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African Canadian Anti-Discrimination Activism and the Transnational Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1965*

ROSANNE WATERS

Abstract

Several recent historical works have challenged interpretations of the civil rights movement in the United States as a strictly domestic story by considering its connections to anti-racist struggles around the world. Adding a Canadian dimension to this approach, this article considers linkages between African Canadian anti-discrimination activism in the 1950s and early 1960s and African American civil rights organizing. It argues that Canadian anti-discrimination activists were interested in and influenced by the American movement. They followed American civil rights campaigns, adapted relevant ideas, and leveraged the prominent American example when pressing for change in their own country. African Canadian activists and organizations also impacted the American movement through financial and moral support. This article contributes to the study of African Canadian history, Canadian human rights history, and the American civil rights movement by emphasizing the local origins of anti-discrimination activism in Canada, while also arguing that such efforts are best understood when contextualized within a broader period of intensive global anti-racist activism that transcended national borders.

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Résumé

Plusieurs travaux récents en histoire ayant examiné les luttes contre le racisme menées aux quatre coins du monde ont mis en doute les interprétations voulant que le mouvement pour la défense des droits civils aux États-Unis ne soit qu'une affaire locale. Le présent article ajoute une perspective canadienne à ce débat et s'attarde aux liens entre la lutte contre la discrimination à l'égard des Afro-Canadiens dans les années 1950 et au début des années 1960 et les mouvements en faveur des droits des Afro-Américains. L'auteure avance que les activistes canadiens s'intéressaient au mouvement américain et ont été influencés par celui-ci. Ils ont suivi les campagnes de défense des droits aux États-Unis, en ont adapté les idées pertinentes et ont mis à contribution l'exemple américain quand ils ont exercé des pressions pour obtenir des changements dans leur propre pays. Les activistes et organismes pour les droits afro-canadiens ont aussi eu une influence sur le mouvement américain en lui accordant un soutien financier et moral. Cet article s'inscrit dans l'étude de l'histoire des Afro-Canadiens, l'histoire des droits des Canadiens et celle des droits civils américains. Il fait ressortir les origines locales de la lutte contre la discrimination au Canada, mais replace aussi ces efforts dans un vaste contexte d'activisme intense à l'échelle mondiale qui débordait les frontières nationales.

In a 1957 editorial, the *Globe and Mail* suggested that the Civic Holiday be replaced with a national holiday in honour of Emancipation Day. Also falling on the first day of August, Emancipation Day marked the British Empire's abolition of slavery in 1833. Long celebrated annually in African Canadian communities, particularly in Southwestern Ontario, it would make for an appropriate national holiday, the *Globe* editorial argued, in part because "[t]he abolition of slavery in the Empire was decreed thirty-two years before the United States took the same step forward — and the Empire managed it without civil war."¹ Such juxtapositions of Canada as a beacon of freedom and tolerance against a long history of slavery and prejudice in the United States were, and remain, common. As Afua Cooper notes, "slavery has been erased from the

collective consciousness” in Canada.² “Discussions about Euro-Canadian slavery,” Cooper continues, “often disconnect Canada from the larger Atlantic and American world of slavery of which it was very much a part.”³ Just as many Canadians have ignored or denied Canada’s history of slavery, there is a similar tendency to underestimate the prevalence of rigid and widespread discrimination against racialized minorities in twentieth-century Canada. While the protests, marches, and speeches of the African American civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s are widely familiar, for example, much less is known about the need for persistent African Canadian anti-racist advocacy in the same period. Such activism was necessary in Canada too, however, where racialized minorities faced significant barriers in housing, education, immigration, public accommodations, and employment. Prejudice was also an underlying and consistent reality in social mores, practices, and attitudes. African Canadian anti-discrimination activism in the decades following World War II challenged these frequently underestimated or ignored experiences.

While African Canadian activists confronted discrimination in their local communities, this article seeks to analyse the ways in which such localized efforts were simultaneously transnational. It builds on recent American historical scholarship that positions the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the global framework of other international human rights struggles.⁴ With a particular focus on cross-border influences and impacts, this article explores linkages between the civil rights movement in the United States and African Canadian anti-discrimination activism in the same period. It casts a particular spotlight on African Canadian rights activists working for the passage into law and strengthening of what James Walker terms “Protective Shield” legislation.⁵ African Canadians commonly worked in this period towards such legislative mechanisms, including Fair Employment and Fair Accommodations laws, through alliances across a relatively small community of Canadian anti-discrimination advocates. Joint efforts were especially common with Jewish organizations that were committed to combating racist and religious discrimination, most notably the Jewish Labour Committee and the Joint Public Relations Committee (of

the Canadian Jewish Congress and B'nai B'rith).⁶ The temporal framework considered here, spanning the early postwar period to the mid-1960s, represents both a period of notably intensive activist efforts in Canada for anti-discrimination legislation and the period during which the civil rights movement in the United States received the most widespread media attention in Canada.

The rights activists discussed here include men and women who promoted legislative protections through formal anti-discrimination organizations and campaigns in Nova Scotia and Ontario. These organized efforts included African Canadian newspapers like Toronto's *Canadian Negro* and Nova Scotia's *The Clarion*, as well as groups such as the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NSAACP), Southwestern Ontario's South Essex Citizen's Advancement Association (SECAA) and National Unity Association, and the Negro Citizenship Association (NCA) and Canadian Negro Women's Association (CNWA) based in Toronto. While by no means an exhaustive study of such organizations, this article considers their ideas and actions as windows into the broader theme of transnational rights organizing. Their efforts were, for the most part, focused locally, not nationally, because the anti-racist measures and anti-discrimination legislation they sought fell largely under municipal or provincial jurisdiction. The geographically fragmented African Canadian population across the country also limited coordinated national organizing.⁷ While their efforts did not necessarily constitute a nationally recognizable movement in the manner of the civil rights movement in the United States, their work compiling evidence and challenging discrimination at the local level, combined with strategic references to the international context, succeeded in attracting the attention of government officials.⁸ As Carmela Patrias and Ruth Frager argue, governments only implemented anti-discrimination measures as a result of the dedicated and persistent activism of racialized minorities.⁹

Many African Canadian activists followed the progress of African American civil rights campaigns and, when relevant, adapted and applied ideas to their own efforts in the fight against racism in Canada. This argument is not intended to suggest that rights activism in Canada was caused by, or resulted directly from, events

in the United States. It emerged, rather, as a necessary response to local experiences with prejudice. Indeed, several important Canadian anti-discrimination efforts predated the most intensive attention given by the Canadian media to international anti-racist issues beginning in the mid-1950s. The National Unity Association and Jewish Labour Committee's campaign to desegregate businesses in Dresden, Ontario began just after World War II, while Nova Scotia's *The Clarion* newspaper and the NSAACP were both founded in 1946.¹⁰ Anti-discrimination legislation in Ontario and Nova Scotia first arrived in the 1940s and early 1950s as well, though these early laws would be expanded and strengthened at the same time as the American civil rights organizing was receiving the height of attention. As Walker reminds us, moreover, the international context's significance in Canada "should not be exaggerated, for although it did promise a new receptivity to minority concerns, it did not guarantee specific measures to correct them."¹¹

