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Introspects, Prospects**
GUEST EDITOR: Esmeralda M. A. Thornhill





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Blacks in Canada: Retrospects, Introspects, Prospects

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Guest Editor's Introduction

During my residency at Temple University's Department of African American Studies as a 2006-2007 Canada-U.S. Fulbright Visiting Scholar, I was privileged to be invited to guest edit this unprecedented thematic issue of the *Journal of Black Studies*, dedicated to Blacks in Canada. It is rewarding to help create this much-needed discursive space that allows muted African Canadian voices to open up the Canadian Record and initiate a dialogue with the diaspora about the *material reality* of being Black in Canada.

It has been a collective effort, and I am particularly thankful to Journal Editor Dr. Molefi Kete Asante for his supportive *encadrement* and collegiality. Special thanks also go to Shirley Small, whose critical and insightful comments helped me to hammer out the very *à propos* title, *Blacks in Canada: Retrospects, Introspects, Prospects*. I sincerely appreciate all authors who made submissions because their enthusiastic and disciplined response to the idea for this thematic issue lightened what for me could otherwise have been a very onerous load.

Indeed, their overwhelmingly positive response to the *call for papers* necessitated an extension of the initial deadline. Tight time constraints, limited space, redundancy, and overlap all combined to exclude many worthy submissions that could have enlarged the scope. As a consequence, a number of important areas of interaction remain that this single issue could not accommodate, such as Black youth, aging, the Haitian community, workplace, academy, media, the arts, political participation, health, immigration, criminal law's impact on community, entrepreneurship and commercial ventures

Far from exhausting the experience of Blacks in Canada, this collection is merely a first peephole on the Canadian corner of the diaspora. The ensemble of multidisciplinary entries is representative of gender, age, geographic regions, and diverse subject areas, even as it includes academics, practitioners, and retirees, both at home and in the African Canadian expatriate community. The collection navigates multiple disciplines and even addresses the realm of literary fiction because literature is rooted in reality, engages us politically, and often comes replete with much deep social and political thought. Above all, literature provides the disenfranchised and marginalized

with their own discursive space when none exists for them in society—namely, a forum where, centering themselves as subjects, their writings can be written, published, and discussed.

The present sampling of Canada's racial history illustrates how the legacy of racism percolates throughout the social fabric of contemporary Canada, tainting and infecting Canadian institutions such as law, education, and immigration. More importantly, this collection articulates the abiding race-related concerns of an African-descended community, still fettered by the subtle—and not so subtle—restraints spawned by Canada's historic "colour line." The ensemble exposes the extent to which the blight of racism scars the lifescapes of Peoples of African descent. But even more significant, revealing how the ethos of our people allows us to transcend, these writings valorize the survival skills and affirm the collective empowerment and advancement of Blacks in Canada.

Together, the writings constitute a political act of agency that interrogates both institutional power and a Canadian status quo that continues, in myriad polite and covert ways, to engage in "racial gate-keeping" and to "police entrenched racial boundaries." Cognizant of the innumerable ways in which racism contrives to bend established rules so as to withhold validation from Black people, as editor I feel that it is imperative to honor and validate Black people, starting with the capitalization of the descriptor *Black* when it is deployed as a proper noun or adjective, in accordance with well-accepted rules and practices of English grammar.

Even though in Canada, Afrocentric voices in the ivory tower of academe constitute a relatively recent phenomenon, yet Black political, social, and intellectual thought are and have always been a constant reality—despite their being dismissed. The authors of this collection deal with current controversies, practices, and processes. They are retrospective, introspective, and prospective while being simultaneously diagnostic as well as therapeutic and prescriptive. The articles address the contemporary, even as they flip to the historical, and identify ongoing acts of omission and commission that carry social, political, economic, and cultural impact. Introducing new theoretical concepts, the collection also articulates the notion of diasporic sensibility at the same time that it argues prescriptively for diasporic literacy.

