African Canadian Women and the Question of Identity

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Abstract

Canada is a nation that embraces diversity and multiculturalism as its corner stone for building the sense of belonging for all her citizens. Many Black Canadian women, however, feel excluded and not part of the Canadian mosaic. This paper shows the complexities associated with understandings and interpretations of identity and discusses Black women's question of identity as situated in Black Canadian feminist theory.

Résumé

Le Canada est une nation qui encourage la diversité et le multiculturalisme comme sa pierre de coin pour bâtir un sentiment d'appartenance pour tous ses citoyens. Un bon nombre de femmes noires canadiennes, par contre, se sentent exclues et de ne pas faire partie de la mosaïque canadienne. Cet article montre les complexités associées avec la compréhension et les interprétations de l'identité et discute de la question de l'identité des femmes noires telle que située dans la théorie féministe de la femme noire canadienne.

Introduction

"Black" and "woman" are the two words that immediately come to mind whenever I'm asked to describe myself. I am always "Black" first and "female" second.

(Riviere 2004, 222)

Canada is a nation that embraces diversity and multiculturalism as its corner stone for building the sense of belonging for all her citizens. However, Himani Bannerji is quick to point out that, in her opinion, the notion of diversity and multiculturalism, although characteristically "Canadian," do not effectively work in practice. She states: "It does not require much effort to realize that diversity is not equal to multiplied sameness; rather it presumes a distinct difference in each instance" (Bannerji 2000, 41). In her discussions on Black women's identity, Adrienne Shadd pointed to some of the stereotypical questions that some racialized Canadians face and, particularly, the question of, "Where are they really from?" Shadd noted that by asking this question, one is "unintentionally" denied what is rightfully hers/his and at the same time rendered vulnerable in her/his host country (Shadd 1994, 15). Francis Deng defined identity as the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture (Deng 1995, 1). Richard Jenkins described identity as the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities (Jenkins 1996, 4). In 2000, Jenkins observed that in common-sense, everyday speech, the notion of identity is used in connection with personal individuality, life-style, social position and status, politics, and bureaucracy and citizenship.

Many Black Canadian women are not excluded from the discussion of their identity and the question of where they are really from, nor from the challenging question of how they should define their ethnicity in terms of whether

they are Canadian, African Canadian, Black Canadian or simply Black or African. Riviere (2004, 222) explains, "I do not quite accept the idea that that choice is fully 'ours' to make." "Black women in Canada are never black or women. They are always both" (Herbert 1989, 274).

This paper draws in part on research findings from a larger three year Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canadian study on Black Canadian feminisms. The broader goal of the study was to examine what constitutes feminisms among women of African ancestry. This paper however, focuses on eight participants' understanding of their own identity. The paper shows the complexities associated with understandings and interpretations of identity. It provides a brief discussion about identity in general and Black women in particular. The discussion is situated in Black Canadian feminist theory that has emerged as a result of Black women activists' and scholars' feelings of being far removed from White, middle-class, liberal feminist discourses (Few 2007, 455). April Few adds that Black feminism is a standpoint theory that transcends the arguments of mere identity politics and actively examines the politics of location in the lives of Black women and the groups of which they are a part (2007, 454). It is important to note that when speaking of Canadian Black feminist theory, one is speaking of a body of knowledge or "the practice of theorizing by and about Black women living in Canada" (Amoah 2007, 106). It is through this theory that the paper explores Black women narratives about their journeys of self discovery; shifting identities; and coping strategies that they utilize to mitigate the myriads positionings.

The study employed a qualitative research methodology and generated data through interviews and focus groups with 400 women from the cities of Toronto, Calgary, Ottawa, Halifax and Saskatoon. The sample consisted of Black women of African ancestry who were over 18 years and with various backgrounds in religion, ethnicity, age, sexuality orientation, language, educational levels, class, etc.

Racial Identity and Black Canadian Feminist Thought

According to Françoise Baylis, a Canadian of Caribbean descent, "For some, racial identity is a fairly stable aspect of an individual's personality, for others it is a developmental process influenced by environmental and personal factors" (Baylis 2003, 142). Nevertheless, she acknowledges the fact that there are multiple ways in which one can own her identity. I remember telling students in my class that what is important to note in terms of identity is that often there is a conflict between the frames that one uses to define one's self and the frames that society uses to define them. However, as Riviere notes "when those two frames meet, they diverge from each other....What is left from that point of divergence is who you really are" (Riviere 2004, 229). Additionally, transnationalism makes it even more difficult to speak of specific identities in relation to a particular nation (Spitzer and Okeke-Ihejirika 2004). As a result, how identity gets constructed becomes an "intellectual exercise, because the myriad forces which shape that identity are constantly moving, constantly changing" (Riviere 2004). According to Castells (2000), identity formation is not an individualistic effort. It cannot be carried out in isolation; rather, identity becomes a material force and a material source of meaning, when it has been enforced enough over time. Koppelman (1996) argues that Black women's simultaneous embodiment of blackness and femaleness leaves them between the categories of race and sex, thus forcing them to divide and prioritize their identities that are integral to their self-concepts and life experience. The concept of "double jeopardy" which is often evoked (Beale 1970 cited in Reid 1984, 247) puts Black women in situations where they must decide between their dual identities as Blacks and women. This double jeopardy, therefore, takes central space in Black Canadian feminist theory.

Black Canadian feminist theory focuses on social justice for women and creates a space to acknowledge their racialized experiences. The theory broadens and deepens the historical and social analysis of black women, exposes the multiplicity of oppressions

and deconstructs neoliberal thinking. This theory is not an end in itself, but rather a pedagogy that may be directed towards greater social justice for all people. According to Rai Reece, "Black Canadian feminist thought occupies a meaningful space in activism, since the interlocking oppression that Black women face...are the molds that provide foundation from which [Black women] stand (Reece 2007, 271). Njoki Wane defines Black Canadian feminism as:

> a theoretical tool meant to elucidate and analyze the historical, social, cultural, and economic relationships of women of African descent as the basis for development of a liberatory praxis. It is a paradigm that is grounded in the historical as well as the contemporary experiences of Black women as mothers, activists, academics and community leaders. It is both an oral and written epistemology that theorizes our experiences and can be applied to situate Black women's past and present experiences that are grounded in their multiple oppressions. (Wane 2002, 38)

The above definition captures women's stories, their lived experiences and their interpretation of what it means to be a Black woman. Black feminism can also be defined "as the sum of its constituent's parts: Canadian, Black, Feminism, Theory, each with its own particular connotations (Amoah 2007,104). Michael Amoah goes on to explain, "It is difficult to identify a certain cultural aspect as being distinctively Canadian, as the element of multiculturalism is itself part of the Canadian identity" (2007, 104). Furthermore, he states that being Black is more than just a culture or color and that what is important is the understanding of what it means to be straddled between more than one world or multiple ideologies. As stated earlier, Black Canadian women's diasporic identities provide the richness and the diversity that constitute this particular mold of feminism. Reece, in making reference to her identity and usage of Black feminist thought states: "...being of West Indian background, I find that Black feminist thought is generally constructed as 'American' Black feminist thought" (2007, 275). She sums up: "[t]here is not one conventional all-encompassing analysis that can harness the fluidity of Canadian Black feminist thought...Black feminist thought occupies multifocal transnational space and gains its strength and momentum from critical exploration though multiple entry points" (2007, 275). Similarly, Patricia Hill Collins describes Black feminism as a critical social theory or as bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing groups of people differently placed in specific political, social, and historic contexts characterized by injustice (Collins 1998, 276).

April Few argues that Black women exist within an intersectionality matrix - a location where multiple systems of oppressions simultaneously corroborate and subjugate to conceal deliberate, marginalizing ideological maneuvers that define "Otherness" (Few 2007). In this unique location within the matrix, specific "historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative boundaries" (Mohanty 1992, 75, cited in Few 2007, 455) influence how Black women have come to define their shared and diverse experiences feminist standpoint.

