

Historical Research Projects on Anti-Black Racism and Cultural Redress

Vignette #4

“Vancouver and the Black Communities: Housing” (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 #4 - “Vancouver and the Black Communities: Housing”

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Vancouver and the Black Communities: Housing

Introduction and Context

In 2019, the National Housing Security Act declared the right to adequate housing as a fundamental human right affirmed in international law (Randle et al, 2021). “Adequate housing” is defined as affordable and secure housing that is “habitable,” “provides access to basic infrastructure;” is located close to the tenants “employment, services and amenities;” is “accessible for people of all abilities;” and finally, is “culturally appropriate.” The experience of finding and getting access to housing that fits these criteria varies greatly across Canada, especially with the price of both homeownership and rent skyrocketing across the country. Two cities that have been consistently ranked high on global lists in terms of their costs of living have been Toronto and Vancouver. They ranked highest in Canada, and ranked globally 92nd and 101st most expensive cities in the world according to the 2024 Mercer Cost of Living City Ranking (Dabu, 2024). Despite these factors, we can still see different communities across Canada experiencing unequal access to housing that is safe, secure and clean. In 2023, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, reported that “economic barriers, cultural differences, and discrimination by landlords and real estate agents” all continue to “reinforce racial and ethnic segregation in urban housing” (Center for Equality Rights in Accommodation, 2021; Springer, 2021; Tesolin, 2023). In particular, Black and African diasporic communities across Canada and the US have historically been affected by displacement due to “targeted revitalization and/or urban renewal” projects led by the cities or municipalities they reside in, and continue to be the target of or face the consequences of this targeting as they search for places to call home (City of Vancouver, 2022).

An early and prominent episode of racially discriminative housing in Canada occurred prior to the country’s independence in 1867, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. After the American Revolution in the late 18th century, many Black people who fought on the side of the British were offered land in Nova

Scotia and upon arrival established what became known as Africville (Mcrae, 2022; Nelson, 2020; Tesolin, 2023). These newcomers were promised “their own land and liberty following a grueling war,” but while they did receive some of the promised land to live on, their presence was met with protest from the “already established white settler community” which “pushed many of these Black settlers to almost inhabitable lands” (Tesolin, 2023). In face of this situation, Africville’s Black community chose to persevere and sustain the development of their home, even though as they developed it and paid their taxes, they were not allowed to access basic homeownership amenities, including “sewage, access to clean water, and garbage disposal” (Mcrae, 2022; Nelson, 2020; Tesolin, 2023). These conditions, in addition to the City of Halifax choosing to construct “undesirable buildings and sites like a garbage dump, prison, and an infectious disease center” all in close proximity to Africville, led to the neighborhood’s decline, destruction and the displacement of its Black community into Halifax’s government housing (Mcrae, 2022; Nelson, 2020; Tesolin, 2023). Sunday Miller, former Executive Director of the Africville Heritage and Trust, states that residents of Africville were “stripped of their dignity when they became a ward of the government”, as even though residents of Africville already lived in poverty due to lack of government assistance, “the destruction of the neighborhood pushed residents into a steeper economic and social decline” (Tesolin, 2023).

On a larger scale, according to Statistics Canada, in 2021 around 382,100 Black people (29%) were reported to be living in “unsuitable housing”, meaning that there were “not enough bedrooms in the dwelling to meet the needs of their household,” according to the National Occupancy Standard (NOS) (Randle et al, 2021). This number was “more than three times higher than the proportion of the total population” living in unsuitable housing, which was 9% (Randle et al. 2021). Additionally, Canada’s Homeless Hub research center found that Black people in Canada experience the highest rate of homelessness of any racialized community in Canada after Indigenous Peoples, with 15.4% of homeless youth in Canada being Black as of 2021 (Homeless Hub, 2024; Government of Canada, 2022b). Black and Afro descendant people have also been found to be twice as likely as white people to “experience unsheltered homelessness”, and this proportion is even higher for Black women (Center for Equality Rights in Accommodation, 2021; Government of Canada, 2022a).

