



## **THE COLOURED WOMEN'S CLUB OF MONTREAL, 1902-1940** **African-Canadian Women Confronting Anti-Black Racism**

David Este, Christa Sato and Darcy McKenna

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### Article abstract

To date, there is limited literature documenting contributions of people of African descent to Canadian social welfare history. Based on both secondary and archival sources, we critically explore from anti-Black racism and African-Canadian feminist perspectives, the contributions of the Coloured Women's Club of Montreal (CWCM) from 1902-1940 to the social well-being of Montreal's Black community. The CWCM played a major role as one of the leading supports for members who encountered harsh challenges in a society where racism prevailed and opportunities for men and women were severely restricted. Club members organized several events that enabled community members to survive in an environment that was hostile to people of African descent, therefore becoming a "pillar of strength" that fostered a stronger sense of community among Blacks living in Montreal. We contend that through their contributions during this time period, these African-Canadian women emerged as key players in the community and secondly, as early social welfare practitioners. It is imperative for social workers to acknowledge the contributions of the women who were involved in the CWCM as a means of interrupting the historical narratives shaping our profession that have predominantly been told from the perspectives of a hegemonic, white culture.

# THE COLOURED WOMEN'S CLUB OF MONTREAL, 1902-1940: African-Canadian Women Confronting Anti-Black Racism

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**Keywords:** Coloured Women's Club, Anti-Black Racism; African-Canadian Feminist Perspective

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*David Este is professor and Christa Sato is a Master's Student in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary. Darcy McKenna is with the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge.*

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**Abrégé :** À ce jour, il existe très peu d'écrits sur la contribution des personnes d'ascendance africaine à l'histoire de l'assistance sociale canadienne. À partir de sources secondaires et archivistiques, nous analysons la contribution du Club des femmes de couleur de Montréal (CFCM) au bien-être de la communauté noire de Montréal entre 1902 et 1940 du point de vue du racisme contre les Noirs et du féminisme afro-canadien. Le CFCM a joué un rôle prépondérant dans ce bien-être en étant l'un des grands soutiens auprès des membres aux prises avec d'importantes difficultés dans une société où le racisme était omniprésent et où les perspectives d'avenir pour les hommes et les femmes étaient fortement limitées. Le club a organisé plusieurs activités qui ont permis aux membres de la communauté de survivre dans un milieu hostile aux personnes d'ascendance africaine. Il a ainsi été d'un grand secours et a favorisé un sentiment de communauté chez les Noirs de Montréal. Nous avançons que, grâce aux efforts de ce club durant cette période, les Afro-Canadiennes sont d'abord devenues des actrices clés de la communauté et ensuite les premières intervenantes sociales. Il est impératif que les travailleurs sociaux reconnaissent la contribution des femmes engagées dans le CFCM afin de faire contrepoids aux récits historiques de notre profession qui proviennent surtout d'une culture hégémonique blanche.

**Mots-clés :** Club des femmes de couleur, racisme contre les Noirs, perspective féministe afro-canadienne

## Introduction

*SEVERAL AFRICAN-CANADIAN SCHOLARS*, including social work faculty members (Bristow et al., 1994; Cooper, 2006; Este & Bernard, 2003; Wane, 2016) assert that the history of people of African descent in Canada continues to be marginalized by the majority of Canadian social sciences. The words written by Peggy Bristow and colleagues (1994) capture this sentiment, "the [Canadian] educational system has maintained and perpetuated the common perception that Black people were either non-existent in the development of Canada, or only arrived in Canada through recent migration from the Caribbean and Africa" (p. 3). In 2007, authors Lawrence Hill and Cheryl Foggo lamented the exclusion of Black Canadian history in the educational system. Hill remarked, "[Black History Month] gives us the opportunity to remember, really, a forgotten history" (Este, 2008, p. 390). Foggo stated, "I don't know why [Black Canadian history] is not taught in schools" (Este, 2008, p. 390).

