THE DECADE FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT, A QUEBEC PERSPECTIVE

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EMBRACING THE DECADE FOR PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN CANADA

Through its International Decade for People of African Descent, the United Nations has declared that the rights of Afro-descendants around the world deserve protection. Scheduled to run from 2015 to 2024, this International Decade aims to recognize rights and implement a multitude of actions aimed at 1) recognition, 2) justice and 3) development. "Today is an important day for Canada. Through our commitment to the International Decade, we will be able to better address the specific and concrete challenges faced by Black Canadians. In this way, we will move forward towards a more just and inclusive country", said Justin Trudeau on January 30, 2018. In introducing the Decade in this way, the Prime Minister of Canada recognizes that there are specificities to the Black condition in Canada, although the country often presents itself as a less "racist" space than its American neighbor (that is one in which relations between black and white populations are less racially based). And yet, as Robyn Maynard notes in *NoirEs sous surveillance*, Canada has its own legacy of slavery and institutional racism, and Quebec is certainly not exempt from this (Maynard, 2018).

According to sociologist Myrlande Pierre, "the size of Black communities in Canada has doubled from 573,860 in 1996 to 1,198,540 in 2016." (Pierre, 2019). Nearly 52% of Canada's Black population resides in Ontario. There has been a change in this population's countries and regions of origin change. Apart from the Black communities historically present in the country, the majority of Black immigrants who arrived in Canada before the 1981 census were born in either Jamaica or Haiti. The main countries of birth of recent Black immigrants, those arriving between 2011 and 2016, are: Haiti, Nigeria, Jamaica, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo. (Statistics Canada, 2019). The size of the Black population in Canada is therefore not negligible.

WHAT SUPPORT IS THERE FOR BLACK COMMUNITY-LED INITIATIVES?

One of the achievements of the International Decade is in the area of funding for agencies and organizations. Indeed, additional funds have been earmarked for Black communities. In addition to programs designed to fight racism through the federal Anti-Racism Fund, financial support has been provided for entrepreneurship, mental health and youth development issues. For example, Canada has implemented a call entitled "Promoting Health Equity: Black Community Mental Health Fund", which aims to highlight mental health issues and the need to consider the effects of living conditions and racism on individuals. An other example is the first national Institute of Black Canadian with the help of a $25 Million over five years for projects and capital assistance to celebrate, "share knowledge and build capacity in Canada's vibrant Black Canadian communities" (Canada, 2019). If Canadian funding seems to assume the duty to recognize the distinctive circumstances experienced by Black populations, one might wonder what the Quebec counterpart to this funding is? What funds exist and are used to address the realities of Black people in Quebec? The initiatives funded as part of the Decade would, in Quebec, much more than elsewhere, be dependent on the pressure that members from the Black communities can exert. Indeed, even if there are undoubtedly projects created to promote *inclusion* or to support *diversity*, only entrepreneurship or security issues can be financially supported by the public authorities in Quebec.

THE SITUATION OF BLACKS IN QUEBEC

In Quebec, 319,230 citizens are counted as members of Black communities and several generations are included in these statistics. Being Black in Quebec brings with it an important experiential specificity. Black communities have a complex history characterized by racialized social relations and economic inequalities with confinement to restricted employment opportunities and/or to underprivileged urban neighbourhoods. At the same time, this history reveals a culture of social, economic and cultural resistance.

Although the experience of being Black in Quebec cannot be reduced to racialization, some of the lived experiences of Blacks in Quebec serve to define the Black condition in the province: issues such as racial profiling, inequity in the justice system, systemic economic and social inequalities, and lack of representation in the political sphere and other decision-making bodies, to name but a few.

The 2006 census data presented by Statistics Canada shows that the Black population in Quebec has a lower employment rate and an unemployment rate almost twice as high as that of the general population (13.5% vs. 7.0%). Far from enjoying a satisfactory economic situation, the average income of the black population is lower than that of the Quebec population as a whole ($22,882 versus $34,074). The same situation is also observed when it comes to the median income of the Black population compared to the Quebec population: $18,071 versus $24,430 (Statistics Canada, 2006). Moreover, according to a report submitted to the Service de Police de la Ville de Montréal (SPVM) in August 2019, Blacks and Aboriginals are more likely to be stopped by SPVM officers, i.e., 4 to 5 times more likely than white people (Victor, Hassaoui and Mulone, 2019).

That statistical backdrop serves to illustrate the systemic racism experienced by minorities and Aboriginal populations. The Black reality in Quebec often fails to be recognized by society's institutions, a form of denial that Émilie Nicolas describes as "*original naiveté*" in her text "*La naïveté originelle dont se réclame le Québécois nourit-elle le déni d'un colonialisme bien de chez nous"* (Does the original naiveté that Quebecers claim to possess nourish the denial of a colonialism that is very much home-grown?) (Nicolas, 2020).