With this caution in mind, this study posits that Canadian anti-discrimination efforts were tied to the American movement for civil rights in important ways. African Canadian rights activists followed African American civil rights struggles, sometimes offering direct support. They occasionally adapted and applied resources and tactics to their own work in Canada. Most significantly, Canadian activists cited the American civil rights movement, which garnered extensive international media coverage from the mid-1950s, as a reason for Canada to take more aggressive action against prejudice. Canadian rights activists argued their country had lessons to learn from the more visible American case. In doing so, they challenged the complacent assumption that Canada was already sufficiently far ahead of its neighbour to the south in matters of tolerance, equality, and rights. By framing local inequalities against the prominent international backdrop, they compelled Canadians to take homegrown problems seriously.

While the focus here is on Canadian-American connections, the broader international context was similarly important. The *Canadian Negro* newspaper, for example, printed several articles on subjects relating to decolonization in Africa.¹² Opposition to Apartheid in South Africa drew specific concern, as demonstrated by

the donation of \$100 by the CNWA to the Committee of Concern for South Africa in 1961.¹³ Connections with the Caribbean were also important. The NCA played a leading role in organizing opposition to racist immigration laws that excluded prospective immigrants to Canada from the Caribbean.¹⁴ The group, whose membership had many personal linkages with Caribbean countries, simultaneously concerned itself with discrimination in Canada. Donald Moore and Bromley Armstrong were deeply involved in both the NCA's immigration reform efforts and protests against segregated businesses in Dresden.¹⁵ Armstrong's memoir highlights how examples of decolonization bolstered the NCA's efforts. It became harder for Canada to justify exclusionary immigration policies when "[i]n Africa, the Caribbean, and elsewhere colonized people were starting to throw off their yokes of oppression."¹⁶ By highlighting connections across the Canada-United States border, this article is not intended to diminish the significance of these international linkages. Rather, it considers one aspect of what was undeniably a much larger transnational story. Natasha L. Henry makes this point with reference to Emancipation Day celebrations, which she argues demonstrate that "the Black community possessed a global and pan-African perspective and awareness of the need to nurture racial solidarity and interest across political boundaries."¹⁷

This article employs a broad understanding of the term "transnational," which Vic Satzewich and Lloyd Wong note "is an extraordinarily elastic concept that has been stretched to cover a range of activities and individuals."¹⁸ According to Ian Tyrrell, transnationalism reminds us that "[t]he nation is not the only historical 'actor'."¹⁹ Distinctive histories and experiences within nations should not be overlooked, however.²⁰ As Michael Behiels and Reginald Stuart explain, "borders matter in some ways, but not in others. It depends on what is being discussed and the period under discussion."²¹ Indeed, both distinctive national experiences and transnational linkages play roles in the story of Canadian anti-discrimination activism in the 1950s and 1960s. The transnational elements of this story help elucidate the ways historical experiences can, as Tyrrell observes, be shaped by individuals, organizations, actions, and modes of thinking moving across borders.²² As Behiels

and Stuart note regarding Canada and the United States, “although the border has separated the countries and their policies, it has had far less impact on cultural values, ideas, ways of life, human relationships.”²³

This discussion draws on Tyrrell’s concept of transnationalism “as framing contexts,” according to which history at the local or national level is sometimes best elucidated with a mind to parallel global contexts.²⁴ “The ‘causes’ of a particular event might be not purely local,” Tyrrell explains, “but instead operate simultaneously on different geographical and temporal scales, namely the local, regional, national, transnational, and global.”²⁵ African Canadian anti-discrimination activism reflected local circumstances, but also took place within an important international environment. Tyrrell’s discussion of transnational history “as patterns of exchange” or “reciprocal processes across boundaries” is also important.²⁶ While the primary focus here is on American impact in Canada, there are examples of exchange in both directions across the border. International fund-raising mattered to American civil rights organizations and efforts. BSCP leader A. Phillip Randolph was concerned with fighting discrimination not just in the United States, but also in Canada.²⁷ African American newspapers, meanwhile, demonstrated an interest in racism and anti-discrimination efforts north of the border. While examples of “exchange” exist, it should come as little surprise that Canadians appear to have been more aware of American events than vice versa. The transnational interpretation remains relevant, however, for, as Tyrrell notes, “the flow of information and the transnational exchanges that occurred were often unequal, even though they were multilateral and reciprocal.”²⁸

African Canadian protest has a long history — a necessary response to an equally long history of racism. In the first half of the twentieth century, African Canadians could experience discrimination through a combination of *de jure* and *de facto* practices. For example, provincial legislation in Ontario and Nova Scotia permitted school segregation until mid-century.²⁹ The systematic exclusion of black immigrants to Canada was similarly based on a combination of similar practices.³⁰ Most commonly, discrimination against African Canadians was not legislatively required, but was legally

permitted and deeply woven into the pattern of daily life. These discriminatory practices could appear in unpredictable ways. Jim Crow style discrimination was often, though not exclusively, most apparent and pronounced in locales with larger African Canadian communities, including several towns and cities in Nova Scotia and Southwestern Ontario, as well as in major cities like Montréal and Toronto. Discrimination could also be particularly evident in fields of work where African Canadians were concentrated, as it was for the men working on railroads as porters. Their experiences with limited employment opportunities, coupled with the leadership of individuals like John A. Robinson and Arthur R. Blanchette, helped make Winnipeg, a city home to many sleeping car porters, a major organizing centre for the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) and its broader anti-discrimination efforts.³¹

While discrimination was a familiar experience for racialized minorities in various facets of life, Canadian laws generally did not demand segregation of public facilities, services, and businesses, marking an important difference from the experiences of African Americans in the United States South. Historian Alex Lichstenstein has argued, with reference to regional differences in the United States, that the prevalence of racism in both the North and South “should not be allowed to erase the fundamental, existential difference between the total *system* of racial domination that reigned in the South and the myriad yet permeable forms of racial discrimination pervasive in the rest of the nation.”³² This assessment applies to Canada in the postwar period, where racism was prevalent but not, to use Lichstenstein’s words, expressed through a “total *system* of racial domination.”³³ Some contemporary observers argued instead that Canada mirrored the Northern United States where, Thomas J. Sugrue notes, African Americans were “unencumbered by the most blatant of southern-style Jim Crow laws but still trapped in an economic, political, and legal regime that seldom recognized them as equals.”³⁴ James R. Dumpson, the first African American Commissioner of Welfare for New York City, emphasized this parallel when speaking in Halifax in 1963 at a Human Rights Day event. “The similarities of the basic issues,” according to Dumpson, “outweigh the differences. I am struck by the familiar description of