Wane (2016) draws attention to the dire exclusion of African-Canadian women in Canadian history. She remarked, "the history of African-Canadian women specifically has been thrown further down the well than the history of African-Canadians in general. Ours is a forgotten past" (p. 156). She added, "our textbooks, founding mythology and

dominant history have on the whole been denied, and thus marginalized the presence, struggle, and accomplishment of African women in Canada” (Wane, 2016, p. 158). Hence it is not surprising that until the past few decades, African-Canadians were virtually ignored in social work and social welfare literature. While scholars such as Bernard, White, and Moore (1993), Christensen, (2001, 1998), Christensen and Weinfeld (1993), Clarke (2012), Daenzer (1997), Este and Bernard (2003), Pon, Gosine, and Phillips (2011) have begun to fill this void; the African-Canadian experience from a social work perspective continues to be marginalized. This group only represents 2.9% of the total population yet their exclusion from Canadian social work literature is not justified (Statistics Canada, 2013). The majority of texts used in social work programs contain little if any relevant material about this community. Two recent notable exceptions to this situation are the texts by Hick (2016) entitled, “Social Work in Canada: An Introduction” and the second by Ives, Denov, and Sussman (2015) entitled, “Introduction to Social Work in Canada: Histories, Contexts, and Practices.”

This article contributes to the existing Canadian social welfare literature by examining the contributions of African-Canadian women to the health and well-being of Montreal’s Black community. From 1902-1940, the Coloured Women’s Club of Montreal (CWCM) played a major role as one of the leading supports for members who encountered harsh challenges in a society where racism prevailed and opportunities for men and women were severely restricted. In a period where the residual model of social welfare persisted, the efforts of the CWCM were an excellent example of the importance of social support. This article is organized in the following manner: (1) discussion of anti-Black racism and African-Canadian feminist perspectives that serve as our theoretical lens; (2) a brief overview of the historical evolution of Montreal’s Black community; (3) an examination of African-Canadian women as social welfare pioneers by virtue of the activities they performed as members of the CWCM; and 4) an in-depth discussion and conclusion linking the historical contributions of the CWCM to contemporary social work practice.

### **Anti-Black Racism**

The first perspective that contributes to our understanding of the Coloured Women’s Club of Montreal is anti-Black racism (ABR). Kumsa, Mfoafo-M’Carthy, Oba, and Gaasin (2014) maintain that ABR is a type of racism that is directed against Black peoples. In a report he authored investigating racism in Ontario, Stephen Lewis (1992) voiced the following conceptualization of the term anti-Black racism:

First what we are dealing with at root, and fundamentally, is anti-Black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community

experience the indignities and wounds of systematic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community, which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in school, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping out, it is housing communities with large concentrations of Black residents where the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage is most acute, it is Black employees, professionals and non-professionals on whom the doors of upward equity slam shut. (p. 2)

Benjamin (2003) who is credited with the further conceptualization of anti-Black racism remarked:

The concept of anti-Black racism emerged as an analytical weapon in the struggles against racism in policing by the Black community. This concept became a lightning rod that gave specific focus to the issues of police violence, harassment and shootings impacting the Black community in Toronto. (p. 60)

She goes on to maintain that anti-Black racism essentially describes the practices and procedures of dominant and hegemonic structures and systems of power over Blacks.

Two publications by the African Canadian Legal Clinic (2012) provided detailed descriptions depicting how anti-Black racism is manifested in Canadian society (Lawson, Smith, Chen, Parson, & Scott, 2002; Smith & Lawson, 2002). In particular, the focus of this form of oppression is presented in the Canadian immigration, legal, education, child welfare, and health care systems. A second important contribution of these publications is their detailed analysis of anti-Black racism from a historical perspective.

### **African-Canadian Feminist Perspectives**

In addition to ABR, another relevant analytical lens for understanding the contributions of the women involved in the formation and development of the CWCM is African-Canadian feminist perspective (ACFP). Black feminist perspectives emerged as a criticism to theories that focused exclusively on one form of oppression such as race or gender, but failed to recognize manifestations of power and privilege that exist within groups (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw 1989; Dei, 2016; Stasiulis, 2016; Wane, 2016, 2004). Proponents argue that the limiting analysis of power relations by a single axis excludes experiences of Black females whose experiences are distinctly different from Black males or white middle-class females.

