

Anti-Black Racism in Canada

A historical perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Africans are known to have been in Canada since the 1500's, but it was not until the early 1600's that the first named African arrived. Multilingual Mathieu Da Costa was a free African man who acted as a translator for Samuel de Champlain with the aboriginal peoples on Canada's east coast. However, the largest early group of Africans to enter Canada did so as enslaved people – involuntarily forfeiting much of their history, heritage, culture and power. The first known Canadian slave was a child of eight years of age, Olivier Le Jeune. He arrived in 1628.

By the mid 1700's, the French ownership of enslaved Africans increased. When the British took control of Canada, they did nothing to end slavery and continued the practice. More Blacks arrived, following the American War of Independence, some as the slaves of Loyalists, others promised land and freedom for their role in defending the British Crown. African people continued to come into Canada from 1793 until the end of the American Civil War in the 1860's.

That Canada was a haven for escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad obscures the agency that African Americans had in making themselves free and suggests that there was national support for them. However, their treatment and the stereotypes connected to slavery have instead encouraged discrimination against them, perpetuated negative stereotypes and the occurrence of internalized racism that impacts contemporary efforts for individual and community development. Then and now, racism affects education, employment, housing and opportunity. It tragically affects self-worth and makes the development of a Canadian Black identity very challenging.

Black people continued to come to Canada, despite government efforts to keep them out, from 1860 to the present. Waves of Black immigration followed WWI and WWII, the passing of the Domestic Service Workers Act in the 1950's, and particularly since the change in immigration laws in 1967.

“Indigenous” Black peoples in Canada have been joined by those from the Caribbean, Europe, and most recently, directly from Africa. Currently, over half of all Canadians of African origin live in the Toronto area.

In order for there to be anti-Black racism in Canada – and corresponding steps to address it, there have to be people of African origin in the country. Then there has to be substantive proof that racism exists and that there is a form that is particularly directed at Canadians of African origin. Both go together, however, mainstream historians have not included mention of Black people in Canada, or have done so in a way that suggests that all Black people returned to the United States after the American Civil War, and the end of the Underground Railroad, or that all Black people are recent arrivals and therefore have not paid their dues - sufficient time has not passed to show the merit of their contribution “if any”. The rise of the Dominion Institute, a historical organization well funded by corporations, maintains a strong focus on Canadian history before multiculturalism was a national policy and suggests that immigration and multiculturalism are responsible for many of Canada’s problems. Recent doctoral students hoping to study African-Canadian history have been advised to focus on African-*American* history since there is supposedly little African-Canadian history from which to scrape together research for their thesis. It is as if Black people in Canada were invisible.

Yet the diverse nature of Canada’s population is still becoming widely known as some of the more accessible and progressive historical materials have been published since the 1970’s. The possibility for broad community appreciation of the contributions and achievements of African Canadians is therefore a relatively new phenomenon despite the 400 year experience of this group in Canada. Why is it that Black people – peoples of African origin, a group that has contributed to the development of Canada, has not been included in the national script? Were they not founding peoples just like the French and the British?

According to the 1996 Census, there are approximately 570,000 Canadians of African descent, the third largest racialized group in Canada; Asians and Southeast Asian communities are the largest groups. However, African-Canadians are unique due to their colour and its connection to their historical experience of slavery and the legacy of slavery, as well as the impact of racism distinct from others affecting immigration, education, employment, the justice system and Canadian mass media and culture. (ACLC, 2002:15)

Similarly, the notion that Canada is a racist country is not widely accepted. Canada does not have a significant incidence of lynchings, race riots, or mass destruction of several communities. It does have continuous episodes of racial discrimination which have resulted with the deaths of Black people at the hands other community members or the police. The continuous nature of the discrimination, combined with their marginalized experience educationally, economically and culturally, create the distinct experience of African-Canadians. However, the racist definition is not only a measure of the frequency, intensity and duration of racist acts, nor is it only connected to acts of violence – it is a definition that is related to race based differential treatment involving notions of superiority and inferiority of one race over others enforced by power. That being the case, Canada is a racist country according to the UN definition, and the work of countless researchers, given its founding as a slave society.

Background & History

Most Black people in early Canada were held in bondage. While the numbers were relatively small, perhaps 1000 by 1760, there were still laws created about their treatment and disposition. The *47th Article of Capitulation of Montreal* among other things, ensured that African and *panis* (Indian) slaves remained the legally recognized property of their owners (Walker, 1980:24). This legal recognition of Blacks and *panis* as property was further supported by the *Peace Treaty of 1763* and the *Quebec Act of 1774*.

