

EDITORIAL ON EDUCATION: CROSSING THE COLOUR LINE

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With no given author, I assume the first editorial on education is written by J. F Jenkins, the editor of *The Dawn of Tomorrow*. Jenkins calls out to black families reading this newspaper to further their children's education, in the "interest of their posterity", to work towards the growth of a race. In particular he calls out to parents, of no specific gender, to do away with the short term financial gain achieved by taking their child out of school, in order to invest in the long-term benefits for the race. This editorial is almost rendered more powerful by the fact that it contains spelling errors, typos such as 'would' instead of 'wish', and a lack of the use of commas demonstrative of the comparative education of the writer.

To give this editorial that was published Saturday, July 21st 1928 some context, it is important to explore the education system in Canada at the time. Historian James W. St. G discusses in his works the colour line that was drawn in Ontario regarding education:

The various attempts to give legal sanction to the line failed universally except in one important area: blacks were denied equal use of public schools in Nova Scotia and Ontario, and this division was recognized by the law. The most important manifestation of colour prejudice in Canadian history is in education.¹

This manifestation of the colour line was drawn in 1849 as Ontario changed its School Act to allow separate schools to be founded for black children.² However in the years surrounding the publication of this edition of *The Dawn of Tomorrow* (1928), this legislation was routinely practiced in rural areas with significant black populations

¹ J. Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada* (Hull, QC, 1980), **quoted in** Sylvia Hamilton, "Stories from The Little Black School House", *Speaking My Truth*.

² R. Winks, "Negro School Segregation in Ontario and Nova Scotia", *Canadian Historical Review* 50 (1969), 168.

working under de facto segregation. In larger cities or towns of the time, such as London, children would attend the school that was in closest geographical proximity. Due to discrimination in housing markets, blacks would usually live together in the less affluent area of town.³

This inequality led to black students receiving a second-rate education, and as the editor of *The Dawn of Tomorrow* identifies as occurred in London, incredibly high drop out rates. Jenkins addresses this inequality, calling out other races for being given “the best education which the country affords”, while 90 percent of their black community are not finishing public school. He seems to be drawing from W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of the ‘Talented Tenth’, and really emphasizing the value of higher education in order to put them on the same playing field as the white race.

Creating an analogy, Jenkins compares the education of black youth as ‘boomerangs and tomahawks’ to white youth possessing the skills of ‘machine guns, aeroplanes, and modern inventions of war’. This language is particularly meaningful to the time when you consider the audience of the parents who were alive during WW1, and also the violence of the Ku Klux Klan, which began organizing in Montreal, Ontario, and British Columbia in the early 1920’s.⁴

Drawing from *The Little Black House*, a documentary film on the experience of segregated schools of Canada, Dr. Howard McCurdy details through his experience one of the points that Jenkins touches on in his article:

³ H. Palmer, and L. Driedger, "Prejudice and Discrimination." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

⁴ Ibid.

In London at St. George's school that I attended, my sister and I were the only Black students there. Where, I wasn't conscious of race in London, when I moved to Amherstburg, I became immediately conscious of it. Employment discrimination in Windsor and Amherstburg was widespread. In Amherstburg, Black people did not work in the town.⁵

While also addressing the inconsistencies of discrimination based on place and geography, this testimonial expresses the crux of the black education debate of the time – why educate your child when they will not have any job opportunities? Jenkins says that the white businessmen that he has talked to preach that they will equally employ black and white people based on qualifications, not race. However he goes on to question these opposing opinions “Who is right and who is wrong? I know not. But the burden of proof rests upon ourselves”. This shining line brings together his argument to place the responsibility back onto the parents, this burden of proof of the colour line. This editorial is an example of why *The Dawn of Tomorrow* was created – to rally the black race and spread knowledge of the issues and inequalities they are faced with. Jenkins calls for education until the children have crossed ‘the river Jordan’, which biblically and symbolically represents a border, a crossing point, in this case of a coloured line.⁶

⁵ H. McCurdy, *The Little Black School House* (2007), **quoted in** Sylvia Hamilton, "Stories from The Little Black School House", *Speaking My Truth*.

⁶ R. Havrelock, “The Jordan River: Crossing a Biblical Boundary”, *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing* (2004), 4.

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