“Our Negro Citizens”:
An Example of Everyday Citizenship Practices

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Introduction

This essay examines the social-historical formation of primarily urban African-Canadian communities in and around Edmonton, Alberta, during the early 1920s. A review of literature indicates that there is a lack of consistent recognition of the lived experiences of peoples of African descent in Canada, especially in Alberta. Groundbreaking work by teachers and community members has documented to some degree an early historical presence. But to date a theoretical interdisciplinary approach, akin to critical cultural studies, that draws on sociological concepts as well as historical excavation has been lacking. To complement Howard and Tamara Palmer’s general description of the social and economic experiences of African Canadians in Alberta, our analysis of the data generated from a newspaper column entitled “Our Negro Citizens” (ONC) will provide new insights into issues of everyday citizenship practices. Our paper takes up more recent theorizations in sociology, history, cultural studies, and social theory to examine how the ONC newspaper column might
allow us to understand early attempts at community formation and consequent identity formation as Christians and Canadians. In particular, the essay highlights the efforts of the writer of the column, Reverend Geo. W. Slater Jr., an African American pastor working within the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (EAME) church in Edmonton. More specifically, we aim to demonstrate how the urban African-Canadian community of early 1920s Edmonton is represented in this column. What identities are enabled for those involved in the activities described in the ONC column? And what relationships are discursively constituted or reconstituted between different people mentioned in the column? The paper starts with an examination of how the research fits within existing literature on African-Canadian presence in Alberta and then goes on to examine the various ways in which Reverend Geo. W. Slater Jr. is able to use the column to highlight issues of racism (in the United States and Canada) while praising Canada as a haven; the ways in which he acts as a mediator of temperance discourses between the mainstream society racialized as white and his own community racialized as “coloured.” As a Methodist church, the EAME had links to a broader community of Methodist churches within Alberta, as well as to influential religious and community leaders such as Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy. Constructions of specific forms of Christian citizenship were constituted through the everyday practices identified in the ONC columns.

**African-Canadian presence in Alberta**

Between 1907 and 1911, approximately one thousand Black Americans immigrated to Alberta. Both push (increasing racial discrimination in Oklahoma) and pull (the extensive advertisements by the Canadian government to attract farmers to the Canadian Prairies) factors motivated these early pioneers. It has been well documented through government papers and popular newspapers of the day, such as the *Edmonton Bulletin* and *The Albertan*, that the reaction of governments, the media, and economic groups such as the Board of Trade was one of hostile racism. Nearly every Prairie town objected to the movement of Blacks from Oklahoma to Western Canada. Further, R. Bruce Shepard’s exemplary text, *Deemed Unsuitable*, does a good job of laying out the journey from the United States that many of these pioneers undertook in order to arrive in Alberta. Of note, Shepard clearly articulates how Prairie newspapers have been an important source of stereotyping and negative representation of these immigrants from the United States. By way of support, Kelly argues, “common understandings of race as a biological concept were promoted in newspapers and magazines reinforcing an underlying question as to Black suitability for ‘the development of the highest sort of citizenship in Canada,’ given that their
sense of humour and predisposition to a life of ease render [their] presence undesirable.” Finally, over the period of 1905 to 1912, various official and unofficial strategies were employed by immigration authorities to discourage Blacks from moving to the Canadian West.

Black immigrants who did make it into Alberta by 1911 settled primarily in four isolated rural communities: Junkins (now Wildwood), Keystone (now Breton), Campsie (near Barrhead), and Pine Creek (now Amber Valley, twenty miles from Athabasca). According to the 1911 census, only 30 percent of these pioneers were located in urban areas, with 208 in Edmonton and 72 in Calgary. By 1921 the census information for Calgary recorded 66 under the "Negro" column, while the Edmonton population had grown to 277. Although Edmonton was the hub for the ONC column, the comings and goings among these four communities were also highlighted. Much of the literature that discusses this period of time assumes that urban experiences, in contrast to self-contained rural experience, was rife with ongoing daily racism and discrimination. We argue that an examination of the everyday lived experience of urban folks as constituted through the ONC column can complement the existing literature and illustrate how peoples of African descent were able to live bearable lives with similar as well as different aspirations to those who were racialized as white. Palmer and Palmer’s and Boyko’s studies indicate that stereotyping within print media was evident and consequently did affect levels of expectations as well as the employment prospects of many of these early immigrants. The issue of restricted employment opportunities and economic racism is pointed out by Shepard and substantiated by Palmer and Palmer, who state, "[I]n Calgary during the 1920s and 1930s the job of porter was virtually the only one open to blacks.” This segmentation of labour in relation to racialized understandings was not unique to Alberta but has been recorded by Sarah Jane Mathieu and Agnes Calliste in a historical analysis of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters in Canada, as well as via the autobiography of former porter, union leader, and social activist Stanley Grizzle. In Edmonton, on the other hand, there was also "a group of entrepreneurs who were not entirely dependent upon a black clientele.” However, little is known about this group’s citizenship practices and how they constituted themselves as new Canadians. Some historians argue that this urban group could only "excel and find recognition in the less rigidly guarded, more fluid, informal world of entertainment and sports.” As well, urban Blacks in Alberta during the 1920s are often depicted as victims of racial discrimination with regard to housing and public facilities; little is written about their undertakings as active citizens. Velma and Leah Carter’s *Windows of Our Memories* does acknowledge both the ONC columns and the EAME church, but little analysis is given to the role that such a newspaper column played within
the community. One of the interesting aspects of the column that is not evident elsewhere in the literature on Black newspapers is the fact that ONC appeared in a newspaper aimed at readers racialized as white rather than in a specific newspaper for African Canadians. In this context, our analysis of a newspaper column entitled “Our Negro Citizens” will complement this partial view of the urban Black community of 1920s Edmonton.