In Ontario, then called Upper Canada, the last will and testaments of individuals was supported through the courts allowing slave ownership for the next of kin to be recognized. Without this guarantee, many slave owning Loyalists would have lost their remaining property – their slaves. At least 500 slaves arrived in Ontario with the Loyalists although most Loyalists headed for the Maritime provinces. Black Loyalists consisted of 10% of the total number of Loyalists; there were about 30,000 Loyalists and 3500 were African. They got their freedom but the land allotted to them was poor, remote and not sufficient to sustain a family, sometimes as little as one acre, often about ten. Many were forced to abandon their land, to squat on property to which they had no legal title only to lose it later with formal land claims (eg. Priceville) or the modern removal of their homes and community

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such as the most severe example of anti-Black racism in Canada – Africville, near Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Africville was created out of the long wait by Black Loyalists for surveyed land. White officers were taken care of first, but with the shortage of surveyors, the process took not weeks but years. Taking ownership of land on the water, close to Halifax, the residents forged out a community of mutual aid. The strong community of over 400 boasted a church and businesses and many depended on Halifax for work. Instead, Halifax built the town dump, a railroad, factories, sewage drains, a slaughter house, and later a prison very close to where residents lived and played. By 1970 despite paying taxes, Africville was without clean water or electricity.

To fix the intolerable situation, Halifax Town Council proposed to move the residents and tear down the settlement in order to use the lands for other purposes. The residents of Africville wanted to remain, but to have the services such as electricity brought into their community. The city started to buy people's homes at less than the market value for prime waterfront real estate, and then in the middle of the night, the heart of the community, the church, was bulldozed. Many residents then opted to leave, often receiving little (\$500) or nothing for the homes they had built or maintained, and the city obliged by providing garbage trucks to haul their possessions. From living in multigenerational households, they were placed in cramped public housing – separating extended families. To date, redress is still being sought. The land remains vacant except for a cairn dedicated to the spirit of Africville – it's resilient residents. (Clairmont, 1992)

Some Black Loyalists, about 1200, were so disenchanted that they left the Maritimes and settled in Sierra Leone in 1792. The Maroons of Jamaica had successfully warded off the invading British through their superior guerilla style raids. When confronted in 1795 with ferocious hunting hounds and tricked into leaving their mountainous home, they were evacuated to the hills of Halifax, Nova Scotia to serve as a defense force and to help to build a fort, the Citadel. Within a very short time, they demanded to be taken to a more hospitable place, socially and climatically, and were removed to Sierra Leone in 1800 following the arrival of the Black Loyalists.

In Ontario, the poor treatment of slaves is evidenced by Chloe Cooley despite there being an abolitionist as the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario. In 1793, Simcoe was informed of a slave woman's forcible capture, and her

sale to southern slave owners. She, Chloe Cooley, had been bound and taken across the river in Niagara to be sold by her owner. Simcoe was outraged and sought to create legislation to prevent a future occurrence. Since his slave-owning peers, including Peter Russell and William Jarvis the secretary of the Executive Council, were not as passionate about seeing Canadian slavery end, only compromise legislation went through which shortened the period of enslavement by the time a slave was 25 years old and halted the importation of slaves. It ended the length of time of servitude for European indentures, but did not end the enslavement of Africans. In fact, Black people continued to be bought and sold well into the 1800's. Slavery was finally ended in Canada through the British Imperial Act of 1833 which abolished slavery throughout the British Empire effective August 1, 1834.

Oro was the only government sponsored Black settlement in Canada. It was remote and bordered the southern end of Georgian Bay. It was important for the security of Canada to have a cadre of trained soldiers who were both committed and loyal to the British living there in the event that a surprise attack were to be launched by Americans. However, with the American threat waning, and the nature of the land difficult, most left for the work to be offered in Barrie, Collingwood or Toronto. Their efforts to be free, to be truly self-sufficient were lost. To survive, they had to start again, often in capacities similar to slavery since they could not sell the homes that they had built nor could they sell the land – clear title was not possible until it was all cleared.

