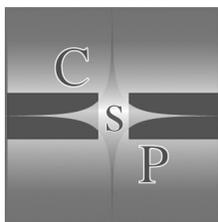


Multiple Lenses

Multiple Lenses
Voices from the Diaspora located in Canada

Edited by

David Divine



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FOREWORD

On October 26th –October 28th, 2005, over 428 delegates gathered in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, to explore over three days what it means to be black and Canadian. The conference was organized by the James Robinson Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies, at Dalhousie University (<http://www.jamesrjohnstonchair.dal.ca>). The title of the three-day series of presentations, discussions and networking was *Multiple Lenses: Voices of the Diaspora located in Canada*. The theme of the event was to explore through the lenses of history, law, literature, film, music, black community organizations, media, sports, black spirituality, party politics, labour markets, education and lived experience, how black people in Canada have identified themselves and been identified, over a four hundred year period and what factors appear to have influenced that process. This volume was inspired by the dialogue which took place at that memorable event.

According to Walker, one of the leading historians on the black presence in Canada, no such event had taken place for some twenty six years. The gathering was more than a unique and long overdue opportunity for an essentially who's who of black Canadian academics and community representatives to meet and discuss issues of mutual concern; it was a celebration and affirmation. Celebration in the sense that there was an increasingly influential number of black academics and community representatives whose contributions to recording the lives and experiences of black people in Canada, was resulting in increased national critical attention. As Walcott argues in his contribution in this volume on 'Towards a Methodology for Reading Hip Hop in Canada', ... 'Black Canadian Studies though in its infancy is a rich set of politically configured desires, hopes, possibilities, failures and potential, all wrapped in mounds of excitement and in 'black pleasure'.....Black Canadian Studies is set to reshape the metaphorical and material ground of Canadian studies and the Canadian academy. In this vein understanding the multiple ways in which blackness makes its presence felt in Canadian institutional spaces is particularly important. And even more so the political stances of the critics of black Canadian culture will be crucially important on this front and should be given close scrutiny for what they say about black Canadian culture.'

Black Canadian Studies, as I see it, is the exploration of the range of histories, experiences, contributions, perceptions, feelings, convictions, triumphs and obstacles awaiting to be overcome, of identified black people of

African descent resident in Canada. Black Canadian Studies revolves around the agency of black people as the subject of investigation. Their stories, their interpretations, their pride, their independence, their self determination, their challenges, their triumphs, their shortfalls and sense of freedom and justice are at the forefront of investigation.

The conference was also an act of affirmation. The event received national Canadian government support. An acknowledgment by Government to use the title of the paper of the historian, Afua Cooper, in this volume, that 'Unsilencing the Past: Memorializing four hundred years of African Canadian history', is now part of the country's government agenda and that the contributions of black people over that period need to be inserted into the national memory. This is a theme elaborated upon by the Librarian and archivist of Canada, Ian Wilson, in his paper, 'The gift from one generation to Another', where it is argued that all of us have a responsibility to '.... ensure that the record we pass on is truly representative of the Canadian experience.(and) that the archival, library and museum legacy we leave to the future is reflective of the diversity and complexity of Canada'.

Walker urges extreme caution in trying to understand African Canadian history and in his paper identifies a suggested preferred approach which revolves around the agency of the subject of the historical investigation. By agency Walker refers to pride, independence, self determination and sense of freedom. He contrasts this with a view of the subject as dependent and submissive, a prey to prevailing currents, events and personages. Carried wherever irrespective of any desire or action on the part of the subject. Walker argues that a great deal of accepted history of black people in Canada is of this vein. Such a conception carries a heavy price Walker argues and that is ' People act according to the history they believe has happenedHistory as it is understood enters a political discourse, it becomes a participant in a power dialectic and it influences relationships'. Quoting George Orwell, Walker argues that 'Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past'. Walker concludes that this applies to African Canadian history as it is understood by blacks and whites; 'Approaching African- Canadian history is a political act, deliberate or not. How you approach it will determine the lessons you derive from it. You can even shape the future'.

This volume seeks to provide the reader with a flavour of a range of experiences, perceptions, feelings, convictions , triumphs and obstacles awaiting to be overcome , of identified black people in Canada over a four hundred year period. The total number of black people of African descent in Canada is small in comparison with many countries in the diaspora. According to the latest census (2001 figures) there were 662,000 black people, some 2.2 percent of the Canadian population. The perhaps unique feature however of the black presence

in Canada is its diversity not only in terms of original family geographical origin, but also in terms of, for example, chronological historical presence in Canada, geographical location in Canada, first language spoken, ethnic origin, religious affiliation, links and allegiances to other parts of the world outside Canada, and future aspirations in Canada. Such diversity is reflected in the volume. Themes revolve around questions of 'belonging', identifying oneself as a black person with a wider grouping of black people perhaps with an assumed common characteristic such as a shared geographical location in Canada and similar period of family historical presence in Canada; making sense of ones past and using that to forge a purposeful present and future, carving out memory and black contributions from state sanctioned historical silence, exploring how black people lived (and continue to live) their lives under considerable hardship and what resources did they have at their disposal to cope with such constraints and in many instances overcome those; what role did (and continue to do) community organizations play in supporting black people in their day to day lives; the use of the law as a means of further suppressing black people; and the importance of education as a vehicle for advancement and resistance.

