. Cohen et al. write:

Many of us began our work sharply critical of beauty contests, thinking of them as part of commoditization, power, and control - as simply reinforcing narrow cultural expectations and understandings of women, gender, and sexuality... Many of us attended our first beauty contest while away from home, seeking respite from the rigors of "real" fieldwork.
Even when we thought that beauty contests were much deeper, more complex, and more important than we ever expected, we studied them with some trepidation (Cohen et al. 1996:5).

As Cohen et al., have identified, pageants or beauty contests, are deeper, more complex, and much more important than ever expected. Their discomfort in approaching the project can be attributed to the enormous challenge which is analysing pageants as spaces where, “power installs itself and produces real effects” (Stoeltje 1996:18). Within pageants, relations of power are masked because they are embedded in a discourse that declares them frivolous or “simply” entertainment (ibid.).

As showcases of “values, concepts and behaviors that exist at the centre of a group’s sense of itself, pageants exhibit values of morality, gender, and place” (Cohen et al. 1996:2). They evoke interest and engagement with “political issues central to the lives of beauty contestants, sponsors, organizers, and audiences - issues that frequently have nothing obvious to do with the competition itself” (Cohen et al. 1996:2).

Cohen et al. identify beauty pageants as places where “cultural meanings are produced, consumed and rejected, where local and global, ethnic and national, national and international cultures and structures of power are engaged in their most trivial but vital aspects” (1996: 8); vital because they are actually elements of mass consumer culture, a kind of entertainment, that “subtly influences the ways we see ourselves” (ibid.:10).

Pageants are not merely events of skill and talent, although they are often presented in this way. Instead, they are events where, “money and physical appearance are crucial” (Cohen et al. 1996:6). Contestants “can never fully achieve the idealized role they are performing” (ibid.:9), because what they are performing is the imagined and non-existent forms of who they would like to be, or who the nation would like to say it is. Yet, “[t]he systematic denial of the pageants
performativity is what makes the pageant coherent” (McAllister 1996:116). Focussing on women’s appearance and placing women in a competitive display event that licenses the public gaze on them, beauty contests utilize the principle of competition to determine the “best,” the woman who comes closest to the ideal image of a woman in a given context” (Stoeltje 1996:18). Van Esterik (1996) supports this point arguing that, 

[for all the rhetoric about the balance between inner and outer beauty... all the facade of the contests serving a higher purpose such as the provision of scholarships, attention is clearly meant to be focussed on women’s bodies and body parts... (208).

Contrary to what Van Esterik identifies as the focus of beauty pageants, according to Stoeltje, the contestant’s goal is, “the opportunity to become the sign of the community or the nation, to represent the larger body and simultaneously to stand for the ideal woman” (1996:27). “While some contests add scholarship money and other remuneration associated with everyday life; the significant reward in the majority of queen contests is the status she acquires and its “symbolic capital”” (Stoeltje 1996:16). Pageant contestants are not motivated to participate only by the prospect of winning, but “by the glamor of the experience and the status associated with the event, whether or not one is a “winner”” (ibid.). Stoeltje recognizes ‘public recognition’ as a “small measure of power”, that is awarded to contestants despite the fact that “power in the form of gender subordination of the female finds its target in the contest of beauty” (Stoeltje 1996:28). Lena Mosalenko (1996), identifies how pageant participation might be negotiated by subjects as a means to an end, despite some of the unwanted experiences of sexism that might follow.

... the contest was the only way to bring some changes to their lives, to break away from a routine and mundane existence, to feel important and recognized, to become Queen, a Princess, to see the world (69).

While this argument is one of the significant points of my own research, the difference between Mosalenko’s work and my own is that the pageant that she refers to was a Russian identified
pageant with contestants who were Russian. The experience of being young Black women in Canada, is a significant factor in my analysis of the subjects' pageant participation. More than using the pageant to gain materials such as scholarship money, they seek the belonging and acceptance that is missing from their lives in Canada. Therefore, the material gains are merely a portion of their motivation to participate, and I would argue, not the most significant portion.

While several of the above stated factors are played out in the MTTC Pageant that I am analysing, there are several other issues that become evident in my study. Perhaps the most significant is that the MTTC Pageant is used by the contestants as a tool for finding belonging and acceptance. The contestants come to the pageant with the experience of being marginalized because of their Blackness in White-dominant Canada. Their participation in the pageant is a direct response of resistance to their experiences in Canada. The MTTC Pageant, though taking place in Canada, offers the winner a title, an alternative identity in this oppositional space, an identity that they struggle to create and perform. The stories of the contestants of the MTTC Pageant expose how these women intend to use the pageant, and what their actual pageant experience was. My suggestion is that what the contestants hoped to achieve through pageant participation is directly related to their needs for survival in Canada, which is directly related to the ways in which Blackness is positioned as subordinate and not Canadian, in Canada.

The Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant

What follows is a description of the MTTC pageant. It is important to note that this description is skeletal because it is void of the emotions and drama that were a large part of what I call the 'pageant experience'. I intend for the emotional aspects of the pageant experience to be revealed through the narratives of the contestants which will be discussed in the following section.
In April of 1998, the co-ordinating committee of the MTTC Pageant announced that they were seeking pageant contestants who were of Trinidadian descent. Pageant contestants would compete for the title of MTTC, a trip to Trinidad and Tobago, and a cash prize of $1000.00. The Mission Statement of the MTTC pageant is as follows:

*Creating and promoting a positive cultural awareness of Trinidad & Tobago is the main objective of [the] Miss Trinidad & Tobago Canada Pageant.*

*Our goal is to encourage young women to develop pride and knowledge of the multicultural aspects of their native land and share them with others.*

The pageant was advertised as a showcase of culture, creativity and intelligence, and in order to qualify as a contestant, all applicants had to be interviewed by a panel of MTTC Pageant committee members. All applicants met at one interview session where we were told the pertinent details about the pageant, and then interviewed and evaluated by the panel. The cost of the interview was $75.00 which was non-refundable, and we were told that we would be contacted if accepted as contestants. After being chosen, each contestant was required to obtain a sponsor. The sponsors were generally small business owners, usually of the Black community of the Greater Toronto Area (i.e. West Indian food store owners), and were required to pay $1000.00 for their contestant’s participation. Out of the $1000.00 paid by sponsors, $300.00 was given to the contestants to ‘cover expenses’ (i.e. evening gown). Also with regard to expenses, each contestant was required to sell a minimum of ten pageant tickets. Besides the financial requirements, contestants were required to attend rehearsals twice per week, for ten weeks. Each rehearsal lasted three hours at a time, and we practised ‘proper’ walking and talking, and were taught a dance routine that was performed on the night of the pageant. In addition, contestants were required to attend all appearances, at various community and media events, to promote the pageant.
With regard to the pageant itself, the theme of the pageant for 1998, was *Gems of the Twin Islands*. The contestants being the ‘gems of the twin islands’, were to display their cultural awareness, creativity and intelligence through the following segments: introduction, talent, cultural presentation, evening wear, and two question and answer segments. Prior to the pageant, contestants were required to write an essay, choosing one of four predetermined topics. The essay would also contribute to the contestants final pageant score. There was no swimsuit competition, and the question and answer segments were most heavily weighed. For the cultural presentations, contestants were required to present information about a particular county of Trinidad and Tobago. A popular presentation method included a skit, where the contestants displayed as much awareness of their assigned county as possible, making sure to incorporate what they regarded as relevant to Trinidadian culture (i.e. Trinidadian accent). For some of the contestants, the culturally fixed Trinidad and Tobago that they presented was actually the Trinidad and Tobago that they imagined.

**The Contestants’ Narratives**

I enter this discussion from the perspective that the MTTC Pageant was a site in which the contestants experienced contradiction and complexity, requiring that they constantly make negotiations in an attempt to find what they sought. I discuss what they sought in terms of what motivated them to participate, and in what follows I have identified from the narratives, the four most significant motivators of the contestants’ participation in the pageant (besides the opportunity to affirm the ‘new narrative’). Since it is my argument that their experience as contestants of the MTTC Pageant was complex and contradictory, I will highlight and discuss the complexities that they met in trying to find what they wanted. The four motivating factors that I find most significant are as follows: 1) finding belonging and acceptance amongst the other
contestants; 2) using the pageant as a platform to present themselves as intelligent women; 3) recognition as women of Trinidad and Tobago; and 4) material incentives.

