ON THE ETHNO-CULTURAL HETEROGENEITY OF BLACKS IN OUR 'ETHNICITIES'

ABSTRACT

The ethno-cultural backgrounds of Blacks in Canada are, arguably, more diverse than those of any other group, even though Blacks are routinely homogenized not only in the mass media, but also in academic discourse. The present narrative sheds light on the enormous diversity of Blacks in Canadian cities and identifies some of the problems and opportunities the Black presence engenders. It is argued that the Black presence in Canada, like that of other minorities, offers considerable prescience and nuanced scrutiny of our prevailing values and taken-for-granted assumptions.

JOSEPH MENSAH

Atkinson School of Social Sciences, York University, and
Center of Excellence for Research in Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) Toronto

Even though the history of Blacks in Canada goes back to the 17th century, it was only after the introduction of the point system in the 1960s that Blacks began to arrive here in significant numbers. There are certainly no simple answers to why people engage in international migration. However, for most Blacks the move to Canada can plausibly be attributed to the yearnings for a higher standard of living and political freedom. Black African and Caribbean countries are among the least developed in the world. And over the past decade or so, ethnic conflicts, political instability, and the scourge of AIDS have combined, quite precariously, with harsh environmental conditions to create deplorable living conditions in several African countries, in particular. The living conditions in some Caribbean nations (e.g., Haiti) are not much better, either. It therefore comes as no surprise that many Black Africans and Caribbeans become immigrants in a place like Canada. The Canadian Black population is patently heterogeneous. However, due, perhaps, to the dearth of data or the sheer lack of analytical rigor, many are those who routinely talk of "the Black Community," as though Blacks are homogenous. The present piece sheds light on the cultural heterogeneity within the Black population in Canada, and highlights the "unique" problems and opportunities of the Black presence in our cities. The urban tilt here is not fortuitous: it does not only fulfill the general intent of a new magazine – *Our Diverse Cities* – but also reflects the high concentration of Blacks in urban Canada. Although necessarily brief and mainly theoretical, most of the arguments espoused here derive from a comprehensive, empirically-grounded study of Black Canadians by the present author (see Mensah, 2002), which readers are encouraged to consult for additional insights.

Understanding the heterogeneity of Blacks in Canada

Africa and the Caribbean are among the most ethno-racially diverse regions of the World. While people of Black African descent are the overwhelming majority in the principal sources of Caribbean immigrants to Canada—including Jamaica, Trinidad-Tobago, Haiti, Barbados, and Grenada—we must note that the Caribbean is home to many other ethno-racial groups. After the abolishment of slavery, several Chinese and East Indians indentured laborer were brought to the region to work on the sugar plantations. Many of these laborers brought their families with them and remained in the region after their contracts. Moreover, centuries of ethno-racial mixing in the region has yielded a sizeable proportion of mixed population which further complicates the region's ethno-racial heterogeneity. Quite expectedly, the European powers propped up their own cultures and languages in their respective colonies in the region. We thus find English, French, and Spanish, and their respective Patois and Creole versions, spoken across the Caribbean. Of the two Canadian official languages, English is by far the most popular among Caribbean immigrants, due to the British colonial dominance in the region. With the exception of Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, all the main Caribbean immigrant sources have English as their official language. In fact, Haiti is the only country among the top ten sources with French as its official language, hence the high affinity of Haitian immigrants to Québec. While Catholicism dominates the religious landscape of such countries as Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Cuba, various protestant denominations (e.g., Anglican, Methodist) are the prevalent in others, such as Jamaica, Barbados, and St. Kitts. There also exist a large number of Hindus and Muslims in Trinidad-Tobago, Voodoos in Haiti, and Rastafarians in Jamaica.

