Black Canadian Feminist Thought
Tensions and Possibilities

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Cet article est l'étude d'une tentativie qui visait à remplir les lacunes dans l'ensemble des connaissances sur les Canadiennes de race noire. Les arguments de cet article discutent de la nature de la pensée des féministes noires et du besoin de développer un cadre approprié enraciné dans une vision communautaire, bref, ce que veut dire l'appartenance à une communauté noire.

> An emerging Black feminist theory is the convergence of journeys in a central place whereby people are differently located in terms of class, sexuality, language, and ethnicity.

> *For me, Black Canadian feminism is everything about me ... my experiences in school, at work, at home, on the streets. It is the stories that my grandmother used to tell me about her struggles and the struggle of her community. It is about my mother's experience as a domestic worker. It is my mother's sacrifice, her spirituality, her tenacity, and her resilience. Black Canadian feminism is about the way I constantly negotiate my shifting identities, my sexuality, and my struggles with other Black women. Black feminism is everything about my history, my ancestors' struggles, their resistance, and me....* (Romero, Focus Group, 2003)[1]

Contemporary Black Canadian feminist thought is a creation of historical and contemporary forces that interweave with the lives of women of African ancestry. These forces are mainly experiential in nature; that is, our experiences at school, at work, at home, on the streets, as well as our history and those of our mothers and grandmothers. This paper draws from my ongoing research: "Black Canadian Feminisms Among Women of African Descent." The study seeks to answer two main questions: first, what informs Black Canadian feminist thought? And second, how do personal experience, education, work, history, cultural background, and other feminisms influence the basic principles of Black Canadian feminist thought? Other questions explored include: What is feminism? How is Black Canadian feminist theory different from other forms of feminisms? If it is different, what informs this feminism? The arguments pursued in the paper center around the contestations of the nature of Black feminist thought and the need to develop a collective and transformative discursive framework rooted in the vision of community; that is, what it means to belong to a Black community.

Romero's words above are an example of the many articulations of feminism that follow after participants in my research develop a working definition of Black feminism or Black Canadian feminist thought. This is regardless of whether they themselves identify as feminists, Blacks or African Canadians. Romero's definition of Black feminism resonated with that of many other participants in multiple ways. Most women envision Black feminism in terms of their history, their fighting spirits, and the struggles they encounter in their everyday lives. Romero also highlights the essence of how she negotiates her identity, a theme that surfaced in all focus groups.

The terms "Black Canadian feminist thought" and "Black feminist thought" are used interchangeably. In addition, I am conscious of the multiple perspectives of feminism and the need for accommodations (Nnaemeka), hence my use of feminism in plural (feminisms). While the term "Black" has been used politically to include other visible minorities who are not of African ancestry, in this paper, the term Black is used in reference to people of African ancestry.

Methodology

The study utilized both qualitative and quantitative methods. However, in this paper, I only refer to qualitative data, the findings from focus group discussions. The focus groups comprised women of African ancestry from continental Africa, the Caribbean, and those born in Canada. The age range of the women was from 22 to 67 years. Two of the women identified themselves as lesbians (a site for contestation and tensions with regard to sexuality and feminism in the focus groups). Participants were also drawn from almost all walks of life—working women and/or students, professional women, mothers, single and married women, community activists, academics, union

members, women in health care, social work, law, and politics. The broad recruitment of subjects allowed for a comparative analysis of intergenerational, class, and sexuality perspectives on Black Canadian feminism.

The goal of the research is to interview 100 Black Canadian women across Canada. Thus far, five focus group discussions have been held in two provinces: Ontario and Alberta. A total of 40 women have participated. Although conflicts and differences in Black Canadian feminist thought stood out from the focus groups sessions, this paper focuses in particular on the challenges of creating a dialogue and communicating successfully across those differences.

