

Black History Month

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Of course, the vote would have taken place in *a church*. Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett notwithstanding, "religion the root of all evil," and all of that, there they were, several hundred black women, men and children gathered in the *Zion Methodist Church* in San Francisco in the winter of 1858, in *their church*, taking their own story and future into their hands; deciding who they were and what they were going to do. But then, that was always one of the principal functions of Black churches in North America, in the *US and Canada*. Relegated to segregated seating, denied ordination and power by white religious elites in Nova Scotia and South Carolina, Montreal and Philadelphia, Afro-Canadian and American church goers, had to create a highly effective parallel religious culture; a distinct kind of church life of their own, in order to afford its members "the full participation, leadership development, and spiritual dignity essential for those" who felt themselves called to unite together in the body of Christ. Root of all evil? Don't make *that claim* in the face of the history of black spirituality and empowerment within *their churches*. (Rev. Denise Gilland, "The Black Church in Canada) (But I digress)

In 1850, California had entered the Union south of the 49th parallel as a so-called Free State. The importation of slaves and the institution of slavery were officially banned; but not exclusion, prejudice and racism; those practices; that mentality, were too deeply ingrained. (You tell me where on this earth in the mid 1800s, did whites, blacks, Asians and Aborigines commune, labour, worship, govern and live as equals? Or today?)

After achieving statehood, one piece of oppressive legislation after another had been enacted in Sacramento: Blacks were excluded from state schools, barred from giving evidence against whites in courts of law, and compelled to register when moving into State which had the intended outcome of chilling the hopes of would-be black residents, and persuading them not to move to the Golden State. A final, dramatic event convinced most California blacks that they had no future there when a slave, Archie Lee, brought knowingly by his owner into the Bay Area, walked free and then was promptly arrested as a fugitive. Though the courts eventually freed him, the message communicated to Black residents was that they could not live and walk securely in California.

Which brings us back to the meeting at the Zion Methodist Church in the winter of 1858. The group assembled there voted to send a delegation to Victoria, on Vancouver Island, to see if and how they would be received as a group seeking to immigrate. Their timing was perfect; and the recipient of their appeal was enthusiastically in favour. James Douglas was the Hudson Bay Company's Chief Agent and the Governor of Vancouver Island. He had risen through the ranks of the Bay Company and district government administration since his arrival in 1828. Unbeknownst to most, Douglas was the son of a mixed race couple: his father was a Scottish merchant and his mother was Guyanese. Throughout his life, and mostly with success, Douglas strove, as we would call it today, to "pass" as fully Caucasian. Douglas agreed immediately to the appeal of the delegation from San Francisco to welcome them as settlers. For gold had been discovered on the tributaries of the Fraser River in 1857. Prospectors from the States, eventually numbering up to 30,000, were streaming in, bringing with them strong US sympathies and fears ran high that their presence would be used as a pretext by the United States to assert sovereignty.

The Black delegation pledged their support to Douglas and to the cause of British sovereignty, and thus it came about that on April 20, 1858, nearly 800 Black Californians, including Archie Lee, boarded the steamship "Commodore" in San Francisco Bay and set sail for Victoria, British Columbia. Within in the next

ten years, that group more than lived up to expectations as loyal immigrants as they settled in Victoria and pioneered as homesteaders on Saltspring Island and elsewhere. In 1860, Black's rallied to the need for a local militia and established the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps, served with distinction flying the Union Jack in the Gulf Islands' so-called "Pig War" in the 1860s, and comprised much of Victoria's early police force. Mifflin Gibbs, and his partner Peter Lester founded a successful mercantile enterprise to compete with the Hudson Bay Company; and in 1866, Gibbs was elected to the Victoria Town Council, making him the first openly Afro-Canadian politician in Canada....

During the past several weeks, a whole new world, the four hundred year history of the Afro-Canadian presence in this country, has begun to open up to me as I have dredged up history web sites, walked this city's streets, consulted historical atlases, and visited exhibits. The story that is slowly and initially unfolding is at once totally new and very familiar. Similar to the States, I discovered that the founding and building of the wealth of this country was achieved in its early days in no small measure from the sweat and labour of slavery and servitude. With grim recognition, I learned that the first sale of a slave in Canada occurred in 1628, that slavery was commonplace in New France, with up to 3600 women and men being transported or born here as slaves by 1760. They laboured from dawn to dusk, without pay, or prospect of freedom, while they built up the wealth of merchants, landowners, government officials and religious orders. Secular priests, Jesuits, Dominicans, and Franciscans, the Brothers of Charity at Louisburg and the Ursulines of the diocese of Quebec all owned and profited from slave labour. These women and men, though permitted the sacraments, were relegated to segregated seating, their children belonged to their owners not their parents, and all were forbidden training, ordination, and Holy Orders by canon law. (Rev. Denise Gilland, "The Black Church in Canada")

When French territories were transferred by treaty in 1713 and 1760 to British jurisdiction, Articles of Capitulation ensured that the slave system remained intact. From 1783-4, British Loyalists displaced from the newly independent States to the south, transported an additional 2000 slaves to Canada.

