

Africentric Social Work

Edited by

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Foreword

Still Fighting for Change

*Rajeane N. Willis, Rachelle Sweeting,
Veronica Marsman, Vivian Dixon, Yvette
Jarvis and Wanda Thomas Bernard*

As members of the executive of the Nova Scotia Association of Black Social Workers (ABS_W), we are pleased and excited to participate in the *Africentric Social Work* book project. In this foreword, we share with you our early beginnings, struggles, challenges and achievements in our fight for Black lives, Black liberation and freedom in Nova Scotia and across Canada. Our fights took place in boardrooms, political offices, community organizations, government agencies, health care institutions and in the streets. The reality of systemic racism forced us to hold our meetings at our kitchen tables in our family homes in the early years. Over time, we were able to partner with organizations that gave us space in kind and, eventually, we were able to obtain funding to acquire office space to conduct the business of our association. The ABS_W builds on a solid foundation of African-centred theory and practice to influence social work in Canada, and this forms the nucleus of the book.

The ABS_W was formed by a group of Black social workers in Montreal in 1977, following their attendance at the United States-based National Association of Black Social Workers (NABS_W) conference. Within Montreal, the nucleus kept the momentum for two years; however, they were unable to sustain the group beyond 1979. As the group was winding down, a former social work intern, Maxine Prevost Sheppard, was returning to Nova Scotia, her home province. With permission from the NABS_W to transfer the organizational charter, she helped form the Nova Scotia group in 1979. The Nova Scotia Association of Black Social Workers was formed by four women: Maxine Prevost Sheppard, Frances Mills Clements, Althea Tolliver and Wanda Thomas Bernard. These women were community-minded, socially conscious, politically astute and shared a common vision of changing the ways in which social services were being delivered to Black Nova Scotians (Bernard, 2015).

The ABSW has been in existence for over four decades and has only recently been funded by the Department of Community Services. Over the years, the organization has survived on the unpaid labour of grassroots community members, activists, students, social workers, other practitioners, church members and academics who were committed to the principles of the ABSW, including Africentric social work theory and practice. The four founding members devised multilateral strategies based on an Africentric paradigm to transform social services and government sectors to enable social service agencies to become responsive to the plight of Black families and communities in NS. For many years, the ABSW was led by the four founding female members while they raised their young families, had full-time jobs and were caring for elders. All the women are now over 65, except for Frances Mills Clements, who is deceased, and continue to impart wisdom, mentorship and leadership to the younger generation and current ABSW members.

The need for and importance of a Black social workers' association cannot be overstated as Black lives continue to be under siege. Historically and presently, Black communities are constantly surveilled, excluded and harassed and experience violence, brutality and death at the hands of state agents, including those in law enforcement, child welfare, education, criminal justice and health. The ABSW has been instrumental in providing leadership, and it contributes to the attainment and implementation of Africentric practice in service provision in both community organizations and government departments. In addition, the association has advocated for institutional accountability and transparency in order to enhance policy and practice that impact the lives of African Nova Scotians. Consequently, the work of the ABSW has had a far reaching impact in social services, justice, education and health care. For example, the ABSW has influenced policy and practice in the area of child welfare across Canada. Members of the association have been called to testify as expert witnesses in child welfare cases in three Canadian provinces. The ABSW has led initiatives with the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services that resulted in significant policy changes to both name and address individual and systemic anti-Black racism. The ABSW developed a strong partnership with the NS College of Social Workers (NSCSW), after a contentious relationship when we first formed. The ABSW has a permanent seat on the board of directors of the NSCSW and is also represented on the Board of Examiners, helping to influence the work of the college. On September 15,

2020, the ABSW signed a historic memorandum of understanding for the profession with the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) that recognizes systemic racism and commits to working together to rectify wrongs and strengthen the lives of African Canadians. These relationships within the profession of social work enable us to directly influence social work policy and practice with Africentric perspectives.