Locating Black Women's Voices in Feminist Theorizing

Despite the fact that they share a common ancestry, Black women are not homogeneous. Communities of Black women consist of a number of groups, including those women whose ancestors have been in Canada for over 400 years as well as African-Caribbean, continental Africans, and Black Canadians from other parts of the world. The histories and cultures of these people have produced a rich and diverse tradition of Black Canadian feminist theorizing both within and outside of the academy. The multiplicity of Black Canadian feminist theories reflects the reality that "Black Canadian" is a contested and heterogeneous identity (Wane 2002a). Thus, an emerging Black feminist theory is the convergence of journeys in a central place whereby people are differently located in terms of class, sexuality, language, and ethnicity. Similar oppressions resulting from slavery, colonialism, and racism, however, makes it possible to speak of shared perspectives on Black Canadian feminist thought though it may be differently defined.

From the focus group discussions, the most contested terminologies were: "Black feminism," "feminism," "Black, "Black Canadian feminism," "African-American feminism," and "African feminism." Many women in the focus groups started by noting that: "I do not consider myself a feminist," "I do not see myself as a Black feminist," "I have never thought of having anything to do with Africa or feminism," or "Patricia Hill Collins' work really articulates my idea of feminism." These initial statements made conversations tense, yet stimulating, as the participants searched for a comfort zone from which to participate in the research.

In Canada, Black feminism has been shaped significantly by the heterogeneity of Black women's historical and contextualized experiences (Calliste; Wane 2002a, 2002b; Carty; Cooper 1994). For example, feminists in the Caribbean locate their oppression within slavery, indentured labour, and colonialism (Baksh-Soodeen; Mohammed). In Africa, feminism did not develop in the academic setting but in the villages where the inclusion of women was evident in the social, economic, ritual, and political spheres (Steady). Nevertheless, in their struggle to overcome different oppressions, Black women everywhere have sought to emancipate themselves from the bonds of servitude, inequality, and racial discrimination (Steady). This study attempts to fill existing gaps in the body of knowledge that constitutes Black Canadian feminism.

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Historically, Black women have been and continue to be defined by people from the dominant culture. Carey, a woman raised both in Jamaica and Canada, speaks to this point:

> *For me, Black feminist thought presumes that Black women ought to be the ones to define and speak about our realities. Since we come from multiple locations and bring varying perspectives to this discourse, it is both exciting and interesting to engage in discussion and debate with everyone who is interested in rupturing dominant structures of knowledge. As with any oppositional discourse, Black feminist praxis poses fundamental challenges to unequal relations of power and I question the long-standing assumption that Black women ought to be the objects of knowledge. For me, many Black feminist writers provide answers to this crucial question in some way* (Focus Group, 2002).

Carey's words sum up her understanding of Black feminism and the ways in which it has been taken up by the dominant culture. Carey asserts that Black feminism gives Black women the opportunity to define themselves, especially from the standpoint of producing diverse knowledge based on their experiences. However, this standpoint of diverse knowledge production, which Black Canadian feminists want to bring to the forefront, has been subjugated and undermined mainly because we live in a Eurocentric culture and, as colonized subjects, our diversity as Black women has been negated.

Black Feminist Thought

Elsewhere, I have stated that Black Canadian feminist thought

> ...is a theoretical tool meant to elucidate and analyze

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

My analysis of Black Canadian feminist thought is about theorizing using an interactive model to examine the ways in which power relations between intersecting systems of authorization normalize a hierarchy of privilege through racialized, sexualized, gendered, culturalized, and class positions originating from dominant ideological frames of social organization. African-American feminist writers have defined Black feminism as an activism that is grounded in Black women's common histories, such as colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and neocolonialism (Collins 2000 ; hooks 1992). Rather than working from frameworks that continue to eclipse or fragment Black women, it has been important to look at the complexities of oppressions of Black women and take action accordingly. A shift towards centering Black women's stories on a feminism that speaks to them as a tool of theorizing is very important, particularly because of their vast range of experiences that are shaped by regional, social, and political differences, and unique historical circumstances. Nonetheless, Black women's similar experiences in exploitative systems ensure some commonalties in emerging feminist theories.