The book is divided into nine sections with each exploring particular features of the variety of black experience in Canada. Part I on history, alluded to earlier, highlights the sensitivities one needs to have in order to more accurately reflect the experiences and actions of black people in Canada under historical investigation. The section also highlights the reality that even although the black presence in Canada can be traced back to at least 1604, significant numbers of black people have arrived in Canada over the past 100 years and in the very recent past with a range of similar and dissimilar experiences. An example is given by Este and Kuol, of the migration of a small group of African Americans from Oklahoma to the Prairies (Alberta) at the beginning of the twentieth century, and a further example is cited of the arrival in Alberta of significant numbers of Sudanese as a result of the civil war in that country. In Calgary, there are approximately 7,500 Sudanese residents, most of whom arrived in this Albertan city since the year 2000.

Part II on lived experience explores not only the complexities and multiple meanings attached to black lives, but also seeks to illustrate how black people in differing settings have attempted to negotiate agency in their lives in the context of racism, isolation, exclusion and denial of fundamental rights. Although such meanings permeate the entire book, specific reference is drawn in this section to for example, how hip hop embraced by many black youth, reflects a political Canadian rootedness and confidence in feeling and demonstrating a sense of belonging in Canada expressed by black youth. In addition as Walcott argues it displays a diasporic sensibility in that ones identity as a black person is not constrained by ones geographical present, where one was born or grew up in,

but where black people reside globally. It is transnational in scope and limitless conceptually. It is confident and powerful. This is placed in contrast Walcott argues with a perceived narrower vision of black Canadian identity espoused by George Elliott Clarke, which hinges on a more geographically constrained compass.

Falconer explores the efforts in Canada to prepare the first National HIV/AIDS Strategy for black Canadian, African and Caribbean communities. The work outlined is the latest available in Canada and reflects how barriers of discrimination and prejudice have compounded progress in an area with profound adverse consequences for black people. It also highlights however the major efforts by black individuals and organizations to address the issues within the available resources and a case study is also given in Part VII by Divine, outlining how an initiative amongst the black communities in Nova Scotia, was undertaken to raise awareness about issues relating to AIDS/HIV, and some of the obstacles encountered both within the communities and outside. Fosty, in his account of *The Lost History of The Coloured Hockey League of the Maritimes, 1895 – 1925*, shows how the roots of modern Canadian hockey originate from African Canadian hockey which grew out of a period of segregation, isolation and exclusion. Fosty illustrates how agency, a sense of pride, freedom and worth, was gained by those black pioneers who played in the league.

Senator Oliver, one of a handful of black Senators, takes the reader of 'Forgotten, Ignored and Exploited: How The Shameful Treatment of Blacks Throughout Canada's History Haunts us still', on a journey over 400 years. The trip visits slavery in Canada which flourished over a 200 year period from 1628, and culminates in 2004 with a major report into the experience of visible minorities in the Canadian labour force. The purpose of the journey was to highlight the contributions to the Canadian economy of black people in Canada.

Part III seeks to explain the role of spirituality in the lives of black people in Canada over the four hundred year history of presence. Paris, in his paper titled *The Spirituality of African Peoples in Canada and Beyond*, defines spirituality as 'the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experience. Metaphorically, it is synonymous with the soul of a people; the integrating centre of their power and meaning...African spirituality is never disembodied but always integrally connected with the dynamic movement of life'. Paris explores how black people demonstrated their spirituality, closely at times allied to resistance, and how some of that spirituality when organized around churches and economic dependence upon white denominations for support, precluded agency in terms of social justice, thought and action. Paris argues that 'Since a measure of freedom is the *sine qua non* of prophetic leadership, ie public social criticism, the latter can only arise from within a spiritual context of freedom and

independence. Thus black churches, then and now, are not likely to rise beyond the function of being custodians of the sacred traditions and supporters of the societal status quo....Should they gain a measure of independence, however, they might unite their pastoral functions with those of the prophetic reformers. More often than not, however, dependency leads the people to seek benevolent white patrons whose charitable support is not aimed at structural change'.