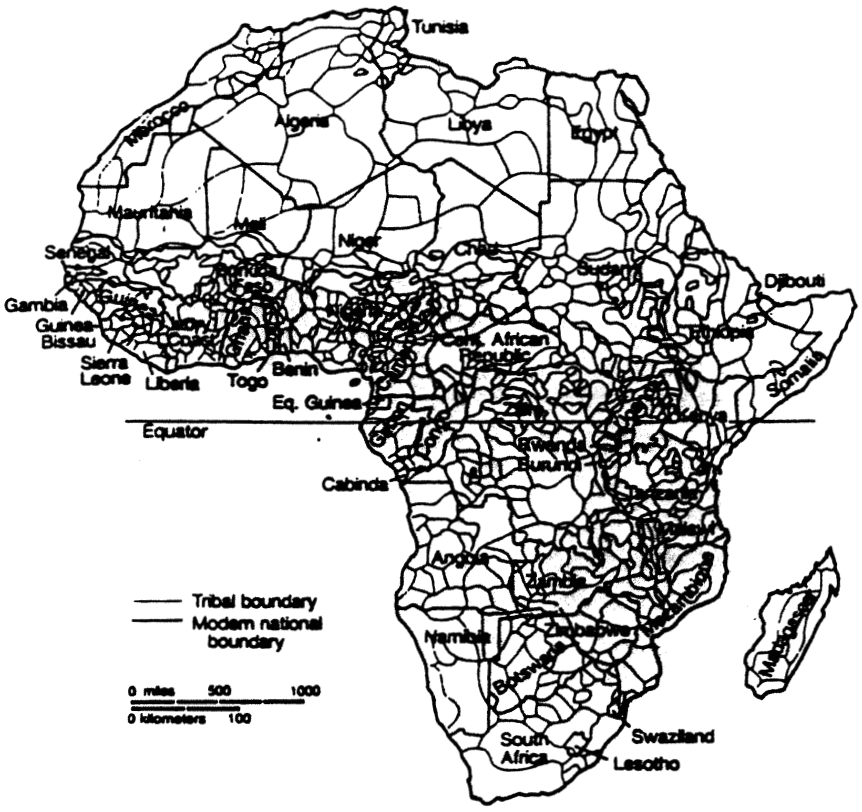
The ethno-racial backgrounds of African immigrants are, arguably, more diverse than those of any other group in Canada, even though Africans are routinely homogenized in our mass media. Africa is undoubtedly the indigenous home of most people who fall into the ambiguous category of "Blacks" in Canada. However, there are some Blacks whose place of birth, mother tongue, or country of last permanent residence (or even those of their parents) are not in Africa. Also, even though most African immigrants from Central and Western Africa are likely to be 'Black,' under any reasonable definition of the term, the same can hardly be said of immigrants from Northern, Southern, and Eastern Africa. Northern Africans, including Moroccans, Libyans, Algerians, Tunisians, and Egyptians, usually consider themselves, and are generally described as Arabs (even in the Canadian census). Also, immigrants from South Africa are just as likely to be Whites, Indian, or "Coloured" as they are to be Black. The situation among East Africans is equally complicated by the large number of East Indians, who trace their ethnicity/nationality to that region. We must recognize that while most African countries have predominantly Black populations, there exists an enormous intra- and inter-national ethnic diversity among Africans. Harm de Blij (1993) and Jackson and Hudman (1990) estimate that Africa has anywhere from 600 to 1,000 different languages. Perhaps no African country exhibits greater linguistic diversity than Nigeria, the most populous nation on the continent. With three major ethno-linguistic regions – the Hausas on the north, Yorubas on the West, and Ibos on the south – and more than a dozen major languages, each of which is spoken by over a million people, and another 230 lesser established tongues, Nigeria's ethno-linguistic diversity is likely to baffle many Canadians. The ethnic diversity of Africa is further complicated by the discrepancies between the continent's pre-colonial tribal territories and its modern geopolitical boundaries, most of which were drawn by the colonial powers during the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, with little regard for the human and physical geography of the areas involved. These discrepancies, so dramatically portrayed by the spaghetti-like map of Figure 1, underlie much of the contemporary ethnic and tribal conflicts ravaging the continent.

Blacks in our diverse cities

By 2001 there were some 662,210 Blacks in Canada, making Blacks the third largest visible minority group, after Chinese and South Asians. Most Blacks reside in cities, with the overwhelming majority living in Toronto (46.81%), Montréal (21%), and Ottawa-Gatineau (5.78%) (Table 1). Slightly more than half of the Black population in Canada (344,255 or 52%) is immigrant. As can be seen from Table 2, with the exception of Halifax, which has traditionally been home to most 'indigenous" Blacks, the Black immigrant population outnumbers their non-immigrant counterparts in most cities. Moreover, as with other visible minorities, the 'influx' of Blacks into Canadian cities, besides Toronto and Montréal, has been a recent phenomenon, with the vast majority arriving only since 1981.

