



“We Deh Yah”: Recognizing the Diversity of Black Canadians Through Curriculum

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia. I am a former secondary school teacher from Ontario, Canada. I am a first-generation Black Canadian woman who was raised by Jamaican-born parents in greater Toronto area (GTA). Reflecting on my own K-12 schooling in the GTA, I realize that there was little discussion about how the many immigrant communities in the GTA came to Canada yet, there was heavy emphasis on Canada being a multicultural nation. I appreciate growing up in communities that celebrated cultural diversity but often ignored systemic oppression such as racism. My goal is to support and inspire educators to honor and make space Black Canadian voices and experiences to challenge the ways Blackness has been essentialized. Outside of my professional pursuits I enjoy dancing, taking fitness classes, traveling, spending time with friends and family and participating in Caribbean Carnivals around the world.



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INTRODUCTION

In August 2022, Garvin Yapp, a 57-year-old Black migrant farm worker from Jamaica, was killed while working on a tobacco farm in Ontario. Yapp's untimely and preventable death came just days after Jamaican farm workers penned a letter comparing their working conditions in Southern Ontario to “systematic slavery” (Raza, 2022). Yapp's story represents thousands of Black Caribbean migrant workers who come to Canada each year to work on farms under deplorable conditions. Omar Graham, Ned Pert, William Bell, and Desmond

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McNeil are just a few of the names of Black Jamaican migrant workers who have been killed in the last few decades while working temporarily in Canada (Davidson, 2012). Like in much of the Americas, Black people in Canada, including Black Caribbean immigrants, face “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment,” this is the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 2007).

Though projected as the “Great White North,” stolen Africans were enslaved in Canada and the legacy of this, the afterlife of slavery, permeates its systems and daily lives for Black people (Cooper, 2007; Hartman, 2007; Maynard, 2017a, 2017b). Scholar Saidiya Hartman (2007) first used the concept of the “afterlife of slavery” to underscore how the system of slavery has defined Black life and its worth, which persists today. The deplorable mistreatment and death of Black Caribbean workers in Canada is part of slavery’s afterlife and is reflected in long-standing temporary labour programs between several Caribbean countries and Canada (Maynard, 2017b). Black immigrants, particularly from the Caribbean, are a notable part of Canadian history and the present yet Canadian curriculum often highlights the experiences of Black Americans while failing to interrogate the experiences of Black Canadians (Wright-Maley, 2022).

This essentialization of Black people obscures the lived realities of Black Canadians who often experience antiblackness that is shaped by their intersectional identities, related to citizenship, language, and socioeconomic status (Walcott, 2003). Thus, to truly apprehend and challenge the manifestation of antiblackness in Canada, it is imperative to recognize and understand the diversity of Black Canadians and the legacy of slavery in Canada. The stories of Black Caribbeans are often missing from classrooms. When in reality, “We deh yah!”¹

We are here.

WE DEH YAH: THE DIVERSITY OF BLACK CANADIANS

The population of Black Canadians has doubled in the last 20 years and based on projections will continue to grow. Black Canadians are a diverse population, and this reality is often minimized in Canadian curriculum. In 2019, a Statistics Canada report underscored this diversity noting that “more than 200 ethnic and cultural origins” were reported by Black Canadians. Black Canadians have immigrated from around 125 different countries, with the top countries of birth being Jamaica, Haiti, and Nigeria, in that order respectively (Canada, 2022). Adding on, Black immigrants to Canada list over 100 different languages as their mother tongue (Canada, 2019, 2022). The data serve as insight into the diversity of Black Canada.

Growing up as a first-generation Canadian, I rarely learned about the experiences of Black immigrants like my parents and grandparents who immigrated from Jamaica to Canada in the 1960s. Like Yapp, my grandmother Barbara came to Canada as part of a domestic workers program that Canada had established with eastern Caribbean countries. Instead, through my P-12 education in Ontario, I was only offered narratives about either Black loyalists or Black Americans fleeing enslavement in the United States. What was glar-



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ingly missing were accounts of the experiences of Black Caribbean immigrants, like Yapp and my grandmother, who represent a large percentage of Black Canadians.

