COMMUNITY ORGANIZING BY AFRICAN CARIBBEAN PEOPLE IN TORONTO, ONTARIO
AMOABA GOODEN

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Quebec Black Women Pulling Together

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North of the Canada–U.S. border, conditions, attitudes, and behaviors toward Blacks practiced during the time of slavery have continued sometimes in crude displays of racism, sometimes in more subtle forms. No Black is exempt—male or female, adult or child. Advocacy is unavoidable; proactive interventions are necessary. This expose deals with the little-known story of Black women challenging the Canadian system in an ongoing bid for quality life for themselves and their families. This valiant, ongoing encounter can only result in some modifications favorable to an improved quality of life for Canadian Blacks. In essence, Harambec opens a window on Black women organizing in Quebec under the aegis of the Congress of Black Women of Canada—a vibrant national organization intent on changing behaviors, perceptions, policies, and practice across the Canadian social, political, and economic landscape.

**Keywords:** Black women; Canadian Black women; Black women’s organizations; Quebec Black women; Congress of Black Women of Canada (CBWC); Black women’s history in Canada

A comprehensive record of the tradition of Black women organizing and strategizing in Canada, particularly in Quebec, is sadly lacking. The little-known reality is that for many years Black women have been very busy doing just that, continuously and untiringly organizing. The information in

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**Authors’ Note:** The title “Harambec,” minted by Shirley Small, is a coinage that locates Harambee, the African principle of self-help, in a specific geographic area, the lives of Black women and their families in Quebec, Canada. This word is minted to connote the ethos of African-descended women as they struggle to emerge from various burdensome controls and barriers they and their families encounter daily.
Blacks who had fled north—even though they were legitimately on Canadian territory. For several decades, freedom remained precarious, and even elusive, for many Black refugees. With the passing of time, the incidence of recapture dwindled but diehard bigotry and racial discrimination—a direct legacy of slavery—persisted. In many instances, promises of rewards of land to Black Loyalists (Ministère de l’Éducation du Québec [MEQ], 1996; Pachai, 1987; Walker, 1992; Winks, 1971) who supported the British Crown were not honored; in those instances when grants did materialize, the rocky, infertile terrain grudgingly given to Blacks rendered the land useless for any agricultural development (Walker, 1992; Winks, 1971); and in yet other instances, White authorities officially rezoned the land so that new Black owners soon lost title to their property (MEQ, 1996).

Well throughout the colonial period, this sort of denial, displacement, and exclusion was practiced in every sector of society by the highest officials in the land. Churches restricted the participation of Blacks in worship and even in the matter of burial (Winks, 1971). Employers confined Blacks to marginal jobs that required unskilled labor. Domestic work or menial low-paid jobs in laundries, factories, or clubs were the fate of Black women. Black entrepreneurs were denied the licenses necessary to establish and operate businesses, and those who did persist were hounded by the police. Housing was very restricted and substandard (Thornhill, 1979). Community efforts to address these needs were of necessity reactive rather than proactive and often were distressingly unproductive. But the community remained undaunted in its efforts to confront and combat injustices. The need for advocacy and representation was great.

**Coloured Women’s Club of Montreal: Progenitor to Congress**

By the turn of the 20th century, although slavery had long been abolished, the backdrop of racist attitudes and policies persisted . . . as they still do. The social, political, financial, and religious climate for African-descended peoples in the Dominion of Canada continued to be exclusionary and debasing. In essence, Blacks were socially marginalized, excluded from all but slave-associated jobs meant to keep them “in their place,” and denied privileges and participatory rights. Further victimized by the courts, they often were subjected to arbitrary justice and penalized with unjust punishments by courts that offered them neither remedy nor relief (MEQ,
Blacks attempting to register for military service during World War II were systematically and systematically rejected, and this caused great outrage and protest, drawing prompt action from community advocates such as Church ministers (Bertley, 1976; Winks, 1971). In spite of government and public biases, the war effort opened up new employment opportunities. With World War II inflicting untold hardships on countries, provinces, communities, and families, immigration into Canada was relaxed but still remained tightly regimented for Blacks who were deemed unacceptable because of “climatic unsuitability.” In the years following the war, immigration into Canada and Quebec from the English-speaking Caribbean was stepped up. In Quebec, the French nationalist agenda further filtered English-speaking applicants through a “points system”; with the 1960s, the doors to Black francophone immigrants started to open up somewhat.

