“Not of the Nation”: Canadian History Textbooks and the Impossibility of an African-Canadian Identity

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Abstract: The historical experience of blacks in Canada has continued to be one of partial remembrance and recognition set against a highly developed and dominant Anglo portrayal of Canadian history. This partiality has greatly limited the development of identity for Canadian blacks due to general non-recognition of them on the part of the white Canadian majority. Historiographically, the historical presence of blacks in Canada has been constructed as distinctly provisional. This study will illustrate the historical exclusion of black Canadians from the Canadian historical narrative by examining pre-Confederation Canadian black history as it appeared in thirty-two intermediate level (grades 7-10) textbooks authorized for use in Ontario between 1950 and 1985. These textbooks were evaluated based on their coverage of slavery in Canada, the Loyalist migration, the War of 1812, the Rebellions of 1837, and the Underground Railroad. These events are helpful in this assessment because they exist at the intersection of noteworthy events in Canadian history and significant moments in the history of black migration and black contribution to the nation. By uncovering these omissions, this study will also discuss the extent to which “black Canadian-ness” was constructed within these texts as a contradiction in terms. Informed by anti-racist pedagogy concerning the hegemonic effects of curricula on racial identity formation, it will focus on where such exclusions affected the process of identity formation of Canadian blacks and how it contributed to the alienation of black children’s sense of belonging to the Canadian nation, curtailing the development of an identifiably black and Canadian identity for indigenous black.

Canadian blacks are among those for whom questions of identity carry great significance. The historical experience of blacks in Canada has continued to be one of partial remembrance and recognition set against a highly developed and dominant Anglo portrayal of Canadian history. This partiality has greatly limited the development of identity for Canadian blacks due to general non-recognition of them on the part of the white Canadian majority. By acknowledging black settlement and the historical presence of blacks in
Ontario, this study will not only illustrate the historical exclusion of black Canadians from the Canadian historical narrative, but will focus on where such exclusions affected the process of identity formation of indigenous African-Canadians—those Canadian blacks of African ancestry who cannot claim another country of origin.

Often advanced as a “new” problem resulting from the influx of “new Canadians” and the increasing influence of “new history” (read social history), the disjuncture of race, education, and identity for Canadian black students is far older and more deeply-rooted than presently acknowledged. Concentrated studies have emerged, of late, due to the obvious increase of students from non-white and non-European races, cultures, and ethnicities living in Canadian communities and going to Canadian schools. A comprehensive approach to curriculum reform is of dire importance to the future of non-white and non-European groups within Canada. Curriculum reform is, however, a contemporary issue. While critical work in this area, such as George J. Sefa Dei, Josephine Mazzuca, Elizabeth McIssac, and Jasmin Zine’s (1997) *Reconstructing ‘Drop-Out’: A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students’ Disengagement From School*, and Gloria Roberts-Fiati’s (1996) “Assessing the Effects of Early Marginalization on the Education of African Canadian Children,” demonstrate the fact that the non-inclusive teaching of history can have detrimental effects on certain students, the history of this historical exclusion in education and its subsequent implications over time has yet to be fully examined in a Canadian context.

Incorporating the conceptually useful North Star myth into a content analysis of thirty-two intermediate level (grades 7-10) history textbooks authorized for use in Ontario schools between 1950 and 1985, this study will illustrate the extent to which “black Canadian-ness” was constructed as an impossibility. By applying pedagogical theories regarding the possible and probable influence of curriculum on the racial identity formation of black Canadians, I argue that said coverage contributed to the alienation of black children’s belonging to the Canadian nation and therefore curtailed the development of a specifically Canadian black identity.

In an effort to limit the scope of my content analysis and to illustrate the “selective tradition” within the Canadian historical narrative, I’ve selected several historical events where the traditional grand narrative and significant moments in the history of black migration and black contributions to the nation intersect. Textbooks were analyzed for their textual and/or visual reference of the institution of slavery in Canada, the Loyalist migration, the War of 1812, the Mackenzie Rebellions of 1837, and the Underground Railroad. These events correspond to several significant waves of black
immigration to Canada and black military contributions. For example, the War of 1812 would necessarily appear in any Canadian history text as a fundamental, nation-building event. However, the participation of blacks in this conflict may not necessarily be mentioned. These events are significant because they exist at the intersection of Canadian history and black history in Canada and would therefore provide evidence of selectivity.

The North Star Myth

Early works in African-Canadian history, such as Fred Landon’s extensive research on blacks in Southwestern Ontario, laid the foundation for a particularly stubborn, pervasive, and oddly purposeful understanding of the arrival and settlement of blacks in Canada. Historiographically, the historical presence of blacks in Canada has been constructed as distinctly provisional. In Ontario, there is a remarkable gap within the historical scholarship between the arrival of blacks via the Underground Railroad, the “mass exodus” at the close of the Civil War, and more recent multicultural discourses concerning the arrival of New Canadians of African or Caribbean origin. By viewing its black population as either temporary or transient, or newly arrived, the need to recognize an ongoing black historical legacy within Canada has been significantly compromised.