**Theoretical orientation: Lefebvre’s theory of “everyday life”**

“Our Negro Citizens” appeared weekly in two major Edmonton daily newspapers—in the *Edmonton Journal* from 10 September 1921 to 12 August 1924 and in the *Edmonton Bulletin* from 27 August 1921 to 21 August 1922. We have traced the columns beyond these dates, but, for the sake of in-depth analysis, we have chosen to limit our data to primarily 1921–22. The columns were often placed alongside the religion section and other news items. Each issue consists of short descriptions of and comments on the everyday comings and goings of a nascent African-Canadian community in Edmonton and environs. The topics highlighted ranged from social activities such as weddings, church meetings, dining, and entertainment, to fundraising, elections, and lectures given by the people within and outside the community. In some ways, these pieces could easily be viewed as mere society columns, as the trivial comings and goings of a specific social group striving for racial uplift and middle-class status. However, a deeper, theoretically infused analysis of the column urges us to see a value in exploring further the everyday lived experiences of these settlers. In particular, we draw on the work of Henri Lefebvre, a French social theorist and philosopher who argues that what is regarded as trivial in everyday life (micro aspects) is just as complex as what is traditionally conceived as the macro-sociological—“both levels ‘reflect’ the society which encompasses them and which they constitute.” They cannot be analyzed as separate domains. Drawing on Lefebvre’s dialectical approach to the study of everyday life, we are able to link the specific instances of comings and goings of the African-Canadian communities to the wider issues of race and racialization as well as to other social issues taking place on a national and international level. Further, in analyzing the specifics of everyday life described by the newspaper columns, we find that Lefebvre’s concepts of strategies and tactics can provide us with some insights into the everyday citizenship practices of the African-Canadian community in Edmonton during the 1920s. A good starting point, according to Lefebvre, is that “individuals can be differentiated by their degree of participation in the consciousness and action of the group; leaders are people who think up the tactic, most importantly, the strategy, and who devote themselves to putting it into action.”
Although Lefebvre acknowledges that tactics and strategies do not exhaust the reality of social groups, he emphasizes the importance of such theorization in that “it eliminates the illusion of inertia and rest of social groups.” These concepts allow us to rethink the stereotype of African Canadians in 1920s Alberta as consistently passive victims of racial discrimination fully segregated from mainstream Alberta. Instead, we can explore what strategies and tactics were discursively produced by individuals and group leaders within and through the columns.

As we mentioned above, this newspaper column is characteristic of the trivia. For each issue, at least twenty people are mentioned, with some issues exceeding forty names of community members. In order to have a general idea of who these people were and what they did, we generated a database in which the names of individuals and organizations, and their roles and activities in each issue were recorded. Based on this database, we conducted a quantitative content analysis to count the appearance and frequency of those individuals and organizations in order to identify which names were most frequently mentioned across several columns.

However, we wanted to push our analysis further than just content analysis to incorporate an understanding of textual meaning. As Richardson argues, the study of manifest meaning through quantitative content analysis is not adequate in revealing the latent meaning of the texts: that is, the ideological and political dimension of the texts. In the process of textual production, consumption, and distribution, “it is also important to recognize that textual or journalistic meaning is communicated as much by absence as by presence; as much by what is ‘missing’ or excluded as by what is remembered and present.” Examining what is written allows us to analyze how relationships are constituted through the columns’ textual representation. As Richardson argues, we should “ask what does this text say about the society in which it was produced and the society that it was produced for? What influence or impact do we think that the text may have had on social relations?”

**Presence and activeness of a community leader: Rev. Geo. W. Slater Jr.**

Based on the results of our quantitative content analysis, a number of individuals and families are identified as active within the community. One of the most significant figures is Reverend Geo. W. Slater Jr., pastor of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (EAME) church of Edmonton. Starting in 1921 and continuing to at least 1924, Rev. Slater was identified as the compiler of the community’s narratives; thus, he has some control over which activities were
His narrative constitutes him as having had what Lefebvre identifies as the sense of presence and activeness of a community leader. It is therefore to Rev. Slater that we look in order to tease out the tactics and strategy identified by Lefebvre. As a member of EAME, he associated himself with a denomination that was founded on both theological and sociological beliefs. The underlying ideology of his church rejected the then-popular negative theological interpretations that tended to dehumanize and render people of African descent second-class citizens. While not discussed directly in the everyday comings and goings of the ONC columns, we are able to piece together some background information on Slater. We find that he was an American who regarded his position in Edmonton as on par with missionary work, especially necessary during the early 1920s when one considers the lack of social services and state responsibility for looking after those perceived as in need. In 1911 Rev. Slater assumed pastorate of what was then the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Clinton church in Iowa. Through tracking the discourses in the column, it is evident that the United States was still an important aspect of the reverend’s life as he and his wife travelled back and forth to the United States to visit family or to attend various African Methodist Episcopal (AME) conferences. The fact that the U.S.-based parent church of Rev. Slater developed from within a protest movement against racism marks his subject position within the community as not just religious but also racialized. We can also verify that he was educated at a well-known AME university, Wilberforce, which he regarded highly. His wife, Missouri, adopted the gendered role of helpmate for her husband’s various missionary duties both internal and external to the church and is often praised in ONC for her singing and administering to the sick. Few personal details about Rev. Slater are presented in the columns, but we do know that he had at least two daughters, both of whom were living in Los Angeles with his parents and sister, and a son, Duke, who was a successful football player in the United States.

