

# “You Don’t Have A History”: Passion as the Counter-Narrative of Heritage, History, and Archives

## Closing Keynote Speech

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### Article abstract

This paper describes my lifelong journey as a historian, heritage activist and librarian-archivist focused on recovering and sharing the history of Quebec and Canada’s English-speaking Black communities. This paper yet again contends that this community faces silence and invisibility. I share personal and professional examples of how I became passionate about Black history and I reveal the real-life consequences of its erasure. From this context, I provide detail on how this passion fueled decades of research, storytelling, and the building of collections and historical and archival materials. Over three decades ago, I responded with groundbreaking books: *Blacks in Montreal 1628-1986: An Urban Demography* (1989), and *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (1997). Since that time, I have written extensively on the need to reshape Canada’s narrative so that it may embrace the diversity we boast about. I share how my efforts to address our cultural ignorance have led to the recent creation of the ABC’s of Canadian Black History Kit. Finally, my article concludes with an underscoring of how that very passion was rooted in my life’s mission to counter my own invisibility in Canada’s narrative.

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## Perspectives

# “You Don’t Have A History”: Passion as the Counter-Narrative of Heritage, History, and Archives

## Closing Keynote Speech

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### Abstract

This paper describes my lifelong journey as a historian, heritage activist and librarian-archivist focused on recovering and sharing the history of Quebec and Canada’s English-speaking Black communities. This paper yet again contends that this community faces silence and invisibility. I share personal and professional examples of how I became passionate about Black history and I reveal the real-life consequences of its erasure. From this context, I provide detail on how this passion fueled decades of research, storytelling, and the building of collections and historical and archival materials. Over three decades ago, I responded with groundbreaking books: *Blacks in Montreal 1628-1986: An Urban Demography* (1989), and *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (1997). Since that time, I have written extensively on the need to reshape Canada’s narrative so that it may embrace the diversity we boast about. I share how my efforts to address our cultural ignorance have led to the recent creation of the ABC’s of Canadian Black History Kit. Finally, my article concludes with an underscoring of how that very passion was rooted in my life’s mission to counter my own invisibility in Canada’s narrative.

**Keywords:** history; archives; identity; passion; narrative

### Résumé

Cet exposé décrit mon parcours de toute une vie en tant qu’historienne, militante pour le patrimoine et bibliothécaire archiviste axée sur la récupération et le partage de l’histoire des communautés noires anglophones du Québec et du Canada. Il soutient une fois de plus que cette communauté est confrontée au silence et à l’invisibilité. Je partage des exemples à la fois personnels et professionnels qui illustrent ma passion pour l’histoire des Noirs et je révèle les conséquences réelles de son effacement. À partir de ce contexte, j’explique en détail comment cette passion a alimenté des décennies de recherches, de récits et l’enrichissement de collections et de documents historiques et archivistiques. Il y a plus de trois décennies, j’ai réagi en publiant des livres révolutionnaires : *Les Noirs de Montréal 1628-1986 : Essai de démographie urbaine* (1989), et *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (1997). Depuis lors, j’ai abondamment écrit sur la nécessité de remodeler la narration de l’histoire du Canada afin qu’elle englobe la diversité dont

nous nous vantons. Je raconte comment mes efforts pour remédier à notre ignorance culturelle ont conduit à la création récente de la trousse de l'ABC de l'histoire des Noirs au Canada. Pour conclure, je souligne comment cette même passion s'est enracinée dans ma mission de vie visant à contrer ma propre invisibilité dans la narration du Canada.

**Mots-clés:** histoire; archives; identité; passion; narration

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This article describes my lifelong journey as a historian, heritage activist and librarian archivist committed to recovering and sharing the history of Quebec and Canada's English-speaking Black communities. It highlights the discussion around the silence and invisibility of this community. I share personal and professional examples of how I became impassioned about Black history. In this personal reflection, I reveal the real-life consequences of its erasure. A detailed account of how this passion fueled decades of research, storytelling, and the building of historical and archival collections is also explored. Over three decades ago, I wrote three groundbreaking books and have written extensively on the need to refashion Canada's narrative to embrace the diversity that Canadians often boast about. I reveal how my efforts to address our cultural ignorance have led to the recent creation of the ABC's of Canadian Black History Kit. Finally, I conclude with an exhortation to work together in the ongoing effort to redress and combat ignorance, thus ending the silence.