In this new wave of immigration, some arrived as students whereas others came as workers in low-end jobs that majority-population Canadians refused to consider. Under new government policy, many Caribbean women were brought in as domestics if they fulfilled the requirements that applicants be single and without dependents (Calliste, 1989). Some fully qualified registered nurses also were admitted and a token quota of professionals was allowed in. For Black people, plagued by obstacles to equal participation, the problems of social integration in society continued, and even worsened. The need for organized, concerted interventions as a response to an undeniable collective problem grew more and more acute. In addition, many newcomers were educated, middle-class Caribbean immigrants who were more demanding, articulate, and assertive in claiming their rights. They insisted on inclusion and organized together so as to ensure that their voices were heard (Warner, 1983, pp. 11-12). Both in Canada and particularly in the Quebec Black community, the climate was ripe for the emergence of a catalyst, and one did emerge: The Congress of Black Women of Canada (CBWC).

**Genesis of the CBWC**

In 1973, the Canadian Negro Women’s Association hosted a momentous Congress of Black Women. This auspicious coming together of more than 500 Black women from across Canada was conceptualized by Kaye Livingstone, whose cherished dream was to convene a gathering of women of African descent on a national scale. This convention had such a powerful
Congress Philosophy and Praxis

From 1974 to 1990, the theoretical underpinnings and the practice of the national organization encompass every Black woman related to the organization, regardless of political affiliation, ethnic, social, or financial differences, or personal preference. Congress serves the women, often by assuming the role of an "elder" or "mother," and it is directed by the women of the organization. In keeping with this philosophy and these very simple but significant goals, and after critically assessing the organization's material reality, Congress realized that we can love, nurture, and honor our members. To create safe spaces where we can love, nurture, and honor our members. To do so, Black women in Congress chose as our symbol the charismatic, widely varied category of Black womanhood.

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barriers—access to training, recruitment policies, promotion patterns, networking ladders, colourblind union subculture—that operate to keep Black workers collectively on the periphery of gainful employment, bereft of efficacious recourse or protection against discrimination. (Thornhill, 1991, p. 5)

Mission, Breadth, and Depth of CBWC

To effect the radical change that is needed to ameliorate the quality of life for Black women and their families, Congress co-operates in limited ways with other marginalized ethnic groups as well as with mainstream White organizations. Such collaborators comprise church and community organizations, educator groups, university faculties, labor unions, government ministries and departments, school boards, university students' associations, professional associations, seniors groups, activists groups with local and international concerns, mainstream women's organizations, international women's groups, and communications media, including public and Crown organizations such as the National Film Board of Canada. These coalitions and liaisons have helped to broaden the platform of Congress, extend its outreach, and expand its sphere of influence. However, it must be noted that commensurate with its priorities, Congress is steadfast in conserving its autonomy to move in and move out of coalitions and eschews any alliance that threatens to dilute, trivialize, or dismiss the gravity of its issues, as articulated from an Afrocentric perspective. In other words, for Congress, the following rights are nonnegotiable:

- the right to locate Black people as full-bodied subjects and free agents,
- the right to name our reality as we live it,
- the right to speak in our own "voices of authenticity" (Thornhill, 2001),
- the right to signal the direction needed for transformative change, and
- the centrality of race and racism in our lives as Black women.