Taylor explores in *Old Roots, New Shoots*, some newer Canadian variations of spirituality with a particular reference to the Muslim faith and its links with more traditional black expressions of spirituality in Canada. Simmons in demonstrating how expressions of spirituality can have a practical impact, looks at how the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in a black community, operate successfully within a framework shaped by local black spiritual beliefs. Duncan explores serial movements of black people both national and transnational and how such migrations, such forced transience, influenced spiritual expression. Duncan argues that 'religion became the most autonomous area through which the enslaved could exercise their free will, creativity and express their desire for freedom and equality. In North America, the black church in Canada and the United States, emerged as the single most important institution in black communities. Churches served far more than the religious and spiritual needs of their communities. They were spaces for community gathering, insurance companies, burial societies, libraries and hosts of various civic and social events. Churches fostered the development of leadership in black communities and were in the forefront of advocacy during the modern civil rights movement in organizing protest against institutionalised segregation on the basis of race. It is only in the post Civil Rights and Post Multiculturalism era that the primacy of the black church has been challenged as the premier social, political and cultural institution in black communities'. Duncan invites scholars and community activists to engage in a dialogue on how in spite of diversity within Black people in Canada, a workable unity of sorts can be achieved.

Parts IV and V look at public memory, the media, including film. Brown in reflecting on her academic and more private life, in 'A journey to Multiple Sites of Memory to Find and Locate the Black Self in the New World African and British Diasporas', likens herself to a ghost, a 'duppy'. A duppy is the 'restless spirit of an enslaved African dead, in Jamaica to be exact, who has not been properly buried. Only I am alive and like the real duppy, I roam the halls and classrooms of the academy where I reside, looking for the truth about my mother and her people and how they came to be forgotten. When I enter a room I suck the air out and disrupt the comfortable conversations of the enlightenment people...The truth is, I haunt and am haunted by painful memories.' Brown articulates the ingrained and enduring intimacy of the sense of loss and pain which can accompany a lack of acknowledgment. This theme is taken up and

elaborated upon in the other contributions in the two sections. Williams provides the most detailed outline available to date on the variety, scale, content and history of black newspapers in Montreal. Their importance as a means of conveying ideas and information and shaping opinion within the black communities at selected historical periods, is also highlighted.

A lifetime goal of Smardz Frost, outlined in *The Underground Railroad and the Creation of Public Memory*, has been to find a way of 'placing and keeping the history of Canada-and especially that of the Underground Railroad-at the centre of our National Narrative'. The Underground railroad simply outlined is the pre American 'civil war mass movement of African Americans out of the Southern United States in search of freedom'. Smardz Frost critically tackles the accepted versions of the oft repeated histories of the Underground Railroad embedded in the National memory of Canada, and raises less aired interpretations which complicate and conflict with what is generally known. One of the radical initiatives described by Smardz Frost is her work as the archaeologist in charge of designing and developing 'the world's first public educational archaeological facility in a major public school system'. The excavations centred on slaves, two in particular, Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, and over 100,000 children were involved. The case of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, Smardz Frost argues, inspired the formation of Canada's first national policies relating to the reception of refugees.

Saunders introduces Part V, on film, by emphasizing a dominant theme in this volume; silence. In *Four Black Documentary Moments*, Saunders illustrates how 'The virtual silence in Canadian history concerning the presences, contributions and experiences of people of African descent in Canada now finally is beginning to trouble the dominant 'national narrative'. Its ability to do so is greatly assisted by the work of black filmmakers, whose contributions, at least at this point in time, collectively comprise the most sustained discourse on black Canada's history in any genre or medium'. Jacob, Hamilton and Sherwood follow, all distinguished filmmakers, explaining their personal motivations and professional purpose in adding to the National memory, voices and images of black people in all our complicated variability.

Part VI on literature is opened by one of Canada's foremost writers who argues in *Introducing a Distinct Genre of African- Canadian Literature: The Church Narrative*, that such 'histories of specific churches-or religious associations-were penned and usually self published, not principally by ministers, but, by disciples, and, frequently, lay women, and were as much about community genealogy as they were about folk theology and transcribed oral history'. Clarke finds in such narratives 'a resistive historiography and radical theology'. An agency is also evident rebuking more formally trained academic authors for their dismissal and withering rejection of the idea that

black people at varying periods made a major impact on their environment in spite of the constraints. Such points are reflective of the earlier comments cited by Walker in relation to historians of the black presence in Canada. Davis interestingly starts her interrogation of *A Feminist Exploration in African Canadian Literature*, by defining her terms. 'I deploy the term African Canadian to refer to the multiple convergences of the African Diaspora in the Americas north of the United States and the Caribbean animated by a self conscious desire to disrupt neat understandings of black identities in Canada...I want to argue further that African identities in Canada are boundaryless in the way in which they demand and rely on a necessary transgression and disruption of multiple geographical, cultural and political borders. African Canadian identities, because of the complexity of the African diaspora in Canada, constitute intersecting, and often competing, national and cultural identities. By reading African Canadian identities in this way –as both convergence and transgression – this paper argues importantly that black literatures in Canada are necessarily poly vocal and amorphous, speaking across nations, languages, ethnicities, sexualities and gender'.

