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Pharmakons: The Poison and Cure of Black Youth Mentorship in Canada

Seon Yuzyk[1] and Jared Wesley[1]

Abstract

Black youth mentorship programs (BYMPs) have proliferated in Canada since 2020, with goals ranging from leadership development and combating systemic racism, on one hand, to connecting Black youth to postsecondary institutions and workplaces, on the other. In this first system-level analysis of these programs, our surveys and conversational circles reveal the challenges facing BYMP administrators in taking Afrocentric approaches to mentorship. We position BYMPs as *pharmakons*, embodying both poison and cure. With a primary focus on individual development and market demands, many Black youth mentorship programs are supplanting centuries-old African traditional practices of youth mentorship with the systematic, quantifying logic of capital. We advocate for a recalibration of program goals, emphasizing cultural transference as a pivotal aspect of Black transindividuation and strategic political organizing.

[1]University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Seon Yuzyk, Department of Political Science, University of Alberta, 11-09A Tory (H.M.) Building, 11211 Saskatchewan Drive NW, Edmonton, AB T6G 2R3, Canada.
Email: syuzyk@ualberta.ca

Plain language summary

The poison and cure of Black youth mentorship

Since 2020, Black youth mentorship programs (BYMPs) have grown across Canada, aiming to build leadership, challenge systemic racism, and connect Black youth with schools and jobs. This first system-level study draws on surveys and group discussions to explore the struggles program leaders face in using Afrocentric approaches. We see BYMPs as both helpful and harmful—tools that can empower but also risk replacing traditional African mentorship with market-driven goals. By focusing mainly on individual success and economic outcomes, many programs shift away from collective cultural practices. We call for a rebalancing of priorities that centres cultural knowledge, identity, and community-based political action.

Keywords

Black youth, racial capitalism, mentorship, anti-Blackness, Afrocentric approaches

Focus has intensified on Black youth mentorship in Canada since 2020 (Abraham, 2021; CBC News, 2020; Oyeniran, 2020). In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, the unequal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic stagnation on Black and Indigenous peoples made it more difficult to ignore Canada's longstanding history of anti-Blackness and structural racism. In addition to a host of government-, academic-, and industry-led initiatives under the umbrella of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) (Shugart, 2023) leaders in Black communities also turned their focus on youth development. With objectives ranging from career and academic assistance to institutional racism [Basra, 2021; Garang et al., 2023, p. 16]), and sexual health advice (Kaufman et al., 2021), various Black youth mentorship programs emerged in several parts of Canada.

Almost 5 years since the emergence of many of these initiatives, it is time to take stock of their scope and effectiveness. Our Black-led team conducted a review of all known Black youth mentorship programs across the country. This included a series of surveys and conversation circles involving program directors from across Canada. The study reveals that Black and Afrocentric modes of mentorship are largely deprioritized under the guise of neoliberalism. Instead of being sites of Black cultural transference, many programs have become hubs for cultural alienation and "elite capture."[1] In this sense, market-driven mentorship programs amount to instruments of capitalist hegemony, distorting and interrupting diverse Black world-building practices, while at

the same time connecting youth to important career paths in the public and private sector. Based on these findings, we advance an argument in favour of rebalancing these objectives, prioritizing cultural transference as a core element of Black youth mentorship moving forward.

This article begins with a comprehensive literature review that contextualizes the significance of mentorship programs for Black youth in Canada while identifying notable gaps in existing scholarship. Next, we outline the methodological framework of the study, which involved a combination of secondary research as well as surveys and conversation circles with Black youth mentorship program directors. Following this, we present a principal finding of our primary research: that the lack of Black representation on many boards of directors and market-driven imperatives from public and private sponsors has hindered the development of Afrocentric approaches. In doing so, the paper characterizes Black youth mentorship programs as *pharmakons*, embodying dual functions. On one hand, these programs serve as vehicles for cultural preservation and affirmation, nurturing Black self-esteem and identity. Conversely, they also operate as market-driven interventions, commodifying mentorship to address labour market exigencies and the EDI objectives of individual organizations. Within this pharmakological[2] framework, the paper explores the conditions conducive to fostering a more culturally-sensitive and -empowering Black mentorship ethos in Canada, emphasizing Afrocentric approaches and ethics of care, and a focus on "decolonial love."

The Significance of Mentorship to Black Youth and Canada

This study applies a meta-narrative method developed by Greenhalgh et al. (2005) to identify, classify, and analyze the diverse body of literature on the importance of Black youth mentorship programs in Canada. A form of systematic review, this approach maps the evolution or storyline of a research field over time (Giang et al., 2022, p. 437; Greenhalgh et al., 2005). It identifies the overarching meta-narrative of a specific discipline and its core epistemological underpinnings.

Reaching as far back as 2002, our search employed research tools such as Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, *Oxford Dictionary of Politics* and a series of other research databases. Scoping reviews and searches were completed between May 2023 and September 2023. From there, the project employed a snowball method through reference tracking. Only publications and contributions that explicitly and directly engage with the significance of mentorship to Black youth were included. This search identified 34 peer-reviewed journal articles in the context of the United States, where conversations regarding the importance of Black mentorship were limited until