With respect to the Black feminist thought, specifically within the Canadian context, Wane (2016) underscores how the nation's historical, colonial, and neo-colonial relations have distinctly shaped the experiences of Black women:

African-Canadian feminism addresses the experiences and realities of women of African ancestry, providing them with a concrete and secure forum in which to express, organize, and resist...The socio-racial makeup as well as the economic, immigration, and cultural priorities of the Canadian state, serve to create distinct conditions of oppression and resistance in the Canadian context. African-Canadian women experience these variegated relations of oppression in tangible ways. It follows that this distinct yet dispersed community of women has suffered, organized, and resisted in unique ways: thus, African-Canadian feminism in Canada is distinct from that of our sisters to the South and elsewhere around the world. (p. 157)

As pointed out in this excerpt, Black Canadian women played instrumental roles in their community, which included organizing, activism, and resistance against hegemonic policies and practices that were discriminatory towards African-Canadians. Black Canadian feminist thought is a useful theoretical framework to, “examine the ways in which power relations between intersecting systems of authorization normalize a hierarchy of privilege through racialized, sexualized, gendered, culturalized, and class positions originating from dominant ideological frames of social organization” (Wane, 2004, p. 147). The CWCM is one example of a group of African-Canadian women whose coordinated efforts were a pillar of support that contributed to the collective well-being of individuals and families in Montreal’s Black community. Throughout this paper, the authors maintain that development and activities carried out by the CWCM were pioneered by women in Canada’s Black community who organized the club to serve as a strategy for social resistance against racism and discrimination.

The authors integrate ABR and ACFP as theoretical frameworks to enhance our understanding in relation to forms of structural and systemic discrimination perpetrated against the Black community in Montreal throughout the first half of the 20th century. This paper provides valuable insights that challenge the dominant racially exclusive narrative embedded within the history of Canadian social welfare.

## **Methods**

The primary author possesses a longstanding interest in Black Canadian history, particularly the African-Canadian community in Montreal. In conducting research on Union United, the city’s oldest Black Church founded in 1907, it became apparent there were a number of organized entities that were key to the development of the community. One of these was the CWCM. As we read some of the available literature on the CWCM, we became quite interested in learning more about the club and the contributions of the Black women who formed, and subsequently joined, the Club. It became quite apparent that the story of the CWCM needed

to be integrated in Canadian social welfare history, as this history has not valued the contributions of individuals and communities of African descent in this country. This is affirmed by Wane (2004), who stated, “historically, Black women have been and continue to be defined by people from the dominant culture” (Wane, 2004, p. 146). Therefore, the authors contend that as social work researchers, it is imperative to acknowledge the contributions of the women who were involved in CWCM as a means of interrupting the historical narratives shaping our profession that have predominantly been told from the perspectives of a hegemonic, white culture.

Our starting point was reviewing a range of secondary sources that were available to us (Bertley, 1976, 1983; Este, 2004; Israel, 1928; Moses, 2008; Williams, 1989, 1997; Winks, 1997). However, we recognized the importance of gaining access to some primary sources that would enable us to get a deeper and more concrete understanding of the Club’s various activities and the motivation that propelled Club members over the years to organize different events for members of Montreal’s Black community.

As a relative of Reverend Charles Este, Minister of Union United Church from 1925-1968, the first author, had access to the minutes of Union United Church meetings as well as the personal papers of his great uncle. The material from Union United Church emerged to be important as the CWCM worked very closely with the church after it was established in 1907.

The most valuable primary source that we gained access to were the CWCM meeting minutes provided by the Club’s current president, Shirley Gyles. Unfortunately, not all meeting minutes were captured in the Club book that was provided. However, there was certainly sufficient volume and details that enabled us to enhance our understanding of how the CWCM became an important player as Montreal’s Black community developed during the period from 1902-1940.

The authors proceeded to do a document review analysis of the meeting minutes of the CWCM and the Union United Church (Bowen, 2009; Patton, 2002). During our initial review of these minutes, we developed a preliminary coding framework. This coding framework was refined as we further analyzed the data contained in the minutes. Finally, we extracted relevant data that contributed to the narrative of the CWCM. Gaining access to these primary sources enabled the authors to retrieve pertinent information and pay tribute to the contributions of Black women in Canada and rearticulate, “neglected and hidden histories” (p. 152) and open up, “a space where our past, present, and future voices, and our triumphs and stories can be told, celebrated, and passed down to future generations” (Wane, 2004, p. 152).

