Absence, “Removal,” and Everyday Life in the Diasporic City

Antidetention/Antideportation Activism in Montréal

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This article is concerned with the “removal” (the Canadian government policy word for deportation) of noncitizens rendered suspect in the climate of 9-1-1 Islamophobia, who are detained and/or deported without specific charges, and with the impact of removals on the landscape of a cosmopolitan city such as Montréal. When people are removed, their absence leaves an imprint; the intimates they have left behind restructure their everyday lives around that imprint. But how is the imprint of absence transposed into presence, and how does that presence affect the city as a site that lets flourish or prohibits radical difference and hybridization? The article focuses on the examples of family members of detainees or deportees and antideportation activist networks.

Keywords: deportation; diasporic city; Montréal; activism

The suspect is that fleeting presence that does not allow recognition, and, through the part held back that he always figures forth, tends to not only interfere with, but bring into accusation, the workings of the State. From such a perspective, each governed is suspect, but each suspect accuses the one who governs and prepares him to be at fault, since he who governs must one day recognize that he does not represent the whole, but a still particular will that only usurps the appearance of the universal.

—Maurice Blanchot (1987, pp. 12-13)
On Montréal’s Ste-Catherine Street in the winter of 2004, there was a spray-painted stencil on a block of concrete that read “Ramenez Cherfi,” bring back Cherfi. Mohamed Cherfi is the Algerian-born Montréal resident who was dragged out of church sanctuary that March to be detained in the United States, his point of entry into Canada, while U.S. authorities decided whether to send him back to Algeria. Cherfi had been ordered removed (deported), deemed unassimilable in Québec—due in part to his involvement with the Montréal-based activist group Action Committee for Non-Status Algerians—and ineligible for refugee status in Canada. He was caught in an odd but not uncommon kind of nonstatus limbo at a U.S. detention center for 15 months but still connected to Montréal through his spouse and a local network of advocates. Although Cherfi was not deported as a security threat, he is widely believed to have been targeted for his activism and outspoken opposition to provincial and federal immigration and refugee policies; he was one of several nonstatus activists to be beaten and arrested at then immigration minister Coderre’s office in 2003. His name reverberates along with those of other detainees, memorized by opponents of secret trials and arbitrary state detention powers.

The tangible remains and the ghostly traces of absent people, detained or removed by the government, circulate in city space partly through the public life of names. Names—painted on city buildings; printed on posters, flyers, and T-shirts; worked into demonstration chants such as “Adil Charkaoui, son pays, c’est ici!” (his country is right here)—remind us of what and who have been taken, but they also issue a demand for redress. As such, they link past and future in a reverberating present call, and they link here (these streets) and invisible theres (the liminal zone of the detention center, the end points of deportation). Names demand that the absent be admitted into public space and consciousness, and their circulation forms part of a broader demand for admittance on new terms. No One Is Illegal, as the name of one organization in the global and local antideportation movements has it; if no one is illegal, each is entitled to this space. There is a difference, as Linda Martín Alcoff (1999) put it, between coming to belong in a place—which after all anyone can do by forming social networks and routines—and having the place belong to you. I describe this distinction below as one between a multicultural and a diasporic city.

What used to be called deportation is increasingly referred to in Canadian government parlance and legislation as “removal.” In the way that many aspects of deportation policy disavow state accountability for the socialization of young residents—legislation introduced in the 1990s targeting Caribbean-born Black men frequently led to the deportation of noncitizens who had been living in Toronto since infancy (not born, then, but certainly “bred”)—the linguistic shift to removal effects an analogous erasure. Although deportation is a noun that foregrounds a state action against particular individuals and groups (and establishes a connection to historical precedents such as the World War II deportation of Jews from Europe), removal is a seemingly benign term, seldom applied to humans in other contexts, that simply describes making disappear a stain or a wart on the body politic. Even more tellingly, in policy documents, we see the syntactically revealing construction “removal to,” which wipes out (removes) the prospective deportee’s dwelling place completely. Cherfi is not ordered removed from Montréal and Canada, then, but to Algeria.

This article is concerned with the removal of noncitizens rendered suspect in the climate of 9-1-1 Islamophobia, who are detained and/or deported without specific charges with the help of “security certificates,” and the impact of removals on the landscape of a cosmopolitan city such as Montréal. Security certificates are predeportation orders, which justify indefinite detention; they do not need to rely on evidence but
rather on suspicion, hearsay, and prospective risk, and they use secret trials during which defendants and their lawyers are not privy to details of the government’s case. They have been in place as legislation for more than 10 years, but their deployment in high-profile post-9/11 cases has triggered public protest on the part of activists and media commentators (e.g., columnists for *Globe & Mail*, writers and filmmakers Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis).