The North Star myth is an underutilized historiographical theory that helps explain how Canadian national and racial hegemony has underdeveloped the writing and recognition of black history in Canada. James W. St. G. Walker (1985, 6) in the introduction of a pamphlet entitled *Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience*, explains that the North Star myth created the impression that the Underground Railroad “led not just out of slavery, but into freedom, equality, and full participation in Canadian life, [and] that the Promised Land was fulfilled in Canada.”

The North Star myth entered the Canadian identity and became a major feature distinguishing Canadians from Americans: only south of the border were blacks subjected to violence, denied their citizenship rights, forced into residential ghettos. The moral superiority of the Truth North depended as much upon contrasting racial attitudes as on any other single factor. (Walker 1985, 6)

Walker goes on to argue that the North Star myth helped slow the development of historical writing about blacks in Canada. The intimation that Canada had been a haven for runaway slaves provided a foundation for the certainty of
Canadian moral superiority over their neighbors to the south. Any desire to research or write a history of blacks in Canada would have been avoided insofar as it would contradict the accepted national mythology of Canada’s superior treatment of blacks, which was understood to be a direct extension of their higher degree of moral integrity. White Canadian nationalists’ desire to ideologically separate themselves from Americans was so central to its overall identity that “Canadian attitudes toward the United States also shaped Canadian attitudes towards Negroes” (Winks 1968, 289). White Canada was quick to vilify America’s “race problem,” comfortably ignorant of Canada’s own history of slavery and systemic race prejudice. So convinced of their moral superiority, white Canadians have attributed instances of discrimination in Canada to an “American virus” (Winks 1968, 294). Such delusions played into the ever-present Canadian preoccupation with limiting American cultural diffusion in favour of a uniquely Canadian culture, all the while reinforcing Canadian superciliousness.

The historiographical remixing of black history in Canada notwithstanding, the history of blacks in Canada is poorly known to students and scholars alike. In order to identify instances of omission concerning black history in Canada, one must establish the subject of omission in fact. In keeping with the effort to manipulate black history in order to provide grounds for distinction from our American neighbors, historians’ failure to acknowledge slavery in Canada serves to encourage the perception of Canada as a humane and welcoming country set in opposition to the sadistic and oppressive slaveholding in the United States. While slavery in early Canada never dominated the colony’s economy, it remains a part of the early history of Canada. By mid-eighteenth century “records show that more than 1,000 black slaves” lived in New France (Walker 1980, 19). New France was not, however, the only area in Canada to welcome slave labour. Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island also participated in the exchange of slaves. Hereditary slavery was established the Code Noire in 1685, and in 1689, King Louis XIV officially consented to the importation of slaves to his colony (Alexander and Glaze 1996, 37; Bertley 1977, 25). The Loyalist migration, the War of 1812, and the Rebellion of 1837, herein discussed, provide additional examples of gross oversight. These are not events where black people were invisible; their contributions to the nation are evidenced in historical documents and their absence can only be understood as deliberate non-recognition of black participation in Canadian history. It is due to this existing problem within the overall historical scholarship concerning the history of blacks in Canada that textbooks cannot be used to represent the central manifestation of western/Anglo hegemony within the school system. By reading these textbooks through the lens of the North Star myth, however, I will
consider them as *tangible reflections* of the dominant national/cultural ideology within their respective historical contexts.

Textbook Analysis

Of the thirty-two texts analyzed, thirteen mention slavery in Canada in some capacity. The purpose and detail of these mentions are, however, generally directed at two goals, which are closely related to each other as well as to issues concerning the development of a positive sense of white Canadian national identity. The first prevailing goal is national/provincial pride. The coverage of the history of slavery in Canada rests not so much in its institutionalization, but rather on its being abolished in Canada. The following quotes are representative of the extent to which slavery is presented in the collective group of textbooks:

> It is interesting to note that one of the first acts of this new legislature (Simcoe) was to abolish slavery in Upper Canada. (Avison 1951, 39)

Britain had finally freed all slaves in her colonies as well as at home, by the year 1833. (Brown, Harman and Jeanneret 1961, 236)

Some texts are more explicit in their purpose for discussing slavery:

> The people of Ontario have reason for pride in the fact that Upper Canada was the first British colony to legislate against slavery. (Middleton 1931, 33-34)

The first quote, from a textbook entitled *History of Ontario* (1951), is interesting for the simple fact that it is false. Although the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, John Graves Simcoe, passed the “Act to Prevent the further Introduction of Slaves and to limit the Term of Contracts for Servitude,” in 1793, which allowed for the measured emancipation of existing slaves, it in no way abolished slavery. As the second quote properly states, slavery was not completely abolished until 1833.