## Black Presence in Montreal

Montreal's Black community originated with the completion of the Grand Trunk and Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) lines in the 1880s. For several decades, Montreal was the major centre for railway transportation in Canada, as the city became CPR's general employment headquarters and Canadian National used the city to hire for its central and Atlantic divisions (Winks, 1997). Following the trend of the Pullman Palace Car Company in the United States, the Canadian railroad companies hired Blacks as porters and dining car attendants, a practice which ensured that companies would have a sufficient labour force and controllable labour costs. From an ABR perspective, employment opportunities were controlled by railway owners, who were members of the dominant, white society that exerted power over Blacks while profiting from the fruits of their labour. ABR also sheds light on the ways in which hiring Blacks was viewed as a vehicle to weaken unionization attempts by white railroad workers (Mathieu, 2006), thus creating conditions for racism directed against Black employees through scapegoating. Porterage soon became the preserve of Black males (Bertley, 1982,1983; Israel, 1928; Winks, 1997). For several decades, other employment opportunities were severely restricted. Williams (1997) noted:

Railway companies benefited greatly from the racism in the overall labour market because they were able to hire only the most educated men. This flies in the face of the stereotype of the ignorant, happy Black porter. However, the image worked to benefit the rail companies because they were able to justify their low wages. (p. 34)

Though Black males porters were highly educated and overqualified for their jobs, practices and procedures of the dominant society rooted in anti-Black racism severely restricted employment opportunities that were available. Furthermore, within the labour market, people of African descent were subjugated to forms of racism against white railway workers and patrons. For example, in describing the work activities of the porters, Mathieu (2006) remarked:

The porter greeted travelers, stowed luggage, pulled down berths in the evening, and hurriedly converted them back into seats in the morning. Responsible for remembering passengers' schedules, he was severely reprimanded when someone missed their stop. The porter, whom passengers condescendingly called "George" or "boy," served food, mixed drinks, shined shoes, cared for small children, sick passengers, and drunken ones too. (p. 4)

The voices of the porters presented a much more critical assessment of how they were treated, "They [the passengers] would insult us...humiliate



us, and no matter what insult was hurled at us, the conductors were always reprimanding us, apologizing to them, promising them that we would be disciplined” (Ruggles & Rovinescu, 1996, p. 62).

The blatant acts of anti-Black racism highlights the struggles that the Black community endured as they encountered personal and structural acts of violence because of the colour of their skin. Even as the recipients of derogatory racial epithets by patrons, Black porters were blamed for provoking these insults. Black men who were not employed as porters were relegated to carrying bags to and from the trains for the white passengers who offered meagre compensation for their efforts. Even with this group of Black men known as “Red Caps” there was a labour distinction. Some were designated as the regular “Red Caps” while those who did not receive this designation did not have regular employment. As Bertley (1982) noted, on some days these men did not receive any money at all.

Using ABR as a tool of analysis, a critical exploration of the historical development of Montreal’s Black community at the turn of the 20th century reveals blatant forms of racism perpetrated against people of African descent rooted in deep-seated beliefs tied to colonialism, neo-colonialism, and attempts to systematically subjugate Blacks. The combination of limiting employment opportunities for Black men as well as hiring them as porters to serve the white patrons who travelled on the trains represents how anti-Black racism prevailed in the Montreal context. Initially, African-Americans were temporary residents – college students who wanted to pay for their education. Most of them resided in housing owned by the railway companies, while some rented a room in a family residence. Services such as social clubs, hotels, barbershops, and restaurants were established (Potter, 1948). A more established Black community evolved in the 1890s as African-American men decided to make Montreal their home (Walker, 1997) as a job on the railway provided a sense of security. They also perceived the racial environment to be less hostile than in the United States, particularly in the South where Jim Crow laws<sup>1</sup> prevailed. Even though some were well educated, employment opportunities were limited for men because of the anti-Black racism and employment as a porter was therefore perceived as having a “good” job.

