

Why don't Canadians know about slavery in Canada? Mythology & Feel Good Stories

Public Memory

According to historian Victoria Freeman, "historical memory is always fluctuating, contested, and precarious" (Freeman, 31). This means the story changes depending on who is telling the story, where, when, why, and how. The 'official' history, the story we teach in high school history, is Canada begins on July 1, 1867 with Confederation, so that's when we celebrate Canada Day. These sorts of big, public celebrations build up public memory, which is what Canadians collectively remember about the past. Freeman notes that if we start the story with the arrival of settlers (people not indigenous to the land they live on), that's not the full story (Freeman, 22). A fuller story includes histories of Indigenous dispossession, slavery, and racially segregated schools, so...why don't most Canadians know about these histories? It is a lot more comfortable for settlers to be proud of being Canadian rather than think about how the lands now known as Canada came to be. Freeman argues the state uses commemorations as a "politics by other means," influencing public memory to erase and idealize the colonial past to promote an "imperial future" (Freeman, 22). To be accountable, we should accept there is more than one Canadian history, and actively listen to and uplift the stories that point out our public memory has been made to forget a lot.

Transatlantic Slavery

Historian Afua Cooper traces the transatlantic slave trade Portugal started in 1444, which followed and financed the rise and fall of European empires (Cooper, 35). In the Canadian colonies between 1628-1833, slavery was legal, socially acceptable, and Black and Indigenous slaves were not just for the rich (Cooper, 172). Britain abolished slavery in 1834 for the same reason slavery was started: economic, not moral, reasons. The unequal racialized, classed, and gendered relations slavery set up continued to make colonial economies function long after slavery was abolished. Slavery is not just about race, because Europeans had a white slave trade before the African slave trade (Cooper, 33). Slavery made race, not the other way around, and slavery also made class, and these class relations continue today in our rigged real-life capitalist system (Whitfield, 43).

Underground Railroad

Canadians tend to think of slavery as American history with Canada as the final stop on the Underground Railroad, the route Black slaves in America took to freedom. However, historian Harvey Amani Whitfield tells us slaves in Canada escaped to the US (Whitfield, 19)! If escaped slaves were caught, they had to go to court, and this is why slavery laws changed. In the Maritimes between 1783-1820, slaveholders and slaves struggled to define slavery (Whitfield, 17). Prince Edward Island had slavery laws, but Nova Scotia and New Brunswick applied common law & Baptist law (Whitfield, 20-21). While some historians credit sympathetic white people or judges, Whitfield emphasizes slaves took their own freedom by running away (Whitfield, 21). After Britain lost the American War of Independence (1783-4) and Black Loyalists came to Canada, escaped slaves hid in free Black communities (Whitfield, 28). However, free Blacks still experienced intense racial discrimination in education systems and elsewhere.

Racially Segregated Schools

Histories of the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and resources and Black slavery allowed white settlers centuries to build up political power, social networks, land and money, which was continued by white settlers racially segregating schools. Filmmaker Sylvia Hamilton argues denying education to Black Canadians denies them participation in democracy (Hamilton, 0:01). Historian Kristin McLaren tells readers how Black Canadians were promised education, like all Canadians, but white Canadians changed the laws to segregate schools (McLaren, 39). In Canada West (present day Ontario), Section XIX of School Act of 1850 legally permitted racially segregated schools after schools had already been illegally segregated (McLaren, 38). School districts were redrawn to disadvantage Black families (gerrymandering), Black students had unreasonably long commutes, Black schoolhouses were underfunded, and Black students were denied admission into common schools but still had to pay school taxes (McLaren, 41-44). When Black people opened schools, everyone was allowed (McLaren, 37). Black parents petitioned School Boards and went to court at great personal cost because all children deserve education (McLaren, 41). When schools were integrated, racist white students and teachers made it difficult for Black students to learn (Hamilton, 0:58).

After four centuries, transatlantic slavery was abolished, but continues to shape Canadian politics, economics, and society two centuries later. Canadians, especially white Canadians who benefit most, should lean into their discomfort and question why do white settlers who make up the state apparatus try so hard to maintain a forgetful public memory. By repeating only one side of the story, there is no accountability for settlers or colonial states.

Bibliography

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