Like other parts of Canada and the United States, Edmonton had both Methodist (AME) and Baptist (Shiloh) churches. While Rev. Slater does to some extent prioritize and highlight the EAME church activities, the actual ONC content moves beyond denominational inclination by including Shiloh Baptist church events. Thus, racialized identities can be privileged in relation to religious denomination:

Last Tuesday night at the Shiloh Baptist church was organized the Douglas Athletic club which proposes to encourage the colored men and women in all sports such as baseball, football, basketball, lawn tennis, croquet and all track work. The club is composed very largely of persons belonging to and attending the two churches, Baptist and Methodist.
The ONC column reveals a flurry of different social and political activities organized around the EAME, some of which gave social and economic solace that would certainly challenge the status quo and Robin Winks’ claim that “for all that these churches—Baptist, Methodist, and other—did give the Negro in succor and inspiration, on the whole they were ineffective in meeting the major problems.” In fact, based on the analysis of the newspaper columns, we would argue that Winks’ generalizations about the role of churches and church leaders offers a partial rather than complex reading of the situation. This newspaper column was used, primarily by Rev. Geo. W. Slater Jr., as a tactic to challenge the unequal power relations and build community between Edmonton and scattered rural areas, a tactic not unique to Alberta but also noted in other Eastern provinces in Canada.

Constructing/reconstructing the community

The identities constituted through Rev. Slater’s narratives are not of stereotypical Negroes (as they were often portrayed in newspapers and magazines at that time) who are illiterate or capable only of directed heavy manual work; rather, they are individuals who have taken advantage of educational opportunities and are moral and gainfully employed. There are no stories where members of the community are presented in a straightforward negative way. In line with the thinking at that time, those within the “coloured” community who fall on hard times are seen as the responsibility of the community rather than the state. When Rev. Slater hears of a destitute old homestead couple, his response is that “this is a most unfortunate case, for the old people and also for the taxpayer.”

Here, the response to old stereotypes is related to a public fear that immigrants of African descent will inevitably become charges of the state. In contrast, the column reflects citizens who are complex and active, and for whom hard work and education is paramount for social advancement and racial uplift:

At the beginning of the new year’s term the following persons entered school: Richard Slater, Nellie Waggoner and Sam Colemon the day period, and Mrs. H. Brooks night period, at the Technical High School; Mrs. E. O. Anderson and Mrs. Hines of Calgary, the McTavish Business school; Mrs. Slater, Anderson and Brooks, musical course at the Victoria High. A number of others plan to enter soon.

These citizens were also experienced teachers such as Mrs. Payne, a graduate of Wilberforce University, who was teaching at Junkins; entrepreneurs such as Mesdames Bell and Proctor, who opened a dressmaking and fancywork store.
in downtown Edmonton; or Dan Hayes, who opened a machinery building and reassessing shop. They also included successful settlers such as Mr. C.A. Watts of Sturgeon, who “owns a quarter section well improved; eight head of good horses; fourteen milkcows; one hundred head of hogs of the best breed; and many hundred head of fowls of all kinds; and a nice farm cottage well furnished.” As well, in support of active citizens, this column purposefully selected and reproduced the stories of a U.S. magazine entitled *The Presbyterian Record*, which introduced “the most remarkable advancements made by the colored people of the United States since freedom.”

Of the three million men, nearly two millions are farmers or farm laborers; 80 percent, of the women are in necessary home and industrial life; accumulated wealth over a billion dollars; directors of seventy banks, forty periodicals and an Associated Negro Press; 400,000 called to the colors during the recent war, and 200,000 saw actual service overseas; that in Alabama, where 1,133,000 was appropriated for 720 Rosenwald schools, $430,000 of it was contributed by colored people.

Discourses are constructed within a context, and within these columns, we can see a link between existing ideas and practices around race and a normalizing of capitalism as an economic system. Rev. Slater’s positive construction of African Canadian citizens is clearly manifested in his response to W.E.B. Du Bois, a foremost pan-African intellectual and the editor of the journal *Crisis*, who, upon inquiring as to whether “colored people were permitted to settle in Canada,” received the answer that “from all the information that he can get that good, industrious and thrifty colored people are welcomed to Canada, and will find justice and protection.” This linking of thrift to capitalism can also be seen throughout the columns, with constant reference to issues of unemployment and labour. Various meetings with the purpose of discussing employment and getting more opportunities for employment are recorded in the ONC, as links are reinforced between citizenship and home ownership:

Mr. and Mrs. Oliver are among our progressive citizens who understand the value of owning a home. Every colored family in Edmonton should this spring buy a home if only on the installment plan. It beats paying rent.

In addition to the construction of positive representation of the coloured community, Rev. Slater also used this column as a tool to challenge, disrupt, and present counter hegemonic media representations that stymie the denigration
of African Canadians. As we mentioned above, Prairie newspapers at this period of time were identified as an important source of stereotypes and negative representation of African Canadians. Examination of stories embedded with stereotypes reveals the use of rhetorical tropes such as hyperbole, metaphor, or metonym. Through rhetorical strategies, an isolated incident can be immediately linked to the Black settlers as a whole and, consequently, can have a negative impact on the whole community. One such case happened in Edmonton on 4 April 1911 and was well documented by historians—an incident in which, as it turned out, a white girl fabricated a story of an attack by a Black man. This "news of the supposed attack spread as quickly as the proverbial prairie fire, but managed to pick up a few embellishments on the way…. [P]rominent newspapers immediately linked the Black settlers with the incident." Racist hyperbole such as "The Black Peril" became a catalyst for agitation against Black immigration to Alberta and for a later vigorous petition campaign by the Edmonton Board of Trade. While this incident indicates the foregrounding of “the age-old sexual mythology that surrounds the Black man” as a menace to white women, it also illustrates the role that newspapers played in naturalizing, for some political purpose, ideological constructions of African Canadians as violent and dangerous. Our rationale for familiarizing readers with this case is to demonstrate how words operate in an intertextual way as they play off existing narratives. Thus, when the theme of sexual proclivities of Black men reappeared again a decade later in the Edmonton Journal, the community, through the ONC column, was able to identify and respond to its charges. This time the African-Canadian community would not let history simply repeat itself; it now had access to a white audience. On 11 March 1922, the newspaper reported that George Borden, who self-identified, falsely, as a coloured sleeping car porter, had been arrested a few days earlier for “attempting to force his attention on a young white girl.” In responding to this incident, the ONC column immediately published a letter from H.E. Williams on behalf of coloured sleeping car employees in Edmonton that aimed to curb the negative impact of this incident on the whole community:

Now I wish to state that he is not a railroad porter and that the railroad company does not employ colored men of his type. They employ men of a clean moral reputation…. Why I call your attention to this is because there are ten or twelve [Black] porters with families living in this city at present, men of that clean moral type that the companies demand, and the action of this man Borden casts a reflection on those men in the eyes of some of the people."
The West and Beyond

In the next issue, 18 March 1922, the column followed up this case and published Rev. Slater’s support of H.E. Williams’ statement.

The reporter [Slater] wished to testify to the truthfulness of the statements of H. E. Williams last week in his article, where he defends the porter’s union as composed of good citizens. The reporter, having had good opportunity to visit them in their homes and quarters has found them very largely intelligent, progressive, home owning and morally dependable. These men, having had exceptional opportunity of travel and observation, furnish that class of our colored citizenry that is the real backbone of all our progress. Having had relatives and friends who were porters and knowing the conditions of their labor, the wonder to us is not that a few may now and then go astray but the remarkable thing is that many of them are most excellent citizens.47

The sleeping car porters’ case indicates how this column, with the aid of Rev. Slater, worked as a tactic to constitute counter-narratives that challenged the media’s negative representation of African Canadian men as violent and dangerous. It also allowed for a challenge to the easy transposing of individual traits onto a social group and thus worked to curb the potential impact of an isolated incident on the entire community. Examining Rev. Slater’s supportive testimony, it is interesting to note the inherently racialized language at work. Reference is made, for example, to "coloured" people as "largely intelligent, … home owning and morally dependable." The type of citizen produced through the column is one who fits the expectations of an ideal Canadian citizen and illustrates Rev. Slater’s privileging of certain national/racialized narratives that can be regarded as "discourses in the name of power."46 The form of citizenship constituted is a Christian one based upon class-based ideals that reinforce the tenets of property ownership and capitalism. Contradictions are writ large here; although Rev. Slater comes from within the community, he is not immune to the taking up of racialized ideologies that dominate within the wider society.

Race consciousness:
Presence and activeness of political organizations

It is noticeable how many political and secular organizations are identified in the column. Many are organizations based on race consciousness in the sense that their aim and purpose is for the betterment of coloured people. Palmer and Palmer speak of the early African-Canadian secular organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which had close ties
with both the EAME and Shiloh churches in Edmonton. As a branch of the New York–based organization of Marcus Garvey, it was dedicated to black self-improvement and consciousness. According to Palmer and Palmer,

[O]rganizational activity reached a peak in 1921 when, under the auspices of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, two other organizations were established. The Negro Welfare Association of Alberta was established to deal with the growing problem of unemployment among Edmonton’s blacks, while the Negro Political Association of Edmonton fought for black rights.

Other than this concise commentary about the existence of Black secular organizations in Edmonton, little detailed public information is available about them. On this point, the column provides us with some historical data about the presence and activeness of these political organizations. First, the column demonstrates the significant role of UNIA within African-Canadian communities, and meetings (Pine Creek and Junkins) were noted and highlighted in nearly every issue. While the details of these meetings were not reported, Rev. Slater offers consistent support and praise for Marcus Garvey. In the issue of March 1922, he states,

Making all allowances for human frailties, we believe Marcus Garvey to be a great, good, and honest man. His scheme is a gigantic international one for the Negro, and, if only one half of it succeeds, he will have contributed mightily to the solution of one of the world’s greatest problems—the race problem. No Negro although he may not agree with Mr. Garvey in total, yet must admire the consummate ability of the man who in less than four years can organize into one organic body four million Negroes from all parts of the world.

Even when financial difficulties were emerging in 1923 about Garvey’s scheme, the ONC position didn’t really shift, and whereas the column announced an upcoming meeting to discuss Garvey, it is noticeable that after an initial cancellation, the meeting was not publicly rescheduled or reported upon.

As well as identifying with U.S. race-based politics, ONC issued a strong call for the community to pay attention to the vote in Edmonton and for individuals to become active citizens. During the 1922 election, Slater strongly questioned readers as to whether they had voted. Voting and “welfare of the race” were at the forefront of local political concerns. In the very first issue of the column, we garner the objectives of the Negro Political Association (NPA):
The object of the association is as follows: to study political principles and tenets of political parties, legislative measures proposed by legislative bodies, and all political propositions as they affect the welfare of the race. It is not the purpose of this organization to endorse any measure or men, but rather to study and give correct information as to reports, studying treatises, or assembling the colored citizens to listen to representative exponents of various theories and propositions. Also to get the people to become voting citizens.¹¹

At voting time, the column was used by the NPA to deliver political claims, on the one hand, and, on the other, to urge African Canadians to use their votes to promote social change:

The Negro Political Association of Alberta wish to inform the different political parties that we will not endorse any until we have heard all the candidates of the different parties. Then that party that sets forth in their platform the true principles of democracy and the protection of their citizens and country, regardless of race, creed, or color, without discrimination and we are sure these candidates are not camouflaging, then that party we will endorse and give our hearty support to at the polls and live up to our obligation in every respect.⁵²