When people are removed, their absence leaves an imprint; the intimates they have left behind restructure their everyday lives around that imprint. But how is the imprint of absence transposed into presence, and how does that presence affect the city as a site that lets flourish or prohibits radical difference and hybridization? I am less interested in conventional acts of commemoration, meaning how loss is made concrete against time’s erosion of memory, than in how absence is lived presently—how it is kept moving, not still. (Anyway, the absent ones I’m talking about aren’t dead, they’re just . . . removed.) The government’s removal of someone who was part of your everyday life reverberates materially and economically, spatially, socially, and psychically. It also affects imaginings of the future. Every kind of grief and loss changes everyday rhythms and habits in the city, for a time or forever, but not every kind changes irrevocably one’s sense of security and full participation in the “host” nation and city. Avery Gordon (1997) referred to the *transformative recognition* inspired by remains:

> The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. . . . The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively . . . into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition. (p. 8)

Absence is made presence when those left behind develop a well-founded suspicion of the state, one that transforms their sense of possible futures. For example, detainee Mohamed Harkat’s Francophone Canadian spouse Sophie Harkat and mother-in-law Pierrette Brunet have both become outspoken critics of “their” government (I elaborate on this and other examples below). The question that arises when we consider the city as a crossroads site whose energy is derived from the coming into relation of people (citizens, legal and “illegal” residents) and their global affiliations is, Do the truncated horizons of the few, the most vulnerable, mean an imperiled future for the diasporic city?

### The Diasporic City: The Spatial Poetics of Relation

Although removal policies are federal, the city is a much more productive site for the analysis of everyday life effects. Cities are, famously, receptacles or collectors of strays, promise seekers, displaced or violently dislocated peoples, social outcasts dreaming of invisibility, and other strangers. Residents occupy every position vis-à-vis state-defined legality, from citizen to permanent resident to temporary worker to refugee to underground and undocumented worker. A minority of big-city dwellers consider themselves rooted there, and that fact is one of the site’s sources of possibility. In Canada, the vast majority of nonstatus migrants live in Toronto and Montréal; the city is the immediate space from which they are removed. It is also the place of activist movements’ expressive disruptions of routine city circulation patterns. But if we want to conceptualize the city
as an affectively charged site of both alienation and hope, we must move away from
the notion of a multicultural city (a place of many bounded cultures), which is too
narrow to handle hybridization, “illegality,” or the asymmetry of entitlements to space.
Elsewhere (Burman, in press), I describe Montréal as a city that is still caught in the mul-
ticultural model—because of factors such as language policies that keep alive the
Franco-Anglo binary, leaving a still narrow space for “allophones” or “cultural commu-
nities,” and migrant community spatial segregation that exceeds Toronto’s—although
one that is changing very fast. I maintain that these factors slow the transformation of
Montréal’s cultural landscape, but here I am nonetheless interested in experimenting
with a model of diasporization in relation to Montréal, more specifically to those possi-
bilities articulated and sometimes actualized by antidetention/antideportation activists
when they refuse the stratified framework of belonging laid out by provincial and fed-
eral policies concerning cultural difference and migrant illegalization. Below, I outline
briefly my use of diasporic city before turning to deportation as an obstacle or blockage
to urban mobility. I then discuss everyday urban life and the local antideportation
movement, which together introduce new flows and possibilities for circulation.

I mobilize the language of diaspora—the adjective diasporic and the process of “dias-
sporization” in particular—to describe the postmulticultural city that is partly a reality,
partly a horizon. My use of the term postmulticultural is intentionally narrow: I find it
useful as a way of flagging the extent to which multiculturalism in Canada, no matter
how expansive commentators try to make its definition, carries the history of awkward,
top-down diversity management. Multiculturalism is virtually programmed to miss the
dynamism of cultural hybridization in cities; in some cases, through cultural funding
programs, it reinforces the culture = ancestral origin equation. Other contemporary
mobilizations of multiculturalism—Gilroy (2005) and Hesse (2000) on Britain, Walcott’s
(2003) use of multiculturalism to describe ground-up changes in Canadian cities—are
more generous. Diasporic evokes dynamic characteristics rather than a fixed object such
as a group defined by way of its common territorial origin, and diasporization (Hall,
1990) suggests a process and project that is open ended and transformative. This chang-
ing social field affects all city residents, not only those who identify as transmigrant or
displaced. The affective dimension and historical weight of the language of diaspora are
key to its rhetorical force: Diasporic city tries to layer places and times to imagine a
dynamic chronotope, one that exceeds the nostalgia of some diasporic longings (bring-
ing to mind Glissant’s (1997) description of a poetics of relation over one of origin).
Diaspora as I use it here highlights emplacement: the sowing after dia-speirein’s scatter-
ing of seeds. The process of emplacement involves coming into relation with other city
residents and their multiple affiliations: This spatial poetics of relation, then, describes a
particular circuitry that is different from urban site to site.