**Finding belonging and acceptance:**

Throughout this thesis, I have repeatedly stated that belonging and acceptance are significant for the survival of young Black women in Canada. What the contestants hoped to find in participating in the MITC Pageant was a space in which they would be amongst women who were like themselves; in this way they hoped to find belonging and acceptance. When asked to speak on the pageant experience, this is some of what I said:

... it was comfortable to be so often, among other Trinidadian people, or people like myself who were born here even, some were, some weren’t but you all live here and you kind of ... that’s the commonality, and you’re young-ish (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

Having had the experience of not fitting into the narrow oppositional narrative of the high school, I hoped to find in the pageant, a sense of belonging that was predicated on sameness. Sameness is not what I found. The complexity and contradictions that I faced throughout the pageant experience were articulated in the following narrative, where I come face to face with the experience of being ‘different’ within the space of the ‘new narrative’. I recall:

There were some women there that were very race conscious, or I don’t know, actually no I wouldn’t call it ‘race conscious’, their big thing was ‘what are you mixed with?’ I mean, I know that as Trinidadians, probably in every case, there is mixed-ness going on, but I mean I had this, there was this girl there, she’s like playing with this other one’s hair and she’s like, ‘what are you mixed with?, Oh really, what are you mixed with? Oh, da da da’. She had Chinese in her and the girl she was touching had Indian. I mean ridiculous-ness like that. To me it was ridiculous. Stuff like that, I mean... I guess they weren’t coming to me and asking me what I was mixed with. Which was quite interesting you know [they are] figuring, ‘you’re Negro’, you know. And that’s just that, you know. So I guess I was race conscious... and being... everyone there also seemed to be both parents Trini, you know, so I think I was the only one there whose Dad was Nigerian, or anything else other than Trini. Um... and that made me different. My name made me different you know. Nobody had... um... everyone’s name was English, or you know, quote ‘normal’ (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).
Seeing myself as someone who belonged as a contestant in the pageant became difficult for me.

Later in my narrative I explain:

... I mean, to have this mix was the big excitement and the ‘niceness’ of it. And that’s [their mixed-ness] what made them nice, and different, and exciting, and Trini even. I would even go so far to say, Trini. You know there is something un-Trini about not being mixed and not looking mixed or you know, not having a soft-ish texture hair or whatever. You know, that kind of un-Trini-ized you [laughing] (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

Amanda, who had participated in the Miss Black Ontario Pageant, hoped that in the MTTC Pageant she would find more belonging amongst the contestants. Amanda explains:

The Miss Black Ontario [Pageant], it was people of all different West Indian backgrounds. So you weren’t really... and I think I was the only Trinidadian, so you had more Jamaicans than anything else. You know, it’s like, in a way I felt out of place because you know, they would talk about things that only they would know and you know what I mean? Like okay... At the time, I wasn’t with my boyfriend who is Jamaican, so I never really you know, um... But being in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago pageant, I got to meet fellow Trinidadians and it was good to know and um... talk about things that we actually know and I can relate to (Interview no. 4. 20 October 1998).

The contestants did not expect to find complexities based on racial or cultural differences, but that is what they found. Renee recalled a problem that occurred during her experience with the MTTC Pageant of 1997. She explains:

A problem that came up in our pageant was race. One girl said, ‘how can you judge my Indian dance versus an African dance?’... Who says an Indian dance is better than an African dance? Like an Indian dance might be more simple, and to somebody, boring, and the African dance might be much more full of energy, but the Indian dance might be more culturally rich... (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

What Renee uncovers here is that in the space of the pageant the contestants realize the significance of their racial differences, and the complexity that such differences can cause in trying to create a ‘new narrative’ where one finds belonging. I do not get the sense that all of the contestants experienced a feeling of acceptance. It was certainly evident in my own narrative that I was struggling to feel accepted by the other contestants.
Particularly in a space where value is placed on how one is able to perform their ‘culture’, difference becomes an important debate. Even in the utopian imagined Trinidad and Tobago, how might an Indian dance be judged against an African dance? Perhaps in the imagined space, no such evaluation would have to take place. However, the question points to the artificial nature of the space that the pageant attempts to create. The truth about the racial, cultural, and religious make-up of Trinidad and Tobago, is that such questions have to be asked.

Presenting themselves as intelligent women:

Presented as a showcase of cultural awareness, creativity and intelligence, the MTTC Pageant attracted the contestants because it allowed them to participate in this type of function, under that guise that it was not about beauty. In fact I would argue that the contestants saw the pageant as an opportunity; it was a forum in which to present themselves as intelligent women particularly under a Trinidadian ‘banner’, and their narratives expose how important this was for them. For example, in my own narrative, I explain,

I have accomplished these things, and I wanna show the world, like I wanna show the people that would listen, that we’re successful, you know. I consider myself successful and I wanted to display that under a Trinidadian banner. You know? That was important (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

Among the six women that were interviewed for this work, three said that they did not want to participate in the pageant initially, and three said that they did, however they all emphasized that they were motivated to participate because they felt that the pageant was not about beauty. The subjects state repeatedly that they understood the pageant to be a showcase of intelligence, rather than beauty, and that this was their motivation to enter. My own narrative about participating in the pageant revealed the importance of the pageant not being about beauty.

