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Article abstract

Examining the oral histories of black women teachers, this article explores the ways in which black women's workplace experiences in Ontario schools and, to a larger extent, broader Canadian society, influenced the development of their educational philosophies. Offering a critical lens towards Ontario's education system, black female educators not only developed resistive pedagogies to cope with the isolation and discrimination they experienced as teachers, but also created strategies that allowed them to educate the children they were responsible to teach. These resistive pedagogies recognized and supported black experiences in Canada and were firmly rooted in their experiences as black women. By teaching black history within their classrooms, merging community uplift with schooling practice, and implementing strict guidelines and expectations for racialized students, black women worked to augment mainstream schooling practices to better serve students of various racial and cultural backgrounds.

'We Got Our Quota'

Black Female Educators and Resistive Pedagogies, 1960s-1980s

by Funke Aladejebi

By the time Canadian born educator Roslyn Meyers was teaching at a private school in Ontario in the 1960s, she had already become critical of diversity hiring practices within Windsor's Board of Education. Meyers experienced both overt and subtle forms of discrimination within school boards, not only as a student, but also as an educator. She explained,

I've never had a good experience with the Windsor board. Again, my experience was: 'oh we got our quota.' So it was like: 'Oh we hired you. The other two are in the class and we got out quota this year?... So I never had [a] role model. I was never taught by a black teacher. My whole teaching career. Never. I mean my whole schooling, I was never taught by a black person.¹

For Roslyn Meyers, while the pres-

ence of black teachers to serve as role models for diverse groups of students was important, the inclusion of black educators merely to 'fill quotas' was a limited and ineffective way of demonstrating inclusion. Meyers instead turned to the private school sector because it gave her some classroom flexibility and allowed her the ability to use black-focused films and tools in her classroom teaching.² Ignoring criticism from her white colleagues, Meyers conducted black history activities in the classroom because she believed that it was "not fair to people coming from other countries not to have known the history of black people, or the people that are still struggling."³ Infusing black history into her classroom became integral to Meyers' pedagogical approach; it served to merge the experi-

¹ All interviewees have been provided with pseudonyms. Roslyn Meyers, interview by author, audio recording, Windsor, ON., 19 August 2011.

² According to scholars Anne F. Bayefsky and Arieh Waldman, private schools became increasingly popular in the mid-to-late 1950s as "radical alternatives to the inflexible, all-too-structured nature of the public school." Private schools offered diversity within curriculum offerings and classroom practices and specialized education from religions to language instruction. Anne F. Bayefsky and Arieh Waldman, *State Support for Religious Education: Canada Versus the United Nations*, (The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2007), 540-43.

³ Meyers, interview. In her interview, Meyers explained that some of her white colleagues did not want her to show the film, *Eyes on the Prize*, because it highlighted footage from Civil Rights

Abstract

Examining the oral histories of black women teachers, this article explores the ways in which black women's workplace experiences in Ontario schools and, to a larger extent, broader Canadian society, influenced the development of their educational philosophies. Offering a critical lens towards Ontario's education system, black female educators not only developed resistive pedagogies to cope with the isolation and discrimination they experienced as teachers, but also created strategies that allowed them to educate the children they were responsible to teach. These resistive pedagogies recognized and supported black experiences in Canada and were firmly rooted in their experiences as black women. By teaching black history within their classrooms, merging community uplift with schooling practice, and implementing strict guidelines and expectations for racialized students, black women worked to augment mainstream schooling practices to better serve students of various racial and cultural backgrounds.

Résumé: *Basé sur des entrevues avec des institutrices noires, cet article décrit les façons dont leurs expériences de femmes noires dans les écoles ontariennes, et plus généralement dans la société canadienne, ont influencé le développement de leurs philosophies pédagogiques. Elles ont trouvé les moyens de se défendre contre l'isolement et la discrimination auxquels elles étaient exposées, tout en créant des stratégies qui leur permettaient d'éduquer les enfants dont elles étaient responsables. Tout en enseignant les matières requises par le curriculum, leurs pratiques pédagogiques soulignaient l'expérience des Noirs au Canada et encourageaient les élèves à attacher à cette dernière une valeur positive. Ce faisant, ces femmes noires ont élargi les pratiques pédagogiques traditionnelles pour mieux servir les élèves de diverses origines raciales et culturelles.*

ences and lessons she learned from her community and mainstream institutions into the strategies she used to teach her students.

Roslyn Meyers was one of the few black educators in this research project who viewed education not as only an opportunity for upward mobility but also as a barrier to racial equality. Challenging mainstream practices that segregated

black students, awarded them lower grades and streamed black students into vocational, technical and behavioural classes, black women teachers not only experienced various forms of discrimination within Canadian schools, but also interpreted and readjusted curriculum mandates to suit their own pedagogical philosophies, often rooted in their racial and gendered experiences.⁴

protests, particularly scenes where young students were subdued by fire hoses. Meyers insisted on showing this to promote discussion and emphasize the lived experiences of people of colour.

⁴ Scholars such as Karen Braithwaite, Afua Copper, George Dei, Carl James, Henry Codjoe and Kristin McLaren all cite discriminatory practices at all levels of the Canadian education system that served to limit equal access to education by black students. See: Karen Braithwaite and Carl James, eds. *Educating African Canadians* (Toronto: James Lorimer & Company, 1996); George Sefa Dei, *Anti-Racism Education: Theory and Practice*, (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 1996); Kristin McLaren, "We had no desire to be set apart: Forced Segregation of Black Students in Canada

By examining the oral histories of black women teachers, this article explores the ways in which black women's workplace experiences in Ontario schools and, to a larger extent, broader Canadian society, influenced the development of their educational philosophies. Offering a critical lens to Ontario's education system, black female educators not only developed resistive pedagogies to cope with the isolation and discrimination they experienced as teachers, but they also created strategies that allowed them to educate the children they were responsible to teach. In particular, school spaces such as the staff rooms served as sites of oppression where black women experienced informal forms of discrimination. They tackled these spaces in a myriad of ways, hoping to gain professional mobility and increase educational equality for racialized students. When educating black children in particular, black women found that their experiences as the racialized 'other' transferred over into their pedagogical approaches, and prepared students for their lives as minorities in white majority society. In her discussion of black immigrant women, sociologist Patience Elabor-Idemudia defines black

women as the racialized other because "their experiences have been socially and institutionally structured in ways that are different from those who are not black and female."⁵ Experiencing their social worlds differently from white administrators and teachers, black women redefined schooling practices based on their own values and understandings.

