

Constructing Black Women's Historical Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

This essay, on constructing historical knowledge about African Canadian women, presents an overview of the current state of Black women's history. By exploring historiography, theory, and method, the author suggests new approaches and interpretations for the writing of this history.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article sur l'élaboration de la connaissance historique des femmes afro-canadiennes, présente un aperçu de l'état actuel de l'histoire des femmes noires. En explorant la théorie, l'historiographie, et la méthode, l'auteure suggère de nouvelles approches et de nouvelles interprétations pour écrire cette histoire.

Is there a need to study Canadian Black women's history? If the answer is yes, then how do we do it? How do we get to it? How do we theorize and construct it? All these questions bring into focus issues of concept, method, and historiography. Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice remarked that "women, like men, need their history." These scholars argue that women need this information in order to develop a total sense of themselves: "The sense of self depends on having a sense of one's past, and to the extent that modern women have been denied, in the historical canon, all but the faintest glimpses of their own history, they are like victims of amnesia."¹ Black women in this country have made history and therefore do have a history. This history must be constructed and made available if we are not to become victims of amnesia. While the two historians just quoted recognize the value of doing women's history, and from a feminist perspective, often what occurs in the writing of this history is that minority women are left out of this construction. White women, mainly of French and British backgrounds, still remain at the centre of historical inquiry.

As has been pointed out elsewhere, Black women's history has been at worst invisible, and at best marginal in the history of all Canadian histories, be they "malestream" or women's/feminist history.² Since the rise of second wave feminism and women's studies in the academy, feminist historians and theorists alike have generally privileged gender oppression as the main cause of women's subordination. But these scholars, mainly

white and middle class, taking their own race and those they write about as normal, have rarely analyzed their whiteness.³ By failing to make race central to the analysis of women's history and gender history, they denied themselves the opportunity to see how their race (and class) gave meaning to their gender.⁴ Making race central to historical analysis would revolutionize the way feminist historians do history. Not only would it allow white historians to interrogate their whiteness and thus make it central to their inquiries, but it would also radically aid in bringing the hidden histories of racialized minority women to the fore.⁵ In addition, when race, class, and other variables are made central to our theorizing about women, we recognize the differences among women based on these factors. In much the same way that a woman is not a man, the Black woman is not a white woman, although both groups share a common gender. White women, as demonstrated by their writings, rarely think about their race; Black women, in contrast, are reminded of their race in even the most mundane situation. Black women have come to analyze their experiences as created by "interlocking systems of oppression" in which gender, class, and race stand at the centre. For Black women as a whole, race and gender are inseparable in our thinking about and writing of history.⁶

Black women and Black people in general, have endured and continue to endure oppression, from white people and the systems they created, based on their race.⁷ Therefore, for us, gender is not

and cannot be separate from our race, or vice versa. We are not a woman today and a genderless Black person tomorrow. Both components are integral to and inseparable parts of who we are.⁸ Black feminist theorists were among the first scholars to challenge the racism that was part of feminist scholarship and theory. One method they used was to deconstruct the term "woman." And yet many of their insights, warnings, and appeals still remain unheeded. If the insights that Black feminist scholars offer are applied to much of the feminist theorizing that goes on in the academy, a positive transformation in theory and practice can occur.⁹

Calling for a "particularization" of the term woman has also led Black women to see the heterogeneity of their own group. As Noga Gayle has pointed out, though all Black women share the same "race," their historical experiences as members of the same racial group vary. These experiences have been shaped by religion, colour, language, class, sexuality, and culture.¹⁰ Sociologist Annette Henry elaborates on the need for scholars to recognize the heterogeneity of Black women's history: "Often, one Black woman's story becomes a kind of canonic text, universalized as representative of Black women everywhere," she argues. "Racism and misogyny render readers satisfied with narrow understandings which they then generalize to an entire population. Rather, we need diverse theoretical understandings of marginalized experiences."¹¹ These warnings must be considered as we attempt to historicize Black women.

How does one present Black women in history? Are they to be presented in a dichotomous manner as either victims or resisters? Linda Gordon points out the tension between these two poles of presentation and warns that neither one does full justice to women's lives and experiences. In fact, at different times, and even at the same time, women in this hemisphere experience both poles of this duality. Recently, in order to present Black women as subjects in their history, it has been standard to cast them in the role of "resister." But to ignore that for the past three centuries on this continent Black women have suffered from an unrelenting oppression is to deny reality. Victimization has been part and parcel of that suffering. As Gordon argues, we need "work that insists on presenting the complexity of the sources of power and

weakness in women's lives."¹²

Once we acknowledge the heterogeneity of Black women and their historical experiences, we must seek to explore "how the history of Black women in Canada began." Who were these women? Where did they come from? What were they doing here? African Canadian history is one shared by Black women and men, therefore what we take to mark the beginning of this history is also the starting point for Black women's history. It is instructive to note that from the beginning of what we now call Canada, there was a Black presence. Canada evolved from settler colony to nation, based on the appropriation of Native land, and became incorporated from its early colonial period (both French and British) into an international capitalist order. And through these myriad incarnations of Canada, Black people have been part of its history though this knowledge, given the history of their subordination in Canada, has been submerged. Let us now look at the beginning and evolution of Black women's history and name its diverse sources.