The topic is one I usually only share with my friends or close confidants. Where I am today, and the work that I am doing, stems from a lifelong passion to uncover who I am as a Black Canadian woman. I don't say this lightly because, through my forty years in academia, very little has provided me with a context for being here. I am not alone. For most Blacks growing up in Canada, what they see and hear around them does not speak to or of them. I strove to be different. My research and writings over the years have taken me into nooks and crannies of Canadian history that neither you nor I have heard of, but I won't reveal any of these gems today. That is not the focus of this article.

I am not an immigrant, nor were my parents or their parents. My family's roots pre-date Confederation, and in Quebec we have sojourned for about five generations. I am a Quebecer, call me a Quebecois if you will, it does not matter to me. This is my home, too. My roots are in the southwest of the island, straddling the communities of Little Burgundy,<sup>1</sup> St-Henri, Pointe-St-Charles, and Verdun. I am a southwest girl, though to many of the Black residents in other boroughs, I am simply from downtown.

The early years of my youth predated the immigration explosion that began in the mid-1960s. In Little Burgundy we were part of a small community of about 6,000 (Williams, 1989). Growing up, I was not isolated by history because it was a part of the fabric of my family and life in that district. Memories were shared orally and came out of a need to make the present more understandable.

Today, we call it genealogy, but growing up in that small-knit community, understanding our family relationships was an almost daily occurrence. If you brought a friend home, the conversation revolved around how so-and-so was related to you, or how your new friend's great aunt twice-removed got a job in some obscure business decades before we were even born.<sup>2</sup> It was all very annoying, but I too must have annoyed them with my innate curiosity. I would ask where we came from and where did we live before? And who was I related to? The memories go way back to my grandmother who recounted her grandmother was a slave in Nova Scotia. For those who may not know, Canada had over 200 years of slavery that ended on August 1, 1834 (Winks, 1971).

So, from my family I got a real grounding in terms of who I was and where I fit in Canada. Unlike many of my new West Indian friends, my family stories were not about immigrating to Canada. They were not about the Caribbean or the United States. They were about Montreal with old memories of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, but always ultimately Montreal. Along the way I learned something about continuity and our relationship to the city.

And then there were times when the adult conversation in the room turned to some incident when so-and-so fought against a racist obstacle, or the occasional skirmish that had turned physical. As a youngster I didn't understand the looks they shared, but I knew they were traces of their lifetime facing many battles.

Despite this lineage, my sense of belonging has always been questioned by non-Blacks. “Where do you come from?” is a familiar query I often tackle, usually in the first five minutes of a conversation. Fair enough. With the exception of First Nations peoples, aren’t we all from somewhere else? It is disconcerting that “Montreal” is rarely a sufficient response. “But where were you born?” or “Where does your family come from?” indicates that, to them, I am either foreign, someone who is not a true Quebecer, or, as some politicians say, part of *les autres* (Williams, 2011).

So, what pegs me as different or foreign? What do they see or hear in those first five minutes? Do they hear an accent? I don’t have one. Perhaps it is the way I dress (you can spot a tourist on Ste-Catherine Street by their clothes), I don’t dress that differently, though I will admit to being fashion-challenged. Maybe it is my family name, after all Williams is very English. Still, I don’t think it is my name. Rather, given some of the testier exchanges I have had, it must be because of the colour of my skin. Aah, brown skin...a Black woman clearly not from here...

Yet, how wrong and how destructive that assumption is because, though many white Quebecers still perceive Black Quebecers as *other*, many Blacks are actually old stock (Williams, 1989). Their ancestors may have been here when Parliament burnt, before the Durham Report, during the conscription crisis, during the Prohibition vote, and they have even voted in the election of Borden or Maurice Duplessis. It has been my mission over four decades to challenge that assumption by revealing the role Blacks have played in Quebec, since New France (Williams, 1997).

Like you, this fact was not one I learned in school. Rather, my awareness of the Black community came through a long process of internalization I just shared with you. And once that salient truth crystallized for me, it became an object of my focus or what some would call my passion. I will walk you along that journey, through the critical personal milestones that have exemplified this passion.