The second objective in the presentation of slavery in the textbooks maintains the subject of pride in ending slavery but introduces a secondary consideration. In keeping with the North Star myth, the Canadian abolitionist tradition is often set up against the treatment of blacks in the United States:

> The only coloured people who came to this continent in any numbers were admitted as slaves; after slavery ended the Negro was generally treated as a second class citizen, especially in the United States. (Brown and
In their desire to establish the moral distinction between Canada and the United States, several textbooks actually embellish Canada’s historical distance from its slave past. In the context of the second Fugitive Slave Law, passed in 1850, one textbook states that,

For many years a few slaves had been seeking refuge in British North America, where slavery had long ago been abolished and where there was sympathy and support for the northern abolitionists. (Bruce Creighton 1960, 203, emphasis added)

And in the context of the American Civil War:

The Canadian provinces had long prohibited slavery, and had given refuge in Canada to many runaway slaves. So strong was the feeling in Canada...that thousands of Canadian volunteers signed up as soldiers in the Northern armies. (Brown, Harman, and Jeanneret 1961, 249, emphasis added)

It would be unfair to dismiss the veracity of Canada’s history of abolitionism, but both quotes problematically emphasize the length of time between when slavery was abolished in Canada and the events that make up their respective foci. Slavery was officially abolished in Canada in 1833, which would make it thirty-two years earlier than the end of the American Civil War and a mere seventeen years earlier than the second Fugitive Slave bill passed in the United States. Neither case is particularly convincing in its relegation of the practice of slavery to some “long ago” time. What is convincing within these passages, however, is the attempt to represent a tradition of Canadian moral superiority over their neighbors to the south despite the fact that it is based on an exaggerated time line. Also worth noting is the authors’ failure to indicate that blacks in Canada were among those “thousands of Canadian volunteers” who signed up to fight with the North.

The reference to slavery illustrates a third and final goal of these texts, which was to deny any serious investment by Canadian whites in the institution of slavery. While it is true that slavery failed to gain the economic ground in Canada that it did in the United States, several textbooks attempt to dismissively justify the practice of slavery by way of Canadian climate and industry.

Not only was slavery condemned by people of
Canada at an early date—it was not suited either to the Canadian climate or to the Canadian method of farming. (Brown, Harman, and Jeanneret 1961, 249)

Slavery was not forbidden by law in the northern colonies when they were under British rule, but the climate and the industries thus made slave labour not very valuable. (Garland 1962, 190)

In a similar vein, the lauded Canadian work ethic is presented as intrinsically connected to the lack of a Canadian interest in slavery:

It was the custom to work. There was no leisure class, no desire to import slave labour. (Middleton 1931, 246)

If taken together, the above quotes are not patently false or overly problematic. Unfortunately, however, many of the above quotes represent the lone mentions of slavery in their respective textbooks. History of Ontario (Avison 1951), Canada and the Commonwealth (Brown 1953), Canada in the World Today (Rogers 1950), Canada and the World (Brown and Careless 1954) Land of Promise (Field and Dennis 1960), and Canada Our Country Part Two (Garland 1962), all leave the history of slavery in Canada to single statements. Of the thirty-two textbooks, only The Romance of Ontario (Middleton 1931), Canada in North America (Brown, Harman and Jeanneret 1961), and Canada: Struggle for Empire (Bruce-Creighton 1960) go into any degree of detail concerning slavery, though even these lengthy mentions focus solely on the process of abolishing slavery in Canada, as opposed to the legislative process of its inception.

In contrast to the lack of recognition given to the institutionalization of slavery in Canada, the Loyalist migration, the War of 1812, and the Mackenzie Rebellions of 1837 are fundamental events within any Canadian history textbook. Unfortunately, however, few Canadians are aware of the parallel significance of these oft-recognized events as they pertain to the first major influx of blacks to Canada and the patriotic contributions of black Canadians. Similar to the Loyalist migration in terms of an exchange of military service for freedom, the War of 1812 led to yet another settlement of blacks in Canada. Though the majority of blacks who fought in the War of 1812 settled in the Maritimes, it remains historically significant that the now well-documented town of Africville grew out of this refugee settlement in 1815. In terms of the Rebellions of 1837, blacks in Ontario, proving eager to contribute to the cause,
independent local volunteer units in Chatham and Windsor. Given the small number of blacks already settled in the surrounding area, it is no small factor that as many as “one thousand [blacks] volunteered for service within a month of the outbreak of conflict” (Hill 1981, 118; Winks 1997, 151). Two separate “Coloured Compan[ies],” made up of eighty men, were created out of Chatham, Ontario, alone (Hill 1981,122). Also of historical note is Captain Caldwell’s Coloured Corps, a “company of 123 Black volunteers,” who helped secure Fort Malden along with the Essex Militia (Hill 1981, 118). The Loyalist migration and the War of 1812 are important within any discussion concerning the various waves of early black immigration to Canada. The Rebellions of 1837 provide concrete examples of black military participation in the defense of a country they considered home, yet has rarely made it into the Canadian historical master narrative. The Loyalist migration to Canada after the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Rebellions of 1837, are tremendously significant events in Canadian history that have shaped Canadian national and political identity. Canada largely defined its nascent nationhood over the course of these commonwealth, military, and ideological battles. The blatant omission within the textbooks of the roles black Canadians played in these events effectively hindered any recognition of their presence and their participation in the building of Canada. Despite their obvious importance to the history of black settlement in Canada, the identification of the black Loyalists within the textbooks is negligible at best. Of the thirty-two textbooks examined, one states that white Loyalists had brought their slaves with them, and only five mention the presence of black Loyalists in Canada. Sonia A. Riddoch’s Our Cultural Heritage is the only one of the five that actually discusses black Loyalists in some detail.