Part VII looks at identified organizations run by and primarily for black people. Compton reminds other black communities across Canada that on the west coast of Canada, in Vancouver, there is as yet a history to be written of a significant number of black people. In *Hogan's Alley: Mapping Vancouver's Lost Black Neighbourhood*, Compton provides a taste of ongoing research in discovering an important part of black Canadian memory, the oldest black community in Vancouver. Hogan's Alley was the local name for Park Lane, a T-shaped alley in the Strathcona district of Vancouver. Hogan's Alley was largely immigrant, Black, Asian and Italian, perched on the edge of China town. The unfinished story reflected in its brevity, attests to the fact that black Canadian studies is at a fairly early stage in development but there is a growing interest and demand for more work to be undertaken in this area coupled with an upsurge in academic and lay interest.

Roswell and Folkes in *Racializing Crime: Challenging notions of a black Canadian Identity*, seek to demonstrate how the 'racialisation of crime', not only reinforces the notion 'of the other' 'and situate visible minorities outside of the imagined Canadian norm, but... also has the potential of affecting one's sense of place and/or connectedness to a Canadian identity.' Using issues of deportation and intra racial homicide as lenses, the authors highlight a shift away from racial identifiers such as black, to references relating to ethnicity, such as Jamaican, which are employed to 'construct images of race and crime in Canada'. This theme of naming, categorizing, in order to funnel meaning and action is also taken up in Part VIII on the Law, particularly the contribution of Judge Sparks in *Judicial Recognition and Remediation of Racial Profiling* by

Canadian Courts. Sadlier in *The Significance and Necessity of Organisations* such as the Ontario Black History Society, provide yet another reminder as to what huge dependence there is in Canada on voluntary effort to initiate and maintain organizationally, memories and artifacts of the black presence in Canada. Bayne (who presented a paper at the Multiple Lenses Conference and Daniel) using the private sector as a vehicle with the aim of economic independence for black people, highlight a project designed to assist black entrepreneurs in Quebec, to successfully set up and maintain their own businesses.

Part VIII has a focus on the ambivalence of the law in supporting and remedying the oppression of black people in Canada and cites examples in the criminal profiling of black people based on race whereby identified criminal activity 'is attributed to an identified group in society on the basis of race or colour resulting in the targeting of individual members of that group; employment as in the contribution of Blackett in *Human Rights at Work*, Legal indeterminacy, and the black community in Canada; critical reflections on Centre Maraicher Eugene Guinois, resulting in a ruling by The Quebec Human Rights Tribunal in 2005, which Blackett describes as '...one of the most telling and disturbing decisions about the role of Law in the perpetuation of occupational segregation in the black community in Canada....Chillingly, it is a reminder that historical human rights gains may very easily slip away unless the community is vigilant'; the role and relevance of Black lawyers and Judges is examined by Justice Dortelus in *Critical comments on the Presence of Blacks in Canada's Legal Community* and whether the use of the law in seeking redress is but one, and perhaps not even an important means, of seeking equality as argued by Williams in *Sisyphus's Ongoing Journey: Anti-Black Racism and the myth of Racial Equality in Canada*.

The concluding section of the book is on education opening with an overview of the history of educational provision to school age children and youth in Canada highlighting both the desire of black people to acquire a formal education and the great strides they made to attain it in spite of almost insuperable odds. Present challenges are highlighted in the Ontario Ministry of Education and steps being taken to overcome those in *Key issues in the Education of Black Students: An Historical perspective*, by Glaze. Foster continues the historical journey on acquiring education but places it in a vision for Canada. Foster argues in *'From Mattheu Da Costa to Michaelle Jean: The Originators'*, that '...ultimately education is about citizenry; and that the most effective citizenship is about doing and having agency'. Nelson explores the notion of agency further in *Speculations on the Visual: Culture, Race and Diaspora*. 'Art history provides a disciplinary space where visual art and visual culture can be exhaustively explored, interrogated and criticized. It is also the

space where cultural producers and cultural institutions can be scrutinized, applauded and held to account. The colonial history of Canada, the West and the World has taught us the sad fact that racial identity has been and remains to be one of the dominant means through which we identify ourselves and one another'. Divine concludes with a case study of how a school authority in eastern Canada attempted to address perceived needs of black learners in a context of identified weaknesses in service provision, and how over a six year period those closest involved felt that changes needed to be made to make the initiative more effective.

Multiple Lenses: Voices from the Diaspora located in Canada, is a contribution to the national memory of Canada. It is offered with humility and pride, building on the work of earlier authors and community pioneers. It hopefully adds to the dialogue taking place on black Canadian studies. It is a celebration and acknowledgment of how far we have come as black people and how much further we need to go.

Professor David Divine

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to first extend my sincere thanks to the presenters who kindly agreed to be a part of the landmark conference upon which this book is based. *Multiple Lenses: Voices from the Diaspora Located in Canada* benefited enormously from your shared experiences and knowledge. Thank you so very much for an engaging series of presentations. Neither would the conference have been such a success without a wonderful group of conference participants from across the country, and from diverse communities. The discussions to which you contributed helped to create the platform – and the demand – for this book. You filled the rooms daily, a fact which reinforces our perception of the importance of Black Canadian Studies.

