

# Worlds Within

Diverse Histories, Identities, and Experiences of Black People of African Ancestry in British Columbia

*Reflections from five Community Reviewers*

"It shows the complexities - the nuances we bring. That we're not a [monolith]. We all beautifully just embody these different cultures and complexities."

"I felt heard. To see how beautifully, and how carefully the stories were weaved and honored, and reflected. It just really made me choke and cry."

"I didn't know that I needed it. I feel like for the first time, I'm not reading Black history from a white man's perspective. It filled my heart with joy."

"I saw myself in a lot of these stories. And I saw a lot of absence in my story as well. Being so disconnected from the countries of Africa. So, I spent a lot of time grieving. And I think it's really important to grieve, to let myself settle into it, and to then [move] forward."

"I didn't feel alone anymore because there were so many times that I just shouted, 'me too! me too! yes! this! that!'. I feel isolated, and I don't necessarily know the few [Black] people that I see. And I'm always so curious to learn a bit more. I think that was the biggest thing for me - that connection that I felt. It's a gift."

Alice Mũthoni Mũrage  
African Ancestry Project

Alice Mũthoni Mũrage is a social and policy researcher and an immigrant from Kenya, who resides in the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples.



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Public use of this report to inform dialogue around multiculturalism and antiracism is highly encouraged. If you wish to adapt or build upon this work, please contact the author via email at [africanancestryprojectbc@gmail.com](mailto:africanancestryprojectbc@gmail.com)

Self-published in Canada by Alice Mũthoni Mũrage as an output of the *African Ancestry Project*.

ISBN 978-1-7780980-1-7

Reviewed by Dr. Ketty Anyeko, Dr. Marie-Eve Bouchard, Dr. Maureen Kihika, and forty anonymous community reviewers

Copy editing by: Judith Nylvek  
(Creative Solutions Editing & Writing Limited)

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The *African Ancestry Project* was conducted in partnership with the BC Black History Awareness Society (<https://bcblackhistory.ca/>). It benefited from financial support through the BC Multiculturalism Grant, the UBC Partnership Recognition Fund, the SFU Community Engagement Initiative, and contributions from the SFU African Studies Working Group and the SFU Labour Studies Program.



**BC Black History Awareness Society**  
OUR ROOTS RUN DEEP

*To every Black person of African ancestry in  
British Columbia whose story has been ignored,  
untold, or marginalized in Canadian discourse.  
Your story and truth matters.*



# Acknowledgement of Context

The *African Ancestry Project* was conducted on the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples. Project participants joined from across British Columbia, including from Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, Vancouver Island, and the Peace River Regional District. I am grateful to live, play, and work on these lands, and stand in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples in their push for decolonization, self-determination, and redress for past human rights violations and injustices they continue to suffer. I commit to learning how to practice reconciliation in everyday living.

The project took place in a time of reckoning on injustices against Indigenous, Black and Asian people in Canada. Resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement following the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the United States allowed for a reflection on similar dehumanization of Black people in Canada. Discovery of mass graves in former residential schools evidenced genocide against Indigenous Peoples in Canada and reminded us that such harms are not a past that can be forgotten. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the surface pre-existing racism faced by Asian people.

In 2020, national incidents of hate crimes sharply increased to the highest number of incidents since data became available,<sup>1</sup> following a steady increase in the previous five years.<sup>2</sup> Hate crimes targeting race or ethnicity accounted for most increases. These crimes targeted Black, East or Southeast Asian, Indigenous, and South Asian people, from most to least by number of reported incidents.<sup>3</sup> Accounting for population, British Columbia reported the highest and second highest number of hate crimes in Canada in 2019 and 2020, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

While the *African Ancestry Project* focuses on histories, identities, and experiences of Black people of African ancestry, the hope is to inspire dialogue on the roots of, effects of, and solutions to injustices faced by Black people and by other equity-deserving groups who continue to be marginalized in our society more generally. I hope to inspire personal commitment and action toward social justice. Our struggles and freedoms are tied to each other. As Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”<sup>5</sup>



# Foreword

**By Dr. Yabome Gilpin-Jackson**

“Mummy, which countries am I from again?” my daughter asks.

I smile and immediately respond: “Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Canada.”

“Yeah, yeah, but where else? I want to know ALL the countries. Please, please can dad just do an Ancestry DNA test already!”

I chuckle and drown her out a little as I continue puttering around, knowing that I will eventually tell her to go talk to her dad to see if he’s interested in discovering more about his lineage, which would add pieces to the puzzle she is trying to solve. You see, this is a game we’ve played for a few years, a game that started when classmates asked her where she is REALLY from? When she noticed the difference in hair type and texture between my hair, her hair, her brothers’ hair, and the hair of both of her Grandmas. When she noticed that the melanated shades in our immediate and extended family ranges from white chocolate to dark roast. When she noticed that she was a different “Black” than the characters on her two favourite “Black” shows, *Black-ish* (and its spinoffs) and *Meet the Adebajnos*. And, even different than the few Black friends she has in British Columbia who represent the range of Black identities made visible in this report...and then some. As her questions have streamed in, we have been in dialogue, making meaning of the similarities and differences in our mother-daughter Black identities and experiences through our shared histories: she, a Black, first-generation Canadian/second-generation immigrant and me, a first-generation Canadian immigrant born to Sierra Leonean parents in Germany. Negotiating our mother-daughter Black identities would be complex enough but, there’s even more to our story.

Our family name is Gilpin-Jackson. This means that, like every Sierra Leonean with an Anglo-Saxon last name—the Coles, Browns, Johnsons, Hamiltons, and many others—who make up the Krio (Creole)<sup>6</sup> peoples of Freetown, my husband’s family understands that they are descended from the freed and repatriated Africans who were formally enslaved in the West during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. You see, these Anglo-Saxon names were inherited from former slavers, in the bid to erase the Black identity, culture, and agency of the enslaved. Freetown, the settlement bought from Indigenous Sierra Leonean locals by abolitionists for the repatriations, was populated by five major groups of Africans, who were formally or almost enslaved, and African descendants. One group was the 411 freed “Black poor” from the United Kingdom who were resettled there in 1787 in what has historically been seen either as a true attempt to support Black freedoms/self-determination or as an attempt to rid London of Black people by encouraging them to “go back home.” The second group, almost 1,200 Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia, led by Thomas Peters and supported by the British Abolitionists, Thomas and John Clarkson, left

Nova Scotia in 1792 on 15 ships to land in Freetown. The third group, 600 Maroons from Jamaica, who were renowned for escaping into the mountains of Jamaica to fight for freedom and who had been deported to Nova Scotia after losing the second Maroon War in 1796, were taken in 1800 to join the Black Loyalists in Freetown. The fourth group was a small group of approximately 40 repatriates from New York/Philadelphia who were sent to Freetown in the early 1800s; a majority of repatriates from America were eventually settled by the American Colonization Society in today's Liberia. The last group numbered more than 6,000 "Recaptives," that is, Africans on slave ships bound for the Americas who were intercepted in the early- to mid-1800s when the slave trade had been abolished but was still operating illegally. Our ancestors could have been from any of these groups. However, given our Westernized name, and the particular Krio identity and culture of our generational family—they are Christian and where they lived in Freetown—they are most likely from the groups repatriated from the West rather than from the Recaptives, who were predominantly Yoruba Nigerians and Muslims freed from slave ships. The latter retained their history, culture, African-heritage names and they lived in specific areas of Freetown such as Aberdeen Village, Fourah Bay, and Fula Town; they are known as Aku Krios.<sup>7</sup>

It is not lost on us that if my husband's ancestors who made their way to Freetown arrived there via Nova Scotia (whether Maroon or Black Loyalist), then we would be returnees, not immigrants—a generational boomerang. It also means that besides Sierra Leone, my husband's family could be from any of the countries along today's West African coastline (Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegambia, Mali, Guinea-Bissau, etc.) or a west-central Africa nation (Congo, Angola, etc.) from which slaves were taken. Our journey then would not be dissimilar from the character Aminata in *The Book of Negroes*, which is a book named after the Canadian Ledger of Black Loyalists, and who the Aminata Walk at the Black Loyalist Heritage Centre is named after.<sup>8</sup> Our storyline would pick up where hers ends in the book, with her arrival on the shores of Freetown, through a reverse migration back to Canada. However, one part of my husband's family lineage we are certain of is that his paternal grandmother was a Yoruba woman, from Benin City, Nigeria. She was sent to Kissy, Freetown at age 14 to be cared for by family living there after the unexpected death of her mother. There she met his Sierra Leonean Krio grandfather, married, and stayed till her passing. The rest of his African ancestry is still unknown and is the reason for my daughter's continued quest.

On the other side of our family, my matriarchal line includes Fulani heritage, which means that, generationally, they are part of the pastoral and nomadic peoples found throughout the African Sahel/Savannah belt from west to east. These peoples are believed to be the mixed-race descendants of African Indigenous Peoples, the Maghreb and Middle Eastern Peoples of North Africa and the Middle East, and Eurasians. This group dates back as far as 600 or 700AD, predating the Trans-Saharan or Arab Slave Trade, and Transatlantic Slave Trades of Africans. They likely grew and spread across the region because of the trades, their nomadic lifestyle, and their role in the adoption and spread of Islam in sub-Saharan

Africa in the push for Islamification, which predated western colonization and Christianization. My mother's lighter skin tone, longer, looser curled hair, and facial features give away this heritage.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, both my patriarchal and matriarchal lineage are predominantly Temne Peoples. Remember the Indigenous Sierra Leonean locals who sold the land that became the Freetown colony to the abolitionists? They were the Temnes of today's Sierra Leone. This group is known for their warrior skills. Bai Bureh, one of the most renowned Sierra Leoneans who went to war against the British to resist colonialism and who was ultimately captured and exiled, was a Temne warrior. We also know that the Temne Kings, Chiefs, and Sub-Chiefs who were the Indigenous rulers when the slavers and abolitionists arrived, including King Naimbana, King Jimmy and King Tom, were often in conflict with both the European arrivals and the Black settlers. Like the atrocities against the Canadian First Nations, evidence shows that these Temne rulers signed treaties they did not understand. When treaties and local protocols with the people they considered guests were breached, they escalated conflict by burning down the original Freetown settlement even though they also housed and helped the displaced Freetownians. Some of the displaced Krios then settled further into the interior for the long run, even after Freetown was re-established.<sup>10</sup>

The Temne and other Indigenous rulers may also have been implicated in the slave trade by providing staff for the Slave Trade Companies and colonists as part of keeping the peace, with active participation in slave capture activities with people they were in conflict or at war with, or by merely turning a blind eye to the slave trade. This is the ugly reality of the chaos, havoc and vicious cycle that was unleashed on Black people throughout the history of enslavement, oppression, colonization, and the worst type of capitalism—profiteering through the sale and exploitation of humans and, in particular, Black people of African descent. The dehumanization and commodification of Black bodies led to a reality of survival of the fittest instincts and internalized oppressive mindsets within us. It does not differ from what is being called today's Trans-Mediterranean Slave Trade—the movement of African peoples escaping economic hardships or armed conflicts who are trying to make their way across the Mediterranean Sea, only to face enslavement and exploitation by a variety of Black, Brown, and White actors, colluding in a world system that continues to oppress and exploit African descendants.<sup>11</sup>

I do not know what side of this chaos my Temne family hails from, whether warrior or colluder, or a bit of both. I do know that if it were the colluder, I stand to break the cycle. I also lived through and escaped from the Sierra Leonean Civil War, one of many armed conflicts on the African continent that result from ongoing neocolonialism and resource exploitation.<sup>12</sup> These ongoing oppressions and hardships keep the continent in a cycle of relative poverty and civil unrest; therefore, African and Black people globally remain vulnerable to in-fighting and exploitation. As my Fulani heritage also shows, exogenous forces and attempts at religious, political, and economic dominance of the people of Africa have been a reality for thousands of years. These historical complexities live on in my husband and me, and in our children. The impacts continue to be felt on and off the

continent in African descendants. As a 2021 Black Canadian national research study showed, systemic anti-Black racism continues to be prevalent: “(70%) of Black Canadians face racism regularly or from time to time, compared to Indigenous people (49%), other non-white Canadians (48%) and White Canadians (18%).”<sup>13</sup> Evidence shows systemic anti-black racism continues in education, healthcare, workplaces, policing, and the foster care system.

For all these reasons, I am steadfast in doing my part to illuminate the fullness of the historical realities that have led us here and the fullness of the present and future possibilities for an equitable future for Black people globally. It is why I wrote my short story collections *Identities* and *Ancestries*, why I research and write about Black experience, such as the constant “*Where are you from*” interrogation, and why it was easy to say “Yes” to writing this foreword.<sup>14</sup> This research and community engaged project is a gift of Identity and Rootedness to the British Columbian African Descendant community. The diverse histories, identities, and experiences documented here evoked a visceral response in me and in the focus group participants I was honoured to share dialogue with because THESE.ARE.OUR.STORIES. This report, though not exhaustive, provides a bird’s eye view of the histories, experiences, and identities of Black lives and lineage and will resonate with African descendant readers personally and with insights into our diverse community identities. It sheds light upon the many ways we walk this earth in our melanated skins and how we have come to be in British Columbia. This research and dialogue project is a gift to my daughter and all the daughters who share in the quest to answer the ultimate human questions: Who am I? What is my story? How did I come to be here? Where do I belong?

I hope that this report will propel all Black British Columbians, Black Canadians, and all Global Africans, wherever they read this report to further answer the questions: Why am I here now? What is my contribution to breaking cycles of oppression and to moving toward Black dignity thriving and flourishing for us and for future generations?

Dr. Yabome Gilpin-Jackson  
[www.SLDConsulting.org](http://www.SLDConsulting.org)

# Preface

The *African Ancestry Project* started as a vision in my mind months before I partnered with the BC Black History Awareness Society and receiving funding in February 2020. As a recent immigrant to British Columbia from Kenya, I yearned to learn more about the person I nodded to or smiled at in the streets—the person who looked like me. As I spoke to other Black people of African ancestry, I realized that others had a similar yearning to learn and connect further. Seeing this need, I dedicated my research skills and experience to telling our stories in our own voice. Through this project, I have centred our voices: voices of multi-generational Canadians who are deeply rooted in these lands; voices of first-generation Canadians; voices of those with African, Caribbean, South American, Central American, North American, Oceanian, and European backgrounds; and voices of immigrants, like myself.

The project was envisioned as a research and dialogue project to bring awareness to the diverse histories, identities, and experiences of people of African ancestry in British Columbia. Through the research, 162 participants shared their stories, thoughts, and reflections in a survey, and 40 further participated in interviews and focus group discussions. I offer my deepest gratitude to those who took the time to participate in the project. Thank you for being vulnerable and for trusting me with your stories, and for enabling a safe space that supported others to do the same. The focus group discussions were not just avenues for research but were spaces for community connections and genuine exchanges.

My deepest appreciation to everyone who believed in the vision of this project and who supported me along the way. Thanks to the BC Black History Awareness Society for being as enthusiastic as I was about the project and for your seamless partnership; many thanks to society members Silvia Mangué, Paul Schachter, and Fran Morrison, your support has been unfaltering. Many thanks to: Eva Sajoo for encouraging me to pursue this project and for your initial contribution to this work; Ketty Anyeko for grounding this research as an adviser and a reviewer; and, the Community Advisory Committee for dedicating your time, expertise, and wisdom to guide the project's approach.

Special thanks to the 40 community reviewers who offered genuine and thoughtful feedback on the first draft of this report. Thanks to project assistants who meticulously transcribed focus group discussions and interviews, which enabled me to analyse the data and quote participants verbatim. Thanks to Dr. Marie-Eve Bouchard and Dr. Maureen Kihika—your diligent review of this report was invaluable. Many others have supported me in various ways; thank you for your insights and for lightening the load as I balanced the demands of this project and my day job. This project would not have been possible without you. Any errors are my own.

With gratitude,

Alice Mũthoni Mũrage

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<sup>1</sup> The Daily, *After Five Years of Increases, Police-reported Crime in Canada was Down in 2020, But Incidents of Hate Crime Increased Sharply* (Statistics Canada, July 27, 2021), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/210727/dq210727a-eng.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada, *Table 35-10-0191-01: Police-reported Hate Crime, Number of Incidents and Rate per 100,000 Population, Census Metropolitan Areas* (August 29, 2021), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3510019101>

<sup>3</sup> The Daily, *After Five Years of Increases*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> The Daily, *Police-reported Hate Crime, 2019* (Statistics Canada, March 29, 2021), 2, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/daily-quotidien/210329/dq210329a-eng.pdf>.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr, *Letter to Clergymen from Birmingham City Jail* (April 16, 1963), 2, [http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document\\_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf](http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Krio is most commonly used to describe this people group. Although sometimes interchangeable with Creole (also known as pidgin English), which is the variety most commonly spoken by the Krio peoples in Sierra Leone and by many other groups whose language is a combination of local/Indigenous languages and English.

<sup>7</sup> "American Revolutionary War," Black Loyalist Heritage Centre, accessed November 5, 2021, [https://blackloyalist.com/?page\\_id=631](https://blackloyalist.com/?page_id=631).

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<sup>9</sup> Tarig Anter, "Who are the Fulani Peoples and their Origins," *Modern Ghana*, accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/349849/who-are-the-fulani-people-their-origins.html>.

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<sup>11</sup> Sara Cincurova, "Women Rescued at Sea Reveal Scale of Alleged Libya Abuses," *The New Humanitarian*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/7/27/women-rescued-at-sea-reveal-scale-of-alleged-libya-abuses>.

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# Introduction

The *African Ancestry Project* is a research and dialogue project that aims to bring awareness of the diversity of people of African ancestry living in British Columbia. People of African ancestry are typically treated as a monolith in Canadian discourse and policy under the social category *Black*, despite the vast diversity in their histories, identities, and experiences. The project aims to give a glimpse of this diversity so that when the category Black is used, it is used with an understanding and consideration of this diversity. While some participants of the project preferred not to be called “Black,” such categorization might be necessary to address race-based injustices and inequities, and to mobilize solidarity of the diverse people of African ancestry. Based on the research, preference is given to the term “people of African ancestry,” but Black is used interchangeably throughout the report. Within the Black community, there is also a need for this diversity to be understood as we pool together to address anti-Black racism and the challenges resulting from structural racism, and continue to build a vibrant community of rich cultural identities. This awareness has never been more important. As a wave of awakening engulfs us and as we confront all things racist, the goal of this report is to inform dialogue around initiatives that will bring us closer to the equitable society we envision, one where we are judged by our character and not by our appearance. This report, as a research output in its own right, builds on related scholarly work and dialogues.<sup>1</sup>

The research component of the project allowed for a systematic investigation of diversity with one overarching question guiding the study: What are the histories, identities, and experiences of Black people of African ancestry in British Columbia? A mixed method approach involving aspects of both qualitative and quantitative research was utilized. Participants were recruited by promotion of the project primarily on social media. Data was collected using a survey, interviews, and focus group discussions, with the survey collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. Research began with publication of the survey to inquire about participants’ family histories, their identities, their connections to Africa and Canada, and their experiences in Canada. After completing the survey, participants could optionally provide their contact information to participate in an interview or a focus group discussion. A total of 162 people of African ancestry completed the survey, with 40 further sharing their stories in 18 virtual interviews and in five virtual focus group discussion (FGD).<sup>2</sup>

Participants provided informed consent via email before being interviewed or participating in a FGD. Verbal consent was further sought before interviews and FGDs. Participation was voluntary and participants could choose not to answer questions posed, and could end their participation at any time without repercussions. To ensure data was accurately captured, the interviews and discussions were recorded through the Zoom platform and transcribed verbatim; the identity of participants remained anonymous. Data security was

ensured through use of encryption; the interview and FGD recordings were deleted after being transcribed. Access to the data collected is restricted and the identity of participants will not be revealed in the dissemination of project's results.

Descriptive statistical analysis was utilized in analyzing quantitative data collected through the survey to find patterns and offer a summary of the sample population. Quantitative data visualized in this report using tables, charts, or maps can hence not be used to make inferences or predictions about the Black population in BC but is only representative to specific sample in this study (N=162). The survey was also used qualitatively to map perceptions and experiences with the follow-up interviews and focus group discussions allowing for storytelling and a deeper understanding of what had initially been shared through the survey. Microsoft Excel and NVivo were used to analyze quantitative and qualitative data, respectively.

The project drew from various research approaches including use of a storytelling lens to understand narratives and underlying meanings, and to weave these narratives together thematically. Reflexive thematic analysis was adopted to analyse qualitative data with an emphasis on contextualizing meanings with the researcher playing an active role in knowledge production.<sup>3</sup> I, the researcher and author, take the role of a storyteller grounded in data and a review of literature, employing my cultural membership and social positioning in this work. Drawing from autoethnographic approaches in social sciences, I reflect on my family history (see section 1.5). In concluding the report, I offer recommendations based on personal experiences and reflection on contributions made throughout the project.<sup>4</sup> In this report, I use a first-person point of view; "we" is used sometimes to position myself as a Black person. A conscious attempt is made to not overanalyze the data but rather to centre the contributions of participants. In doing so, participants are quoted verbatim; these quotes are italicized.<sup>5</sup> Where participants' pronouns were not known, I used "they" and "their" to refer to a single person.

A community review of the first draft of this report, without the conclusion, was subsequently undertaken to ensure that stories shared were interpreted and presented as intended. Other people of African ancestry who did not participate in the research were invited to share their feedback. Twenty-one research participants and 19 other community members participated in six focus group discussions and two interviews reviewing the report's content; these 40 individuals are referred in this report as community reviewers. I primarily wanted to learn how the report resonated, whether there were any points of concern about how the stories were interpreted and weaved together, and whether important issues concerning people of African ancestry in the province were missed. By using the storytelling lens, I included some contributions from community reviewers within the report to offer a fuller picture of some narratives within specific themes. When they reflected on stories by other participants or remembered stories they had not included during data collection, some research participants who reviewed the draft report shared new stories or added details to their original stories, which are included in the body of the report. These additions are identified as contributions made during the community

review. Some reflections by community reviewers are mentioned in the conclusion of this report.

The study has some limitations. First, for legal consent, all participants had to be 19 years of age or older, which limited the diversity of stories represented in the project and excluded narratives of the youngest generation. Second, some survey respondents shared that questions concerning their connection to Africa were not applicable because they did not have familial ties to Africa. While responses to these questions provided insight on participants' identities, some participants might have felt that the survey was not relevant to them; hence, they may not have submitted responses or may have been deterred from participating further in interviews or FGDs. Nevertheless, 41% of survey respondents and 40% of interview or FGD participants did not have a known or current familial connection to Africa, which reflects the demographic distribution of people of African ancestry in Canada as demonstrated in the following section on participants' demographics.

Third, the project had a small sample of 162 participants. The 2016 population census recorded 43,500 Black people in BC, representing 1% of the provincial population. The number of people of African ancestry in the province is higher than this because some of those of mixed ancestry were grouped among the 40,465 multiple visible minorities.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the project offers only a glimpse of the vast diversity embodied by people of African ancestry living in British Columbia. The sample size was, however, sufficient to gather common themes and meanings that might apply to those of similar backgrounds. While data saturation, defined in qualitative research as a "point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data," can be met even after twelve interviews,<sup>7</sup> data saturation was not considered when recruiting participants for this study. The sample size was only limited by interest expressed within the project timeline; each person who expressed interest and consented to participate was included. Quantitative data collected through this study was analyzed descriptively to summarize and find patterns within the sample population and hence cannot be used to make inferences and predictions about the Black population in BC.

This report includes three main chapters: *Diverse Histories*, *Diverse Identities*, and *Diverse Experiences*. *Diverse Histories* focuses on participants' family histories within the context of the history of Africa, enslavement, and migration to Canada. *Diverse Identities* weaves participants' perceptions of their identities into a discussion around African identities and Black identities to reveal how identities of people of African ancestry are formed, sustained, and adapted to their environments. How they define and express their identities is also shaped by their histories through which they inherited their appearance, accents, and cultures. *Diverse Experiences* reveals how experiences are shaped not only by these histories and identities but also by social constructs, which determine societal rewards and penalties given to people of African ancestry. Identities and experiences are dynamic and they simultaneously inform each other. Assumptions about experiences of racism are challenged through an exploration of the role of intersecting factors in determining one's social situation at a specific time and location. The extent to which participants experience

isolation and feelings of unbelonging in various contexts is revealed. The various ways participants have carved out a space for themselves through community and cultural connections and by participating in mainstream Canadian society are examined. The report concludes with a summary, reflections from the community review, and recommendations emanating from contributions by project participants and community reviewers.

### **Project engagement**

- Community Partner: BC Black History Awareness Society
- Community Advisory Committee
- Research Adviser
- Research Participants
  - 162 survey respondents
  - 40 of the survey respondents further participate in interviews and focus group discussions
- Community Reviewers
  - 40 community reviewers of the draft report: 21 research participants and 19 community members
- Academic Reviewers
- Funders and supporters

In this report, the following terms are defined as follows:

- **First-generation immigrant** refers to a person who was born outside Canada and who immigrated to Canada.
- **Second-generation immigrant** or **first-generation Canadian** refers to a person who was born in Canada with at least one parent born outside Canada.
- **Second-generation Canadian** refers to a person who was born in Canada to parents who were both born in Canada, and where at least one grandparent was born outside Canada.
- **Multi-generational Canadian** refers to a person who was born in Canada, and whose parents and all grandparents were born in Canada.
- **Ancestry** is taken to mean biogeographical and cultural origins of a person's ancestors, more distant than a grandparent.
- A person of **mixed ancestry** hence refers to a person who can trace their ancestry to two or more biogeographical and cultural origins.

*The classification of generational status in this report is consistent with that of Statistics Canada.*

Figure 1. Terms Used<sup>8</sup>

## Participant demographics

Research participants were people of African ancestry who reside in British Columbia. The 162 participants responded to the project's survey; among those who participated in the survey, 40 further participated in interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). A majority of survey respondents (59%), and interview and FGD participants (60%) had familial connections to Africa, either as first-generation or second-generation immigrants. According to survey responses (N=162), the others trace their African ancestry through family connections in the Caribbean (22%), Central or South America (2%), North America (15%), Oceania (1%), and Europe (1%)<sup>9</sup>.

The majority of survey participants were born in Africa (48%) or in Canada (33%) (see figure 3 below). Among those born in Canada (n=54), 72% are first-generation Canadians, meaning that at least one of their parents was born outside Canada. Of the rest (n=15), at least 6 are multi-generational Canadians. Among the first-generation Canadians, 44% (n=17) had at least one parent born in Canada. See the definitions on the previous page.

Of the survey participants, 33% were born in Canada and 67% are first-generation immigrants. Of the first-generation immigrants, 17% have lived in Canada for 20 years or more, 19% for 10 to 19 years, 10% for 5 to 9 years, and 21% for 4 or fewer years. Among those who had lived in Canada for more than 20 years (n=27), 9 had lived in Canada for 41 to 52 years. These statistics, also represented in figure 5 below, indicate how 'rooted' or 'settled' in Canada participants are.

Among those who participated in an interview or a focus group discussion (N=40), 20 (50%) were born in Africa, 10 (25%) in Canada, 7 (18%) in the Caribbean, 1 in Europe, 1 in Oceania, and 1 in the US. Among those who were born in Canada, seven are first-generation Canadians and the rest, multi-generational Canadians.

The demography of participants resembles that of the population of Black people in Canada based on the 2016 Census. In Canada, 56.4% of Black people are first-generation immigrants, 35% are first-generation Canadians, and 8.6% are second-generation or multigeneration Canadians; hence, 43.6% were born in Canada. Between 2011 and 2016, a majority of Black first-generation immigrants were born in Africa (65%) or the Caribbean (27%), with the rest born in the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Oceania. Among the Black population in Canada, 12% reported being both "White" and "Black."

Below I use data collected through the project's survey to further illustrate the demographics and diversity of research participants.

## Illustration of participant demographics

<b>Metro Vancouver</b> <i>(n=123, %=76)</i>		<b>Rest of BC</b> <i>(n=13, %=8)</i>	
Burnaby	19	Sunshine Coast	1
Coquitlam	4	Lillooet	1
Delta	4	Kamloops	3
Langley	4	Kaslo	1
Maple Ridge	2	Prince George	5
New Westminster	6	Smithers	1
North Vancouver	4	Peace River	1
Pitt Meadows	1		
Port Coquitlam	4	<b>Total</b>	162
Port Moody	1		
Richmond	4		
Surrey	23		
Vancouver	45		
White Rock	2		
<b>Fraser Valley</b> <i>(n=4, %=2%)</i>			
Abbotsford	2		
Chilliwack	2		
<b>Vancouver Island</b> <i>(n=22, %=14)</i>			
Ladysmith	1		
Victoria	21		

Figure 2: Participants' place of residency in BC

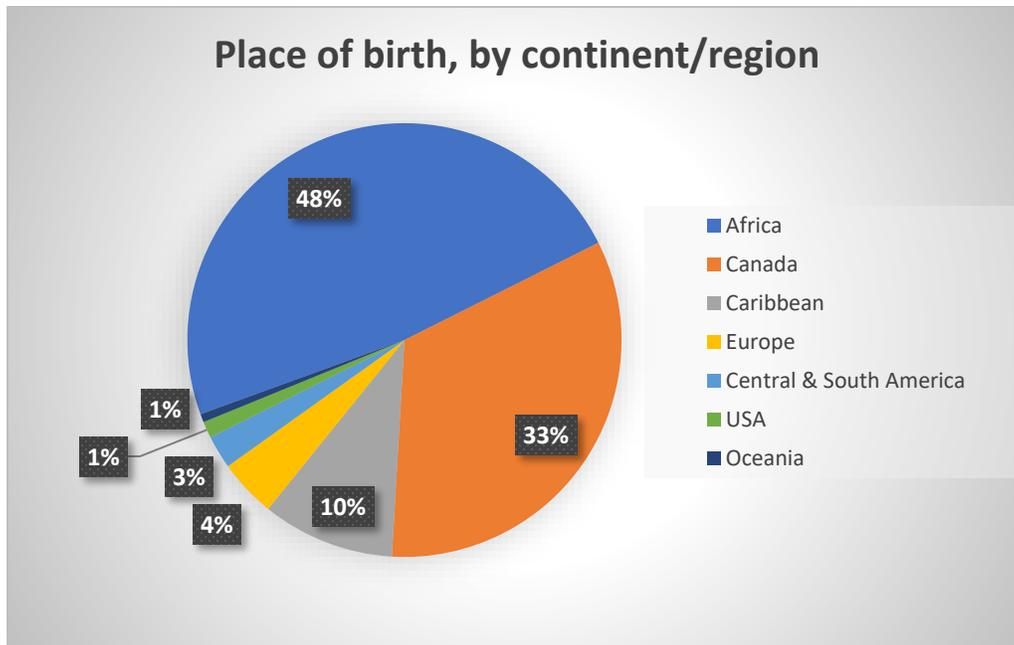


Figure 3: Participants' place of birth by continent or region<sup>10</sup>

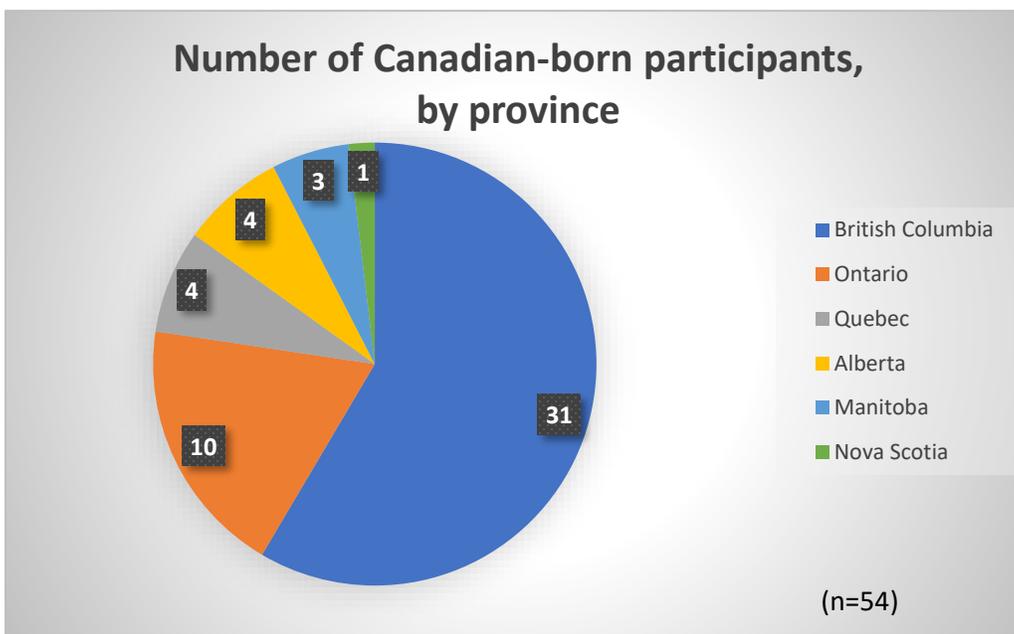


Figure 4: Canadian province of birth of participants born in Canada

*An indicator of migration patterns of participants and their familial connections within Canada.*

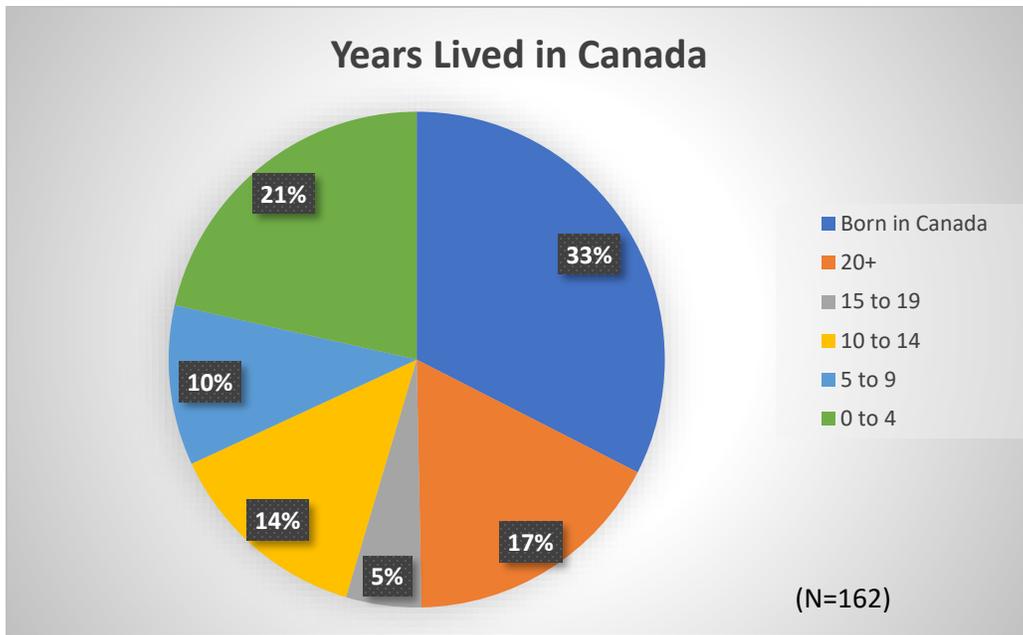


Figure 5: Rootedness in Canada

*An indicator of rootedness in the country. Those born in Canada ranged from seventh- to first-generation Canadians.*

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, over ten academics collaborated on a publication on the identity and belonging of people of African ancestry exploring some themes that emerged in this project. See:

Wisdom J. Tetty and Korbla P. Puplampu, *The African Diaspora in Canada: Negotiating Identity and Belonging* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), <https://press.ucalgary.ca/books/9781552381755/>.

<sup>2</sup> Four focus group discussions had five or six participants, and one had two participants. Two of the people who participated in a focus group discussion were further recruited for a one-to-one interview. One survey respondent does not currently reside in British Columbia but was born and grew up in the province.

<sup>3</sup> Reflexive thematic analysis approaches conceptualize themes from data as meaning-based patterns, with a researcher exploring and developing an understanding of patterned meaning across a dataset. Coding is an organic and iterative process drawing on a researcher's experience and subjectivity.

Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Nikki Hayfield, and Gareth Terry, "Thematic Analysis," in *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences*, ed. P. Liamputtong (Singapore: Springer, 2019), 843-860, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4\\_103](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4_103).

<sup>4</sup> Autoethnography is a qualitative research method in which the researcher uses self-reflection to explore personal experiences in connection to wider cultural, political, and social meanings.

Christopher N. Poulos, "Conceptual Foundations of Autoethnography," in *Essentials of Autoethnography*, Christopher N. Poulos (American Psychological Association, 2021), 3-17, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000222-001>.

<sup>5</sup> Quotes by participants are italicised in this report. Fillers such as "ums", laughter, and pauses were omitted. In a few instances, light editing was done to correct grammar. Inserts are sometimes included within brackets in quotes for clarification.

<sup>6</sup> "Census Profile, 2016 Census," Statistics Canada, updated October 27, 2021, <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm>.

Also see: Nick Boisvert and Raffy Boudijikianian, "Statistics Canada Exploring Changes to Census to more Accurately Reflect Canada's Diversity", *CBC*, July 17, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/statistics-canada-multiple-visible-minorities-1.6106571>.

<sup>7</sup> Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, "How Many Interviews are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability," *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (February 2006), 59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>.

<sup>8</sup> Statistics Canada classifies 'first-generation' as an immigrant, a person who was born outside Canada; 'second-generation' as a child of an immigrant, a person born in Canada with at least one parent born outside Canada; 'third-generation' as a person who was born in Canada with both parents born in Canada.

Statistics Canada, "Classification of Generational Status," last modified 30 September 2021, <https://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=117200&CVD=117200&CLV=0&MLV=1&D=1>

While 'first-generation' is used widely in the academia to refer to immigrants of Canada, some scholars specifically use the term 'first-generation immigrant' to avoid ambiguity because 'first-generation Canadian' is used in common discourse to refer to a child of an immigrant born in Canada.

<sup>9</sup> The familial connections around the world were based on data on parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who are of African ancestry. Some participants were of mixed ancestry.

<sup>10</sup> Canada and the USA have not been grouped as continental North America to give context to the participants' connection to Canada. No participant had familial connections to Mexico.

# Chapter 1: Diverse Histories

In this chapter, the diverse histories of people of African ancestry in British Columbia are explored through the stories of participants. First, I trace African ancestry through ancient African histories to a time of great African empires, kingdoms, and chiefdoms. Second, I trace histories of multi-generational Canadians, descendants of Africans who were enslaved and taken to North America. Their histories are contextualized in an era when Canada was overtly hostile to those of the “Negro race.” Third, I explore histories of those who came to Canada during a wave of migration of people of African ancestry from the late 1960s following immigrant policy reforms in Canada, and decolonization of African and Caribbean countries. These “pioneer immigrants” paved way for Black immigrants who steadily followed. Fourth, I look at history through the eyes of first-generation Canadians, the children of those who immigrated in the 1960s. They experience the joys and struggles of having different cultural roots, one of which is Canadian. Last, I explore history through the eyes of recent immigrants settling in Canada, those with two places they can call home, but not quite.

## 1.1 The African ancestry

The history of people of African ancestry is as diverse as the stories they represent. However, as the name suggests, we share an ancestry that can be traced to continental Africa and, with it, a right to call Africa our motherland. Africa has experienced a rich history of empires, kingdoms, and chiefdoms that flourished before European contact. The Mali Empire in Western Africa between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries Common Era (CE) is known for historic wealth in gold, early technology, an educational hub in Timbuktu, and the legendary King Mansa Musa. Such richness also existed in the Songhai Empire, the Ghana Kingdom, the Ashanti Empire, the Kingdom of Numidia, the Kongo Empire, the Kingdom of Aksum, the Kingdom of Abyssinia, the Ethiopian Empire, the Buganda Kingdom, the Kingdom of Kush, the Zulu Kingdom, the Gaza Empire, the Great Zimbabwe Kingdom, the Mutapa Empire, the Merina Kingdom, among many others that existed across the continent Before the Common Era (BCE).<sup>1</sup> The empires and kingdoms interacted extensively with each other through long-distance trading (predominately trading with or for gold) within the continent, even across the Sahara Desert.

If genealogical records were available, those who participated in the *African Ancestry Project* would be able trace their ancestry to this rich history and to one of these empires or kingdoms. Some pre-colonial structures and artifacts remain standing as remnants of this history.<sup>2</sup> The vast diversity of culture and traditions at the time evolved and continued in various forms even after the fall of the empires, kingdoms, and chiefdoms. The diversity of cultures in modern-day African countries points to the diversity that existed within a single

kingdom. In Nigeria alone, while the exact number of ethnic groups with distinct languages, cultures, and traditions is unknown, the number has been placed between 250 and 400.<sup>3</sup>

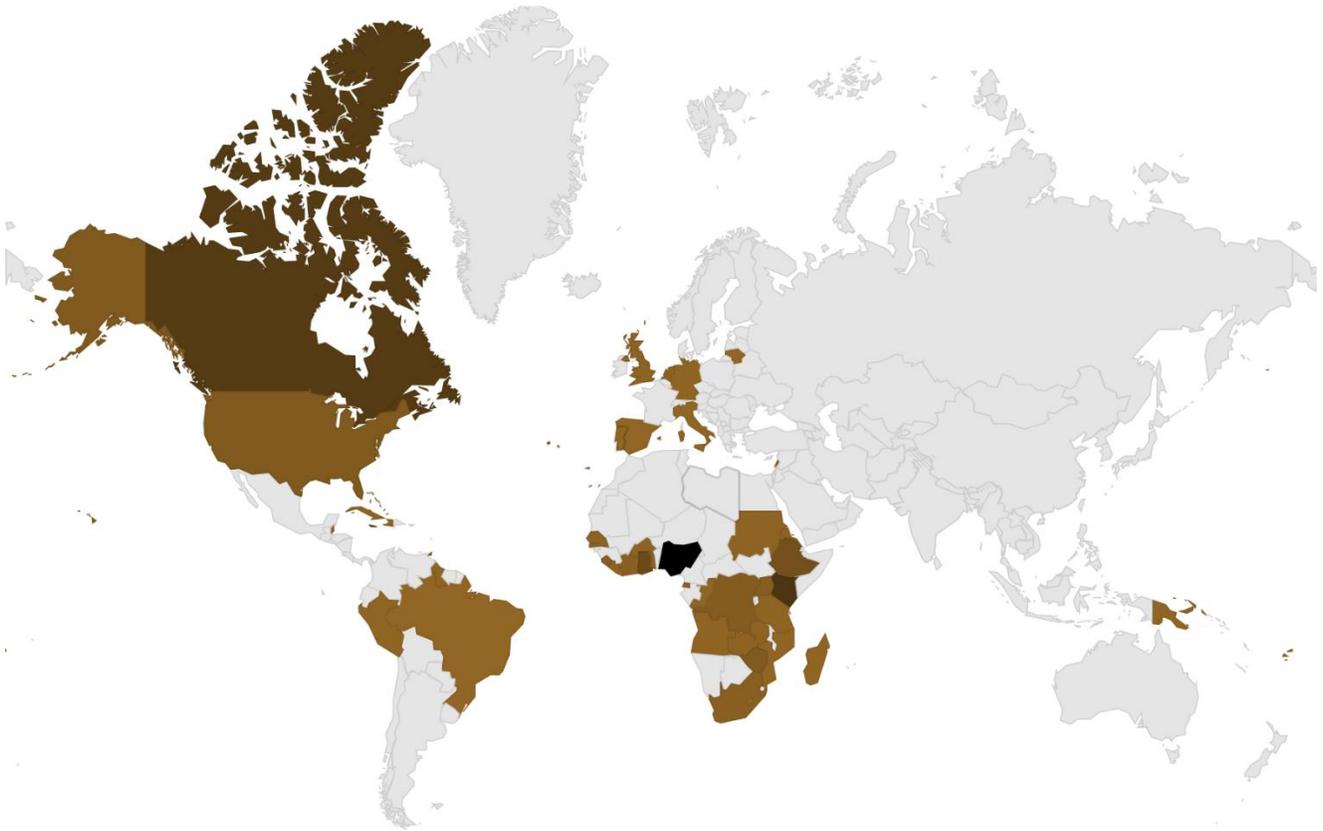
The start of the decline of African empires and kingdoms can be attributed to drought, internal power struggles, and increased conflicts among the empires and kingdoms, and the outside world. Africa was particularly devastated by European exploration from the fifteenth century and the subsequent exploitation of the continent and its people to develop Europe and its industries. Enslavement of Africans by Europeans began in the sixteenth century and concluded in nineteenth century with over 10 million enslaved Africans shipped to the western hemisphere in over 20,000 voyages: 4.8 million to Brazil, 4 million to the Caribbean, 1.3 million to Spanish Central America, and 388,747 to North America.<sup>4</sup> Slave trade, however, existed in Africa even before Europeans arrived. The entry of Muslim Arabs in the seventh century resulted in the opening of slave trade across the Sahara Desert. Although this trade was officially abolished in the twelfth century, it continued in various forms, with the Morocco Empire ignoring abolitionist pressures through the nineteenth century. The trans-Saharan slave trade which was sustained mostly by the Ottoman and Morocco empires resulted in the enslavement of approximately between six and seven million Africans in North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> African empires and kingdoms were further devastated by colonization, which intensified following the abolition of slave trade.<sup>6</sup> The adverse impacts of slave trade and colonization are still deeply felt within the continent and the diaspora.<sup>7</sup>

African cultures were, nonetheless, carried by enslaved Africans to other parts of the world. These cultures were adapted to various contexts and were passed on from generation to generation. Remnants of African cultures are found in the Caribbean, South and Central America, and North America in language, folklore, spiritual practices, food, music, dance, and other cultural carriers. A glimpse of this cultural continuity is observed in the ancient folklore of the Akan people—the Kwaku Ananse. *Ananse* means ‘spider’ in the Twi language. The story of a wise spider is commonly told to children in the Caribbean and is known by various names: Hapanzi, Nanzi, Anansi, Ananse-Tori, Aunt Nancy, Bre-Nancy, Brer Nansi, or Brenda Nancy.<sup>8</sup> Akan people live in present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast in West Africa and can trace roots to the Ashanti Empire. A participant of the *African Ancestry Project* who moved to British Columbia from Barbados as a teenager, grew up listening to the Bre-Nancy stories and likely shares an ancestry with the Akan people.

Much study is needed to gain an understanding of the civilizations that existed in Africa before the European conquests. Often the history was hidden or untold, but more and more of the rich African history is entering mainstream discourse. When unpacking this history, first observe from which perspective the narrative is written or told as many Eurocentric authors downplay the richness of Africa’s ancient history. In narrating the ancient history of Ethiopia, Hailu Habtu shares that “the formulation of Ethiopian and other African historiography by European scholars at times suffers from Afro-phobia and Euro-centrism.”<sup>9</sup> When asked about the history of Africa and its people in 1843, Noah Webster, a well-known lexicographer, responded, “of the woolly-haired Africans...there is no history

and can be none.”<sup>10</sup> In the 1820s, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, a famous philosopher of history whose work continues to enjoy academic prestige, shared in lectures at the University of Berlin that Africa “is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.”<sup>11</sup> Historian Robin Walker notes a deliberate erasure of ancient African history by Europeans to “make it look like they colonized and enslaved nobodies. When people have a history, that makes you a somebody.”<sup>12</sup> Bumni Oyisan further explains that Europeans not only erased, but also twisted the history to change the narrative to one where their civilization was superior to subjugate and dominate Africans and “colonize their minds.”<sup>13</sup> These contributions point to how recollecting the richness of our history could contribute to a collective consciousness of greatness and solidarity within the continent and in the diaspora.

