

# Canadians Denied: A Queer Diasporic Analysis of the Canadian Blood Donor

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## Abstract

Canadian Blood Services (CBS), through its blood donor screening process, constructs a blood donor body/subject that is framed through a series of exclusions. Using queer diasporic analysis, I explore and interrogate not only the construction of the blood donor body/subject, but also the political and legal challenges brought to this construction.

## Résumé

La Société canadienne du sang, par son processus de présélection du sang, définit un donneur de sang /sujet, en se basant sur une série d'exclusions. En se servant de l'analyse diasporique queer, j'explore et j'interroge non seulement la construction du donneur de sang/sujet, mais aussi les défis politiques et légaux qui sont apportés à cette construction.

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When you click on the "Donor" section of the Canadian Blood Services' (CBS) website, you are met with a picture of a white man, with his right arm outstretched, as if he is about to roll up his sleeve, preparing himself to donate blood. The text begins with the statement, "Donors are the heart of our blood supply system..." and closes with gratitude and a seemingly gentle command, "If you are already a donor, thank you; if not, **'it's in you to give.'** Please book an appointment today" (CBS n.d., emphasis in the original).

However, while it may be "in you to give," your blood may not be wanted.

In detailing the eligibility requirements for blood donations, Canadian Blood Services also dedicates two web pages to temporary and indefinite deferrals. On the page titled, "Indefinite Deferrals," Canadian Blood Services catalogues and details six factors that lead to indefinite deferrals from the blood donation process. These factors are: "1) Geographic Deferrals; 2) Possible Exposure to CJD [Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease] or vCJD [Variant Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease]; 3) HIV High Risk Activities; 4) Disease, 5) Diabetes; and 6) False Reactive (False Positive) Test Results" (CBS n.d.). It is in the third factor that we find the following statement, "All men who have had sex with another man, even once, since 1977 are indefinitely deferred" (CBS n.d.). Canadian Blood Services' use of the words "defer" and "deferral" may suggest that a person's opportunity to donate blood is just merely postponed, when in fact their body has been permanently banned from this process.

Canadian Blood Services' blood donor screening process is a significant part of a larger system that is intended to protect the blood supply from debilitating and deadly infection, in particular HIV/AIDS. The provisions for deferral target particular bodies for temporary or indefinite deferral. Bisexual men, gay men and men who have sex with men are specific examples of bodies that are

indefinitely deferred.

According to Canadian Blood Services' website and its television and radio commercials, the most precious gift one can give is to donate one's blood and give the gift of life. Canadian Blood Services positions the blood donor as heroic, generous, selfless, thoughtful and moral, the traits of an ideal, proper and authentic Canadian citizen. Since blood donors are considered heroic, generous, selfless, thoughtful and moral, what does it mean if bisexual and gay men are barred from donating blood? When bisexual and gay Canadian men attempt to donate their blood are they positioned as heroic, selfless and moral? Or are they considered unethical, improper and un-Canadian in their attempts?

Lesbian and gay political and legal groups, such as the professional organization Egale Canada (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere), along with other *ad hoc* organizations formed on college and university campuses and over the Internet, are actively engaged in having the ban against bisexual and gay men removed. While I find this an important intervention, I am concerned with how these initiatives position bisexual and gay men. Currently, in the challenges brought to the blood donor screening process, lesbian and gay political groups have only focused upon the conflation of HIV/AIDS infection with gay bodies and the resulting exclusion of gay blood,<sup>2</sup> without taking into consideration that HIV/AIDS infection is also intimately tied to other bodies and that gay bodies are rarely just gay. Other categories of people (sex workers, people addicted to drugs, people from continental Africa, and the people who have sex with people from these groups) are considered to be at greater risk for HIV/AIDS infection and are therefore also subject to indefinite deferral in Canadian Blood Services' attempts to safeguard the blood supply from these infections.

Not only am I intrigued by the refusal to acknowledge or incorporate the "just gay" body as a proper and acceptable (non-tainted) blood donating Canadian, but I also seek to explore the complex conceptual link between "homosexuality" and "race," particularly with

how this link further disrupts the normative positioning of the blood donor body/subject. Blood has been used to tie an individual to the nation, and within the nation; HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C has tied tainted blood to individuals who are gay, sex workers, addicted to drugs, from Haiti (in the beginning of the tainted blood crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s), and from continental Africa (currently). In this paper, I examine how Canadian Blood Services operates as a technology of Canadian nationalism as it posits the blood donor as an ideal, proper and acceptable Canadian and the effect this has on the bodies of African gay-Canadians.