In 1849, a Presbyterian minister living in the United States conceived of a way to handle the slaves he had inherited through marriage to a Southern woman, he would bring them to the Chatham area of Ontario and assist them in the formation of a primarily Black settlement. This would prevent their recapture in the U.S. and allow them to bask in freedom and self-sufficiency. However, his efforts to create the Elgin Settlement and Buxton Mission was threatened by a powerful politician, Edwin Larwill who argued that Black people were inferior, not to mention that white women and children would be in danger from the threatening free Blacks. His extreme campaign backfired, and his supporters abandoned him leaving Rev. William King to proceed. To date, Buxton has survived and is a national historic site.
(OBHS)

The Underground Railroad was the first freedom movement of the Americas and fuelled the image of Canada as a benevolent country found by following the North Star. However, while between 20,000 to 100,000 African Americans fled to Canada, freedom rang hollow when other rights were not guaranteed. In fact, at the height of the UGRR movement, the Common Schools Act of 1850 was passed creating schools separate along religious or racial lines. Already disadvantaged by slavery and by limited opportunity, Black communities were often hard pressed to raise the funds to create the segregated schools that they had not even requested. Areas well supported by abolitionists, such as Toronto, did not see the creation of Black schools. This law did not come off the books until 1964. (OBHS)

That Black people had been enslaved, as if other groups did not have slavery in their histories, was enough to cause many people to feel personally insulted by the mere presence of a Black person, never mind one in uniform. Their colour was synonymous with being inferior. (Walker, 1985) On June 28, 1852 in St. Catharines, Black militiamen were conducting their annual exercises at a parade ground. Whites continually provoked them until a scuffle ensued. A Black man, Harris, who was not part of the scuffle was attacked, and when he sought the support of the constabulary, he was ignored, so he took matters into his own hands and with the aid of his friends, assaulted the attacker. The situation flared up, resulting in the destruction of several Black owned houses. (Ripley, 1986: 215) Situations like this were repeated across the country. A Black family moving into a new home in a "white" district in 1937 Trenton, Nova Scotia, were faced with scores of white attackers over a 2 day period. Since the mayor would not intervene, the attackers demolished their home and the homes of two other Black families. (Winks, 1971) and even outside: Black Canadian military men were jeered at, attacked and beaten as they attempted to march in the Victory Parade in Liverpool, England after WWII. (Walker, 1980: 96) What were they guilty of? Living their lives as Black people.

All Americans were attracted to Canada's West by the 1900's since land prices were much more reasonable than in the United States (\$2 compared to \$50). The government encouraged settlers to come in, and many Black people did. However, by 1910, attitudes began to change when it was anticipated that throngs of Blacks would attempt to come to Canada from Oklahoma due to changes in segregation laws there. The media was used to reinforce negative stereotypes about Black people including their sexual aggressiveness. One newspaper story was about a young white girl who

claimed to have been assaulted and her ring stolen by a Black man alarmed people across the country. When it was later determined that she had fabricated the story to avoid punishment for losing the ring, the damage had been done – community groups had already made strong statements about their fear, loathing and contempt for Black people.

It was decided to send in a Black doctor to speak to prospective settlers, exodusters, and dissuade them from coming with ludicrous stories about Canada. When this proved unsuccessful, restrictions were placed only on Black settlers at the border, but because they had money, property and were in good health, they were admitted. Finally, the government passed a regulation that stated that Black people were “deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada”. While this did not become law, it effectively sent a message that Canada was not interested in Black immigration. (Shepherd, 1996) In total, perhaps 1500 exodusters entered Canada. It would not be until after the end of WWII, that Black immigration would increase.

Following the end of WWI in 1919, Prime Minister Borden shared the position of his party on the potential union with Newfoundland, then independent, as well as several Caribbean islands. While clear that such a union would benefit Canada through an expansion of administrative opportunities, he was nevertheless concerned that Black West Indians would expect representation in Parliament. He went on to say that the “backward” mixed race West Indian societies were a threat to the values and democracy of Canada. (Alexander, 1996: 139) Without anti-Black racist attitudes, Canada would have gained a Caribbean province.

Following the strong tradition of defending Canada, Black men were eager to enlist during WWI, and thousands were denied entry into the military. Since government policy supported Black enlistment, but recruiting officers rejected them, Black people decided to create their own units much as they had done for the War of 1812 with the Colored Corps. The Number Two Construction Battalion, a Black battalion under white leadership, was formed with enlistees from across Canada.

African Canadians did not necessarily want to have their own regiments, communities, schools or churches, but it was due to the exclusion, rejection or uncomfortable experiences they had with “mainstream” institutions, that facilitated the formation of all Black supports.

