

THE POWERFUL WRITTEN WORD

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Contributions and Legacies of Black Canadian Authors

It has been said that, “the written word is one of humanity’s most powerful tools.” Indeed, writing, through its various forms, can be used to express emotions, disseminate thoughts, and influence others. Throughout Canadian History, black authors, editors, journalists, and poets have left a deep legacy on Canadian culture and society, helping to expand the definition of “Canada,” and their contributions have influenced generations of Canadians.

Mary Ann Shadd was one of the most prominent black Canadians in the early days of the nation. She devoted her life to the advocacy of civil rights by establishing the *Provincial Freeman* in 1852, the first Canadian newspaper headed by a black woman. With “Self-Reliance Is the True Road to Independence” as the paper’s motto, she encouraged black people to not succumb to the dark reality of their rights being deprived. Recognizing the power of the female voice, she also courageously called for women’s political rights at a time when no suffrage organizations had been established, setting a positive precedent.

However, Shadd is not the first black Canadian to establish a newspaper. This title goes to Henry Bibb, who published the nation’s first black newspaper, *Voice of the Fugitive*, in 1851. Along with attacking racial discrimination and advocating for Canadian society to accept the full integration of black people, Bibb also published interviews with escapees of the “Underground Railroad,” through it is speculated that the articles were largely written by his wife, Mary Bibb, thereby being an example of black women attempting to make their voice heard, despite society’s taboos. The newspaper became an influential voice for Black Canadians, and even attracted subscribers from the US. Henry and Mary Bibb, along with Shadd, were early role models for black Canadians to speak up and fight for their rights.

In the 20th century, black Canadians continued to use writing as a way to make their voices heard. Afua Cooper specialized in dub poems, which were influenced by the rhythms of reggae music, and became a Canadian leader in its development. Poetry, for her, was not only a tool to fight “a racist and patriarchal culture,” but also to connect with her Afro-Caribbean roots. She also published books of poetry, such as the 1983 book *Breakin Chains*. In a recent interview, Cooper commented that “the music expands the poetry.” As a Canadian poet, she expanded a foreign form of poetry and helped to integrate it into Canadian culture, enriching the Canadian poetry scene. As well, through her dub poems, she encouraged Canadians to keep true to their roots and embrace their heritage, thus celebrating Canada as a multicultural society.

Similarly, Marlene Nourbese Philip made significant contributions as a black Canadian poet and activist. Her poems presented the challenges of speaking and writing in English for newcomers to Canada. Her book, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, received the Casa de las Americas award in 1989, making her only its second Canadian recipient. As well, as an activist, she encouraged other minority Canadians to use writing to express their ideas by expanding black membership in the Canadian division of PEN, an international writers’ organization. Her efforts led to the inclusion of more minority writers, helping to increase the inclusiveness of Canadian society.

In the 21st century, black Canadian writings continue to flourish. A notable figure is Lawrence Hill, whose 2007 novel *The Book of Negroes* followed the fictional life of a female slave who escaped for freedom, fought for Britain, but eventually returned to her roots. The moving novel received widespread acclaim rendering Hill the foremost black Canadian writer and major contributor to contemporary black culture in Canada.

The achievements of Lawrence Hill, and others before him, have inspired countless Canadians. Inspired by Hill, I believe that I, as a Chinese Canadian, can use writing to raise awareness on the impacts of minority Canadians. In 2016, I took on a project to commemorate an Aboriginal Canadian soldier by writing a tribute to him. I contacted his community, the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte, and eventually presented the tribute to the Chief and Council, helping to show that the contributions of these soldiers are still relevant today.

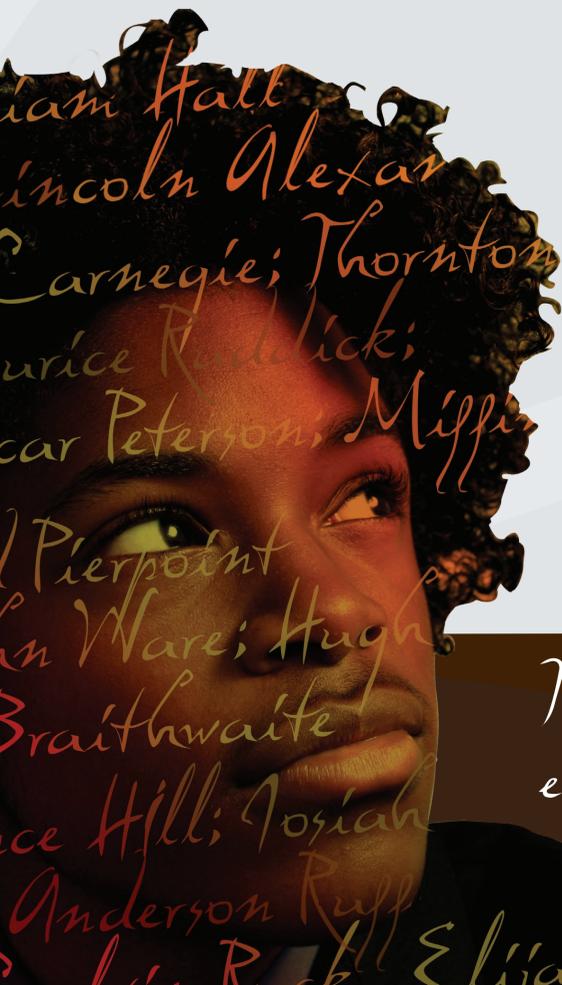
Over time, black Canadians have been influential to the buildup of a Canadian identity through various forms of writing, leaving a rich legacy. Young Canadians today are inspired by them to embrace their heritage and raise awareness through writing. The legacy will continue to shape generations to come, resulting in continuous enrichment of Canadian culture.

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