A Seat at the Table: Engendering Black Canadian Pasts and Futures

“If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”
- Shirley Chisholm

I. Project Objectives

Canada is in the midst of a great social transformation, an unprecedented demographic revolution that is fundamentally transforming Canadian society. This social transformation is shaped by diversity among Indigenous peoples, generations of established patterns of racial and ethnic diversity, and new waves of transborder migration (Smith, 2018). These changes require a shift in research foci from minimally descriptive and often banal diversity thinking to critical engagements with “super-diversity” (Vertovec 2007) or “hyper-diversity” (Noble 2011) that now characterize Canada’s major urban areas. This social transformation requires, as Andrés Tapia (2014) suggests, our current approaches to diversity must be “turned upside down” because they are based on a vision of yesterday, rather than today’s reality in which “minorities” are fast becoming demographic majorities. Although national narratives – the stories we tell about ourselves – increasingly identify diversity as a defining feature of our national fabric, there are major gaps in research on the complicated threads that weave through Canada’s past and present as well as on the contours of majority-minority dynamics. This knowledge gap applies to Black Canadians and, especially, to Black women, whose multiplicity are either invisible in Canadian national narratives, or concealed within singular stories about Black Canadian-ness. This project seeks to make visible, and thereby disrupt, single stories of Black Canadians both by recovering hidden histories, and by telling new stories about obstacles, aspirations, mobility, and upliftment.

My Trudeau project, “A Seat at the Table,” addresses the virtual absence of Black women in many of the stories that Canadians tell about themselves. It has three broad objectives: first, it aims to disrupt predominant single stories of Black Canadians by demonstrating that the experience of Blackness in Canada has been consistently shaped by diversity, intersectionality, and diasporic multiplicity. “Disputes over black nomenclature are inexhaustible,” as Trudeau Fellow and former parliamentary poet laureate George Elliott Clarke (2002) has written. However, ‘Black Canadian’ and ‘African Canadian’ are among the community consensus terms that are used interchangeably to denote heterogeneous peoples of African descent. Second, my project addresses significant gaps in Canadian diversity stories by excavating and foregrounding the often hidden histories of Black women’s contributions to the advancement of human rights and dignity in Canada, and by compiling contemporary stories of Black women’s strategies of resistance, survival and success, focusing on three key sectors – politics, law, and the academy. Third, this project provides a heuristic and contextualized reading of intersectionality and intergenerational differences among Black women primarily through in-depth interviews with a selected sample of women identified as historical pioneers, contemporary ground-breakers, and nextgen leaders in these sectors. The project employs a mixed method research design, including a discursive analysis of archival sources, quantitative analyses of two decades of census data (1991-2016) and a targeted survey of Black women in politics, law and the academy, and qualitative data drawn from in-depth interviews with both contemporary and emerging leaders among Canadian Black women. Together, these sources will provide a more granular understanding of the intersections of Blackness and gender, and advance how Canadians think about and act on human rights, diversity and the future of citizenship. The research findings will be mobilized through a symposium, roundtable, articles, digital storytelling, and a multimedia teaching, research, and policy-advocacy web portal, “Digital Diversities Canada.” The project will also provide the spine for a sole-authored book, Engendering Black Canadian Futures: Beyond a Single Story.
II. Context

There is an urgent need to address the status and experiences of Black Canadians in contemporary Canada. An October 2016 fact-finding mission by the UN Human Rights Commission’s Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent issued a sobering report highlighting how the legacies of colonialism and slavery continue to reverberate within Canadian institutions and across the broader society. These often unacknowledged and ongoing social legacies, “inform anti-black racism and racial stereotypes that are so deeply entrenched in institutions, policies and practices, that its institutional and systemic forms are either functionally normalized or rendered invisible” (Canadian Press, 2017). Moreover, the report notes that, the “contemporary form of racism replicates the historical...conditions and effects of spatial segregation, economic disadvantage and social exclusion” (UNHRC, 2016). Among other things the report’s recommendations called on the Canadian government to consider creating a federal department of African Canadian Affairs, apologize for slavery, make reparations, and build a monument recognizing the contributions of African Canadians.