I thought, I don’t want to parade in a bathing suit, and I don’t know, a lot of things came to mind… I don’t know. I was weary about a whole bunch of things and I didn’t think I’d
have the time, and I couldn’t... I was highly concerned about my academic um... image. The look of how this would look in the academic field and what would they think, and OISE [University of Toronto], and... what would my thesis supervisor think... So my answer was, No. I don’t think so... Anyway, to make a long story short, I did it because... I heard that it was, their mandate was about brains. Like um... intellect and culture you know. And I heard that um... there was no swimsuit section. Um... I heard that you had to write an essay, and... I thought oh well you know, I’m pretty smart... I thought I might have an edge because of my academic thought, kind of my grounding, and my career goals and whatever. So that’s basically why I did it (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

Renee had a similar reaction to the idea of participating in a pageant. She had this to say about her overall impression of pageants:

Pageants all together, when I think pageant, I think pretty face, ditzy girl, big busts or something. You know. Cause that’s the image the media gives us. That’s what the image makes us believe. So... not knowing nothing about pageants, that’s automatically what I think (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

When I asked Renee about her decision to participate in the MTTC Pageant, she responded in this way:

R: I didn’t want to [participate in the pageant].
I: Okay.
R: Um... It was more or less pressure or influence from my family. They were like oh, go, and my uncle came home with the paper one day and he was like, I saw this in the ... Caribbean Camera, and I think you would be good for this. Go, go. And I was like no... Pageants aren’t my style those are for ditzy girls. I’m not a flake. And I won’t look good in a bathing suit and ... I was just throwing negative things at it. And they kept pressuring me, pressuring me, pressuring me (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

Further in the interview, after stating that she was motivated to participate in the pageant because of pressure from her family, Renee explained the importance of intelligent responses during the pageant’s question and answer periods. Renee said this about the pageant and the significance of intelligence:

I’m not saying that I’m not good looking. I think I’m good looking but um, those factors, cause the way the pageant is weighed, um they’re weighed on uh, the basis, the last
question is what the decision is [based on]... So [a] pretty face can only get you so far. It now goes up to your intelligence and what you know, well being a Trinidadian Canadian pageant, what you know about Trinidadian Canadian culture (Interview no. 3. 18 October 1998).

Like Renee and myself, Peggy’s initial response to the idea of participation in the pageant was negative. However, after learning that the pageant was not a showcase of beauty, but of intelligence, cultural awareness, and creativity, she became motivated to participate. Peggy explained:

P: ... in karate um... after class, a friend of mine, he was reading... I don’t know, one of those West Indian papers. I think it was the Caribbean Camera and he said, ‘why don’t you take part in the pageant?’, and I said, ‘no I don’t want to take part in no pageant’... And uh he said, ‘oh it’s not about beauty or anything’. ‘Cause my assumption was that you had to be extremely tall and skinny and supermodel like... He said ‘no, its... they said that their mandate is about culture and um... intelligence and what not. I said, ‘okay, well that sounds like something [that] I’d like to do’... I love a good debate, I love when people approach me with intelligent questions and I think that’s something I can try... that’s why I entered (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

When I asked Peggy whether she thought that women should be judged in a pageant setting,

Peggy responded:

P: The whole point of a pageant is to choose a queen that can best represent the mandate of that, or the objective of that pageant; what the title holds... When you’re holding a title... when you’re Miss Trinidad and Tobago throughout the year, you’re gonna be asked many questions, you’re gonna be put under many situations and experience many circumstances, and you have to be prepared for that... Everyone is judged. Why not women? I don’t think they should be any exception.

I: Did you agree with the criteria for selecting a queen?

P: Yeah I did. I like the fact that um... it wasn’t about beauty, or height, or um... your physical appearance. It was about your mind. Um... your intelligence, the way you’re able to articulate yourself. I think all that shows how educated you are (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

The other three women, Amanda, Serena, and Rachel, were not quite as hesitant to participate in the pageant, and they too emphasized that intellect was more important than beauty.
Both Amanda and Serena identified the MTTC Pageant as being unlike pageants of the past, or pageants they had had experiences with, where beauty was measured.