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My research on Black Canadian feminism builds on the works of many great women. Peggy Bristow's groundbreaking book, We're *Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up,* stands as a landmark document in Black Canadian women's historiography. It firmly locates Black women within Canadian history, identifying the contributions they have made in freeing themselves and other enslaved people in North America. This collection also provides the reader with historical insights into traditions of Black feminist thought in Canadian society (see Wane 2002a). Makeda Silvera's book, *Silenced*, offers a critical look at the exploitation of Black Caribbean women recruited by Canadian citizens and officials as domestic workers, is another landmark. Silvera's study reveals the extent to which white Canadian women achieved gender equity on the backs of these Black women. In addition, other Black Canadian writers have taken up such topics as sexuality, racism, mothering, community leadership, activism, the academy, work, violence, women's health, history, culture, immigration policies, and the general African female diasporic experience in Canada (Brand; Carty; Carty and Brand; Cooper 1994, 1999; Shadd; Henry; Hamilton). These works highlight the achievements of Black Canadian women in all sectors of society. They also present insightful critiques of racism and classism within the feminist movement; sexism and homophobia within the Black community; nationalist and religious fundamentalism; discriminatory immigration policies; white supremacy; and, finally, exploitative capitalism within the larger society (Brand; Carty; Henry; Silvera). The works of these authors deal with ideas that contribute to developing a framework for Canadian Black feminist thought. Some of the authors examine colonial and neocolonial identities, power, and Black women's multiple and hybrid identities, as well as questions of difference and domination. Others highlight historical as well as the contemporary perspectives of Black Canadian women.

While all these works have strong implications for developing a Black Canadian feminist theory, none of these succeed in harnessing the rich heterogeneity of Black Canadian women's experiences (Wane 2002a). Since Black feminist theory is still carried out predominantly in piecemeal fashion, a more unified Black feminist voice needs to be formed, both on a theoretical and practical level. My ongoing research, therefore, strives to contribute to this important body of work.

Identity Politics

In the focus group discussions was how different women were able to come up with their own definition of feminism in relation to their location, as noted by Veronica's words below:

> *The space I occupy as a Black woman informs my feminism. This space seems to be controlled from outside by all sorts of structures such as colonialism, neo-colonialism, different forms ... that suffocate my family, other Black women, and me. I enter this space as a Black woman carrying stories of struggle that my mother narrated to me about her service to the Canadian workforce as an underpaid nursing aide. My mother cleaned and nurtured other people so that my siblings and I could take piano lessons, go to school, wear nice clothes.... It is the sacrifices of my mother and other*

women like her that inform Black Canadian feminist theory. (Focus Group, 2003)

According to Veronica, the impact of colonialism, whether it has to do with schooling or work, informs Black feminist thought. The structures of colonialism have continued to reproduce themselves and many Black women or many marginalized communities have become prisoners of these structures. Many Black mothers sacrifice to provide some aspects of the dominant culture not necessary to conform to the dominant culture, but to provide tools of negotiation. It is through these Black mothers' sacrifices that new forms of resistance and theories are developed or created. The struggles of these mothers, therefore, should be read not as a form of submission, but as a way to ensure their children have choices.

Students who had a background in women's studies displayed a high level of theorizing of Black feminist thought as articulated by African-American feminists, and sometimes did not reference Black Canadian feminist thought at all. Nick, for instance, noted:

> *I have always identified myself with [Patricia Hill] Collins, [bell] hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith just to name a few writers. It never occurred to me that their articulation of feminism was very specific to American women—for instance bell hooks' work—it is so real.... I guess the only thing missing in these African-American feminists is that they make no reference to my experiences as an immigrant woman from Jamaica. Listening to all these women has made me to rethink about my engagement with feminism ... The whole discourse is confusing, but I think I am a feminist and a Black Canadian feminist.* (Focus Group, 2003)

Over the four years that I have taught my Black Feminist course, many students have expressed the same ideas. Feminism as a discourse or a discipline has evolved out of women's struggles and many women may not see the need for the specificity of Canadian Black feminism. However, it is clear that as more Black women identify themselves as Black Canadian feminists, the discourse will develop a Canadian identity. My research and my Black feminist course have thus provided a space to help carve out Black Canadian feminist theory, a theory that has always been there, but not addressed rigorously in an academic setting.

Nevertheless, even though many of the women in the focus group do feminist work they may not necessarily label their work as feminist or even see themselves as feminists. Zipora, a participant who has worked in the pharmaceutical industry for many years, made the following comment about feminism:

> *The academic feminism (Black or white) is not for people like me.... Yes, I am a feminist.... A community person ... my feminism is about my work with the community ... When I assist women or men or even youth ... that is my feminism—that is, what feeds my feminism—not the academic feminism where no one understands the language you use.... Feminist writing should be accessible so that people like myself who are not academics can make use of research on women who need to further their understanding on feminism.* (Focus Group, 2003)

"The academic feminism (Black or white) is not for people like me.... My feminism is about my work with the community ... , —not the academic feminism where no one understands the language you use."

Many women from the focus groups could relate to Zipora's words. It is clear that there is an assumption that feminism in general is an academic discourse and that it is alienating. Many saw feminism as disconnected from the people in the community. Yet many participants also felt that feminism as a discourse is changing. A crucial element of Black feminism is, thus, to connect with the community because many participants' work and life experiences are informed by the fact that they are members of a community, and in this particular instance, Black community. For many participants who identified themselves as Black feminists, their life's work reflects their rootedness in that community.

Some participants were reluctant to acknowledge the need to identify with feminism. Fereria provided insightful sentiments when she stated:

> *As a Black woman, I have enough to identify with. I do not need feminism. In my undergraduate years, I wrote stories about my mother and my grandmother. I referred to them as two strong women. I guess this could be part of the feminism you are talking about—my writing is on Black women.... I have contributed to feminist literature in my writing.... Although people say this is feminist work, I do not call myself a feminist. Not too long ago, a friend of mine asked me if I was a feminist and I told her no.... I am struggling to call myself Black or African—I do not think I can add another problem to all the identities that I have. Before coming to Canada, I never saw myself as Black until somebody referred to me as Black. I never saw myself as Black or African, but others did.* (Focus Group, 2003)

Although many participants agreed with Fereria's stand-

point on feminism, others indicated that they distanced themselves from the words "feminist" or "feminism" because it is often perceived as mainstream and alienating to many Black women. Black women, both inside and outside the academy, struggle with identifying themselves as feminists because such self-identification conjures up many different images (Nnameka). There are those who felt that to identify themselves only as a feminist ignores who they are and their struggles as Black women, and the impact of racism in their lives. In addition, others felt that when they struggle to label themselves Black or African, in one way or another, they have to negotiate their identity. Marie, captured the dynamic nature of identity politics when she stated:

[A]s a Jamaican you know you are Black, still you see yourself as Jamaican. Many people do not want to identify with their African ancestry because of the ways in which colonialism has made us negate that part of us. We see being African as the "Other," "lesser than." Many Black women who are Black do not necessarily label themselves as such, yet they are forced to take on labels prescribed by the dominant society. This is true of the experiences of many Black women young or old alike. It is a part of our struggle. (Focus Group, 2003)

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Obioma Nnaemeka has argued that "the majority of African women are not hung up on articulating their feminism, they just do it" (5). Although Fereria is "struggling to call herself Black or African," she does indicate that her work may be referred to as feminist. Another participant, Noteria, stated:

I am a member of Black Canadian women's collective ... and my voice is located within ... recognizing the collectivity of our own actions as falling under the rubric of Black Canadian feminist thought is a task that I am still coming to terms with ... it is however clear that we must take feminism as a change agent and a motivator in repositioning Black Canadian feminist voices in the Diaspora. I think I am a participant in this emerging discourse. (Focus Group, 2002)

It was clear in the focus groups that the women's experiences, locations, and identities shape and inform their different views about Black feminist thought. Although these women's histories and specific contexts differ, there are commonalties among them: they have all been exploited, racialized and gendered, and their survival and resistance strategies are similar.

Amos and Parmar affirm that the experiences of Black women are complex and multilayered, and that we cannot simply prioritize one aspect of our oppressions to the exclusion of others since our day-to-day realities make it imperative for us to consider the simultaneous nature of our oppression and exploitation. They suggest that only a synthesis of class, race, gender, and sexuality can lead us forward, as these form the matrix of domination on Black women's lives. Amos and Parmar further argue that existing theoretical frameworks are limiting if we seek to use them to understand the complexities of Black women's oppression in society. This highlights the importance of having a discursive framework that speaks to our divergent lived realities.

