

Historical Research Projects on Anti-Black Racism and Cultural Redress

Vignette #1

“Vancouver and the Black Communities: Recreational & Community Spaces” (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 #1 - “Vancouver and the Black Communities: Recreational & Community Spaces”

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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Vancouver and the Black Communities: Recreational & Community Spaces

Introduction and Context

Marginalized communities are disproportionately experiencing the impacts of the post-pandemic recession (Mohamed, 2023). This makes investments into social infrastructures like community centres, art spaces, and cultural events a worthwhile approach to both social and economic recovery that “all levels of governments should pursue to avoid bolstering already urgent levels of inequality in our major cities” (Mohamed, 2023). After the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and subsequent global uprisings, combined with a global pandemic and accompanying confinements and business shutdowns, the importance of gathering spaces, and of opportunities to connect with others in person, have become more crucial than ever before (AACCCS, 2022; Mohamed, 2023; SCCR & II, 2022). More than finding spaces to mourn and heal from large tragedies as a community, it is important to think of inclusive recreational and leisure spaces as places where Black joy can be created and celebrated in multiple ways, and members of the Black community can access skills and resources in ways they would otherwise not be privy to (SCCR & II, 2022).

In thinking of historical Black space in Vancouver, “Hogan’s Alley” readily comes to mind. Black Strathcona, commonly called Hogan’s Alley, was a community established by Black immigrants from California who settled in BC during the early 1900s (Web, 2024). This neighborhood became a “vibrant cultural hub” where Black Vancouverites could “cultivate connections with each other through music, food, and the similarity of their backgrounds” and form community through multiple spaces integral to Black life, from churches like Fountain Chapel and restaurants like Vie’s Chicken and Steak House (Johnson & Adjelebi, 2021; Web, 2024). While Black Strathcona was a hub for various forms of recreational community building, it is important to note Black activity and presence outside of this neighborhood and to consider the importance of Black community spaces emerging all around Vancouver. For example, English Bay was where the city’s first and

most prominent Black lifeguard, Seraphim Joseph Fortes (also known as Joe Fortes) made a name for himself, saving lives and helping the community despite facing racial prejudice (BC Black History Awareness Society, 2024). Two other influential figures in Vancouver's sporting history are Harry and Valerie Jerome, Black siblings who represented Vancouver internationally and broke national records, all despite the lack of recognition and discrimination they faced in Vancouver, including being unable even to find housing, despite being world record setting athletes (Patel, 2024; Dixon, 2018; Walcott, 2010). Following successful sporting careers, Harry Jerome went on to help create Canada's Ministry of Sport and designed "the British Columbia's Premier's Sport Award Program" and Valerie Jerome became a high school physical education teacher. Both chose to create recreational environments for Black youth who wanted to succeed as they had, giving these youth the safe learning spaces they could not access during their time as athletes (Patel, 2024; Dixon, 2018; Walcott, 2010).

Despite the longtime historical presence of Black spaces in Vancouver that have contributed to advancing the city's "economic, social and cultural welfare," acknowledgments given to these spaces has been little, "negatively impacting Black and African diaspora communities" across generations (City of Vancouver, 2022). The City of Vancouver's Black and African Diaspora Community Advisory Committee¹ noted the importance of affordable and accessible work and creative spaces for members of Vancouver's Black community that would support and encourage them to thrive (City of Vancouver, 2022). Spaces that would raise the visibility of the Black community on the present-day landscape would be important for the recognition of the history, successes and contributions of Black people in Vancouver (City of Vancouver, 2022).