Negro social and economic status in Nova Scotia.”³⁵ While similarities certainly existed between Canada and Northern states, an important distinguishing factor for the United States was the constant threat and reality of racialized violence across all regions, including in northern cities like Chicago and Detroit.³⁶

While experiences with discrimination differed between the two countries, such differences should not be interpreted as evidence that discrimination in Canada was insignificant or unimportant. Barrington Walker has emphasized the paradoxical nature of African Canadian experiences, “caught between formal legal equality and deeply entrenched societal and economic inequality.”³⁷ While the law did not require discrimination against African Canadians in all realms of life, legal precedence protected the right of business owners and landlords to refuse services to whomever they chose prior to the arrival of Fair Accommodations laws. The Supreme Court upheld this principle in 1936 with its ruling that a bar in Montréal could refuse service to an African Canadian man named Fred Christie.³⁸ The “right” to discriminate, which at the time was viewed as a matter of freedom of contract, was prioritized over any notion of a right not to be subjected to discrimination. This principle was on display a decade later in Nova Scotia, when a movie theatre denied Viola Desmond a ticket for the “white” seating area.³⁹ These were not isolated cases. As Thornhill notes, “multiple court rulings decreed that the right of a White merchant to contract freely with whomever he pleased outweighed the right of a Black member of the Canadian public to be shielded or protected from discriminatory treatment.”⁴⁰ Racialized minorities could thus face severely limited access to businesses and services otherwise available to the public. They also encountered restricted job and housing opportunities, often finding themselves low on the socio-economic ladder with limited opportunities to move up.⁴¹ Austin Clarke spoke to the wide-ranging impacts of Canadian racism in a 1963 *Maclean's* article. In response to the common question of how he could be sure discrimination existed when it was not always obvious, Clarke explained, “as a black man I am *ipso facto* an expert on discrimination. I do not want to experience prejudice, and I do not need to look for it — it is the very atmosphere in which a black man

exists.”⁴² Barrington Walker argues that, while situations differed between Canada and the United States, the term “Jim Crow” was still an apt descriptor for Canada: “Despite the lack of legally codified Jim Crow laws in Canada, social customs and court rulings that allowed individuals the freedom to act in a racially biased manner led many Black Canadians to identify Jim Crow as a continental rather than exclusively US phenomenon.”⁴³

Just as racism was deeply ingrained in Canadian society, so too was a long tradition of African Canadian protest. In the twentieth century, World War I marked a milestone due to the hope that participation offered an opportunity to attain respect and claim rights.⁴⁴ As historian Sarah-Jane Mathieu puts it, “Canada’s first generation of black civil rights leaders were veterans of the Great War, men and women who had believed that their contributions to the war effort would produce more equality but now understood the import of defining and exercising racial democracy for themselves.”⁴⁵ As a result, African Canadians organized protest and lobbying efforts to counter discrimination in its various manifestations. In Windsor, for example, they cited participation in the war when lobbying the all-white police force to hire black officers. A 25-year effort ensued, finally resulting in the appointment of Alton C. Parker to the police force in 1942.⁴⁶ African Canadians in Toronto and Halifax protested Canadian screenings of the blatantly racist 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) orchestrated petitions and protests against the film across the United States.⁴⁷ Protests were also organized in Canada with the aim of halting screenings or, failing that, having the film’s most offensive scenes censored. Several prominent African Canadians led protests in Toronto, but, while cinemas agreed to show an edited version, the film nevertheless drew huge audiences.⁴⁸ Protestors achieved greater success in Halifax, where screenings of the film were successfully stopped.⁴⁹ A planned screening in Montréal in 1921 was also halted after protests by the city’s NAACP branch.⁵⁰

Advocacy organizations proliferated following the war. Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) had an estimated 5,000 members in Canada and was particularly strong between World Wars I and II.⁵¹ A black nationalist organization that

advocated racial pride and economic independence, Canadian UNIA branches organized events to celebrate black heritage and culture, while also attempting to address issues such as housing and employment barriers.⁵² Another significant organizing tradition emerged from the concentration of African Canadian men working as railroad porters. After they were excluded from a white railroad union, porters in Canada organized the Order of Sleeping Car Porters in 1917 to demand better working conditions, workforce mobility, and broader anti-discrimination reforms.⁵³ They later established transnational connections with the BSCP, which A. Philip Randolph helped to organize in the United States.⁵⁴ In Montréal, African Canadians established the Colored Political and Protective Association (CPPA) in 1917. The organization led a legal challenge in 1918 when a black patron was ejected from a movie theatre. In recruiting support and funds, the organization reminded readers in a pamphlet, "You offered your life in the Great War because Democracy and Justice were the watch-words. Will you not join hands with hundreds of your own Race to secure redress for wrongs done to us?"⁵⁵ The legal challenge ultimately failed, but the organization continued a few years later as an NAACP chapter.⁵⁶

Participation in World War II also prompted intensified activism. In the United States, African Americans drew on their contributions to the war effort to promote a "Double V" campaign of victory over racism abroad and in the United States.⁵⁷ A similar effort emerged in Canada where, as Patrias argues, the war presented a "unique opportunity" to demand full citizenship rights.⁵⁸ The African Canadian newspaper *Dawn of Tomorrow* seized this moment when it published an editorial decrying the irony of blacks fighting overseas, while lacking equal treatment at home: "The great numbers of Coloured Canadians as well as Americans, who are among the invasion force fighting, bleeding and dying to liberate those enslaved peoples, also know what it means to be oppressed."⁵⁹ A. Philip Randolph, the American BSCP leader, made a similar point when he visited Canada early in the war, warning black citizens in both countries to "not relax their efforts to protect the rights of labor and minority groups at home, lest the war be won in Europe but lost 'in Canada and the U.S.A.'"⁶⁰

A common theme across these organizing efforts was their connection with related international anti-discrimination efforts. Transnational linkages were fuelled by shared experiences with prejudice and the corresponding view that fighting it in one country had a direct bearing on fighting it in another. In his article about the Afro-Caribbean diaspora in Toronto, Jared G. Toney discusses interactions between the local and the transnational. “Through trans-local and transnational networks,” Toney explains, “immigrants engaged the diaspora and participated in a global community beyond the physical borders of the city and nation.”⁶¹ The UNIA, Toney notes, was one organization through which these diasporic connections were lived.⁶² Sarah-Jane Mathieu emphasizes the organizing of railroad porters as a site of transnational connections between Canada and the United States. Prior to World War II, Mathieu argues, African Canadian activists already understood “that their plight was inextricably linked to that of African Americans. The two groups joined forces when possible and shared resources and strategies for social advancement; most important, both adopted transnational alliances as their assured path to success.”⁶³

