Welcome to Professor Wendell Nii Laryea Adjetey

This Fall, I am joining the Department of History and Classical Studies as Assistant Professor of History. I have come from Harvard University, where I held the William Lyon Mackenzie King Fellowship at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and a Lectureship in the Department of History. I specialize in post-Reconstruction US history, African American history, chattel slavery in the Atlantic world, and African Diaspora history.

I was well into my mid-twenties before considering a career as a historian. As an adolescent, I recall asking my father, a superb storyteller, endless questions about our Gã forebears (whence they came, their cosmology and spiritual systems, language, exile, and warfare). Although neither my dad nor my mom had the privilege of obtaining a high-school education due to quasi economic caste in post-colonial Ghana, they used oral history, much like our forebears, and copious LESSONS gleaned from a hard-knock life to ignite my imagination. These stories sharpened my critical thinking skills, giving me an appreciation of the past, specifically those whose sacrifices have blessed me with a sense of identity and purpose. I quickly discerned that history—whether tragic, triumphant, or both—is imbued with redemptive qualities, if one looks closely.

In 2008, I completed my Honours BA in history and political science (with a focus on international relations) at the University of Toronto. Diplomacy and international security, specifically nuclear non-proliferation and the phenomenon of child soldiers (topics on which I wrote two senior theses), sparked my interest in a career with the Canadian Foreign Service. My focus changed from the global to the local, however, when metropolitan Toronto experienced the "Year of the Gun" in 2005, a tragedy that affected many, my friends included. As a result, I launched an award-winning non-profit organization that mentored and tutored youth who had lost elder siblings to gun violence or were themselves at risk of gun violence.

After my BA, I stayed at the University of Toronto to pursue a master's in political science, writing a research paper on the structural-cultural factors that trigger gun violence among black youth in Toronto.

From 2009 to 2012, I worked in youth gang prevention and intervention in north Toronto neighbourhoods that were mostly black, immigrant, and low-income. This experience strengthened my resolve to learn more about the history of racial caste and its legacies in North America. When the program's funding ended after three years (and it became apparent that it would not be renewed), I left gang intervention work, as well as consulting in healthcare and education, to pursue a doctorate in US and transnational history at Yale University.

Living and studying in New Haven, Connecticut—a post-industrial city that is visibly black, poor, and sometimes violent—taught me an unforgettable lesson about the tragedy of US society where racial caste and African Americans are concerned. I met welcoming and noble men and women, young and old, who considered the distance between them and Yale's campus as equivalent to Planet Earth and the Moon. These were descendants of the enslaved. Their forbears' uncompensated labour over centuries generated the wealth of the nation. They overcame Reconstruction and the hydra that was Jim Crow while simultaneously creating a charismatic culture consumed and emulated the world over. Trailblazers such as Edward Alexander Bouchet—who was one generation removed from bondage, and the first black person in the nation to obtain a PhD in 1876 and the first from Yale (and one of a handful of scientists in the West with a physics doctorate)—made my story possible as a Ghanaian-Canadian PhD. Yet, the nation often disavows the nightmare to which it subjected generations of African Americans. I left Yale and New Haven with love and a profound appreciation for what the enslaved and their descendants have endured and continue to endure in the United States.

My formative experiences, whether recent or in the distant past, shape my teaching interests. At McGill, I will teach various topics in African American and US history, diasporic Africans in North America, and slavery in the Atlantic world. This Fall, I will teach the year-long advanced seminar "Citizenship and African North Americans."

My experiences also shape my research. My first book project, Cross-Border Cosmopolitans: The Making of a Pan-African North America, 1919-1992 (under contract with UNC Press), situates fundamental questions of twentieth-century US history—immigration, civil rights, radicalism, and surveillance—within a North American diasporic frame. I have an upcoming chapter on Canadian protest letters that saved an illiterate African American from death row. I will edit the first edition of the Yale Journal of Canadian Studies. Future projects will explore North American pluralism, messianic Pan-Africanism, and internal displacement in the United States and Canada. My research agenda, in sum, explores race-making across the US-Canadian borderlands, and the ways that African descendants imagined diaspora and leveraged transnational strategies to combat racism, resist nation-state hegemony, and assert their citizenship.