

# **Unsettling the Great White North Black Canadian history**

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## Critical Histories of Blackness in Canada

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### Introduction

This meditative paper considers how we might continue to go about the difficult task of writing critical histories of Blackness in Canada. I want to highlight the various issues at stake in thinking about historical scholarship as a critical practice by attempting to work through a number of themes in the space provided here. As we write our histories of Blacks in Canada, who, exactly, should we remember and why? If narrative is the process through which nations realize and imagine themselves, where do Blacks fit in with this project? Put another way, what, exactly, is the relationship between “Blackness” and this settler colony we inhabit, this space that has had many different names – including and originally Turtle Island – that we now call “Canada.” And more specifically, what is the particular positionality of Blacks within the history of settler colonialism and its ongoing modes of colonial governance vis-à-vis Canada’s Indigenous peoples?

In attempting to answer these questions – perhaps not quite in the order that I have presented them here – I will consider the existing historiography, much of which has been written with these sorts of critical questions in mind. In addition, I will consider the possibilities for the historiography that is to come – how we might envision the sorts of critical Black histories we will write in the future.

I argue that the writing of critical Black histories must continue to emphasize the move beyond simple storytelling that is all too prevalent during public historical commemorative events that characterize the typical Black History Month fare and, although it is rarer, can still also function as a kind of strategic retreat for some professional (university trained and/or employed) historians as well as their so-called “amateur” counterparts. Such a retreat tragically and needlessly cedes the ground

of Black criticality to newer disciplines whose grasp of the complexity of Black histories in Canada is often superficial, bereft of historical or historiographical nuance.

Part I of this paper deals with questions of historiography and sketches a few of the major approaches that have shaped the field of African Canadian history over the past fifty years. Part II turns to questions of theory and method in the writing of African Canadian history. Part III discusses how we might move toward a critical history of Blacks and the racial state, focusing on three historical case studies from the mid-nineteenth century.

## Part I. Historiography

I would like to begin my discussion with two early narrative history texts, both of which are important general surveys of Black Canadian history. These are classic texts, but their importance has certainly not diminished with age. The first is Robin Winks's *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, first penned in the late 1960s and republished in the 1990s by McGill-Queen's University Press. The second is Dan Hill's *The Freedom-Seekers*, a textbook that was written in the 1980s. Winks's book, all five-hundred-plus pages of it, is a work that has inspired mixed reactions. This book, though based on an astounding research effort, seems to have been met with what only can be described as a resounding thud by the Canadian historical profession when it was first published. For a book that essentially formally opened up a "sub-discipline" in Canadian history, the response was rather curious. It did not spark the sort of intellectual ferment or create institutional spaces within the Canadian academy that might have been expected.

This was the case for two reasons. First, Winks was writing into a scholarly void that existed precisely because of the overwhelming Whiteness of the Canadian historical profession and its blindness with regard to a critical engagement with Black histories in Canada. The writing of the history of Blacks in Canada, although it had a relatively long history (I will say a bit more on this later) was simply not deemed important nor worthy of serious study when Winks published his book. I met this sort of attitude head on when in the early 1990s I was on the cusp of completing a master's degree at the University of Toronto. At that time, I was rather generously granted a meeting with a leading historian of Canada in one of the country's most respected departments. In response to my query about the possibility of pursuing a doctorate in his department and writing a dissertation in Black Canadian history in partial fulfilment of that degree, I was politely informed by my well-meaning host that writing

such a dissertation would prove difficult because the history of Blacks in Canada was virtually non-existent and, by extension, irrelevant. I was thus encouraged (and it is not the last time I would be met with such advice) to perhaps broaden my research to include other non-Anglo Celtic groups in Canada. Winks's book received a somewhat chilly reception for another reason. When Canadians did think about the history of Blacks in Canada, it was in the vein of the celebratory histories written by an earlier generation of historians, most notably Fred Landon.

Landon was a University of Western Ontario-based historian and librarian who was also a member of the interracial board of London's civil rights organization – the Canadian League for the Advancement of Coloured People – and a prolific historian, having produced some three hundred publications, many of which were on the history of Blacks in Canada. Indeed, Landon is regarded by many as the “founder” of the field of Black Canadian history. Landon's work was foundational in the sense that he was one of the first to professionalize the study of Blacks in Canada by disseminating his research in professional journals. Landon's work on the history of Blacks in Canada (he published widely on the history of Ontario beyond Black history) was solid, and it was based on the systematic and conscientious use of primary sources. One of my main bones of contention with Landon, however, was that much of his work – not all – mirrored some of the worst excesses of ideas about the Underground Railroad that were proffered by White abolitionists. As many readers undoubtedly know, the numerous publications that White abolitionists produced tended to rely on a number of rhetorical strategies with which we are still saddled.<sup>1</sup>

