Situating Older Caribbean Canadian

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Cet article examine la praxis féministe traditionelle et essaie de situer les Caribéennes canadiennes âgées dans ce processus. Plus spécifiquement, l'auteure exprime son anxiété face aux chercheures qui veulent utiliser différentes formes de méthodologies féministes sans une analyse critique des expériences et du statut social de cette population.

The Canadian academic environment, like most, is dominated by white male ideologies. These ideologies have successfully maintained the status quo that benefits certain groups of people by allocating to them unearned privileges. However, White academic feminists have challenged their male counterparts and have successfully carved out a niche for themselves in academia, thus creating a viable channel through which White women's experiences and knowledge can be shared, appreciated and honoured. Historically, African women, (Sojourner Truth, Ella Baker, and Nanny of the Maroons) have challenged both white supremacy and male supremacy. In recent times, Black women such as Dionne Brand (1987), Agnes Calliste (2000), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Patricia Daenzer, Angella Davis, bell hooks (1981; 2000), Audre Lorde, and Makeda Silvera have made additional inroads. However, there is an urgent need to expand those discussions and gains. As a continuation, this discussion situates older Caribbean Canadian[1] women on the feminist research agenda by questioning and challenging the ideological praxis of feminist research methodologies. In this discussion, I am pushing the inflexible boundaries of the academy so that Black women in Canada and by extension Black women in the diaspora will continue to claim our places in academia so that our experiences and knowledge can be shared and honoured. Undoubtedly, this space will continue to challenge various aspects of White feminism and white supremacy in general.

Research Background

I conducted this research in partial fulfillment of my

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Master of Social Work research requirement. I examined the relationship between pre and post labour-related experiences of Black Caribbean women within the framework of human capital concentration. I examined the labour market patterns of this group of Black Caribbean women who immigrated to Canada prior to 1969 and emphasized their experiences of discrimination in the secondary sector of the labour market, in their ascribed roles as domestic workers. The research also explored the inability of these women to move from the lower rung of the labour market into upwardly mobile positions, regardless of their education and skill level. I interviewed six older women in their late 60s to early 70s and two community advocates, one retired and one employed at the time of the research. Through that discussion, I began to peel back the layers of the undocumented, yet pertinent stories of these women. I have been reluctant to leave this project behind since I believe that the final product did not do justice to these women who will always occupy a special place in my heart. This work challenged my thinking and my reliance on available academic resource in ways that I could not have imagined when I began the project.

Feminist Research

Feminist research was and still is, to a large extent, based primarily on gender discourse and focuses on women's shared experiences of oppression in a patriarchical society (Driscoll and McFarland; Finch; Neuman; Neysmith). Feminist research aims to "develop knowledge that can contribute to the elimination of gender-based oppression" (Neysmith 59). Given that this paradigm is based on a gender analysis, it naturally targets male supremacy. It is therefore unlikely to account for racialized women's unique needs in society and specifically in the research process. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise challenge other White feminists on the oversimplification and overuse of the terms "gender" and "woman" in the feminist research process. They suggest,

Women in Feminist Research
A Reflection

the category "woman" used in academic feminist writing then (and, to an extent, now) actually reflected the experiences and analyses of White, middle-class, heterosexual, First World women, yet treated these as universals. (22)

This argument is reflective of racialized women's challenge to White feminist researchers who have begun to offer some credence and attention to the critique. Black feminists (e.g., Brand 1987; Davis; hooks 1984; Hill Collins 1991; Lorde; Phillips) have consistently challenged the way in which White feminists continue to exclude racialized women from their research and how they speak on behalf of all women regardless of race, class, or sexual orientation. This broad-based challenge of feminist praxis opens the space from which scholars of Aboriginal, African, Asian and Latin ancestry can develop a structure within, or separate from, the traditional feminist framework. In this sense, we can create and reproduce "legitimate" knowledge relevant to our experiences and grounded in our realities.