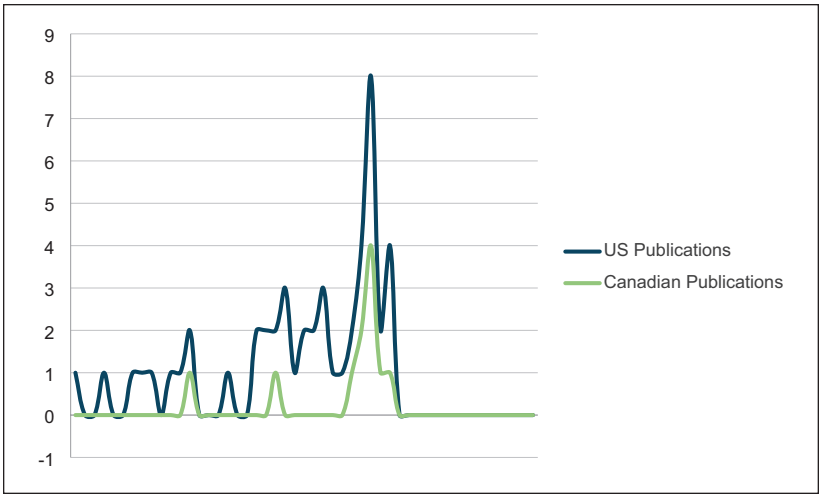

Figure 1. Publication comparison of Black youth mentorship in Canada and the United States (1990–2023).

surging in the period of 2020–2021 (see Figure 1 below). According to these American studies, mentorship programs tailored to the needs of Black and racialized students are essential in combating racism in schools and post-secondary institutions. They provide vital support to youth and elevate their voices and perspectives, validating their personal experiences (Adebo, 2022). Mentorship initiatives are instrumental in fostering a more equitable and supportive learning environment, ensuring that Black and racialized students receive the necessary support to thrive academically.

In Canada, only eight such contributions exist, comprising a mix of articles, graduate theses, and book chapters (see Figure 1 below). Publications addressing the significance of Black youth mentorship in Canada began to emerge in 2002, with publication numbers remaining relatively low until the rise of global discussions on anti-Blackness and the disproportionate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black lives between 2020 and 2021. Programs typically offer a wide range of activities, including résumé-building, work placement support, and industry networking, from sexual health workshops, food and shelter services, scholarship assistance, and constructive feedback to enhance decision-making skills.

According to the available evidence, Black youth mentorship programs provide crucial career and academic guidance while providing participants with an increased sense of empowerment. Research from the University of Alberta Black Youth Mentorship Program (UABYMP) conducted in February

2021 demonstrates the positive impact of mentorships on its high school participants. Basra (2021, p. 33) observed that Black youth who participated in UABYMP reported enhanced awareness of available resources for pursuing post-secondary education and receiving institutional support. The findings indicate that the likelihood of Black youth pursuing post-secondary education rose from 75% to 84% during the mentorship program. Additionally, a notable proportion of youth participants who expressed strong intentions to attend university increased from 61% to 84% by program completion (Basra, 2021, p. 33). The report further underscores the significant impact of mentorship on cultural identity, with 96% of Black youth participants reporting a strong positive cultural identity fostered by a supportive community with mentors who share a similar heritage (Basra, 2021, p. 33). Although only one rare example, Basra's study suggests how mentorship can play a pivotal role in empowering Black youth, enhancing educational aspirations, and fostering a sense of belonging and support.

While mentorship programs are undoubtedly beneficial for the personal and professional development of Black youth, it is vital to recognize their potential to prioritize market demands over the cultural relevance of mentorship. This dynamic can inadvertently perpetuate the system of racial capitalism in Canada. Alexander (1979, 1985) and Robinson (1983) define racial capitalism as the intricate relationship between race and capital, wherein racial disparities serve as the primary mode of exploitation. They view racial capitalism as a framework for understanding the conditions under which racism and capitalism emerge as inextricably linked. Importantly, this discussion highlights the concern that diverse Black cultural mentorship practices are increasingly becoming sites of resource extraction and less of an Afro-cultural exchange. Furthermore, according to Tecle (2021, pp. 218–220), the emphasis on individual behaviour and responsibility in the neoliberal context deflects from the inherent racialized violence present in local and global markets. Tecle argues that mentors in such programs often assume the role of a successful Black person acting as "corrective agents" to (re)direct and discipline youth in underserved communities. To break free from this hierarchical model, Tecle suggests that mentorship programs must shift their focus from trying to "fix" youth to conform to the needs of the job market to fostering environments that encourage critical questioning and rejecting racism as standard practice. When approached from a "bottom-up" perspective, mentorship becomes a form of Black activism, providing spaces for diverse Black people to strategize and confront the effects and endurance of racial capitalism on their lives. As noted by Butler (2021), Black activism in Canada often centers around a powerful ethic of collective care that strengthens communities. An inspiring example is the Sistah Mentorship initiative, established by

Black women in the Greater Toronto Area, to address the challenges of racism in Canada. This program offers educational, emotional, and material support to single mothers, exemplifying the proactive efforts within the Black community to uplift and empower one another (Butler, 2021, pp. 28, 42). Consequently, mentorship programs are not only beneficial for personal and professional growth, but they also serve as political spaces through which Black people combat racial capitalism.

Canadian studies also reveal broader societal benefits of Black mentorship. Jibril's (2011) research highlights how mentorship programs contribute to reducing crime rates in Alberta among Black youth. The study draws attention to the alarming situation of Black Somali youth leaving Toronto to seek employment in Alberta's oil and gas industries, where they become targets for police violence. Over 35 Somali youths were tragically murdered in Alberta between 2005 and 2011, prompting significant unease within the Somali community in both Toronto and Alberta. Jibril (2011) observes that media coverage often associated Somali youth with gangs and gang-affiliated activities during the incidences of Black youth murders (p. 29). Jibril (2011) notes that most of these cases remain unresolved, with law enforcement still conducting investigations (pp. 18–19). In response to this critical issue, the Government of Alberta granted the community $1.9 million, with $1.3 million allocated for other projects aimed at helping migrants integrate into Canadian society (Jibril, 2011, p. 29). Alberta's Justice Minister at the time, Alison Redford, emphasized that the funding aimed to keep youth away from gangs and instead engage them in positive activities (Jibril, 2011, p. 29). While Redford's comment held some validity in that some Black youth grow up in underserved neighbourhoods with high crime rates, labelling all Black youth as violent and dangerous is deeply problematic. In fact, mentorship programs can offer essential support to all youth, regardless of their background or circumstances, as emphasized by Dubois et al. (2002) and Joseph (2020).

