

## **A Glaring Silence: A Critical Reflection on Black Canada in the Pages of the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association***

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Résumé de l'article

*Grâce à une lecture attentive des résumés d'articles à partir de 1922, cet article explore les cent premières années de la Revue de la Société historique du Canada (RSHC), en se demandant comment cette revue donne un aperçu de la façon dont les historien.ne.s ont fait des recherches et écrit sur l'histoire des Noirs du Canada. L'auteure examine les quelques articles publiés sur le Canada noir dans les pages de la RSHC et conclut que ce « silence flagrant » est symptomatique d'un sentiment anti-Noir systémique, observée dans toutes les institutions du Canada, de la maternelle à la douzième année, et même au sein d'institutions telles que la SHC.*

# A Glaring Silence: A Critical Reflection on Black Canada in the Pages of the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*

CLAUDINE BONNER

## *Abstract*

*Through a close reading of article abstracts beginning in 1922, this article explores the first one hundred years of the Journal of the Canadian Historical Association (JCHA), asking how this journal provides insight into the ways historians have researched and written about Black Canadian history. The author looks at the few published articles on Black Canada in the pages of the JCHA and concludes that the “glaring silence” is symptomatic of a systemic anti-Blackness, seen across institutions in Canada, from kindergarten to grade 12, and even within institutions like the CHA.*

## *Résumé*

*Grâce à une lecture attentive des résumés d'articles à partir de 1922, cet article explore les cent premières années de la Revue de la Société historique du Canada (RSHC), en se demandant comment cette revue donne un aperçu de la façon dont les historien.ne.s ont fait des recherches et écrit sur l'histoire des Noirs du Canada. L'auteure examine les quelques articles publiés sur le Canada noir dans les pages de la RSHC et conclut que ce « silence flagrant » est symptomatique d'un sentiment anti-Noir systémique, observée dans toutes les institutions du Canada, de la maternelle à la douzième année, et même au sein d'institutions telles que la SHC.*

At the annual Canadian Historical Association (CHA) conference in New Brunswick in 2011, I presented my first scholarly social history paper, “Narrating Community, North Buxton, Ontario,” during a panel on place-making and community in nineteenth-century Upper Canada. This paper explored oral history and other community narratives from North Buxton, a small rural community in southwestern Ontario, formed during the Underground Railroad era. The paper was well received, but as someone who was not a trained historian, I was nevertheless surprised that those present were not familiar with the place of Black Canadian history within the fabric of provincial, Cana-

dian, American and African American history, nor the broader history of the African Diaspora.

I have since attended and participated in a number of these conferences and witnessed a growth in knowledge and a willingness to engage in these topics. I have also noted epistemological and methodological changes on the part of historians in the field. To me, Black Canadian history seemed like a fledgling field when I entered the academy, but it has grown by leaps and bounds in a very short period.<sup>1</sup> So much so that participants in the CHA's recent webinar series called *Rethinking History in Canada*, an exploration of the experiences of BIPOC historians, agreed that it is possible we are in a golden age of African Canadian historiography, the result of a long journey of activism and sacrifice on the part of earlier scholars.<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging that moment, and the global mobilization it emerged from, I jumped at the prospect of writing a short piece on how historians — as seen through articles in the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association (JCHA)* — have researched and written about Black Canada.

The *Report of the Annual Meeting* was published from 1922 to 1965 (1922-1965), and it was renamed the *Historical Papers* in 1966. Since 1990, the association has published the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*. For the purposes of this exercise, I read through the abstracts of all of the publications since 1922, looking for any articles focused on some aspect of Blackness in Canada. I had a particular set of assumptions. For instance, I expected that the publications would reflect the conservative ideology and politics of a national approach to history-making. I also expected evidence that Black Canadian history was silenced or rendered invisible, whether deliberately or systemically. I expected to see a shift during the history wars of the 1990s, and finally representation at the turn of the twenty-first century. I myself began my Black Canadian history dissertation research in 2004, so I believed I had a clear idea of what was happening in the field at that time, and I thought it would be reflected in the published scholarship.

