



# Artists In Motion

## **Black In Canada** Guide

[WWW.AIMTORONTO.CA](http://WWW.AIMTORONTO.CA)

# WELCOME TO BLACK IN CANADA



**DIRECTOR/CHOREOGRAPHER**  
Shameka Blake

**CAST**  
Marquisha Sparkes-Whonder  
Diane Jean-Louis  
Kayla-Renée Wilson  
Onija Bennet

## This Guide

We're excited to welcome you to **Black In Canada** presented by Artist in Motion Dance Company. This guide is designed to provide you with important program details ahead of time, ensuring you have a more informed and enriching experience.

## Synopsis

Viola Desmond, Michaëlle Jean, James Mink, and Lincoln Alexander. These are the names of a few Black pioneers in Canada who are essential for understanding the early presence of Black Canadians outside of slavery. Through movement and speech, "Black in Canada" highlights the importance of acknowledging, listening to, and understanding the Black experience in Canada. It delves into the themes of identity, belonging, and cultural expression to ultimately showcase where we have come from, where we are, and where we can go as a people.



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# Introduction

## ABOUT AIM

Artists in Motion (AIM) is a Toronto-based, multi-disciplinary dance company that is Black-led, Black-focused, and Black-serving. Founded and directed by Shameka Blake, AIM has been active for nine years, creating innovative performances that center on social justice issues and Black culture. The company's mission is to educate, inspire, and empower through dance.



## Mission Statement

Artists In Motion is a performance company committed to serving the dance community on a global scale. AIM exists to:

01.

### Mentorship

We are committed to mentoring students of all ages, backgrounds, genders, and socioeconomic statuses.



02.

### Community

We create performances that resonate with the lived experiences of communities, addressing important issues such as inclusion and racism.

03.

### Education & Collaboration

AIM is dedicated to using dance as a tool for education, creating work that not only engages but also enlightens. We are committed to collaborating with and serving the arts community, upholding excellence through every performance and initiative.





**Shameka Blake**  
 Instagram icon @aimtoronto

### *Artistic Director & Choreographer*

Award-winning choreographer Shameka Blake was born with an innate drive to create. Through her artistic practice, she is dedicated to highlighting issues of social justice, particularly in relation to culture, gender, and ethnicity. Her contributions to the commercial dance industry earned her the 2015 Black Canadian Award for Best Urban Dance Act. Shameka's work has been showcased at prestigious events such as the Association for the Performing Arts Presenters (APAP) Convention in New York City, Roots Canada, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and several local Toronto festivals, including Yensa, Dusk Dances, Dance Ontario DanceWeekend, TIFF, and Pride. Though Shameka began her career in the commercial dance scene, her artistic journey has since evolved, finding a powerful new voice in the world of dance and theatre.



**Marquisha Sparkes-Whonder**  
 Instagram icon @Marquisha.Sparkes.Whonder

### *Principal Dancer*

Marquisha Sparkes-Whonder was born to entertain. Being self-taught she was accepted into the Fine arts dance program at York University at 17, eventually branching out to advance her skills and work with a variety of professional companies. Now, you can find her on the tv screen dancing in motion pictures for Disney, Netflix, and lifetime television. Dance has steered her to travel internationally to work with artist like Sean Paul and Keri Hilson and to work with choreographers like Shameka Blake, Hollywood Jade, Tanisha Scott, and Ebony Williams. She feels gratification through exploring diverse personas and aspires to influence marginalized groups to speak up and use their voices.



**Onija Bennett**  
 Instagram icon @OnijaBennett

### *Principal Dancer*

Onija's appreciation for the arts began to grow into a passion for dance and acting, and he started educating himself with videos from YouTube whilst practicing choreography with friends. To further his studies, Onija joined a training program to develop a strong foundation in hip-hop and contemporary dance. Having learned from some of the industry's best instructors and choreographers, he went on to perform on variety of sets and stages across Canada. Currently, Onija is a principal dancer at Artist in Motion, where he and fellow company members take on and tackle world issues through the lens of the BIPOC community.



**Diane Jean-Louis**  
 Instagram icon @DianeJLouis

### *Principal Dancer*

Diane Jean-Louis was born in Haiti and raised in the US and Canada. Diane has developed into a industry professional which has given her many opportunities to share her passion. Diane has been fortunate enough to have opportunities to learn from Toronto's best Dancers and Choreographers. As a current member of AIM (Artist In Motion) Dance Company directed by Shameka Blake, Diane is thrilled to see where this chapter of her dance journey will take her, in a all black lead, all black force and all black serving space. Diane would one day like to create in hopes to teach and inspire the younger generation of dancers.