THE RESEARCH

Canada's Antiblack Immigration Policies

Black Diaspora scholars such as Hartman (2007) and Sharpe (2016) have named the ways that the enslavement of Black people and, consequently, antiblackness, have and continue to impact the lives of Black people across the Americas. Black Canadian scholars, like Afua Cooper and Robyn Maynard, have more specifically named and challenged the manifestation of antiblackness in Canada and its systems. Maynard (2017b) does this by interrogating Canada's immigration policies that have long been rooted in white supremacy (Maynard, 2017b). Beginning with the late 19th century building up to the present day, she reveals how Canada's immigration policies intentionally excluded Black people and other racialized people, in the name of creating a "white Canada" (Maynard, 2017b), p. 112). Notwithstanding Canada's formal adoption of multiculturalism in 1971, antiblackness persists across its institutions, including immigration (Maynard, 2017b; Walcott, 2003).

Though Canada's Black population continues to increase, Black Canadians are disproportionately underemployed and impoverished (Maynard, 2017b). Mandated multiculturalism did little to change the lived reality for Black Canadians. Canada's temporary labour programs with Caribbean governments, such as the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAWP)², which was established in 1966, is just one example of many highly exploitative temporary labour programs that benefit Canadian businesses at the cost of Black lives, who are not given any of the protections of Canadian labourers (Maynard, 2017b).

Often leaving post-plantation economies in search of ways to financially support their families, Black people from the Caribbean have engaged in such programs, which replicate similar conditions to enslavement (Bergner, 2019; Maynard, 2017b). The Caribbean Domestic Scheme, another exploitative labour program established in 1955, relegated Black Caribbean women to domestic work resulting in subordinate and precarious economic statuses. These women, including my grandmother, were minimally compensated and faced the threat of deportation if they challenged abusive working conditions. Despite this program ending in the 1960s, SAWP and other racist immigration policies continue and undergird antiblackness in Canada. The experiences of Black Caribbeans in Canada are important, yet Canadian curriculum often leaves them out.

Recognizing the many Blacknesses of Canada

Black Canadian scholars have long spoken to the "many Blacknesses of Canada" (Walcott, 2003, p.13). In Rinaldo Walcott's (2003) seminal book *Black Like Who? Writing Black Canada*, he described his intentionality in including accounts of the range of Blackness in Canada from pre-confederate Black migrants to more recent Black immigrants, including Black Caribbeans. Walcott's (2003) work is an example of existing scholarship that has accounted for the diversity of Black Canada (Cooper, 2007; Maynard, 2017a, 2017b; Nelson,



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2010; Winks, 2021). Black History scholar LaGarrett King (2020) notes how Black history is often told through a white lens, maintains the status quo, and “ignores the diversity of Blackness” (p. 337). In order to recognize Black lives, we must account for all Black lives, including Black Caribbeans in Canada (Maynard, 2017b).

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

Acknowledging Canada’s Antiblackness

Through highlighting the diversity of Black Canadians, my hope is that Canadian curriculum and educators can contribute to better representation of the experiences of Black Canadians. To conclude, I offer two ways educational stakeholders, like teachers, can approach recognizing the diversity of Black Canada and challenging antiblackness.

First, educators must take an active role in dispelling the myth of Canada as a tolerant and benevolent society. Palmer (1976) cautioned comparing Canada to the United States as “The history of the treatment of Blacks in Canada is only less dismal because there are fewer Blacks” (p. 525). Educators should draw on the work of scholars of color, namely Aboriginal and Black scholars, who have long held that Canada is built on exclusionary and racist ideals (Maynard, 2017a, 2017b; Walcott, 2003). Even with recent attempts to address antiblackness within Canada, there is still little acknowledgement of it within provincial curricular documents (UFCW Canada, n.d.). While antiblackness is global, its local manifestations must be understood to be challenged (Busey & Dowie-Chin, 2021; Walcott, 2014). Drawing from King’s (2020) “Black Historical Consciousness Principles” table, educators can guide students to explore “power and oppression” in Canada’s institutions using compelling questions such as: How has racism shown up in Canada’s immigration policies? How does SAWP compare to other Canadian labour programs? How has Black enslavement in Canada been addressed in the country? While teaching about power and oppression is needed to highlight oppressive structures, educators must also teach that Black people are not merely victims through teaching about Black resistance and agency (King, 2020).