The blood business in Canada is intimately connected to Canadian nationalism. In January 1940, the Canadian Red Cross Society urged Canadians to "make a date with a wounded soldier," and thus the first blood donor clinic occurred (Picard 1995, 9). The creation of a voluntary blood donation system during the Second World War positioned blood donation as a patriotic act - the Canadian thing to do. Canadian Blood Services relied on this history when faced with the daunting task of having to rebuild the blood supply system in Canada after the tainted blood crisis. "It's in you to give" effectively reminds Canadians that voluntary blood donation fulfills the international narratives of generosity, nice-ness, morality and tolerance and therefore becomes as archetypically Canadian as the national anthem, hockey games, multiculturalism, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

In an effort to be considered an ideal and proper Canadian, and consequently included in all things Canadian, lesbian and gay political organizations have focused on specific questions included in the blood donor questionnaire that directly target bisexual men, gay men and men who have sex with men. I'll come back to this discussion in moment. Instead, I begin my analysis by focusing on the following sample of declarative statements and phrases made by Canadian Blood Services on their website and YouTube channel.

- ▶ "Without *generous and committed* donors, there would be no blood

- system in Canada." (CBS n.d., Donor section, my emphasis)
- ▶ "Canada's blood system is founded on the principle of *gratuity*." (CBS n.d., my emphasis)
  - ▶ "Canadian Blood Services ... [is] dedicated to ensuring that Canadians have access to *safe and secure* supplies of blood and blood products..." (CBS n.d., Media Room, my emphasis)
  - ▶ "Canadian Blood Services is committed to maintaining the *Canadian tradition* of unpaid and volunteer donations for both whole blood and plasma. In fact, research shows that Canadians donate blood because *they want to help their fellow Canadians* in need." (CBS n.d., FAQ, my emphasis)
  - ▶ "... finding more and more communities coming to us and asking us how they can be a difference in their community. *How they can be Canadian*. And we are telling them, you know what, *to really be Canadian is about giving blood* [...] and that is *what being Canadian is about*." (YouTube: CBS n.d. Official Channel, my emphasis)

I believe that the words and phrases I've highlighted provide valuable information regarding the discursive practices utilized by Canadian Blood Services in the construction of the ideal and proper blood donor body/subject. The use of seemingly explicit and definitive language in an effort to produce distinct types of knowledge relies on deliberate and specific erasures. In my exploration of how African gay-Canadians destabilize the blood donor body, I employ a theoretical framework which also makes use of destabilizing constructions - queer diasporic analysis.

Queer diasporic analysis is a poststructural critical theory that not only draws upon the critical practice of deconstruction but also draws upon discourse analysis as posited by Michel Foucault. I draw upon queer diasporic scholars Rinaldo Walcott and Gayatri Gopinath who describe

this form of analysis as a suturing of queer theory with/to diasporic analysis in order to "recuperate those desires, practices and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable" (Gopinath 2005b, 11) within conventional nationalist imaginaries. Queer diasporic analysis utilizes the need to employ a genealogy of the present that takes into account how the body/subject is constructed differently and divergently through time, space and place. Additionally, this analysis insists on the intersectional, interlocking use of multiple fields and disciplines, specifically the discursive practices of race, nation, diaspora and sexuality. It is for this reason that I believe that queer diasporic analysis is an effective tool with which to engage "impossible subjects," such as the African gay-Canadian, that exist beyond the normative single logic of identity.

Gayatri Gopinath posits that queer diasporic analysis considers how specific racial, sexual and gender configurations, when read simultaneously, "exceed the nation's boundaries and contest its absolutist logic" (Gopinath 2005a, 160). The potential of an analysis framed through diasporic queerness suggests and makes prominent the destabilizing, disappeared "other." This analysis challenges the technologies of nationalism by insisting on foregrounding the excluded, and putting forth a contrapuntal reading of belonging, home, and the ideal, authentic and natural body politic. Queer diasporic analysis carries with it a hope of new meanings, new possibilities and the space to think what was previously unthought and unthinkable.

