



Black History Navigational Toolkit



This deck of cards is a toolkit to help you navigate the histories of the African diaspora in Toronto. Instead of a comprehensive, linear overview, we have put together an assortment of activities, places, people, and events that make up what we, Camille Turner and Yaniya Lee, understand to be Black Toronto. We visit Blackhurst and Little Jamaica, meet artists and organizers, hear from writers and poets, see churches, dance, and creative arts. This is not a complete history—it will present you with a glimpse of our favourite aspects of these unique histories, and an invitation to complement them with your own stories and memories. These cards are an offering: an open, ongoing history that includes blank cards for you to fill in on your own. What is your Black Toronto? Or rather, where and when and who is your Black Toronto?

Black History Navigational Toolkit

By Camille Turner and Yaniya Lee

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Abolition



Yaniya Lee

Black artists and activists in Toronto have laboured to bring attention to the violence of our carceral systems and to the networks of care created to counteract their devastating effects. A'maal Nuux's 2019 music video "Later" is dedicated to F.E.A.T.'s (Fostering, Empowering, Advocating Together) bus program, which connects people with friends and families incarcerated across Ontario. In the video, a group of people journey on a bus from the City of Toronto to the jails and prisons that hold their loved ones. The video shows the time and dedication given to supporting caged relations.

Black organizing for abolition has deep roots. In 1851, hundreds of Black people came together in Toronto during the North American Convention of Colored Freemen, a three-day gathering coordinated in response to the Fugitive Slave Act passed a year earlier in the US. One of the outcomes from that convention was the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. A couple of years later, in 1853, Mary Ann Shadd Cary and her husband founded the abolition newspaper *The Provincial Freeman*, printed weekly in Toronto. And at the end of the nineteenth century, Anderson Ruffin Abbott, the first Canadian-born Black physician, fought against racially segregated schools.

Recently, abolitionist organizers have succeeded in bringing public attention to calls to defund the police—the police being one arm of a carceral system that disproportionately imprisons Black people. Calls to defund the police are propelled by a will to recognize our fundamental interconnection, and to renew our investment in a right to life for all people.

Writes Toronto activist and scholar Robyn Maynard:

"The call to defund, in fact, emerges from the Black radical tradition, which has not only contested racial violence in all forms but has also been a form of world-building. Abolition, as [Ruth Wilson] Gilmore and [Angela] Davis and [Miriam] Kaba continue to remind us, is as much about building the conditions for safety as it is about dismantling institutions of harm and captivity, and ending racial violence in all of its forms."

Alexandra Park



Yaniya Lee

When I was growing up, my mom and I would sometimes visit my father at 20 Vanauley Street, just north of Queen Street, where he lived with my siblings. A large community of Black people resided in the area, which stretched from Vanauley to Alexandra Park, and across to Scadding Court. My brother Cason Sharpe writes about the neighbourhood in his short essay, “One for the Faeries of Alexandra Park” (2017):

“Alexandra Park was walled in like all good ghettos, Queen Street to the south, Dundas to the north, Spadina to the east, Augusta to the west. Growing up I had the best the city had to offer all around me—I could get a beef patty in Kensington Market, wash it down with a bubble tea in Chinatown, and then go shopping along Queen. Everything was within a stone’s throw. There were no streets for cars to drive through Alexandra Park, only a labyrinth of concrete paths, each with a row of identical brown townhouses lining either side. It was a little anomaly right in the center of things, a small island in the heart of downtown.”

Racial tensions in Alexandra Park date back to the 1940s, when racialized people began to move into an area that had, until then, been predominantly occupied by white settlers and immigrants. The Harry Gairey skating rink is one legacy of those tensions. It was renamed in the 90s to commemorate the fight, in 1945, of a local father against the rink’s segregationist policies. Transformations in Alexandra Park are ongoing. In the early 2000s, the City of Toronto cooperated with an all-white team of urban planners—the Toronto Community Housing Corporation—to redevelop the low-income neighbourhood into a mixed income area. They referred to it as the “Alexandra Park Revitalization.” The project entailed demolishing existing apartment blocks to make way for the new development, as well as the displacement of many community members. Despite these proposed monumental changes, the people who gave Alexandra Park life—for decades—have left a lasting imprint.

Black Churches



Camille Turner

My sister is always looking for “the perfect church,” one that is allied with her values and makes her feel like she’s been “to church.” For her, church is the place where a preacher delivers a message from the Bible that nourishes the soul. Where the minister, the musicians, and the congregation are in sync to offer a call and response—a feeling of surrender—and the recognition that you are participating in something bigger than yourself.