Beginning in 1628 with a young boy from Madagascar, Black slavery became a part of life in New France and hence the beginning of Black women's history.¹³ Colonists acquired slaves from the West Indies, Europe, West Africa, and from the thirteen British colonies to the south. The slave population also grew from natural increase. At the time of the Conquest in 1760 scholars note that of the almost 3000 slaves purchased over time by the colonists of Old Quebec, about 1100, or 35 percent, were Black. In Ile Royale, with its 216 slaves, fully 90 percent of the slaves were Black.¹⁴

One scenario that highlights the history of slave women in this country is that of Marie Joseph Angelique. Angelique was a slave woman owned by the de Francheville family of Montreal. In April 1734 a fire ripped through the town, destroying over 46 houses. Arson was named as the cause, and Angelique the arsonist. She was arrested, tried, and hanged. Angelique could serve as an icon for feminist struggles, as an important figure in early Canadian history, and one who embodies the tragedy of slavery and the interlocking system of Black women's oppression.¹⁵ Angelique is important for another reason: she represents in a clear way the very diasporic nature of Black women's history that I am talking about. Angelique came not from Africa but from Europe. Born in Portugal (it is not known

if she was a slave in Portugal), she endured slavery in New England. There a French bourgeois, Francois Poulin de Francheville, purchased her and brought her to Montreal where she lived and worked as a slave until her tragic end. Angelique crossed an ocean not in search of fame and fortune but as a victim of a sordid feature of Atlantic trade. Her life, history, and enslavement should also be understood in the context of Atlantic history and world history.¹⁶ Slave women in New France, with their diasporic origins, form the first "stream" of the history of Black women.

The American Revolution has particular resonance for Black Maritimers. It was because of this war that some 4,000 Black Loyalists - slave and free - entered Canada with their white and Native counterparts. The vast majority of these Loyalists settled in the Maritime provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, but Quebec got its fair share; Upper Canada was carved out of Quebec to satisfy the needs of white Loyalists who wanted a province of their own. The expulsion of the Jamaican Maroons to Nova Scotia by the British government in 1796 forms an important part of folk memory among African Nova Scotians and Jamaicans in the Jamaican diaspora. Maroon women form another source of African Canadian women's history.¹⁷ The War of 1812 also contributed to the Black population of Canada as some 3000 refugees who had fought on the side of the British were given habitation in Canada (New Brunswick and Nova Scotia) by the British Imperial government. Both these wars point to the dynamic exchanges of history between the United States and Canada, and the fact that the United States has supplied Canada with sources for its Black population.¹⁸

The "Great Emigration" of American Blacks to Canada lasted from 1812 to 1860 during which time thousands of people entered Canada fleeing "republican oppression."¹⁹ This period is associated with runaway American slaves who found a haven in Canada via the Underground Railroad. The active mythmaking by both Black and whites about this period (certainly in Ontario where the bulk of these Americans came) has led to some dubious interpretations.²⁰ New research is showing that a large number of the people who came to British North America in this period were free people, and the majority of the escaped slaves made it to Canada through their own efforts. One scholar

in particular has shown that although there were "stations," "conductors," and "secret routes" to aid escapees, a "well organized underground railroad system" is largely a myth.²¹

The migration of American Blacks from California to British Columbia, though a less romanticized event (all these emigrants were free; the fugitive factor was not an issue), is nonetheless another important stream of Black women's history. The several hundred women who made British Columbia their home between 1854 and 1858 laid the basis for the contribution of Black women to the province's story.²²

Between 1867 and 1920 when Canada embarked on a nation building program, a reversal of the Black movement into Canada occurred. The first prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, though married to a white Jamaican woman (some Jamaicans think she was certainly of mixed African and European blood) did not include Blacks in his construction of who was Canadian. Macdonald also made it clear that Blacks as immigrants were not welcome to the country. Between these two dates and beyond, several prime ministers, their ministers of interior, and the immigration department systematically put in place obstacles to prevent the entry of Blacks and other members of "undesirable races" into Canada. At the same time the Canadian state was courting and encouraging European and white American immigration.²³ Within Canada, the invisible colour bar was raised higher and settlers faced a virulent racism in all aspects of their lives. Denied opportunities to better themselves and their lives, shut out of the expanding agricultural and industrial sectors, hundreds if not thousands of Black Canadians fled to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Ironically, the United States had segregation and racism encoded in its laws but the American Black population, given its size and historic oppression, had also established its own institutions. Black America had its own banks, insurance companies, schools, hospitals, colleges, stores, and farms.²⁴ This era must be counted as an important part of the Black women's history as many Black Canadian women left the country for work and educational opportunities when the internal population almost strangled beneath a racist yoke.

Having said this, it would be specious not to mention that at the same time policy makers

denied Black emigrants the opportunities to enter Canada between 1867 and 1900, selective exceptions were made. Premised on the need for labour, the Dominion government grudgingly accepted a few hundred Black miners from Barbados and the United States, the latter mainly from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Other Blacks, mainly students, sailors, preachers, and others sneaked in. The Canadian government regarded Black immigrants as a source of labour rather than as potential settlers.²⁵

Presently, the largest population of Black people in Canada is Caribbean or of Caribbean descent. The vanguard of this group arrived after the Second World War when, given the labour demands of the post-war period, Canada opened its doors to "selective" immigration from the Caribbean. Women from the French and British Caribbean were recruited as domestics; Black nurses of "exceptional merit" were also allowed into the country to work. Black Caribbean nurses also came in from Britain during this period. It must be noted that the majority of these women were not allowed to enter the country as prospective immigrants but as workers on a temporary visa. This fact contributed to their marginalization, alienation, and vulnerability as exploited workers. In 1962 Prime Minister John Diefenbaker's government liberalized Canadian immigration policies and based entry on a points system. The systematic discrimination against the darker races was eased somewhat. After 1967 the Black Caribbean population burgeoned as the points system was further liberalized, allowing tens of thousands of Black Caribbeans to migrate to Canada. Today, at the turn of the twenty-first century, this population is responsible for establishing a very visible Black presence in Canada, especially in the urban centres of the Central and Western provinces.²⁶