Getting Black Women's Stories

This article examines the oral histories of twelve black female educators who taught in Ontario from the 1940s-1980s. Sharing their experiences over two years (2010-2012), black women recounted personal memories, incorporated local and family histories, and used personal community and teaching documents to describe their experiences within Ontario schools in the twentieth century. Interviews lasted between one and four hours and respondents were solicited through free advertising over social networks and retired teachers' organizations, appeals to African Canadian community organizations, word-of-mouth, and the snowball technique.

Building on the works of Dionne

West Public Schools and Myths of British Egalitarianism," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 37:73 (May 2004); Henry M. Codjoe, "Fighting a 'Public Enemy' of Black Academic Achievement – The Persistence of Racism and the Schooling Experiences of Black Students in Canada," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 4:4 (December 2001), 343-75; George Dei, "Black-Focused Schools: A Call for Re-Visioning," *Education Canada* 46:3 (Summer 2006), 27-31; George J Sefa Dei, Arlo Kemp, eds. *New Perspectives on African-Centred Education in Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc., 2013).

⁵ Elabor-Idemudia argues that the racialization of Canada's immigration policies were experienced by minority groups in diverse ways. When describing the experience of black women in particular, she contends that African/black immigrant women experienced discrimination and subordination primarily due to their race, gender and place of birth. Patience Elabor-Idemudia, "The Racialization of Gender in the Social Construction of Immigrant Women in Canada: A Case Study of African Women in Prairie Province," *Canadian Woman Studies*, 19:3 (1999), 38-44.

Brand, Peggy Bristow, Sylvia Hamilton, Annette Henry, Karen Flynn and others, this article situates the lived experiences of black women in Canada as central to Ontario schooling history.⁶ As historian Karen Flynn explains, oral history methodology challenges traditional notions that situate women as observable objects and instead, “locates women as subjects, not objects, and as producers of knowledge and agents of social change.”⁷ Similarly, scholars Rebecca Coulter, Helen Harper, Kristina Llewellyn and others, document the complex nature of using oral stories in historical analysis. In her work, *Democracy’s Angels: The Work of Women Teachers*, educational historian Kristina Llewellyn challenges oral historians to examine women teachers’ stories “in relation to a multitude of conflicting truths, understood and acted upon their surroundings.”⁸ Llewellyn and others caution us that while oral histories offer a way to centre women’s experiences within the Canadian historical narrative, these stories must also be critiqued and deconstructed. Supporting this frame-

work, this article uses black women’s stories to re-frame Ontario schooling experiences frequently represented as ‘white’ and male. While all women faced the challenges through their encounters with Canada’s patriarchal schooling systems, black women’s intersectionality not only through the axes of race, class and gender, but also via place of birth, educational training and certification, resulted in a set of experiences that were fragmented, multifaceted and rooted in Canadian experiences both inside and outside of school environments. The following article will highlight some of their experiences of conflict, cooperation and resistance with the hope of examining how education shaped black women’s identities in twentieth-century Canada.

Black Women’s Experiences Within Schooling Institutions

By 1961, distinctive Italian, Jewish, Chinese, Slavic, Caribbean and Canadian-born black neighbourhoods were

⁶ For more on the experiences of black women in Canada, see: Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s to 1950s*, (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1991); Peggy Bristow, Dionne Brand, Linda Cary, Afua Cooper, Sylvia Hamilton and Adrienne Shadd, “We’re Rooted Here and They Can’t Pull Us Up”: *Essays in African-Canadian Women’s History*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994); Agnes Calliste and George Dei, eds., *Anti-Racist Feminism: Critical Race and Gender Studies*, (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2000); Annette Henry, *Taking Back Control: African Canadian Women Teachers’ Lives and Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998).

⁷ Karen Flynn, *Moving Beyond Borders: A History of Black Canadian and Caribbean Women in the Diaspora* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 14.

⁸ Kristina Llewellyn, *Democracy’s Angels: The Work of Women Teachers* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2012), 14; Rebecca Priegert Coulter and Helen Harper, *History is Hers: Women Educators in Twentieth Century Ontario* (Calgary: Detselig, 2005).

⁹ Howard H. Palmer, “Reluctant Hosts: Anglo-Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century,” in John R. Mallea and Jonathan C. Young, eds., *Cultural Diversity and Canadian Education: Issues and Innovations* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1984), 36.

established in large Canadian cities as well as concentrations of Ukrainian, Russian, and German communities across the Western provinces.⁹ In an effort to respond to these demographic changes and provide universal education for all, the Ministry of Education increased studies and research programs about immigrant groups in Ontario classrooms, as well as the discourse surrounding education in Canada, so that it was focused on the individual needs of school children and increasing educational equality amongst its pupils. At the same time, social and political activism in the province was characterized by French Canadian appeals for the recognition of their cultural and linguistic rights, Indigenous communities who advocated for the settlement of land treaties and claims, second wave feminists who demanded equal pay and access to greater administrative posts, and increasing racial and ethnic

consciousness among minority populations.¹⁰ These political and social conditions affected education and educators in Ontario as school boards and administrators frantically worked to accommodate growing public concerns about equality and inclusiveness.

