

## “A Vision Outside the System”: A Conversation with Faith Nolan about Social Activism and Black Music in Contemporary Canada

Nicole Birch-Bayley  
Laurentian University

Faith Nolan (b. 1957), a social activist and musician from Nova Scotia, has described her music, or “political work,” as being firmly rooted in her status as working class, woman, African Canadian, and queer. Of mixed African, Mi’kmaq, and Irish heritage, Nolan was born as a fifth generation Canadian in the predominantly black community of Africville. After leaving Africville at a young age, Nolan and her family moved to Toronto’s Cabbagetown neighborhood. She lived there for most of her adolescence and young adulthood. In 1971, at the age of fourteen, Nolan left home after revealing to her mother that she was gay. For years, Nolan struggled with the social implications of her sexuality, as well as the challenges resulting from her racial and economic status. Throughout her life, in her relationship with members of her family and community, Nolan has also faced challenges associated with drug and alcohol abuse, as well as mental health, all issues that are implicit in the struggle of particular marginalized groups in Canada.

As an activist from a musical family of a profoundly diverse racial background, Nolan gives performances that resonate with issues of Canadian black history and heritage, feminism and gender equality, and the rights of disenfranchised workers. Enhancing her musical abilities is her educational background in theatre, opera and writing, and her commitment to social activism and community work. As someone of mixed heritage who grew up very poor, Nolan is concerned with how different social isms collide. “Along with being queer, we also carry the institutionalized burdens of racism, classism, ableism, sexism,” said Nolan in a 2006 interview, “and until all of us have full equality, none of us do. Until all of us are free, none of us are” (Kuhr para. 11, 12). Nolan won several honorary awards during Toronto Gay Pride Week, and has continued to play an important role in Toronto’s Pride festivities, as well as community outreach and educational initiatives. Recently she was named the Queering Black History 2011 Recipient by Egale Canada. Nolan’s activism also centers on concerns of poverty, racism, and the prison system. She is the founder of the Kingston Women Prisoners Choir and helped to produce the film *Within These Cages*, a documentary about

women in the Canadian prison system.

Much of her career has focused on documenting the social, political, and cultural history of Africville, the African Canadian settlement on the shore of the Bedford Basin in Nova Scotia, where she lived while she was very young. In 1968, over 400 residents of Africville were forcibly relocated in order to accommodate for “urban renewal” in the city of Halifax. Cynthia Sugars has identified the destruction of Africville as an attempt by English Canada to limit the cultural voice of particular marginal groups and to discourage the reclamation of a historical narrative. Part of Nolan’s musical agenda has been to reclaim this narrative through her music by educating Canadians on the legacy of Africville, both in its time as a thriving black community, and the consequences of its destruction. Nolan believes that the cost of Africville’s relocation has been felt economically and culturally for decades, and her work confronts the continuities between the historical decimation of Africville’s culture and what she recognizes as a continued maintenance of racial hegemony in contemporary Canadian society.

Addressing the pedagogical function of Nolan’s music, Pauline Bullen aptly identifies Nolan as an “educultural” activist. Bullen describes this form of activism as a way to dismantle oppressive systems, to examine how economic contradictions cause conflict in society, and to consider how dominant ideologies invade the lives of marginalized groups. Indeed, Nolan’s career-long ambition has been to educate disenfranchised groups of people by confronting class and racial divisions. Nolan’s work is especially relevant to the field of postcolonial studies, as she investigates the translation of settler colonialism into contemporary Canadian multiculturalism. One of her preoccupations has been in participating actively in a distinctly anti-racist musical movement, this movement being both a personal and collective journey of self-discovery, emancipation, and resistance.

Paul Gilroy’s study of the transatlantic journey of black music across national and historical boundaries is salutary here. In his profoundly influential book, *The Black Atlantic*, he argues that the self-identity, political culture, and grounded aesthetics that distinguish black communities have often been constructed through music, which then becomes especially important in troubling the polar oppositions that structure colonialist logic. Nolan directly challenges the discord between individualist, nationalist and pluralist ideologies, seeking instead to reinvent the “will” and “whim” of cultural aesthetics and symbols, as well as systems of language and political interactions. Black identity becomes not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned in accordance with political rhetoric or agenda, but rather the outcome of basic social function, or “practical activity,” including language, gesture, bodily significations, and desires (Gilroy 102). The musical performances of individuals such as Nolan become a kind of counter-ideology, an anti-war movement, as well as a physical demonstration of an ongoing journey of cultural reclamation and individual self-identification. Ultimately, as

Gilroy suggests, the most important role of musical performance within black communities, as well as outside of them, lies in its staging of an ongoing dialogue aimed at retrofitting traditional ideologies of race and gender.