Many Black churches began in basements and living rooms. The First Baptist Church was founded in 1826 by fugitive slaves in the town of York (which later became Toronto). The group of twelve people were not welcomed by white churches so they met outdoors, in each other’s homes, or in leased venues. They constructed their first small building at Queen and Victoria. This historic church, the oldest Black institution in the city, still resides at Huron and D’Arcy in a building constructed in 1955.

Some Toronto churches have become highly organized mega-churches. Rhema Christian Ministries, headed by pastor Orim Meikle, offers services such as fitness training and nutritional consultation. Televangelist Pat Francis, who has become one of the largest Black Christian brands, extends her reach to global development, disaster relief, financial planning, and leadership.

Like the large Black churches, the activities of small churches happen more outside of the church than inside. Volunteers visit, feed, pray, or fast with you. They even pick you up at the airport. Black churches have always recognized “social justice” as not just a buzzword. They offer a place to collectively mourn the violence of racism targeting Black people. However, since the church has historically been a source of violence for Black people, they are also sites of contradiction. And the future of the Black churches depends on whether they are willing to embrace and support the diversity of all Black lives. This reinvention is already happening in new gatherings, formal and informal, and on digital platforms that bring like-minded people together from around the world.

Black Dance



Camille Turner

I am a lover of dance. When I first came to Toronto in the 1980s, I took classes at various downtown studios. It wasn't until Patrick Parson arrived in 1990 to study with the Toronto Dance Theatre and develop Ballet Creole, with its fusion of African, Caribbean, and modern dance, that I experienced the excitement of studying Black dance forms for the first time. Along with Ballet Creole, Black dance emerged in Toronto with dance groups like COBA, which began in 1993, and Dance Immersion, which started in 1994. Since then, the dance landscape has expanded to include numerous new dancers and companies such as Jaz Fairy J and Esie Mensah's City Dance Corps.

Looking at the history of dance in Canada provides a window into the ways that Black people's bodies have been a site of representation, freedom, and resistance. In 2017 Seika Boye curated *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970* to celebrate and present the story of Black dance in Canada. The exhibition questioned the silences in the archive that have prevented us from knowing the depth and breadth of this story.

The legacy of enslavement in Canada has cast its shadow on dance since at least 1792 when so-called "Negro frolics" (referring to Black gatherings) were banned in Shelbourne, Nova Scotia. The motivations that drove a community to ban dancing are still alive today, but perhaps harder to recognize. Only after a global pandemic and an Instagram post by National Ballet of Canada member Nicholas Rose calling out discriminatory practices did the organization acknowledge and address an atmosphere in which Black dancers feel unseen, unheard, and unwelcome. Anti-Blackness exists across Canada. In Winnipeg, Rachael McLaren, who did not see Black dancers in the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, dreamt of being a dancer. She was rejected by their professional program and had to go south of the border to forge her career. The talented dancer went on to become principal in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company in New York City.

Black Film & Video Network



Camille Turner

The vibrant Toronto-based organization known as the Black Film and Video Network (BFVN) was founded in 1988 and brought together Black Canadian filmmakers to produce programs, nurture talent, and provide professional development opportunities and visibility to Black filmmakers in and beyond Canada. To list but a few of the luminary members: Cameron Bailey, Toronto International Film Festival CEO and Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences member; award-winning director of *Rude* (1995) Clement Virgo who adapted Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* (2007) for the small screen; and filmmaker and director Nadine Valcin, creator of groundbreaking digital projects.

In “An oral history of Black Film and Video Network” published in 2020 with the CBC, Amanda Parris situates the origin story of the network—founded by Christene Brown, Michael Griffiths, Karen King, Glace W. Lawrence, Lanna Lovell, Roger McTair, Claire Prieto, Karen Tyrell, Basil Young and David Zapparoli—at a luncheon where Black filmmakers convened to discuss honouring the passing of emblematic filmmaker Jennifer Hodge Da Silva. Even though many did not know each other, this convergence was so fruitful that they decided to continue meeting, and ultimately formalized their meetings by starting the BFVN.

I was hired as BFVN's first coordinator in 1993, the year they partnered with the National Film Board of Canada to host acclaimed filmmaker Haile Gerima to screen his film *Sankofa* (1993) to a jam-packed and appreciative Toronto audience. Although I never became a filmmaker, I do use film in my artistic practice. That first experience of Gerima's work, which uses time travel as a strategy to explore the history of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans, deeply inspired me and continues to impact my artistic work today.

