

Where Are You Really From?: A Commentary on Ancestral Black Nova Scotian Identity

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Abstract

The purpose of this commentary is to discuss Ancestral Black Nova Scotian (ABNS) identity, while advocating for the unified advancement of people of African descent (PAD) in Nova Scotia that is inclusive of ABNSs as a distinct people. I began critically examining identity and contemplating this issue during my doctoral research. As a Black feminist scholar, I have conducted reviews of literature related to PAD in Canada as well as in-depth qualitative research with ABNS nurses. My expertise on this matter is further informed by lived experience and ongoing discussions on intersectionality and Black health with mentors from across the diaspora. The sum of this insight has brought me to a change in the language that I use to describe ABNSs. I was inspired to share this commentary, at this time, for two reasons. The first—and more practical—reason involves my deepening understanding of language and identity and how I apply it in my work. The second—and more political and contentious—reason relates to the attempted erasure of ABNS identity. My position in this commentary is that of an advocate for ABNS identity alongside the unity of PAD in Nova Scotia. I acknowledge the extensive entanglement of identity with other important and multi-faceted issues, such as resource allocation; however, it is critical that these issues are understood as interconnected rather than conflated. For example, resource allocation has become so entangled with identity that the erasure of ABNS identity has become a symbolic master key to unlocking a metaphoric treasure chest. The differences that exist among PAD in Nova Scotia have created a welcomed shift in the demographic composition of the population. These shifts and unique differences mean that PAD in Nova Scotia are not a monolith, and this achievement is one to be acknowledged, celebrated, and embraced.

Keywords: Ancestral Black Nova Scotian, People of African Descent, Black Health

“Okay, your parents were born here, but where are their parents from?”

For many Ancestral Black Nova Scotians (ABNSs), this is a familiar conversation. The question “Where are you *really* from?” captures a fraction of the ancestral work that ABNSs have undertaken to define their identity and to

uncover their history—a history that is quickly dismissed and an identity that is frequently scrutinized and denied. Where am I really from? Like many ABNSs, my great-grandparents were born in Nova Scotia. I am *really* from Nova Scotia. I am Scotian (Clarke, 2021).

Identity encompasses important and unique characteristics that define individuals.

Individuals may have multiple identities, which shift in relation to group membership or a particular role in society (Burke & Stets, 2009; Jefferies & Price, 2021). Cultivating one's identity, which includes uncovering and making sense of one's history, is an important and critical process, especially for groups who have been forcibly displaced, stripped of identity, and marginalized for centuries. As a Black feminist scholar who has the privilege to conduct and publish research regarding Black health, I am well aware of the nuance and delicacy related to identity. Importantly, my position in this commentary is informed by my experience as an ABNS, having led reviews of literature related to people of African descent (PAD) in Canada and conducted qualitative research with ABNSs, as well as having extensive conversations with mentors from across the diaspora. To this end, the purpose of this commentary is to discuss the evolution and the problematization of ABNS identity, while advocating for the unified advancement of PAD in Nova Scotia that is inclusive of ABNSs as a distinct people.

What is in a Name?

Ancestral Black Nova Scotians “are a distinct people who descend from free and enslaved Black Planters, Black Loyalists, Black Refugees, Maroons, and other Black people who inhabited the original 52 land-based Black communities in that part of Mi'kma'ki known as Nova Scotia” (African Nova Scotian Strategy Advisory Council, 2021, p.1). This definition was developed by the African Nova Scotian Strategy Advisory Council to clearly define and situate African Nova Scotians (ANSs) as a distinct people. For many years I identified as ANS. Being ANS allowed me to find a sense of community and belonging with others who share a similar understanding, ancestry, socialization, and world view. I have also used the term ANS in my research. Notably, ANS is not the first term applied to this distinct group. Over the years, other terms such as Indigenous Black, Africadian, Afro-Métis, or Black Nova Scotian have been used to identify ANSs (Clarke, 2021). Arriving at a suitable term that encompasses the

complex ancestry of ABNSs has not been a linear process. Furthermore, the evolution of language and the migration patterns of PAD have created a refreshing shift in the demographic composition of PAD in Nova Scotia. However, the evolution of language and demographic shifts of PAD in Nova Scotia have also been combined with the historical and social circumstances of ABNSs to problematize the term ANS.

Recent progress in institutional, organizational, and government policies—for PAD and ABNSs alike—have catalyzed concerted efforts against ABNS identity. These concerted efforts are masked as inclusion, and yet a genuine goal of inclusion does not require the sacrifice or erasure of one's identity. If the primary tool in the arsenal is used to extinguish the identity and history of a group, this raises a critical question about the motivations of the goal. In the current debate, I wonder whether ABNS identity would generate such scrutiny if the issue of resource allocation (or reparations) was removed from the conversation. Would claims to ABNS identity still be made (or challenged) if the focus was simply on appreciating and cultivating an understanding of the culture, history, experience, and world view of ABNSs? Resource allocation (and reparations) for PAD in Nova Scotia requires careful consideration of the diversity within the diaspora as well as a sincere and compassionate desire to create equitable pathways to move forward collectively. The work of reparations begins with having an honest conversation about the issues, identifying multi-level goals and solutions, and possessing a thorough understanding of the varied experiences among PAD.