The diasporic city gains its dynamic emotional texture—sedimented, yes, but in
Glissant’s (1997) sense, which is closer to motive ocean sedimentation than mineral-
to-rock formation—in part from the critical mass of residents with deep, ongoing
attachments and connections to other places. Residents’ everyday lives are conditioned
as much by those connections (visible and invisible, nostalgic, hostile, tender, ambiva-
lent) as by material surroundings. In turn, their translations of external orientations,
whether essentially private (i.e., informal storytelling to intimates) or addressed to
broader urban publics (i.e., commercial enterprises, artistic ventures), come to infuse
the imaginations and everyday lives of all residents, even those who believe themselves
to belong “naturally” and historically to the city. The hybridization of places and subject
positions in the diasporic city is a cumulative creative process born of accidental
encounters, deliberately cultivated habits of multiplicity, conscious and unconscious desires and practices. But when “reading” the cultural landscape, it is easy to forget the impact of that which has been ejected. Peter Nyers (2003) used the term deportspora to highlight the route out, pointing out that current border control policies are creating an abject diaspora traveling in the reverse direction to most. It is important, then, to be attentive to events that invoke the absent or invisible in ways that are not abstract but deeply entwined with city space and evocative of particular relationships: Inhabited spaces still remember the absent, both officially, as in the commemorative park across from Ecole Polytechnique where Marc Lépine killed 14 women in 1989, and unofficially through informal and everyday recollections.

Coerced Mobility as Stoppage: Detention and Deportation

Stoppages and flows are intertwined: the rhythms of city traffic in goods, people, and money are made up of both mobile and immobilized subjects and objects. Understanding the workings of immobilization—not only the obvious examples of detention and removal but also the stagnation of “inherited” poverty; the persistent link between race and poverty that hinders the mobility of communities stuck in city housing projects and dangerous neighborhoods; the ceilings faced by migrant professionals who cannot get upwardly mobile employment without Canadian experience, and vice versa—contributes to an understanding of circulation and flow in the city. When a particular blockage is met with active resistance and activist mobilization, however, as in the case of detention and deportation, we see a dialectical tension between block and flow. Targeting, detaining, and removing suspects from the city block movement and horizons but give rise to new spatial and community possibilities through demonstrations, marches, sit-ins in government offices, and other appropriations of urban space. New temporary alliances and mutual affective investments are created through oppositional politics, which reopen a sense of possibility: Something is absented, something is created.

In June 2002, Canadian policy makers replaced the Immigration Act with an overhauled, “security”-conscious version, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. The new act was tabled in the House of Commons in February 2001 and had been in development since 1997, but the urgency introduced by 9/11 lent its changes strong support and led to the proposal of Bill C-36 (the Anti-Terrorism Act; Roach, 2003). In spite of several cultural commentators’ insistence that irony is the emblematic expression of Canadian identity, the naming of the new act was surely an example of postirony: The main changes in the nominal move toward protection narrowed the grounds for migrant admissibility and expanded the grounds for expulsion. The local city-based opposition to policy changes introduced an important and in many cases measurably effective opposition and counterdiscourse to so-called antiterrorist legislation. I discuss oppositional movements later in the article, but first, the galvanizing crisis: the government’s targeting, detention, and deportation of members of racialized or ethnicized migrant communities, often without official accusations or recourse to appeals.

Practices of detention and deportation in Canada and the United States have drawn renewed justification from the events of September 2001, but it is worth noting that the so-called war on terror joins a long list of “reasons” for the unjust treatment of citizen and noncitizen suspect communities: Take the well-known historical examples of head taxes on Chinese migrants and the World War II internment of Japanese and Italian Canadians.
In the 1990s in Canada, with the introduction of Bill C44, the federal government granted itself extended discretionary powers over migrants in the name of public safety. A noncitizen legal migrant charged with a criminal offense could be deemed a “danger to the public,” detained indefinitely, and then sent “back home,” no matter how long he or she had been a resident of Canada. This kind of administration of punishment through removal, however, sidesteps questions of socialization and criminalizes racialized noncitizen bodies (Valverde & Pratt, 2002). Mass media are instrumental in the reinforcement and circulation of ethnoracial stereotypes: The Canadian Islamic Congress, which issues an annual report on representations of Islam and Muslims, has in a reverse pathologization referred to the “condition” of “image distortion disorder” that afflicts the Canadian press.  

