EDUCATION MATTERS
The Journal of Teaching and Learning
Volume 4, Issue 1, 2015, pages 16-22

RESISTANCE

Send Little Outbursts across the School: Black Women Teachers and Micro-Resistive Strategies in Ontario Schools, 1960s – 1980s.

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As early as 1850, black Canadians faced legislated discrimination and segregation with Canadian school systems. The Separate School Act of 1850 permitted the creation of separate schools for Roman Catholic, Protestant families and black families in Ontario. While the act was intended to allow for freedom of choice and access to education in various communities, its implementation allowed for the creation of separate black schooling institutions.[1] Amidst these early renderings of racial discrimination in Canada, black Canadians resisted legal and de facto educational inequality though the creation of schools like the Buxton Mission school which opened its doors students of all races in 1850 and quickly became a school noted for its high-quality education and focus on classic training.[2] Despite the early success of schools like Buxton Mission, the legacies of racial prejudice and institutional biases would continue to mark the black experience in Canada into the 20th century. As a result, racial prejudices engrained in educational facilities of the twentieth century were manifested in the streaming, classroom biases, high dropout rates, absence of blacks within school curricula.

Scholars Carl E. James, Karen Braithwaite, Anthony Stewart, Henry M. Codjoe, George S. Dei and Afua Cooper argue that within historical and contemporary contexts, Canada's educational system failed to meet the needs of black students. In their seminal work, In *Educating African Canadians*, Keren S. Braithwaite and Carl E. James argue continuities of

[1]Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 193-195.

[2] Kristen McLaren, "'We Had No Desire to be Set Apart': Forced Segregation of Black Students in Canada West Public Schools and Myths of British Egalitarianism," *Social History/Histoire sociale*, Vol. 37 No. 73 (2004): 37.

racial discrimination in Ontario's education system. In "The Education of African Canadians: Issues, Contexts and Expectations," Braithwaite and James contend that inherent racism in the education system was most evident through discriminatory teachers, counselors, administrators, and in curriculum and school practices. These forms of systematic racism led many blacks to feel isolated within the school system. Braithwaite and James also reveal that despite these racist restrictions, blacks were still motivated to succeed. Braithwaite and James write, "But despite the seemingly insurmountable barriers that racism and discrimination posed for Black students, they continued to hold the belief that they would be able to negotiate the barriers and succeed."[3] For many black students, education was an important motivator for social mobility and success in Canadian society. As a result, many black youth understood their minority position in society and worked to overcome racial stereotypes.

Consequently, black Canadians have worked extensively in resisting systems of oppression that served to limit opportunities for racialized students. As a result of community beliefs that education was a way to combat racial inferiority, black Canadian educators and community members worked to subvert dominant notions of racial inequality and pushed for equal access to education. The presence and work of black women teachers particularly, served as a way to understand how resistance happened from the locality of 'outsiders-within'. While black women teachers joined larger organizations such as the National Black Coalition of Canada (NBCC), Canada's first national civil rights organization founded in 1969 working to address the social, economic, political challenges facing African Canadian communities in the 20th century, broader mainstream umbrella organizations represented one of a myriad of ways that black Canadians resisted discrimination inside and outside of institutional settings.[4] This article will focus on the micro-resistance strategies implemented by black women teachers within Ontario schools from the 1960s to 1980s to reconceptualize the ways in which we understand resistance. African Canadian women held precarious positions within mainstream educational institutions where they struggled for representation and legitimacy but also found gains in obtaining professional careers.[5] The work they conducted within their individual classrooms and local communities served to subvert dominant institutional forms of discrimination and inequality. Using the oral histories of black women teachers in Ontario, I argue that black women's micro-resistance in their classrooms disrupted Eurocentric notions of education and access. Black women teachers in this study conducted a series of small but consistent activities within school settings that insisted on the insertion of blackness - its history,

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[3] Carl E. James and Keren Braithwaite, "The Education of African Canadians: Issues, Contexts, Expectations," in *Educating African Canadians*, Keren S. Braithwaite and Carl E. James, eds., (Toronto: James Lorimer& Company Ltd., 1996), 19.

