

ETFO Black History Month

We Didn't Cross the Waters Alone



#FutureGriot



Elementary
Teachers'
Federation of
Ontario

ETFO Black History Month Poster Symbols

We Didn't Cross the Waters Alone: Artist: Suzan Destinie Adélakun

No.	Symbol	Description
1	Black Smoke (Tower of Freedom)	Represents the historic smoke signals from the Tower of Freedom in Windsor, Ont., used as a symbol of hope and freedom for those crossing into Canada via the Underground Railroad.
2	Great Western Railway Locomotive	The train is an exact rendition of the 1854 Great Western Railway locomotive, one of the early engines built in Canada.
3	VR Goggles – Future Worldbuilding	The child wearing VR represents imagination, innovation, and new ways of seeing. A symbol of worldbuilding and the next generation shaping the future.
4	Henson Patch & Microphone	A reference to Josiah Henson and the generations connected to the Henson legacy of liberation. Symbolizes lineage, memory, and return. The microphone connects to him being a future griot, (West African storyteller, memory-keeper, historian). As a griot, he also represents being the voice of his generation.
5	Ankara Print	Ankara is one of West Africa's most recognizable textiles. Although originally produced by Dutch factories trying to mimic Indonesian batik, it was rejected in Indonesia and embraced across West and Central Africa instead. There, communities claimed it and shaped it into a fabric of identity, pride, politics, and celebration.
6	Lantern (Harriet Tubman)	The lantern symbolizes Harriet Tubman's leadership, guidance, and the many night journeys she made leading people to freedom as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Tubman's rescue missions spanned roughly 1850 to 1860, guiding enslaved people from the United States into safe communities throughout Ontario (then called Canada West). The lantern also serves as a reminder of how Tubman, an amazing naturalist, would intentionally pause to connect with her natural surroundings to chart courses to safety. The lantern is a reminder of both literal and spiritual light during the darkest passages of escape.
7	Bridge of Migrants	Figures walking across the bridge over the water symbolize migration, intergenerational movement, and the journeys taken toward new futures.
8	Yemoja	Yemoja, the Mother of Waters from the West African pantheon, is reimagined here as Ayaba Mayafra, the Queen of Snow. In this story, she arrives in the northern, ice-covered lands, symbolizing: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• resilience across climates• ancestral protection• the adaptation of African spiritual traditions in new worlds Folklores across the diaspora say Yemoja travelled spiritually across the Middle Passage to be with enslaved children and protect them through hardship. She is celebrated throughout the Americas as Yemaya, the Water Mother who watches over migrants, coastlines, and those who cross oceans seeking freedom.
9	Cowrie Shell	Represents wealth, trade, femininity, protection, and sacred value across Africa and the diaspora. A symbol of both currency and spiritual power. Fun fact: Cowrie shells were used as money across West Africa from about the 10th century all the way into the early 20th century. They were one of the longest-circulating forms of currency on the continent.
10	Northern Cardinal	A bird that lives between water and land. In West African belief, cardinals are messengers of ancestors. Also, a subtle symbol of migration and spiritual presence.



2026 Black History Month Poster

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The poster is a visual narrative that blends West African cosmology with northern landscapes tied to Black migration routes, such as Windsor-Detroit, Amherstburg, and Chatham-Kent along the Great Lakes.

Central Figure: A young Black boy imagined as a young griot, a modern keeper of memory. In many West African cultures, griots are the storytellers, musicians, and living libraries who carry history through voice, rhythm, and oral tradition. The child wears futuristic virtual reality goggles, which symbolize dual vision: how history is inherited, how the future is imagined, and how children hold both ancestral memory and possibility at once. His sweater is a traditional Nigerian print and his bright orange vest features an embroidered Henson patch, which is meant to represent that he is a descendent of Canadian pioneer Josiah Henson.

The microphone on the patch symbolizes the boy's voice and his ability to be the sound of his generation. By placing this symbol on an ingenious Black child, the poster reclaims and centres the people who were historically omitted from the narratives in the image. He is not simply observing the scene; he is participating in the retelling of the stories they evoke. In this way, the poster positions the child as a carrier of ancestral memory, a translator of mythology into the present, and a future architect of how history will be told.

Black & Canadian Imagery: On the boy's left, emerging from the frozen lake stands the winter manifestation of Yemoja, the Orisha of the great waters, memory, and protection. She is portrayed as a Black woman with long white braids holding a

glowing lantern that symbolizes Harriet Tubman's nocturnal journeys. Her inclusion merges several elements: water as memory, the light in the lantern that guides people across dangerous landscapes, and the unseen spiritual support behind every migration journey.

The train and railway to his right references the railroads that shaped settlement in Canada, including the infrastructure built through Black labour and, in particular, the Black porters who unionized in response to race-based discrimination. The railway routes also represent the pathways that freedom seekers navigated. The front of the train features the emblem of the Orisha Ogun, the builder, symbolically visualized as iron, tracks and technology, without depicting him directly.

The train grounds the mythic imagery in Canadian history and geography highlighted by the steam in the shape of the Tower of Freedom in Windsor. Silhouettes of travellers on a frozen bridge represent Black families crossing into new territory, the legacy of the underground railroad, and the courage and vulnerability of leaving one world to enter another.

Canadian Landscape & Natural Symbols: The winterberries, Canadian Rockies, snow-dusted cattails, northern cardinal, and frozen Great Lakes represent the contrast between the promise of "Canada West" advertised in the early 1900s and the actual northern climate, and the ecosystems that carry histories and stories in their waters and land. This landscape becomes a character – a witness – in the story.

**The poster reminds us that our ancestors are always with us.
Through migration and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the**

Black diaspora has never crossed waters alone.