Amanda had been a contestant in the Miss Black Ontario Pageant, a few years earlier and so she compared that pageant to the MTTC Pageant. When I asked Amanda if she thought that women should be judged, she explained:

A: ... to a lot of people, pageants represent beauty. I mean that’s how it was thought to be in the beginning, the years before, thought to be beauty and it didn’t concentrate a lot on education and mind. But you see with this pageant I felt that um... education was the main factor kind of thing because in what pageant do you know of that we have to you know research a project, [or] do essays? You know what I mean? And memorize that project that we research and say it in front of a whole crowd of audience? So a lot of pageants are not like that. I mean even with talent, that’s all part of it. That’s a part of your education kind of thing... But in that way, it doesn’t matter if we’re, we’re judged kind of thing. I think men should be judged too. They should have a talent competition for men. They should you know, education competitions... you know, stuff like that. In that sense I don’t think there’s a problem with women being judged. But if it’s just based on beauty, no, I don’t believe in that at all because it’s not what’s on the outside of a person, it’s what’s on the inside. And inside includes personality, it includes education, it includes, everything...(Interview no. 4. 20 October 1998).

I attempted here, to narrow my question a bit more, and so I asked Amanda:

I: Do you agree with the circumstances under which we were judged?

A: Well I don’t believe that there was a um... that they judged us on beauty. Even though I think, I don’t believe there was a criteria for prettier, kind of thing. So again they judged us on our talent, on our ability to speak, on our research, our essay writing. I mean they judged us on things that are like totally away from beauty. So yeah the criteria, I mean that’s just what you need. You don’t need a dumb queen going up, representing your country...(ibid.).

Like Amanda, Serena felt that the MTTC Pageant was unlike other pageants.

I thought that this pageant changed all the... views of other pageants where you had to be a certain size and you had to be um... and you had to like show a certain amount of your body. I thought it was more education, cultural, and I started to know, or I was finishing high school and I started to learn a lot more about Trinidad, so I thought wow, I should have a good chance (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1998).
Rachel, like Amanda had been in a pageant before, in Trinidad and Tobago, and seemed very comfortable with the idea of entering the pageant. When I asked her about her decision to enter the competition she responded:

Well first of all I should say,... the reason I wanted to because I had experience in pageants before so it wasn’t like a big thing, or I wasn’t scared or anything about that. So that was one of the main thing[s]. I had experience and I wanted to go out there and then being in Canada too, I wanted to represent Trinidad, while living in Canada. So that was another reason why I entered the pageant (Interview no. 1. 14 October 1998).

Regarding her decision to participate, Rachel went on to say:

... well I believe in myself and I think, I think it was a great experience. It allowed me to meet other people. To interact with other people. And it gave me um... what should I say... it gave me courage, great courage to do that because I know, it is a hard thing to do because most people would say, there’s no way I’m going to go up there and enter the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada, or whatever, you have to have the courage to go and do that. And I think that um... by doing that I’m proud of myself... (Interview no. 1. 14 October 1998).

I later asked Rachel whether she thought that women should be judged. This was her response:

...It depends on what you take the pageant as. I don’t think women should be judged by beauty because beauty is only skin deep, but attitude goes right down to the bone, so you could be the most beautiful woman, but when [it] comes to attitude, you could have the worst. So I don’t think women should be judged by their beauty. If its intelligence, or, or, what... intelligence, well fine. But whereas for beauty, I don’t think so because everybody is beautiful in their own way (Interview no. 1. 14 October 1998).

With regards to pageantry and women being judged, all of the contestants responded that a showcase of intelligence was acceptable, but a showcase of beauty was not. Despite our initial responses to the idea of entering the pageant, we all placed emphasis on the pageant not being about beauty. The question is, why? Why is it so important that the pageant be understood as a showcase of intelligence rather than a showcase of beauty? What would these women risk by involving themselves in a showcase of beauty? And more importantly, what do they have to gain by being involved in a pageant that was a showcase of intelligence?
I would infer that the importance of presenting the pageant as a showcase of intelligence is a direct result of feminism. The feminist argument that beauty pageants objectify women, has been accepted by the mainstream, and because of the dominance of the feminist position, pageants can no longer be presented as showcases of beauty; they must be presented in other ways. For example, the MTTC Pageant was presented as a showcase of intelligence, creativity and cultural awareness. The contestants struggle to negotiate the mainstream feminist view of pageants. It is important, however, to consider what other negotiations around notions of beauty they must make to participate. What might their being positioned as Black women in Canada have to do with their narratives and their pageant participation? My suggestion is that as Black women in Canada, the risks involved with being associated with a pageant of beauty are simply too great. I would argue that the risk involved is that of being associated with what has been the historical sexualization of the Black female body. In this regard, bell hooks (1992) explains:

Bombarded with images representing black female bodies as expendable, black women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it... (65).