So where did my focus or passion start as an academic pursuit? Strangely, after having given it some thought, I was able to pin it down to 4<sup>th</sup> grade.<sup>3</sup> I had always been an avid reader and by grade 4 I was rarely without a book. We had a year-end history test based on key topics throughout the textbook. I took the teacher’s challenge and read the entire history book over two days. I thought it was fun and aced the test. I reveled in my accomplishment and wanted to know more. In those days of course, Black Canadian history was never talked about and the textbook focused on British history (Jackson, 2017).

The next time history tug at my heart was at the Negro Community Center<sup>4</sup> where student leaders spent many hours passing on the stories of Africa to the younger members. I was fourteen or fifteen. This was an electrifying time, post-Sir George Williams Affair,<sup>5</sup> and the older students were fervent, and on a mission to ensure we knew about our own history (Ebert, 1969; Forsythe, 1971). They understood how powerful the image of Africa was for youth aching to find in themselves evidence of greatness beyond the Jackson Five, Muhammad Ali, or Diana Ross. They captured the glory of ancient Africa and, alongside neighbourhood kitchen stories, this history kept me going during those formative years. It was fascinating and empowering. The word *empowering* is often over-used but, like the youth of Black Lives Matter today, Black youth in Montreal after Sir George wanted to break the chain of ignorance and raise aspirations of the youth to come (Gaye, 2012).

Perhaps the most significant lesson I took away was that history, the subject I love, was actually the story of the conquerors. I became deeply convinced as a teenager that the history of the conquerors was a short-sighted history. I could see that history about the Canada I loved was not about me. Blacks had not won; we were invisible.

I'm not sure exactly when that idea coalesced, but it was reinforced by my activities in the Afro-Canadian Club at Montreal High School which had been formed some time around 1971. The Afro-Canadian Club was the first all-Black student club in Montreal.<sup>6</sup>

My education at the NCC, coupled with the chatter heard while attending the afterschool club, was energizing and revelatory. My friends and I, we sopped up the history they presented, beginning with the great civilizations of Africa, European colonialism, the rape of Africa, the middle passage genocide, and the depravity of slavery. We debated the lingering legacy of enslavement, and the decolonization of Africa was also our struggle in Canada.

This was heady stuff, not something I would ever learn in a regular high school class. I loved it as much as I love algebra and biology. African history and the rhetoric around the African liberation movement in Montreal was something that we were all agitating for. We believed that African peoples, though downtrodden at the time, would rise again to the glory they once had and once again the world would stand in awe of Africa's splendor.

I am sure that all of these thoughts were spinning in my fertile mind that fateful day in 10<sup>th</sup> grade when I asked the history teacher in front of the class why he never talked about slavery in Canada and why Black history was not taught. He told me I had no history. Me, the 5<sup>th</sup> of six generations in this country, did not have a history. He went on to say that Black history was not written and, therefore, it did not exist and there was not really enough history to be taught.

I believe that my story, that of my own invisibility in the Canadian narrative, began that day and has rarely wavered since. That's why, when I arrived at university, I asked historians in my department why they did not teach a course on Montreal's slave history. The answer was essentially the same, "there isn't anything written."

Thus, the crux of my pursuits was simple. I am a Black, female African Canadian historian impassioned by the need to recover a history that has been made unrecognizable or rendered insignificant. It was like a wave that built over time. The miseducated comments like the ones mentioned above provided me with a purpose. The teachers were wrong: we indeed had a history. However, they were right that it was not written, and I knew then what I wanted to do. I wanted to get it all down on paper and I had figured out how achieve this even before entering university. I still have the first essay I ever wrote on a Black Canadian subject, and it was in high school. I have been uncovering the written stories of Canada's Black history since the early seventies. It didn't stop there.

Throughout my university studies, I continued to produce more Black history research. In fact, I can remember only one university course where I could not find any information about Blacks. It was a survey course on the history of China. Oh well, it was ten years before researchers uncovered African totems in the heart of China (Van Sertima & Rashidi, 1987). Sadly, due to the dearth of Black professors in the field, I had no mentors urging me to learn about Black scholars and Black historiography; but I was not deterred.

