

their oral traditions of rhetorical speechmaking and storytelling with the written word, a Canadian writer of Indian ancestry is sure to follow suit.²⁷

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Black Writing in Canada: The Problems of Anthologizing and Documenting

I would like to point out that the proper title of this paper should have been "Literary Writings by Blacks in Canada: Anthologizing and Documenting." This paper, based upon my experiences, eventually resulted in the publication of *Other Voices: Writings by Blacks in Canada* and *The Bibliography of Literary Writings by Blacks in Canada*, the former published in 1985 and the latter in 1986.

First, I would like to give you some biographical details I consider relevant to this topic. I was born in Tobago, the smaller of the two islands that are now referred to as The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Like all other emigrants from this country, I was subjected to the familiar pattern of colonial education — that included the reading and studying of works by the Great Masters of the English literary tradition. Proudly, I committed to memory hundreds of lines from Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Victorian and the Romantic poets and others of this ilk.

Let me say at this point that I have benefited greatly from this literary grounding. The unfortunate thing, however, was that I never once stopped to question the relevance of such unknowns as the joys of spring, the glories of summer, the fullness of autumn and the trials of winter. Moreover, I never once recognized the significant absence of any material that sprung out of the immediate environment that had bred and nurtured me — the landscape of my consciousness.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, after my arrival in Vancouver as an adult student several years later, I elected to write my B.A. thesis on Joseph Conrad. Eventually, I was introduced to James Baldwin's work by one of my professors, but was forbidden to use him as the focus of my thesis. Baldwin, you see, had not proven his worth as a writer as yet; moreover, he was still alive. After a while, however, I agreed to discuss Baldwin's and Fitzgerald's writings, with special emphasis on the American Dream/Nightmare theme.

At this point of my education, I had not read any books written by my fellow West Indian writers — books which had been published during the

27 Two important works on native writing appeared in 1990. See *Canadian Literature* 124/25: *Native Writers and Canadian Literature* (Spring-Summer 1990) and Thomas King, ed. *All My Relations* (Toronto: McClelland and Stuart 1990). Also, *I Am Woman* by Lee Miracle (Vancouver: Write-On Press 1988) is receiving critical attention.

literary renaissance of the forties and fifties. What was more ironical was the fact that some of these very writers had previously been my classmates; for example, Ian MacDonald and V.S. Naipaul. My awareness of the wealth of literary writings by West Indians was delayed until my coming to Montréal to work at McGill University in 1964. Not much later, I chose to write my doctoral dissertation on the works of Wilson Harris, a Guyanese writer who had immigrated to England and still lives there now.

It was at this time a proposal that Caribbean literature be added to the curriculum of the English Department was approved. On my reading list, I included a work entitled *When He Was Young and Used to Wear Silks*, a novel written by Austin Clarke, an immigrant from Barbados, published by Anansi Press, Toronto, in 1971. This indeed was my first contact with literary writings by Blacks in Canada. A collection of essays, this work dramatized the plight of young men and women who had been lured to the shores of Canada by the powerful dream of success, but were experiencing the inevitable disillusionment of the cold reality of life in Toronto, instead. Ironically, however, the thought of investigating the state of literary writings by Blacks in Canada never occurred at that time.

Later, when I was invited as a part of the Canadian contingent to submit a proposal for a paper to be presented at the Colloquium of the Second Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture at Lagos, Nigeria, I chose to approach my discussion of Black-Canadian culture by way of relevant statements on arts and culture made by West Indian writers living outside of Canada. It was then that I was asked why I had not mentioned any Canadian writers. My answer was that there was no information in the libraries on the state of such literature and Austin Clarke was the only Black writer of whom I was aware. At this point, I was challenged by Dr. Hutson to undertake an investigation into such literary works. Little did I realize that this remark had struck a spark of interest that would never die.

As editor of literary submissions to the Lagos Festival, I had come into contact with writings by such people as Gloria Wesley-Day, Dionne Brand, Charles Roach and others — writings which were soon to be published by recognized Canadian presses, they were nevertheless, reluctant to submit their manuscripts without the proper guarantees of copyright protection and adequate royalties. Unfortunately, since I was unable to offer such guarantees, the project proved to be abortive.

Around this time, Ms. Judy Young of the Multicultural Section of the Secretary of State, on Mr. Gil Scott's advice, came to McGill University to consult with me on ways of assessing the state of ethnic writings in Canada. My suggestion was that the announcement of a comprehensive Anthology of such writings should attract these unknown writers and provide an opportunity for such a survey. This, however, was overruled in favour of

individual surveys by a representative of each ethnic group. Eventually, I was awarded the contract to carry out such a survey. The works which I mentioned at the beginning of my paper were direct off-shoots of this survey. Not only did I discover that there were Black writers who had actually published their work, but that there were several people who had written quite a lot but who, in their frustration, had put their work into storage. Moreover, most of the published works, I discovered, had been published privately.

