

# **A RECOMMENDATION FOR THE NAMING OF THE BLACK AND CARIBBEAN HERITAGE COLLECTION OF THE TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY IN HONOUR OF DR. RITA COX**

**“Rita Cox represents a generation of librarians who acted out of the passionate belief that libraries were both a sanctuary and a launching-pad for the imagination.”**

Dan Yashinsky Storyteller & Founder of the Storytellers School of Toronto

## **Purpose**

To request that the Board of the Toronto Public Library endorse our recommendation to have the Black & Caribbean Heritage Collection, housed by the Toronto Public Library in the Parkdale, York Woods, Cedarbrae and Maria K. Shckuka branches, be named in honour of its founder, Citizenship Court Judge and Librarian Emeritus, Dr. Rita Cox; that the name apply to all the branch collections; and that this unique, standing collection be furnished with the necessary knowledge base and resources to ensure its continued success and legacy.

## **Board Policy**

The members of the “Committee for the Naming of the Black & Caribbean Heritage Collection in Dr. Rita Cox’s honour” have done some research and have found no new policies developed under the new city’s amalgamation that defines the naming of collections. We have checked the old policy inherited from the City of Toronto and could find no criteria prohibiting the naming of a collection after a living individual. We were, however, encouraged to find that there is provision for Board’s discretion and leadership.

## **Background**

The local public library is one of the pillars and key stake holders in a community. It is the place where opening books leads to open minds and open doors. The local library is one of the few constant and consistent

institutions in our society. It is a haven for people from all cultural backgrounds and walks of life, all with varying needs.

After 34 years with the Toronto Public Library, 22 years as Head of the Parkdale Branch library, Rita Cox retired, but not before she created one of Canada's best community libraries and assembled one of the most comprehensive Black and Caribbean Heritage collections in Canada. Affectionately called the Queen of Caribbean Heritage, Rita Cox has received numerous awards including doctoral degrees from York University and Wilfred Laurier University. This community developer and beloved story teller has also been awarded the Order of Ontario, the Order of Canada, and the Public Service Medal of Merit from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, to name a few.

As a citizenship court judge, one of her great moments was the granting of Canadian citizenship to Dr. Rubin Hurricane Carter. Parkdale library was a home for Dr. Carter when he first arrived in Toronto. It was a safe space to share his story.

### **What is the Black & Caribbean Heritage Collection?**

In 1972, Rita Cox founded the Black and Caribbean Heritage Collection at the Parkdale branch. Rita undertook this initiative as she saw the needs of Toronto's communities change and diversify with the arrival of new immigrants. Understanding the role of the library to be a centre of activity, and with her knowledge of the Caribbean as a region with a long history of books and publishing, Rita Cox set about acquiring the tools needed to build a unique collection. Over the years due to its success, and an expressed need from Canadians to have greater access to Black and Caribbean literature, the Parkdale collection became a model for the development of similar collections in other library systems across the city in pre-amalgamation Toronto.

The current city-wide Black & Caribbean Heritage Collection offers a lived experience, based on the stories, scholarship, and culture of people of the Caribbean and African Diasporas, for visitors to Parkdale, Cedarbrae, York Woods and Maria A. Shchuka branches. The purpose of the collection is to inspire a broader understanding of Canada and the Canadian mosaic by celebrating, honouring and validating the Black and Caribbean experience.

The collection became nationally and internationally known as people travelled and relocated. The news of its existence travelled through word of mouth and through the advertising of events that accompanied the collection.

Other library systems, as in the case of the North Public Library located in the Halifax Public Libraries, were inspired to create similar collections.

The collection from its inception received calls from all across North America seeking information on Caribbean books and books on and by the African diaspora. International writers were encouraged to visit, while local writers used the Collection as a centre to carve out an African-Canadian literary identity.

### **What is Unique about the Black & Caribbean Heritage Collection?**

The Collection has always played a role as a cultural/tourist destination, a venue for literary tourism. It serves as a centre of information and a meeting place for visitors to the city. “Where can I find some Black History?”

“Check Parkdale Library.” “How do I find out about Black Canadians.”

“Check Parkdale Library,” can be the response. Toronto strives on cultural and literary tourism, as seen with the Film Festival, Caribana, the many Music Festivals and Harbourfront Centre’s Author Festival. The Black & Caribbean Heritage Collection has proven that it can play a role in literary tourism. A generation of visitors from the Black and Caribbean Diaspora have used it as a way to reconnect with their roots and their culture. “This is the library where I first heard Anansi stories,” you will often hear remarked. The fact is that the Collection is still one of the few spaces in the city where one can easily access this literature.