I extend my sincere thanks to Mark Rushton for technical support / research and administrative support, and to Jacqueline St. Aubin for her contribution to the administration of the *Multiple Lenses* conference.

Most deserving of my gratitude is my wife, Ann Divine, and our children: David, Davinia and Ephraim, for their total support during my first two-and-a-half years as the James R. Johnston Chair. This has been a time of great adjustment and change, during which my position as Chair consumed all of my time, including my private time. I thank you sincerely for your understanding and forbearance.

Thank you to everyone who contributed, in ways large and small, to the success of the conference and this publication. Notwithstanding the Herculean effort of all concerned to bring this book together, the author assumes responsibility for any errors or omissions herein.

This book is dedicated to the Honourable Mayann E. Francis, O.N.S., Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia in acknowledgement of her history of dedication to helping others throughout her life.

Professor David Divine
James R. Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada. (August 2006)

Part I
HISTORY

CHAPTER ONE

APPROACHING AFRICAN-CANADIAN HISTORY

JAMES WALKER

There are multiple ways of “approaching” African-Canadian History. I begin with a quotation from one approach that most of us, I think, would reject:

Unlike the Black Pioneers who were proud in their sense of Loyalism, and the Maroons who were crude but vigorous in their military unity, the Refugee Negroes were a disorganized, pathetic, and intimidated body who seemed unable to recover from their previous condition of servitude, their sudden voyage up the Atlantic to Nova Scotian shores, and their persistent lack of leaders. They unwittingly fanned the sparks of a more conscious, more organized, white racism than Nova Scotia had known, just as the last vestiges of slavery were passing. These new arrivals clasped their freedom to them, willed themselves to do well, did not want to leave their new found land – and yet failed utterly.

Yes, that was Robin Winks, in his widely-read and extremely influential book published in 1971.¹ Despite a considerable body of new research and publication since then, which challenges this approach fundamentally, you will unfortunately find that identical paragraph in the 1997 edition of Prof. Winks’ book, so it is being read by our current students.

And furthermore he has sparked some imitators in the meantime. Compare Winks to this description of the Black Refugees:

Unskilled and uneducated, the majority of the refugees settled in Nova Scotia, and lived in perpetual poverty because they either could not or would not be gainfully employed. Shunned by former Loyalist slaves, they worked at occasional odd jobs rather than becoming farmers or fishermen, they never became involved in politics, nor sought to better themselves through education. As a group, the refugees became associated with charity; a stigma that manumitted Loyalist slaves had managed to avoid, and one that led to friction between the two groups of blacks. More significantly, white Canadians perceived the refugees as representative of the bad characteristics of blacks in general. To Canadian whites, the indolence of the newly arrived blacks reflected on the entire race, and they looked upon the refugees with increasing impatience.

That comes from Jason Silverman's book, *Unwanted Guests*.²

There is an impression of the African-Canadian people that comes from such approaches to their community history. They are depicted as belonging to an historically dependent, submissive, factionalized and pathological society, with a weak family structure, no sense of community, content with second-class citizenship, whose pathetic behaviour is at least indirectly responsible for white racism. "Victims", then, but victims who failed to overcome their disadvantages even when given the chance. Forgive me for quoting Winks once again:

Negroes in Canada were often responsible for their own plight, since they by no means made use of all the channels of opportunity or all the roads to progress and all the sources of strength open to them.... Canadian Negro leaders strove for accommodation to the dominant white community. They accepted the dominance of that community and worked neither to undermine it nor to become equal to it but to find a guaranteed role to play within it....

The Negro tended to work for and through white leaders of presumably greater power.... Goals were defined in gradualist terms and often, by the Negroes themselves, in paternalistic terms: white man, give us funds for a new school house. White man, give us land. White man, we are poor ..., give us alms, funds, books, education, grace.³

To be fair to Winks, let's remember that a generation ago the term "poverty sub-culture" was being used to describe African-Canadian culture by some of our leading sociologists. In 1964 the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People referred to the black population here as an apathetic and defeated people, seemingly incapable of breaking the syndrome of poverty and disadvantage,⁴ and even Frantz Fanon said "The black man is not a man", that is he was so psychologically damaged by slavery and racism that he had lost his initiative, his self-direction.⁵

Now I want to tell you a story, illustrating a very different approach. In the Fall of 1968 my friend Rocky Jones took me out to North Preston, where we joined a gathering of elders in a warm kitchen. I was at the time researching the history of the Black Loyalists, and I'd spent several months in the Archives. I wanted to see if there were any local traditions that could enliven my studies, so I asked the gathering if they knew how their ancestors happened to come to this place, North Preston. A lady stood up and gave a very elaborate answer, which I can only summarize. She explained that after fighting on the British side during the War of 1812 their ancestors made their way to Nova Scotia, and they were met at the dock in Halifax by Queen Victoria, who told them that in honour of their loyalty to her and to the Empire they could choose whatever land they wanted in Nova Scotia. The ancestors scouted around for several days

and then told the Queen that they wanted North Preston. Why is that? asked the Queen. First, they said, because it's far enough inland that the Americans can't just come and recapture us in their ships. Secondly, the rise of land from Lawrencetown Beach can serve as a natural rampart, so that if the Americans do come we can fight them off and maintain our freedom and independence. And that's how our ancestors came to Preston.