In all activities undertaken, the quest of Congress is to bring about fundamental change for collective upliftment and community improvement. Such transformative change is liberating both for the marginalized and for those who perpetrate, condone, or incite such marginalization. This type of change may involve behavioral correctives or it may call for the introduction of appropriate legislation along with meaningful policy implementation and effective enforcement. Education is one tool on which Congress relies. This education is twofold:
1. to quicken the understanding and self-esteem of our people, and
2. to heighten the sensitivity and sensibilities of those that habit and history
have so conditioned, either to dismiss crass and cruel behaviors as normal
or to trivialize bona fide complaints as the exaggerated, emotion-driven
figments of Black people’s imagination.

**Scope of Interventions and Activities**

Throughout the years, Congress has intervened at different levels of
public authority to pinpoint weaknesses, to urge and ensure modification,
for example, to school policies, practices, text choices, curriculum, and
staffing. As a community advocate, Congress has made representations
before the courts and administrative tribunals as well as intervened with
social service agencies on behalf of Black mothers threatened with loss of
jurisdiction and even parental authority of their children. Congress has sup-
ported community members falsely accused—whether by state action, pri-
ivate firms, or individuals. A third organization has scrutinized employment
conditions, practices, and policies affecting both men and women. Concerns
with Black community health and the working conditions of Black nurses
and caregivers also have formed part of Congress’s agenda. Lobbying in
parliament, participating in constitutional charter challenges brought before
the courts, as well as tabling briefs and memoranda to commissions inves-
tigating police brutality and wrongdoing have figured prominently among
Congress’s many submissions to state authority. Congress is a valid and
respected interlocutor appearing for the Black community before parlia-
mentary standing committees and boards of investigation and sitting on
committees of inquiry and consultative bodies. Ever in touch with the
pulse of the community, Congress has shoulder to a heavy share of partici-
pation in protest marches, rallies, boycotts, and vigils, locally, nationally,
and internationally. This wide spectrum of activities attests to the fact that
Congress has involved itself on every single front—wherever necessary and
whenever possible—in issues that affect the rights, status, image, well-
being, and progress of Black women and their families.

Even though the struggle is ongoing, many of these efforts have paid off.
For example, Congress interacted regularly on policy with the Quebec
Ministry of Education (see, e.g., Thornhill, 1978) and has had meaningful
input into the preparation of government-sanctioned teaching materials to
be used at the secondary level for the teaching of the history of Blacks in
Quebec and Canada (MEQ, 1996). As early as the mid-1980s, Black women
directly confronted the then-Minister of Education of Quebec, the Honorable
Camille Laurent, and held him publicly accountable for having approved
material with derogatory racist content. That objectionable material in the
textbook, La Lecture sous toutes ses formes, published by the Centre éducatif
et culturel, was later withdrawn! Under the aegis of Congress, the first-ever
Canadian university-accredited course on Black women’s studies—Black
Women: The Missing Pages from Canadian Women’s Studies—was concep-
tualized, developed, and taught by Esmeralda Thornhill at the Simone de
Beauvoir Institute of Concordia University in 1983 (Thornhill, 1983). Members
of Congress have been very active in helping to bring Black history
observances to the public agenda, and the organization has sponsored a series
of well-received public education lectures by such internationally acclaimed
authors as Beryl Bankfield and bell hooks.

In addition, the Quebec women of Congress took the lead and jointly
sponsored with the Chinese community a public education legal seminar
that addressed reparations and the need for the Canadian government to
redress historical injustices perpetrated under Canadian law on the Black
and Chinese communities. This model seminar was subsequently repeated
by Congress chapter members both in Winnipeg and Vancouver.