Do Blacks of different ethno-cultural or national backgrounds tend to live in difference Canadian cities? Are there discernable regional patterns in the ways Blacks from either the Caribbean or Africa select their respective cities of residence? Tables 3 and 4 rank the ethnic origins of Blacks in our cities who come from the Caribbean and Africa, respectively. Clearly,

Jamaicans, Trinidadian-Tobagodian, Barbadian, Guyanese, in that order, are the leading Caribbean groups to be found



Map of African tribal and political boundaries

Note: Most of Africa's modern national boundaries were drawn by the colonial powers during the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 with little or no regard for the human and physical geography of the areas they divided. In the process, some unified tribes were ripped apart, and hostile ones were lumped together. Without question, much of the tribal and ethnic conflicts in contemporary Africa can be attributed to the dramatic discrepancies between national and ethnic boundaries.

See :Fellmann, J. and col., 1992, p. 415.
Mensa, J., 1997.
Sadowski, Y., 1998, p. 15.

across Canadian cities; the notable exceptions are in Montreal and Ottawa-Gatineau, where the Caribbean presence is understandably dominated by Haitians.

Compared with the Caribbeans, the Black African presence in Canadian cities is far more complicated, with very few distinct patterns: Firstly, Somalis are the leading group in nearly all the cities with the exceptions of Calgary and Vancouver, where South Africans, most of whom are unlikely to be Blacks, in any case, dominate; Halifax, where Nigerian are the leading group among the very small number of Black immigrants in that city; and Montréal, where Francophones, such as Congolese, Cameroonians, Zairians, and Mauritians (with Ghanaians as outliers) dominate. Secondly, there is some affinity between Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean groups in Canadian cities. This affinity is perhaps attributable to their shared background in Islamic religion and Arabic (and to some extent, English) language. This affinity is surprising, given the historic conflicts between Ethiopians and Eritreans, for instance, back in Africa. In any case, the fact that some 6% of Ethiopians in Africa are of Somali background is equally important here. Only a finely disaggregated spatial data could shed light on the true nature of the intra-urban residential patterns of these groups. Thirdly, the only West African ethnic origins that feature prominently in our large cities, outside of Montréal, are those of Ghanaians and Nigerians. Whether Ghanaians and Nigerians feature so dominantly *because* there are Canadian visa offices in these two nations or *that is why* there are visa offices is difficult to say.

In addition to the ethno-cultural diversities engendered in our cities by Blacks from the Caribbean and Africa are those attributable to the "indigenous" Black population in Canada and to contemporary Black immigrants from the United States, Latin America, and other regions of the world. The Black experience in Canada is, arguably, unique, not only because of the immense heterogeneity it brings, but also because Blacks are the only people whose ancestors were forcibly removed from their homelands and enslaved in this part of the world. Furthermore, Blacks are generally, albeit speciously, seen as the polar opposite of Whites, the dominant group, and, consequently, face the worst forms of skin-colour racism, as well as all the negative connotations that 'Black' conjures in both the sacred and secular discursive practices of the West. A corollary of their antithetical position is the fact that "Black" is often the all-encompassing label for most racially mixed people, regardless of their skin color. This is as true of Black-cum-White offspring as it is of Black-cum-other-visible-minority offspring. What this does is to further complicate the heterogeneity of Blacks in our society. Moreover, "Black" is the only visible minority category in the Canadian census that has no specific national or geographic reference point, thereby making the category highly ambiguous; the geographic reference points of such categories as Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Japanese are too obvious to delay us here. And who can gloss over the obvious fact that Blacks are the most 'visible' of the visible minorities in Canada, and, ironically, among the most 'invisible' in our corridors of power. The preceding, together with the realization that most Black immigrants come from Africa and the Caribbean (two of the poorest regions of the world), certainly makes the Black uniqueness thesis hard to nullify.

