

Dear Members of the Executive Committee,

My name is Andrew Lochhead, and I am the author of the petition that first called on the City of Toronto to begin a public process to rename Dundas Street. This is now the fourth time I have come before Toronto City Council's Executive Committee to speak on an issue connected to this process and the fifth time I have had to speak to a municipal committee on the matter of renaming civic assets bearing the name of Henry Dundas, First Viscount Melville.

While it is always an honour and a privilege to address the Mayor of our City and our elected representatives, I am disappointed that I must be here again to speak in favour of what to me should be an obvious and easy decision for all of you to support—the naming of Sankofa Square.

In fact it is an easy decision to support because you have already made it.

Some elements of council continue to insist that this decision should be debated again, and again, simply because they feel that spending even the smallest sum of money on efforts to promote reconciliation, to celebrate cultural diversity and to honour the contributions of Black, African and African descended people to our city is worthless.

Under the guise of fiscal conservancy, these elements have abused our democratic processes in order to give a platform to those who would promote wilfull misunderstanding of the past, and espouse hateful, divisive, racist rhetoric that has no place in a city like Toronto.

While debate is the lifeblood of our democracy, constantly having to defend the smallest equity-seeking initiative such as the naming of a public place is itself a form of structural and systemic violence that our city has previously committed to eradicating in, for example, it's Confronting Anti-Black Racism Five Year Action Plan.

In December of last year City Council voted to accept the consensus decision reached by a committee of senior academics, Indigenous Elders, community leaders that represent the interests of business, residents and the voices of historically marginalized peoples, to name our main municipal square, Sankofa Square. Sankofa is a name that speaks to the issues at the very heart of the public conversations that the original petition to rename Dundas Street raised, namely returning to the past, to learn from it, and to use that knowledge to inform and shape the future. Just as it represents the heart of these concerns, Sankofa, as a concept, rightfully belongs at the heart of a city like Toronto—a truly global city that has made its rich cultural diversity and its commitment to progressive values a part of its core identity.

Sankofa also represents a profound expression of Black and Indigenous solidarity. If one reads part of the Community Advisory Committee's rationale in choosing a name that it was the preference, given Henry Dundas' association with the transatlantic slave trade, of Indigenous Elders and the CAC to choose a name that reflected the Black historical experience.

To suggest that an Indigenous language name would be preferable is to erase that expression of solidarity, not to mention flatten the complexities and diversity of languages spoken on this, the treaty lands of many first peoples.

In my work as a scholar of public memory, and as an artist and public historian, I have had the opportunity to speak with members the African-Canadian community who have expressed to me the immense sense of pride they feel in seeing Sankofa embraced as a concept in our city and their heritage and contributions to Toronto celebrated and recognized in such a public manner. Indeed many of these same individuals have expressed how important seeing themselves represented in public is, to making them feel a part of the city.

To suggest, as some have, that Sankofa is not a Canadian name, is to deny not only the Canadian-ness of African-Canadians, but is to deny the truly multicultural nation and city that we are.

In conclusion, I encourage the Executive Committee and Council to continue to support Sankofa Square as the name for our city's premier public events and gathering place, and to make strong financial commitments to education and outreach initiatives around the name and concept of Sankofa. Further we must continue to support the important work of the City's Recognition Review process that addresses the ways in which racism and colonial violence are celebrated in our city's toponyms, monuments and other public spaces and institutions.

If we are to maintain our municipal status as a world leader in equity, diversity and inclusion and, as I have said before this committee multiple times, live up to our motto of Diversity, Our Strength, - we simply cannot afford not to.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Lochhead', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Andrew Lochhead