My personal world began to reflect the academic world I was exploring. Slowly, my home began to fill up with boxes of reports, articles, and reams of data on Blacks in Canada. I think others noticed, and over the years, they began to send me their documents. They would come unannounced, often by mail or in packages left on my step. The archives that I maintain have now become a collection of fonds from individuals of note in the community. Spanning the past century, their records often consist of vital and personal records, including the documents of organizations to which they are or were affiliated, a host of community papers detailing events, social movements, and career milestones.

One such person who entrusted me with his papers was Richard Lord.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Lord has worn many hats over the years but is perhaps best known as the vice-president of the Quebec Liberal Party. He held that position for years, decades before Dominique Anglade took the reins.<sup>8</sup> He was also well-known in philanthropic and service sectors, (Wisenthal, 2017) sitting on many boards, including the Atwater Library. He was a man of many firsts—breaking the concrete ceiling on several occasions. For disclosure purposes, Richard Lord was the subject of my 1999, Master's History thesis, *The Jackie Robinson Myth: Social Mobility and Race in Montreal 1920–1960* (Williams, 1999). He died about seven years ago but, decades prior to his death, he had started ceding his historical papers to my archives. Today, his wife continues to expand his collection with occasional deliveries of new-found files.

I was fired up about what I was exploring so, when I got a call from Esmeralda Thornhill at the Quebec Human Rights Commission, I was ready. It was 1983, and the Commission was looking for a researcher on Black mobility. Esmeralda had taught me as an undergraduate at Concordia and encouraged my interest in Quebec Black research.<sup>9</sup> She had already paved the way, and then I met Muriel Garon who was in charge of this research.<sup>10</sup> Muriel Garon allowed me to design and create my own dream report and, apparently, it exceeded even her expectations (Williams, 1989, p. Forward).

The Commission was only looking for background on the Black community in Greater Montreal for their nascent anti-discrimination campaign in housing. They needed an internal document, a reference source that their investigators could bring to court or use at hearings when they believed racism was a factor. I agreed to assemble a modest document for internal use, focusing only on the demography of the Black community. I remember cautioning that as a historian, I would have to incorporate more than just the past ten years of lived experience in Quebec.

As the research progressed so much more was included than a historical demography. I will pause to describe what is meant by demography. Derived from two Greek words, demos means the people, whereas graphy means to write, draw or record something. So it can refer to compiling statistics on aggregates and cohorts. Although some people use demography to refer to one's personal or individual statistics, the term usually refers to meaningful data on large groups.

Thanks to my growing archival collection, I had an opportunity to demonstrate how the roots of racism stretched back over centuries and affected waves of migration to the city of Montreal. Six months later, I had cobbled together scores of documentary evidence and was ready to reveal the breadth and depth of writings on Blacks in Canada, in Montreal in particular. It was not enough to cite fact. I took the time to ensure that each citation of a specific fact was included. The result was that *Blacks in Montreal 1628–1986: An Urban Demography* (Williams, 1989) is a perfect primer for Afro-Québécois literature, with multiple corroborations and cross-references. For the novice, unschooled in the range of sources, it is a great foundation for building bibliographies on Blacks in Quebec.

You could say I was on a mission. I was fixated on proving there had been written documentation stretching back over hundreds of years. Moreover, I took advantage of my standing and community connections and interviewed many elders about their life experiences.<sup>11</sup> I wanted to corroborate, better yet, to fill in the gaps from the written record I had uncovered.

Finally, I sat down and began to write. Thirty days later the manuscript was complete. What satisfaction having, for the first time, shown that Blacks indeed had made a footprint on the province and the city. The Quebec Human Rights Commission was also convinced that all of Montreal should know what the monograph contained, urging its publication. *Blacks in Montreal 1628—1986*: (Williams, 1989). became Book Number 4 of the Commission's series. I concede urban demography in the title is cumbersome, but it was descriptive. At the time I had just finished my bachelor's degree in History. I knew the book was not history, at least not in the academic, formal



sense of history. It had been written from the long lens of history, using broad themes that were repeated throughout each period. Subsequently, it has been difficult to convince people that the book is not history, but the distinction is ignored.