The following interview reveals the extent to which Nolan is invested in opening up dialogues in the service of reinventing such ideologies. During our conversation, much of which charts the trajectory of her career, Nolan discusses the activist dimension of her music, touching on issues as wide-ranging as prison reform, the G20 protests, affirmative action, and the politics of academia. She also identifies several challenges that currently face activism in order to uncover the answers to certain pressing political questions that she has posed throughout her career.

In publishing this interview, my hope is to help disseminate Nolan's story, and in this way, bring it forward for further consideration. An important task for Nolan has been not only to reclaim black history in Canada but also to recover her own personal history. Until now, the latter has ultimately remained untold in full, instead being presented orally and musically as a kind of universal narrative, a story of black womanhood subsumed within stories of other notable black women in Canadian history.

NB: What was it like for you growing up?

FN: Well, my family lived in Africville [Nova Scotia] but they left before the final relocation in '61, and then we came up here to Toronto and I grew up right around this neighborhood, "Cabbagetown," around Regent Park. Growing up was really hard because there were only two black kids in my school, my sister and I, and there was one half-Japanese girl, Patty, and her brother, Mike. [It] was during the 1960s, before the Civil Rights Movement, so it was very racist. We would get called names, get beaten up every day almost, and have to fight; and the teachers would call you names – and it was a Catholic School too, so there was a lot of physical abuse and sexual abuse.

I would get in trouble a lot in school, and I got kicked out of my school in grade seven, went to another school, Winchester, just up here [in Cabbagetown], a public school, and that school was very racist too. Then I went to Jarvis until grade eleven; I got kicked out of Jarvis... The reason I got kicked out of Jarvis is because I would always fight back, you know, like I would tell the teachers to go "fuck off," or whatever. I would never really acquiesce to being called names.

NB: What about your parents?

FN: My mother was pretty Catholic. But she quit the church [later in life]. She never got married because my father was a Jazz musician, and he had all of these other children, so he didn't marry her. She used to call herself Mrs. Nolan and wear this wedding ring, and it would confuse me for

years... you know, because, at that time, women took men's names.

My mother didn't keep us when we were born. She went off to New York. I'm not sure, but I think my father was a bit of a pimp or something. My father, he used to drink; he was a "rubbie," that's what they called them then, alcoholics who lived in the laneways... a "rubbie," like for drinking rubbing alcohol. He used to drink that and gasoline, and so he died at 42, very young. But before he died, he was very physically abusive of us, well me mostly, because I was too light skinned; he didn't like that. My sister was a little darker.

[So when we were kids], we went to a coloured children's home, which was in North Preston; that is the largest black community in Nova Scotia and in Canada still today, North Preston. And there was a place called the Coloured Children's Home, which is still there today; now it's just empty, boarded up.

I was born in the Salvation Army, which is now called Grace Maternity, because I guess someone didn't want to call it the Salvation Army Hospital, because it's a freebie, right? But when we were born, my mother put us both there, because she went off to New York; and then she came back and got us, I think I was three or four years old, but I had been living with families in Africville, and so I had my sister. But my sister was placed permanently, she was with the Howes; she stayed with them the whole time, and so they really loved her and everything. But with me, every weekend I was with different people, back and forth from home to home.

When I remember being small, I had a really heavy African Scotian accent, which probably if you go online and listen, you can find examples of this.

NB: When you watch the documentary film on Africville, from the Canadian National Film Board, the accent is really apparent.

FN: Like the Southern States.

NB: And that is how the settlement has been described.

FN: Yes, very southern, full of soul music and gospel, and all of that. Until I was fourteen, no one could really understand me. Then my mother had a friend—she used to bootleg and one of the guys she bootlegged for was an opera singer—and so he gave me voice lessons. That helped me, you know, to speak properly... to speak "white." And, not that I speak so white now—well I am pretty good, you know—I could if I really tried... And my mother, she spoke Irish Gaelic. She was from Cape Breton, and her family was from Cape Breton, and so they had these heavy, heavy accents.

