

Knowledge Production and Afro Canadian Experience Workshop in Vancouver, BC sets the trend!

Written by Joy Walcott-Francis

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Back Row (L to R) Monica Wells Kisura, Ikeyla Lombadisha, Henry Daniel, Afua Cooper, Hakim Adi
Middle Row (L to R) Terry Roswell, Isaac Saney **Front Row (L to R)** Greg Tourino, David Austin

On the heels of her successful launch of the 'Black Communities in British Columbia, 1858 – 2008' exhibition, Dr. Afua Cooper has yet again caused our hearts to stir with passion and our souls to be fully charged as we press along in an up hill struggle towards greater Black achievement, success and recognition. The culmination of three days of thought-provoking and enriching discussions hosted by Dr. Cooper, brought with it a historic accomplishment; that of the formation of a Black Canadian Studies Association (BCSA).

The three day workshop, Knowledge Production and the Black Canadian Experience in Canada, called and hosted in Vancouver by Dr. Cooper, the Ruth Wynn Woodward Chair, Department of Women's Studies at the Simon Fraser University, commenced on Friday, May 1, 2009, which fittingly earmarked May Day, a day when people across the globe recognize and celebrate the struggles and achievements of the 'working class' and might I interject here, those of Black people of African descent. The workshop brought together a diverse group of scholars and practitioners, nationally and internationally who work in the area of Black Studies, to engage in critical dialogue about the state of Black Canadian scholarship.

A recurring theme over the three days emphasized the need for greater collegiality and networking among people in the field. Participants pointed out that an absence of a cohesive body of scholars in the field of Black Canadian studies does have an impact on where, when and how scholarship in the area can take place. Major challenges in this respect relate to the problem of accessibility of funding opportunities as well as to the vastness of Canada's landscape which tend to keep Black Canadian academics geographically segregated. Of note, was that while various universities throughout Canada have over time offered single courses in Black Studies, to-date, there is no program on offer that provides students with a degree in Black Studies.

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Presenters raised concerns about the void in the knowledge of African history that is being transmitted, pointing as well to the lack of coherence where knowledge production is concerned. Those present were cautioned that in as far as they move ahead in academic scholarship, they needed to be cognizant and vigilant about the resources that they have the librarians order, how they organized the curricula and the questions generated for discussions. And again the matter of adequate funding came to the fore as participants agreed that the Canadian archives were indeed full of Black history but alas, there were no resources to effectively access them.

What does it mean to be Black Canadian? While there may be no straight-forward answer to this, participants found it important to stress that our lived experiences do reflect a diversity of cultural traditions and as such scholarship should reflect this ethnic diversity while at the same time examine the ways in which our lives have become embroiled in the Canadian history. Further on the matter of Canadian history, Dr. Cooper stressed the need for us to unearth the historical relationships that have existed between Aboriginal peoples and the Black settlers who came to the shores of Canada. This history, she said, "is an important piece of history and one that needs to be incorporated and written into our history as we seek to fill in the missing pieces...we therefore need to develop on how we are going to deal with it, both politically and theoretically."

Some of the other issues that were raised involved (1) looking at the relationship between academics and the community and how best to engage communities and community historians in the work that academics do; (2) deconstructing the connection between crime, law enforcement and the African Canadian experience; and (3) the impact of Canadian policies on the lives of not only adult immigrants and refugees but their children as well.

On day three, after much deliberating and brainstorming, the resounding consensus was that the way to go forward was to begin the networking process from among ourselves, hence the formation of the Black Canadian Studies Association (BCSA), which was felt by all present to be a timely and much welcomed step in the right direction. Dr. Cooper was elected interim Chair and will be assisted by two co-Chairs; Dr. Charmaine Nelson, McGill University, Montreal and Dr. Charles Quist-Adade, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, British Columbia. As its vision, the BCSA aims "to encourage and support research, publication, teaching, and understanding of diverse Black communities in Canada and the Diaspora," while its mission is "to create and sustain a common forum and space to study, research and exchange ideas that advance the interest, study and understanding of Black Canada and the Diaspora".

The workshop however ended on a more somber note, with a tour of Hogan's Alley, a historic Black community in Vancouver, located in Strathcona, between Union and Prior Street, from Main to Jackson Avenue. Known officially as "Park Lane," Hogan's Alley was once home to a large concentration of African-Canadian people who were drawn to the area because of its close proximity to the railway and the employment opportunities that came with it. Construction of the Georgia Viaduct in 1972 however destroyed several homes and businesses in Hogan's Alley, which eventually drove residents out. Today, all that is left as remnants of its past is the building of the former first African-American church; "African Methodist Episcopal Fountain Chapel" now sold to new owners.

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None-the-less, the three day workshop was a seen as a success by all the participants, who thanked Dr. Cooper for conceptualizing such an event and for her resilience in her efforts at trying to restore and reclaim Black Canadian history.

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