As liberal ideologies that promoted multiculturalism and racial diversity emerged in public discourse in the late 1970s, Ontario school boards followed provincial government initiatives such as the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, and worked to respond to their changing student populations.¹¹ By establishing initiatives such as the Heritage Language Programs in 1977, school boards situated themselves within the federal bilingualism and biculturalism model, and sought to include ethnic and racial groups previously ignored in ministry mandates.¹² Furthermore, multicultural and language diversity programs

¹⁰ Carl James, "Multicultural and Anti-Racism Education in Canada," *Race, Gender & Class, Perspectives on Canadian Anti-Racism*, 2:3 (Spring 1995): 34; Helen Harper, "Difference and Diversity in Ontario Schooling," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 22:2 (Spring 1997), 199.

¹¹ The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was conducted between 1963 and 1969 as a response to growing discontent from French Canadians in Quebec, who advocated for the protection of their cultural and religious rights. The Commission's findings resulted in the creation of the Official Languages Act and the Federal Department of Multiculturalism. For more on the royal commission, see: *Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism: Book IV, The Cultural Contribution of Other Ethnic Groups* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1969); Jean Burnet, "The Policy of Multiculturalism within a Bilingual Framework: A Stock-taking," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 10:2 (1978), 107-113; Milton J. Esman, "the Politics of Official Bilingualism in Canada," in William R. Beer, James E. Jacob, eds., *Language Policy and National Unity* (New Jersey: Rowman & Allenheld, 1985), 45-66; Eve Haque, *Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework: Language, Race, and Belonging in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

¹² K. Mazurek and N. Kach argue that the heritage language program was created as a result of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism in 1963. Serving as the precursor to Canada's official multiculturalism policy of 1988, heritage language programs, ESL instruction and multicultural resources for students represented 'multiculturalism within a bilingual framework'. K. Mazurek and N. Kach, "Multiculturalism, Society and Education," in E. Brian Titley, ed. *Canadian Education: Historical Themes and Contemporary Issues*, Calgary (Alberta, Detselig Enterprises Ltd., 1990), 135-42.

were also paired with initiatives that encouraged gender equality among board staff and administration. For example, the province established the Equal Opportunity Advisory Committee in 1975 to promote employment equity programs for women employees throughout its school jurisdictions and sought to hire and promote female educators into upper administrative positions with their boards of education.¹³ Responding to increasing societal and political pressures from minority groups, Ontario schools broadened their mandates to include, although often sporadically and unevenly, women and racialized groups in these educational policies as well.

It is within this context that black women educators developed varying pedagogical approaches and practices within changing Ontario classrooms. While black Canadian educators were teaching in their own communities as early as 1850, the post Second World War baby boom and subsequent teacher shortage lead to the training and certification of hundreds of black women in Ontario public schools.¹⁴ Upon entrance into Ontario schools, some black educators described their experiences of discrimination as 'typical' and therefore expected, and they understood these instances of oppression as part of their everyday

workplace experiences. In particular, the staff room became a place where black women experienced the most overt forms of discrimination and separation from their peers. While the staff room represented a place where friendships could be forged and educators could find a break from isolating classroom spaces, for some black female educators it became a site of oppression where they experienced overt forms of racism.

When Tamara Migrant began the practice teaching placement portion of her training program in a school near the Danforth area in Toronto in the 1960s, she was abruptly told by staff members that she was not permitted to eat in the staff room but could have her lunch in the basement of the school.¹⁵ Although she refused to eat in the basement, Migrant's need for professional accreditation and economic stability forced her to search for alternative places to have lunch. Migrant revealed, "I wasn't about to jeopardize my opportunity for a job so I went back, just wandered during lunchtime, [and] went for a walk."¹⁶ She eventually told her teacher coordinator, another staff member responsible for supervising teacher candidates, who said he would take care of the situation. Remembering this as a particularly negative experience, she took comfort in the fact

¹³ Paul R. Carr and Thomas R. Klassen, "Different Perceptions of Race in Education: Racial Minority and White Teachers," *Canadian Journal of Education*. 22:1 (1997), 70-71.

¹⁴ My research identified a significant number of *visibly* identifiable African Canadian men and women who were enrolled and their pictures documented in the year books of London, Windsor, Toronto, Hamilton, Lakeshore and Stratford Normal Schools. I identified 215 visibly 'African Canadian' women who graduated from these listed teachers' colleges.

¹⁵ Tamara Migrant, interview by author, audio recording, Toronto, ON., 26 July 2011.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

that she was able to voice her concerns, but she did not disclose any further during her interview if the staff room situation had improved following her complaint. Instead, Mogrant chose to refocus her attention on classroom teaching but remembered it as one of several discriminatory practices she experienced within Ontario schools.

Tamara Mogrant was not the only educator who found staff rooms to be oppressive places. Even after moving up the professional ladder, and holding the position of school principal, Harriet Williams remembered the ways in which other educators isolated and ignored her presence. As the principal of a Catholic elementary school in Toronto between 1974-1976, Williams recalled that a group of educators would play a 'game' where they would leave her sitting alone in the staff room. Whenever she moved tables to sit with this group, they would all leave. Williams recalled this act as a 'little thing' which she pretended did not affect her, at least when she spoke to other educators. However, in remembering that this lasted for half of the school year, Williams explained,

And they played this game and I said: 'Good, I can see this game. If they think I'm not seeing it, I can see it. But I'm not going to make a big noise about it.' You see when you make noise, you lose your footing right there. So I just followed them.¹⁷

Williams believed her silence enabled her to exert some control over the circumstances she was facing. Refusing to

be isolated in a space that she was meant to supervise, Williams followed these educators until they finally acknowledged and accepted her presence. While one can speculate that because Harriet Williams was a principal, she may have been viewed as an authority figure and thus disconnected from her staff, Williams makes no mention of this. Instead, she attributed her presence as a *black* woman in a position of authority as the root of this staff room separation. In reaction to these isolating practices, Williams took pride in her ability to reclaim her right, which came at great personal cost, to be in the staff room. Her awareness, which she labels as 'seeing the game', became an important way to help her navigate oppressive situations. She later recalled that after six months, staff members eventually welcomed her and she used the experience to assist other educators on staff who experienced isolation.