In 1989, the book's publication was a milestone in the Black community for a couple of reasons. First, it was seminal as the first historical survey of Blacks in Montreal spanning centuries. Second, it was written from the inside, in other words, by a Black person about the Black community. These were words to be trusted and added to the treasury of oral stories the community already possessed. The book told everyone they had been there. That feeling was something I understood, because I too have never been comfortable with invisibility.

However, because of my craft, undoing this sense of invisibility became my life's work. I've made it my mission to know who I was and what my community had done. Not everyone has been so lucky or so informed. Most people take it for granted that the history taught to them is the only true version. Children of colour, particularly Black children, do not question why they are invisible. They just live with the negative fallout of a lack of belongingness that permeates their lives.

That is why, over the next ten years or so, long after the book's sales had waned, I continued to give lectures, particularly in public schools, usually around Black History Month<sup>12</sup> in February. Originally, I thought the interest in my presentations meant that the message had been received, but realized I was mistaken. For when I lectured in the schools, I was struck by the lack of African Canadian information our students had. Sure, the students researched Black heroes, but they were either African American, or African heroes with little or no immediate relevance to Canada. I'd ask about that absence, but the teacher might just smile apologetically, or reply they did not know. This simply cemented my belief that knowledge about Blacks in Canada, even among educated teaching staff, was, in many cases, little better than their students.

I came to see this as a reality not simply from these one-on-one encounters, I often heard the same when lecturing to adults. Inevitably somebody would raise their hand and ask, "Why didn't I know this?" or, "How come no one told me?" It was very personal for them that they did not know. Indeed, when I started lecturing about thirty years ago, it was such a challenge for some in the room to hear my presentation. I have even been called a liar in public. I was not deterred; I was not done.

About 1995, *Blacks in Montreal 1628–1986*: (Williams, 1989) went into remainder, and I decided it was time to write the narrative I had been itching to write. Luckily, it was my first Master's degree and I was able to use interlibrary loans and library resources. Moreover, by this time, my own archives were bursting at the seams. I had had much to say in the original book, so I used it as my template and fleshed out a new manuscript.

However, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Williams, 1997) was to have a different purpose than *Blacks in Montreal 1628–1986*: (Williams, 1989). The focus of the new book was the history of Black Montrealers. And, while Québécois still perceived Blacks as *other*, I wanted to show that, in this province, our history should not be second-class nor rendered as *other* or insignificant.<sup>13</sup> I felt it was critical to raise awareness of how this specific community had been established in Montreal. Quebec needed a guide to understanding Blacks in the city, to understand their lived experiences, appreciate their contributions, and to see the roots of their community concerns and societal issues. *The Road to Now*: (Williams, 1997) captured memories, while it laid bare the abject Black social conditions perpetuated by the socioeconomic effects of racism that doubled our unemployment rate, reduced social mobility and perpetuated generational inequality (Torczyner, 2010; Ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles, 2006; Torczyner & Springer, 2001). Nothing can erase these facts.



However, to be honest, the book sets out to refute the belief that there is insufficient literature not only in Quebec but in Canada as a whole. Now, three decades on, I continue to beat that drum. For, unlike African American studies, Canada has been bereft of African Canadian studies. There are some changes on the horizon, but not in Quebec yet and certainly not in the 1990's.<sup>14</sup> What I did see through my graduate work was a focus on Blacks, but only in the context of immigration or ethnic studies, Caribbean/Canadian relations, and perhaps a minor on a country on continental Africa. Programs specifically about Blacks in Canada remained hard to find.

In *The Road to Now*: (Williams, 1997) I was far more explicit about this issue. Part of the reason for my pointedness then was that, by this time, I had recognized the power of the historian. Historians are very powerful people. I tell my students: “You must be kind historians. If they don’t like you, or don’t see you or hear you, they can very easily erase you.” Don’t be sceptical, don’t laugh, they erased me. Not just as a Black person, but as a woman, though feminist historians are working hard to reinsert themselves into the narrative. Fifty years after the feminist revolution, it can still be a tough slog.