BlackGrange



Camille Turner

From 2007 to 2021 I lived in the Grange, an area in Toronto between Spadina and University Avenues further bordered by Queen and College Streets. I knew about the area's rich Black past but walking through the Grange, I saw few reminders. It was as if there never was a Black presence. This absence prompted me to create *Miss Canadiana's Heritage and Culture Walking Tour* in 2011. It was the first of many projects I would create about the Grange's past. During my research for the walk, it was thrilling to meet Black people who had grown up in the neighbourhood.

The First Baptist Church at Huron and D'Arcy is a local community hub for activism, and is one of the oldest Black institutions in the city. Its advocacy aided Ruth Bailey to become one of the first Canadian-born Black nurses in 1948. The church was founded in 1826 by fugitives who escaped enslavement south of the border, and who were excluded from local white churches. In the early 1920s, the Toronto chapter of Marcus Garvey's UNIA (United Negro Improvement Association) was located at 355 College Street and members continued their advocacy for decades.

In 2018, I created *BlackGrange*, a walk of the area commissioned by walkinglab.org. We walked in the footsteps of those who came before us. We began at the University of Toronto where Anderson Ruffin Abbott, the first Canadian-born Black doctor, graduated in 1861. We wound our way south, inviting participants to perform actions to honour Black locals along the way. At Ogden Junior Public School, participants wrote notes in chalk on the pavement to acknowledge the Black parents who became activists so their children would be allowed into schools. At the corner of Peter and Queen Streets participants raised their fists to salute Peggy Pompadour, an enslaved Black woman who wrote herself into history by resisting bondage. This walk reimaged the Grange's Black past and its connection to the present from the point of view of people from a liberated future.

Black Pop-ups



Camille Turner

The Black community regularly organizes its own events. For example, Blockorama is an annual, not-to-be-missed Pride event organized by Blackness Yes!. BSAM Canada, founded in 2016 by Quentin VerCetty and, under the direction of Queen Kukoyi and Nico Taylor, internationally brings Afrofuturists together. Some beloved events are now only memories. Love Jones Sundays, in the early 2010s, was a showcase of emerging poets, spoken word artists, and musicians held on the first Sunday of each month. Toronto artist Sandra Brewster organized Open House, an annual exhibition she hosted in her home from 2012 to 2014. Other vibrant art institutions and events brought Black communities together whenever and wherever they happened.

Chinedu Ukabam, who describes himself as a lover of Africa and flâneur of Toronto, is all about joyful community vibes. He founded SUPAFRIK in 2011, an event where you can shop for African fashions, snack, and listen to Afrobeat music while meeting up with old friends. Gumbo, a dance party event created by Ukabam, centres food and non-stop dancing. Numerous shopping events, like Black Owned Holiday Markets, are organized as limited-time pop-ups. Among my favourites are the Black Owned Food Market event at Wychwood Barns, and BAND's Black Owned Christmas Market.

This tradition of pop-up events taking up public space and asserting Black presence is alive and well. Social media has provided new means through which Black communities can connect, organize, and converge. Black Owned Toronto, for instance, started on Instagram and moved to a much-needed physical location at Scarborough Town Centre. With over one hundred vendors, they will soon expand to Toronto's Eaton Centre. Black Wimmin Artists, a group founded by Anique Jordan, is a community of over two hundred Black women and non-binary folks connected on a single WhatsApp group. The community convened in a physical space in 2019 for *The Feast*, an event organized by Jordan and several of the members. They brought together over one hundred Black artists at the Art Gallery of Ontario for a gathering and performative dinner.

Blackhurst



the history of Black Toronto. Welcome to Blackhurst is here to celebrate and commemorate this history. From the influx of Caribbean people in the 1960s all the way back to the arrival of African-Americans via the Underground railroad in the 1860s, the black history of this neighbourhood runs deep. Contrast on 28 Lennox St. was more than just a newspaper, it was the war room for strategic activism. Third World Bookstore satiated people's thirst for knowledge. 2 Black Guys Trane Studios was here. Lloyd's Barbershop is still here 40 years later and A Different Bookstore has morphed into a cultural hub. In many decades, this neighbourhood has been at the confluence of Black activism, entrepreneurialism and creativity.

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Camille Turner

Blackhurst is a term coined by Chinedu Ukabam, who curated the exhibition “Welcome to Blackhurst” in 2016 to commemorate Black histories from the Bloor and Bathurst neighbourhood. When I moved to Toronto in the 1980’s, I had gravitated to the area. Items in the exhibition, such as headlines from *Contrast Newspaper* and a shirt from Too Black Guys, a streetwear line who once had a storefront at 968 Bathurst, triggered memories.