In other instances, staff rooms became places where black women were not only hyper-visible, but also hyper-invisible. Although she had reported having strong relationships with a small group of educators throughout her teaching career, Jackie Morris remembered that staff room discussions often involved derogatory racial comments and stereotypes. As an elementary school educator in Chatham, Ontario, Morris remembered her white male colleagues denigrating Ben Johnson's intellectual ability after his historic 1988 Olympic gold medal win and subsequent cheating scandal.

¹⁷ Harriet Williams, interview by author, audio recording, Toronto, ON., 11 July 2011

She overheard staff members comment, “I bet he couldn’t even get a job picking cotton,” and she remembered that, “It was very hurtful[,] embarrassing. [And] I just stop[ped] going to the staff room because if that’s what you got to say, I have nothing to talk to you about.”¹⁸ The staff room then became a place where other educators expressed broader societal sentiments that often ignored or disregarded black educators as belonging to the school community. Despite her status as a *visible* racial minority, Morris and her sensibilities were rendered invisible by her colleague’s privilege as a white male educator.

Racial stereotypes were also directed at black students in the school, even in the presence of black educators. Recalling that ‘dealing’ with racial prejudice was common practice throughout her teaching career, Jamaican-born Afia Oyo revealed the ways racial stereotypes permeated staff room environments. After a ten-year-old black student entered her school staff room in the late 1970s, Afia Oyo remembers one of her colleagues commenting “Oh wait a second, isn’t he handsome. [I] can just see him as a porter in the airport.”¹⁹ Oyo was deeply both-

ered by this comment and questioned: “is that the only aspiration you want to communicate to this kid?”²⁰ Oyo’s white colleagues expressed broader sentiments about the social and economic limitations of black employment in Canada. Since the inception of slavery in Canada in the seventeenth century, black Canadians were relegated to difficult, low-paying, service-type work. As part of a racial and gender stratified labour market that continued into the twentieth century, black men were typically engaged in seasonal type work that included positions such as bellhops in local hotels, general labourers and porters on the railroads, and worked in foundries and auto plants. Reinforcing popular notions of black men as labouring bodies who could withstand hot temperatures and physically intensive work, the career options for black men were often limited and devalued.²¹ For black women, labour structured by race and gender created systematic patterns of discrimination in different, but no less oppressive ways, whereupon black women were believed to be ‘naturally’ suited for specific types of labour, especially domestic work.²² Recognizing that

¹⁸ Jackie Morris, interview by author, audio recording, Buxton, ON., 18 July 2011.

¹⁹ Afia Oyo, interview by author, audio recording, Etobicoke, ON., 9 June 2011.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Dionne Brand, “Working paper on Black women in Toronto,” in *Returning the Gaze*, 232. Pamela Sugiman, “Privilege and Oppression: The Configuration of Race, Gender and Class in Southern Ontario Auto Plants, 1939 to 1949” in James Opp, ed., *Home, Work, and Play: Situating Canadian Social History, 1840-1980* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2005), 220; Judith Fingard, “From Sea to Rail: Black Transportation Workers and Their Families in Halifax, 1870-1916.” *Acadiensis*, 24:2 (Spring 1995), 49-64; Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Colour Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Agnes Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An Ethnically Submerged Split Labour Market,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 19:1 (1987), 1-20.

²² Linda Carty, “‘Labour Only Please’: African Canadian Women and the State” in *We’re Rooted*

black Canadian men and women held economically unstable jobs, Afiya Oyo's evaluation of her colleagues' comments demonstrated the ways in which education influenced and limited career options for black students.

In their analysis of African Canadian education in the twentieth century, Karen Brathwaite and Carl James contend that despite having high educational and career aspirations, "the social construction of Black students as academically incompetent operated as a barrier to the realization of their educational goals."²³ Pushing students into lower level and vocational classes left black students at a disadvantage in the labour market. As such, Afiya Oyo's memory of comments made by her colleague served as an indication of how some teachers reflected lower aspirations for racialized students. At the same time, the ability of her colleagues to express these comments reflected how Oyo was simultaneously present, yet ignored as a true participant in the staff room. The fact that her staff members conveyed these comments so freely also highlighted the pervasive and informal nature in which racial prejudice and difference became imbedded within schooling environments.

In her work, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, black cultural theorist, Katherine McKittrick, analyzes the politics of place and placing for black women in Canada. She argues that black women occupied 'not-quite' spaces of black femininity where their lives and histories have been unacknowledged and expendable. She further explains that,

The 'not-quite' spaces of black femininity are unacknowledged spaces of sexual violence, stereotype, and sociospatial marginalization: erased, erasable, hidden, resistant geographies and women that are, due to persistent and public forms of objectification, not readily decipherable.²⁴

In occupying these spaces, black women also developed their own 'insurgent' geographies where they addressed their space and place. In a similar way, Roslyn Meyers and Harriet Williams offered a different sense of belonging within school staff rooms in reaction to the oppression they faced within these spaces. Following McKittrick's analysis, these educators produced space with the context of domination and objectification and created an alternative place of empowerment.²⁵

Tamara Migrant and Jackie Morris

Here and they Can't Pull Us Up, 94; Agnes Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from the Caribbean, 1900-1932," *Journal of Canadian Studies*. 24:4 (Winter 1993-94), 132. Patience Elabor-Idemudia, "Gender and the New African Diaspora: African Migrant Women in the Canadian Labour Force," in Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies and Ali A. Mazrui, eds., *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Self-Fashioning* (Indiana: Indiana University Press), 237.

²³ Brathwaite and James, *Educating African Canadians*, 16.

