

# an identity?

## Dual identities: to thine own self be true

by Kurt Wildman

When I was young, it was pretty easy to be Black and Canadian. With a naive, inchoate sense of racial consciousness and national pride, it seemed quite reasonable that a person could have a comprehensive identity: fully content as a Black person and eager to stake a claim in Canada as a Canadian.

Like many other kids growing up in Metro, I immersed myself in what could be considered the Torontonion child's culture of winter fun: learning to skate in an old pair of CCM's, loving the Leafs (the bad version from the 70's and 80's), and tobogganing in the parks of the Don Valley. Once the summer came, trips to the Ex, the Thousand Islands, the Peterborough lift-locks, or down to Marineland (before they had roller coasters), Dominion Day and fireworks in East York's Cedarvale Park, picnics at Woodbine Beach, or strolling with relatives in Edwards Gardens, seemed to be fundamental components of the Canadian experience — Toronto style.

Living out the multicultural ideal was done without effort. You could build snowforts in the supermarket parking lot with the son of Mr. and Mrs. Lim and be cheeky with the older South-Asian girl who lived in the apartment next door. You could play a spirited game of foot hockey in the school yard with Rocco and Nick. You could go to the creek with Devon to catch frogs and turtles then go back to his house for fried dumplings (washing our hands first of course).

Thinking about the future, I could dream "Canadian" and dream big. When they spoke of bringing the Constitution home, who cared what it meant. I just knew that I had to be something called a constitutional lawyer. When Palmater flopped around in the net, when Turnbull scored five, or when "Tiger" Williams fought, it didn't matter that the Leafs were losing. I just knew it would be cool to play in the N.H.L. During that first trip to Queen's Park, the debate on the legislature floor was irrelevant. I just knew that I could aspire to be the Premier, or even the Prime Minister.

But that ultimate aspiration was more than that. It was also about being a Black Prime Minister, the very first one. Somehow the significance and semantics of skin colour was not lost amidst a desire to identify as a Canadian.

Maybe that initial awareness stemmed from years in an all Black school, the kind of place where Black women and men taught us on the inside, while white bids on lunch from other schools would spit at us through the fence on the outside. Then again, it may have started before that, in Grade 1, when I used to borrow that book about John Henry over and over again. No matter how many times I read it, I always felt sad when I read the part about his dying with "a hammer in his hand."

Whenever this racial cognizance started, it helped me try to make sense of that time when I was 8, when the cop interrogated and detained me for an hour and a half in a dirty old garage because he didn't believe it was my bike. It fostered pride when I saw Black quarterbacks



running the show in the C.F.L. and heightened my disgust when I understood why they were not getting the same opportunity south of the border. It inspired me to do that grade 8 social studies project on South Africa and apartheid so that other kids would know about the injustice that was taking place.

Still, back then, being both Black and Canadian never seemed problematic.



Mutual exclusivity never entered the mind because, somehow, racial and national dimensions, though different, were reconciled.

But, alas, things changed with time and a sense that I might not be as Canadian or as Black as I once thought crept in.

Chants of "nigger" as you skate by your opponent's bench and deliberate cross-checks, applied tenderly to the neck and back, indicated that sharing a passion for the national game did little to help some see the same Canadian I saw everyday in the mirror. Moreover, I learned that even by liking the sport I may have violated one of the fundamental tenets of Blackness or engaged in an act of self-hatred.

Over time it became clear that if someone took issue with policing in this city and chose not to make "cops are tops" his mantra, he would be regarded as some species of traitor; seditious by omission and very un-Canadian-ness. I couldn't help but feel that if I took the Toronto Sun test for "Canadian-ness," passing would be difficult because my Black reality, at time deviated from the norms of the "Silent Majority."

Unfortunately, while personal assurance in a Canadian identity weakened, some Black cohorts were ready to judge and stigmatize.

If you sounded as if you were born and raised in south-central Ontario rather than south-central L.A. (or Jamaica), some suggested that the white-wash is in effect. If you tended to refer to yourself as a Canadian, accusations of disinterest in and disdain for conversations with Caucasians, all of a sudden, you were "in love the white people."

In effect, accounting for all the criteria and minutiae of national and racial identity, as imposed by others, has become quite onerous. Aiming to please and conform is bound to prove ineffective and personally dissatisfying. This doesn't mean that individual concepts about what it means to be Black and Canadian should be insulated from the examination. The insight of others who scrutinize ones own views may suggest a need for a little more introspection.

However, for those who insist that you don't quite Black enough or that you don't exactly measure up as a Canadian, there is little else that can be done. Ultimately, after honest reflection, when it comes to your identity you can't satisfy anyone but yourself.

o I don't see how that's possible. If are any artists in the community a vision of an African-Canadian I 't read them. Everyone I've read is bred in the Caribbean, which isn't their fault. Young artists need to be more spaces in which to construct here their visions.

There's Black Girl Talk.

ne: But that's American, too, if you it a lot of the messages in there. We to look at the impact America has aping our identity. A lot of our ide- American.

pr.: Maybe we shouldn't be crit- iting it here. Any book that is put that is supposed to reflect the com- y, is probably not representing the community in Toronto. We should r around, put the book on the and scrutinize it to the last word— st period.

You can't have a twelve-year-old the media coming out and talking such issues. What do you mean a Black woman is the hardest thing ? And they're asking a twelve-year- old what it is to be a women?

I'm not asking you to predict the , but from what you know of our here, in this place, where do you ric-Canadians in the future?

lle: A lot of us are going to go where else.

it: There's nothing wrong with this to go back to the country where ere born. What is crucial for all of ce we are here, is to deal with our ate reality. A lot of us are staying, ruggle will continue.

: In this age of globalization and echnologies you can't attain a high e of cultural autonomy. There's so coming at you and I think that's gonna affect any new culture that me about.

To have a distinct African-Canadian ty is gonna take generations. But will be built here. Something will ill.