**Kayla-Renée Wilson**  
 Instagram icon @KaylaReneeWil

### *Principal Dancer*

Kayla-Renée Wilson is a dance artist from Toronto, Ontario. From an early age, she worked alongside Black creatives, learning the significance of producing art that is focused on and serves the Black community. At age 7, she trained at DOAHL Dance Academy, focusing on hip-hop choreography and freestyle. While at Unionville High School, she expanded her skills to include Tap and Modern Jazz in Musical Theatre.

Kayla-Renée has learned from Canadian dance collectives like Bag of Trix, Deuce 'N Dip, and Twisted Ankles and is currently a member of Artists in Motion Dance Company. As a hip-hop practitioner, she specializes in hip-hop dance while also training in various Black dance forms, including house, popping, locking, and breaking. Her journey has taken her to events like Fringe Toronto and the Yensa Festival, as well as participating in dance battles in Toronto and abroad, where she highlights the importance of understanding and preserving Black culture in dance.





# THE SHOW

**BLACK IN CANADA** is a glimpse into the social and emotional impact of systemic-racism, while teaching audiences about the accurate history of racial oppression in Canada. All while shining a light on the tremendous and lasting impact Black people continue to have upon the cultural fabric of our land.

Engaging and thought-provoking, the performance of **BLACK IN CANADA** begins with the perilous journey of runaway slaves navigating the Underground Railroad. It captures a world filled with danger and uncertainty, yet ignited by an unyielding hope for freedom. The weight of sleepless nights and the constant fear of capture press heavily upon them, but the promise of reaching Canada—where slavery has been abolished—propels them onward. Upon finally stepping onto Canadian soil, they experience an exhilarating sense of safety and liberation, transforming their arduous journey into a triumphant new chapter.

Through powerful spoken word, they reflect on the complexities of their Black experience, seamlessly blending movement with narrative. The show navigates the beauty and heartbreak of growing up in a world that often works against you, yet celebrates the resilience that allows them to rise and thrive regardless.

Some pieces of the show tell of Canadian history, acknowledging that yes, Canada was a place where slaves ran to for freedom, but the ideologies and effects of slavery, systemic oppression and discrimination for years to come was what was waiting for them on the other side. Other parts tell of Black American Civil Rights leaders who helped create change, but also Black Canadian pioneers who have added to the fabric of Canadas' success, highlighting their accomplishments and saying their names proudly so they are always remembered and never forgotten.

The cast each share personal monologues that are spoken and voice recorded. They tell of their own struggles with racism and come together for powerful moments of dance and stillness. At the very end of the show, the house lights will come on, and the performers will take turns dancing to upbeat and joyful music while individually and collectively taking their final bow.

## The Set

The set is only the stage and a plain backdrop. There are no props or set pieces during the show.

## Engagement

During the show, if you experience something that resonates with you, feel free to respond in ways like snapping your fingers or clapping. There will also be the occasional chant in the show. If you feel so compelled, you can join in with the performers.

## Costume

Throughout the show, the four performers will be wearing unifying monochromatic looks of various styles and colours.

Their costumes consist of complementary flesh tone shades of brown, reflecting each person individually and highlighting their richly melanated skin.



# Pre-Show Activities

Students should be familiar with key Black pioneers in Canada, as certain aspects of the show will be interactive and involve sensitive content that requires thoughtful consideration.

## Potential Questions to Explore

- Who are some important Black figures in Canadian history? Can you name any that you've heard of?
- What is the significance of the Underground Railroad in Canada? How did it help people?
- How do you think Black Canadians have helped shape the culture and history of Canada?
- Have you heard of Viola Desmond? What did she do to fight for equality?
- What do you think "Black history" means, and why is it important to learn about?
- Can you think of any Black Canadians who made a big impact in sports, arts, or music?
- Why is it important to talk about racism and inclusion? How can we make sure everyone feels welcomed?
- What do you think we can learn from the struggles of Black Canadians in history?
- Can you think of a time in Canadian history when Black people fought for their rights?
- What does the phrase "Black history is Canadian history" mean to you?

## Assignment Prompts

Select one notable Black Pioneer and explore their life and contributions.

Create an Encyclopedia of Black Leaders.

## Support Materials

Book: An Enduring Heritage- Black Contributions to early Ontario

## Resource List of Black Pioneers Mentioned in Black in Canada

Willis Nazrey  
 Harriet Tubman  
 Richard Pierpoint  
 Josiah Henson  
 Mary Ann Shadd Cary  
 James Mink  
 Samuel Ringgold Ward  
 Lucie and Thornton Blackburn  
 Mifflin Wistar Gibbs  
 Viola Desmond  
 Lincoln Alexander  
 Violet King  
 Rosemary Brown  
 Jean Augustine  
 Senator Anne Clare Cools



# Post-Show Activities

## Discussion Questions

- Who was the first woman publisher in Canada and the first black woman publisher in North America?
- Name two facts you have learned from the show and how it impacted you.
- How has Black in Canada changed your perspective on Canadian history?
- Who were some of the Black Canadians mentioned in Black in Canada? What were some of their accomplishments.
- What fact surprised you the most from this presentation?
- What was your biggest take away from Black in Canada?