With specific attention to African/Haitian bodies, I draw upon Rinaldo Walcott, who uses queer diaspora to read "race," specifically blackness, back into the Canadian nation. In his article, "Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory," Walcott maps how queer diasporic analysis can be applied when exploring black queer subjects within the nation. In this passage, he speaks to HIV/AIDS and the usefulness of queer diasporic analysis. He states, "HIV/AIDS connects across the diaspora as much as it disconnects, raising the difficult issues of instability and indeterminacy as both

diaspora and queer theory throw up those terms for consideration and analysis in the making and unmaking of community, thus offering us more complex and complicated encounters with how we belong on the basis of race, gender and sexuality" (Walcott 2007, 34).

Walcott cautions that blackness can, should and is being read outside of the imperial borders of the United States in spite of the dominant presence of American (and African American) productions of culture in Canada. By firmly placing blackness in Canada, the possibilities for analysis and critique are furthered, specifically in relation to black queers in the diaspora (Walcott 2001; 2003; 2007). According to Walcott, to implement a queer diasporic analysis, one must engage in a "...reading that reads for [race]; a transgressive reading that can doubt itself; a tentative reading; a reading that is both local and extra-local, thus placing nation and outer-national identifications into useful dialogue and conversation, even antagonism" (2007, 32).

To place Canada into useful dialogue, conversation and even antagonism, I turn to Canada's violently instituted origins.

Canada, a colonial settler society, is fraught with the grandiose denials of its exceptionally violent history. The discourse of being founded by two nations, as opposed to being invaded by two nations, significantly structures the imagined political community that is the nation. Additionally, founding nations are relied on not only as the moral markers for the nation, but also as the marker by which bodies are measured for citizenship. Bodies from the founding nations are therefore positioned as ideal, exalted (Thobani 2007) and as Canadian-Canadian (Mackey 2002, 33).<sup>2</sup> Other bodies are raced and subsequently positioned as less than ideal, improper and not truly Canadian. However, it is important to note that each of these constructions is a haunted position. By haunting I am attempting to convey that neither of these constructions is static or naturally forming. Instead, I suggest that these constructed positions are haunted by, or filled with, tensions, disquiet and pestering caused from the unsuccessful repression of

the colonial formation of Canada.

Current accounts of Canada being a civil nation - a generous, nice, moral and tolerant nation - make it difficult for the nation to imagine, comprehend and hold the violence with which and upon which it is founded. An othering of indigenous and not-white bodies is a significant tenet within European and American discursive schools of race, (Somerville 1995)<sup>3</sup> and Canada is a nation deeply dependent upon the discourses of race and the practices of racism. I interrupt the normative narratives of founding and home to take into account the necessity of having bodies perpetually estranged from the nation. The nation knows itself not simply by who is included, but specifically by who is othered in that inclusion.

Canada's multiculturalism policy and the perpetual estrangement of the raced body are interlocking tools in the technology of Canadian nationalism. After all, a nation that risks its safety and security to include these othered bodies must be a generous, tolerant, moral and gracious nation. Racism and racial discrimination are effectively understood to happen elsewhere (or in the very distant past), and this narrative instructs the discursive practice of innocence. To maintain the discourse of innocence requires an aggressive adherence to Canadian discursive practice of multiculturalism and its disavowal that racism, historically and currently, occurs within the nation. We see the effects of this discursive practice when slavery in Canada is not only denied, but also aggressively disavowed.

Slavery in Canada<sup>4</sup> lasted for over 200 years; however, because Canada's slave institution was smaller in scope than the slave institutions in the geographical regions currently known as the United States, Caribbean and Latin America, it is often considered "too small to warrant intellectual or political consideration" (McKittrick 2006, 97). However, by not taking Canada's slave institutions into consideration, blackness and black bodies are effectively placed outside the boundaries of how we understand Canada and Canadian society. Even though "black" people continue to make Canada home, Canadian "black" bodies are often considered

recent arrivals whilst simultaneously belonging elsewhere. The Caribbean region and the United States are considered more appropriate spaces/places for "black" bodies and continental Africa is irrevocably positioned as the geographical, environmental and historical producer of "black" bodies. I use the discourse of blackness to trouble the normative narratives of the "black" body. I concur with Mercer, when he states,

...our blackness is thoroughly imbricated in Western modes and codes to which we arrived as the disseminated masses of migrant dispersal. What is in question is not the expression of some lost origin or some uncontaminated essence...but the adoption of a critical voice that promotes consciousness of the collision of cultures and histories that constitute our very conditions of existence. (Mercer 2003, 255)

Notably, I am aware that to take up the very category that I am attempting to rupture and interrupt positions me as operating from an already regulated position, subsequently maintaining that very category. However, I posit that blackness, as a discourse, does to the "just black" subject, what queer does for the "just gay" subject - it resists the signification of singularity, simplicity and homogeneity.

