

**Memories of Difference, Dominance and the Struggle  
for Social Justice:  
Black Women Teachers in Twentieth Century Ontario**  
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This paper discusses the lives and professional histories of four retired black women teachers; two emigrated from Trinidad and the other two from Jamaica. It will be argued that the experiences of these four women, although very different, have some common characteristics that might provide some insight into the lives of black women teachers and the complex articulation of racism and sexism in the Canadian educational system.

**Methodological Notes**

Since 1980s, an increasing number of women of color and women from the third world challenged the essential notion of women that has been theorized by the mainstream feminist movement. The main focus of this criticism was the very notion of feminism, as articulated by white, liberal feminists (Antias and Yuval-Davis, 1993; Bannerji, 1993; hooks, 1981; Mohanty, 1991; Ng, 1993). It was argued that white feminists had been mostly concerned about their own white, middle class, heterosexual experiences. bell hooks (1981), looking at the historical development of women's movement argues that "the first white women's rights advocates were never seeking social equality for all women; they were seeking social equality for white women" (124).

Although these criticisms have been useful in creating awareness about race and racism, the analysis of racism and sexism remained unaddressed in most scholarly disciplines, including history. For example, oral history has become a legitimate research method for researchers who are seeking to understand and analyse women's lives (Pierson, 1991). While in recent years there have been a number of oral history projects dealing with the experiences of women in teaching profession, little attention was paid to the experiences of minority or marginalized women within the general category of woman. As Etter-Lewis (1991) argues:

The search for self in many contemporary scholarly studies by and about women often proves to be fruitless for women of color. Usually what is found in research on women is the “mythical male norm,” or, in more current research, the white female norm, as the standard by which all others are judged. (p.43)

In addition, conducting research by using oral history methods has been looked at critically. For example, Kathleen Weiler (1995) and Marjorie Theobald (1999) discuss some of the problematics of the oral history method in their own research on women teachers' narratives of their decisions to become teachers. Weiler (1992) using the work of Passerini (1987), Foucault (1972) and the Popular Memory Group (1982) discusses some of the challenges facing those who use the oral history methods to uncover the experiences of women. Weiler's approach “opposes an empiricist view of the past as something unchangeable and ‘there’ to be discovered. Yet it does not reject the idea that the past existed and exists and thus can in some ways be known.” (40) She further elaborates that reading oral history narratives in a critical way does not deny the material reality but rather “recognizes the constructed quality of memory itself. Thus the reading of popular memory can suggest ways of conceptualizing the relationship of ideology, consciousness, and material life.” (40) This research is also conscious of the danger of interpreting the oral history narratives. It takes into account the complex construction of memory and provides but one critical reading of the experiences of four black women who emigrated from the Caribbean countries and who retired in 1990s.

All the four participants in the study were referred to the research through the community in which these teachers are active participants. They were contacted and prior to the interviews, they were asked to complete a written questionnaire detailing information about their lives, such as where they were born, their schooling, and which grades they have taught. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format, and were tape-recorded. The tapes were transcribed and became the main source of data for the study.

These four women have their own unique individual experiences that are particular to their family situations, their areas of expertise and their education. However, they share experiences related to their gender and race identities. Here, research on memory might be useful in conceptualizing the women's experiences. Jo-Anne Dillabough, drawing on the work of Gardner, 1999; Luttrell, 1997; and Rosenberg and Simon, 1999 shows the usefulness of concept of memory in understanding women's work as citizens in teacher education. She suggests that two elements of memory are worth special scrutiny: individual memory and social and collective memory. Individual memory is based on a person's private life and the maintenance of her/his 'narrative identity'. The concept of social and collective memory which is particularly relevant for this research is described by Dillabough as follows:

may be particular to one's life or locality but, at the same time, may expose something about social practices, which members of a group share in some manifest form- for example, memories of Holocaust, of war and of some sustained institutional injustice. From this standpoint the existence of a social or collective memory implies that any history of events or ideas is characterized by what Rosenberg and Simon (1999) refer to as 'pedagogical intent'. Collective memory therefore leaves behind not just a 'legacy' of shared knowledge but also encourages a proactive social response to it in the future. (Dillabough, 2000: 167).

Although these four women have different individual experiences and memories, they share some similarities in terms of social practices that affected them within Canadian society. This was particularly critical for those interested in promotion and advancement.

### **Individual Narratives of Black Women**

Lenore, who earned a Master of Education from the University of Toronto, completed all course works toward obtaining a Ph.D. and the principal qualification courses, but could not get into an administrative position. She discusses her situation as a clear case of systemic racism. She elaborated that when she came to Canada,

she was offered a job at a small community in Ontario. Although she had the academic credentials and math teachers were in short supply, she could not get a job in Toronto. After two years of teaching in small town Ontario, she started applying for jobs in Toronto. Her first choice was to work in an academic school, but she was offered a job at a vocational and basic level high school. This job in some ways determined her future opportunities. There was an unwritten rule that those who taught in such schools would not go on to be a principal. This rule was not written in a textual form nor was it much discussed, although teachers familiar to the education system knew it.

*Starting my career in [name of high school] had really influenced my entire career, because once you got into [name of high school] it was impossible to get out. I have become the head of Math and I wanted so desperately to get out, I couldn't get a headship. Even an assistant headship anywhere else (ACPID088).*

Lenore finally obtained a job as consultant at the board office and continued unscussfully to apply for administrative positions. In response to the questions of to what extent she was accepted as a black woman working as a consultant, Lenore responded:

*Most of my colleagues I think were fairly sophisticated, more sophisticated than the average classroom teachers... more careful and more knowledgeable and more accepting. I can't really remember any incidents of individual racism. I am sure there were lots of them. I know I had one teacher who just flung every door in my face. I don't know that she would have done it to other teachers. I've known teachers who have said no, I don't need the help of a consultant, you know (ACPID088).*

Lenore who became more convinced that she had the ability to be a principal, superintendent and educational leader realized however that there might not be possibilities for her promotion within the board. She therefore made a conscious decision to look outside for recognition:

*Yea, when I got to the point where I realized that, you know, my career wasn't going the way I wanted it to, and I think there was one year when I was very, very angry. I was really angry, and then I thought, you know, this isn't gonna work. This is not good from my point of view. And so I made a conscious . I think in a sense I ameliorated some of the damage to my own self-esteem and self-worth by simply making the decision that if I wasn't going to be recognized within the board, then I would be recognized outside the board (ACPID088).*

Lenore became involved in the National Council of Math Teachers and was seconded to a university position as a teacher educator and then worked for few years for the Ministry of Education and Training, returning to her board in 1996. She approached the director of the board and asked him about the possibilities for promotion. I told him “Now, I have all this experience, I’ve done this, I’ve done that, what do you have for me?” But he did not encourage her to pursue her dream. When a coordinator position came up, she heard only after the submission date was passed. It had been advertised for only four days. She filed a grievance and while the grievance was in process, another coordinator position was advertised and she was offered that position. She was in that position when she retired in 1998.

Maria, who came to Canada in 1967 as a single mother, had an easier time gaining a suitable job. It might have been because of her teaching experience in England but also that there was a demand for teachers in Ontario. According to Maria “The jobs were advertised [in England], and all over the subway you would see “Come to Canada to teach.” They were desperate for teachers”. Although she was interviewed in August and teachers had already been hired for that year, she gained a long-term occasional teaching contract:

*They gave me a contract; they didn't want to lose me. So what they would do, they would give me this permanent supply, and I would just be in the school. When people were absent, I would fill in. At the same time it was great because you were observing a new system, without having to begin in it. So, it was terrific (ACPID079).*

Maria gained a permanent contract within two months and stayed in the job for 9 years. Meanwhile she completed her university degree at the University of Toronto. When she needed a change she transferred to teach math in high school. However, she recounted that she enjoyed teaching at the elementary school level better "because there was a sense of togetherness and collectivity. It was like being in a family."

She did not apply for an administrative position because she was happy working with children. She claims that she never felt any hostility or experienced name-calling from her colleagues or the principals. "If they really did, they kept it under cover". But there were a few incidents with parents. "But some parents I think they were a little they never had a black teacher in those days. And I think they were a little apprehensive " In terms of other black teachers, she said that "I've heard of other people feeling a bit not getting promotion because they were black."

Claudia, who had trained as an economist, came to Canada in her early 20s. She took the advice of the immigration officer who suggested that in order to get a job she should not reveal that she had a university degree.

*I had to eat. Because I had to lie and say that I only had a grade 12 to get into the system, or I would be still out of a job. So, in fact, that was the advice of one of the immigration officers, he was kind enough, he said: Look, this is what to do." He wouldn't say why, but I was not stupid, and like this is the way to get in, you are over-qualified, you are too qualified.(ACPID103)*

Claudia took a clerical position working for Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP), where she worked for 10 months. She said, "I couldn't stay there, that job was....I mean you used about 1 percent of your brainpower. It just drove me crazy." During this time, she met someone working at OHIP who was applying to the Faculty of Education at the University of Toronto to become a teacher. He encouraged her to apply, and as a result she completed her teachers' certificate in business. She applied for various jobs, getting one right away in which she worked for four years. She talked positively about the experience. After getting

married, she moved to British Columbia and after about six months she returned to Toronto and applied for a job in one of the school boards in Metropolitan Toronto. She was hired first as a long-term occasional teacher and in 1975, she received a permanent contract. Her workload however was problematic. "They gave me one here, one there, and they took courses from people who wanted to get rid of those courses, because they were having difficulties with the kids. So, I remember getting two grade 9s, from hell. And again these kids had not seen a black teacher." She also mentioned the difficulties of going for promotion within the system.

Following this, she became involved in supporting minority students and organized several multicultural activities in her school. Claudia is well aware of the differential treatment of minority/black teachers within the school. She recalled that she worked very hard as an assistant head of department and when she became the acting head of business department, she initiated several changes:

*You were treated differently. I worked my butt off, because you see I had to prove myself each time. When I became assistant head, they didn't have many assistant heads in any area [in the school board]. When I became the department head I worked with other teachers, I made the decision to abandon certain courses . I worked hard. The principal, he would make comments: 'Oh, you always pretend that you are doing work; we know that you're not working. Paul [previous head of the department] worked harder.' If Paul had been working that hard, he would have pruned all these courses (ACPID103).*

She talked about how difficult it was to work in a department that was predominantly male and white and to have a principal who did not respect women. Claudia was the only woman in the department and the only minority woman teacher in the school. In terms of racism she said, "It was there. But it wasn't... most of the time it's not on the surface." She said that as a head of the department her comments and ideas were not valued and recalled an incident that demonstrated a total disregard and disrespect for her opinion. The principal had moved her department to a location in the school that was not acceptable for her. He confirmed

the move without her knowledge or presence in the school. She expressed her feelings about this in a letter to the principal, in which she stated "In all the years of teaching, I have never felt as ravaged, as I feel now. The total lack of respect, the loss of privacy." and "I just went on, and the more angry I get, the more eloquent I become".

At the end of the interview Claudia commented that the most difficult issue was getting promotion and moving up:

*It is just fighting to move further up. It was wonderful that I got up, the fact that I did. But to go to that other level was not as easy as people think. The previous principal, I had told him I was applying to go to do my principal's course, and he said, 'What's the point of doing these things, because you are not going to get it anyway?' And I listened and made no comment. But it always I always kept it in the back of my mind. Because in that one sentence he told me how supportive he was. That was the same person who said: "What an excellent teacher, what an excellent person." And how well I had done, and how much work I had done in the department when he wasn't there. You see? How interesting?(ACPID103)*

Brenda came to Canada from Jamaica in 1961 having completed a three-year teacher-training program in 1958 and taught for three years. She had great difficulties in obtaining a permanent teaching position in Canada. She went to the Ministry of Education and asked "If I could redo my training so I could have Canadian training, and they told me I have more training than all their teachers, and all I have to do is some upgrading." (ACPID076) She took 3-4 courses at York University and worked as an occasional teacher for 12 years. Ultimately she filed a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) to seek redress for contractual violations she had suffered in her attempt to secure a permanent position. Several times she had been promised a full-time position, and started it, only to find that someone else (usually a white woman) had been hired for the full-time job. It took about seven years for Brenda to get a final response and compensation from the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

She got a permanent position in 1989 and retired in 1996. She describes the experience of racism in the following way:

*When I came from Jamaica I was energetic and full of life and wanted to do things, wanted to make good for myself, you know ... I never got credit for it... Be prepared, do the work, and then other people take the credit... When I went to the Human Rights they asked me if I knew anybody else who was being treated the same way as me, and there were quite a few, but nobody wanted to go (ACPID076).*

## **Discussion**

It is clear from the above narratives that these four women had different encounters within education institutions in Ontario. While finding a job was not an issue for Lenore and Maria, Brenda had greater difficulties in securing a permanent position. Claudia who did not have a teacher training qualification, was admitted to the University of Toronto and landed a permanent position easily. However going for promotion and being accepted as a department head was much more difficult than anticipated. Maria, who worked in England before coming to Canada, likewise did not have any problem finding a suitable job. The Principal even created a job for her when there was no serious need in the school for a teacher with her specific subject expertise.