We must remember that the history of Africa is diverse, and such diversity existed within empires, a legacy that we can observe in present-day African countries. The modern history of Africans on the continent and those in the diaspora, whose ancestors were enslaved and forced to the Americas and the Caribbean, is also diverse. Everyone who participated in the *African Ancestry Project* claimed a distinct history. These diverse histories contribute to the diverse ways participants identify themselves and describe their lived experiences.



**Figure 6: Geographical representation of participants' familial connections globally**  
*The darker the shade, the more the familial connections of participants based on where participants, and their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents were born<sup>14</sup>*

## 1.2 “Rooted here”: Histories of multi-generational Canadians

I spoke to participants who are best described as multi-generational Canadians, as one participant put it. Their stories shed light on generational Black roots in Canada that date to as early as the 1600s.<sup>15</sup> While participants traced their histories to ancestors sold into slavery in the US, who then migrated to Canada beginning in the early 1900s, enslavement of people from Africa existed in Canada from the 1600s.<sup>16</sup>

In the early 1900s, the Canadian government advertised in the southern US for farm labourers to come to Alberta and Saskatchewan, where they would receive promised land. Black people who were fleeing because of the oppressive Jim Crow Laws of segregation and the violent racism by the white supremacists sought refuge in Canada.<sup>17</sup> This migration was, however, met with a racist backlash and a public outcry against their migration into Canada. Through what has been called a “campaign of diplomatic racism,” an Order-in-Council to ban entry of Black people was approved in 1911 by the Cabinet of Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier. It read, “For a period of one year from and after the date hereof the landing in Canada shall be and the same is prohibited of any immigrants belonging to the Negro race, which race is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada.”<sup>18</sup>

Although this Order was not adopted into law and being Black could not be grounds for refusing entry according to the 1910 Immigration Act, immigration officers rejected their entry on medical grounds. The government started propaganda that targeted Black people in the southern US to spread rumours that life was harsh in Canada. This policy approach reflected the sentiments of government officials and was fed by racism. Frank Oliver, the then Minister of Interior, stated, “It is not merely a question of filling the country with people...[but] the building up of a Canadian nationality...This can never be accomplished if the preponderance of the population should be such a class and character as will deteriorate rather than elevate the conditions of our people and our country at large.”<sup>19</sup>

A participant whose grandparents were born in Amber Valley, Alberta, recalled that his great-grandparents had migrated to Canada from the southern US around 1910. He noted that there was a “little window of time” when migration from the US was encouraged by Canada, but by 1912 that window was closed for Black people. The open door immigration policy of the time had a hierarchy of desirable immigrants with Anglo-Saxon settlers from Britain and the US as the most desirable, and Jews, Asians, Roma people, and Black people as less desirable, in that order.<sup>20</sup> Estimates indicate that about 1,500 Black Americans immigrated to Canada between 1905 and 1912, arriving mainly from Oklahoma.<sup>21</sup> Despite the racist backlash faced by those who got to Amber Valley, they built one of the first all-Black settlements in Canada.<sup>22</sup>

One participant shared that his great-grandparents migrated to western Saskatchewan around 1910 and settled in North Battleford. They were among the original Black settlers

in the area who later became known as “Shiloh People” after the church and cemetery they established, as they were not permitted to join the local churches or bury their dead in the local cemeteries.<sup>23</sup> His grandmother moved to British Columbia in the 1920s or 30s where she may have met his grandfather, who worked as a porter at a time when Hogan’s Alley in Vancouver was a vibrant Black community.<sup>24</sup>

Another participant shared that her maternal and paternal families had lived in Oklahoma, but did not know one another; the families came to Canada in different eras. Her paternal family came to Canada as Black Loyalists after the American Revolution and they settled in Nova Scotia as land labourers, where they were given infertile lands. Her maternal family fled because of the Jim Crow Laws in the early 1900s and settled in Amber Valley; her grandfather moved to Vancouver where he worked as a porter and joined the vibrant Black community in the Hogan’s Alley and Strathcona area<sup>25</sup>.

With the promise of freedom and land, enslaved and formerly enslaved Africans were lured into joining the British regiments during the American Revolutionary War (1775-83). After the war, they joined tens of thousands of Loyalists who migrated to Canada and settled mainly in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. White Loyalists also migrated with approximately 2000 enslaved Africans.<sup>26</sup> The promises the Black Loyalists fought for faded as they faced a racist backlash and a corrupt land grant system that gave them less desirable land with no land title.<sup>27</sup> Approximately 3,500 Black Loyalists arrived in Nova Scotia during this period; almost 1,200 of them later migrated to Sierra Leone to seek refuge.<sup>28</sup>

A survey participant said that their maternal and paternal ancestors came to Canada as Black Loyalists and via the Underground Railroad, respectively. Their paternal ancestor would have been among the 30,000 to 40,000 African Americans who fled enslavement through a secret network of abolitionists, known as the Underground Railroad, from the early 1800s until slavery was abolished in America in 1865.<sup>29</sup> The 1793 Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada, a compromise for white Canadians who enslaved Black people, offered a way out of slavery for African Americans through the Underground Railroad by providing that enslaved people who reached Canada became free upon arrival.<sup>30</sup>

Because of the limited sample size of the project, participants shared only a glimpse of the histories of multi-generational Canadians of African Ancestry in British Columbia. Another possible history can be traced to the 1796 immigration of the Jamaican Maroons, descendants of Black slaves who escaped from Jamaica.<sup>31</sup> Others might trace their history to the Black pioneers of British Columbia, who migrated from California and settled on Salt Spring Island and in Victoria in the late 1850s. They were invited to contribute to Sir James Douglas’ agenda to establish a settlement in British Columbia, an opportunity that offered an escape from racial discrimination and oppressive laws. Through their commercial and civic engagements, the Black pioneers contributed to the development of colonial British Columbia and eventually BC’s entry to the Confederation of Canada in 1871. Their settlement was, however, marked by a racist backlash from white settlers and resistance

from Indigenous Peoples, who may have been fighting colonial encroachment.<sup>32</sup> A 2015 study discovered that a group of people of African ancestry from Virginia and Tennessee settled in Wellington, BC, where they represented 6% of the area's population by 1891.<sup>33</sup>

A community reviewer who added to these Black histories shared that her African ancestors were among those enslaved by the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. By 1861, between eight and ten thousand Africans were enslaved throughout Indian Territory, which were lands reserved for the forced re-settlement of Native Americans. The Cherokee Nation was the first to pass an act to end enslavement in 1863; Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole Nations later followed. Those who share this history might trace their ancestors through the Dawes Rolls, officially known as "Final Rolls of Citizens and Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory." The list was established following the enrolment of those who belonged to the five Nations between 1898 and 1907. Those who were enslaved by these Nations and their descendants, including those of mixed ancestry, due to intermarriage with Native Americans, are listed as "Freedmen."<sup>34</sup>

I spoke with several people who migrated from, or whose parents migrated from, the US more recently (e.g., since the late 1900s) and who shared their ancestor's painful history of enslavement. While they could be considered immigrants and their children first-generation Canadian, they are rooted in North America. Further, they could be descendants of African Americans who were captured in their attempt to seek refuge in Canada through the Underground Railroad, or of those who tried to get to Canada but were refused entry in the early 1900s, or of those who returned to the US following the abolition of slavery.

## 1.3 'Finding roots here': The new wave of migration from the 1960s

In the early 1900s, migration of Black people to Canada was largely curtailed because of racist immigration policies and practices. In the mid-1900s, migration from the Caribbean was sporadic and largely limited to meeting demand for low wage labour.<sup>35</sup> One participant shared that despite his father wanting to train as doctor, he was instead accepted into a nursing program in 1957, after which he immigrated to Canada and joined a group of Black male nursing students from the Caribbean islands.

In the late 1960s, immigration reforms took place ushering in a new wave of immigration of people of African ancestry. A move toward a fairer immigration point system meant that anyone who met requirements such as age, education, language, and occupational skills immigrated with limited discrimination.<sup>36</sup> However, the point system still disadvantaged people whose education, skill, and work experience did not follow Eurocentric definitions, which had racial implications.<sup>37</sup>

The change in immigration policies, nonetheless, saw over 5,000 and 10,000 people from the Caribbean immigrate to Canada in 1967 and 1971, respectively.<sup>38</sup> By the late 1970s, Caribbean migrants represented over 10% of total of landed immigrants in Canada. Most of them were technical and professional workers who faced systemic and institutional racism in job placement and in compensation.<sup>39</sup>

In Africa, a wave of independence in the 1950s and 60s was characterized by increased mobility of Africans seeking education and economic opportunities in western countries. A participant who immigrated to Canada with his family as a child noted that they were among the first people from Ghana to arrive in Canada in the mid-70s. It is not until 1971 that Canada's census had a statistically significant record of Africa as place of birth of foreign-born residents.<sup>40</sup> Migration from the Caribbean had preceded that from Africa. Among foreign-born people of African ancestry who arrived in Canada before 1961 (4,400 in number), only 1% were born in Africa, while about 72% came from the Caribbean, or from Central and South America.<sup>41</sup>

A participant who immigrated as a child with her family to Canada from Trinidad and Tobago in 1975 shared her family history, through which she can trace her African roots to her grandmother and great-grandmother who were born on the island of Martinique. Her ancestors were enslaved from Africa and taken to the Caribbean.

*I am going to make an assumption that my great-grandmother in Martinique was born free because in 1848 slavery was abolished in the island and my grandmother was born in 1898. So, if I make an assumption that my great-grandmother was 25 when she had my grandmother, it would mean that she was born around 1872 and she was born free and it is possible that if her parents were 25 when they had her, they would have just been born free. So, it's going to be two generations of being born free.*

The island of Martinique was one of the territories in the Caribbean administered by France from the 1600s and it remains one of the French Oversea Departments. Although France abolished slavery after the French revolution in 1794, it was not until 1848 that the practice was abandoned in Martinique.<sup>42</sup> When the participant's family moved to Trinidad and Tobago is not clear, but they may have been among the free Black people who, at least initially, continued to work in sugar plantations.<sup>43</sup>

Following the end of slavery in the Caribbean, labourers from India and China were brought in to fill labour shortages.<sup>44</sup> The legacy of this history of migration is visible in the Caribbean's diverse ethnic landscape. The participant from Trinidad and Tobago is of mixed ancestry: African, Indian, and European. Her Indian ancestry is predominant and is traced through her mother of Indian ancestry and her father of mixed ancestry. She traces her African and European ancestry to her paternal great-grandmother and great-grandfather, respectively, in Martinique. Although oral history passed down in her family indicated that her paternal great-grandfather was French, a recent DNA test revealed that he was likely British, perhaps explained by colonial struggles between France and Britain that saw the British control Martinique between 1794 and 1802.

The participant's DNA test identified her ancestry as 73% Indian, 14% African, and 13% European. Her African ancestry was traced to Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, Congo and Western Bantu, Benin, and Togo, which is consistent with the account that Africans enslaved in Martinique were mostly from "the regions of Biafra [part of Nigeria] and Sierra Leone...[and] fewer from the Congo."<sup>45</sup> Her European ancestry was traced to Britain and northwestern Europe and her Indian ancestry to Northern India and to the Bengali region.<sup>46</sup> Her rich and diverse ancestry has shaped both her privileges and struggles around identity and belonging.

A participant who has been in Canada since the late 1970s narrated his history by looking back at his journey from Nigeria to Canada. He was awarded a scholarship to study in the US and then moved to British Columbia to complete his studies. While he got the scholarship through a stroke of luck and because of his intelligence, he shared how his siblings came to Canada before him through scholarships.

*In those days, a long time ago [years following Nigeria's independence in 1960], brilliant people get opportunities to go to school either through government or through an organization to advance their education.*

Nigeria, although not a country at the time, was among the African nations that were most devastated by the slave trade. Some participants traced their African roots to Nigeria through DNA testing. Olaudah Equiano, one of the enslaved Africans who got freedom in his lifetime and wrote a memoir,<sup>47</sup> was Igbo—a West African ethnic group largely found in Nigeria. He was born in the Eboe (Igboland) district in the Kingdom of Benin. Olaudah wrote of the rich culture in the Kingdom, which had many musicians, singers, poets, artists, and dancers; dancing was a big part of the culture.

The devastation of Africa went beyond the brutal enslavement. The diplomatic movement inland by European explorers, traders, missionaries, and government officials turned aggressive and, by the late 1800s, following the abolition of slave trade, a scramble for Africa began. Empires, kingdoms, and chiefdoms were conquered and colonized. These acts were legitimized by the 1884 Berlin Conference and bilateral agreements that saw Africa partitioned and the territories divided up among European nations. Some argue that demographic, economic, social and psychological devastation, and destabilization because of slavery made Africa vulnerable.<sup>48</sup> One legacy of colonization is the redrawn map of Africa with borders of countries that did not consider local demographics, ethnicities, or political organizations.

In Igboland, part of present-day Nigeria, cordial trade relations with British traders and missionaries turned violent as the British interfered with internal affairs and later established a military presence. In 1900, Igboland was conquered and annexed.<sup>49</sup> The arbitrary partition of Africa into countries explains why Igbo people reside in Nigeria, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea. Following independence of formerly colonized African countries, ethnic nationalism, boundary disputes, and secessionist movements were common. Following Nigeria's independence, the Chiefs, Elders, and Representatives of Eastern Nigeria mandated that the Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria declare an independent Igbo Nation following secession agitations, breach of diplomatic agreements, and ethnic-based conflict.<sup>50</sup> Although the 1967 declaration of a Republic of Biafra received recognition by five African countries, with France and Haiti openly supporting the secession,<sup>51</sup> retaliation by the Government of Nigeria resulted in a devastating civil war.<sup>52</sup> The memories of the Biafra war are evoked by present-day retaliation against pro-Biafra movements and calls for a separatist referendum.<sup>53</sup>

The participant who immigrated to Canada from Nigeria in the late 1970s survived the Biafra war. He continued with high school after the war before pursuing a scholarship to study in North America. His sibling, a student in Canada before the Biafra war, was forced to stay in Canada because she "*was cut off and couldn't come back home*"; consequently, her grandchildren are second-generation Canadians.

Because of historically racist immigration policies, very few foreign-born people of African ancestry were in Canada before the wave of Black immigration that began in the 1960s; by 1961, only 4,400 Black people had immigrated to Canada. After reforms of the immigration policy, the population of people of African ancestry increased dramatically from 34,400 in 1971 to 239,500 in 1981, which represents an increase from 0.2% to 1% of Canada's population.<sup>54</sup> This influx of immigrants up to 1981 was from the Caribbean (83.3%), the rest of the Americas (6.7%), Europe (5.1%), Africa (4.8%), and Asia & Oceania (0.1%).<sup>55</sup>

During this wave of immigration, most of those of African ancestry came as technical and professional workers,<sup>56</sup> and as participants shared, some came as students and stayed. A first-generation Canadian shared that his parents came separately in the 1970s, one as an MBA student from Africa and the other as a Caribbean exchange student. Another first-

generation Canadian noted that her Caribbean parents immigrated to Canada separately in the 1968/69 and 1970, after being recruited to work in Winnipeg following their university education in England. These groups of pioneer immigrants, who entered Canada after the immigration policy reform, largely navigated uncharted spaces to finding a place of belonging and they paved a way for their first-generation Canadian children and for later immigrants of African ancestry.

## 1.4 'Navigating different roots': First-generation Canadians

First-generation Canadians, like their parents, navigate uncharted territories. While they were born in Canada, they embody two or three cultures that shape their sense of belonging, identity, and experiences. Some participants who came to Canada at a very young age have the same experience. They spoke of this as a bicultural dilemma, characterized by challenges in navigating both their parents' cultures and mainstream Canadian culture. Their histories are linked to those of their parents' stories of migration and their ancestral histories. Some were born in Canada when their parents were grappling to find their place here and to make ends meet, while others were born after their parents were settled.

A participant whose parents moved to Canada from Ethiopia in the early 1990s, shared that her parents fled Ethiopia in the late 1980s because of conflict and sought refuge in Sudan. They had to learn the language there and they earned a living working in a refugee settlement. Unable to see their future in Sudan or Ethiopia, they left all they knew behind and came to Canada after their application to the US was rejected. Around this time, western media was filled with pictures and news of the great famine in Ethiopia that left over one million people dead. Behind the famine, however, was a protracted armed conflict that can be traced to the 1960s. Northern Ethiopia's province of Tigray, where the participant's mother was born and raised, was particularly impacted by the famine and conflict.<sup>57</sup> The participant's parents were among the hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians who left the country as refugees.

As the country continues to work toward resolving protracted conflicts, the story of Ethiopia needs to be understood beyond that context. Ethiopia is one of the few countries in Africa that was never colonized, save for the short-lived occupation by Italy between 1936 and 1941. The Battle of Adwa or the first Italo-Ethiopia War in 1896 ended with a decisive victory by Ethiopia, which secured its independence at a time when most empires and kingdoms in Africa were being conquered and colonized. modern-day Ethiopia can trace its origins to the Kingdom of D'mt from the seventh century Before the Common Era (BCE) and, subsequently, the Kingdom of Aksum and the Abyssinia (Ethiopian Empire).<sup>58</sup>

The participant grew up without an understanding of her rich African history. She identified first with Canadian mainstream culture and associated her parents' actions as those of immigrants who did not understand Canadian culture. In her way, she tried to Canadianize them. However, as an adult, she wishes she had a deeper connection to her African ancestry. At the time of the interview, she was planning to go to Ethiopia "*[to] soak in the culture...separate from my parents, like just for myself.*"

Another first-generation Canadian shared that her father came to Canada in 1957 from Saint Vincent; her mother, originally from Trinidad, joined him in 1959. At the time, her father was trying to get into universities in Commonwealth countries to train as a doctor;

however, he was accepted into a nursing program in Saskatchewan. Later, the family moved to British Columbia for the warmer weather. The participant knew little about her family's history in the Caribbean or about her African ancestry because her mother passed away when she was young, and her father talked little about his life in St. Vincent. The participant's father left for Canada at the height of independence movement.

Much like the island of Martinique, Saint Vincent fell prey to French and British colonial struggles with the British taking control. St. Vincent has a unique history of Indigenous Peoples and Africans working together to resist colonial occupation. Africans landed on the island following capture by Indigenous people, after escaping from neighbouring islands, and after surviving the shipwrecks of slave ships of 1635 and 1675. The Indigenous people of the island were called Carib by Spanish explorers to distinguish them as hostile. The Africans were called Black Caribs by the Europeans and Karifuna by the Indigenous people; they called themselves Garifuna, an African modification of the later. Over time, the African population surpassed that of the Indigenous people; a 1735 report recorded 4,000 Indigenous people and 6,000 Africans.<sup>59</sup> Integrating Africans into the Indigenous Peoples' lives, including through intermarriages, resulted in cultural interactions in language and practices.<sup>60</sup>

Remarkable revolutions took place, primarily through the first and second Carib wars, in 1772 and 1795 respectively, which threatened and delayed the occupation of the British Empire. Following their defeat, most Indigenous Peoples and Africans in the island were deported to an island off the coast of Honduras, but many of them died from disease or starvation enroute. Back in St. Vincent, the British had full administrative control with plantations operating with the free labour of enslaved Africans. Natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and floods, and the abolition of slavery in 1834 (compensated for by introducing Portuguese and South Asian labourers) reduced the economic value of the island. A push for representative governance resulted in a legislative council in 1925 where descendants of slaves were excluded. Riots in the mid-1930s sparked by the Great Depression paved way for constitutional reforms and a movement toward independence. Britain maintained control until 1969 when St. Vincent gained control over its internal affairs; in 1979, St. Vincent gained its independence.<sup>61</sup>

While the participant whose father came to Canada from St. Vincent may not have known of this historical account, she has been thinking of her African ancestry and has considered taking a DNA test. Through her cousin's study based on oral history, she believes her African ancestors came from Nigeria. This is likely true because African ethnic groups that have been traced to St. Vincent include Ibo (Igbo), Efik, Yoruba, Fon, Fanti-Ashanti (Akan), and Congolese.<sup>62</sup> The Igbo, Efik, Yoruba, and Fon peoples reside in present-day Nigeria.

*I thought of doing the 23andMe. I have been trying to get enough information from my family for a very long time... But I did find out and had it confirmed from my cousin that my genealogy is from Nigeria. So, a great amount of my ancestry comes from Nigeria and my grandmother's father as far as we know—they believe that he came*

*from Africa...my cousin who is a schoolteacher, he knows some of the history being passed down from his grandmother because he lived with her. It is his understanding that her father came from Africa and his great-grandmother also came from Africa, but that is on hearsay. And he also said, Western Africa, Nigeria.*

This participant became very interested in her ancestral and family history as an adult. Growing up, like other first-generation Canadians, she tried to Canadianize her parents because she identified strongly with mainstream Canadian culture while partaking of West Indian cultural practices at home.

The bicultural dilemma among first-generation Canadians and the desire for genetic testing for those without familial connections to Africa will be explored in chapter two.

## 1.5 'Disruptions': Recent immigrants

The population of Black people in Canada has been increasing steadily since the late 1960s, increasing from 32,100 in 1961, to 239,500 in 1981<sup>63</sup>, to 573,860 in 1996, and to 1,198,540 in 2016<sup>64</sup>. These increases can be attributed to changes in Canadian immigration policies, increased opportunities for mobility and immigration from the Caribbean and Africa, and economic and political instability in some countries of origin, among other factors. Over the years, the demographic of immigrants of African ancestry has shifted from mostly Caribbean to mostly African. Immigrants from the Caribbean and from Africa represented 83.3% and 4.8% respectively of all Black immigrants into Canada up to 1981. By 2016, immigrants from Africa represented 65.1% of all Black immigrants, followed by immigrants from the Caribbean and Bermuda at 27.3%. Black immigrants from the rest of the Americas, Europe, Asia, and Oceania have remained consistently low. See figures 7 and 8 below.

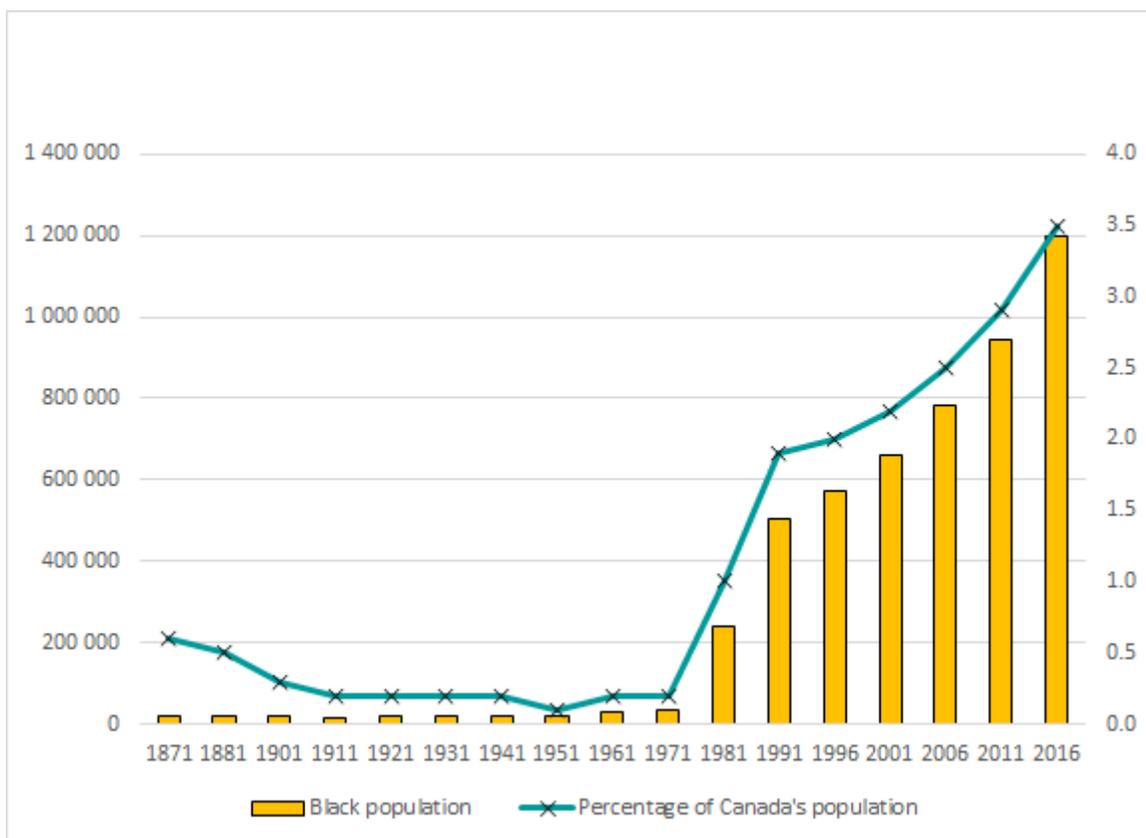


Figure 7: Number of Black people in Canada and as a percentage of Canadian population between 1871 and 2016.<sup>65</sup>

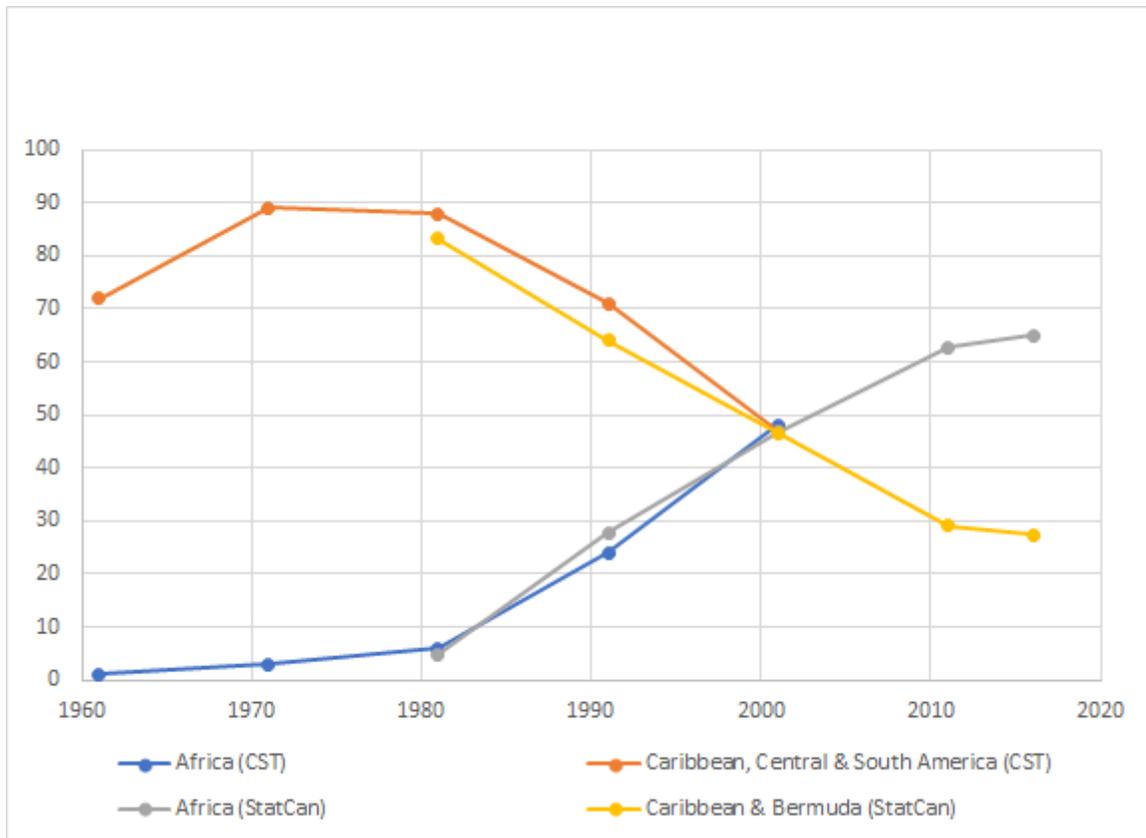


Figure 8: Region of birth of Black immigrants as a percentage of all Black immigrants by period of immigration<sup>66</sup>

First-generation immigrants represent 56.4% of the Black population, followed by first-generation Canadians at 35%, and second-generation Canadians and multi-generational Canadians at 8.6%.<sup>67</sup> This section explores history through the eyes of recent immigrants to Canada, those with two places they can call home, but not quite.<sup>68</sup>

The history of recent immigrants, as shared by participants in this study, is characterized by disruptions. One participant shared how his parents were the first generation to live in a nuclear family in post-colonial Burkina Faso. Disruptions characterized by colonization and independence included disruptions in “*culture, customs, language, religion, and economy.*” Besides adoption of the French language, for instance, the participant highlighted change in social structures such as a shift in the understanding of a family being an extended network, to the adoption of nuclear family living arrangements. Economically, opportunities based on the colonial agenda were centralized in urban areas, resulting in a rural-urban divide that encouraged urban migration. The participant narrated how his parents navigated uncharted territories after moving to the city in search of social and economic mobility as migration to urban areas increased in the post-colonial era.

*When they were raised, they didn't have a model of what it means to be a nuclear family and because they didn't have a model, they therefore didn't have the tools and*

*necessary skills specific for a nuclear family living...all of a sudden, it is one small, tiny house, and you see your children everyday compared to like a compound where the children are running around, you are not always taking care of them, because everybody else is taking care of them. And now you have to deal with the emotions, wants and energy of the kids.*

As an immigrant from Kenya, this participant's contribution inspired me to reflect on the colonial history of Kenya and my family's experience in that context. Colonization, as with the slave trade, had as its goal resource extraction. In Kenya, the British took the most fertile lands to establish plantations confining displaced locals to reserves, which were arid areas in which wild animals lived. The British government in Kenya imposed legislative and financial measures to force Kenyans, including the displaced, to offer cheap or free labour in these lands. Measures such as taxes and restrictions of what the locals could grow on their lands ensured that many Kenyans depended on wage employment in what came to be called the White Highlands. Locals were "transformed from landowners to squatters [workers who lived in the White Highlands] overnight."<sup>69</sup> Some squatters joined the Mau Mau armed struggle for independence that lasted from 1954 to 1962. However, the promise that their struggles held was soon replaced by other interests. With Kenya's independence in 1963, "decolonization occurred in such a way to ensure that the (British) settlers were fully compensated, and that British metropolitan interests in Kenya were safeguarded. In other words, what was termed decolonization was, in effect, Kenya's transition from a colonial to a neo-colonial state."<sup>70</sup>

My grandfather participated in the Mau Mau struggles and purchased back his ancestral lands. He and other men would sleep in the forests for weeks at a time during the rebellion. Ingenious wives, including my grandmother, would cook food, put it in bags, and make balls out of them for children to play with in the forest, leaving the food-filled balls for the men. Just like the previous participant, my parents moved to the urbanized capital city in post-colonial Kenya in search of opportunities where they started a life together as a nuclear family.

Colonial countries maintained social and economic ties with former colonies, which translated to favourable migration policies toward citizens of former colonies, likely influenced by linguistic and educational proximity, and labour needs. Citizens of the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, would have found it easier to immigrate to Belgium than Britain. Conversely, Kenyans would have found it easier to immigrate to Britain than Belgium. The favourable immigration policies by former colonies lasted until the late 1980s, coinciding the opening of countries such as Canada, which had been traditionally closed to immigration from Africa. Consequently, African emigration diversified.<sup>71</sup>

A participant, who identifies as a Black European, traces her African roots to São Tomé and Príncipe where her parents were born and raised before moving to Portugal in the 1970s to seek a better life for themselves and their children. Having been born in Portugal

without ever visiting São Tomé and Príncipe or having any direct connection to her African culture, she saw herself as only Portuguese. As an adult, she has come to learn and appreciate her family history. Her great-great-grandfather is believed to have been a formerly enslaved African who migrated to São Tomé and Príncipe from Brazil. He is remembered for always wearing white, a religious practice by Afro-Brazilians believed to increase closeness to orixás.<sup>72</sup> These African deities can be traced to the Yoruba people mostly found in present-day Nigeria, Benin, and Togo.<sup>73</sup> The participant's European and Asian heritages can be traced through her maternal and paternal grandfathers. Her maternal grandfather was among the white Portuguese who settled in colonial Angola. He fled to São Tomé and Príncipe during the Angolan struggles for independence. Her paternal grandfather was from Macao, through migration likely linked to Portuguese colonial ties.

Recent immigrants shared that they moved to Canada as adults for education and career opportunities, to reunite with family, and to seek safety. Multiculturalism, political stability, and pathways to citizenship also made Canada a more attractive destination country compared to others. In a focus group discussion with immigrants from Africa, the consensus was that political instability, corruption, and limited economic opportunities were significant factors they considered when seeking opportunities in western countries. The increasing "brain drain" from Africa, and some degree of "brain circulation" within the continent, has been attributed to these factors.<sup>74</sup> Participants shared:

*The only frustrating thing for me is the political situation in Africa. Otherwise, the economic and social are very best in Africa. So, I will see if Africa gets stabilized in the next decade. I want to live in Africa.*

*I would love to go back to Zimbabwe. However, in terms of opportunities and financial stability and the way the politics work there, it would be very difficult to succeed and to be able to support the people who depend upon me and that's very sad.*

*If Nigeria had a level playing field for me to get my right education, for me to get my job without actually bribing or going through crooked means, I probably wouldn't think about leaving because things are working.*

*I have come to realize that most people really wouldn't embark on any journey if Africa was in good shape.*

The wars of independence fought across the continent did not translate to freedom and political stability in most African countries. Anthony Ong'ayo writes that "Africa is still haunted by historical injustices and oppressive structures that were bequeathed to the post-colonial leadership," noting that political stability for development is also undermined by poor leadership and external geo-political and economic interests.<sup>75</sup> Internally, political participation has progressed as young people increasingly demand political freedom, good leadership, fiscal accountability, and equitable policies.<sup>76</sup>

For a recent immigrant from Eritrea, however, political participation for change was not an option. He fled religious persecution when the government prohibited some religious

groups, political parties, and nongovernmental organizations, and where opposition was met by imprisonment. He remembered how *“in 2002, the Eritrean government banned all churches and started persecution and our pastors have been in prison for 17, 18 years.”* He was forced into military college and then forced to continue in service as a teacher for the military after his graduation, an experience he described as imprisonment. Despite a decree limiting national service for all 18-year-olds to 18 months, forced conscription is reported to be prolonged indefinitely with the conscript being subject, with no recourse, to inhuman treatment including punishment by torture.<sup>77</sup> He and his brother, who had been imprisoned, embarked on a physically difficult, very risky, and expensive journey across the Sahara, assisted by smugglers, to Sudan, and through Egypt to Israel. Almost 15% of the population has fled Eritrea since 1998.<sup>78</sup> In Israel, he faced discrimination based on religion, blatant racism, and restrictions on pursuing an education. He lamented that the eight years in Israel were wasted years.

*The risk (taken to reach Israel) was a life risk. It was not worth it to pay such kind of risk even though it is better than my homeland.*

Like other Africans in Israel, he searched for options to seek asylum in another country. He eventually got asylum in Canada. However, due to slow and unpredictable asylum-seeking processes, his brother took the risky journey back to Africa. His, and other participants' stories, seem to have resonance to a comment made by another participant, *“My journey is a thread of disruption all the way ‘til now, for some years until now has been to find something I can call grounding.”*

A participant from Ghana highlighted that in countries like hers, which are politically and fiscally stable, migration can be driven by the adventure to have a different experience. Even in countries experiencing political and/or fiscal instability, some prosper in their home countries and migrate for the adventure. In an interview, a participant who migrated from Nigeria, noted that, to follow his dream of living abroad, he had to forgo luxuries such as having a cook and a driver.

*You know you are used to something different but in this part of the world, you have to do everything yourself...I have a mindset that I can survive anywhere. I have made my decision and I want to make it work. It is just that the process might be quite different.*

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<sup>1</sup> For deep dive into the African pre-colonial empires, kingdoms, and chiefdoms, see: Molefi Kete Asante, *The History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (Routledge, 2007). Robin Walker, *If you Want to Learn Early African History Start Here* (CreateSpace, 2015) Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Africa's Greatest Civilizations* (McGee Media, Inkwell Films and Kunhardt Films, 2017), film, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6ujhce>. Zeinab Badawi, *Kingdom of Kush - History of Africa*, film, BBC News Africa, April 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwaP1kyAqqo>. Zeinab Badawi, *Kingdom of Aksum- History of Africa*, film, BBC News Africa, April 9, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4OSEpexs\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4OSEpexs_Q). Zeinab Badawi, *Southern Kingdoms- History of Africa*, film, BBC News Africa, April 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdSupLM4zAA>. Zeinab Badawi, *North Africa- History of Africa*, film, BBC News Africa, April 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCKPyAHgX7U>. Zeinab Badawi, *Desert Empires*, film, BBC News Africa, April 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shEU4PQUxxA>. Note that in some cases, the terms kingdom and empire have been used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to pre-colonial structures featured in films in note 25, see: Haru Mutasa, *Great Zimbabwe*, film, Al Jazeera English, May 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVNoSvqT3zk>. Núria Castellano, "Rival to Egypt, the Nubian Kingdom of Kush Exuded Power and Gold", *National Geographic*, accessed January 7, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/ancient-egypt-nubian-kingdom-pyramids-sudan>. <sup>3</sup> Fasiku Gbenga, "Ethnicity in Nigeria," *Philosophia Africana* 11, No. 2 (2008), 149, <https://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/philosophia-africana/article/11/2/141/262103/Ethnicity-in-Nigeria>.

<sup>4</sup> Josh Jones, "The Atlantic Slave Trade Visualized in Two Minutes: 10 Million Lives, 20,000 Voyages, Over 315 Years", *Open Culture*, June 14, 2016, <https://www.openculture.com/2016/06/the-atlantic-slave-trade-visualized-in-two-minutes.html>.

For a detailed exploration of the history of enslavement of Africans, see the digital memorial databases: "Slave Voyages," Slave Voyages, <https://www.slavevoyages.org>.

Other selected literature in starting to understand the transatlantic slave trade from various perspectives: Zeinab Badawi, *Slavery and Suffering- History of Africa*, film, BBC News Africa, October 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajl8lkYdmAk&list=PLajyiGz4JeyPq2lpEt2skZRhQsAspIQcP&index=17>. "Slavery Narratives - Moad Museum of African Diaspora," Moad Museum of African Diaspora, <https://www.moadsf.org/slavery-narratives/>.

Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440-1870* (Simon Schuster, 1999).

Fictional novels exploring this history:

Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing* (Vintage, 2017); Lawrence Hill, *Book of Negroes* (Harper Collins, 2007). The latter has been adapted into film: CBC, *The Book of Negroes*, film, <https://gem.cbc.ca/media/the-book-of-negroes/s01>.

<sup>5</sup> John Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007). Memories of the trans-Saharan slave trade live on through voices of the Collective for Black Iranians and the Ismkhan people in Morocco. See:

Cynthia Becker, "We are Real Slaves, Real Ismkhan': Memories of the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade in the Tafilalet of South-Eastern Morocco," *The Journal of North African Studies* 7, no. 4 (March 2007): 97-121, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13629380208718485>.

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<sup>6</sup> Selected reading on European colonization:

A. Adu Boahen, *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

- Aimè Césaire, *Discourse on Colonization* (Monthly Review Press, 2001).
- Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Penguin Books, 1994).
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* (Civitas Books, 2009).
- <sup>7</sup> Selected reading on the impact of the colonization:  
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<sup>65</sup> This chart utilizes two sets of data to offer a full picture of the Black population in Canada from 1871 thru to 2016.

Data set 1: Anne Milan and Kelly Tran, *Blacks in Canada: A Long History* (Statistics Canada, 2004), 3.

Data set 2: Hélène Maheux and Deniz Do, *Diversity of the Black population in Canada: An Overview* (Statistics Canada, 2019), chart 1.

<sup>66</sup> This chart utilizes two sets of data to offer a fuller picture of migration patterns from 1960 thru to 2016. The first dataset combines data on immigrants from the Caribbean and Central & South America. Since migration from Central and South America was low, it can be assumed that most of the recorded migration came from the Caribbean; likely accounting for the difference between the first data set (in orange) and second data set (in yellow).

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<sup>68</sup> New immigrants or newcomers are defined by Statistics Canada as landed immigrants who came to Canada up to five years prior to a given census year. This section, however, considers narratives of immigrants who have been in Canada for between one year and 15 years, with a majority having lived in Canada for less than 10 years. Their account of settling into Canada as new immigrants is relevant for this section.

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<sup>73</sup> Maria L. Nunes, "The Preservation of African Culture in Brazilian Literature: The Novels of Jorge Amado," *Luso-Brazilian Review* 10, no. 1 (July 1973): 86-101, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3513036>.

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<sup>75</sup> Anthony O. Ong'ayo, "Political Instability in Africa," 2.

Recommended reads on political stability and colonization:

Robert Blanton, T. David Mason, and Brian Athow, "Colonial Style and Post-Colonial Ethnic Conflict in Africa," *Journal of Peace Research* 38, no. 4 (July 2001): 473-491, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343301038004005>.

Nic Cheeseman and Jonathan Fisher, "How Colonial Rule Predisposed Africa to Fragile Authoritarianism," *The Conversation*, October 31, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/how-colonial-rule-predisposed-africa-to-fragile-authoritarianism-126114>.

Alexandra Dumitru and Raphie Hayat, "Sub-Saharan Africa: Political more Stable, but Fragile," *Economic Research of Rabobank*, December 03, 2015,

<https://economics.rabobank.com/publications/2015/december/sub-saharan-africa-politically-more-stable-but-still-fragile/>.

<sup>76</sup> Moky Makura, "Africa's youth: Busting myths and creating change," *The Africa Report*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/49657/africas-youth-busting-myths-and-creating-change/>.

Tafadzwa Maganga, "Youth Demonstrations and their impact on Political Change and Development in Africa," *ACCORD*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/youth-demonstrations-and-their-impact-on-political-change-and-development-in-africa/>.

<sup>77</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Word Report: Eritrea* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2019),

[https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/hrw\\_world\\_report\\_2019.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/hrw_world_report_2019.pdf).

<sup>78</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Word Report: Eritrea*, 204.

Also see:

Office of International Religious Freedom, *2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Eritrea* (U.S. Department of State, 2019), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/eritrea/>.

## Chapter 2: Diverse Identities

In this chapter, the diverse identities of people of African ancestry in British Columbia are explored as shared by the project's participants. Participation in the project was based on self-identification of participants as Black and of African ancestry. Over the course of the project, it became clear that some participants self-identified with only one of these identities. Some participants had reservations about identifying as Black while others had reservation about claiming African roots. What also became clear was the fluidity of how participants self-identified. Some participants, whose African connection was severed because of the history of enslavement and displacement, shared their quest to seek those roots and to embrace their Africanness. Some immigrants from Africa shared how they learned or were learning to embrace their Blackness. Also centred are the cultural experiences of first-generation Canadians, who find themselves navigating distinct cultural identities. Participants demonstrate that identity, as a set of attributes, beliefs, principles, or aspirations, is not an outcome but a process of reflecting on one's relationship with oneself, others, one's experiences, and one's ancestry.

When discussing identity, this report will reflect on this fluidity and will draw from the definitions of other thinkers. Identity is explored as:

- Socially constructed: "distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes."<sup>1</sup>
- Mutually constructed: emerging from sets of meanings attributed to oneself "while taking the perspectives of others."<sup>2</sup>
- Embracing personal distinguishing characteristic(s): one in which "a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more or less unchangeable."<sup>3</sup>
- Contingent on history: A "unique product of our particular historical context."<sup>4</sup>
- Complex: An "unsettled space, or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses...Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point."<sup>5</sup>
- Political and intersectional: A "product of the matrices of oppression and resistance that intersectionality helps us identify and dismantle."<sup>6</sup>
- Morphing: "Never fixed or stable, even provisionally, but always becoming."<sup>7</sup>

## 2.1 Black identities

The Black identity often comes with negative connotations and a historical context that can be traced back to European efforts to create a human hierarchy. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) asserted that Greeks were superior to all non-Greeks noting that “extreme hot or cold climates produced intellectually, physically, and morally inferior people who are ugly and lacked the capacity for freedom and self-governance,” labelling Africans “burnt faces.”<sup>8</sup> These assertions were used to normalize expansion and slaveholding by the Greeks. Over the years, this and other theories that hierarchize humans were used to justify inferiority of Africans and rationalize their enslavement and colonization. A 1453 biography by a Portuguese chronicler, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, began the recorded history of anti-Black racism; the biography became well-circulated in Europe mobilizing concerted efforts in the enslavement of Africans by reducing them to “barbarians who desperately needed not only religious but also civil salvation.”<sup>9</sup>

Abolition of enslavement and colonization did not eliminate the deep-seated notion of a human hierarchy based on skin colour, and systems that supported and benefited from this notion. This is evidenced by the current existence of racism and the hierarchy in the expression and experience of racism. While science has debunked the myth that a person’s capabilities can be attributed to a person’s skin colour, this myth continues to play out in racialized stereotypes. There are also myths about the experience of oppression contributing to Black people’s inferiority, to which Ibram Kendi writes that the “history of oppression has made Black opportunities—not Black people—inferior.”<sup>10</sup> Kenan Malik observed that, “in the end it mattered little that the scientific basis of racial divisions was tenuous at best. Race was a social category, not a scientific one.”<sup>11</sup>

Participants of the *African Ancestry Project* demonstrated the multiplicity of the Black identity, hence the use of the term “Black identities” in this text. How this socially-constructed identity is translated to self-identification and informs experiences widely varies. Differences in values, traditions, and aspirations, as products of varied histories, contexts, and experiences, are also testament to their variety of Black identities.

*My parents being new immigrants here and living a whole life in Ethiopia before they came here, have a different identity than me who grew up here, who identifies as Ethiopian Canadian. For a long time, I just wanted to be Canadian even though I wasn’t really being treated like everyone else. So, just sorting through that too and learning that there are different degrees of being Black in Canada—like different experiences and different definitions.*

*I identify as the global nomad, West African Black man, which means that even when I hang around people who are born in this country, who are Black, there are also a lot of differences and sometimes I find myself like “Uh! There is only so much you and I see eye to eye on these things.”*

Another participant shared about their struggle with, *“some of the attitudes of recently arrived Africans, especially around gender, sexuality and religion.”* While those rooted here identified as a *“basic Canadian”* or confessed to looking at things through a *“Eurocentric lens,”* recent immigrants shared some culture shocks they found in Canada such as a lack of *“sense of music appreciation,”* a lack of *“sense of community,”* *“passive aggressiveness,”* friendships being *“almost always a little more careful,”* and restraint about building relationships with someone they meet on the streets. While Black identity, as a singular, is used to demonstrate the socially constructed identity, we need to acknowledge that the people who are categorized, or who self-identify, as Black are as diverse as each one of them.