As this discussion illustrates, anti-discrimination activism in Canada had long roots at both local and transnational levels. Just as American history scholars have recently emphasized the extended origins of the civil rights movement, African Canadian anti-discrimination activism following World War II is best understood as connected to earlier efforts.⁶⁴ Intensified activism and widespread societal attention to racism and rights protections also set the post-war period apart, however. While the African American movement for civil rights did not necessarily prompt increased activism in Canada, it did help establish an environment wherein Canadian rights activists could attract more attention and support from the media and state. In discussing new human rights laws in his memoir, former African Canadian Member of Parliament Lincoln M. Alexander recalls the civil rights movement as a factor “helping to sensitize people to the impact of racial prejudice.”⁶⁵

The Cold War also distinguished this period. In the United States, there was clear tension between systemic racism against African Americans and the government’s claim to leadership of the

democratic world. "How could American democracy be a beacon during the Cold War, and a model for those struggling against Soviet oppression," Mary Dudziak notes, "if the United States itself practiced brutal discrimination against minorities within its own borders?"⁶⁶ African American civil rights workers highlighted this hypocrisy when demanding changes to their country's domestic situation.⁶⁷ Prime Minister John Diefenbaker reflected on a similar pressure when discussing the Canadian Bill of Rights in 1960. The legislation, Diefenbaker posited, "will declare the principle that every individual, whatever his colour, race or religion, shall be free from discrimination and will have guaranteed equality under the law. This is so important today, for wherever discrimination exists in the world there you have a seed-bed for Communism."⁶⁸ Alongside Cold War pressures and other international issues, Canadian anti-discrimination activists could leverage the American civil rights movement to justify their efforts.

African Canadian newspapers covered civil rights activism in the United States as it gained more attention following the war. While *The Clarion* mostly focused on local concerns, it also published stories on topics such as the African American minister and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Jackie Robinson and segregation in baseball, the NAACP in Boston, school segregation in California, and all-white primaries in Mississippi.⁶⁹ The *Canadian Negro* newspaper reported with outrage on the vicious lynching of 15-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi.⁷⁰ The *Brown v. the Board of Education* Supreme Court decision on school desegregation also received extensive attention, and the newspaper featured the Montgomery Bus Boycott as a cover story.⁷¹ The *Dawn of Tomorrow* reported on similar themes and issues, publishing excerpts from American publications on topics ranging from anti-segregation activism in Mississippi and the National Council of Negro Women to Martin Luther King, Jr. and student-led protests.⁷² African American newspapers, meanwhile, also printed stories about Canada, covering topics such as discrimination in housing, economic inequality, and limited employment options.⁷³ Other articles highlighted progress against discrimination in Canada, coverage that served a political purpose in the United States.⁷⁴ By highlighting

positive new measures elsewhere, African American journalists encouraged similar steps in their own country.

Coverage in African Canadian newspapers of the civil rights movement translated into offers of both moral and financial support. When the boycott against segregated buses began in Montgomery, Alabama, African Canadians in Toronto organized support. The boycott required substantial funding, and the *Canadian Negro* ran a front-page notice encouraging donations to the Montgomery Improvement Association.⁷⁵ The same edition advertised a talk by Reverend Thomas Gilmore about the boycott.⁷⁶ The CNWA offered financial support to the American movement in 1961 in the form of a donation of \$50 to the NAACP's legal branch.⁷⁷ Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the CNWA sent member Alcenya Crowley to attend his funeral in Atlanta on the organization's behalf. While the CNWA contemplated sending money, the group ultimately felt their attendance was more important. Crowley explained, "I felt I was carrying the spirit of the negro community of Toronto down there with me ... Being there was important."⁷⁸ The BSCP's Toronto branch sent a 1965 contribution to the Congress of Racial Equality "to assist in your efforts to obtain first class citizenship for Negro's [sic], as well as all others who are denied their rights as first class citizens."⁷⁹ Canadian BSCP leader Stanley Grizzle was a member of the NAACP in the United States, and he corresponded with American rights activists and organizations.⁸⁰ This linkage traversed the border in both directions, with American BSCP leader A. Phillip Randolph also following Canadian matters. When Grizzle updated him on various protest efforts, Randolph sent a congratulatory reply that underlined the importance of activism across borders: "Unless peoples of color fight uncompromisingly for the status of complete equality in their community and country, no forms of progress they make will be secure."⁸¹ The American BSCP also contributed to Canadian human rights organizing through a donation to the Jewish Labour Committee.⁸²

Examples abound of other Canadian organizations that organized support for American efforts. An Ontario Human Rights Commission report noted that Windsor's Tanner African Methodist Episcopal Church "has been involved very deeply in the civil rights

movement in the U.S.A.”⁸³ Toronto’s African Methodist Episcopal Church, First Baptist Church, and British Methodist Episcopal Church organized a memorial service following a horrific act of violence in Birmingham, Alabama, where the bombing of a church killed four young girls. The donations collected at the service went to the Martin Luther King Fund (MLK Fund).⁸⁴ When police brutally beat voting rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, the NSAACP wrote President Lyndon Johnson in protest. “The recent dreadful events, both immoral and unchristian,” the letter read, “cannot but have an adverse effect on American foreign policy and the American image abroad.”⁸⁵ The Halifax Colored Citizens Improvement League also followed events in Selma, sending a message of support following the president’s call for federal voting rights legislation.⁸⁶ Upon Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, Nova Scotia’s African United Baptist Association (AUBA) donated \$100 to Ralph Abernathy, who had taken over leadership of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).⁸⁷

One of the most prominent examples of Canadian support for the civil rights movement was the MLK Fund, established in the early 1960s. The organization contemplated becoming an official chapter of the NAACP, but ultimately decided that using King’s name would allow them to act as “an umbrella organization in Canada working in support of civil rights.”⁸⁸ Primarily geared towards fund-raising for the SCLC, the group sought to embody an “inter-faith, inter-racial” ethos.⁸⁹ Its executive included representatives from various organizations and associations, including the Social Action Committee at Toronto’s Holy Blossom Temple, the BSCP’s Stanley Grizzle, Ontario’s first Human Rights Commissioner Dr. Daniel G. Hill, Dr. A.S. Markham of the British Methodist Episcopal Church and NCA, and Anglican minister Roland de Corneille.⁹⁰

