

Historical Research Projects on Anti-Black Racism and Cultural Redress

Vignette #2

“Vancouver and the Black Communities: Education” (Wright et al., 2025)



Artwork by Yaimel López Zaldívar[†]

The following historical research project was commissioned by the City of Vancouver’s Social Policy & Projects department in 2024, as part of ongoing work towards addressing and redressing anti-Black racism in Vancouver. The City engaged Dr. Handel Kashope Wright, Director, Centre for Culture, Identity & Education at the University of British Columbia to develop a series of historical research “vignettes,” brief narratives about the various ways the Black and African diaspora communities have contributed to the cultural, economic, political and social tapestry of the City, and experienced harms related to historical segregation, slavery, and colonization, and ongoing systemic discrimination. We extend our appreciation to Dr. Wright and graduate research students Abena Somiah and Chineye Eze for this historical research and insight into future research opportunities.

[†]In 2025, the City commissioned Yaimel López Zaldívar to create a piece of artwork to accompany the City’s anti-Black racism and cultural redress work and provide a meaningful reflection of community. *Artist’s Statement:* The design is a tribute to the optimism, pride and faith in the future of all Afro-descendant people. It is inspired by the excellence of Black people and the rich cultural heritage that Africa has given to Vancouver and the world. It also aims to represent the cohesion, unity and pride that all Black people should have, regardless of their countries of origin, as we are all representatives of traditions that, in many cases, are fundamental to many cultures around the world. The three symbols used were Adinkrahene, Aban and Akoma Ntoaso which represent united hearts, togetherness, leadership, charisma, strength, the seat of power, authority, and magnificence. These symbols move and expand dynamically, just as African culture itself does around the world. The 3D forms allude to the long sculptural tradition of the African continent. The Anna’s hummingbird is the official bird of Vancouver. The colours red, black and green represent Pan-Africanism and are present in the flag of that ideology/movement.

Content warning:

This document includes discussion of topics such as systemic violence, oppression, racism and colonial policies. Some readers may find this material distressing. Please engage with the content in a way that feels appropriate for you.

Historical Research Projects on Anti-Black Racism and Cultural Redress

Vignette #2 - “Vancouver and the Black Communities: Education”

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Vancouver and the Black Communities: Education

Introduction and Context

In the past few years, multiple studies and statistics have shown that anti-black racism in Canada remains acutely experienced in four areas, including “children and youth development; job opportunities and income supports; health and community services; and policing and the justice system” (City of Vancouver, 2022). In Canada like in every other country, education constitutes a fundamental human right and a “key social determinant of health, citizenship, civic participation, and life chances” (Jean-Pierre et al, 2021; City of Vancouver, n.d.). Access to education and quality of education is directly related to “employment outcomes and social mobility,” making questions of equity and inclusion vital to the wellbeing of all Canadian children regardless of race, religion, or background (Jean-Pierre et al, 2021; City of Vancouver, n.d.). This report will discuss how a more equitable and inclusive environment can be reached within current education systems in Vancouver, first by looking at how anti-black racism manifests in Canada’s public and post-secondary schools and then focusing on the current state of education within the Black community in British Columbia and Vancouver.

In 2018, 14% of racialized students who completed the BC Adolescent Health Survey reported experiencing discrimination because of their race, ethnicity, or skin color (Singh et al., 2021; Ministry of Education and Childcare, n.d.). Anti-Black racism against children and youth takes the form of labeling, many frequently labeled as “disruptive, difficult, and/or low-achieving”, which has the effect of capping their potential through biased educational assessments and treatment, leading to “disproportionately low educational attainment, high dropout rates, suspensions and expulsions, and streaming into general and basic-level academic programs rather than advanced programs” (City of Vancouver, 2022). Black children and youth who experience racial discrimination in schools report feeling lower self-confidence, self-esteem, and less hope for the

future (Singh et al., 2021; Rutherford & Daniel, 2021). Additionally, it has been found that Black children are at higher risk of surveillance from teachers, of their parents being reported to child services without proper justification or procedure, and expulsion from class and school (Rutherford & Daniel, 2021). In this sense, provincial K-12 education systems have failed to empower and support Black students. This failure has led to additional systemic barriers in terms of accessing higher education and career opportunities (Statistics Canada 2020; Jean-Pierre et al, 2021; City of Vancouver, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2023). To remediate this problem the disproportionate traumatic impact of racial discrimination on Black youth in the education system must be addressed at all levels of government to create safer, more inclusive learning environments that highlight and uplift the histories and experiences of Black communities in Vancouver, so as to better the mental and social development of all children and youth.