First, there was a tendency to trade in rather graphic accounts of the harsh treatment that was inflicted upon the bodies of slaves in order to generate empathy on the part of the intended (White) audiences of these pamphlets. Sadiya Hartman has argued brilliantly in her work *Scenes of Subjection* that the discourse of empathy, the identification of the observer with the slave, ultimately reinforced White supremacy while it facilitated the erasure of the subjectivity of the slave.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the abolitionists tended to relegate Blacks to the status of those acted upon rather than the central actors in their story. The agency of Blacks, the role that they took in seizing freedom, was often missing in the work of the abolitionists. Third, their work tended to highlight the notion that Canada was a more or less pure haven from slavery. This work was mobilized to support a foundational historical narrative of White Canadian beneficence. It is the creation of a narrative arc that contributes to the making of the nation, and this process sits at the intersection of knowledge (i.e., the archive) and power. Landon's work did not engage in the voyeuristic

excesses of his abolitionist predecessors, but it was quite resonant with it on the last two fronts.

Winks's *The Blacks in Canada* was the first critical response to the tradition that Landon and his White abolitionist antecedents represented.<sup>3</sup> Winks's tome was an archival tour de force. His meticulous research was instructive from the standpoint of doing the important work of excavation for writing critical histories. His work shows us that often the first step in writing good critical history is premised upon the importance of empirical archival research, not as mere recovery and retrieval but as a first step en route to critical practice. For Winks, the key to debunking the long cherished myths of Canada as a haven from slavery and a promised land lay in the manuscript sources – what we historians also call primary research. As many others (including myself) have written elsewhere, stories of benevolence via the Underground Railroad and Canada as a welcoming terminus where Blacks enjoyed freedom under the British flag tell only part of the story. Winks's work smashed those myths with astonishing surgical precision. First, he highlighted the central role of slavery in New France and the Loyalist era (Marcel Trudel had also done this earlier in his seminal study of slavery in New France).<sup>4</sup> After charting the various factors – economic, political, legal, and perhaps even social – that caused slavery to peter out, Winks went on to show us that the “afterlife” of slavery in Canada was far from idyllic. In fact, quite the contrary; the single most important contribution of Winks's work was that it made the case that while Blacks enjoyed formal equality, they were subject to pervasive patterns of social and cultural discrimination. This took the form of residential segregation, separate (and inferior) schools, political and economic marginalization from the mainstream of political life, episodes of mob violence, and a popular culture that made the denigration of Blacks one of its central preoccupations. And these cultural products were both home-grown and imported from the torrent of such images being produced south of the border.

So, while Winks's empirical work freed the study of Blacks in Canada from romantic myths about the nation, in other respects his work failed to live up to critical scrutiny. The Canada that was narrated in Winks's book, which was a bald rebuke of the “promised land” narrative, also served to inscribe a narrative of Black subjection and abjection that denied Black Canadians their humanity. For all of its success in shattering the myth of Canadian racial tolerance, there is an unfortunate undercurrent of White (and liberal) supremacy in that book that makes many of us uneasy. This is why many scholars no longer teach this book and why, even among the handful of students who have made their way to my university to undertake advanced study of race in Canada or Black

Canadian history under my supervision, fewer and fewer seem to have grappled with this book. Winks's portrayal of Black Canadians was at times condescending, even insulting. To cite a famous example, in his chapter on the Black Refugees of Nova Scotia Winks wrote that

the Refugee Negroes were a disorganized, pathetic, and intimidated body who seemed unable to recover from their previous condition of servitude, their sudden voyage up the Atlantic to Nova Scotian shores, and their persistent lack of leaders. They unwittingly fanned the sparks of a more conscious, more organized, white racism than Nova Scotia had known, just as the last vestiges of slavery were passing. These new arrivals clasped their freedom to them, willed themselves to do well, did not want to leave their new found land – and yet failed utterly.<sup>5</sup>

This is but one example in a tome that is rife with these sorts of statements and sentiments. Winks essentially concluded that Blacks in Canada were unsuccessful because by almost every objective measure they were unable to match the successes of Blacks in the United States. Where US Blacks were led by charismatic figures, Black Canadians seemed leaderless. While these charismatic American Black leaders embarked on a variety of programmatic responses to confront White racism in the United States, ranging from Garveyism to civil rights, Blacks in Canada seemed to lack a coherent organizing philosophy and when these ideological currents did manage to trickle across the border, they failed to take root in the shallow soil of Black Canadian life. It is also evident that Winks's construction of Blackness was deeply rooted in the perspective of his own position as an American and influenced – at least in part – by ideas of American exceptionalism.