The robust twin beliefs that (a) Black is “Color, Culture, and
Consciousness” and (b) globally Black women, an endangered group, con-
stitute an international underclass battling against the “triple oppression” of
race, gender, and class have dictated that Congress’s reach extend into the
international arena. Congress was an active interlocutor instrumental in pres-
uring for political prisoners to be released from the cachots of Haitian dic-
tator Duvalier. Members also actively supported African liberation and
anti-apartheid struggles through rallies, vigils, dissemination of literature,
and awareness-raising campaigns. Congress remained sensitive to and
showed solidarity with African-descended peoples in struggle globally from
South Africa to Kanaky (New Caledonia). Congress’s representation on the
Organizing Executive of the Third International Feminist Book Fair ensured
that Black women writers were not only well and fairly represented but also
were allocated the “Black-woman-space” to which they were entitled. In
addition, the Montreal chapter provided substantive CBWC input and repre-
sentation at both the Nairobi and Beijing World Conferences for Women.

Even though Congress believes collaboration to be forged in the crucible
of confrontation, membership in Congress is not limited solely to con-
frontation and advocacy. Women enjoy self-affirming camaraderie at chapter
meetings, special social events, national conferences, vins d’honneur, religious
services, Afrocentric grooming sessions, and at opportunities to display
hobbies, expertise, and handicraft. Congress membership is well represented on other active community organizations such as the Quebec Council of Black Aging, the Quebec Board of Black Educators, The Black Literary Guild, and the Black Business and Professional Association. As part of its ongoing commitment to self-growth and self-affirmation, Congress sponsors from time to time in-group discussions and rap sessions, public lectures, forums, panel discussions, workshops, seminars, working teas, and conferences.

**Congress as Transformative Agent of Change**

Always working with other organizations, updating its own mandate, and expanding its involvement, Congress has, to a considerable extent, started to successfully mediate the marginalization that Black women's groups once faced, and the organization now commands the attention and respect of governmental and parallel women groups. Because most Quebec English-speaking members speak French with varying degrees of fluency, this has enabled Congress to overcome, in large measure, the hurdles of communicating in two languages and allows for direct dialoguing with government agencies.

In the more than three decades of its existence, Congress has had to remain steadfast in its stance for independence, self-determination, and self-sufficiency. This defense of its agency is absolutely necessary so as, first, to avoid being eclipsed by other groups coalescing or being convened under the opportunistic "multicultural" banner and, second, to escape becoming lost behind the "women of color" cover-all. This is a very real and constant challenge because absorption fades the focus and mutes the long-standing and pressing Afrocentric, race-driven concerns that Congress prioritizes.

The recruiting of new members, particularly youth, is the goal of every participant in Congress because the membership firmly believes that this renewal will enable the Congress of Black Women of Canada to keep its pulse attuned to the diverse and ever-changing needs of its constituency. Furthermore, prioritizing young Black women will empower and equip them to pass on to generations of women-to-come a positive sense of self and of comfort and pride in Blackness and Black heritage. In the injection of young blood lies the hope of passing on the baton of community service, self-help, and dignity both to Black women growing into adulthood and, consequently, to their families.

**Conclusion**

Congress is convinced that these continuing efforts, sooner or later, will bring about changes in the laws of Canada that will sensitize the Canadian public to the ills of racism and move the legislators and bureaucrats to entrench in law the necessary deterrents and incentives that would sensitize the Canadian public at large to still unexamined racism, which may be deliberate or unconscious, overt or covert. It behooves the lawmakers to summon the political will to make it abundantly clear that individual or institutional disregard and violation of such legislation will trigger meaningful penalties and sanctions on individuals and corporations alike—whether they are in the private or public sector.

In the tradition of the indomitable spirit of Black women, Congress remains strong in its determination to bring about basic institutional change and legal reform that could lead to a new day of equality in the daily lives of Blacks in Canada. The story of Congress in Quebec is merely a part of one missing chapter of the obfuscated story of Black women's history and our contribution to the Canadian reality.