The dearth of Canadian research aligns with gaps in Black studies in Canada, in general. Unlike the United States, discussions about race and anti-Black racism have been bracketed away from the country's history (Nath, 2011, p. 162; 2018). She observes that the lack of discussion of race in Canada removes the experiences of an entire class of political subjects and limits how we think about and conceptualize constitutive forms of violence and domination that differentially impact the lives of people of colour (Nath, 2011, p. 162).

In fact, many Canadians believe that Canada does not have a "race problem" (Maynard, 2017; Thompson, 2008). National and international perceptions of Canada often paint a picture of a country that has successfully

addressed its racial issues (Bannerji, 2000, p. 538). Canada's multicultural image, Bannerji (2000) argues, only serves as a marketing tool for "inclusiveness" without having to address the structural realities of racism and capitalism. Others have argued that the multicultural myth obscure the realities of slavery, racism, and anti-Blackness within Canadian history and society dating back to the 1600s (Austin, 2007; Cooper, 2006; Maynard, 2017). Furthermore, the insufficient representation of Black faculty in Canadian universities and colleges poses a significant obstacle to the establishment and sustainability of Black studies programs in these institutions. Black faculty represent only about 2% of all faculty which is lower than the representation in the overall workforce (Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT], 2018, p. 2). This lack of representation further contributes to the absence of research on Black youth mentorship, specifically, as well as meaningful discussions on the issues facing Black youth and Black communities, more generally.

Scholars writing on the relationship between race and capital in Canada highlight the ingrained racism in Canadian political economy. Garang et al. (2023) draw attention to the fact that Canada was once legally a European-only country, leading to a form of "Afrophobia" in the nation. The authors caution that Black youth mentors participating may unknowingly hold racist beliefs and stereotypes about Black people. Black youth often face negative perceptions, being labelled as "thugs" or "at-risk," and may not always receive respectful treatment from upper-class mentors such as doctors and psychologists, even when those mentors are Black (Garang et al., 2023, p. 16). Garang et al. (2023) argue that racial stigmas and stereotypes should be seen as forms of structural racism because racist language structures the realities of Black youth in Canada (pp. 16–17).

Anti-Blackness has deep roots in Canadian political culture. Lincoln et al. (2019) point to the 1811 Education Act passed by the Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly, which imposed a direct financial barrier, denying the majority of Black residents access to public education (Lincoln et al., 2019, p. 27). Discriminatory practices persist, like the immigration points system, which prioritizes admitting people with language skills, occupational abilities, education, and wealth that contribute directly and immediately to the Canadian economy; this focus tends to rule out Black immigrants, many of whom lack or are perceived to lack the requisite qualities (Tabag, 2013, p. 1; Triadafilopoulos, 2013). Housing is another example. Decades after racist zoning policies kept Black families from settling in middle and upper-class neighbourhoods in many Canadian cities (Maynard, 2017, p.77), the 2008–2009 global housing crisis prompted a substantial wealth transfer from Black communities in North America to multinational banks (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

The enduring effects of this crisis on diverse Black communities have elevated the socio-economic barriers that impede Black youth from accessing higher education and the job market in Canada. Addressing these implications is crucial to ensuring equitable opportunities for Black youth and fostering inclusive mentorship programs that empower them to thrive. The following analysis marks the first systematic attempt to assess the success of these programs in meeting these objectives.

Method

This study employs a two-pronged approach to understanding Black youth mentorship in Canada: surveys and conversation circles involving key program organizers. To recruit participants, we compiled a list of all Black youth mentorship programs in Canada, identifying 46 such initiatives. Our Black-led research team gathered essential details about these programs from their websites, including supporting organizations, founding years, mission or purpose, target audience, operational sectors, geographical locations, approaches to mentoring Black youth, and publicly available contact information. The surge in active Black youth programming in Canada is presented in Figure 2 which depicts a historical surge in mentorship programs in Canada. Figure 2 shows that structured mentorship programs have been established in Canada since 1994, with a notable upswing in programming observed from 2018 onwards, peaking in 2020 amidst the events surrounding George Floyd's death and the global COVID-19 pandemic, before gradually diminishing in 2023.

Illustrated in Figure 3, Black youth mentorship programs are heavily concentrated in the central Canadian province of Ontario and the eastern province of Nova Scotia. Both regions played host to the initial Black Loyalist and Jamaican Maroon migrations in the 18th century and are home to some of Canada's oldest Black communities (see the works of Asaka [2017] and Nelson [2016] for more on this discussion). Six pan-Canadian programs serve Black youth across the country. In Western Canada, Black youth mentorship programs are scarce, concentrated almost entirely in Calgary and Edmonton, two cities that have welcomed a relatively high number of African immigrants in recent decades. We were not able to locate Black youth mentorship programs in four provinces (Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador), nor any in the territories. This does not suggest none exist in those areas, only that they may be difficult to find, not only for researchers, but for participants as well.