Citizenship’s mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operate through local measures and tactics—the recruitment of “native informants,” the surveillance of demonstrations, border security measures—that change according to global geopolitical concerns (Kymlicka & Norman, 2000; Razack, 2002). In Canada, as elsewhere in the “strong passport” countries, the construction of worthy and unworthy citizens is partly effected by redefining illegality and deportability (De Genova, 2002), stratifying the population anew, and rounding up undesirables to both flex muscle and keep mainstream Canada secure.  

Through removal policies, the project of inclusion posits a normative concept of the mainstream (those Canadians naturally entitled to citizenship and “national security”), as exclusion targets selected groups. Policy changes aim to ferret out “illegals” and to redraw the boundaries between citizen and noncitizen, as well as transform the space between them, expanding a liminal zone wherein some are pushed incrementally toward the illegal side of the spectrum.

Everyday Urban Life

Un an derrière les barreaux!
Au moins trois cent soixante-cinq bisous de Khawla de râté!
Des milliers de réunions et de repas familiaux de gaché!
De longues nuits doublement blanches, neige continue et stress incessant!

—“Un An,” Adil Charkaoui, May 21, 2004

The Canadian city has been an idealized destination since the late 1960s because of low crime rates, a humanitarian national reputation, and a besieged but still existent social welfare state. But how does new or revised legislation concerning national security influence everyday life in urban Canada? Michel Laguerre (2003) wrote about the overlapping diasporic temporalities in New York City, mainly by following through the implications of having several different religious calendars operating at once: “Diasporic temporalities fragment the social landscape of the city, link its components to overseas sites, globalize that relationship through the deployment of transnational networks, and in the process, give rise to localized global chronopolises” (pp. 3-4). In the 1930s, Ernst Bloch (1935/1991) wrote about what he called noncontemporaneity:

Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, through the fact that they can be seen today. But they are thereby not yet living at the same time with the others. They rather carry an earlier element with them; this interferes. Depending on where someone stands physically, and above all in terms of class, he has his times. (p. 97)
Together, these two texts join the macro-level transformations usually described under the rubric of globalization—the fragmentation of contiguous space and the normalization of transnational linkages—and the individual and collective stories people walk around carrying, which straddle their pasts, presents, and futures. It is important to explicitly spatialize these times, because the Now is partly made up of past and present links to extraterritorial sites: We have our spaces. Lefebvre’s (1970/2003) concept of differential space, developed to describe the overlap of urban, rural, and industrial space, is useful when conceptualizing interdependent noncontiguous “glocalized” urban spaces. He wrote that spatialized differences are engendered by the energies of those who settle in and confront urban realities: “Contrasts, oppositions, superpositions, and juxtapositions replace separation, spatio-temporal distances” (p. 125).

Other examples of different everyday chronotopes include refugee claimant or noncitizen limbo: This is the time-space between applying for and receiving (or not) landed immigrant or citizenship status. During this period, one can move around the city freely, working and socializing, but without a sense of ownership or entitlement. This can last for more than 10 years, as in the case of some Algerian nonstatus residents of Montréal. An Algerian man I know tells me about friends of his who grow more and more depressed as time goes on: They work, but their inability to lay roots wears them down, warps their senses of time and horizon. This man had lived in Montréal for 7 years without ever buying himself anything too big to carry, let alone investing in the future in the way the North American economy rewards you to do, by for example buying a house. He did not propose marriage to one woman he loved for fear that she would think he was after her passport. He has no trouble understanding why a fellow Algerian threw himself off the Cartier Bridge a few years ago.

Removal policies affect the everyday lives of city residents in several different ways, engendering differential relations to the city as a place of mobility and free circulation. There are those people specifically targeted, such as Mahmoud Jaballah in Toronto and Adil Charkaoui in Montréal, who were or still are detained within miles of their families for months on end; those who know that they may at any moment be targeted and so watch their own every move and become paranoid about past social encounters (detainees are often identified by secret witnesses who claim to have met them in various dubious locations) or tourist activities (at a time when depending on what you look like, taking pictures of the CN Tower can go into a Canadian Security Intelligence Service file); those left behind, who personally move freely but for whom the environment is still less safe; finally, those who are not directly implicated but express opposition nonetheless by joining activist events and movements. The variable instability of city dwelling is portrayed in a number of literary texts by Canadian migrant writers, such as Gérard Etienne (1991) in Montréal and Dionne Brand (2005) in Toronto.

The most vulnerable city residents are haunted, as we all might be, by what De Genova (2002, p. 439) called their own deportability. Stories circulate, such as the one about the Algerian who was arrested for jaywalking and then resisting arrest on a busy street corner: The cover story in the Montréal weekly The Mirror (Hechtman, 2002) involved the case of “Hassan,” a nonstatus Algerian refugee claimant:

Hassan stepped off the sidewalk to hail a taxi at the corner of Decelles and Edouard-Montpetit. As Hassan recounts it, he was promptly stopped by police for jaywalking. Handcuffed and thrown in the back of a patrol car, he managed to talk the charges up to obstruction and uttering death threats to a police officer. . . . He fears that if he’s
convicted, he’ll be taken to the Laval immigration detention centre and from there to the airport. His lawyer, Denis Barette, admits, “They can—it’s important I don’t say they will—use this to send him back.”