Now this story did not match the "facts" I was accumulating in the Archives, but I tell you that experience in North Preston gave me my approach to African Canadian history. That story resonated with pride, independence, sense of freedom, self-determination – with what we have come to call *agency*. These were not victims, they were not defeated, they did not humbly accept second-class status. The story confirmed for me that familiar quotation from Karl Marx: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past".⁶

Some of you will be familiar with the statement by C.L.R. James that any history of the civil war "which does not base itself upon the Negroes, slave and free, as the *subject* not the *object*, is ipso facto a Jim Crow history".⁷ Approaching African-Canadian history, likewise, it is essential first to recognize who is the subject of the story, who are the agents who confront the circumstances so often established by others, and who create within existing barriers a rich and dynamic culture.

Consider the people who founded the black communities across Canada. The Black Loyalists, not "manumitted slaves" as Silverman calls them but people who had *freed themselves* from American slavery and who voluntarily joined the British in response to a promise of freedom and equality as British subjects, and to a strong indication that a British victory would mean an end to slavery for *all* African Americans. There were no "Sambos" here, as Stanley Elkins would have it,⁸ who had accepted their own inferiority. They expected to be treated as equals and they demanded equal treatment. In Thomas Peters' famous petition to King George III, the black Nova Scotian leader says that he and his people are Loyalists and they were promised equality, but local officials are withholding their grants of land – and he wants the King to interfere. In a second petition, Thomas Peters attacked the enslavement of fellow-African Nova Scotians, "as if the benevolent reach of His Majesty cannot extend so far as Nova Scotia". He fully expects the King to act on this request; he is confident slavery and black disadvantage will be overcome.⁹

The Black Refugees of the War of 1812, similarly, had believed a British promise of freedom and equality and had freed themselves to take advantage of the British offer. Or consider the Fugitives who fled to Ontario: imagine the

initiative, the pure physical determination it took to run away, all the way to Canada, and to establish free communities in the face of what was often overt hostility. And just like Thomas Peters, the Fugitives did what they could to attack the enslavement of those left behind.

In 1854 Mary Ann Shadd editorialized in *The Provincial Freeman*: “There is an importance in the position of the Coloured Population of Canada. In no country, in the world, does the condition of our people bear relations so important to the cause of the enslaved as here”. Shadd encouraged her readers to lead an exemplary life, because what happened in Canada would have repercussions in the United States and beyond. Canada was a showcase, where African-descended people could demonstrate their equality. And it would work, she was convinced, because the inherent character of the Fugitives would enable the “Yankee lies” of black inferiority to be refuted once and for all.¹⁰

Stop me when you hear tones of submissiveness and defeat.

The early twentieth-century migrants from Oklahoma to the Prairies were equally determined to achieve equality. *Two-thirds* of them had already migrated to Oklahoma to escape Jim Crow racism in the Old South. Then, when Oklahoma gained statehood, Jim Crow was established there too so they moved on to Canada where they expected to be free at last.¹¹

These are the founders of the African-Canadian community, whose history we approach with care and respect.

In the Fall of 2005 the federal cabinet issued guidelines describing the ideal immigrant for the future development of Canada. The Black Loyalists, the Refugees, the Fugitives, the Prairie Settlers – they personified these exact criteria: they spoke one of our official languages, they had skills that were desperately needed in our frontier economy, they were willing to settle outside the main centres of population.... But as we all know, their qualities were not always recognized and those promises and expectations were not always fulfilled. Increasingly aware of their own vulnerability as individuals, the black founders looked to their communities for the strength to survive.

The rejection of their claims for equality lent a direction to their subsequent development. Economic dependence produced obvious limitations, but in most other areas of life black people relied on their own resources. In their own all-black churches there grew not only a unique religious style but a positive sense of worth and identity. Thus could the political vision be articulated in religious terms. The separate churches lent institutional support to the preservation and transmission of black culture, so that particular features that were not essentially religious would often bear religious motifs.

Religion and community are fundamental themes in black Canadian history, and can be recognized in several pervading features of African-Canadian life: the insistence upon strengthening the group from within, through self-improvement; self-reliance, not as individuals but as a group; assistance to less fortunate group members; and the advancement of community rights within Canadian society.