This form of denial was brought to light during the controversy surrounding the SLĀV show in Quebec, in June 2018. Speaking on Radio Canada about the accusation of cultural appropriation leveled at Robert Lepage's show, Ricardo Lamour wondered about the then government's lack of interest in the International Decade for People of African Descent in the following terms:

> "...at the provincial level, Philippe Couillard, whose ancestor Guillaume Couillard owned a slave named Olivier Lejeune, how is it that he is slow to ensure that there is support, support in terms of funding that can be channeled to the *Conseil des Arts et Lettres du Québec* and to our other Crown corporations, such as Télé-Québec and so on". (Lamour, June 2018)

This quote from the artist and social entrepreneur sheds a harsh light on Quebec's ability to address the issues faced by Black communities. It is illustrative, as it highlights Quebec's failure to recognize the specific social and economic conditions of Black and minority populations in general.

CITIES, THE IDEAL PLACE FOR THE RECOGNITION OF THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF RACIALISED OR IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES

THE HISTORICAL CONTRIBUTION OF BLACKS AND THE RECOGNITION IT RECEIVES IN CANADA AND QUEBEC

The contribution of African Canadians to our country began in the early days of New France. Indeed, Mathieu Da Costa arrived in New France in 1608 to help Samuel de Champlain and the French communicate with the Aboriginal peoples.

Several waves of immigrants followed over the centuries, including the Loyalists after the American Civil War and slaves on the Underground Railroad. In fact, many sites already recognize the contribution of people of African descent to Canada: St. Catharine's, Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site, Buxton National Historic Site, Chatham-Kent, Buxton National Historic Site, Chatham-Kent, St. Lawrence Hall in Ontario, and Africville in Halifax, Nova Scotia, among other long-established sites.

DOES QUEBEC GIVE ENOUGH RECOGNITION TO THE CONTRIBUTION OF BLACKS?

Strangely enough, Quebec is tentative in this regard, despite the crucial importance of Blacks in its history. For example, among the important sites in the city of Montreal, the Maison d'Haïti is a jewel in the eastern part of the metropolis. The settlement trajectory of the various waves of Haitian immigrants led to the establishment of Maison d'Haïti in this part of the city, transforming a community initiative into a pivotal institution. However, the contribution of the city's blacks could also be recognized in the west of the city, acknowledging the presence of citizens with roots dating back hundreds of years before the arrival of the Haitian immigrants.

FOR A RECOGNITION OF THE ROLE OF AFRICAN CANADIANS IN MONTREAL: LITTLE BURGUNDY OR THE HEART OF AFRO-MONTREAL HISTORY

LITTLE BURGUNDY, A KEY URBAN SPACE FOR RECOGNIZING BLACK QUEBECERS?

Little Burgundy saw its first black inhabitants congregate there in the 1820s. Rejected by Protestant churches and other predominantly white associations, they created their own institutions, including the Coloured Women's Club of Montreal, the Union Congregational Church, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Negro Community Centre (NCC). Their contributions propelled the city onto the world stage, among other grass root activities, through jazz. The Rockhead's Paradise bar, which made the neighborhood vibrate, turned Montreal into one of the three major North American centers in this genre, along with Chicago and New Orleans. The giants who crossed the border included Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Lead Belly, Nina Simone, Fats Waller, Dizzy Gillespie and Sammy Davis Jr. It is in this fertile territory that the Festival de Jazz de Montréal was able to develop from 1980 onwards, to become the largest jazz festival in the world and certainly a source of pride for all Montrealers.

Today, with the urban transformation of the city's downtown areas, Little Burgundy has seen many of its historically black residents leave for other areas. From the point of view of the symbolic importance of the territory, it is imperative to ask how this rich history is now being recognized. Apart from the examples of toponymic recognition, including the names of streets, parks or squares, and the obscure plaques or sealed archives of Concordia University, in which other settings and in which institutions is this vibrant culture celebrated?

In the same way that heritage institutions, such as the Segal Centre within the Cummings Centre or the Casa d'Italia, house permanent exhibits on the Jewish and Italian communities of Montreal and Canada, what spaces in Montreal could do justice to the history and impact of its Black communities? From this standpoint, Little Burgundy would be a prime location to highlight the important role played by Blacks in Quebec, for Quebecers and Montrealers alike, as well as for the many tourists visiting the city attracted by the charms of multiculturalism. In this decade for people of African descent, doesn't the recognition of Black Quebecers require the establishment of a heritage site in Quebec?

In liberal societies, minority communities benefit either from symbolic recognition or from initiatives aimed at socio-economic redistribution (Honneth and Frazer, 2003). An anti-racist perspective that connects and reconciles these approaches acknowledges the need for "real recognition" (Manaï, 2015), particularly in and through institutions (Manaï and Bensiali, 2019). The Decade for People of African descent is an ideal opportunity to raise awareness of the black condition through the symbolic recognition of Quebec's black communities, and Montreal is the natural setting for this. At a time when Quebec has seen a Black woman rise to the head of the Quebec Liberal Party and the recent social questioning with #BlackLivesMatters, it seems more necessary than ever to grasp the complexity of the Black experience in order to achieve not only recognize, real emancipation.

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