As a theory, therefore, Black feminist thought places Black women's experiences and ideas at the center of analysis (Collins 2000). It is engaged in the reclaiming of voice, space, and re-writing of history through a praxis that will create a historically located field of origins in order to critically center or re/center traditionally subjugated bodies of knowledge.[2]

Theorizing from Black Women's Diverse Experiences

Contemporary Black feminist thought as elaborated by theorists, activists, and feminists from Canada and the United States speaks to the lived experiences, different and common, of women of African ancestry (Cooper 1994 ; Carty; Henry; Collins 1990, 2000; hooks 1984a, 1992; Lorde 1991; Walker; Davies; Christian and Smith).[2] As Black women of African descent, our experiences are informed by neo-colonial systems of education housed in institutional structures founded and governed by patriarchy. This was eloquently captured by Zigita, who noted:

When we talk about feminism, especially Black feminism, our lives are so intricately interwoven with colonialism, patriarchy ... very complicated ... because I cannot talk about feminism only, but the intersections of race, class, gender, and all the sexualities.... All these things come with a level of pain and joy and you know you cannot really capture it in a lot of ways.... There are certain things you cannot capture in theory ... like the spiritual pain inflicted on you by institutions, or places that do not value you, your skills, your talents or your education. (Focus Group, 2003)

Black women's lives are thus informed by the various

forms of colonialism that are pervade their everyday experiences. There were many examples in the focus groups of the ways in which the participants' race, gender, and class background determined their life chances. Many asserted that Black women's knowledge is often devalued and their existence undermined whether at work, school or in their everyday interactions with others.

However, another participant indicates that she does not want to employ existing theory to provide insights to her life. Eckell would like her work, experience, and life in general to inform her theory—a theory that will challenge her at the cognitive as well as at the practical level. Eckell echoed these sentiments:

> *When I think of Black feminism in Canada I can't think about it without thinking about my life ... how I am leading it.... I have also to think of it in terms of community and connecting with people and building relationships.... I am not quite sure what that will look like or even call it Black feminism ... that is, if you put a label on it ... but I do know that it is not enough to go to school and learn all these theories.... I guess for me the search for meaning in my life ... which I think is what any theory should help you to be able to do ... not just understand things cognitively but speak to your soul.... I do not know whether you could call it Black feminism.... This is part of my struggle ... because I do not want to fit my Black feminism into what I read in the text or what others are telling me it is.... I want to let the theory develop itself from my work, my life ... my experience ... but that does not sound academic ... you know the way we have been told to make it academic.... I have lost touch with lot of things so I cannot hang on to any theory, feminism or otherwise that does not speak to me or heal me in some way.... I need a theory that is going to heal me in some way. I need a theory that is going to make my life more meaningful in some way. I do not necessarily need a theory to explain and give me ... clear cut answers.... I want a theory that is going to challenge me on some very different level not just cognitive level. I need for it to speak to me on many, many different levels.* (Focus Group, 2003)

Eckell's words provide insights to the complexity of theory and how it intertwines with everyday practice.

Sites of Contestation

In the course of our focus group discussions issues of class, sexuality, skin colour, ethnicity, and length of stay in Canada were also raised. However, the negation and silencing of black women's sexuality was prominent. Monique noted:

> *I may be new to this focus group but it is interesting to observe how in Black feminist discourse we skirt around issues of sexuality. When I am in a queer community, I am always present and I do not shield my sexual identity. We have been discussing different issues for nearly two hours—especially issues of racism, and nobody has brought up the issues of homophobia in our community or even among Black women. I feel there is lack of concern for gays and lesbians.... I guess these are the things jumbling and tumbling in my head in terms of your question about risk, identity and feminism ... the silence among us on issues of sexuality.* (Focus group, 2003)

Monique's comments created a significant degree of ension and discomfort. What was it that made the women shift in their seats and look at me as if to get them out of a difficult situation? Was it because the participants did not want to discuss issues of sexuality, or did the statement challenge them both at a personal and community level? After what appeared to be a long silence (it could have been a minute or two), I thanked Monique for her comments and indicated to the group that such comments are very important and useful in our feminist dialogue. After my comments, different women responded and expressed how they felt about the issue of sexuality. From the comments of participants, there was clear indication that this is an area that requires more research and dialogue.