Table 1 - The Population of Blacks in Canadian Cities[1]

City	Urban Population	Black Population	% of Canada's Black Population in the City	% of City's that is Black
Calgary	943,310	13,665	2.66	1.45
Edmonton	927,020	14,095	2.12	1.52
Halifax	355,945	13,085	1.97	3.68
Hamilton	655,055	12,855	1.94	1.96
Kitchener	409,765	7,345	1.11	1.79
London	427,215	7,610	1.15	1.78
Montréal	3,380,645	139,303	21.00	4.12
Oshawa	293,550	7,180	1.08	2.44
Ottawa-Gatineau	1,050,755	38,185	5.78	3.63
Toronto	4,647,955	310,500	46.81	6.68
Vancouver	1,967,475	18,405	2.77	0.93
Windsor	304,955	8,125	1.22	2.66
Winnipeg	661,725	11,440	1.72	1.73

[1] These are cities with 5,000 or more Black residents.
Source: Statistics Canada; *2001 Census of Population* http://estat.statscan.ca/cgi-win

Implications…

What are the implications of the uniqueness and heterogeneity of Blacks for their integration into Canadian society, in general, and for the socio-economic and cultural vitality of our cities, in particular? The leading factor in immigrants' decision on which city (or rural community) to settle is the presence family and friends (Justus, 2004). Once in their selected destinations, Black immigrants – perhaps, more so than others – face several difficulties in finding decent, affordable housing, employment, and education, due to their disadvantaged economic background and the prevalence of skin-colour racism in Canada. Often, Blacks in cities, such as Toronto, Montréal, and Halifax, find themselves in rundown, racially segregated housing (Murdie, 1994;

Table 2 - Blacks and Immigrant Status and Period of Immigration for Selected Cities

City	Total Black Population	Non-Immigrant Population	Immigrant Population	Before 1961	1961-1970	1971-1980	1981-1990	1991-2001	Non-Permanent Resident
Calgary	13,665	6,210	7,105	80	415	1,335	1,725	3,555	350
Edmonton	14,100	6,875	6,640	55	660	1,555	1,535	2,840	585
Halifax	13,085	11,905	945	40	80	120	160	550	235
Hamilton	12,850	6,210	6,070	130	1,110	1,410	1,115	2,305	570
Kitchener	7,350	3,395	3,855	55	475	870	735	1,715	100
London	7,610	3995	3360	100	520	565	620	1555	255
Montréal	139,300	59,850	76,215	1,075	5,805	20,745	19,051	29,570	6,240
Oshawa	7,180	3,710	3,440	55	730	1,160	715	775	25
Ott.-Gatineau	38,180	14,670	21,915	230	1,355	2,930	4,935	12,470	1595
Toronto	310,495	125,620	178,250	1,735	21,205	44,945	42,105	68,250	6,630
Vancouver	18,405	8,815	9,135	120	1,095	1,970	1,985	3,965	460
Windsor	8,125	4,915	3,045	50	250	570	560	1,630	165
Winnipeg	11,440	5,5190	5,960	120	775	1,255	1,430	2,375	290
Canada	662,210	297,985	344,255	4,420	36,485	82,845	80,690	139,815	19,970

Source: Statistics Canada, January 21, 2003. *2001 Census of Canada.* Catalogue number 97F0010XCB2001003.

Table 3 - Top 5 Caribbean Ethnic Origins in Selected Canadian Cities, 2001

City[1]	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Calgary	Jamaican	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Guyanese	Haitian
Edmonton	Jamaican	Trinidadian-T.	Guyanese	Barbadian	Grenadian
Halifax	Jamaican	Barbadian	Trinidadian-T.	Guyanese	Cuban
Hamilton	Jamaican	Trinidadian-T.	Guyanese	Barbadian	Cuban
Kitchener	Jamaican	Guyanese	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Bahamian
London	Jamaica	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Guyanese	Grenadian
Montréal	Haitian	Jamaican	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Dominican
Oshawa	Jamaican	Guyanese	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Grenadian
Ottawa-Gatineau	Jamaican	Haitian	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Guyanese
Toronto	Jamaican	Guyanese	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Grenadian
Vancouver	Jamaican	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Guyanese	Cuban
Windsor	Jamaican	Trinidadian-T.	Barbadian	Guyanese	Cuban
Winnipeg	Jamaican	Trinidadian-T.	Guyanese	Barbadian	Grenadian

[1] These are cities with 5,000 or more Black residents.
Source: Statistics Canada, January 21, 2003. 2001 Census of Canada. Catalogue number 97F0010XCB2001001.