I used to wander across from Bathurst Subway Station to Joyce’s West Indian Foods, owned by Carmel and Joyce Shoucair. The small grocery store was always crammed with customers, familiar food, and filled with the lilt of Caribbean voices. There, groceries were not just for physical sustenance but were a balm for the soul and a little taste of home. After Joyce’s, I’d walk past the constantly lively businesses—the Golden Barber Shop, Lloyd’s Barbershop—to Mascoll’s Beauty Supply Shop at 870 Bathurst Street to buy my hair products. When my Mom came to town we would head further up the street to Ken and Tony’s to get our hair done. Then we would go for lunch at Wong’s, a Jamaican-Chinese restaurant at 930 Bathurst. One of my favourite places for gripping political conversations, books on Black history, and quiet contemplation was Third World Books and Crafts at 942 Bathurst, owned and run by Leonard and Gwendolyn Johnston. From the late 1960s to the 2000s, it was one of the largest Black owned bookstores in North America and was visited by celebrities like Angela Davis and Paul Robeson.

The area that “Welcome to Blackhurst” commemorated has transformed over the years. Many of the old and familiar landmarks exist only in the memories of the people who visited them. A Different Booklist, however, a bookstore and cultural centre that has been a staple in the community for over twenty years, has managed to survive, thrive, and carry the torch for Black business and culture in the area.

Caribana



Camille Turner

The colours, rhythms, and the sweet sound of steel pan wraps around and embraces you long after the festival has ended. This is Caribana. The annual Caribbean Street Festival was gifted to Canada by the Caribbean community via the Caribbean Cultural Committee (CCC) in 1967 on the event of Canada's centennial. Since then, this energetic event—a feast of music, food, dancing, and beautiful people and culture—has graced the city every summer. That many Caribbean people in one place makes you dizzy with the realization of how big the local Black diaspora is. However, Caribana's audience extends well beyond the local Caribbean community. It is the largest festival of its kind in North America and attracts two million visitors annually.

More than a celebration, it is also a competition. Mas Camps are the workshops in which the conceptual worlds and aesthetics of Caribana take shape. The Camps, often run months in advance, result in the astonishing costumes and floats seen in the Grand Parade. When I first came to Toronto in the 1980s, the Grade Parade headed south down University Avenue. Back then, you could jump up with the revellers and join in. The event has grown exponentially since then, with the Parade route relocating to Lakeshore Boulevard. Crowds now watch the parade from behind barricades.

Caribana draws from histories of colonization, enslavement, and resistance in and around the Caribbean, as well as from the Emancipation Day traditions of Canada and the US. Many Caribbean carnivals were responses to the European celebrations performed before Lent. These celebrations were mocked, imitated, transformed, and absorbed by enslaved Africans who then created elaborate characters, costumes, and performances taking over public space. They made the events their own. Carnival, known by different names in various Caribbean countries, continues. Although the name of the Toronto event has changed numerous times, it is still best known as Caribana.

Creative Arts



Yaniya Lee

In the fall of 2019, curator and organizer Denise Ryner and I worked with Trinity Square Video on the Bodies Border Fields Symposium: three days of panels, workshops, and performances by Black artists and scholars. There were open and lengthy conversations about the issues confronting Black practitioners, and the various futures we imagined based on our experiences. A year later, Ryner and I were invited to guest edit a special issue of *Canadian Art*. We called it *Chroma*, and used it as an opportunity to assemble an—admittedly incomplete—survey of Black arts practices in Canada, from the quilt making of Black Nova Scotian communities to a call for institutional restructuring by a coalition of Black Canadian curators.

As with publishing and writing, the Black creative community thrives when we are both creators and presenters. The recently expanded Nia Centre, founded in 2008 and now located on Oakwood Avenue and Eglinton West, is dedicated to community engagement and supporting African diasporic artists. In the Parkdale neighbourhood, Black Artists' Network In Dialogue (BAND) is another institution dedicated to creating exhibitions that showcase work by Black artists. Online, the Black Canadian Arts/History Reading Group is a forum in which members share news and achievements from within Black creative cultures. The group came out of *State of Blackness*, a 2014 conference organized in Toronto by curator and scholar Andrea Fatona. It brought Black arts practitioners and curators together from across the continent to discuss the state of Blackness in the arts.

