



## Keynote Speakers Announced for 2023 Universities Studying Slavery Conference

**Dr. John Mahama, Sir Hilary Beckles, David Comissiong,  
Dr. Afua Cooper, Dr. George Elliott Clarke,  
Dr. Sylvia D. Hamilton, Dr. Harvey Amani Whitfield**

For immediate release

February 21, 2023

HALIFAX, N.S. – The 2023 Universities Studying Slavery (USS) Conference will feature keynotes by seven leaders from the spheres of politics, the arts and academia—each an internationally renowned voice on slavery and reparations. Scheduled to take place in Halifax, N.S., from Oct. 18–21, the conference will be hosted by Dalhousie University and the University of King's College, working together and in partnership with the Black Cultural Centre of Nova Scotia. As the first gathering of the USS to be held outside the United States, the conference will explore the theme 'Slavery, Reparations and Education: African Nova Scotia, Canada and Beyond.'

Based out of the University of Virginia and comprising more than 60 universities, USS is dedicated to organizing multi-institutional collaboration on research into historical and contemporary issues dealing with race and inequality in higher education and university communities. Dalhousie was the first Canadian university to join this groundbreaking research, followed shortly thereafter by King's.

The 2023 conference will feature keynote speeches by individuals who are active on the international, national and local levels: **Dr. John Mahama**, former president of Ghana; **Sir Hilary Beckles**, Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West Indies and Chairman of the CARICOM Reparations Commission; **David Comissiong**, Barbadian lawyer, former senator and founder of the Clement Payne Movement; **Dr. Afua Cooper**, distinguished historian and poet, and Killam Research Chair in Black and African Diaspora Studies at Dalhousie University; **Dr. George Elliott Clarke**, renowned poet and E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto; **Dr. Sylvia D. Hamilton** renowned filmmaker, writer, journalist and artist, and University of King's College Inglis Professor; **Dr. Harvey Amani Whitfield**, leading historian of Black history and slavery in Colonial Canada and a Professor in Black North American History at the University of Calgary.

The conference will focus attention on the multiple ways in which anti-Black discrimination in and beyond universities is rooted in historical enslavement and the perpetuation of the racist ideologies that fueled it, while also examining the multi-generational harms and disadvantages that are its legacy. Furthermore, the conference will focus on the perseverance, contributions and triumphs of Black people and communities, in Canada, Nova Scotia and around the 'Black Atlantic' world. There will be a parallel focus on the urgent calls in response to Black Lives Matter for universities to redress anti-Black racism, foster Black inclusion and enable Black flourishing, and the work universities have undertaken in response to those calls.

As joint hosts of the 2023 conference, Dalhousie and King's affirm their commitment to the work advanced by the USS, and their respective commitments to address anti-Black racism and advance Black inclusion and achievement. In recent years both institutions have undertaken scholarly inquiries to examine their connections, direct and indirect, to slavery in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 2019, led by Dr. Afua Cooper, Dalhousie University published its [Report on Lord Dalhousie's History on Slavery and Race](#), and in 2020, King's released the papers written for [King's & Slavery: A Scholarly Inquiry](#). Both studies documented Dalhousie and King's multiple connections with slavery and their financial dependence on the wealth created by enslaved Black people.

Interested participants are invited to submit proposals for papers and for panels. Panels can be disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, or consist of academics and non-academics. [Learn more](#).

## **Keynote Speakers**

### **Dr. John Mahama**

Dr. John Mahama was the fourth president of the Fourth Republic of Ghana (2013–2017). Under former president Mahama, Ghana witnessed a massive infrastructure development drive in all sectors of the economy, including education, health, ports and harbours, aviation, rail, oil and gas, ICT and many more. His vision and strategic investments in these areas have, today, solidly positioned the country for its next phase of development as a lower middle-income country.

Beyond investment in the socio-economic infrastructure, Mahama's presidency is notable for its advancement of social justice and equity, including his promotion of girls and women's interests at all levels. During his administration Ghana attained gender parity in basic education. He also ensured the appointment of many women to high positions in his administration.

Mahama is a former Chairperson of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission and a first Co-Chair of the United Nations Advocacy Group on the Sustainable Development Goals. He is currently the Chairperson of the Tana Forum, a high-level forum on security in Africa, headquartered in Ethiopia. In recognition of his contributions on the African

continent and around the globe as a leader and model, Mahama has been conferred with a number of honorary doctoral degrees from distinguished universities across Africa and Europe.

Mahama has written for several newspapers and authored a number of publications, including his first book, a memoir entitled *My First Coup D'État and Other True Stories from the Lost Decades of Africa*.