Table 4 - Top 5 African Ethnic Origins[1] in Selected Canadian Cities, 2001

Cities[2]	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Calgary	S. African	Ethiopian	Nigerian	Sudanese	Somali
Edmonton	Somali	Ethiopian	Eritrean	S. African	Nigerian
Halifax	Nigerian	S. African	Ethiopian	Sudanese	Ugandan
Hamilton	Somali	S. African	Ghanaian	Congolese	Sudanese
Kitchener	Somali	Ethiopian	S. African	Sudanese	Eritrean
London	Somali	Sudanese	Ethiopian	S. African	Eritrean
Montréal	Congolese	Ghanaian	Cameroonian	Zairian	Mauritian
Oshawa	S. African	Kenyan	Ethiopian/Ghanaian	S. Leone	Nigerian
Ottawa-Gatineau	Somali	Ethiopian	Eritrean	Congolese	Ghanaian
Toronto	Somali	Ghanaian	Ethiopian	S. African	Nigeria
Vancouver	S. African	Somali	Ethiopian	Ghanaian	Nigerian
Windsor	Somali	Ethiopian	Nigerian	Rwandan/Sudanese	Ghanaian
Winnipeg	Ethiopian	Eritrean	Sudanese	S. African	Nigerian

[1] North Africans, including Libyans, Algerians, Moroccans, Egyptians and Tunisians are excluded, as the Canadian census categorizes them as Arabs.

[2] The ranking in these cities are approximations, since many of the categories used in the Census are overlapping (a good example is the use "Black" "Ghanaian," "Akan," and "Ashanti" – a typical Ashanti may very well belong to the other 3 categories).

Source: Statistics Canada, January 21, 2003. 2001 Census of Canada. Catalogue number 97F0010XCB2001001.

Mensah, 2002, Ornstein, 2002; Torjman and Leviten-Reid, 2003). While such places provide the necessary support networks for the eventual settlement of Black immigrants, they also engender serious negative consequences, not the least of which is the potential for heightened marginalization and ghettoization. Disturbingly, many who live in such unsafe and rundown neighborhoods pay fairly similar price for their housing as do "their more affluent neighbors, a few streets over" (Preugger, Cook, and Hawkesworth, 2004, 124). Also, residents of such poor neighborhoods generally pay more for auto and residential insurance, grocery, and many other urban facilities, because of the relative paucity of these facilities and the high incidence of crime and violence, these neighborhoods invariably breed, regardless of the racial background of the residents involved.

Meanwhile, once the image of a 'crime area' crystallizes in the mass media, the police intensifies its surveillance and racial profiling of the residents of these neighborhoods, which then yields the familiar self-fulfilling prophesy, articulated in the *audacious* scholarship of Scot Worley and his colleagues at the University of Toronto[i]: "Because the Black community is subject to much greater police surveillance, they are also much more likely to be caught when they break the law than white people who engage in the same forms of criminal activity" (Wortley and Tanner, 2004, 197). *Audacious* is used advisedly here, as police departments in many cities deny racial profiling, while at the same time opposing any suggestion to collect the necessary race-base data on the people they stop and search. Insurance companies, employers, and many other individuals and institutions of power engage in their own ecological, homogenizing, and genetic fallacies about Blacks living in such neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, many Blacks in such neighborhoods now use the addresses of friends and families in other neighbourhoods for job, auto insurance, and other applications, to avoid the hefty and craftily veiled penalties that are associated with their places of residence.