Discussion: Women's Voices on Identity, Education and Work

George Dei notes that "voice" allows readers to bring their own interpretations to data presented. Accordingly, the voices presented herein reflect the complexities associated with understandings and interpretations of identity (Dei 1996). Many participants talked about their arduous and turbulent journey of self-discovery to reposition and relocate themselves in Canadian contexts, both the Canadian-born and those who emigrated to Canada. Participants pointed to the ways in which they contend with experiences of shifting identities, as students, mothers, nursing aides, professional women or homemakers. They also shed light on the coping strategies they utilize to mitigate the trauma and trials of their myriad positioning, reflecting Millsom Henry-Waring's observations of the ethnic, gendered and national subjectivities of African-Caribbean women in Britain from which she called for a critical, radical and new framework which would enable the shifting and multiple nature of African

Caribbean women's lives in Britain to be validated. Henry-Waring further noted that a diversity of responses and negotiations that challenge racism need to be celebrated as well as looked at as a case of essentializing "otherness" (2004, 39).

Who is included in the categories of "Black"; "African"; "African Canadian"; "people of African ancestry?" Who uses these categories when they describe themselves and why? Michelle Wright states, "Blacks in the Diaspora possess an intimidating array of different historical, cultural, national, ethnic, religious, and ancestral origins and influences. [...] Despite this range of differences, they are most often identified in the West as simply "Black" and, therefore, as largely homogenous" (Wright 2004, 2). Narrative responses likewise point to the ways in which multiple and sometimes shifting identities of the participants yielded problems relating to identity formation. For example, some participants debated on whether they are African or Black. Arret, who emigrated from the Caribbean when she was a teenager, commented:

> Yes, I am a Black woman, but I am not African. I was not born in Africa. My family has been here for more than 500 years. I do not think I have anything African in me or even my culture, except my skin color. So who am I? At least with Africans, Africans, they know who they are and where they are from - I do not see them having any problems with their identity.... (Focus group 1 2005)

Arret's account points to the negotiations of identity among women of African ancestry in the diaspora. Her narrative suggests the different, and sometimes competing, identifications individuals have to deal with as they negotiate specific contexts (Dwyer 2000). This is clearly seen in Arret's narrative when she states that she is black but not African, and argues that women from the continent of Africa have no problem with their identity because they can trace their ancestry to a particular country such as Ghana, Nigeria or Kenya. The narrative reveals the uncertainties one can get caught up in especially in diasporic contexts in terms of drawing boundaries between Black and African identities, which yield a more complex form of identity.

The works of Black Canadian scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott (2003), Michelle Wright (2004; with Shuhmann 2007) and Katherine McKittrick (2006) show that forms of naming, which are based upon skin pigmentation and ethnicity, in most cases tend to deny the complexity of what may and may not constitute blackness. While some of these labels and terms are used more often than others, they are all contested, perhaps particularly so among research participants. Blackness in Canada becomes contested and is often identified with immigration but rarely with slavery. This is because slavery in Canada was not as widespread as in the United Sates, Caribbean or Latin America (McKittrick 2006, 97). In particular, it is speculated that slavery and segregation only took place in United States and not in Canada (Wane 2009). Elsewhere I have indicated that slavery did play an integral part in Canada's development as a wealthy colony/country and segregation and civil rights movements played out from coast to coast in this country (Wane 2007).

For some women who emigrated from African countries, defining themselves was an unsettling and challenging undertaking. Eunice, who is originally from Ghana and has been in Canada for over a decade, noted:

> Since my arrival in Canada 15 years ago, I have had feelings of disorientation, dislocation, alienation, and no sense of belonging - I can say. I have culture conflict as well as an identity crisis. I did not feel it when I was younger, growing up in West Africa. I was not born with it there was an entry point. I was aware that I was from a Ghanaian background and I belonged to the Akan people, which is part of my identity. I feel that the...initial crisis happened after my arrival in Canada. I experienced rejection and displacement. I was faced with choices I had to make pertaining to the values I wished to adopt and follow. Besides, the phenomenon of racism was a reality in my life. I feel that this form of differential treatment contributed to the identity crisis that I went through...
>
> (Focus group II, 2005)