[4] Barrington Walker, "The National Black Coalition of Canada, 'Race' and Social Equality in the Age of Multiculturalism," *The CLR James Journal* Vol. 20 No. 1-2 (Fall 2014): 161.

[5] Throughout this paper, I use black Canadian and African Canadian interchangeably to highlight the experiences of African descended peoples from Canada, the United States, African and the Caribbean. See: Wisdom J. Tettey & Korbla P. Puplampu, "Continental Africans in Canada: Exploring a Neglected Dimension of the African-Canadian Experience," in Wisdom J. Tettey and Krobla P. Puplampy, eds. *The African Diaspora in Canada,* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 6-12.

presence and relevance in Canadian schools. Therefore, this study hopes to connect and expand concepts of resistance to include the everyday practices of black women teachers who made sense of their power and place within Ontario schools through individual and collective efforts.

Black Women's Micro-Resistive Strategies in Canadian Schools

The ways in which each African Canadian educators interpreted and reinterpreted their roles within education systems spoke to the multiple and fluid identities of blackness in Canada. As Heidi Safia Mirza argues, black women not only resisted racism within educational institutions but they lived in other worlds, by which they redefined and recreated their own understandings of identity and black womanhood.[6] These worlds were often parallel and, at times, worked against what it meant to be *black* and *female*.

When black women entered Canadian schooling systems as professional teachers in the 20th century, they did so for a variety of reasons. Some decided to be teachers because of the independence and freedom it offered, others decided to go because it was their calling; but many entered the field because of the limited options available for black women in the work force. Ultimately, teaching offered them the economic and social mobility they required while also fulfilling ideas of community and racial uplift. As women negotiated their professional needs with community desires for equality, the Canadian school curriculum represented a contested terrain for black women as they worked to (re)interpret a curriculum that largely excluded the presence and contributions of blacks to the Canadian nation. Anti-racist theorist, Henry M. Codjoe contends that both in the historical and contemporary contexts, the Canadian curriculum taught the superiority of Western culture by denigrating those of African descent. Codjoe explains, "the absence of black knowledge in many Canadian school curricula was not a simple oversight." This absence, as Codjoe argues, represented an academic insistence of racism, or what has been described as 'willful ignorance 'and aggression towards blacks.[7] According to Codjoe, the erasure of African Canadian culture from the school curriculum had adverse effects on black students and exemplified the understated and systematic discrimination within Canadian schools. Black women teachers in Ontario schools were also aware of this absence within the school curriculum Holding 'in-between' spaces where they had to not only teach Eurocentric curriculum as part of their job requirements, black women (re)interpreted this curriculum to reflect their experiences as racial minorities and to represent Ontario's diverse student populations, many of whom were black.

On several instances research participants for this project resisted Canada's curriculum, by inserting black experiences within their individual classroom; more specifically, the

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[6] Heidi Safia Mirza, "Black Women in Education: A Collective for Social Change," in Heidi Safia Mirza (ed.,) *Black British Feminism: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), 272.

[7] Henry M. Codjoe, "Africa(ns) in the Canadian Educational System: An Analysis of Positionality& Knowledge Construction", *The African Diaspora in Canada: Negotiating Identity and Belonging* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005), 65.

created black history units, projects and activities while simultaneously advocating for the creation of board wide programs that would recognize the presence of African Canadians. Women in both rural and urban school settings worked diligently in institutions that ignored the historical and cultural significance of African Canadian communities. Such was the case of Canadian born educator Camille Mead who reported that despite teaching in rural schools for 14 years, there was no black studies program at any of her schools. She explained,

> There was nothing. No, no black studies at all. We didn't. We could have studied the Uncle Tom settlement, Josiah Henson settlement. There was no place in the curriculum for that. And we could've studied Buxton, but there was no place in the curriculum. And I was there from '45 to '63, 1963.[8]