We contacted all programs using publicly available information, inviting their primary organizer(s) to participate in a 15-minute online survey. The survey was tailored for program directors, mentors, and mentees to supplement

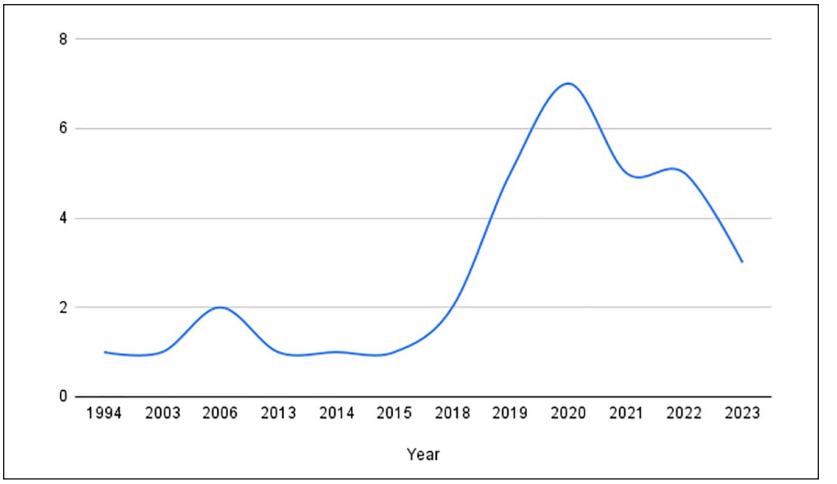

Figure 2. Number of new Black youth mentorship programs established in Canada by year, 1994–2023.

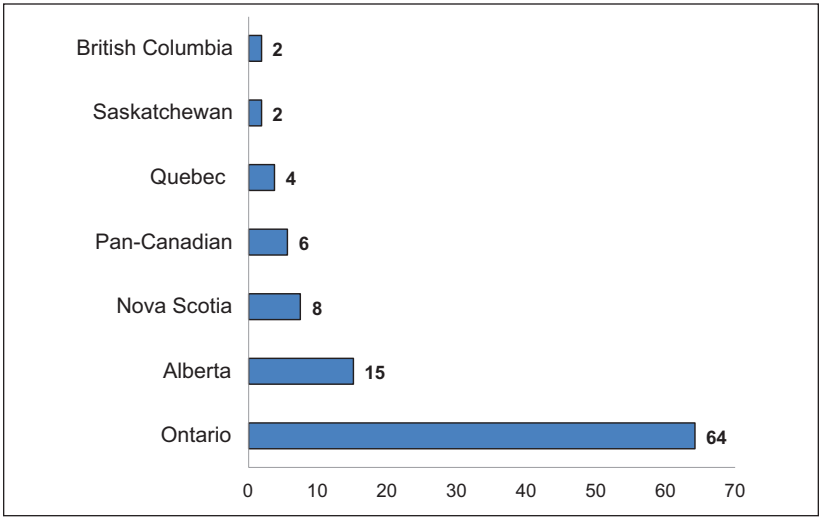

Figure 3. BYMPs in Canada by geographic location.

and verify information about the programs. Participants in this study were all over 18 years old; information about the experience of younger participants was obtained anonymously through program directors and mentors. Following

four rounds of follow-up contact, the research team obtained 47 survey responses from program directors; we received only two from mentors and mentees, forcing us to focus solely on the views of program directors for this stage of the research. Surveys were conducted between September 23, 2023 and concluded on November 25, 2023.

Program directors were also invited to partake in a series of 45-minute, online conversational circles to explore challenges, opportunities, and best practices within the Black youth mentorship ecosystem across Canada. Our approach involved the Afro-Indigenous Caribbean method called "liming": an informal and unstructured method to generate authentic dialogue within diverse Black communities, offering a "thick description" of their unique experiences (Nakhid-Chatoor et al., 2018, p. 3). Liming can be thought of as a culturally-sensitive form of focus group or group interview research. However, rather than being deductive or focused on mining discussions for pre-determined themes, liming centers participant-driven conversations as a central locus for analysis and inquiry. Whereas most focus groups and interviews involve a moderator posing questions using a script to ensure replicability, liming is less structured and prioritizes story-sharing and relationship-building over data collection. These conversation circles took place between October 25 and November 25, 2023.

A preliminary "what we heard" report was circulated to participants for feedback between January 1, 2024 and January 31, 2024. A final report with the research findings was submitted to the study sponsor, Women and Gender Equality (WAGE) Canada, in April, 2024. While supporting the research through a standard grant, WAGE did not have substantive input into the findings nor are they responsible for anything written in this article or other research emanating from the project. These methods were approved by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (Pro00132477).

The Pharmakological Nature of Black Youth Leadership in Canada

The following analysis focuses on one of several key concerns raised by program directors in our conversational circles: the loss of culture and the lack of African/Black representation in the mentorship ecosystem. The sample size for our conversational circles consisted of 10 program directors, selected to provide in-depth analysis and to triangulate survey findings. Of our 47 survey respondents, 20 participants indicated that Afrocentrism should play a pivotal role in the way mentorship programs are designed and operated. Yet many discussions in our conversation circles revolved around the absence of

Black people in leadership positions within mentorship programs and a lack of Afrocentric approaches.

According to our analysis of program websites, survey of program directors and mentors, and conversation circles, most Black youth mentorship programs in Canada pursue two objectives (to varying degrees). The first treats mentorship programs as spaces for youth advocacy, political strategizing, and Black transindividuation processes. These contributions primarily concentrate on addressing the structural and systemic forms of racism faced by Black youth in Canada. They underscore the importance of educating Black youth about the historical and continuing efforts of Black dispossession in Canada and the multiple forms of intersecting violence that invade their lives.

The second strand emphasizes the significance of personal development, career streamlining, and filling Canada's labour market gaps. Although structural racism remains present in the background of these conversations, the primary focus lies in fostering youth self-esteem and integration in Canadian society and the economy. These contributions focus more on promoting individual youth development through collaboration and career mentorship and less on equipping mentees with the tools to confront racism, embody a sense of collective care, challenge racist stereotypes, and address racism in education.

Of the two strands, the latter receives priority in most Black youth mentorship programs in Canada. Program directors noted that proposals for Afrocentric mentorship programs are typically rejected by boards of directors that are largely constituted by non-Black Canadians who view Afrocentric approaches as exclusionary to non-Black youth and offering special attention to one group over another.

A program director remarked that "Although funds are crucial, they often come with limitations influenced by the sponsor's political and social affiliations. This sometimes hinders the adoption of equity initiatives proposed by Black people, such as Afrocentric frameworks, which are unfairly labelled as exclusionary." Another program director highlighted disparities in leadership representation within government-led programs, stating, "The leadership in these programs mainly consists of White Canadians, which limits the influence of Black communities in shaping program focus and frameworks." Corroborating this sentiment, another director echoed that "Sponsors play a significant role, but are often disconnected from both the youth and the broader community. Their financial support is usually tied to their own corporate goals, rather than genuinely supporting Black youth and their cultural needs through mentorship programs."

We learned from Black program directors that White Canadians serve on boards and steering committees for many BYMPs, relegating Black people to part-time, contract roles with less job security. The troubling consequence

of this is that Black people, who are most closely connected to their communities, lack influence on the formulation of programs and their operational frameworks.

We also learned that another contributing factor for rejecting Afrocentric projects is directly correlated to the expectations of sponsors, who often provide conditional financial support that serves corporate or government needs. Program directors observed that funding outlets such as many governments and leading banks use mentorship programs to achieve equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) goals that improve their corporate image; they appear less interested in the cultural relevance of mentorship programs and the success and well-being of Black youth who participate. One director noted, "Once youth are part of a government-led or sponsored program, there's a noticeable decline in interest from government and corporate sponsors in EDI initiatives. It seems they're more concerned about the numbers on their ledger books than the actual well-being of the youth." A Black youth mentor insisted that "Government and corporate-led programs often prioritize a numerical approach to EDI issues, neglecting the cultural significance of mentorship and perpetuating a class divide within the mentorship ecosystem." Another participant insisted that "There's a widespread understanding that government-led programs historically neglected the needs of Black people, treating engagement as a means of extracting value rather than genuine support," leading to an erosion of trust in government-affiliated organizations among Black communities.

Participants observed that because of the significant role government and corporate funding play in the mentorship ecosystem, we must seriously consider the implications they hold in directing programming and keeping most of these programs operational. Our survey data highlights the diverse array of funding streams that sustain mentorship programs, further underscoring the significance of collaborative efforts between governmental entities and private corporations in supporting initiatives aimed at nurturing the growth and development of Black youth across the country. To the extent that there are conditions or objectives attached to those funds (e.g., reporting requirements, curriculum, and product promotion), private and public sponsors play a significant role in shaping Black youth mentorship in Canada. Figure 4 depicts the mentorship funding landscape in Canada.

These conversation circle discussions reflect a growing concern that capital is an indispensable form of cultural hegemony. The commendable drive for connecting Black youth to postsecondary education and the job market has the side-effect of transforming Black youth into rational market actors. This strand of mentorship programs is emblematic of a form of cultural alienation that ruptures diverse Black modes of knowledge production and being.

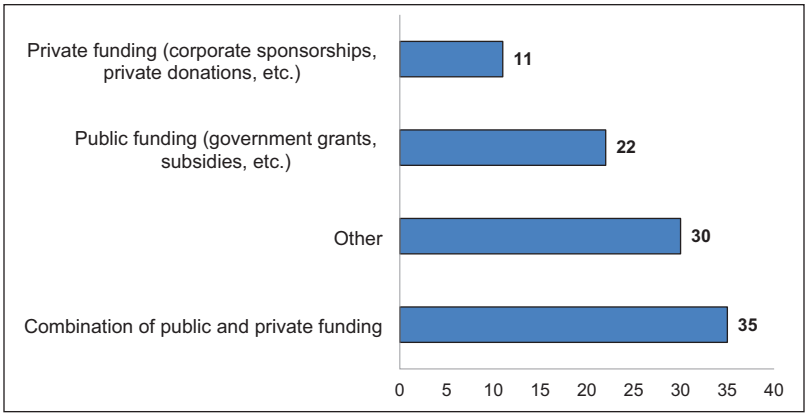

Figure 4. Source of funding (%) for Black youth mentorship programs in Canada.

Black youth become tools for instrumentalizing capital: skill-bearing labourers tasked with managing their own livelihoods. The pharmakological tension highlights the need for greater support for youth, including additional programming that incorporates Black world-building practices across the diaspora, acknowledging how youth are differently impacted by the histories of racial capitalism. In this context, Black world-building refers to mentorship programs and institutions that center Black experiences and histories, empowering youth to challenge and navigate systemic oppression. It also encompasses the racialization of space and the political economy that excludes Black voices (Hill, 2024). Black world-building practices can thus be seen as a deconstruction of space to reflect the lived realities of diverse Black communities, serving as a form of "de-mapping" of hegemonic spaces (Hill, 2024).

While important differences exist among Black people, the legal, political, and economic structures of colonial domination remain largely intact. Despite geographical and cultural variations, methods of subjection often reveal stark similarities among Black people in the diaspora (Kelley, 2000, p. 27).