By 1897, the Black community comprised approximately 300 people but with the prospect of gaining employment as a porter serving as the primary attractor (Winks, 1997), the influx of new residents quickly increased the population to 500 (Williams, 1989, 1997). African-Americans constituted 50% of the community; the remainder was comprised of West Indian immigrants and Blacks from Nova Scotia and rural Ontario (Bertley, 1983).

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<sup>1</sup> *Jim Crow laws were state and local laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States (ACRU, 2014)*

The majority of Blacks resided in the area known as Little Burgundy located near the rail yards of the two major railroad companies. Although most of the Black men were employed as porters, their wages were very low. Hence, Blacks tended to either gravitate to or were virtually forced to reside in Little Burgundy (Williams, 1997), as most could not afford to live elsewhere. Blacks generally were relegated to menial jobs such as washing dishes, sweeping floors, or shining shoes; some men occasionally worked as unskilled or semi-skilled factory and construction hands (Walker, 1997). Those who were professionally trained were subjected to overt forms of racism and underemployment.

To deepen the analysis from a gendered perspective, Dei (2016) discerns, "the entanglements of gender and power demand that we do not decouple gender and race in anti-racist work ... there are gender differences around how race and racism are experienced" (p. 5). For Black women, employment opportunities were even more so limited than their male counterparts. Working as domestics emerged as the primary occupation. Williams (1997) notes that by 1921, 25% of English-speaking Black working women were employed as domestics. In many cases, the salaries of these women and those who were employed in dress factories frequently constituted the main source of family income.

The social environment in Montreal was not as congenial as many Blacks perceived, or experienced. While there was no legal segregation, anti-Black racism was manifested in societal institutions such as restaurants where Blacks were forced to sit in specific sections or were denied service altogether. Charles Ashby, a former long-time member of the community remarked:

I was refused service several times at a restaurant on St. Catherine's Street in Montreal. Each time I went into the restaurant, one of the employees would ask, "Where are you going?" And I would reply that I wanted something to eat. Some of them would ask, "Are you a stranger here?" (Quoted in Vipond, 1976, p. 16)

Establishments in the city such as hotels and stores often refused service to Blacks. Admitted into white schools, Black children received limited attention from the teachers. Some perpetuated anti-Black racism by not encouraging the Black students or by stressing their only employment options were as porters or as domestic workers. This is congruent with Lewis' (1992) conceptualization of ABR described earlier, in terms of Black students being inappropriately streamed in school.

Low-income levels made it virtually impossible for Black families to acquire housing outside of Little Burgundy. Landlords often took advantage of their situation by increasing rental payments to the maximum that a family could afford and out of proportion with the condition and value of the property. The few Blacks who could afford to

move were often turned down by the landlords who feared their property value would decrease if Blacks moved into their residential areas (Greaves, 1930; Williams, 1989).

Acts of personal and systemic oppression can be seen in various institutions such as housing, employment, education, and public institutions. These manifestations of anti-Black racism also impacted the socio-economic status of Black community members as they struggled to survive economically given the low wages both men and women received. In their efforts to combat anti-Black racism and discrimination, the Black community turned inward and developed organizations that would strengthen their health and well-being. One of the earliest organizations was the Coloured Women's Club of Montreal (CWCW), which was founded as a social club for African-American women whose husbands were employed as porters.

### **The Coloured Women's Club as a Social Welfare Entity**

In 1902, seven African-American women formally organized the CWCW under the leadership of Anne Greenup (the Club's first president) and Matilda Mays. One of the first activities that the Club engaged in was tending to veterans returning from the Boer War (Mathieu, 2010). Four major factors led to the decision to become a formal group. First, as Williams (1997) noted:

The CWCW emerged during the era of suffragettes and organized women – a time when women's auxiliaries and clubs proliferated across the country, when the collective activities of women were becoming the mainstay of churches, schools, and other social and cultural organizations. (p. 50)

The second reason was the rejection of Black women from clubs organized by women from the dominant group, which was consistent with the other forms of exclusion experienced by Blacks in Montreal. This also highlights the critical need for ACFP analysis: "while mainstream feminism responds largely to the oppression faced by the middle-class, its gaze has missed the racial oppression experienced by women of African ancestry" (Wane, 2016, p. 156). The strong desire to provide assistance to other Blacks in the community represented the third reason for the creation of the Club. Given limited employment opportunities and low incomes for those who were able to secure work, many experienced difficulties meeting their basic needs. The fact that founding members of the CWCW were all African-Americans represented the final reason that contributed to the formation of the Club. Coloured Women's Clubs existed in several African-American communities. In 1896, the National Association of Coloured Women's Club was formed (Leffler, 2014).