Stories such as this one combine banal everyday life routines with the dangers of a selective police state: They have the power to influence vulnerable people’s perceptions of how safe they are, how careful they must be, how randomly they might be targeted, and so on, and thus their behavior. Furthermore, one’s fate in such circumstances varies not according to the objective threat a refugee claimant-cum-deportee would face “back home” but according to the status granted the site by politicians: In the case of Algeria, Canada’s removal of a moratorium on deportations (in spite of a severe travel advisory addressed to legal Canadians) followed then prime minister Chrétien’s visit to Algeria rather than any change in the violence of the Algerian civil war. There is a demonstrable inconsistency in the Immigration and Refugee Board and danger opinion (ministerial) decisions: Many who have faced but escaped deportation know someone with a virtually identical story whose claims were denied and who was deported.

People left behind by the post-9/11 detentions and removals of their loved ones have been vocal in the media and at public activist events about both domestic effects and political implications of government actions. Spouses of detainees, such as Sophie Harkat, Monia Mazigh, and Louise Boivin, have stepped into the public eye. Harkat says that she will abandon Canada for Algeria if Mohamed is deported; she is also the most explicit about the bodily effects of separation (no affection or sex, a new dependence on Pepto-Bismol). Families provide the most obvious emotive content of opposition activism: The teenage daughter of Mahmoud Jaballah, with classic teenage self-absorption, says, “I’m at an age where I should be going out and having fun with my friends. Instead I’m sitting at home and helping my mom with my brothers”; a 10-year-old daughter’s grades are suffering at school without her dad’s homework assistance; an adult sister is hospitalized because of stress-related illness; a 2-year-old daughter learns her first slogan, which she sings like a schoolyard chant: No borders, no nations, stop the deportations.

In one of Pierre Mayol’s contributions to Volume 2 of The Practice of Everyday Life, “The Neighborhood,” he places in tension the subject’s interior and exterior in a description of how the resident “appropriates” or “privatizes” city space:

[The neighbourhood] is a practical device whose function is to ensure a continuity between what is the most intimate (the private space of one’s lodging) and what is the most unknown (the totality of the city or even, by extension, the rest of the world). (de Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998, p. 11)

What is altered, in the case of today’s in-between dwellers, is not only the relationship between intimate and unknown, in which public space is fraught with apprehension because of the possibilities for screwing up, but the very makeup of the intimate, at the level of lodging (people deemed “illegal” may be scooped from their homes at any time) and imagination. Blanchot (1987) wrote that everyday life is partly “a utopia, and an Idea, without which one would not know how to get at either the hidden present, or the discoverable future of manifest beings” (p. 13). Although it is clear that potentialities are unevenly experienced, hope for discoverable futures is still, always, discernible. Expressions of outrage and hope coexist in oppositional urban politics; this is perhaps the quintessential manifestation of an everyday dialectics of alienation and potential liberation (Gardiner, 2000, p. 17).
No One Is Illegal: Activism and the Politics of Identification

Everyday life is what we are given every day (or what is willed to us), what presses us, even oppresses us, because there does exist an oppression of the present. Every morning, what we take up again, on awakening, is the weight of life, the difficulty of living, or of living in a certain condition, with a particular weakness or desire. Everyday life is what holds us intimately, from the inside.

—Paul Leilliot (quoted in de Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998, p. 3)

For those made vulnerable in the current political climate, the usual pleasures of anonymity, walking in the city (the pleasures of adrenaline flow and kinetic movement), fleeting glances or meetings (visual and haptic erotics of city life), are curtailed, or tinged with the shadow of imminent threat, or quashed altogether. Other communal pleasures, of course, might intensify, like those to be found in a demonstration or politically oriented social event (not to mention the momentary visibility of and encounters with an oppositional segment of the “mainstream,” i.e., Anglo- or Franco-Canadians). What might be added to an analysis of antideportation activism and everyday life in the city is an opening to questions of desire for proximity, for face-to-face interaction with kindred strangers and familiars, for communal remembering of people who have been removed. As Gardiner (2000) wrote in his discussion of Lefebvre’s work,

The body manifests sensuous, inarticulate desires and impulses that cannot be fully colonized by rationalized systems. Human embodiment retains the trace of a longing for communal solidarity, of intense collective experience and action, and of the need for physical proximity and intimacy with concrete others. (p. 16)

Demonstrations, although risky because of their heavy policing, temporarily reterritorialize urban space and create a sense of safety in a like-minded crowd (one can at once sharpen suspicion of police and slacken suspicion of surrounding strangers). Such realignments of intimate and alienated relations are meaningful in relation to the question of how identities are refashioned through experiences of intersubjectivity. Svetlana Boym’s (2002, p. 251) description of “diasporic intimacy” speaks to strategies of finding a feeling to substitute for “home.” New intimacies don’t need to rely on a common origin—people come into intimate relation on the basis of a shared understanding of displacement and/or emplacement or a shared affective investment in the future of a common dwelling place.