Finally, the column publicized how the work by the Negro Welfare Association was linked to other political groups in Edmonton, a fact attested to by the support it obtained from the mayor of Edmonton, D.M. Duggan:

The committee composed of Rev. Geo. W. Slater, Jr., Pastor of the Immanuel A.M.E. Church, Ira J. Day, and D.W. Anderson, who a few days ago called upon the mayor and the principal authorities in the interests of the unemployed colored people report that their efforts are meeting with very gratifying success. Rev. Geo. Slater Jr. reports that he finds that the mines, the packing plants, and the harvest fields are securing extra help now from the ranks of their people who were idle a few days ago and that also in complaints with the request made in the following letter from Mayor Duggan, Rev. Geo. Slater Jr. called upon Mr. Jamieson of the C.N.R. and finds out the demands for labour on the railroad is such that all of the unemployed men of the Negroes can find permanent work with that company.⁵³
Through the efforts of these political organizations, African Canadians were able to participate in both the political and economic domains, and had connections with the mainstream authorities rather than remaining, as is frequently indicated in earlier literature, an isolated and often powerless community stymied by racism.

Racial discrimination:
Using the narrative of the Canadian nation

It is apparent in reading the column that the Black community was in its early stages of formation and that many of its members were in a phase of transition from regarding themselves as solely Americans (family visits to the United States are consistently interspersed in the column) to positioning of themselves as Canadians citizens with certain rights and expectations in Canada. The ONC column was a site where issues of race and racism in the international U.S. context were linked to the local issues of racialization. Certain discursive practices are apparent in the highlighting of active participation of members of the community in various organizations such as the Negro Political Association.

Further, Rev. Slater takes up existing perspectives that constitute Canadian identity as aligned with fairness. He uses what can be regarded as a narrative of the nation, the stories, images, landscapes, scenarios—national symbols and rituals which stand for, or represent—which give meaning to a nation. For example, in the issue of 21 January 1922, the column reports that Rev. Slater received news from Campsie that “the parents of the colored children who have not been permitted to attend school for five to seven years are petitioning the new government for redress of their wrongs.” In support of their petition, Rev. Slater argues that “we feel sure that that Canadian spirit of justice and fair play would not tolerate that situation for a moment when once it is appraised of the same.” In the follow-up report on 4 February 1922, it is noted that “the colored children have been shut out of school for about seven years in that district. The white people … have arbitrarily contrary to the legal vote of the people, mapped out a checker board school district that makes it impossible for the colored people to go to school unless they leave the district.” Rev. Slater once again asks, “Is this Canadian justice and fair play?” Finally, he laid the issue before the ministerial association:

A committee consisting of several of the more prominent preachers of the city was selected to wait upon the minister of education concerning the matter. On Wednesday they were very cordially received by the minister and were given assurance that the situation was under
immediate advisement and that in a short time it is hoped to have the whole matter amicably settled. Wednesday night Rev. Mr. Slater reported the recent situation to a meeting of the U.N.I.A.55

This example reveals that Rev. Slater not only took advantage of the capacity of newspapers to publicize this injustice in Campsie, but he also used the opportunity to question Canada’s self-proclaimed stance and moral high ground on issues of justice. Further, he strategically broadened the issue to the mainstream community and worked collectively with other religious associations to solve the issue of discrimination and exclusion. Here, Rev. Slater’s ability to act as a mediator between communities and his effectiveness as a leader able to galvanize support on a community rather than individual basis are highlighted. The struggle against racial discrimination directed toward the coloured children in Campsie undermines the stereotypical images of passive Black church leaders and African Canadians totally isolated from mainstream Edmonton society. Similarly, when one of his church members was refused entry to the Metropolitan Theatre in Edmonton, Rev. Slater regards it as an issue for all coloured residents and unequivocally calls for justice under the British flag. For him, such resistance meant a more diplomatic and tactical approach that continually co-opted nationalist discourses that envisioned Canada’s past, present, and future as a country of justice and fair play. Here he positions himself as a Canadian, fully accessing his rights and seeing no difficulties in being both “coloured” and Canadian. In the 4 February 1922 issue in which the above Campsie case is discussed, the story is immediately followed in the next paragraph by laudatory praise of the Canadian sense of justice:

The colored people of Edmonton rejoiced to know that their honored fellow citizen, the Hon. Charles Stewart, displayed the true Canadian spirit of justice and fair play when he refused to send Matthew Bullcock back to North Carolina, U.S.A., where colored people are lynched for almost trifling cause. This action of the honorable minister of the interior was in strict keeping with the attitude of the Canadian government from the old American slavery days when Canada became a safe asylum for the fleeing slave by way of the Underground Railroad.56

The idea of Canada as fair and just is not only drawn upon as justification of rights but is also linked with responsibilities, as these new African Canadians are urged to demonstrate their appreciation and loyalty to Canada. So, for example, the following was highlighted one week:
The Chicago Defender last week had a full page given to a review of the history of Canada’s attitude in protecting the coloured people who have in the last century fled to her soil for escape from the injustice of oppression of the States. Every Negro should read it and tell it to his children for there is no history like it in the world. The land of the Maple leaf shall ever be dear to men of Negro blood.

In combining the seemingly contradictory elements that recognize the existence of racial discrimination in Canada while praising Canada as a country of justice and fair play, ONC delivered a message of critique, in an acceptable way, to a mainstream Canadian audience. Also evident in the column are various linguistic strategies such as “foregrounding” in relation to the United States and what Richardson, after Teun van Dijk, identifies as the “ideological square.” Richardson argues that for van Dijk, “the ideological square is characterized by a Positive Self-Presentation and a simultaneous Negative Other-Presentation; it is a way of perceiving and representing the world—and specifically ‘our’ and ‘their’ actions, position and role within the world.”