### 2.1.1 “I’m Black?”: An imposed identity

Participants who immigrated from Africa shared that, when they came to the West (to Canada directly or through countries such as the USA or UK), they discovered they were Black. The Black identity becomes an imposed identity to many who previously did not associate their skin colour as an identity marker. One participant described her culture shock experience.

*You know when we were back home, we consumed so many western media. The movies we watch, the music we listened to and so we come here with these notions and ideas of what it is going to be like. You know I was like I am going to this diverse country where I am going to make friends with white people, with African Americans and all sorts of people. And when I landed, I realized, and that’s one small aspect of the culture shock, that I wasn’t. That’s when I knew I was Black. I went to the States and I was like what? I’m Black? Okay...Coming from a majority tribe in Kenya, everybody looks like you, we know about tribes but the Black and white is not our thing. So having to really come to terms with my Blackness, my Africanness. And also realizing that there was such a divide between African American, Black people and white people, and other communities. It crushed my dreams of having all these friends and integrating into the culture.*

Another participant highlighted how his identity felt like a social contestation.

*Disruption happens in also how my identity in formed, in terms of how I start to identify myself. I become what in the literature is called a “third-cultured kid, a global nomad.” And my racial identity becomes very contested. On the one hand, I am in a continent and everybody is Black, so rare are the time I am reminded that I am Black. In fact, there is no Blackness in the 1980s in the context of Africa, even though colonialism happened, in the everyday because everyone looks like me. There isn’t that much sense of being an other racially because everybody looks like me. Now, there are moments where we sense that to be Black means something.*

In a focus group discussion with immigrants from Africa, one participant shared:

*When I did go to the UK for school, that's when I knew that I was Black, that's when I knew that "oh...things are a bit different here." So, I would say I have always had that...I realized then when I moved to the UK because you have different races and everything...It's a very multiracial community. So, I would say that is when I started putting myself in a certain category, not just existing. I kind of like "Okay... I am Black now." I would say when I moved to the UK and then coming to Canada was kind of like "oh yeah, we'll just continue same as before."*

Through her experiences at school, a participant whose family moved to Canada when she was a teenager, discovered that, in her new home, she was othered.

*That's when I realized that I am different from the other people because no one was talking to me when we were doing assignments. We were supposed to group ourselves maybe into four people, me, my sister, and maybe a few of, sorry to say, Indians, because them too were so isolated. We found ourselves so isolated and we felt it and that's when my sister told me "Wait, do you think I am too Black? What's wrong with me? What's wrong with my colour?" Okay, so she's younger than me, so she used to feel it way too much than me.*

There was a consensus about the Black identity being an imposed identity and that resonated with the shared experience of the sudden discovery that "I'm Black" among immigrants from Africa. Participants shared their struggles of "really [coming] to terms with [their] Blackness." In reflection, a community reviewer shared how in the 1970s he went through an identity crisis negotiating what being Black meant to him. He found himself gravitating toward an African American persona as stereotyped by media.

*In my early university days, I admired the movie stereotype of our American Black brothers. I walked with a limp. I talked like them. I wore a big funky hat. When I look back, I want to disappear... Since the eighties when I was more mature, I have seen myself as a Blackman from Africa. I have tried over the years to keep this identity visible. I never adopted the wet look hair style solely for that reason.*

As Toni Morrison once shared, "...the moment you found out you were Black. That's a profound revelation. The minute you find that out, something happens. You have to renegotiate everything."<sup>12</sup>

Participants shared how they became aware of the privilege they held having been raised in Africa. They felt privileged to have been grounded in their culture and in the confidence of their potential and abilities. A participant from Zimbabwe who identified as Black in her home country because of the country's colonial legacy observed:

*Here, inherently, being Black there are limitations to the privileges you have... Having come here as slaves, their identity was taken from them, and it was forgotten... Hence why people do 23andMe [genetic test] trying to figure out what tribe [they are] from. It's very sad because I have never felt the urge to do that test because I know where I am from, and I know my people and I'm very grounded in that.*

Even with such grounding, some participants narrated the negative psychological impact associated with the culture shock of suddenly being visibly in the minority and experiencing anti-Black racism. A participant who moved to Canada for studies from Jamaica observed:

*I haven't been here too long, just over a year. It is my first time living in a country where Black is not a majority so to speak and it was a nightmare for me to adjust to just because people stare at you like you're a dog walking on two legs...It's like dirt is on my skin instead of my complexion.*

### **2.1.2 “Reduced to just Black”: An erasure of unique and diverse identities**

As discussed earlier, the Black identity is a product of erasure of historical and cultural richness of people of African ancestry to justify subjugation through enslavement and colonization. Today, in the Canadian context, this identity continues to erase diversity. A participant who immigrated to Canada from Africa noted:

*I think the moment I stepped foot into Canada, my identity as an African was erased because when people see me, they see the colour of my skin which is Black, so I am referred to as Black not African unless if I speak up and say so. I feel like my identity as an African is only acknowledged when I'm with other Africans.*

Another participant, a first-generation Canadian, shared:

*One of the things that really, I have learned over the past little while is thinking about Indigenous people, for example, who have had their culture stripped away from them actively for how long. I think of myself and I'm like, “Wow. I am so lucky that my parents came here and I am the first-generation born here.” Because I have that tie, I can have that, being able to speak my language, being able to have my religion and my culture, it really gives me my personal sense of identity and I have grown up that way so, that is my identity. But when I am here in these spaces, especially in British Columbia, I am reduced to just Black whatever that means... it is that social imposition that we have.*

In their survey responses, some participants lamented how the Black History Month contributed to this erasure. One response seemed to summarize this sentiment:

*The term Black history assumes a singular, monolithic history, that Black people everywhere have the same story or history. My history becomes condensed and repackaged to fit the archetype or narrative of what people expect the Black experience to be. I am not seen for my unique Zimbabwean history.*

Participants' responses indicated that people of African ancestry in British Columbia have a unique experience of erasure because their small numbers are dispersed across the province. As one participant put it:

*Because there's so few Blacks in BC, to be a Black, we are given a very narrow playing field in which to live this Blackness. There is that, for people to realize that Africa is a continent and not a country.*

Another lamented how *"others really just see me as a minority or a statistic."*

While strongly influenced by its historical context, the social construction of the Black identity is an ongoing process. As society negotiates and renegotiates who belongs to the Black category and what being Black means, it becomes an identity that is contextualized. A participant highlighted the significance of geographical context in his expression of Blackness.

*Identifying as Black is partly geographically informed but also because of the dominance of American images, discourses, messages, knowledge on the internet and on media. That also plays a role in my identification and how I identify as Black, i.e., the narratives that I use, but also because of my West Africanness and because I grew up and was raised at least until the age of nine on an African continent, that also plays a role in how I identify as Black.*

Two participants who moved to BC from Toronto as adults highlighted how the *"playing field"* of their identities was broader growing up in Toronto.

*My experience growing up with Jamaican culture was one where I was lucky to grow up in the Toronto area. Toronto is definitely a mosaic of cultures, so it was quite common to be among others who were also first-generation Canadian. I honestly knew way more people whose parents were from another country than individuals whose parents were born in Canada. For me, I've always felt very comfortable saying that I'm Canadian and equally comfortable saying that I have Jamaican parents. I'm definitely proud of both and know that my ability to see the world through a diverse lens comes from my two heritage experiences.*

The other participant noted how she experienced an erasure of her unique identity just by moving from Toronto to Vancouver.

*I am from Toronto originally, and growing up, up to high school, I went to schools that were predominantly Black or POC. So, it was really about identifying as Ethiopian and when I moved to BC last year, in 2019, then it became more so like just Black because there are barely any Black people. So, I feel like even that identity definitely switches for me.*

### 2.1.3 “Why would I identify myself by that structure?”: Resistance to the Black identity

Some participants expressed their resistance to the Black identity, crediting this identity for cultural erasure, perpetuation of racism, and societal division. They shared:

*I definitely hesitate [to identify as Black] because I feel like it invalidates the richness of the cultures I belong to. The fact that my skin is brown and not black. I feel like this is something imposed on us by colonizers rather than the way we've seen ourselves.*

*To me, calling somebody Black or white is an act of racism because you are now ascribing another individual to a category that you have decided that individual belongs to. And that to me, the two pillars of racism are those terms. That's holding it all up... These are historical terms that come with these negative connotations that carry forward and they are divisive. It is why I say, "I am not a colour, my ancestry is this" because I want people to think beyond a category based on colour. So that's why refer to African ancestry, European ancestry.*

*Reducing it [my identity] to a colour only supports racism and racism is a construct. It was literally constructed by the colonizers, and I am not going to support that type of hierarchy at all. I will never support it and I think people of African ancestry have such a rich ancestry that they should be celebrating this.*

*I just felt the more I tried to understand [the historical context of the Black identity], the more I see that it's like a caste system, a hierarchical structure put in place by some smart guy, I'll use the word smart, so he put the hierarchy of a white, then the last bit is the so called Black. So, for me, I just said "Wow this is more like a caste system put in place." So, why would I identify myself by that structure?*

This resistance was also evident in survey responses, “I no longer like to be referred to as Black since it belittles my heritage”; “I don't refer to myself as Black because racial categories are colonial constructs. I explain where I was born and what my heritage is.” One participant sees Black as a derogatory word and could not even get himself to say the word:

*I am a Nigerian and I come from a tribe called the Yoruba. So, if you want to know me, you can identify me as the Yoruba guy but do not call me the word with a “B.” If you don't want, say, “he's a Canadian” and you want to identify me, identify me with my tribe, go down and try to understand who I am.*

Resistance to the Black identity is a form agency expressed by how some participants self-identify with their unique cultural identities and how they expect those around them to identify them uniquely. One participant shared how she takes it upon herself to educate others on the diversity of those identified as Black.

*I do identify as Black... However, when I came to Canada, I realized that being Black there is a certain misconception of what being Black is. When they see you, they have*

*certain misconceptions about you and the thing that I kept trying to tell them was “Yes, I am Black; however, I am from Africa; we have the most ethnically diverse continent in the world.”*

In the survey, a few participants who migrated to Canada from Africa shared how they had initiated events during the Black History Month to amplify this diversity. While some felt that they did not belong in this space, a few took the space to educate others on their diverse and unique identities. As a social construct, the Black identity becomes one that is up for social renegotiation, with the resistance to this identity representing agency and participation in the negotiation process.

### **2.1.4 “Conscious performance of my Blackness”: A performed identity**

Many participants of the *African Ancestry Project* highlighted the performative nature of the Black identity. This identity, as constructed, is associated with behavioural expectations and stereotypes. As demonstrated by participants, an expression of Blackness outside these parameters is met by surprise, disbelief, pushback, and suspicion. Societal rewards and penalties are assigned based on adherence or non-adherence to expectations and stereotypes. Performance is based on societal cues that are learned from observation, experience, or socialization to receive rewards and to avoid penalties. It becomes a social identity performed differently to different audiences and contexts outside an individual’s culturally safe spaces. By virtue of its performative nature, the Black identity becomes inconsistent with an individual’s personal identity.<sup>13</sup>

As one participant put it:

*Black identity is based on the messages I get in my everyday life about what others think it means to be Black and what my place ought to be. My identity is fluid. Sometimes I am Black, sometimes I am not Black in terms of how I identify consciously, but I think it is one of those things that has impacted so many aspects of my life that I cannot say my Blackness starts and ends here. But I can definitely say the conscious performance of my Blackness, ends and starts here.*

When trying to make friends in school, a participant who moved to British Columbia from Trinidad and Tobago as a teenager shared how she performed the expected Black identity to make friends.

*They [school mates] assumed this kind of persona about me and kind of talking to me like I was a Black American. A totally different attitude than when they talked to other people. Then, I, of course, wanted friends, so I started to just feed off of that and take that on. When there was another Black person that came into the picture, I would almost feel a little threatened by it... [I felt] that person is probably more genuinely what everybody else is look for in a Black friend...I felt insecure because somehow, I figured that the only reason people were talking to me was because it was a bit of a check box or because they thought that I would be more fun.*

Her fear of losing friends by expressing her authentic self were not unfounded. A participant who grew up in Canada shared how he would get a backlash from friends for not subscribing to an expected performance.

*I felt in some ways, I was kind of whitewashed in terms of like only getting sort of what was expected of Black people vis-à-vis what Black people actually are. For instance, all of my friends would be mad, not mad, but like frustrated when I didn't meet their stereotypical Black things... It pissed me off. Obviously, I was young so I couldn't really vocalize that to them.*

The expression of the Black identity is not only learned, performed, and adapted to context to enjoy friendships but, as some participants noted, this performance becomes a necessity when navigating an environment where the potential for a racist experience is omnipresent. One participant shared how he constantly has to “double back” and think about his safety even in little things, like what he wore. This caution was informed by “years of experience with police and other people like high school, elementary school and so on.” Sharing his experiences of being followed around by supermarket attendants, he spoke about the stereotype about the proclivity toward criminality that informs disproportional surveillance of Black people. This stereotype has been internalized by non-Black people who adopt similar surveillance trends in their work and public spaces.

Other stereotypes that contribute to negative socioeconomic outcomes of Black people include Black people being intellectually inferior to white people, and Black people being physically stronger and more adept to athleticism than white people.<sup>14</sup> These stereotypes are deeply rooted in the history of enslavement and colonization and are a living legacy of this history. In the performative expression of being Black, how you behave, what you wear, how you wear your hair, and even how you sound determine the rewards and penalties you receive in different contexts based on stereotypes, which inform the perception of threat, and your ability, and professionalism. Black women with straightened hair, for instance, are viewed as being more professional or intellectual in some contexts because of the semblance of their hair to that of their white colleagues who are stereotyped as being intellectually superior.

*You always hear and see those memes and jokes, like this is like my work vis-à-vis my real voice. I feel like for Black people this is true. Like you have to be a different person at work, or you have to put your customer service voice on or straighten your hair to get taken seriously. It's frustrating.*

*Here in BC, they don't want to learn from my Blackness, from my West Africanness. It's not an exchange, it's more a demand that I be like them...Be Black but don't be too Black. Be Black so we can feel good about the fact that we are a multiracial or multicultural society, but don't be too Black 'til you start talking about racism and you start having another type of vernacular, “world English” vernacular or African American vernacular, or you are more excitable in meetings than everybody.*

*There is a lot of pressure to combat the image portrayed of Black people. There is pressure to be better, to prove your worth. There is a burden when being the only Black person in a particular context. There is the challenge of not being able to relate to others around you and having to not be too Black, sometimes biting your tongue which is hard for me to do sometimes.*

In describing his conscious performance of Blackness, one participant referenced W.E.B. Du Bois' theory on bifurcation of consciousness. Du Bois grimly stated the following:

*It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>15</sup>*

Du Bois made a point that resonates with the performance of the Black identity in BC. A survey participant shared how being African in Canada means *"being two different people in one person: Black and Nigerian."* When answering a question on whether they would attribute any challenges they face to their identity, another participant shared, *"I haven't experienced any issues that target me specifically as African, only as a Black person."*

The performance of the Black identity can result in one embodying double identities: one that is public facing and another that is expressed in culturally safe spaces. Arguably, it is by having a singular consciousness, defined as an awareness of oneself and the world, that one is able to perform the Black identity and still maintain and express authentic and unique identities in safe spaces. A participant who moved to Canada from Trinidad and Tobago at a young age shared:

*I made a very conscious decision at the age of ten and I remember this very clearly. The first snowfall. I was looking up into the sky and snow was falling on me. And in that moment, I said...that I never want to lose my accent. So, a Trinidadian can tell that I am Trinidadian by the way that I speak even after 45 years...I refused to lose my accent...I can put on my Trinidadian accent whenever I want...You know it is a mask. You change your accent; it is a mask and there are enough masks that you have to wear.*

Contributions by some participants, nonetheless, indicated that this performance, or lack thereof, and interactions with associated rewards and penalties, could result in cultural assimilation and internalization of racism.

*When I came to this part of the world, I think the guy I met, I think he's a Somalian guy. The first time I came to Canada, within the first six months, we had a conversation about my desires and goals here in Canada. The statement he made was this, he said "people like us can't aspire for that."*

*We are so nuanced, we are so deep and complex and full, including our cultural expressions. I wanted to give myself room to truthfully go through the process of becoming richly, fully Black, fully African, and so, this has meant looking and naming and identifying the times past and present where I have been alien from my skin, where my Africanness is nothing to me, where my Blackness is offensive even to me.*

*When I was younger, I was always aware that I should be proud to be Black, but society always made me feel ashamed.*

*The language was a big barrier because even though we speak English, people did not understand a word I said, and it makes you feel stupid and dumb...they make you feel like you're saying is wrong and their way is right...There was a desire to be heard and I think subconsciously you just start to talk like whatever accent you're around and I think as you watch the TV and listen to music, you also kind of internalize it.*

*There's so much diversity within what we call Black...I think for those of us who are fortunate enough to—we have that connection, or we know our families, they are available to us, and we can see these things. It's really important for us to empower ourselves within our own culture so we don't also lose that.*

As one participant indicated, asserting cultural uniqueness and perpetuating related group stereotypes could also have a similar effect of limiting full expression of self-identities.

*Growing up I always thought that being Black meant that you had to act a certain way and do things a certain way. But being Black can mean a lot of things...My point is that you can be Black and love classical music. Growing up you know how we talk about Oreos. We talk about like a Black cannot do this. I'm not talking of the other people outside the Black community. I'm talking about the community I grew up with. They say as a Black you have to know how to dance... Like you think you have to act a certain way because you are Black.*

### **2.1.5 “Too Black or not Black enough”: Unbelonging**

To some participants, the Black identity is one that highlights or contributes to othering and unbelonging, not only in the context of the broader Canadian society, but also within communities identified as Black.

In the broader Canadian society, unbelonging is highlighted as a product of anti-Black racism and oppression felt by participants in various ways: “[feeling] hypervisible and invisible at once”; “not always being seen as Canadian and being asked where I am from”; “working to find a sense of belonging...working hard to feel understood or accepted”; being unrepresented and at the “bottom of social priority”; and nobody knowing “how to deal with a Black person in any of their emotional states.” A participant shared, “I had all of my white friends kind of giving me shit for not meeting any Black stereotypes because they watched whatever show. So, it was like I was too Black in skin only or I wasn't Black enough.” In their

everyday lives, this translated to tangible barriers. Most survey participants (73.3% of the 162 participants) attributed some challenges faced in studying, working, and living in Canada to their identity as a Black person of African ancestry.

In addition, some people who are identified as, and are assigned rewards and penalties as, Black people, do not feel like they belong to, or are accepted by those in this group identity. In responding to a question asking if they attend Black History Month events, some survey participants responded as follows:

*I'm African but not purely Black as often thought of here in Canada. I feel like sometimes everyone assumes Africans equal a certain type of Black, a certain tone. So sometimes I don't feel I fit North Americans version of Black History Month.*

*No, though I have heard of it [Black History Month], I'm skeptical for fear of being looked at as the other Black person who doesn't belong here.*

*Despite my 21 years of living in BC, I still identify as South Sudanese because the mainstream culture and the Black History culture looks at me as the other.*

These responses indicate that the participants feel excluded because of their light skin tone as well as a lack of representation of their histories in what is viewed as Canadian Black history. As noted earlier in this chapter, the content of the Black History Month can contribute to erasure of unique and diverse identities by focusing only on the history associated with multi-generational Canadians. While this focus is warranted because of an erasure and denial of this history and related consequences on all Black people,<sup>16</sup> some participants do not feel represented or connected to the Black identity that is represented in Black History Month. However, such sentiments do not negate skin tone as an identity marker, which comes with some experiences of unbelonging and racism within the broader Canadian society.

To some, the sense of unbelonging comes from their light skin tone. Some participants with mixed ancestries and who were born in Canada shared sentiments of unbelonging within the Black communities. One participant shared:

*I struggled with my identity a lot growing up and to cross that line between being too Black for white people and not being Black enough for Black people, it's very frustrating. And yeah, colourism, I do acknowledge that it exists. You know my dad, what he went through is very different being tall, large, dark, male, from what I go through but I also experience a lot of racism and a lot of it within the Black community again like you're not black enough. The interesting thing is like, to people who are aren't Black, like when I walk out the house, I am Black, so I get treated as Black, so that's how I have always identified with. I have always acknowledged that I am half-white or mixed, but I am Black, I feel Black.*

A participant of mixed ancestry—African, European, and Indian ancestries—who moved to Canada as a child from Trinidad and Tobago shared how as a teenager, she was told, “You’re

*not Black. You are white with brown skin.*" A first-generation Canadian whose parents were born in Fiji shared:

*Growing up I was always told I wasn't Black or white or Indian by others. My father presents as half-Black, half-white as his father is white and my grandmother is Black and identified as a native Fiji Islander... I have never participated in any Black History Month events because I have always been told that I didn't count as Black. I feel like an intruder.*

A participant shared that despite her experiences of racism, *"I typically identify myself as biracial and that's really to acknowledge the amount of privilege I have because I have lighter skin."* Similarly, another participant shared how over time the way he identified has shifted from *"mixed"* to *"Black/mixed"* to acknowledge both the privileges and racism he experiences and sees.

Colourism, as a product of white supremacy, occurs when Black people with lighter skin receive better rewards and fewer penalties because of their proximity to whiteness. This consequently sets them apart from Black people of darker skin tone because of real or perceived societal advantages they have, which results in the belief that they have not had shared experiences or grievances. As will be explored further in the chapter on diverse experiences, such advantages can be given and taken away from those with lighter skin depending on the context, which results in uncertainty about when and where one will be disadvantaged. As one participant noted:

*I recognize that perhaps I have been given some privilege because of that [lighter skin tone] whilst other times, in other circumstances, I have also been disadvantaged. So, it's what I am saying, like this outsider within being a bit in the middle, that's exactly how I feel.*

In describing further her feelings of being an *"outsider within,"* the participant indicated that unbelonging can also stem from classism and internalized stereotypes.

*Being this outsider within. That's exactly it. And, I think because being born in Portugal, some of my friends, or even my family that I am not so close to, would perhaps say that I wasn't Black enough and because I grew up in a neighbourhood which majority were white people. So, I was never, you know, "you're not Black enough because you don't know the songs, or you don't know how to dance" but also, on the other side, I was different than my friends right? So, it's always—I navigated this space and that's the only space I know.*

### 2.1.6 “Proud to be Black, but...”: Reservations and disclaimers

Some participants shared that they were proud to be Black and some were in a process of finding this pride following years of shame and trauma related to racism and oppression. However, many had reservations and disclaimers.

A participant shared that while he is proud to be Black, he seeks another unifying identity in light of the historical context and construction of the Black identity.

*I am very proud of that identity because if that's how we are seen, then I accept that, if nothing else. But first of all, we have to remember where the origin of the sin started. For me, that's why I say African Canadian. I have been pushing that...I say I am African Canadian because I live here, and I am a citizen of this country. All my children are Canadian, and I see thousands of others come and be part of that and thousands of their children are Canadians. This is our new home.*

Another participant shared about looking for another way to identify people of African ancestry that would acknowledge unique experiences.

*Whereas Black is a common term that identifies us, it is also a downside because people don't really realize the nuances among the Black identifying people. We have been talking about the Black and African diaspora community to signify those unique experiences that people have.*

A contribution by another participant indicates that pride in the Black identity comes from the existence and celebration of the unique and diverse cultures embodied by those who are identified as Black. Their pride hence does not come from the Black identity as socially constructed but from their ancestry and cultural identity.

*I definitely identify as Black; I am very proud to be Black. I love the fact, when I was younger, I think I might've wanted to be a little bit like everybody else, like I remember wanting the eraser with my name on it or something like that, just wanting to blend in with everyone else but I appreciate the uniqueness. I think despite the struggles, we are very lucky to have such a rich history, very lucky to have such a rich and diverse culture, we have the food, music, strength and the perseverance. I wouldn't change it for anything, I love being Black. If I had to come back in another lifetime, I wouldn't change anything.*

Some participants took the Black identity as a natural identity because of their skin colour, but even then, had some reservations and disclaimers. One participant was unsure if he could refer to Black as an identity.

*I think I am Black because this is how God made me... so I am Black. I look Black. For me it's hard to say that Black is an identity. I think black is the colour of my skin. I need to google the definition of identity before I say more.*

*Being a Black person isn't bad. You can't choose what else you could be but it's hard to reconcile when you come from a different background from what they perceive the norm is for a Black person.*

*I guess there is no hiding. The cat's out of the bag! I've been a Black woman for a long time. I'm comfortable with it. I didn't feel like that [racism] impacted how I felt about identifying as a Black woman, but it did upset me as I questioned how other people felt they should treat me as a Black woman. But as far as identifying as one, I am comfortable with it... [however] Afro-Caribbean says more. It recognizes the ethnicity that I would categorize myself as a person who is descended from Africa but it also indicates that I am from the Caribbean which also tells you something more about my experience, my family's experience as far back as I know up 'til now.*

While comfortable with identifying as Black despite experiences of racial discrimination, the participant quoted above notes how the Black identity fails to acknowledge her ethnicity and family history.

In a focus group discussion with immigrants from Africa, a question about being proud to be Black was met with nods. However, the subsequent discussion indicated that the pride expressed was in who they are as individuals with diverse cultures from Africa and not the Black identity as socially constructed in Canada.

Another participant shared that she started identifying herself to others as a Black European when she moved to BC to assert and bring awareness to her unique family history and life experiences; she previously did not care about this identity.

*The reason why I started saying I am a Black European is because...well firstly, because I think a lot of people on this side of the world perhaps don't know that Black people also exist in Europe. They talk about African American or African, so that's the reason why, that's one of the reasons why... it's to remember or perhaps teach people that there are Black people in Europe.*

Pride in the Black identity, as noted by project participants, is also drawn from shared resilience in the face of racism and oppression.

*Being Black to me is beautiful as it fosters resilience, growth, and strength. We as a people endure so much pain and negativity so to still have joy and to prosper in life is amazing!*

*I think it [my existence] is a testament to our resilience as Black people and as Black women because no matter what has been done to us, we still keep going. There is a sense of pride knowing that we are still here and there are people who are doing amazing things and that we look up to, that can be our role models, but it [being Black] is almost like always having a target on your back.*

In a community review focus group discussion, dialogue emerged about whether to identify as Black. While some reviewers were against using the term Black, others (notably multi-generational North Americans) shared how strongly they identified as Black and how difficult it would be to let go of that identity as it was their only connection to their family history and to other people of African ancestry.

*From my perspective, if I'm not Black, I don't know what I am. I don't like the term African Canadian. I've never associated with it. It's actually a new term to me. I think maybe because being from people who...we don't know where we come from, we find power in that word Black and it's empowering. I've always brought up, like be proud to be Black. Black as power. Black as beauty. It's powerful. So, I think I don't want to let go of that term because it's the only thing that connects me to like the rest of you [other people of African ancestry] from my perspective.*

*I embrace it [the term Black]. I love it. I'm so happy that it's come back into the vernacular because it was gone for a little while. And there was a focus on African Canadian. And my African roots are so far back that I don't embrace African Canadian because I had never stepped foot there. My parents didn't. My grandparents didn't. My great-grandparents didn't. And so, for me, the term Black really is something that I hold onto.*

### **2.1.7 “Black to ascertain collective power”: A political identity**

The Black identity, as shared by some participants, is embraced for its practical utility in uniting people of African ancestry in solidarity and mobilizing in advocating for racial justice. Solidarity is drawn from ancestral roots that can be traced to Africa and consequent cultural affinity, as well as shared experiences of racial oppression and unbelonging in broader western societies.

On solidarity, participants shared:

*I do have friends that are from all over, some are Americans. I have some friends that were born in Africa. My best friend is South African and I've known her for over fifty years and I've got really good friends that live in Atlanta. So, I have a mix of people in my life, and I feel really fortunate, and I think we were friends first because we really like one another. Some of them I have known for a long time and some of them not so long but we do share in the political agenda. We do share about what is happening here at home and in the United States. We look at our Blackness as being connected, like it's bigger than just who we are. It's not about being from Trinidad or Saint Vincent.*

*I consider myself as a Black person, I am an African, but I also consider myself as a Black woman and as a Black African immigrant woman. I am friends with Caribbeans, with African Americans. When I lived in the States, all my friends used to be African*

*American. My definition, aside from Africa, has included other Blacks in my community so I have a lot of friends from other Black communities.*

*Now, I just see myself as Black honestly because I feel like my Jamaican heritage is one side of me but, growing up in the Western world, I have also been influenced largely by the African American culture. I lived in South Florida for a year. I graduated from high school down there. So, that left an impression on me and then I have a lot of friends that were born and raised in Africa and then immigrated here later on. So, I have been surrounded by a lot of people from the continent and hoping to get there someday. So yeah, I see myself as Black and I do acknowledge that my lineage comes from the continent, I just don't know where.*

*I think I identify as a Black person every day. It's something I have known all my life. I lived in the UK for a bit and there's a much better vibrant community there and you get that sense of "yeah, I belong to something," if it makes sense. Because there's a lot more people like you, people who've got the same, they kind of understand where it is, you're coming from.*

*When I was talking about the collective or uniting factor of being identified as Black, I think it's the shared understanding that we as Black people, people of African descent, newcomers from Africa or whatever we want to call ourselves, we have such unique experiences.*

*It unites us and helps us uplift and celebrate each other but also in our shared struggle of our marginalities as Black people within that racial hierarchy. Even within racialized people, Black people are still at the bottom.*

Immigrants from Africa recounted how they have had to actively learn of the history of slavery and racial oppression in North America to understand the experiences of Black people in Canada. They noted that experience of enslavement outside Africa is not something they learned growing up. Participants highlighted how such an understanding not only inspired empathy but also helped them make sense of their experiences of racism. This history, and its legacy of racial oppression, becomes one that is inherited by immigrants and consequently cultivates solidarity with other people of African ancestry who are rooted in North America.

*It took me I'll say, after about six years, I really started to identify as a Black woman living in North America because now I am part of the tapestry of Black culture. I am part of that history, I have inherited that history now but before, when I came, it was slightly different because I was like "Yes, I know this is what happened and it's awful what happened," but I didn't really understand the Black experience.*

*For me, later coming here, that's when I started asking myself. I don't really know, maybe I got interested in the story of slavery because back in Nigeria it's not something you think about. You never really understood the magnitude of what happened in those days and moving to this part of the world—I can't really remember*

*what triggered my desire to begin to try to understand what slavery was and it really touched me. I didn't know it was that very bad. I didn't know that just because you identify with a part of the world, then you're viewed in a different way. So, for me, I felt the need to really understand it.*

*When I come down here [to Canada], more people tend to identify me or see me as African American. Like with the protests which happened in the States a couple of months back, it wasn't something I had directly experienced. It was just something that I know used to happen in America, and I needed to educate myself more about all of these things. I needed to maybe watch some movies and see more pieces of literature about stuff that's happened in the past, sort of like to bring myself up to speed. Like these people also have their own fight; it's not something I have directly faced. I mean, back home, the only kind of oppression that we get was just from the government and that's just the government just being corrupt. So, you don't have, like, rights to proper things; like, you get your rights taken away from you. That's the only kind of oppression I know. But these people got, like, a different oppression. So, for me to kind of, like, tap into their pain or tap into what they are feeling, I had to properly educate myself. I had to properly understand what's going on.*

*I think with the Black Lives Matter and the recent resurgence, it is like a heightened awareness of our Blackness. We are so vulnerable, the fact that we just die on the streets like that, so that's the uniting factor. It's like "Oh my gosh, this is our common identity, and this is a common, shared experience." It really impacts all of your life, there's no question about it.*

Going hand in hand with the Black identity's utility to galvanize solidarity is its utility as a political identity. This identity has been adopted not only to come together because of shared experiences of racial oppression, but to mobilize advocating for racial justice and equity. One participant noted this as its main utility; if the Black identity was not associated with racial injustice, it would therefore have no utility.

*To be Black is just a political identity in the sense that, it is an identity for the purpose of advocating and asserting my rights and my value. That's what politics is all about. It's like we all want rights, we all want to be valued, we all want to make sure that we get the services that we are owed—that is politics with a small p.*

Another participant cautioned that despite its political utility to people of African ancestry, the diversity of those who identify as Black should be highlighted particularly to non-Black people.

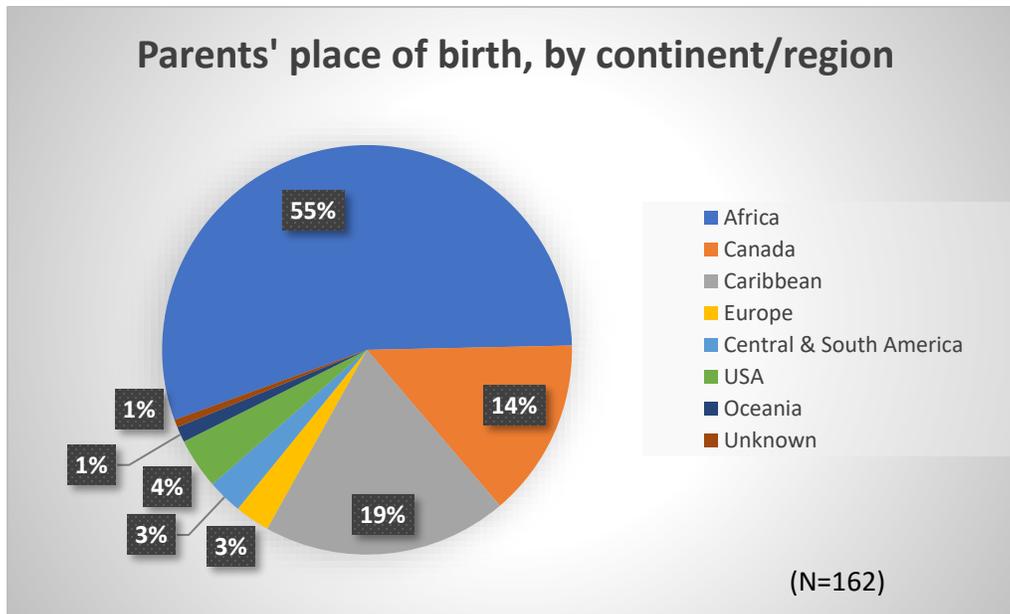
*I think that Black identity is quite complex because I see it as twofold. It's like almost a solidarity identity where we collectively identify as Black to ascertain collective power, to ascertain that power in numbers and power in common identity but the other side of that coin is that often times other people do not realize the diversity even within the Black community.*

## 2.2 African identities

As was explored in chapter 1, the African ancestry is a uniting force for those who are identified or self-identify as Black, all of whom may call Africa their motherland. There is no one African identity, but rather a vast variety of identities that can be traced to empires, kingdoms, and chiefdoms that existed across the continent for centuries even before the Common Era. These identities are centred around culture and traditions that have been passed down for generations, even beyond the continent of Africa. The diversity of African identities can be demonstrated by the over two hundred distinct ethnic groups within countries like Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Continuity of African cultures and traditions in the diaspora is evidenced by creole languages across the Caribbean and South and Central America. Ananse folklore of the Akan people is still narrated to children in the Caribbean, and some religious practices in Brazil aim at increasing closeness to deities traced to the Yoruba people.

In this section, I centre stories of participants of the *African Ancestry Project* as they share their connection to Africa and their corresponding African identity or identities. While some have current familial connection to Africa, others lost this connection because of enslavement and displacement of their African ancestors two or more centuries ago. While some seek their African roots through family trees and DNA tests, others feel alienated from their African identity and do not undertake such pursuits. While others acknowledge the inheritance of their dark skin tones from Africa, others never considered their ties to Africa. Because of similarities observed among those with similar historical and cultural backgrounds, this section categorizes narratives based on such backgrounds. We will hear from first-generation immigrants from Africa, from first-generation Canadians with parents who immigrated from Africa, from those with Caribbean or South and Central America background, from those who migrated from Europe or from Oceania, and multi-generational Canadians and Americans. The categorizations are applied for their utility in this context. However, the stories shared here are those of participants and they do not speak for entire groups. Even where similarities are observed, the diversity and nuances that exist within such groups must be acknowledged.





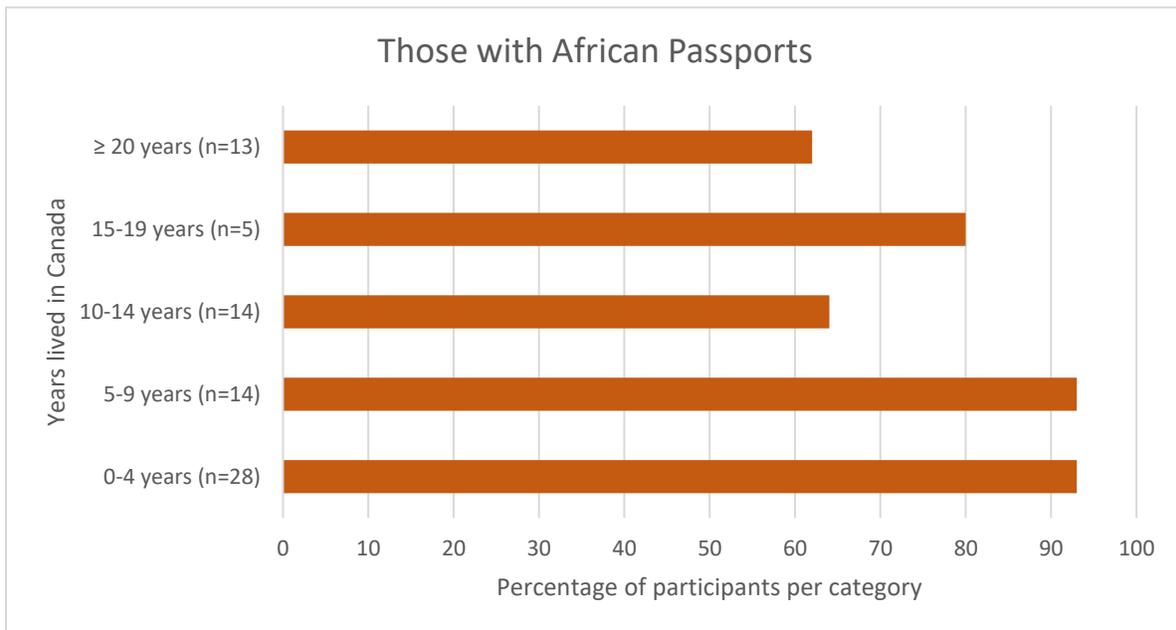
**Figure 11: Participants' parents' place of birth by continent or region**  
*An indication of participants' diverse identities with roots from around the world*

### 2.2.1 First-generation immigrants from Africa

First-generation immigrants from Africa are diverse not only in their practice of culture and traditions, some of which were acquired during colonization, but also in how and when they emigrated from Africa. Some were the pioneer immigrants from Africa who set out to seek educational and professional opportunities in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Others came to reunite with their spouses and families. Some came to Canada as refugees because of political instability in their home countries. Recent immigrants are settling into Canada while maintaining a strong connection to Africa, where their families reside.

Immigrants from Africa, particularly recent immigrants, maintain a strong connection to Africa through their families. Their ties are mostly social as they try to stay connected with family and friends, with some communicating via WhatsApp almost daily. When asked if they were plan on visiting their ancestral African country, all but three of the 74 survey participants who migrated from Africa answered "Yes." One noted how *"engaging in my past life makes it difficult to move on."*

Another indicator of connections to Africa is one's possession of an African passport. For countries that allow dual citizenship, immigrants can maintain their African nationality while adopting a Canadian one and hence able to hold two passports. Most immigrants from Africa who participated in the survey (81%) had a passport of their home country. Almost all (93%) who have lived in Canada for 0 to 9 years had a passport for their home country. As most African passports are valid for five to ten years (meaning that many participants renew their passports), this indicates that most participants want to retain their connections to their African roots.



**Figure 12: Participating immigrants from Africa with African passports**  
 Calculated as a percentage of those in each category based on years lived in Canada (n=74).

Despite a majority of the participants having an African passport, only 51% answered “Yes” to a broad survey question that asked if they are engaged in the political and social life of their home countries; however, some participants interpreted that this question was asking about their political participation in their home countries and, hence, answered “No” regardless of their social connections through family. Participants shared that their engagement ranged from staying in touch with and supporting family and friends, staying updated on the affairs of their home countries through the news and social media, to contributing to humanitarian work, social entrepreneurship, and investment, to political and social advocacy involving political injustice, corruption, and poor leadership. Some maintained connections to their home countries through participation in African associations in Canada; the Ghana Canadian Association of BC and the Eritrean Community Association of Metro Vancouver were mentioned. While no pattern was found to be related to years spent in Canada, those who had lived in Canada for 0 to 4 years answered “Yes” more often to the question on engagement in the political and social life in Africa.

Most participants expressed their lack of interest in the politics of their home countries because of poor leadership and lost connections, among other factors.

*Politics in Nigeria is depressing, and pessimism is rife. I try to avoid discussions around Nigerian politics most times. We have so much potential, but the elites do not want progress.*

*I left the country when I was a teenager, so I've lost a lot of contact with people and I'm not into politics.*

*I'm a bit detached from the goings on in Kenya, but I read the news three days a week. I guess it has not really crossed my mind to do so.*

However, others shared that they follow the news because of the impact politics has on the daily lives of their families including the potential impact to the economic support required by their families. Some shared that they help improve the political environment in their home countries by supporting youth leadership initiatives and providing mentorship; one participant shared that she aspires to go back to her home country to run for office.

Recent immigrants shared feeling homesick and displaced sometimes as they negotiate finding their place in Canada while maintaining roots in their home countries.

*We [participant and family] connect every day. We talk through WhatsApp, but it's not like being there. Even though I have been living here for five years and have a wife and two kids, sometimes I just feel lonely.*

*Aside from wanting to be home and being 12,000 miles away, I try as much as possible to connect with Nigeria. My twitter is Nigerian timeline. I make sure I am in contact with friends and family through WhatsApp.*

*I try to visit at least once a year to maintain those relationships. The thing that I feel sometimes lacks when I get homesick is the sense of community. It is vastly different from community in Canada. My siblings and I do support my mother, but the hardest thing was when she got ill, figuring out how to support her.*

*I have a bunch of African friends, so I don't really feel lonely. I think the university environment is prime for that because I think everybody is new and everyone is trying to make friends.*

*The first five years were really hard and then I got used to it and I figured out the happy medium of how often I need to see people and also encouraged my family to come and visit me.*

The participant who fled from Eritrea (see section 1.5) found a community in BC, but his happiness is disrupted by who and what he left behind.

*I am so happy, but there is pain in my heart. My pastors who treated me like their child and my elder sister are still there in prison. I can't enjoy Canada in reality because the pain is always inside me.*

Some try to find ways of contributing to development in their home countries.

*What I try to do in my own capacity is to support as many young African women as I can that are interested in my work. In my work, I think about the many ways in which I can work on African projects and my company has an office in Nigeria. I am looking into seeing how I can do some projects in the West African region.*

*I have a dream and I have started supporting the education of people on what the product of good governance and leadership can actually be.*

*I always keep abreast with what is happening economically because it impacts the rates of whatever we need to support our families with. I think it's just a way to stay connected and to know how eventually I might be able to support, whether is it through a non-profit organization or whether is it through me going back and running for office.*

Recent immigrants shared coming to terms with their “new” Black identities, facing racism for the first time, experiencing culture shocks, negotiating their identity and place in Canada, learning to mirror expectations, going back to school because their credentials were not recognized, capitalizing on new-found opportunities, and excelling in their professions, all the while trying to maintain roots in their home countries. Amid this reckoning, some participants shared feeling like their place in Africa was slipping away without them being rooted in Canada, a theme commonly shared by participants who left their home countries over ten years ago.

A participant who migrated from Ethiopia to the US before moving to Canada shared:

*My connection [to Ethiopia] is really becoming dim unfortunately. You go to school and you go to work and time just passes. [When I visited Ethiopia] I knew the language, I knew my family were there to support me, but I was a different person. So, my connection is dimming pretty much by living here for way too long. But I do follow the news just to try to make myself updated and I try to support non-profits through financial resources.*

Having family ties was highlighted as important in maintaining a connection to Africa. Those who did not have these ties or whose ties with family in Africa had been severed because of prolonged time away or other factors, shared of a disconnect to their home countries. The participant above noted another reason why her connection to Africa was diminishing,

*a lot of my family members have left because of political situations over the last fifty years and so I can say very few people from both my parents' side live in Ethiopia. And many of them are old, they are dying.*

Another participant shared that her parents had never visited their home country for over twenty years after immigrating to Canada; limited familial connections was likely one of the reasons for this.

*My dad, he has two siblings and they both live in America and his father and his mother have passed away and so for him I think, maybe there wasn't a big drive for him to go back.*

One participant described her experience of building a home for herself in Canada while maintaining roots in Africa as being in limbo.

*It feels like I left it [Kenya] a few years ago and now I am here, but this is really not my permanent home even though I have immersed myself in that [Canadian] culture. I am living here, playing here, working here, and schooling here so I am contributing to the Canadian society, yet I am not fully Canadian either by citizenship. When I go home it's like well, so many things have happened since you left. So, it's almost like being in a limbo. But I still identify as Kenyan all the time.*

In reflecting on this, a community reviewer shared how he had been in such a limbo for over forty years. He initially invested in the agricultural and transportation industries in his home country while in Canada. He then moved back there for some years before deciding to move back to Canada, giving up his life in Zambia.

*Most Africans are sitting on two stools not deciding which stool to finally settle on. It took me over forty years to finally decide I will remain in Canada. Zambia is my country, but I [decided I] would not live there. In so doing, I have sacrificed part of my heritage.*

There are some who find ways to maintain some degree of connection to Africa despite being in Canada for many years. A participant who has lived in Canada for over forty years shared:

*My connection to Nigeria is current, not to the level that I would like to see it as far as involvement in what is going on there is concerned, because we all have to live our lives here. My connection to Nigeria is very spiritual, deep, and current.*

This participant still speaks Igbo and a bit of Hausa so is maintaining a cultural connection through language.

Collectively, 84% of the 74 participating immigrants from Africa spoke 30 different African languages, with a few speaking three or four different African languages (excluding English, French, Arabic, and Portuguese). Languages embody and express unique cultures and identities, which are an indication of the participants' continued cultural connections to Africa. As demonstrated through figure 13 below, there was little correlation between likelihood to speak an African language and the number of years lived in Canada.