This project is animated by storytelling: who tells stories about Black Canadians, what stories are told, how they are told, and what is at stake in which stories are told and by whom. Even the most highly educated Black Canadians struggle to have credentials and experiences recognized, break through the concrete ceiling, and achieve upward social mobility. The project attends to the increasing precariousness of Black women’s lives, as evident by wide-ranging socio-economic indicators in the areas of employment, income, and intergenerational poverty. This project also seeks to understand why, despite higher education achievements, conditions appear to be worsening for many second generation visible minorities, and Black Canadians in particular. Black women experience higher levels of unemployment (11 percent) compared to the broader female population (7 percent). Similar to Indigenous peoples, Black Canadian women are over-represented in the criminal justice system, as are Black children in the child welfare system (Maynard, 2017; Monchalin, 2016). An intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Bilge and Hill Collins, 2016) lens reveals new social solidarities and alliances in the ongoing struggle for human rights and dignity. In offering Indigenous solidarity with Black Lives Matter, the social movement ignited by Black queer women, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) notes that, “black and indigenous communities of struggle are deeply connected through our experiences with colonialism, oppression, and white supremacy.” This study explores intersectionality through a targeted survey of Black women in politics, law and the academy, exploring about how they self-identify, their self-understandings of their social conditions, and by asking through workshop themes and interview probes about educational and career goals, perceived obstacles, and strategies for success.

This project contributes to a growing body of research that responds to the UN International Decade for “People of African Descent: recognition, justice, development” (2015-2024), by examining the histories and current status and experiences of people of African descent in Canada, and by highlighting Black Canadians’ contributions to the advancement of human rights, dignity and justice. The UN Decade has three principal objectives that extend into this project: first, to promote and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights and freedoms of people of African descent; second, to advance knowledge about, and respect for, the contributions of people of African descent, including to challenge as “morally condemnable, socially unjust and dangerous” knowledge and practices that revive or reinforce discredited notions of separate human races, racial hierarchies and superiority; and, third, to encourage the adoption of national, regional, and international measures to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination and social injustices faced by people of African descent.
III. Project Description

My project foregrounds the importance of storytelling in the production of, and resistance to, entrenched stereotypes and institutional exclusions, but also to affirming human dignity, perseverance, and social upliftment. Storytelling does not purport to be representative of broad social or conceptual categories, as does, for example, large-N social survey research. Instead, storytelling can reveal the nuances and variegated biographies as well as the shared contexts, challenges and aspirations experienced by Black women. Storytelling is both a profoundly personal and political act: “How we portray the past, ourselves and our fellows can defend or contest social arrangements” (Ray, 1999: 9). As novelist Chimamande Ngozi Adiche explains, stories can be used to dispossess, malign and “break the dignity of a people,” but they also can inspire, educate, and “repair that broken dignity” (2009). The stories we tell, including those we tell about and tell on each other, matter greatly “for developing a more critical consciousness about social relations in our society” (Bell, 2003: 4). Negative social constructs not only sustain glass ceilings, biases, barriers and discriminatory practices, but also indelibly shape Black lives by obscuring avenues for alternative futures. This project will draw on narrative storytelling and digital storytelling using video, audio, images and other digital media to document how Black Canadians chart alternative futures.