Since the 1980s, Black curators like Fatona, Michelle Jacques, Pamela Edmonds, Julie Crooks, and Sally Frater have steadily organized impactful exhibitions of Black art. Their curating led to recognition and change within a very exclusive arts sector. In 2018, Black Canadian artist Kapwani Kiwanga won the prestigious Sobey Art Award, and in 2021, a monumental work by sculptor Tau Lewis was acquired by and presented at the National Gallery of Canada. A new generation of young Black artists in Toronto are continuing a legacy of art making and presentation.

Gatherings



Yaniya Lee

Black folks have organized and gathered in small and significant ways that have yet to be written into history. Toronto has been host to conferences, symposiums, festivals, cookouts, debates, dances, exhibitions, concerts, protests, strikes, and all sorts of gatherings that brought various Black communities together in shared purpose. In 2017 Michèle Pearson Clarke and I initiated the regular, informal, Habits of Assembly gathering. We named the group inspired by the words of theorist Fred Moten, who we had seen speak in Toronto in 2017: “We have to renew our habits of assembly. We have to really practice getting together in that double sense of the word ‘practice’—you know, it’s a praxis, it’s a thing that we engage in constantly.”

Michèle and I had almost no budget, but we offered what we could. I shared a meeting room in the basement of my mother’s co-op. Michèle, with the help of her partner Sue, cooked or catered delicious food. Black folks would come together and share what they were working on, gossip, eat, and support each other. The meetings were informal and advertised through word of mouth and email. The invitation was open, and so, often, people would be meeting one another for the first time.

Toronto has historically been the site of many such gatherings. In the first half of the twentieth century, a major assembly was organized by the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). UNIA was housed on College Street from 1925–82. It became a galvanizing organization for Black people living in Toronto. Originally founded by Marcus Garvey in Jamaica, the mandate included to unify people of African diaspora, and to repatriate Black people on the African continent. They “served as an important catalyst to the establishment of Black communities in Canada,” scholar Carla Marano has noted in *For the Freedom of the Black People”: Case Studies on the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1900-1950*. “The UNIA acted as a community-building tool for Black newcomers to Canada from the Caribbean and the United States.”

Literature

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Yaniya Lee

The many gifted authors in Toronto is a testament to the rich publishing history of the city and, more widely, Ontario. Writers like Dionne Brand, David Chariandy, Lillian Allen, M. NourbeSe Philip, George Elliott Clarke, and Esi Edugyan contribute to a strong literary tradition that reflects the unique stories and histories of Black people in Canada. Black-owned bookstores like Third World Books (1968–2000) and A Different Booklist (1995–present) have shared these literatures and double as community hubs and spaces for urgent conversations and intellectual exchanges.

Black publishing in Ontario was first initiated by Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the powerhouse abolitionist and journalist who founded *The Provincial Freeman* in 1853 with an education and advocacy mandate “devoted to anti-slavery, temperance and general literature.” It was in print for only a few years, but the legacy of Black people publishing is ongoing. There has been an increase in publishing activity since the 1980s. In the 1990s, artist Karen Miranda Augustine founded and published the art magazine *At the Crossroads*. This was when *Our Lives*, a political journal presenting Black queer perspectives, was published by the Black Woman’s Collective.

In 1985, Makeda Silvera and Stephanie Martin founded Sister Vision Press after repeated frustrations with mainstream publishers who refused to print writings by Black women and other racialized people. In conversation with *Black Writers Matter* editor Whitney French, Silvera explained how the press started: “One of my goals as managing editor of Sister Vision Press was to publish very new writers alongside established writers, to continue to build a community that crossed along the lines of race, class, and sexuality, but also varied experiences.” Until its closure in 2001, the independent publisher addressed class and sexuality in writings by women of colour in a way that couldn’t be done with other publishers.

There is power in being in command of the creation and dissemination of media. Black bookstores in Toronto helped create access and gathering places for the community, and Black publishers worked to edit and publish contemporary intellectual and creative work.

Little Jamaica



Camille Turner

In Little Jamaica, a bustling community in the Eglinton and Oakwood area of Toronto, hairdressing is an institution. But then again, Little Jamaica is an institution. Night or day—especially before Caribana or Christmas—you will be sure to find a braider if you walk up and down Eglinton Avenue. The myriad Barbershops and hair salons lining the streets are modern hush harbours, spaces of solace for the community.

The reggae scene in Canada was born on these streets and is commemorated in a colourful mural on Reggae Lane on Eglinton, east of Oakwood. Among the iconic reggae artists painted here is my uncle: singer, songwriter, and Juno award winner Leroy Brown. But Uncle Leroy is not only a reggae artist, he is a sign artist whose iconic hand-painted signs can be seen on numerous shop windows in the community. Although Little Jamaica is a cultural hub, it is also a business district. Sellers hawk posters and fresh callaloo from parking lots. Some enter nearby stores harassing customers with bootleg movies and music CDs. Drop by Gus Tropical for a goat leg. Go to Spence Bakery to buy duck bread at Christmas. Find rare-and-crafted Ludi boards, for the game played in Jamaica and other British colonies at Trea-Jah-Isle, a Rasta-owned and staffed shop that sells music, incense, and clothes.

Little Jamaica is alive at night when reggae music is blasting and jerk chicken smoker barrels line the street, filling the air with the tantalizing aroma of spice and smoke. Raps, a restaurant with a distinctive green, red and gold sign was never the same after their restaurant make-over. But then again, nothing is as it was. This neighbourhood is caught in the crosshairs of Eglinton's Crosstown, a years-long transit expansion. Many of these institutions are now just a memory. This vibrant community is being snuffed out. This is a common story of vital Black communities targeted and disappeared in the name of "development" in Canada. Think Priceville in Grey County, Africville in Nova Scotia, or Black Strathcona in Vancouver.

North York



Camille Turner

The majority of Black people live outside of the Toronto city centre. Studies conducted by the University of Toronto's David J. Hulchanski show that Toronto is increasingly a divided city, spatialized along racial and economic lines. In Jane and Finch, an area in North Toronto, Black people comprise 26% of the residents according to the 2016 census. This is a significant concentration, considering Toronto's Black residents make up only 8.9% of the city's overall population.

Black people living in North Toronto is not a new phenomenon. In the early nineteenth century, the area was home to the city's second largest Black community. The 1871 census reports 224 Black people living in what was then called York Township (the Yonge and Steeles area). Many were descendants of those searching for freedom after escaping from bondage south of the border. Others were free Black people who pressed north, seeking safety when the Fugitive slave law of 1850 was passed in the US. This law enabled slave catchers to round up people who had escaped and also opened a way for free Black people to be captured and enslaved.

In 1833, Britain had finally ended two centuries of the enslavement of Black people in its colonies, including land that has since become Canada. After the enslavement of Black people ended in America in 1863, some returned to reunite with their families. Those who stayed in Canada were recorded in the census records as African, although many of them were born in either America or Canada. Susannah Maxwell, for instance, was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 1805 to free parents. In 1851, her home was raided by slave catchers and she fled with her family north to the state of New York. She then migrated across the border in 1858, finally settling just North of Toronto in the township of Markham. When she died in 1923, Susannah was 117, the oldest person living in Canada at that time.

Organizing



Yaniya Lee

Long before I learned of venerable activists like Mary Ann Shadd Cary and Viola Desmond, the only activists I knew were my parents. As a part of a larger community of Black activists in the city, I saw my mothers holding workshops with incarcerated folks; they co-founded the Black Women’s Collective (1986–89) and the Diasporic African Women’s Art Collective; they marched on the front lines in protests they helped to organize. Over the years, individuals and collectives continue to push for social justice—groups like the volunteer collective Blackness Yes! and Black CAP (Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention). I grew up in a community of people who fought for change, and my experience is similar to many other Black kids growing up in Toronto, with elders making space for Black life and Black queer life.

This kind of organizing can sometimes be small, private; at other times it can grow bigger and gather momentum. The Black Action Defense Committee, for instance, started in the 1980s in response to the murder of Lester Dobbs. The committee is a precursor to Black Lives Matter Toronto, which was inaugurated in 2015 after the deaths of Andrew Loku and Jermaine Carby.

Every generation has its own organizers and new ways to approach radical change. Coalition building and collaboration across issues and identities has long been a source of strength for Black organizers and activists. A few years ago, long-time activist, poet, and social worker Courtney McFarlane organized the exhibition *Legacies in Motion: Black Queer Toronto Archival Project* at BAND Gallery in Toronto. MacFarlane brought together paper ephemera and artworks by local Black queer activists. The exhibition showed a history of gay, lesbian, and trans people who have joined together to host events, share resources and organize for change, working collectively towards their own vision of a different world. Activism like theirs perseveres, although documentation of these collective efforts is too often “lost” or disregarded by official historical narratives.