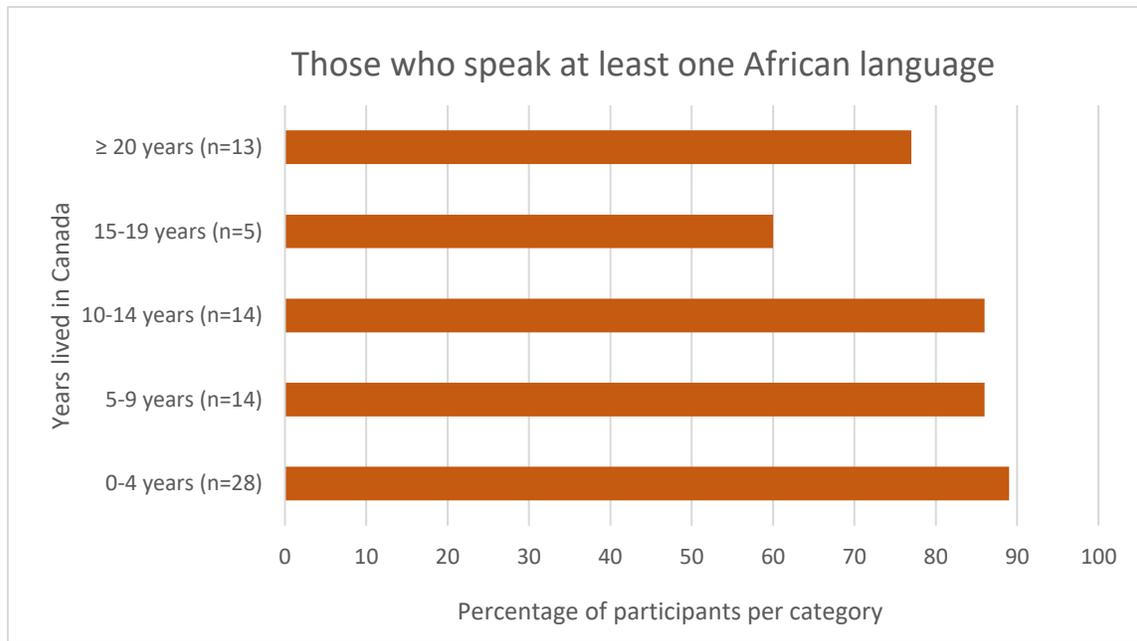


Figure 13: Participating immigrants from Africa who speak at least one African language  
 Calculated as a percentage of those in each category based on years lived in Canada (n=74)

A participant who immigrated to Canada more than ten years ago shared that he and his wife speak only English at home because they identify with different ethnic groups in Nigeria and grew up speaking different languages.

*My wife is not from my tribe. My wife is from a different tribe. I am from the West, Yoruba, and she's what they call Ibibio. So, we are from different cultural backgrounds so, we communicate in English. So, I can't speak her language, she can't speak my language, so our mode of communication has been English. So, automatically my daughter—we never actually taught her my own language or my wife's. Maybe if we had been in our environment in Nigeria, I would have maybe considered that fact in terms of teaching her Yoruba and my wife teaching her own language. And you see that you don't have that extended family [in Canada].*

Despite not being able to communicate in Yoruba at home, he remains culturally connected through the Yoruba Social and Cultural Association of BC.

In the interviews and focus group discussions, some participants shared how language alone is not enough for them to feel connected to Africa. A participant who migrated from Ethiopia over thirty years ago as a teenager felt disconnected when she went back to Ethiopia years later despite her language skills and familial connections there. After living many years abroad, she realized that her outlook in life and culture had changed, and so had her home country.

*I went back in 2008 for about a year and a half and it was very difficult to adjust. I left at the age of 16; when I went back it was almost 20 years later. It was so difficult to be able see myself in there...part of the reasons why it became difficult for me to adjust is*

*because of the political system, the ethnic politics, civil war, ethnic conflict, the corruption—I have never seen anything like it in my entire life and as a woman in such a male-dominated society.*

Another lamented:

*I have been away for more than a few years such that I feel like I no longer fit back home.*

There are also those who do not speak any African languages: 16% of immigrants from Africa who participated in the project. This is characteristic of a growing concern about African languages not being passed down which contributes to the disappearance of languages.<sup>17</sup> European languages were imposed on Africans during the colonial era, and they continue to play an important role in the economic progress of African countries and individuals. In sub-Saharan Africa, most countries have a European language as their main national language, which is the default language for educational and professional settings. European languages have utility in supporting communication among those who do not share an African language; hence, business and professional exchanges between African countries use a language from their shared colonial past.

There are, however, African languages, like Swahili, that are growing in usage across countries with different colonial histories. Conversely, some African languages have become irrelevant in daily usage, especially in multicultural settings, and/or some people have lost interest in practising and passing on these languages to their young ones. As we learned from the Yoruba participant quoted earlier, some languages can be lost through intermarriage and/or cultural disconnect resulting from migration; such factors can have the same outcome within Africa.

Some participants shared that instead of feeling culturally disconnected after immigrating to Canada, they felt more connected to their African culture. They shared of a renewed appreciation for their African languages, cultures, and identities. A participant shared how she disowned her English name in favour of her ethnic name. This was an important marker in her journey to reclaiming a cultural identity, which she came to realize was tainted by colonization.

*I honestly feel like I didn't really value my roots, or people or culture as much until I left. And when I started learning about different things like capitalism, colonialism... and I started to really unpack and really reflect on how our governing and educational system was, and so it gave me a curiosity to search and dig a little bit deeper... [to] understand my culture and ask my mom questions, and even after this point when I decided to use my middle name, I feel like it's part of that reclaiming my identity as a Kikuyu woman and really being very proud of who I am and wanting to identify with my roots so, I would say I have a very strong connection [to Africa] and I want to build and develop that connection.*

## 2.2.2 First-generation Canadians of African background

First-generation Canadians, with at least one parent who immigrated from Africa, as well as those who immigrated from Africa with their families as babies, shared how they navigated uncharted territories of embodying two or three cultures that have shaped their identity and sense of belonging. They navigated their Canadian, African, and sometimes, a third cultural identity. Some participants of the *African Ancestry Project* shared how this felt like living a double life with more than one cultural standard. When trying to navigate these different cultural environments, participants experienced a bicultural dilemma, which is discussed further in section 2.3.

The cultural connection to Africa by first-generation Canadians of African background ranged from deep cultural connection to cultural disconnect. In the survey, first-generation Canadians identified more often as African Canadian or Canadian compared to those who immigrated from Africa who mostly identified with a specific African nationality or ethnicity. Only two of the 12 participants in this category spoke an African language, with another speaking “*extremely awful Amharic.*” Participants shared how language was a significant barrier to connecting with their parents’ African culture and engaging in the political and social life of their ancestral African country. With regards to the latter, participants shared:

*I engage sometimes through my parents, if they are hosting an event, but rarely engage on my own due to not speaking the language and feeling not “fully” Ethiopian.*

*No, because I only speak English and I’ve never been to Uganda and do not know anything culturally.*

Family ties were also important for maintaining a connection to Africa.

*I have no contact with my biological father, so I have no ties or links to Nigeria.*

*I’ve always wanted to go to the Congo and see where my father was from and try and find family members. I unfortunately don’t know anyone on my dad’s side.*

*Just trying to stay up to date with the news, especially right now with the TPLF [Tigray People’s Liberation Front]. I have an older brother over there who fought both in the Eritrea/Ethio[pia] civil war and the current one with Tigray and the government, so I have no choice but to be politically involved.*

Another participant shared that despite having a big extended family in Ethiopia, including her grandparents, language was always a barrier:

*Not speaking Amharic really makes me not Ethiopian in some people’s eyes and I haven’t lived there. I can’t fully claim that I am full Ethiopian even though my heritage is from there; my parents and my whole family is from there.*

Growing up, her family never visited Ethiopia. She only experienced her parent’s African culture through her parents’ lens, mostly through food, phone calls made to family in

Ethiopia, and a memorable visit from her grandmother. Whenever her parents spoke to her in Amharic, she responded in English. Despite acknowledging efforts made by her parents to “instill some Ethiopian culture in us,” she lamented that “my parents were trying to assimilate here and kind of giving up the culture, a little bit of passing it down.” Her parents were busy building a life in BC, her father doing a PhD and her mother learning English. Her grandmother’s visit when she was in high school highlighted how distant she was from her African culture.

*I think that was one of the most fundamental moments when I felt not Ethiopian enough because her mom really saw me as just a Canadian kid. It was one of those moments where I felt like “okay, well, maybe I am not Ethiopian really” because I was pretty much raised here completely.*

As an adult, she regrets not practising Amharic instead of conversing with her parents in English: “I really wanna learn how to speak it and hopefully one day pass it on.” The bicultural dilemma she faced growing up was a barrier to her appreciation of her parents’ culture; she was caught between Canadian and Ethiopian cultures. In navigating these two cultures, she identified stronger with the Canadian culture and even attempted to Canadianize her parents.

In her journey to reclaim her African identity, she visited Ethiopia with her mother as an adult, a trip that she remembers as “a roller coaster.” She was taken aback by both the fast pace and high population density of the capital and the slow pace of village life.

*It’s [the capital] overwhelming and just like everything is kind of different, so you are trying to navigate the senses of the...food is different, dealing with the water is different, the electricity would cut out constantly and at that time there was no wi-fi that you could just get, so I had to keep going to the café to email my dad or whoever. So, it was a lot to wrap my head around a little bit and, when we went to Adwa and stayed there for the month, that was the total opposite. It was a small little town and there is not much going on, there is no restaurants that you go to, there is the market if you want to pick up stuff. But that was the first time that I just did nothing basically for an extended amount of time. You get your breakfast in the morning, you clean up and then you start making your lunch and you clean up after that and then it’s dinner and you clean up and that’s the whole day, every day.*

Despite the culture shock, this first trip to Ethiopia changed her perspective in life.

*It was a nice break for me to realize that there are different ways of living, and it’s not a worse way of living by any means. I remember thinking “oh, that’s a way better way of living life” because you’re actually spending time with people and they are really connected. Family and friends mean way more than it does here. We should definitely connect a lot more. There is something wrong with us a little bit when we are not seeing each other for weeks and we live in the same house.*

After this trip, the participant decided to work toward moving to Ethiopia for several months because she *“kind of missed that aspect of my identity.”* Acknowledging that she always associated Ethiopia with her parents, she wanted to create a personal association with her African ancestry.

Responses to survey questions on whether participants had an African passport and whether they were planning on visiting Africa were telling of the connection first-generation Canadians had to Africa. Even though only one of the twelve first-generation Canadian participants had an African passport, nine were planning on visiting their African country of ancestry. To some, especially those who had never visited Africa, this was an aspiration. Two of the three who answered “Maybe” to this question highlighted challenges about migration policies and affordability. Some of those who had previously visited Africa shared their plans to visit again, with a few thinking of potentially moving there.

*I went once about ten years ago when I was turning fourteen. I plan on going back there again when I graduate from university. I'm eternally toying with the idea of living there for a while, but as someone who doesn't know the culture very well nor the language, it would probably suit me to just take frequent trips over there until I could make a more permanent move, if it's in the cards.*

*I have been visiting Ethiopia since I was one year old, and have been back eight times, including when I lived/worked/volunteered there for a year.*

Visits to Africa were foundational to some participants. A participant shared that despite being *“not so deeply entrenched [in the African identity] because my father is from Ghana and mother is from Jamaica, I have two cultures that I belong to,”* his frequent visits to Ghana growing up made him *“absolutely feel connection there [Ghana]. I have family there that I connect with often. We text often, and I maintain desire to be there, to go there and visit them.”* Another participant shared how travelling to Ethiopia frequently while growing up, and working there allowed her to strongly connect to her African identity. A foundation of this cultural connection was built in Canada, eating Ethiopian food, listening to Ethiopian music, and speaking Amharic with her mother. However, as an Ethiopian born and raised in Canada, she did not feel fully accepted in Ethiopia.

*[Growing up] I felt very Ethiopian not Canadian...and I have gone back many times and then recently I worked there for a year. So, I'm a public health student., I was doing some public health work and that is when I realized that “okay, no, they don't consider me Ethiopian.” You know, you're the diaspora, so, it is very different.*

While such travels contribute to stronger connections to African cultures and identities among first-generation Canadians, not all families are able to facilitate this for their Canadian-born children. As a participant put it:

*I think I belong to a privileged family, so I was able to travel to Africa many times and that's how I had that connection. It was really important to my family to know where I*

*was from, and they could afford to make that happen. I am sure not everyone has that opportunity.*

Some of those who did not have the opportunity to travel while growing up make such cultural explorations as adults, and others seek cultural connections through African associations in the province. Through such associations, they are able to partake in and share their African cultural identities as part of a community. A first-generation Canadian shared how participating in celebrations and wearing cultural clothing to events organized by the Ghanaian Canadian Association of British Columbia was a highlight of his teenage years.

### **2.2.3 African ancestry with Caribbean and/or South & Central America background**

Forty-one of the 162 participants of the *African Ancestry Project* were of Caribbean, or of South and Central America background. They included recent and long-standing immigrants, first-generation Canadians, and second-generation Canadians. As discussed in the first chapter, immigration of people of African ancestry from the Caribbean or from South and Central America preceded that from Africa. While there were no second-generation Canadians of African background, there were two of Caribbean or South & Central America background among the project's participants. The second-generation Canadians shared the following:

*We are eight generations or so in Barbados and then my grandfather immigrated to Canada by fighting in WW2 for Canada.*

*My grandparents on my dad's side and our lineage as far as anyone can remember were born in Guyana, South America as Afro-Guyanese people. Often with mixed white or other ancestry due to slavery and colonization. We can assume our Afro ancestors were brought to those lands through enslavement, but from where in Africa, we do not know.*

Participants traced their familial connections and background to Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba, Barbados, Belize, Brazil, Peru, Dominica, Grenada, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, the Bahamas, and other countries. Some traced connections to more than one country, which reflects the legacy of migration within the region. As one participant put it:

*My parents, of course, they are Trinidadian, I think my grandfather on my mom's side is from Grenada, my grandfather on my dad's side is from Barbados and there's probably some ties to Guyana, so basically, I am the perfect example of an Island girl, a Caribbean Island girl.*

In sharing their connections to Africa and their African ancestry, participants' responses ranged from negative associations, to a lack of conscious associations with Africa, to

appreciation of their African ancestry from a distance, to seeking more connections to this ancestry but not feeling entitled to claim it, and to having close cultural connections.

In the survey, 54% of participants with this background acknowledged their African ancestry in how they identify- as “*African Canadian*,” “*Afro-Caribbean*,” “*Afro-Caribbean-Canadian*,” “*Afro-Brazilian*,” “*African descent*” or “*Afro-Canadian*”; one of them identified as African.

A participant of mixed ancestry who immigrated with her family from Trinidad shared how she grew up associating Africa with poverty. She observed how poverty among Black children in Trinidad resembled poverty in Africa as portrayed by western media. Consequently, she did not want to associate herself with her African ancestry despite being “*in a conflicted environment and as a victim of colourism within myself*” because of this ancestry.

*I would also say in Trinidad, I was sort of middle class, maybe upper middle, middle class ranking and on our way to school there was still a lot of shanti towns. That was really hard for me to see as a young child, as I could see that the poverty was predominantly African heritage, you know the African community. So, I grew up understanding the political battle between the Indians and the Africans in Trinidad and to me I didn't like seeing such poor...you know there were children running around in such poverty. I didn't like to see that, so I never wanted to go to Africa because of that, because the way Africa is filtered to the West it's sort of like Africa is full of these poor children, like it is impoverished and all of that stuff. Which to me, growing up, I didn't want to see that. I don't want to celebrate that, that's hard enough to see.*

Another participant who also grew up in Trinidad shared how she never learned about Africa beyond the slave narrative. She grew up feeling ashamed of her African ancestry because of her experiences of racism and colourism, and the lack of a cultural connection to Africa.

*It [education on Africa] was mostly just like the slave narrative and honestly just that we came to Trinidad because we were slaves. Slaves were traded from different parts of the Caribbean, and North America, and we brought certain culinary influences to the country. But in terms of actually learning anything about the continent of Africa in school, sadly that has definitely never been my experience and so, I don't think I had the chance to develop that sense of pride. Honestly, I was quite ashamed of it, and feeling less than, especially comparing to the Indo-Trinidadian people that had such a strong sense of their culture, and their language. They had a language; they had a culture; they had traditions, and it felt like we did not have such a strong tie and honestly sometimes felt less than because of our hair, skin colour, all these things.*

Another participant, a recent immigrant from Jamaica, shared that she felt no connection to Africa, partly because of resentment about the involvement of Africans in enslavement of fellow Africans, to whom she traces her African ancestry.

*I do acknowledge obviously that I have African ancestry, but I don't feel a connection with Africa. Part of it, I feel like it comes from some sort of resentment that we were sold by our brothers and sisters in the past. At least that's how history says it but even within our own country, when the slaves arrived, there was some turning against each other. So, I don't know—I just don't feel that connection that others might feel with the motherland.*

In reflecting on her connection to Africa, a participant who immigrated from the Bahamas shared how she wished this connection could be based on something other than the history of enslavement. She narrated how she was pained to have to explain her connection to Africa to her students at an English as Second Language (ESL) school.

*I would have to explain the sad history of the slave trade; it was really awkward. But I think that kind of represents a bit of my relationship with Africa. With Africa, it's kind of unsure where you fit in but you would like it to be based on something other than all that, all that comes when you say the word slavery; it's so charged but you don't also know what happened before so, it's uncertain.*

Two participants shared how they never associated themselves with Africa growing up despite their dark skin tones. One, a first-generation Canadian with parents from Jamaica always saw herself as Jamaican and was taken aback when someone asked if she identified as African Canadian. The other, adopted as a baby from Jamaica, shared that a DNA test they took to learn about their ancestry is what revealed to them a connection to Africa.

*I honestly really didn't think about myself being considered as African until I went to my first year of university. So, I grew up in Toronto, and my parents are Jamaican, so I've always considered myself Jamaican, Black, Canadian but mostly Jamaican and now when I moved for my bachelor to [a state in the USA] and one of the teachers in my class was like "so, would you consider yourself African Canadian?" and I was like, I have never actually considered—I consider myself as [her name]. I consider myself Jamaican and that was the first time I started to consider that—my parents are Jamaican, I am Canadian but my lineage—Jamaicans came to the Islands from being slaves, so then I would be considered from my lineage and from my heritage African. So that was my first experience of even thinking about that because the culture which I grew up in was very "you're Jamaican or you're Black" but there was no African ever in that mix.*

*So, I did that 23andMe [genetic testing] and found out that they got it right on the nose when they said like "you have lots of family members in Jamaica" but also, they said, historically, I had many roots in, I believe it was, Western Africa, which I thought was interesting because I wouldn't have ever thought of that. So, it was interesting to see my actual history be a place in actual Africa as well. If I didn't do my genetics, I wouldn't have known I was African as ignorant as that might be to say. I know that Africa and Black people, it all started there. So, I get that, but when I was born in Jamaica, I am Jamaican, so seeing that there is Africa—actual Africa in my lineage, I*

*thought that was quite cool because it wasn't necessarily something that I associated with, not even in a bad way. But it wasn't something that was on my radar.*

Some participants shared how they appreciated their African ancestry or how they sought this connection over the years, but that in the end, they do not feel entitled to claim this ancestry. A participant shared her journey of embracing her African ancestry, tracing this ancestry through DNA testing, but yet feeling unable to claim an African identity.

*I am embracing it [her African ancestry] more and more because it's just a natural progression from what I did when I was a teenager. I don't want my African ancestry to be something negative. The world may see it as negative, but I don't want to see it as negative. I am going to celebrate it to the nth degree. I wouldn't be here without it. My children wouldn't be here without it. My great-grandmother, my grandfather, all of my connections, we wouldn't be here without it, and I think the more you celebrate the Africa in you, the more the Africa would be celebrated in the world. Because there is so much incredible history there and I'm 55, and it's been a lifelong journey to come to understand and appreciate, and to decolonize myself.*

As part of her daughter's migration project, this participant did a genetic test which revealed that 13% of her genetic material can be traced to Africa, and specifically to Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, Congo and Western Bantu people, Benin, and Togo. She shared that while she could give "sketchy stories" of her Indian and European heritage based on oral stories, she could not answer her daughter's questions about her African heritage. While she was intrigued by these DNA results, having her ancestry traced to over five different countries and the realization of the generational loss in culture made it difficult for her to claim this African ancestry.

*All of our African ancestry comes from different parts of Africa, but there are different cultures in Africa. So, that's why I said to myself, I can't just say I have African ancestry. I need to go back and find out where that ancestry came from and now, I know. It's Nigeria, it is Mali, it is the Congo, it is Cameroon...how can I claim the land or the cultures of the people? We are just so far removed from it, generation upon generation, culture upon culture. I don't want to falsely claim something that I can't claim. I don't even know what I can claim anymore.*

Participants who had taken genetic tests to trace their African ancestry, or aspired to do so, shared their need to answer questions about their African identity for themselves and their children, and their drive to connect with and appreciate this ancestry.

*Taking one of the genealogy tests was one of the things I planned to do this year. And it's something I would like to do in the fairly near future, just to answer some of those [identity] questions.*

*My mother is English-Irish and my father, who I didn't grow up with, was from the Caribbean. When I did my 23andMe, if you can rely on those results, it said that my*

*African heritage was from the Congo area. So, I have always been interested in that part of my identity just because it was missing in terms of parental role model.*

*For me really, [I want to do a DNA test] just knowing more, actually knowing the lineage of where I potentially, you know where my ancestors in Africa were from and to then study that more... to know the stories more.*

*I just thought it was important [to do the DNA test] especially since I have kids that are biracial. So, I think it's important for myself as well as them to know the other part of their history. I mean especially since...we are seen first as Black and there is a lot that gives with that and I also think education is power, so the more they know, the better equipped they are to deal with the things they have to [deal with].*

*Now that I am getting older is realizing how much more depth in my culture there is if I choose to seek it and find out more about my roots and my lineage, and that I do have a story beyond just "my parents are Jamaican" and looking at that a little bit more for myself and excited about learning more about different parts of Africa, because I have friends that are in my circle that are from different parts of Africa and I see that diversity. So, I'm like "Oh, I wanna know where along those lines I might fall in" to know more and just to appreciate it a little bit more.*

*I've done the 23andMe test and it told me that I'm 53 percent Nigerian. I think I'd like to go there someday because of the culture and industry.*

*I plan to visit many countries in Africa including Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, which are places that my ancestry hails from according to ancestry.com and I hope to one day make it to Ethiopia as I am a Rastafarian.*

Participants shared how not knowing a specific African region or country of ancestry makes it difficult to claim or build a connection to Africa.

*I guess my connection [to Africa]...I guess it's mostly just feeling like someone who is part of the African diaspora, as opposed to someone who kind of knows what, sometime in the past, what specific region or regions my family would've been connected to. So, it feels tenuous, like something you kind of want to say but you don't feel like you have the right to because you don't really know exactly where it would be.*

*I don't know what African country my ancestors came from. DNA test just said West Africa.*

*It's difficult to ascertain my true country of ancestry as there are numerous ones.*

*Many African descent in the diaspora don't know their tribe, in my case I am assuming I am Yoruba and Bantu but not 100 percent sure.*

*My story of my African heritage was stolen from me. I do not have a known country of African ancestry. It's also possible I have multiple.*

A participant shared how not having familial connections in Africa makes her feel unable to claim her African identity in Canada alongside people who have these connections despite embracing this identity when she lived in Trinidad.

*In Trinidad because of...there's two dominant I guess ethnicities which would be those of African descent and those of Indian descent. So, in Trinidad, I would've associated myself more of African but coming to Canada and finding "real Africans," people from the actual African continent, I have found myself somewhat digressing from that identity. It's been a very interesting I guess, dilemma, of how to accurately identify myself. At the same time, there's been this growing desire to connect with the motherland so to speak.*

Some participants were still grappling with learning of their Caribbean or South and Central American cultural identities and were prioritizing that because of their familial connections there. A first-generation Canadian, whose father was born in Brazil and whose African ancestry was traced to 1800s in Nigeria, shared:

*Firstly, I'd like to visit Brazil because that is the culture I identify more with. 50 percent of my family is there and I've never been. They have also been there for generations. I only found out my specific African heritage recently through a DNA test.*

Other participants shared:

*I was adopted by a white family and have had very little contact with people of colour and am just learning a bit about my background through DNA testing. I haven't thought of it [visiting African country of ancestry]. I would rather see Jamaica to connect with my culture there first.*

*This is a distant connection [to Africa]. Last year I visited Ghana. I have traced my ancestry to that region through DNA. I want to visit Barbados too so I can learn about the ancestors who made the journey and were enslaved, then free.*

Other participants shared of a close connection to Africa and African cultures. Growing up in Metro Vancouver, a participant shared that she had friends who "knew where their great-great-grandparents were from" and felt bad for not knowing "exactly where I come from beyond the history I know from Jamaica." Following the encouragement of her partner who immigrated from Senegal, and who insisted that her ancestry would likely be traced back to Senegal, she took the genetic test as a joke. To her pleasant surprise, her ancestry was traced primarily to Nigeria. Her godmother, who immigrated from Nigeria, had given her a Nigerian name at birth, unknowingly matching her name to her African ancestry. Going to Africa for the first time after this discovery "rejuvenated" her.

*Last year I was able to go to Africa for the first time and that was really nice and just eye-opening. As soon as I got there, I was like "Aah," I felt like a part of me that has been missing had been rejuvenated. Like this is where I am supposed to be. I love being able to see people that look like me. I just want to learn as much as I can; it made me want to delve further into my history by going there.*

A participant who travelled to Kenya and Tanzania as a teenager shared an instant connection.

*It was interesting being part of the dominant culture even though I knew nothing about Swahili traditions or anything. But people would look at me like I'm supposed to know kind of or like I am one of them.*

Another participant demonstrated a connection to Africa resulting from cultural proximity. She grew up in Trinidad with rhythms and music, and "*stories that kind of echo stories that you might hear in Ghana or Nigeria.*" Her ancestral connections were traced from "*stories about a great-great-great- or great-great-grandfather being on the Titanic or something like that...all these little kinds of stories that are not quite certain but kind of being passed down kind of thing,*" which "*doesn't really go too much far back as to which part of the African content we've actually come from.*"

She grew up listening to an ancient folklore that can be traced to the Akan people, whose ancestral home is found in present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast. The Bre-Nancy stories, which she was accustomed to, started off as "Kwaku Ananse" in West Africa and were carried by enslaved Africans to the Caribbean where they have been told and retold from generation to generation. After immigrating with her family to Canada, she got to meet people of African background and was exposed to West African music and culture; she was taken aback by the similarities. She began embracing her African ancestry through these connections.

*Just the revelation of the similarities. I was like, "Oh, my gosh! This is how I can connect with some of my, I would like to say, African brothers and sisters." And it's a way of kind of getting in touch with something beyond just my parents and my grandparents and touching a bit more on my ancestry.*

Other aspects of culture that were carried by enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and to South and Central America include food, language, and spirituality.<sup>18</sup> A participant shared how she felt a connection to Africa through a dish her grandmother used to make her, called *callaloo*. *Callaloo* is a vegetable dish traditionally made from an Indigenous leafy vegetable called *amaranth*. The dish is made differently in different countries in the Caribbean, as it is in different African countries, locally known as *efo riro* in Nigeria and *biteku tek* or *ndunda* in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Language was also carried on and evolved with contexts and time to the present-day languages spoken by some participants: Jamaican creole, Bahamian dialect, Patois and Trini English. Some religious

practices still practised by Afro-Brazilians aim at increasing closeness to *orixás*, African deities traced to the Yoruba people. Those of Caribbean and of South and Central America background also inherited certain physical features from their African ancestors, including their dark skin tones. A participant shared how these features were a source of connection to Africans as she was travelling around the world: *“Eritreans, Egyptians, Somalians were looking at my features and connecting me to them.”*

Through travels and cultural connections in Ghana and Jamaica where his parents immigrated from, a first-generation Canadian shared the similarities he noticed between his parent’s cultures.

*There are numerous similarities between Jamaica and Ghana partly due to the transatlantic slave trade including more than spirituality, food, and dance. The Akan [of Ghana] and the Maroons of Jamaica have many interesting parallels when it comes to language, names of children, and willingness to travel [or] live in countries around the world, [in] my opinion. The differences I see are few; however, I do believe Ghanaian people are more homogenic than Jamaicans, meaning they are less likely to date and marry outside of their culture. I would say the tribal heritage within Ghana remains quite intact; thereby, there are more practised traditions overall in Ghana, connected to their history from hundreds of years ago in comparison to the more “westernized” Jamaica.*

Even with various aspects of African culture and identity passed on, contextualized, and redefined from generation to generation, communities of people of African ancestry in the Caribbean and in South and Central America became producers of unique cultural identities as espoused by how some participants identified first as Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean, Caribbean-Canadian, or Afro-Caribbean-Canadian. In countries where people of African ancestry do not form part of the dominant culture, participants’ identification as Afro-Cuban or Afro-Brazilian acknowledges the cultural uniqueness of these communities.

#### **2.2.4 Multi-generational North Americans of African ancestry**

Fourteen percent of survey participants were multi-generational North Americans, rooted in Canada and/or the US. They shared feelings of disconnect with Africa because of the enslavement of their African ancestors, shame from this cultural disconnect, rootedness in North America and the Black experience therein, their drive to explore their African ancestry, and contentedness with connecting first with their North American history and reality. Most of the survey participants in this category identified as Canadian, then as African Canadian and/or African American. Only two of the 23 participants with this background included African as one way they identified.

When trying to trace their familial connection to Africa, participants shared how they believed that this connection could be traced to early as 1600s and 1700s, through their great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents. One shared:

*My great-grandparents were from Africa, but all we know is they were sold to Chickasaw tribe in Alabama.*

Despite acknowledging this ancestry and familial connection to Africa, most participants found it too distant to claim an African identity.

*I wouldn't really identify myself as "African" seeing as the ancestors who have that identity haven't lived in Africa since they were forcefully removed due to slavery hundreds of years ago. As I don't have a specific cultural frame of reference from Africa to identify with.*

*I don't have any tangible link with the continent of Africa since my family on my dad's side has been here [in North America] for seven generations, with the slave trade being our lineage.*

*I use African American because my lineage is of enslaved Black/African peoples brought to the United States.*

*I don't identify as African. I would like to feel like I could, but I almost feel like I can't because I don't know where I am from.*

*Africa is not central to my sense of self. It is only one component.*

The lack of an African "cultural frame" or "direct ties to Africa," as one participant indicated, could result in feelings of shame. Through her artistic work, she is continually exploring her African ancestry and what that means to her.

*I find myself feeling a little bit of—in terms of this relationship between being Black or being African—feeling a sense of embarrassment or shame in my area if I come across someone who is a rooted African in BC or in Canada because I do not have the same connection. If they ask me where I am from, I say "I am just from here" or "where is your family from." At best, I know it's West Africa. So, I feel—because right now I am still literally valuing knowing what my roots are—I am just in a season where I maybe idolize in a sense. If I am just speaking frankly, those who know where they are from, who come to BC from Africa, that I am in a space where I can't claim myself as much as they can. So, I feel a little bit, if I am just being truthful, a little bit ashamed of that lack of self-knowledge right now.*

She embarked on this journey of exploring her African roots as an adult: "For most of my life, I had very little opportunity or space or reason or interest in identifying with my African roots." As a performing artist who explores her ancestry by researching on and performing West African folktales, she still struggles being in spaces where people "naturally assume that I am rooted in this culture...[they] assume I am more African than I have known how to

*claim.*” She questions herself on whether she has the right to tell these stories despite having this right given “*in Western Canada’s eyes*” because of the colour of her skin. The participant shared that she felt like she does not have an “*authentic African connection*” because of having no family in Africa; that familial connection was severed when her ancestors were taken from Africa.

Others shared how they felt grounded in Canada and North America, and, hence, did not seek to explore or claim their African identity. Having traced her roots in Canada back seven generations, one participant noted that meant “*I am grounded in this Canadian Black experience of hardship and struggle and perseverance and just that I identify so strongly with this country.*” Speaking of her connection to Africa, she shared:

*I feel like if I claim African, then I am shunting aside all of the history here in Canada that my family went through, and they went through a lot of things. I claim this long history in Canada as both to honour my ancestors here, acknowledge my ancestors, who were slaves, who were taken from Africa, who “worked,” in the United States and also just to say I am fully embedded in this country and in this society.*

Other participants also shared how they first needed to explore their North American family history.

*For me, in order to get to the African roots, I need to go through my African American family history experience, the slave trade and all of that. The wait in the pain of that. And also, as a Black Canadian living on the West Coast, this experience I have is worlds apart from the experience my grandma and grandpa had in Alabama and Mississippi and what it meant to be Black for them.*

*[It’s] been nice to actually connect with them [African American family she had never met before] and one of my aunts has been doing like a family tree. So, I was able to talk to her about some of that stuff, obviously it only goes back so far. One of her mom’s ex-boyfriends, his family did that, they actually have their slave papers and stuff like that. It was really interesting to see. So, I have definitely thought about looking into my heritage and background, whatever that means.*

Another participant started to look into his family’s history as an adult because he realized that he knew much of his mother’s European ancestry but very little of his father’s African ancestry.

*I think it has been an evolving process for myself. I feel a little bit of disconnect and I would say that when someone asks me where I am from, I try to say that I am Canadian, but I have European and African ancestry. That said, the last few years I have been looking into it a lot more from my father’s side to learn a little bit more and as I learn more, I feel a little bit more whole inside and kind of coming to terms with how I identify myself. And that comes a lot from learning about my great-great-*

*grandfather, how they used the underground railroads and networks to escape the US from Oklahoma into Saskatchewan.*

While he started by exploring his family's history in North America, he plans to explore deeper and to *"never stop learning and trying to know more."*

Just like some participants of Caribbean and South and Central American background, some of the multi-generational North Americans shared their quest to find out about their African ancestry through genetic testing. Others knew someone who had done this test, and some highlighted their skepticism because of concerns about DNA information security and privacy, applicability, relevance, and accuracy. Indeed, there has been public criticism about the accuracy of these tests.<sup>19</sup> A participant shared that although she was skeptical and *"on the fence"* about taking the 23andMe genetic test, she is considering it because *"I just don't feel that connection [to Africa] and would like to."*

Those who did the test shared a closer connection to Africa and their African identity. A participant, who was signed up for the test by her husband as a gift, shared how the test did not really matter to her but that *"It wasn't until I did my ancestry.com test and found okay West Africa, that I ever really had any sort of tangibility to it [Africa]."* Speaking of her friend's experience, one participant shared, *"My friend did it and she found out she was Nigerian which is great—she's Nigerian so she woah, she now eats like the food, the music, and stuff like that."* In reflecting what she would do if such a test links her ancestry to a particular African country, such as Ghana, she shared:

*I'd probably like to even go there and just see, like what my experience could've been if my ancestors weren't stolen from this land. So, that would be very interesting. I've always wanted to go to the African continent. It's weird, it's such a mixed feeling, like I wanna go but I almost feel like an imposter or something like that—like I don't wanna go without knowing. It's just weird—I wanna go so bad but I also feel like part of me doesn't belong, but I want to. So, what would I do with that information? I would probably wanna go there, research, speak to people. I know there's like a restaurant and I think the woman is from Ghana, I'd probably go visit her and just like talk to people and get to see what their experiences are like—connect with my peoples...[it's] like a piece is missing.*

Other participants shared:

*I have had to do research to reclaim our family history. I will visit the countries of which I know we have originated: Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana.*

*I want to see my ancestral homeland.*

*I just want to be in a sea of Black faces—of faces Black like mine.*

While the genetic tests can trace one's African ancestry to a broad geographical location such as West Africa or multiple African countries, some results are more precise in indicating a specific country or ethnic group, or percentage in ancestral claim to these

locales or identities (see appendix 1). A couple of participants shared how the country of ancestry might not be relevant or accurate because of human migration and intermarriages over time. To some participants, nonetheless, geographical location linked to their African ancestry and consequent “*cultural frame*” mattered. It offered an entry point to an exploration of identity and culture within the African continent, and hence a stronger connection to their African ancestry.

Participants shared the various reasons that led them to seek a connection to their African ancestry: struggling with identity because of isolation and/or racism; growing up and realizing how little one knew about this ancestry; feeling shame in not knowing or having this connection; being able to pass on this knowledge to one’s children; and, being inspired by friends who were doing this and the recent resurgence centring African ancestry. Some accidentally stumbled onto this path or did it for fun and stayed the course.

*So, I faced racism at a very early age, very overt too—very in your face. So, it’s always shaped my identity and being one of the only Black students in school, one of the only Black people in my community, I struggled with my identity and who I was and that’s why I latched onto where my father was from.*

*I didn’t really have many experiences with my extended family from my father’s side either and I think as I got older, I started to think of, if and when I have my own kids, what will I tell them and what will I share with them?*

*I identify as Black, so, the African part of it, for a long time I was just like “no, no, no, no” but it has been this year through the Black Lives Matter and just this resurgence that I have actually started to embrace those ties even though they’re still far back in history but obviously it is reflected in my skin; it’s not reflected in my culture at all. But that African piece is starting to resonate a little bit more with me.*

One participant shared how, for her, this exploration has become a spiritual quest.

*It’s become a spiritual quest. It’s become a quest of my soul and of my heart because I want to understand this life I have on earth and my Blackness, my African heritage, my slave trade heritage. I think that’s my relationship to my Blackness right now; it’s propelling me to quest and to go deep through my soul, through my soul claim my heritage.*

Culturally, participants shared connecting their African identity to the African American culture through literature, music, and fashion. Enslaved Africans in the US were isolated from their culture through separation from their lands and ethnic communities in Africa, through separation from families and communities built in the US, and again through a ban of cultural practices such as drumming because of fear of coded messages that aided uprisings or escapes through the Underground Railroad. Despite this, African culture was passed on in various ways. Drums were, for instance, substituted by clapping and tapping of the feet to reproduce African drum rhythm.<sup>20</sup> In the First African Baptist Church in Georgia, a Kongolese Cosmogram was discovered beneath a space in which enslaved

African would await safe passage through the Underground Railroad, indicating a continuity in African spiritual practices.<sup>21</sup> A Creole language spoken by African Americans in South Carolina and Georgia in the 1930s included words and grammatical structures from African languages such as Kongo, Hausa, Wolof, Vai, Twi, and Bambara languages. Subsequently, words such as *gumbo*, *yambi*, *yam*, *chigger*, *nana*, and *tote* have become part of the US American English vocabulary.<sup>22</sup> Language, music, spiritual practices, dance, stories, and culinary traditions were passed on; they evolved, and then they were passed on again and so on.<sup>23</sup> With people from different African cultures and identities building communities with each other, the various cultures converged to create a unique culture which then evolved adapting to its context.<sup>24</sup> While the convergence and evolution of African cultures overtime distanced the emergent African American cultural identity from contributing African cultures, that cultural connection is evident to this date.

African Americans who migrated to Canada two generations ago or earlier carried with them this cultural identity as evidenced in the prominent jazz culture in the 1920s and cultural institutions in urban pockets with churches and businesses acting as cultural spaces.<sup>25</sup> A participant shared:

*[In Canada] there is a like a subculture just...more explicit in some instances as opposed to others. I think, it is stronger just due to sheer number in Central Canada and in and around Toronto, in Halifax because there is a well-established Black Canadian community there.*

He observed that despite the church his family attended acting like a “*huge cultural gathering point*,” he did not experience any subculture in BC. This is likely because of the small numbers of Black people in the province. His father, who grew up in Greater Vancouver, once shared that in those days, the only Black people they knew were related to them. Another participant shared how they grew up listening to blues and jazz but “*in terms of cultural markers, we are just some basic Canadian.*” Those who did not have the African American cultural reference through family, sought it through the media and literature coming from the US. One participant confessed that she grew up knowing a lot about African American history and culture, but nothing about the history of people of African ancestry in Canada.

Participants shared that even without cultural reference to Africa, they could not deny the connection through blood, genetics, and inherited skin colour. In trying to articulate his connection to Africa, one participant noted that this connection could be spiritual.

*I think it [the connection to Africa] is [through] the genetic aspect of it and how you are reminded by society that this is where you are [from] and this is what you are. It's interesting because I have this desire to go [to Africa] one day, but I have never been because my family is of African American descent. I mean who knows when the last direct ancestor was actually born in Africa? I would say it's more of spiritual—I don't know if spiritual is the right word—I would say spiritual because I don't know if it's really cultural. I can't say it's cultural because I've never been. I was not raised in that*

*culture, and I honestly don't know that much other than what I have read and spoken with people or seen documentaries.*

### **2.2.5 African ancestry with European background**

Eight participants (5%) of the *African Ancestry Project* were either born or raised in Europe and have lived in Canada for 10 months to 21 years. How they identify varied, from African, Caribbean, African-European, Afropean, Black European, Black British, to African Canadian. Two identified with a specific African ethnicity. They spoke European languages that are spoken in countries where they were born or raised; most spoke at least two European languages, and three spoke an African language. One of these participants is a second-generation European, five are first-generation Europeans, and two immigrated to Europe with their families as children. Some are of mixed ancestry; one of their parents migrated to Europe and partnered with someone of European ancestry. Participants with a European ancestry whose parents immigrated to Canada from Europe are not included in this category. Note that people of African ancestry are not a recent presence in Europe; they have a long history that can be traced to the third century.<sup>26</sup>

Depending on familial connections, histories, and circumstances, participants shared their varied connections to Africa. A participant who was born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), raised in France, and moved to Canada as an adult had never gone back to his country of birth and did not feel a strong connection to Africa despite a cultural connection through speaking Lingala. A participant who was born in Equatorial Guinea and grew up in Spain noted that she was not interested in visiting her birth country nor be involved in the political or social life there.

A participant who was born in Germany and lived there for their first eleven years before moving to Canada, shared how they felt connected to Ghana, the home country of one of their parents. This connection was evidenced by their ownership of property in Ghana as well as their self-identification as "*African-European*" or "*Ghanaian mixed*." Another first-generation German, with parents born in Nigeria and Germany, identified in a variety of ways: Afropean, Black, Nigerian-German, West African, German, Nigerian, and Igbo. Another participant born in Germany to two African parents, spent her initial years in Europe before the parents returned to their home country, Sierra Leone. Despite living in Canada for 21 years, she maintains a strong connection to Africa where her extended family lives. She wants "*(her) children to develop that sense of knowledge and belonging with their African ancestry*."

A first-generation British participant of mixed ancestry, with parents born in Jamaica and the UK, shared that their maternal grandfather was born in Gambia and has visited Gambia several times. A second-generation British participant with grandparents born in Jamaica shared how they had "*no current ties directly with Africa*" but noted they were planning on visiting Africa since a DNA test traced their ancestry to Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone.

A first-generation Portuguese participant, whose parents who immigrated to Portugal from São Tomé and Príncipe as a couple in the 1970s, shared that she experienced her African cultural identity through music, food, stories, and cultural values passed on by her parents. She fondly remembered how they would always cook more than needed for people who might just come by. She noted, *“I think that sense of community, that’s definitely something that I cherish, like a community of giving to the other with not expecting anything in return.”* Despite her never visiting her parent’s home country, she grew up embracing the *“léve léve”* way of living in from São Tomé and Príncipe:

*In São Tomé there is this saying, when you ask people in São Tomé how they are doing, they usually say “léve léve” which means that they are okay, they are well, life is good, they are going with the wind. There’s this sort of peace to the way people live. They don’t have a lot but what they have they cherish. So, I would say that I quite embrace that way of living. Yeah, things may not be the way you want them to be, but they are still pretty good and you’re still here and you have health and all of that.*

The participant, however, lamented about her inability to speak her parents’ creole language. Growing up, her parents only spoke Portuguese at home. Her older siblings, nonetheless, were able to pick up the creole from their nanny. This loss of language over generations is not taking place just in Portugal. Research indicates that creole languages in São Tomé are losing their significance as cultural or identity markers. Local languages are viewed with contempt because of pejorative ideologies held since colonial times and are perceived to be hinderance to a unified nation, while the Portuguese language is associated with “national unity, modernity, and European-ness” resulting in its spread on the island and a move toward monolingualism.<sup>27</sup>

Although she primarily sees herself as Portuguese and a Black European, she started to critically think about her identity and look into her family history as an adult, and wishes she knew more.

*I think it’s important to know your history and where you come from. I think especially as you build your identity, and you get to know yourself, I think that’s important. For me, I find that important. But also, I think it’s about knowing the history of your family, right? And I think it’s interesting. I always like to hear the history, so, it’s something that I think we should continue to tell also the stories to those that come after us.*

She found out how her mixed ancestry was linked to the history of slavery and colonization in São Tomé. She traced familial connections to a great-great-grand father who had been enslaved in Brazil, a Portuguese grandfather who sought refuge in São Tomé at a time when Europeans were facing armed resistance to colonial rule in Angola, and to a grandfather of Asian ancestry from Macao.

This participant is looking forward to her first visit to São Tomé and Príncipe where she anticipates meeting *“quite a lot of aunties and uncles”*; her grandfather made a list of all his children in 1987 where he counted 45 to 50 children. She fondly remembered how a

woman from São Tomé and Príncipe once gave her a big hug after she introduced herself and shared her parents' names and where they were from. She is confident that *“there will definitely be a connection and I think people will know [her family] because it is a very small community. Everyone knows everyone.”*

Another participant shared how growing up in France, in a city neighbouring Belgium, he was always surrounded by Congolese people, music, and food, as well as the Ndongolo dance and the Lingala language. Despite never going back to DR Congo after he immigrated to France as a child, he never questioned his connection to Africa or his cultural identity. He experienced *“a little bit of racism”* but, for him, *“it was just kind of normal; it’s like racism is part of life.”* When visiting smaller cities, such experiences were notable and where he was made *“to feel that you are different than other people.”* Culturally, however, he felt grounded until he moved to British Columbia where he started feeling alone and culturally isolated. In reflecting on his current connection to Africa, he questioned:

*I am not sure if I am still African. I know I am African, but I am Black. I was born in Africa, I speak Lingala. I know few things about my country and different countries in Africa, but does this make me African?*

He shared how he felt like Simba in Lion King:

*When Simba leaves. I feel like I am little bit like Simba, when he lost his dad, and he went to the jungle and now he’s a little bit lost.*

His mother immigrated to Europe as a single mother and so the participant had not seen his father since he was a child. His father is a renown musician in the DR Congo, and he looks forward to visiting him as an established musician himself.

*I said to myself when I was young, I need to go back to Congo as an established musician because I don’t want to be in the shadow of my father. This year after graduation, it was my plan, I wanted to graduate and go back to Congo.*

## 2.2.6 Connections in Oceania

People in Oceania are not considered people of African ancestry. Genetic studies indicate that their connection to Africa is like that of someone of European ancestry, traced to one expansion of modern humans out of Africa about 75,000 years ago.<sup>28</sup> Recent studies even indicate that present-day people in Papua New Guinea have at least 2% of their genome originating from an earlier dispersal, with the genetic split between Yoruban and Papuan lineages estimated to have occurred around 120,000 years ago.<sup>29</sup> Similar physical features to the Biaka or Bantu people in Central Africa has been explained as likely resulting from convergent evolution, where similar phenotypes arise because of adaptation to relatively similar environmental conditions.<sup>30</sup>

Some people from Oceania would identify or be identified as Black in Canada. The 2016 census noted that between 2011 and 2016, 0.8% of Black immigrants came from Asia and

Oceania.<sup>31</sup> Two participants with familial connections in Oceania were included in the *African Ancestry Project* because of their articulated and perceived ancestral and cultural connection to Africa.