African feminists in the diaspora are challenged to create the space that supports the emergence of knowledge construction relevant to our social locations. Certainly various forms of feminism are relevant to women in general. African American feminism, for example, is relevant to African American women in particular. White feminists, for example, promote ideas focused on social and political change and consciousness raising that advance women's interests in the private and public domain (Pascal; Evans and Wekerl)e African women's feminism advocates for structural dismantling, radical shifts in political ideologies and the eradication of social policies that promote the continued social exclusion of racialized people (Brand 1991; Cooper), inclusive of multiple forms of oppression. Although these domains of feminist theories intersect, there are fundamental differences as well.

Radical feminism, for example, is grounded in the belief that private occurrences in women's lives are directly related to occurrences in the public sphere; that men oppress women because of their gender; that "patriarchy is based in psychological and biological factors and enforced through violence against women; that men and women are fundamentally different" (Saulnier 32) and that society must be restructured to eradicate male domination. Alternatively, the philosophy of African women

Marie-Denise Douyon, "Madra and misère." lead pencil, 10" x 8", 1991. Photo: Paul Simon

feminism is predicated on the notion that race, class, gender and other forms of oppressions are inextricably linked and therefore, limits women's participation and involvement in society (Carty; Wane). This paradigm uses African American women's experiences as an entry point and "centers on a *complex matrix* of oppressions" (Saulnier 119) rather than gender and class. Oppression is therefore, based in systemic and structural domination rather than social identities. Based on this premise, it is clear that African women need an alternative space from which to construct knowledge.

Creating "Our" Space

In this research, the participants and the researcher are

of Caribbean descent; we do not fall neatly into any of the current methodological frameworks. Some areas of feminist and African American feminist methodology concur with my political positioning, these methodologies fails to account for my political reality as a Caribbean Canadian woman of African ancestry and it further compounds the livity of these older Caribbean Canadian women. Research process needs to accommodate participants' needs rather than expecting participants to fit the established molds, the needs of the researcher, and the proposed research agenda. Being cognizant of this perspective, it is unrealistic to attempt to separate Black women's experiences especially in light of our multiple social locations and identities. Sheila Neysmith suggests using terms and categories that are opposites of each other "rests on images of dichotomies, distinct divisions and separations" (61). Yet she suggests that one of the goals of feminist research is to "develop knowledge that can contribute to the elimination of gender based oppression" (59). It then begs the question: How do Caribbean Canadian women integrate our experiences into mainstream White feminist ideologies without proposing separatist arguments and enduring continued silencing, exclusion, and invisibility? Patricia Hill Collins (2000) helps with this tension by articulating that an alternative epistemology must be used to emphasize Black women's experiences.

Collins (1992a; 1992b) argues that an alternative epistemology must be used to reflect the dual experience and location of Black women from the standpoint of feminism *and* Afrocentricism. She asserts "Afrocentric feminist epistemology reflects elements of epistemologies used by African-Americans and women as groups, it also paradoxically demonstrates features that may be unique to Black women" (201). A unique epistemology is especially important in light of Black women's social location by "being simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing apart from it, this forms an integral part of Black women's consciousness" (Collins 2000). In this regard, Black women's meanings and standpoint are concretely rooted in our experience. This unique epistemology incorporates African American feminist thought as an entry point. This political positioning is suitable for African American feminists but how relevant it is for other Black women in the diaspora? Analogous to differences between Black feminism and White feminism, there are fundamental differences between African American feminism and Caribbean Canadian feminism.

African Americans of various ages and social class have been widely included in scholarly work given their histori-

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cal presence in the United States. This has not been the case for Caribbean Canadians people. Dionne Brand, in her narrative *No Burden to Carry*, identifies the invisibility of Black Canadian women's stories. She challenges the assumption that Black people's experiences are static and that African Canadian Blacks are a genderless group. Brand further notes: "if Black life in Canada as a whole has been absent from the works of Canadian scholars, or inadequately served by them, Black women's lives have been doubly hidden" (12). Makeda Silvera proposes: "as a Black feminist engaged in research I have become more aware of the neglect of the contributions to the Canadian society of people of colour and in particular Black women" (viii). Given this vacuum and deliberate exclusion, where then do we situate Caribbean Canadian women in feminist research? How do we locate older Caribbean Canadian women who do not identify as feminists? Still, how do we incorporate the voices of these older women who are often excluded from research?