The histories of these women clearly indicate the complex, contradictory, and deeply fractured notion of race, gender, and power. The narratives of these women show the subtle androcentric and racist structures that became common sense or 'true' in Gramscian terms (1971). All of the four women interviewed discussed the subtleties and hidden nature of the racism and sexism present in their professional lives. For example Lenore's first job in a special school determined her future professional career. She reported:

*I remember one year I applied for something like 12 positions (Vice Principal). I got some interviews, but you know it was always the same thing, you got the feedback, well you don't have experience in any of these groups [academic schools and/or general level schools]. So, by having had to start my career in a special school, I was literally, that literally excluded me from. Well that is racism, because I could only get into the special school because of racism (ACPID088).*

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Lenore could not pinpoint any overt forms of racism directed to her. But according to her, it was more structural racism and sexism, which in a sense was more difficult to detect.

*You don't know; it is hard to say. What I would say, If I'm to pinpoint racism, I would aim it more at the administration. I would point more at the structural racism within the board. I would say definitely when I was trying to seek promotion, I was going to an interview with four whites, males, and I knew, you know, I walked in and I saw them and I knew I wasn't getting the job. Now that's where the gut feeling comes in. I think I definitely had that gut feeling more in terms of trying to gain promotion (ACPID088).*

Brenda also talked about the subtle ways in which she was denied a permanent full-time position for 12 years. She was compelled to file a complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission and won the case on the basis of evidence of systemic discrimination. Brenda said it was a hard struggle for seven years. After her complaint was held up, people would react towards her differently. "Every time I go out there, there is somebody to say 'Oh, she's looking for trouble.' What did I do?"(ACPID076)

Claudia also had to deal with systemic issues. She claims that "it was there [racism]. But it wasn't... most of the time it's not on the surface." As the head of the business department, her authority was challenged but she did not file a formal complaint because:

*It is too easy for them to say : "Right, something happens, and immediately talk about race....Even though that's what it was. So I didn't do that because it would have been an uphill battle (ACPID103).*

Maria who had a relatively easier time in obtaining employment and worked in a more supportive environment, was also aware of the subtleties of racism.

All four women came to Ontario in the 1960s, at the time of liberalization of the immigration policy in Canada. All were among the first groups of black Caribbean women who taught in Ontario schools and were the first black woman consultant, department head, and math teacher. Three of them had a difficult time which they attributed to systemic discrimination; Lenore and Claudia over promotion and advancement and Brenda over obtaining a permanent position. The most important aspect of their experiences is that they were not as powerless as may be anticipated. According to Young (1995), assumptions about a homogeneous category of women helps to create a homogeneous category of Third World Women who stand as the Other to western feminists who in turn define them as "powerless victims of patriarchy" (p. 101). The reality is that people of diverse backgrounds and experiences are differently situated in matrices of power and privilege (pp. 107-108).

These women found ways of making their professional lives more meaningful and also challenged the system for treating them differently. Despite of limitations in promotional opportunities, they shared a positive outlook towards their occupational situation. For example Maria and Claudia created significant support systems for minority students in their schools. This corresponds with the findings of Annette Henry (1998) who claims that black women teachers tend to view teaching as a form of activism. There are some similar, if not parallel, experiences, described by teachers in both Henry's study and in the interview data collected for this study.

Another interesting and significant finding of this study is that those black women who had experience and exposure to colonial education practices had a higher aspiration and confidence in their abilities as teachers. Three of the women had relatively easy access to the job market and obtained a permanent teaching contract soon after they arrived to Canada. This raises another interesting question; does a colonial education privilege immigrant minority women attempting to enter the Canadian workforce? This subtle practice could provide an

insight into Canadian society more generally, its appreciation of a colonial type education, and also the complexity of colonial discourses that still prevails in our society.

Although these women narrate diverse experiences, they reveal certain social practices that are shared by the overall group. Their collective memory as Dillabough mentions certainly focuses on social injustices faced by minority teachers in Ontario schools. Those with even higher aspirations and an interest in career advancement paid a higher price. The collective memory of these and other women teachers expose social practices that were prevalent in Ontario and elsewhere. These encouraged teachers and scholars to make a proactive social response against any forms of injustices and inequities.

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