A number of scholars crafted critical responses to Winks's work. University of Waterloo historian James Walker criticized Winks for writing the history of Blacks "as an issue in white Canadian life" rather than "the history of Negro life in Canada."<sup>6</sup> I have always only partially agreed with Walker's assessment of Winks's work regarding this issue. I do not think you can disentangle Black history from White supremacy or its connection to the idea of race and the emergence of the racial state, because the history of Blacks in the West is inextricably bound with each of these things. It is a fact, nonetheless, that Winks's history tends to reproduce the logic of racism by positing Blacks as the passive recipients of White racial abuse. Indeed, in his preface to the second edition of *The Blacks in Canada* Winks rather strangely remarked that one of the oblique stylistic interventions of the book was his decision to write the chapter on what he called the "nadir" of the Black experience – essentially

his narrative account of what we would now call Canadian anti-Black racism – in the passive voice. Given Winks’s dim view of Black life, one doubts whether he was merely being even partially ironic.

I have devoted this much attention to Winks because although it is a text that many in our field would like to see dead and buried (about a decade ago a colleague criticized me for devoting time to a text that was over thirty years old at the time) its influence continues to loom large, although this is often unacknowledged. After Winks, much of what followed in the writing of the history of Blacks in Canada built on his important excavation of White supremacy in Canada while providing a critical response to many of the underlying assumptions in his book around the place of Blacks in shaping their own history – which, Winks claimed, was minimal. James W. St. G. Walker’s *The Black Loyalists* was first published shortly after Winks’s work appeared. Walker’s influential book highlights the role of Blacks in forging their own freedom during the American Revolution. They were neither the “flotsam and jetsam” of imperial contests nor the passive beneficiaries of British colonial policy.<sup>7</sup> Walker argued that Blacks forged their own freedom by seizing the opportunities that emerged during the war. They were not “freed” but rather they exercised their “agency” by freeing themselves.<sup>8</sup> Other works written in the aftermath of Winks’s work also endeavoured to place Black Canadians at the centre of their own history. Daniel G. Hill’s *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* explicitly argued that freedom was not something that was conferred upon Blacks in Canada but something that they actively sought out and forged for themselves. This is most poignantly illustrated in the culminating chapter of his book, “The Freedom-Seekers,” which provides sketches of eighteen Black Canadians, central historical figures who were the movers of early Black Canadian history.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, C. Peter Ripley’s 1986 collection, *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, sought to focus explicitly on the contributions and history of Black abolitionists via an extensive introduction and a rich compendium of primary sources. The work is, in essence, an archive of Black emancipatory thought and practice in the nineteenth century, one that seeks to highlight Black abolitionist thought in Canada as part of a larger movement that spanned Britain and the United States.<sup>10</sup> The emergence of agency as a central theme in the history of Black Canadians has been key in subsequent work that emerged in the 1990s and beyond. During this period, the decentering of Black men in Black Canadian history took hold as scholars such as Afua Cooper, Adrienne Shadd, and Maureen Elgersman (to cite just a few) devoted works to Black Canadian women’s history.<sup>11</sup> While much of the work on Black women’s history somewhat ironically reproduced the recovery mode of writing that characterized

much of the male-centred work they were writing against, there is evidence that the latest generation of Black women's history is moving away from that. It is somewhat more attuned to theory, interdisciplinarity, and "a nuanced and audible and resonant conversation between the past and the present."<sup>12</sup>

Thus, for at least two decades now, much of the scholarly writing of critical Black Canadian history has moved largely beyond the simple story and the mythologizing of Canada as a haven from slavery and discrimination (though some recent publications have seemed to return to it in a noteworthy post-revisionist turn that, though avowedly atheoretical, is in fact heavily imbued with certain theoretical and ideological precepts).<sup>13</sup> What historians have turned to now is centring Blacks as the agents of their own history, but there are other issues that we need to consider when writing critical histories of Blackness in Canada as well. I am thinking of three things here: first, how we move beyond histories of "firsts" and the sorts of celebratory histories that often result; second, how we think about Black peoples' relationships to settler colonialism in Canada; and third, how the methodology of the historian can take up the methodological insights born of Black feminist intersectional theory and praxis and the Black modernist chronotopes that emerge from slavery and its aftermath.

Much of the writing of Blacks in Canada has been preoccupied with excavation of the archives to unearth Black "firsts." This is perfectly understandable given the history of White supremacy and the denigration of Blackness that pervades so much of the lived experiences of Black folks in the past, in the present, and very likely into the future. The focus on heroes in the writing and public dissemination of Black histories is thus a predictable response to White supremacist assaults on Black aesthetics, intelligence, and accomplishments. Thus, boilerplate Black History Month celebrations typically feature stories of Black heroism or Black accomplishment in a range of fields including arts, law, science, literature, and even athletics (though typically in the pre-World War II era, as barriers to Black participation in professional and elite-level sports have been torn down outside of a handful of vanilla sports such as golf and hockey). It is understandable too that these sorts of conventions would have found their way into some of the historical scholarship as well, where there has been an inordinate focus on exceptional elites, in large part as a result of the challenges presented by finding sources that might point the way to lesser-known figures.