Perhaps the contestants constant referencing of the MTTC Pageant as a showcase of intelligence is their way of resisting negative historical images of Black women as worthless and expendable. Dionne Brand argues that Black women are presented as “slack and sexually available”, in the media (1993:239). Also with regard to the socialization of Black women, Brand argues:

Black women are also told by their socialization that they are inferior as women, that they are “unfeminine.” Ironically, resistance to this perception has precipitated the copying of white women’s exploitation: hence, the Miss Black Ontario, the Miss Black Quebec, and the Miss Black America beauty pageants. Witness the community’s unbridled joy at Miss America being Black in 1984 (1993:240).

Brand argues that Black women’s involvement in pageants is merely copying White women’s exploitation. Although I would argue that she is overlooking the agency and resistance involved
in pageant participation, I do think that she has a valuable point with regards to why Black women participate in pageants. Natasha Barnes (1997) supports Brand’s argument. Barnes conducted an historical (1940s-50s) analysis of pageants in Jamaica where only White women were to participate. Barnes explains:

> Wrapped in a mantle of respectability and civility that was denied to black people in general and black women in particular, beauty contests became the place for the making of feminine subjectivity in a racial landscape where femininity was the jealousy guarded domain of white womanhood (287).

Barnes highlights the response of Black feminists of the time, noting:

> The fact that Jamaica’s earliest black feminists rallied against the exclusion of women of color from the contest - rather than the patriarchal structure of the pageant itself - reminds us that the struggle for black women everywhere to be recognized as women, as feminine subjects, is not, as Nancy Caraway puts it, simply “derived from vanity... but is a crucial component of a larger collective effort at self definition” (1997:292).

What both Barnes (1997) and Brand (1993) offer is a suggestion for what might be the underlying cause, or another cause, for the contestants’ pageant participation. In a struggle to define ourselves aside and apart from the dominant groups definition of us, we participate in the pageant in resistance. We are resisting dominant notions of beauty and positioning ourselves within an alternate discourse of beauty at the same time. In essence, we are exercising our agency to claim a space that has been historically denied to Black women.

**Recognition as women of Trinidad and Tobago:**

Yet another motivating factor of the contestants of the MTTC pageant was the opportunity to be publicly recognized. They hoped to achieve some sort of status as pageant participants, and for the most part, they were disappointed. Rachel describes her hopes for status.

> So, what I was thinking in my head was okay, if I win, well I’ll be recognized in Canada, recognized in Trinidad, I would like have a title, whatever, more or less like a Miss Universe something. But when I get into it, it was nothing like that, nothing like that as I say. No recognition. Nothing whatsoever (Interview no. 1. 14 October 1998).
When I asked Rachel if she found the pageant experience to be empowering, this is what she had to say:

Really and truly, I honestly… No. Because as far as I see it even the person who won the pageant, right… After you win the pageant, that’s it, nobody cares about you. Nobody don’t know you. You will go there and people wouldn’t even know well you are the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada… whatever. So I don’t see it as being empowering or anything like that (Interview no. 1. 14 October 1998).

The general feeling amongst the contestants was that they were disillusioned. What they expected to gain from their experience in the MTTC Pageant, was not what they found. Here I express my own disillusionment.

Um… well you know, to make a long story short. It wasn’t as glamorous as I had hoped it would be [laugh]. And you certainly don’t feel like any kind of star or glamour queen. Oh, it’s work.

Despite my feeling that participation in the pageant was not a glamorous experience, I chose to maintain my position as a pageant contestant, and so did the other women interviewed.

**Material incentives:**

Along with the title of MTTC, the pageant winner was to receive a $1000.00 scholarship and a trip to Trinidad and Tobago. Some of the contestants identified these material incentives as motivations for the participation. When I asked Serena initially why she had entered the pageant, she answered:

Honestly? I wanted to win the trip to Trinidad and $1000.00. That was really it for me (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1998).

What is interesting to me is the way that materials such as the prize money and the trip, are what attracted some of the contestants to the pageant, and yet, materials, particularly money, was exactly what the contestants lost. From the contestants’ narratives, there is a sense of
disappointment in what they received for their participation. There was also a sense that they had been economically exploited. Peggy had this to say:

I think if anything, it was basically the financial aspect of it that um... stressed me out the most. I was a part-time worker. Well I worked part-time in [the] summer, and uh... basically, I couldn’t afford exactly what they were asking for (Interview no. 5. 23 October 1998).