In its early years the ABSW established a partnership with the Dalhousie School of Social Work (DSSW), which continues to grow and flourish. The DSSW provided office space to the ABSW for a number of years, and the ABSW has a designated seat on the DSSW Advisory Committee and the Diversity and Equity Committee. In 2017, the ABSW worked with students to establish the ABSW Student Group at DSSW. This strategic positioning enables the ABSW to influence social work education, educational policies and research. The ABSW has been a community partner on several research projects with faculty of the DSSW and other departments at Dalhousie University. For example, the ABSW was a key community partner on the Racism Violence and Health Study (2002–10), a pan-Canadian study that examined the impact of racism on the health and well-being of African Canadians in three Canadian cities: Toronto, Halifax and Calgary. This ground-breaking research led to the publication of *Race and Well-Being* (James et al., 2010), which, in the current climate of anti-Black racism and the Black Lives Matter movement, has become an essential text to further understanding and guide actions to address structural and systemic anti-Black racism.

Partnership, innovation and creative interventions are hallmarks of this organization. From student placements to strategic partnerships with community-based organizations and government departments, the ABSW has been able to develop programs and services in the community to drive change. Most recently, the ABSW was on the front lines to assist communities dealing with COVID-19. When the Government of Nova Scotia declared a provincial state of emergency to help contain the spread of COVID-19 on March 22, 2020, the ABSW provided leadership to support the African Nova Scotian community in dealing with the pandemic. The ABSW partnered with the Health Association of African Canadians (HAAC), and together they engaged other strategic partners to deal with the pandemic. They quickly established province-wide services to create awareness, mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and help community members with specific needs as they arose. This response and impact are now

being established as a model to use in other emergency situations. The Africentric approach, which is holistic and integrative, has been effective in helping the community to deal with the pandemic of COVID-19 that collided with the pandemic of anti-Black racism in 2020.

Another area to which the ABSW has made significant contributions is culturally specific spirituality and faith-based practices. We have worked with the African United Baptist Association (AUBA) to tackle challenging issues in the African Nova Scotian communities, such as intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, victims of crime, grief and loss, and work with prisoners. The ABSW has also partnered with academic researchers to conduct research on spirituality and have made major scholarly contributions to the field of spirituality and social work.

In addition, the ABSW has organized a number of conferences, seminars and training events that focus on anti-Black racism and Africentric social work in numerous contexts. A highlight was the thirty-fifth anniversary conference of the ABSW, entitled “Moving Forward: Pathways to ‘Culturally Competent’ Practice with People of African Descent,” which ran September 25–27, 2014. The attendees included educators, health care workers and social workers, featuring conference topics such as racism, child welfare, mental health and addiction, justice and intimate partner violence. The idea for this edited collection emerged at the 2014 conference, and three of the editors of this text, Mullings, Este and Bernard, were all present and engaged in the conversation that led to the creation of this book.

This Africentric-focused text provides social work educators and students with a rich educational and practice tool to help them better understand the challenges faced by African Canadians and to develop awareness of best practices to address them. At this time in the evolution of the ABSW, we are experiencing tremendous growth and development, and this text will support our efforts. As we go forward, we firmly believe that this text will help to move Africentric theory from obscurity and the margins of the social work profession to the centre of social work practice, research and policy development in Canada.

The ABSW is now in its forty-first year and has been using Africentric theory and practice since its inception. The ABSW initiatives include collaborative research, community engagement, advocacy and activism, on issues such as adoption, addressing violence, working with elders, mental

health, addictions, youth, education and HIV/AIDS, to advocate for and support the African Nova Scotian communities. This text has many themes that are aligned with our work, such as violence, child welfare, working with families, disabilities, HIV and mental health, with practice examples. This timely book fills a gap as there is an absence of Canadian content on social work with African Canadians. The chapters present important information about African Canadian people and communities and provide invaluable education about how Africentric theory and practice can help improve the ways in which services are delivered to people of African ancestry. It is widely known that there is not enough awareness of and attention paid to an Africentric approach in Canadian social work. This book can serve as the foundation for education on this topic for undergraduate students and field practitioners, to support their growth, development and preparation to provide equitable and accessible Africentric services to African Canadians.