[A]nd that was essentially how it was for me growing up... I took music lessons on the side [from the opera singer], vocal lessons; he kind of wanted to help me for some reason. [Because] everyone would say that

I was “retarded”... people would call me a lesbian [and] no one would hang with me because they would be seen as a “lessie” too.

Most of my friends had dropped out very early from school, for maybe racial and economic reasons; and not a lot of parents were supportive, most of them were big drinkers... The schools around here were very debilitating; I think it was the economics, even the white kids were told, “you aren’t shit, you aren’t going to get anything, don’t expect any more than working in a store,” and you know, we would say we were going to be flight attendants or something, and they would tell us, “no, you’re never going to do that, don’t aim higher than what you are.”

And I think it was all of those kinds of things combined. And [growing up], there was a lot of liquor... I did drugs until I was probably nineteen, and then going to that racist school... I eventually had a breakdown and I went to the mental hospital. In the hospital, if you are queer, it is a mental illness; it was diagnosed until I think 1976 as a mental illness. So, I was eighteen or nineteen [being told that] and I was locked up in the mental hospital and they weren’t going to let me out unless I said I was straight.

NB: How old were you when you came out to your mother?

FN: I was fourteen when I came out to my mother. And she said I was sick and to get out. She threw me out immediately, because she said, you have two choices: don’t do that, be straight, or get out. This was funny because she had friends who were gay, men, I guess, not too many women; and she had known lesbians, because she had been in the army, and so had my father. But I think that actually made them more abusive and made them drink more—because the army is a whole culture of violence, being tough.

NB: Anything that could make you appear vulnerable or different in other peoples’ eyes, right? It is also aligned with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, where women who spoke out could be locked up by their husbands. It was called “hysteria.” And you would think that this mentality doesn’t exist anymore, but even up to the sixties and seventies, if you were speaking out, if you were different, you were deemed mentally ill.

FN: This really hasn’t changed today, because when you see the numbers of people who were locked up, and who faced the most criminalization by the police, it is those people who were poor, people of colour, women, transgender.

NB: Given your diverse background [Irish, Mi’kmaq, African], how do you see yourself nationally, culturally? Do you feel connected with all of your roots?

FN: I do actually. You know, it’s funny, I remember my mother would

sing me these Irish ditties in Gaelic when I was small, and so I learned all of these tunes. Like I know a lot of Irish songs, and then with black people, I learned tons of black music.

NB: Your songs “Wenden” and “Yemeyah” show some knowledge of this. I was wondering, did this come from your upbringing in Nova Scotia?

FN: No, I think it’s from my experience growing up in Toronto too; it was always very multiracial, so I was always drawn to everything. One of my best friends was Chinese growing up, for example.

And I think that is part of the experience, when you grow up, even in the flavor of this place. Toronto is such a global city, so you have many influences, because you have friends from everywhere. And so, I am totally interested – interested in the world and its peoples. I don’t really believe in geographics; I kind of consider myself to be a global citizen... I think that nationalism is really patriotism; it just works on the side of corporations, so they can divide up everyone. I think that was a song I wrote when I was sixteen, “Divide and Rule.” I think I’ve always held the belief that we have much more in common than we do that divides us, but the divisions are what are hyped up, trying to keep the social control.

NB: What do you think it is about music that makes the message so accessible, the cause so possible?

FN: I think it is because of the emotional quality. Real art has an emotional quality and it is something about us all as human beings, where we feel emotion. And if I can feel your emotion and you can feel mine, then we can really have a strong way of relating and so being able to sound out that emotion, or write out that emotion, or paint out that emotion, it is such a strong connection and you don’t forget it. An intellectual message on its own is easy to forget.

NB: I agree. You need proximity to the message to get so much closer to it.

FN: And they remember, they don’t forget. Like, I remember, anything I ever heard that touched me emotionally, any concert, I can recall with great detail... It touches you and you’re going to care about that forever. Like a friend of mine wrote a song, “Don’t Park in a Wheelchair Place,” and that song hit me so hard that, even if I see someone in a wheelchair place, I respond so strongly.

NB: Your music has been called your “political work.” Do you think that music is always political?

FN: I think it is for anyone. I think that to have a politic, really, is to have

an idea. So even if you are just espousing “I love you” songs, “I want to get married” songs, that is a really mainstream politic.