At the same time it must be borne in mind that the Caribbean presence has other roots. A significant portion of New France's slaves were Caribbean and many of the Black Loyalists were of Caribbean origins. The Maroons were certainly Caribbean and, as the censuses of the nineteenth century tell us, many Black women and men noted the "West Indies" as their place of birth. The miners, sailors, and other workers who made it to the Maritimes during the latter half of the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries were Caribbean, coming especially from the eastern portion of the archipelago.²⁷

As African Canadian women's history develops, the fact of background or "origins" becomes important. I once taught Black history to a group of Black youngsters. Most were born in Canada or they came from the Caribbean when they were very young. While they enjoyed the stories of the Great Emigration (this is a central period in Black history), they wanted to know about Caribbean history - about Nanny, Marcus Garvey, and other freedom fighters. I did not find this odd. The thread of their personal history was still connected to the Caribbean experience. This tells me that in constructing a history of African Canadian women, the history of the Caribbean is of central importance. In a key way, therefore, Caribbean history becomes an arm of Canadian history. Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Canadian history knows that these two histories are intertwined. From the days of New France important trading links existed between the Caribbean and Canada. Indeed, Caribbean slaves for at least two centuries survived on salted cod and wheat flour from what is now Canada. The Caribbean supplied rum, sugar, molasses, and slaves in return.²⁸ This arrangement continued under the British regime and intensified during the period of capital accumulation and imperialism with the establishment of Canadian banks, insurance companies, and multinationals in the Caribbean.²⁹ This intertwining of Canadian and Caribbean history demands that a hemispheric historical awareness be at all times central to the historian's efforts at doing Black women's history.

The fact that Canada and the United States share a common border has had a dynamic (some Canadians would say dangerous) impact on each country's history. Of course, this is not new. Before the European invasion, Native people themselves went back and forth across this future border, and built cross border empires and alliances. With the development of French and British colonialism and the rise of the American and Canadian nation states, cross border movements of people of both colonial holdings and countries became a fact of life. This trend is clearly demonstrated by the migration of some 500 Creek-Negroes of Oklahoma and several hundred other Blacks from the Plains states who

managed, despite much opposition, to make it into Western Canada during the opening decade of the twentieth century.

During the first two decades of the century, responding to Canada's invitation, hundreds of thousands of Europeans and (white) Americans flooded the country. Most were destined for what became the Prairie provinces. Native people on the Prairies were conquered so as to make way for the building of the trans-Canada railway and the European settlers that it would bring. The noted afrophobe, W.D. Scott, who then headed the Immigration Department, made it his personal duty to exclude Blacks. White Americans were wanted but not Black Americans. It is interesting how in this context African Americans were denied their nationality. Scott used the most devious methods to exclude Blacks, and when some of these methods failed, he proposed legislation barring American (and all) Blacks. The hue and cry raised by white settlers on the Prairies regarding the few hundred Black farmers who managed to get in also gave the Immigration Department food for thought. Between 1896 and 1920, three millions immigrants entered Canada and fewer than two thousand of these were Africans. By structuring the nature of its immigration policies along racial lines, Canada for almost a century managed to make itself into a white nation.³⁰ Yet the women of the Creek-Negro community and others who came from the Plains area of the United States form part of African Canadian women's history and the history of women pioneers in Western Canada.

Another twentieth century movement of African Americans to Canada, though not as structured as the movement of the Blacks from the Plains states, occurred due to the Vietnam War. The fluidity of the border allowed this movement to take place.³¹ Many of the men were draft resisters, but women also came as part of this movement. While women were not escaping the draft, many came with husbands or partners; others simply left the United States as a way of protesting the war. Though no one as yet has done any work on these women, like their sisters of the Great Emigration era, they constitute a source of Black women's history.

Women of African descent also came from Spanish and Portuguese America. These women have been invisible in the discourse on Black

women in Canada. This discourse generally assumes that all Black women are Anglophones and hence share a single, unified identity. Once in a class on African Canadian history, a Black woman rose to speak. "Where do I fit in here?" she asked. "I'm Black, I'm Dominican, I'm Caribbean, but all your references, in fact your entire outline, privilege English-speaking Black women." She was right and I did not defend myself or my choices. Her statement graphically points to the discourse of exclusion and erasure that can occur when a term such as Black women becomes a totalizing one. Black French-speaking women also often feel excluded from discussions about Black women.