²⁴ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.), 61.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

abandoned staff room spaces and instead used their individual teaching approaches to engender their own empowerment. In her discussion of black Canadian nurses in the twentieth century, historian Karen Flynn argues that black nurses encountered discrimination in hospitals across Canada. In *Moving Beyond Borders: A History of Black Canadian and Caribbean Women*, Flynn describes the story of Virginia Travis, a Canadian-born nurse who entered nurses' training at Chatham General Hospital in 1954. Virginia's nursing director expressed reservations about promoting her to the next level of certification and told her "I would get my cap, but I had to stop acting like a monkey." Distraught over her director's comments, Virginia explained, "So in [my] first year, at eighteen years of age, I knew that I had to be very careful."²⁶ Flynn attributes Virginia's response as part of a larger process that subordinated black women's responses under existing power arrangements. She contends that "working in an environment where white people's assessment of their behaviour tended to be colored by racist and sexist stereotypes, even if Black women had legitimate reasons to be angry, they tended to suppress their own reactions."²⁷ In a similar fashion, Migrant and Morris policed their gendered and racialized performances within white dominated

spaces; they understood quite clearly that their encounters with white colleagues were characterized by race, class and gendered prejudices and as such, they chose to maintain silence and distance rather than to directly express discontent. Opting to pick and chose their battles, Migrant and Morris resisted and fought negative stereotypes by deflecting these experiences and refocusing on their jobs as professionals. The pattern of exclusion and isolation, then, became part of the 'black experience' in Canada and it permeated the professional and social lives of black Canadian women.

While all women worked to gain acceptance in the professional workforce, intersections of race, class, gender, place of birth and training made it even more difficult for racialized women to gain professional status. Black women's historical roots in service and service-type work not only made the need for professional accreditation and career increasingly appealing, but it also challenged black women's mobility once in the profession. Scholars Maureen Elgersman, Kenneth Donovan, Patience Elabor-Idemudia, Linda Carty, Dionne Brand and others document black women's presence in early Canada as rooted in their productive and reproductive capabilities, particularly though domestic work.²⁸ They argue that labour structured by race

²⁶ Flynn, *Moving Beyond Borders*, 79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁸ Maureen Elgersman, *Unyielding Spirits: Black Women and Slavery in Early Canada and Jamaica* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1999); Kenneth Donovan, "Slaves and Their Owners in Ile Royale, 1713 – 1760," *Acadiensis*, 26:1 (Autumn 1995), 3-32; Elabor-Idemudia, "Gender and the New African Diaspora," 234-53.

and gender created systematic patterns in which black women were believed to be ‘naturally’ suited for specific types of work; so much so that up until the 1940s, eighty percent of black women worked as “domestics, mother’s helpers, housekeepers, general helpers and laundresses.”²⁹ By the end of the Second World War, economic growth and prosperity afforded more black women the opportunity to enter the trained professions, but it often meant that they were part of a limited number of women who gained access to the teaching field. Within schools, racialized women often faced institutional and systemic forms of discrimination exemplified through critiques about their qualifications, difficulty gaining permanent teaching positions, and informal experiences of difference within class and staff room settings.³⁰

Alongside negative and overt forms of discrimination in their schools, some black women built lasting friendships with other educators in the field and felt deep connections to their school boards and the opportunities that their positions gave them. These interracial relationships reflected the varying experiences and degrees of discrimination in Canadian institutions and also of the possibility that educators who, after having accomplished careers as teachers, chose to remember the positive rather than the negative aspects of their teaching experi-

ences. Therefore, black women’s desire for racial and educational equality did not necessarily hinder their ability to forge positive interracial collaborations with their white colleagues. Some interview participants found allies with white administrators and recalled positive encounters with their white colleagues.

Despite describing experiences of discrimination in her teaching career, Blaire Gittens recollected that with the Etobicoke school board, she only experienced subtle forms of racism.³¹ Focusing on educating students of all racial backgrounds, Gittens expressed that she wanted to be distinctly defined by her teaching ability. Her discussion of subtle racism may also be attributed to her comparison to more overt forms of discrimination in England where she taught before coming to Canada. In describing her early encounters with discrimination in Ontario schools, Gittens explained, “some people might have more than [me], but I had no racism. I would say [I had] absolutely nothing to shout about.”³² While she remembered that other educators in the field experienced varying forms of discrimination, her experience and lasting friendships with people at the Etobicoke board overshadowed any negative experiences that she had. Weighing her experiences against more overt forms of discrimination faced by other black female educators, Gittens believed

²⁹ Elabor-Idemudia, “Gender and the New African Diaspora,” 237.

³⁰ Goli M. Rezi-Rashti, “Women of Color and Teaching: Exploring Contradictory Experiences of Immigrant Women Teachers,” in Coulter and Harper, eds. *History is Hers*, 97-105.

³¹ Blaire Gittens, interview by author, audio recording, Toronto, ON., 5 July 2011.

³² *Ibid.*

hers were less serious. Eighty-one-year old Sherri Gooding echoed similar sentiments when she described her experiences as an early childhood educator in Chatham in the 1950s. She explained, “I really don’t think I’ve ever noticed that. I don’t feel that I was put upon by anybody along those lines during that time. And I did a good job so that helps. I know it does.”³³ While Gooding’s reflection that she never *noticed* any racism is different from a clear statement stating that racism did not exist, she avoided particularly negative discussions about her teaching experiences and recalled positive experiences throughout her teaching career. In their study of the oral histories of women teachers in the twentieth century, Rebecca Priegert Coulter and Helen Harper also found that many of the teachers they interviewed offered uncritical narratives of their teaching experiences and often recounted stories describing the pleasure of teaching and the joys of working. Citing Micaela Di Leonardo’s term “rhetorical nostalgia,” Coulter and Harper explain that at times women denied the existence of discrimination despite describing specific examples of gender inequality.³⁴ In much the same ways, Gooding’s recollection reveals the complexity of historical memory and the need to ground these experiences in broader structural and social relationships.

Interview participants also negotiated their schooling experiences by building alliances with other white ad-

ministrators who encouraged them to pursue positions of importance within various school boards. These administrators assisted black educators and encouraged them to move forward with their qualifications to gain top administrative positions as vice-principals, principals and superintendents. Educators like Bernadine Beacons remembered that white administrators encouraged her to pursue her career as a superintendent. She recalled, “And so I had people coming to me, highly recommended me and encourag[ed] me to apply to become a superintendent and they were all white people, because we don’t have anyone that is [black] here.”³⁵ Given that both black men and women were still struggling to break racial and gendered barriers in various Canadian institutions, white administrators were often the ones who encouraged black women to move beyond the classroom and into positions of responsibility within the school board. Based on Beacons’ account, it seems that some white administrators genuinely recognized the limitations and discriminatory practices of Ontario’s school system and they worked to challenge them by promoting and recommending black women into administrative posts.