Rachel said this about the expense of participating in the pageant:

... number one, you spend too much money doing this... Everybody want to look nice and whatever. What did they get back? Even though you come the runner up, the prizes weren’t great or nothing like that. So it wasn’t that great. I expected more from the organizers (Interview no. 1. 14 October 1998).

The contestants seemed to have been unaware of what it would take to participate in the pageant, thus they found that participation was expensive. I expressed it in this way:

K: I don’t really know how anyone that lived ‘hand to mouth’ could have possibly done the pageant. It was... it would have been impossible... I mean, this thing was a full time job and I was really tired and I didn’t work, and if I didn’t have a home, that I didn’t pay rent at you know, and a mother that kind of chipped in here and there, like you know she paid for the earrings for the dress and this and that, I would have been up the creek.

I: Did you pay for your outfit? What about the sponsor?

K: Well what happens is the sponsor gives $1000.00 to the organization right - to the people putting on the show. And they give you $300.00 off of that, and with that you’re supposed to go and do something. I don’t know what because by the time I paid my pianist $150.00 you know, and um... bought my material [for the evening gown]... not even! My material was five times [the $300.00]. Yeah all of that came out of my pocket. So it was a major loss. See at that time all you could see was like, I have to win this. Every dollar you spend more, is more reason that winning is crucial. You know, because I spent, must have been at least $2000.00 on the pageant... of my own money. My dress, my fabric alone. Not even the maker. Not nothing... You know and of course the hair and the legs and the fingers and the toes, and the face and the teeth and everything had to be perfect. No really. And this is what they told us. And they made it seem like anybody could do it. But as I was telling you, if someone was living ‘hand to mouth’...

I: So most of those people, their parents must have given them the money?

K: Well, let’s put it this way. For those that didn’t have that kind of backing, it showed.
I: Yeah that’s true.

K: You suffered... You suffered for whatever reason. For those that have to work two jobs to be there, it showed in their lack of preparation (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

Pageant success required money, and according to this exchange between myself and the interviewer who was able to affirm my point because she attended the pageant, those that did not have money or financial support from their families, stood out. The importance of financial support, speaks to yet another form of difference among the contestants; that of class. To simply be a young woman of Trinidadian descent, who lives in Canada was not enough to win the title of MTTC. Not only did one have to perform an imagined Trinidad and Tobago, but one had to be able to afford to play the part. Regarding the $1000.00 contribution of the sponsors, I explained:

...it [the money] goes to the organization. And that’s basically how the organization puts on the show. Through the sponsor’s money. And if you look at twelve girls at a thousand, that’s twelve thousand dollars right away (Interview no. 6. 28 October 1998).

Some of the contestants were unhappy with the organizing committee and felt that they were being used. Serena complains:

... I didn’t feel like it [the pageant] bettered society in any way now. Looking at what the queens [i.e. Miss Guyana, MTTC - 1997] are doing, and its like what are they doing? It’s a bunch of crap. It’s a whole money making scheme, that’s all it is and they use the girls to make their money too. If it wasn’t for us half of those tickets would not have been sold. Um... it was just like... I felt as if I was a pawn in a chess game. Now that I look back (Interview no. 2. 18 October 1998).

With hopes of finding material gains, the contestants’ narratives show that instead they found themselves being used by pageant organizers, to make money. Generally, they felt that they did not gain anything. When I asked Rachel if she was empowered by the pageant experience, she interpreted the question slightly differently than I had intended, but her response is worth noting because I think it provides a synopsis of the contestants’ experience.
I don’t think it was empowering to me because I put out so much and I get back nothing... (Interview no. 1, 14 October 1998).

In conclusion:

In this chapter, I have presented a discussion around the MTTC Pageant, and the participation of the women who are the focus of this thesis. Using first hand accounts of the contestants’ pageant experience, I have identified several moments in which the experience presented these women with contradictory messages regarding who they are, and complex negotiations that they had to work through in order to continue to participate. Their continued participation, marks their strong desire to find belonging among Trinidadians in Canada, despite the complexity of doing so.

For the women who were the focus of this study, participating in the MTTC Pageant was an act of resistance. Among other things, participating in the pageant gave them the opportunity to compete for the title of MTTC; a title that would affirm once and for all that they were accepted as women of Trinidad and Tobago, in Canada. With survival in Canada at stake, the contestants endured several disappointments throughout their pageant experience, making negotiations in order to achieve their goal of finding belonging and acceptance. As with their other experiences of resistance, and trying to define themselves in this oppositional space - Canada, the contestants find that even among ‘their own’, they cannot escape complexity and contradiction.