Eventually, in 1978, *A Survey of Literary Writings by Blacks in Canada* was submitted to Ms. Judy Young — the findings of which were to be used by the Federal Government for their own internal purposes. It was hoped that such information would assist them in selecting speakers for lecture tours, writers for workshops and such. In addition, I had added three recommendations. The first was that I should undertake the preparation of a more academically prepared version of my findings, which would then be made available to the public at large through libraries and other sources of information. I argued that it would serve as a valuable source of information for all students of Canadian literature and culture.

The two other proposals were as follows: an Anthology, which would include works by the best writers and by those who showed great promise. I suggested that such a work could be used in schools throughout Canada; a Conference of the Black Artist in the Canadian Milieu, which would not only enable Black artists to meet one another and share each other's expertise, but would also allow them to exhibit their work to the Canadian public at large, to take orders and to meet with representatives of the various governments and of the publishing and production worlds.

With the help of Government financing, the three projects have been realized. Unfortunately, however, the hope that such a Conference would be held every three years could not be fulfilled, due to the lack of funding.

There were, indeed, other incentives for my pursuit of these projects. In 1977, at a symposium on Caribbean Literature and the Performing Arts, sponsored by the Canadian Caribbean Association of Winnipeg, I listened to a group of concerned parents and instructors complain about the scarcity of, and the need for, literary works which could inform their young ones on their cultural background and also on the experiences of those Blacks who were born in Canada or who had come here before them. On another occasion, a student who intended to do a comparative study of literature written by various ethnic groups on Canada came to me for assistance. To my embarrassment, I was forced to confess my ignorance of Black writing in Canada.

These, then, have been some of the happenings that inspired me to embark upon to continue my research. There have been many obstacles. One

argument that has been repeatedly put forward to me was the fact that it was not commercially viable. True enough, writers of all ethnic groups have had their works rejected because of questionable commercial viability. What worried me most, however, was the suggestion that West Indian, African and Black-American publishers might be more favourable. One has to pause and carefully consider what the true intent of such a statement is. One possible argument could be that Canadian readers and audiences would not be interested in such literature. Such an argument could be legitimate if the settings of these works happened to be outside of Canada — although this premise is completely subverted by the popularity of literature written by American, British and European authors and, moreover, by the success of plays staged by, performed by and sometimes written by Blacks in Canada, even when life in the Caribbean, Africa and such places is dramatized.

Certain questions arise here. Is work written by Blacks in Canada of an inferior quality to those written by others? This does not seem to be the case, especially when one considers the success of Blacks in other fields of endeavour. Are there, then, other reasons, unknown to us, for the reluctance to handle such material? Is the argument that Blacks are by nature not equally gifted as whites still prevalent today? If not, why then should one's work be rejected when it is described, on the very rejection slips, in such favourable terms as a work of 'much merit,' an 'ambitious and intelligently written piece of work,' and 'a fascinating approach to the problems of identity and security' which were 'fully explored'?

Blacks in Canada do form one of the important sections in the Canadian multicultural mosaic. They are richly talented and highly productive people of various regional and ethnic origins. The majority of us belong to one of two nationally recognised ethnic and linguistic groups, the French and the English. The similarities of the colonial experiences of Canada and the countries of our origins are obvious. English-speaking Blacks, who are in the majority, share a common literary heritage with most English-speaking non-Black Canadians. A similar relationship can be found between the literary heritage of the Blacks of French tongue and the non-Blacks of French-speaking areas of Canada.

The reality is however, that despite such obvious parallels in literary experience and despite the expressed desire of the Canadian government that minority ethnic groups remain visible and not be melted into one faceless Canadian mass, one finds that the creative output of Blacks in Canada is yet to be fully recognised, made available and properly assessed.

One other thing that considerably slowed the progress of my research was the fact that very few works by Blacks in Canada had been published by recognised publishing companies. There was no readily available source of information about the works for which I was searching. Even less readily available was information on the authors themselves. As a librarian at the

University of British Columbia library informed me, writers are never classified by colour in Canada. What she failed to realize was that Blacks in Canada are the only group whose works were not classified under the appropriate ethnic heading in the reference books, despite the fact that there was a heading for Black-American writers' works.

Faced with this problem, I sought advice from other sources. Eventually, one librarian suggested that there was a book-seller whom she believed to be one of the best sources of such information. This person eventually proved to be the key to the successful gathering of relevant information. He also gave me names of other important Blacks in Vancouver who might be valuable contacts. I am indeed most grateful to those many people who not only guided me to proper contacts, but also helped to make my stay in the various places happy ones.

