A REVIEW OF WHO'S WHO IN BLACK CANADA[1]



Who's Who in Black Canada. Dawn P. Williams. Toronto: d.p.williams & associates, Toronto, 2002. 421 pp. $59.99/hc, $39.99/sc.

"How can you tell I'm not from here?" Dawn Williams asks those who enquire about her origins, while on her first trip to Africa. All of her life, living in Canada, she has been asked the same question. But now, right here in Nairobi, where she thought that for the first time in her life she was going to fit, blend, ease right in, she bumps into the same question of identity.

Despite our endorsement of multiculturalism and our pride in the mosaic that we call Canadian culture, we still feel the need to ask those who are not white where they are from – as if they couldn't simply be from here, born and bred on Canadian soil, no questions asked. Visibly not from the mainstream, Dawn Williams grew used to the questions. But when she finally had the opportunity to travel where people look like her, the question, repeatedly asked, took her aback – despite her efforts to immerse herself in the culture of Nairobi, there was still something very distinctly non-African about her that gave her away. "You walk too fast to be an African woman. The women here walk slowly, so they can walk long distances."

The two years spent collecting and putting together the 705 entries in her self-published *Who's Who in Black Canada* took Williams on an extensive journey. That long road may not have mellowed her gait to the rhythm of an African lifestyle, but it gave her plenty of opportunities to continue pondering the hues and nuances of identity politics. In fact, she put together *Who's Who in Black Canada* out of frustration "in seeing very few representatives of the various ethno-racial groups in Canada reflected in trade publications and some public media events" (*WWIBC* 19). The invisibility of members of diverse ethnic and racial groups in the public sphere could be remedied, especially if the omission was based on a lack of available contact information rather than a deliberate attempt to exclude them. Identity politics, then, is at the root of Williams's ambitious project. The very title of her book, she explains, raised important questions concerning black identity. Clearly, a publication devoted to documenting the presence of blacks in Canada and to promoting their achievements forces those compiling the list and those included in the list to first establish *what* is, or more specifically, *who* is *black,* a question that must be approached cautiously because of its political sensitivity.

As an example of one of the difficulties she encountered, she had to take into account the possibility that the word *black* was going to alienate those contributors who do not self-identify as black, or who are uncomfortable with the label they feel such a word imposes. Indeed, Williams recounts that some of the potential contributors she contacted refused to be included on the basis that they did not want to be branded as a *black* fill-in-the-blank professional. She also had to consider whether choosing African-Canadian, Afro-Canadian, or even the hyphenated marker coined by professor / poet / author / playwright George Elliott Clarke, Africadians, rather than black, would help alleviate some of the concerns. But any one of these identity markers would raise their own set of issues, reflects Williams.

While the genesis and growth of the book finds its roots in identity politics, the purpose of the book is somewhat more pragmatic. Williams wishes to make available to the media and to executive search firms, educators, and others, a compilation of the names of black men and women who are examples of success and excellence in their respective professions – be it, for example, medicine, business, law, education, the military, the arts, etc. If someone were to be looking, say, for an expert on the structural mechanics of railways to comment on the cause of a recent train derailment, they could find in Williams's directory the name of Jude Igwemezie, a professional engineer and CEO of Applied Rail Technology, in Brampton, Ontario. And if someone else were to be interested in the experiences of the black sleeping car porters working the Canadian railroads, they could contact Selwyn Jacob and request a copy of his award-winning 1996 NFB film entitled *The Road Taken.*

Who's Who in Black Canada follows a well-established tradition of such directories of successful members of various groups. In fact, in the preparation stage of the book, she met with Gillian

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Holmes, the editor of *Who's Who of Canadian Women,* for advice about the processes of collecting, and selecting the biographical sketches for the volume. The organizing of the information in the book also draws from the *WWOCW,* specifically the use of representative icons to make the categories to which the professionals belong – Business, Community, Dance, Education, Philanthropy, Visual Arts, etc. – easily identifiable. Although the idea of using icons as a way to present the information in a visually pleasing way was inspired by the layout of *WWOCW,* Williams is indebted to a team of graphic artists for the conception of her own set of iconic symbols.

It is important for Williams to balance out the textual and visual components of the entries. Other such volumes, she comments, are often cryptic, heavily relying on many abbreviations. She has opted for a more narrative style, one nonetheless framed by visual elements that permit access to information "at a glance" – after all, she wants the book to become an important tool for everyone; for intellectuals who find comfort in words, busy businessmen and women who value economy of time, or inquisitive teenagers eager to see in a book, any book, images of themselves, and to see their lives, ambitions, and dreams reflected in the experiences of others. This reflexive concern links William's volume with another of the Who's Who family members, namely the *Who's Who in Black Americans.* This volume, edited by Iris Cloyed, and prefaced by the Honorable Damon J. Keith, Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, emphasizes the debt owed "to those who made our success possible." "However we choose to pay back our debt to the black community," Keith pleads, "the debt ought to be paid… the elder runners must prepare the youth and pass on their batons." This metaphor conveys the importance of extending an eye forward to the future as well as backwards to the past. And this is precisely the spirit that animates Williams's achievement. It is a kind of "shout out," if you will, to those who have achieved, and whose echoes guide those who will achieve.

We must be grateful to Dawn Williams for producing such an important book. The work is not perfect – such an endeavor could never be to a perfectionist such as Williams – and perhaps not as extensively compiled as she had hoped. Hence the reason she is already planning a second edition. She hopes that the second time around those who at first withheld their contribution will be less apprehensive to add their biographical sketches to a repertoire that has garnered only thanks and praises. To these praises already earned, I add my own and urge you to acquire and make use of this valuable resource.

Note

[1] A version of this book review will also appear in *Canadian Ethnic Studies,* Vol. 35, No. 2, 2003, pp. 137-138.