The State of Black Education in K12 Schools

Many Black students in Canadian public schools receive an education that is separate and unequal from that of their peers (Hampton, 2012; Turner, 2023), steeped in a legacy of segregation and anti-Blackness—a disparity that has gone largely unchanged for decades (Hampton, 2012; Cameron & Jeffries, 2021). With majority White teachers and Eurocentric curricula—largely ignoring Canada’s history of enslavement and segregation (Hampton, 2012; Parents of Black Children Canada, 2021; Turner, 2023)—students report feeling unwelcome and unseen. Only 54% of Black students report feeling supported by their teachers (Rankin et al., 2013). Often seen as a threat to the education of their White peers (Maynard, 2017), Black youth—especially Black boys—face more frequent, severe punishments (Cameron & Jefferies, 2021).

British Columbia’s curriculum defines “core competencies” and “curricular competencies” as the knowledge that students are “expected to have acquired by the end of the course” (Turner, 2023). As of 2016, the demands of BC’s social studies curriculums do not highlight Black history, culture and identity as content that is important to include in K-12 curriculum. If we refer to the Ministry of Education’s list of curricular competencies and content directives for BC schools, children from kindergarten onwards are expected to know about “diverse characteristics of communities and cultures in Canada and around the world, including at least one Canadian First Peoples community and culture”. It should be noted that the Eurocentric curriculum is currently being broadened, as shown by the inclusion of Indigenous and South Asian people within mandatory class content. But while this directive opens the floor to learning about the diversity of Canadian society, the first mention of “Africa” within the curriculum only happens in Grade 7, and there is no mention of a study of Black, African Canadian populations or their contributions. Nowhere in these directives is there mention of Africans as an indigenous group of people to their continent in topic discussions of global indigenous people and cultures. This first mention of the African continent and its

peoples also occurs within a context of learning about “ancient” cultures and human development from an anthropological perspective. From this example, we can think about how the teaching around Africa from this perspective could have the effect of temporally peripheralizing the continent and its peoples, rendering Africans and their descendants “apart” in space and time from other communities of racialized people in Canada. The next time African diasporas are mentioned is in the curriculum suggestions for Grade 9 classes: in talking about “discriminatory policies and injustices in Canada and the world, such as the Head Tax, the *Komagata Maru* incident, residential schools, and World War I internment”, at no point is slavery or the displacement of African peoples mentioned as a history of importance. The way in which Black history and contributions of Black communities to British Columbia and Vancouver’s society and development goes unmentioned, or is made a peripheral, last minute thought, invisibilizes Black children in the classroom. Black children are made to feel that their identities, communities, and histories are not counted as part of Canada’s multicultural past and present. The absence of Black presence in K-12 curriculums impacts the growth of not only Black children, but all children, since all students do not learn about or get to recognize the importance of the Black diaspora’s contributions to Canada’s development and future.

The State of Education in Postsecondary Institutions

Among the ten largest municipalities in Canada, Vancouver has the second highest rate of post-secondary education, after the City of Ottawa, with 73% of Vancouverites between the ages of 25 and 64 having some form of post-secondary credential as of 2016 (Memo, City of Vancouver 2016 Census). However, in a census done the same year by Statistics Canada, Black women and men in Vancouver were less likely to hold a bachelor’s degree or higher levels of education compared to women and men in the rest of the population — a difference of about 10 percentage points in both cases. Additionally, it was found that although 94% of Black youth in Canada aged 15 to 25 aspire to get a bachelor’s degree or higher, only 60% actually believed themselves capable of obtaining one (Cameron & Jefferies, 2021). Black students’ perceptions about their educational attainment potential may be influenced, among other things, by the treatment they received from certain teachers and other professionals in the school system prior to their arrival in postsecondary (Rutherford & Daniel, 2021).

Vancouver is home to the University of British Columbia, one of Canada’s leading post-secondary institutions, a multiracial, multicultural and multilingual institution that welcomes 68,498 students from Canada and abroad (UBC President’s Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence, 2022). UBC is home to a well-established Asian research institute and Asian studies program, as well as an undergraduate degree program in First Nations and Indigenous Studies (FNIS), established in 2001 (Home First Nations and Indigenous Studies, 2024). The presence of these

programs and spaces of learning are positive and needed indications of the institution's support of diversity and inclusion. However, the Black community has so far not been made a part of this expansive inclusion project, as UBC currently has no program aimed at the study of Black diasporas or Black Canadian history. Established in 2005, UBC's African studies program currently only holds a minor, whose requirements comprise four courses (About | African Studies Minor, 2024).