Eunice indicates that she experienced identity crisis when she came to Canada because of differential treatment. In spite of growing up knowing that she was Ghanaian, the respondent got disoriented and dislocated

when she got to Canada because of the culture shock and racism she faced. Eunice notes that in a number of instances, she had to make choices or give preference to some values or aspects of mainstream identity in order to fit in. Henry Giroux, writing on identity, describes this as the search of the individual self (Giroux 1990, 12). Eunice's narrative above confirms this assertion as she tries to define a space and place that she can call her own within the Canadian landscape. This searching process results in a shifting of identity that is signified by dropping some of her traditional identities and her acquisition of Canadian identities. This indicates that identities are not static or monolithic. From Arret's and Eunice's narratives, one can also argue that the psychological processes that construct the social position of Black women can lead to identity crisis, stress, cultural shock and dislocation. Reflecting on the narratives of Eunice and Arret, one can only hope that their experiences can produce a particular level of consciousness of systems of oppression that could lead to unifying Blackness and other racialized women.

In addition, the voices of the participants reflect their anxiety about cultural adaptability and acceptance as a source of identity contestations. Indeed, Gay Wilentz, in acknowledging the changes that occur when one moves from one place to another, remarks that whenever people with shared values, cultural traditions, and racial or ethnic identity are dispersed into hostile environments, there emerges simultaneously a culture which retains many of the residual traditions while attempting to cope with the alien-and most often dominant-society around them (Wilentz 1992, 385). One source of this anxiety for the women are the conflicts and contradictions they find themselves in between the traditional culture back home and mainstream culture. This is echoed by Masa, a university student:

> The process of searching for an identity has often placed me in a state of confusion and conflict. I was not sure of my identity and how the tensions associated with it played out most in my relationship with my fellow classmates. My parents are from Grenada, I was born in Canada, but very conscious of my African identity. I had to constantly choose what aspects of the African culture or the African Grenadian culture I was going to disclose in my conversations in class. Besides, I had to ascertain what aspects of the Canadian culture I wanted to imbibe and follow. I think the identity crisis is the result of negotiating these tensions in one's life. One is never going to be fully African or fully Canadian. I am always going to be living in a "hybrid" culture, following a blend of the traditional and modern forms of values, beliefs and customs...
>
> (Focus group I, 2006)

As this quote suggests, Masa found herself torn between Grenadian, African and Canadian culture. She had to make choices on what to prioritize and what not to. The respondent notes that one is not really going to be fully African, Grenadian or Canadian but rather a blend of the three cultures and thus, live in a hybrid culture. As Claire Dwyer found, individuals prioritize different aspects of their compound identities depending on context. At the same time, individuals attempt to negotiate "hybrid" identities, which emphasize a fusion of cultural influences and which challenge discourses that seek to essentialize difference (Dwyer 2000, 483). What is more, the change in values, attitudes, mannerisms and behavior are indicative choices one is forced to make (Giroux 1990). Olgah eloquently captures her dilemma:

> I went through awkward, uncomfortable and stressful situations when people grossly misinterpreted and misconstrued what I was saying, in some cases, due to the odd power dynamic that existed between the two cultures - the African culture and the Western culture. I am constantly in a state of crisis and many times I wish I could just be me - Black Canadian woman who brings a wealth of knowledge to Canada. (Focus group III, 2005)

Olgah's words point to issues that arise when two opposing cultures meet. Unfortunately, it is quite evident that newcomers' values get masked and overrun by dominant cultures. It is a mistaken notion among the respondents that they would find more acceptance from their mainstream colleagues if they tried to conform to dominant patterns of behavior. Instead, racism negatively affects their integration into the new culture and, thus, they experience additional stress

caused by the emphasis placed on them to try to integrate into the host society. The word "crisis" was often mentioned by women while talking about their lived experiences. This crisis continues to reverberate long past the actual point of arrival, settlement and attempt at full participation within the Canadian mainstream society as reported by Emily:

My identity crisis was quite evident when I [was] asked the question "where I was from." Who I am - I thought to myself. Was it not obvious I was African and Black? I often wondered why this question shook the roots of my identity. Of course I am African searching for....Not sure. Many times when I meet with Black women who are Canadian they tell me I should have no problem at all with my identity. What they do not realize is that, growing up in Africa, I always wanted to be a woman with long flowing hair, something from the movies, but when I got to Canada, I did not want that any more. I wanted to be me - African woman with short kinky hair...Many times, I was at times irked by clichéd questions, "Where are you from? Where are you really from?" - regarding my country of origin. These common racist questions made me feel that I did not belong to the host society and that I was neither an African nor a Canadian, manifesting a shifting identity through reaffirming difference in my life. These questions also indicated the notion that the word "Canadian" only includes White people and excludes people of color... (Focus group I, 2005)