Our unilingual understanding of Black women's history does not reflect historical reality. New France's Black women, for example, spoke a polyglot of languages: French, Dutch, English, Portuguese, and other European and African languages. Reflecting on the diverse multi-ethnic heritage of the enslaved, Sterling Stuckey, that great authority on slave culture, remarks that one of the many talents that many slaves had in the early period of New World slavery was proficiency in several languages.³²

And where does Africa fit in all of this? All Black women have the fact of skin colour in common. All share Africa as our place of origin. It is because of the slave trade's forcible removal of Black women from Africa to the so-called New World that an African diaspora within the Americas began. At the same time, the reality of continental African immigration must be central to our analysis and exploration of Black women's history, especially in the twentieth century. After the Second World War immigration from Africa speeded up. Male students were in the vanguard of the movement, in direct opposition to the Caribbean stream in which domestics were at the forefront. Black emigration from Africa really took off in the 1970s and 1980s. Though a large portion of this movement was "family or spousal" sponsored immigration, refugee women have made up a significant portion of these emigrants. Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and South Africa have produced many refugees. More recently, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and Burundi are providing their share. Black emigrants too have come from former French colonies such as Senegal, Mali, and Cote d'Ivoire. An indigenizing process is taking place

and will continue to take place with ongoing immigration producing new and hybrid cultures.

This brings me to a very intriguing and controversial question regarding who is African Canadian. Do all Black women living in Canada regard themselves as such? What about these Caribbean and African descended youths? The term African Canadian is an all-encompassing one, based on the acknowledgement that all Blacks share a common African ancestry. The term is especially useful as a strategy for organizing a subordinate folk. Since the eighteenth century in this hemisphere, Black people, in coming to a consciousness of themselves as an oppressed group, and in recognizing Africa as the source of their origin, have seized the word Africa and variations of that word to name themselves. Afro, African, Ethiopian, and Africo, have been used by Blacks as prefixes for descriptions of themselves. Sometimes the word African was/is used solely instead of as part of a hyphenation.

At the same time many Black women, while working out their relationship to this land, continue to be attached to their original national identities. Many describe themselves as African Americans, Cubans, Antiguan, Somalis, Haitians, South Africans, and so on. These same people also embrace the term African Canadian. It is not that Black women are victims of fragmented identities, but we are consciously negotiating the multiple identities which arise out of our modern and post-modern condition.

Having identified the various streams from which Black women's history springs, it is now necessary to discuss how one goes about doing this history. The first step in this endeavour is to come up with theoretical and conceptual frameworks for enabling this history. The multiple sources of Canadian Black women's history direct our attention to the need to use a cross-cultural and diasporic framework in making historical knowledge about Black women. The theory of African feminism has been used by Diaspora scholar, Filomina Chioma Steady, to study the experiences of Black women. Steady identifies two dominant measures which Black women used to combat racial, gender, and class tyranny. These measures are self-reliance and a survival strategy imperative. These values, according to Steady, have become institutionalized in many African and

African descended communities. Women drew on a network of female kin and extended social contacts to put these values into practice.³³

Boarding house practices reflect one aspect of Black Canadian women's history. In Toronto, up to the 1960s, Black women boarded workers, students, visitors, and entertainers in their homes. These boarders had often been refused permission to stay in white owned hotels and other public places of accommodation. Women in the Black community organized themselves to remedy this situation. Lenny Johnson, former co-owner of Toronto's Third World Books, informed me that his mother was one of the women who took in boarders. He noted that was how he came to meet entertainer Sammy Davis Jr. Davis and his father used to perform at some of Toronto's most prestigious clubs and hotels, but could not stay in the city's hotels because they were Black. The famed and elegant Royal York Hotel was one such place where Davis performed but could not sleep. Johnson stated that Davis and his father when in Toronto often stayed at his mother's home. Racism against Black American entertainers who performed in Toronto enabled a meaningful relationship to develop between Black musicians of the two countries; African American musicians often found themselves staying at the homes of their Canadian counterparts with whom they also worked.³⁴ Many of these Black women who used their homes as boarding places had few options for paid employment outside the home. As research has shown, most Black women doing waged work worked as domestics. That kind of work was fraught with exploitation of all kinds. Running a boarding home was a superior alternative to domestic work and it demonstrates the self-reliance and survival strategy that Steady identifies as present for Black women in their quest for wholesome lives.

Black women also demonstrated self-reliance and survival strategies as entrepreneurs. Slave women across the Americas sold craft and agricultural produce in markets. After slavery this pattern continued. Sylvia Hamilton and Suzanne Morton have shown how African-Nova Scotian women sold quilted goods, woven baskets, and agricultural produce in the markets of the province.³⁵ Through their entrepreneurial work, Black women supported themselves and families

and became respected for their skills.

My own work has shown that Black women used whatever resources they had to better themselves and their communities. Black teachers in Ontario founded schools for Black children where none existed. Many of these women saw teaching as a viable way to earn a living. The Black teaching force was feminized before this became a reality in the wider society. Having fewer options, Black women on average stayed longer in teaching than white women. One woman, Julia Turner, taught in Ontario for over 35 years. She made teaching a career long before many white women considered it that way.³⁶

Using the concepts of self-reliance and survival strategies to study Black women's lives is also a good way to interrogate the opposing duality of victim and resister. This model shows that Black women were victimized by class, race, and gender oppression, but they resisted as much as they could in very creative ways. There are many other themes that need to be explored. Migration and settlement, slavery, and, work have dominated the research. Autobiographies, biographies, and oral histories have also been given much attention.³⁷ Interaction with the law, history of the family, sexuality, religion and spirituality, culture, sports, out-migration to the United States, post-war Caribbean migration, and the flowering of women's literature are all areas demanding scholarly attention.³⁸