While it is true that much of the preoccupation with Black Canadian elites has to do with who has produced and left behind documentary evidence of their lives, there is also more going on in the decision that



many historians of Black Canada have made to focus on elites. If Blacks are the agents of history, there is also a belief among many historians – both explicitly stated and not – that Black elites, or those who are otherwise particularly accomplished, are the movers and creators of Black Canadian history. This is essentially the Du Boisian “talented tenth” conception of Black history, a holdover from older ideas of history and historical practice that emerged in the nineteenth century and the whiggish preoccupation with ideas of teleology and historical progress.<sup>14</sup> Writing critical histories of Blackness entails not eschewing the history of elites but thinking more carefully and critically about their role in history. A critical approach to history alerts us to the fact that elites are a product of a given social, cultural, and economic context. Moreover, a critical approach to history demands that we also move away from our preoccupation with exemplary historical figures to look at the lives of everyday Black men and women – most of whom were engaged in various sorts of legal and illicit work – to get a sense of how they shaped the contours of modern Black history. Though we have a few excellent studies of slavery in Canada, very few studies of the Canadian Black working class exist, not to mention the Black underclass or lumpen proletariat. Nor do we have many studies of those Blacks who were enmeshed in the criminal justice system, which, again, is understandable given the historic power of dominant stereotypes of Black criminality and historians’ discomfort with and resistance to engaging with them. The few historical studies that do exist (sociologists and criminologists have been more likely to take on these issues) are either met with a stony silence or criticized for reifying or trading in negative stereotypes, responses with which I am familiar.<sup>15</sup> But the criminal justice system and the mass incarceration of the prison industrial complex have played an inordinate role in shaping Black life after slavery. Indeed, we need more work that explores the genealogy of the prison and policing in Canada in the Middle Passage and slavery.

## **Part II. Theory, Method, and Black Canadian History**

Writing Black Canadian history involves careful consideration of theory and method. Several questions arise around, first, how we “do” Black Canadian history and, second, what exactly we want Black Canadian history to “do.” How are we going to go about the process of systematically remembering the Black past and what is the nature of the archives from which we can draw? How do we define the Black Canadian archive and what is our relationship to it? How does writing Black history in Canada open new ways of thinking about the relationship between time and space? How should historians of Black Canada address the issue of agency in the future?

Rather than offer definitive answers, I would like to offer some tentative positions from which we might begin to respond to such questions. Writing Black history in Canada is a simultaneous practice of theory and method. Historians of Black Canada must double down on the tried and true counterhegemonic strategies of the historian of the quintessential “Others,” the subaltern. They must be attuned to the strategies of “reading against the grain” of the gaps and silences and the routinized, often banal violence of the records of officialdom. At the same time, we must expand the archive beyond traditional manuscript and oral history sources. To be sure, both are crucial to the writing of the histories of people who are steeped in a rich oral tradition. At the same time, however, I am gesturing to the Black archival futurity, an archive that exceeds the limits of manuscript sources or oral histories.

Black archival futurities will need to continue to mine the archive that is the Black body, a body that bears the weight of so much of our histories as Black people during slavery and its aftermath and that is so often the focus of critical scholarship on Black histories, cultures, and experiences. The body’s archive is contained not only in the ways in which it has been surveilled, constructed, and interpellated but also in the history of Black looks, gestures, gaits, and how the memory of slavery and displacement is embedded within and among them. Past scholars have read slave notices and their vivid descriptions of the infirmaries of runaway slaves as inventories of the violence their masters inflicted upon their bodies. Future historians may well look to the realms of “bioarchaeologies,” for example, and the traumas that are archived within us, quietly ticking away in mitochondrial DNA, literally collapsing the past and the present. But while the materiality of blood, bone, sinew, and mitochondria mark one potential path of archival futurities, historians will also have to grapple with digitized, disembodied, and artificially intelligent/algorithmic and cybernetic expressions of Blackness and the Black modern. These archives can neither be reduced to the old notions of what Frantz Fanon called the “bodily epidermal schema” nor be contained by the national or transnational frameworks upon which our prior work has been rooted.<sup>16</sup> The historian will also have to look to these cybernetic expressions of Blackness as an archive of new sites of resistance and struggle.