As well, racism and discrimination, both institutional and cultural, have been part of Canada's history and its economic, social, and cultural landscape. In 1783, promises of arable land and financial grants made to the 3500 Black United Empire Loyalists who arrived in Nova Scotia were systematically broken, which led directly to the economic decline and collapse of that community. Race riots flared up in Shelburne and Birchtown in July 1784. Free men and women were reduced to sharecropping and indentured servitude. By 1815, I read that black congregants were kept behind partitions in churches and eventually excluded from worship. In that same year, the provincial legislature passed a bill to stop further settlement by Blacks in Nova Scotia. (Gilland)

In the decades that followed, in one province after another, public schools were segregated, Black American farmers were actively discouraged from emigrating and settling in the Prairies, and cemeteries, theatres, hotels, swimming pools, residential areas, unions, and employment were segregated and restricted. Even the military was out of bounds to Black men when they tried to volunteer in 1914. But finally, this country, in shock over war casualties and desperate for recruits, relented. And thus came about the formation of the all-black No. 2 Construction Battalion. Though, I must add, the Battalion was conveyed to France on their own, segregated ship. (on history of racism, see Henry et al, *The Colour of Democracy...*, ch.3, 1999) Describing his memories of the absence of Blacks in "visible jobs" in the 1920s and 30s, one man states that: "I never once saw a black nurse, secretary, politician, teacher, fireman, civil servant, clerk in a department store, trade union or business leader" and its not because there were no blacks in Toronto, far from it; they were just made to be invisible. (K. Henry, *Black Politics in Toronto since WWII*)

Wayde Compton, a Vancouver based authour, recalls how during the 50s, his father, serving in the US Air Force at the time and stationed at Moses Lake, Washington, used to drive up here with his buddies to see

bands while on weekend leave. The music was great, he told his son, but he also said that “in the fifties Vancouver was just as racist as Texas.” Now “that’s a pretty strong statement,” the younger Compton adds, “but both my parents have all sorts of stories corroborating it.”

Well folks, so far so familiar: Canada, the States, slavery, discrimination and racism. But look again with me. Because wrapped around the story of his father’s experiences with racism in Vancouver in the 50s, Wayde Compton adds this. Comparing his father’s crossing the border and eventual decision to immigrate and settle here with the story of Afro-American author James Baldwin and his self-exile to France, Wayde Compton says the following:

My father’s “never said this to me...but I think part of it...was going to a place where the scripts around blackness weren’t so solid. They weren’t all laid out. That’s not to say there wasn’t racism...But I think it *was* different...there was some breathing space here. In the US, things were very official; segregation had a long tradition. But he was here in Vancouver a few times...and ended up staying.” (see “The Epic Moment: An Interview with Wayde Compton, *WCL Interview*, 2002, 131-45) A couple of weeks ago, I think I got a glimpse of what *was different* here for Wayde Compton’s father. I found it in an exhibit of Fred Herzog’s extraordinary documentary photographs of Vancouver in the 50s and 60s that’s currently on display at the Vancouver Art Gallery. I didn’t know it going into the exhibit, and it’s not necessarily tied into any kind of formal recognition of Black History Month, but here was a Vancouver, more working class, more of a port town, full of colour, with residents of colour. Of black men working on ships, a man walking with his daughter dressed in their Sunday best, of a mixed race couple out on a date at the PNE totally at their ease, at rest, at work, at peace. There may just-well-have-been something different here that would have beckoned to an Afro-American serviceman from Texas to move across the border to this city and put down roots.

For the truth is, while similarities exist between the States and Canada, the differences with regard to experience of Afro-Canadians, I think, have been palpable and real. Not to discount what’s been wrong: the injustices, the violence, the discrimination...for one person in slavery, in bondage, one person denied her rights and dignity, is one too many, and a witness and a challenge against the self-regard and self-satisfaction of us all who think that things are so much better here. Indeed, I agree with Colin Thomson when he states that “Black Canadian history is valuable for what it reveals about the dominate society.” (cited in Gilland) And yet, still, I can’t forget or deny or discount what I have seen and learned these past couple of weeks that and corroborate Wayde Compton’s assertion: “I think it *was* different...there was breathing space here.”