Instead, what I found in my critical reading of the *JCHA* was a handful of articles, but mostly silence. Between 1922 and 2022, the journal only published seven articles centring Black Canadian history,<sup>3</sup> beginning with Marcel Trudel's 1961 article "L'attitude de l'Église catholique vis-à-vis l'esclavage au Canada français," which helped lay the foundation for studying slavery in French Canada. Yet between 1961 and 2021, no other articles exploring slavery in New France

or elsewhere in Canada were published in the *JCHA*, despite Canada having extensive connections to the “Atlantic and American world of slavery of which it was very much a part.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1996, David Sutherland published an article outlining the history of Black presence in Halifax, Nova Scotia, including the evolution of Black involvement in mid-Victorian provincial politics and race relations during this period.<sup>5</sup> Twelve years later, the journal returned to the same time and place, publishing an article by Queen’s University historian Jeffrey L. McNairn, which explored travel writing in mid-Victorian Nova Scotia, and how travel narrators and many historians inexplicably omitted any real discussion about the province’s Black population. According to McNairn, the exception included some travel writers, who saw Nova Scotia as a failed experiment in terms of Black freedom.<sup>6</sup>

The years 2013 to 2021 would be the *JCHA*’s most productive in terms of scholarship on Black Canada, highlighting mostly the work of junior academics. In 2013, the journal published an article on civil rights activism in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s by Rosanne Waters, then a McMaster University PhD candidate. In her article, Waters underscored the position of Canada in the “global framework of other international human rights struggles,” highlighting the transnational nature of African diaspora scholarship, which is perhaps at the core of contemporary explorations of African diaspora research and writing.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, Carla Mariano, then a Waterloo University PhD candidate, published an article on the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Toronto, highlighting the connections between the politics of Black Canada and the broader diaspora, and how the Garvey Movement had made inroads into Black Canadian communities.<sup>8</sup> Francesca D’Amico, a York University PhD candidate, published an examination of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Black music culture in Canada, with an exploration of the history of Canadian hip hop and rap in 2015. This article details Canada’s place in transnational African diasporic music culture and explores its evolution within the boundaries of the nation.<sup>9</sup> The last Black Canadian history article published during the period I examined was by communications scholar Cheryl Thompson. In her article, Thompson looked at the history of blackface minstrelsy, drawing connections to a broader history of anti-Blackness in Canada.<sup>10</sup> All these articles centre post-emancipation experiences, but few, if any, mention Canada’s slave past.<sup>11</sup> A fulsome reckoning with the presence of Blackness in Canada since the seventeenth cen-

ture is not present in this collection of articles. What we have instead is a partial examination of this aspect of Canadian history.

In my reading, I did notice the publication of a list of titles of papers presented at the annual CHA conference, but these were not published in the journal itself. These included six more titles on Black Canadian history. I recognized the names of well-known scholars of Black Canada, and even a paper I have come to know well and which had later found a home elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> The list of titles suggests that perhaps more and broader conversations about Black Canada were being held at CHA gatherings than were visible in the pages of its journal. But what happens in the period between the presentation of a conference paper and the submission of a refined version of that same paper to the *JCHA*? Some blame can perhaps be laid at the feet of the writer for not converting their conference paper and sending it in, but the absence of the voices and experiences of Black Canada remains overwhelming.

The evolution in Black Canadian history scholarship is simply not visible in the pages of the *JCHA*. Not participating in the general discourses arising from major societal movements results in a static and dated narrative. Beyond Black Canada, the *JCHA* has published a handful of articles on slavery in the Caribbean and the United States, as well as explorations of colonial spaces outside of Canada, but the presence of Canadian Blackness has consistently been limited.<sup>13</sup>

An argument could be made that when the CHA created a booklet series, initially titled Canada's Ethnic Groups, it attempted to address some of the gaps in scholarship around ethnic and racialized groups, but it does not address the problems of the journal itself.<sup>14</sup> If the booklet series was created to address the gaps, it underscores a deliberate choice to place Canada's ethnic group histories at the margins of what its editors understood to be Canadian history, and it certainly does not make up for the *JCHA*'s limited representation of Blackness.