Lastly, and relatedly, I would like to say a little more about the question of agency. We must heed Gilroy’s observation in *The Black Atlantic* about the new chronotopes that emerged in and through the Middle Passage, slavery, and its resultant Black modernity and what this means for writing Black histories. The roots of the formal academic study of history are firmly embedded in the Enlightenment project of empiricism, positivism, rationality, and possessive individualism. Indeed, it is my view that one of the ironies of the turn to the Black historical agent as the mover of history

is that the idea of “agency” (by definition the ability of the individual – the historical agent – to act independently in the context of overarching social, cultural, and political structures) is a product of the Enlightenment project, a project that did not include non-White non-Western peoples. We thus need to embrace a future of new historical methods that heed Gilroy’s famous and brilliant injunction that the Black Atlantic constitutes the dark side of the Enlightenment – a “counterculture of modernity” – that long anticipated the conditions of modernity that we now call “postmodern.”<sup>17</sup> And these insurgent methods must shape how we can begin to write about not broken people or helpless victims but rather those who had to confront the “crushing objecthood” – to invoke Fanon yet again – that battered bodies and psyches, fracturing the subjectivities of those who survived and resisted the barbarous conditions of Black life that created the Black modern.<sup>18</sup> The “double consciousness” that characterizes Black life under modernity can only be partially contained, captured, and embodied by the positivist and empiricist logistics that structure the conventional historical archive.<sup>19</sup>

Future historians of Black Canada will have to develop an approach to writing history that is informed by the principles of intersectionality – and what form that might take, exactly, is unclear – to deal with the fractured Black subject/object as well as the compression of space and time that occurs under the conditions of slavery and post-slavery and how this affects conventional notions of historical progress. The lived experiences of Black people also embody historically and spatially overlapping colonial projects. The practice of carding, for example, gestures to histories and practices of slavery and surveillance in Canada and the Caribbean, Jim Crow in its older and newer iterations, and the racialized deployment of state power against people who embody the Global South regardless of their geographical location. In other words, newer historians of Blackness in Canada and elsewhere will have to puzzle out how a discipline that is wedded to positivist notions of “change over time” can come to grips with the “changing same” of Black life over swaths of time where new iterations of White supremacy supplant the old to ensure the conditions that expedite Black death.<sup>20</sup>

### **Part III. Between Fugivity and Colonization: Blacks and Canada’s Racial State**

David Theo Goldberg has argued that “the history of the modern state and racial definition ... are intimately related.”<sup>21</sup> Race has always been central in Canadian state formation. The issue of slavery has been central to Canada’s emergence as a modern state. Slavery was widely practised

in many parts of pre-Confederation Canada, most notably in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Upper Canada, and Lower Canada. Scholarly critical transnational histories of Blackness have moved us beyond the nation-state as the primary lens through which to study Black history. And this makes perfect sense given the intertwined histories of Blackness in the Atlantic World and the circulation of Black peoples through the circuits that made up the Black Atlantic. Nonetheless, we need to think more critically about Black Canadians' relationship to settler colonialism and the foundation of a racial state that has its genesis in the dispossession of First Nations peoples.<sup>22</sup> Sunera Thobani puts it brilliantly in her work, regarding the question of citizenship for non-White settlers, "many of whom had been coerced into migration": "Can a citizenship conceived in, and maintained by, a genocidal violence leave untainted any group which comes to be included in its orbit, no matter how severe the forms of their own previous exclusions or how tenuous their subsequent inclusions?"<sup>23</sup>

In my own work I have challenged the promised land myth (in both its historical and more recent and admittedly more nuanced iterations) in favour of a thinking about the liminal space that Blacks occupied between legal equality and social ostracism. But my work has not fully thought through how even the liminal status of Blacks made them not only not-quite-citizens but also not-quite-settlers. Black people did not create the racial colonial state, but they managed to carve out a tenuous hold within it. The significant commercial successes that some Black men were able to achieve were clearly only possible because of the racial state's criminal theft and appropriation of Indigenous land, evidence of how non-White men benefited from the gendered contours of the colonial project. But in the large scheme of things Blacks were supplicants, getting the crumbs of White British-Canadian imperialism when they did manage to own a piece of stolen land outright (as opposed to being placed on tickets of occupation). The well-documented differential treatment of White and Black Loyalists and the shabby treatment of the Refugees are prime examples. What, then, is to be done with what I have elsewhere called the liminal space between fugivity and colonization, the unsteady ground between the ex-slave and the citizen, the fugitive and the settler?

Three case studies highlight the complexities of thinking critically about Blacks' relationship to the racial state in Canada and this liminal space between fugivity and colonization that shaped the contours of Blacks' experiences in Canada West: the coloured convention movement; the narratives collected by Benjamin Drew, who toured Canada West in the nineteenth century and interviewed ex-slaves; and Mary Ann Shadd's colonization guide, *A Plea for Emigration*.

In the nineteenth century, coloured conventions became a staple of Black life in North America. From the early to the late 1800s, coloured conventions sprang up across North America and largely, but certainly not exclusively, in the United States. During this era, which encompassed both the pre- and post-slavery eras, Blacks met to discuss how best to achieve the elusive goal of freedom. In the years before the Civil War the question of slavery loomed large in these discussions. Should Blacks seek to undermine the system from within through political agitation or by forming strategic alliances with Whites from the (relative) safety of the North? Among free Black populations in the northern states during slavery there remained the question of how best to secure their full citizenship under the yoke of impingements on their freedom via a series of anti-Black laws that portended the ubiquitous Black Codes that would mark Black life after slavery in the South. These northern laws and social customs restricted Blacks' freedom in myriad areas of social and civil life. In the post-slavery period, these organizations found themselves facing the same vexing questions in the Northern US and Canada. What the conventionists learned is a lesson that resonates throughout Black North American history: the end of slavery did not mean the end of racial prejudice.<sup>24</sup>

At ten o'clock on the morning of 11 September 1851, the North American Convention commenced its meeting at St. Lawrence Hall in Toronto. The convention's participants, the vast majority of whom were Black, hailed from Canada and the northern United States; one of the delegates, who was White, came from Jamaica. In attendance were stalwarts of the abolitionist movement such as Thomas W.F. Smallwood, a factory owner in Toronto and a Maryland ex-slave; Henry Bibb, Windsor-based Black abolitionist ex-slave and founder of the abolitionist newspaper *The Voice of the Fugitive*, and Martin Delaney, the well-known author, public intellectual, and activist. Over the course of the next two days the convention addressed a number of issues presented as formal motions and reports by various committees and individual delegates. The second day of the convention included, for example, "reports from several delegates, setting forth the moral, civil, and pecuniary condition of our people, in their respective localities." On the third day of the convention it was resolved that, "slavery being a sin against God, and an outrage upon man, we feel sacredly bound, as a convention and as individuals, to make common cause with the enslaved, and never to cease our efforts against slavery until it is swept from the face of the earth or our vital breath and pulsation cease."<sup>25</sup>

It was the first day of the convention, however, that encapsulated the dilemma of the fugitive slave's settler strivings. During the afternoon session, the business committee made the following resolutions, which are worth quoting at length:

1. Resolved, that the infamous fugitive slave enactment of the American Government – whether constitutional or unconstitutional is an insult to God, and an outrage upon humanity, not to be endured by any people; we therefore earnestly entreat our brethren of the northern and southern states to come out from under the jurisprudence of those wicked laws – from the power of a Government whose tender mercies towards the colored people are cruel.
2. Resolved, that we feel truly grateful, as a people, to her Britanic Majesty's just and powerful Government, for the protection afforded us; and we are fully persuaded from the fertility of the soil, and salubrity of climate of the milder regions of Canada West, that this is, by far, the most desirable place of resort for colored people, to be found on the American continent.
3. Resolved, that we warmly recommend to colored settlers in Canada, to use all diligence in obtaining possession of uncultivated lands, for the purpose of making themselves and their offspring independent tillers of a *free soil*.<sup>26</sup>

These resolutions are striking for a number of reasons. The first resolution was an appeal to universal humanity and a rebuke of a republican government that was, in essence, a *Herrenvolk* democracy based on White supremacy and built upon a foundation of “wicked laws” that were an “insult to God.” The second resolution was a further rebuke of American republicanism, which was unfavourably compared to the “just and powerful” government of “her Britanic Majesty.” The third resolution spoke to the in-between position of the “colored settler.” This resolution called for Black people coming into the province to obtain “uncultivated lands.” These were in essence imagined as “*terra nullius*,” empty lands that needed to be tamed, civilized, and put to proper use. Further, it is through cultivating these uncultivated lands that the refugee would be transformed into a citizen (or at least nearer to that ideal). Once cleared and tilled, the land would be put to “the laudable purpose of making themselves and their offspring independent tillers of *free soil*.” This attitude toward land and soil and its relationship to (still elusive) national belonging is the key to understanding the attitudes and outlooks of those who would try to make the journey from slaves to citizens. The act of purchasing and tilling “free soil” was then the conduit through which the slave, who has no sovereign claim under the “vel of slavery” not even to his body, can make life anew.<sup>27</sup> But it was a conception of freedom built upon free land that was not free. (The gendered contours of formal citizenship made this calculus more complicated for

Black women, of course, but their participation in the colonial regimes of property ownership gave them many of the benefits of substantive freedom nonetheless.) Put another way: What are the prospects for and possibilities of freedom for a stolen people who settle upon stolen lands?

Consider too the narrative of Ephraim Casey, a free-born Black man who migrated to Colchester, in Canada West. Abolitionist Benjamin Drew recorded Casey's testimony in *The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, originally published in 1856. In his narrative, Casey introduces himself as hailing "from the State of Georgia, where I was born free. But the laws were not better about learning for a free man than for a slave." At the age of twenty-three, Casey continued, he "emigrated" to Indiana "carrying no property." Once in Indiana, Casey's fortunes seem to have improved dramatically. From his propertyless status in the cotton belt, Indiana afforded him the opportunity to amass some land, a farm sprawling over some eighteen acres. Casey, nonetheless, decided to leave: "I liked the country very well. The Laws bore hard on me before I came away – I had a case in law, and could not prove my side good by the evidence of colored me which caused me a loss of fifty or sixty dollars. I did not feel disposed to stand this, and emigrated to Canada." Once in Canada, Casey settled in Colchester, where he "bought out a white settler, land and stock, for seven hundred and fifty dollars." After having made vast improvements on his newly purchased land, including a new irrigation system, a well, and even a sawmill, his fortunes improved so much he was able to "hire colored men to work for me whenever I wanted their help, and I have seen them hired by others," Casey continued, "but they prefer, so far as I know, to work for themselves, and to get an independent living."<sup>28</sup>