So, in *The Road to Now* (Williams, 1997), I expanded my explorations, while explaining to the reader about the fire that lights my passion—the counter-narrative I was aiming for. The following excerpts are from 1997. The first states that “Quebec did not create distinct communities for Blacks within the province. Blacks were never included in Quebec’s historical record. Blacks remained an invisible population in Montreal with few references to Blacks in Quebec’s historical documents” (p. 13). I continued:

The historian also empowers through the recording of different voices different narratives...With the available recording technology it would be remiss of any historian not to tap the living stories of people who lived through periods being researched...This is the time to investigate for soon those voices will be silenced and we will wonder and speculate...Montreal Blacks share their own 350 years of history. What sets them apart from Montrealers of European descent is their African heritage and experience of slavery. The institution of slavery stripped slaves of their connection to the land, tribe, clan or village. With few exceptions, no vestige of this heritage remains—not our names, our language, or customs.

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I needed to stress the point about belonging and emphasized:

As a person of African descent, all of Africa, anywhere, could have been my home among many of the 60 or more nations in 1700 languages. As an Afro Canadian I claim it all. It is what binds Africans in the Diaspora together under all the trappings of skin colour, hairstyles, mother tongue, and social and occupational status. Therefore, Blacks who have arrived the last 20 or 30 years share a 350-year history that is as much theirs as the African Canadian family whose roots can be traced to New France.

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I concluded with this quote that makes it clear how my scholarly perspective or historical lens is tied to a strong personal sentiment about being Black in Montreal:

We know, as part of the African Diaspora, the history of Blacks in Montreal is the history of all Blacks in Montreal. There is no break in our continuity. We were here, we are here, and as long as one black citizen calls it home, Montreal will be our history.

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In the Introduction to *The Road to Now: (Williams, 1997)*, I told the world why I wrote...and why I continue to write. The word Montreal could be substituted by any Black settlement in the country; I was writing about Montreal because it is where I belong.

The book was my last monograph however, it was not my last narrative, for I had not yet addressed the needs of public schools. Years after, my focus was turned to postgraduate work, I still remembered those blank looks, the shrug of teachers' shoulders and the apologetic glances. After completing my Master's, I began to address the lack of Black resources in K-12.

In 1999, together with Dr. Dolores Sandoval, we established the DaCosta-Angelique Institute (DAI) to develop and disseminate educational resources about Blacks in Canada.<sup>15</sup> We were very focused on research and referred to DAI as a think tank. The concept was built around a set of ABC's of Black stories that I had been working on for Black history education in K-12. In our first brochure we introduced these ABC's.

Eventually our paths diverged. The DAI under Dr. Sandoval began to agitate for an immigrant museum or what she called an *observatoire* that would allow for Black artifacts to be exhibited alongside the histories of many other ethnic groups of Montreal.<sup>16</sup>

While Dolores had a grand vision for the future, my heritage efforts centered on saving Montreal's Black past. I worked in the non-profit sector to pay the rent but took it upon myself to identify Black document repositories in the city. The most significant was situated in the heart of downtown. For several years, I volunteered in the Black Studies Center, organizing its massive collection that dated back to the early seventies.<sup>17</sup> Today, Concordia's archives preserve their archives. strike through community. Did I tell you I love archival work?

My Ph.D. is actually in Library and Information Studies. How does LIS relate to my passion? Well, the framework of my LIS research was uncovering and creating a narrative of the print heritage of the Black community. This had never been explored before. I had access to some copies of the very first Black newspaper in Montreal (Williams, 2007), the jewels of the collection. I identified and now own 198 various serials and periodicals produced by Montreal's Black community (Williams, 2006). The depth of the research materials was so mind-blowing, my dissertation committee asked me to stop finding more serials. I concluded that Black print culture in Montreal was thriving, though sadly it too remains an invisible segment of our historical heritage.

That said, nothing has been as satisfying as saving the memory of the Negro Community Center (NCC). The NCC was unarguably the most iconic Black institution in Montreal.<sup>18</sup> It was founded in 1927, and by the sixties it had become the go-to Black community center on the entire island. This Little Burgundy institution was the home to generations, a safe Black space offering a myriad of educational and leisure activities. It fostered community development in a powerful way, erecting Black satellite centers on the island. Still, by the late eighties, the NCC had lost its core funding and closed its doors.<sup>19</sup> Almost immediately consecutive committees formed, died and re-formed, all in futile effort to revive it. Sadly, as the building waited for life to return, its interior decayed.