One of the primary objectives of this research project is to disrupt what Adiche calls “the dangers of a single story.” This danger is not so much that such a story is untrue. Rather, a single story invariably rests on a stereotype – “show[ing] a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become” (2009). This project is concerned with researching Black Canadian diversity shaped by centuries of migration, diasporic multiplicity, and living at the intersections of various hyphens, such as African Nova Scotian, Africadian, ‘Caribbean Canadian,’ ‘Afro-Latina,’ ‘Indigenous Blacks,’ Black queer, and alliances and solidarities like BIPOCs (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour). This project aims to document intergenerational stories of Black women in order to capture what it means to become and to be Black in contemporary Canada. It is premised on the view that Blackness is largely what one becomes on Canadian soil (or other host countries), and not necessarily how one is understood or how one understands oneself elsewhere, such as in previous home countries. As Yamri Taddese, a Producer at CBC Radio tells her story, “In Addis Ababa... since everyone is Black, nobody really is” (2017). Taddese goes on to state that until arriving in Canada, “I was largely oblivious to stereotypes about Black people...It felt as though people expected me to know my place and I sincerely had no idea where this place was.” In this all-too-common experience of becoming Black, the “becoming” collides with durable stereotypes that contradict the stories we tell ourselves about Canada’s commitment to multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusive citizenship. My project addresses three cross-cutting themes that disrupt the single story: (1) hidden Black Canadian histories and the paradox of hyper-visibility and invisibility; (2) presentism and misrecognition; and (3) intersectionality and the re-imagination of Black women’s futures.

1. Hidden Histories and the Paradox of Hyper-Visibility and Invisibility:

Black Canadians tend to make only fleeting appearances in the successive national imaginaries and dominant stories, and then, often only as recent immigrants (see Winks 1971; Fraser 2009). Yet, the fact of Blackness has been a consistent thread in the Canadian story for centuries. For more than three centuries waves of free Blacks, enslaved, fugitive slaves, settlers and refugees have migrated to, and been present on the various Indigenous territories that now constitute Canada. The first recorded Black person was Mathieu Da Costa, a free African man, who served as an interpreter for European explorers, such as Pierre Du Gua de Mons and Samuel de Champlain on his 1605 excursion to New France. The multilingual Da Costa spoke French, Portuguese, Dutch, Mi’kmaq, and ‘pidgin Basque,’ a dialect used as the common trading language for European and Indigenous peoples (Switala, 2006: 139). Sir James Douglas became the first Black politician in the colony of British Columbia, where he was appointed as governor in 1851. He formed the Victoria Pioneer Rifles, an all-Black police force comprised of hundreds of African-American freedmen and former slaves, who resisted American efforts to seize land along the
west coast (Fraser, 2009). While many Canadians are familiar with narratives of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, fewer know about, among others, the early-1900s all-Black pioneer community of Amber Valley in Alberta (Jarvin, 2017), the historic Black community of Africville in Nova Scotia (Fraser, 2009), and many human rights struggles against segregation and unequal citizenship, for example, in Dresden, Ontario in the 1950s and 1960s. Today, Black Canadians are Canada’s third largest ‘visible’ or racialized minority group, just behind South Asians and Chinese Canadians (StatsCan, 2016).

Black women are notable for their ‘absent presence’ (Wright, 2014): they are present and hyper-visible and, at the same time, absent and invisible in national narratives of citizenship and belonging. Despite their remarkable contributions to struggles for human rights and dignity – for example, Marie-Joseph Angélique’s resistance to slavery in Old Montreal in 1784 (Cooper, 2006), Viola Desmond’s resistance to racial segregation in Nova Scotia in 1946 (Backhouse, 1999), and the contributions to political life of, for example, Vivian Barbot, Rosemary Brown, Anne Cooles, Jean Augustine, Marlene Jennings, Mayann Francis and Michaëlle Jean – Black women appear as footnotes in national narratives. This study aims to make visible the often hidden histories of Black women in politics, law and the academy, telling their stories through archival research, biographies, autobiographies, multimedia sources, and interviews with current and nextgen Black women leaders.