The State of Black Inclusion Around Community and Recreational Spaces

In a 2022 report, it was noted that the Black communities in Vancouver constitute around 1.09% of the population (City of Vancouver, 2022). People of African descent in Vancouver statistically face higher unemployment rates, lower annual wages, higher barriers to postsecondary education, and higher rates of "children living in low-income homes" than the rest of the population (Statistics Canada, 2020; SCCR & II, 2022). These conditions have left the Black and African communities with "inadequate access to infrastructure such as public transit and well-maintained schools," in addition to lacking the resources necessary to "build physical spaces for gathering and strengthening networks that community and cultural centres can provide" (SCCR & II, 2022). Anti-blackness deploys itself in diverse ways around urban spaces. In particular, longstanding racially discriminatory urban planning and immigration policies have "historically limited Black communities' access to land ownership and their ability to redirect associated profits

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

in this manner today” (SCCR & II, 2022). Currently, the City of Vancouver has no major community-led cultural and research center dedicated to the leisure and development of Vancouver’s diverse Black population.

Outside of Vancouver, organizations like the Issamba Centre, which houses the African Art & Cultural CCC founded by Pulcherie Mboussi in 2012 are “Black-Led, Black-Serving, and Black-Oriented” organizations meant to “foster awareness and appreciation for the richness and diversity of African cultures and traditions” through “cultural, educational, and artistic activities, events, and programs” (Issamba Centre, 2020). The Issamba Centre was founded first in Victoria and has held most of their activities there but has spread its programs recently to Mainland Vancouver. Other community-led support spaces have also sprouted up around BC, some prior to Issamba. For example, in 2002 and 2003 respectively, two Black-led community organizations were created specifically to address the needs of new African immigrants to Vancouver: The Centre of Integration for African Immigrants (CIAI), currently directed by Paul Mulangu, and Umoja Operation Compassion Society, founded by Amos and Edith Kambere (Johnson and Adejlabi, 2021; CIAI, 2024; Umoja, 2024; Government of Canada, 2010). These organizations both emerged to “provide targeted settlement services to immigrants and refugees from Africa” and were “founded and run by men in the community and were largely staffed by members of the community as well” and are mostly active in New Westminister and Surrey (Johnson and Adejlabi, 2021). The CIAI is a bilingual organization that “tends to focus on programs delivering services to women, seniors and youth”, but offers resources and skill sharing to members of various demographics who need help settling into BC (CIAI, 2024). Also, for over 20 years, they have been holding a “Black History Market and Cultural Showcase” in honor of Black history month, meant to spotlight the contributions of Vancouver’s diverse Black community to the city’s culture (CIAI, 2024). In the case of the Umoja Operation Compassion Society, the organization offers food hampers, college scholarships for youth, parenting programs, digital and vocational skill training, after school programs and adult literacy programs to name a few of the services they make available to new immigrants (Umoja, 2024).

Making Black Space and Representation in Vancouver

Over the past few years, Vancouver has seen a rise in the number of organizations and community spaces that provide opportunities for members of the Black community to not only connect with each other, but also to connect with other people of color (Nwabuikwu, 2023).

More recently, Black Arts Vancouver, founded by Berlynn Neam and Chase Keetley, is a “community organization focusing on furthering the arts expression of Pan-African Youth in Vancouver, Canada,” namely through information distribution and hosting of no-cost events and

workshops “centered around Black expression and Afro-Canadian histories” (BAV, 2024). Their publicly accessible website showcases up to date art initiatives and exhibitions led and created by Black Vancouver residents of all ages. This organization focuses on accessibility of the arts and spreading a message of inclusivity by highlighting the possibility of artistic spaces and participation as one of leisure and expression for all ages and genders. In 2023, they also hosted fundraisers for back-to-school supplies, clothing and equipment for 1,500 Black children, youth and young families in B.C (BAV, 2024); and to aid community members who were dealing with legal fees relating to being arrested as an Activists of Land-Defenders in local social justice movements (BAV, 2024).

Sometimes Blackness is represented temporarily in certain prominent public spaces and institutions. For example, jointly curated by Nya Lewis and Nuno Porto, the UBC Museum of Anthropology held an exhibit in 2022 titled “Sankofa: African Routes, Canadian Roots,” which explored “the dialogue between Black artists from BC and Africa to discover the complex connections and identities of people from the African diaspora” and featured the work of Black Arts Vancouver’s founders (Global News, 2022). Nya Lewis Williams also currently serves as the Director/Curator of Artspeak Gallery, and along with the Artistic Director of Gallery Gachet, Olumoroti Soji-George (who also is the creative director of the Black Arts Centre in Surrey), is part of the small but prominent and impactful group of Black artists who direct accessible and inclusive community spaces in Vancouver, that draw the local community into the Black diasporic history that has been an integral part of the city’s making (BLAC, 2024; Williams, 2024; Smith, 2023).