Arreta was the first to respond:

> *I hear what you are saying.... How do I make an entry point to engage in an experience that is not my own? These are the sorts of questions that I ask myself when people put these issues on the table. I can tell you, that's where my silence comes from. However, I know this lack of concern that you are referring to ... and it is a recurring problem in feminism, even Black mainstream feminism ... issues of sexuality are never taken up nor are issues of homophobia discussed in our communities. I think on my part, it is my own political awareness that race is so often knocked off the table and I want to keep the focus on race and I have seen how feminism or sexuality can hijack the discussion ... anyhow whatever identities we have they are affected by race ... so I can speak toward that silence, not as a discomfort but silence comes from me ... so it is not that I did not hear you.* (Focus Group, 2003)

Despite her discomfort, Arreta was able to articulate her feelings and what her silence meant. Arreta's priority was race and not sexuality or feminism. It is true that because of the greater focus on race, there is a tendency by many women to downplay the importance of sexuality as a factor in the oppression of black women.

Rosie added:

> *I think too that is where my silence comes from ... regardless of a person's particular sexual choice ... I think there is a conflict ... I guess we need to ask ourselves, what other issues*

are involved in our lives.... If it is not my issue, do I need to engage in it? To me the sexual issue is an issue separate and apart from feminism, though it is an aspect of it. Because other issues will still be issues of being marginalized ... whether it is because you are black, female or male, short or skinny ... these are all issues. (Focus Group, 2003)

Echoing Arreta's words, Rosie clarified that her silence was due to some inner conflict or tension in terms of priorities. As far as Rosie was concerned, feminism and sexuality were separate issues. Although some participants did not agree with her, they respected her openness and her opinion. Rosie's words were a further indication of the complexity of feminist discourse.

Ferecia affirmed that Black feminism should serve as an agency through which we could discuss our differences and similarities, not necessarily to agree but to work towards understanding and towards constructively utilizing our commonalties as well as our differences. She noted:

Maybe this is the space to talk about all these differences that we either connect or don't connect with because they affect us in different ways that are not obvious right now. If something is different and I cannot personally relate to it, I would chose to respond as opposed to being silent.... I strongly believe there ought to be some connection.... I am not saying you have to relate directly with the queer community, but there has to be some connection because this indirectly, shapes our feminisms. I think we need to take note of the muting that goes on just by even saying, yeah well because it is not part of my general experience or people that I know personally, it is not something that needs to be brought up? Right now the fact that I came out to my family ... I am sure therefore, I am a part of what challenges all of us ... to be human is a complex thing. (Focus Group, 2003)

Ferecia's comments brought the sexuality discussion to some conclusion. She felt that the space provided by the focus group was important because it provided a unique opportunity to examine challenges facing Black women both individually and collectively. She indicated that there was a need to respond to issues that are uncomfortable. As far as she was concerned, it was not enough to shrug one's shoulders.

Monique's statement provided an entry point to a discussion and openness which enabled participants to express themselves in relation to the issues of sexuality and feminism or sexuality and race. At the end of the session, it was evident that there will be no liberation unless we address all forms of marginalization and oppression in our community. Monique's words challenged and created space for a dialogue which may not have taken place if she had not raised the issue of sexuality and silence within the Black community.

Discussion

What does Black feminist thought mean to Black Canadian feminists in the Diaspora? The African Diaspora assumes the character of a dynamic and complex phenomenon stretching across time, geography, class, gender, and sexuality. This dynamism was evident in the voices of the women who participated in the focus group discussions. The women clearly indicated their desire to end their silences and speak their truths as they know them.

The search for the meaning of Black feminism revealed not only the various ways women talk about Black Canadian feminism, but also—and more importantly—how they understand feminism. The power of their words lies in their narratives and how they are able to draw from their lived realities as examples of Black Canadian feminist theory. From the study, it was clear that women do not speak about their feminism with one voice or from one location or one standpoint. This paper attempted to delineate their convergences and affinities as well as tease out their differences and paradoxes for a better understanding of the complex web of issues of what constitutes Black Canadian feminism.