This strategy enabled the survival of this column and its line of critique in the very mainstream Edmonton Journal and Edmonton Bulletin newspapers. As Lefebvre argues, “survival in itself is a form of action.” In this sense, it is apparent that Rev. Slater played the role of mediator between the mainstream, dominant Anglo-Saxon community and the African-Canadian community by discursively drawing on and reproducing ideas across both communities.

Rev. Slater as a mediator of discourses:
Slippage between communities

The column’s title indicates that the writing was couched in rhetoric of the “Negro citizen,” and thus framed African Canadians as possessing a distinct form of citizenship, one set apart from the norm of “white” citizenship. This distinction from the mainstream recalls Gillian Rose’s comment that “racist discourses construct racialized identities in part by erecting supposedly impermeable barriers which depend on an essentialist understanding of difference.” Through examination of the columns, it is apparent that ideologies are not bound to distinct and fully segregated communities. At times, it is evident that the column was produced to speak to more than the existing coloured community, as when Rev. Slater highlights how a domestic position has been found for a woman in the community and how he would be able to provide this service again if necessary. More explicitly, he states, “[W]e know that the column is read by white and colored settlers.” So the column was not just for the so-called Ne-
gro community; rather, the newspaper crossed discursive boundaries, allowing for flows from the mainstream into the newly emerging African-Canadian communities. Finally, by introducing and filtering the existing dominant ideologies, Rev. Slater helped construct a community identity characterized by a willingness to open up—and be uplifted. Identified most explicitly in terms of the discourse and social practices of women’s organizations, gendered/racialized uplift is a practice not unique to Alberta; it has been recorded by James St. G. Walker and Dionne Brand in other provinces in Canada.62 Indeed, a language of racial uplift joins with other narratives around temperance to act as part of a larger discursive formation that produces social practices such as administering to the poor. In the issue of February 1922, the column made its regular report of the meeting of the Phylis Wheatley Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).63

Mrs. H. Brooks and Mrs. Shirley Oliver read well written papers on the life of Miss Willard, and Madame Pinkey Hunt read one of Dunbar’s poems on Frederick Douglas. Mrs. Edna Anderson recited a beautiful poem. After several very interesting remarks the ladies took up the discussion of heredity and environment. Rev. Geo W. Slater, Jr., pastor of the Emmanuel A.M.E. church, being present, was called upon for an address. Rev. Mr. Slater, in his remarks, called the attention of the ladies to the great spread of the drug habit, as he had been informed by an address to the Social Service Council by Mrs. Magistrate Murphy.64

Evident here are the ways in which race-consciousness was achieved through the holding of regular meetings to read literature, some of which was related to racial uplift. Rev. Slater discursively reproduced, introduced, and linked women within his church community to mainstream WCTU ideas on moral regulation. Two prominent women and members of the mainstream WCTU are referenced in many of the ONC columns: Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy. In highlighting the speeches and homilies of “Mrs. Magistrate Murphy,” better known as Emily Murphy, the column links existing dominant ideologies concerning social change and prohibition in 1920s Edmonton with these new coloured citizens. Embedded in these dominant ideas were perceptions of women as responsible for saving the sanctity of home and patriarchal rule within it. As we know, Emily Murphy was a well-known Canadian women’s rights activist and the first woman magistrate in Canada.65 Her ideas represented mainstream Canadian feminism at that time. By consistently making positive references to Emily Murphy, the column once again emphasizes the key role Rev. Slater played in mediating ideas of the mainstream community racialized as white and communities racialized as coloured. More importantly,
it demonstrates the role of an African-Canadian women’s organization in trying to upgrade their knowledge to be on a par with that of mainstream white women. In other words, the subtext of the message presented here is that African Canadian women held similar ideas in terms of temperance to their white counterparts and that through reading and consciousness raising, they also had the potential to be the equals of white middle-class women. That the Wheatley WCTU had links to the mainstream temperance movement in Alberta and that members attended provincial meetings alongside other women representing rural and urban unions has been verified through an examination of the Reports of the Annual Convention of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Alberta. While the third annual convention booklet of 1915 made no mention of the Phylis Wheatley group, examination of a 1916 Annual Report identifies the existence of the group through a hand-written note indicating a “coloured” group. In verifying the date of their establishment, the 1921 Annual Report states that “Wheatley observed their 4th anniversary on 25 July; they have purchased over 100 blotters and cards and succeeded in having over 50 children sign the pledge.” Further, the columns indicate that the Phylis Wheatley WCTU members were active women who associated with the mainstream WCTU. The stated aim of the WCTU is Christian citizenship, and this aim is certainly exemplified within the work of the Phylis Wheatley group.

In 1921 they reported holding fourteen regular meetings, three special and one parlor meeting. Members of the union canvassed the district during the referendum campaign, held a prohibition concert put on a drive for new members and have 18 paid up members. Observed Mothers’ day. Held a Frances Willard memorial meeting gave a drama and bazaar from which we realized $129.59, most of which has been spent. We found a home for a small girl who could not otherwise get to school, gave a free Xmas social to orphan children. We mother a L.T.L. of 12 members. Two of our members were part of a committee to wait upon city council to protest against high rental taxes.