A first-generation Canadian with parents from Fiji shared that her ancestors were from Madagascar.

*My father presents as half-Black, half-white and is half-Black and half-white as his father was white and my grandmother is Black and identified as a native Fiji Islander. After her death I was contacted by her relatives, and they let me know that their ancestors were from Madagascar. [I identify as] African, Irish, Indian, and Native Fijian.*

The second participant could not trace familial connections to Africa but was skeptical of the science where “anthropologists told us that our ancestors came on a dry bamboo, others said the ancestors came through the ice age.” He believes his ancestry can be traced to the Mali Empire.

*I am sure my first ancestors who came with Abu Bakr II were from Mali Empire. I have been making research on my ancestors and I found out that my ancestors came from West Africa. Abu Bakr II cross Atlantic Ocean to North and South Americas, and Indian to Pacific Ocean with 3200 ships even before Christopher Columbus.*

He strongly identified with African cultural identities and people of African ancestry because of similarities to his cultural upbringing.

*If you go to Papua New Guinea, we have about 370+ culture and 1,000+ language. Some of the languages sounds like the Arabs, some languages sound Nigerian and our culture when it comes to traditional dance, there is no difference. The way that family living together in one house. We have the custom of family living together, respecting elders, making traditional herbs and medicine. Everything is similar. Now I am making research into the African culture, my culture and there is no difference. For me, it is not hard to blend myself with Africans because when I was in the US, we have real Black Americans: Nigerians, Kenyans, Cameroonians, Ugandans. When we were mixed together, people were confused as they couldn't identify us. This is because we came from the same family.*

While the first participant mentioned above was unsure about visiting Africa, this participant was looking forward to it.

*It is my goal to go visit my ancestral land, especially going to visit West Africa and Timbuktu.*

## 2.3 Bicultural dilemma: First-generation Canadians in the in-between

First-generation Canadians shared an experience one participant highlighted as a bicultural dilemma. They noted that growing up, their parents were not embedded into Canadian culture but rather learned to navigate it while holding onto their original culture and belief system. As children, first-generation Canadians not only integrated into the mainstream Canadian culture, particularly through shared experiences with school mates and friends, but also had a different cultural experience with their parents. The second, and sometimes third, cultural identity often contradicted their mainstream Canadian cultural experience and related expectations.

In explaining this cultural contradiction, a participant whose parents migrated to Canada in the 1970s from Ghana and Jamaica shared that:

*Bicultural dilemma is in fact what I think of our experience because we carry different backgrounds that many times are not Christian or aren't individualistic. I think we come from collectivist backgrounds that are different than a lot that we see here in western culture. So, I think we very easily and often go through that bicultural conflict of being here but belonging to a different culture that has different backgrounds.*

Growing up, he noted the distinction between his cultural experience in his home and outside his home and tried to navigate both cultural spaces.

*Western ideas and concepts especially as an adolescent that you are exposed to, they contradict things that your parents are comfortable with, and that happens often. You learn from your mates that you are not the same and you have to, unfortunately, go through life with the headaches sometimes of abiding by those different kinds of rules that your family sets based on their comfort and experiences because often, my family, I never saw them as assimilated to the culture here.*

A participant with parents who immigrated to Canada in the 1990s from Ethiopia shared similar sentiments.

*For me and my brother growing up here, it's [Canadian mainstream culture] basically the only culture that we knew. Ethiopia was kind of always associated with my parents and their culture because I wasn't born there and I didn't grow up there. So, I always just associated it with "oh, it's my parents and my parent's friends." That's what Ethiopia is.*

She noted that her experience of Canada and that of her parents were distinct when she was a child, as her parents were still newcomers. Her parents were striving for success in the new country they found themselves in, with the mother working toward improving her English and the father pursuing higher education.

*I think that was probably really challenging for my parents now that I think about it as an adult. My parents were trying to learn the new culture in Canada, and they have two kids who are being brought up in this culture and they are just trying to figure it out themselves. Yeah, so I am sure that was very challenging for them to then have to jump into this new world. But then for me and my brother it is just kind of normal, like trying to assimilate with the kids.*

In her own way, she tried to Canadianize them to bridge the gap between the two cultures. She identified with Canadian mainstream culture and associated her parents' actions with them being immigrants and not understanding Canadian culture.

*As a kid you don't really understand, and I think a lot of times I just associated my parent's choices with them being immigrants or Ethiopians [and] not understanding Canadian ways. For example, my parents, and my mom in particular, wouldn't let me sleepover at any of the kid's house. They were pretty strict on like keeping me home and with other things as well, they just seemed to be stricter than my fellow students and I just thought like it's because they are Ethiopian, they don't understand. Or like, if I did anything wrong, they would punish me in Ethiopian ways and not like a Canadian standard. We would never get grounded or anything, but my parents would come up with interesting ways to punish us. So, I always just felt like we were definitely different from everyone else. And you really felt that in a way of not being able to...like the other kids in the schools that I went to weren't experiencing the same things I was at home. So, there was always this kind of difference. I was different and the only way I could figure out to be not so different was to kind of like push Canadian values on my parents.*

As his own way of coping, her little brother always complained about eating Ethiopian food and would ask for burgers and sandwiches. She observes that *"as a kid, you just wanna be like everyone else."*

A first-generation Canadian with a father from Saint Vincent and mother from Trinidad shared a similar experience. She grew up surrounded by other families from the West Indies and, as the eldest daughter, she *"learned a lot pretty quickly about cooking and some of our customs and traditions, especially on my mother's side."* Even with this grounding in her parents' culture and realizing from an early age that they were different, she remembered questioning her parents' way of saying and doing things when this deviated from what she knew from mainstream Canadian.

*There were many times we would hear my mom and dad talk; we would hear them speak about certain words and things and I can remember saying "no, it's this way mom" or "no, this is how you say it," or "this is how you do it," but also recognizing that growing up in my neighbourhood, we were different. We were different for a whole pile of reasons; we were different because we were Black, because we were Seventh-day Adventists, because of the choices and opportunities that we had. We look, act, dress different, our values—in some regards [we] were very different.*

Another participant born to parents from Jamaica shared that growing up, she felt like her Caribbean identity conflicted with mainstream Canadian culture.

*The way my parents would have raised me or disciplined me would be different from the way my white friends would've been. The things that they were allowed to get away with, I would've never been able to get away with, like the way they talked to their parents or the way they were disciplined. Just the things they did that was different. Sometimes, I remember growing up and sometimes being embarrassed to bring Caribbean food for lunch. I would tell my mom, "Why can't I have just a peanut butter and jam sandwich like all the other kids?"*

Another first-generation Canadian with parents also from Jamaica noted that she integrated into Canadian culture through her school where she celebrated all Canadian holidays with one exception.

*When it came to Halloween, my mom wasn't particularly fond of that holiday even though all of my peers and everyone would want to get dressed up. Sometimes I would have to beg to join them just to feel like part of it, but I know that comes from their Jamaican side and their beliefs about that particular holiday.*

She, however, appreciated some Canadian holidays like Thanksgiving that were celebrated the Jamaican way.

*Christmas was always nice, even Thanksgiving because I have a large extended family here and they would always bring in the Jamaican side. Like we'd always have Jamaican food, curry gold, rice and peas and so it was always like combining the two cultures, which was really nice.*

Growing up in a multicultural neighbourhood with friends from similar ethnic backgrounds, she never thought of herself as different. It is in high school, where most fellow students were white, that she started noticing how differently she was raised and consequently how differently she saw the world.

*I really started to feel the difference between how I have been raised and how my friends have been raised, their views on the world and how free they were to participate in the world where I felt more restricted in ways because of my upbringing. I saw a disconnect in terms of how I was raised versus how my non-Black Canadian peers were raised. I felt like a lot of them, they had a lot of privileges that I didn't experience in terms of being able to go out uninhibited to find themselves, to grow, to make mistakes, to get into trouble, to just do what kids do whereas my experience I feel was the opposite.*

The protective parenting style could have resulted not only from her parent's cultural values but also a perceived need to protect their visible minority child in a context where racial discrimination was an expected possibility.<sup>32</sup>

While trying to make sense of the different cultures he grew up with and how those have shaped his sense of belonging, another participant shared:

*I always have my identity as a Black person who belongs to different cultures but lives here in Canada and is born here in Canada. Born in this country but I am not of this country.*

This contribution mirrored that of the prior participant whose parents migrated from Ethiopia.

*I am still learning to navigate this. Like you don't fit in either category. You are kind of like a blend of the two but not quite on either one. I think being Canadian but not being seen as Canadian, you often have to defend your Canadianness and you have to explain your whole life story of how you are Canadian.*

The participant noted that, in her experience, most people who have asked her about her history seem to be trying to figure out “*how you are not Canadian.*” Growing up, she had never gone to her parent’s home country, she understood but didn’t speak her parent’s mother tongue, and she tried all she could to fit in with her mostly white peers, but she felt her Canadian belonging was always in question. The questioning of belonging started in elementary school where she was singled out and put in ESL classes despite English being the only language she spoke.

*On the other hand, I am not fully Ethiopian. I can't fully claim that I am full Ethiopian even though my heritage is there, my parents and my whole family is from there.*

A first-generation Canadian who was raised by a single mother, also from Ethiopia, fondly recalled being raised with Ethiopian values, Ethiopian food, Ethiopian music in a house adorned with Ethiopian decorations, and they spoke Amharic. She visited Ethiopia many times growing up and had recently worked there for a year. Consequently, she identified strongly as Ethiopian. However, she noted that, in Ethiopia, she was not considered Ethiopian.

*I have a lot of grappling that I do with that because I still feel like I don't identify as Canadian, but then at the same time, I grew up here my whole life, I was born here, and I have certain cultural aspects of the Canadian or western culture I have that doesn't match up with Ethiopian culture. I feel like I just actively rejected identifying as Canadian for so long.*

This participant joined in for the community review of the draft of this report from Addis Ababa, where she decided to move after her studies, to work and “*see how it goes.*” In reflecting on the difference in experiences with other first-generation Canadians, she noted that her experience could have been shaped by how protective her mother was when she was growing up.

*Maybe it's a little different because my mom is like very protective, so we stayed at home all the time and so everything was like very, very heavy Ethiopia focused.*

The participant was born and raised in Ontario and only moved to British Columbia as an adult. Her childhood experience and early sense of belonging might have also been shaped by her environment as well. Over 50% of Black people in Canada reside in Ontario, with Black people making up 9% of total population in Toronto. In BC, where the Black population makes up only 1% of the population and is fairly dispersed, Black people might feel a stronger need to fit in rather than identify as being from a different culture.

Another participant reflected that she might need to create her own unique sense of identity as she does not feel like she fully belongs to either her parent's culture or the Canadian mainstream.

*I am beginning to think now that I have to build an identity for myself and just start ignoring people's ideas of how I should be or how I should identify, and just claim it for my own.*

Left in the in-between, navigating their different cultural roots but being grounded in neither, first-generation Canadians of African ancestry can be pushed to build a third, an in-between cultural and self-identity. The participant quoted above, has taken on a journey to acquaint herself with her African ancestry and history as an adult as she builds her distinct identity.

- <sup>1</sup> James D. Fearon, "What is Identity (as we now use the word)?" Working paper, Department of Political Sciences, Stanford University, November 3, 1999, 2, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/fearon-research/cgi-bin/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/What-is-Identity-as-we-now-use-the-word-.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (June 1994), 385, summarizing the ideas of George J. McCall and J. L. Simmons in *Identities and Interactions* (New York: Free Press 1978).
- <sup>3</sup> James D. Fearon, "What is Identity (as we now use the word)?", 2
- <sup>4</sup> Nancy J. Knauer, "Historical Contingency and the Limits of Identity: Implications for Law and Policy," 28 *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 387 (2019), Temple University Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2018-30, September 7, 2018, 391, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3246113](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3246113)
- <sup>5</sup> James D. Fearon, "What is Identity (as we now use the word)?", 5, quoting Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," *Radical America* 23 (1989): 9-20.
- <sup>6</sup> Nancy J. Knauer, "Historical Contingency and the Limits of Identity," 389
- <sup>7</sup> Alan McKinlay, "Performativity and the Politics of Identity: Putting Butler to Work," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21, no. 3 (March 2010), 234, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2008.01.011>.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning. The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), 17.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 24.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 11.
- <sup>11</sup> Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 1996), 121.
- <sup>12</sup> Zia Jaffrey, "The Salon Interview - Toni Morrison," *Salon*, February 2, 1998, [https://www.salon.com/1998/02/02/cov\\_si\\_02int/](https://www.salon.com/1998/02/02/cov_si_02int/)
- <sup>13</sup> For a theoretical discussion about social identity and performance, see: Alan McKinlay, "Performativity and the Politics of Identity: Putting Butler to Work," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21, no. 3 (March 2010): 232-242, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2008.01.011>. Bob Jeffrey and Geoff Troman, "The Construction of Performative Identities," *European Educational Research Journal* 10, no. 4 (November 2011): 484-501, <https://doi.org/10.2304/eeerj.2011.10.4.484>.
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- <sup>15</sup> W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic*, August 1897, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/>.
- <sup>16</sup> The history of slavery in Canada and the early contribution of Black people in the development of Canada is particularly victim to this erasure and denial. Kyle G. Brown, "Canada's Slavery Secret: The Whitewashing of 200 years of Enslavement," *CBC Ideas*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/canada-s-slavery-secret-the-whitewashing-of-200-years-of-enslavement-1.4726313>. Terri Coles, "Black Canadian Heroes who have Paved the Way for Future Generations," *Huffpost*, February 27, 2018, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-canadians\\_n\\_6108750fe4b0497e6702759c](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/black-canadians_n_6108750fe4b0497e6702759c).
- <sup>17</sup> Kiplangat Cheruiyot, "Our Languages are Dying," *Cultural Survival*, accessed July 01, 2021, <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/our-languages-are-dying>.
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- <sup>22</sup> Paulla A. Ebron, "Beyond the Written Document: Looking for Africa in African America Culture," *National Humanities Center*, accessed July 1, 2021, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/aaculture.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> Fabienne Toback and Karis Jagger, *High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America*, film, Netflix, 2021, <https://www.netflix.com/title/81034518>.

<sup>24</sup> Matt Schaffer, "Bound to Africa: The Mandinka Legacy in the New World," in *History of Africa*, eds. Lorelle Semley, Teresa Barnes, Bayo Holsey, and Egodi Uchendu (2005): 321-369, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2005.0021>.

<sup>25</sup> Dorothy Williams, "Black History in Canada: 1900-1960," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/black-history-in-canada-1900-1960>.

<sup>26</sup> Olivette Otele, *African Europeans: An Untold History* (Basic Books, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Marie-Eve Bouchard, "Becoming Monolingual: The Impact of Language Ideologies on the Loss of Multilingualism in São Tomé." *Languages* 4, no. 3 (June 2019), 50, <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages4030050>.

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<sup>30</sup> Timothy A. Jinam, Maude E. Phipps, Farhang Aghakhanian, Partha P. Majumder, Francisco Datar, Mark Stoneking, Hiromi Sawai, et al., "Discerning the Origins of the Negritos, First Sundaland People: Deed Divergence and Archaic Admixture," *Genome Biol Evol* 9, no. 8 (August 2017): 2013-2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gbe/evx118>.

<sup>31</sup> Hélène Maheux and Deniz Do, *Diversity of the Black population in Canada: An Overview* (Statistics Canada, 2019), Data table for chart 7, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2019002-eng.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Recommended reading on impact of racism on parenting styles:

Paul Banahene Adjei, Delores Mullings, Michael Baffoe, Llodydetta Quaicoe, Latif Abdul-Rahman, Victoria Shears, and Shari Fitzgerald, "The 'Fragility of Goodness': Black Parents' Perspective about Raising Children in Toronto, Winnipeg, and St. John's of Canada," *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 12, no. 4 (November 2017): 461-491, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2017.1401575>.

Cecilia Ayón and San Juanita García, "Latino Immigrant Parent's Experiences with Discrimination: Implication for Parenting in a Hostile Immigration Policy Context," *Journal of Family Issues* 40, no. 6 (February 2019): 805-831, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X19827988>.

# Chapter 3: Diverse Experiences

This chapter explores the diversity of people of African ancestry in British Columbia as shared by the participants of the *African Ancestry Project*. They shared their struggles with their sense of belonging and experiences of isolation as related to societal assumptions of their unbelonging, cultural and racial isolation, lack of representation, and their experiences with racism and the ways they cope with this. Multiple intersecting identities and social divisions based on era, place of residency, skin tone, gender, class, education level, profession, language and accent, ability to “codeswitch” or “fit in” were highlighted as important in how racism and its effects are experienced. Those who felt shielded from racism or some aspects of it spoke of this as a privilege. Some shared the guilt that came with this privilege awarded by society. Participants also shared their deep cultural connections and the ways in which they found, built, and nurtured strong communities. Some shared the contributions they have made in the Canadian society, their struggles to be heard and acknowledged, and their efforts to create a space for themselves to find belonging. The diverse histories and identities informed these diverse experiences.

## 3.1 Unbelonging and isolation

Participants shared how they struggled with their sense of belonging within the broader Canadian society and how that was tied to societal assumptions of their unbelonging, cultural and racial isolation, lack of representation, and experiences of racism that made them feel like “*the other*.” One participant highlighted that:

*Even if you are Canadian and that’s an important reality—that just because you are born on the soil, [it] doesn’t mean you necessarily feel this overwhelming feeling of belonging... it’s a common experience that we often still feel like “the other” rather than Canadian. Other communities will come here and have closer experiences toward feeling Canadian, but I think it’s a different experience when it comes to somebody from the African or Caribbean diaspora. I think it’s important for people to recognize that and even if you migrate here and have children here, that “otherness” is still very much alive and strong.*

### 3.1.1 “Where are you from?”: A questioned belonging

The sense of unbelonging, however, applies not only to immigrants. Multi-generational Canadians noted that despite their families being in Canada for up to seven generations, their belonging is usually still in question. The question “Where are you from?” is a question they have had to answer throughout their lives. While this question could come from a place of innocent curiosity and an attempt to connect, to those whose families have

been in Canada for generations, being asked the same question repeatedly can be frustrating.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes it feels like a constant reminder they do not belong. A study in Vancouver revealed how this query is central to processes of racialization in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

A multi-generational Canadian noted this question sometimes seems to ask why they are not white: *“White people tend to want to know why my skin is not white and funny how they know how to phrase the question respectfully or properly, so I just tell them Canadian.”* Despite Canada’s claim of multiculturalism, participants pointed to a societal assumptions or expectations that multi-generational Canadians are white and that people of African ancestry in Canada are immigrants. The title of a CBC article, *“Think you know what a 7th-generation Canadian family looks like? Think again,”*<sup>3</sup> sums up this assumption. Canada’s racist immigration policy in the nineteenth century likely contributed not only to the ethnic landscape of Canada but also to the expectation of what an ideal Canadian looks like.

One participant shared that, when she has been asked *“Where are you from?”* she has gracefully answered, *“Oh. I’m Canadian and I’m seven-generations Canadian, I have been here a long time. My family has been here for a long time,”* as she thinks, *“Am I an imposter? No, I am as what you see. I am a pretty regular kind of Canadian.”* Her belonging in Canada continues to be questioned despite her not having any other cultural reference or family connection outside Canada. In answering this question, participants shared feeling the need to defend their belonging in Canada.

A first-generation Canadian noted that being African in Canada meant *“not fully belonging, being asked questions like ‘Where are you from?’ all the time.”* Another first-generation Canadian further noted how people have told her on countable occasions, *“Go back to where you came from.”* While she dismisses such slurs thinking, *“Do they want me to go back to Richmond?”* they are a reminder that she does not belong. Where would she go back to if Canada is the only place she calls home? Where would a multi-generational Canadian go back to? This sense of unbelonging in Canada, while having nowhere else to call home, was observable in the following survey response.

*While I’m a multi-generational Canadian, with even more generations in the United States, [being of African ancestry] has basically meant that I understand the culture here, it is my country in so far as I identify with it to some degree, but I also see its deficiencies and feel a bit apart from it. I don’t feel as if I have anywhere else I could go though and have that identity with.*

Among participants who immigrated to Canada, reactions to this question were mixed. Some shared similar sentiments as those of multigeneration and first-generation Canadians above, while others saw the questions as one of curiosity and a conversation starter. However, they noted that how the question is received and answered was noted to be dependent on how the question is asked, by whom, and the context in which the question is posed. For immigrants, efforts to deepen their roots and find their sense of belonging in Canada are often disrupted by societal assumptions of their unbelonging.

### 3.1.2 “It’s not an exchange”: Cultural hegemony and isolation

Cultural isolation was noted to contribute to the sense of unbelonging. Participants spoke of “*cultural hegemony*”; not relating to or acting in accordance with the dominant culture resulted in feeling and/or being treated as “*the other*.” Hegemony has been described as where “the most powerful members of society determine what is ‘real’ within a culture.”<sup>4</sup> In such a system, cross-cultural exchange is limited. One participant shared this perception: “*Here in BC, they don’t want to learn from my Blackness, from my West Africanness. It’s not an exchange, it’s more like a demand that I be like them.*” Despite a formal acknowledgement of multiculturalism in the province, in practice this does not result in a cultural exchange or a feeling of belonging for those embodying a culture different from the dominant culture. Those outside the dominant culture are perceived as a minority who need to assimilate. Participants shared:

*I feel like Black people are quite the minority still. My guards are up, it is definitely up where I work. I find that if I am trying to express a feeling or a thought, or I don’t relate to an experience that they all have, whether it is their vacation experiences or their traditions or what they do for Christmas, whatever. I know, whatever that is, that I cannot relate to their way of being and there isn’t any [way] for me [to engage in] these topics. I don’t know how else to put it, but I don’t know—that’s just the best way I can say it. It feels out of place and topic if I try to insert my place into them in those environments.*

*Cultural hegemony is to not so much be explicitly anti-Black but it’s more an allegiance with how things have happened for a long time. This is just how we do it here and we are not against the fact that you’re Black, but we want you to assimilate into the broader business as usual, in my context, to assimilate into the professional middle class world. Hegemony means its pervasive, it is all encompassing and that which is pervasive is white Anglo-Saxon, white Celtic.*

Reflecting on her feelings of cultural isolation, a participant noted that the “*sense of music appreciation is something that was drastically taken away within a Canadian culture*” because in Trinidad there were always festivals and celebrations where the “*whole soundscape of my existence was so marinated in the music.*” She shared how she missed living in a multicultural environment where people celebrated each other’s culture.

*I also miss the level of multiculturalism, and I know that in Canada we do see ourselves as a quite a multicultural country but in Trinidad or in my home country, we really partook of everybody’s culture. It was just way easier to experience and enjoy the Southeast Asian side of Trinidad or the, I guess, the native experiences of Trinidad, even just the religious context. You just were able to experience a lot more without necessarily practising or being a particular ethnic group, you were just able to enjoy and appreciate so much more. You don’t hear like a bunch of tassa drums and these things for like times of Diwali.*

In sharing how cultural hegemony manifests at work, a participant noted how he sometimes seems to get questions like, “*What do you mean you don’t laugh at an office joke or you don’t watch The Office?*” He thinks to himself, “*The Office is the whitest shit ever. I can’t watch The Office. I don’t know why you find it funny, and I don’t know why you folks find it funny, but I am not from this part of the world.*” In expressing himself at the office, he receives messages that suggest that he should not be “*too African, more excitable in meetings than everybody, or too Black*”: Just “*be Black so we can feel good about the fact that we are multicultural.*” As discussed in the previous chapter, the identity of people of African ancestry is contested, defined through the lens the dominant culture; its expression is met by societal rewards and penalties that result in a conscious performance of an accepted version of the Black identity. The participant noted that even while he acknowledges this conscious performance, he resists assimilation. Reflecting on this resistance, he shared how in his home country “*another person is a potential brother, auntie, uncle, or friend,*” while here “*another person is a stranger unless you know them.*” For him, assimilation was synonymous to losing himself.

*I cannot assimilate here because...to assimilate into that means that I have to pick up certain messages where I show allegiance to a way of life that right now is also detrimental to my country and other places around the world where Black people are predominant...and, frankly, I don’t want to assimilate. I think it is problematic because assimilation means I have to get rid of myself.*

As one participant highlighted, while assimilating does not necessarily result in belonging, markers of assimilation determine the degree to which one is accepted as belonging.

*To be Black means to experience the pressures of having to assimilate into whiteness while knowing you can never fully assimilate because you will always be asked “Where are you from?” and you will be treated based on your phenotype, and the treatment is worse if you haven’t achieved other indicators of assimilation such as mastery of English, understanding the pop culture of Canada, the history of Canada, your body posture—how you move, how you address people. It shows that you’ve assimilated, you know, like jumping queues.*

Reflecting on the history of genocide, the attempts to assimilate Indigenous people, and the racist immigrant policies, a participant shared how the past informs the present where “*to be Canadian, still in the imagination of what it means to be Canadian, is to be white.*”

First-generation Canadian participants noted that their struggle with finding a sense of belonging was also linked to the bicultural dilemma they experienced growing up (see section 2.3). They shared how the contradiction of the different cultural values, such as community and collectivism embraced at home in contrast with the individualism encouraged in the broader Canadian society, made them feel like they had to abide by different values in the different spaces. As they were growing up, they realized how culturally different they were from their peers. A participant who coped with the bicultural dilemma by fully embracing Canadian values and trying to push these values onto her

parents, noted how assimilation was not enough to belong in Canada. Another participant shared how being a first-generation Canadian, born and raised in BC, to him meant being *“born in this country but... not of this country.”*

A participant who was adopted as a baby from Jamaica and raised by a white family shared how he felt isolated for being visibly different from his family and peers. Although his parents made attempts at increasing his proximity to Jamaican culture by cooking Jamaican food, he was largely raised within the dominant culture. Hence, the isolation he felt was based on his appearance and how he was treated because of this appearance. He did not have connections with other people of African ancestry.

*There are many times when I would think like, “I wonder what my life would be like if I was white.” Now as more of an adult, with some life experience, I am like “ooh you got to embrace the Jamaican, embrace the melanin,” but at the time when you’re feeling like your identity is compromised I guess—just being constantly the one that is kind of left out, I don’t know if that’s the right word, but it is obvious that you’re different and for once you kind of want to be part of the dominant group and it sucks that, unfortunately, it would require your culture, the colour of your skin to change. But yeah, that’s how I felt sometimes when I was younger, just being like “Wow, everything would be so much easier if I was white” or, “I would understand more if I was white” and not feel so left out because I didn’t have many Black friends, if any Black friends. So, I didn’t even get a chance to embrace that part of the Black culture even if I wanted to.*

Another participant who was also adopted by a white family as a baby shared a similar feeling of isolation and unbelonging. She noted that because of a lack of Caribbean cultural reference, she did not find belonging even within the Black communities.

*I wasn’t always accepted into the Black community because I didn’t know the culture, food, languages, so, I have always kind of been like an outlier.*

### **3.1.3 “The one and only”: Racial isolation and lack of representation**

Participants described cultural closeness or solidarity they felt when engaging with other Black people regardless of their cultural background. As highlighted in chapter 2, people of African ancestry embody diverse cultures and identities. However, there are similarities in values particularly for those with African and Caribbean backgrounds. Where cultural similarities are limited, participant indicated similar closeness resulting from solidarity in shared experiences of unbelonging and racism. Isolation was described as *“being the one and only”* Black person in spaces they occupied and having no or little racial representation in many public spaces. One participant shared how this isolation made him *“feel like I am crippled over here.”* In describing their experience of isolation in various spaces and times, participants shared:

*My brother and I were the only Black kids in elementary school...My first actual Black friend was in the 9th grade, so there really wasn't a Black community [in Victoria].*

*I was always the only Black child from kindergarten. Up to grade 8, I was the only Black child in my school. High school, there were a few more but as the years went on, the Black population grew, so I started to know a few people but there was always the kind of strange thing because I didn't have Black family...I definitely didn't know any other Black children and I mean, it's not that I was treated poorly by anyone. I had a good upbringing, but it was definitely very isolating.*

*I remember my dad telling me stories about what it was like growing up in Vancouver and basically the only other Black people he knew were people he was related with. When I went to school, there were only like a handful of Black or mixed students at any level of school...In my current job, there are a few Black staff [but] none in my department.*

*When I first moved here, there was a lot less Black people that I saw around my circles. I went straight to school, and I was the only Black person in my program...in the entire school for contemporary arts.*

*When I came here to study, there were virtually no courses at UBC covering the history, writings, or anything to do with Black studies of any origin...I had one shot to take a Caribbean women's writing class. It had limited seating, and the incidentally Caucasian instructor told me I was out of luck; it was for honours students only, no exceptions. I did get to take an African lit course, though over a third of the books were by white South African authors, which seemed a little skewed.*

*I'm basically the only Black person in my family, except, like, I have technically second cousins that are my adoptive dad's cousins and she remarried to, like, a Black man. So, seeing them at a family reunion, I was like "Aaaah! I'm not the only one! Thank God!"*

*In my cohort, there was only one other Black student, and I would walk into the rooms of this school of nursing, and they had pictures in the rooms, in the corridors. So, pictures of those that have graduated from there and I remember walking and then trying to see if I could identify anyone that was Black or that looked like me in those pictures.*

*When I first moved here, I had no idea that there would be so few Black people here in Vancouver. I used to play a game where I would count the number of Black people that I would see in a day just for kicks. On a good day, if you went to like a festival, you might see nine, on a typical day you might see yourself at the end.*

A community reviewer highlighted that this feeling of isolation is one that was shared by her senior father.

*I was just really centred when I read the report. I was explaining it to my father who is eighty-nine...For so long, even though I was born here, I've never really felt a part of the greater community. I always felt like I was siloed. I was born in New West, raised in Surrey. There were a few Black families, but I never really felt connected as a whole. And explaining the report to my dad and listening to him talk to me back and saying, "even though I've been in Canada for so long, I've felt like that too."*

A participant shared how the isolation and lack of representation made him feel like is he is losing his identity.

*When I came here, I first lived in Burnaby for a bit, and it was just like an Asian-centric neighbourhood, if you may. By the time I moved down to Vancouver and, like, the same thing as well. It was more Asian-centric and like a lot more Caucasian and everything. I mean, I've got no problems with that, but for me, sometimes walking down, because I walk to work, and some days, weeks even, it's just me on the road. So, having a sense of identity, you begin to lose it gradually.*

Participants adopted by white families shared how this isolation was extended to their homes where they felt their families, despite being loving, did not share in, or understand, their experiences. When she was twelve, one participant told her mother, *"I know you guys love me, but you guys will never understand how I have to live every day."* Two unrelated participants shared that after trips to Africa with family, their relatives reported that they were starting to understand how they must have felt. While the historical and racial context was different, their relatives got a glimpse of what it was like growing up in a *"sea of whiteness,"* with people constantly staring, *"booping"* noses, and touching hair, sometimes without permission.<sup>5</sup>

A participant who moved to BC to pursue her PhD studies shared how the lack of representation at the university made her feel like an imposter.

*I think it's for school in particular, I really felt some imposter syndrome because there are not that many—I have yet to see a Black professor within my department at UBC. So, it's almost like "what are you doing here?", you're the only—well, not the only Black student but there were like three Black students in a sea of non-Black—and it just felt like I didn't belong there. I'm working on that mindset now, but it's still a little difficult to adjust to when you don't see people like you within your area of study.*

In describing his feeling of unbelonging, a participant shared the analogy of an uninvited guest:

*You know like when you go to somebody else's house and you came with friends, and they didn't invite you, and they don't really know you. If they are a good host, they would make you comfortable, they will speak to you, but, if they are not a good host, they are mainly speaking to the friends that they know and you're kind of there and you feel like the third wheel. That's how I feel in Vancouver, more so than I felt in*

*Hamilton because there were just way more Black people there and so I could have moments where I feel like I belong.*

Participants indicated that where there is a higher population of people of African ancestry, they experienced a higher sense of belonging because of reduced racial and cultural isolation and increased opportunities to join or build communities. In British Columbia, the population of Black people is estimated to be 1% of the population in the province, compared to 3.5% of the population in the country. Ontario is home to over 50% of the total Black population in Canada representing 4.7% of the provincial population, with Toronto having the largest Black population in the country at 7.5% of the city's total population.<sup>6</sup>

A participant who grew up in Toronto had a strong sense of belonging growing up in an area where she felt neither isolated nor like a visible minority.

*My experience growing up with Jamaican culture was one where I was lucky to grow up in the Toronto area. Toronto is definitely a mosaic of cultures, so it was quite common to be among others who were also first-generation Canadian. I honestly knew way more people whose parents were from another country than individuals whose parents were born in Canada. For me, I've always felt very comfortable saying that I'm Canadian and equally comfortable saying that I have Jamaican parents. I'm definitely proud of both and know that my ability to see the world through a diverse lens comes from my two heritage experiences. When asked [where I am from], I typically say, that I'm Canadian, but to me being Canadian means that your parents or roots come from somewhere else.*

Another participant who also enjoyed such cultural diversity in the UK before moving to BC shared similar sentiments:

*I lived in the UK for a bit and there's a much better vibrant community there and you get that sense of "Yeah, I belong to something," if it makes sense. Because there's a lot more people like you, people who've got the same—they kind of understand where it is, you're coming from.*

Another participant who moved to Langley from Toronto highlighted this discrepancy:

*Coming to Canada and living in Toronto, I was close to the African community. But leaving Toronto and coming to Langley...you know, you start to feel alone, not because people are not good. It's not about people, it's just that you feel alone.*

A participant who grew up in a small city in Ontario shared how it was isolating to be the only Black student in school. Over the years, she was glad to see the population of Black people in her city increase. However, she lamented that when she moved to BC years later, she started reliving the isolation she felt as a child.

*When I moved to BC, it was a bit of a shock. I live in Ladysmith; it's not a big town, but once again, I was the only [one]. It kind of felt like going back to being a little kid. Like I could go weeks and weeks without seeing another person of any colour. It's definitely been very interesting, and definitely over the pandemic and all these social injustices going on could be very isolating because obviously there is no one that shares your experience here.*

In reflecting on these experiences of isolation, a community reviewer who was also a participant in the research shared how she is worried more about the isolation faced by her children of mixed ancestry.

*I have three children who are mixed up, Italian and English on their dad's side, and Black Canadian on my side and I just think—I don't really have a community of Black people that I hang out with. My family is not around. My children are missing out. I'm missing out, but I feel even more for them and that tenuous sort of connection to their Blackness. And so that's just something that I'm kind of wrestling with.*

### **3.1.4 “Hypervisible and invisible at once”: Ignored perspectives and needs**

Some participants shared the irony of simultaneously feeling visible and invisible. Visible because of their dark skin tone where “*people see us from ten kilometres... We always stand out. We can never camouflage like somebody with lighter skin,*” and yet invisible, metaphorically described as “*not being seen.*” Regarding the later, participants shared how their perspectives, ideas, challenges, and needs were neither acknowledged nor appreciated. The lack of representation in education (teachers/lecturers, curriculum, reading lists), professional spaces, and public policy, as well as unresolved racism and discrimination also contributed to this feeling of invisibility. Invisibility was also linked to cultural and racial isolation. In describing this feeling of invisibility, one participant shared:

*Being a Black person in Vancouver comes with an existential loneliness and disconnection. There are very few Black people here and the Black community is lacking. It feels like I don't belong anywhere here and [it] feels like I don't matter, like I'm invisible.*

In elaborating on what it means to be a person of African ancestry in Canada, participants shared being “*hypervisible and invisible at once,*” “*physically visible yet systemically invisible in the Canadian spheres of life,*” and “*a very small group of minority and sometimes being invisible.*” Some participants linked this invisibility to experiences of racism: being “*a visible minority and many people have little awareness or tolerance,*” “*being misunderstood because there's not enough people to educate others,*” and feeling “*invisible and a lot of micro aggression plus prejudice and racism swept under the rug.*”

In reflecting on her first experience of racism after arriving in Canada, a participant noted how isolating this felt and countered dreams she had held.

*It wasn't easy at all because I came in 2018 February, and in mid-February I had to go back to school and you're going back to school where you're [in] isolation to everybody. Nobody is talking to you, just me and my sister for probably two years. We were just the two of us. Nobody ever talked to us, no one ever wanted to associate with us.*

Participants highlighted how dismissal of their experiences of racism further contributed to their needs feeling invisible to others.

*They [white friends] don't really understand your experiences. They try and it's like gaslighting or they are trying to slip it off and say "Oh, stuff happens to me," but when it happens everywhere you go, you know what I mean, like the looks, the disbelief, when you have serious issues and you kind of like soften it up. Its hard when your feelings aren't validated by the people that surround you and everyone says that what you're experiencing isn't valid.*

*In the Okanagan, to be Black was having to erase the fact that I am Black because in the Okanagan from my experience, there is this desire to not see [colour]...it's almost like, if you identify as Black, you are considered a racist. If you identify as colour, you're considered a racist, so don't identify. But the act of saying don't identify as Black is to teach someone to identify to be Black, ironically, because I am still treated in ways in which people are responding to my phenotype even though linguistically, they are saying "oh no, it's not an issue." So, to be Black in [the] Okanagan is to have to fight to be recognized as Black—recognized, just acknowledged and that it matters.*

Sharing his experience of seeking police assistance following three cases of racism, a participant illustrated how institutions can contribute to this invisibility and a sense of unbelonging where the needs of people of African ancestry are ignored and/or unmet.

*I still have those experiences [of feeling invisible] because [of] institutions. Where services did not meet my concern, one police officer questioned me to death. Another police officer did not even come to my goddamn door. Another police told me that there is no racism in Canada, it comes from elsewhere and then used the 'N' word [to illustrate a point on what racism entails]. To me, those are experiences where, institutionally, my needs are not being served, and therefore, my needs are considered secondary, which means I am an other.*

In reflecting on unmet needs, another participant observed:

*I believe that not having a seat at government policy tables has attributed to my experiences and my needs being overlooked.*

### 3.1.5 Other determinants of unbelonging and belonging

Participants highlighted other factors which contributed to feelings of unbelonging and belonging in BC. One participant shared that lack of recognition of educational and professional qualification from her home country made her feel unwelcome and unvalued in Canada.

*He [participant's husband] faced a lot of struggles trying to practice being a pharmacist because he was a pharmacist from back home, and seeing how the systems and structures are not as permeable to immigrants. It really makes you question if you're in the right place and if this is really your home if I can't fully be who I am as an individual like my husband for example. You start questioning those ties and how welcoming the society is really and so I think that touches a little bit on how that connection [to Canada] feels like for me.*

A participant, who accepted his fate of having to go back to school after immigrating to Canada, shared the multiple barriers he faced trying to enrol in a medical training program to be a technician. After three years of doing a myriad of qualifying tests, including English language tests, he still could not get into the program. Although he passed all the academic exams, he was failed in the CASPer test, a web-based situational judgment test meant to evaluate personal and professional characteristics. The participant shared an example of questions asked: “Two parents are playing with their kids in a park. One kid hit the other, so how—so they have a discussion going on—so how what is your reaction?” He has tried to get feedback on his CASPer test results with no success, a test he would need to retake. Subjective tests requiring intuitive responses where people draw from their cultural backgrounds and personal experiences put recent immigrants from diverse backgrounds at a disadvantage. Such tests are noted elsewhere to be “very demanding, expensive, culturally biased and unfairly administered.”<sup>7</sup> Institutions demanding such tests create barriers and contribute to systemic racism, resulting in racialized immigrants giving up on their dreams and resorting to manual, low-paying, and precarious work to survive; an experience not limited to people of African ancestry.<sup>8</sup> This participant, however, hopes that his efforts and investment so far will not go to waste, and that he will stop working as a janitor and pursue a professional career.

*I'm an A student. A or A+ student. So now the school is telling me, we know your academic scores are very good. And they even sent me an email saying that people who started the program that it denied me of this September—people who started that program, they started with an average of 7.2 GPA. I have an average academic score of 7.6, but you still won't let me get into the program. So, if everything I'm doing, all the requirements you asked me to do I did it in English, my third language. And then I have an average GPA of 7.6. You didn't let me in...when people are saying there's systemic racism and people are saying no, there's not. That's for me, personally, that's where I see it...Since 2018 I came here, I work as a janitor because I'm new. I don't have—they won't recognize any—back home, I was a translator. I translate from French to*

*English. I don't have that job. Ok, I work as a janitor. I work as a dishwasher, but I'm like, hey. For me to have a life here I need to go back to school...like where is the inclusiveness?<sup>9</sup>*

When a 2020 Statistics Canada report noted that immigrant women from African countries have the lowest employment rates nationally, it did not account for systemic barriers resulting in Black people having the lowest employment rates or the underemployment they experience.<sup>10</sup> The participant quoted above highlighted how such circumstances can have a profound consequence not only on one's sense of belonging, but also on one's mental and physical health. He wants to give up, but feels like he must keep fighting not just for himself but also for future immigrants likely to face similar barriers.

*I'm just trying to get into a program that—I wanted to quit right? I just want to let it go because it's bothering me because it's giving me anxiety at night. I cannot sleep because of that...If somebody in a few years migrate to Canada, and they are doing the same thing, to the same person [someone else of African ancestry], then the cycle is gonna keep on going. So, it's gonna be up to me to try and fight. Or at least leave a mark that this thing happened to me just so people are aware...I know it's hard, but let's just keep being resilient. And then we see one day we're gonna win this battle.*

Another participant shared that the lack of awareness or understanding about the historical and cultural context of Africa, and the subsequent erasure of diversity and cultural hegemony made her feel like there was no space for Africans in BC.

*I don't feel like there is a space here for Africans, because I feel that sometimes, there is still a lack of understanding of the history, the culture. Then people generally speaking always put Africa as a one country thing and not as a continent thing. So, because there's so much diversity and so much culture in there, so when you put everything in one sect, and immediately you're starting to see some cultures and even in general some cultures start to go low. So, instead of each individual can express their own identity or their own ways of doing things, it's just like one only sect. And immediately that only sect goes down, so then you have to explain a little bit more and that is the frustration that sometimes happens because of the lack of history, culture and understanding.*

Another participant shared how connection to land through ownership was important for her to feel rooted in Canada.

*In a little while, I will have spent the same amount of time here as I have there [the Bahamas]. But I don't feel like I have a hundred percent put roots down here. It's expensive to buy property so I don't feel like I have that physical connection, like having some land that I have purchased, like I truly have a home...I could just as easily live somewhere else if the opportunity came up and all the other aspects of life were in place to do so. I'm still unrooted even though it's been a long time.*

A participant who migrated with his family from Nigeria shared how important it was that Canada had a straightforward path to citizenship as this to him entailed belonging.

*If Canada did not offer those options—becoming a citizen within three years, and also being a, supposed to be, diversified country...I know I am a Canadian citizen. I have that Canadian citizenship. It's kind of like a trade-off; you're leaving something well settled to come into someplace. It's more like you're starting all over. Without that aspect, I wouldn't have made any choice to go to any part of the world. I know I'm part of the country that means I can say it's my country. That's very important. So, because you're making a move, you're making that place a part of you.*

In responding to the comment “to be Canadian is to be white, Anglo-Saxon,” a seven-generation Canadian reflected on the cultural and ethnic groups who made up and built Canada, and concluded the comment “doesn't hold any water for me.” To her, Canada's diversity and contributions made by its diverse residents contributed to her sense of belonging.

*I am just looking at the experiences of my friends and my husband's family. His grandfather came from Italy on his father's side and on his mother's side, his family is white Anglo-Saxon, yet he is no less Canadian, and I am no less Canadian than he is. So, I don't subscribe to the notion that Canadian is to be white because if we look back at history—if we look at Quebec, Upper and Lower Canada and we look at all the people who were brought into Canada—Chinese, Indo-Canadian, South Asian, and Japanese, everybody who built this country, we are what made Canada, Canada.*

On aspects that made him feel a sense of belonging in Canada, another participant highlighted the welcoming environment he was met with when he first landed in Toronto. He felt embraced by Canada.

*When I came to Toronto, in the city, you have flags and signs that would say “we've been expecting you.” So, it was very welcoming, and this sentence was in every language, so for me it was like “wow.” You know I grew up in France and I was often the only Black person and things like that. And here, they said “come on.” I forgot to mention, in France, immigrants are not very welcome, but, for me, right away I fell in love with Toronto and Canada because of the fact that you belong—this is home, and this is a place that wants to celebrate you and embrace you and give you everything you want as long as you work for it.*

While this participant admitted that experiences of racism affected that initial sense of belonging, opportunities for professional development and subsequent success still made him feel like he belonged in Canada.

*Compared to France, I feel I belong, at least at the professional level. Although I have encountered racism mostly in the realm of work, I feel like I am lucky to be where I am today. Being African in Canada is also being successful.*

Another participant shared that despite feeling happy to be in Canada, it was hard to enjoy this happiness because of family and friends who continue to be targeted and persecuted in his home country, Eritrea. However, compared to his experience of seeking asylum in Israel, he is glad pursue a professional career, even though he is doing this later in his life.

*Thanks to Canada, really, I am so happy, but the pain is in my heart. It's still my pastors who treated me like their child, and my elder sister is still there in prison. I can't enjoy [Canada's] reality because the pain is always inside me...But in Israel, I had a dream. I had a dream to learn something, but in Israel, because I had no legal paper, I was not allowed to get education...I lost a lot of years in there. So, I am in... [over 35 years old], I joined university here, I completed my English.*

Another participant noted how articulating his unique experiences as a Black person in BC, and this being acknowledged, contributed to a sense of belonging. Lack of acknowledgement of such experiences made participants feel invisible.

*I moved to Vancouver [from Vernon] and the experience is different. On the one hand, now I feel that I can speak more about my experiences of Blackness and to be able to speak about it and it being acknowledged allows me to feel more integrated, or like I belong, or at least that's part of me.*

In line with the earlier discussion, participants also shared how seeing more representation and having spaces for cultural or community gatherings would contribute to their sense of belonging in Canada.

### **3.1.6 Finding belonging**

The lack of a sense of belonging was a hinderance to participants' full participation in and contribution to Canadian society. While many shared about their volunteer work, advocacy, and other contributions, as discussed later in this chapter, some noted how challenging it was to do so while feeling invisible and isolated. One participant who immigrated to Canada as a child shared how she never considered voting because she did not feel included.

*I cast my first vote when I was 40, and the only reason I did it was because my husband wanted us to vote and show our children voting. Imagine as an immigrant, growing up in Canada and the ads for voting—that was not even something that was anywhere near my mind—so the outreach program to get people to vote didn't even reach me not even when I was at the university. It was always something that was over there. I didn't even pay attention to it because I didn't feel included.*

Some participants shared how their parents shielded them from isolation growing up, at least on weekends when they would visit, host, and be around other people of African ancestry.