I see this limited presence as a result of the journal, and perhaps the Canadian government, working to maintain the grand narrative, or to assist in the process of providing a unified version of historical memory that we can interpret as the overarching history of the nation.<sup>15</sup> This overarching history creates our national identity by focusing on aspects of our past that meet with our present understanding of what Canada is and who is (and more importantly in this case, who is not) Canadian. As Timothy Stanley has noted:

“Within the Canadian grand narrative, history proper begins with the arrival of Europeans, whether Lief Ericson [*sic*] and the Vikings, John Cabot and the English, or Jacques Cartier and the French. . . . Grand narrative traces the progress of European resettlement, emphasizing ‘nation-building’ by farseeing politicians, most often ‘great men.’”<sup>16</sup> This foundational historical narrative of white Canada creates unity by representing things as they believe they ought to be, not necessarily how they really are. Rather than engaging with the stories and memories of the marginalized and excluded groups in the nation to produce an agreed-upon public memory, the work of the *JCHA* and similar entities has been to uphold the grand narrative. They favour the version of history put forward by those who are privileged and hold power.

The narratives of nondominant peoples, such as African Canadians, are overlooked and mostly omitted. Sometimes they are smoothed out and thus rendered palatable. This highlights that there is something about Blackness that puts it outside of what is and can be understood as “Canadianness” within the grand narrative. With fewer than ten publications focusing on Black Canadian history in its one hundred years of existence, the majority written by white historians, the *JCHA* has rendered it mostly invisible. While other associations and journals have been engaged in discourses of Blackness — just as major movements have swept the country and the world — the *JCHA* has not been a part of these conversations.

The fact that most of the articles dealing with Black Canadian history were published in the last twenty years may be indicative of a change in the journal’s trajectory. Since my 2011 attendance at the conference, the presence of scholarship on Black Canada has increased generally, along with the number of scholars and students in the academy. With more historians working in this field, I feel hopeful about seeing change in the overarching Eurocentric narrative.

### Systemic Issues in and Beyond the Journal

As institutions across the globe look inward and interrogate issues of anti-Blackness and systemic racism, it is important that the *JCHA* acknowledges its own systemic acts of erasure, which have been entrenched since its founding. And perhaps as Canada becomes even more diverse and we step away from a singular focus on nationalist ideas, we might ask ourselves what the future will look like for the

journal. The exclusion I describe is not limited to this context, and is generally embedded within academic structures and other social institutions, but an institutional commitment to decolonization should mean challenging these systemic issues everywhere.

For example, the limited presence of Blackness within the pages of the journal is closely tied to the graduate (and maybe even undergraduate) student experience, and how history polices its disciplinary boundaries. There are still few Black Canadian (academic) historians, a reality that directly correlates with the absence of African Canadian narratives in the curriculum from kindergarten to high school, and even in undergraduate programming. There is also a continued reluctance or unwillingness to see Black history as real and “objective” history. So perhaps the omission of African Canadian history narratives in the *JCHA* highlights the need for a corrective, beginning as early as elementary school, where the absencing starts. This has been argued for by generations of Black scholars, highlighting the fact that adding African Canadian counternarratives to the history curriculum should serve to “rupture” our taken-for-granted memory. Countermemories argue for what is missing or hidden under the overarching public memory, working to expose and correct erasure.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps if we did this, at the next centenary, the discussion will be about the work we undertook to insert more Black Canadian history into the publications of the CHA.

The question at the heart of this discussion, however, is how the work of historians of Black Canada has changed over the hundred-year history of the journal. Based on publications in the *JCHA*, as a sub-field in the discipline of Canadian history, Black Canadian history and Black Canadian historians did not exist until the 1961 publication of Trudel’s article on the attitude of the Catholic Church toward slavery in French Canada. Thirty-five years later, the journal published Sutherland’s foundational article on race relations in Victorian Halifax. These authors, and the five historians whose work followed, highlight the particularities of the work of the historian of Black Canada and the rest of the African diaspora. The work requires moving beyond history’s traditional practices, and working to push the field into new directions while engaging with contemporary issues.