It is significant that Mead highlights Josiah Henson, an escaped slave from Maryland who settled in the area that would become Ontario in 1830 and was believed to be the inspiration behind Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous anti-slavery novel on Uncle Tom's Cabin.[9] Mead recognition of the early presence and significance of blacks in Canada not only rooted in the legacies of slavery within the Canadian landscape but also highlighted black participation in early nation building projects in Canada. As such, the very *presence* and recognition made by educators like Mead challenged notions of citizenship by forcing mainstream administrators to become aware of inequity and historical erasure of the black experience in Canada. Later in her teaching career, Mead made it a point to discuss issues of streaming black children into non-academic courses with her administrators and navigated issues of race and colour between her students in her classes. While Mead challenged Ontario's Eurocentric curriculum by naming the importance of black Canadian contributions, other educators directly admonished school administrators for deliberately ignoring blacks within school settings.

After being passed over for a job promotion in her school, Cecily Tremaine decided to take a stand against what she felt were overt forms of discrimination by naming the importance of black experiences at her school. Speaking to a white female colleague about the importance of have black women teachers in positions of power, Tremaine directly connected her professional status to community activism and racial uplift. She described,

> And I told her: 'this is not about me. This is about the bigger picture.' In other words, this isn't about me as one person. This is about black people! That's the message I left her. Don't mess with my race of people.[10]

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[8]All interviewees have been provided with pseudonyms. Camille Mead. Interview by author. Audio Recording. Buxton, On., June 3, 2011.

[9] Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 193-195.

[10] Cecily Tremaine. Interview by author. Audio recording. Markham, On., May 9, 2011.

For Tremaine, the struggle for inclusion within the educational system became part of a larger movement of collective activism. Tremaine's recognition of racial prejudice and discrimination made her constantly aware that her position in the professional sphere was connected to the progress of blacks as a group. Tremaine interpreted the rejection for promotion as a direct attack on blacks within schools. She felt that keeping silent would have allowed for an air of complacency that she was not willing to accept.

Equipped with the lessons she learned from her community work in Toronto, Tremaine explained the importance of maintaining racial diversity both inside and outside of school settings. When she was assigned to work with students at racially diverse school in the heart of downtown Toronto, Tremaine felt like she could identify with the students there because they reflected the economic and racially diverse populations she worked with in the community.[11] Bringing culturally sensitive material into the classroom, she organized school productions such as "When Cultures Meet", a play on cultural diversity, organized school presentations from Indigenous community leaders, and was part of a TVO series on classroom management. After explaining that students at her school disrupted popular racial and economic stereotypes at a board assembly, Tremaine recalled with pride that, "when those so-called poor kids stood up and delivered in that assembly at 50/50 [equivalent]. Oh my goodness, that was something else. So I did all that kind of work. With other people as well. Because I've always been … a community person."[12]Through her support and coaching, Tremaine recalled that her students, who were considered economically and racially unprivileged and disadvantaged by school administrators, could perform equally, if not better, than her affluent white students when given support and encouragement.

Other women took more direct action and obtained additional qualifications and joined curriculum writing groups to ensure that black Canadian history was part of the school environment. Such was the case of Candice Gillam who created a black unit in her school and submitted the draft proposal to her school board for implementation in the 1980s. Despite having her proposal rejected, Gillam continued to use and teach her black unit in each of her classrooms.[13] Gillam's continuation of the unit can be interpreted as direct resistance to mainstream school requirements that required her to teach the prescribed provincial curriculum. Instead, Gilliam used the limited spaces of classroom autonomy that teachers had to conduct her own research that would deliberately highlight the importance of black history in Canada. Lisa Oteng took on a similar approach when she helped to write one of the first black studies programs in her school district. She joined a committee with five other black educators and the program later received Ministry approval for the implementation across school districts. In addition to this program, Oteng encouraged

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid. In her interview, Tremaine describes her time at a middle school in Toronto. She reveals that the student demographic of this school was comprised of predominantly low income, racially mixed (with a high population of immigrant students). Tremaine began teaching in the school in the late 1980s until her departure in the mid-1990s.