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Chapter 1

A Foundation for the Social Work Profession

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The social work profession in Canada has not been motivated for or committed to an Africentric paradigm. Wanda Thomas Bernard and Dave Este are established scholars who have, over many years, provided the foundation and synergy for Africentric social work (ASW) education and practice. In spite of their efforts, their work has not appeared regularly or consistently in social work education or practice. In recent years, Delores Mullings challenged a professor in a PhD theory class by asking why the course literature was almost exclusively written by white/Eurocentric scholars and people. She wondered why Black and racialized people's voices were invisible. The professor responded, "We have lots of women authors, like Judith Butler, but we also have Edward Said." The inclusion of one white woman and one racialized theorist was intended to make racialized people's experience visible and valued. In her role as associate director of field education, Jennifer Clarke recalls a conversation about anti-Black racism during a workshop with a group of bsw/msw field instructors. There was subtle but clear resistance from some field instructors to the introduction of anti-Black racism theory. Those participants wanted to quickly move the conversation to other aspects of the agenda, including a workshop activity that was geared towards an anti-oppression approach. One field instructor explicitly asked, "Do we now have to consider anti-Black racism along with anti-racism?" In that moment she knew that she had a lot of work to do with field instructors, especially with those who would be supervising Black students. For Sulaimon Giwa, resistance to teaching about anti-Black racism or the Africentric paradigm came from students themselves. He recalls an experience in which a white doctoral student had made a snide remark

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about looking forward to future sections of the course, where the focus on race and marginal groups was imagined to be less. Implicitly, that student seemed to suggest a discomfort or antipathy towards learning about the full extent of white domination. For all of us, social work education had silenced our lived experiences and erased our voices from the education and practice spaces.

Our experiences of invisibility fueled our determination to do things differently — to create a movement to ensure that the lives of people of African descent move out of the shadows of social work education and practice. We have intentionally mentored frontline social workers and undergraduate and graduate students. We have spent hours helping authors to shape their ideas and write their research and analyses. We have supported young Black scholars to bring their intellectual work to fruition. We have included social work students, practitioners and educators in this book. All of this has truly been a labour of love. This is a movement in which we are committed to investing in Black people as knowledge holders and writers.

AFRICENTRIC SOCIAL WORK SCHOLARSHIP

During the past decades in Canada and the US, there has been an increase in the body of literature focused on Afrocentricity or Africentricity.¹ Black Canadian scholars have consistently challenged the Eurocentric social work approach by infusing anti-Black racism scholarship in their research, teaching and practice. For example, Mullings (2006, 2016) examines Black Caribbean elders in nursing homes and what needs to be done from an Africentric paradigm to enhance services to this population; Clarke (2011, 2012) and Clarke, Hasford, Mills-Minster and Gudge (2018) explore the experiences of African, Caribbean and/or Black (ACB) families as service users of the child welfare system in the city of Toronto and the province of Ontario, and what must be done to reduce disparity and disproportionality in the system. Despite the increasing Black scholarship and focus on Africentric theory, there remains a dearth of literature on Africentric social work in Canada. The authors in this text are aware that while there are similarities among diasporic Africans, they also have different historical experiences and cultural contexts. They are also cognizant of the sociopolitical and sociocultural nuances in Black people's lived experiences and adjust practice modalities accordingly to avoid applying stereotypical traits that essentialize the Black body and Black communities.

AFRICAN CANADIANS IN CONTEXT

In 2016, approximately 1.3 million Canadians self-identified as Black people (Statistics Canada, 2020). The large majority of African, Caribbean and Black people (91.4 percent) reside in five Canadian provinces — Ontario (52.4 percent), Quebec (26.6 percent), Alberta (10.8 percent), Manitoba (2.4 percent) and Nova Scotia (1.8 percent) — and are concentrated in urban areas compared to the general population (94.3 percent and 71.2 percent, respectively). The majority live in large urban centres, with over 50,000 reported living in each of Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa-Gatineau, Edmonton and Calgary. They represented significant percentages of the population of Toronto (7.5 percent), Montreal (6.8 percent), Ottawa-Gatineau (6 percent), Oshawa (5.7 percent), Edmonton (4.5 percent) and Calgary (3.9 percent).