How accessible are the sources for doing Black women's history? Recently, I went to the library at a prestigious Ontario university to look at a document on Black women's history. I had the reference number for the document but the librarian that I had spoken to sighed and said "there isn't much on that topic." She may have been correct in that there are not tomes occupying the library shelves but I knew that the document I wanted was at this particular library. If I had not had this knowledge, I would have walked out the library disappointed. I wonder to myself how many seekers of their past have been turned away from libraries and archives by words of denial and ignorance. I told the librarian that there was a decent body of work on the subject and directed her to the bibliography which I had compiled, published in *We're Rooted Here*.³⁹ Fortunately, this book was in the library. I continued talking to her for awhile

about Black history and then she directed me to the "Regional History Collection." I was frustrated in that department, too, as the worker there felt what I wanted was not there. We looked through several finding aids and soon enough she came with a large box in which I found what I was looking for. I relate this story to showcase two things: that often those who keep the records of Black history do not even know (or care?) that they have these records, and that this ignorance can lead to a cover up of a particular past.⁴⁰ When one is told by a librarian, archivist, professor, however well-meaning, that "there isn't much on that topic," that is a way of simply denying and erasing a particular past. When I attempted to write a history of Ontario's Black teachers I was advised by several well-intentioned educationists to give up the project because there "wasn't much." On rummaging around in the archives, I was staggered by the vast amount of sources and evidence that were available to write a study of Black teachers.

The sources that historians have used to write the history of other marginalized groups are the same ones available for the construction of Black women's history. Retrieval of data from archives and other repositories is the first step. Such records include tax and school records, census data, vital statistics (marriage, birth, and death records), wills, church records, newspapers, parliamentary and other government records, diaries, photographs, paintings, phonographic records, and the official papers of white women and men.

What becomes clear is how often Black women's history is interconnected with white women's, Black men's, and white men's history. Take the case of Peggy, for example. She was a slave in the household of Ontario's former administrator Peter Russell and his sister Elizabeth. The main source for Peggy's history is the Russell papers, namely the documents of Peter Russell and the diary of Elizabeth Russell. From Elizabeth's diary we learn that Peggy "is dirty, idle, and insolent." From Mr. Russell, we discover that Peggy was a habitual runaway and, upon her last capture, he put her up for sale. These documents also tell us that Peggy was a wife and mother, that her son Jupiter was jailed for "threatening" a York (Toronto) family, and that her daughters Milly and Amy "are addicted to pilfering and lying." Elizabeth Russell later gave away Milly as a gift to her

god-daughter, Elizabeth Denison. We also learn that Peggy's husband, Pompey, or Pompodour, was free. Without a careful reading of these documents Peggy's story might have remained unknown. From the diary of Elizabeth Russell we learn how elite white women lived lives of leisure based on the labour of the slave and servant class. In these writings whites reveal the tensions inherent in a master/slave relationship, how owners tried to discipline their slaves, and how the enslaved resisted. Peggy, though enslaved, tried to exercise some agency and control over her life by running away, saucing her owners, and refusing to accept their vision of her or how she should behave. The Russell papers also allow us to glean how Black and white femininity and masculinity are constructed in a frontier settler society.⁴¹

The question of voice is central here. The master class is the one who is telling us what the slaves are like. There is no counternarrative from Peggy or her family. This raises the question of the validity of the oppressor's voice when talking about the oppressed. The Russells present their slave family as debased. Like most owners of human property, they blame the victims for the victims' faults. However, through their actions, Peggy and her family provide a counternarrative to the one given us by the Russells. By running away, being insolent, and teaching her children bad manners, Peggy writes her own history and becomes a subject in it. By doing so, she defies the attempt of the Russells to objectify her.⁴²

Travel accounts written by whites are also useful sources for Black women's history. British tourist Anna Jameson in her *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles* tells of how Black women resisted slave catchers and law enforcers at Niagara Falls in 1837 in their attempts to liberate the jailed Solomon Mosely. Though she spoke condescendingly about the women, her comments reveal their militancy.⁴³ *Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* by Benjamin Drew is another example of how texts written by whites can become a source of Black women's history. Drew, a Boston abolitionist, toured Black Ontario in 1855. He interviewed hundreds of Black women and men. One of the most intriguing narratives is that of Sophia Pooley. As a young child, Pooley was kidnapped from New York toward the end of the American Revolution. Taken to the Upper Canadian

frontier by her abductors, she was sold to the famed Mohawk chief Joseph Brant. Pooley noted that Brant treated her "well" but not so his wife. She remarked that as a child she spoke "Indian" better than English, having learnt the Mohawk language in the Brant household. Pooley gained her freedom in 1833 under the British Emancipation Proclamation.

Pooley's life and history are remarkable. When Drew interviewed her, she was over 90 and living in the Black community of the Queens Bush, cared for by neighbours. Pooley was a participant in, and witness to, Ontario's early history. She observed the province passing from frontier colony to a settled agricultural and proto-industrial community. She can be considered a "founding mother" of the province. Yet Pooley's story in Drew's *Narratives* takes up two pages. And because Black women are generally missing from feminist excavation work on women in early Canada, Pooley remains unsung. I am convinced that, with creative and imaginative research, a biography of Pooley can be produced.⁴⁴

Oral history is key to Black women's history. Through this method, unknown women's histories come to light. Makeda Silvera's *Silenced* provided a methodology for writing and conceptualizing Black women's studies. In *Silenced* ten Black women and women of colour from the Caribbean working as domestics provide oral accounts of their lives and work experiences. *Silenced* bore witness to the fact that domestic work was, and still is, racialized, that it is work done primarily by immigrant women and that these women work in isolation and experience alienation and blatant exploitation in the homes of well-to-do white women and men.⁴⁵ Dionne Brand also used oral history to get to the history of Black women, especially for the period between the First and Second World Wars. From the narratives she and her co-workers collected, we learn that Black women, unlike white women, were barred from factory work and offices "until Hitler started the war." Brand's work also shows the validity of using a cross-cultural perspective to get to the history of Black women: the women interviewed came from several points of the Black diaspora. Annette Henry, writing about Black women teachers who taught in Toronto from the 1950s to present, also used oral history and a cross-cultural framework.⁴⁶