Scarborough



Yaniya Lee

In his 2017 novel *Brother*, novelist David Chariandy describes a neighbourhood in the former suburb of Scarborough—just east of downtown Toronto—where he was born and raised:

“A dozen blocks west of the towers and housing complexes of the Park, at the intersection of Markham and Lawrence, there lay a series of strip malls. There were grocery shops selling spices and herbs under signs in foreign languages and scripts, vegetables and fruits with vaguely familiar names like ackee and eddo. There were restaurants with an average expiry date of a year, their hand-painted signs promising ice cream with the “back home tastes” of mango and khoya and badam kulfi, a second sign written urgently in red marker promising that they’d also serve, whenever asked, the mystery of “Canadian food.”

In 1997, the City of Toronto incorporated several suburbs including Scarborough to become the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), despite much consternation from the communities involved and local politicians alike. Scarborough is legendary. An outsider to Toronto might not know that these suburbs have long been the centre of much of the city’s cultural life force. Racialized people are a visible majority in Scarborough, and the mix of cultures and histories growing there have brought forth an incredible generation of young Black Torontonians.

In 2018 during the Scarborough edition of *Nuit Blanche*, I was invited by curator Alyssa Fearon to moderate a talk with artists Erika DeFreitas, Anique Jordan, and Rajni Perera. *Nuit Blanche* is a franchise art event held in major cities across Europe and North America, including Toronto. For one night, from dusk till dawn, the event presents free performances, public art, talks and programming. For one night, the neighbourhood is transformed into a display of creative force. I sat with DeFreitas, Jordan and Perera, who discussed the joys and frustrations they had experienced growing up in the neighbourhood. They explained how they saw Scarborough and that life on the so-called periphery has never been marginal to those living there.

Theatre



Camille Turner

When I arrived in Toronto in the 1980s, one of my first jobs was at Theatre Fountainhead, a Black theatre company founded by Jeff Henry in 1974. It was preceded by Black Theatre Canada, founded in 1973 by Vera Cudjoe. However, Black Canadian theatre did not begin here. The Negro Theatre Guild was active in Montreal as early as 1942, and Montreal's Black Theatre Workshop was founded in 1971. Similar groups existed across Canada, such as Sepia Players, founded in Vancouver in 1969, and Kwacha, founded by Walter Borden in Nova Scotia in 1984. These institutions provided opportunities for Black playwrights, directors, and performers to tell stories relevant to Black audiences, and bring Black perspectives to the wider Canadian theatre world.

Black theatres of the 1970s to 1990s nurtured actors, musicians, playwrights, and directors such as Marvin Ishmael, Jackie Richardson, Leon Bibb, Ahdri Zhina Mandiela, Joe Sealy, Richardo Keens-Douglas, Diana Braithwaite, Philip Akin, and a host of others. Some went on to create their own theatre companies. We Are One Theatre, for example, was founded by Ishmael in 1986. Obsidian Theatre, an established company, was founded in 2000 by Awaovieyi Agie, Ardon Bess, David Collins, Roy Lewis, Yanna McIntosh, Diane Roberts, Kim Roberts, Sandi Ross, Djanet Sears, Satori Shakoor, Tricia Williams, Alison Sealy-Smith, and Philip Akin. b current, a company that was inaugurated by Mandiela in 1991, cultivated Nicole Brooks's award-winning *Obeah Opera* (2012), which told the story of Tituba, a Black Caribbean woman accused of witch-craft and executed in the Salem Witch trials.

Recently, Black theatre groups in Toronto include d'bi young anitafrica's Watah Theatre. young, a "theatre interventionist, decolonial scholar & holistic healer," is a daughter of dub poets with deep roots in Jamaica's theatre community. She creates a wide range of impactful performances, and has trained numerous performers in her methods. Black theatre proves to take many forms. While some are formally staged there is also an explosion of street theatre, political actions and interventions, spoken word, social practice, intermedia, and VR projects.

Camille Turner



I was born in Jamaica and came to Canada with my family at the age of nine. When I was twenty-two, I returned to the place my parents called "back home" for the first time. It was a shock to realize how much I, and Jamaica, had changed. I no longer fit and yet I was constantly reminded that Canada was not home. This rupture drives my work.

Miss Canadiana, a persona I created in 2002 and performed for more than a decade, embodies the contradictions between Canada's constitutional multiculturalism and my lived experience as a person of African descent. As Miss Canadiana, I navigate spaces in which my Black body is seen as a foreign body, not the body that is expected to represent Canadian heritage.