It is also important to note that this increase in white administrative support came at a time when ministry policies were drawing criticism from women and racial minorities about employment equity within their schools. Organizations

³³ Sherri Gooding, interview by author, audio recording, Buxton, ON, 4 June 2011.

³⁴ Coulter and Harper, eds. *History is Hers*, 23.

³⁵ Bernadine Beacons, interview by author, audio recording, Toronto, ON., 22 July 2010.

like the Federation of Women Teachers of Ontario as well as the Ontario Human Rights Commission launched campaigns focusing on the gender and racial discrimination that existed within several government organizations, including the Ministry of Education.³⁶ In response, the ministry funded research projects, distributed equity pamphlets and flyers, and created committees to assess and improve equity within its schools. In the 1975-76 academic year, for example, the Ontario Ministry of Education funded the Ontario Status of Women's Council's publication, *About Face: Toward a Positive image of Women in Textbooks*, which worked to combat sexism in Ontario textbooks. That same year, the Ministry also urged school boards to encourage women within the profession to prepare and apply for supervisory and administrative positions. They also created the Equal Opportunity Advisory Committee to help with affirmative action programs within Ontario schools.³⁷

In addition, anti-racist critiques from

organizations like the Urban Alliance on Race Relations led to the creation of a Sub-committee on Race Relations at the Toronto Board of Education in 1977. This sub-committee reported experiences of racial discrimination among staff and students in Toronto schools. By 1980, the ministry created a race relations package that was distributed through its schools. These packages included posters and resource guides encouraging multiculturalism and racial diversity in Ontario schools.³⁸ Amidst these increasing demands and programs for employment equity within school boards, it is possible that by placing Beacons in a position of greater authority, administrators hoped not only to recognize her skills and expertise, but also responded to increasing pressure from minority populations for diverse staffing.

By challenging representation within the education system, white administrators and black educators found commonalities that enhanced the professional status of the latter. These white allies en-

³⁶ For more employment equity campaigns launched by like the Federation of Women Teachers Association of Ontario and Ontario Human Rights Commission, see: Pat Stanton and Beth Light, *Speak With Their Own Voices* (Toronto: Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, 1987); Mary Labatt, *Always a Journey: A History of the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, 1918-1993* (Toronto: Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario, 1993); Rebecca Coulter, "Gender Equity and Schooling: Linking Research and Policy," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 21 (1996), 433-52. Agnes Calliste and George J. Sefa Dei, eds. *Anti-Racist Feminism: Critical Race and Gender Studies*. (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2000), 21. Sarita Srivastava, "Tears, Fears and Careers; Anti-racism and Emotion in Social Movement Organizations," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 31:1 (Winter, 2006); Carl James, "Multicultural and Anti-Racism Education in Canada," *Race, Gender & Class*, 2:3 (Spring 1995), 31-48; Earl Mansfield and John Kehoe, "A Critical Examination of Anti-Racist Education," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 19:4 (1994), 418-30.

³⁷ *Report of the Minister of Education, 1975-76*, 16.

³⁸ *Toronto Board of Education, Final Report of Sub-committee on Race Relations*, (Toronto: Sub-Committee on Race Relations, Toronto Board of Education, 1979), 3; *Report of the Minister of Education, 1980-81*.

couraged the development of leadership skills and forged closer professional ties with black educators. Ultimately, these relationships provided black women with the opportunity to better understand how they could gain professional mobility and positions of responsibility within the school boards. Despite having interracial coalitions with white administrators and educators, black women teachers developed various coping mechanisms to assist with the challenges they faced in Ontario school systems.

Black Women's Development of Resistive Pedagogies

The responses of some black women to their workplace experiences, both on an individual and collective level, were multifaceted and strongly influenced by the nature of their jobs, their familial and cultural backgrounds, and alliances with other educators. Black women teachers in this research study assessed, and in some instances were critical of, the curriculum and knowledge that they were meant to disseminate. While interviewees were primarily elementary school educators and taught different grade levels and subject areas, the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum meant that “the exclusion of visible/ethnic minorities from curriculum materials, and the distorted, inaccurate rendering of the participa-

tion of minorities in Canadian history and Canadian life” was something that they all contended with.³⁹ Thus, black women teachers worked to discern and discard information that did not positively acknowledge or encourage black students. Employing diverse pedagogical approaches, some black women worked in overtly politicized ways, as well as on more subtle levels, to undermine and challenge mainstream ideologies.

Having experienced their own forms of exclusion and discrimination within the school system, black teachers worked to prepare all their students for contradictions in the education system that excluded them from equal access and opportunity. Recognizing that the odds could be stacked against children of colour, many educators felt they needed to enforce strict guidelines and expectations in order to encourage these students to work hard and to be prepared for the racial challenges that lay ahead. Nicolette Archer remembered having to maintain strict educational parameters for the sake of student success. She explained,

Well, my point is, if you let them slide by thinking life is going to be a bowl of cherries, with no challenges... I was strict because I knew. Being black, you got to be better than the white man or woman next to you. So you got to have that work ethic, you got to work harder.⁴⁰

At times these strict expectations put

³⁹ Garnet L. McDiarmid and David Pratt, *Teaching Prejudice: A Study of the Treatment of Minority Groups in Ontario Social Studies Textbooks* (Toronto: O.I.S.E., 1971), 86; *Toronto Board of Education, Final Report of Sub-committee on Race Relations*, 7.; Also see: Ken Montgomery, “Imagining the Antiracist State: Representations of Racism in Canadian History Textbooks,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26:4 (December 2005), 427-42.