Back in the early nineties, as initial efforts to revive it failed, it became clear a solution was needed to salvage the documentary remnants of its seventy-year history. One Saturday, Nancy Marelli, the archivist of Concordia University in Montreal, brought her team together and we moved 150 boxes

and containers off-site for conservation. When the NCC's west wall collapsed in April 2014, I comforted myself knowing that those 150 boxes had been saved (Gould, 2014). Today the history of that building, its programs and impact can be readily accessed (MacLeod, 2018). Its physical demise remains a painful scar.

Throughout this period, I continued to visit schools. I shared the ABC's in dozens of presentations. However, it was not until I partnered with Linton Garner, after completing my PhD, that much time was put into getting things published (Garner, 2021b). In 2010, we decided to produce the ABC's. Those simple stories I had drafted a decade earlier expanded into a kit with multiple classroom resources. The ABC's of Canadian Black History Kit was not student centered. Rather, I decided to empower teachers so they could teach students about Black Canadians accomplishments.

The Kit was deliberately designed to help Canadian educators become proficient and comfortable about teaching. Previously, Linton had been a School Commissioner, so there was a meeting of the minds (Garner, 2021a). We were convinced that many teachers wanted to teach Black history but needed a guide. They, like their students, were miseducated and had no idea where to start or what was credible. This was a valid concern, and many were also nervous about offending. This was, and is, the reality that tens of thousands of teachers in this country experience.

I pondered several foundational issues: First, how could we make Black history come alive for teachers who have had no prior introduction? Second, could we develop a resource that teachers would want to use? And third, how could Black stories from across the country, spanning hundreds of years, be related in simple, clear language for primary school educators? These and other challenges consumed my creative energies until the Kit's launch at the McGill University Faculty of Education in 2016 (Mitchell, 2016).

I think we hit it on the nose. The Kit is turnkey, meaning that it can be used right out of the box, and no one has to go back to school to get the point. My aim was for a teacher in a one-room school in northern Alberta with no diversity education nor personal knowledge of Blacks to feel comfortable teaching with it. I spoke to teachers, acknowledging their schedules and the challenges they faced integrating material. The Kit offers many ways to teach based on their students' needs and the literacy levels of their students. In the Kit, I stress that they can be flexible and allow their students to recreate the poems and play with rap or music. I wanted teachers to fall in love with the stories and share them readily, with the goal of building their cultural literacy.

My last efforts to counter the narrative come from my engagement as a professor at Concordia University. Whenever I teach, students ask me why they were never taught Black history in school or in their own words: "Professor Williams, how come I did not know this before?" I challenge these students to think about what is gained or who benefits by not talking about and not including Blacks in the Quebec narrative (Banerjee, 2020). I ask them to consider their understanding of themselves as a distinct people and how this belief might be challenged or enriched by a narrative that includes the diversity that has always existed in Quebec.

In my course, Black Montreal, they learn about what happens when one is not part of the narrative. Students also come away with newfound awareness of how knowledge and memory are constructed. Constructed histories are not exclusive to Canada. I caution students that all national histories are constructed or written to tell a single story about one tribe or dominant group. So that, now, when they learn about other cultures and histories, they are much better equipped. I want them to think about and examine who is missing, who is silent in the narrative (Pantlitz, 2020). I trust they will be listening.

Finally, the Kit incorporates many learning modalities so educators can encourage learners to evaluate the stories' explicit and implicit messages against their own ethical, moral and/or democratic principles. And, if history can inspire independent thinking and foster critical analysis,

well all the better. Do students get this? Well, this past year, one student shared that she was switching to history because of what she learned about history and how the profession frames narratives. Yes, history can do that and I am proud of what I do.

Given that I am visible in the media people ask me: Why do you do what you do? What is your goal...your agenda? I answered those questions in 2010 on the DVD I created when I reprinted *Blacks in Montreal 1628–1986*: (Williams, 1989). I explained then that the answer was quite simple: “I want to change Canada’s narrative.” I was again met with blank stares, but now you know what I mean.

Despite the awards and honours I have garnered along the way, I have always written for my own personal agenda. What is my agenda? Now that I have shared my secret, I will frame it a bit differently: I need to counter the widespread perception and that one lone voice that said I, Dorothy W. Williams, the 5<sup>th</sup> of 7 generations in Canada, didn’t have a history, neither in Montreal nor in Canada. And now you know, this is what lights my fire.

## Notes

[1] The moniker, Little Burgundy only came into use in the mid-sixties and was commonplace only in the late seventies. Prior to the current municipal designation, Little Burgundy-Griffintown, Blacks used various names to refer to the district: downtown, Ste-Cunegonde, St-Henri.

[2] There is a rich resource that captured many of these milestones. Black community stories of community triumph, of firsts, mixed with family genealogy is replete in *Memory Book* (Hostesses of Union United Church, 1982).

[3] Like all non-Catholic, English-speakers in the district, I attended Royal Arthur School, run by the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal.

[4] The Negro Community Center (NCC) sat in the heart of Little Burgundy’s Black community. Its role and legacy will be described below.

[5] The Sir George Williams Affair refers to a 1969 event at Sir George William’s University (Concordia University) in downtown Montreal where the protests of Black and White students led to the occupation of and damage to the University’s main building. This racially-charged incident became international in scope, and it wended its way through the courts for years. For many, it was the culmination of, and an example of, the city’s anti-Black racism and a rallying cry for civil rights action (Cummings & Mohabir, 2021; Ebert, 1969; Forsythe, 1971).

[6] Although it was a new club, it was very influential in a high school of 800+ students. It was one of the significant drivers of the city-wide student strikes and demonstrations that roiled throughout Montreal in 1973 and 1974. In retrospect, this high-school student protest is not surprising, coming on the heels of the lingering impact of the Sir George Williams Affair that had occurred in 1969 at today’s Concordia University (Forsythe, 1971). For an excellent retrospective on the aftermath (Cummings & Mohabir, 2021).

[7] For an in-depth look at his social mobility in Montreal, please refer to my biographical and family study included in (Williams, 1999).

[8] Haitian born, Dominique Anglade became leader of Quebec’s Liberal Party on May 11, 2020.

- [9] Dr. Esmeralda Thornhill's career is prodigious. Her scholarship is on display at ethornhill.ca: (Thornhill, n.d.).
- [10] Muriel Garon, Social Research Coordinator, Research Directorate, Quebec Human Rights Commission.
- [11] A list of elders integrated into my writings can be found in Williams, 1989, p. 141-142.
- [12] The City of Montreal recognized the month decades before many other cities. Given official provincial sanction in 1991, the Black History Month Roundtable has received government funding since 1992.
- [13] These tropes have persisted for decades. Recently, the Quebec government has found itself explaining its references to otherness and facing the resulting controversy of who a true Quebecer is, and who is entitled to certain privileges (Authier, 2021).
- [14] It is unclear whether universities are leading or following the way but, within the province, there appears to be greater effort to include courses about Black history in Canada. For instance, on September 20, 2020, McGill University released its Action Plan to Address Anti-Black Racism containing some targets to establish a Provostial Visiting Fellowship-in-Residence on Black Life and History as well as an expansion of its core African Studies degree. These actions are expected to lead to courses on the teaching of African Canadian studies (McGill Reporter Staff, 2020). As McGill released this, Concordia University announced it had just put together a team of Blacks to report on its proposals for anti-Black racism teaching, scholarship, and practices (Carr, 2020).
- [15] Following her death in 2015, DAI continued and continues to this day, to use her art to further Black anti-racist education in Montreal-area schools.
- [16] MOI, as the project was called, began to lobby for museum space to highlight the immigrant/migration experience of the Quebec population. Initially, the initiative was sustained by key leaders in several ethnic communities.
- [17] Established in the early seventies, this organization had been housed on de Maisonneuve Blvd. Eventually, it aligned with the John Molson School of Business, Concordia University. It does not currently operate programs.
- [18] There is no definitive or official monograph on the Negro Community Center. In recent years, Concordia's archives has spearheaded academic research into its operations, motivations, impact and legacy. Explore the range of studies on the NCC, published in the *Quebec Heritage News* special edition (MacLeod, 2018).
- [19] I was the last Executive Director and closed its operations and shuttered the building in 1989.

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