

FINAL REPORT

Ruth Wynn Woodward Professor: Dr. Afua Cooper

I held the Ruth Wynn Endowed Chair for the school year 2008-2009 in the Department of Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia. The RWWP is a prestigious appointment and it has been one of the most engaging, intellectually stimulating, and delightful events of my academic career. As an independent scholar working in the field of African Canadian history, an area that is marginalized within the Canadian Academy, holding the RWWP has given my area of research more prestige, credibility, and visibility.

My work as Woodward professor encompassed three areas. First, I taught two courses over the period of the year to senior undergraduate students in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Second, I engaged in public outreach in order to build bridges between the academic and lay communities. And third, I conducted research on the Black Canadian history with a special focus on British Columbia. For the RWWP my expertise in various Black history fields were utilized, as well as my skills and talents as a poet.

1. Teaching

For the semester Sept to Dec. 2008 I taught WS 320: Exploring African Canadian Women's History. This course examined the interplay of gender, class, region, sexuality, religion and race in shaping the historical experiences of Black women in Canada. A chronological framework was used as a signpost, but in addition, the course was also organized according to themes. Some themes and topics that were explored included conflict and change, culture, the Underground Railroad, women and the development of the Black press, slavery, resistance, and freedom, gendering the African Diaspora, labour and migration, immigration, work, gender roles and conventions, consciousness, community building, and civil rights. The course was anchored within the broader, comparative framework of Canadian women's history, and taught from a feminist perspective. Further, it placed Canada within the broader context of the African Diaspora.

For the second semester, Jan. to April 2009, I taught WS 310: The Black Autobiographical Tradition: Memory, Body, and Surprising Narratives. This course examined the Black Autobiographical Tradition in the Western Hemisphere. We read and analyzed several autobiographical texts that *scanned* the continuum of Black personhood across the African Diaspora and the Black Atlantic, and discussed them in their historical, social, gendered, and political contexts. The course was organized around such themes as writing as natural as air, Killing the Black Body, A Call to Action, Reclaiming Self/reclaiming the body, Wonderful Adventures, and Loving the Black Body. Special attention was given to the contributions of African Canadians to the Black autobiographical tradition.

2. Community Outreach

A long-standing tradition of the RWWP is to bridge the gap between the lay and academic communities by engaging in active outreach which deals with an aspect of the Chair's expertise. I delighted in continuing this tradition in three crucial ways. First, I curated an exhibit on the Black British Columbian historical experience. Second, I called

and chaired a workshop on Black Canadian Studies. And third, I gave regular lectures, readings, and presentations throughout Southern BC, and Washington State.

The Exhibit

2008 marked the 150th anniversary of the founding of British Columbia as a colony and province and I wanted to include the Black community in this historic occasion. I therefore curated an exhibit called **Black Communities in British Columbia: 1858-2008**. This looked at the contributions of the historic and historical Black British Columbian community and the contemporary African Canadian community. However, before I launched the exhibit I struck a committee made up of persons from the Simon Fraser University community and the Vancouver Black community to discuss the means through which the project could be realized. Committee members were Mary Lynn Stewart, Chair of the SFU Women's Studies Program, Lara Campbell, SFU Women's Studies professor, Barbara Binns, Black Women's community organizer, Nalda Callender, CEO of the BC chapter of the Congress of Black Women Foundation, Ayisha Faruk, artist and business woman, Kandake Ikheyla, community organizer, and Esther Harrison, RWWP assistant. Sherry Edmunds-Flett, a writer, community organizer, and SFU Ph.D., history candidate was also an offsite committee member. Community meetings were held from Sept to Dec. 2008. A partnership to mount the exhibit was established with the Simon Fraser Art Gallery under the direction of the curator Bill Jeffries. My first idea was to tell the history of BC's Black women through photographs but I decided to make the exhibit more inclusive given the initial impetus for the idea. Thus, ultimately, the exhibit told the story of BC's Black communities through photographs. A research assistant was hired to work along with me. However, she was unable to continue for the duration of the research. Detailed research was conducted in order to delve deeper into the history of Black BC. Because most of the earlier Black pioneers came from the United States (California and Washington State), it was also necessary to conduct research into the history of Black California and the Pacific Northwest.