Here in Nova Scotia the elemental crusade was gaining grants of land, and then, as property owners, qualifying for the franchise. They coordinated their voting behind candidates who would serve black community interests, most effectively in the mid-1880s when they gained access to integrated secondary education for their children.¹² Education was fundamental for the black Ontarians as well. Parents launched legal challenges to overcome their children's exclusion from the public schools, and when that succeeded only partially they embarked on tax strikes, withholding their contribution to the school budgets of southwestern Ontario until their children were admitted.¹³

The founding characteristic of black Canadian culture, the defining feature of black Canadian identity, was a belief in their own equality and a determination to have it acknowledged. One consequence, recognizable at every stage of African Canadian history, has been an insistence on their respect as subjects and citizens. Historically, white Canadians have held an image of black Canadians that was derived from slavery and its consequent stereotypes, and this image translated into a restricted "place" for black people in Canadian society, with repercussions in employment and educational opportunities, in social relationships and residential patterns, even in civil rights and courts of law.

It was not therefore just because of hurt feelings that the Anglo-African Mutual Improvement and Aid Association of Nova Scotia pledged its members in the 1840s to challenge any insult or restriction against them on grounds of colour.¹⁴ In the same decade black Torontonians successfully petitioned the city council to ban American minstrel shows, or at least to require them to omit certain ridiculing songs from their repertoire.¹⁵ When the film *Birth of a Nation* appeared in Canada, with its implicit approval of the Ku Klux Klan and its disparaging images of black people, the black Toronto newspaper *The Canadian Observer* launched a counter-attack, and editor J.R.B. Whitney organized a community protest in September 1915.¹⁶ Similar protests were held in Halifax and later in Calgary.¹⁷ In 1944 the Coloured Citizens' Improvement League initiated a campaign to have *Little Black Sambo* withdrawn from school readers in Nova Scotia, and in the 1950s a similar campaign, supported by *The Negro Citizen* newspaper, was equally successful in Toronto.¹⁸ In each case, and in many others, they recognized that it was essential to their dignity and to their quest for justice.¹⁹

The 1947 American government report entitled *To Secure These Rights* claimed that “It is not at all surprising that a people relegated to second-class citizenship should behave as second-class citizens”.²⁰ African Canadians reversed this concept: by behaving as first-class citizens, they believed, their first-class citizenship would be recognized.

African Canadians fought in every British / Canadian war, beginning with the American Revolution. In World War I the Rev. William White encouraged young black men to enlist for the chance to demonstrate their equality and earn respect for the entire community. And just listen to the dignity in this statement, made by William Franklin in a London, Ontario court in 1923. Refused service in a restaurant, Mr. Franklin sued, as he explained it, “for the establishment of what I believe to be a right as a Canadian. I am not fighting to soothe my own injured feelings. I am taking this stand for the benefit of all peoples of colour, for generations of coloured children yet unborn. I want to prove to all the world that the majesty of the British law will brook no prejudice.”²¹ In 1936 Mr. Fred Christie sued Montreal’s York Tavern for refusing him service, and with the moral and financial support of the city’s black community Mr. Christie took his case eventually to the Supreme Court of Canada. The black newspaper in Montreal declared: “Unless we are prepared to fight for equal treatment under the law of the land, we ought not and will not be regarded or treated as responsible citizens”, and the Christie Defence Committee insisted that “To allow this case to be closed without any attempt to appeal ... to the Supreme Court of Canada, would only tend to encourage further and more open discrimination against members of the Negro race, to encourage the disregard of public order, and indeed to foster inter-racial discord”.²²

And if there’s anyone left who thinks African Canadians accepted second-class citizenship, here is the Rev. W.P. Oliver in Halifax in 1949: “We must be courageous enough to refuse to accept any standard for our people other than the standards of the country where we live”, he wrote; “we must endeavour to work on the basis of full citizenship as implied in a democratic Christian country with all the rights and responsibilities...”²³

Viola Desmond in Nova Scotia, Hugh Burnett in Dresden, Ontario, Ted King in Calgary: they all insisted on their rights, they all demonstrated their great sense of dignity and their commitment to justice.²⁴ In the process they changed the law of Canada, not just for themselves and for the black community but for *all* Canadians. The human rights legislation we have in place today, including the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, owes its origin in great part to the refusal of courageous African Canadians to accept anything less than first-class citizenship. The equality frontier is still being extended by community fighters such as B.A. “Rocky” Jones here in Halifax. And think also of the movement

for immigration reform led by people like Donald Moore, Bromley Armstrong and Stan Grizzle: they changed the face of Canada.²⁵

People act according to the history they *believe* has happened. Notice those violent protests in China earlier this year against the way Japanese textbooks portray the Second World War. The Chinese protesters know they can't change what happened, but they can change how it is interpreted and presented and this is important for how young Japanese children will grow up, and behave, and think about the world around them depending on the history they understand.

History *as it is understood* enters a political discourse, it becomes a participant in a power dialectic and it influences power relationships. George Orwell knew this when he gave Big Brother the slogan "Who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past".²⁶ Without endorsing Big Brother, we can recognize the truth that people do in fact act on what they believe to have happened in the past.

This applies to African-Canadian history as it is understood by both black people and white people. Approaching African-Canadian history is a political act, deliberate or not. How you approach it will determine the lessons you derive from it. You can even shape the future.

Endnotes

¹ Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada. A History* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), 114.

² Jason H. Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800-1865* (Millwood, NY, Associated Faculty Press, 1985), 13-14.

³ Winks, 480.

⁴ Library and Archives Canada, MG28 V75, Jewish Labour Committee Papers, Vol. 40, file 13, "Correspondence, Halifax Human Rights Advisory Committee", 14 December 1964.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks. The Experiences of a Black Man in a White World* (New York, Grove Press, 1967), 10.

⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, found in Lewis Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY, Anchor Books, 1959), 320.

⁷ Quoted in Richard H. King, *Race, Culture, and the Intellectuals, 1940-1970* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 216

⁸ Stanley Elkins, *Slavery. A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (3rd Ed., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976) especially Ch. 6, "The Two Arguments on Slavery", 267-302.

⁹ Public Record Office (England), FO4/1, Petitions of Thomas Peters "on Behalf of himself and others the Black Pioneers and Loyal Black Refugees", December 1790.

¹⁰ *Provincial Freeman*, 25 March 1854.

¹¹ R. Bruce Shepard, *Deemed Unsuitable* (Toronto, Umbrella Press, 1997).

¹² E.g. Judith Fingard, "Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20 (1992), 169-195; David A. Sutherland, "Race Relations in Halifax, Nova Scotia, During the Mid-Victorian Quest for Reform", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 7 (1996), 35-54.

¹³ E.g. *Washington v Trustees of Charlotteville*, (1854) 11 *Upper Canada Queen's Bench* 569; *Hill v Camden and Zone*, 11 *UCQB* 573; *Simmons v Chatham*, (1861) 21 *UCQB* 75; *Re: Stewart and School Trustees of Sandwich East*, (1864) 23 *UCQB* 634.

¹⁴ *Constitution and By-Laws of the Anglo-African Mutual Improvement and Aid Association of Nova Scotia* (np, nd), copy in Public Archives of Nova Scotia (Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, NSARM).

¹⁵ Archives of Ontario, Toronto City Council Papers, Ms. 385, 20 July 1840 and 14 October 1841. Their objections met with a favourable response, for in 1843 the city council permitted an American group to perform in Toronto only "on condition of their not singing Negro songs - this to save the feelings of the gentlemen of colour", see Toronto Public Library, file "Negroes", 12 July 1843.

¹⁶ Issues of *The Canadian Observer* are available on microfilm at the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Toronto.

¹⁷ *Calgary News-Telegram*, 31 May 1918.

¹⁸ NSARM, RG35-103, City of Halifax Papers (3B.7), No. 42, Coloured Citizens Improvement League, resolution passed on 26 January 1944, copy sent to Halifax mayor, 29 January 1944, asking for the elimination of "objectionable material" from public schools including the *Story of Black Sambo*, which "holds the colored race up to ridicule, causing deep pain among our children and presenting our race in such a manner as to destroy respect"; Daniel Braithwaite, *The Banning of the Book "Little Black Sambo" from the Toronto Public Schools, 1956* (Toronto, printed by Overnight Typing and Copy, 1978).

¹⁹ Once again Prof. Winks has misunderstood when he writes: "centuries of relative deprivation, of being taught by the dominant white society to think of themselves as second-class citizens, have led Negroes into the familiar early stages of paranoia, when racial insults are detected where none are intended....", 470.

²⁰ US President's Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights* (Washington, DC, US Government Printing Office, 1947), 137.

²¹ *Franklin v Evans*, (1924) 55 *Ontario Law Reports* 349; *Dawn of Tomorrow*, 2, 9 and 16 February 1924.

²² *Christie v York*, [1940] *Supreme Court Reports* 139; *The Free Lance*, 9 July 1938.

²³ Report by Rev. W.P. Oliver to the Urban and Rural Life Committee of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, August 1949 (copy in NSARM).

²⁴ For discussions of these and many other legal challenges brought by African Canadians see Constance Backhouse, *Colour-Coded. A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto, Osgoode Society and University of Toronto Press, 1998), Ross Lambertson, *Repression and Resistance: Canadian Human Rights Activists 1930-1960* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005) and James W. St.G. Walker, 'Race', *Rights and the Law in the Supreme Court of Canada: Historical Case Studies* (Toronto and Waterloo, Osgoode Society and Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997).

²⁵ Donald Moore, *Don Moore: An Autobiography* (Toronto, Williams-Wallace, 1985); Bromley Armstrong, with Sheldon Taylor, *Bromley. Tireless Champion for Just Causes* (Toronto, Vitabu Publications, 2000); Stanley G. Grizzle, with John Cooper, *My Name's Not George. The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada* (Toronto, Umbrella Press, 1998). An overview of the civil rights and immigration campaigns conducted by African Canadians in the postwar era is provided in the film *Journey to Justice*, directed by Roger McTair, National Film Board of Canada, 2000.

²⁶ George Orwell, *1984: a novel* (New York, Penguin, 1977).