In Montréal, dozens of Palestinian refugees are slotted for deportation, along with hundreds of others deemed suspect or undesirable (North Africans and South Asian Muslims, for example, have seen their cases scrutinized and their claims treated with prejudice). This has led to a great number of demonstrations in which crowds fill the streets, shouting over megaphones, “So so so! Solidarité! Avec, avec, avec les refugiés,” as well as public actions outside and inside government offices: weekday morning pickets in front of Montréal’s Citizenship and Immigration Canada offices; the sit-in at the then immigration minister’s Ottawa offices that led to Taser gun injuries, abuse, and then the incarceration of unarmed, nonviolent protesters (many of these actions have been documented and screened by the local video collective Les Lucioles). Sometimes, demonstrators wear handmade oversized ID papers around their necks with their government dossier numbers or carry placards with the images of people
denied refugee status, as in the case of the Ayoub family poster, depicting three elderly Palestinian siblings in the church sanctuary room where they lived for several months (they have since been released and granted sanctuary because of the persistence of activists). Richard Day (2004) described an anarchist logic of affinity characterizing the so-called antiglobalization and other recent social movements, motivated by a politics of the act rather than of the demand. I suggest that demonstrations that momentarily take over public or corporate terrain, interrupting the regular flow of everyday downtown and thus reappropriating city space, would profit from an analysis that considered both the demand and the act. Young White Québécoise women marching along a commercial thoroughfare during a demonstration and shouting repeatedly, “Fatiguées, fatiguées, donnez-nous nos papiers!” both articulate a demand for the regularization of “illegal” migrants and assert a politics of affinity by inventing a new “nous.” Furthermore, the anarchist anticorporalism that sometimes leads to property violation arrests is strictly controlled in antideportation actions. Bold antipoverty activists—whom I have seen in other contexts antagonize the police—here consent to organizers’ insistence that because of the precarious legal status of many of the demonstrators, participants must agree on a peaceful behavioral protocol.

Antideportation activism in the Canadian cities of Toronto and Montréal is a key site for the articulation of a postcolonial politics of identification, one that brackets solidarity on the basis of common ethnic origin to pursue a crisis-based alliance. The antideportation and antideportation movement has gathered force globally over the past 10 years and in Canada over approximately the past 5 years. Locally, the movement is concentrated in Toronto and Montréal, cities whose demographic transformations over the past 30 years have changed their social and cultural landscapes irrevocably. There are now No One Is Illegal chapters in both Canadian cities, as well as in Vancouver and Edmonton. The name of this organization deploys what might be called a compensatory humanism to foreground the anti-human-rights policies pursued by “host” nation-states. No One Is Illegal emphasizes the hypocrisy of the discursive construction of migrant illegality on the part of wealthy nation-states whose foreign policies and histories of colonization are deeply implicated in modern-day stories of mass dislocation. Illegality and the renewed fortress mentality are the underbelly of the sense of entitlement that the nation-state offers to its “natural,” umbilically connected citizens. Thus, the space between citizen and noncitizen widens but also that between fellow citizens born on and off native soil.

Canadian No One Is Illegal groups borrow their name from a collective of cultural producers, activists, and writers who first announced their presence at Documenta X (1997), in Kassel, Germany. The collective quickly linked up with a transnational coalition-building network to oppose Fortress Europe and other entrenchments of exclusory borders. In Europe and the United Kingdom, the movement has drawn artists and other activists alike: The Internet art concerning illegality (e.g., fake Lufthansa ads offering special deals on “deportation class” flights at http://www.deportation-class.com; U.K. artist Heath Bunting’s project to cross borders illegally and document each successful passing through) and the utopian desire for border dissipation are important aspects of these antideportation and asylum-seeker advocacy movements. In Canada, things are proceeding differently: Participation seems to be grounded primarily in antipoverty, antiwar, and antiglobalization social movements. In both cases, though, we see evidence of short-term plans to challenge, disrupt, and refuse—such as attempts to shift the language concerning illegality, a good case being the Australian campaign “We are all boat people”; the physical occupation of government offices; the networks of churches who keep “deportables” on their premises until either deportation orders are
revoked or, if all else fails, until the people in question are moved underground—as well as long-term horizons that on occasion invoke a vision of borderless societies (i.e., “no borders, no nations, stop the deportations”).