I think the difference between what I consider art is that I don’t think that mainstream stuff is necessarily artistic, because I think that artistry speaks to a deeper self, like a real truth, and that truth must be the truth that we are human and we are connected. I think that is the real truth and we must speak our own truth in our own lives, in that connection to others, and that is the voice that they want silenced. And so “pop” and all of that kind of commercial art, you know all those mainstream paintings, everything has to be neat and orderly, like the Group of Seven in Canada, which is all nature scenes, it is because they do not want anyone drawing pictures of something not mainstream, something different.

NB: And we idealize those paintings, don’t we? And it is because you don’t have to look at difference in society.

FN: The Canadian landscape: that is a huge myth. They don’t want anything that suggests an ideology, and so it does have that power. And that is why we don’t have a lot of true art, because we don’t have a lot of truth. And even the idea of Canada as a country, in and of itself, is a falsehood.

But I think now, with the native movement, it calls for truth, which is so similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa... Let’s start to tell the truth, like [first asking], what is it? Do you really believe that? Is that really true for you? Do you believe that the Queen did a great thing? Does anyone really believe that?

NB: That idea that we can finally be honest with ourselves.

FN: Yes, and then we can have a truthful society.

NB: But people think that is scary.

FN: It is, because even the truth about our own lives is scary. To admit, to say my mother was a prostitute, my father was a pimp, that is shameful... Because the standard is you have to be white, middle class, live like this, look like this, or at least try to. And if you don’t, do as much as you can: straighten your hair as much as you can, put skin lightener on, whatever you can do. And if you are white, make your hair blonde, because you are not white enough. And if your eyes are blue, make them more blue. Whatever we are is never good enough.

NB: And it is never authentic.

FN: It has to be manufactured, because once it is manufactured, it is controlled. I think a great [native writer], John Trudeau, writes about that sort of manufacturing, and in a deeper sense, Noam Chomsky, and I think

he writes just about the authenticity of truth, and what that would really call for in all of us.

NB: When would you say that you evolved from musician to activist?

FN: I didn't understand economics until I met Dionne Brand and we became partners in the early 80s. I think I had understood the Lesbian Feminist Movement because I kind of came out reading Jill Johnson's *Lesbian Nation* and the Black Power Movement with Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis, and all of those things. I knew those kinds of things, but in terms of really understanding the economics, that I did not. And that gave me a much more integrated view. Because why do they want division? Why are some people suffering? Well, somebody is making a buck off it, obviously; this is the bottom line. When we see oppression, whether it is disabled people, whether it is immigrant people, whether it is women, whether it is queers, somebody is making money off of it... So the fact that women are paid less than men, somebody is making money. Don't treat them like men, give them less. It is really the polarization between all of that, that I think is a politic that I really picked up in the 80s.

NB: What do you think are some challenges that face activism today?

FN: Well, I think it is the Royal Bank and the Bank of Montreal, and the corporate takeovers of the arts, the silencing [of] artists. It is also silencing NGOs, all of the women's shelters [who] are dependent on charitable donations of the elite who are conservative. So that has been happening for a long time, the continual silencing of people. And you know students, now you've got students who are being silenced by student debt.

I think it is an interesting time, you know. I do think that there is that kind of dialectic, a kind of right-wing Christian religious movement... pulling back from [a very] dark, dark oppressive era.

NB: And when did this happen? You know, some people say that it happened overnight, but has it always been there?

FN: I think about the awareness of people during the G20. You know, that was the great awakening I think, particularly for white middle-class people, who had felt protected, that you know, "I live okay, I have this and I have that," they thought they were going to be okay and there was no distinction [in regards to police presence and arrests].

NB: What did you think of the G20 Summit and all of the riots that resulted, or at least how the media portrayed these events?

FN: Well, this is going on globally, right? I mean, they met in Italy, in Copenhagen, then in B.C... And I was in Oakland, and they shut down the



whole city of Oakland, and brought in the military and the police. It is because they are practicing global shut downs.

NB: And what about the way that the laws can change as a result?

FN: I was reading *Women and Economics*, a website [that said that] sixty-nine or sixty-five percent of white people were middle class in 1969. Today, the middle class only constitutes twenty-nine percent of the population in Canada... It's all [because of] poverty, all poverty. And at the top, two percent of the bourgeoisie controls the whole economy... Even the institution of slavery is back in the jails. But it is global, and the incredible thing now is how so many people are aware, particularly young people, they have such a global [perspective], they are so sophisticated, and I think there was a catch-up point, where people of my generation are really microscopic, they are very, you know, "my union" and "my world" in this sense... and you know, the nature of young people, what they have grown up in, information technology, so there is a huge awareness of it.

