

Karina Vernon
University of Victoria
Victoria, BC

Decolonizing Black Canadian Cultural Studies: The Limits of Black Indigeneity

This paper analyzes the rhetorical and ethical limits of the metaphor of indigeneity as a trope for black Canadian belonging.

Indigenizing metaphors have persisted in black Canadian literary criticism since 1975, when Liz Cromwell first introduced the term “native born Canadians” as a metaphor for the rootedness of black Canadians to Canadian spaces. Because multicultural and other national discourses fail to sincerely recognize blackness as an integral part of the nation, critics have necessarily sought tools that enable a different kind of thinking about blackness. Though critics (Clarke, Walcott) have pointed to some of the problems of indigenizing metaphors, particularly the ways they divide attention between the histories and cultural canons of long-standing and immigrant black communities, the deeper problems of indigenizing metaphors, from a postcolonial and First Nations’ perspective, remain unacknowledged.

This paper scrutinizes the metaphors that have come to shape the reception of black Canadian cultural production as well as its criticism in an effort to find a more responsible language with which to theorize long-standing Canadian blackness. It develops an interdisciplinary methodology for investigating how the metaphor of black indigeneity operates. Drawing from the work of linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, as well as NourbeSe Philip, black-Albertan writer Linda Peko Campbell, and Indigenous studies scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred, this paper explores what the metaphor of black indigeneity highlights, and, troublingly, what it hides.