The challenge of excavating and producing knowledge on Black history in Canada has often meant that scholars are confronted with locating available sources and having to prove the legitimacy and relevance of studying Black Canada in academic disciplines. It also



means positioning oneself as a scholar activist of sorts, working, as Barrington Walker has noted, to “double down on the tried and true counterhegemonic strategies of the historian of the quintessential ‘other.’”<sup>18</sup> Historians of Black Canada have worked in the archives, while acknowledging that it, too, is shaped by the same logics that result in the erasure of Blackness from the pages of the *JCHA*. Many of the sources to be found in the official archives are not created by marginalized communities and peoples, and the historian of Black Canada has had to fill in the gaps, engaging in critical conversations, not only with the sources, but also with the archives themselves. They undertake this work understanding the logics of archives as institutions that reflect the colonial contexts in which they were created, and that choices were made in terms of “what subjects are cross-referenced, what parts are re-written, what quotations are cited” and hence, what would be omitted.<sup>19</sup>

Confronted by a profession that has remained overwhelmingly white and not always welcoming, the historian of Black Canada has had to be creative and innovative in terms of methodology, embracing interdisciplinarity and geographic situatedness with their own publications and even employment. Several scholars of Black Canada are hired throughout the diaspora, and work and publish not only in history, but also in Black and ethnic studies programs and beyond. But this again takes us to the issue of belonging. A question for the CHA and their publications going forward would be: In the process of imagining ourselves as a nation, where does Blackness fit?<sup>20</sup> In the case of communities like North Buxton, which have been largely omitted from the discourse or relegated to the peripheries, community members have shared their own stories and their own rememberings, creating their own countermemories. The grand narrative paints a picture of fugitive slaves seeking temporary refuge in the “promised land” and departing this place upon the arrival of freedom with the American Civil War. Yet communities like North Buxton persist, and what may have started as an American tale, has become a part of Canadian history. On special occasions, members of the community share family memories, stories, and jokes, working to reinscribe family and community histories. In these processes of retelling, they work to maintain that community’s memory.<sup>21</sup> North Buxton is just one of many such places, and the gathering of the histories and stories of communities such as these should not be left to annual celebrations of Black heritage; rather, this gathering should be a part of an inclusive



curriculum that values all aspects of the history of the nation. The history of enslavement and segregation and their rootedness in our culture and in the foundations of our economy, as well as the clear lines that can be drawn between this history and the persistent ills of structural racism, all need to be interrogated and better understood. At the 101st meeting of the CHA, there were two strong panels on Black Canadian history, a paper on blackface by one of the coeditors of the *JCHA*, and three roundtables on Black Canadian history. For those of us in attendance, it was refreshing to see the growth in scholarship and scope. It is my hope, as I remain cautiously optimistic, that the *JCHA* will continue in its movement toward meaningful participation in the discourses of the place of Blackness in Canadian history.

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**CLAUDINE BONNER** (she/her) is an Associate Professor of race and ethnicity at Acadia University and the inaugural Vice-Provost Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. Claudine is a scholar of the twentieth century with a specialization in Black Canadian history. Her research and teaching interests focus on African diaspora (im)migration and settlement in the Atlantic world, Black Canadian labour history, and diversity and equity in education. She is currently editing, with Drs. Nina Reid-Maroney and Boulou Ebanda de B'éri, a collection of essays titled *The Black Press: A Shadowed Canadian Tradition*. This collection, spanning the period from the 1850s to the early twentieth century, is the first to bring together original historical and communication studies research that position pioneering Canadian Black journalists as effective intellectual activists. Her current research explores early twentieth-century African-Caribbean migration networks, by way of the ports in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

**CLAUDINE BONNER** (elle) est professeure agrégée spécialisée en race et ethnicité à l'Université Acadia et inaugure le poste de vice-rectrice à l'équité, à la diversité et à l'inclusion. Claudine est une spécialiste du vingtième siècle et de l'histoire des Noirs canadiens. Ses recherches et son enseignement portent sur l'(im)migration et l'établissement de la diaspora africaine dans le monde atlantique, l'histoire du travail des Noirs au Canada, ainsi que la diversité et l'équité dans l'éducation. Elle coédite présentement, avec Nina Reid-Maroney et Boulou Ebanda de B'éri, un recueil d'essais intitulé *The Black Press: A Shadowed Canadian*

*Tradition*. Ce recueil, qui couvre la période allant des années 1850 au début du XXe siècle, est le premier à rassembler des recherches originales en histoire et en communication qui positionnent les journalistes noirs pionniers du Canada comme des activistes intellectuels efficaces. Ses recherches actuelles portent sur les réseaux migratoires afro-caribéens du début du XXe siècle, via les ports de Nouvelle-Écosse et du Nouveau-Brunswick.