Second, educators must speak to the diversity of Blackness in Canada. They can begin by drawing on the work of Black Canadian scholars, like the ones mentioned earlier. Additionally, rather than focusing largely on the experiences of Black Canadians born in America, educators need to intentionally include Black Canadians that are representative of the many Blacknesses of Canada (Walcott, 2003). Furthermore, King (2020) encourages educators to “provide a more complete, diverse, and equitable Black history” through the theme of “Black Identities” (p. 340). This can be done by investigating what it means to be Black in Canada. Educators can invite students to critically interrogate concepts of race, citizenship and belonging, and ultimately antiblackness. In sum, educators must engage in a complex geographic reading of Blackness, which “also mean that we acknowledge what it means to be Black in varied societies” (Dei, 2020, p. 10).



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Q & A WITH TIANNA DOWIE-CHIN

Question #1:

Teacher's Question:

You write that "educators can invite students to critically interrogate concepts of race, citizenship, and belonging and ultimately antiblackness". Can you unpack that to provide some examples of how you might do this within the context of studying the Jamaican immigrant experience?

Tianna Dowie-Chin's Response:

One of the ways that educators can invite students to critically engage with antiblackness in Canada is through attending to the complex and intersectional identities of Black Canadians. Using the example of Marvin Yapp and other Jamaican workers who have participated in Canada's Seasonal Agriculture Worker Program (SAWP) since its inception in 1966, teachers can guide students to examine and interrogate Canadian work and immigration policies. This could be done by students exploring immigration policies in order to understand who is afforded citizenship through work programs. Teachers can take a policy like SAWP and have students interrogate this program in relation to the identity of its participants and compare SAWP to other immigration policies.

Using the context of Jamaican immigrants as an example, students could examine Canada's West Indian Domestic Scheme, which was a targeted immigration program from 1955-1967 between Canada and several Caribbean countries, including Jamaica. This policy brought thousands of mainly Black Caribbean women to work as Domestic workers in Canada. To be eligible for the program, these women had to be single, between 18-35, and have an 8th-grade education, amongst other things (Maynard, 2017b).

The program was also critiqued for its strict medical exam and specific attention to the women's marital status. Educators could guide students to consider the criteria for the program as well as what the consequences were for the women and their families to engage in this program. Thousands of Jamaican women, including my grandmother, came to Canada through this program and left behind their families in order to find employment as Jamaica's post-plantation economy could not support its population. This program, amongst other exploitative labour policies, can make way for students to examine Canada's immigration policies beyond its dominant multicultural narratives.

Question #2:

Teacher's Question:

Many educators might argue that the concept of multiple Blacknesses falls under the concept of multiculturalism; that emphasis on multiculturalism in the curriculum has reduced Black Caribbean identity to songs, dance, and food. Canadian curricula have often subsumed ideas of Blackness under this guise. How does antiblackness get manifested in multicultural curriculum and education? And how do you respond to these ideas of the multicultural



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curriculum in Canada?

Tianna Dowie-Chin's Response:

While the concept of multiculturalism has positive aims, its implementation as both a national framework and approach to education and curriculum has failed to challenge Eurocentric ideals by failing to address power and privilege. Antiracism has remained unchallenged and even strengthened by multicultural curricula and education, which often focus on celebrating diversity and highlighting differences while avoiding issues of power and systemic discrimination. For instance, celebrating Caribbean culture and celebrations in classrooms does little to speak to the material conditions of Black Caribbeans in the country. Like other Black communities in the Americas, Black Caribbeans are overrepresented in low-paying jobs and the criminal system in Canada. Canadian curriculum needs to both celebrate multiple Blacknesses while also addressing antiracism. As noted by King (2020), Black joy, resistance, and agency are all important features of Black history; issues of power and privilege cannot be left out. This is why educators must move beyond traditional notions of multiculturalism and make space for counternarratives of Black Canadians that highlight both their differences as well as issues of antiracism.

Question #3:

Teacher's Question:

Beyond simply referring to Black scholars or Black individuals, how might educators bring diverse Black voices into the classroom? How can they account for the complex systematic forms of discrimination that we see with the SAWP program (isolation, lack of citizenship, emphasis on labour, etc.)?

Tianna Dowie-Chin's Response:

In addition to including counternarratives by and about Black people, educators can also incorporate primary texts written and created by Black people in their classrooms. These texts could include letters, stories, oral histories, and art. Educators could utilize these texts in a multitude of ways, including guiding students through a textual analysis of the letter written by Jamaican workers participating in SAWP, in which they compared their current working conditions on Canadian farms to enslavement. This type of analysis would assist educators in troubling the master narrative around Canada's benevolent immigration policies. These texts, in addition to others, can help educators uncover the complex systematic forms of discrimination embedded within these programs. As discussed in this piece, Black Caribbean farm workers often work in deplorable conditions and are not afforded the same protections as other Canadian workers. Narratives offer insight that government documents cannot, and this is why they are a powerful tool to be used in classrooms to speak to the lived experiences of Black people in Canada. The Rita Cox Black and Caribbean Heritage Collection includes thousands of texts focused on Black Caribbean people, particularly within



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the Canadian context. The collection is housed with the Toronto Public Library and could be used to give voice to the experiences of Black Caribbeans in Canada.

Question #4:

Teacher's Question:

The title of your piece, "We Deh Yah," makes an important declaration not only about Black belonging but also language. In what other ways can "We Deh Yah" be used to draw on diverse notions of Blackness within Canada?

Tianna Dowie-Chin's Response:

"We Deh Yah" highlights the diversity of Blackness within Canada by underscoring the fact that Black Canadians speak many different languages, including Jamaican patois, which is used in this piece. Statistics Canada notes that Black Canadians list over 100 languages as their mother tongue. This fact can help educators to question the flattening of Blackness that often centers the experience of Black Americans and renders invisible other Black communities, even within Canada. Additionally, the exploration of language can also incorporate questions of power and privilege in relation to the politics of language.

Educators can ask students to investigate "What constitutes a language and who determines that?" This could lead to discussions around the loss of languages or the failure to have languages formally recognized; many Caribbean countries have struggled to have their languages, including Jamaican patois, positioned as a language. Rather Black languages, from Jamaican patois to Haitian creole, are often regarded as pidgins, or worse, as forms of broken English. Though diverse, as highlighted here, Black communities face similar forms of discrimination as the result of antiblackness, which can also be seen in the politics of language.

Question #5:

Teacher's Question:

Teachers often experience anxiety about adding content to already densely packed curricular outcomes. How might you help teachers to rationalize the tradeoffs necessary to make room for this important topic?

Tianna Dowie-Chin's Response:

Education scholar and theorist, Gloria Ladson-Billings' ([Ladson-Billings, 1995](#)) wrote almost thirty years ago that culturally relevant teaching is "just good teaching!" And unfortunately, since the writing of her seminal piece, Canada's statistics on Black students have also not changed significantly. Black Canadian students are disproportionately pushed out of schools amongst other abysmal educational statistics and educators must see our curriculum as tied to these statistics ([Maynard, 2017a, 2017b](#)). As the well-being and success of students should be our primary concern as educators, teaching fuller and more



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complete histories must be positioned as “just good teaching.” Including counternarratives from various Black Canadian communities allows educators to highlight the diversity of Blackness in Canada while also speaking to antiblackness within its systems. An inclusive and thoughtful approach to teaching can make way for Black Canadian students to not only see themselves as included in Canadian curricula but as belonging as well.

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