The pharmakological tension lies in the paradox where, while Black youth strive for improved education and employment, they face the peril of losing centuries of rich, diverse Black world-building practices. In the process, Black ways of life risk erasure at the hands of capital's systematic, quantifying and neoliberalist logic.

Mentorship programs vary widely in their methods, focus, and frameworks, sometimes but not always reflecting the diversity within Black communities and cultures. While integrating diverse cultural elements can enhance these

programs, it should not be a universal evaluative criterion. Instead, cultural integration can be achieved through activity frameworks, community leadership, and ensuring youth perspectives are central to both the design and implementation of programming. This approach positions youth as active agents in shaping their lives and empowers them to guide the meaningful development of programs.

Instead of being a vehicle for Black cultural transference, Black youth mentorship has become a process of proletarianization in Canada, reducing participants to instruments in capitalist market economies (Stiegler, 2015a, pp. 158–159). Although market-driven mentorship approaches provide valuable support for Black youth, they often obscure the socio-economic realities faced by the youth these programs seek to support. Discussed below, Afrocentric mentorship prioritizes cultural transmission as foundational knowledge, contrasting sharply with market-driven mentorship approaches that emphasize skill acquisition tailored to market needs.

African relational practices are diverse, reflecting the vast cultural, regional, and historical contexts across the African diaspora. Afrocentric mentorship does not aim to homogenize these traditions but instead emphasizes shared values, such as intergenerational knowledge transfer and ethics of care, as foundational principles. While dividing mentorship programs into rigid silos of region, religion, or class is neither feasible nor desirable, programs can better support cultural transmission by involving youth in their design and implementation. This approach ensures mentorship aligns with the lived experiences of participants, bridging the gap between programming goals and the risk of cultural alienation.

Centering Blackness in Black Youth Mentorship

Mentorship holds profound significance across diverse Black traditions, dating back centuries before European colonization. Within these traditions, it serves as a vessel for passing down vital narratives of resilience, determination, and the enduring impact of elite capture. Elite capture, as defined by Táíwò (2022, pp. 10–12), underscores the alarming trend where powerful entities shape governing practices to serve their own interests. In the context of Afrocentric mentorship, we see a troubling erosion of Black agency in shaping culturally-sensitive programming. This erosion is particularly distressing because Afrocentric mentorship plays a pivotal role in guiding younger generations through life's trials. Elders, drawing from their rich experiences and ancestral wisdom, serve as stewards of cultural heritage, safeguarding narratives often overlooked in mainstream education (Shockley & Frederick, 2010; Washington et al., 2006). When it comes to mentorship, certain common principles or ethics of care traverse African

culture. Many of these stress collectivism and inter-generational knowledge transfer that sit uneasily alongside market-driven mentorship approaches. Consider *Ubuntu* approaches that stress the importance of togetherness, spiritual connections, and nurturing relationships grounded in community (Hawkins-Moore, 2022). The notable Ghanaian teachings of *Sankofa* instill a sense of responsibility for reclaiming and safeguarding one's history and culture, providing a framework for mentorship that honours ancestral wisdom and heritage (Hawkins-Moore, 2022). Additionally, the Swahili concepts of *Umoja* and *Kujichagulia* center unity as a key feature of collective identity, promoting a form of self-determination aligned with the broader interests of one's community. Moreover, *Ujamaa* advocates for cooperative economics, stressing economic solidarity and meeting common needs through communal support. *Nia* encourages youth to find purpose rooted in African ethics, while *Kuumba* celebrates creativity as essential for building vibrant communities (Hawkins-Moore, 2022).

African ethics of care also stress the significance of accountable leadership, allowing youth to focus not only on themselves, but on their greater role in their communities. Such approaches are grounded in community compassion, cooperative economics, creativity, and faith (Sánchez et al., 2018). The central catalyst for these forms of ethics is their focus on creating transformative opportunities for youth that benefit not only individuals but also establish a social network of support and care beyond market labour needs. These forms of ethics and principles leave social tracks and travel with Black people wherever they go.

It is important to note that African ethics of care are not understood as romanticized; rather, they come with an understanding that stresses the everyday political and intentional acts of resistance needed to ensure the continuity of age-old African relational practices. Such approaches may run counter to market logics that emphasize routines and immediacy. The foundations of these African ethics also come with the understanding that slavery, colonization, and the genocide of Indigenous peoples not only wreak intergenerational havoc on youth but also point to the multiplicity of ways in which conquest transforms our relationships with each other and the world. This observation has been advanced by the important works of Indigenous feminists challenging the destructive forces of colonization, patriarchy, and extractive industries that interrupt traditional practices among Indigenous peoples and ways of life (see the works of Altamirano-Jiménez, 2020, pp. 160–161, 2021; Simpson, 2017; Spillett, 2021, p. 15; Starblanket & Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, 2019).

The varied impacts of heteronormative racial capitalism on Black youth, particularly Black women and LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, highlight the need for nuanced approaches to mentorship and youth development. Laws

like the Virginia Code, which institutionalized matrilineal slavery (Morgan, 2018), and sodomy laws, which stigmatized diverse sexual and gender relationships (Ferguson, 2004; Foster, 2019; Woodard, 2014), entrenched cisheteronormative colonial structures that exploited and marginalized Queer people all compound to impact their lives differently. These power relations, often shaped by systems of economic extraction and exclusion, underscore the importance of mentorship programs that critically address these legacies to foster full participation and empowerment for all youth.