Since 2012 I have focused on the history of the African diaspora who arrived here before me. I am particularly interested in the ways this history intersects with the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans and how this story has been suppressed and silenced. For instance, Peggy Pompadour, a Black woman, was enslaved by Peter Russell, the administrator of Upper Canada. Russell posted an ad in the *Upper Canada Gazette* in 1806 offering Peggy and one of her children for sale. As I walk Toronto's streets I imagine the swish of Peggy's long skirts as she walks in front of me. Since I literally follow in Peggy's footsteps, not surprisingly, she has been featured in some of my artworks such as the sonic walks *HUSH HARBOUR* (2012) and *The Resistance of Peggy Pompadour* (2013) and a video installation created collaboratively with Camal Pirbhai titled *Family Matters* (2017).

Yaniya Lee



Growing up, I saw my artist parents make art, organize, and fight on the frontlines for social change. I shared my time between them, going from Montreal to Toronto and back again. It was their lives and struggles as artists that inspired me to become an arts writer. For years, I worked as an editor at a major Canadian art magazine. I earned a Master's degree at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario for my research into the absented presence of Black Canadian art. Friendships, collaborations, and residencies taught me how Black cultural production creates new ways for us to thrive. In the fall of 2020, curator Denise Ryner and I co-guest-edited *Chroma*, a special issue of *Canadian Art* dedicated to black artists and black art histories. Recent workshops include: *WhAt She Sald: Promiscuous References & Disobedient Care*, 2021 (with Cason Sharpe and Zoe Sharpe); *Song. Prayer. Scream. A praxis of looking*, 2021 (with Jessica Lynne), *Desire x Politics*, 2019 (with Fan Wu) and *Ideas From Moving Water*, 2022 (with Lillian O'Brien Davis, Letticia Cosbert Miller and Tiana Reid).

Image Credits

Abolition Black Lives Matter protests in Toronto, 2020. Photo by Yaniya Lee.

Alexandra Park *Portrait of Harry Gairey*, 1980. Photo by Boris Spremo. Toronto Star Photograph Archive, Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

Black Churches *First Baptist Church (opened in 1907) at University Avenue and Edward Street, 1953-06*. Photo by James V. (James Victor) Salmon. Courtesy of the Toronto Public Library.

Black Dance Ballet Creole performing in partnership with Ontario Culture Days. Photo courtesy of Patrick Parson.

Black Film & Video Network Canadian Artists Network (Black Artists In Action) Ad Hoc Committee (Pictured (L-R): Glace Lawrence, Marva Jackson, Ayanna Black, Charles Gray, Karen Tyrell, David Zapparoli, Adrienne Shadd, Cameron Bailey, Hazel Da Breo, Chloe Onari). Several members went on to form the Black Film and Video Network. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Celafi25 Digital Archives.

BlackGrange, a walk by Camille Turner and the Outerregion performers, commissioned by WalkingLab, 2018. Photographed by Anise Truman. Courtesy of Camille Turner.

Black Poupys A visitor viewing work by Dionne Simpson at Sandra Brewster's *Open House*, 2015. Photo by Kevin Jones. Courtesy of Sandra Brewster.

Blackhurst A young visitor viewing *Welcome to Blackhurst*, curated by Chinedu Ukabam, 2016. Photo by and courtesy of Lanrick Bennett Jr.

Camille Turner Photo by Ebti Nabag.

Caribana *Woman in Caribana mas*, 2012. Photo by Karen Turner. Courtesy of Camille Turner.

Creative Arts Tau Lewis, *Symphony*, 2020, Various recycled and hand dyed fabrics, recycled leather, cotton batting, beads acrylic paint, PVA, glue, metal hoop skirt, pipe, sea shells, wire, hand sewn, Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Gatherings *The Feast*, hosted by Black Wimmin Artists at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2019. Photo by Samuel Engelking.

Literature Third World Books and Crafts Advertisement from the Black Trade and Business Directory, 1970. Source unknown.

Little Jamaica Everett King Culture Cooper (left) and Garth Roots (right) at King Culture Record Co. at 2502 Eglinton Avenue West, 1983. Photo by Beth Lesser.

North York Susannah Maxwell, circa 1880s. Photo courtesy of the Richmond Hill Public Library.

Organizing Dudley Law, organizer of the Black Action Defence Committee, 1992. Photo by Richard Lautens. Toronto Star Photograph Archive, Courtesy of Toronto Public Library.

Scarborough Ebti Nabag, *Bubble of Youth*, 2020. Malvern Public Library, south façade, 30 Sewells Rd, Scarborough. Photo by Toni Hafkenscheid.

Theatre D'bi Young and Honor Ford-Smith at Mikey Smith Raw Works Festival, Watah Theatre, 2015. Photo by Camille Turner.

Yaniya Lee Photo by Yuula Benivolski.