Among the settlers in Nova Scotia were black Loyalists who had been slaves. By supporting the British they had gained their freedom. But this did not better their economic situation greatly. They knew little of farming, and harsh climate and rocky soil did not make learning easy. Added to this was the prejudice that the white community felt towards them. For blacks this land was truly to be ‘Nova Scarcity,’ (Riddoch 1979, 205)

I.L. Martinello’s Call Us Canadians refers to black Loyalists only by using a document entitled “Boston King, a Black Loyalist,” which serves as a text exercise for learning how to analyze a primary source and learn of the settlement conditions in Nova Scotia. Seeing as the presence of black Loyalists failed to make it into the narrative of the Loyalist migration,
One may find it less shocking, though no less unacceptable, that of all of the textbooks, none plainly mention the participation and contributions of blacks during the War of 1812 or in the Rebellions of 1837. Of all the historical references to blacks in Canada within the textbooks, however, the history of the Underground Railroad was by far the most popular. In contrast to institutionalized slavery, the black Loyalists, the War of 1812 and the Rebellions of 1837, the Underground Railroad, along with the number of historically famous settlements and characters connected with it, captured the attention of some of the textbook authors who have written its history into these textbooks in unprecedented detail. Despite the greater interest, however, of the thirty-two textbooks, still only 11 mention the Underground Railroad. The earliest mention, in Margaret Avison’s *History of Ontario* (1951) is clouded by its unfortunate negative connotation:

> …the American Civil War was not a direct threat. But it did cause some uneasiness. For one thing, Canada became the haven of refuge for hundreds of runaway slaves. The area around Chatham was the headquarters for the whole Negro underground on the continent. (Avison 1951, 95)

Three other representative references to the Underground Railroad read as follows:

Many Northerners helped runaway slaves to escape. They planned routes by which the runaways could make their way to Canada and freedom. (Garland 1962, 197)

But some Northern people, who sympathized with the slaves, bonded together to form what was called the ‘Underground Railway’…At the end of the Underground Railway lay Canada, where slavery was forbidden altogether, and where black men became free. (Brown, Harman and Jeanneret 1961, 240)

Now more than ever, Canada became the goal of the runaway slaves, for they knew that no Slave Law could touch them there…Stories are told of Negroes who dropped to their knees in gratitude to kiss the Canadian soil when they reached it. Usually they arrived with nothing more than the ragged clothes on their backs. Canadians had to find homes and clothes
and jobs for them. (Bruce Creighton 1963, 203)

Luella Bruce Creighton’s *Canada: Trial and Triumph* goes so far as to provide a five paragraph contextual background to the flight of slaves through the Underground Railroad due to the threat of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 (1962, 202-203).

**General Trends in Textbook Analysis**

While the textbook coverage of the history of slavery in Canada, the black Loyalists, the War of 1812, the Rebellions of 1837, and the Underground Railroad varies somewhat, three general trends emerged in the textbook literature that should be elucidated. First, of the thirteen textbooks that mention the question of slavery in Canada, ten came from the group of textbooks authorized for use in the 1950s and 1960s. One of the best treatments of the history of slavery in Canada came from J.E. Middleton’s *The Romance of Ontario*, which was published in 1931. Similarly, most mentions of the Underground Railroad (including people and places) occur in those earlier textbooks. Thus at the same time that a commitment to multiculturalism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, much of the already limited content concerning the history of blacks in Canada disappeared. For example, Derald G. Willows and Stewart Richmond *Canada: Colony to Centennial* (1970, i), state in their introduction that they “have tried to deal with significant events and the many people whose influence has helped direct the course of Canada’s history.” In their effort to look at the diversity of the Canadian peoples, they proceed to describe the treatment and settlement experience of Scandinavians, Norwegians, the Swedish/Danish, Germans, Ukrainians, Jews, Hungarians, Doukhobors, the Mormons, the British and the French (Willows and Richmond 1970, 313). Somehow in this ethnic configuration, Canadian blacks were overlooked, as they fail to appear anywhere in this textbook dealing with “significant events and… people.”