Casey's narrative, though brief, is quite rich. It tells us about the nature and elasticity of fugivity as an analytical category, and it corroborates Michael Wayne's classic findings that while many Black people fled bondage, in fact, more fled conditions of unfreedom rather than slavery qua slavery.<sup>29</sup> It also gives us a window, albeit limited, on the complex relationship among coloniality, race, land, capitalist accumulation, and citizenship. Casey's ability to convert land to capital and leverage capital for substantive citizenship was compromised in the United States because of the overt nature of White supremacy in the form of unequal justice in the courts. Once in Canada, the alchemies of race, citizenship, and capital accumulation changed, allowing him to exercise his property rights in the purchase of land from a White settler and the protection of the law to conduct business, hire employees, and accumulate capital. Nonetheless, like so many such narratives it is silent on the transfer of the land from Indigenous peoples. Colchester's settler-colonial origins began in

the late eighteenth century with a series of land purchases and treaties. In the post-Revolutionary era, William Caldwell, a British captain, secured a “grant” from Indigenous peoples and immediately set about preparing the land for soldiers-cum-settlers (the details about how Caldwell secured the land are unclear). In 1787, a man named Thomas Smith surveyed land near the Caldwell “grant” that was joined with it. A few years later, in 1790, “the Ottawa, Chippewa, Potawatomi and Huron Indians” transferred over 1.3 million acres of land to settlers through a Detroit-based British Indian agent named Alexander McKee. This land was exchanged for “‘valuable land and merchandise’ including blankets, combs, looking glasses, penknives, ribbons, silk handkerchiefs, hats, tobacco and rum” worth 1,200 pounds.<sup>30</sup> The treaty stipulated that the Crown was “to have and to hold the said Lands and Premises hereby given and granted, mentioned or intended to be given and granted until His Majesty George the Third, His Heirs and Successors for Ever.”<sup>31</sup> This treaty, like scores of others that came before it and would follow, mark the essence of the contract that converted Indigenous land to lots divided by concessions, lines on a map that made settler space and turned land into fungible alienable property. It was this act of exchange, often conducted under highly dubious circumstances with more than a whiff of the coercive power of the colonial state, that created the conditions under which Black people could escape their unfreedom, achieve elusive citizenship, and try to begin anew.

Lastly, consider Mary Ann Shadd’s nineteenth-century tract *A Plea for Emigration*. Early in the *Plea*, Shadd turns to the subject of “Soils-Timber-Clearing Lands.” In this section she clearly outlines the vision of freedom that was paramount for prospective emigrants, and it is worth citing at length:

So far as coloured people are interested in the subject of emigration to any country, their welfare in a pecuniary view, is promoted by attention to the quality of the soil. Lands out of the United States, on this continent, should have no local value, if the question of personal freedom and political rights were left out of the subject but as they are paramount too much may not be said on this point; I mean to be understood that a description of lands in Mexico would probably be as desirable as lands in Canada, if the idea were simply to get lands and settle state, or if a permanent nationality is included in the prospect of becoming purchasers and settlers.<sup>32</sup>

For Shadd, pecuniary considerations alone were not sufficient to make the case for Black emigration to Canada, nor were practical considerations such as the fertility and richness of the soil. These things mattered, to be sure, but only in service of the quest for “permanent nationality” or citizenship. Black migrants to Canada West sought to solve the problem



of fugivity by staking their claim to national belonging through embracing the logic and practice of settler colonialism. They would find, however, that this offered them no protection from the insurgent Canadian racial state. Indeed, they were to discover that the colonial state, precisely because it was a White supremacist project, would be the antecedent of the racial state. Hence, the promise of substantive freedom was ultimately illusory. A critical history of Blackness in Canada has to take this trajectory seriously, because it has not only greatly shaped the Black past in Canada but also shaped the contours of the Black present and future in rather profound ways.

## Conclusion

This brief essay has attempted, through a study of historiography, method, and practice, to engage in a discussion of writing Black Canadian history that continues to move us beyond simple storytelling, fact gathering, and archival spadework. While all of these elements are important aspects of the historian's craft, we must continue to build upon and go beyond these facets to explore the complex relationships among colonization, Blackness, fugivity, and the modern Canadian racial state. Lastly, in these perilous times what do we want Black history to "do"? How can it help to secure the liberation of Black peoples from the terror of the racial state? Does the historian of Black Canada, in other words, have the luxury of writing history for history's sake?

## NOTES

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- 1 See, for example, Fred Landon, "The Negro in Canada," *Negro History Bulletin* 12, no. 1 (1948): 5, 19–22; and Landon, "Agriculture among the

- Negro Refugees in Upper Canada,” *Journal of Negro History* 21, no. 3 (1936): 304–12.
- 2 Sadiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
  - 3 Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997).
  - 4 Marcel Trudel, *Canada’s Forgotten Slaves: Two Hundred Years of Bondage*, trans. George Tombs (Montreal: Véhicule, 2013); originally published as *L’esclavage au Canada français: Histoire et conditions de l’esclavage* (Laval: Les Presses Universitaires Laval, 1960).
  - 5 Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 114.
  - 6 Quoted in Winks, xvii.
  - 7 Winks used the term “flotsam and jetsam” to describe, again, the passive role of the Black Refugees, a view he no doubt held of those Blacks who came to Canada during the Loyalist era. See James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
  - 8 See Barry Cahill, “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada,” *Acadiensis* 29, no. 1 (1999): 76–87; and James W. St. G. Walker, “Myth, History and Revisionism: The Black Loyalists Revisited,” *Acadiensis* 29, no. 1 (1999): 88–105.
  - 9 Daniel Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Agincourt, ON: Book Society of Canada, 1981), esp. chap. 12.
  - 10 C. Peter Ripley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol. 2, *Canada, 1830–1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 3. Ripley does not, however, seem to focus on the racism Blacks experienced to the extent that Winks did in his work, even though these themes virtually leap off the pages of many of the primary documents he has placed in this text.
  - 11 See, for example, Maureen Elgersman, *Unyielding Spirits: Black Women and Slavery in Early Canada and Jamaica* (New York: Garland, 1999); Peggy Bristow, coord., *“We’re Rooted Here and They Can’t Pull Us Up”: Essays in African Canadian Women’s History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).
  - 12 Nina Reid-Maroney, Boulou Ebanda de B’béri, and Wanda Thomas Bernard, introduction to *Women in the “Promised Land”: Essays in African Canadian History*, ed. Reid-Maroney, de B’béri, and Bernard (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2018), 4.
  - 13 Nina Reid-Maroney, *The Reverend Jennie Johnson and African Canadian History, 1869–1967* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013).
  - 14 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics*, ed. John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 207–390.
  - 15 Barrington Walker, *Race on Trial: Black Defendants in Ontario’s Criminal Courts, 1858–1958* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010). See also Walker,

- ed., *The African Canadian Legal Odyssey: Historical Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).
- 16 See Frantz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," in *Back Skin White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), chap. 6.
  - 17 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), chap. 1.
  - 18 Fanon, "Fact of Blackness," 109.
  - 19 The concept of "double consciousness" was first developed by W.E.B. Du Bois in his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*; see chap. 1 ("Of Our Spiritual Strivings") in that text. The concept of double consciousness is a foundational one in Black studies, and Du Bois is the foundational thinker of the field.
  - 20 Katherine McKittrick, "'Their Blood Is There, and They Can't Throw It Out': Honouring Black Canadian Geographies," *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (2002): 33; William J. Harris, "'How You Sound?': Amiri Baraka Writes Free Jazz," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 312–25.
  - 21 David Theo Goldberg, *The Racial State* (New York: Blackwell, 2002), 2.
  - 22 Many First Nations peoples also clearly profited from Black racial slavery, but those considerations are beyond the scope of this chapter.
  - 23 Sunera Thobani, *Exalted Subjects: Studies in the Making of Race and Nation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 95.
  - 24 For a discussion of the myriad anti-Black laws that were passed to circumscribe the life of free Black people in the antebellum North, see Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).
  - 25 "Proceedings of the North American Convention Convened at St. Lawrence Hall, Toronto Canada West 11–13, September 12, Friday Morning," in Ripley, *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 153, 155.
  - 26 "Proceedings," 152.
  - 27 Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (2014): 583–97.
  - 28 Ephraim Casey narrative, in Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (1856; Toronto: Prospero, 2000), 375.
  - 29 Michael Wayne, "The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment of the Manuscript Census of 1861," *Histoire Social/Social History* 28, no. 56 (1995): 445–85.
  - 30 See *Colchester 225: 150 Historical Facts* (Essex, ON: Town of Essex, 2018), <https://www.essex.ca/en/discover/resources/Colchester-225-Revised-Edition-2018-for-WEB.pdf>.

- 31 Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, "McKee Treaty No. 2," *Treaty Texts – Upper Canada Land Surrenders*, last modified March 7, 2016, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1370372152585/1581293792285>.
- 32 Mary Ann Shadd, *A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West*, ed. Phaneul Antwi (1852; Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2016), 25.