⁴⁰ Nicolette Archer, interview by author, audio recording, Windsor, ON., 19 August 2011.

her at odds with black students who felt that she was picking on them. She maintained that she risked relationships with particular black students in order to ensure they had a greater chance of academic success. Archer subtly circumvented mainstream mandates by organizing multicultural events, including students who felt ostracized by the school system and giving extra attention to students who needed it. For instance, Nicolette Archer conducted student interviews in community spaces with black parents who could not make school appointed interview times and spoke directly to parents when she had behavioural issues with students in her classroom. Archer's resistive pedagogy blurred the lines between her professional occupation and community work. Often taking into account the communities in which her student lived, she encouraged students to bring cultural artifacts such as traditional Turkish shoes, as well as advocated for a black studies course within the school board.⁴¹ Archer used her pedagogy to transplant cultural and community knowledge and participated not only as a professional teacher who maintained high expectations but also as a community worker striving for racial uplift and social advancement.

In other instances, because some black women educators taught few minority students, they felt a particular close-

ness to students of colour and sought to equip them with skills intended to combat mainstream society. While Melody Adekin was teaching at her last school in Toronto, she remembered the moment when her only two black students did not hand in their final assignments. Remembering it as one of the saddest moments in her career, Adekin recollected that she did not want to fail the students because she felt that they were one of 'her own'. Feeling betrayed by the students, she remembered that her expectations were higher for those students knowing the challenges that they would probably face. She revealed,

I think that I expect[ed] more of black students and sometimes that may be putting them in a particular bind because they may be giving it their very best. But I still expect them to [excel]. I guess it's because of the environment and how many things are stacked against us. So I expect you in my classroom to do well.⁴²

While Adekin remembered that all her students thought she was particularly strict, her recollection of these two black students indicated that she may have gone out of her way to ensure that they understood the challenges that came with academic success.

Adekin's interview also revealed the ways in which 'other-mothering' practices became infused with student learn-

⁴¹ The Black Studies course Archer describes was eventually offered at Patterson Collegiate Institute in Windsor, Ontario in 1969. John Tomlinson, "GG Teaching Award 'Wonderful,'" *The Windsor Star*, 9 December 2011; *African-Canadian Roads to Freedom: African Canadian Connections to the Ontario Curriculum for Grade 10 Canadian History Since World War I* (Academic and Applied) and Grade 10 Civics (Open), (Greater Essex County District School Board, February 2010).

⁴² Melody Adekin, interview by author, audio recording, Toronto, ON., 1 April 2012.

ing. Black feminist theorist, Patricia Hill Collins, describes other-mothering as the belief that the larger community was responsible for the ‘rights’ of child rearing. Disrupting mainstream ideas that viewed children as “private property”, black women used other-mothering practice to create woman-centred networks and reclaim community based learning.⁴³ As an extension of this other-mothering practice, Hill Collins describes how the pedagogical approaches used by Archer and Adekin served to educate all children but specifically to prepare black students for the challenges that lay ahead. This pedagogy was sensitive to the presence, history and needs of black Canadians and subverted mainstream notions that silenced African descended peoples and limited their opportunities in academic institutions. Instead, their pedagogies worked to acknowledge black diasporic histories while equipping students with skills to cope with broader systemic restrictions.

While the pedagogical approaches of Archer and Adekin seemed to have a limited impact on greater changes in the curriculum, a broader connection to black communities distinctly characterized the resistive pedagogies of black women. In her work on the development of black British feminism, sociologist Heidi Mirza argues that on the surface black women’s pedagogies can appear conservative for their connection with mainstream ideas

and their focus on inclusion, but they are also radically subversive for their work on social transformation. Charting the educational experiences of black women as “out of place, disrupting, [and] untidy,” Mirza challenges readers to look beyond essentialist notions of black women’s responses to inequality as resistance within accommodation, and to view it as transformative.⁴⁴ The activities of Archer and Adekin support this argument. They used their authority and positions within schools to better prepare black pupils for social and systemic oppression. This served to promote a social transformation that enriched black Canadian communities.

Whether it was through maintaining high standards in order to prepare children or accommodating parents outside of school hours and spaces, Melody Adekin and Nicolette Archer maintained pedagogies rooted in their positions as black professional women *and* community workers. For Caribbean-born educator, Cecily Tremaine, her community and professional work remained deeply connected. Believing that community activism made her a better educator, Tremaine only began teaching after years of working with organizations like the Black Education Project, an after-hours tutoring project created in 1969 to help black students combat discrimination in Toronto schools.⁴⁵ Tremaine recalled, “What peo-

⁴³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 182.

⁴⁴ Heidi Safia Mirza, “Black Women in Education: A Collective for social change” in *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, ed. by Heidi Safia Mirza (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 269-76.

⁴⁵ Maureen Holgate, “Black Education Project: Community Programme plays remedial Role in

ple don't realize is that when you work in the community, you have more skills and strategies than anyone who has gone into the university and opened a book. The reasons that I do that [is] because you got a good combination of skills."⁴⁶

Equipped with the lessons she learned from her community work, Tremaine explained that she felt ready to deal with any group of students. When she was assigned to work with students at a racially diverse school in the heart of downtown Toronto, Tremaine felt like she could identify with her students because they reflected the economic and racially diverse populations she worked with in the community.⁴⁷ Bringing culturally sensitive material into the classroom, she organized school productions such as "When Cultures Meet," a play on cultural diversity, organized school presentations from Indigenous community leaders, and was part of a TVO series on classroom management. After explaining that students at her school disrupted popular racial and economic stereotypes at a board assembly, Tremaine recalled with pride that "when those so-called poor kids stood up and delivered in that assembly at 50/50 [equivalent]. Oh my

goodness, that was something else. So I did all that kind of work. With other people as well. Because I've always been... a community person."⁴⁸ Through her support and coaching, Tremaine recalled that her students, who were considered economically and racially unprivileged and disadvantaged by school administrators, could perform equally, if not better, than her affluent white students when given support and encouragement.

