

Cultural evolution

Toronto schools break new ground in studying black culture in Canada

BY Andrew Chin

SINCE THE FIRST African studies program in Canada was launched in 1969 at McGill University, the field has flourished among Canadian post-secondary institutions. Early on, the focus was on studying African history and the experiences of African-Americans and African-Canadians in post-slavery society. Today, these programs have taken a multidisciplinary approach that blends social sciences, science and the arts.

"Ten to 15 years ago, I wouldn't have thought that we would be getting the funding for the type of scholarship we are doing now," says Professor Paul Lovejoy, director of the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research at York University.

The Tubman Institute has evolved from a resource centre to a growing force in Africanist studies. Co-sponsoring between 10 and 12 major conferences around the world each year, the institute has sent its graduate students to Jamaica, Britain, Angola and Brazil. "Through this program, grad students in the music and fine arts programs will have the ability to play drums with someone in Cuba," Lovejoy explains as an example of the program's reach.

While the Tubman Institute has done extensive work digitalizing source material, crossing many academic disciplines, Lovejoy recognizes that the role of the centre isn't just to appeal to enrolled students.

"A lot of scholars are concerned that the knowledge [gap] between scholars and regular people is widening as this subject becomes increasingly specialized," he says. "So through technology, we want to do things like what the University of Illinois did when they created a virtual Harlem through a supercomputer. We want to create web portals for our historical characters like [British abolitionist] Olaudah Equiano with information that kids will have access to."

While the Tubman Institute focuses on the African diaspora, the University of Toronto Centre of Diaspora and Transnational Studies incorporates African studies and a variety of other diasporas.

"The centre is the first of its kind," says its director, Professor Ato Quayson. "There are many centres that focus on a single diaspora, but we are the first to be foundationally multi-focused. Our students are required to have studied at least two diasporas by the time they finish their degree."

Launched in 2005, the centre has roughly 90 people enrolled in its undergraduate program and will be launching its masters program next year. While the program covers a variety of disciplines, Quayson breaks down the program into two tendencies: sociological and humanistic.

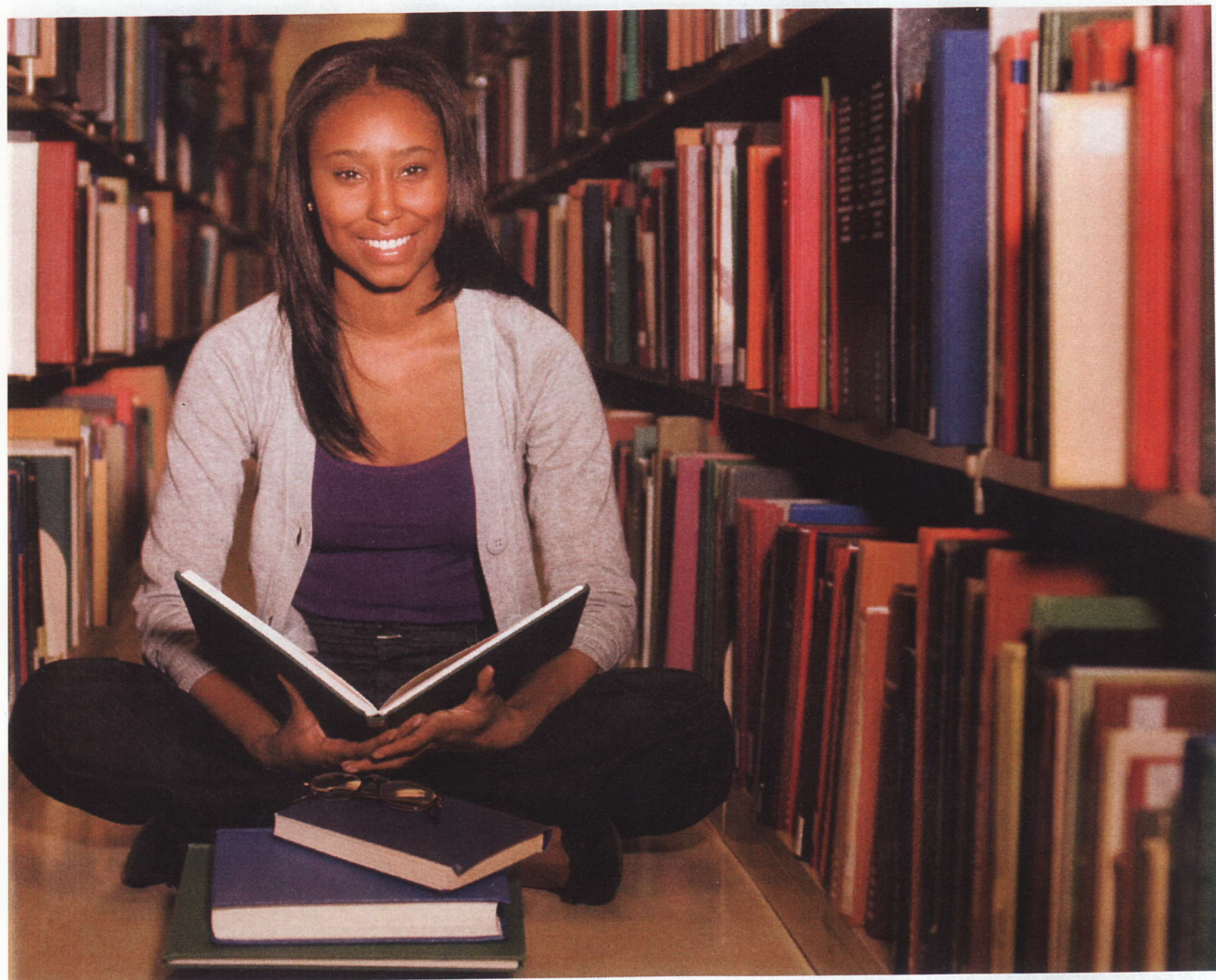
"The sociological tendency includes questions, like how many foreigners does the Toronto District School Board assimilate into the educational system,