The MLK Fund garnered headlines in 1964 when Alabama’s segregationist Governor George Wallace spoke in Toronto at a Lions Club International gathering. The group published a message about Wallace in the *Toronto Star*, encouraging donations to their cause in response to his visit. The open letter articulated a transnational view of human rights:

We are not unaware that we here in Canada have unresolved racial problems of our own. We are forever pledged to solve them and pursue this objective with dedication borne of deep religious conviction. And because we know this we also know that justice like equality is indivisible. In civil rights there is no border line concern. We oppose your ideas as inimical to human progress everywhere. Our answer is not one of violence. It is of direct, generous help to those who labor for the rights of man.⁹¹

Beyond the open letter and fund-raising efforts, the MLK Fund, Canadian Anti-Apartheid Committee, various unions, the CNWA, members of Holy Blossom Temple, and others picketed Maple Leaf Gardens during Wallace's speech.⁹²

Further evidence of transnational connections lies in the travel of rights activists across the border. Such travel was a feature of annual Emancipation Day events in Southwestern Ontario, where the Canada-United States border's proximity had long facilitated transnational linkages. Nina Reid-Maroney describes a "fluid border" between Ontario and Michigan," noting that "[w]hile national narratives on both sides shaped black Canadian experience and identities, those narratives overlapped."⁹³ Dating to the mid-1800s, Emancipation Day was a draw for Canadian and American visitors who attended to enjoy the festivities and visit with family and friends.⁹⁴ According to Victoria Campbell, Windsor's Emancipation Day celebrations in the 1950s and 1960s "became increasingly associated with the Civil Rights Movement across the border."⁹⁵ As Natasha L. Henry highlights, they featured speeches from several American civil rights leaders such as Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women, Daisy Bates of the NAACP, Martin Luther King, Jr. just after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Fred Shuttlesworth from Birmingham, Alabama, and Myrlie Evers, the wife of murdered NAACP leader Medgar Evers.⁹⁶ Their attendance suggests the value these prominent figures placed on international support for their efforts. Mary McLeod Bethune articulated this point when praising Emancipation Day, which she said "served to blend ideals together

and to help people to know one another better so that they might be an inspiration to the people who are yet asleep to the need for brotherhood.”⁹⁷ A 1953 Emancipation Day event included a speech by Dr. William Holmes Borders, minister of a church in Atlanta. His speech, according to one account, “lashed fearlessly at Jim Crow, segregation, and discrimination, holding 35,000 people in the spell of his brilliant imagery.”⁹⁸

Emancipation Day was not the only occasion that brought American civil rights figures to Canada. In 1962 Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at Toronto’s Holy Blossom Temple, where the Rabbi was a leading figure in the struggles against racist and religious discrimination in Canada. Members of the CNWA were on hand for King’s speech about nonviolence and the civil rights movement. CNWA members were also in attendance when King’s wife Coretta Scott King performed a fund-raising concert at Toronto’s Massey Hall in 1966, which Stanley Grizzle organized as Chairman of the MLK Fund.⁹⁹ Two representatives of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) travelled to Toronto, Ottawa, and Montréal in support of Canadian sympathy protests with the 1965 voting rights movement in Selma, Alabama. In her speech at one such demonstration in Ottawa, SNCC’s Prathia Hall discussed the importance of transnational activism: “our destinies are bound together. Freedom is not a sectional issue but applies to people all over the world. I’m sure the action of our Canadian friends has caused reaction in Washington.”¹⁰⁰ Lafayette Surney of SNCC, meanwhile, told the Ottawa marchers, “We thank you ... your interest in us is encouraging.”¹⁰¹ During these protests, a small group of Canadian students and activists travelled to Washington, DC, hoping to meet with political leaders there in support of Selma. One member of the group, Burnley “Rocky” Jones, would become one of the most well-known and significant human rights advocates in Nova Scotia.¹⁰² Later in the decade, he would bring former SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael and members of the Black Panther Party from the United States to visit the province.¹⁰³

The international context is especially notable for the encouragement it offered those engaged in anti-discrimination efforts at the local level in Canada. One example involved a protest against a seg-

regated school in Southwestern Ontario. In a letter to the school board, SECAA leader George F. McCurdy described “a pervading quiet resentment of the fact that our coloured children have been the victims of de facto discrimination and segregation.”¹⁰⁴ In a submission to the school board, the SECAA alluded to the international context, broadly speaking, as a source of encouragement:

... with all that has been happening in this changing world the rate-payers at S.S. # 11 have been given hope. The fear and silence identified with the past has been supplanted with courage and determination to make certain that their children are going to receive the best possible education from this day forth, on an integrated basis, equal to the standards established for other children of the area and the Province.¹⁰⁵

As opposition to the segregated school gained wider attention, the American parallel was highlighted in the Canadian media. Evidently anticipating surprise that a segregated school existed in Ontario in the mid-1960s, a *Globe and Mail* editorial emphasized that this “story was not the usual tale of segregation and neglect in Mississippi or Alabama ... what is most shameful is that an Ontario school is to all intents and purposes segregated.”¹⁰⁶ The segregated school was eventually closed as a result of local activism, with the support of Ontario’s first African Canadian Member of Provincial Parliament, Leonard Braithwaite.¹⁰⁷

Similar influence is also evident in Nova Scotia anti-discrimination efforts. Reverend Dr. W. P. Oliver held various community leadership positions, as minister of a Halifax church, with the NSAACP, and as an advocate of adult education. He also had connections with anti-discrimination activists in the United States, having met with NAACP leaders in New York and visited traditionally African American educational institutions like Morehouse College and the Tuskegee Institute. During these travels, Oliver spoke publicly on comparable issues in the two countries.¹⁰⁸ The American example, according to Oliver, encouraged the NSAACP in the fight against discrimination: “The more study that was given to these problems of our people and the more we learned about the

problems of our people in the United States, the more we realized that this was a task that involved all the people and not just the church.”¹⁰⁹ Oliver promoted a social role for the church as moderator of the AUBA when he observed, “these are unusual days for our people throughout the world. Significant changes have been taking place; some quietly and un-noticed, others are accompanied with revolution and blood shed.” Against this backdrop, Oliver concluded, “As long as there are Negro families living in isolated communities there is need for the Negro church and the African Baptist Association.”¹¹⁰ Oliver also discussed a parallel between the American situation and that in Nova Scotia in his newsletter. A section on voting rights in Mississippi highlighted “the courage and aggressiveness of these people as they follow their leaders in their great struggle to obtain their human rights.”¹¹¹ Oliver discussed his admiration for activism in the United States and drew lessons for local circumstances. “I am inclined to feel,” Oliver explained, “that we are not going after the vital problems today with the unity and aggressiveness that is required, because we feel that too few stand to benefit.” He therefore promoted more local action, especially around housing and employment issues.¹¹²