*I always knew I was different especially growing up in Richmond where there is not a lot of Black people. I probably knew every single Black person that was in Richmond. My parents made sure that, like, every weekend I was around Black people. Maybe not in school, I wouldn't see Black people and stuff, but on weekends and after school, we were always at somebody's house, or we were always involved in some sort of Caribbean or African function.*

*It wasn't easy fifty years ago. You were pretty much the only Black person in your neighbourhood, in your school, that you saw unless you were connected to these groups of families—aunties, uncles, cousins.*

To find belonging, some participants went against the conservative culture of “*not making friends on the streets*” and “*careful friendships*” to build strong friendships and communities. Some found pre-existing communities that they joined and they continue to celebrate unique cultures and identities in these spaces. Later in this chapter, I further explore how some participants found and built communities, to mitigate, to some extent, the feeling of cultural and racial isolation and unbelonging.

## 3.2 Racism

Experiencing racism was highlighted as a significant part of life by most participants of the *African Ancestry Project*. When asked if they could attribute any challenges they face in school, work, and life to their identity as a Black person of African ancestry, 73% answered “Yes” (N=162), with most attributing these challenges to racism (at least 76%). Some of those who answered “No,” noted discrimination when elaborating on their response; others regarded such challenges as *“being part of life,”* indicated that *“it doesn’t matter to me if there are challenges,”* and needed to *“just get on with living.”* Others wondered if they had faced occurrences of racism but had not been *“conscious or aware of them.”* Some of those who had not experienced racism noted this as a privilege. Some shared the guilt that came with this privilege awarded by society. Multiple intersecting identities and social divisions based on era, place of residency, skin tone, gender, class, education level, profession, language and accent, the ability to *“codeswitch”* and *“fit in”* were highlighted as determinants of racist experiences. Others highlighted that their persons attitude, spiritual beliefs, and access to support systems shielded them from effects of the racism.

A multi-generational Canadian shared how his “whole life has been shaped by how I look and not how I am inside.” He shared that, for instance, he does not feel like he can wear sweatpants and go to a drugstore. If he does, he gets followed around and, as he put it, this experience, “[is] just unnerving.” While he notes this example might seem trivial,

*other people of other cultures and ethnicity, they do the same thing but there’s no problem. But I always have to double back and think about my safety and that stems from years of experience with police and other people like high school, elementary school and so, it’s just an evolving process and trying to come to terms and I should be able to feel 100 percent comfortable in what I am doing and what I am wearing.*

Most participants shared various ways experiences of microaggression, covert racism, *“blatant racism,”* and systemic racism shaped their lives, some from an early age.

*I don’t remember this memory, but my mom says when I was about five or six years old, I came home saying that kids said I looked like poo. They called me a monkey in elementary school. So, I faced racism at a very early age, very overt too—very in your face. So, it’s always shaped my identity.*

*I think I was four years old standing at the corner store and an older adult walked by and with all the hatred in the face called me the ‘N’ word and I was four. And travelling with my mom in Greece on tour, a woman looked at me and just shook her head and said “disgusting” and I can’t get my head around it, so, it is traumatizing [participant sobs]. I’m fifty-six [years old] now, that was fifty-two years later, and it’s still very painful. I believe it shapes your identity and it is just now that I am trying to let go of that stuff.*

*Oh my God. It's like nobody knows how to deal with a Black person in any of their emotional states. Everyone just kind of freaks out and sees you as a threat. The whole hair thing, of course too, and how it could be seen as "professional" or not. And this is just some of it. It runs so deep that I probably don't have enough room on this google doc [survey].*

*Where to start, being followed, detained, systematic racism in school, work and personal life.*

*My mother and grandfather made it clear from a young age that, as a Black person, I would have to work twice as hard to be recognized above my white peers, that cops would always target me, and that I would be followed in stores. They were right.*

*Sometimes when I want to rent from some landlords and they see you as Black, they don't rent out to me.*

*I endured abuse and violence in my youth because I was Black.*

*I have a lot to say. Racism is real in BC. I've been called "nigga" by strangers three times in thirteen years. I have experienced it at work. My kids have experienced it at school. I had to educate myself on this evil. It's stressful always watching your back.*

*I have a young son, not young, he is thirty, and just watching him grown up here and having many of the same discussion that I had with my parents i.e., "Oh my goodness, its ten p.m. and he's not home yet, where is he?" and still to this day being worried in Vancouver about his safety and security. That sucks.*

*In my later teens, my dad [who worked in corrections] was arrested. There was a bank robbery, he was with his colleagues downtown near Granville and Seymour, my father's office was in Granville and Seymour. He was walking with his colleagues—he actually was their boss. And the police came and they arrested him and the people that he was walking with at lunchtime tried to tell the officers "you don't want to arrest this man. He is innocent."...Still from a very young age, you realize what could happen to your father who is way up there in the criminal justice system and it can happen to anybody. It might have been a little easier because we were female.*

*If I am out for a walk and someone says a racial slur at me, I would not be surprised, disappointed, but not surprised.*

*I think it really hit me when I got into the workforce because at that time, you are now working with people from multiple generations and it's typically the older generation that hold a lot of the—more of the prejudice and biases and the racism I have experienced, it's typically from older workers. I work in healthcare, and even [experienced racism from] patients. I feel that as I have gotten older, the impact of racism and such on my identity has become more prevalent.*

*As a result of my skin colour, I am held back in my job, I've received lower marks from my peers in school for equal or better work I completed. I am looked at suspiciously by store employees. I get paid less than my Caucasian co-workers. My child has been treated as a difficult student just because he is Black. I am a fifty-two-year-old, "librarian-looking" Black woman...I live my life with my head held up in honour of my African ancestors, although events as noted above break my heart daily.*

*I have dealt with racism, prejudice, and intolerance all my life in Canada. As have my family in school, in workforce, in community or social settings. They are too numerous to mention. They range from polite and subtle to quite aggressive and blatant. The majority I would classify in the polite and subtle range, which I believe is due to how Canadians often tend to exhibit their prejudices.*

### **3.2.1 "You are left questioning": Covert/polite racism**

Some participants who shared that they had never experienced racism admitted that perhaps they might have experienced discrimination without being aware of it. Some of these participants might have experienced covert racism, a type of racism that is concealed and subtle so that it is not noticed. It has been described as "colourblind racism," "racial profiling racism," "everyday racism," and "polite racism."<sup>11</sup> However, its impact can be more insidious than overt or blatant racism. Sometimes it is microaggression, but not really micro. Some forms of covert racism are sustained by institutional traditions, norms, and practices, and manifest as systemic racism. Those who experience covert racism are sometimes unsure if what they are experiencing is racism and are often left wondering why people seem to treat them differently or why they are "*getting the short end of the stick in situations*" despite their efforts. As one participant noted, "*There are multiple situations where I find myself wondering if a particular outcome was due to me being of African descent.*"

Participants highlighted examples of covert racism that did not go unnoticed: in stores, at work, at school, in neighbourhoods, on transit, in seeking health care, and in adoption.

*When I go into my local [drugstore]—chose this store as it happens daily—I am followed by the very obvious Loss Prevention Officer, store security, although they should be following the person I just saw put something in their coat. That person is not Black, they would be an obvious choice for a Loss Prevention Officer [LPO] to follow, but they aren't Black, so they are not followed by the LPO. I get the unwarranted attention.*

*I go to [a store] in Burnaby, which is at the mall. I'm shopping and I get racially profiled by a customer. This customer accuses me of trying to steal something because he saw me put something in my pocket and so he assumes that I am stealing; he starts videoing, he takes out his camera, he won't let me go, he's following me.*

*Hairstyles and workplace expectations are often Eurocentric...I have dreads and feel discrimination because of my hairstyle, for example.*

*I had a boss tell me I eat smelly food.*

*I spoke to an employer about a job and when I got there they ask me multiple times if it was me that spoke to them on the phone and you can see the disappointment in their faces.*

*I once was asked if I was or ever was part of a street gang, during an interview.*

*[I] definitely felt like I experienced racism at university; professors were more critical of me.*

*There is subtle segregation and maltreatment of the African community. I'm talking from my point of view and what I have experienced at work.*

*I was picking up an Evo car in a particular neighbourhood, and somebody asked me if I live in the neighbourhood.*

*I remember even on public transportation, you could see the confusion on person's faces when there was just one empty seat beside me and they were like where do I sit, where do I go?*

*I came into the bus and sat at the back, there was already a white person there on my left side and I am all the way at the back looking forward and this person is on my left, he starts looking at me in a menacing way, kind of like looks back and looks at me every now and then and kind of stares and would make grimaces on his face. I sit again [another incident] at the back of the bus, at my right-hand side there is a couple, a white person and an East Asian person. The white person is a man; the East Asian is a woman. As soon as I sit down, he looks at me; he makes a grimace and then he gets up and picks up the hand of his partner to kind of move toward the other side, and they go, and they move to the other side of the bus, like opposite them. In those moments, I was so annoyed. Is this racism? Is it not racism? You're left questioning.*

*My chocolate-coloured skin placed me in an adoption category of "hard to place children." I was moved from one foster home [to another] because of my African ancestry...As a shy, quiet, well-behaved child I was place in the hard to handle class because of the colour of my skin.*

*We had a complication in—at the end of pregnancy and labour which we had experienced one other time before and it was kind of just written off as a one-off. The same thing happened and this time around we lost our baby. And so, I think just since that time for me it is something that I often think about...did it have some anything to do with race? Did that inform the type of care that I had? Was I listened to properly? Were my experiences taken seriously?<sup>12</sup>*

I observed that multi-generational Canadians spoke more about their experiences of racism as well as those of their parents and family members. This indicated to me that perhaps because of generational experiences of racism and socialization on how to avoid these experiences, they are more likely to notice covert racism and discuss these experiences at home. Among recent immigrants, covert racism might go unnoticed or might be excused away as one-off incidents or as resulting of the perpetrator's bad mood because racism is an experience that might be new to them. However, as noted by Joseph Mensah,

...[while] skin colour had little material consequence for many Black continental Africans until their dialectical encounter with the dominant white society in Canada. Once in Canada, however, race becomes such a prime identity marker for Black continental Africans that only a few of them, if any, have the luxury of ignoring its impact, given the persistent racism they have to endure in many spheres of life together with other Blacks in this country.<sup>13</sup>

An immigrant from Trinidad shared how racism in British Columbia was more subtle than what she experienced in her home country.

*In BC, it's different. People would be nice and pleasant—there is a bit of a façade in the sense of what people think about you—but you would see it manifested in the sometimes opportunities or the chances that you're given for certain things or those quick split-second choices that people make here or there or the things that people assume of you here and there.*

A participant who has lived in Canada for 15 years shared that he has never experienced racism. He also had never discussed racism with his family until there was a racist incident at his daughter's school. His teenage daughter reported that she had never experienced racism.

*I've never really looked at it that my identity actually impacts anything. So, for me, I hear people talking about experiencing racism, but I have not...I try to separate—racism is racism, right? But also, not everybody needs to like you. Not everybody needs to talk to you. I'm trying to separate because we cannot call everything racism because you might just have a natural dislike for somebody, but it's only when it now comes to the level of "oh, it's because of my identity, that's why you're doing that," then we can call it something else. Because racism would be very clear, I think so. If you have experienced it, it's not something that you can, notwithstanding—that I can say I've not. [This] does not rule out the fact that it is happening and it's real.*

His definition of racism was overt or blatant racism and, hence, where racism was not "very clear," he might have missed it or explained it away as a "natural dislike." While participants demonstrated how common and widespread the experience of racism is, not all Black people in BC experience racism at an individual level (vis-à-vis systemic racism which is inescapable to those disadvantaged by it). A multi-generational Canadian, who is acutely aware of racism experienced by her ancestors after seeking refuge in Canada in the early

1900s, highlighted how the spaces she has occupied throughout her life have shielded her from racism.

*I've had a lot of privilege to tell you the truth. I have been raised primarily in white spaces, North Vancouver...I've always had white friends. I have always been with white partners. I went to SFU, did a couple of degrees there and working in a primarily whitish space, in a school. But to tell you the truth, I have not had issues because of my race or my colour. I have put myself into situations. I have avoided situations too. So, I was thinking, is this possibly a place where I am going to be not welcomed or what have you but honestly, in my fifty years here, I have not had many experiences where I think "Oh, that's racist," or "Oh, you're treating me this way because of your judgments of me."*

Even so, this participant knew she was not exempt from racism and hence her strategic avoidance of some "situations."

By acknowledging that "there [are] always people with a lot of prejudice," one participant noted that "whether I am aware of it or not, I know that my skin colour is cause for prejudice for some people." The knowledge of how widespread anti-Black racism is might hence make racism feel omnipresent even when not personally experienced.

A couple of participants shared how they metaphorically avoided racism and its impacts by not "looking for it" or "accepting it."

*As an African living in Canada, I am being reminded all the time that am different. Having that at the back of my mind, I go about my way through life in Canada by focusing on my goals and looking for opportunities to better my life. I do know that discrimination exists, and I have experienced it. But I try not to see it because I believe that if I don't look for it, I am not likely to see it.*

*Let's not deny the fact that it does happen, right? We need to be very clear about that, but for me, I am also very careful with what I accept. Because, what I accept can also influence the way things happen to me. There are certain things which are psychological and spiritual as well, so I come from that understanding and awareness as well. I am not denying the fact that it exists, but I don't just accept that it can happen to me...All those barriers are mindset.*

Some participants shared of incidents where those around them, including friends, and those they sought redress from, including the police, did not validate their experiences; some dismissed or excused incidents of covert racism. One participant shared how her friends who are white would tell her that "stuff happens to me [too]," but for her "it happens everywhere you go." She shared how sometimes she is left wondering "whether you're dealing with a terrible doctor, or every time I have been to the hospital, is it because of racism."

When sharing his experience when he reported incidents of racism to the police, a participant explained, *“I experienced what is called second revictimization, which is after you have been victimized the first time, then society victimizes you again when you attempt to get help or support.”* Lack of validation of experiences of racism, particularly when they are covert, can result in confusion and internalization of these experiences.

A recent study revealed that only 34% of Canadians believe Canada is a racist country; furthermore, 12% of Canadians believe that some races are superior to others. The same study found that 41% of Canadians believe that people seeing discrimination where it does not exist is a bigger problem for the country than people not being able to see where it does exist.<sup>14</sup> In shedding light on the experience of racism, a different study revealed that 71% of people who identify as Indigenous, Black, Person of Colour (BIPOC), or Asian in Greater Victoria experienced racism on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis in the last five years; among those, 30% experienced racism from the police. The same study highlighted commonly experienced racism as “online violence, a range of daily microaggressions in grocery stores and on public transit, overt and direct violence, and structural and systemic racism in schools, workplaces and with government services.”<sup>15</sup>

A participant who immigrated to BC from Trinidad shared how significant it was for her to have built friendships with people who validated her feelings and experiences of racism.

*I found a group of friends that were from the African diaspora within school, and we talk about them [experiences of racism] a lot there and there I got a lot of validation with how I was feeling. Otherwise, I thought I was the only one and I thought I was wrong in the way that I felt concerning how other people talked or treated me on a regular basis. And it was really good to hear how other people articulated those same feelings and it also gave me a bit of a vocabulary to understand what I was going through and maybe how I can be a little bit more vocal and not just stay in my head about it. But just, not necessarily call it out but at least just stand up for myself and be like “you know what, this is not okay,” but I can make a choice based on not being that insecure or questioning what I was really going through.*

Another participant shared how a friend made him aware of the covert racism he was experiencing.

*[As a newcomer] I was trying to find contacts and then I found them, and they were playing soccer and then I loved soccer and they invited me to play soccer. So, before we go play, one friend was telling me that, “this team, it seems like they’re racists because of the way they play and behave toward you is racist.” And then I didn’t first believe him, I was like “Ooh, let’s just go and play.” But when I went, the first time I played with them, it stood out to me that they were treating me differently, that’s when I knew that something was happening here.*

Growing up not talking about racism with her parents who immigrated to Canada as adults, one participant highlighted a chain of racist incidents from an early age which made her

question her abilities. In elementary school, she was placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class despite English being the only language she could speak. She did not understand why her friend who was born in Poland and who spoke Polish at home was not placed in the same class. In grade 6, a teacher who was white and male would always pick on her; she *“didn’t know why, and I began internalizing it thinking like am I that bad.”* Although a teaching assistant apologized on his behalf at the end of the school year, this did not address her self-doubt. In grade 10, after sharing her ambitions of going to Simon Fraser University, a career counsellor told her not to aim too high and she might *“do a year of college and see how that goes.”* Again, she internalized this thinking that *“she knows what she’s talking about, she sees my grades and maybe she’s rights and she’s just being honest with me.”* Her father, who had a PhD and believed in her abilities, was furious. These experiences contributed to her hating school.

As an adult, she initiated the first ever conversation about racism with her parents. In coping with racism, her mother told her she believed *“we have to work ten times harder than white Canadians. That’s just a fact, you got to keep your head down and do it.”* She realized how different that was from her belief that *“we should be fighting to get rid of that. We should have an equal playing field, so we don’t have to keep fighting and working ten times to get to the same place.”* On why they never talked to her about racism, her father disclosed, *“he doesn’t want to put those ideas in my head; he doesn’t want to limit me before I go and pursue something, so he didn’t want to talk about those issues because he was fearful that it would be in my head and then I would come from a place of defensiveness and not go out for all the opportunities that I would want to go after because I’d be limiting myself.”* Despite understanding her parents’ perspective of *“trying to protect me and trying to give me a better life than they did, part of me is kind of choked because I wished we had those conversations a lot earlier.”* She noted:

*I think it’s really tough to be treated differently but not really know why, and no one else around you is really supporting you on that idea and so, you are kind of left alone to figure it out...It wasn’t until I started my adult life of like going out, working and going to college that I started thinking about my identity as a Black person and how that might be affecting how I live. Like how I am being treated and things that were happening to me might be because of that identity...I started seeing a therapist a couple of years ago too, just to...I think I knew that I was experiencing certain racial issues, but I didn’t know how to process it.*

### 3.2.2 “Hired over me, above me, paid better than me”: Racism in the workplace

A participant recalled how facing racism at work in the late 1970s resulted in an unexpected shift in his career. Following the rejection of his application to study at the University of British Columbia (an outcome he believes was a result of systemic racism), he was able to secure a place at Simon Fraser University to study accounting. For his articling, he was hired by Thorne Riddell, one of the biggest accounting firms in Canada at the time. He was excited about this position, but after some time, he realized that he was called back to the office when he went to work with clients and was not learning much. After some drinks with colleagues one night, a colleague solved the mystery of his predicament at work; clients in Kamloops did not want him in their establishments. He was later fired for questioning his supervisor on why they did not stand up for him. *“I’m sorry, you don’t fulfill our requirements anymore” was all he was told.* The participant noted how that was, *“the end of my pursuit of my chartered accounting degree.”* He later became one of two Black bus drivers in the lower mainland. He was relieved that, unlike his previous job where his white peers were getting \$10,000 more than him as starting salary, as a unionized bus driver the pay was very good and same for all drivers. He was also happy to be able to follow his passion for music as a ground-breaking DJ on the side.

This experience from the 1970s is neither isolated nor historical. Medical professionals are still asked by patients if there is a white doctor or nurse on call.<sup>16</sup> Several participants of the *African Ancestry Project* shared their struggles to advance in their careers and suspected systemic racism, where *“glass ceilings”* and *“quotas”* seem set for them.

*It is hard to put a finger on exactly why, despite being qualified and experienced, I have never been offered a job in my field, but one wonders. Likewise questionable why in ten years with a company, despite constant praise and increased responsibilities, I was never able to progress beyond a just-above-entry-level position, while countless others have been promoted to senior positions. Maybe it was coincidence, but I doubt it.*

*I find that I am a go-getter. I am a very hard worker and I find that a lot of people get promoted over me and I just don’t understand why. Maybe it’s because I am not right for the job or maybe it’s because of racism, but it’s hard when your feelings aren’t validated by the people that surround you.*

*I worked for a company for almost ten years, and I watched numerous people hired over me, above me, paid better than me and I was often told how much I was appreciated and valued but it was not backed up with promotions or financial recognition. No one was ever blatantly rude to my face, but it was difficult not to feel as though there was something else going on when I actually looked at the reality of it.*

*In the healthcare industry, there has always been this desire to keep certain people [in private sector business] out because it is such a lucrative field. So, that’s been the only*

*time that I felt that there's a line that I have crossed and if I have to enter it, I'd have to really push to be a participant in that.*

*I have met all qualifications and standards and found myself lagging behind less qualified colleagues. There was no other explanation left except the intersection of my race and gender.*

*I hold a degree in Industrial Engineering and my first job was cleaning washrooms. What do you think?*

*With all my credentials, I'm underemployed and it's still hard to find the least job opportunities [entry jobs in their field].*

*From a very, very young age, my father made sure that I knew that it has nothing to do with how intelligent you are. You are going to need way more than that to get through the door. So, if you're just going to rely on your intelligence, that's not gonna work. So, putting out on the bed, the rejection letters from the universities that he had applied to because they had met their Black quota and I paid attention. Because I recognized that if he was not getting through the door, with all that he is, what else is required? And watching my parents work and watching the way my father worked—it taught me a lot. So, in my role, I don't expect people to automatically just read my profile and hand it to me. Because I have seen it, "we can't have you in this position at this time even though you scored the highest because this job needs to go to a Black male."*

One participant facing challenges in career progression did not attribute this to racism but acknowledged it as a systems problem.

*Gaining a job appropriate to my level of qualification and experience is extremely difficult, but I guessed this seems to be the way the system is structured and not specifically about Black Africans descent.*

Systemic racism around professional development and progression negatively affects an individual's ability to utilize their full potential and productivity. Several participants shared that they did not work in professions and positions they are qualified for. Others shared how experiences of microaggression, and racism were "*exhausting*" and how "*a lot of energy is diverted to navigating society safely.*" This safe navigation includes perfecting the art of codeswitching and fitting in by giving in to expectations around what is considered professional. Participants shared that they had to change their appearance, hair styles, names, and accents to fit in, to be considered professional and smart. They highlighted how they had to package themselves to fit these expectations even if this sometimes meant being a different person at work. Based on the experiences of their parents and/or grandparents, and their own experiences, some participants noted that they go into workplaces expecting to be discriminated against. They learn to cope with racism by "*watching their back,*" "*keeping their head down,*" and "*working harder than [their] peers.*"

In addition, people of African ancestry navigate cultural hegemony and isolation in workspaces. Participants shared being “*the one and only*” and “*not being a cultural fit at workspaces*,” with one participant noting the imposter syndrome that can sometimes be experienced. Some navigate these situations by assimilating or “performing” as expected to receive associated rewards and to avoid penalties for not conforming. A participant shared that he “*saw a fellow Black co-worker get fired because she tried to talk out differences with another co-worker and was labelled the aggressor*”: the co-worker was penalized because she did not “*keep her head down*” nor “*keep feelings in*.” Participants shared how they had to be careful about how they expressed themselves at work.

*Sometimes I want to speak my mind, but I know that it's a slippery slope to getting fired.*

*[It] can be difficult because you're working against stereotypes while also trying not to ruffle too many feathers if you correct them.*

Racism in workplaces silences voices, ideas, and perspectives, negatively impacting an individual's satisfaction and creativity at work. This is compounded by cultural hegemony and isolation in workspaces (see section 3.1.2).

Participants also shared concerns over tokenism where the visible diversity they bring to workspaces seems to be valued over their professional contributions.

*I've had situations where my ideas are not heard and then someone else says something after me that is exactly what I said, and they are acknowledged.*

*Simple tasks can become very arduous when having to interact with people who treat you as if you are some strange being just because you are of African descent.*

A participant who believes that she has received some leadership opportunities “*probably because I am the token Black person*,” shared that despite the reason that she gets such opportunities, she takes them seriously.

*It is important to be visible. It is important that people see you there because the minute that you become invisible, people forget the claim or the stake or why it is important that we represent. So, I take it seriously.*

Participants noted that the “*yardstick for performance is different at times*.” To be noticed and to advance in their careers, they work harder and for longer, a coping mechanism ingrained in some at an early age. This is an attempt to fight stereotypes that designate Black people as intellectually inferior to their white peers. Such stereotypes are deeply rooted in the history of enslavement and colonization and are a living legacy of this history.

*I found that come closing time, I would stay late to pick up the slack of others because that was the way I was raised—to make sure to never rest until my good was better and my better, best.*

*There is a lot of pressure to combat the image portrayed of Black people. There is pressure to be better to prove your worth.*

*The idea is to get really good at what you are and what you're doing and be proud to showcase it at any point, and then you would automatically command that identification and respect.*

Pressure to perform above and beyond at work also stemmed from the belief that their performance would determine how future Black employees and applicants would be treated. This performance pressure, as participants noted, can cause burnout and can affect the mental health of people of African ancestry.

*When people see you, when they ask you questions in meetings, in the office, wherever you are, they always assume that you're speaking for your race and not speaking for yourself. When you get a job it's like, "Oh my gosh, I have to perform well because I am not just here for myself. However, I perform will impact the people that come after me." So, it's like the responsibility doubles.*

*We are working so hard because we wanna make sure that we are trying to get rid of the stigma and negative images about Blacks and Africans in general. For me, [the question] "at what expense?" is always where I come to. Because I am expected to deliver every single time and be so successful so I can open the door for other Black people and for other people of colour and at the same time at one point, you do end up being completely burnt out. It happened to me, I actually had to take time off because I had to deliver—deliver successfully every time—excellence is the only way I could have won, and no white person has to say that. They don't have to do that. They do their own fair share, and they leave, but here I am carrying a whole burden for my community.*

### **3.2.3 "Layers of privilege": Intersectionality and racism**

Participants highlighted that experiences and effects of racism can be contingent on intersecting factors that determine one's social situation at a specific time and location. Contributions by participants precisely demonstrate what has been conceptualized as intersectionality. Rooted in Black feminism and critical race theory, the concept emphasizes that "race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age [among other social divisions] operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities."<sup>17</sup> Some participants shared that they felt shielded from blatant racism because of their light skin tones, female gender, high levels of education, non-frontline occupations, comfortable socioeconomic status, acceptable or adaptable accents, or their ability to codeswitch and hence "*slip in.*" Participants shared how these factors seemed to determine the nature and/or frequency of racist experiences. Being in a social location that shielded one from blatant racism and impacts of racism was spoken of as privilege. A few expressed guilt for

enjoying such privilege and for not experiencing racism in the way they knew other people of African ancestry were experiencing it.

A participant shared how her *“layers of privilege...help to balance out the race element.”*

*I also think that the gender dynamic is also important because when I think of myself as a Black woman who is educated, who dresses a particular way, wears her hair straight, which is also part of how people see you, talks in a particular way, can afford to sometimes change my accent to sound Canadian and sort of slip in. It's very different from my partner's experience. He has a very thick Nigerian accent which is fine, but he would be treated differently from me because he is a Black man. There are certain spaces where people doubt that he should be in this space at all. If he goes to a hotel, they will check his ID five times to be sure he is not lying about who he is. If we were to go to a restaurant, the server may pretend that they don't understand what he is saying because of his accent. That gendered experience is so important because, me, as a Black woman who can just move through the world, speaks French, the layers of privilege, my class privilege helps to balance out the race element.*

Another participant illustrated through two incidents how the difference in experiences of racism between men and women are *“quite obvious.”* When he and his female friend went to different aisles at a drugstore one time, he observed, *“I was followed, my friend wasn't followed despite the fact I did not have a backpack, she had it.”* Another time when he was being driven home by a female friend after a night out, they were stopped by the police. He noticed how the line of questioning and treatment was different from what he had previously experienced. He was sure that if he had been driving, the questioning would not have been friendly, and he would have got a ticket.

Some women shared that being in the intersection of Black and female resulted in them being *“minimized,” “fetishized,”* and/or *“sexualized.”* One participant shared that she had physically developed earlier than her classmates in elementary school, and because she was bigger and taller than her peers, she was *“always adultified.”* She lamented how, *“it always just made me angry because I felt like I couldn't be a kid, I couldn't be a child.”* Because her family was white, she had no one to look up to who looked like her, so she turned to American media. She did not like the images of how Black women were portrayed, which seemed to reinforce stereotypes.

*With the media, you either saw Black women—they were either like queen Latifah, TLC, kind of rough around the edges—or, it was like Foxy Brown, Lil Kim—overly sexualized. There was no like Britney Spears, no Tiffany, no kind of pop princess that...I always just grew up just believing that like Black women, we weren't like little princesses, we weren't like the innocent little girls, and it just made me angry and I kind of adopted that and it got me in trouble a lot actually.*

Another participant shared how her high level of education did not shield her from the negative stereotypes.

*I have been fetishized, sexualized, and minimized my entire life, despite multiple post-secondary education.*

Colourism and its intersection with racism was brought up frequently throughout the research. Some participants of mixed ancestry shared how they felt their light skin tone shielded them from racism, to some extent.

*I would say because of the privileges I have, such as mixed African and European, cisgendered, male, prevent me from experiencing day-to-day blatant racism [like] being followed by security all the time in a store, being accused of being a negative Black stereotype, being called racist names on a regular basis, potentially being physically threatened due to ethnicity. I find what is usually directed at me in a more subtle way than other Black folks or it is directed in a way at me that is meant to highlight my privileges.*

*I think because my dad was darker skinned, with more African ancestry, he had a harder life than me and, therefore, wasn't able to financially provide as well for me as he would've had he been white. When one considers average incomes by race, and as such I grew up in a working-class household and, therefore, had fewer resources than families with middle-income or higher wages.*

*I have this friend who is also mixed., He says that it [being Black] is definitely one of his main identities. But in terms of the colourism thing, he's a little bit darker than I am and he has curlier hair, for example, so he's like more frequently identified as being of Black descent than I would be. So, I think it's [Black identity is] something that I think about frequently, but I don't think about all the time. Maybe it's like a spectrum. So, for him, he thinks about it more frequently than I do, for example.*

Some participants, however, cautioned that having a light skin tone does not always shield them from racism, and that “context is very important.” A participant who grew up in a predominantly white town shared that, “I’m light skinned but I have been the darkest person in the room almost my whole life. That’s just because of the community that I grew up in.” She noted,

*I do acknowledge that it [colourism] exists. You know my dad, what he went through is very different being tall, large, dark male from what I go through, but I also experience a lot of racism and a lot of it within the Black community again like “you’re not Black enough.”*

In a focus group discussion with mostly light-skinned participants, almost every participant had a heart-breaking story of experiencing blatant or covert racism. From being called “poo,” “monkey,” the “N-word,” and “disgusting,” to being followed in stores and having encounters with police, to discrimination when seeking healthcare and when in the workplace. At the end of the discussion, a participant of a darker skin tone exclaimed, “I feel like a lot of the conversation around lighter skin Black people tend to be around the privilege

*that they have over the darker-skinned persons, but I seldom hear about their actual challenges!”*

One participant shared how her experiences of racism and privilege based on skin tone seem dependent on context.

*I think the context is very important and I don't—I do think that despite being Black and despite knowing that sometimes there are opportunities that aren't given to me, I also recognize that I have also been very privileged because I have had some opportunities...I think I also recognize that the colour of my skin and the way I speak and the way I present myself can be contributive of that...So, it could be my hair, or it could be the fact that my skin is light. (However), in other circumstances, I have also been disadvantaged.*

This participant's contribution mirrors Nance Fraser's assertion of intersecting structures of oppression and domination:

Rather, individuals are nodes of convergence for multiple, cross-cutting axes of subordination. Frequently disadvantaged along some axes and simultaneously advantaged along others, they wage struggles for recognition in a modern regime.<sup>18</sup>

Some participants shared that the era is important to understand the context of racism in BC. When comparing their experiences with those of their parents, some noted that their parents went through tougher situations. Some noted that what their parents experienced was more blatant, and some noted that their parents' experiences were worse because they had a smaller support network because there were fewer Black people in the province. Those whose parents were immigrants, noted how their experience was exacerbated by other factors such as having little, if any, support or having “*thicker*” accents. In reflecting on their experiences of racism, some noted how incidents of racism have increased recently and have become more blatant.

*I remember this time when my dad told me this story about when he grew up in Vancouver. This was something that I found kind of shocking and I was kind of like, “Oh, that explains a lot” and it's something I don't feel like I've had to deal with to that degree. He said, sometimes he'd actually have to walk around with a rock in his pocket, because people would yell at him, from a car, racial epithets and things like that. It's like yeah, I have been called things like that before, but I have never felt just walking down the streets that I would have to do something like that. And so, I thought that was a really shocking but also now looking at the state of the world, not so shocking. It was kind of a wakeup call for me sort of thing. I mean I haven't had to do that thus far in my life and I would hope that no one would have to do that.*

*My parents, honestly because they had thicker accents that were not Canadian accents, they would have stories of when someone assumed them not able to speak English well or that they need to go back to where they came from or all of these different things.*

*They kind of honestly had a bit of more negative experiences within their workplace sometimes.*

*I have had to always prove that I belong or prove that I am supposed to be in certain spaces. I've had to justify my education and justify my positions at work but through that strength, I have learned to persevere. It's definitely made me more appreciative of the struggles of my parents who probably had it a lot harder than I did because I know it must have been very difficult coming and being [in Canada]. At least now I can go out and see people that look like me and I know I have friends in my corner who are going through the same thing as I am. But I can only imagine our parents coming to this extremely white place in the '60s and not really having such a huge support network and just having it be more difficult. It is kind of sad that in 2020 some of the struggles that they had, we are still facing.*

*I grew up as a Brownie in Brownie Girl Guides. It was an incredible opportunity for me. It taught me so much about people, leadership, social, recreational and what Canadian life looks like, because growing up with the West Indies, my family was West Indian. So, I absolutely embraced the whole system. So, when my son was like six and I was putting him into Cubs [Scouts], I was just like, "this is great, he would love doing Cub" but, instead, he met discrimination and racism.*

*It's a very different climate than it was when I was growing up and I feel a lot more fear right now than I did growing up, because we live in BC, and the Ku-Klux-Klan is here. And after Trump was elected, I was looked at even more. That look that you get "You don't belong here."*

*I have experienced some things that are quite pointed and is probably reflective of the general global trend. I think it is becoming very acceptable for people to, you know... I think there is an element around the world that feels more comfortable being pretty bold in their racism now. I think I have experienced or witnessed that slightly more in recent times than I have in my earlier years here when people were tucking their hatred aside a little more discreetly.*

*As an older well-lived and experienced person [77-year-old multi-generational Canadian], I am aware of the entire institutionalization of racism. Canada is only slower to admit it. We have a long history of racism in this country particularly toward visible minorities. Sadly, with population increases, the racism is more blatant than ever.*

One participant highlighted that being in "white spaces" can shield one from experiences of racism. Being a seventh-generation Canadian, she was "grounded in the Canadian Black experience of hardship and struggle and perseverance" because of her ancestors' struggles and consequent intergenerational trauma, but her personal experiences were not shaped by racism. Having fled from Oklahoma to Nova Scotia and to Amber Valley, her maternal and paternal families faced racism, segregation, and hardship. But they fought for rights

that were denied to them, contributing to the freedom of their descendants.<sup>19</sup> The participant noted that she has had a lot of privilege because of being primarily in “white spaces,” such as majority-white neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces. She reflected, “*I look at my life to this point. It has been one where I have been able to live my life as who I am and embrace who I am.*”

The privilege this participant experienced from occupying white spaces further points to privilege that allowed her to be in those spaces; financial resources and higher levels of education for instance might help circumvent structural barriers to access. Nonetheless, she noted that she has had to assess if she would be welcomed in some spaces to avoid encounters with racism. While white spaces provided safety for this participant, to many participants, white spaces are unsafe.

The occupation of participants was a determinant factor in their exposure to racism. Those working in the frontlines or requiring regular interactions with clients reported experiencing more blatant racism at work. Participants who worked in hospitals and long-term care homes shared their racist experiences with patients and clients. Almost one-third of Black women worked in healthcare and social assistance in January 2021, with over 80% of them immigrants.<sup>20</sup> While those in the healthcare workforce have been lauded as heroes for risking their lives to provide care to those in need during the COVID-19 pandemic, a Black nurse told CBC, “I may be a hero because we deal with racism every day, but not necessarily because of COVID. The fact that you can get out of bed every day, go to a workplace, still be insulted and come back the next day—for me, that’s more heroic.”<sup>21</sup> A participant who worked in a long-term care facility shared similar struggles.

*The whole of this week wasn’t a good week for me because I had to help people who are so racist to me—it’s not a good day for me. Knowing that I am waking up every morning to go help the seniors out there, but someone is mistreating me.*

In a recent open letter, the Coalition of African, Caribbean and Black Nurses in British Columbia highlighted that harassment and racism directed at Black nurses is not only perpetrated by patients but also by colleagues, with systemic racism limiting redress options and career progression.<sup>22</sup>

In reflecting on what was shared with colleagues at an equity session at a municipal government department where he works, a participant reflected:

*My job is relatively flexible in the sense that, for instance, I am working from home. I’m not having to go out into a frontline role. And so, I thought it was interesting to hear some of my colleagues, and it also reminded me of when I was working in more frontline jobs, of this sort of infantilizing behaviour of supervisors or managers toward their staff. So, that seems to be universal but when you add in the fact that there was a lot of people in working-class frontline roles, you add in the fact that they are Black, and you get like this additional level of control on people that I don’t feel in my day-to-*

*day. So, I think just being reminded of that privilege and freedom from just being bothered by petty, dumb shit all the time.*

The same participant noted how his current, better position at work gave him the confidence to advocate on issues around anti-racism and inclusion.

*As I have more educational opportunities and [a] better job, [I am] feeling more confident in asserting that identity to some degree. Because before I felt like, “put your head down, go through life, whatever [happens] don’t draw attention to something that is already there.” But now I’m kind of like, “Okay, well, I can advocate.”*

This, however, does not imply that this participant would experience less racism outside work because of his higher education or position at work. A university professor shared numerous experiences of racism, including being accused of stealing in a supermarket. The incident of a retired BC Supreme Court Justice being wrongfully detained by the police in May 2021,<sup>23</sup> mirrored the experience of a participant’s father mentioned earlier who was “way up there in the criminal justice system” but was, nonetheless, arrested as a suspect in a bank robbery while taking a walk with colleagues during his lunchbreak.

Some participants who immigrated from Africa as adults shared how they viewed their confidence in their abilities as a privilege that allowed them to ignore or to cope with racism. Having never experienced racism growing up, they shared how they had never questioned their abilities. Their confidence remains intact even in the face of racist encounters, providing a shield.

*It’s important for me to recognize my positionality as a Black person here and the layers of privilege that may shroud me from other people’s experiences. When I moved here, I was already a confident young Black girl...so, I had that sense of self and so when I would move through the world in Vancouver, I would move with confidence, and I wouldn’t even notice if anybody tried to look at me sideways. But a lot of people I’ve realized that grew up here may not have that. In some like schools, for example, I have heard many stories of kids that are doing well in school, but their teachers don’t try to encourage them, or their teachers try to tell them that because you are Black you should be doing sports instead of science and all of that kind of stuff. But I didn’t have that experience.*

*So, moving to Canada and finding out that I come from a place of privilege as well, so reconciling the two...there was a time I used to work with high at-risk youths and some of the Black children, some were South African, Jamaica, they came, adoptions failed and now they were in care. When I was talking to them, they are never taught of the power that they have as people. That being Black is not a bad thing. You are smart. Also, not seeing representation is a big thing. Having grown up in Africa you see different people at different levels in terms of success. So, you know you can be what you want to be as long as you put in the effort. However, they don’t see that here. Never having seen someone who looks like you do very well really affect the way you perceive*

*yourself...It's hard to reconcile when you come from a different background from what they perceive the norm is for a Black person and slightly feeling guilty.*

Sometimes, incidents of racism seem to be random. A first-generation Canadian who has been told on several occasions “go back where you came from” shared how her husband, who has been in Vancouver for about fifteen years, had never been told this.

*I don't know if its maybe he's never encountered very ignorant people, or he just surrounds himself, or maybe it's because I've been here for forty plus years in this place, maybe I've just had more experience or maybe I'm more sensitive to it.*

With the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, there have been calls and initiatives to address anti-Black racism and to increase equity, diversity, and inclusion within organizations and government. While awareness of the issue has increased, participants cautioned that the outcomes of these efforts need to be tangible and systemic.

*I have felt privileged in Western Canada because of my skin, especially in this day and age as an artist, being now with the label BIPOC and being given so much privilege because of my skin. This experience I have is worlds apart from the experience my grandma and grandpa had in Alabama and Mississippi and what it meant to be Black for them.*

*I think that now because so much that has happened this year [2020], since the summer, and so in some ways it is suddenly fashionable [to be a Black woman]. I see companies that have never advertised using Black women and suddenly you discover that people actually have melanin and kinky hair; and it's suddenly very conscious and socially responsible to represent us. So, in some ways it has never been more fashionable in my lifetime to be a Black woman. So, right now I feel pretty great about it. I feel good about identifying as a Black woman, but I don't always feel respected in real tangible ways as a Black woman.*

### **3.2.4 “The net result is exclusion from public life”: Impact of racism**

Participants highlighted the profound affect racism can have on people of African ancestry. Despite Canada's efforts to advance equal rights, promote multiculturalism,<sup>24</sup> and make attempts at reparation for past harms on Black communities,<sup>25</sup> racism continues to affect the everyday lives of people of African ancestry regardless of their histories and roots in Canada.

Some participants said they feel isolated and feel that they don't belong in BC. Some avoided spaces and situations that harmed them, including resigning from politics as one community reviewer noted she had to do for her well-being. Some of these affects can linger over generations. Grandparents and parents pass on trauma as their children and grandchildren observe their experiences of racism from a young age and learn from them how to cope with racism, with some internalizing racism. Participants also indicated that

systemic racism affects the generational accumulation of wealth, which may contribute to poverty levels of their descendants generations later.

*Even though my family's been here for hundreds of years, there's no generational wealth, and everything that I have achieved in my life, I have taken loans and paid for myself.*

*The struggle is in every pocket of my life. Lack of family wealth meant I needed a student loan, but I was unable to find employment in my field for six years. I have had to sacrifice savings in order to live closer to employment.*

By internalizing racism and trying to cope, racialized stereotypes can become self-fulfilling prophecies. One participant revealed how experiences of racism as a child made her angry; she acted out and got into trouble. Having struggled with her identity and sense of belonging, she mentored young people as an adult “so that they are not out getting in trouble; so that they don't go through the system.”

*I experienced racism at a very, very young age, and it made me very angry. I kind of adopted that and it got me in trouble a lot, actually. As a teenager, I used to go out and run the street with my friends. I actually got arrested a lot. So, I have actually been through the system. Fortunately, I never went through juvenile detention. I was actually always really smart, and I think that the adults in my life, teachers and principals, they knew that I was struggling with my identity, struggling with being Black and I think whenever I got in trouble with the law, they were always there to support me...I thankfully never actually went to juvenile detention, but I did go through the system, probation and stuff.*

Reflecting about their experience as a teenager, a participant shared the psychological impact of experiencing racism as a teenager by individuals they considered friends.

*The thing that was tough about it [racist stereotyping] is like we're friends, but they would say it like it was always a joke. So, I was kind of whatever when they said it. But of course, now that I am looking back with the hindsight, it was like, “Wow, that was really oppressive, it made me feel kind of shitty.” But they are also, like it was in high school, so like teenagers just saying stuff not really knowing the weight of what they are saying or what it actually means sort of thing.*

Psychological effects of racism are also felt by parents who constantly worry about the exclusion of their children in school and the safety of their teenage sons. One mother shared,

*Still to think [to this] day being worried in Vancouver about his safety and security. That sucks...I just don't see those experiences just with my son, I see it with my sister's adult children and their children as well. Like my grand-niece just turned fourteen and I am consciously aware of it. So, having that discussion again the other day i.e., “you get arrested, where do you keep your hand?” and running through these drills with*

*some hope that that will keep him safer, not “safe” but “safer.” Not everybody does that.*

This effect on parents does not discriminate against the race of the parent. In thinking of her white single mother, one participant reflected how much harder it might have been for her as a parent who had never experienced racism to worry about it, and try to protect her Black children.

*I just started realizing recently as well, yeah, single parents but how hard was it for my mom to try and raise two Black children at once, especially with, if I’m gonna be honest, with my brother. And I think she was always scared as a Black man like what would happen and then, his life, how he did get into selling drugs and how many sleepless nights that my mom had just like trying to navigate being a parent of Black children in a white world, and even she didn’t know what that was like. I’m sure being a single parent is hard for a lot of people, but I acknowledge that for a lot of white parents of biracial children who probably struggle with how to help [their children] navigate through life.”*

In trying to address her son’s experience of racism while attending Cub Scouts for eight- to ten-year old’s, the leadership told her, “*We don’t know what to do, and we can’t protect your son.*” In the end, her son did not want to attend anymore because of the name calling and exclusion.

*I ended up pulling him out because he didn’t want to go. I wish today I had taken an extra step and tried to talk about the whole discrimination and diversity agenda, but at that point I remember my son being as heartbroken as I was—he just broke down, so I pulled him out.*

The participant was disappointed that the system failed and that those in charge were not willing or able to address racism.

*It was in a system that is supposed to work; that is built on the values of benevolence, kindness and doing good for one another and more.*

These experiences highlight the psychological effects of racism not only on those who experience it, but also on those who care for them, regardless of their background. Studies have revealed that racism not only affects one’s mental health, but also one’s physical health. Anti-Black racism is a determinant of health: racism that results in inequalities in education, income, employment, housing, and health care access, among other determinants, contribute to poor health outcomes.<sup>26</sup> A 2010 study revealed that while newcomers are healthier than native-born Canadians, their health declines soon after immigration, with “visible minority status” a statistically significant factor in this pattern.<sup>27</sup>

Experiences of participants of the *African Ancestry Project* also point to an affect of racism that goes beyond personal outcomes. As one participant put it, “*the net result [of racism] is*

*exclusion from public life.*” Indeed, a recent study found that “racism might be the biggest barrier to the full integration of immigrants who are racialized.”<sup>28</sup>

As demonstrated through stories of participants of the *African Ancestry Project*, despite noted similarities and patterns, experiences and effects of racism are diverse. As one participant observed, just as these experiences are unique, each person is on a distinct healing journey.

*I realize that everyone has their own difference, different kinds of experience from up here and I think it's important that we report that we are not a monolith, and we have different experiences. We have different experiences in this country, me living on the lower mainland in comparison to someone who has been living in Northern British Columbia might have a radically different experience, a radically different outlook. We are definitely on different healing journeys when it comes to what it means to look like us in this continent, the threats and challenges that come with that. I want to make sure that I really just emphasize- my experience is my experience.*

### 3.3 Carving out space: Community and belonging in BC

Finding ways to build and be surrounded by a community of people of African ancestry was important to many project participants. They created cultural connections and support networks for solidarity based on shared experiences of racism and in their search for a sense of belonging. As some participants noted, finding a sense of belonging is an important aspect of being Black in BC, but it can be a *“lifelong process.”* While the word community is used in singular, there are multiple Black communities in BC in which people of African ancestry have built and participated in. Some communities have familial connections, heritage, ethnic or national connections, and cultural affiliations, while others are based on friendships and common interests and experiences. Participants shared how they also worked toward contributing to Canadian society by advocating for social justice and racial equity, by voting, and by volunteering in community organizations and projects. Through their actions, people of African ancestry carved out, and continue to carve out a space for themselves in British Columbia.

