

Talking Black History: Rich tapestry of ?Blackness? is often overlooked

As a young girl in school, Dr. Cheryl Thompson ?clung? to her peers who looked the same.

More often than not, they shared a similar background, descended from parents and grandparents who came to Canada from the Caribbean.

They understood each other, she says, but there was a whole world out there ready to be discovered.

In the intervening years, Dr. Thompson, an Associate Professor of Ryerson University, has dedicated much of her scholarship to race and the Black identity.

Last week, to mark Black History Month, the author of Uncle: Race, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Loyalty was hosted for a multifaceted talk on the history around us and, in many cases, forgotten or deliberately ignored history that still needs to be addressed.

Such is the case of the diverse tapestry woven together by Black Canadians.

Dr. Thompson, who has also penned Beauty in a Box: Detangling the Roots of Canada's Black Beauty Culture, delved deeper into this issue inspired by a question from a member of the public who asked whether she saw similarities between Black women and race relations in Canada and the United States when it comes to the issue of Black hair and the education system.

?There's a lot of similarities between Canada and the U.S. as it relates to hair,? said Dr. Thompson, who sat down with Reccia Mandelcorn, Manager of Community Collaboration for the Aurora Public Library, on Thursday evening. ?The only thing that makes our context a little bit different is we are, in many ways, just a more diverse Black population.?

?We have a lot of different Black communities coming from the continent of Africa,? she continued. ?We have a lot of different Black communities coming from the Caribbean at different stages of immigration. Then, we have historically Black communities that have been here for centuries, long before the War of 1812. Because we have that, we all have a different beauty culture that kind of comes together at the beauty salon or beauty shop, but it is a little bit of a different beauty culture.

?In the U.S. context, I think what sets it apart is they just have a less recent history of Black immigration. Of course, there are still people from the continent of Africa immigrating to America, there are still Caribbean people coming to America, but not en-masse as we experienced in Canada in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. Their immigration wave was really, if we're talking about post-slavery into the 20th century, their big wave was really in that 1890 to 1930 chunk of time when a lot of Caribbean people in particular came to America.?

Dr. Thompson said that following the recent death of Cicely Tyson, she was surprised to learn the acclaimed and celebrated actress was born to parents who had come to the United States from the island of St. Kitts. But, at the end of the day, Dr. Thompson said it made sense with her because it fit in with the timeline.

?What makes us different is our immigration stories, 50 or 60 years apart,? she said. ?Because we have a relatively newish sort of...Black people living in Canada, we just have different nuances in how we engage with hair care. I could kind of know I am dealing with people who might be from Africa and people who might be from the Caribbean in terms of if it is their descent or if they are a recent immigrant. There is just such a different hair culture and a different beauty culture.?

When she was a young student, most of the Black children, she said, were from the Caribbean. She did not know many kids whose parents were directly from the African continent.

For today's students, she says, it is probably ?a 50/50 mixed bag.?

?When I went to school, we were culturally kind of the same. We were having the same kind of conversation about stuff: products, what my parents were doing, what my mother was doing. Now, when I think Black children are in school? I think it is good, you're realizing that as much as we are racially Black, we are ethnically very different. There are different ethnicities within Blackness, different nationalities within Blackness that are nuanced and different. Now, in the Canadian Black population, there is just a lot more of that.

?I said in my classes, one of the things I hate about how Black people are seen in Canada compared to other groups is we do not get seen by our regional ethnic difference. Instead, we are just Black. If you were to go on StatsCanada, often you just see the stats for Black Canadians. They don't really break it down like they do for Asians, South Asians and other groups. We're really different. We're complex. In that respect, I think it is easier for young Black kids in some respects in school today because they can kind of comingle with each other and learn different things. When I was a kid in school, I kind of felt like I needed to cling to these people because they were the only people who really understood. There was just a different relation in terms of friendship and even talking about hair.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter