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THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN CANADA: NEGOTIATING IDENTITY & BELONGING

Edited by Wisdom J. Tetey & Korbla P. Pupilampu

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REFLECTIONS ON THE LONG STRUGGLE FOR INCLUSION: The Experiences of People of African Origin

Ali A. Abdi

INTRODUCTION

WITH THE NUMBER of African-Canadians now residing in this country approaching the half-million mark, it would be very useful to increase the number, as well as the breadth, of scholarly treatments that investigate the social, political, economic, educational, and cultural situations of these Canadians. African-Canadians expect and strive for full participation in all these arenas, especially in a highly developed nation that is consistently ranked among the *best* places to live in the world. However, as we shall see, the historical marginalization of Blacks has not been completely overcome, even though there has been some limited progress, including an increasing number of people who are using all available economic institutions and, where necessary, legal avenues to better their lives. Hence, it is clear that while legal racism and/or socially sanctioned exclusion from viable sectors of economic, political, and educational development have been neutralized, institutional forms of exclusion have not yet been completely overcome.

In order to discuss and analyze these and related issues, this chapter combines a historical focus with a quasi-subjective interrogation of current realities to account for the problems and prospects of the socio-economic situation of Blacks. Let me state that, while the overall focus of the book is on the experiences and social conditions of those from continental Africa, this generalist chapter provides observations and analyses that thematically speak about the case of all Blacks, including those from the Caribbean region and possibly from elsewhere. Such an overview will set the context for understanding the socially constructed *racial* and historico-cultural positioning of continental Africans in Canada.

CRITICAL HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL POINTERS

History, it is often said, tends to be unkind to people who neglect it. Historical accounts of a society, whether accurately recorded or not, play a major role in our interpretation of the contemporary social world. Therefore, the historical context of African-Canadians, to a large extent, is the appropriate starting point for understanding their contemporary experiences (Bolaria and Li 1988). Blacks were among the first non-Indigenous residents of Canada. As Robin Winks (1997 [1971]) notes in his authoritative book *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, Blacks were here before the middle of the seventeenth century. This early presence is partly related to slavery. But beyond slavery, Blacks have also been here as free, educated, and skilled people earning a decent living and contributing greatly to society over the past 350 years.

Broadly speaking, the Black experience can be categorized into three major historical periods. The first spans the early part of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, followed by the second period, dating from the early 1800s to the mid-twentieth century. The last extends from the mid-twentieth century to the present (Mensah 2002; Winks 1997; Lampkin 1985; Boyko 1995). The first wave of Blacks was comprised of people who arrived as servants, slaves, or indentured labourers. Olivier le Jeune, from Mozambique, is the first African “to have been transported directly from Africa, to have been sold as a slave in New France, and apparently to have died a free man” (Winks 1997, 1–2). However, Matthew da Costa (or Mathieu da Coste), the Negro servant of Governor Sieur Du Gua de Monts, is generally considered to be the first known Black settler in Canada (Saney 1998; Winks 1997; Lampkin 1985). He worked in Nova Scotia, then later with Champlain as an interpreter in other Canadian communities.

Labour shortages towards the end of the seventeenth century prompted a concerted effort to import Blacks, mostly slaves, in significant numbers, an exercise that continued well into the early nineteenth century (Mensah 2002, 44; Walker 1980). This labour infusion was critical for the economic well-being of Ontario and Quebec, as well as the Atlantic Provinces (New Brunswick

and Nova Scotia). Black slaves “were used to build Halifax, which later became a leading centre for the public auction of Black slaves” (Mensah 2002, 45).

Typical immigrants, in the sense of free people, did not arrive in Canada until the early 1800s. The initial group was composed of Black fugitives from the United States of America who arrived via the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad, which has become a legendary part of the Black experience in Canada, “was unquestionably the highly effective means by which a number – an exaggerated and indefinite number – of fugitive slaves reached British North America” (Winks 1997, 233). The Underground Railroad was possible because the *Abolition Act of 1793* in Upper Canada made runaway slaves who entered Canada theoretically free. The number of Black fugitives who actually came to Canada this way remains a mystery, and that adds to the legendary nature of the Railroad. What is known is that some fugitives did come into Canada through the activities of various organizations and individuals. With reference to the former, the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Quakers, and the American Baptist Free Mission Society deserve some attention (Winks 1997). On an individual level, Harriet Tubman was instrumental, not only in arranging for the movement of people, but also in providing accommodation to some of the refugees (Mensah 2002). Estimates place the number of Black fugitives who entered Canada between 1850 and 1860 at about twenty thousand (Mensah 2002, 50).

Among those who came to Canada during the era of slavery in the United States were hundreds of freedom seekers who saw Canada as a place where they could exercise their full humanity. Many of the so-called “fugitive” African slaves saw Canada “as the promised land, the land of freedom. Canada was romanticized as being a utopia” (McClain 1979, 1). Indeed, a popular song during those times was “I am on my way to Canada ... That cold and distant land ... Farewell old master ... I am on my way to Canada. Where coloured men are free” (Hill 1981, 25).

There was undoubtedly some physical freedom that accompanied the escape to Canada, but the rest of the *story*, that is, definable and reliable notions of equity, full socio-economic and political rights, and the support and open mechanisms required to earn a decent living, were never a reality. It is indeed the case that this country has always been organized around a complex web of, if not legal, at least institutional, racism and its attendant modes of socio-economic and political exclusion. As Tulloch (1975, 140) noted, Blacks “in Canada, as in the United States, [have been continuously] victims of an excruciatingly destructive system of oppression, [not only via] the economic and social legacy of slavery but also [through] its ideological heritage, institutional racism.”

Despite these impediments, Hill (1981) observes that early arrivals from the United States in the mid-1800s, were, as was the case with other immigrant groups, hardworking and determined men and women. They cleared the land,

built their own homes with their own hands, and successfully raised large, families under trying and, by all accounts, fundamentally racist surroundings and circumstances (see also Winks 1997). Some became successful and prosperous. Winks (1997, 247–48) documents the case of John Long who, in the Toronto of the 1830s, acquired property in the Niagara district, as well as that of the “276 Negroes in London [who] owned real estate valued at \$13,504” in 1853. But the hard work and self-reliant ethic of Blacks did not diminish their socio-economic marginalization. Theoretically, the fugitive slaves were free in Upper Canada. In practice, their conditions were unstable. The fortunes of even the successful ones would change with the economic panic of 1857 to reflect the lot of those who had to contend with prejudice and racism in accessing resources and rewards. The point is that, whether successful or not, the cultural marker of being labeled Black held sway in their relationship with the larger society.

The relationship between Blacks and the dominant segments of Canadian society is demonstrated by the case of Africville. Established in 1842, Africville, near Halifax, was an important community of Black slaves until the City of Halifax, under circumstances still being contested, decided to relocate it in the 1960s (Clairmont and Magill 1999). A major contention is that the City of Halifax withheld basic social services (water and sewer) from the community, located undesirable services (a garbage dump) nearby, and then cited the lack of water and sewer services as reasons to demolish the community. Perhaps it is the contested nature of the relocation, which some contend smacked of racism, that prompted the Federal Government, in 2002, to declare Africville a national historic site (CBC 2002). Africville highlights, directly or indirectly, how race influences social policies and the implications for those judged “inferior” and undeserving of social goods and resources. It is instructive to note that the Roman Catholic Church presented the relationship between slaves and their masters as “inherent in man [*sic*] but was a temporary condition arising from the accident of events” (Winks 1997, 12). In essence, slaves should be morally upright, because spiritual life should be their priority and not their status as slaves! This case lends some theoretical significance to Karl Marx’s famous dictum of how religion “is the sigh of the oppressed creature [but also] the *opium* of the people” (Sayer 1989, 137, italics in the original).

The experiences of Blacks who fanned out to Western Canada were, by and large, not different from those of their counterparts in other parts of Canada. They encountered official obstacles by way of policies that, in turn, encouraged the larger society to harass or deny services to the “unwanted.” In effect, it was an atmosphere characterized by a collective conspiracy to denigrate and exclude. In Manitoba, J. S. Woodsworth, Superintendent of the Peoples’ Mission of Winnipeg and co-founder of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), referring to John R. Commons’ comments in the *Chautauquan* (November 1903) regarding American Blacks, stated, as

follows: “All travelers speak of their impulsiveness, strong sexual passion, and lack of will power. The very qualities of intelligence and manliness which are essential for citizenship in a democracy were systematically expunged from the [N]egro race through two hundred years of slavery” (Woodsworth 1972, 158). Woodsworth, writing on behalf of a religious organization interested in ensuring the smooth assimilation of immigrants in Canada, noted that Canada did not have a “Negro problem” (Woodsworth 1972, 158). One cannot help but notice how Woodsworth, without any critical analysis, sanitized the experiences of Blacks in Canada with the self-congratulatory remark that the country had no “[N]egro” problem. Whether the lack of analysis of the [N]egro problem in Canada was an act of commission or omission, the comment fits a general pattern (see Winks 1997, 233).

Gwyn (1995, 174), for example, maintains that “only a relatively small number of native-born [B]lacks have had to endure historical discrimination” in Canada, and the experiences of those few, while horrible, were not “comparable to the slavery and legalized segregation suffered by their counterparts in the United States.” The implicit suggestion of slaves in Canada having a *better* life than those in the United States is distasteful, minimizes the human indignities of slavery in general, and fails to acknowledge that their particular experiences in Canada included legalized segregation (see Mensah 2002; Boyko 1995).

While Woodsworth was announcing the absence of a Negro problem in Canada, “Prairie governments, business establishments, and many ordinary citizens did all they could to frustrate the existing Black communities and also to prevent the influx of additional Blacks into the region” (Mensah 2002, 52). In Woodsworth’s own Winnipeg, Bruce Walker, the Dominion’s Commissioner of Immigration in the city, admitted that the Canadian government “was doing all in its power through a policy of persuasion, to keep [N]egroes out of Western Canada” (cited in Winks 1997, 311). The policy of persuasion had several components. The Commissioner expected the American Consul-General in Winnipeg “to bar [Blacks] from Canada, upon the broad ground of being undesirables” (cited in Winks 1997, 311), and remind them that the climate was unsuitable for them. The Dominion Commissioner of Immigration also built an incentive into the work of agencies that dealt with American Blacks by, for example, rewarding the medical examiner for every Negro rejected (Boyko 1995, 166; Winks 1997, 310–11; see also Lampkin 1985).

In order not to be perceived as soft on the settlement of American Blacks or outdone in the efforts to halt their migration, the cities of Calgary, Edmonton, and Winnipeg passed resolutions between 1910 and 1911 that called for the immigration of Blacks to be stopped. Not content with the resolution alone, the Edmonton City Council, in April 1911, went ahead and “passed a resolution completely banning Blacks from the city” (Boyko 1995, 155; see also Thompson 1979). Besides the resolution of the city councils, organizations like the Edmonton Board of Trade, the Athabasca Landing Board of Trade,

and the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire registered their opposition to the settlement of Blacks in the province through petitions to the Federal government. These petitions were, in many cases, based on stereotyping and outright lies designed to engender a hostile reception towards Blacks (Kelly 1998, 38–39). The Great Northern Railway was also instrumental in preventing the settlement of Blacks on the Prairies by refusing to sell tickets to would-be travelers (Winks 1997, 312). Yet Blacks refused to succumb to discrimination and other difficulties. Some of them single-handedly cleared the wilderness and created, in the process, new cultivable lands, which led to their relative prosperity in areas such as the Amber Valley (Thompson 1979).

The reception of Blacks in British Columbia can be placed on a continuum from warm to hostile. On the warm end of the continuum, the leadership offered by Governor James Douglas is noteworthy. Perhaps he offered that kind of leadership on pragmatic and personal grounds. As a critical voice among the established elite in Victoria, he articulated the general impression that the island needed as many settlers as possible to serve as a bulwark against the Native Indians. On a personal note, Douglas' approach was also influenced by the "knowledge that his mother was either a West Indian mulatto or a Creole" (Winks 1997, 275).

Once a member of the establishment had set the tone, some media outlets, notably the *British Colonist*, reminded the larger society about the "sobriety, honesty, industry, intelligence, and enterprise" the Black settlers would bring with them (cited in Winks 1997, 275). Indeed, as Krauter and Davis (1978) note, the Black settlers went into various businesses (e.g., carpentry and trading), mainly as sole proprietors, but sometimes in competition with the Hudson's Bay Company, which also employed Blacks (Winks 1997, 275; see also Lampkin 1985). On the hostile end of the continuum were the activities of some religious organizations. The "church," as Mensah (2002, 51) notes, "was one of the first major sources of racial division on Vancouver Island." However, because Blacks in British Columbia "were not barred from the common schools, public office, or the churches, as they were in Ontario and Nova Scotia" (Winks 1997, 286), Krauter and Davis (1978, 45) conclude that that was the "closest approximation to equality for Canadian Blacks in the nineteenth century."

Until the middle of the twentieth century, Blacks were generally less forthcoming in demanding their rights. This was due to their vulnerable status vis-à-vis the larger society and their relatively small numbers. They therefore sought more accommodating ways to achieve their objectives. This approach, which conformed more to the development ideology of Booker T. Washington in the United States (see Winks 1997 [1971]), set the context for the failed and fundamentally flawed philosophy of separate and essentially unequal development between dominant and subordinate groups.

Up to the 1960s, the best a Black could hope for in the world of work, regardless of level of education and skills, was to become a domestic servant,

a porter, a shoe shine boy, or other cleaning jobs. The pay for such jobs, not surprisingly, was pathetic, benefits were unheard of, and job security and employee rights were technically oxymoronic. Indeed, this was the case of Earle Swift, an African-Canadian who graduated from McGill University with a bachelor's degree in economics in the mid-1920s. The only job Earle Swift could find was to work as a sleeping car porter for the Canadian National (CN) railways (Holas 2000).

The tendency of Blacks to approach relationships with dominant groups with a sense of docility showed long-term continuities that were remarkably visible up to the 1960s. It was only in the post-1960s era that Blacks in Canada, mainly emulating the civil rights movement in the United States, became more vociferous in their demands for political and economic rights. The inter-generational difference in approach was evident in the fact that the post-1960s group was more willing to take risks in achieving livelihood possibilities in a country where they were, for all practical purposes, third or even fourth class citizens. The new demands by Blacks for a more meaningful place in Canadian society shattered long-held and pathetically false perceptions about their capacity to achieve much beyond childish excitement, generally triggered by satisfied physical needs. An example of these perceptions was expressed in the following racist comment by none other than Adams Archibald, the former Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia. The Governor was *sure* at the beginning of the twentieth century that “a [N]egro with plenty to eat and drink, with clothes and a shelter, had little care for anything else, has no other ambition, [and] to him, labour is a last resort” (in Walker 1985, 4). In other words, the overwhelming majority of Blacks were, until recently and in terms of earning a living, at the mercy of widespread and exclusively racist practices.

The above discussion of the broad historical experiences of Black-Canadians provides the background for understanding the situation of Africans who have come to Canada since the latter part of the 1960s as part of the third major wave of Black migration to Canada. The major stimuli for this wave, as noted in the introductory chapter, were the changes in immigration policy, the declining number of immigrants from traditional sources, and deteriorating economic conditions in several African countries during the latter part of the 1970s. With these changes, tens of thousands of Blacks arrived, initially from Caribbean countries, later from continental Africa. It was mainly as a result of these changing demographic realities that new and more forceful demands for political and general human rights for Blacks, including continental African immigrants, became a more visible feature of Canada's public space. It must be acknowledged, nevertheless, that while the numbers were important, they cannot, by themselves, empower people. Those who hold economic power, even if their numbers are small, can control the economically weak. Another significant dimension of the post-1960 era is the fact that a large number of new Black immigrants were professionals seeking better economic and educational opportunities. These immigrants

were first class citizens in their countries of origin and were culturally and socially endowed, even if socio-economically deprived. As such, many in this new group of immigrants did not see themselves as inferior vis-à-vis anybody. These dynamics arguably contributed significantly towards elevating the influence of African-Canadian voices beyond where they had hitherto been.

SOME CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REALITIES

Despite the more *noisy* struggles of the post-1960 period, Blacks continued to be marginalized, especially in terms of job opportunities as they tried to earn a decent living in urban centers. The extent of their economic participation was constrained by painful but hard-to-prove practices of institutional prejudice. Mensah (2002) notes that, by and large, African-Canadians are predominantly marginalized in terms of income, employment, and occupational status. Indeed, as promulgated in John Porter's (1965) classic work *The Vertical Mosaic* (1965) and as re-affirmed by Helmes-Hayes and Curtis (1998) in *The Vertical Mosaic Revisited*, the Canadian terrain is still, overall, rife with situations where ethnic and racial considerations determine employment and the concomitant advancements that result from it. It must be acknowledged that some highly determined and enterprising African-Canadians have made progress in the business and professional realms. By and large, however, African-Canadians with qualifications similar to their non-African compatriots are less likely to be employed and more likely to be concentrated in jobs with less prestige and lower income (Mensah 2002; Torczyner et al. 1997; also see Laryea and Hayfron in this volume). Their marginalization in this regard is aptly captured by Cecil Foster (1996, 84), as follows:

How vulnerable the [African-Canadian] community is can be seen in the daily hardships of the thousands of professional people who have spent the last while walking the streets of major Canadian cities looking for jobs. None of them seem to have a resume good enough to get the job they deserve. Most of them protest about how they always manage to come up short because of someone with connections who jumps ahead of them because of a special relationship with the person hiring, *including, of course, good old ethnicity and colour affiliations, and, therefore, psycho-cultural and emotional (some would call this trust and dependability assumptions) relationships, because of a special position in the network (emphases are mine).*

These challenges have not subsided, even with their increasing numbers in the Canadian population. In fact, the multi-layered racism that African-Canadians have to contend with is so entrenched within institutions and in the collective psyche of mainstream society that "striving to be twice or three times as good to have a chance" is usually not enough (see Alexander and Glaze 1996;

Ruggles and Rovinescu 1996; and Thompson 1979). As Walker (1985, 24) correctly points out,

[t]he [African-Canadian] experience demonstrates that racial discrimination has not been directly linked to numbers, cultural differences, economic depression, or prosperity. [While] legal reforms have restrained openly hostile behaviour, these have not affected the essential factors leading to discrimination.

In the midst of continuing complaints by both public and private enterprises and their managers about the shortage of engineers and other technical professionals in Canada, one cannot help but share the bewilderment of many African-Canadians trained in those professions, some of whom received their training in Canada. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a good number of them cannot find gainful employment.

The preceding points are not intended to indicate that others in Canada, especially members of so-called visible minority groups, are not subjected to these exclusionary practices. The realities of the *colour* coded considerations so prevalent in Canada, complemented by the harsh legacies of history and by the current conditions that African-Canadians endure, suggest their marginalization is exacerbated by the fact that they are the darkest *parcel* of *The Dark Side of the Nation* (see Bannerji 2000). They bear the brunt of the crime of racism and its enduring derivatives more than other visible minorities, as evidenced by the 1992 Stephen Lewis *Report on Racism in Ontario*.

The preceding observations represent the overall situation of African-Canadians in Canada. It is important to note, however, that the situation varies across the country, albeit not significantly. Mensah (2002), for example, notes that Blacks are socio-economically better off in the Prairie provinces (Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan). This observation is surprising, because one would have expected that the province of Ontario, due to the high concentration of Blacks there, would provide a better socio-economic environment. Blacks tend to be major targets of racial profiling, unlike Whites and other non-White groups. They are more likely to be stopped, questioned, searched, and generally harassed by the police. The connotations (as well as the realities) of the situation here are that some Canadian police departments are willfully criminalizing a person's skin colour by violating the legal rights of Black Canadians.

A problematic, possible by-product of this encounter is a situation wherein young Black men, especially, react negatively to this abominable violation of their rights and risk incriminating themselves due to the counter-persecution behaviour that might be expected after suffering such persecution. The criminal records that result from such incidents then stunt their employment and economic prospects, and hence, any potential for socio-economic development.

Worse still, the cycle becomes inter-generational, not only in terms of socio-economic mobility, but also, and more destructively, in the continuities of the labeling *game* which casts Blacks as troublemakers and underachievers, while positive contributions and accomplishments by members of that community are ignored (see Codjoe 2001).

The foregoing discussion depicts a situation where Blacks, especially, are hardly the agents of their lives and are simply falling into predetermined traps. Centuries of subjugation continue to be sustained by current oppressive practices by police and other powerful authorities from the dominant society. The following words by Paul Laurence Dunbar (in Thompson 1979, 93) reflect the situation of a large number of African-Canadians:

We wear the mask that grins and lies
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes
This debt we pay to human guile
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

The reality is that racism is alive and well in multicultural and multiethnic Canada, whether it is structured through the mechanics of modernity or sustains itself in the more nuanced framework of postmodernism. Indeed, this was the finding in a nation-wide survey conducted by *Maclean's Magazine* at the end of 1993, which dubbed so-called mainstream Canadians as *polite bigots* (read, discursively promulgated and cleverly implemented institutional racism).

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have engaged in a general discussion on certain historical points of African-Canadian life, with more systematic pointers to the current socio-economic situation of this specifically marginalized group of the Canadian population. From re-visiting some of the perspectives propagated in the preceding pages, it should be clear that the contemporary case of African-Canadians is not as bleak as it used to be. However, an examination of Canadian reality, especially those segments of life that represent the *sine qua non* for meaningful and inclusive social development, suggests the country is still not adequately responding to the needs (employment, social mobility, and overall cultural liquidity) of its African-Canadian population. Symbolic gatherings and so-called cultural celebrations, such as *Caribana* in Toronto, *Carifête* in Montreal, and *Cariwest* in Edmonton, will not lead to concrete improvements in the lives of rank-and-file African-Canadians. Let me end with these eloquent, but above all else, existentially powerful lines from the

contemporary African-Canadian poet George E. Clarke (2000, 258) who, in his poem “Casualties,” writes:

Our minds chill; we weather -
the storm, huddle in dreams. -
Exposed, though, a woman -
lashed by lightening, repents -
of her flesh becomes a living -
X-ray, “collateral damage.” -
The first casualty of war -
is language. -

Clarke’s poetic perspectives are analytically highly relevant for the topics I have been treating in the context of this chapter. That is, for far too long, Blacks have been fighting institutional racism and have suffered the most conspicuous collateral damage from the subtle and infinitely stealthy forms that it assumes. As Cornel West (1994) noted in the African-American case, the language of liberation must become the basis for embarking on viable projects of horizontally inclusive, social development.

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