BLACK HISTORY

Dr. Rosemary Sadlier is passionate about Black history as a means of extending inclusion and justice. She is the president of the Ontario Black History Society, the first such organization in Canada (a Provincial Heritage Organization of the Government of Ontario). The OBHS is responsible for initiating the local, provincial and national observances of February as Black History Month and the local and Provincial celebration of August 1st as Emancipation Day. She is the author of 4 books on African-Canadian history and consultant/co-author of a fifth.

ABSTRACT

While the provision of Black history education has been taking place within the African-Canadian community, it also is taught to varying degrees at various points in the K-12 curriculum. What are some of the main points connected to Black history in Canada? What affects our ability as educators to teach this material? Is it more the way that this topic is addressed – how do we value non-traditional stories? Do we have a greater need to challenge our own levels of awareness?

RÉSUMÉ

Bien que l'offre d'un enseignement de l'histoire des noirs soit mise en place dans la communauté Afro-Canadienne, cette histoire est aussi enseignée à divers degrés à divers moments dans le curriculum K-12. Quels sont quelques-uns des points principaux reliés à l'histoire des noirs au Canada ? Qu'est-ce qui affecte notre capacité en tant qu'éducateurs à enseigner ce matériel ? C'est plus que de penser à la manière avec laquelle ce thème est abordé — coment valoriser les histoires non-traditionnelles ? Devons-nous remettre en question nos propres niveaux de conscience ?

Is it the *way* that we teach that needs to be queried, and certainly, there is always a need to improve our practice, or is it what we bring to the learning environment to inform, inspire and include, that needs to be challenged or reframed?

This is a seminal question for all educators because among those aspects that support and impact our efforts would be the nature of **required** Provincial curriculum leading to the teaching of a range of African-Canadian history topics through to our own understanding about who and what a 'real' Canadian is – along with their experiences and contributions to the building of this country. What is the national narrative that informs what stories are collected, preserved, deemed necessary? What is 'Canada' for those who are of African descent? What role does our interpretation of history have in reinforcing white privilege? What do we want Canada to become and how do we see our teaching of history moving us in the appropriate direction?

To begin this discussion, it is important that we are working from the same general Black history background. Black history is as much a part of Canadian history as African history is to world history. The disciplines are connected and mutually reinforce each other. To begin to discuss this, we might ask of ourselves, how is it that we have managed to further a part of a Canadian narrative that has managed to exclude Canadians who were here from the earliest times? If we as a community of educators were including Black history in a regular and routine way, why then was there a need for the creation of an African-Canadian historical organization? How is it that the UN has declared 2011 to be the International Year for People of African Descent with the opportunity to focus on recognition, justice and development issues? History is about recognition. It reflects, reports and influences our understanding of justice. It results in the fair development of communities based on an adequate understanding of their contributions and achievements. History raises awareness while creating our national story and we channel that story to those we teach.

BACKGROUND

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

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

That Canada was a haven for escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad obscures the agency that African peoples had in making themselves free and suggests that there was national support for them. However, their treatment and the stereotypes connected to slavery have instead encouraged discrimination against them, perpetuated negative stereotypes and held them responsible for many of Canada's problems. The record of Black presence in Canada has been diminished, overlooked and sanitized. It is as if Black people in Canada were invisible and their contributions unimportant.

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

There are approximately 600,000 Canadians of African descent, the third largest racialized group in Canada; Asians and Southeast Asian communities are the largest groups. However, African-Canadians are unique due to their colour and its connection to their historical experience of enslavement and the legacy of slavery, as well as the impact of racism distinct from others which has affected immigration, education, employment, the justice system and Canadian mass media and culture.

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

This is not to say that the Black Canadian community is without success stories, the educated, the sports or entertainment figures, the politicians, lawyers, teachers, social workers, artists or affluent individuals, but comparatively, the Black community does not fare as well as others.

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

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

Africville was created out of the long wait by Black Loyalists for surveyed land. White officers were taken care of first, but with the shortage of surveyors, the process took not weeks but years. Taking ownership of land on the water, close to Halifax, the residents forged out a community of mutual aid. The strong community of over 400 boasted a church and businesses and many depended on Halifax for work. Instead, Halifax built the town dump, a railroad, factories, sewage drains, a slaughter house, and later a prison very close to where residents lived and

played. By 1970, despite paying taxes, Africville was without clean water or electricity.

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

Much earlier, another forced relocation in the Maritimes ended poorly. The Maroons, while in Jamaica, had successfully warded off the invading British through their superior guerilla-style raids. When confronted in 1795 with ferocious hunting hounds and tricked into leaving their mountainous home, they were evacuated to the hills of Halifax, Nova Scotia, to serve as a defense force and to help to build a fort, the Citadel. Within a very short time, they demanded to be taken to a more hospitable place, socially and climatically, and were removed to Sierra Leone in 1800. In Sierra Leone, some 1200 Black Loyalists had already made this West African country their home since they too were so disenchanted with their lives in Canada that they left the Maritimes and settled in Sierra Leone by 1792.