### **Sir Hilary Beckles**

A distinguished academic, Sir Hilary Beckles is a global public activist in the field of social justice and minority empowerment who has achieved recognition internationally for his academic contributions and leadership expertise. He has lectured extensively in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia and has published over 100 peer-reviewed essays in scholarly journals and over 13 books on subjects ranging from Atlantic and Caribbean history, to gender relations in the Caribbean, sport development and popular culture.

In 2007 he was awarded Barbados's highest national honour when he was made a Knight of St. Andrew for his contributions to higher education, the arts and sports. He has received numerous honorary doctorates from around the world and in 2021 he received the Martin Luther King Jr. Global Award for Peace and Freedom. Sir Hilary is Chairman of the CARICOM Reparations Commission, Advisor on Sustainable Development to former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, President of Universities Caribbean, and Chairman of the Caribbean Examinations Council.

### **David Comissiong**

David Comissiong was born on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent. The son of a travelling Methodist Minister of Religion, Comissiong received his primary education at Tranquility Primary School in Trinidad, before attending Harrison College and the University of the West Indies (UWI) in Barbados. He won a Barbados Exhibition in 1979 and the 'Sir Fred Phillips' academic prize at the Faculty of Law, University of the West Indies in 1981 and has been a practicing attorney-at-law since 1984.

Comissiong is a former senator in the government of Barbados, and is currently Barbados's Ambassador to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and to the Association of Caribbean States (ACS).

He is also a founder-member of the Caribbean Pan-African Network (CPAN), the Clement Payne Movement of Barbados, the Caribbean Chapter of the International Network In Defence of Humanity, and the Global Afrikan Congress (GAC), and was an architect and the first Director of the Barbados Government's Commission for Pan-African Affairs (CPAA). He represented the Caribbean region at the 7th Pan-African Congress in Uganda (1994), played a key role in the United Nations' World Conference Against Racism in South Africa (2001), and has represented the Diaspora on the African Union's Economic Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC). Since the year 2012, Comissiong has served as a member of Barbados's National Task Force on Reparations.

In the year 2017, Comissiong was awarded the Medal of Friendship by the Council of State of the Republic of Cuba.

Comissiong is the author of *The Wide Streets of Tomorrow: Essays and Speeches, It's the Healing of the Nation: The Case for Reparations*, and *The Pan-African Love Story of Arnold and Mignon Ford*.

### **Dr. Afua Cooper**

Dr. Afua Cooper has been at the forefront of mobilizing multidisciplinary knowledge about Black Canadian Studies. She is Canada's leading expert on slavery and freedom and further, is trained in Black Canadian history, the history of the African Diaspora, and Decolonizing studies.

A professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Dalhousie University, she is Director of the Black People's History of Canada Project and holds the Killam Research Chair in Black and African Diaspora Studies. Her book *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Slavery in Canada and the Burning of Old Montreal* broke new grounds in slavery studies and the history of Black Canada. Cooper was the Coordinator and Chief Knowledge Officer of the Ontario Bicentenary to Abolish the Slave Trade Act and for that endeavour, oversaw 33 projects that pertained to slavery and freedom in Canada. Cooper has curated and co-curated eight exhibits on slavery in Canada and the African Diaspora.

Cooper chaired the scholarly panel that investigated Dalhousie University's relationship to race, slavery, and anti-Blackness, and was the lead author of the subsequent document *Report on Lord Dalhousie's History on Slavery and Race*. She was recently appointed the Canadian UNESCO representative for the United Nation's Slave Route Project. An academic leader, between 2011 to 2017, Dr. Cooper held the James R. Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies. She also founded the Black Canadian Studies Association and served as its Chair for 10 years. An author of young adult fiction, her novels have received national and international awards. Additionally, Afua is a sought-after speaker and a prominent public intellectual. A celebrated poet, she is one of the founders of the Canadian Dub Poetry movement and has published six books of poetry including the award-winning *Black Matters*. She is the recipient of the Portia White Prize, Nova Scotia's highest artistic recognition.

### **Dr. George Elliott Clarke**

Dr. George Elliott Clarke was born in Windsor, N.S., near the Black Loyalist and Afro-Metis community of Three Mile Plains, in 1960. A graduate of the University of Waterloo, Dalhousie University and Queen's University, he is now the inaugural E.J. Pratt Professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Toronto.

Though Dr. Clarke lives in Toronto, Ont., he also owns land in Nova Scotia. His many honours include the Portia White Prize for Artistic Achievement, Governor-General's Award for Poetry, the National Magazine Gold Medal for Poetry, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Achievement Award, the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Fellowship Prize, the Dartmouth Book Award for Fiction, the

Eric Hoffer Book Award for Poetry, appointment to the Order of Nova Scotia, appointment to the Order of Canada at the rank of Officer, appointment as Poet Laureate of the City of Toronto, appointment as Parliamentary [National] Poet Laureate, appointment as a Fellow of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and the receipt of eight honorary doctorates.