Annette Henry's cross-cultural ethnography of black educators in an Ontario urban elementary school examines the ways that teachers such as Cecily Tremaine worked to assume control of education for black Canadian students. In *Taking Black Control*, Henry claimed that black women had unique pedagogies that "have creatively moved toward liberatory education, inside and outside of the mainstream institutions within which they teach."⁴⁹ Henry argues that black Canadian women teachers operated from multiple agendas in order to authenticate forms of black knowledge largely undervalued by mainstream society, while also providing the literacy and social skills students needed to function in Canadian society.⁵⁰ In a similar vein,

Education of Black Students," *Spear Magazine*, January 1775, 4:6, 5. Harold Hoyte, "Black School Gets Down to Real Problem," *Contrast Newspaper*, 1 November 1970.

⁴⁶ Cecily Tremaine, interview by author, audio recording, Markham, ON., 9 May 2011.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* In her interview, Tremaine describes her time at a middle school in North York, near Lawrence Avenue West and Dufferin Street. She reveals that students at this school were predominantly low income and racially mixed (with a high population of immigrant students). Tremaine began teaching in the school in the late 1980s until her departure in the mid-1990s.

⁴⁹ Annette Henry, *Taking Back Control: African Canadian Women Teachers' Lives and Practice* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), 66.

⁵⁰ Annette Henry, "Learning from the Teaching of African Canadian Women: A Reflection for African American Students," in Vincent R. D'Oyley and Carl E. James, eds., *Re/Visioning: Canadian*

Tremaine's community work informed her teaching pedagogy and made her a more well-rounded educator. Although mitigated by systemic discrimination, she engaged with existing mainstream structures while also creating black female spheres of influence that extended into her community. Tremaine's ability to use her community experiences to connect with diverse groups of students in Ontario's institutions worked not only to give her power but also authority within the classroom on her own terms. It is here that she worked to transform student opportunities to subvert what she felt were racist expectations and beliefs of students.⁵¹

Black women educators encompassed anti-racist pedagogies into their educational philosophies but also included feminist frameworks that spoke to their multiple layers of oppression. Enid Rubin's educational philosophy was strongly rooted in her experiences as a racialized woman and remained distinctly feminist in nature. After migrating from Jamaica to Alberta, then settling in Ontario, her marriage ended and she

became a single parent raising four children alone. Coming from a middle-class financial and educational background in Jamaica, Rubin's ex-husband refused to accept his limited and lowered status once he arrived in Canada and ultimately left his family. Believing that she was more prepared to deal with the challenges that her family faced in Canada than her husband, Rubin reflected a common immigrant experience.⁵²

For immigrants who came from good socioeconomic backgrounds in their birth homes, the transition of becoming 'black' in white Canada and their experiences of racial discrimination and prejudice placed heavy strains on familial relationships and at times, destroyed these families. It also meant that these challenges, ones that Enid Rubin recollected as gendered in nature, informed her approaches within the classroom in the 1970s. Rubin used her experience specifically to support women in the education field. She remembered,

Because I know the challenges that black women face. I came here as a black woman challenged. In so many ways; I was left as

Perspectives on the Education of Africans in the Late 20th Century (North York, On: Captus Press Inc., 1998), 129.

⁵¹ Mirza, "Black Women in Education", 276.

⁵² For more on challenges facing black immigrant populations in Canada, see: Joseph Mensah, "Black Canadians: History, Experiences and Social Conditions," in Barrington Walker, ed., *The History of Immigration and Racism in Canada: Essential Readings* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2008); Carl E. James and Andrea Davis, eds. *Jamaica in the Canadian Experience: A Multiculturalizing Presence* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2012); Babacar M'Baye, Amoaba Gooden, and Wendy Wilson-Fall, "A History of Black Immigration into the United States and Canada with Culture and Policy Implications," in Zachery Williams, ed., *African Cultures and Policy Studies: Scholarship and the Transformation of Public Policy* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 219-46; Amoaba Gooden, "Community Organizing by African Caribbean People in Toronto, Ontario," *Journal of Black Studies*, 38:3 (January 2008), 413-26.

a single parent with four kids, so I'm very much aware of upgrading your education, taking care of the family and then taking care of yourself and also being active in the community. So my goal has always been to assist black women to achieve their potential and to make them aware of how important it is for us to work together. Regardless of whether we have a good education or not. Because at the end of the day, no body cares whether you have a good education or illiterate you're seen as a black woman.⁵³

Rubin's position helped her formulate a teaching philosophy that worked specifically to aid black women in the education system. She often spoke out to assist children from single parent homes and was actively involved in the Congress of Black Women of Canada for thirty years and remained the Ontario provincial representative for four years.⁵⁴ Organizations such as this spoke to the concerns and lived experiences of women like Rubin.⁵⁵ Her woman-centered approach, which was often geared to her unique circumstances in Canada, helped her develop pedagogies that would deal with the multiple forms of oppression that African Canadians experienced.

Conclusion:

Experiencing multiple forms of oppression, black women teachers were restricted and isolated in school staff rooms and taught curriculum that was Eurocentric in nature. Alongside these experiences, some black female educators built strong relationships with other educators, gained support from some white administrators, and climbed the professional ladder to further their careers. Often occupying contradictory positions of hyper-visibility and invisibility, black women were conscious of their limited positions and developed various coping mechanisms to deal with their experiences in Ontario schools. Female educators developed distinctive resistive pedagogies that recognized and supported black experiences in Canada. These pedagogies were rooted in their experiences as black women. By teaching black history in their classrooms, merging community uplift with schooling practice, and implementing strict guidelines and expectations for racialized students, black women worked to augment the mainstream curriculum to better serve students of various racial and cultural backgrounds.

⁵³ Enid Rubin, interview by author, audio recording, Toronto, ON. 5 August 2011.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ The Congress of Black Women evolved from the Canadian Negro Women's Association (CANEWA) which was founded in 1951 by a small group of black women in Toronto. The organization focused on assisting black women and their families, delivered various programs to support black education, health, housing and employment as well as addressed concerns surrounding racism, sexism and human rights. Lawrence Hill, *Women of Vision: The Story of the Canadian Negro Women's Association* (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1996).