In the flagship article, "So Seldom for Us, So Often Against Us: Blacks and Law in Canada," Esmeralda Thornhill contextualizes the collection as she focuses on Canadian legal culture and exposes the obfuscated role of complicity and duplicity that law as an institution has traditionally played with "race" throughout Canadian history. Then, in "*Baker* Revisited," legal

practitioner Roger Rowe continues the scrutiny of law as he critically assesses, in retrospect, the impact, fallout, and legacy of *Baker v. Canada*, the landmark administrative law case that he pleaded before the Supreme Court of Canada.

In "Schooling as Community: Race, Schooling, and the Education of African Youth," George Dei signals the alarming deficits of the present education system, inasmuch as they adversely impact Black youth, and he prescriptively presents cogent arguments for a change in direction predicated on Black community agency, if we are to save our Black youth. Locating Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin as a linchpin at the nexus of Black and Russian studies, Department Chair John Barnstead's "Black Canadian Studies as the Cutting Edge of Change: Rethinking Pushkin, Revisioning Pushkinology" offers us an introspective account of how Black Canadian studies has unexpectedly enriched and expanded the rather inward-looking Russian studies curriculum and the possibilities Black studies holds for higher education.

In "Ghosts in the Canadian Multiculturalism Machine: A Tale of the Absent Presence of Black People," Yvonne Brown recounts her own personal trajectory and journey to enhanced consciousness as she articulates and reifies the ways in which she has experienced and continues to experience the British Colonial Project—a master plan or template she finds encrypted anew in Canada's much-touted policy of multiculturalism. The article "Black Canadian Historical Writing 1970-2006: An Assessment" by David Este provides us with a very informative and useful critical overview of some of the salient contributors to Canadian historiography in its description of the strengths and shortcomings of their work.

In "A Retrospective on the Strengths of African Nova Scotian Communities: Closing Ranks to Survive," Adrienne Lucas Sehatzadeh pries open a small window on "Up the Avenue," a "historically Black," African Nova Scotian community, whose survival is really symbolic of the survival of so many other Black communities in Nova Scotia and across Canada. In order to survive, alienated Black communities in Canada have had to be self-sufficient, self-reliant, and independent; and in "Community Organizing by African Caribbean People in Toronto, Ontario," Amoaba Gooden gives us an account of how early Caribbean immigrants in Toronto organized community, grounded in the concept of *diasporic sensibility*. Shirley Small and Esmeralda Thornhill continue the examination of community in "Harambee! Quebec Black Women Pulling Together." This article puts on the record the little-known story of the initiatives of the Montreal Regional Committee of the Congress of Black Women of Canada, organizing for constructive community change, locally as well as nationally and interna-

tionally. In complementary fashion, Karen Flynn's article, "'I'm Glad That Someone Is Telling the Nursing Story': Writing Black Canadian Women's History," addresses the importance of prioritizing nontraditional sources so as to recover and retrieve the obscured history of Black women in the nursing profession in Canada.

Since literature takes on added importance for marginalized peoples because it openly reflects our *material reality*, the last three articles address the realm of literary fiction. In "'A Geography of the Mind': Black Canadian Women Writers as Cartographers of the Canadian Geographic Imagination," Sharon Beckford throws light on a constellation of Black women writers and their scholarly contributions to our Canadian literary heritage. Nigel Thomas critically examines "Cecil Foster's *Sleep on, Beloved: A Depiction of the Consequences of Racism in Canadian Immigration Policy*"; finally, in "The Possibilities of Home: Negotiating City Spaces in Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For*," Molly McKibbin's assessment serves as a metaphor for the ongoing *material reality* of Black people living in Canada . . . not belonging, and hungering to feel "at home."

A bibliography follows each article, and a filmography listing about 4 dozen National Film Board of Canada films dealing with Blacks in Canada completes this issue's Collection.

It is our hope that this unprecedented issue, "Blacks in Canada: Retrospects, Introspects, Prospects," will prove to be an interesting and useful resource for a broad spectrum of readers. May this first "Canada–United States outreach" generate a series of meaningful diasporic linkages. We Peoples of African descent must continue to construct these bridges, globally, so as to realize true diasporic literacy. Far too many unprobed strands of "racial history" that deserve examination remain in our respective communities and countries!

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