[13] Candice Gillam. Interview by author. Audio recording. Windsor, On., July 16, 2011.

students to learn about the black Canadian and diasporic histories that was often missing within the provincial curriculum. Oteng revealed,

> I had the students in that class, every day one of them would go down and read something significant or important, some[thing] [an] African Canadian or even African American had done. So that would just send little outbursts across the school.[14]

Oteng's deliberate insertion of black 'outbursts' throughout her school served as a reminder of the historical presence of blacks within Canada and supplemented their historical erasure in the curriculum. Furthermore, Oteng connected diasporic identities across geographic and national boundaries that joined black experiences in the United States. It is here that we see black women's resistive strategies as deliberate yet smaller acts of subversion within schools.

Participants in this study countered broader forms of discrimination with personal and intimate understandings of power and resistance. Negotiating classroom autonomy to shift curriculum focus and position blacks as being present and active within the historical and contemporary experiences of Canadian history became an important part of their professional work. Speaking to what scholar George Yancy describes as micro actions of resistance, black women teachers in this study not only disrupted Eurocentric curriculum models but also reaffirmed the black presence as part of this curriculum. In his analysis of black resistance in North America, George Yancy contends that because black bodies are constantly under discursive and physical erasure, the ability of blacks to resist and affirm is fundamentally important black identity formation. Yancy argues that micro actions of resistance periodically shifted tables of power and created black spaces of value within systems of institutional dominance.[15] As such, while formal organized resistance was also one of the ways in which women worked to assert power over their own lives, their incorporation of smaller acts of resistance not only demonstrated individual agency but reconceptualized what was possible for professional working black women.

While Oteng and Gillam's teaching approaches seemed to have limited impact on the broader curriculum changes, this broader connection to black communities distinctly characterized black women's resistive politics. In her work on the development of black British feminism, sociologist Heidi Mirza argues that on the surface, black women's pedagogies can appear conservative for their connection with mainstream ideas and focus on inclusion, but they are also radically subversive for their work on social transformation. Charting black women's educational experiences as "out of place, disrupting, [and] untidy," Mirza challenges readers to look beyond essentialist notions of black women's responses to

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[14] Lisa Oteng. Interview by author. Audio recording. Windsor, On., November 23, 2011.

[15] George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2008), 132.

inequality as resistance within accommodation, but rather to view it as transformative.[16] Oteng and Gillam's activities support this argument. They used their authority and position within schools to better prepare black pupils for the social and systemic oppression they would face while reinforcing the existence and importance of blacks as part of Canada's national identity.

Black women's involvement as educators can be understood as a constant shift between institutional and community work. Conscious of their precarious positions within mainstream educational institutions, black women strategically negotiated ideals of African Canadian identity to serve both individual and collective needs. They used the limited opportunities available to them, renegotiated and reinterpreted mainstream curriculum mandates to plant themselves as permanent fixtures within the Canadian landscape. Their micro resistive strategies were marked by individual classroom practices that infused lessons about African descended peoples and prepared racialized students for the challenges they would face in mainstream society. Black women's presence and role within these Canadian institutions directly challenged conceptions of blackness in Canada. Through this, black female educators remained connected to their ideas of community work and racial uplift but also developed a particular kind of black female resistance that worked to subvert mainstream institutional mandates that denied and rejected black participation in the Canadian educational process. Instead, black women's presence and reaction to varying forms of oppression used education a tool for social transformation and communal/racial survival.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Funke Aladejebi is currently a doctoral student in the Department of History at York University. Her dissertation will outline the importance of African Canadian women in sustaining their communities and preserving a distinct black identity within restrictive gender and racial barriers. Funke strongly believes in the importance of studying the past as an avenue for understanding the present. She also volunteers her time with the Malvern Alumni Network where she mentors young adults in the Scarborough community. A repeat speaker at the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on Africa and its Diasporas, Funke was the recipient of the 2012 Black Pearls Scholarship Award for Academic Achievement.

[16] Heidi Safia Mirza, "Black Women in Education: A Collective for social change" in *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, ed. Mirza, Heidi Safia (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 269-276.