The sheer number and diversity of ethno-cultural organizations and social clubs advertised in any of the leading Afric-Caribbean or Black Newspapers, points to the difficulties imbedded in any attempt to mobilize Blacks for political and other actions in our cities. In addition to continental/regional organizations (i.e., African-Canadian and Caribbean-Canadian organizations), and the scores of national ones, such as the Ghanaian-, Somali-, Jamaican-Canadian organizations, are the numerous intra-national, ethno-linguistic organizations and social clubs. Unfortunately, some of these organizations are not merely overlapping in their objectives, but are often competitive and antagonistic, rendering them susceptible to the usual divide-and-rule tactics of dominant groups and institutions. Indeed, any attempt to unite Blacks, or to seek communicative rationality-*a-la-Habermas*, is essentially an exercise in frustration – at the risk of sounding pessimistic. Often, inklings of unity in this diversity are engendered only in the face of high-profile racial incidence against Blacks and other minorities. John Biles and Erin Tolley (2004), for instance, write about how the uneven application of Canada's anti-terrorism and security regulations and increased racial profiling by the police in Ottawa have galvanized Somalis and other minorities in that city to be actively involved in politics.

At the same time it bears stressing that the Black presence has important positive implications for life in our 'EthniCities.'[ii] With only 5% of its members in the retirement

cohort, compared to the national average of 12%,[iii] the Black population is relatively young. Also, contrary to popular belief, the levels of education among Blacks are very comparable to those of other Canadians (Mensah 2002). Thus, given a level playing field, Blacks could contribute immensely to the socio-economic and cultural life of our cities. The outstanding accomplishments of Blacks in Canadian sports – perhaps the only field, which by its very nature bears some semblance to a level playing field – hints of what we can expect to gain, as Canadians, in other spheres of human endeavor, by tapping into the youthful, exuberant human resources that the Black presence offers. The potential benefits of Blacks' ethnic diversity to the cultural vitality of our society should be apparent to even the most cursory observer of the ongoing cultural-turn in our cities and academia. In education, in particular, the diversity of voices and 'lifeworlds' of Blacks offers our children the opportunity to learn from people of different cultural backgrounds and contrapuntal perspectives. One does not need to be a student of Hegelian dialectics to appreciate the stunning prescience and enhanced awareness that the self – or the dominant group, in this case – stands to gain from the contradictions, creative destructions, and the nuanced scrutiny of prevailing values and taken-for-granted assumptions that the encounter with the Other invariably yields. The ensuing improvement of the dominant group's self-awareness is all the more important when we acknowledge, as did Nietzsche in the preface to his *Genealogy of Morals*, that of all the knowledge that we seek, the hardest to achieve is self-knowledge – hence Nietzsche's famous axiom: "Each man [sic] is farthest from himself." Still, the legion difficulties our educators face in establishing any semblance of absolute, authoritative moral values in this postmodern, multicultural, and patently relativist educational environment can hardly be overlooked.

…And a brief Conclusion

Estimates by Statistics Canada suggest that by 2017, "[a]bout one-half of the population in Toronto and Vancouver could belong to a visible minority."[iv] Issues relating to the presence of Blacks and other minorities could only assume more significance in our public discourse, as the 'visible minority' population becomes the 'invisible majority.' It is only prudent to begin substantive discussions on the integration of Blacks and other visible minority into our cities, before it is too late. Much of the rhetoric of vibrant EthniCities, promulgated by our municipal leaders through tourist brochures, ads, and multicultural festivities, with its redolent self-congratulation and triumphalism, needs to give way to genuine managerial and discursive practices that respect the basic humanity of the Blacks and other visible minorities and offer them their fair share of the proverbial municipal pie.

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Notes

i See Wortley, Hagan, and Macmillan, 1997; Wortley and Tannar, 2003 and 2004.

ii This postmodern wordplay was borrowed from John Biles and Erin Tolley 2004, p. 175.

iii This estimate was made from the Statistics Canada, January 21, 2003, *2001 Census of Canada*, Catalogue number 95F0363XCB2001003.

iv Statistics Canada, *The Daily*, March 22, 2005, p. 2.

Author

Joseph Mensah teaches geography at the School of Social Science, Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professionals Studies, York University, and has a cross-appointment to the Graduate Program in Geogdraphy at York; he is also a Research Associate at the Centre of Excellence in Research in Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) in Toronto. Dr. Mensah has written several journal articles and contributed chapters to a number of books. He is the author of *Black Canadians: History Experiences, Social Conditions* (Fernwood, 2002) and the co-editor of *Globalization and the Human Factor: Critical Insights* (Ashgate, 2004).