

## Historical Research Projects on Anti-Black Racism and Cultural Redress

### Vignette #3

#### “Vancouver and the Black Communities: Employment” (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 #3 - “Vancouver and the Black Communities: Employment”**

Wright, H.K., Somiah, A., & Eze, C. (2025), University of British Columbia, Centre for Culture, Identity and Education.



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

## **Vancouver and the Black Communities: Employment**

### **Introduction and Context**

According to Section 2 of Canada’s federal Employment Equity Act (Legislative Services Branch, 2021) equality in the workplace is defined as no person being “denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability” and in order to fulfill that goal nationwide, the “conditions of disadvantage in employment” experienced by Indigenous peoples, women, people with disabilities, and “members of visible minorities” must be corrected through “special measures and the accommodation of differences” (Legislative Services Branch, 2021). Anti-Black racism in Canada, rooted in systems of colonialism, continues to manifest itself today in the current social, economic, and political marginalization of Black Canadians and African Canadians, taking the form of unequal opportunities for jobs and education, an overall lower socio-economic status compared to the Caucasian majority, “higher unemployment,” and “significant poverty rates” (City of Vancouver, 2022). This report addresses the employment of Black people in Vancouver and will give an overview of the national situation around anti-Blackness in the workplace and its implications for Vancouver’s Black communities. In addition, the report will look at how traditional and untraditional forms of employment is an important topic for how Black communities in Vancouver support themselves. It is important to contextualize Vancouver’s current employment inequities as it relates to the national situation – the conditions Black communities face across Canada in the realm of employment are replicated, to a large extent, locally in Vancouver. As such this piece will draw on the national and provincial data and characteristics to draw conclusions for their implications for Vancouver’s Black communities.

While labor market experiences of Black people in Canada are “just as diverse as the Black population” varying between recently immigrated African communities, long settled African Canadians, and settled Black Canadians of Caribbean descent, the socioeconomic conditions of

Canada's Black population are generally lower than the "non-racialized" population (Creese, 2009; Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023b; Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2024b). As of 2020, the annual wages, earnings and employment of Black populations in Canada are on average lower than the rest of the population (City of Vancouver, 2022). In Vancouver despite the Black population only constituting around 1% of the general population, the 2020 City of Vancouver's Social Indicators Profile indicated that of the 20% of Vancouver residents who experience income poverty, 29% of them are Black. In other words, Black people in Vancouver are 45% "more likely to have incomes below the poverty line" (City of Vancouver, 2022). Addressing inequalities in employment access for Black populations in Vancouver will mitigate the long-term harm this will have on generations of Black families. As of 2016, there are "close to two times more Black children living in a low-income situation (31.9%), compared with children in the rest of the population" (Statistics Canada, 2020). This report will look at the current state of Black employment in Vancouver, the factors that have led to this situation, current initiatives meant to rectify the situation, and lastly, consider what more can be done by the City to better include its Black community into the labor market.

### **Characteristics of and Factors Affecting Black Employment in Vancouver**

When considering employment and labor inequality in Vancouver, much like the rest of Canada, we need to take into account the varying circumstances that impact the social mobility of Black populations in Canada (Llewellyn-Thomas, 2018). These factors include education access, gender, language and immigration status, and more recently, the pandemic and subsequent business closures and mass firings. All of these factors are at play in the disparities in employment not just between Black peoples and the majority Caucasian population, but also within the Black communities (Llewellyn-Thomas, 2018; Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2021). To begin with, disparities in access to education highlight some of these differences within Black groups: in 2023, it was reported that Black people of "Canadian-origin" aged 25 to 54 years (16%) are less likely to hold a bachelor's degree or higher degree than Black people of Caribbean-origin (27%) and of African-origin (46%) (Government of Canada Statistics Canada, 2023b).

The differences in educational attainment were associated with comparatively "higher earnings for the African-origin Black population and lower earnings for the Canadian-origin Black population" (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023b). Differences in "educational attainment" is the largest source of wage gaps between different Black populations. According to Statistics Canada, in 2023 differences in educational background accounted for a difference of "approximately \$8,000" in terms of annual wages between the highest-educated (in this case of African-origin) and lowest-educated (Black people of Canadian-origin) Black populations, for both women and men (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023b). Outside

of the Black community, Canadian-born Black populations were more likely be in “lower-skilled jobs relative to their education and/or work part-time or part year”, compared with White colleagues whose parents are both born in Canada (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023b). Overall, the unemployment rate for the Black population, (both women and men), as of 2016 is approximately one and a half times higher than that of the rest of the population (Statistics Canada, 2020).