2. Presentism and Misrecognition:

The second thread in this research project engages with the concepts of presentism and misrecognition. Invisibility often travels hand-in-hand with presentism – the tendency to project distorted single stories about the present onto the past and the future. In recent years, dominant representations of Black Canadians, particularly in print and online media, tell singular stories of violence, criminality, and a tyranny of low academic and professional expectations, fueling what has become known as the “school to prison pipeline” (Laucius, 2017). These stories about Black criminality indelibly shape the “psychosocial lives” of Black people and Black futures (Walcott, 2008: 254), and underwrite discriminatory practices such as profiling, carding, and the disproportionate incarceration of Black men and women (Maynard, 2017). These representations also are mirrored in low expectations for Black Canadian girls who “have shared experiences of being told to aim lower in their education by guidance counsellors and teachers” (Gooch, 2017), and for Black youth who disproportionately experience punitive disciplining, suspensions, expulsions, and streaming into non-academic careers. Singular stories misrecognize multiple stories of aspirations and resilience – stories about “parents who have dreams for their children, and of black children who are ambitious, excited about learning and deserve the quality of education offered to other children” (James qtd in Wong, 2017). Most starkly, left untold are the many and complex stories of Black women pioneers in historical and ongoing struggles for human rights and dignity, contemporary ground-breakers in their professional fields, and nextgen leaders who are growing up within the context of a new and uncharted majority-minority dynamic in Canada. This project seeks to tell some of these stories.

There are few studies in the burgeoning body of Canadian diversity and inclusion research that differentiate among the experiences of specific visible minority groups (Henry et al, 2017), or tease out the increasing hyper-diversity or heterogeneity within and among visible minority groups (Smith, 2018). Broad social designations can obscure important differences between specific visible minorities, including in the areas of education, employment, income, health outcomes, and intergenerational social mobility (Deverall, 2011). Even fewer studies provide an intersectional analysis that weaves in the experiences of diverse Black and visible minority women, sexual minorities and persons with disabilities. Consequently, the specific experiences and contributions of Black Canadians remain untold in national stories, leaving the social imaginary to default to hegemonic narratives, normative whiteness, and heteronormativity.

“Black Canada is not one thing. It’s multiple moments of Blackness. It’s multiple relations to the nation space. It’s multiple points of arrival. It’s a set of different histories” (Walcott qtd. in Antwi and Chariandy,
George Elliott Clarke has cautioned against any notion of “a model Blackness” (Clarke 2002), instead advancing a Black multiplicity that builds on an African-Canadian literature that is “multicultural, and, in a word, diverse, thanks to its origins in the migration of black intellectuals and artists from the Caribbean, the United States, Africa, Europe, and South America, over three centuries, to colonial and (post-) modern Canada….Diversity, thy name is African Canada” (Clarke, 2009: 2). Writings on the multiplicity that constitutes “Black Canada” also challenge the idea that this northern Black Canadian-ness is derivative, “not black enough,” in relation to Black American counterparts. In “Borrowed Blackness,” André Alexis explicitly rejects the idea that Black American experiences are the benchmark for all diasporic conceptions of Blackness. While acknowledging the polyvalent, transnational fact of Blackness, and diasporic Black fusions in the Americas, Diana Jacobs similarly stresses the ways in which Black Canadian identity can become more marked by border crossings: “Strangely it was in the U.S.A. / that I truly became a Black Canadian. / In an attempt to rebut American Blacks’ assumption / that being Canadian was an aberration, / That Canadian Blackness has no history” (Jacobs qtd in Clarke, 2002: 41). This study engages the multiplicity of Black Canadian-ness in two ways. First, the increasing diversity of Black Canadians can be tracked through the disaggregation of visible minority groups over decades of census data, and by delving into diversity among Black Canadians based on other vectors of identity (e.g. gender, nationality, age, and language) as well as education, employment and income. Second, participants interviewed for the study will be asked to reflect on perceptions and experiences of being/becoming Black in contemporary Canada, and how they negotiate their identity in the context of education, employment, and the broader community.