Yesterday, I went to a demo for the disappeared native women, and there were so many young people there, and all different races, and I had never seen that kind of support for native rights. But I think people are looking outside of the system, because we need a vision outside of the system.

NB: Because the system only teaches us so much. There is always an agenda, and I think young people, for the most part, are starting to see through that agenda.

FN: Especially when you look at the destruction of the planet, because it is not just the destruction of the people, although the people are the hugest of any species... millions of millions are wandering the earth now, displaced and starving, but also, the destruction of the water, the oil spills, the BP oil spill, the tsunamis that are coming, and people are living in these cities, and these things are growing [in number], and the alienation [of it all], the numbering of people, becoming more like, "what's your number?" Very much like the jails...

NB: What do you think of Stephen Harper's initiative to pour more money into the prison system?

FN: Yes, I heard. Well, that is big business. That is the lobby. [B]ut where are the jobs going? They are not all going to Mexico and Third World countries; they are going to the jails. There is tons of industry going on in the jails. There are factories connected to the jails...

In the jails, like when I go to Central East Correctional Center, I do a program there, and Central North Correctional Center, they have people in there, men and women, working for slave wages; they get chocolate bars at the end of the week. They make all of the metal garbage cans [for

Ontario] for the Trillium Foundation, but it is like big money, because you've got this slave labour force... All of these companies are making tons of money, which we pay taxes for. So also they get this free labour, it's a win-win situation. If you had ten women in jail, in a half-way house, you could charge \$137,000 per woman, you could get \$1.3 million, from ten women living in your house; that is how much it costs to keep a prisoner, each woman prisoner.

Jail has become the social safety net, where if you are a woman on welfare, if you steal because your kids are hungry, or you are on drugs because you have been raped or abused and there are no services to help you, or whatever, and so you wind up in the streets, there is your safety net: put them in jail.

NB: Who do you think is most likely to end up in these jails?

FN: More and more youth, because especially as the universities become more and more inaccessible; that is why [they are opening] that Brampton Jail, a new youth jail. And this is not just in Canada, again, this is global. I went to Nigeria, they had the same thing going on. I was in the Howard Prison in England, same thing going on. It's a whole global take down.

This is a money thing, and so of course they are being lobbied left and right. There is money to be had, better than a casino.

NB: There are activists and scholars, such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, who have looked at the politics of resistance. Especially given the recent events of the G20 Summit, resistance is most often associated with physical violence. What is resistance to you? What does it look like and how should one resist?

FN: Well, I don't know if I can say what people should do.

NB: This is your chance.

FN: I think I like some of the things that I have seen people do. Like I've seen, during the G20, a mobilization, it was called the G20 mobilization committee; a lot of young people got the back of Parkdale Lot Services, and they had a drop-in center where they gave people food [for the protestors] and they could sleep there, and there was lots of literature and lots of sort of networking. And then I saw just this week that people were coming down from Manitoulin Island and the Great Barrier Lake [for the native demonstration] and there was housing. And I think, when we were doing this camp for women, women could live together and could build together on the land. And I think if people could open up to that idea, as opposed to always sectioning off, they could really share resources and really be a big revolutionary family.

NB: Like breaking down the barriers that would otherwise keep us from

sending and receiving clear messages?

FN: Right, and bring into their fold so many young people, like the 70,000 homeless people in the streets, bring into it those people and change the way that we live. And moving outside of the system, I think, more because they need our labour. And I remember this [woman] from Africville made a speech, and she said that the greatest threat to the system was people who were self-sufficient, in villages in Africa and India.

NB: And that is really why Africville was shut down.

FN: Right, because they were self-sufficient.

NB: And they did not fit into the system, fit into their conception of what was “society,” what was the right way to live.

FN: The idea that people could get their own water, that people could get their own food, people could make their own schools, could pay for their own labour.

NB: But in a commercialized society—that doesn’t work.

FN: [It would mean] a sort of collectively run way of living. I think that would be good, because I don’t believe in these structures. Because even the way that cities are built, it is so unhealthy; and even the urban [lifestyle], people coming to [these centers], is unhealthy. I think we need to move away from this. I have lived in the woods for a while and I really think moving out of [the city], you can really get a clearer view, because you get bogged down with all of this flim-flam.

