



Buffy, Ben, Blacks and the Media

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Black sociologists in Canada have the same dilemma and suffer from the same existential angst as *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. We would like to have the opportunity just to go out on a date and have fun sometime, but we are too busy trying to save the god-damned world.

Recently, it was reported in the mainstream media that a Jamaican deportee was arrested disguised as a "Spice Girl", hiding in a freezer in a Toronto apartment.

Read as: Black people are strange, unpredictable threats to the social order, especially if their from Jamaica.

Since White people rely almost entirely on the mainstream media for their information about minorities and the issues that concern their communities, the relationship between the White community and Black people is largely filtered through the perceptions and beliefs of journalists and other media pundits.

How evocatively newsworthy, edifying and instructional – "A Jamaican deportee ... disguised as a Spice Girl, hiding in a freezer in a Toronto apartment". This is a classic example of the process of "othering" – where instead of celebrating our differences, the media think of minorities only in the context of their difference, and therefore, are prevented from fairly and accurately reflecting and representing the multiracial reality of Canadian life.

Despite all self-congratulatory pronouncements to the contrary, the mainstream media is not a free flowing exchange of ideas, opinions, and information; nor does it represent the cornerstone of liberal democracy, upholding the ideals of freedom and equality, by championing unity in our differences. In reality, while espousing democratic values of fairness and freedom of expression, the mainstream media actually comprise "the chattering class" in the White social stratification system – serving as the harbinger of, and providing surveillance for, White hegemony.

You don't have to take my word (or the word of the "Spice Girls", for that matter), just ask Ben Johnson. The mainstream media, after all, invented the "Ben Johnson Syndrome", where a Black man on steroids can change from a Canadian hero into a Jamaican immigrant faster than the speed of human cognition. Indeed, it would seem that the only thing that may have been faster than Ben Johnson on steroids, was the reinstatement of his alien status.

Ben Johnson is not really consider a fallen countryman by mainstream media, he is actually considered to be a rude guest. But, it is important to grasp the fact that, it wasn't the steroids that transformed Ben from a hero into a Jamaican immigrant; this transformation was primarily achieved through an electronic and print media that racializes crime and immigration, and marginalizes people of African descent through contrived caricatures in terms the categoric possibilities in the arenas of "the athlete", "the entertainer", or "the criminal".

In this regard, it has been pointed out that the process of "othering" in the media "racializes" people of colour as social problems, and so, it can contribute to ultimately

"marginalizing" them by denying full and equal access to the social, economic, and political institutions of society. But, perhaps, even more importantly, "othering" acts to largely exclude racial minorities from participation in public discourse on matters of national interest and concern.

Minorities are defined in the media by their unfamiliar differences, which have the effect of devaluing their images and their contributions in Canadian life. So, minority views, for instance, are often sought on race relations issues (that is, issues about their difference), but not in the larger context of Canadian or world affairs.

In this regard, Ben Johnson is one Black man who had to learn the hard way, after posting a 9.73 on steroids in Seoul, that he belongs to a community of guests, surveilled by media pundits, who for the most part still hold on to the idea that if people of colour don't like it here enough to heed the expectations of their hosts, and appreciate the hospitality of the dominant White majority -- straighten-up and fly-right, so to speak -- they are welcome to go back to jungleland, or whatever tropical island they come from.

People of African descent in Canada represent a four hundred year old "community of guests" -- guests, of whom it is assumed at times, ought to stay out of trouble, and out of the loop on the important matters affecting the course and conduct of society, and be overjoyed that they are even allowed to stay and partake in some of the more modest refinements of Western civilization.

So, incidentally, while it has been accurately pointed out that Christopher Columbus' crew included, among others, a Jew, and Irishman, and Englishman, a Pole, and an African -- the future New World in microcosm, as it were -- in Canada today, people of African descent are still considered by the dominant White majority to be exotic and alien. They are a pioneer culture that never achieved pioneer standing. Hence, their contribution is at most considered an afterthought, not a central feature of the collective conscience of the nation; and as an afterthought it is easily abridged in mass media narration.

On the next episode of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* -- Ben Johnson gets married to a Jamaican deportee who was once arrested disguised as a Spice Girl, initiates a family class sponsorship, and frustrates Canadian immigration authorities.