Founded in 2017 by Ralph Escamillan, Van Vogue Jam is a Vancouver based “non-profit organization helping to support, build, and nurture the Vogue/Ballroom scene within Vancouver” contributing towards “building a culture of Ballroom with the accessibility and safety of the LGBTQIA2S+ BIPOC community at its core” (VVJ, 2024). Recently, Black members of the Ballroom scene who have engaged with VVJ in the past but felt unrepresented, decided to create Black Out, community ballroom training and dance session restricted to Black members of the queer community interested in learning more about the scene, wanting to be a part of it, or simply looking for a safe space to brush up on their skill while making friends. Ballroom and ballroom culture, founded by Black and Latino people in the US around the 1980s, has historically been a space where Black queer life and expression could be protected, making the initiative of Black Out more important (Bailey, 2013). Another recent example of community led initiative to create recreational open spaces, is the Black Block Party, which has been held annually for three years, is a free-entry festival “celebrating Black music, arts, and culture” founded by community leader and activist Doyin Agbaje. This festival features live performances by Black artists and increased visibility for Black and POC vendors, creating a safe and uplifting space for Black multimedia artists and business owners to showcase their talents.

Lastly, opened in 2022, the youth-led Vancouver Black Library was the first library opened in Vancouver whose collections are exclusively dedicated to books written by members of the Black diaspora and other communities of color (Chan, 2022; Mridha, 2024). The library also serves as a community hub for things like poetry and book readings, music gatherings like Couch Jams, job fairs, school trips, reading buddy programs for kids, art workshops, and as a meeting space for social justice movements like the Vancouver chapter of Black Lives Matter. VBL provides resource access and skill sharing so youth, children and adults can have low-barrier access to bigger opportunities (Chan, 2022). As a recreational space, organizing space, and one of leisure where those of all ages can gather and relax or meet, the Vancouver Black Library is a space that proves the importance of keeping Black history alive, nurturing Black futures and talent, and cross community solidarity building.

How Can These Infrastructures be Better Supported in the Future?

In 2022, four draft priorities with 23 preliminary actions were identified by the City of Vancouver's Black and African Diaspora Community Advisory Committee, and two of these priorities, Economic Wellbeing and Prosperity, and Creating Culturally Relevant and Safe Planning Processes include three actions aimed at supporting community spaces (City of Vancouver, 2022):

- **1.2:** Provide financial support to Black and African diaspora-led organizations, local business and/or social enterprise economic development programs focused on youth, including, but not limited to, Black queer youth;
- **4.5:** Work in partnership with the broader community, including the Hogan's Alley Society to identify spaces where Black and African diaspora communities can convene;
- **4.7:** Following the completion of the Commemoration Policy, direct staff to explore opportunities to preserve cultural heritage that's important to Black and African diaspora communities;

It is important to reiterate that Black-led art centers and cultural hubs provide spaces for solidarity and community building beyond the Black community. We can see these in the Indigenous planting and terrarium making workshops co-organized by the BAV, as well as with the Black and Asian joint art-making workshops hosted by the Vancouver Black Library, whose products were then featured at Artspeak for public appreciation. These artists, creators, and community members all work as part of an ecosystem that sustain not only the Black community in Vancouver, but support the city's Indigenous, and other ethnoracial communities as well. It is of great importance, therefore, that they continue to be supported financially by the City so that their growth can be furthered, and more spaces of the same kind can be created, and most importantly, to work with diverse community members and leaders to create more centralized

spaces and networks for the advancement of children, youth and adults of Black and African descent in Vancouver.

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