#### 3.3.1 Paving way and building foundational communities

When reflecting on the experiences of their families, multi-generational Canadians shared that building community was important to those who immigrated to Canada in the early 1900s. Churches were important for these communities as they faced segregation and discrimination. A participant whose family settled in Saskatchewan around 1910 noted how the Black community had to build their own church because they were not welcome in existing churches: The church became their community space. Another participant noted that when his father was a child, community *“revolved around the church.”* He noted that the church in Vancouver had a Black pastor and half of the congregation was Black, which was unusual since *“having any room where half of the people are Black is rare,”* so, the church became a *“huge cultural gathering point.”*

A first-generation Canadian also noted that the church was important for her parents to connect with other people from the Caribbean where they would *“just embrace each other.”* She noted that such connections shielded them from isolation in the Greater Vancouver area about 50 years ago where *“you were pretty much the only Black person...unless you were connected to these groups of families.”* Some of those who immigrated to Canada, including newcomers, also highlighted the church as an important space for finding and building community.

*In Canada it was not hard for me to live [settle] actually. But to be a refugee always [means] to start new life that way. To start a new life, it is very hard anyways. When I came to Canada, I got a job in three days. So, directly I had to start, and we had family here, family like a Pentecostal church. With one another we [share] everything. So, it was not hard to resettle life here. Community is powerful.*

*I went to a church named Calvary Worship Centre. So, in the first year when I came here in 2016, I spent Christmas and maybe two other Sundays there. It's an African church. Even though it is multicultural, but predominantly it is African people there. I also have a few friends from Congo that I stay in touch with. I have some friends from Kenya, Nigeria. I also go to a Nigerian church in New Westminster, so yeah, I would say it's my faith that connects me to the African community.*

*I was connected to my church family, which was predominantly people from African countries. So even within here I found myself connected in Canada but with people from the continent. I did have a few Canadian connections as well, but I think the strongest relationships I have formed are with people from the continent, from the Caribbean, other immigrants from other countries.*

A multi-generational Canadian, however, shared how the conservative nature of her childhood church put off the younger generation.

*I think [the church's significance to building community] only really changed in the last 20 to 30 years because in this instance, it was a very conservative environment and it does not really work for a lot of the younger generation. So, it is kinda sad in the sense that it didn't really evolve with the times. So even though it was this central community focus, the fact that it was very conservative to the point of being homophobic and all that stuff doesn't really make it appealing or inclusive.*

African and Caribbean associations, pioneered by immigrants who characterized the wave of immigration of people of African ancestry following reforms in the Canadian immigration policies in the late 1960s, were also highlighted as another avenue of community connections. These associations were largely created to cater to national, ethnic, and cultural affiliations. These pioneer immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean offered spaces for cultural connections and a support network for new immigrants. These spaces continued to offer cultural connections to their first-generation Canadian children, second-generation Canadian grandchildren, and newcomers.

One participant shared that his father, together with other Ghanaians who migrated to Canada in the 1970s, formed the first Ghanaian association in Calgary. He observed how *"that was a big collaboration of people from Ghana coming in and forming their own cultural identity."* When they moved to British Columbia, the family became very involved in a Ghanaian association already in place in Vancouver.

Another participant fondly recalled what a rich cultural experience it was to be engaged with and to attend events organized by the Jamaican Canadian Cultural Association of British Columbia and the Ghanaian Canadian Association of British Columbia. As an adolescent, he found a belonging and connections through the associations. He shared, *"It was grounding, it was empowering, it was like fun. You had things to look forward to, the celebrations, cultural clothing, certain times of the year. It was the best thing."* He remembered how his parents made him attend these events with the family whether he

wanted to or not, but he reflected that, “*making it mandatory was the most impactful, important gift that my family gave me, really.*”

In British Columbia, there are dozens of associations like this, some registered as non-profit organizations with a mission of not only creating spaces to share and celebrate their culture and heritage, but also to offer practical assistance to their members, including newcomers as they settle in Canada. Some also collaborate on humanitarian efforts in their home countries. African associations include the Ghanaian Canadian Association British Columbia, the Nigeria-Canada Association of British Columbia, the Kenyan Community in British Columbia, the Sierra Leonean Community of British Columbia, the Ethiopian Community Association of BC, the Great Zimbabwe Cultural Society of British Columbia, the Eritrean Community Association of Metro Vancouver, the South African Cultural Association of British Columbia, among others. The Yoruba Social and Cultural Association of BC transcends country boundaries to promote the culture of the Yoruba ethnic group. The Swahili Vision International Association promotes the Swahili language, culture, and arts to bring together those who speak Swahili, mainly those from East African countries.

Caribbean associations have mostly organized themselves under the umbrella organization, the British Columbia Organization of Caribbean Cultural Associations whose members include the Jamaican Canadian Cultural Association of British Columbia, the Canadian Haitian Cultural Association of BC, the Grenada Cultural Association of BC, Barbados Cultural Association of BC, among others.<sup>29</sup> In consideration of the multicultural nature of the Caribbean, these organizations are not exclusive to people of African ancestry. The Trinidad & Tobago Cultural Society of BC, for instance notes that “Membership is open to people of all nationalities, colour and creeds. This is similar to what one would expect to find in the makeup of the people of Trinidad & Tobago, and in many of the other islands of the Caribbean.”<sup>30</sup>

Just as people of African ancestry are diverse, membership in a cultural association is diverse. While such associations might bring people together based on a shared nationality, those who join come with their different ethnic identities, cultures, religious affiliations, and ideologies. Putting this into perspective, a community reviewer highlighted the diversity in the Eritrean community in BC, and how this diversity has been challenging to reconcile.

*The Eritrean community is really very strong but very complex. And it's not just one Eritrean association...There are four or three different [Eritrean] churches since 1995...The diversity of Eritreans is based on multiple factors, but political alignment is most pertinent. The Eritrean community that was initially founded in Vancouver in the 90's broke up in the early 2000's due to a disagreement on whether funds accumulated should go back home to Eritrea's government or stay localized to be used by the community itself. Essentially one group came to be pro-Isaias Afwerki's government and the other group was anti-. But there have also been silo groups that have separated into a Muslim Eritrean community group. But as of recently even people*

*who are in the same community group have had contentious fights over an old school vs. new school approach to internal governance.*

It is not clear if people of African ancestry from Central and South America have organized such associations. As a demographic marginalized and discriminated against in their home countries,<sup>31</sup> they might not be active in associations such as the Brazilian Community Association of BC, the Mexican Canadian Community Association of Victoria, or the Peruvian Community in BC. A community reviewer shed more light on this as she shared how she felt more connected to people of African ancestry in Canada than to Brazilians of other ancestries.

*And my friends in Brazil are all ethnicities. They are Brazilian. That's how we see one another. But when I come here it's so hard. Like it changes. In Brazil I have you know, white or you know Asian, like all sorts of friends. But here, it's like, I can I always remember what I experience there. Like just the worst parts. And I don't feel like my experience is connected. So, it's not the association [Brazilian Community Association of BC] that I want to go because I don't know, I just think that this captures that. Like I usually don't—if I were to join a group it would be this group [group of other people of African ancestry]. This is the experience that I feel is more shared.*

While the mission of African and Caribbean associations might have changed since the 1970s,<sup>32</sup> the celebration of culture remains at the centre, which has allowed, and continues to allow, first-generation, second-generation, and future generations of Canadians who can trace their roots to the specific countries to stay in touch with their African ancestry and cultural affiliations without having a connection to Africa or the Caribbean. Operating in the periphery of mainstream Canadian culture, such associations, however, might contribute to the marginalization of African and Caribbean cultures and silos among Black communities. Conversely, they hold the potential of contributing to recognition and celebration of diverse cultures in the broader society and building connections with other Black communities.

One participant observed that despite associations and consequent cultural spaces that created strong community connections for him growing up, the younger generation does not seem to embrace these spaces. He noted that the contribution of the younger generation to the Ghanaian Canadian Association of British Columbia has dwindled over the years. When reflecting on this reality, he was left pondering how his generation can hold the space for the next generation.

*The older generation, my parents' generation, they made sure that continued. My generation we haven't had as much luck in pooling together to continue it. So, it is slowly sort of falling apart. There are events that come up during the year, but the participation from people who are my age and younger seems to be dwindling. So, it was much stronger from the original group, so that is something that I do think about. I don't know if I necessarily do anything to correct that. I look at it as part of our history coming in but there hasn't been a real strong impetus to take the reins and continue that going forward. So, that's one of the things I struggle with; how do you*

*continue your group identity like your parents did as the younger generation and how do you set an example for those who follow so that this continues and then they know where they come from?*

### **3.3.2 Continuum of connections and communities: Shifts and adaptations**

Churches and associations offered a foundation for communities. While others shared how these avenues continued to be useful for this reason, other avenues were highlighted as offering a continuum of connections.

Participants shared how even an eyebrow lift, a nod, a smile, or a quick hello on the street by someone of African ancestry made them feel connected. One participant fondly remembered how she made her first friend of African ancestry by going up to her and saying “Hi.” With this approach, she became a community builder at her university where she continued meeting people of African ancestry, making friends, and bringing these friends together.

*When I moved to UBC, I feel like I could count the number of Black students that had joined in my year and literally I would just go out to people and be like “Hi, my name is [name omitted], I’m from Ghana. Can we be friends?” That’s how I made my first friend. She’s from Nigeria and we have been friends for like seven or eight years...I literally was the person that was just meeting Black people and bringing us together. That’s how I made friends. So, I have a bunch of African friends, so I don’t really feel lonely.*

The participant above admitted that the university setting was unique in that most people in that context are seeking friendships. Another participant lamented how she lost that source of community after leaving university.

*The thing is I came as a student, and I found that coming in as a student provides a lot of building opportunities for community. There were a couple of organizations that I got involved with when I was at UBC and that gave me a type of feeling of community as a Black person living here. After leaving [university] that went away, partly because I wasn’t a student anymore and also because of various reasons. When you finish school, some people plan to stay and some people don’t. You lose touch with people.*

Some participants who immigrated to Canada noted that meeting someone in the streets and making friends did not seem culturally appropriate in Canada, so they restrained themselves.

*I’m walking down the street or mall and I see my fellow African, someone who looks at me and I start smiling. But some of the time, I feel like, “Oh, is this weird?” I just feel the instinct of, “Oh, I know this guy is like me. Oh, maybe I wanna say Hi” but the culture here, you can’t just see somebody on the street and start communicating with him.*

One participant observed that although saying hello to another person of African ancestry on the streets used to be common practice for multi-generational Canadians growing up in

Greater Vancouver, there has been a shift as the younger generation did not continue in this tradition.

*I remember when I was a kid, my dad would always say “Hi” to other people and he was lamenting that a lot of other Black people wouldn’t do this anymore because when he was younger, they would always do this—regardless of whether or not you knew the person. You will be like, “Hey, how is it going?” especially for older Black folks in the city. They always do that, so I always do that. But for younger Black folks, I don’t really do that because I am not expecting them to do that, and they may think that it is weird to do that.*

One participant noted that while friendly gestures such as smiles, nods, and greetings make her feel connected, they did not translate to tangible community for her.

*When I actually see other Black people, I usually get a smile or a head nod and so I think there is a connection there, in that way. But in terms of feeling like a strong part of a community in a practical kind of, “I have something going on—who should I call?” not that strong.*

Participants also shared how they built friendships and communities with other people of African ancestry through informal introductions and later as they pursued their professional and personal passions. Others built communities through their engagement in initiatives to advocate for racial equity.

*About ten years after I had initially moved here, just by chance when I was on a trip back to the Bahamas, I was put in touch with someone who wanted to move here. So, we became good friends. Really, we’ve become each other’s community and have since learned about other Bahamians that have lived in the lower mainland area. But I think that’s kind of my primary community when it comes to keeping in touch with the Black community.*

*I co-founded [an anti-racism organization] about five months ago in June of this year [2020]. Since then, I have been connecting with a lot of people, I mean a lot of people of colour and mostly Black and Indigenous but for the last little bit, like the last few months, I have really been connecting with more Black people from different walks of life. I have been getting in touch with my Blackness and not being ashamed of it and being unforgiving with it too. I’m not gonna hide my Blackness anymore, I think it’s been empowering to talk to more Black people and be around people that look like me and share my experiences. It’s interesting because I have met people who are maybe first- or second-generation—but it doesn’t matter, like when you walk out of the door, people don’t know if you’re gay or straight, they don’t know what your accent is, they see you’re Black. And we all have very similar experiences and similar stories and it’s been really empowering to just meet people that have similar experiences.*

*I put together and developed a coalition of [Black] nurses, and I think this is definitely the first time that there is a group of Black nurses in British Columbia that have come*

*together. So, Black nurses, nursing students that are Black, and international students. And I think one of the things that is common amongst all of us is that “Oh, I didn’t know there were more of us here” and some others have said “I felt quite alone when I moved here, and I did not see anyone that looked like me.” So, this group is excellent.*

Participants also shared how connections and communities are moving online. Facebook groups and virtual events create a sense of community, particularly for those who find themselves isolated and those who live in remote locations.

*[Visiting Jamaica is] something I have thought about, but also thinking of different ways to get part of that culture without possibly going there. So, that’s why I joined the group [Facebook group] just to get a chance to really immerse myself with not only Jamaicans but just other Black Vancouverites because I have been basically the only Black person in my school forever basically. And, like it’s just nice to have that connection with someone because it wasn’t necessarily a connection I found in my family. Even though my [adoptive white] family was super supportive, it was an obvious difference that they tried their hardest to understand, but unfortunately not everything they do—but they are trying, which is great.*

*The Facebook groups and events—although because of COVID all of the [in-person] events were stopped—there were lots of events and gatherings that happen, so that has always been very helpful for me to continue to volunteer and support initiatives locally here as well.*

After moving to a more remote town and becoming a mother, one participant noted how access to community changed for her. Now she faced barriers because of distance to community events and spaces, and time limitation with new responsibilities as a mother. During the interview, she requested recommendations on where she could connect with other new mothers of African ancestry. I recommended a couple of online communities.

*What has changed in terms of community is that I have moved. I am not in the City of Vancouver. I am in the suburbs now with my lifestyle of having a small child. Even though I see and hear about events that look great or things that might be nice to do, it just doesn’t fit in as easily for me to take part in them. So, I am a little bit removed from certain elements of feeling like I am a part of a wider Black community just because I am not—part geography and part where I am in life right now.*

Black History Month (BHM) events were important points of connection for most participants, with 61% of the 162 participants initiating or attending such events. While some participants noted the importance of the events for educating themselves and others about the history of Black people, many noted that Black History Month creates an environment which allows for collaborations and enables community connections. On why they participated, some shared:

*At this stage in my life, so that my kids can celebrate their heritage, culture, the diversity, and richness in being Black and so they can interact with more kids like them.*

*It's very enriching and important to connect with the Black community.*

*Opportunity to meet other Black people.*

*The Habesha community is so small that I will often find other Habeshas there. Also, it's important to have the community that BHM and just being Black here can give. It's unfortunate living between two worlds as a diasporan Habesha, but here we are.*

Not all participants were, or felt, connected to the Black History Month events. Not being aware of these events, having busy schedules, living in isolated locations, not being interested, and feeling like they did not belong at these events, were the main reasons given for not attending.

Some participants shared how they sought or created communities that reflected close cultural affiliations and shared experiences. A participant who immigrated from Kenya shared how she felt most connected visiting with a Kenyan friend, eating Kenyan food, and conversing in Swahili.

*I feel like when I am visiting my Kenyan friend, for example, we are chitchatting in Swahili and eating our chapati or ugali, in that moment I feel like I am home. We are listening to music from home, talking about home. So, I think there's a few people we connect to in that way, and I feel like wherever we are, we always feel like, "Yep! This is our little haven, this is like home."*

A participant who moved to Canada from Trinidad shared how, as a person of mixed ancestry, she did not feel like she fit in Afro-centric communities. By bringing together a group of women of mixed Caribbean ancestry, she built a community.

*I met a woman [at work], and she is mixed with Bahamian and Jamaican ancestry and so we started this group and started inviting people of different ancestries from the Caribbean. So, our group is called [name omitted] and so it is through a Caribbean kind of connection we all have. We get to talk about our ancestry. I also felt, prior to that, outside of the African community because it was 14 percent of who I was [genetically]. And I felt torn because if I were to join them, I have to focus on my African ancestry and that's only 14 percent of who I am.*

Some participants lamented that there were no physical spaces that would support tangible and sustainable community building and engagement. They noted that while community connections have been enabled by virtual spaces, a physical space was important to feel grounded.

*There is probably one Afro-Caribbean-Franco space but there is not as much gathering for us to be able to affirm our experiences in a way that is more quote unquote,*

*“unapologetic.” When people say, “be unapologetically Black,” they make it [sound] as if it’s about like being like a superhero where you’re like “I am Black no matter what you say.” And trust me, what allows people to be unapologetically Black is when in their space there are normally a lot of Black people, but also infrastructure like cultural centres, businesses, organizations also owned and led by Black people and that serve Black people, schools and all that stuff, but also the presence of Black folks in high spaces, in different ranks who in their own way legitimize the experience of what it means to be Black.*

Not-for-profit community organizations led by people of African ancestry were spotlighted as offering avenues for connections. Where physical spaces do not exist, some organizations take it upon themselves to rent out accessible spaces for the community to congregate and share. One participant noted that a program, run by the African Friendship Society, aimed at facilitating cultural healing through singing, storytelling, dance, and drumming, offered her a rare experience which made her feel a sense of belonging.

*I definitely found [belonging] when we were on a project with [the African Friendship Society] and the drumming and the singing, and the storytelling. Oh man, honestly, that was the highlight of this year [2020] and getting to see other Black females and seeing how everyone is coming in the circle and just expressing themselves and just beaming with light and acceptance—that made this year really worthwhile, this year after all the COVID stuff, like it was. That’s so important to me and I’m just smiling just thinking about that experience...I still feel like I crave having that connection with other Black men and women within Vancouver. It’s something that may not easily be replaced. I think it’s so important and it’s irreplaceable, that I hope that there can be more opportunities to encourage that—play my part as well but also be involved as well.*

There are organizations and individuals working toward securing physical spaces for such connections. The African Art and Cultural Society currently offers a unique cultural hub for people of African ancestry at the Issamba Centre in Victoria. The Unity Centre Association for Black Cultures is working toward securing a similar hub in Vancouver. The Hogan’s Alley Society is working to establish a cultural centre where a vibrant Black community once existed in downtown Vancouver and to pursue the City of Vancouver’s reconciliation commitments through the Northeast False Creek Plan. A group of Black youth came together to establish a gallery and community site in Surrey called the Black Art Centre.<sup>33</sup>

Participants shared the positive effects of belonging and having access to a community; social and psychological benefits were particularly highlighted. Community shields people from isolation and racism, or mitigates their affect. Some participants noted the importance of community to help them navigate societal structures to access resources, particularly for newcomers. Others highlighted how community made them feel like they belonged and created cultural safety where they could be themselves and express themselves fully and “unapologetically.”

*The thing that I feel [lacks] sometimes when I get homesick is the sense of community. It's vastly different from community in Canada. I can put it this way, sometimes when I meet another African person, be it by chance or whatever, I am very excited because there is that connection when you meet someone from home. And it's rare to find groups where you can create that community and have that regularly. That would most probably solve the homesickness situation.*

*To be in this kind of spaces gives us that empowerment. It allows us to realize that we are not here alone, and I think a lot of times, that is the issue—you just feel so alone, especially in BC.*

### **3.3.3 Carving out space in BC: Engaging the mainstream**

In carving out a space for themselves in British Columbia, people of African ancestry have engaged and made a mark in mainstream society; they shared ways they participated and contributed to society. Some identified the contributions made by their parents and ancestors, from serving in World War II, to working in various departments and levels of government and politics, to advocating for social justice. Others started initiatives to make African and Caribbean cultures part of the mainstream in Canada, which had the effect of not only celebrating their cultures, but also allowing Canadians from other backgrounds to appreciate and enjoy their cultures.

A participant who came to Canada in the 1970s recalled how, at Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia, he started the first radio program to play African music and he presented information about Africa. He was happy to share that over 360 colleges and community radio stations now have similar programming. He also introduced African music and reggae music to the Commodore Ballroom, then a popular night scene.<sup>34</sup> He shared the joy of seeing Afrobeat music and dance “all over the whole place” despite the subsequent appropriation he observed.

By following their professional and personal passions, participants shared the paths they had taken to fulfill their dreams and ambitions. Responses to questions about volunteering and voting showed active contributions to and participation in mainstream Canadian society. Most participants (58% of the 162) highlighted the volunteer work they engage in. Their roles ranged from founders, directors, and members to occasional volunteers in the following organizations: Healthy Saanich Committee, Hope Worldwide, Stroke Recovery Association of BC, Nursing Association of UBC, Canadian Association of Neuroscience Nurses, Jazz Festival, Vancouver Marathon, Granville Seniors Centre, Junior Achievement, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Thrift Shop, Camp Misawannee, Crimson Coast Dance Society, Royal Canadian Military Institute, Counselling Association, Women Against Violence Against Women, Girl Guides, SFU Graduate Caucus, University of Northern BC Women's Centre, Cadets Effective Speaking Course, Canadian Red Cross, and United Way of the Lower Mainland. While not naming specific associations, some participants noted that they volunteered in their church communities, soccer communities, thrift stores, and

animal hospitals, or participated in wellness activism, affordable housing initiatives, political groups, mentorship programs, organizations that their children were involved in, boards of local organizations, and professional regulatory colleges.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, experiences of racism and isolation can cause individuals to be or to feel excluded from public life. Despite feeling excluded, participants shared how they bravely participated in spaces which were not designed with them in mind. A participant explained the importance of showing up in such spaces even when faced with barriers. This participant has made it her life's mission to promote equity and inclusion in her city.

*At city hall, I am very involved, and the aspect of diversity and inclusion is very important to me on many different levels. So, for over 40 years I have worked with people with disabilities and their families, but I also come with all of this stuff around diversity, inclusion, and equity. Those values are very strong with me, and I think that being a visible minority at city hall is very important because everybody is watching all the time. I may speak on an issue that has to do with inclusion, but my breadth of experience to deal with inclusion brings into it many different aspects such as equity. I look at all the ways people are intersectionally related and I look at "are there some discriminatory practices?" and I look at the racialized aspects of it—around poverty and how those things play out in society and things that I have experienced and things I have seen.*

While acknowledging challenges around being the only Black person in such spaces, she shared:

*I don't look at it as a burden. I look at it as an opportunity because it makes me work hard for what I want. Maybe that has helped me achieve some of the measures that I have had—knowing that I have to work hard. You've got to work hard, show up and represent.*

A participant who never felt included in the electoral process, shared that while the desire to vote did not come to her naturally, a development project in her neighbourhood, which "brought out the battle between the community, developers, and city hall" made her realize that she needed to be a more active participant and voice her opinion in community meetings and advocacy initiatives.

*It really opened my eyes to what goes on politically in the municipal level and that was eviscerating. That just opened me wide up and I was so disgusted, I really was—by that whole thing. So, I can't go back and hide and be on the margins anymore.*

Another issue that made her more active politically was the information that came out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on crimes committed against Indigenous Peoples.

*I stand with Indigenous people on making sure that this history is never repeated, that the truth comes out. So, I started to educate my family and myself on history. I*

*volunteered on a reserve when I was in high school. And I knew something was inherently wrong and I was a Catholic student. So, I didn't know about the residential schools at that time, but I knew something was inherently wrong with us being there and volunteering on the reserve. But that was my first eye-opening experience with that. And in my master's degree, when I did post-colonial studies, I also did Aboriginal studies. So, not only was I angry from my experience, I was angry because of the Aboriginal and Indigenous piece. In 2018, that's when another blow apart came in me when Truth and Reconciliation—I was on a journey to ensure that the truth is heard, and that we don't erase what history is and tell the truth, the real history.*

In sharing this truth, the participant took a personal risk in challenging the biases and stereotypes held by her husband's family of British ancestry.

*Imagine for a moment that my husband's family of UK ancestry and I am bringing up the truth of history. What that's going to mean for us as a family. So, this year particularly, with the protests and rally, I was glad to see both groups working together and allying at these rallies. It was really difficult to show my UK family just how much they have internalized this type of racial and marginalized behaviour and that it was happening within our family. I had to stand strong and tell them that. That was very difficult.*

Besides being drivers of change in the broader society and within their inner circles, people of Africa ancestry are active participants in elections, despite their experiences of racial injustice and exclusion. As two survey participants shared:

*Even though I kind of dislike it here, I still feel like I should use my right to vote for the betterment of this country.*

*As much as I hate it here, I live here, and it's best to use my voice when I have the capacity to do so.*

Of the 162 survey participants, 61% had voted in a federal, provincial, or municipal elections. A majority of those who had not yet voted were ineligible to vote largely because they were not yet Canadian citizens, with a few not yet of voting age at the most recent elections. Those who voted noted that elections were one of the ways, if not the only way, to be heard and to influence policies that affected them. Many indicated that voting was their civic right, duty, or/and obligation.

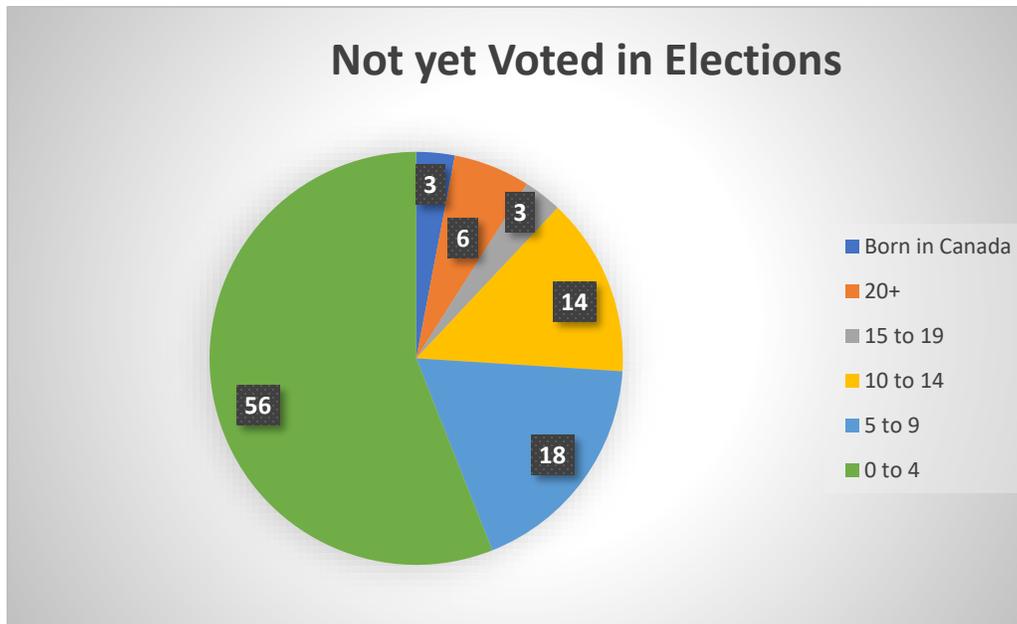


Figure 14: Participants who have not yet voted in elections

*Categorized by years lived in Canada and calculated as a percentage of all survey participants who had not yet voted (n=63)*

Participants who had lived in Canada for 0 to 4 years at the time of the survey represented 21% of all participants, and none of those in this category had participated in an election, which reflects Canada’s legal provisions for citizenship eligibility. To apply for citizenship, one must be a permanent resident in Canada for at least 3 years of the last 5 years of residency.<sup>35</sup> However, some residents do not apply for citizenship when they become eligible. Some participants who had been in Canada for over 20 years were not yet citizens. Most participants who had lived in Canada for 15 years or more had previously voted. This demographic represented 55% of the 162 survey participants, but 81% of all participants who had voted in an election and only 12% of those who had not yet voted. Only two of the 53 participants who were born in Canada had not yet voted in an election, with one who had not yet reached the age to be eligible in recent elections.

As participants highlighted, voting is one way people of African ancestry engage and carve out a space for themselves in Canada. By voting, they actively try to let their voice be heard and influence leadership and policies that affect them. Some participants acknowledged that voting is a civic right that Black people have not always had in Canada.

*And as a Black person, it's our duty as respect for all the people who fought and died for us to now have the ability to vote.*

*It's important to vote so I voted a week ago and I make sure that I do that because people fought for that. And I think it's a privilege, an honour but also a responsibility to vote and to be active. Not to always be a victim. To take leadership and ownership of things.*

Only with the abolition of slavery in 1834 did Black people in Canada attain some civic rights. Until 1920, voting rights were tied to ownership of taxable property, a provision which excluded many Black people. Black women, as other women in Canada, did not have the right to vote at the federal level until after 1918. At the provincial level, British Columbia was fourth to grant women this right in 1917, with Quebec being the last in 1940. People of African ancestry have been at the forefront to mobilize and advocate for themselves as they faced numerous barriers to the right to vote and to run for office.<sup>36</sup>

As one community reviewer highlighted, people of African ancestry still face challenges in trying to exercise their rights to participate in politics.

*It's a very difficult territory for most of us Black people, even to run those campaigns, to fundraise and to do everything, even just the screening process itself. It's another different level. You know, they screen you more than they screen any other different candidate... One reason why I [got into politics] was just to ensure that people know that people of African descent can still run a decent campaign.*

Another community reviewer who is a politician in a district where people of African ancestry represent only 0.2% of the population shared how encouraging it was to read, in the initial draft of this report, that many people of African ancestry hold in high regard their right to vote. She is considering leaving politics due to “astounding” racist pushbacks, experiences she noted intersect with the treatment of women in politics. She was, however, encouraged to continue with her work of mentoring Black and racialized individuals who enter politics.<sup>37</sup>

*It's so nice to hear that there is the acknowledgement of how important it is for people to participate in that democratic process, especially people that are severely like almost non-existent in that world. It's so great to hear that there is—there are people that understand that you need to—the only way you can get representation is to make sure that you're voting for those people... It gives me a further sense of responsibility to continue doing the work that I am [doing].*

Participants of the *African Ancestry Project* shared how they continue to mobilize and advocate for racial justice and equal rights. Founders, directors, members, and volunteers of various activism organizations were among the project participants. They indicated their participation in municipal- and provincial-level diversity advisory committees including organization of events showcasing diverse cultures, Black History Month events in their workspaces, science fiction book clubs showcasing BIPOC authors, leadership and membership in the BC Black History Awareness Society, UBC Africa Awareness Initiative, United Centre Association for Black Cultures, Black Speaks Victoria, National Black Students' Caucus of the Canadian Federation of Students, Anti-Racism Coalition, Hogan's Alley Society, BlackChat, Black Lives Matter, Coalition of Black African and Caribbean

Nurses in BC, and BC Community Alliance. The last two organizations address racism and advocate for equity within the healthcare and education systems, respectively.

Even within organizations whose primary mandate or mission does not include activism for racial or social justice, participants shared that they were advocates within those spaces and beyond.

*In my work, officially we are reviewing climate change policy and all that and seeing that climate change has differential impacts on different populations based on marginalization amongst other things. I feel like it is my duty to sort of add this additional thing.*

*It is important for us as Black and African folks to use these spaces to raise our voices and make sure we are being heard, although usually the change still doesn't happen. I am taking it upon myself to make those who are "high up" in our [University] faculty aware of what is happening, and that they have to listen to us.*

Another participant shared that working within institutions of power would allow them to learn how to break down the systems of oppressions upheld by these institutions.

*I enjoy being plugged in and seeing the machine for what it really is [to be] able to break it down later.*

One participant indicated interest to get involved in politics as an elected official.

*I think for me it's just following up on what is happening politically, and I think as somebody who is just getting connected to the municipal government here, it is also a way to see how the political system works at the grassroots level and also seeing a few other women that I look up to, how they move and how they strategize... I think just watching from a distance a little bit... who knows whatever tomorrow will bring?*

<sup>1</sup> Recommended resources on the question ‘Where Are You from?’:

Yabome Gilpin-Jackson, “Where Are You from? Building Relational Intelligence across Identity Differences,” *Practising Social Change*,

<http://www.ntl-psc.org/archive/where-are-you-from-building-relational-intelligence-across-identity-differences/>.

Nadia Jannif, “But Where Are You Really from? A Seemingly Simple Question, with a Complicated Answer,” *CBC News*, July 01, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/where-are-you-from-1.5195126>.

Christina Zdanowicz, “No, Where Are You Really from?” *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2017/08/opinion/where-im-really-from/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gillian Creese, “Where Are You from? Racialization, Belonging and Identity among Second-Generation African Canadians,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42, no. 9 (June 2018): 1476-1494, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1484503>

<sup>3</sup> CBC Short Docs, “Think You Know What a 7<sup>th</sup>-Generation Canadian Family Looks Like? Think Again,” *CBC*, accessed July 01, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/shortdocs/features/think-you-know-what-a-7th-generation-canadian-family-looks-like-think-again>.

<sup>4</sup> Zaidi, Zareen, Daniëlle Verstegen, Rashmi Vyas, Omayma Hamed, Tim Dornan, and Page Morahan. “Cultural Hegemony? Educators’ Perspective on Facilitating Cross-cultural Dialogue,” *Medical Education Online* 21, no. 1 (November 2016), 2, <https://doi.org/10.3402/meo.v21.33145>.

<sup>5</sup> Recommended read on touching of hair:

Janice Gassam Asare, “Stop Asking Black People if You Can Touch Their Hair,” January 8, 2020, *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2020/01/08/stop-asking-black-people-if-you-can-touch-their-hair/>.

<sup>6</sup> H  l  ne Maheux and Deniz Do, *Diversity of the Black population in Canada: An Overview* (Statistics Canada, 2019), 14, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-657-x/89-657-x2019002-eng.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Tatjana Elez, “Restoring Hope: Responding to Career Concerns of Immigrant Clients,” *The Canadian Journal of Career Development* 13, no. 1 (January 2014): 36, <https://cjcd-rcdc.ceric.ca/index.php/cjcd/article/view/188>.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Jung, “Immigrant Nurses in BC Say Language Proficiency Tests a Barrier to Practice,” *CBC*, September 26, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/ien-english-exam-petition-1.6182882>.

Uday Rana, “For many Newcomers, ‘Canadian Experience’ Remains a Barrier to Meaningful Employment,” *The Globe and Mail*, December 18, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-for-many-newcomers-canadian-experience-remains-a-barrier-to-meaningful/>.

<sup>9</sup> This contribution was made by the participant during a community review focus group discussion in October 2021, adding to his initial contribution in November 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Ren   Houle, *Changes in the Socioeconomic Situation of Canada’s Black Population, 2001 to 2016* (Statistics Canada, 2020), [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2020/statcan/89-657-x/89-657-x2020001-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2020/statcan/89-657-x/89-657-x2020001-eng.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Amos Nkrumah, “Covert Racism: The Case of Ghanaian Immigrant Entrepreneurs in Three Canadian Prairie Provinces,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (June 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2021.1899949>.

<sup>12</sup> The participant shared this experience during a community review interview to call attention to discrepancies in health care experiences. While experiences of Black people in seeking health care have not been systematically researched on or methodically documented, a 2020 report highlighting Indigenous-specific racism noted experiences of denial of service, long wait times, lack of communication or shunning, minimizing concerns, inappropriate pain management, medical mistakes, and rough treatment among others. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond (Aki-Kwe), *In Plain Sight. Addressing Indigenous-specific Racism and Discrimination in BC Health Care* (BC Ministry of Health, 2020), <https://engage.gov.bc.ca/app/uploads/sites/613/2020/11/In-Plain-Sight-Full-Report.pdf>.

- <sup>13</sup> Joseph Mensah, "Black Continental African Identities in Canada: Exploring the Intersections of Identity Formation and Immigrant Transnationalism," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2014), 15, <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcs.48.3.5>.
- <sup>14</sup> Angus Reid Institute, "Diversity and Racism in Canada: Competing Views Deeply Divide Country along Gender, Generational Lines," June 21, 2021, <https://angusreid.org/diversity-racism-canada/>.
- <sup>15</sup> Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership and Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria, *Racism in Greater Victoria: A Community Report* (Victoria: ICA, 2021), 6, <https://www.icavictoria.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GVLIP-Racism-Survey-Report-FINAL.pdf>.
- <sup>16</sup> Imani Walker, "'You Have Patients Say the N-word': Black Nurses Call for Support against Racism on the Medical Frontlines," *CBC Radio*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/you-have-patients-say-the-n-word-black-nurses-call-for-support-against-racism-on-the-medical-frontlines-1.5964656>.  
Hallie Cotnam, "A Physician and Father Asks if Things Will Be Different for His Boys," *CBC News*, June 09, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/racism-black-doctor-growing-up-name-calling-medical-school-impact-career-1.5603251>.
- <sup>17</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas," *Annual Review of Sociology* 41 (March 2015), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142>.
- <sup>18</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation," in *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, eds. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (London, New York: Verso, 2003), 57.
- <sup>19</sup> Recommended reading on early civil rights movement by Black people in Canada:  
Agnes Calliste, "The Influence of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement in Canada," *Race, Gender & Class* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 123-139, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41674712>.  
Jason Permanand, "Canadian Civil Rights Trailblazers," *Canada Museum for Human Rights*, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://humanrights.ca/story/canadian-civil-rights-trailblazers>.
- <sup>20</sup> The Daily, "Study: A Labour Market Snapshot of Black Canadians during the Pandemic," *Statistics Canada*, February 24, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/210224/dq210224b-eng.htm>.
- <sup>21</sup> Imani Walker, "'You Have Patients Say the N-word': Black Nurses Call for Support against Racism on the Medical Frontlines," *CBC Radio*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/you-have-patients-say-the-n-word-black-nurses-call-for-support-against-racism-on-the-medical-frontlines-1.5964656>.
- <sup>22</sup> Coalition of African, Caribbean and Black Nurses in British Columbia, *Open Letter* (November 24, 2021), <https://www.cacbn.ca/openletter>.
- <sup>23</sup> Jason Proctor, "Handcuffing of Retired Black Judge Mirrors Brother's False Imprisonment 46 years ago," *CBC News*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/black-judge-handcuffed-racism-1.6033332>.
- <sup>24</sup> The 1988 Canadian Multiculturalism Act, although being largely symbolic, was an official recognition that Canada is a multi-cultural country. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau reiterated this by stating, "Although there are two official languages, there is no official culture"  
Jack Jedwab, "Multiculturalism," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/multiculturalism>.
- <sup>25</sup> Such reparations include: Viola Desmond being featured in the \$10 from 2018; City of Vancouver reconciliation through the Northeast False Creek Plan for destroying homes and the Black Community in Hogan's Alley in the 1960s; and a formal apology by the Mayor of Halifax in 2010 for demolition of homes in Africville in the 1960s, although without compensation as those dispossessed by the city and their descendants have been seeking compensation for over 50 years.
- <sup>26</sup> Commission on Social Determinants of Health, *Closing the Gap in a Generation: Health Equity through Action on the Social Determinants of Health* (Geneva, World Health Organization, 2008), [https://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/final\\_report/csdh\\_finalreport\\_2008.pdf](https://www.who.int/social_determinants/final_report/csdh_finalreport_2008.pdf).  
Ifrah Abdillahi and Ashley Shaw, *Social Determinants and Inequalities in Health for Black Canadians: A Snapshot* (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020), <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health/social-determinants-inequities-black-canadians-snapshot/health-inequities-black-canadians.pdf>.  
Sherly Nestel, *Colour Coded Health Care: The Impact of Race and Racism on Canadians' Health* (Wellesley Institute, 2012), 10, <https://www.wellesleyinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Colour-Coded-Health-Care-Sheryl-Nestel.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Fernando De Maio and Eagan Kemp, "The Determination of Health Status among Immigrants to Canada," *Global Public Health* 5, no. 5 (September 2010): 462-478, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441690902942480>.

<sup>28</sup> Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership and Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria, *Racism in Greater Victoria: A Community Report* (Victoria: ICA, 2021), 7, <https://www.icavictoria.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GVLIP-Racism-Survey-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> "Member Organizations," BCOCCA, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.bcocca.ca/>.

<sup>30</sup> "About Us," Trinidad and Tobago Cultural Society of BC, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.ttcsbc.org/about/>.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Morrison, "Race and Poverty in Latin America: Addressing the Development Needs of African Descendants," *United Nations*, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/race-and-poverty-latin-america-addressing-development-needs-african-descendants>.

Edward Telles and Stanley Bailey, "Understanding Latin American Belief about Racial Inequality," *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 6 (May 2013): 1559-1595, <https://doi.org/10.1086/670268>.

<sup>32</sup> The work of these associations now ranges from helping newcomers settle in Canada, to humanitarian work in home countries, to acting as a bridge in translating cultures to the new realities in Canada, to advocating for the rights of members.

<sup>33</sup> See appendix 2 for a non-exhaustive list of community resources, organizations, associations, and groups.

<sup>34</sup> On the legacy of the Commodore Ballroom, see:

Bridgette Watson, "Iconic Commodore Ballroom Celebrating 90 Years of Music, Memories and Midnight Revelry," *CBC News*, December 03, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/commodore-ballroom-90-1.5827104>.

<sup>35</sup> "Apply for Citizenship: Who Can Apply," Government of Canada, March 23, 2021,

<https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/canadian-citizenship/become-canadian-citizen/eligibility.html>

<sup>36</sup> Natasha Henry, "Black Voting Rights in Canada," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, January 18, 2016, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/black-voting-rights>.

Matthew McRae, "The Chaotic Story of the Right to Vote in Canada," *Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, accessed July 1, 2021, <https://humanrights.ca/story/the-chaotic-story-of-the-right-to-vote-in-canada>.

Maryse Zeidler, "100 Years Ago Today, (Most) Women Got the Right to Vote in BC," *CBC News*, April 05, 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/100-years-ago-today-most-women-got-the-right-to-vote-in-b-c-1.4057683>.

<sup>37</sup> For more on experiences of politicians of African ancestry in BC, watch:

African Arts and Cultural Society- Issamba Centre, *Online Conference on Political Engagement & Elections*, film, October 16, 2020, video, <https://www.facebook.com/aaccsociety/videos/354081562675370/>.



# Conclusion and Recommendations

## Summary

This report weaves together stories of over 160 participants of the *African Ancestry Project* to offer a glimpse into the vast diversity of Black people of African ancestry in British Columbia. Three composite themes addressed in each of the three main chapters articulate this diversity: Diverse Histories, Diverse Identities, and Diverse Experiences.

The first chapter, Diverse Histories, opens by contextualizing African ancestry, highlighting the rich cultural heritage of the empires, kingdoms, and chiefdoms that existed in Africa before European imperialism and its remnants in the diaspora. So much of this history was hidden and left untold to justify dehumanization of Africans and consequent enslavement and colonization. Histories of project participants are then explored, complemented by supporting research. Multi-generational Canadians shed light on generational roots of Black people in Canada, which can be traced to the following: slavery in the country from the 1600s; migration of Black Loyalists and those who were enslaved by white loyalists following the American Revolutionary War in 1780s; Jamaican Maroons, who migrated to Canada in 1796; enslaved Africans and their descendants who fled enslavement, discriminatory policies, and hate crimes in America from the early 1800s to early 1900s; and, Black pioneers of British Columbia who migrated from California in the 1850s. Although these foundational Black Canadians faced racist backlash, they fought for their place in Canada as they contributed to its development.

Canada's racist immigration policies from the early 1900s to the 1960s limited immigration of Black people, but policy changes in the late 1960 were met with increased immigration from the Caribbean and Africa when these regions gained independence from direct colonial rule. The population of people of African ancestry rose from representing 0.2% of Canada's population in 1971 to 1% in 1981<sup>1</sup>. The majority of immigrants of African ancestry were technical and professional workers or students. Those who migrated to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s were pioneer immigrants who built cultural associations and communities that continue to attract memberships. Migrations of people of African ancestry to Canada steadily increased over the years, representing 3.5% of Canada's population by 2016. Those who come to Canada embody diverse and distinct histories. Participants shared family histories linked to the enslavement of their African ancestors, and colonialization and independence movements in their home countries. Participants shared their journeys, experiences, and the trade-offs made to come in Canada.

The second chapter, Diverse Identities, explores various ways people of African ancestry identify with Blackness and their African ancestry. Black identity is first contextualized in its historical origins of the myth of a human hierarchy, which was used to justify

oppression. Participants demonstrated diversity in how people of African ancestry translate this socially constructed identity and why the multiplicity of Black identities needs to be acknowledged. The Black identity was described as the following: an identity imposed on immigrants who previously did not consider skin colour to be an identity marker; an identity that erases unique and diverse identities; a remnant of the myth of human hierarchy participants did not want to identify with; an identity requiring conscious performance to receive associated societal rewards while avoiding societal penalties; an identity associated with unbelonging; a political identity allowing for collective power in fighting and addressing shared experiences of racism; and, an identity embraced with pride by some, albeit with reservations. Participants highlighted a unique identity crisis faced by first-generation Canadians who find themselves between two or more cultural identities, a phenomenon described as the bicultural dilemma. Raised by immigrant parents with unique cultural identities and practices in the home while being integrated into the Canadian mainstream culture outside the home, participants shared that they did not feel like they belonged to either.

This chapter also explores the connection participants have with their African ancestry. African identities are diverse, with countries like Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo having over 200 distinct ethnic groups, each with their unique languages and cultural practices. Immigrants from Africa embody this diversity. While recent immigrants shared their current social connections to Africa, long-term immigrants who have been away from their home country for ten years or more shared of their dwindling connection to Africa. Some shared how they felt like they were in limbo, not belonging in Canada nor their home country. Those without familial connections in Africa, such as immigrants from the Caribbean and Americas as well as multi-generational Canadians, noted their lack of connection with African cultural identities because of enslavement and displacement of their African ancestors. While others acknowledged inheritance of their dark complexions from Africa, others never considered their ties to Africa. Some actively sought to discover their African ancestry through DNA testing while others felt alienated from their ancestry and did not consider such pursuits. A continuum of African cultural identities is in the diaspora with such cultural connections evident to this day. For instance, one participant shared how she grew up reading Bre-Nancy stories in Trinidad, an African folklore called “Kwaku Ananse” originating from the Akan people of present-day Ghana and Ivory Coast. Some who felt no connection to an African identity, acknowledged a connection that could be best described as spiritual.

The third chapter, *Diverse Experiences*, sheds light on similar yet diverse experiences of people of African ancestry. Participants shared their struggles with finding a sense of belonging within the broader Canadian society. Some common themes included struggles associated with societal assumptions of their unbelonging, cultural and racial isolation, lack of representation, and experiences of racism. “Where are you from?” was highlighted as a familiar question received by many as an interrogation of their belonging, with multi-generational Canadians having to answer this question throughout their lives in spite of

having no familial connections elsewhere. Cultural hegemony in British Columbia was noted as an impediment to cross-cultural exchange where assimilation seems encouraged. Participants shared how they simultaneously felt hypervisible and invisible, with their perspectives and needs ignored.