## Endnotes

- 1 Not without struggle. For further discussion on the struggles experienced, see Afua Cooper, “Afua Cooper: My 30-Year Effort to Bring Black Studies to Canadian Universities Is Still an Upward Battle,” *The Conversation*, April 4, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/afua-cooper-my-30-year-effort-to-bring-black-studies-to-canadian-universities-is-still-an-upward-battle-144401>.
- 2 Rethinking History in Canada III – BIPOC Experiences (<https://cha-shc.ca/publications/engaged-engages-a-cha-webinar-series/engaged-engages-a-cha-webinar-series-rethinking-history-in-canada-iii-bipoc-experiences/>) was one of three webinars created as part of the CHA’s 100th anniversary celebrations.
- 3 Marcel Trudel, “L’attitude de l’Église catholique vis-à-vis l’esclavage au Canada français,” *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapport de l’assemblée annuelle* 40 (1961): 28–34; David A. Sutherland, “Race Relations in Halifax, Nova Scotia, During the Mid-Victorian Quest for Reform,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 7 (1996): 35–54; Jeffrey L. McNairn, “British Travellers, Nova Scotia’s Black Communities and the Problem of Freedom to 1860,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 19, no. 1 (2008): 27–56; Rosanne Waters, “African Canadian Anti-Discrimination Activism and the Transnational Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1965,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 24, no. 2 (2013): 386–424; Carla Marano, “‘We All Used to Meet at the Hall’: Assessing the Significance of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Toronto, 1900–1950,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 25, no. 1 (2014): 143–75; Francesca D’Amico, “‘The Mic Is My Piece’: Canadian Rap, the Gendered ‘Cool Pose,’ and Music Industry Racialization and Regulation,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 26, no. 1 (2015): 255–90; Cheryl Thompson, “Black Minstrelsy on Canadian Stages: Nostalgia for Plantation Slavery in the Nineteenth and Twentieth

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- 4 Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2006), 8.
  - 5 Sutherland, “Race Relations in Halifax.”
  - 6 McNairn, “British Travellers.”
  - 7 Waters, “African Canadian Anti-Discrimination Activism.”
  - 8 Mariano, “‘We All Used to Meet.’”
  - 9 D’Amico, “‘The Mic Is My Piece.’”
  - 10 Thompson, “Black Minstrelsy.”
  - 11 For more on the history of slavery in Upper and Lower Canada, see, for example, William Riddell, “The Slave in Upper Canada,” *Journal of Negro History* 4, no. 4 (1919): 372–95; Roy F. Fleming, “Negro Slaves with the United Empire Loyalists in Upper Canada,” *Ontario History* 45 (1953): 27–30; Cooper, *Hanging of Angélique*, and Kenneth Donovan, “Slaves and Their Owners in Ile Royals, 1713–1760,” *Acadiensis* 25, no. 1 (1995): 3–32.
  - 12 Judith Fingard, “Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 20 no. 2 (1993): 169–95.
  - 13 Some of these titles include, Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, “The Role of Women in the Antislavery Movement,” *Historical Papers / Communications historiques* 2 (1967); Kanya Forstner, “Myths and Realities of African Resistance,” *Historical Papers / Communications historiques* 2 (1967): 167–83; H. N. Fieldhouse, “Noel Edward Buxton, The Anti-Slavery Society and British Policy with Respect to Ethiopia, 1932–1944,” *Historical Papers / Communications historiques* 7 (1972): 287–312.
  - 14 The CHA began publication of this series in 1979 to provide brief histories of Canada’s ethnic groups. See <https://cha-shc.ca/english/publications/immigration.html>. How much this was in response to the receipt of funding and support from the Department of Canadian Heritage and the rationale for creating a separate space for the history of the Other is beyond the scope of this discussion.
  - 15 For more on this, see Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire,” *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7–24; and Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003), 133–36.
  - 16 Timothy J. Stanley, “Nationalist Histories and Multiethnic Classrooms,” *Education Canada* 42, no. 3 (2002): 13.
  - 17 Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, “Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): 23–44.
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- 19 Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,”  
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- 20 Walker, “Critical Histories.”
- 21 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row,  
1980), 62.