In Ontario, the poor treatment of slaves is evidenced by the treatment of Chloe Cooley, even while the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario at the time, John Graves Simcoe, was an abolitionist. In 1793, Simcoe was informed of a slave woman's forcible capture, and her sale to southern slave owners. She, Chloe Cooley, had been bound and taken across the river in Niagara to be sold by her owner. Simcoe was outraged and sought to create legislation to prevent a future occurrence. Since his slave-owning peers, including Peter Russell and William Jarvis, the secretary of the Executive Council, were not as passionate about seeing Canadian slavery end, the only compromise legislation passed shortened the period of enslavement to the age of 25 and halted the importation of slaves. It ended the length of time of servitude for European indentures, but did not end the enslavement of Africans. In fact, Black people continued to be bought and sold well into the 1800's. Slavery was finally eliminated in Canada through the British Imperial Act of 1833, which abolished slavery throughout the British Empire, effective in Canada on August 1, 1834. This is the major spark that brought about the Underground Railroad.

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

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

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

That Black people had been enslaved, as if other groups did not have slavery in their histories, was enough to cause many people to feel personally insulted by the mere presence of a Black person, never mind one in

uniform. Their colour was synonymous with being inferior. On June 28, 1852 in St. Catharines, Ontario, Black militiamen were conducting their annual exercises at a parade ground. Whites continually provoked them until a scuffle ensued. A Black man, Harris, who was not part of the scuffle, was attacked, and when he sought the support of the constabulary, he was ignored. So he took matters into his own hands and, with the aid of his friends, assaulted the attacker. The situation flared up, resulting in the destruction of several Black-owned houses. Situations like this were repeated across the country. A Black family moving into a new home in a "white" district in 1937 Trenton, Nova Scotia, was faced with scores of white attackers over a 2 day period. Since the mayor would not intervene, the attackers demolished their home and the homes of two other Black families, and even outside: Black Canadian military men were jeered at, attacked, and beaten as they attempted to march in the Victory Parade in Liverpool, England after WWII. What were they guilty of? Living their lives as Black people.

All Americans were attracted to Canada's West by the 1900's since land prices were much more reasonable than in the United States ($2 compared to $50). The government encouraged settlers to come in, and many Black people did. However, by 1910, attitudes began to change when it was anticipated that throngs of Blacks would attempt to come to Canada from Oklahoma due to changes in segregation laws there. The media was used to reinforce negative stereotypes about Black people including their sexual aggressiveness. One newspaper story, about a young white girl who claimed to have been assaulted and to have had her ring stolen by a Black man, alarmed people across the country. When it was later determined that she had fabricated the story to avoid punishment for losing the ring, the damage had been done – community groups had already made strong statements about their fear, loathing and contempt for Black people.

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

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

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

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

The distinct history of African Canadians has resulted in the perpetuation of anti-Black racism in Canada. Just being of a darker hue has been connected to being a slave. Being a slave is connected to being inferior. Being enslaved meant taking orders, not giving them; it meant being policed, not policing oneself… It meant socializing another's definition and perception of you, and your beauty and your traditions. It meant not knowing one's own history so that one could readily develop a strong sense of heritage and culture as part of a process of empowering oneself and strengthening the community.

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

This is not to say that the Black Canadian community is without success stories: the educated, the sports or entertainment figures, the politicians, lawyers,

teachers, social workers, artists or affluent individuals, but comparatively, the Black community does not fare as well as others. For example:

- unemployment rates for Blacks in Toronto are twice as high as they are for a non-Black
- a Black university graduate will fare as well as a non-Black who has not completed high school
- over half of all Black children in Toronto live below the poverty line

In terms of history, what can be done to improve the situation for African-Canadians? For all Canadians since we are connected. What can be done to improve what we bring to the educational experience so that we are empowering? The OBHS hopes to develop broad support for the national cultural centre/museum of African Canadian museum project of the OBHS to be a touchstone for the Black community, especially our youth. It will also be a place of honor for extant African-Canadian artifacts, documents and other historical materials. It will serve as a repository for our history and a vehicle for the expression of our souls.

Among the proposals of the UN:

> That governments be encouraged to include in their education activities awareness-raising events relating to the observance of the International Year for People of African Descent, including, inter alia, through art competitions, cultural events, awards, academic events, films and documentaries with a view to the restoration of the dignity of people of African descent.

As history educators the promotion of African-Canadian history will help to develop a sense of connection to Canada and to global communities while extending and challenging social justice ideals.