African Canadians have survived and continue to thrive under the harsh gaze of whiteness and the brutality of anti-Black racism. This brutality began with the barbaric practice of slavery in Upper Canada and Quebec (Winks, 1997) and continued when Black Loyalists, who fought for the British against the Americans, were given poor land and no title (Pachai and Bishop, 2006). Descendants of some Black Loyalists are still fighting to receive the deeds to their lands. Africville, an independent community of African Nova Scotians, was destroyed in the 1960s using the gentrification model of urban development; community members lost their homes and properties that were mortgage free, becoming displaced, isolated and homeless (Africville Genealogy Society et al., 1992). The physical location of Africville was made into a dog park and ACB Canadians who visit this historical site to pay homage to our past often witness white people stooping and scooping after their dogs.

The perpetuation of anti-Black racism across Canada includes police violence and brutality, such as beatings, shootings, killings and unexplained death of Black people in police custody, systemically targeting citizens through surveillance, disproportionate representation in the criminal justice system and overrepresentation in the prison population (ACLC, 2002; Crichlow, 2014; Sudbury, 2002; Tator, Henry et al., 2006; Wortley, 2003). Between 2013 and 2017, a Black person was nearly twenty times more likely than a white person to be shot by the Toronto police (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2018). African Canadians have historically been over-policed and over-scrutinized due to stereotypes asserting that Black men are violent perpetrators and prone to criminality,

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such as gun violence and drug trafficking (ACLC, 2002; Bundy, 2019; Lurigio and Loose, 2008; Khenti, 2014).

Theories of upward mobility presuppose that high educational attainment will result in better jobs and economic improvement and will ultimately propel people out of poverty. This theory contradicts the experiences of African Canadians, who consistently have lower employment rates compared to other Canadians, even when they have higher education levels. Black Canadians with postsecondary education have an unemployment rate of 9.2 percent, compared to 5.3 percent of other Canadians. Further, in 2016, Black men and women had 78.1 percent and 71.0 percent employment rates respectively, compared with other men, at 82.6 percent, and other women, at 75.5 percent (Do, 2020). In addition, while Black Canadians noted having overall workplace satisfaction, they were more likely to report workplace discrimination and unfair treatment in comparison to other Canadians. With respect to annual wages, Black women who were born in Canada earned between \$3,500 to \$7,000 less than other women in the Canadian population. The median salary for Black men remained at \$40,000 between 2000 and 2015, while men in the general population experienced an increase (Statistics Canada, 2020). While persistent unemployment/underemployment plague ACB workers in spite of high education attainment, African Canadians children are also in peril in schools.

Policy-makers in the education system have consistently implemented anti-Black racist policy, which has systematically failed African Canadian children and youth (Clarke, 2019; James and Turner, 2017). In the 1990s, the Mike Harris Conservative government implemented the Ontario Safe Schools Act, which disproportionately targeted Black youth for expulsion and suspension (Clarke, 2019). Consequently, 52 percent of ACB Canadian youth leave high school before earning their diploma. This shift in policy resulted in large percentages of illiterate and uneducated Black youth (Clarke, 2019; James and Turner, 2017; OHRC, 2003). In addition, these children and youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system (see Chapter 5 in this book for a detailed discussion) as social workers and teachers aggressively target and remove Black children from their homes, thus destroying Black families (Adjei, Mullings, Baffoe, et al., 2018; Ojo, 2016; Phillips and Pon, 2018). While established Black families are disintegrated, ACB refugees and immigrants also face disenfranchisement through immigration policy.

Canadian-sanctioned immigration policies frequently restrict and unjustly detain Black people without warrant. This is illustrated vividly through Canada's detention of migrants. One-third of immigration detainees are held in prisons; many of them are Black, including individuals with mental health conditions (Global Detention Project, 2018). Rowe (2008) argues that the systemic anti-Black racism permeating the Canadian Immigration Act enforces the mass detainment and deportation of Caribbean and other Black immigrants. In these and other ways, Black immigrants are stripped of the rights and freedoms typically preserved by the government, based solely on the criminalizing of race and their precarious immigration status.

As of 2019, there were forty-three schools/faculties/modules in Canada with accredited social work programs (CASW, 2019). Ontario and Alberta have large numbers of registered social workers, at 22,600 (ocswssw, 2021) and 7,962 (Alberta College of Social Workers [ACSW] 2019), respectively. The Atlantic provinces have smaller Black populations compared to larger urban centres such as Toronto and Montreal, but the region has an ambitious agenda to attract and retain new citizens, so it is worth noting that Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island have 1,608, 2,002, 2,000 and 300 social work members, respectively (NLASW, 2018; NSCSW, 2019; NBASW, 2019; Personal Communication). The CASW-ACTS (2018) reported that 3,258 self-selected social workers from across Canada responded to its survey. The association has 18,000 members, of which 1,891 responded. The CASW's membership is primarily derived from academics, so many frontline workers are not included.