that can be answered with statistics," Quayson explains. "The humanistic tendency can't be answered in statistics because it's more nebulous. It includes questions about emotion, nostalgia, memory and the type of narratives people tell about their homeland."

Although Quayson admits that work done within the sociological realm is found "very prominently in migration studies and most government departments that follow migration," he has a soft spot for the more abstract findings of the humanistic stream. "It's rewarding knowing how many of these traveling stories from all over the world intersect," he says.

It's a thought that Professor Lovejoy echoes: "One of the worst things about slavery is that it severs links," he says. "To do a lot of what we need to do, we need stories, and we can try to connect some of these links by learning more about these stories." ■



Doing the knowledge

Looking for a place to study black culture in Canada? Check out these academic offerings from some of Canada's leading post-secondary institutions.

Carleton University's African Studies curriculum includes courses on African Literature and African Economic Development

Dalhousie University operates the **Centre for African Studies**, featuring nine full-time Africanist faculty members

McGill University houses continuing African studies major and minors programs

The **University of British Columbia** has recently developed an African Studies minor program

The **University of Toronto** offers African studies through the **Centre of Diasporic Studies**

York University is home to the **Harriet Tubman Institute of Research**

Scholarships for black students

Build up your bank account and your grades by qualifying for these great scholarships available to black students.

BBPA Legacy Scholarships

Value: \$2,000 to \$5,000
Qualification: To qualify for one of the 11 legacy scholarships, candidates have to be between the ages of 17 and 30, enrolled in a full degree diploma or certificate program, demonstrate high academic achievement, have financial need and have made a recognized contribution to the black community.

Deadline: May 30, 2009
Contact: Black Business and Professional Association National Scholarship Fund at 416-504-4097

BBPA Leaders of Tomorrow Scholarship

Value: \$2,000
Qualification: To qualify for one of the four scholarships, candidates have to be from one of the following Toronto neighbourhoods: Crescent Town, Dorset Park, Eglinton East-Kennedy Park, Flemington Park-Victoria Village, Jamestown, Jane-Finch, Lawrence Heights, Malvern, Scarborough Village, Kingston-Galloway, Steeles-L'Amoreaux, Westminster-Branson and Weston-Mt. Denis, with students needing to be enrolled in a full-time college or university program and demonstrating financial need.

Deadline: May 30, 2009
Contact: Black Business and Professional Association National Scholarship Fund at 416-504-4097

Centennial Scholarship Awards

Value: \$2,000
Qualification: To qualify for one of these five scholarships offered by the

Canadian Urban Transport Association (CUTA) students have to be aiming for a career in the transportation industry and enrolled in a school that STM is a member. A scholarship will be awarded to a student from the Atlantic region, Québec, Ontario, the Prairies, the Territories and British Columbia.

Deadline: August 15, 2009
Contact: Canadian Urban Transport Association at 416-365-9800

Maytree Scholarship for Protected Persons or Former Protected Persons

Value: \$17,000
Qualification: To qualify for one of these scholarships offered by the Maytree Foundation, students have to be between the ages of 18 and 26; not living with their parents; and must be protected persons or landed immigrants who were protected persons.

Deadline: March 28, 2009
Contact: The Maytree Foundation at 416-944-2627