Historic photographs were acquired from the Provincial Archives in Victoria, the City of Vancouver Archives, the North Vancouver Archives, and Salt Spring Island Archives. The Congress of Black Women Foundation kindly lent photographs of modern personalities from their holdings. At the same time, it was necessary to commission Vancouver photographer David George to take pictures of some modern persons who were to be included in the exhibit. Thus, drawing from a wealth of photographic sources, I was able to select 22 African Canadians of diverse backgrounds and skills and talents who made vast contributions to BC's life and culture over 150 years. These photos were accompanied by relevant texts. It was a labour of love.

Bill Jeffries at the SFU Art Gallery and his team were responsible for the design, outlay, and framing of the photographs. The exhibit was part of the Gallery's offerings and was listed in all the Gallery's promotions. Finally, on 18 February 2009, the photographs and texts were hung at the downtown Gallery at the Teck Gallery at the Harbour Centre, SFU Vancouver. The official opening was held on 25 February. On that date, at 7p.m. **Black Communities** was launch with much excitement and anticipation. Over 200 members of the public turned up at this opening at the Harbour Centre. Among the audience was Dr. Michael Stevenson, president of SFU. He gave the opening

remarks. I followed with a lecture and powerpoint presentation on the history of Black people in BC beginning with their mass arrival in 1858, the very year it became a British colony, and their continued arrival in 2009-2009 from such places as the Sudan, the Congo, and elsewhere. After the lecture, there was a Q and A, followed by a reception and a tour of the exhibit.

The event was a resounding success. It was reported in major print, audio, and visual media such as television and internet. As a result people from all over British Columbia learnt of this exhibit and news of it also spread to Washington State and California. The exhibit remained at the Teck Gallery until **March** 2010. It was then acquired by the City of Vancouver Archives where it will be on display until 2 October 2009. A copy of the exhibit was also acquired by the AfroNews, BC's Black community newspaper, as part of its permanent holdings. Talks are underway with the Bennett Library, SFU for the exhibit to be digitized. It is hoped that the SFU Archives will acquire the original copies of the photographs and texts.

As a tool of community outreach the exhibit was a huge success. It was grounded in solid academic and archival research and used the popular medium of photography to tell a riveting story. As important, it brought to light a relatively unknown and ignored part of BC's past. One of the key responses from people who viewed the exhibit was that they had no idea Blacks had lived in BC for so long, or that they had achieved and contributed so much. Many people had no idea that it was a Black man, Mifflin Gibbs, that built BC's first railroad for example, or that the Stark family was one of the first non-Native families to homestead on Salt Spring Island. The exhibit brought history to the community.

I was thrilled that it ran for over two months at the Teck Gallery and for several more months at the City of Vancouver Archives. These public showings will have enabled hundreds of people to view the exhibit. This will promote history and further contribute to knowledge. It will further enhance the prestige of the RWWP.

Funding for **Black Communities** came from the RWWP office, and diverse groups and agencies made financial and other kinds of contribution. Bill Jeffries from the SFU Art Gallery obtained funding for publicity and promotion from the BC Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts.

My second outreach Project was a workshop titled **Knowledge Production and the Black Experience in Canada**. This was held from 1 to 3 May 2009 at the Segal Business School, SFU downtown campus. The aim of this meeting was to bring together scholars, both academic and community, who work in the field of Black Canadian studies to explore the state of the field. The workshop had three specific objectives: to discuss how Black Studies could be institutionalized within the academy, to build a research network among Black Studies scholars, to create a program of critical research, and to reconceptualize the role of the Black community in the Black Studies agenda. Over 22 scholars who work in various disciplines including history, library studies, art history, dance and theatre, and criminology attended. Most came from with Canada, with a good representation from Simon Fraser University and Southern BC. In addition, there were two scholars came from Britain and one from the United States.

The workshop included panels, keynotes, and roundtable discussions. Papers were presented on a variety of topics that dealt with research, funding, employment, publishing, and digital technology. On the first day proceedings culminated in a reception that highlighted African music performed by SFU faculty Albert St. Albert, and Vancouver musician Themba Tana. At lunch on the second day participants were taken on a tour to the Teck Gallery to view the **Black Communities in British Columbia** exhibit. On the final day, some of the participants were taken on a tour of Hogan's Alley District, the historic centre of Vancouver's early Black community.

After three days of engaged discussion and dialogue, the participants agreed that the only way that the objectives could be realized was to form an association. Hence the workshop ended with the formation of the Black Canadian Scholars Association. The vision of the Association was outlined as "to encourage and support research, publication, teaching, and understanding of diverse Black communities in Canada and the Diaspora." The mission statement reads: "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." I was chosen interim chair, with two interim co-chairs, Drs. Charmaine Nelson of McGill University and Dr. Charles Quist Adade from Kwantlen University. It was unanimously decided to hold another meeting in a year's time. Jennifer Kelly of the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta and Paulin Mulatris of College St. Jean, University of Alberta agreed to be the hosts of the next Black Canadian Studies meeting. The International Journal of Canadian Studies, represented by Paulin Mulatris offered to devote a 2011 issue of the journal of Black Canadian Studies.