3. Intersectionality Matters:

The third thread in this research examines the ways in which intersectionality matters to the re-imagination of Black women’s futures. “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives,” wrote Audre Lorde (1984). Coined by Black feminist legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality captures how analyses based on single categories like gender or race or disability can illuminate a single dimension of identity and relations and, at the same time, obscure different experiences within and between such categories, for example, the experiences of being a woman who is Black and disabled. Intersectionality research explores the ways in which structural, political, and representational dynamics shape personal identity, hierarchies of social power, and inequalities in life chances and outcomes. The absence of a gender and race intersectional lens can obscure the interlocking dynamics of racism and misogyny – what Black queer feminist Moya Bailey (2010) termed misogynoir “to describe the particular brand of hatred directed at Black women” in visual and popular culture, and on social media. In social policy analysis an intersectional lens can reveal a gender and racialized wage gap. Canadian-born university-educated visible minorities, for example, earn 87.4 cents for every dollar earned by their white counterparts. Disaggregating the visible minority data further shows that Black Canadians earn, on average, about 80.4 cents for every dollar earned by white Canadians (Conference Board of Canada, 2017). The average income of Black women is fifteen percent less than their white female counterparts and thirty-seven percent less than that of white men (UNHRC, 2016). The racialized wage gap is widening (Mahboubi, 2017). Intersectionality is a key analytic tool for this project because it better enables the teasing out of the nuances of diversity, gender, and Blackness across Canada.

IV. Research Strategies and Timelines

This project centres Black women’s histories and experience in Canada within the broader context of the UN Decade for People of African Descent. It deploys a mixed method strategy to triangulate stories of Black Canadian women’s lives through: (1) comprehensive census profiles; (2) primary (archival) and secondary (library, internet) research, and; (3) survey and interview responses from Black women in three important and inadequately explored sectors: politics, law, and the academy. This triangulated approach affords a broad overview as well as more textured insights.
Phase 1 (2018-2019): Phase 1 of the project has three components: a longitudinal analysis of census data to demonstrate the shifting demographic and social profiles of Black women in Canada since 1991; archival and secondary research including a comprehensive literature review and web analytic; and the initial construction of ‘Digital Diversity Canada,’ the project’s website for research dissemination and digital storytelling. Census data are essential for constructing a comprehensive profile of Black Canadians, including competing nomenclatures, self-identification, gender, age, income, education, nationality, and linguistic and religious diversity. A comprehensive statistical profile will tell one kind of story of the gendered dimensions of Black Canadian multiplicity. This phase in the research also will go behind the numbers, using archival and qualitative research methods. It will build on and extend unused archival material that I have collected in the past decade, especially resulting from my collaboration in the SSHRC project, “Racialization, Immigration and Citizenship,” which revealed hidden stories of Black women in western Canadian history. This rich archive includes photographs and newspapers stories, and will be supplemented with autobiographies, biographies, and writings by Black pioneers and trailblazers, ranging from, for example, by Mary Ann Shadd, abolitionist and founder of the Provincial Freeman (Canada West (now Ontario),1853), who was the first Black woman newspaper publisher in North America to Rosemary Brown’s Being Brown: A Very Public Life (1989), the autobiography of women’s and civil rights advocate who became the first Black woman elected to a Canadian provincial legislature to National Film Board’s productions such as “The Right Candidate for Rosedale,” which describes barriers to political candidacy for now Senator Anne Cools.

Phase 2 (2019-2020): Phase 2 of the project will include a survey of Black women who are working in three major sectors – law, politics, and the academy as well as a symposium. The online survey will build upon a questionnaire initially used in our Equity Myth (UBC Press, 2017) research, but will be redesigned and tailored to operationalize key concepts that tap the experience of women of colour in the professions such as “presumed incompetent,” a term co-developed by American Black legal scholar, Angela P. Harris, and “brick walls,” an inventory of behaviours developed by UK cultural studies scholar, Sara Ahmed. The potential respondents to the Survey Monkey questionnaire will be identified through organizations such as the Black Female Lawyers Association, the Congress of Black Women, and the Black Canadian Studies Association. Black women in the academy were previously identified during the Equity Myth project, and will be updated. Lists of women in politics (federal, provincial and territorial) are scattered across several websites. I also intend to conduct in-depth interviews with several Black women who are, or previously served in politics, practiced law, and held leadership positions in the academy. Interviews with these “key informants” will be conducted (throughout the project) in each of the following cities: Edmonton, Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax. I will be on a half-year sabbatical during this second phase of my research and plan to organize a symposium in the fall of 2019 at the University of Alberta, which also has funds available to support such ventures. Tentatively entitled, “A Seat at the Table: Black Women and Leadership in Canada,” will invite selected participants and key informants to present a paper reflecting on their experiences of obstacles to, and strategies for, success as a Black woman in politics, law and the academy. One major plenary during this symposium (hopefully) will feature leading members of the Trudeau community, such as Trudeau Mentors Rita Deverell and Sylvia Hamilton, Trudeau Fellows Adelle Blackett and George Elliott Clarke, and two
Trudeau Scholars, Wendell Adjetey and another yet to be determined. The symposium will be digitized, and the papers presented will be compiled into an edited book, entitled, *A Seat at the Table*, which I plan to publish with a university press.