According to Mariana Valverde, whose important book *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water* overlaps the period of time under discussion in this essay, the WCTU, as a primarily small-town venture with an exclusively female membership, enabled opportunities for autonomous organization. So, the Phylis Wheatley WCTU—named after the founder and representative of African-American literature in the United States—provided women of the African-Canadian community with a spiritual and intellectual place for consciousness raising and autonomous organization.
The racialized nature of the Phylis Wheatley group is further highlighted by the fact that, unlike other district unions, the Wheatley group appears to be the only one, at this time, that is not identified by a geographic area (e.g., Highlands, Westmount) within Edmonton. Similarly, a prominent member of the Famous Five, Nellie McClung, is often praised in the column for her various activities related to her role as a member of the legislative assembly as well as for her ecumenical and Methodist work in Canada and in England. She is credited by Rev. Slater with giving a presentation at the Wesley Methodist that was a “rich feast filled with fact, reason and soul.” She is further credited with speaking “highly of the dignity, learning and soul-strength of the Negro delegates to the Methodist Ecumenical conference in London.”

While McClung’s interaction with the EAME and Rev. Slater seemed to revolve amicably around Methodism and temperance, nonetheless Valverde cautions that “feminism, Christian, chauvinism, and ethnocentrism were for McClung and her fellow feminists a unified whole: the superiority of the Anglo culture is not an incidental belief that could be exercised, leaving a pure feminism behind.” Such ideas, espoused by Murphy and other women involved with the WCTU, on the importance of mothers and families are linked to a wider social concern for racial purity at that time. In trying to understand these early forms of feminism, we have to recognize Murphy’s paradoxical role in the Canadian race-making project, as well as her articulation of settler woman as an emblem of sexual vulnerability and an agent of government. There are evident contradictions within Murphy’s position as a liberal in relation to gender yet a conservative racist and nationalist in her work as a writer and judge in the women’s court. Questions are raised here as to how the women of the Phylis Wheatley WCTU related to the dominant discourse of moral regulation that was infused with issues of racial degeneration, whiteness, nation, and woman’s mission as mother of the race. Were these African Canadian women aware of this disjuncture in beliefs? Although the columns do not give an indication as to how the Phylis Wheatley WCTU reacted to the racist narratives of their fellow temperance allies, Rev. Slater states, “We have heard Mrs. Murphy give her lecture on the ‘Black Candle’ and shall secure the book for reference for my library.”

**Conclusion**

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In concluding, we return to Richardson’s questions posed at the beginning of this essay: What does this text say about the society in which it was produced and the society that it was produced for? What influence or impact do we think that the text may have had on social relations?
First, 1920s Edmonton, Alberta, was a vibrant place in terms of community, social, and political organizations. Dominant ideas of the period were racialized, gendered, and classed, all of which intersected religious sensibilities and were crystallized through social practices related to the temperance movement. Coming from a Methodist church, the column illustrates the intersections of these various complex discursive practices and the identities that are enabled as well as constrained. These intersections are exemplified in relation to mainstream elite middle- and upper-class Methodist women such as Nellie McClung and Emily Murphy, both of whom were associated with the campaign for temperance in wider Canadian society.

The naming of the column is interesting and says a lot about the society for which it was produced. Peoples of African descent were regarded as separate beings within a society normalized as white. This underlying assumption of separate spheres based on racialized identities is what makes plausible the very idea of a column entitled “Our Negro Citizens.” There is also a degree of irony in the title, as the column is less about “our” African Canadian citizens—African Canadians as wards of the dominant white state—than it is about the construction of “us” as Canadian citizens. Put differently, the column is as much about the African-Canadian community’s understandings of itself as it is about the stereotypes within mainstream society. Further, we can also argue that the “us” is not a stable category or a one-dimensional position, as this “us” can shift from a racialized collective to an elite, classed, and socio-economic grouping. In terms of what effects on social relations ONC had, we can start with the insight that people project themselves as certain types of persons and that the identity that a person projects relates, in part, to the activity that he or she is attempting to accomplish. So the activities that are engaged with will illustrate what types of identities these church members are trying to perform and in particular how Rev. Slater was able to produce himself as an important member of the coloured community who had access to elite individuals from the mainstream community.

From what we can discern, “Our Negro Citizens” was produced for a society that would enable peoples of African descent to achieve their due recognition. It was also produced in order to give the self-defined coloured individuals highlighted in the column a way to position themselves within Canadian society as respectable, moral, Christian, middle-class citizens who value hard work, thrift, and property ownership. As Lefebvre argues, not only do subjects vanish at the threshold of the everyday; they are constituted and reconstituted there as well. In positioning the ONC column in relation to literature on Black newspapers, we argue that the column offers a different reading of traditional literature that tends to highlight problems of small readership base and lack of
ongoing financial support. Instead, ONC is illustrative of a space of border crossing where communities racialized as white and communities racialized as coloured are able to engage with common ideas. Similarly, community formation took place between and within the four rural and urban African-Canadian communities. Taking up the idea that language use is a form of enacting identity, we can observe processes of collective identity formation taking place. However, this formation is neither static nor one-dimensional; instead, we extend our analysis of identity and draw on the work of Stuart Hall, who theorizes identification as complex and more about becoming than being. As he views it, “cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning.” If we take up this argument that “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past,” then it is evident that these citizens are both Canadian and American. The ideas constituted in the column enable identification with their past experiences in the United States as well as their present everyday lives in Canada. Thus identifications constituted in the columns can, at least tentatively, be regarded as “diasporic” rather than solely Canadian or American, a point supported by Jane Rhodes, who argues, “[E]xamining black migrations in North America—the formation of a continental diaspora—is crucial for understanding the dynamics of black America and black Canadian identities.”