Current Initiatives Towards Redressing this Problem

In order to address interpersonal and systemic racism in BC's school system, in 2021 the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Care began working with the Anti-Racism Learning Resource Advisory Committee to identify resources that promote a more comprehensive understanding of anti-racism, human rights, diverse cultural experiences, histories, and contributions (Ministry of Education and Childcare, 2023). This Committee is made up of representatives of diverse community organizations, including the BC Holocaust Education Centre, BC Black History Awareness Society, First Nations Education Steering Committee, and the National Association of Japanese Canadians (Ministry of Education and Childcare, 2023). In working with this committee, the K-12 Anti-Racism Action Plan was set into motion that same year (Singh et al., 2021). Using this multi-year framework, the Ministry of Education aims at dismantling systemic racism in the K-12 provincial education sector through several actions, including community roundtables, the embedding of anti-racism reporting requirements within strategic plans, the crafting of inclusion calendars to supplement district and school calendars in a diverse way, anti-racism training for educators, staff and ministry, and the inventory of curriculum resources (Singh et al., 2021; Ministry of Education and Childcare, 2023; BC's Redesigned Curriculum, n.d.).

On a post-secondary level, establishing Black and African studies programs across Canada has been a slow endeavor, but one that has been gradually gaining traction: since 2016, several Canadian universities including York, Queens and Dalhousie have put forward Black African Diaspora and even Black Canadian Studies programs. Additional diplomas, courses and programs have been announced since then and are in the works across other Canadian universities on the East Coast. In Vancouver, UBC launched its Black Faculty Cohort Hiring Initiative in 2023, pledging to hire a total of 23 new Black scholars over the course of 4 years in accordance with the recommendation of its Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence Task Force, to develop a strategy aimed at advancing Black excellence (recommendation #13) (*Black Faculty Cohort Hiring Initiative | Vice President Academic*, 2023). In 2022, it was recommended on behalf of UBC's Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence Taskforce that the University establish a Black studies program, as well as improve Black student mental health and wellness (UBC President's Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence, 2022). To this end, the Black Student Space, an identity-affirming space

available only for Black undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled at the UBC Vancouver campus was opened by the Office of the Vice-President Students and the Centre for Student Development and Leadership in 2023 (*Black Student Space*, 2024).

Locally, grassroots organizations such as the British Columbia Black Educational Leaders Association (BCBELA), BC Black History Awareness Society, and the Hogan's Alley Society, have events, resources and partnerships aimed at empowering Black educators and students by uplifting Black voices and histories (Tung, 2024; BC Black History Awareness Society, n.d.; Hogan's Alley Society, n.d.). For example, the BC Black History Awareness Society (BCBHAS) provides teaching information, guides and materials on their website, including an online exhibit named "BC Black Pioneers: Their Industry and Character Influenced the Vision of Canada" and is a founding member of the BC Black History Curriculum Committee (BCBHCC). Formed in 2020, the aim of the BCBHCC is to influence the Ministry of Education to include Canadian Black history intentionally in the BC curriculum "to create a more fully rounded citizenry and diminish the impacts of acute and systemic anti-Black racism throughout the province of British Columbia." (BC Black History Awareness Society, n.d.).

Future Directions:

The issue of systemic anti-Black racism in the BC education system is not just one of a lack of Black representation/presence in schools, but about visibility in the minds of youth as a whole. Being absent from the curriculum both at K-12 level and tertiary education level has real and serious consequences and impacts on Black students (who are affected most directly) and all students for how they see their communities and society.

Currently, there is yet to be an official Black Studies program including a major and minor option, or diploma that is inclusive of Black Canadian and Black African histories and cultures within BC's major post-secondary institutions. In the BC K-12 curriculum there is a lack of clear recommendations for the inclusion of Black history and culture within required content, in the same way the history of Vancouver's Japanese, Chinese and South Asian communities are (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016; Turner, 2023; BC's Redesigned Curriculum, n.d.). Teaching children and youth about Canada's multicultural history and present necessitates that the Indigenous communities and communities of color that make up British Columbian society are given equal mention within the curriculum, to further emphasize how multicultural cohesion and solidarity can grow and continue to occur on Indigenous, unceded territory (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016; Turner, 2023).

Going forward, the City of Vancouver might want to think about what is being done within its boundaries in terms of making Black presence acknowledged in schools, and the ways it can be

done through the curriculum. In order to further the objective of societal redress, it is imperative for the British Columbia Ministry of Education and Child Welfare, the Province and the City of Vancouver work towards giving importance to teaching about historical and contemporary local, provincial and national Blackness in K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions, in a way that details the diversity and impact of Canada's Black communities and history. Additional communication with local representatives from Black community organizations around Vancouver would be of great use to develop new curriculums and pedagogical policies that would assert Black children and youth's place in school and Canadian civic society in the long run. Lastly, it would be key to expand these conversations to school boards and city governance across British Columbia.

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