The second trend within the textbooks is the concentrated discussion of blacks in connection with the American Civil War. The majority of the textbooks that mention black people at all mention them in a chapter dedicated to the Civil War. In those textbooks that make specific reference to blacks in Canada, such information in presented as an aside to the overpowering drama of the war between North and South. As such, many of the references to the Underground Railroad serve to provide a contrast to the evils of slavery in the United States.

Lastly, in terms of the question of representation, a third trend emerged within the textbook analysis that is essential to the overall consequence of this curriculum.
Where there were references to black people in a general sense, it tended to be in an American or African context. In the American context, there were a great number of pages depicting slaves in chains, on auction blocks, running away, and working in fields. In the African context, most of the representations showed a backward people in need of Western aid, and/or a savage people who could not comprehend or master technology. These questionable characterizations, though not necessarily written about blacks in a Canadian context, carry considerable representative weight. Given the limited space the history of blacks takes up in the average textbook, any reference to or representation of blackness takes on added consequence. An example of a characterization concerning blacks and slavery can be found in Aileen Garland’s *Canada Our Country, Part 1* which states that “[t]he English and the Spaniards had both tried to make the Indians slaves but the Indians were too proud and fierce to submit” (1960, 122). Though not an explicit reference to black people, a characterization has been established by comparing the “proud and fierce” Indians against the African slaves who must have been anything but.

Similarly, George Brown and J.M.S. Careless’ *Canada and the World* (1954, 270) characterizes Africans as living an “ancient and savage life [that] still remains,” and Negroes whose “grandfathers or great-grandfathers scarcely used a wheel.” Aileen Garland’s *Canada Our Country, Part 2* (1962, 209), while describing the emancipation of slaves, makes a note that “most of them [the freed American slaves] were woefully ignorant and had no idea how to think or act for themselves.” A final example of such characterizations can be found in the index of George E. Tait’s *One Dominion* (1962). A student wishing to find additional information concerning blacks would come across a page reference that reads “Negroes: See Slavery.” Though Tait’s work is not the only one to equate “Negroes” with slavery, in that their only reference to black people in general is within the context of slavery, an obvious connection is made which negates the possible significance of blacks outside of their history of slavery. The impact of such characterizations cannot be taken lightly when considering indoctrination vis a vis the process of identity formation among Canadian black students. And when coupled with the overall neglect of Canadian black history within these textbooks, the injurious nature of characterizations such as those mentioned above present serious impediments to the development of positive self-image for Canadian black students.11

Several general observations can be made regarding the content of the textbooks. First it is clear that the North Star myth is especially prevalent in Canadian history textbooks authorized for use between 1950 and 1985. By 1985, the still limited historical scholarship concerning African-Canadians...
maintained earlier historiographical trends. The paucity of new research and scholarship paired with the unbroken perception of an impermanent population unworthy of scholarly focus certainly would not have helped balance textbook contents. The textbooks reflected the spirit of the North Star myth insofar as they were a product of the ideologically dominant construction of the black presence in Canada. The clearest indication of this prevalence is the dearth of information in the textbooks about blacks in the traditional defining moments in Canadian history (the Loyalists, 1812, the Rebellions) and the extensive (though still relatively meager) coverage of the Underground Railroad.

Second, it is obvious that the writing of Canadian black history in these textbooks is grossly inadequate. This, coupled with the representative weight of the abovementioned damaging characterizations of black people, provides grounds for the argument that not only were Canadian black students denied a modicum of consideration within these texts, but that in the absence of a specifically Canadian black history these students became a captive audience to a history that failed to value the contributions of blacks within Canada while associating “blackness” with U.S. slavery or African backwardness.

This leads to a third and final observation. If the indigenous Canadian black child/adolescent had some sense of him or herself in terms of his or her perceived racial and national identity (black and Canadian), the history textbooks used between 1950 and 1985 completely fail to confirm or validate such an identity. An average of little more than one third of the textbooks mention blacks in Canada, though the majority of the thirty-two textbooks did mention blacks in an American or African context. It therefore seems possible to tentatively conclude that the historical narratives set forth within the textbooks marginalize the individual black student as well as the larger abstraction of what it is to be a black Canadian by writing black history as non-Canadian history and Canadian history as a lone European endeavor.

Anti-Racist Pedagogy and the Possibility of African-Canadian Counter Hegemony.