Montréal's antideportation movement, international in its concerns but intensely local in its actions, is a good example of a heterogeneous coalition politics. The Union United Church, for example, the province of Québec’s oldest Black church, has come to be one focal point of local activism: Meetings and press conferences take place in the church basement; several families slotted for deportation have taken sanctuary in the church, gaining much media attention and leading to in one case a reversal of then immigration minister Coderre’s decision; Reverend Darryl Gray has been a most outspoken local opponent of deportation. Churches, along with other nongovernmental institutions (e.g., legal advocacy groups such as the African Canadian Legal Clinic), occupy an important gray zone in what otherwise might seem in this study like a binary relationship between grassroots activism and top-down, government-mandated hegemony (Lippert, 2005). The antideportation movement is gaining momentum through a savvy use of mainstream and alternative media, especially new media technologies. Activist organizations generate mainstream publicity, organize and inform through the Internet (list servers, Web sites, etc.), and document actions and demonstrations with digital video cameras with great savvy. There is much room for narrative analysis of amateur Internet reportage, which pays significant attention to the implications of strong-arm state tactics to deport undesirables in terms of the everyday, the interpersonal ricochet, the physiological and psychological side effects. In short, unlike mainstream journalism, it pays attention to the affective dimension of life under “protection” legislation.

The action-reaction dynamic that is one aspect of state-activist relations is only part of the story: In the process of forming temporary communities of opposition, people knit together in a new way on the basis of a shared hope for the future of a shared site. There is a catalyzing dissonance between Canada's humanitarian reputation and its current legislations and practices that succumb to heavy U.S. pressure, and for many, the dissonance acts as an imperative. For the targeted, this new and pressing dimension of one’s identity, as illegal, undesirable, or suspect, is unexpected and unwanted. In a different and less immediately urgent way, this redefinition of Canadian comes as a shock and shameful dimension to critically reflective people already identifying as Canadian. This is not Charles Taylor’s (1992) “fused horizon,” which he deems necessary for the success of a politics of recognition under multiculturalism. Rather, it permits the building of “communities of dissensus” (Scott, 1999): alternative ways of being-in-common on the basis of friendship, momentary commonality, and complementary (not identical) visions of the future.

It is important to examine the dynamic dialogical relationship between policies regarding citizenship and immigration (shifting the emphasis from the “illegality” of migrants to that of nation-states contravening international human rights covenants), and the banal everyday actions, dreams, and perceived horizons of city residents, as well as to recognize the work of actors occupying the political terrain between state policy makers and individual and group protesters. There is a potential attenuation of horizons effected by new (but old) measures to “protect” some and “secure” others, which amounts to the transformation of the relationship between past, present, and future. It is this question of the spectral horizon that links antideportation activist movements, which simultaneously perform and demand a just articulation of temporal and territorial sites, to the future of the city as site of possibility or becoming.

The kinds of spatial reappropriations and public evocations of the absent that I have been describing are part of the city's soft circuitry. What Lee and LiPuma (2002) called
the cultures of circulation would seem to involve temporary crystallizations of overlapping spaces and times that sometimes find their coherent expression in new social configurations or communities. The nous in “donnez-nous nos papiers,” when uttered by citizens and noncitizens alike, changes the usual channels of nation-state-based community building and thus challenges the preexisting conduits of circulation. This version of “us” displaces the hegemonic articulation of global to local spaces (meaning the local translation of a paranoid global geopolitics by way of surveillance, policing, and detention strategies), replacing it with the kind of politically based affinity indexed by “no one is illegal,” and makes visible the city as a node of differential temporalities and asymmetric orientations to the nation.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Joseph Rosen, Will Straw, and Space and Culture’s two anonymous readers for their very helpful feedback on this article at different stages. I am also grateful for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council’s financial assistance through a Standard Research Grant.

2. In March 2005, a demonstration called “Free the 5 in 2005” traveled along Ste-Catherine Street to protest the detention, with insufficient evidence, of five men under “national security” legislation: Mohammad Mahjoub, Mahmoud Jaballah, Hassan Almrei, Adil Charkaoui (now out on bail), and Mohamed Harkat. Mohamed Cherfi was granted political refugee status by the U.S. Board of Immigration Appeals in June and released from custody in July 2005. He awaits reconsideration of his file by Quebec and Canada.