There have also been links established between immigration status and job inequality, as reflected in studies conducted on the labor integration of immigrants in Canada (Rudder, 2008; Mensah, 2022; Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2024). Despite being invited by the immigration system to bridge the gap of the labour market, African immigrants, like Latin American and Asian immigrants, are faced with systemic and structural racism and racialization compared to White people immigrating from Europe or the United States of America (Ngwenya, 2018). For example, upon arrival in Canada, Black immigrants professionally trained outside of the country often face nonrecognition of their “foreign” qualifications and experience as well as racial and ethnic prejudice (Ngwenya, 2018). “Credentialization” used by government policy systems, is a huge challenge for Black immigrants, such that Black immigrants with university degrees have been found to have greater difficulties finding suitable employment than similarly qualified immigrants from European countries (Ngwenya, 2018). In Vancouver, credentialization and workplace discrimination related to race and nationality can also take the form of linguistic discrimination. According to indicators from the 2021 Census of Population, nearly 12% of workers in Vancouver regularly use a language other than English at their workplace, demonstrating the diversity of Vancouver’s workforce (O’Donnell & Singh, 2023; Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2024b). According to a 2010 study, over 80% of fluent English speakers of African origin immigrants to Vancouver identified their accents as a barrier to equal treatment, especially in the labor market, in terms of accessing desirable jobs, certain fields of employment or just being employed in general (Creese; 2009; Creese, 2010). It has been found that African immigrant youth and adults across Canada have been screened out during the hiring process, their accents and names impacting whether or not a job is offered, and even face discrimination after the job is obtained for the same reasons (Creese, 2010; Oreopoulos & Dechief, 2012; Zaami & Madibbo, 2021). To rectify employment disparities and inequities we need to consider the varied backgrounds and needs of Black Canadian populations seeking to contribute to the labour market in Vancouver.

### **Current State of Black Inclusion in Traditional Employment Sectors**

In 2021, Black men were recorded to be working across the economy and in a variety of occupations (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2021). Around 27.5% of Black men in

Canada work as tradesmen, or transport or equipment operators, which is comparable to the amount of non-visible minority men who work in the same sector (27.4%) (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2021). A smaller percentage work in natural and applied sciences (12%) and in the corporate sector, Black men are about “40% less likely to work in management occupations than non-visible minority men” (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2021). For Black women, almost one-third of them find employment in health care and social assistance (31.7%), and around 81.2% of these women were immigrants (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2021). In comparison, over 22.9 percent of non-visible minority women worked in this industry (ibid, 2021).

There are also jobs that are indications of Black people not only being employed but also creating employment for other members of the Black and non-Black communities in Vancouver (e.g. through Black owned businesses). As of 2018, it is estimated that around 66,880 businesses in Canada are Black owned (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023a). Black business owners in Canada account for around 2.1% of all business owners (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023a). The majority are men (70.4%), immigrants (61.4%) and are in Ontario (50.6%) or Quebec (23.3%) (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023a). There are currently no exhaustive lists or statistics that specify the number of Black owned businesses in B.C. but between 2005 and 2018, the number of self-employed Black people has increased across Canada, including Black business owners in Vancouver (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023a). Some examples of Black owned businesses in Vancouver include God’s Gift Coiffure, Farafena Food Distribution, and Mawogan Fashion (Diment, 2023). Despite this, Black owned businesses remain smaller in size and tend to perform less well financially compared to those owned by White people and other racialized individuals (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2023a).

### **What is Currently Being Done: New Paths and the Importance of Community Leaders**

If we think about current work to sustain Black employment, or work that is being done around the Black community in Vancouver, it is important to consider that Black Vancouverites are engaged not only in traditional employment but also non-traditional forms of employment. This means that in addition to identifying Blacks in the traditional public and private sector, it is important to also include Blacks working in and indeed creating employment in non-traditional forms.

Among notable Black community workers around Vancouver, we have Barbara Chirinos, an activist and film expert who notably launched VIFF’s Black History Month film series in 2012 (Furminger, 2018). There is also the work of Marcus Mosley, a gospel singer and leader of the

Marcus Mosely Ensemble music troupe who has led gospel workshops across Canada, uplifting the Black community through song and arts (Marcus Mosely Music, 2024). The work of Jacky Essembe is also of great importance to recognize: a professional dancer, speaker and TV and radio show host, as well as community organizer, she has put together workshops and fitness courses based around African culture and dance for people of all ages and genders (Roots and Blues, 2024).