Social work graduates and registered social workers care for people of African descent in Canada. In spite of the growing Black populations, there are few Africentric social work practice texts that deal comprehensively with issues and concerns of ACB people. Specifically, this text fills a dire need to assist undergraduate students with the foundational skills and knowledge needed to further their understanding of how to initiate and maintain best practices with African Canadians.

TERMINOLOGIES: ACB CANADIANS

A word on terminology is important before we proceed. We use the terms Black, African Canadian, Afro-Caribbean and African, Caribbean and/or Black (ACB) interchangeably in the text to refer to people of sub-Saharan

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African descent, regardless of their specific ethnic identity or place of birth, who share similar experiences and histories of colonization, legacies of enslavement via the Transatlantic Slave Trade, anti-Black racism, police violence and brutality, institutionalized marginalization and exclusion. ACB is a relatively inclusive term that is commonly used in health literature in North America and Europe (Aspinall, 2009). ACB Canadians represent a diverse population in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, religion, class, gender, age, sexual orientation and other axes of identity, and they come from many countries of origin, including Jamaica, Haiti, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Somalia. While there is tremendous diversity among people of African descent, there are important nuances in terms of identity and the terms utilized to categorize and describe them (Botswain and Lalonde, 2000). These experiences contribute to the systematic disenfranchisement of ACB Canadians, as discussed below.

INTERSECTIONAL LENS

Intersectionality is a term that is derived from critical race theory (CRT), an intellectual movement that centralizes race, and it was coined by African American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991). It allows us to identify and complicate the nuanced marginalization that Black women experience when two or more forms of oppression intersect. For instance, diverse ACB Canadians may experience two or more overlapping oppressions (e.g., racism, classism, ableism, sexism, Islamophobia, transphobia, etc.), which compound the systemic disadvantages that they encounter and position them on the margins of society, where they are forced to live in deprived and disintegrating neighbourhoods characterized by substandard housing, violence, poverty and unemployment (Dumbrill and Yee, 2019; Galabuzi, 2006). It is critical to understand how multiple identities compound and complicate levels of disenfranchisement in order to address the types of disadvantages ACB Canadians face at these intersections. Applying an intersectional lens can help social workers understand and address the complex and multi-layered issues facing Black families and communities.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

In spite of the centrality of Black lives to Canada's nation-building project, race, racism and anti-Black racism are deeply embedded in the nation's history and national identity, as reflected in the legacies of enslavement,

segregation, disenfranchisement and state violence (Clarke, Hasford, Mills-Minster and Gudge, 2018). The chapters in this text focus on the lived experiences and institutional processes of anti-Black racism in various systems from child welfare to criminal justice, education and health. There remain gaps in understanding the scope of anti-Black racism in Canada, largely due to institutional resistance to the collection of disaggregated race-based data and Canada's aversion to speaking about race and its emphasis on multiculturalism (Owusu-Bempah and Millar, 2010). This theoretical approach serves as a foundation to the contextualization, interpretation and analyses of the chapters in this text.

Race and Racism

Racism and racial discrimination are a distinct set of ideologies, beliefs and practices that work to exclude, marginalize and oppress racialized groups based on their race. Derived through a socially constructed racial hierarchy rooted in white supremacy, racism unjustly asserts prejudicial views and ideologies about racialized persons as a means to justify discrimination and affirm the "superiority" of white people and whiteness as a system of domination. In contextualizing its impact, it is critical to examine the roots of racism, as well as its present-day manifestations through the historical legacy of white supremacy and colonization, which actively sought to subordinate Indigenous Peoples and racialized populations.