**Phase 3 (2020-2021):** During Phase 3 of the project, I will conduct in-depth interviews with nextgen Black women leaders. A list of potential interview subjects will be identified during earlier phases of the project but my intent is to select young leaders that embody the multiplicity of contemporary Black-ness in Canada. Interviewees may potentially be selected from the leadership cadres of Young Diplomats: Empowering Ethiopian and Eritrean Youth, BQY (Black queer youth) or, from a list of recipients of relevant recognitions such as the African Canadian Achievement Awards, or top 30 under 30. During this final phase in the project I will further build the Digital Diversities Canada portal, converting in-depth interviews, symposium and roundtable presentations and multimedia storytelling into short videos, animations, and podcasts. The final component of this project is a roundtable that will both summarize the findings of the project and invite selected participants to address the question of “what is to be done,” suggesting practices and strategies that will enhance the visibility and successes of Black women in Canada. I will draw on key informants from the study, such as members of the Black Pioneer Society of Alberta, as well as distinguished scholars working in diversity and inclusion studies, potentially including Trudeau Fellows Constance Backhouse, Isabella Bakker, and Deborah Cowen, as well as Indigenous scholars. I also intend to invite observers to this roundtable, including representatives from university administrations, the University of Alberta’s Leadership College, and the Status of Women Alberta.

V. **Deliverables**

This project’s research findings will be communicated through an ambitious open access dissemination plan aimed at diverse publics. It will include a multi-media “Digital Diversities Canada” portal with digital storytelling, journal articles, a peer-reviewed edited book, a single author manuscript, conference presentations, and interventions in traditional and social media.

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<td>Develop census profiles and Recovering hidden histories</td>
<td>Symposium: ‘A Seat at the Table’ including Trudeau Mentors, Fellows and Scholars</td>
<td>Prepare for publication an edited volume from symposium</td>
<td>Roundtable of research participants in Dialogue with key informants, Trudeau Fellows, and Diversity and Inclusion Scholars</td>
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<td>Design and launch “Digital Diversities Canada” portal</td>
<td>Digital Storytelling (audio, video, photos) of pioneers, and ground breakers in law, politics, the academy</td>
<td>Videos and podcasts of Symposium to the portal</td>
<td>Digital storytelling of political, legal, and academic nextgen leaders</td>
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<td>Videos and podcasts of Roundtable to DDS portal</td>
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<td>Write and present a research paper of preliminary findings at the Black Canadian Studies Association (BCSA) annual meeting at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences</td>
<td>Complete and submit journal article to the Journal of Canadian Studies Present paper at the CPSA, UK or US Canadian Studies with scholars in US and UK working on race and gender</td>
<td>Draft book length manuscript, <em>Engendering Black Canadian Futures: Beyond a Single Story.</em> Present paper at the CPSA, BCSA and BACs.</td>
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VI. Proposed Trudeau Fellowship Budget

BUDGET (2018-2020/1)

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*Additional funds will be sought through a SSHRC workshop grant, the Faculty of Arts’ conference fund, and the Kule Institute for Advanced Study (KIAS) ‘Dialogue Grants.’
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