Considering the contextual factors, including the problematization of the term ANS, I now use the term ABNSs (in my work) to describe ANSs for three main reasons. First, there are ABNSs who do not claim direct or immediate ties to continental Africa or view themselves as African, since neither they nor their parents or grandparents are from the continent. They are Scotian. Second, the term ABNSs reduces confusion and aggregation with PAD in Nova Scotia who emigrated from

continental Africa, the Caribbean, or other parts of the diaspora, and who wish to use the term ANS yet do not have the ancestral land-based connection to the 52 original communities. Finally, my use of the term ABNS could be viewed as a concession that attempts to safeguard the centuries-long work of recovering history and cultivating ABNS identity, as opposed to succumbing to the colonial process of an imposed definition that eliminates core aspects of identity.

Identity as Self-Defined, Not Imposed

ABNSs have experienced centuries of marginalization compounded by physical, mental, and emotional assault. The attempted erasure of history, community, and identity is both intentional (i.e., a colonial mechanism) and the by-product of other processes that reinforce historical oppression and contemporary anti-Black racism. I have witnessed and experienced the interrogation of, dismissal of, and attempts to delegitimize and erase ABNS history and identity. This erasure also includes the attempts to impose a definition (that eliminates historical considerations) upon ABNSs without engagement or consideration for the views, preferences, and experiences of ABNSs (those who are being defined).

With an understanding of the ways in which ancestry and socialization impact experience, I sought to understand the experiences of ABNS nurses in my doctoral research. To do this, I used a conceptual framework that elucidated how ancestry, the sociological and structural deprivation of resources, and anti-Black racism impacted ABNS nurses (Jefferies, Martin-Misener, et al., 2022). Notably, a central finding of my doctoral research was the concept of ABNS identity, the meaning ascribed to ABNS identity, and how ABNS nurses defined themselves.

Conducting reviews of the literature on Black health has revealed variability in terms used to define PAD in Canada (Jefferies, Richards, et al., 2022). Many Black health researchers in Canada are acutely aware of the issues with homogenizing PAD and the Black

experience. Black health researchers and scholars alike have expressed the need for greater clarity and understanding of intersectionality among PAD in Canada (Cénat, 2022; Etowa et al., 2009; Jefferies, Richards, et al., 2022). Anti-Black racism impacts all PAD in Canada. However, the effects of anti-Black racism vary depending on a multitude of factors including time, space, geographical location, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability status, and generational status (Bristow, 1994; Cénat, 2022; Etowa et al., 2009; James et al., 2010; Jefferies, Martin-Misener, et al., 2022; Massaquoi & Wane, 2007; Thompson, 2022).

Beyond Intersectional Lip Service

Acknowledging, embracing, and celebrating the distinct and legitimate variability among PAD can occur alongside collective unity. However, attending to this variability requires an understanding of the nuance of Blackness through an intersectional lens. The ability to understand and apply nuance to inform individual and collective issues requires knowledge and skills as well as compassion. Problems—including hypermarginalization within groups—arise when there is a failure to understand and consider intersectionality within groups. Furthermore, failing to attend to intersectionality serves only to aggregate PAD into a monolith, thus reinforcing and accelerating intra-group marginalization. Rather, recognizing, understanding, and celebrating diversity within (and between) groups is not only best practice but also a step toward liberation.

Liberation Through Unity

This commentary is a respectful call for a collective movement that embraces difference among PAD in Nova Scotia. As a Black feminist, I believe in inclusion, and I believe in unity. However, inclusion and unity does not require the aggregation of experience or the erasure of identity. For other complex issues such as resource allocation, there are ways to approach

these matters without blatant and covert attacks on identity. I am optimistic and inspired by the progress of other historic groups in Nova Scotia. For example, despite continued displacement and inequities, the Mi'kmaq, upon whose land we live, work, and learn, continue to reclaim that which has been stolen while welcoming visitors, including other Indigenous Peoples. Another important example are the Acadian People, who preserve their Acadian culture and heritage while including and welcoming the ever-expanding and diverse francophone population in Nova Scotia. As a distinct group, ABNSs continue to support and welcome PAD from across the diaspora, while uncovering, maintaining, and defining their history, their identity, and importantly themselves as a people. I believe that it is possible to cultivate ABNS identity while simultaneously recognizing and celebrating differences and moving forward as a unified collective of PAD in Nova Scotia.

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