Parallels also existed between Canada and the United States in the ideas and tactics used to challenge discrimination, with Canadian organizations sometimes employing American materials and resources. The Joint Public Relations Committee brought an American programme about overcoming prejudice, *The Dream*, to air with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.¹¹³ Similarly, an American film about discrimination, *It Happened in Springfield*, was screened in Sydney, Nova Scotia, accompanied by a talk about sources of prejudice and ways to move past it.¹¹⁴ The CNWA, meanwhile, hosted a Toronto screening of the film *Your Brotherhood*, about the BSCP’s relationship to the labour movement in the United States.¹¹⁵

The civil rights movement in the United States gained widespread attention through direct action protests against segregation. These actions, including sit-ins at segregated facilities, boycotts, voter registration drives, and marches, sought to expose racism on a wide scale and thereby attract support to the movement. Sit-ins at segregated businesses, for example, were initiated en masse after four

college students sat down and attempted to order at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960. While this was not the first sit-in in the United States, earlier efforts had not attracted as much attention. This time news spread quickly from Greensboro, and students organized similar protests across the South that same year.¹¹⁶ The sit-in tactic spread to other countries, including England, where a pub sit-in shed light on local practices of racial discrimination.¹¹⁷

Sit-ins were also used in Canada, where they actually predated the American examples of the early 1960s.¹¹⁸ In Dresden, volunteers gathered evidence of discrimination by sitting-in at diners and requesting service. Sit-ins were also organized against segregated businesses in Windsor, Ontario, in the years following the war.¹¹⁹ While clearly not the inspiration for this tactic, therefore, the extensive media attention accorded it by the American civil rights movement would prove useful years later in drawing attention to Canadian anti-discrimination protests. Three members of the New Brunswick Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NBAACP) organized a sit-in in 1964 at a barbershop to protest businesses that refused to cut their hair. "Few barbers in Saint John," NBAACP leader Joseph Drummond stated, "are abiding by the provisions of the New Brunswick Fair Accommodations Act."¹²⁰ The protest attracted substantial media interest, as had the American sit-ins a few years prior, likely due in part to its timing. It followed closely on the heels of several highly publicized events in the civil rights movement in the United States, including the integration campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, both in 1963. These events had received intensive coverage in Canada, and few at the time would have missed their parallel with the NBAACP sit-in. The NBAACP action can be read, therefore, as a challenge to Canadians to see discrimination as a reality at home, not just across the border. A *Moncton Daily Times* piece suggests the protest's impact: "All too often one can condemn hatred and violence when it takes place a long way from home ... [W]e want no prejudice in New Brunswick. And we are as prepared to speak out against it when it happens here as we are when it takes place thousands of miles away."¹²¹

Marches were another direct action technique commonly associated with the civil rights movement in the United States. While utilized less frequently in Canada, marches were occasionally planned both in support of the American movement and to highlight connections with Canadian issues. Toronto's 130th annual Emancipation Day march commemorated black War of 1812 soldiers, but also had a more contemporary political purpose. Several participants carried "Canada Needs Racial Equality Too" signs, with the word "too" serving as a reference to anti-racist efforts in the United States and elsewhere around the world.¹²² The following year, rights activists in Canada organized sympathy marches with voting rights protestors in Alabama, including one in Windsor, Ontario. In her recent book, Karen Flynn quotes Freida Steele, a Windsor resident who paid close attention to events in Selma. "[T]hat whole period," Steele explains, "just enflamed me so. And we decided to have a sympathy march here in the city ... We had to make a stand and say what we believed in."¹²³ The march down Windsor's main street was imbued with transnational symbolism and purpose. It was at once a demonstration of support for voting rights in Alabama and an indictment of discrimination at home. Indeed, participants marched with signs demanding "Open Apartments, Open Golf Clubs, Open Housing" to remind Canadians of discrimination in their own country.¹²⁴

While shared resources and parallel tactics were important, American events around civil rights in this period were most frequently relevant for Canadian anti-discrimination activists as a foil to Canada. Canadian rights activists recognized the value in suggesting that similarities existed between their own struggles and contemporaneous events south of the border, because many Canadians saw their country as uniquely tolerant and accepting. Various scholars have highlighted the prevalence of this view. James W. St. G. Walker refers to "[t]he North Star myth," according to which "only south of the border were blacks subjected to violence, denied their citizenship rights, forced into residential ghettos."¹²⁵ Toney observes the prevalence of "popular (mis)conceptions of Canada as a racially inclusive country of relative tolerance vis-à-vis the United States."¹²⁶ Constance Backhouse argues that Canadians have long conceived of

their country, in contrast to the United States, as a “raceless” society without a prominent history of divisions along “racial” lines.”¹²⁷ Barrington Walker, meanwhile, observes that Canada “has historically prided itself on its supposed racial equality.”¹²⁸

Drawing comparisons was all the more effective because many Canadians also conceived of themselves as sympathetic to the aims of the African American civil rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Mainstream Canadian media coverage of the American movement was extensive and, as Mallory Schwartz argues, generally positive.¹²⁹ Throughout the period, historian Robin Winks notes, “Canadians looked across the border with concern — and some air of superiority.”¹³⁰ Coverage in several Canadian newspapers of the 1957 school integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, illustrates this point. In September of that year, nine African American students attempted to integrate the local high school following the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against school segregation. In response, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus called in the National Guard to turn away the “Little Rock Nine.” Images of the teenagers subjected to racist taunts, hostility, and violence while simply trying to go to school prompted news coverage around the world.¹³¹ One article in the *Montreal Star*, reprinted in the *Atlanta Daily World*, celebrated the Little Rock students:

Where they ... get the sheer guts to go through with it, we don't know. Nor is it easy to imagine the soul-searching that their parents went through before letting the children step into such a maelstrom of terror ... What sort of dedication does a man — or more important, a youngster need to face the stones of a crowd, their knives or guns or clubs, of being cornered by a mob?¹³²

The *Toronto Star* featured the story on the front page as it unfolded throughout September, with bold headlines and accompanied by large photographs.¹³³ Editorials announced support for school integration while condemning the “[u]gly demonstrations of race hatred and prejudice” displayed by those defying the *Brown* ruling in Little Rock.¹³⁴ The *Globe and Mail* published dozens of articles on its front pages about Little Rock throughout the fall of 1957, while the

Halifax Chronicle Herald also featured near daily stories. Little Rock marked just one instance of Canadian media interest during the civil rights movement era, which collectively helped ensure that issues related to discrimination and equality were on the minds of the Canadian public and government officials. Evidence of parallels between racism in Canada and the widely covered and condemned events in the United States challenged the narrative of Canada as a distinctly moral country. By undermining the comfortable notion that Canada was already sufficiently ahead of the United States in these matters, Canadian activists effectively pressured for stronger anti-discrimination measures.