## Assignment Prompt

Choose two Black pioneers from the presentation. Imagine they are having a conversation with one another—whether from the same historical event or different time periods.

- If they are from the same historical event: What would they have talked about? Consider their individual roles in that event, their motivations, and the challenges they faced. Would they have shared similar goals or perspectives?
- If they are from different historical events or time periods: What ideals, beliefs, or struggles would they have agreed on? How might their views differ, given the different contexts they were part of? Would they find common ground in their fight for justice, equality, or freedom?

Use specific examples from their lives or the events they were part of to support your ideas.





# Post-Show Activities

## PHILOSOPHICAL CHAIRS

*Philosophical Chairs* is a fantastic strategy for fostering student engagement, critical thinking, and respectful debate! It's great for getting students to hear different perspectives and be open to changing their views. Here's how you can set up and facilitate a Philosophical Chairs activity, with examples of how you might use it for discussing Canadian Black History.

### How it works:

- **Set the Rules:** Participants are divided into two groups, each advocating one side of the issue.
- **Debate:** Each group presents their arguments, one after the other.
- **Switching Positions:** After each round, students can switch sides if they hear compelling arguments. This is the "philosophical" part, where people learn to understand different viewpoints.
- **Reflection:** After the debate, participants reflect on how their thinking may have changed or been challenged.

It is important to emphasize that the goal is not just to "win" the debate, but to engage in respectful, thoughtful conversation. Encouraging participants to listen to different perspectives and reflect critically on their own beliefs is key to the success of the activity.

### Structure the debate around several key themes, such as:.

#### 1. The Role of Black Canadians in Shaping Canadian Identity

- Position 1: Black Canadians have significantly shaped Canadian culture, yet their contributions are often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives.
- Position 2: While Black Canadians have contributed to Canadian society, the overall impact on Canadian identity has been less significant than other cultural or ethnic groups.

#### 2. Historical and Ongoing Racism in Canada

- Position 1: Canada has a history of systemic racism against Black Canadians that persists today in various forms, from policing to economic inequality.
- Position 2: While racism exists in Canada, it is not as entrenched or severe as in other countries, and significant progress has been made since the days of slavery and segregation.

#### 3. The Legacy of Slavery and the Underground Railroad

- Position 1: The legacy of slavery and the efforts of the Underground Railroad continue to affect Black Canadians, particularly in terms of generational trauma and systemic disadvantages.
- Position 2: The legacy of slavery in Canada is not as significant as in the U.S., and modern Black Canadians are not heavily impacted by it today.

#### 4. Representation and Education in Canadian History

- Position 1: Canadian schools and historical institutions often fail to adequately represent the history and experiences of Black Canadians, reinforcing historical erasure.
- Position 2: While representation could be improved, Canadian education systems are making strides toward inclusivity and acknowledging Black history.



# Post-Show Activities

## Perspective Writing Template

**Objective:** To examine Black historical events through the lenses of various individuals and groups, promoting a deeper appreciation of their experiences, beliefs, and motivations, while enriching our understanding of Canadian Black history and perspectives.

### Step 1: Choose Your Perspectives

Select 1-2 individuals/groups from Black History. Choose people with opposing views or experiences to create contrast (e.g. How would a Canadian Black Loyalist, a Confederate soldier, Harriet Tubman, and a slave living in the south during the war think, feel, or talk about the Civil War?

### Step 2: Write from Their Perspective

For each person, answer the following questions from their point of view. Try to think about their feelings, beliefs, goals, and experiences during the Civil War.

How would this person think about the event?

What are their hopes and fears regarding the Civil War?

What do they believe is their role and responsibility?

### Step 3: Reflect on Their Goals and Actions

- Do these perspectives reveal any contradictions or tensions? For example, how might a Harriet Tubman and a Confederate soldier see their motivations as justified? How would a slave view their fight for freedom versus the fight for the Confederacy?
- What common threads, if any, connect these perspectives? (For example, a desire for freedom, protection, survival, or justice.)

### Student Reflection/Discussion Questions:

- What new insights did you gain about the perspectives of different individuals or groups from this event?
- How might these differing perspectives influence how we understand Black Canadians?
- How does imagining these perspectives change the way you view their motivations or actions?

This template offers students a guided approach to immerse themselves in the perspectives of various historical figures and key moments in Black history, prompting them to grasp the complexities of human experience in these contexts. Moreover, it fosters empathy and a deeper appreciation for the diverse experiences during crucial historical events.



# CONNECT WITH US

We'd love to stay connected, so feel free to follow us! You can find the cast's information listed under their headshots on page four. Stay up-to-date with Artist in Motion Dance Company on social media @aimtoronto, or visit our website at [aimtoronto.com](http://aimtoronto.com).



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