These are the narratives of Canada I read back into the nation when I come across the words and phrases declaratively used by Canadian Blood Service in their construction of the donor body. I take the realities of the violence of colonialism, racism, race discourse and the absented presence of blackness into account when I am confronted with words and phrases such as "safe and secure," "Canadian tradition," "fellow Canadians," and "to really be Canadian."

Even though the white European body is positioned as the ideal Canadian-Canadian this body must also adhere to restrictive narratives regarding sex, sexuality and gender. These restrictive narratives posit that ideal Canadians must control their sexual urges if they are to become proper Canadians; in this case, virtuous and moral. The Canadian-Canadian sexual subject is monogamous and only engages in sexual activities for the purposes

of procreation. The Canadian-Canadian sexual subject is responsible for replenishing the nation's population with healthy and ideal bodies. Sexual activities should not be overly enjoyed, nor engaged in excessively or outside of the monogamous coupling. However, in order for this sexual reproduction to occur a particular sex/gender equation must be in place. There must be no more than two bodies involved in these sexual activities at one time. One of these two bodies must have a penis (an external appendage), which means it is male and therefore a man, and therefore in charge of the sexual encounter. The second body must have a vagina, considered a lack of an appendage, and having this vagina means that the body is female and therefore a woman. This woman is subservient to the man, in his care and under his control. In other words, these sexual activities occur between a man and his wife. Sexual activities that occur outside of monogamous marriage are considered deviant practices which may threaten and undo the well being of the family and therefore of the nation. Feminist political, social and legal actions have effectively shifted many of these regulations; however many of these beliefs still exist in the discursive practices of misogyny, patriarchy and homophobia.

Seeking recognition as Canadian-Canadians, lesbian and gay political and legal rights movements in Canada challenged the nation's narratives on the ideal, proper and authentic sexual Canadian subject, which resulted in many successes. Same sex sexual activities were decriminalized; homosexuality was no longer officially considered a mental illness; lesbians and gays retained access and their legal rights to their children; and were granted unrestricted access to the adoption process. Most recently, lesbians and gays gained the rights to be legally married.

In order to achieve these legal rights within the state, lesbian and gay political and legal rights organizations not only took up an essentialist construction of a gay body, but also actively engaged in putting forward an ideal "just gay" Canadian sexual subject. This "just gay" sexual body was not only sex-gender-genital compliant but also

embraced the narratives of monogamy and family. This "just gay" Canadian sexual subject became a simple, cohesive and innocent subject. In her article "Marrying Citizens! Raced Subjects? Re-thinking the Terrain of Equal Marriage Discourse," Suzanne Lenon contends that, "The coherency of this 'just gay' legal subject is produced and made legible in part through the occlusion of whiteness as a racial category - it is a norm to which no racial reference need be made" (Lenon 2005, 413).

With the coherency of the "just gay" subject being produced through the occlusion of whiteness as a racial category, it is important to examine the challenges launched by Egale Canada and other *ad hoc* lesbian and gay political groups against Canadian Blood Services.

The following questions are identified by Egale Canada and other *ad hoc* lesbian and gay political groups as being discriminatory to bisexual men, gay men and men who have sex with men.

- ▶ Question # 12: Have you ever had an AIDS (HIV) test other than for donating blood?
- ▶ Question # 19: Male donors: Have you had sex with a man, even one time since 1977?
- ▶ Question # 22: Female donors: In the last 12 months, have you had sex with a man who had sex, even one time since 1977, with another man?
- ▶ Question # 29: In the past 6 months, have you had sex with someone whose sexual background you don't know?