In this thesis, I have argued that young Black women in Canada experience a sense of not belonging primarily because of the normativity of Whiteness in Canada. This experience of racism teaches these women that they do not belong, and so, in resistance they seek and attempt to create belonging in spaces such as the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant.
Using the social setting of the school system, I have argued that the moves of resistance available to these women are limited. For example, the oppositional narratives of their high schools required that they perform a highly policed 'Black' identity, one that they did not feel represented by. For young women of Trinidadian parentage who were my subjects, a sense of belonging could not be found among their peers in their high schools. In an attempt to create a space for themselves in which they feel acceptance as women of Trinidadian heritage, the subjects participated in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant. Although their pageant experience, much like their other resistance strategies, presented them with a number of complexities and contradictions, they endured the experience in hopes of winning the title. Winning the title – Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada, would affirm once and for all that they belonged to their imagined place in the sun—Trinidad and Tobago.

In this thesis, I have argued that identities, though felt as real, are performed and constructed in ways that ensure survival. Focusing on second generation Caribbean women in Canada, I have provided a small window into their identity making processes and their negotiations of White supremacy, class exploitation and patriarchy. My hope for this study is that it brings new understanding, particularly for educators of second generation Caribbean women in Canada.
References


APPENDIX I

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

The following sets of interview questions have been organized to follow a chronological timeline in 3 phases: Childhood; schooling; and a more recent time of pageants.

It is my intention that the following questions will encourage participants to openly discuss their lives and experiences.

1. Childhood:

   With whom did you grow up?
   What type of family, nuclear? Extended?

   What are some of your childhood experiences?
   Where?

   How did growing up in Canada affect you socially, culturally, economically?
   How did immigration affect you socially, culturally, economically?

   How often do you visit/return to Trinidad? Why?

   According to your questionnaire response, you identify as __________, why?

2. Schooling:

   Where did you attend elementary school?

   How do you describe yourself as a student?

   How would you describe your schools? - Elementary, high school, college, university

   Do you participate in any extra-curricular activities? - in and outside of school

   Do you have many friends? - if yes, who are they, if no why?

   Were your parents involved in school activities, in supporting your work?

   If you had the ability, what would you change in the school system?

   Do you have career plans? What are they?
3. Pageant:

What made you want to take part in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago Canada Pageant?

What caused you to feel you could represent Trinidad and Tobago in Canada?

Tell me about the experience. How did you feel about ... weekly practices, the coaching, the appearances, the expenses, the requirements of participants?

Do you think that women should be judged?

Did you agree with the criteria for selecting a queen?

Do you feel that the experience of the pageant was empowering?

What strengths / weaknesses did you bring to the pageant?
Letter of Consent

Date:

Dear:

I request your participation in a project that I am working on for the purpose of my Master’s thesis for the department of Sociology and Equity studies at OISE of the University of Toronto.

I wish to conduct a research project on the identities and experiences of young women who, like myself, are second generation Caribbean and living in Canada. This project will be supervised by Professors Sherene Razack and Kari Dehli, of the department of Sociology and Equity Studies at OISE.

Throughout the month of October, I wish to conduct five to six interviews with women who participated in the Miss Trinidad and Tobago pageant, and I am requesting your participation. These interviews will be informal, and are to be held in a location that is convenient for you. In general, the project will involve tape recording, and analysing the narratives of interviewees. In addition, these interviews will be confidential.

I am concerned to discover how the identities of second generation Caribbean women in Canada are constructed; how this identity is situated in systems of domination (i.e. race, class, gender); and how these identities get constituted through issues of race, class, and gender in beauty pageants.

It is my hope that this study will provide a moment through which to consider and analyse the ‘space’ that we occupy as second generation Caribbean women in Canada.

The narratives of interviewees will remain confidential throughout this project. Let me emphasize that you have the right to refuse to participate at any time. If you have any questions regarding this project, or my request for your participation, please call me for further information. My home phone number is (905) 567-8587.

Yours sincerely,

Kike Ojo
Student researcher.
Consent Form

I __________________________ hereby grant Kike Ojo the permission to tape record and use narratives collected in her research project. I understand that despite this agreement, I remain free to withdraw from participation. I further understand that the tape recordings may be used by the student researcher and the student's thesis supervisor, for academic purposes, but that before they are used I have the right to review the recordings. If at that time I do not wish these materials to be used in current, or any future research projects, they will be destroyed immediately.

________________________________________
Signature of Participant