By looking at these issues of inclusion, exclusion and identity through the lens of anti-racism education and pedagogical philosophies concerning the process of identity formation, one can begin to approach a greater appreciation of the ideological impact of such curricula on a student’s developing self. The anti-racism approach to understanding the hegemonic potential of education also classifies history as a fundamental way to examine questions relating to exclusion, marginalization and identity. In his
essay, “The Politics of Recognition,” Charles Taylor highlights dignity and democracy as two precursors to the desire for and expectation of historical recognition. As such

…identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm [and] can be a form of oppression. (Taylor 1994, 76-77)

This recognition must not rely on the similarities between individuals. Taylor insists that the recognition of equal dignity must apply along with a politics of difference acknowledging the unique differences of groups and/or individuals (Taylor 1994, 82). He also claims that any legitimate demand for recognition must “extend beyond an acknowledgement of the equal value of all humans potentially, and [come] to include the equal value of what they have made of this potential in fact” (Taylor 1994, 84). Applying Taylor’s theory to Canadian blacks, a demand for recognition would be legitimized not simply on the basis of difference, but also on the facts of their actual historical contributions, participation, presence, and allegiance. The problem is, however, that those contributions have been excluded from the Canadian historical narrative.

Picking up on this question of historical recognition, racial difference and identity, Timothy Stanley states in his article, “The Struggle for History: Historical Narratives and Anti-Racist Pedagogy,” that if left [u]nchallenged, nationalist historical narratives create a binary in terms of possible (read acceptable) identities. One can either belong to a place…or one is ‘from’ somewhere else. One is either included by the story or one is inexorably excluded. Binaries become the stuff of racializations, their silences the stuff of exclusions. (Stanley 1998, 50)

These historical exclusion made on behalf of the dominant group are possible because, ideologically, the “alien…subaltern” are viewed as “not of the nation” (Stanley 1998, 48). The Canadian grand narrative, by virtue of its whiteness, places Canadian black students in the category of “not of the nation.” Being made “not of the nation” within the historical narrative leaves Canadian blacks devoid of a claim to their country of origin.
Having been thus estranged from the dominant Canadian identity, Canadian blacks have recourse to another source of self-identification, which would also provide a foundation for counter hegemony: their blackness. While such identification may be possible within a supportive family and/or community, given the representations of “black” within these textbooks, the racial and national identities of black Canadian students functions as a double-denial. If being black means identifying American and/or African, then one denies their Canadian-ness. If being Canadian means being white, it would be impossible for a black student to so identify in a racialized society.

Canadian black history in Canadian textbooks, in the best of cases, was merely an aside to the otherwise well entrenched, respected and acknowledged dominant white Canadian historical narrative. What still remains at issue are, however, the effects of this form of historical marginalization on the perceived identity of Canadian blacks who have largely “derived an image of their own worth that has been defined by others” (Walker 1980, 5). By looking at the theoretical relationship between systemic exclusion and identity, it is possible to make several conclusions that reveal the types of challenges Canadian blacks face in their quest to define themselves and be recognized. When dealing with the question of systematic exclusion, it is important to appreciate the osmotic relationship between one’s identity and the society within which one lives. It is generally accepted that society has a great deal of influence on how people see themselves and see others. Michael Apple states that “[t]he individual acquires a particular awareness and perception of the society in which he [or she] lives. And it is this understanding and attitude towards the social order which [in large part] c o n s t i t u t e s h i s [ o r h e r ] consciousness” (Apple 1990, 33). Similarly, in her essay “Black Children’s Ethnic Identity Formation: Risk and Resilience of Castelike Minorities,” Margaret Beale-Spencer asserts that “[i]dentify is intimately tied to how an individual is responded to by the socializing agents (1987, 111, emphasis added). Ethnic groups are viewed and come to view themselves as significant or marginal as a consequence of their treatment by state agencies...” (Beale-Spencer 1987, 111) William Pinar’s observation in “Notes on Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text,” can reasonably be applied in a Canadian context:

If what we know about ourselves—our history, our culture, our national identity—is deformed by absences, denials and incompleteness, our identity...is fragmented. This fragmented self is a repressed self, that is, it contains “repressed” elements. Such a self lacks access both to itself and the world. 12 (Pinar 1993, 61)
Beale-Spencer offers one way to counter the negative effects of exclusion, marginalization, and feelings of otherness. According to Beale-Spencer, “parents are the first source of a child’s ‘sense of self’, and Black parents provide their children with fundamental attitudes about themselves as Blacks” (1987, 116). It is the black parents’ ability to provide “compensatory cultural emphasis on the strengths of the…minority group” which may determine whether or not a child will positively associate with his or her black identity (Beale-Spencer 1987, 108). That the “self” begins at home is a valuable notion that allows for the possibility of alternate modes of provoking a positive and salient sense of black identity. However, such counter hegemonic measures, if they are to be truly effective, must be constant and consistent.