Smith and Jeppesen (2017) assert that European invasion, imperialism and colonization was a global project in which white bodies became the centre of the world and regions where Indigenous Peoples reside became dispensable in the European quest to build national empires. Within the violent forces of the colonial project, white supremacy was inherently designed as a means to oppress, subjugate and dominate the knowledge and lives of the Other. Benn-John (2016) notes that colonial violence, practices, mythology and racial hierarchies in Canada embedded a systemic erasure of Indigenous Peoples and by extension, other racialized populations. Centuries later, white supremacy and racism continue to serve as intentional tools to uphold the dehumanization of Black, Indigenous and racialized communities in Canada.

As racial privilege, whiteness operates, maintains and reproduces systemic and structural dominance of white people in all spheres of society (Clarke, Pon, Benjamin and Bailey, 2015; Dumbrill and Yee, 2019). Therefore, despite Canada's projection and celebration of multiculturalism and diversity as pillars of Canadian identity, critical analyses of the nation's

institutions reveals the insidious nature of Canadian racial injustices (Bernard and Smith, 2018). McKenzie (2017) defines institutional racism as an ecological form of racial discrimination that leads to inequity for different racialized groups when organizations fail to take effective action to eradicate inequities. Bernard and Smith (2018) identify racism as an ever-present system of oppression woven into the fabric of our society, evolving with policy and dominant discourse to remain concealed from exposure. Racism creates the conditions that limit the life opportunities for those seen and marked as the “Other” (Bernard and Smith, 2018). Producing life-threatening consequences, systemic racism subjects African Canadians to the dangerous powers of white supremacy.

Anti-Black Racism

The specific and distinct experiences of Black people and their unique subjection to discriminatory practices and exclusion in Canada is derived through the violent practices and policies of anti-Black racism (ABR). The African Canadian Legal Clinic (ACLC) defines anti-Black racism as follows:

Anti-Black racism is the racial prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination that is directed at people of African descent, rooted in their unique history and experience of enslavement. It is manifested in the legacy and racist ideologies that continue to define African descendants’ identities, their lives and places them at the bottom of society and as primary targets of racism. It is manifested in the legacy of the current social, economic, and political marginalization of African Canadians in society such as the lack of opportunities, lower socio-economic status, higher unemployment, significant poverty rates and over-representation in the criminal justice system. Anti-Black racism is characterized by particularly virulent and pervasive racial stereotypes. Canadian courts and various Commissions have repeatedly recognized the pervasiveness of anti-Black stereotyping and the fact that African Canadians are the primary targets of racism in Canadian society. (as cited in Morgan and Bullen, 2015, p. 7)

The United Nations (2017) also contends that the inequities that African Canadians face is a direct result of historical anti-Black racism in Canada, rooted in its legacy of enslavement and colonization. The UN notes that anti-Black racism is sustained through multipronged laws, policies and

practices that have enforced segregation and discrimination in education, housing, employment and other social institutions. As Mullings, Morgan and Quelleng (2016, p. 23) further highlight, “anti-Black racism is manifested in the current social, economic, and political marginalization of African Canadians in society through a lack of opportunities, lower socioeconomic status, higher unemployment, significant poverty rates, and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system.”

While at Ryerson University, scholar-activist Benjamin (2003) popularized the term anti-Black racism in her theorizing of the dialectic of anti-Black racism in Ontario as a necessary and profound act of resistance. According to Benjamin, anti-Black racism is a “particular form of systemic and structural racism in Canadian society, which historically has been perpetuated against Blacks” and their “resistance against dominant ... systems and other forms of whiteness and the building of agency and social transformation” (p. ii). We use an analysis of anti-Black racism to challenge dominant hegemonic systems of whiteness, facilitate collective agency and advance social transformation against intersecting forms of oppression and violence (Benjamin, 2003). For the purposes of this review, it is critical to clearly distinguish the key differences between *racism* and *anti-Black racism*. As previously stated, racism is an overarching societal issue which facilitates the discrimination against racialized groups who have a history of being enslaved and colonized. Anti-Black racism articulates the implications of harm and racial trauma inflicted upon people of African descent as a result of ideologies and practices developed to oppress them in the colonial era and in the present day.