Experiences of racism further contributed to participants' sense of unbelonging. Those who had not experienced racism directly or avoided situations that made them vulnerable to racism highlighted this as privilege. Multiple intersecting identities and social divisions based on era, place of residency, skin tone, gender, class, education level, profession, language and accent, and ability to codeswitch and fit in were highlighted as determinants of racism experiences. Some participants, however, noted that racism seemed random and inescapable, where one might experience privilege in one situation and racism in another. Spiritual beliefs, personal attitude, and access to a support system contributed to effects of such experiences. Racism was noted to affect mental and physical health, financial situations, and participation in public life, with intergenerational implications.

Despite experiences that made them feel like they did not belong, participants shared ways through which they have been able to carve out a space for themselves to build community and a sense of belonging in BC. Having churches as culturally safe spaces in Canada dates to 1900s, with cultural associations built as early as the 1960s to cater to diverse cultural identities embodied by immigrants. Participants indicated that while these initial organizational frameworks continue to offer a great sense of community to their membership, many have found other ways to build community and stay connected. They built their own communities where they felt at home, accepted, and understood. Non-profit organizations were also identified as avenues to community connections. By following their professional and personal passions, participants also shared how they were engaging with mainstream Canadian society and making meaningful contributions particularly toward social justice in their community, academic, professional, and policy circles.

The *African Ancestry Project* demonstrates the diversity of Black people of African ancestry in British Columbia. Even where there were similarities among participants' contributions, nuances could be identified. This project has been an important learning journey for me, as I tried to wrap my head around our diversity. This report allows us to reflect on each other's histories, identities, and experiences, and acknowledge both what we share and what sets us apart. Our diversity should not only be acknowledged, but also celebrated. Let's embrace each other for it. Our African ancestry, regardless of how distant this connection might seem, has shaped our lives and connects us to each other.

### **Community review reflections**

Forty community reviewers read the first draft of this report and shared their reflections through focus group discussions and interviews. While they found resonance on some themes and stories, they were surprised or shocked by others. Racism, for instance, is an experience that could be assumed to be shared. However, while racism marked the lives of

most participants, some did not report experiencing racism. The degree and frequency of these experiences also differed based on personal circumstances. Some reviewers were shocked at the extent of experiences of racism while others were shocked that some participants reported never experiencing racism. Conversely, some community reviewers noted they felt alone in their feelings of isolation and unbelonging, but were surprised at the extent to which participants shared in this experience.

Community reviewers shared that by reading the report, they felt seen and heard. They did not see themselves in all themes or stories; however, each read something that resonated with them and made them feel they were not alone. In noting that she felt seen through stories of participants who like her grew up in a white household with no connection to a Black community, one reviewer shared:

*And I really, really appreciate you putting this together Alice, because growing up in small towns and BC with absolutely no Black community for sixty years, I've always felt like I've come from Mars and that nobody understood me. And I had no idea what it is to be Black except to be—except to have people discriminate, and be rude, and be vile to me. That's the only part of Blackness that I understand. I grew up in a totally white family. My brothers, my half-brothers are blond and blue eyes, and Norwegian. And I'm half Norwegian, so that's the only thing I ever knew. And people always laughed at me saying, "Oh, don't be ridiculous, you're not Norwegian." But I didn't know the other half of myself until five years ago. So, reading this report has been like a gift. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this gift. It's beautiful.*

Another community reviewer shared how she found deep resonance with what other first-generation Canadians shared regarding the bicultural dilemma they struggled with growing up.

*I can say for me, I being a first-generation Canadian, I historically felt really insecure. Like am I really African? There's someone [who] had mentioned, when you go back home you know they're like "eh, eh! I know you're Canadian." ...There's a fruit in my country [Eritrea] called Kheremty, and because it only comes in the summer, that's what people call you. So, whenever you come, every time you come in, because we always travel in the summertime! And I think it was really nice to feel included if that makes any sense. To have a story that [someone] never really felt African enough. To be included in that and when you also go into those nuances. And so, it's the inclusivity that I really appreciate. That I always felt shame like "Oh, this is not my story I have to stop."*

Another reviewer shared how content she felt finding a community of other “in-betweeners” in reading the report.

*Part of my family is from India and the other half belongs to the Kamba tribe in Kenya. So, for me it's been about negotiating that mixed racial identity. In Kenya, they call me [by a Kamba name] and if I go to India, I'm called African. In Canada, they're not really sure what to make of me because I'm not quite what they would expect from someone from India. So that in-between identity has been something that is—that I've been trying to negotiate for all my life. And by reading this report, I kind of felt like I found a community of other in-betweeners and I found a little bit of that sense of belonging.*

Reviewers also expressed surprise about how they also resonated with experiences of participants from different backgrounds than them.

*When I read the report, the thing that I think really took me deeply to pause—that I'm not alone. Like a lot of those feelings that I feel, I'm not alone, even though I'm not from the West Indies, or from Africa, or from the United States.*

*Even though there's so much diversity, among the diaspora, so many of the experiences are so similar and across history, across place, it's quite striking.*

Another reviewer shared how as someone born and raised in British Columbia, she found resonance in experiences of immigrants who for the first time realize they are Black when they come to Canada. As she grew older and moved to another part of the province, she had to renegotiate what Blackness meant to her in a different context as someone with a lighter skin tone.

*When I was reading the report, what I found interesting was a comment that someone had made that when said they immigrated to Canada, it was the first time they realized that they were Black, because they grew up in in a Black community. And I thought, Wow! Like, what an amazing experience and not even realize that you're Black. Just growing up in a community of your own people and just being. Just being a human and not even having to worry about racism and then just acknowledging that like when you are in your adult or your later in life and having to navigate that new world. I thought that was quite interesting and it resonated with me. Because like, the concept of being light skinned and having that difference between people who are dark skinned wasn't even a concept to me until I got a bit older because I grew up in Victoria—a very white community. I was very much treated like I was Black...I thought that I had the same experiences of everybody who was Black. But as I get older, I'm realizing that there's so many mixed experiences within the Black community and in the diaspora.*

Black identity as a performed identity resonated with one community reviewer who noted that sometimes this performance can be subconscious. He was surprised to discover he was not alone in this performance.

*As people living in Canada, you know, we sometimes do have to [perform], whether it's on purpose or not. I realize even in myself that we have a way of being with our family*

*and friends from home. And then we have a public face that we use when we're working and maybe interacting with our non-African counterparts and it seemed to happen automatically, but that point resonated with me because it's a very factual thing that occurs with me as well, and I don't even think about it. You know you just automatically adjust your role based on where you are, and I thought that it was good to hear that point because I thought that I was the only one who behaved that way. But clearly, it's something that is common.*

Noting that the section on cultural hegemony is something that resonated with her, another reviewer shared how this hegemony played out for her when she settled in British Columbia as an immigrant.

*In my last few years of living in Canada, it's been about wanting to choose what you bring. And being very careful about what you practice here. The idea being that you're not going to bring some of those more traditional practices that you had at home. That you need to westernize yourself in some way in order to integrate and, you know be grateful for being in this new country. And you know there are other members in my family who moved here in the '60s and '70s, and they're always telling me about not preparing foods that have a strong fragrance because your more white Canadian neighbours will have an issue with it...The other piece was around religion. Like, don't bring your strong religious practices to Canada. Don't be obviously Muslim. You know, don't tell someone that you follow the Islamic faith, because you're trying to integrate in a multicultural community. So, I've always been shy and cautious about celebrating my culture.*

Some community reviewers shared that by understanding the diversity of people of African ancestry, they felt they were not alone and that gave them permission to be themselves and to appreciate their unique selves.

*I always found it problematic to talk about me experiencing racism because to a large extent I don't feel like I have that right because I'm not a visible Black of African ancestry. So, I think it's also about owning up to experiences and feeling like they're legitimate in a world where there is so much discrimination.*

*Another thing that really resonated with me was how many people have done some kind of DNA testing. And I got a [DNA testing] kit about three years ago for Christmas. And at—finally this year I just I just threw it out. I was really conflicted about whether I would do that or not. Both of my parents, my adopted parents, have passed away like many years ago so that wasn't part of the decision. But after reading this report I thought, "Okay, I'm just going to get one and I'm going to do it." And the reason why I changed my mind originally, is because in my immediate family—so cousins, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters—I have some pretty racist relatives and I just did not want to do this because of that. And reading this report, I changed my mind. I absolutely—I wanna do that. I'm very proud to call myself Black and to be of some kind of ancestry.*

There were some points of contention, such as whether people of African ancestry should identify as Black. On the one hand, there were community reviewers who strongly believed that the term Black should not be used as it contributed to erasure of diversity and racism. On the other hand, there were those who could not imagine identifying any other way, as they believed it honoured their ancestors, who had never been to Africa. Nonetheless, some multi-generational North Americans were against using the term Black and some immigrants from Africa expressed pride in their newly adopted Black identity. By reflecting on this, a community reviewer rightly noted that given the diversity of people of African ancestry, it would be difficult to find consensus on this, as with many other issues, and that contradictions are fine. Understanding and respecting diversity of thoughts and feelings allows Black communities and Black people to work together better.

*I think those are complexities, and contradictions are okay, because we are different people. And, sometimes, you know, as part of that continuity, it's okay to know that I can be this in one setting, and I can be this when I want to organize and come together collectively. So, I think that complexity is still just as good, right? I think having that nuanced understanding helps us to even be better and build more resiliency.*

A community reviewer noted that having a globally accepted definition of what Black means might help bring clarity in dialogue about Blackness and reduce ambiguity when using the term. She shared how she would not be comfortable using the term Black if in one context it is held in high esteem while in another it is a derogatory term.

*If we're using a term that is not defined clearly around the world, then when that term is used, there are negative connotations that come with that term worldwide and globally. And it helps to reinforce that negative portrayal, and that's what I'm—that's what I argue against—is that negative portrayal of people of African ancestry who have these incredible stories. Because the rest of the world looks at that term in a derogatory fashion outside of the community.*

While scholars largely shy away from defining the term Black as an identity given its emergence and translation as a contextual societal construct, dictionaries with broad audience offer generic definitions.

The Oxford Dictionary categorizes Black as an offensive term defining it as “a member of a group of people who have dark skin, especially people who come from or whose ancestors came from Africa.”<sup>2</sup> The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “of or relating to any of various population groups of especially African ancestry often considered as having dark pigmentation of the skin but in fact having a wide range of skin colors.”<sup>3</sup> The Cambridge Dictionary defines it as “relating or belonging to people with black or dark brown skin, especially people who live in Africa or whose family originally came from Africa.”<sup>4</sup> The Collins Dictionary defines a Black person as someone who “belongs to a race of people with dark skins, especially a race from Africa” noting that calling Black people Blacks could cause offence.<sup>5</sup>

Dictionaries, therefore, define Black as an identity based on skin tone. Although some definitions noted Black is an offensive term, the dictionaries did not describe the character of those defined as Black. However, definitions of black as an adjective on the same page, point to negative attributes of anything black. For instance, the Collins Dictionary defines “black” as: “without light,” “very bad” (situation), “miserable and depressed” (mood), “very cruel or wicked,” “corrupt,” black humour and black magic as evil, “very dirty or soiled,” “angry,” “black-hearted,” “disgraceful,” “without hope,” among other negative adjectives.<sup>6</sup> While this does not mean that someone reading these definitions will think of Black people as being without light, cruel, corrupt, very dirty, angry, etc., it does contribute to racial prejudice.<sup>7</sup> It also highlights why the term Black was chosen to dehumanize people of African ancestry. On the other hand, white was used to describe Europeans, deemed to be on top of the human hierarchy. The same dictionary defines a white person as someone who “has a pale skin and belongs to a race which is of European origin” with adjectives of something white including: “honourable,” “honest,” “benevolent,” “morally unblemished,” “pure,” “favourable,” “auspicious,” white lie or white magic as free from evil intent, among other positive adjectives.<sup>8</sup>

The historical use of the term Black to dehumanize people of African ancestry and the definitions of “black” and “white” contribute to continued negative portrayal and stereotypes of Black people. Through the #RedefineBlack movement, people who proudly identify as Black or want to reclaim the Black identity and want it associated with positive attributes globally, have called on dictionaries to reconsider their definitions.<sup>9</sup> Changes in how “black” and “white” are defined as colours and used in everyday life is noted to have the potential to “gradually erode some of our implicit biases,” For example, using metaphors such as “as pure as the blackest eyes,” drawing villains in white, or baking dark-chocolate angel cake could help to erode biases.<sup>10</sup>

The community reviewer who raised the question of defining Black lamented how her children of mixed ancestry “*are torn by these [socially constructed] terms.*” While redefining the meaning of Black through our everyday living is one way to disassociate traditional attribution of negativity of Black people, we must acknowledge that these terms change over time. Another reviewer shared that she does not subscribe to the various terms used to describe people of African ancestry because of how the terms change over time. When she was young, it was considered polite to call her Negro, and Black was considered derogatory; now, Black is the term that is predominantly used to describe someone of African ancestry in BC.

*Over my sixty years I've never grown attached to any title because growing up in small towns [in British Columbia], my first recollection was if somebody said [Black]—I mean it wasn't really something people said much because it was a homogeneous area. I didn't see a Black person 'til I was fifteen, so if Black was mentioned, that was like swearing. People would gasp if you said “Black person.” You had to say “Negro,” and that was considered polite. So, I was a Negro. Then by the time I was ten, that title*

*went by the wayside and “coloured” was the polite title. And then again, gasping, we had to come to Black.*

Throughout this report, we have witnessed the ways participants have identified themselves, which changed with time and place. In this report, a multi-generational Canadian who does not identify with the term African Canadian was glad that the term Black was back in use. Other socially constructed identifying terms included “coloured,” “visible minority,” and “BIPOC” or “IBPOC” (the latter noted by a reviewer to acknowledge that Indigenous Peoples come first in Canada). These terms further contribute to erasure by boxing several diverse groups of people into one category. Again, these terms face social contestation as they seem to define people who are not categorized as white; relegating them to peripheral “others.”<sup>11</sup> By reflecting on the irony and contradictions such terminologies represent, a community reviewer commented that it would be interesting to read a similar report in ten years to see what terms people use to identify themselves.

Community reviewers highlighted the importance of dialogue as an exchange that need not end in consensus, but, rather, brings an understanding of a different perspective. I deeply appreciate their efforts in creating a space for very fruitful dialogues that will continue as each of us explores themes in this report with those around us.

## **Recommendations**

Over the years, people of African ancestry have spent many hours coming together in solidarity to brainstorm and research on ways individuals, leaders in various sectors, and the government can address the social injustices they face. These efforts have resulted in recommendations, some of which have been submitted to various government departments and officials. Others, more recently, have worked with private and public sector institutions on policies and practice for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Many others continue to offer their wisdom by writing books, speaking up on television, radio, podcasts, blogs, and Op-Eds. A lot of work has been done. This section, therefore, builds on this work and largely reiterates what has been articulated.

When conducting the *African Ancestry Project*, I did not anticipate offering recommendations, but rather hoped that the outputs of the project would inspire readers to formulate recommendations they could implement within the circles they occupy. I am writing this section in honour of project participants who asked me, “What next?” They did not want to leave it to chance that someone reading this report would be inspired to spring to action by these stories alone. I offer this as a starting point to inspire thought and action to create a more equitable society, free of racism, where multiculturalism is genuinely celebrated, and where everyone feels a sense of belonging. A multi-level approach is required, starting with the individual level, and working toward the interpersonal, institutional, structural, and policy-levels. However, it is individuals who make change happen in all these levels. It starts with you.

Below I highlight recommendations emanating from the experiences of participants of the *African Ancestry Project* and recommendations offered by participants and community reviewers.

### **1. *Appreciating the diversity of people around you***

The aim of the *African Ancestry Project* is to bring awareness to the diversity of Black people in British Columbia. This report offers only a glimpse of this vast diversity. Continue educating yourself on the diversity around you and celebrate it. Let's not stereotype people based on their ancestry or appearances. Participants demonstrated how they struggle everyday to fight stereotypes, including in their workspaces. These struggles impact on their physical and mental wellness. While stereotyping might reduce social complexities, it does a great disservice to those who are negatively stereotyped. Get into the habit of treating people individually based on what you know about them. When you treat someone based on internalized stereotypes, gently correct yourself. It is a process that takes repetitive reflection.

### **2. *Engaging in dialogue***

When reflecting on themes explored in this report and the diverse stories and perspectives shared, engage in dialogue with your family and those in your social, professional, and other circles. Share this report with them and continue the dialogue. Be mindful of your positionality and social structures that offer you rewards and penalties. By doing this, you will be more aware of yourself, those you engage with, and the power dynamics at play that might previously not have been visible to you. If you are socially constructed as white, educate yourself about white privilege. Do not shy away from self-reflection and having difficult conversations with yourself. By having this dialogue with yourself, you will be better placed to engage in dialogue with others. Dialogue is not about reaching consensus, but rather seeking mutual understanding and potentially collaborating on solutions. Where possible, create safe spaces for such dialogues in your schools, workplaces, and elsewhere. Dialogue will allow us to question deep-seated misperceptions and attitudes that sustain racism. Let's normalize these dialogues and engage people from a variety of backgrounds.

### **3. *Asking the question "Where are you from?"***

While this question might be asked from a place of curiosity, it will probably be received as questioning one's belonging. Before asking this question, interrogate yourself on the value of the question to you and to the person you ask. What is the value of you finding out where the person is from? Is the value of the response greater than its potential harms? Reflect on your positionality and that of the person you ask and the corresponding power dynamics. Participants noted that the person asking, how it is asked, and the context in which it is asked are important for determining how the question is received. Consider other non-

personal small talk and mutual avenues of building trust and friendship: Your curious questions around a person's ancestry will likely be answered, even without asking.<sup>12</sup>

#### ***4. Raising anti-racist children***

Nelson Mandela once wrote, "No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."<sup>13</sup> Participants shared hurtful experiences of racism and exclusion in elementary schools, including experiences of their children. While some participants were still dealing with trauma resulting from these incidents as adults, those who harmed them are likely oblivious of the effects of their actions as children. As we strive for a racist-free society, we need to take on the challenge of not only raising children who are not racist, but also children who are anti-racist. In doing so, we need to teach our children to appreciate diversity; buy them toys and books that are representative of the diversity of our province. Make them aware of injustices around them and teach them how to identify and act in the face of injustice. Correct and engage them in dialogue when they do something hurtful to other children. Ultimately, teach them by example.<sup>14</sup>

#### ***5. Teaching and practising anti-racism in schools***

Schools are important societal structures which socialize children in their formative years. This reality gives the provincial government an important responsibility to socialize children to be anti-racist. There have been concerted efforts by the BC Ministry of Education, which have included leaders from Black communities, to comprehensively include Black histories in the education curriculum and to develop a provincial K-12 Anti-racism in Education Action Plan. This momentum has been encouraging and I reiterate the importance of these steps. These actions, however, need to go hand in hand with an update of other educational and school policies. Teachers and other staff need to be engaged with how they can be anti-racist and support children who face racism in school. School districts should follow by reflecting on how they can contribute toward this momentum. Ongoing dialogue on ways to teach and practice anti-racism in schools is needed for those working in the education system.

#### ***6. Addressing systemic racism***

Individuals in leadership within institutions that perpetuate systemic racism have a responsibility to reassess their institutional policies. Initiate dialogue on the barriers your policies create for individuals. Leaders in higher education institutions, for instance, need to look closely at how their enrolment policies affect those who are racialized and marginalized in society. Requirements for very demanding, expensive, and culturally

biased tests need to be reconsidered. Removing barriers could mean the difference between someone becoming a doctor or working as a janitor, without regard for intellectual abilities. It is in our collective interest for everyone to have opportunities to reach their full potential. Systemic racism can often go unnoticed until attention is paid to those with lived experience. The importance of genuine and meaningful engagement with those experiencing the effects of discriminatory policies cannot be overemphasized. Diversifying leadership in such institutions could also go a long way to closing the gap between those creating policies and those affected by policies.

### ***7. Practising equity in the workplace***

Workplaces can be unsafe spaces when discrimination and inequities are present, and where such inequities are not recognized, acknowledged, or addressed. We need to be mindful of our actions at work and our workplace culture and policies. How do you treat your workmates? Is your workplace culture exclusionary? Are there policies and redress mechanisms to protect staff from discrimination and harassment? If you are in a position of power and have commitment to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, how does this translate to the experiences, compensation, and career development of your staff? These are important starting questions for reflection and dialogue in workplaces across industries.

### ***8. Considering prior recommendations and engaging communities***

Over the years, people of African ancestry have come up with many recommendations in their efforts to advocate for social equity, some directed to government institutions.<sup>15</sup> Government officials and officials of other institutions need to monitor progress on recommendations already made to them as they continue to engage Black communities. In a community dialogue I was once invited to by the provincial government, one attendee noted that she had participated in a similar discussion with a different section of the same government department. She expressed disappointment to be offering the same recommendations and spending many unpaid hours on a repetitive exercise with little follow-up. Those in leadership must be mindful when engaging community members. Good starting points for meaningful engagement include building an understanding of what has been done in communities and reflecting on that when engaging them, and ensuring the criteria used to determine who is called to participate is as inclusive as possible.

### ***9. Building vibrant Black communities***

Participants shared how they craved deep connections with others of African ancestry. They shared how such connections and places to connect were either non-existent or insufficient. More community spaces are needed to reduce the isolation and sense of unbelonging shared by many participants. I honour those who have taken it upon

themselves to create spaces of connection, either physical or virtual. Organizations creating and maintaining these spaces would benefit enormously from government support and funding. The Hogan's Alley Society, for instance, has been pushing for a Black cultural centre in an area in Vancouver where a vibrant Black community was dispersed following the demolition of the neighbourhood to build the Georgia viaduct in the 1960s. A 2015 commitment by the City of Vancouver through the Northeast False Creek Plan is yet to be honoured.

A pathway to government funding for unregistered community groups, such as cultural associations, would go a long way in building vibrant Black communities. A funding model like the City of Vancouver's Neighbourhood Small Grants at the provincial level could offer much-needed support to small but vital Black community groups across the province, including those in rural BC. These communities not only offer practical and social support, but also offer culturally appropriate mental health support. Participants indicated that there is a lot of healing that needs to happen, healing of both personal and intergenerational trauma resulting from racism.

Another aspect that came up during the *African Ancestry Project* was the importance of Black communities pulling together in solidarity to address racism and its impact. Community reviewers noted that collaborations would make contributions more successful. In reaching out to each other, let us educate ourselves on the diversity of Black communities and the people of African ancestry in the province. Dialogue around our diversity and how to work together while appreciating this diversity is necessary. Let's not take our diversity for granted. It is a strength to be celebrated and leveraged.

These nine recommendations only scratch the surface of possible individual and institutional actions that will contribute to social equity and inclusion in the Province of British Columbia. I encourage you to continue reflecting on ways you can contribute to make our society a better place for everyone. My deep appreciation goes to those who have already embarked on this journey; some perhaps have been on this journey all their lives. One community reviewer advised on the importance self-care when doing this work. Physical, mental, and moral fatigue is common when on this journey. Try not to let this work weigh you down or affect other important aspects of your life. I once heard someone say, "This work is not a sprint, but a marathon. It is okay to pass on the torch, take a rest, and pick up the torch again." I offer this wisdom to anyone who has committed to contribute to social justice and equity. To some, this contribution is an imperative with limited luxury of choice. For those who are new to this journey and those who have not experienced racism directly, be kind to yourselves. You will make mistakes, you will learn, and you will do better. Thank you for joining in this journey. Let us take care of ourselves and each other. *A luta continua.*

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 7: Number of Black people in Canada as a percentage of Canadian population between 1871 and 2016.

<sup>2</sup> “Black,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed December 21, 2021, [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/black\\_2](https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/black_2).

<sup>3</sup> “Black,” Merriam-Webster, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/black>.

<sup>4</sup> “Black,” Cambridge dictionary, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/black>.

<sup>5</sup> “Definition of ‘Black’,” Collins, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/black>.

<sup>6</sup> “Definition of ‘Black’,” Collins.

<sup>7</sup> Aradhna Krishna, “How Did ‘White’ Become a Metaphor for All Things Good?” *The Conversation*, July 6, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-did-white-become-a-metaphor-for-all-things-good-140674>.

Daisy Grewal, “The ‘Bad Is Black’ Effect: Research Finds Darker Skin is Associated with Perceptions of Evil,” *Scientific American*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-bad-is-black-effect/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Definition of ‘White’,” Collins, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/white>.

<sup>9</sup> Jackie Menjivar, “How Young People Are Inspiring Dictionaries to Redefine “Black”: Impact of #RedefineBlack,” *DoSomething.org*, accessed December 21, 2021, <https://www.dosomething.org/us/articles/how-young-people-are-inspiring-dictionaries-to-redefine-black>.

<sup>10</sup> Aradhna Krishna, “How Did ‘White’ Become a Metaphor for All Things Good?”

<sup>11</sup> For a closer look into dialogue around this social contestation, see:

Sharon J. Boatwain and Richard N. Lalonde, “Social Identity and Preferred Ethnic/Racial Labels for Blacks in Canada,” *Journal of Black Psychology* 26, no. 2 (May 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798400026002006>.

Shereen Marisol Meraji, Natalie Escobar, and Kumari Devarajan, “It is Time to Say R.I.P. to ‘POC?’” September 30, 2020, in *CODE SWITCH*, podcast, 38:00, <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/29/918418825/is-it-time-to-say-r-i-p-to-p-o-c>.

Jasmine Jameelah, “Don’t Call Me ‘BIPOC’ When You Mean ‘BLACK’: Say Black with a capital B or say nothing at all,” *Her Voice*, xoNECOLE, July 23, 2020, <https://www.xonecole.com/dont-call-me-bipoc-when-you-mean-black/?rebellitem=1#rebellitem1>.

Douglas Todd, “‘Visible Minority’ Now Meaningless Term in Metro Vancouver, Toronto,” *Vancouver Sun*, October 27, 2017, <https://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/douglas-todd-visible-minority-now-meaningless-term-in-metro-vancouver>.

<sup>12</sup> Recommended resource on building connections:

Yabome Gilpin-Jackson, *How to Get Past Disconnection to Social Change* (TEDxSFU, 2021), video, 17:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enIR7Y9I4Mw>.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Back Bay Books 1995), 609.

<sup>14</sup> Recommended reads:

Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (One World, 2019).

Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Raise an Antiracist* (One World, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Other reports to consider, offering concrete recommendations include:

Africa Arts and Culture Community Contributor Society, *Black in B.C. Convener Pilot Project* (Victoria: AACCS 2022), [https://www.issambacentre.ca/\\_files/ugd/dc8154\\_b243d121cda84f649f8d3980f27daf7a.pdf](https://www.issambacentre.ca/_files/ugd/dc8154_b243d121cda84f649f8d3980f27daf7a.pdf).

Oludolapo Makinde, *Towards a Healthy City: Addressing Anti-Black Racism in Vancouver* (UBC, 2019), <https://sustain.ubc.ca/about/resources/towards-healthy-city-addressing-anti-black-racism-vancouver>.

Greater Victoria Local Immigration Partnership and Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria, *Racism in Greater Victoria: A Community Report* (Victoria: ICA, 2021), <https://www.icavictoria.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/GVLIP-Racism-Survey-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

Coalition of African, Caribbean and Black Nurses in British Columbia, *Open Letter* (2021), <https://www.cacbn.ca/openletter>.

Parliamentary Black Caucus, *Statement by the Parliamentary Black Caucus* (2020), [160](https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/corporate/transparency/open-government/standing-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

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[committee/chagger-whole-senate-addressing-ending-systemic-racism/statement-parliamentary-black-caucus.html](#).



# Appendices

## Appendix 1: DNA results of a participant obtained through ancestry.ca



### Ethnicity Estimate

● Southern India	31%
● Northern India	28%
● Bengal	13%
● England & Northwestern Europe	7%
● Devon & Cornwall, England	
● West Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly	
● Nigeria	4%
● Mali	3%
● Cameroon, Congo & Western Bantu Peoples	3%
● Benin & Togo	3%

## **Appendix 2: Were any of your grandparents or great-grandparents born in Africa?**

*A sample of survey responses from participants with no current familial connection to Africa*

“Not sure. My great-grandmother was of African heritage, but I don't know if she was born in Africa or the Caribbean.” – Participant born in Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean

“I have been told that my great grandparents on my father's side are from Madagascar.” – Participant born in Canada and parents in Fiji, the Oceania

“I am not sure about my great-grandparents. I just know my grandma from my dad side was Bantu and my mom side Haitian and Le Guadeloupe.” – Participant born in Cuba, the Caribbean

“My grandparents on my dad's side and our lineage as far as anyone can remember were born in Guyana, South America as Afro-Guyanese people. Often with mixed white or other ancestry due to slavery and colonization. We can assume our Afro ancestors were brought to those lands through enslavement, but from where in Africa we do not know.” – Participant and parents born in Canada

“None of my grandparents or great-grandparents were born in Africa. My father's family is Black from Grenada. Some stories say that some immigrated from parts of Africa to Grenada to work via the Commonwealth connection, but it would have predated my great-grandparents.” – Participant born in Canada, and parents in Grenada, the Caribbean and the US

“I believe my great-grandparents were from Africa but all we know is they were sold to the Chickasaw tribe in Alabama.” – Participant born in Canada and parents in Canada and the US

“I am sure my first ancestors who came with Abu Bakr II were from Mali Empire. That is something I have [been] investigating to know more to link my heritage back to Africa.” – Participant born in Papua New Guinea, the Oceania

“None. We are eight generations or so in Barbados and then my grandfather immigrated to Canada by fighting in WW2 for Canada.” – Participant and parents born in Canada

“No, my grandparents/great grandparents were part of the foundational Black Americans and slaves on plantations.” – Participant born in Canada and parents in Canada and the US

### Appendix 3: Participants' reasons for voting in elections

#### *A sample of survey responses*

I am a Canadian citizen, and it is my right. Not voting means you give up your right to be heard/listened to.

It's our right to have a say and let our wishes be known. You can't have democracy without people participating in it. And as a Black person it's our duty as respect for all the people who fought and died for us to now have the ability to vote.

Even though I kind of dislike it here, I still feel like I should use my right to vote for the betterment of this country.

Only chance to influence what's going on.

Voting is part of my civic obligations as a Canadian citizen.

If you don't vote, you can't complain.

I think it's important to have your voice heard and if you don't participate it won't be.

It's important to choose our elected representatives wisely as they are our voice.

I vote because I would like people who represent my interests to be in office.

I believe it to be the obligation and responsibility of citizens to be engaged in the governing of their communities.

I want to participate in how my tax dollars are spent.

I voted because it's important as a Canadian but also, it's important that I make my voice heard on issues that impact me since I do in fact live here.

As much as I hate it here, I live here, and it's best to use my voice when I have the capacity to do so.

My vote is a right I have been given and I believe that it is my duty to have my voice heard.

Every vote counts.

### Appendix 4: List of community resources (non-exhaustive)

Category	Associations/Organizations/Groups	Website/Social Media
<b>African Associations</b>	Kenyan Community in B.C.	<a href="https://kenyacommunitybc.org">https://kenyacommunitybc.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/2368046867">https://www.facebook.com/groups/2368046867</a>
	Ghanaian Canadian Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.ghanaiansinbc.ca">https://www.ghanaiansinbc.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ghanaiansinbc">https://www.facebook.com/ghanaiansinbc</a>
	Nigeria-Canada Association of B.C.	<a href="https://ncabc.org">https://ncabc.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ncabc.org">https://www.facebook.com/ncabc.org</a>
	Nigeria-Canada Youth Association, B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/NCYABC">https://www.facebook.com/NCYABC</a>
	Nigerians in Okanagan	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/425083432253948">https://www.facebook.com/groups/425083432253948</a>
	Ethiopia Community Association of B.C.	<a href="http://vancouverethiopia.com/">http://vancouverethiopia.com/</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/vancouverethiopia">https://www.facebook.com/vancouverethiopia</a>
	Burundi Community Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Burundiancommunity">https://www.facebook.com/Burundiancommunity</a>
	South African Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/sacabc.ca">https://www.facebook.com/sacabc.ca</a>
	South Africans in Vancouver	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/saffersinvancouver">https://www.facebook.com/saffersinvancouver</a>
	South Africans in Victoria B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/44095377486">https://www.facebook.com/groups/44095377486</a>
	Federation of South Sudanese Associations in Victoria	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/federationofsouthsudaneseassociationsinvictoria">https://www.facebook.com/federationofsouthsudaneseassociationsinvictoria</a>
	Sudanese Canadian Society of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/SUDANIVANCOUVER/">https://www.facebook.com/SUDANIVANCOUVER/</a>
	Uganda Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Uganda-Cultural-Association-of-British-Columbia-280732325308177">https://www.facebook.com/Uganda-Cultural-Association-of-British-Columbia-280732325308177</a>
	Congolese Community of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/DRCbritishcolumbia1995">https://www.facebook.com/DRCbritishcolumbia1995</a>
	United Congolese Community of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/United-Congolese-Community-of-BC-466154863417628">https://www.facebook.com/United-Congolese-Community-of-BC-466154863417628</a>
	Somali Canadian Society of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/somalicanadiansocietyofbc">https://www.facebook.com/somalicanadiansocietyofbc</a>
	Somali Community Association of Greater Victoria	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/SomalisofVictoria">https://www.facebook.com/SomalisofVictoria</a>
	Eritrean Community Association-Metro Vancouver	<a href="http://www.vaneritrea.com/about-us">http://www.vaneritrea.com/about-us</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/EritreanCommunityAssociation">https://www.facebook.com/EritreanCommunityAssociation</a>
	Sierra Leonean Community of B.C.	<a href="https://www.slcbc.ca">https://www.slcbc.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/slcbccanada">https://www.facebook.com/slcbccanada</a>
	Great Zimbabwe Cultural Society of BC	<a href="https://zimbc.ca">https://zimbc.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Zim-BC-Strong-171277370245875">https://www.facebook.com/Zim-BC-Strong-171277370245875</a>
Zambians in B.C. Association	<a href="https://www.zambc.ca">https://www.zambc.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/zambc">https://www.facebook.com/zambc</a>	
Mauritian Canadian Multicultural Association B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/bcmauritians">https://www.facebook.com/bcmauritians</a>	

	Yoruba Social and Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/Yoruba-Social-and-Cultural-Association-Of-BC-276445465879">https://www.facebook.com/Yoruba-Social-and-Cultural-Association-Of-BC-276445465879</a>
<b>Caribbean Associations</b>	British Columbia Organization of Caribbean Cultural Associations	<a href="https://www.bcocca.ca">https://www.bcocca.ca</a>
	Jamaican Canadian Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="http://www.jccabc.ca">http://www.jccabc.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/jccabc">https://www.facebook.com/jccabc</a>
	Trinidad & Tobago Cultural Society of B.C.	<a href="https://www.ttcsbc.org">https://www.ttcsbc.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ttcsbc">https://www.facebook.com/ttcsbc</a>
	Antigua and Barbuda Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.antiguabarbudabc.org">https://www.antiguabarbudabc.org</a>
	Barbados Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/BarbadosinBC">https://www.facebook.com/BarbadosinBC</a>
	Grenadian Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/The-Grenadian-Cultural-Association-of-BC-Canada-1376994035896590">https://www.facebook.com/The-Grenadian-Cultural-Association-of-BC-Canada-1376994035896590</a>
	Guyanese Canadian Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="https://guyanabc.wordpress.com">https://guyanabc.wordpress.com</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/GCCABC">https://www.facebook.com/GCCABC</a>
	Canadian Haitian Cultural Association of B.C.	<a href="https://chca-bc.org">https://chca-bc.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/CHCABC">https://www.facebook.com/CHCABC</a>
	Cari-Can Heritage Society	<a href="https://www.cchsociety.ca">https://www.cchsociety.ca</a>
<b>Heritage, arts, culture &amp; sports organizations</b>	B.C. Black History Awareness Society	<a href="https://bcblackhistory.ca">https://bcblackhistory.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/BCBlackHistoryAwarenessSociety">https://www.facebook.com/BCBlackHistoryAwarenessSociety</a>
	Nanaimo African Heritage Society	<a href="http://nanaimoafricanheritagesociety.com">http://nanaimoafricanheritagesociety.com</a>
	Unity Centre Association for Black Cultures	<a href="https://ucabc.ca">https://ucabc.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/unityucabc">https://www.facebook.com/unityucabc</a>
	African Heritage Association of Vancouver Island	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/AHAVIJoinUs">https://www.facebook.com/AHAVIJoinUs</a>
	African Descent Society	<a href="https://www.adsbc.org">https://www.adsbc.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/AfricanDescentSocietyBC">https://www.facebook.com/AfricanDescentSocietyBC</a>
	Swahili Vision International Association	<a href="https://swahilivision.org">https://swahilivision.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/swahilivision">https://www.facebook.com/swahilivision</a>
	African Friendship Society	<a href="https://africanfriendship.org">https://africanfriendship.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/AFRICANFRIENDSHIPSOCIETY">https://www.facebook.com/AFRICANFRIENDSHIPSOCIETY</a>
	African Stages Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.acsca.net">https://www.acsca.net</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/africanstages">https://www.facebook.com/africanstages</a>
	Afro Van Connect Society	<a href="https://www.afrovanconnect.com">https://www.afrovanconnect.com</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/afrovanconnect">https://www.facebook.com/afrovanconnect</a>
	African Fashion and Arts Movement	<a href="https://www.afwv.ca">https://www.afwv.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/AFAMVancouver">https://www.facebook.com/AFAMVancouver</a>
	African Arts & Cultural Society- Issamba Centre	<a href="https://www.issambacentre.ca">https://www.issambacentre.ca</a>

		<a href="https://www.facebook.com/aaccsociety">https://www.facebook.com/aaccsociety</a>
	African Heritage Music and Dance Society	<a href="https://www.festivalafrica.org">https://www.festivalafrica.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/festivalafrica1">https://www.facebook.com/festivalafrica1</a>
	African Caribbean Enrichment Society	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/afrocaribbeanenrichment">https://www.facebook.com/afrocaribbeanenrichment</a>
	Black Art Vancouver	<a href="https://blackartsvancouver.com">https://blackartsvancouver.com</a>
	Black Arts Centre	<a href="https://www.blacartscentre.ca">https://www.blacartscentre.ca</a>
	Harambee Cultural Society	<a href="https://harambee.americommerce.com">https://harambee.americommerce.com</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/HarambeeSummerFestival">https://www.facebook.com/groups/HarambeeSummerFestival</a>
	African Canadian Soccer and Cultural Associations	<a href="https://www.acsca.net">https://www.acsca.net</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ACSCA-African-Canadian-Soccer-Cultural-Association-105524819650903">https://www.facebook.com/ACSCA-African-Canadian-Soccer-Cultural-Association-105524819650903</a>
	Colour the Trails	<a href="https://colourthetrails.com">https://colourthetrails.com</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/colourthetrails">https://www.facebook.com/groups/colourthetrails</a>
<b>Equity-seeking Organizations</b>	B.C. Community Alliance	<a href="https://www.bccommunityalliance.com">https://www.bccommunityalliance.com</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/bccommunityalliance">https://www.facebook.com/bccommunityalliance</a>
	Black Lives Matter Cowichan Valley	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/blmcowichan">https://www.facebook.com/groups/blmcowichan</a>
	Black Lives Matter Vancouver	<a href="https://blacklivesmattervancouver.com">https://blacklivesmattervancouver.com</a> <a href="https://www.instagram.com/blm_van">https://www.instagram.com/blm_van</a>
	Hogan's Alley Society	<a href="https://www.hogansalleysociety.org">https://www.hogansalleysociety.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/hogansalleysociety">https://www.facebook.com/hogansalleysociety</a>
	Foundation for Black Communities	<a href="https://www.forblackcommunities.org">https://www.forblackcommunities.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/FdnBlkComm">https://www.facebook.com/FdnBlkComm</a>
	Federation of Black Canadians	<a href="https://fbcfcn.ca">https://fbcfcn.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/federationblackcanadians">https://www.facebook.com/federationblackcanadians</a>
	Anti-Racism Coalition Vancouver	<a href="https://www.antiracismcoalition.org">https://www.antiracismcoalition.org</a>
	Ninandotoo Society	<a href="https://blackexcellenceday.ca/index.php/about-us">https://blackexcellenceday.ca/index.php/about-us</a>
	Center of Integration for African Immigrants	<a href="http://www.ciia-ciai.com">http://www.ciia-ciai.com</a>
<b>Professional and business Associations</b>	Black Physicians of B.C.	<a href="https://www.blackphysiciansofbc.ca">https://www.blackphysiciansofbc.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/BlackPhysiciansofBC">https://www.facebook.com/BlackPhysiciansofBC</a>
	Black Canadian Healthcare Professionals Association	<a href="https://www.bchcpa.ca">https://www.bchcpa.ca</a> <a href="https://www.instagram.com/bchcpa">https://www.instagram.com/bchcpa</a>
	Coalition of African, Caribbean and Black Nurses B.C.	<a href="https://www.cacbn.ca">https://www.cacbn.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/cacbnbc">https://www.facebook.com/groups/cacbnbc</a>
	Black Educators B.C.	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/1141052362926089">https://www.facebook.com/groups/1141052362926089</a>
	Black Business Association of B.C.	<a href="https://www.blackbusinessbc.ca">https://www.blackbusinessbc.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/blackbusinessbc">https://www.facebook.com/blackbusinessbc</a>
	Black Women Business Network	<a href="http://www.blackwomencanada.org">http://www.blackwomencanada.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/blackwomenbiznetwork">https://www.facebook.com/blackwomenbiznetwork</a>

	Black Entrepreneurs and Businesses of Canada Society	<a href="https://www.blackentrepreneursbc.org">https://www.blackentrepreneursbc.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/BEBCSociety">https://www.facebook.com/BEBCSociety</a>
	Vancouver Black Owned Businesses	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/828941530986315">https://www.facebook.com/groups/828941530986315</a>
	Afro Hub	<a href="https://afrohubmarket.ca">https://afrohubmarket.ca</a>
<b>Mentorship &amp; peer support</b>	National Congress of Black Women Foundation	<a href="https://www.ncbwf.org">https://www.ncbwf.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ncbwf">https://www.facebook.com/ncbwf</a>
	Black Women Connect Vancouver	<a href="https://blackwomenconnectvancouver.com">https://blackwomenconnectvancouver.com</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/657899204615867">https://www.facebook.com/groups/657899204615867</a>
	Empowered Black Girl	<a href="https://www.empoweredblackgirl.com">https://www.empoweredblackgirl.com</a>
	Black Boys Code	<a href="https://blackboyscode.ca">https://blackboyscode.ca</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/blackboyscode">https://www.facebook.com/blackboyscode</a>
	Black Kids Code (Girls)	<a href="https://www.blackkidscode.com">https://www.blackkidscode.com</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/blackkidscodegirls">https://www.facebook.com/blackkidscodegirls</a>
	Ethos Lab	<a href="https://www.ethoslab.space">https://www.ethoslab.space</a> <a href="https://www.instagram.com/ethos.lab">https://www.instagram.com/ethos.lab</a>
	Black Youth Empowerment Group	<a href="https://vsac.ca/2021/11/black-youth-empowerments-bystander-intervention-workshop-is-back">https://vsac.ca/2021/11/black-youth-empowerments-bystander-intervention-workshop-is-back</a>
<b>University student associations</b>	Langara African Club	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/LangaraAfricanClub">https://www.facebook.com/LangaraAfricanClub</a>
	SFU Students of Caribbean and African Ancestry	<a href="https://www.sfusoca.ca/">https://www.sfusoca.ca/</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/SFUSOCA">https://www.facebook.com/SFUSOCA</a>
	SFU African Students' Association	<a href="https://go.sfss.ca/clubs/298/info">https://go.sfss.ca/clubs/298/info</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/SfuAfricanStudentsAssociation">https://www.facebook.com/SfuAfricanStudentsAssociation</a>
	Black Students' Union, Capilano University	<a href="https://csu.bc.ca/collectives/black">https://csu.bc.ca/collectives/black</a>
	UBC Black Student Union	<a href="https://amscampusbase.ubc.ca/bsu/home">https://amscampusbase.ubc.ca/bsu/home</a> <a href="https://m.facebook.com/UBCBSU">https://m.facebook.com/UBCBSU</a>
	Kwantlen Black Students Association	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/KASAgrou">https://www.facebook.com/KASAgrou</a>
	African & Caribbean Students' Association, UVic	<a href="https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/acs/">https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/acs/</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/uvicacsa">https://www.facebook.com/uvicacsa</a>
	Victoria University African Students Association	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/vuasa">https://www.facebook.com/vuasa</a>
<b>Social connections</b>	Akoma Vancouver	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/akomavancouver">https://www.facebook.com/akomavancouver</a>
	AfroQueer YVR	<a href="https://afroqueeryvr.com/AfroqueerYVR.html">https://afroqueeryvr.com/AfroqueerYVR.html</a> <a href="https://www.instagram.com/afroqueeryvr">https://www.instagram.com/afroqueeryvr</a>
	Black Adoptees in B.C.	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/black_adoptees_in_bc">https://www.instagram.com/black_adoptees_in_bc</a>
	Black/mixed moms of Vancouver	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/347410220463758/">https://www.facebook.com/groups/347410220463758/</a>
	Black Chat Vancouver	<a href="https://blackchatca.wordpress.com/">https://blackchatca.wordpress.com/</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/blackchatvancouver/">https://www.facebook.com/blackchatvancouver/</a>
	Meanwhile, Black in Vancouver	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/groups/322072037957896">https://www.facebook.com/groups/322072037957896</a>

Worlds Within

<b>Health organizations</b>	Vancouver Black Therapy and Advocacy Foundation	<a href="https://vancouverblacktherapyfoundation.com/sanctuary">https://vancouverblacktherapyfoundation.com/sanctuary</a>
	Healing in Colour	<a href="https://www.healingincolour.com">https://www.healingincolour.com</a>
	Afro-Canadian Positive Network of B.C.	<a href="https://www.afropositive.org">https://www.afropositive.org</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ACPNet">https://www.facebook.com/ACPNet</a>

## *Reflections from five Community Reviewers*

“It shows the complexities - the nuances we bring. That we’re not a [monolith]. We all beautifully just embody these different cultures and complexities.”

“I felt heard. To see how beautifully, and how carefully the stories were weaved and honored, and reflected. It just really made me choke and cry.”

“I didn’t know that I needed it. I feel like for the first time, I’m not reading Black history from a white man’s perspective. It filled my heart with joy.”

“I saw myself in a lot of these stories. And I saw a lot of absence in my story as well. Being so disconnected from the countries of Africa. So, I spent a lot of time grieving. And I think it’s really important to grieve, to let myself settle into it, and to then [move] forward.”

“I didn’t feel alone anymore because there were so many times that I just shouted, ‘me too! me too! yes! this! that!’. I feel isolated, and I don’t necessarily know the few [Black] people that I see. And I’m always so curious to learn a bit more. I think that was the biggest thing for me - that connection that I felt. It’s a gift.”

Alice Mũthoni Mũrage is a social and policy researcher and an immigrant from Kenya, who resides in the unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples.