The Collection has nurtured and continues to nurture great Canadian writers and literary works - authors like: Governor General Awardees - Dionne Brand, George Elliott Clarke, and Djanet Sears; Giller and Commonwealth Prize winner - Austin Clarke; Dub Poet and twice JUNO Award winner - Lillian Allen; and the 2005 Cheikh Anta Diop Awardee – Dr. George Dei – to name a few.

The Collection serves as a meeting point and a space where new and emerging writers and spoken word artists cut their teeth, at readings and cultural activities surrounding the collection.

The Collection can boast of promoting and introducing the works of two Nobel Prize Winners for literature from the Caribbean: St. Lucia's Derek Walcott and Trinidad & Tobago's V.S. Naipaul, long before they received their prestigious awards.

### **Unique and Scholarly**

The Collection's uniqueness extends to the great scholarship that is available on the shelves. The Collection has been and is home to great scholars such as Ivan Van Sertima, Cheikh Anta Diop, Chinua Achebe, C.L.R. James, Manning Marable, Walter Rodney, Dr. Eric Williams (former prime minister of Trinidad & Tobago) and Canadians - Dr. Carl James, Dr. Fred Case, and Dr. Frank Birbalsingh. The Collection offers up books for academics and students that may otherwise be inaccessible or difficult to obtain.

Interestingly enough, the Collection evolved at the same time as the Caribbean and African Studies departments at York University and the University of Toronto. In fact, the Collection provided a forum to facilitate the vision of these respective departments.

### **The Collection and Community Economic Development**

The Collection's support of small and independent bookstores for its resources is an example of equitable practices by the Toronto Public Library at its best. Support of these businesses within the Black community by the Toronto Public Library, has encouraged other institutions and educational partners to do business with them. The economic success of community bookstores such as the highly renowned Third World Books and Crafts was enabled by the Toronto Public Library doing business with them. The promotion of books and audio visual materials by the Collection also encourages families to support bookstores and the publishing sector. The bookstores in turn are able to give the Library feedback on the reading habits of their customers in order to better serve the community. Furthermore, the Collection's advocacy on behalf of Black writers and writers of Colour encouraged Canadian publishers to engage with a new crop of Canadian writers.

### **The Collection as a Good News story**

The Collection gives a sense of pride to areas of high population density and areas experiencing economic or cultural depression. Something positive that

can be said of the Jane & Finch community is that the York Woods Branch Library located there, is home to a fine collection of Black & Caribbean books - a collection that reflects the experience of the community it serves. This can also be said of all the aforementioned branches. The Collection's role in shaping a community's identity can be both powerful and positive.

### **The Collection as a Bridge to the Community**

In the past, the Collection has served as a means to bridge dialogue between the Black and Caribbean Community, the Toronto Public Library, and the public at large. The more people see themselves reflected as equal partners in the society, the more relationships will take place. As people become attached to a branch, participation increases and forums to establish sensible discourse happen. The staff of the branches benefit from the indigenous knowledge offered by the community, while the patrons receive a feeling of ownership. Ownership of community breeds a sense of pride.

Furthermore, the Collection's importance rests not just simply with the establishment of relationships with the community but, to a greater extent, with the cementing and maintaining of them. The importance of having the Collection named in Dr. Cox's honour is precisely to emphasize that legacy, endurance and continuity.

### **The Collection Validating a People's History & Culture**

Black and Caribbean history has been lost, stolen, or misrepresented. To know that a body of work exists that seeks to correct these historical barriers and that it is readily available at their Branch Library gives marginalized people the hope that their history and accomplishments will be duly recognized and respected by the broader society. As we attempt to negotiate with our youth today, between fact and fiction, real and unreal, the Collection can serve as a valuable enabler in this effort.

In sum, our request is for the members of the board of the Toronto Public Library to show the same vision and insight as those board members who first supported the development of the collection 33 years ago in 1972 and then the later expansion of the collection into other locations. We aspire to have the entire Collection in all the specific branch libraries be named in Dr. Rita Cox's honour. We come with this proposal not seeking legitimization but legacy. We hope that the future caretakers of the collection will possess the passion and excellent knowledge base as its founder. We trust that the

Toronto Public Library will commit the necessary resources needed to make the city of Toronto and the world proud of this legacy.