Again drawing from the work of Wane (2016), who poignantly states, “in this contextual duality between oppression and resistance that African-Canadian women emerged as community leaders and cultural custodians” (p. 164). The CWCM continued to demonstrate its importance from a social welfare perspective when it provided food, housing, and clothing to the community during the major flu epidemic of 1902. The contributions were extremely important, as there were a limited number of social agencies in Montreal to help the poor.

Religion was a significant part of life for most African-Americans who settled in Montreal. They initially sought religious salvation by attending the local white churches, however, they were often placed in the choir lofts or in the back pews; in some cases, admittance was outright refused by the pastors (Bertley, 1983; Israel, 1928). The treatment of Black community members by the white churches represented another manifestation of the anti-Black sentiment that existed in Montreal. In 1907, community members including women of the CWCM recognized the need to form a church to meet the spiritual needs of Blacks in Montreal where they would feel accepted and valued. From both an ABR and ACF perspectives, the church as an institution served to reinforce dominant colonial structures of oppressing people of African descent. Faced with these hostile displays of anti-Black racism, women of African ancestry organized strategies of social resistance (Wane, 2016) by building community from within as a means of strengthening the cohesion of Montreal’s Black community. During that year, the Union United Congregational Church opened its doors.

The CWCM and other groups in the community promoted the Union Congregational Church and it became the focal institution in Montreal’s Black community. Because the majority of the men were employed as porters and spent considerable time away from Montreal, the women assumed major roles in the governance of the church. Along with the CWCM, the Church battled the ongoing social, economic, and racial issues that confronted members of the community. Women emerged as “quiet leaders,” but they were the lifelines in a context where men were frequently away due to the nature of their work as porters. Essentially, the leadership and activism of these women clearly demonstrate how, “in their struggle to overcome different oppressions, Black women everywhere have sought to emancipate themselves from the bonds of servitude, inequality, and racial discrimination” (Wane, 2004, p. 146). The CWCM also recognized the importance of organizing social activities to foster a sense of cohesion in a city where opportunities for Blacks to integrate into mainstream organizations were extremely limited as a result of the overt racism that existed.

Shortly after the creation of the CWCM, a small group of members established the Sunshine Branch whose impetus was the conglomeration

of issues members of the community faced, especially the challenge of daily survival. Accordingly, the main priority of the Sunshine Branch was to discover those Blacks who required assistance. As Israel (1928) stated:

One quarter of the monthly dues of twenty cents a member plus assessments and funds from entertainments given by the Women's Club are donated to the Sunshine Branch for relief of the needy. Cases of burials of four men and two women...are cited as part of the activities of this group...the Women's Club is playing the leading part in the raising of funds to return another tubercular case to his home in Demecara. (p. 199)

The women of the CWCM and subsequent Sunshine Branch were driving forces in identifying, addressing, and delivering services needed in order to survive in a society where racism was pervasive. These Black Canadian women emerged as important figures in Montreal's Black community in addressing the social welfare needs that very few mainstream organizations provided.

During World War I when Montreal experienced a flu epidemic, the CWCM maintained a bed in the Grace Dart Hospital. Club members cared for the homes and children of hospitalized parents. A plot of land was provided in the Mount Royal Cemetery for the internment of community members whose relatives could not afford a burial (Bertley, 1983; CWCM, 1917).