NB: And really, urban centers are not inclusive for everyone, because when you are in a center like Toronto, there are people who don’t fit because they are not traditionally accommodated here; they are marginalized because the system fails so many.

FN: Homeless people, people who work at McDonald’s and make \$400 a week, you know, and they cannot afford rent and so they eat at the food bank. It is just a grueling [existence]. And now, with all of these new condos going up, and the moving of the poor, which is again another global thing... And I think another thing that I realized was [at this camp for women] is that the worth of every woman, I should say every person, was just invaluable, each person, each of us together, what we can build together, and realizing the worth.

NB: In cities, you have to measure it by what you can make, by what you can produce monetarily or socially.

FN: What is your job, where do you live, right? And how the value of human beings [is lost], to be able to see this. I remember there were thirty women building this road [at the camp] and I remember shoveling and just moving along, and I thought, “wow, unbelievable,” and these women, being able to build up shelters, building these beautiful organic gardens, and that we were able to do all of this stuff. And that was the real [thing]; that is life. We had food, we had shelter; well, that is life... This goes back to native philosophy, where you connect to the land. It is really rooted in the land, knowing mother earth, who has it all for you. But the alienation [here], we are really being alienated from ourselves too, so that whole connection would be really important in the movement.

NB: I’ve asked you about challenges to activism, but what do you think are the greatest challenges to racial politics in Canada?

FN: Well, I think if we go back to mythology and [reference] a book from the States, *Insight*, a book about women’s collectives, and they talk a lot about white authoritarianism and oppression; they talk about those two things, the idea of whiteness and hegemony... So this whiteness, this pervasive whiteness, because it is still very much a [form of colonization], now we have a new GG, another old white man, this idea of whiteness that people are scared to let go of because they will lose power within that. And even people who benefit from it in terms of race, people of colour who benefit from it because they buy into it, because they walk the walk, talk the talk, because they adhere to those things, the letting go of those things. Yeah, I think it is [about] challenging that whiteness.

NB: Are you then opposed to affirmative action?

FN: I had a friend, Clifton Joseph, and I remember he called everyone pimps; he said you know you’ve got your race relations pimps, you’ve got your feminist pimps... all these people who do these things so they can sell it to the system, not for the true emancipation or liberation of people but for the dollaration of themselves, to get the dollar, you know, and that is their motivation. And they will [just] say snippets.

I think the one thing that always makes it clear is when one brings in class... I mean, who are people aligning themselves with? How many people are aligning themselves with the street people? How many people are aligning themselves with peoples on reserves? How many people are aligning themselves with women prisoners? How many people are aligning themselves with women living in shelters? Most of them are just servicing them; they are pimping off of them.

So the whole system, the state co-ops, the things that once were; the anti-racist movement was in the streets, people walked in the streets, it wasn’t in the universities, it was never studied. It was people who said, “you know what, I want to be equal, and not just the colour of my skin,” just as simple as that. To get out into the streets, stand up and say, “we’re

not moving, we're having our equality." [It was] the same thing with the women's movement.

NB: And you don't always learn these values directly in university. You can learn them first-hand.

FN: Well, it's how you live. You know, it is how people say, "walk the talk." If one is really interested in anything, get with the people, whatever it is, go with the people, hang with the people, create true alliances.

I think [in regards to the field of postcolonial studies], scholars really need to get out there, because it becomes all heady, and it [creates] a disconnect. And then what happens is that they are really just pimping off the story. Like they go there and they are set up to buffer, which is like many of the NGOs, they just buffer people from having a revolution. They are just the band-aid solution holding the people back. They are just [safely] giving the information, just like the Red Cross who gave information to the US army on where to go and attack the people. How do we placate the people? How do we get more money out of them? The academic [aspect] of it has not changed; it is good information, they are great thoughts, but it needs to be [about] walking hand in hand with the people.

NB: It goes beyond theorizing and analyzing it, to really living it.