That difference became acutely clear at the outset when reading Adam Hochschild’s *Bury the Chains* and Simon Schama’s *Rough Crossing*. Both books turned what I knew about the War for Independence in the States upside down. I use to teach classes on US history, and never knew that tens of thousands of black women and men and their families fled plantations and houses of servitude to serve the British cause. They rallied to the Union Jack because of the promise made to them that their service would be rewarded with their freedom. For thousands, it was a promise kept. White Americans patriots fought for their independence and *for the perpetual servitude* of their slaves. Black Americans fought for the British side *for their freedom from slavery*, for their independence; and at war’s end, Canada became a promised land for them and would remain so. An ambiguous utopia to be sure, one that failed them time and again; but the promise of freedom that Canada embodied led one great migration after another of Afro-Americans: in the 1780s, after the War of 1812, and then in the 1840s and 50s, to brave extraordinary danger and hardship, and to journey to and settle in this land. We’re living in a time of another great migration; this one is of women and men from the Caribbean and Africa making their way to this country for similar reasons: to escape grinding poverty, violence, persecution and mayhem. For many, Canada is still a land of promise.

In the first half of the 1800s, they followed the northward pointing stars of the “drinking gourd” constellation for good reason. A monumental campaign for the abolition of slavery in Great Britain and its colonies, championed by British Unitarians like Josiah Wedgwood, Joseph Priestley and Erasmus Darwin, successfully struck down, in one blow after another, the laws and institutions of the British slave economy. That great political and social movement swept to these shores and led to the Upper Canada Abolition Act of 1793, and the declaration, in 1819, by Attorney General John Beverly Robinson, that residence in Canada made Blacks free. Finally, on August 28, 1833, the passage of the Imperial Act by Parliament made abolition permanent, the law of the land for Great Britain and all its colonies. By the time of the American Civil War between 30 - 40,000 fugitives from slavery had found their way to Canada

The 800 women and men, who boarded “The Commodore” in San Francisco Bay and set sail for Victoria in 1858, knew what they were doing and wrote their own history, their own future. “There *was* something different” north of the 49 th parallel. “Scripts around blackness weren’t so solid...” Good heavens, the Governor, James Douglas, was a clandestine black... “who found breathing space here” for himself, and who then welcomed British Columbia’s pioneer Black settlers and their need for breathing space and the dignity of their own free labour....

What with Valentine’s Day, the Year of the Pig celebrations, Britney Spears’ shaved head, the Provincial’s government’s so-called “housing budget” that’s really no such thing, and with the Oscars coming up tonight, it may have been difficult to remember or to find Black History Month in Vancouver this year. I went looking for it, and it was hard to find; barely a trace of it at the Downtown Public Library. Hogan’s Alley, once the epicenter of Vancouver’s black community, lies under the steel and concrete of the Georgia Street by-pass, and the Fountain Chapel, once Vancouver’s Black church, now houses a Chinese Lutheran congregation. In contrast to southern Ontario that interacts culturally with Buffalo and Detroit, our geography isolates, there’s less border crossing, no big inner city projects; “black culture” arrives by way of books, music, and movies. It may mean isolation; but it also may create space like that provided the black Commodore pioneers to write their own script and re-invent themselves: as riflemen, islanders, and politicians.

We have a long row to hoe, all of us still, in breaking down what John Porter forty years ago called Canada’s “vertical mosaic”; breaking it down and making it more inclusive: a vibrant mosaic of equals.

And I’ve got this hope. For when I survey the 400 years of the Afro-Canadian experience in the this country, one that began with slavery in New France, one that once relegated women, men, and children to the back of the bus and to a segregated “invisible” parallel culture, an experience which also includes Canada in the vanguard of abolition, a welcome port for “The Commodore” and its 800 souls looking for freedom; the ending of slavery in Canada for the handful who were still in servitude sixty years before the States and without a Civil War; when I consider that the daughter of Haitian parents is now the Governor-General of this nation; when I reckon with the centuries’ long struggle for dignity and rights in this land that helped to secure a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, a Charter that asserts “every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination...based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.” When I consider this extraordinary story, this nation’s grand narrative of making room, of our aspiration to welcome each and all to our common table; then I have hope that Wayde Compton’s words are true: Canada “was [and will be] different.... There is breathing space here.” Let us breathe the pure oxygen of freedom; and may we work and live so that all will breathe and move and achieve in a land of opportunity, dignity, and liberating freedom.