African Canadian newspapers frequently alluded to American circumstances when pressing a point about domestic matters. One editorial in *The Clarion* thanked a local businessman for donating to the NSAACP in support of Viola Desmond's court case following her arrest at a segregated movie theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. "In spite of the fact that the name 'New Glasgow' stands for Jim-crowism, at its basest, over the entire globe," the editorial warned, "we will need have no fear, while we have men of his courage and generosity."¹³⁵ Another editorial made a similar point in response to the accusation, levelled early in the newspaper's existence, that it was creating trouble where none actually existed. "Racial and Religious hatred is trouble of the gravest kind," the editorial countered. "It is a vicious, smoldering and insidious kind of trouble, born of fear and ignorance. It often lays dormant for years until some would be Hitler, Bilbo or Rankin emerges to fan the flame."¹³⁶ This analysis carried the implicit caution that Canadians might follow a similar path, unless stronger anti-discrimination measures were taken. Another editorial, with its title "Canada or Dixie," wasted no time in making the comparison clear. It denounced the persistence of segregation in some New Glasgow businesses and warned they were "fast becoming a town that the Bilbo's and Huey Long's can be proud of."¹³⁷

The *Canadian Negro* newspaper employed a similar approach in editorial cartoons and written content. One editorial cartoon depicted two Canadian businessmen at the fictional "Superwijit Corp" reading *Life* magazine, with the caption, "Isn't it dreadful the

way those Americans treat the Negroes down South?” Directly below the picture of the businessmen was a cartoon of a Canadian “Superwijiit” employment officer dismissing a black job applicant.¹³⁸ Canadians, this cartoon made plain, should not feel too secure in their sense of moral superiority. Strong anti-discrimination measures in employment, it argued, were necessary in Canada just as they were in the United States. Another issue carried two front-page articles side by side under large, bold headlines. One headline, “Second Class — Canadian Style,” led a story about Canada’s racially restrictive immigration policies. Right next to it was the headline “Second Class — U.S.A. Style,” about a black family facing violent attacks after moving to a new neighbourhood in Kentucky.¹³⁹ Violence clearly distinguished the American from the Canadian example in this instance. Yet, placed side by side, the stories seemed to imply both that racism was not unique to the United States and that Canadians needed to take measures to ensure that their country did not follow the violent American example. A *Canadian Negro* editorial made a similar point. Entitled “Dresden or Dixie,” it implied that segregation in the Ontario town was intended to appeal to prospective American tourists: “To these Tourists the result must have been gratifying, especially those from the south, who must feel that Dresden is just like Back Home in Dixie.”¹⁴⁰ The editorial at once drew an explicit parallel between the Canadian town and racism in the United States South, while simultaneously implying that such racism need not be the default reality in Canada. Advocating a strong application of Fair Accommodation legislation, the editorial concluded, “It is to be hoped that the speedy enforcement of the new Fair Accommodation Practices Act will bring full realization to those who practice discrimination that American racism will not be tolerated in Canada.”¹⁴¹

Human rights advocacy organizations likewise discussed parallels with the American situation when advocating specific anti-discrimination measures. The Windsor Council on Group Relations, an anti-discrimination organization in southwestern Ontario, referenced international examples in a 1955 newsletter about Dresden, Ontario. When Dresden businesses continued to discriminate in spite of the new Fair Accommodations law, local activists with the

National Unity Association and allied organizations like the Jewish Labour Committee (an organization whose leaders had close connections with their counterpart in the United States) filed complaints.¹⁴² The government obfuscated and equivocated in response, before reluctantly filing charges against two Dresden businesses. A judge initially found the business owners guilty and levied fines, but an appeal judge overturned the punishment.¹⁴³ Seeing that the law was not functioning as hoped, the Windsor Council made use of one of its few remaining options in its newsletter by attempting to embarrass the Ontario government into taking firmer action: "The British Commonwealth has its South Africa. The United States has its Deep South and Canada has its Dresden."¹⁴⁴

Activists continued to press the Ontario government to strengthen Fair Accommodations legislation after it became law. They were particularly concerned with the law's failure to prohibit discrimination in housing rentals. Various organizations worked together on the issue, including several churches, the Association for Civil Liberties, the Canadian Jewish Congress, the Toronto Labour Committee for Human Rights, the BSCP, the NCA, and the CNWA. They sent a letter to Ontario Premier Leslie Frost advocating a remedy to the law's rental shortcoming and alluding to school integration in Little Rock and the Cold War. As the letter explained,

The amended legislation we propose is designed to further this concept of one world in Ontario, a province where our common and earnest desire is to have people live in brotherhood. In this way we can strengthen ourselves on the world scene, secure in our minds that we have no 'Little Rock's' [sic] to undermine our position morally and destroy the mutual respect and confidences we enjoy and share with those nations and peoples of the world which are of different race and colour, and we can honestly discharge our responsibilities as members of the United Nations whose ideals and goals are so closely identified with this legislation.¹⁴⁵

Stanley Grizzle, who was involved in this letter, also drew on the proverbial glass house in a 1962 speech: "we as Canadians have no

reason to take an ‘I am holier than thou’ attitude towards our sister nations ... Most of the white nations are vulnerable on the race question — the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Belgium and South Africa.”¹⁴⁶

In late 1964 George F. McCurdy helped organize a protest in Amherstburg, Ontario, against a minstrel act that was included in the local high school’s Christmas show. A brief to the school board presented a forceful argument about both the immediate and long-term consequences of minstrel shows and suggested concrete steps to prevent similar incidents in the future. “Our children,” the brief stated, “will not sit in the midst of an auditorium full of their cheering, laughing, applauding classmates while the objectionable stereotype of their race is being perpetuated.”¹⁴⁷ In a *Windsor Star* article, McCurdy compared the Amherstburg debate with a recent controversy in Philadelphia. Prior to the 1964 Philadelphia mummer’s parade, the NAACP won a court ruling preventing participants from marching in blackface. According to McCurdy, both cases dealt with the problem of offensive stereotyping. The difference between Windsor and Philadelphia was that “we look to negotiate the problem with men of reason here, but in Philadelphia, in the absence of men of reason, it was necessary to say that they would lay their bodies before the parade.”¹⁴⁸ By highlighting the supposed “reasonableness” of Ontario’s citizens, this statement implied a subtle challenge: if Canada wanted to uphold its reputation as a tolerant country, it ought to condemn minstrel shows. The protests were successful, with the school board eventually adopting a policy “not to sponsor or allow any plays, entertainment or performances which might demean the Negro or any other minority group.”¹⁴⁹ McCurdy did not always refer to Canada’s sense of superiority; he later made a similar point by flipping the comparison. In discussing the need for equitable employment opportunities in Amherstburg, he noted the paradox that in nearby Detroit, a place more associated with explicit racism, “you will find colored employees in sales, service and secretarial work” more often than in Canada.¹⁵⁰ In both instances, the parallels he explored between the two countries served as challenges to Canadians that they actually live up to their oft-repeated claims of greater acceptance and equality.