The key to integrating African ethics of care into Black youth mentorship lies in prioritizing Black modes of knowing and being. This can be operationalized by emphasizing Black world-building practices and culture, allowing Black youth to be seen as *full* human beings who bring distinct worldviews when entering mentorship programs. Centering culture is crucial in cultivating environments of belonging and self-confidence, all of which may contribute to strengthening youth self-esteem and fostering a renewed sense of purpose in their lives.

Although discussions on the significance of Afrocentric approaches to mentorship are slow to arrive in Canada, growing evidence-based studies in the United States have stressed the importance of Black pedagogical praxis in mentorship for Black youth. Students engaged in Afrocentric programs demonstrate higher academic achievement and success compared to their peers (Gordon et al., 2009, p. 2). Washington et al. (2006, p. 48) found that incorporating Afrocentric spirituality into programming positively influenced the ability of Black males aged 9 to 17 to adapt to oppression. They emphasize that cultural practices in mentorship can support male development by providing relatable experiences, with spirituality offering a source of strength and resilience. Similarly, Scott and Deutsch (2021, p. 349) observed that male adolescents were more empowered by Black mentors within their kinship networks, fostering their resilience.

Advancing the significance of culturally relevant pedagogy in mentorship programs, Watson et al. (2016) point to the importance of countering Eurocentric and colonial approaches to mentorship. They assert that such approaches can broaden Black youth's understanding of structural racism and empower them to confront broader socioeconomic systems that perpetuate oppression. Social justice approaches, they argue, are pivotal in addressing youth concerns, including racism, health disparities, and entrepreneurship.

Furthermore, program directors have suggested that successful mentorship programs not only acknowledge the intersecting complexities in the lives of Black youth but should also strive to "meet youth where they are." Participants in conversational circles highlighted the significance of developing effective communication skills with oneself and others, shifting the guise

of programming from individualism to collectivity. Indigenous frameworks such as "decolonial love" can help youth feel a sense of belonging in their lives. According to Simpson (2015), decolonial love—developed in the context of Canadian settler-colonialism by Indigenous feminists—involves the reclaiming of one's culture and ancestral teachings. It is a form of love dedicated to preserving and recovering cultural and traditional practices central to how Indigenous peoples perceive themselves in the world. This form of love is not individualistic but involves the appreciation and acceptance of Indigenous worldviews and teachings, and using those teachings to inform how one relates to others and the world (Butler, 2023, p. 1381).

Decolonial love is the stark act of resistance to colonialism, challenging dominant frameworks that are often imposed on Black and Indigenous peoples in Canada. As an act of resistance to anti-Blackness in the mentorship ecosystem, we learned from program directors that programs can create a strong sense of belonging by teaching youth about their histories and legacies as distinct and diverse peoples, helping them to make sense of their place in the world. It is a "love language" of resistance which rejects dominant Eurocentric culture and centers the histories, stories, languages, lives, and experiences of Black people in mentorship and other learning environments. Furthermore, it is a way of developing Afro-Indigenous processes of "radical self-love," simultaneously resisting anti-Blackness in Canada (Butler, 2023, p. 1381).

Black notions of love, compassion, care and spirituality constitute the incalculable dimensions of Black world-building practices. Afrocentric mentorship programs serve as strategic political moves enacted by diverse Black communities to resist quantification, racism and the violence of capitalism. Grounded in Black principles of care, Afrocentric programs elude assessment through market-driven metrics, offering alternatives outside the dominant approach to mentorship.

Afrocentric mentorship programs, as strategic political acts, cushion the blow of racial capitalism on Black youth in North America. This form of "Black internationalism"—the establishment of Black international networks of care—mitigates the lethal impacts of racial capitalism on Black youth. In this way, Afrocentric mentorship protects the histories of Black people, including the structural and economic power configurations that constrain the opportunities available for Black people in Canada. Black transindividuation processes, mediated through traditional mentorship practices, underscore the monumental and structuring role of race and capital in the making of Canada, alongside state practices of slavery, genocide, heteropatriarchy, and land theft in the country. Collectively, Black mentoring practices constitute the intricate networks of influence and solidarities engineered by Black people to end the

harrowing practice of slavery in Canada and to push against renewed manifestations of systemic violence on Black lives.

Consequently, mentorship serves as fragments of Black memory that contribute to the construction of Black "prevision," reflecting Black people's perpetual awareness of historical modes of violence that structure their lives. The notion of prevision, building on Gramsci and Hall, encompasses Black peoples' collective consciousness of the oppressive workings of colonial empires and strategies for navigating capture (Hall, 2013, pp. 16–17). Afrocentric programs are thus modes of cultural and historical recovery. The recovery of culture and tradition here refers to more than the archeological discovery of "great kings and queens of ancient Africa" (Austin, 2001, p. 64), which measures African success based on colonial conquest and domination, but instead, Afrocentric programming aims to recover the novel strategic political practices and acts of survival crafted by Black people in Canada to undo repressive racist and economic structures.

Discussion

Considering the recent emergence of many Black youth mentorship programs in Canada and the corresponding dearth of academic research, our study is, by necessity, an exploratory one. More observational and evidence-based research on the benefits and effectiveness of mentorship programs in Canada is warranted. In particular, more large-N comparative research is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of these programs on youth. While such studies from the United States exist (Butler, 2021; Jones et al., 2022; Reddick, 2011; Somers et al., 2016; Torres et al., 2012), it is crucial to note that their findings may not apply to the Canadian context due to the varying ways racial capitalism developed and continues to develop in both countries. Therefore, it is imperative to pay closer attention to the historical context specific to the emergence of racial capitalism in Canada.