Prior to and after World War I, the community experienced an influx of immigrants from the West Indies. Once again, manifestations of anti-Black racism rooted in historical and colonial white, hegemonic structures and processes continued to endure in the early 1900s. In order to ensure having an efficient group of Black porters, employment agents for the major railway companies ventured to the West Indies as early as 1912 to recruit potential candidates. Mathieu (2006) commented, "West Indian workers were thought to suit Canadian railways companies given that colonial and plantation economies had forced black workers into service positions for the white ruling class" (p. 10). These new residents were subjected to the exclusion experienced by existing members of the community. By 1928, 90% of employed Black males in Montreal worked for the railroad, many of whom were highly educated university graduates, yet they were unable to get any other kind of work (Walker, 1995). The CWCM served as a welcoming committee for the newcomers who rapidly became dismayed with the situation in Montreal. The basic necessities of food and clothing were provided by the CWCM to those in need (CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1928, 1929).

During the 1920s, the prosperity of Union United Church began to decline during the economic depression when some members of the congregation migrated to the United States in search of employment. Cognizant of the spiritual and social importance to the community, the

CWCM offered fiscal resources to maintain the operations of the Church (Union United Church Trustee Meeting Minutes, 1923). Club members supported the national movement by the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational Churches to merge into one religious body known as the United Church of Canada, which subsequently occurred in 1925 (Montreal Daily Star, 1928).

With the relatively small number of Blacks residing in Montreal, CWCM members were well positioned to assess ongoing needs and the Club continued to provide community support. This reinforces the notion that, “early African-Canadian women played integral roles in the sustenance and development of their people and the community” (Wane, 2016, p. 164). It also demonstrates the resilience of the CWCM and its members’ ability to persevere during economic hardship. To generate funds to carry out its social welfare activities, social functions continued to be organized by the Club (CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1927). Another source of funds for the Club came from the membership fees that were required from club members (CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1927, 1928, 1933, 1934)

When the Great Depression began in 1929, the Club remarkably continued to operate despite fiscal challenges. The strategies employed by the CWCM solidify the strength of these early social welfare pioneers. Using ACFP analysis, the actions taken by the Club members were a clear exertion of Black women’s agency who resisted oppressive forces in a society circumscribed by anti-Black racism (Wane, 2004). According to Williams (1997) and Copp (1974), the impact of the depression in Montreal was devastating. Williams (1997) stated:

Conditions for all blacks worsened as the Depression inflicted hardships on a community already economically deprived. Many families were forced to rely on the charity of those few who were able to hold onto their jobs and on the tireless efforts of community workers like Reverend Este of Union Church and Reverend Ellis of the High African Methodist Episcopal Church. (p. 74)

For members of Montreal’s Black community, the Depression reinforced the secondary status society ascribed to them. Already working in the most menial jobs, they were now competing for these positions with a large number of Whites who were seeking employment. One of the areas addressed by Club members was the unsanitary living conditions in Little Burgundy, which were common for those residents of Montreal at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder (CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1930).

The CWCM was involved in a number of other initiatives to alleviate the intense impact of the Depression. Appeals were made to the citizens of Montreal to contribute to the soup kitchens to assist community members who were destitute and living on the streets (Bertley, 1983;

CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1930). The desperate search for this particular service is recalled by Ashby:

It was terrible. Half of the men were out of work. Some places went into bankruptcy. From 1929 to 1932, everything was in a slump and the Black community suffered like everyone else, except there was no work at all and all you could do was go in search of soup kitchens. (Quoted in Vipond, 1976, p. 15)

The CWCM provided individuals with clothing and financial assistance, however, given the tremendous demand, it was impossible to respond to all requests (CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1931-32).

In an effort to generate additional funds, increasing the membership to the Club became a priority. Thus, in the fall of 1932, the CWCM agreed to a merger with the Whist Club, another group of Black women in the city:

The session 1932-33 opened on September 29...The merging of the Women's Whist Club with the Women's Club was also discussed and agreed upon becoming an accomplished fact at the following meeting in October. (CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1932-33)

The decision to merge with the Whist Club as depicted in the above meeting minutes represents a strategy employed by the women to ensure that it could continue to meet the needs of the community. This example of collaboration among Black women's clubs speaks to the sense of solidarity and cohesion among African-Canadian women interwoven historically as they endured common struggles (Wane, 2016).