The participants decided that the best way to move ahead and to begin implementing some of the objectives such as continuing the dialogue among scholars was to set up a list serve and blog. Greg Tourino, SFU librarian, took on this task. Greg has now set up a blog <http://bcsa.wordpress.com> which serves as a site of information dissemination and dialogue between scholars.

News of the workshop and its outcomes were broadcasted in various print and internet media.

The workshop was sponsored mainly by the RWWP through its community outreach budget, but further financial support came from SFU's vice-president Academic Office and Vice-President Research's Office. The Canadian Studies Office in Ottawa also gave support, as well as Canadian Studies Program at College St. Jean at the University of Alberta. The Congress of Black Women Foundation, BC Chapter, the Committee to Commemorate and Memorialize the Abolition of the Slave Trades (CMAST), SFUPIRG, SFU CUPE, and other organizations gave crucial financial and other support to the Workshop.

My third community outreach initiative was continuous. This involved giving presentations on Black Canadian and African Canadian Women's histories, and poetry readings to diverse communities within the Lower Mainland of BC. These included the Abbotsford Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, the North Shore Women's Centre, and poetry recitals at the Raw Canvas and Café deux Soleils in Vancouver.

3. Research

As part of my Chair's duties, I engaged in intensive research on Black Canada's history, particularly that of British Columbia. At the start of my project I hired a research assistant, through funding from the RWWP, but she left the project before its completion. The research fed into the exhibit **Black Communities**. Further, I conduct research specific to my field on slavery and abolition in Canada by looking at the lives of enslaved Black women in New Brunswick, Quebec and Nova Scotia, and the steps many of them took to gain their freedom. This particular branch of research culminated into a paper titled "Enslaved Women and the Law in Early Canada."

Comments

My tenure as RWWP was successful. This was largely due to the resources available for the support of the Woodward Chair. The office of the Woodward assistant is absolutely crucial. My assistant Esther Harrison rendered crucial administrative and other kinds of assistance. Wonderful support was also furnished by Women's Studies office manager, Roberta Neilson and staff Kathryn Hunter.

The allotted budget given to the RWWP for community outreach proved to be insufficient and I had to fund raise from diverse places to obtain the monies needed to realize my projects. A good example of this initiative involved the Black Studies Workshop.

I felt it was critical to hold the Black Studies Workshop given that I was a nationally-known Black history scholar and well-connected in the scholarly community. However, the application I put in to SSHRC for funding for this Workshop was not successful and I had to around and off campus seeking additional funding. I was greatly supported by academic and community agencies. As a result, I was able to hold the Workshop and stayed within budget.

As RWWP I took part in the External University Review. I was interviewed by four reviewers as part of their work in assessing the various departments at Simon Fraser University. I gave my views on what I saw as the vital role played by the Women's Studies Department in academic life.

Final Thoughts

I had a wonderful year at SFU as the RWWP. I was a very active and visible chair as exemplified in my work as a teaching professor, researcher, and public intellectual. This is a prestigious Chair and I believe my being the RWWP raised the visibility of Black history and studies at SFU and within British Columbia and Canada. My community outreach project, the exhibit **Black Communities**, continues to be viewed by dozens of members of the public.

However, I believe that given my expertise and the fact that Women's Studies Programs and departments are under siege in this country I feel that I could have been utilized more by the SFU Women's Studies Dept. that houses the Woodward Chair. I think there could have been a relationship set up with Women's Studies and the history

and English departments to utilize my expertise. Another link could have been made with Contemporary Arts.

I would like to thank all who made my stay at SFU the success that it was. Many thanks to Mary Lynn Stewart, chair of the Women's Studies Department during my stay. Dr. Stewart provided invaluable support. A big thank you to my assistant Esther Harrison, and WSDA staff Roberta Neilson and Kathryn Hunter. Many thanks to the Women's Studies faculty, to Moninder Buber and Greg Tourino librarians at the Bennett Library, Bill Jeffries of the SFU Art Gallery, and Malcolm Tom, computer support staff. A special thank you to Nalda Callender CEO of the Congress of Black Women, BC Chapter, and Kandake Ikheyla of Burnaby, BC.