An interdisciplinary perspective must also

be considered. Carol Duncan, for example, has creatively drawn upon history, literature, anthropology, cultural and critical theory in her work on Spiritual Baptist women in Toronto and Trinidad. By employing political science, economics, sociology, and history to construct knowledge about nurses, domestics, race, ethnicity, and the immigration process, Agnes Calliste has produced an exemplary body of work.⁴⁷

If official (academic) historiography has paid little attention to Black history, African Canadian lay persons have always written their history and have been at the forefront of ensuring that our historical presence in this country not be erased. And Black women have been in the forefront of keeping, retrieving, and recording Black history. Tessa Benn-Ireland, Mary Bibb, Rella Braithwaite, Velma Carter, Pearleen Oliver, Charlotte Bronte Perry, Mary Ann Shadd, and Dorothy Shadd Shreve are some of the female community historians who have always felt Black history to be important and hence worth writing down.⁴⁸

Black women's history in Canada is in its embryonic stage. Although some important work has already been produced, we can still learn much from practitioners of established women's history and social history in Canada and historians of African American women's history and diasporic history.⁴⁹ There are also some tendencies to avoid. For example, when Black American historians speak of "Black women" they tend to mean only women indigenous to that country for several generations. "New" African Canadians also deserve our attention. Practitioners of Canadian Black women's history must also guard against an Ontario-centred focus. As an Ontario specialist, I am very much cognizant of this fact and consciously strive to remember that Ontario is not Canada. African Canadian women's history from its beginning in New France to the present has much to offer to Black women in the development of a total sense of ourselves by rescuing us from amnesia. It also can contribute much to Canadian history and to the history of women in the hemisphere.

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ENDNOTES

1. Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice, "Feminism and the Writing and Teaching of History," *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal* 7.2 (Spring 1982): 41. It is only fair to say that since the time these two historians have written this article, both have consciously and seriously begun to engage the diversity of Canadian women's history. Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," in Ruth Roach Pierson, et al., eds. *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): 79-106; Alison Prentice, et al., eds. *Canadian Women: A History*, 2nd edition (Toronto: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1996).
2. Peggy Bristow, Dionne Brand, Linda Carty, Afua P. Cooper, Sylvia Hamilton, 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, rev 1999): 3-11.
3. Jacinth Herbert, "'Otherness' and the Black Woman," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 3 (1989): 269-79; Noga A. Gayle, "Black Women's Reality and Feminism: An Exploration of Race and Gender," in Dawn H. Currie, ed., *The Anatomy of Gender: Women's Struggle for the Body* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1995): 232-42; Ruth Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
4. Biological studies have revealed that race is not a biological but a social and mythical concept. Does this mean that all racial categories should be abandoned? Law scholar Constance Backhouse warns that this would be the "graveyard of errors," for, as she notes, though the construct of race is mythic, "racism is not." Constance Backhouse, *Colour Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999): Introduction.
5. The recent discussions in *left history* alert us that some feminist historians still feel that racing whiteness yields dubious benefits for history production. Joan Sangster, "Beyond Dichotomies, Re-Assessing Gender History and Women's History in Canada," *left history* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 1995): 109-21; Karen Dubinsky and Lynne Marks, "Beyond Purity: A Response to Sangster," *left history* 3.2/4.1 (Fall 1995-Spring 1996): 205-20; Franca Iacovetta & Linda Kealey, "Women's History, Gender History and Debating Dichotomies," *Left History* 3.2/4.1 (Fall 1995-Spring 1996): 221-337.