It has to be recognized that the discourses within the newspaper illustrate a classed positioning by those within the community as they attempt to provide “uplift” for others perceived as less fortunate than themselves. The Wheatley WCTU saw a lot of their work as rescuing the destitute and the poor and as such produced themselves as good, respectable, Christian citizens who would assist their less fortunate neighbours. Using de Certeau’s understanding of the everyday, we argue that the “Our Negro Citizens” column was very much in the nature of tactics. Rev. Slater used the language of nation, moral regulation, religion, gender, and class as a tactic that “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety.” In the process, the emergent African-Canadian community was able to challenge negative constructions of their community identity, fight against denigration in the media, and interrupt the unequal power relationship with the mainstream community racialized as white.
Notes

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2 Throughout, the term African Canadian is used interchangeably with Black. Coloured is used when referring directly to the column.


5 Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, “Urban Blacks in Alberta,” Alberta History 29 (Summer 1981): 8; Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer, “The Black Experience in Alberta,” in Peoples of Alberta: Portraits of Cultural Diversity, ed. Howard Palmer and Tamara Palmer (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1985), 366–93. About ten years ago, one of the authors encountered this column while undertaking archival research for a book project. A return to the “Our Negro Citizens” columns through the generous funding of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) has meant that we are now able to give due recognition to the importance and significance of the columns.

6 However, the Canadian government deterred Black American farmers under the racialized excuse that Canada’s cold climate is not suitable for non-whites. For further details on this part of history, see R. Bruce Shepard, “Plain Racism: The Reaction against Oklahoma Black Immigration to the Canadian Plains,” in Racism in Canada, ed. McKague Ormond (Saskatchewan: Fifth House, 1991), 14–31; Shepard, Deemed Unsuitable; Palmer and Palmer, “Black Experience in Alberta.”


8 Kelly, Under the Gaze, 42.

9 For details of these strategies, see Boyko, Black Canadians 1791–1970; Shepard, “Plain Racism.”

10 Sarah Carter, Lesley Erickson, Patricia Roome, and Char Smith, eds., Unsettled Pasts: Reconceiving the West through Women’s History (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005); Hooks, Keystone Legacy.

12 Ibid., and Boyko, Black Canadians 1791–1970. An examination of the Edmonton Journal and Bulletin at this time indicates that jokes portraying Blacks as stupid were prevalent. As well, because the newspapers took many of their stories from larger newspapers in the United States, there was a crossover and travelling of racist stories.


18 Junkins was also highlighted, as there was a growing church community in the area.

19 This idea of “uplift” is an ongoing part of Black identification and also has roots in W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of the Talented Ten.


21 Ibid., 106–07.

22 Ibid., 106.


24 Ibid., 93.

25 Ibid., 51.

26 In the first issue of the Edmonton Journal, 19 September 1921, it states, “News for this column should be reported to Rev Geo. W. Slater, Jr., of Coppin Centre News Agency, 9633 107 A Avenue, Edmonton, Alta: phone 6084.”


28 “In 1855 the Cincinnati Conference on the Methodist Episcopal church decided to raise money to establish a college for black youth that incorporated the following year as Wilberforce University … after a brief suspension at the beginning of the Civil war, it was re-opened under the sponsorship of the African Methodist/Episcopal church.” See John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans, 8th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 181.
While not discussed explicitly in the column, Internet searches suggest that he had at least one son who achieved fame as a football player at the University of Iowa. As well, I speculate that this is the same Rev. Geo. W. Slater Jr. who was a socialist minister and writer in early-1900s Chicago. http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/Duke_Slater.

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Palmer and Palmer, “Urban Blacks in Alberta.”

Edmonton Journal, 15 April 1922.

Winks, Blacks in Canada, 360.


Edmonton Journal, 17 June 1922.

Ibid., 7 January 1922.

Ibid., 11 March 1921.

Ibid., 18 March 1922.

Ibid.

Edmonton Journal, 7 January 1922.

Ibid., 15 April 1922.

Shepard, “Plain Racism.”

Ibid., 23.

It is an editorial entitled “The Black Peril” in the Lethbridge Daily News on 8 April 1911. It was quoted by Shepard in “Plain Racism,” 23.

Here the work of Sarah Carter is instructive in analyzing constructions of Aboriginal males as a similar threat.

Edmonton Journal, 11 March 1922.

Ibid., 18 March 1922.


Edmonton Journal, 10 September 1921.
52 Ibid., 22 October 1921.
53 Ibid., 19 September 1921. Ira J. Day was the president of the Negro Welfare Association at that time.
55 Edmonton Journal, 18 February 1922.
56 Ibid., 4 February 1922.
57 Ibid., 1 April 1922.
59 Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday Life, 106.
61 Edmonton Journal, 12 August 1922.
63 “The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was organized in 1874 by women primarily racialized as white and who were concerned about the problems alcohol was causing their families and society. The members chose total abstinence from all alcohol as their lifestyle and protection of the home as their watchword.” http://www.wctu.org/.
64 Edmonton Journal, 25 February 1922.
65 Emily Murphy, in her book The Black Candle and Other Writings, expressed racist ideas about the various racial and ethnic groups. This book was published in 1922, the same publication year of this newspaper column.
66 Glenbow Museum, WCTU file.
67 Woman’s Christian Temperance Union of Alberta: Report of 9th Annual Convention, 1921, 45. This dating of the formation of the Phylis Wheatley WCTU as founded in 1915 contradicts the ideas put forward in Windows of Our Memories that the Booker T. Washington WCTU was the first to be founded.
70 This intersection among race, gender, and religious ideology was also evident in later WCTU groups from the Black community that were named after individuals rather than geographic areas.


73 Valverde, *Age of Light, Soap, and Water*, 60.

74 *Edmonton Journal*, 18 Nov 1922.

75 Ibid., 19.

76 Both Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, and Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary*, have interesting and in-depth discussions of Black newspapers.