One other problem which I had encountered early in my preparation was the belief expressed by some of my generally trustworthy colleagues that there were no significant Black population west of Toronto or east of Montreal (except for Halifax in the latter case). Since I had attended U.B.C., I knew that this was not true of Vancouver and Winnipeg; but I thought it to be true of the other provinces. This eventually turned out to be untrue of other places like Edmonton and Calgary. In fact, one of my best sources turned out to be Phil Fraser of Edmonton, who had won cinematic acclaim and awards for his film, "Don't Shoot the Teacher."

One of the most surprising obstacles in my way — one that is most ironical — was the reluctance of Blacks themselves to provide samples of their work for possible publication. I eventually discovered that this attitude was a result of the fact that they had been frequently duped by people who came full of promises, but delivered nothing.

Another disturbing development was the response received from people from whom I had solicited material for the planned Anthology. Several people demanded to be paid according to the going rates suggested by the Writer's Union. Others wondered whether it would be safe to send their material to me when there was the possibility that I may use it for my own benefit. Temporarily distressed, I then stressed the fact that the project had been undertaken on behalf of all Black writers in Canada and that such attitudes were most counter-productive.

Fortunately, I was able to complete the Anthology of Black Literary Writings. Over fifty people (poets and short story writers) eventually submitted work, from which writings by forty three writers were selected. Of these writers, twenty-two were women and twenty-one men. Of these, only seven were originally born in Canada. The majority, thirty-one, had come to Canada from the Caribbean — eighteen from Trinidad and Tobago, nine from Jamaica, two from St. Vincent, one from British Guiana (Guyana today) and the other from Barbados. Three of the remaining writers had

come from the U.S.A., one from the United Kingdom and the other from Africa. It is interesting to note that the majority of them (22) then lived in Ontario, mainly Toronto; eleven were residents of Montreal; five lived in the Maritimes; four in the Prairies and two in British Columbia.

In compiling the bibliography, I frequently had to write more than one letter to various writers. The information I received was carefully checked by consulting the various journals in which the work was supposed to have been published. Very often, especially in the case of the more prolific poets, the listed number of the journal turned out to be wrong. In other cases, the journal was unavailable. As in the case of the Anthology, editing and proof-reading proved to be a major problem, since most of this had to be done by telephone.

In addition to all these obstacles, I experienced great difficulties in both convincing the multicultural representative and my publisher that I should continue with the publication of my findings. In the former case, it was suggested that it should be a part of a larger work that would include all reports turned in by the representatives of the various ethnic groups. In the latter case, there seemed to be much greater interest in the Anthology, which had already been published, even though I argued that the Bibliography was the more important of the two. Again the ominous presence of commercial viability seemed to have intruded upon the scene, but it was finally ignored.

I would like to end this paper with a few observations as to the future of Literary Writings by Blacks in Canada. It must be realized by the governments, federal and provincial, by the publishers and production companies, and, more so, by the Black writers and artists themselves, that the cultural needs of Canadian Blacks can no longer be ignored. Like all the other pieces of the Canadian mosaic, Blacks need to be recognised as a viable part of the Canadian community.

Today, when many literary works are being re-examined in terms of the cross-cultural imagination and when there is a rapidly growing demand for more Canadian content on radio and television, the Black artist needs to be involved. An authentic literary history of Canada cannot be written without the inclusion of the contributions made by Black writers. The Bibliography lists the titles of all literary works published by Blacks living in Canada, as well as those who once lived here but no longer do so. The writers who have contributed to the success of the Anthology represent a cross-section of the Canadian Black community, including writers from almost every province and including those born to families of long-standing Canadian residency, as well as those who came as immigrants during the recent and not so recent past. Their writings reflect the richness and variety of their different cultural and geographic backgrounds, as well as their different literary influences. Indeed, it will be noticed that the term, 'Black writer,' includes not only the

sons and daughters of Africa, but also Afro-Asians and others of the diaspora. These are the people, who together with all the other ethnic groups, will eventually become the voices of the Canadian cross-cultural imagination.

"We — mankind — are a conversation" a German philosopher once wrote. "The being of man is founded in language." Nations, indeed, have been founded upon the rock of language, but many have been undone through language. For too long now Blacks have allowed themselves to be undone by language. It is time today that they should strive to restructure their lives in their own image through language. The Black writer in Canada must stand and be recognised for what he/she is — a true artist, as dedicated and talented as any other in this country. For only in this way can he/she fulfill his/her responsibility in the shaping and the promotion of this country in the eyes of all peoples of this world.

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