**Notes**

1. "Material reality" means that which is real, concrete, and palpable (see Thornhill, 1995, p. 95, Note 20).
2. Marie-Joseph-Angélique was a Black woman born in Portugal, southeast of Lisbon, who was the slave of a Flemish owner in New England; he in turn sold her to the wealthy Montreal merchant François Poulin de Francheville. After an aborted escape attempt in February 1734, Marie-Joseph-Angélique was recaptured. Weeks later, on April 21, 1734, a fire mysteriously started in the residence of her mistress and rapidly spread through the entire city, destroying more than 46 buildings, including a convent, church, and Hôtel Dieu Hospital. Marie-Joseph-Angélique was accused, tried, convicted as the culprit, and sentenced to death. She was cruelly tortured, had her hand lopped off at the wrist, was hung, and then was burnt at the stake before having her ashes scattered in the wind.
3. Harriet Tubman, the most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, made 19 trips back to the South, leading to freedom for more than 300 people.
4. Mary Ann Shadd edited the abolition newspaper *The Provincial Freeman*; this editor, publisher, and educator later went on to study law in the United States.
5. For example, Article 47 of the 1760 Capitulations of Montreal stipulated that Black and Aboriginal peoples would remain in their quality as slaves, the property of their White masters (see Bentley, 1976).
6. See *The Emancipation Proclamation: An Act for the abolition of slavery throughout the British Colonies*; for promoting the industry of the manumitted slaves; and for compensating the persons hitherto entitled to the services of such slaves (28th August 1833) 3 & 4 Guelph IV A.D. 1833, Cap.73. CAP. LXXIII (cited in Thornhill, 2003, p. 116).
8. For example, the areas of East Preston and North Preston in Nova Scotia (see Thornhill, 2000).

9. For example, in Montreal, the Black community was for many years confined to an industrial area “below the hill and between the tracks” (see Thornhill, 1979).


11. Founded in 1902, the Coloured Women’s Club of Montreal (CWC) is reputed to be the oldest women’s organization in Canada (see Warner, 1983, p. 9). In reviewing its present status and performance, the Congress of Black Women of Canada (CBWC) proudly acknowledges the CWC and the Negro Women’s Association of Canada as the inspirations that helped to bring the seminal idea of a Montreal Regional Committee into existence in 1974. It was the CWC that acted as midwife during the years when policy, mandate, and procedure of the Montreal Regional Committee were in the birthing throes. It was that venerable grandparent body, the CWC, that backed the fledgling Montreal Regional Committee’s decision to promote the formation of a national Congress of Black Women of Canada, whose idea was formally launched in 1976.

12. Union United Church is the First Black Congregation of Montreal and was pastored by the Reverend Charles Esté for more than 40 years. Montrealers and visitors of African descent routinely sought out Union United Church as their preferred place of worship and fellowship—little did their religious persuasion or particular denomination matter in the context of the harsh reality of de facto racial discrimination.

13. The Immigration Act: An Act Respecting Immigration, S.C. 1910, c.27; Article 38(c): “Prohibits for a stated period, or permanently, the landing in Canada, or the landing at any specified point of entry in Canada of immigrants belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada, or of immigrants of any specified class, occupation or character” (cited in Thornhill, 2003, p. 352, Note 11).


15. Throughout the intervention of Congress, expert witnesses testified at a number of court hearings involving members of the Black community.

16. Congress played an active role when Black taxi drivers were forced to confront the openly racist practices of some Montreal cab companies.

17. “Sledged Out by Law for Unequal Treatment” is a Congress legal seminar initiative in collaboration with the Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC) around the Chinese community’s “It’s Only Fair!” redress campaign seeking indemnification and compensation for the few remaining, fast-dying-off, original Chinese Head Tax payers.

18. In fact, a unique Congress-sponsored workshop titled “Multiple Jeopardy—Silencer of Black Women” was videotaped by The National Film Board of Canada. In the interest of protecting one participant, at that time “undocumented,” Congress insisted that the film not be released for public consumption.

References


Shirley Small is a writer, poet, educator, and long-time community advocate and organizer. Small is a former English Department Head who taught for many years with the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal. She has delivered many public recitations of her poetry works, both in Canada and abroad, most notably at the closing ceremony of the 1985 United
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