Fundraising became a major priority throughout the Depression, thus members organized social events such as dances, concerts, and fashion shows. The ongoing financial contribution by the CWCM to community functions clearly demonstrated its commitment to the well-being of Montreal's Black community. For example, in 1939, the Club collected approximately \$208 in membership fees of which \$163 was distributed to entities such as the Sunshine Club, Union Church, members who encountered financial challenges, and to social events (CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1939-40).

The CWCM also worked closely with the Negro Community Centre (NCC). The centre was created in 1927 by Reverend Charles Este and Golden Darby, an American-born Black with valuable experience in community organizations. Within a short period of time, the NCC emerged as a major social centre for Blacks in Montreal. The CWCM and the NCC organized social activities for community members. Programs for the youth of the community were viewed as particularly important and programs such as music and art classes were developed.

Youth were also recruited by the Club to serve as volunteers at its major social functions. The attention provided to the young people of the community supported the belief that if things were to change in the broader society, the impetus would come from the youth (CWCM Meeting Minutes, 1930; Montreal Daily Star, 1928).

The improved economic climate in Montreal during the latter half of the 1930s relieved some of the pressure on the CWCM to provide essential services to members of the Black community, however, the plight of members of the community continued to be of prime importance.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The CWCM is a case example that illustrates the valuable contributions of African-Canadian women working together to provide much needed services for the Black community in Montreal. Although this article focuses on the historical achievements of the CWCM in the first half of the 20th century (1902-1940), its significance to social work still resonates for contemporary social workers and practitioners in the 21st century. In particular, it is imperative that social workers understand the historical contexts experienced by marginalized and excluded populations such as the Black community in Montreal as a foundation for understanding the current issues facing African-Canadians in contemporary society. Hence, a strong historical foundation provides valuable insights for social workers and service providers who work with this population.

From a social work value perspective, a core principle is the need to offer clients the best quality service possible. It is also imperative for practitioners to expand their knowledge base and secondly, further develop the skills they possess (CASW, 2005). Inherent within this principle is the recognition that social work professionals need to be knowledgeable about the historical and contemporary experiences of African-Canadians. As well, all levels of social work education in Canada should ensure that practitioners possess the skills to work effectively with members of this community.

From ACF and ABR perspectives, the authors strongly assert the necessity to recognize the contributions of these women who were early social-welfare pioneers resisting their exclusion and marginalization within Canadian society. These women played an essential role in providing social services to their communities and the history of these women and the broader African-Canadian community cannot be excluded or forgotten from mainstream Canadian social work. The provision of economic and social supports by the CWCM was vital to the Black community in Montreal as it evolved from being transient in nature in the 1880s to a more permanent entity at the turn of the 20th century. The historical achievements of these Black women as



social workers warrant merit for their early leadership in community organizing and mobilization. From a race and gendered perspective, Wane (2004) argues that Black Canadian feminist theory has always been there, but has not been addressed rigorously in academic settings:

The exclusion of Black women from the sphere of academia reveals their oppression through the Euro-patriarchal production and validation of knowledge. Black women, however, have not been completely silenced...Meanings and paradigms situated in Black people's experiences can be applied to rupture and collapse the in/visible divides that have kept Black people in general – and Black women in particular – in the periphery. (pp. 151-152)

As such, in analyzing the case of the CWCM from an ABR and Black Canadian feminist lens, we are paying homage to the contributions of African-Canadian female social welfare pioneers and advancing a discourse that validates their experiences of adversity and resilience within Canadian social welfare literature and curriculum.

In critically reflecting on the parallels between this historical case example and the contemporary context of African-Canadians today, it is disconcerting yet not surprising that manifestations of anti-Black racism experienced over a century ago continue to persist in the 21st century (African Canadian Legal Clinic, 2012; James et al., 2010; Lawson et al., 2002; Smith & Lawson, 2002). It also draws attention to the uncomfortable reality that subjugation of certain groups is perpetuated over time and across generations, thus amplifying the structural nature of racism and oppression. In spite of these identified struggles, cases such as the CWCM exemplify the strengths, resilience, and resistance of the Black community in Canada to the injustices they encountered.

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