FN: 'Armchair activism.' It is armchair activism, and it has wasted so many lives. And these books that are out there, nobody in jail ever reads books written by sociologists or criminologists, not one woman in jail would read those books and if she did, she would be like, "what [are] they talking about?" They are talking about her life, who she is, and she knows it. They are going after the big questions of her life, and then they reinterpret it, [concluding] that "this is what it is." But when they want to talk about women in jail, they don't want to talk to her. What does she know? ... You don't want to hear from those people; you want them to remain powerless, so even their voices are silenced... Even the white person, working-class, is silenced [to some degree] in this. I think education is really important but I just feel that what it has done is hold people back, hold back the revolution of people. Just like the welfare cheque, it holds people back in Ontario just enough, just keep them placated, so that they don't just lie down in the road and die... Preferably put them in one of those plantation jails and get them working, right?

NB: Many of your songs are stories, stories about the past that insist on remembering, trying to recall a colonial past and the problems associated with it, songs like "Harriet Tubman" or "Marianne Shad." What is the best way to remember the past?

FN: Read about it, because you can't live it; it's gone. You're only as

strong as your history. Any person is only as strong as what they know of themselves.

NB: What is the best way to rewrite the reality we live in now? And to go a little further, as you rewrite and redefine your own reality, how do you see the future of your own work?

FN: Well, I think right now I am working with a group of PSWs, Personal Support Workers, they're all black women who came from the Caribbean, low-wage workers or poverty workers, they work cleaning people's houses, domestic workers in Toronto, they are with CUPE. I have been doing music with them for a couple of years, writing songs about their work conditions, you know, anti-racism, homophobia, all of those things are included in our music and we put out a CD, it's called *Hang On CUPE*.

Also, I'm also working on a [few songs in a collection], it's called *Dead Time Blues*, because now prisoners have to serve. Before if you did one day, if you were waiting to be sentenced, it was considered that you had done two days in jail, two or three days even, but now if you do one day, it is only one day. I'm hoping to write more songs, songs about their relationships and their lives, particularly about their children.

Also, I wrote a song actually last night about my family history—how my mother was crazy, my grandmother was crazy, and how that is linked to this generation over and over again. And I want to get women in the jails to write those kinds of songs, to show that this is not unique, it is about a person who has been stepped on all of their lives. So I am interested in getting those stories told so that people realize, you know what, this is systemic, it is repetitive.

I have two groups of women in jail that I do music with, one is Central North. And I've also really wanted to have a marching band. We'll go all over, everywhere, for demos and rallies, or I'd like to see a parade that would celebrate anti-Columbus day. It has to have a purpose or a meaning, because I think that art has to have a meaning, because everything has been so skewered and fluffed. I would really like to see that, and I am working on writing a bunch of new songs now.

Then I've got the 75 acres that the women are working on, and I am really glad that worked out because I have been trying for years to get women to go up north and just work on the land. [The property] was bought by Multicultural Women in Concert, which is a group that I started in 1983; we took the name because we thought we would get more state funding... The idea of multiculturalism is good in and of itself, it is that word 'multi,' [the feeling] of being multidimensional or whatever...

Also, I really try to bring along as many young women of colour who are cultural workers with me [during my projects] to mostly everything I can.

NB: It sounds like you want to establish a legacy, in a way.

FN: It is actually that [young people] will open your own eyes, because the thing is, my eyes are half-shut the older I get, so I need somebody younger to actually keep my eyes open, to tell me what is going on, you know? That is the future, that is the vision, and what you can envision and what you can see, [as a young person] tell me, because you know.

NB: It is a reciprocal relationship, but can people really work together?

FN: I don't know if there is really that willingness for people to maintain [relationships].

NB: I think you sing a lot about a kind of hope for people to be cooperative, to work together. It comes through in a lot of your lyrics, a kind of optimism. And there is also a mentality of 'brothers and sisters' on the Left that really opens people up to cooperating.

FN: Especially on the Left, there are so many good people, so I have been very lucky. [And] I think, I believe, that [it is ultimately a part of] our truer spirit.

#### Works Cited

- Bullen, Pauline. "Black Woman 'Educultural' Feminist." In *Undoing Whiteness in the Classroom: Critical Educultural Teaching Approaches for Social Justice Activism*. Eds. Virginia Lea and Erma Sims. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 223-36. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Harper Collins, 1993. Print.
- Kuhr, Fred. "2009's Grand Marshals and Honoured Groups: Pride 2009/ Why They Can't Stop, Won't Stop." *Xtra! Canada's Gay and Lesbian News*. 2009. Web. 1 March 2011.
- Sugars, Cynthia. *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*. Toronto: Broadview P, 2004. Print.