Indeed, the questions generated from my experience in "researching" older Caribbean Canadian are overwhelming, in particular, when answers seem slow to emerge. More importantly, these questions provide glimpses into the untold stories, misrepresentation, and exclusion of these women's stories. These questions allow us to begin to develop an understanding of the tenacity and power that preserved these women through the years. Finally, these questions also illuminate research possibilities and some of the fundamental reason why feminist research and African American epistemology will not suffice for conducting research with older Caribbean Canadian women. In my reflection I begin to open some of those spaces previously excluded from the research discussion.

Reflecting

Feeling of Respect

I felt a great sense of respect and yet an equal sense of burden being involved in a working relationship with these women. I felt that I had to negotiate my research approach carefully. Approaching elderly Caribbean Canadian women with a series of questions and asking them to respond is outside of their reality. It is considered highly disrespectful for me, a younger woman, to ask elders certain questions. Similar to African American grandmothers, Caribbean elders are the gatekeepers of our culture (Dilworth-Anderson; Mullings) and asking these women intrusive questions is a cultural taboo: they ask the questions and direct the flow of knowledge and cultural

continuity orally. These women do not necessarily respond to questions straightforwardly. Answers are often provided in the form of stories and metaphors. A response such as "*wen yuh han deh ena tiga mout yuh haffi tek yuh time and tek it out*"[2] requires thought and interpretation. The researcher therefore, is expected to "find" or interpret the basis of the metaphors.

My personal cultural norm of respect for elders predisposed me to defend and protect the women from the harshness of the "mainstream" Canadian livity in its cultural manifestations. Therefore, in spite of my immediate positional power, I felt a level of anxiety in working with this group of older Caribbean women. This is partially due to my cultural standard that is predicated on the way I employ my socialization as a Caribbean Black woman when interacting with my elders. This sense of respect for the women compelled me to alter my customary attire and present myself in a more conservative manner. When I went to the focus group for example, I wore a plain knee-length beige skirt with an unobtrusive beige and brown floral short-sleeved top, buttoned almost to my neck. I wore matching sandals and pulled my natural mid-back length hair neatly into a ponytail. I also addressed the women with titles such as "Sister" and "Auntie" which is the customary title that a younger relative or friend would use to address our female elders (Gopaul-McNicol). I had great respect for the women and I also felt a need to protect them and their stories.

Feeling of Protection

On one level, most of the women were very open and willing to share their past experiences of discrimination and harassment in their work environment. Five of the six women shared employment and social experiences of mistreatment with me on the telephone during the initial screening process. This experience of research was new for all of them. They had never been approached by anyone to share their knowledge or experience for academic purposes. Understandably, some of the women were excited yet cautious about participating in the research. Much of the initial discussion focused on knowledge gathering and why they had never been asked to participate in other research project. I sensed a quiet pride in five of the women who agreed to share their stories. They vocalized their pride that someone had asked them to talk about their experiences and that their stories were going to be recorded for others to learn from.

On a deeper level, particularly during the interviews and focus group discussion, some women were under-

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standably cautious about protecting themselves, their families and their privacy. One participant was adamant in her refusal to sign the forms. Two women hesitated signing the forms and one asked if the final research paper could be produced and discussed and then they could sign the form. These questions and clarifications may have signaled anxiety in being involved in the project; it might have been mistrust for me and the work that I proposed to them. Ironically, in academia the consent form symbolizes legitimacy in the research and proposes to give participants control over their stories. It is also meant to convey privacy that their information will be kept in confidence and used responsibly. It seemed reasonable that the women would feel comfortable signing the form. However, this was not the case with some of the Caribbean Canadian women. At this juncture, I again realized that I needed to work with the women's experiences as Black women in Canada and operate from the premise that they have reasons to mistrust me as an agent who represented the interest of an institutional environment. The women's reaction brings to light another reason why feminist research, as it is presently structured, cannot serve the needs of women who fall outside the so-called White Canadian mainstream reality. These concerns resurfaced in the focus group.