Arret also noted:

My life is trauma in itself - I have always been traumatized ever since I can recall. It was always the same story from my grandmother and my mother who would say "watch out otherwise you will end up like so and so or what is wrong with you, you want to be white now - or your skin is too dark already, do not stand for too long under the hot sun." The only time I felt I was me, was when I was asleep, because no one nagged me about my skin color or my future in this country. In school, it was the same thing - I can vaguely remember my first blonde wig, my mother struggled to fit it on my tiny head - I can still recall the whispers from other children in my class when I walked in. I thought, they would accept me now that I had their hair but no. They laughed at me - but I was not sure why they laughed - I was too young then. I really wanted to have a sense of belonging, but up to now, I have never found any... (Focus Group I, 2005)

According to Arret, family impacts greatly on identity formation (Keefe and Padilla 1987) especially during the childhood years. The family presents an individual with an observer position and from that point one is able to see and know who she is. Arret's early formative experiences shaped or sculpted her underlying layers of identity and those layers were contradictory, confusing and traumatizing. The respondent tried to negotiate expectations for her to fit into the mainstream culture, yet other children laughed at her when she attempted to do so. Arret's experiences are reflective of the way in which, as Judith Butler (2005) contends, a negative effect, or shock can be the beginning of formation of identity and self. It can happen at anytime in childhood, after crossing oceans to emigrate to a land of new opportunities. The respondent's experience speaks to the process of disconnection with self, and the struggle to redefine and build a new identity. Allena provided another perspective of how she perceives her identity:

I grew up in the Caribbean and came here when I was twelve years old... I came here having an identity that was shaped by my family...race was not an obsession...although in the Caribbean...something about how light skinned one was could make a difference in the job market...but I had a good sense of myself...yes, I came thinking I could do anything...however, the way I felt about myself was not how others felt...my counsellor laughed at me when I said I wanted to be a lawyer...that destroyed my self confidence...since then, I have spent a lot of my time building myself...strengthening myself from the inside... (Focus Group 1, 2006)

Allena's words provide an avenue for a dialogue on how women of African ancestry define themselves both individually and collectively. The narrative creates opportunities to interrogate, examine and rethink ways of creating, locating and incorporating the whole self as women of African ancestry in a set of negotiated positions.

Lafo, a newcomer from Jamaica, explained the effects of racism on accessing employment and the consequences on her family and, particularly, the disintegration and

the emerging confusions on the identities within the family:

I initially found it difficult to obtain jobs due to lack of Canadian experience, language and skin colour. When I did get a job, it was not proportionate to my educational qualifications. This downhill trend caused acute status shock/dislocation in my life. I experienced a drop in social status and it was difficult for me to accept that I was now of a lower class than I was back in Jamaica. My occupational status decline was quite significant in my life and the lives of my children and my husband...my marriage ended in a divorce and some of my children dropped out of school. Everyone in the family had lost their sense of belonging and each felt they were more Canadian than the other - it was difficult to adjust from the initial intense "status-shock." Another thing is this "Canadian experience" they ask of you on your arrival- how on earth was I going to fulfill this requirement when no one was willing to give me a job. (Focus group I, 2004)

Lafo's racial and language identity implicated her chances of securing adequate employment. Ironically, some of the criteria for granting landing status in Canada are good education and proficiency in either English or French. Many times, however, newcomers have had their education and previous work experiences rendered irrelevant upon stepping on the Canadian soil. Lafo affirms that failure to secure a job had implications not only on her own economic well-being but also that of her family. The complications and challenges emanating from lack of employment and therefore, economic insecurity saw Lafo's marriage disintegrate. This also implicated the family's definitions of who they are. The words of this woman cut across age and class, showing interconnections and diversities in the experience of black Canadian women. In their responses to forces that shape their identities, Black women pointed to factors such as experience, location, class, work and education. Racel talked about class, geography and education in the quote below:

My identity has been shaped by three things: my social and economic class, geographical location, and educational background. I grew up in Jamaica and race was not a big issue. I grew up knowing I am Jamaican and that is how my identity was shaped until I came to Canada and suddenly I found out that being a black woman in Canada has these negative stereotypes as presented in the media. To know that people think of you in derogatory terms was rather annoying for a while...I mean people could say to me, you speak English so well, oh you are very well learned or you have more experience than other people. I am like what are you saying? It was ridiculous for me. (Focus Group II, 2005)

Racel reflects on ways identity is understood in her birth place (Jamaica). She talks about her past and present experiences as a young person in Jamaica and her relationships with other people. This process led her to develop a secure, positive sense of identity as a Jamaican. Upon arriving in Canada, she gained insights into the implications of being black in the Canadian society. Chaje explained how her work experience shaped her identity in the following words:

My identity as a black woman really got strong when I came to Canada and began working as an educator. I realized that things were different for students and having my own nieces and nephews talk about their experiences in school. (Focus group IV, 2005)

What Chaje is pointing to are the forces that inform their identities as newcomers to Canada. All the women reveal ways in which their bodies are read at work, places of abode and in educational settings, and a practice that impacts on their social and economic mobility.

Some Final Thoughts on Women's Narratives

The women's narratives have demonstrated that race, though a social construction, is central in the construction of the self. The study participants indicated that they learned about who they are through lived experiences and that the negotiation of their identity took place in relation to being Black and African or being "just Black." However, feelings of racism caused insurmountable stress. Wing and Merchan describe this stress as "spirit injury" (Wing and Merchan 1995, 516). Spirit injury inflicted on an individual leads to a deliberate and gradual deterioration of the soul, psyche and identity. Feelings of racism that are

indescribable suggest that many women were experiencing a form of spirit injury and this had implications on how they perceived themselves.

The status-shock of newcomers had severe repercussions on the family dynamics between parent and child relationships and other members of the community. The effects of status dislocation had far reaching psychological implication for many women. The integration process forced many to accept the "best" values in both cultures and mediate a space for themselves in the "new" country. In a racially discriminating environment, it is possible that familial support together with cultural affiliations could be a source of tremendous strength during the initial years in Canada.

Many Black women who were interviewed indicated that they shared problems with friends and family members and tried to maintain a balance in their lives. Patience Elabor-Idemudia writes of how Black women who migrate to the Canadian prairies become, over time, resourceful and help each other to find employment as well as listen to each other's problems (Elabor-Idemudia 1999). Many of the participants in this study said that they did not seek professional counseling. This could be due to the unease and shame that is associated with the practice of going to see psychologists or psychiatrists. Talking about the reality of shifting identities with friends and family could then be an excellent way to cope with the crisis, stress, status-shock and low self-esteem because everyone had experienced some degree of stress and hence, the need to talk and think about it collectively.

Conclusion

A dialogue on identity is complex and the women's voices have shown how they get caught up trying to create a home in Canada. The women's voices show that they live a dual life whether they are Canadian born or have emigrated to Canada. The participants are forced to lead a "double life" possibly because they perceive their cultural lifestyle as inferior to Euro-Western ways of life. In fact, some participants indicated that they held a mistaken assumption that they would find "more acceptance" from their mainstream colleagues if they tried to conform to dominant patterns of behavior. Consequently, the newcomers did not fully assimilate but struggled to integrate into the host culture. They held their own culture to a certain degree while at the same time sought to participate in the dominant culture. Nevertheless, racism negatively affected their full integration into various spheres, particularly employment and education. The women's everyday experience is shaped by stress as they live in conflicting worlds of desiring to maintain their culture and struggling to fit into the mainstream culture.

Overall, the study findings show that many Black women of African ancestry struggling to live in diasporic contexts consider themselves to be outsiders of the dominant culture. The women's voices point to negotiations of listening to and understanding of self and society while self reflecting and examining the assumptions that, historically, socially, economically and politically, are deeply embedded in the normalcy of whiteness. Listening to Black women from diverse communities and their experience of self, of work, of becoming and belonging, of family, education and feelings, all contribute to debates on Black women's question of identity.

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