The counter-hegemonic importance of the black family and community is explained in bell hooks’ essay “The Chitlin Circuit.” hooks describes her childhood reaction to school desegregation in the American south as mournful and steeped in a deep sense of loss (1990, 34). She recalls the warmth and security, belonging and recognition while attending black schools and the sense of alienation and hostility she encountered when she suddenly became the minority within the desegregated system. More importantly, she describes the segregated schools as part of something she calls the “chitlin circuit,” or the “network of black folks who knew and aided one another” (1990, 36).

Such romantic idealization of communal affirmation cannot be completely or properly applied in the Canadian setting. While black communities do have a history in Canada, those populations never reached levels anywhere near those in the United States. Historically, blacks in Canada have made up little more than one percent of the overall population, and have made up no more than five percent of any given provincial population (Walker 1980, 3; Winks 1997, 484). As well, few black communities in Canada could claim absolute self-sufficiency and few could be described as completely segregated. Few black communities maintained their racial homogeneity into the mid-twentieth century. The concept of a “chitlin circuit” in Canada, among Canadian blacks, is certainly feasible. Yet due to the dispersed demography of black populations in Canada, and their limited numbers in relation to the European population one could justifiably argue that experiencing the comforts and benefits of homogeneous communal support would be rare for the majority of Canadian blacks born or raised between 1950 and 1985 in Ontario. Therefore, the potential for counter hegemony at the community level is somewhat limited for Canadian blacks.
Conclusion

The study of textbooks authorized for use in Ontario between the years 1950-1985 has shown black history in Canada to be a marginal or non-existent concern within the writing of the dominant Canadian narrative. And if one were to subscribe to the view that “the study of black history can give blacks a sense of positive achievements of their people, and provide self-confidence and self-pride which are essential to any program of assertiveness,” it is not difficult to presume that the absence of black history within these textbooks has, to varying degrees, severely limited the positive and undamaged identity development of Canadian blacks (Walker, 1980, 5). And while one can concede the fact that black parents are an elemental force in the process of identity formation for black children, a large part of this study was conceptualized on the obvious assumption that black parents were, at some point in time, black children themselves. A Canadian black child born in 1940 and raised in Ontario would have confronted one of the textbooks herein studied. Lacking in any content that they could relate to, these Canadian black children would suffer the same limitations as the black child in the 1950s, 1960s, and the 1970s. Essentially, the black parents responsible for compensating for these limitations could not impart what they themselves failed to develop. We can therefore understand a failure to cultivate a sense of identity that is simultaneously Canadian and black, that cannot be contradicted, as a hereditary problem.

While contemporary studies are moving ahead where the question of writing an integrated Canadian history is concerned, I want to acknowledge those generations who are no longer school-aged, but remain marked by their educational experiences in this country. It is one thing to be misrepresented, and quite another to not be represented at all. The failure to incorporate the historical Canadian black presence and participation in the building of this country, resulting from a commitment to the invention of nation, should be understood as one of several detrimental features inhibiting the formation of a uniquely and non-contradictory Canadian black identity. I have argued that ideological dominance, as it is reflected within Canadian textbooks, has the potential to seriously damage the multiple identities of Canadian blacks and has done so. George J. Sefa Dei’s work on black-focused schools attests to the severity of the problem of non-inclusive schooling in Canada, black students’ drop-out rates, and the social and academic challenges black students experience when their multiple identities are uniformly marginalized (Dei 1996, 37-50).

It must not be understated that these historical omissions are fundamentally racist, can be and are absorbed and internalized by black schoolchildren, and, if given enough
time, they can prove to be damaging and self-perpetuating. Hazelle Palmer, in her monograph (1997) “... But Where Are You Really From”: Stories of Identity and Assimilation in Canada, identifies in her title alone the challenge of being black and Canadian. As she so astutely argues, the frequency with which black Canadians are asked where they are from “keeps us forever foreign, forever immigrants to Canada...[such] questions are by nature racist; their faulty premise assumes that because we are not White we could not be Canadian” (Palmer 1997, v-vi). Such questions and assumptions seriously limit the degree to which Canadian blacks can truly feel as though they belong here, despite the fact that they know no other home.

References


experience. Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association Historical Booklet.


1 See, eg., R. Ghosh and A.A. Abdi, Education and the politics of difference: Canadian perspectives (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2004); Diane Gérin-Lajoie, Educators’ Discourses on Student Diversity in Canada: Context, Policy and Practice (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2008); N.N. Wane, “Experiences of Visible Minority Students and Anti-Racist Education Within the Canadian Education System,” Journal of Thought 39, no.1 (2004); Russell Bishop, “Addressing Diversity: Race, Ethnicity and Culture in the Classroom,” in Diversity and Multiculturalism: A Reader, ed. Shirley R. Steinberg (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009).

2 First alluded to in Robin Winks’, “The Canadian Negro: A Historical Assessment The Negro in the Canadian-American Relationship, Part One,” (1968) the North Star Myth gained theoretical significance in the introduction of James W. St. G. Walker’s Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience (1985). Briefly stated, the North Star Myth is the (mistaken) belief that Canada was welcoming and kind to newly arrived blacks and that Canada’s superior treatment of blacks suggests Canada’s moral superiority over Americans.