Focus Group Process

The women were excited to meet in a focus group. The focus group exercised a level of control by changing the meeting time and engaging in a festive gathering. We began the group session more than two hours later than the scheduled time. The women decided that they wanted a party and they turned this sterile process into a social occasion. We elegantly presented the table with formal place setting. Each participant and myself contributed food so that we had fried fish, freshly baked bread, crumpets, scones, sweet bread, "real" chocolate tea, and other Caribbean Canadian delights. We ate, talked, laughed and enjoyed each others' company. At various intervals each elder interacted with my daughter who might easily have been any of the women's granddaughter or great granddaughter. The women placed food on my daughter's plate, poured drinks for her, encouraged her to eat, gave her extra cheese and dessert after I told her not to eat any more sweets, and later helped her to locate a comfortable place in the home to play while were did "research." These interactions were similar to the ones I experience in my family with my older relatives and younger children.

During the group interaction, the women seemed comfortable and at other time they seemed less so. They repeatedly asked for clarification and assurances of how I may use the information that they shared. At different intervals, women requested that the audio recorder be turned off or they enquired if it was "still on." To facilitate their needs, I offered to turn the audio recorder off when anyone signaled for me to do so. This compromise was agreeable to the women so we continued with the focus group discussion. After the audiotape was turned off, the women shared other information that was relevant to the research. I received their permission to take notes and use the data as I would the tape-recorded information. This information was richer with detail in some respects than the data captured on the audiotape. This may also be a reflection of the women's mistrust and feeling of vulnerabilities to directly provide their voices and relate their stories to me, a stranger. Nonetheless, the women reflected and shared a great deal that evening. The gathering ended when one of the women needed to leave to take care of an ongoing medical situation.

Continued Relationship

Our relationship did not end after the interviews and the focus group. Researchers are cautioned to avoid the pitfall of becoming intimately involved with their participants. There is an assumption that the researcher and the participants are separate entities and professional boundaries and distances need to be respected (Alvesson and Skoldberg; Oakley). My experience with this particular group of women crosses professional boundaries and dispels the myth of subjective professionalism. I have maintained a personal relationship with five of the participants. They were excited at the possibility of attending my convocation and they talked about their pride and happiness with my educational achievement. One year after our meeting, I held a dinner party at my home to honour these powerful women's courage and willingness to break new ground with me in the academy. We continue to communicate to this day. In essence when I embarked on this project, I found research participants but in "true" Caribbean style *mi fine som anti tu yuh noh*.[3] White feminist research paradigm does not have the foundation and capacity to support Caribbean Canadian research space. As an African Canadian woman, it is important that I align myself with theories that correspond to my life experiences, the way I conduct my being in this society and the way I envision my existence. Clearly, we need an alternative research paradigm.

Conclusion

When I began this research I could not have envisioned the intricacies of the project, the questions that would emerge and the spaces that would be created. Through this reflection, I have established that White feminist research is inadequate in its principles and analysis to incorporate the needs of older Caribbean Canadian women in the research sphere. Similarly, while African American women share some similarities with Caribbean Canadian women, that epistemology also fails to recognize the sensibility of this population. In spite of the inherent limitations in this research project, these Caribbean women, our grandmothers, sisters, aunties, and spiritual guides recorded their thoughts from their unique perspectives, which are shaped by the diversity of their social locations including those of spirituality, country of birth, class, and age. This process ensured that their stories are recorded and recognized in academia as "knowers" of their own "truth."

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[1]English speaking women of African descent.
[2]Translation: When your hand is in a tiger's mouth you must be careful how you remove it.
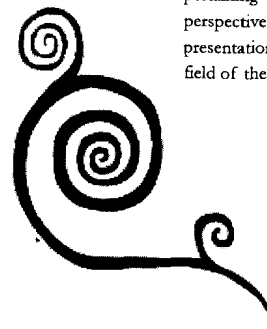[3]Translation: I found some aunts.

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