The history of housing discrimination in British Columbia and Vancouver

Located on the unceded traditional territories of the x^wməθk^wəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓xwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations, the city of Vancouver is made up of 22 smaller neighborhoods, inhabited by a number of communities, each with a history of how they came to be, and today provide different services to the communities they serve (City of Vancouver, 2024). One of these communities was Black Strathcona, better known as Hogan’s

Alley, which used to be located around today's Chinatown and Strathcona areas. During its peak in the 1940s, Black Strathcona was home to around 800 Black residents, its community comprised of "descendants of Black immigrants from California who had originally settled in Victoria and nearby Salt Spring Island", in addition to "Black homesteaders from Oklahoma and Black railway porters who worked for Great Northern Railway" (Bailey et al. 2020). It included community areas such as the African Methodist Episcopal Chapel and Vie's Chicken and Steak House, where Jimi Hendrix's grandmother Nora Hendrix, a vaudevillian performer and choir singer, worked as a cook, in addition to a residence dedicated to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (CBC News, 2024). However, city planning initiatives in the 1970s, notably the construction of the Georgia and Dunsmuir viaducts, led to mass displacement of its residents, who were denied business licenses, mortgagees and even garbage pickup following this decision (CBC News, 2024).

In addition to municipally mandated displacement, Black people and other people of color have found themselves affected by covenants (i.e. agreements by lease, deed, or other legal contracts) barring racialized people from living in certain areas, notably West Vancouver (Vauclair, 2021). Originating in 19th century California and Massachusetts, race based, and other identity based restrictive covenants "have been written into the deeds of millions of homes" across North America, well into the 20th Century, their aim being "to restrict the sale, occupation, and use of land on the basis of sex, race, nationality, religion, etc." (Vauclair, 2021). As a result, infrastructural racism has been able to prevent minorities from settling in "desirable" neighborhoods (Vauclair, 2021).

Black community members in Ontario have reported facing stereotyping that eliminates them from the application processes of renting - one of said prejudices they face as within the rental market is the belief from landlords that they are "criminals or have too many children", which directly affects their chances of getting selected for tenancy (Springer, 2021; Tesolin, 2023). These stereotypes could very well still affect the housing prospects of Black and Afro-descendent Canadians all over the country, but it is difficult to gain a grasp of how much as Canada is "reluctant to collect race-based data" (Oduro-Marfo et al., 2021; Springer, 2021; Tesolin, 2023). Today, Black newcomer immigrants coming to British Columbia hoping to pursue educational or work opportunities, unaware of the barriers to access they will face, encounter difficulty with access to housing and are unable to draw on community support when seeking housing, as there is "limited institutionalized Black community support for newcomers in terms of housing." (Oduro-Marfo et al., 2021; Springer, 2021).

The displacement of Black and Afro diaspora communities to different areas of Vancouver, or even outside the city entirely, has led to "a wide dispersal of people of African descent across the lower mainland" (City of Vancouver, 2022). The larger geographic distance created among

community members, and away from neighborhoods they established themselves, has as a result made “community and connection difficult to establish and maintain” among Black community members in Vancouver, thus negatively impacting the “establishment of cultural organizations”, their “visible presence in Vancouver”, and the development of Black/African cultural communities (City of Vancouver, 2022). In addition to this, it has been shown that the displacement Black people have been subjected to across Vancouver, and the anti-Black racism they face as they search for housing in the city has also contributed to “significantly less intergenerational wealth being created and transferred in Vancouver’s Black communities” in comparison to other communities of color and the white community (City of Vancouver, 2022). Much like a vicious cycle, this has then had an impact on home ownership and hence on “housing tenure, prosperity and security” (City of Vancouver, 2022).

Current initiatives towards housing justice

Diverse households make Vancouver “vibrant and unique”, but the diversity that makes it so is “being placed at risk by the current housing crisis” in addition to the long-standing and systemic inequities that continue to affect the City’s Black community (Bond, 2021). To remediate this, the City of Vancouver launched a “Social Housing Initiative”, aiming to make it “faster and easier for non-profits to get approvals for social housing projects” (City of Vancouver, 2024b). Prior to this, in partnership with BC Housing, the City of Vancouver completed phase one of a “*Rapid Response to Homelessness* programme”, which would create “600 new temporary modular supportive homes in 13 buildings across ten different sites in Vancouver,” and would provide support from “experienced non-profit housing providers” (Bond, 2021). Notably, one of these buildings “prioritizes black and Indigenous residents,” and “another two projects prioritize women with experience of homelessness” an important initiative considering that Indigenous and Black communities in Canada are disproportionately affected by homelessness (Bond, 2021; Homeless Hub, 2024).