Endnotes
See, eg., Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” in Schooling and Capitalism: A Sociological Reader, eds. Roger Dale, Geoff Esland, and Madeleine MacDonald (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976) and Michael Apple, Ideology and Curriculum, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 1990). According to Michael Apple (1990, 3), schools “create and recreate forms of consciousness that enable social control to be maintained without the necessity of dominant groups having to resort to overt mechanisms of domination.” The Marxist theory of selective tradition posits that the selection of textbooks, for example, or curriculum design in general is anything but neutral. Rather, the transmission of knowledge via school curriculum is intended to reproduce class (or as I’m employing it here, racial and national) hegemony.

The traditional grand narrative in Canadian history textbooks follows the dominant British and French historical timeline of significant events in Canadian history. This grand narrative is, generally speaking, wholly focused on Anglo conquest, government/Parliament, military battles, and Canada’s economic history.

According to Michael Wayne (1995), in his reevaluation of the 1861 census, there are several demographic misconceptions concerning the immigration and settlement of blacks in Ontario that have heavily influenced the subsequent writing of black history and perceptions of the historical black presence in Canada. Popularized by a number of historical scholars and promulgated by succeeding historians, the first misconception is that most blacks arriving in Canada as escaped slaves or free blacks settled in all-black and predominantly black settlements. In reality, Wayne discovered that a significant number of blacks chose to settle as racial minorities within white communities. The second demographic misconception is that blacks arrived to this province in considerable numbers. The third misconception posits that an equally large proportion of the black population returned to the United States after the end of the Civil War. By comparing the data between the 1861 and 1871 census, Wayne reveals that the numbers of blacks arriving in Ontario had been inflated, and the popular belief of the post-Civil War “exodus” had been equally exaggerated. The implications of these major findings have yet to be fully analyzed or explored.

The textbooks chosen were divided by decade, 1950-1959, 1960-1969, 1970-1979, and 1980-1985. The authorization dates, rather than the publication dates, were instructive when designating a representative decade. For example, a textbook published in 1974 and authorized for use in 1975 could have remained authorized for use until 1989. In that case, and as that title would have reoccurred in subsequent years, the textbook in question would appear solely in the group of books authorized between 1970-1979, not to be repeated within the textbook list of succeeding years. The authorization “start” date, therefore, served as a guide when placing the textbooks in their chronological (by decade) category. Textbooks were chosen on the basis of their Canadian or Ontario focus (where applicable), covering the period up to the turn of the twentieth century. The dates, 1950-1985, were chosen for both their symbolic and their historical value. The study and teaching of history and the demography of higher education changed a great deal over the course of this thirty-five year period, indicating a shift in the type of history being presented to Ontario students. These dates are also significant because within those thirty-five years, a minimum of three generations of Canadian blacks would have experienced the types of history presented in these textbooks (those who were middle school age during the 1950s, those born during the latter part of the baby boom up to 1950, and the first children of those born during the 1950s, being middle/high school grade by 1985). Intermediate grade levels were chosen because senior level history texts (grades 11-12/13/OAC when applicable) focused primarily on world and ancient history. The textbooks chosen for any given time period serve only as a representation of the types of textbooks used within each chronological grouping, respectively, though from the 1950s until the 1970s, the textbooks selected in this study represent the majority (if not all) of the textbooks authorized.


For example: George Brown and J.M.S. Careless’, Canada and the World states: “The only coloured people who came to this continent in any numbers were admitted as slaves; after slavery ended the Negro was treated as a second class citizen, especially in the United States” (1954, 450, emphasis added).

For example: Middleton, The Romance of Ontario Toronto “Before the first session of the new legislature the chief justice of the colony had declared in a charge to a grand jury that slavery should not be permitted. Simcoe in a message to the legislators, announced that he was in sympathy with this opinion. The Parliament of Upper Canada approved the suggestion of the governor and decreed that from that time no slaves might be imported. Those already in the country were to be free nine years later, and their children must be freed by the age of twenty-five...[t]he people of Ontario have reason for pride in the fact that Upper Canada was the first British colony to legislate against slavery...” (1931, 33). See also, Bruce Creighton, Canada: Struggle for Empire, “One of the first acts of the first parliament in Upper Canada was designed to abolish slavery in that province” (1960, 389).

See, eg., C.E. James, “Negotiating School: Marginalized Students’ Participation in their Education Process,” in Race, Racialization and Antiracism in Canada and Beyond, eds. G. Fuji Johnson and R. Enomoto (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007) and C.E. James, “Challenging the Distorted Images: The Case of African Canadian Youth,” in The Urban Challenge and the Black Diaspora, ed. C. Green (New York: New York State University Press, 1996).