3. The Campaign to Stop Secret Trials (2005) prepared a detailed and forceful critique in the form of a “brief for members of Parliament” titled “What’s Wrong With Security Certificates?” Convention refugees can be deported through “danger opinions,” ministerial decisions regarding the potential security risk or danger to the public of a resident (see Canada Border Services Agency, 2004). These pieces of legislation are part of a continuous effort to exercise control over suspect and otherwise undesirable communities. Historically, Canadian immigration policy has always left plenty of room for arbitrary decisions regarding whom to include and exclude. See, for example, Roberts (1988) on the exclusion of Caribbean and other migrants for reasons of climate unsuitability and general unassimilability.

4. See Sophie Harkat’s Web site at http://www.zerra.net/freemohamed. Mohamed Harkat was released on bail in May 2006, after almost 3 1/2 years in detention, on condition of strict house arrest.

5. For a thorough analysis of detention centers, detention and deportation legislation, security concerns, and discretion as concerns the criminalization of migrant communities, see Pratt (2005).

6. See the essay collection Race, Space, and the Law (Razack, 2002) for explorations of several historical cases of injustice and the antidemocratic targeting of non-European-descended Canadian residents (First Nation peoples, Japanese Canadians, mixed-race Canadians, and Black Canadian residents of Africville).

7. Its latest report is available at http://www.canadianislamiccongress.org. The Canadian Islamic Congress reports a 16-fold increase in verbal and physical attacks against Muslims since 9/11.

8. There exists a most instructive linguistic distinction here, with “protection” for immigrants and refugees and “security” for mainstream Canadians—citizens descended from premulticulturalism policy “charter groups” (English, French, Aboriginal peoples) and other European Canadians.

9. This poem appeared on the website dedicated to Adil Charkaoui’s struggle, adilinfo.org, in May 2004. The full text is available at http://www.adilinfo.org/actions_coalition/demo_21052004_FR.PDF
10. In February 2005, Charkaoui was released on bail, which was an important victory for Montréal antidetention/antideportation activists. At a bail hearing I attended, the small courtroom was filled with relatives in the front row and friends and activist supporters behind them, taking notes, whispering about fine legal points, translating for non-French speakers. The regular showing of community support is said to have played a key role in the judge’s decision.

11. An October 2004 protest reacted to the case of Kassim Mohamed, an Egyptian Torontoan investigated by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and jailed in Egypt for having videotaped the tower and other tourist sites in Toronto: During the protest, Muslims and others assembled at the base of the CN Tower to videotape it en masse.

12. The moratorium has since been reinstated, largely because of the organized resistance of activists, and then again revoked.

13. Sources for these kinds of stories include reports and articles circulated on list servers and posted on Web sites (http://www.homesnotbombs.ca, http://www.ocap.ca, http://www.adil-info.org, the No One Is Illegal list server).

14. I should at this point make my own activist investments and identifications clear. I am a peripheral but regular participant in the local oppositional movements I describe. Although I play no organizational role, I attend demonstrations, workshops, symposia, lectures, bail hearings, and so on, as a supporter of detainees’ rights to fair trials; I encourage university students to get involved; I have jointly sponsored a prospective deportee; and in the broader research project of which this essay is a part (one that will include interviews with family members of detainees and deportees), I position myself unambiguously as an advocate for detainees’ and deportees’ rights.

15. See Naber (2002) on post-9/11 coalition building and activism in San Francisco. She discussed examples such as Nosei, a Japanese American group that has affiliated itself with the fight against backlash politics now targeting Arab U.S. residents, and several organizations representing women of color.

16. A partial list of nodes and networks would include the No Borders Network, the Make World collective, Border panic, X Border, Barbed Wire Britain, pajol, and le Collectif Anti-Expulsions, in addition to the countless nongovernmental organizations working on behalf of asylum seekers, refugees, and detainees.

17. On Web sites such as http://www.homesnotbombs.ca, people who attend hearings or events (e.g., the public portion of security certificate hearings) post detailed descriptions.

18. Operation Thread, the government’s 2003 “immigration sweep” that swept up 24 South Asian Muslim men in the greater Toronto area (more than half of whom were deported in the following year), gave rise almost immediately to Project Threadbare, a coalition of South Asian Canadian communities that worked persistently to expose the absence of evidence. Muslim communities were in some cases accused of withholding support, remaining silent, and disavowing links to the accused (No One Is Illegal symposium, Toronto, 2003). Although both reactions are on some level understandable, one is attuned to self-preservation and assimilation and the other to a longer term horizon.

19. As soon as one pays attention, there are infinite reminders of the precariousness characterizing the lives of neighbor-strangers in the city. Before Adil Charkaoui was released on bail, updates and details circulated continuously on the activist list servers: He was permitted to hold his newborn only for a few moments during each hearing, his sister, who had been granted citizenship, was in and out of the hospital with stress-related illness, the courts cared nothing for the passing of time. Every day, there are new stories with different characters, new emergencies, new appeals for legal funds and intervention.

References


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