(CBS, "Record of Donation" April 2009, 2)

Egale Canada and other *ad hoc* organizations find that the focus on a particular group of people, as opposed to high-risk behaviours, is misleading in terms of HIV/AIDS information and blood safety. To assume that only bisexual men, gay men and men who have sex with men engage in unprotected anal sex is deceptive and fictitious. It is important to explore why Canadian Blood Services does not believe that heterosexual couples would participate in

unprotected anal sex with their partners and with people outside of their coupling. The "just gay" body positioned in these challenges, as constructed by Egale and other organizations, is a gay man in a monogamous married couple where he and his husband have protected sex consistently and also test negative for HIV.

I am interested in what happens to this "just gay" body when other questions from the questionnaire are introduced into the analysis. I suggest the following questions:

- ▶ Question #30 a): Were you born in or have you lived in Africa since 1977?
- ▶ Question # 30 b): Since 1977, did you receive blood transfusions or blood products in Africa?
- ▶ Question #30 c): Have you had sexual contact with anyone who was born in or lived in Africa since 1977? (CBS, "Record of Donation" April 2009, 2)

The bifurcation of "sexuality" from "race" effectively posits questions 12, 19, 22 and 29 as disconnected and independent from question 30, sections a, b and c. However, as queer diasporic analysis illustrates, the African gay-Canadian body is a very real presence, which means that these questions must be read collectively and concurrently.

The desire of Egale Canada and other organizations to have "just gay" bodies included within the current configuration of Canadian-Canadians requires a separation of sexuality from race. Additionally for the "just gay" body to be considered a "good" subject, he/she must be sex/gender compliant, married, monogamous, family oriented, and white, and take up the national narratives regarding the "just black" body (recently arrived and belonging elsewhere). The reading of gay-Canadian with/through blackness disrupts not only the challenges launched by lesbian and gay political groups against Canadian Blood Services but also disrupts the discursive practices utilized by CBS in their construction of an ideal and proper blood donor body/subject.

Queer diasporic analysis understands

that the donor is heavily regulated through the exaltation of Eurocentric heteronormativity, and because of this, the only *good* gay is the one who does his duty by not attempting to donate his blood. This is what it means to engage a blood donor system that is founded upon a racist, heteropatriarchal and homophobic system. The complexity of bodies in and of the nation exceeds the binary structures of representation. However, Canadian Blood Services' constructed blood bodies/subjects rely upon an unacknowledged set of assumptions about the foundations of "identity that work in favor of those very hierarchies" (Butler 1999, xxxi).

As a tool of Canadian nationalism, Canadian Blood Services must ensure that the narratives of the nation are not only adhered to diligently, but also are protected, safe and secure. And as a technology of nationalism, Canadian Blood Services mimics the discursive practices of the nation. Consequently, like the nation, Canadian Blood Services may tolerate difference among potential blood donor bodies; however, it will not relinquish its construction of the ideal blood body and the othered body that remains positioned as inherently threatening the blood supply. Self-evident truths do not come from the body, they are in fact constructed and then written upon and through the body; therefore, what does this mean for the safety and security of the blood supply?

The opportunity to donate blood is clearly felt as a process of belonging, even though the Canadian Blood Services' blood donor is a haunted, violently instituted and over-determined subject. Canadian Blood Services' inability to take into account the so-called "impossible subjects" of queer diasporic populations within the nation is as much a danger to the blood system as are former, current and future diseases.

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2008 annual conference of the Canadian Women's Studies Association at the University of British Columbia.

### **Endnotes**

1. I draw on two documents - Egale Canada's press release and Angela Lambert's article. Egale Canada's press release entitled, "'It's in You to Give' But Not If You Are A Gay or Bisexual Man" dated June 12, 2007, focuses upon CBS's continued intention to exclude gay and bisexual men from donating blood and also calls attention to CBS's focus on "...sexual orientation rather than on unsafe sexual practices." In Angela Lambert's article, "The Impact of Heterosexism on Our Emergency Blood Supply," dated June 2000, Lambert cites an education campaign run by the Canadian Federation of Students where they challenge Canadian Blood Services to focus on high risk behaviours and not gay men.
2. I borrow this term from the work of Eva Mackey. Mackey posits that in order to have "normal personhood," it is imperative to understand one's self through a defined, differentiated and enclosed identity. "Canadian-Canadian" is such a term. The term is coined by an interview subject who is attempting to establish herself as a proper and ideal Canadian, someone who is white yet not "raced" (Mackey 2002).
3. I am specifically referencing Somerville's work on monogeny and polygeny.
4. During the practice of slavery in Canada, the nation held the designations "British North America" and "New France."

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