The erasure of the thriving neighborhood of Black Strathcona was acknowledged by the City of Vancouver in 2018 through its Northeast False Creek Plan (NEFC) which aims to “replace the Georgia and Dunsmuir viaducts with a new street network”, and is the “first official city document to publicly recognize historic discrimination toward the Black community and their displacement from Hogan's Alley” (CBC News, 2024). In addition to this acknowledgement, the City has been working with the Hogan’s Alley Society a non-profit organization composed of “civil rights activists, business professionals, community organizations, artists, writers and academics committed to daylighting the presence of Black history in Vancouver and throughout British Columbia” to redevelop and revitalize the historical neighborhood (HAS, 2024). In 2022, the HAS signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the City of Vancouver that “set out the

terms for the negotiation of a long-term lease” for what will be called the “Hogan’s Alley Block” (HAS, 2024). HAS is also in the process of establishing a non-profit Community Land Trust, aiming to “provide affordable housing, small and social enterprise spaces, cultural amenities, and other infrastructure elements” to “redress displacement and prevent gentrification”, which has “disproportionately impacted Black communities across Canada” (HAS, 2024). Hogan’s Alley Society is also the “lead operating partner” of Nora Hendrix Place, “a 52-home temporary modular social housing development on the Hogan’s Alley Block, which prioritizes Black and Indigenous people who are at risk of or currently homeless” and would hopefully provide “permanent housing” to those in the community land trust (HAS, 2024). In addition to the spaces it is building for the purpose of increasing the Black and Afro descendant community’s capacity to effectively participate in Vancouver’s growth and development, the Hogan’s Alley Society also offers a Housing Support Program that provides “intervention and advocacy for the Metro Vancouver Black/African diaspora” who have “emergency housing needs”. This program also helps members of the Black community at risk of experiencing homelessness and housing uncertainty to “avert eviction” (HAS, 2024).

On a smaller scale, Black community members like educator Shayla Bird have also been doing their part to increase the awareness around Vancouver’s historic neighborhoods by conducting educational neighborhood tours of Hogan’s Alley during Black History Month (Norman & Bower, 2024).

Looking towards the future: Supporting Black families and Black housing safety

To address Black renter’s barriers to accessing equitable housing, more resources, informing Black renters of the legal support and advocacy support they could access after experiencing housing discrimination or search for alternatives are needed (Center for Equality Rights and Accommodation, 2022). More research should also be done to better understand the needs and changing circumstances of long term and newly arrived Black Vancouver residents as they navigate in an increasingly competitive housing market (Choi & Ramaj, 2022). More meaningful conversations must be had with Black renters about their experiences, in a way that would generate “targeted policies and funding that would ensure purpose-built and culturally appropriate housing for Black communities” as well as “policies to resolve the eviction crisis. Mechanisms must also be put in place for the monitoring and investigation of discriminatory housing practices, and further support and resources must be created for Black newcomers to Vancouver as they navigate their new home (Oduro-Marfo et al., 2021; Panou et al., 2023). It would be interesting to see a database of racially restrictive covenants still located in Vancouver so that more initiative can be taken to remove them, in collaboration with tenants and affected communities.

Lastly, it is important to note that displacement of Black tenants and renters from the city of Vancouver, in addition to a lack of recognition of the city's Black historical neighborhood has led to a pervasive perception from both long-term residents and newcomers to the city that "there are very few Black people living in Vancouver," a harmful historical dismissal of Black presence that persists to the present day. This constitutes a double erasure of Blackness: a physical displacement of Blacks and a failure to recognize the presence and contributions of historical and present-day Blacks. This double harm must be mitigated and redressed through housing policy as well as a greater push for education around historical and contemporary Black community presence in Vancouver, and the contributions of African diasporic communities to the City's cultural and economic prosperity.

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