The above juxtaposition between racism and anti-Black racism is critical to fully understand and affirms the need for redress and reparations that are owed to African Canadians given their unique history of enslavement in Canada. Without articulating the specific distinction and manifestations of anti-Black racism, we perpetuate it by enforcing false stereotypes and ideologies of Black people being inherently angry, lazy, unintelligent, unproductive, undeserving or ungrateful Canadians. Acknowledging this historical foundation of racial oppression enables us to understand the present-day implications of the legacy of colonization and enslavement on Black Canadians. As Clarke, Pon, Benjamin and Bailey (2015, p. 155) point out, the dialectic of “anti-Black racism offers a framework for theorizing about power and privilege that enables whiteness

and white supremacy to be exposed.” This framework has much to offer the social work profession, particularly in naming and resisting anti-Black racism and the building of a just society where leadership among ACB people is fostered (Clarke et al., 2015).

Africentric Social Work Practice

Globally, Africentricity is a pillar in centring, honouring and protecting African ancestral knowledge systems, practices and ways of being. As a paradigm, Africentric social work enables people of African descent to reclaim and recentre their cultural identities. Bent-Goodley (2019, p. 2) note the framework “utilize[s] African philosophies, history, and culture as a starting place of interpreting social and psychological phenomena, create relevant approaches of personal, family, community healing and societal change.” Through its use we inherently enhance resistance to oppressive systems, strengthen communal protective factors and support the mobilization, education and self-determination of African Canadians.

This is significant as social work in Canada marks a historical legacy of harm; the nation’s first social workers were central to the colonial project, and they enacted violence upon Indigenous, Black and racialized peoples (Badwall, 2016). Concealed through discourses of “helping,” white social workers exerted power through individual, systemic and institutional means. Although efforts have been made to address racism and social work’s colonial history through frameworks such as anti-racist and anti-oppressive social work practice, these frameworks cannot be relied upon to address the specificity of anti-Black racism and may serve to minimize entrenched ideologies and social work’s active participation in Canada’s anti-Black racism project (Clarke, et al., 2015; Mungai, 2015). Este and Bernard (2019) put forward Africentric practice as an alternative approach to address the limited effectiveness that traditional social work has in responding to the diverse sociopolitical and economic realities faced by people of African descent.

The historical foundation of social work in Canada represents the longstanding oppressions that African Canadians have and continue to face. The field, governmental organizations, health, education, child welfare and criminal justice institutions and their policies and practices have entrenched anti-Blackness, which causes distrust and leads to inadequate cultural responses for community members and social workers alike. The cultivation and use of Africentric social work practices in Canada are of utmost importance to the resistance, survival, thriving and culturally

safe systems of care needed for African Canadians. Within this racial and cultural framework we offer a foundation in which to root meaningful responses to micro and macro levels of oppression that community members face (Bernard and Smith, 2018). Embedding transformative cultural shifts, we disrupt our engagement in colonial systems that have aimed to stamp out African Canadian people and our ancestors. African Canadian social workers engaged in the system as change agents collectively risk what Audre Lorde (1984) identifies as “using the master’s tools” to address anti-Black racism in social work by embracing holistic Africentric practices.

For those of us living within the African Canadian diaspora, the paradigm becomes an imperative tool to ground our connectedness in a borderless manner. Encompassing those who identify as continental Africans, Caribbeans, African Nova Scotians and Afro-Latinx people, the Africentric approach cultivates an intentional unification of our shared identities, which was separated during the Middle Passage of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Through Africentricity we reclaim our power and forge a path of hope and healing that counters white supremacy’s attempts to dominate us sociopolitically. Shifting our knowledge, ourselves and our communities from the periphery to the centre, Africentric social work permeates the advancement of African Canadian people through a lens of empowerment and strength-based liberation that systemically uproots anti-Black racism.

INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTERS

This book consists of two interrelated parts that explore various aspects of Africentric social work practice with African Canadians. Each part focuses on the lived experiences of African Canadian children, youth, elders, men, women, 2SLGBTQIA+ and families in Canada’s urban centres, primarily in Toronto. The chapter authors draw on various aspects of social work, including academic, activism, community, direct practice and leadership in organizations and postsecondary institutions. The narratives of Black people as service users, practitioners, and academics demonstrate the need for Africentric social work theory and practice. The authors come from a range of disciplines, but primarily social work, each resisting positivist discourse and centring Black lives through Africentric social work theory and practice. The chapters in Part 1 address the broad context and foundation and those in Part 2 discuss the institutionalization of Black bodies.