

My Canada

by Donna Coombs-Montrose

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Coombs-Montrose has been an Archivist/Librarian (MSLS), Independent Researcher; Labour and Community Activist, Member, and Director of Alberta Labour History Institute. She has been deeply involved in the Caribbean Women Network, CARIWEST, Trinidad & Tobago Cultural Association, and Edmonton-based Living History Group.



My region of birth consists of a chain of islands from Bermuda and Cuba to Trinidad/Tobago. They had been part of the Spanish, Dutch, French, American, British, and Portuguese, and later United States, colonial empires. This foreign occupation, spanning centuries, wiped out most of the indigenous Carib people, after whom the Caribbean Sea and Region are named, and has created new societies with different first languages, cultures, and histories. I had therefore grown up on an island that was Spanish, French, English at different periods in its history. Our Mardi Gras, carnivals, and festivals like Cariwest had also grown out of this environment.

In recent colonial times, we were nurtured on rigid British educational standards and habits. Our societies

had also retained many practices from our slave heritage (like the worship of Yoruba deities) as well as Britain's indenture-ship experience which brought thousands to the region from India. The foods we eat, and the fabric of our societies, reflects these multiple heritages.

*

The plane touched down in Toronto's Pearson International Airport on a September day in 1969. It had brought me to a new country and continent. My family, back in Trinidad & Tobago, were proud of my decision but felt shattered by my leaving home for the first time. I was following a childhood dream to study Library Science. Canada, which attracted students from various

Caribbean islands seeking higher education, suited my goals.

I expected Canada to warmly welcome us, new students from the Caribbean eager to achieve our dreams. But no. Toronto introduced me to racism: in housing, in human rights case hearings, education, and discrimination due to accent. I had arrived in Toronto a few weeks after West Indian students seized Montreal's Sir George Williams University's Computer Centre, an

men to be conscientious objectors protesting the Vietnam war. They had fled to Canada to avoid a draft into the US Army. Their resistance would mushroom into what came to be called "The Black Power Movement" in the US. These developments had a big impact on my region which had a shared history of slavery and oppression with African Americans. Furthermore, anti-colonial armed struggles taking place in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and elsewhere in Africa, stimulated us into solidarity with other

“Their resistance would mushroom into what came to be called “The Black Power Movement” in the US.”

event featured in a National Film Board documentary, "The Ninth Floor", produced by Selwyn Jacob. Those students had all been consistently failing computer courses, falling short of medical school entrance requirements. Some of these protesting students did jail time. This event had tremendous impact on many West Indian students in similar postsecondary institutions, and on some Caribbean governments, which asked their students to return 'home'.

At the time of that protest and in its aftermath, scores of young African-American men were also occupying space in my Ryerson campus cafeteria daily. I later understood these young

oppressed peoples, making us realize we were not alone in our struggles for justice, equality, and respect.

The complex environment created by this wave of political ferment caused students to meet to discuss and understand issues, and to create or join organizations. We formed cultural organizations, opened ethnic or specialised stores.

We wanted to represent who we were in our new society.

One of the best-known organizations to come out of our desire to represent who we were and that became internationally recognised, was Toronto's

Caribana Festival, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2017. This singular festival developed to bring \$400-\$450 million annually to the coffers of Toronto. Caribana/Toronto Carnival has spawned other similar festivals in Montreal (Carifesta), Hamilton, Edmonton (Cariwest), Calgary (Carifest), Vancouver, Winnipeg (Caripeg) and other cities in Canada. Caribana's influence also spread to many North American cities including New York (Labour Day), Miami

visibility.

In conclusion, let me say that living initially in Toronto and understanding its dynamics as they affected my circumstances made me realize that others from different climes faced their own problems adapting to and winning recognition in this new society. Doing graduate studies and interacting with

“Others from different climes faced their own problems adapting to and winning recognition in this new society.”

(Miami Carnival), Los Angeles and Chicago. It has even spread to Notting Hill, England.

I myself did contribute to develop Edmonton's Cariwest to mobilise Western Canada's Caribbean communities. I presided over it as it grew into a pillar representing these communities' aims and aspirations. We collaborated to build costumes with schools, organized workshops at the University of Alberta, and created community oral histories that documented the earlier arrivals of West Indians to Alberta. We created linkages to attract skilled workers to migrate to this province. Increased public participation in our annual August festival enhanced Cariwest and its

other nationalities caused me to mature in my consciousness about many things, and to become a contributing member of the Canadian society. Overall, I think that the struggles of and contributions by those of us from the Caribbean and elsewhere, have made Canada a better country for all.