The distinct history of African Canadians has resulted in the perpetuation of anti-Black racism in Canada. Just being of a darker hue has been connected to being a slave. Being a slave is connected to being inferior. Being enslaved meant taking orders, not giving them; it meant being policed, not policing oneself; it meant being ignorant because one was denied the opportunity to be educated; it meant bearing children for whomever sowed them; it meant being physical and athletic not cerebral and aware; it meant dining on scraps because that was all that was given. It meant socializing another's definition and perception of you, and your beauty and your traditions. It meant not knowing one's own history so that one could develop a sense of heritage and culture as part of a process of empowering oneself and strengthening the community.

Being seen as inferior has resulted in discriminatory acts being taken against the Black community actively or passively, by individuals, groups or government, to reduce their experience of freedom, narrow their ability to obtain educational or employment goals, limit the nature and type of housing they can access or to acknowledge their presence and contribution to the building of this country for over 400 years. Why is it that as a group, people of African origin in Canada find themselves at the bottom of the society? Is it not our distinct history and experience as African-Canadians?

This is not to say that there are not successful Black communities with African-Canadians having the capacity to manage well. It is not to suggest that the Black Canadian community is without "success" stories, the educated, the sports or entertainment figures, the politicians, lawyers, teachers, social workers, artists or affluent individuals, but on balance in terms of others, the Black community does not fare as well.

A recent demographic analysis of Toronto's Black community based on Statistics Canada 1996 census data provide powerful objective data (Torczyner, 2003). For example

- unemployment rates for Blacks in Toronto are twice as high as they are for a non-Black
- a Black university graduate will fare as well as a non-Black who has not completed high school
- Blacks are underrepresented in higher paying occupations such as upper and middle level management

Our families are under strain:

- the Black community has a higher percentage of single parent families
- 60% of single parent families are living below the poverty line
- over half of all Black children in Toronto live below the poverty line

Our community is suffering, “thus at all levels and throughout the country, Blacks have double the poverty rates of non-Blacks” (Torczyner, 2003:63)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Each presenter will offer recommendations for further action as related to their topic. In terms of *history*, what can be done to improve the situation for African Canadians?

While February is not the only time to learn and appreciate the role of African-Canadian people in the building of Canada, the OBHS chose to, in solidarity with African-Americans, seek the official recognition of this celebration. In order to place and ensure the inclusion of the contributions and achievements of Canadians of African origin in the hearts, homes, schools and community, the Ontario Black History Society initiated the formal celebration of February as Black History Month. At first, this was at the city level, but recently the OBHS has been successful in having February declared Black History Month across Canada. The Federal Government extended the celebration through the creation of the Mathieu Da Costa Challenge. However, what is needed is legislation to address the specific needs and concerns of the African-Canadian community. With legislation there is a budget and other resources to ensure that our specific needs are met. Racism affects people from the outside in areas such as immigration, education, housing, employment and is also internalized leading to a range of other socio-psychological issues. Therefore, the OBHS recommends that

- legislation to address anti-Black racism be drafted and passed to create a Department of African-Canadian issues
- tri-level government support be given to the development of the cultural centre/museum of African Canadian museum project of the OBHS
 - o to be a touchstone for the Black community especially our youth

- to be a place of honor for extant African-Canadian artifacts, documents and other historical materials
- to be a repository for our history and a vehicle for the expression of our souls
- support be provided to the OBHS to effectively be able to carry out it's very necessary mandate of studying, preserving and promoting African-Canadian history to ensure that our youth have some understanding about the long-term nature of the struggle and contribution of earlier African Canadians
 - to help to develop a sense of a connection to Canada and to other Black people in the Diaspora
 - to develop anti-racist attitudes among non-Blacks
- to advocate for the inclusion of African-Canadians as founding people
 - to underscore the long-term contribution of African-Canadians to the building of Canada
- to seek reparations for the ongoing impact of African enslavement
 - to be a broad meaningful and symbolic project formed with African-Canadian input (such as a museum - not individual sums of money)
 - to assist in repairing the damage done through the distinct experience of African-Canadians related to enslavement and its ongoing impact

The African Canadian population is diverse coming from areas around the world, speaking several different languages and having varying experiences as majority or minority peoples before their arrival in Canada. In addition to the challenges faced in seeing themselves as a "community", they are the recipients of internalized racism which is most challenging to combat. For example, Jamaicans may know more about British history than about the contributions and achievements of Blacks in Grenada due to the way that the school system valued British history. It serves to keep people apart and not allow them to see their commonalities. Upon arrival in Canada, they would be hard pressed to know about African Canadian history.

We need to be able to band together to combat racism, to advocate for the changes that will benefit our community while learning more our contributions.