Past academic appointments include Assistant Professor of English and Canadian Studies at Duke University, North Carolina, the Seagrams Visiting Chair in Canadian Studies at McGill University, Noted Scholar at the University of British Columbia, Visiting Scholar at Mount Allison University, and the William Lyon Mackenzie King Visiting Professor in Canadian Studies at Harvard University.

Clarke's background additionally includes roles as a researcher with the Ontario Provincial Parliament, editor of *Imprint* at the University of Waterloo and *The Rap*, Halifax, N.S., as a social worker with the Black United Front of Nova Scotia, parliamentary aide in the House of Commons, and a newspaper columnist with *The Daily News* and *The Halifax Herald*, both of Halifax, N.S.

### **Dr. Sylvia D. Hamilton**

Dr. Sylvia D. Hamilton is a filmmaker, writer and artist who is known for her award-winning documentary films as well as her publications, public presentations, and extensive volunteer work with artistic, social, and cultural organizations at the local and national levels. Her films include *Black Mother Black Daughter*, *Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia*, and *Portia White: Think on Me*, a documentary about the legendary Canadian contralto Portia White, and *The Little Black School House*, an exploration of Canada's segregated schools.

She has been invited to screen her films in festivals in Canada and abroad and they have been telecast on various Canadian networks. Her films, essays, and poetry are used in schools and universities across Canada. Early in her career she worked as a radio journalist and later at NFB's Studio D where she co-created New Initiatives in Film, a program for women of colour and Indigenous women. Her poetry collection, *And I Alone Escaped to Tell You*, was a finalist for the League of Canadian Poets 2015 Gerald Lampert Memorial Award and Nova Scotia's Masterwork Award. Her second collection, *Tender*, was launched in 2023.

Hamilton has been widely recognized for her work, with awards including a Gemini, The Portia White Prize, the Governor General's History Award for Popular Media, the CBC Television Pioneer Award and honorary degrees. *Excavation: A Site of Memory*, a multi-media installation exploring individual and collective memory of African Canadians has been featured in Canadian galleries and museums, including the Royal Ontario Museum. Hamilton was the 8<sup>th</sup> Nancy's Chair in Women Studies at Mount Saint Vincent University and held the Rogers Chair of Communications at the University of King's College, where she is now Inglis Professor.

### **Dr. Harvey Amani Whitfield**

Dr. Harvey Amani Whitfield is a Professor of Black North American History at the University of Calgary. He is the author of six books, including five about Black history and slavery in Colonial

Canada. His most recent book is *Biographical Dictionary of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes* (2022). He is also the author of *Blacks on the Border, North to Bondage*, and *Black Slavery in the Maritimes: A History in Documents*.

Whitfield has published numerous articles about slavery in Canada including “White Archives, Black Fragments: Problems and Possibilities in Telling the Lives of Enslaved Black People in the Maritimes,” in the *Canadian Historical Review* (2020). He has served as the Riley Distinguished Lecturer in Canadian History at the University of Winnipeg, the W. Stewart MacNutt Distinguished Lecturer at the University of New Brunswick, and the Donald Creighton Lecturer at the University of Toronto.

### **About Dalhousie University**

Dalhousie University is Atlantic Canada’s leading research-intensive university, a key driver of the region’s intellectual, social and economic development for over 200 years. Located in the heart of Halifax—in the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq—with an Agricultural Campus in Truro/Bible Hill, Dalhousie is a truly national and international university, with more than half of our 20,000 students coming from outside of the province. Our 6,000 faculty and staff foster a diverse, purpose-driven community, one that spans 13 faculties and conducts more than \$194 million in sponsored research annually.

### **About the University of King’s College**

Established in 1789, King's College is Canada's oldest chartered university and is associated with Dalhousie University. A small and extraordinarily lively academic community located in Halifax (Kjipuktuk), Nova Scotia, King's is known nationally and internationally for its highly acclaimed interdisciplinary programs in the humanities, including its renowned Foundation Year Program, its professional programs in journalism and its fine arts programs in creative writing.

### **About The Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia**

The Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, established in 1983 as a provincial museum and community gathering place with a mandate to Protect, Preserve and Promote the rich history of one of Canada’s founding cultures. People of African descent have called Nova Scotia home since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and have made a significant impact as the birthplace of Black Culture and Heritage in Canada. The Centre features exhibits and artifact collection that shares this little known history, through programs, displays and outreach, both provincially and nationally.

For more information contact:

Shannon Bezanson, Event Manager/Co-owner, Event Partners Group  
+001 902.448.0350 | shannon@eventpartnersgroup.com