6. Patricia Hill Collins popularized the term and concept "interlocking systems of oppression" in her analysis of the multifaceted nature of Black women's oppression. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought, Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990). See also bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "Afro-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992) 251-74 for similar discussions.
7. I write this with full knowledge of the post-structuralist tendency toward deconstruction where power and oppression are decentred. In such a view the real oppressor and victim cannot be found, since each one exercises power and metes out oppression in different social and familial contexts. This aspect of post-structuralism has become quite influential in the academy among feminist thinkers. In my view, this is problematic because such a view can and does maintain structures of domination. Racism is an oppressive system of power and oppression. That is a fact for Blacks. What is also a fact is that most of the maintainers of this system are white, both men and women. See bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989).
8. bell hooks, "The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity," and "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning, Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1990):15-31.
9. Some of the earlier works that challenged essentialist feminism are Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansberg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Diane K. Lewis, "A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism," *Signs* 3.2 (Winter 1977): 339-61.
10. Gayle, "Black Women's Reality and Feminism."
11. Annette Henry, *Taking Back Control: African Canadian Women Teachers' Lives and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998): 8.
12. Linda Gordon, "What's New in Women's History," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed. *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 25.
13. New France theoretically extended from the North East portion of the continent right down to the Gulf of Mexico (Louisiana), but in practice, and for this paper, when I talk about New France I am referring to the "Canadian" portion of it. William Riddell discusses the evolution of Black slavery in New France in his "The Slave in Canada," *Journal of Negro History* 5 (1920): 263-72; while Kenneth Donovan, "Slaves and Their Owners in Ile Royale, 1713-760," *Acadiensis* 24.1 (Autumn 1995):13-32, does so for Ile Royale. W.J. Eccles elaborates on the concept and geographic content of New France in his *France in America* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990).
14. Panis (a corruption of the term Pawnee) Indians made up the rest of the slave population. Although many slaves belonged to the Pawnee nation, the term came to include all Indian slaves. Marcel Trudel, *Dictionnaire des Esclaves et Leur Proprietaires au Canada Francais* (La Salle, Quebec: Cahiers Du Quebec, 1990); Donovan, "Slaves and Their Owners," p. 5.
15. There is an important correction to the omission of slave women from early Canadian and feminist history. See Afua Cooper, "Marie Joseph Angelique, Slave Woman in Canada and the Reshaping of History," paper to be presented at the Canadian Women's Studies Association meeting at the Congress of the Social Sciences and Humanities, Edmonton, 28 May, 2000.
16. Ivan Van Sertima, ed. *African Presence in Early Europe* (Somerset, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993); Bailey W. Diffie and George D. Winus, *Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977): 76-88; John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic; Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993); Michael Adas, ed., *Islamic and European Expansion, the Forging of a Global Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Joseph Inikori, *Forced Migration, the Impact of the Export Slave Trade on African Societies* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1982).
17. James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783-1870* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); W.A. Spray, *The Blacks in New Brunswick*. (Fredericton, NB: Brunswick Press, 1972); Sylvia Hamilton, "Naming Names, Naming Ourselves: A Survey of Early Black Women in Nova Scotia," in Bristow et al, *We're Rooted Here*, pp. 13-40; John N. Grant, *The Immigration and Settlement of the Black Refugees of the War of 1812 in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick* (Dartmouth, NS: The Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1990).
18. Mavis Campbell, *The Maroons of Jamaica, 1655-1796: A History of Resistance, Collaboration and Betrayal* (Granby, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey, 1988); Hamilton. "Naming Names."
19. I am borrowing from the American term "The Great Migration" which describes the large movement of African Americans from the South to the North and the Mid-West from 1890 to about 1920.

20. Michael Wayne discusses this topic in "The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment based on the Manuscript census of 1861," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 56 (Nov. 1995): 65-85.
21. Lara Gara, *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (Lexington, KY: D.C. Heath, 1967).
22. Sherry Edmunds-Flett is doing important excavation work on BC's Black women's history. See "'A Home for our Children in the Right Place': First Generation African Canadian Women and Their Daughters on Nineteenth-Century Vancouver Island," in Catherine Cavanaugh, ed. *ReWriting Western Canadian History: Women, Colonization, Settlement and Community Building* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000).
23. Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates, Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy: 1540-1997* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1997); W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever, Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990); John Schultz, "White Man's Country: Canada and the West Indian Immigrant," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 12.1 (Spring 1982): 53-64;
24. James Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1980): 66-69.
25. Schultz, "White Man's Country."
26. Agnes Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy: Blacks from the Caribbean, 1900-1932," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 28.4 (Winter 1993-94): 131-48; "Women of Exceptional Merit": Immigration of Caribbean Nurses to Canada," *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 6.1 (1993): 85-102.
27. Donovan, "Slaves and Their Owners"; Calliste, "Race, Gender and Canadian Immigration Policy."
28. Donovan, "Slaves and Their Owners."
29. Janet Henshall Momsen, "Canada-Caribbean Relations: Wherein the Special Relationship?" *Political Geography* 11.5 (Sept. 1992): 501-13; P.K. Newman, "Canada's Role in West Indian Trade Before 1912," in B.D. Tennyson, ed. *Canada and the Commonwealth Caribbean* (London: University Press of America, 1988): 105-35. George Beckford, *Persistent Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).
30. Trevor, W. Sessing, "How They Kept Canada Almost Lily White: the Previously Untold Story of The Canadian Immigration Officials Who Stopped American Blacks from Coming to Canada," *Saturday Night* 85.9 (September 1970): 30-32.
31. I have discussed this fluidity of the Canada/United States border with regard to nineteenth century North American Blacks in a paper titled "The Fluid Frontier: Henry Bibb and the Detroit River Region," paper presented at the York University Graduate History Conference, Toronto, April 1998.
32. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and The Foundation of Black America* (New York: Oxford, 1987): 44.
33. Filomina Chioma Steady, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Books, 1985): 20-23. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn elaborates on Steady's research and theory in her article "Through an African Feminist Lens: Viewing Caribbean Women's History Cross-Culturally," Verene Shepherd et al, *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective* (Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1995): 3-19.
34. See for example, Ken Alexander, "The Blacks Who Broke Barriers," *Toronto Star*, 14 Feb. 1999.
35. Sylvia Hamilton, "Naming Names"; Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in Late-nineteenth-Century Halifax County," *Acadiensis* 22.2 (Spring 1993): 61-83
36. Afua A. P. Cooper, "Black Teachers in Canada West: 1850-1870: A History," (M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1991). Cooper's research on Julia Turner has resulted in: "Putting Flesh on Bone: Constructing a History of African Canadian Women, the case of Julia Turner," Ed Montigny and Lori Chambers, eds., *Ontario since Confederation: A Reader*. Forthcoming, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming. See also Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shaad Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
37. There are many works written on slavery (see Riddell and Donovan, op cit), though none specifically dealing with women. However, Maureen Elgersman's recently published *Unyielding Spirits: Black Women and Slavery in Early Canada and Jamaica* (New York: Garland, 1999), has served partially to rectify this lack. Migration has received the most attention. A few examples will suffice: John Grant, "The 1821 Emigration of Black Nova Scotians to Trinidad," *Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly* 2.3 (1972): 283-92; "Black Immigrants into Nova Scotia, 1776-1815," *Journal of Negro History* 58.3 (1973): 253-70; Stewart Grow, "The Blacks of Amber Valley: Negro Pioneering in Northern Alberta," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 6.1-6.2 (1974): 17-38. On autobiographies see, Carol Talbot, *Growing up Black in Canada* (Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1984); and Carrie Best, *That Lonesome Road: The Autobiography of Carrie M. Best* (New Glasgow, NS: Clarion Publishing, 1977).
38. Constance Backhouse has recently published a long-overdue and path-breaking essay on Viola Desmond's civil rights struggle. "'Bitterly Disappointed' at the Spread of 'Colour-Bar Tactics': Viola Desmond's Challenge to Racial Segregation, Nova Scotia, 1846," In her *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada* (Toronto: Osgoode Society/University of Toronto Press, 1999): 226-71. There's been an outpouring of Black women's literature over the past two decades. Sister Vision Press has been at the forefront of this movement. Afua Cooper, "'Out of a Cardboard Box beside Our Bed like