We can also cite those involved in higher education and cultural production through writing, such as Wayde Compton, an activist, fiction writer, literary critic and professor at University of Victoria, who has addressed Blackness, including Black BC, e.g. *Bluesprint* (Compton, 2001); and David Chariandy, a writer and English professor at Simon Fraser University who has published important work on the Black experience in Vancouver, such as *I've Been Meaning to Tell You: A Letter to my Daughter* (Chariandy, 2018). Among community members who are also engaged in the sector of higher education, we also have Vanessa Richards, June Francis and Handel Kashope Wright, whose contributions have been indispensable to the growth of Black excellence inside and outside of the university. Vanessa Richards identifies as a “transdisciplinary artist facilitator initiating or contributing to cultural projects that move people towards life-affirming change,” who has worked for Kwi Awt Stelmexw Language + Arts Society for the Squamish People, the City of Vancouver Black History Month Advisory, was a founding director of the Hogan’s Alley Society and is currently an instructor at Simon Fraser University (SFU, 2024). Dr. June Francis, a professor at the SFU Beedie School of Business, is the Director of the Institute for Black and African Diaspora Research and Engagement, and cofounded the The Co-Laboratorio to address the “structural barriers to participation of Indigenous, Black and other racialized groups – in workplace culture, marketing, supply-chains, policy, programs, partnerships and service designs” (SFU, 2024). And a final example, Dr. Handel Kashope Wright is professor of Education at UBC and founder and director of the UBC Centre for Culture, Identity and Education (<https://ccie.educ.ubc.ca/>) which does a lot of work on local and national Blackness and also advocates for inclusion of Black studies in both K-12 and post-secondary curricula (e.g. British Columbia Black History Curriculum Collective). He has also conducted anti-racist work with the City of Vancouver and the BC Ministry of Education and Child Welfare. Much of the work on Blackness undertaken by community and academic activists is unpaid, undertaken in addition to full time work and inspired by dedication to addressing Blackness locally (and sometimes nationally and even internationally).

## **The Future of Black Employment in Vancouver**

The City of Vancouver's Black and African Diaspora Community Advisory Committee<sup>1</sup> recommended that the City also ensure that workspaces are not only safe spaces but also environments which actively work to break down systemic barriers, are de-colonial, and support Black professionals (City of Vancouver, 2022). This recommendation stems from a desire to mitigate the harm experienced by Black people in Vancouver who “overcome systemic barriers in hiring processes” and frequently report “entering unwelcoming workspaces with the added and unreasonable expectation to tackle the anti-Black racism that they must also navigate silently” (City of Vancouver, 2022). These struggles lead to “exhaustion, stress, mental duress, earning gaps, reduced earnings over time, unemployment, and underemployment” (City of Vancouver, 2022). These stressors within and related to employment impede on the career progression and ambitions of Black people in Vancouver. It is critical to state that tackling inequities in Black employment is not just a labor force issue but also about the survival and overall long-term wellbeing of Black families.

In order to sustain and increase Black employment opportunities, there is a need to not only decrease barriers to education pathways, that could give Black populations of all backgrounds an equal opportunity for a higher income, but to also consider immigration disparities that make it more difficult for Black immigrants to be integrated into the City's labor market. Further research needs to be generated, more routinely, in collaboration with Vancouver's Black communities as to how education inequality is manifested within the K-12 system, especially regarding the effects of non-Black inclusive syllabi on both Black and non-Black children and youth. In addition to this, the City of Vancouver must also find ways to nurture and honor Black excellence that is already occurring, that is vital to sustaining the Black community in Vancouver. Specifically, research and literature must be generated and distributed widely on the accomplishments of Black community members who work in all sectors. Research is needed to create coherent and current lists of Black businesses so as to increase their visibility and support, and possibly to help them generate networks among themselves. It would be interesting to see data on how many Black community members engage in community work alongside their jobs for a low fee or for free, to take into account the additional labor needed to support these communities and get a better idea of how to sustain them and prevent the overburdening of community members. The question then is how the City can honor the work that is being done by Black community members and leaders and create spaces for others to start this work, or to stay and continue the work they are already doing. It is important to consider how Vancouver can become a place where

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<sup>1</sup> The Black and African Diaspora Community Advisory Committee is known as Anti-Black Racism and Cultural Redress Community Advisory Committee, since 2024.

Black activists can stay and continue to contribute to community building; to do so, more visibility needs to be generated around their important work.

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