Compounding the issue, the Canadian mentorship landscape has no comparative studies testing the strengths and benefits of community-based mentorship versus state-owned and -operated programs targeted to Black youth. With empirical studies, governments and policy practitioners can better serve the varying needs of youth in these programs. Without them, we lack the ability to identify and share promising practices, or to learn from the challenges and failures faced by different BYMP organizations. Surveys of mentors and mentees are in short supply, at least those that are available to academic researchers. Our own attempts to reach mentors and mentees were unsuccessful. After conducting 10 virtual conversational circles, we encouraged program directors to share the survey with their program participants. Only two responded, indicating a need to better understand their reticence.

Furthermore, a glaring knowledge gap exists concerning Black young women, girls and gender-diverse youth. Studies from the United States reveal that youth in the LGBTQIA2S+ community face their own, and often layered, experiences with anti-Blackness, sexuality, homophobia, transphobia, gender violence, heterosexism, masculism and cis-genderism – many of which are prevalent within Black communities (Kaufman et al., 2021, p. 4; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Reed et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2012, p. 3). Furthermore, LGBTQIA2S+ youth often encounter rejection from family and cultural networks, leading to feelings of isolation and lowered self-esteem. In our conversational circles, some program directors have expressed reluctance to discuss topics concerning the LGBTQIA2S+ community openly. One program director lamented, "Black men and boys face significant threats from the criminal justice system in their daily lives. However, my understanding is that this isn't the same for LGBTQIA2S+ Black youth." Another participant contributed by stating, "The youth we work with seldom raise concerns about sexuality and gender, presumably due to the ongoing process of self-discovery and uncertainty surrounding their identity and expectations from society." Additionally, a participant conveyed, "Most of us are here because we have a calling to support Black youth in whatever way we can. However, some mentors lack the training needed to engage in conversations about sexuality and identity with youth effectively." Notably, they raised the question, "At what point does our role transform from mentors and to parental figures?" Echoing this, a participant shared that "I am the lighthouse. Like a lighthouse, youth dock at my lighthouse when they need guidance, and when they get what they need, they sail away."

The Black mentorship ecosystem could benefit from a program structure like the Black Youth for Social Innovation (BYSI) program at the University of Alberta which bridges service gaps in mentorship by empowering youth to lead changes they are passionate about, with mentors providing guidance and support. In its inaugural year with 10 mentees, all participants volunteered to stay after the completion of the program between May 2024 and August 2024, demonstrating BYSI's potential to create lasting impacts for youth. Mentee Veren Abeghe shared, "As a Black woman, my instinct has been to hide parts of myself. . . But within two weeks [of being part of BYSI], I realized this was a safe space that embraced all perspectives" (Rubayita, 2024). Similarly, Obikwelu reflected, "I realized [that I am] passionate about the social and political climate and enacting change in the lives of marginalized communities and the demographic [I am] part of" (McMaster, 2024). The program illustrates that when youth are actively integrated into the mentorship ecosystem and empowered to shape its vision and programming, they achieve more impactful and meaningful outcomes.

Conclusion

Collectively, Black youth mentorship programs in Canada serve two primary roles. One strand of programming is dedicated to ensuring Black youth have access to the necessary support to overcome socio-economic barriers to post-secondary education and the job market. The other positions mentorship as a tool to challenge oppressive systems of power and racism in Canada. Together, these two strands of programming are designed to equip Black youth with practical tools and relationships necessary to navigate a Canadian economy that continues to marginalize many members of Black communities.

Within this broader context, we consider Black youth mentorship programs as *pharmakons*, a term (Stiegler, 2010, 2015a, 2015b) interpreted as embodying both poison and cure. Many Black youth mentorship programs, while striving to diversify individual firms, sectors, and the broader economy, risk shifting focus away from the rich traditions of African youth mentorship, instead emphasizing the priorities of capital-driven frameworks. In this way, market-driven mentorship programs function as both poison and remedy, transforming Black lives into essentialized goods of commerce and, while connecting youth to essential jobs and careers, potentially take insufficient consideration of Black youths' cultures and histories.

There remains potential for reclamation, however. Viewed through the lens of pharmakology, mentorship is not inherently toxic, but rather is a site of struggle where the balance between preservation and commodification hangs precariously. It is imperative for us to recognize this dichotomy and strive towards reclaiming mentorship as a *mode* of cultural preservation and hubs for political strategizing against exploitative market forces. Only through such efforts can we hope to safeguard the legacy of Black world-building practices and foster genuine empowerment for Black youth as they enter the broader Canadian economy and society.

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ORCID iD

Seon Yuzyk https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5481-3309

Notes

1. Elite capture refers to an elite group's disproportionate control over governance, redirecting collective goals toward their interests (Táíwò, 2022, pp. 10–12). We use this concept to show how mentorship programs prioritize market needs over youth lived experiences.
2. Borrowing from Stiegler (2010), we define pharmakology as the commercialization of thinking and being, where diverse Afro-Indigenous relational knowledge about ways of living is displaced by industrial work practices. This transformation not only alters modes of work but necessitates the cognitive proletarianization of individuals, reducing ancestral knowledge into commodified objects for market consumption (Stiegler, 2010, pp. 1–44).

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Author Biographies

Seon Yuzyk, a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Alberta, is currently working on his dissertation titled "The Canadian Tradition of Anti-Black Racial Capitalism." This project explores the intersection of racial capitalism and anti-Black racism in Canada's historical context. Yuzyk frequently posts work on his Substack which investigates the intersections of gender, race, sex and capital across varying scales (seonyuzyk.substack.com).

Jared Wesley is a Professor of Political Science, member of the Black Faculty Collective, and Executive Director of the Black Youth for Social Innovation program at the University of Alberta. He leads the Common Ground research team, which is examining the intersection of public opinion, political culture, and public policy in Western Canada.