a Baby': The Founders of Sister Vision Press," in Elspeth Cameron and Janice Dickin, eds., *Great Dames* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997): 291-306. The literary output of the now dozens of Black women is growing. Maxine Tynes, Lillian Allen, Makeda Silvera, Djanet Sears, Claire Harris, Dionne Brand, and Nalo Hopkinson, plus many others, have made significant contributions to Canadian literature. One critique of Black women's literature is Myriam Chancy, *Searching for Safe Spaces, Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997); Chancy is herself an Haitian-Canadian writer.

39. Bristow, *We're Rooted Here*, 231-248.

40. The metaphor of the "surfacing" Negro cemeteries in Ontario is apt in describing the unearthing of Black history. All over this province, in school yards, parks, corn and potato fields, Negro cemeteries are surfacing. These long-buried cemeteries appear after strong thunderstorms, or sudden discovery by farmers. The furore caused by these discovered cemeteries says much about attitudes to race. Many whites want the cemeteries re-covered. Blacks want the opposite. Blacks also feel that many whites oppose the coming to light of these cemeteries because these whites know that some of those who lay buried are their ancestors. Robert Avery, "Restoring Cemetery Gives 'Rightful Place' to Black Ancestors," *Toronto Star*, 31 August 1998.

41. The Russell Papers are housed at the Archives of Ontario, Toronto, and the Metro Toronto Reference Library. I also presented a paper on Peggy's history: Afua Cooper, "'Awkward Visions of Freedom,' Peggy Pompodour and a Self-Liberating Ethos," paper presented at Trent Black History Month Celebration, Trent University, Ontario, February 1999.

42. Can men write about women? Can whites write about Blacks? Can the master class write about the subjugated class? Should those who dominate write about the dominated? How true and valid are the perspectives and voice of the dominant group? Ruth Roach Pierson lucidly engages these questions with particular reference to the writing of Canadian women's history in "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," *op cit*.

43. Mosely, an American slave stole his master's horse to effect his escape to Canada. Considered a criminal by both Canadian and American governments, the latter called for Mosely's extradition. Placed in a Niagara jail, Mosely was freed by Black women and men who defied the courts and the governments of two countries. Anna Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1923): 98-100; Janet Carnochan, "A Slave Rescue in Niagara Sixty Years Ago," *Niagara Historical Society Papers*, no. 2 (1897): 14-11.

44. Benjamin Drew, *Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1856; rept, Toronto: Coles, 1981): 192-95.

45. Makeda Silvera, *Silenced: Talks with Working Class Caribbean Women about Their Lives and Struggles as Domestic Workers in Canada* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 2nd ed. 1989).

46. Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991); Annette Henry, *Taking Back Control*.

47. Carol B. Duncan, "'Dey Give Me a House to Gather in di Chil'ren,' Mothers and Daughters in the Spiritual Baptist Church," *Canadian Woman Studies* 18.3-18.4: 126-131; Calliste, *op cit*.

48. Rella Braithwaite and Tessa Benn-Ireland, *Some Black Women: Profiles of Black Women in Canada* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993). Mary Bibb helped in the production of the "Voice of the Fugitive" by writing articles and helping in its editing and publication. The "Voice" is a veritable source of early Ontario Black history. Velma Carter, *The Black Canadians: Their History and Contributions* (Edmonton: Reidmore, 1989); Pearleen Oliver, *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953* (1953); Charlotte Bronte Perry, *The Long Road: A History of the Coloured Canadian in Windsor, Ontario, 1867-1967* (Windsor: Sumner Printing, 1967); Mary Ann Shadd, Canada's first named woman publisher, edited and published the *Provincial Freeman*, between 1854-1859. The *Freeman* is also an important source of Ontario Black history; Dorothy Shadd Shreve, *The Afri-Canadian Church: A Stabilizer* (Jordan Station, Ont.: Paideia Press, 1983).

49. Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, *On The Case, Explorations in Social History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Elsa Barkley Brown, "African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History," *Signs* 14.4 (Summer 1989): 921-29; Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Terry Crowley, *Clio's Craft: A Primer of Historical Methods* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988).