It is difficult to measure how effective this comparative approach was, because government officials only occasionally identified it explicitly as a factor behind policy changes. Yet the evidence suggests it did help pressure officials to implement anti-discrimination measures. The legislatures in Ontario and Nova Scotia introduced several new anti-discrimination measures in the 1950s and 1960s, and both provinces eventually established human rights commissions to enforce those laws. It would be inaccurate, of course, to suggest that international pressures *caused* these changes. Change in Canada was the result of persistent local activism. Yet, as this paper has shown, Canadian anti-discrimination activists were also adept at drawing on international issues to promote their own efforts. In advocating specific anti-discrimination measures, they drew attention to simultaneous events south of the border and suggested that Canada would follow a similarly embarrassing path, unless new measures were adopted.

The comparisons yielded some results in Nova Scotia, where Carrie Best's work at *The Clarion* and organizations like the NSAACP drew attention to the pervasiveness of discrimination in the province. The attention and pressure they generated helped induce the provincial government to establish the Interdepartmental Committee on Human Rights (ICHR) in 1962. Around the time the ICHR was established, Dalhousie University's Institute of Public Affairs released its widely publicized "Report on the Condition of Negroes in Halifax City." The report's foreword reflected the increased frequency with which activists and officials were connecting local and international issues. It observed

... a period of new and determined racial aspiration throughout the world, and of self-examination and action in democratic countries, especially in the United States, upon minority problems. All these changes are bringing into sharper focus the problems of the Negroes of Nova Scotia, which can no longer be denied, doubted, or minimized.¹⁵¹

When an ICHR representative spoke before the NSAACP in 1963, he also addressed the impact of both local and international pressure on the government:

Nova Scotia has the largest Negro population of any Province in Canada ... World wide concern about racial problems, not only of the Negro, but of other colored races, has focused public interest on the economic and social condition of many of our Negro population in Nova Scotia. It is good that we should be concerned about discrimination against colored persons wherever this occurs in other parts of the world, but it is even more urgent that we should be aware of injustices if they affect colored persons in our own province.¹⁵²

There are indications that leveraging the international context helped bring about change in Ontario as well. When Premier Leslie Frost introduced amendments to the *Fair Accommodations Practices Act* in 1961 to prohibit discrimination in some apartment rentals and create the Ontario Anti-Discrimination Commission (later the Ontario Human Rights Commission), he referenced global events:

[I]n the realm of human rights today, the conscience of our people is deeply stirred. This is very evident from reading the newspapers of these days and times; we are no longer living in a little world of our own. What happens elsewhere is of deep concern, and our people have turned this concern to themselves, looking at themselves; it is here in my opinion that the great gain has been made. It is evident in the unanimity with which this bill has been received by hon. members and by the press and by the people of this province...¹⁵³

Premier John Robarts' comments in the legislature during Brotherhood Week in 1962, shortly before introducing the new *Ontario Human Rights Code*, reflected a similar concern with conforming to the times. First initiated by the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, annual Brotherhood Week activities focused on education in and promotion of tolerance and equality. In Robarts' view,

... while there is every indication of a more widespread acceptance and practice of that spirit [of brotherhood]

around the world, there still exist attitudes and actions which are destructive of elementary justice. I would not suggest that these things are rampant in Canada but I would never dismiss them as manifestations peculiar only to some other part of the world.¹⁵⁴

These comments illustrate a measure of success for anti-discrimination activists in suggesting equivalencies between Canada and other countries. With frequent press coverage of global anti-racist activism as a backdrop, politicians were particularly susceptible to such pressures. As R. Brian Howe notes, there was fairly widespread support for human rights legislation introduced in Ontario in this period, in part because of pressure generated through examples outside Ontario, including south of the border.¹⁵⁵

While anti-discrimination measures became law in Ontario, Nova Scotia, and other provinces during this time, they were limited in significant ways. As Howe and Johnson note, human rights activists used an “an incrementalist strategy” that targeted specific, measurable, achievable, and non-revolutionary changes. “Step by step,” they note, “separate fair practices laws were enacted, and these led to the creation of the code and a commission to oversee it.”¹⁵⁶ These laws, however, continued to permit some forms of discrimination and required constant vigilance to ensure enforcement. They also placed the onus on those dealing with discrimination to mount a challenge, meaning many discriminatory situations could, and did, carry on as before. The new measures also made no attempt to address the overlapping issues of racism and limited economic opportunity. As the 1960s progressed, various new and increasingly prominent African Canadian organizing efforts emerged to address these and related issues of inequality, representing a range of ideas and approaches.¹⁵⁷ Some new organizations, as James W. St. G. Walker notes, “grew more militant” in challenging the status quo, for example by interpreting racism as more fundamental to Canadian society than had previously been acknowledged and by advocating a shift away from “piecemeal reform.”¹⁵⁸ Clearly, then, the mid-1960s by no means marked an end to anti-racist activism in Canada. Rather, it reflected a shift in approach away from the focus on anti-

discrimination legislation discussed here. With passage of new civil and voting rights laws in the United States in 1964 and 1965, it also reflected the decline of widespread and sympathetic Canadian press coverage of the civil rights movement.¹⁵⁹ The American example could no longer be leveraged by Canadian rights activists in the same manner as before. While new ideas and tactics emerged in Canadian anti-racist organizing in the latter half of the decade, however, an important point of continuity is worth noting. An emphasis on local issues and activism, which was simultaneously imbued with a transnational interest in anti-racist advocacy around the globe, continued throughout the decade.¹⁶⁰

As this paper illustrates, African Canadian anti-discrimination activism in the 1950s and 1960s was at once local and transnational. It was local because it emerged in response to racism in Canada, developed through local leadership and participation, and attained meaningful results in specific communities and at the provincial level. Yet the individuals and organizations involved were not constricted in their activism by their country's national boundaries. They also followed and supported the African American civil rights movement, employed related resources and tactics, and referenced its actors, events, and ideas for their own purposes. The civil rights movement in the United States, meanwhile, received financial and moral support from rights activists across the border, as it did from other sources around the world. Neither Canadian nor American rights activism in this period can be understood as defined strictly by national borders, because many of the individuals and organizations driving it in both countries saw their efforts as at once local, national, and transnational.

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