For many Black women in the group, it was particularly important to start with acknowledging their experiences and their social and academic locations. The fact that most of their experiences are an outcome of a history of oppression and stigmatization was evident throughout the sharing of stories. It is therefore not an accident that for many women, academic encounters always center on a rigorous questioning of whether or not they have an epistemological framework for their argument. Invariably, many women explain how they enter into a discourse of historicity grounded in an epistemology based on an oral tradition, passed down in their lineage through generations of kinship. The women believe this collective knowledge and philosophy compose their theories, which in themselves inform their epistemologies.

The exclusion of Black women from the sphere of academia reveals their oppression through the Euro-patriarchal production and validation of knowledge. Black women, however, have not been completely silenced. One way in which they have attempted to redress their exclusion has been through the development of a feminist theory that speaks to their situation—Black feminist thought. This theory has become a critical tool for exploring contextual questions pertaining to identity, patriarchy, race, gender, class, sexuality, and imperialism. The conceptual focus and analytical methods derived from Black feminist theorizing and praxis underscore the relevance of formulating a critical, re/centering look at Black women's history. Black women's critique of theory has not just involved coming to terms with absences, but also examining the ways in which we have been rendered invisible even when we have been seen (Carby; Wane 2002a). In other words, meanings and paradigms situated

in Black people's experiences can be applied to rupture and collapse the in/visible divides that have kept Black people in general—and Black women in particular—in the periphery. The theory examines colonial and neocolonial identities, power and Black women's multiple and hybrid identities, as well as questions of difference and domination. It highlights the historical as well as the contemporary perspectives of Black Canadian women. Since Black feminist theory is still carried out predominantly in piecemeal fashion, what my ongoing research is attempting to accomplish is a more unified Black feminist voice both on a theoretical and practical level.

Black feminist thought is not merely "a term" for feminists and activists, or just the question of naming a particular mode of feminism. Patricia Hill Collins (2000) noted that our concern should not be in naming; it is more useful to have a dialogue as to why Black feminist thought exists at all. It is a lived theory that places Black women at the centre of analysis (Wane 2002a, 2002b; Collins 1990; Steady; hooks 1981; Ogundipe-Leslie). More than simply a term, it is a theory, an epistemology. Black feminist thought is also an action, a struggle; and most importantly, it is the lived story of Black women's agency and how they resist oppression to survive in a world that seeks to exploit, denigrate, and dehumanize their very existence (Wane 2002a, 2002b). It seeks to explain how positive and negative factors have been influenced by the intervention of Black women in their social structures. Many of us (including Black people) do not know how African-Canadian women strategized, struggled, and resisted the oppressive forces of racism, colonialism, and patriarchy. As Peggy Bristow argues, the contributors to her edited collection, *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up*, came together:

> [To] write about African Canadian women for two primary reasons. First, as women, our experiences have always differed significantly from those of men. While we are subjected to racism as are Black men, gender compounds this situation. How we have managed historically to survive both racial and gender subordination deserves special attention. (4)

This powerful statement rings true for African Canadian feminists. As we are in the process of retrieving our neglected and hidden histories, I encourage women to keep their memories alive by paying tribute to these Black Canadian women who have continued to strive, and to document their stories. Bristow's documentation of historical episodes provides a link between Black Canadian women's oppressions and that of their African counterparts (Wane 2002a).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted some of the current tensions as to what constitutes Black Canadian feminist thought. From my dialogues with the participants in my research, it was clear that we cannot universalize Black experience; however, we need to make a commitment to forging intellectual and cultural linkages that are grounded in commonality of origin. It was also clear that Black women have held onto hope and faith and have continued to struggle, survive and wage war against oppressive forces of all types. The search for the meaning of Black feminism revealed not only the various ways women talk about Black Canadian feminism, but also—and more importantly—how they understand feminism. Black feminism as a tool therefore empowers Black women, and provides them with a means of social recognition as well as new challenges. Black feminism is also a space where our past, present, and future voices, and our triumphs and stories can be told, celebrated, and passed down to the future generations. As true sisters scattered across the globe, we can form a powerful circle that will "collapse all screens which threaten to obscure our women's eyes from the beauties of the world" (Ogundipe-Leslie 1).

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[1]All the names of the participants are pseudonyms.

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HOLLY LALENA DAY

Hudson

The lawnmower makes me wish
I was an animal, some four-footed hoofed
thing
that lived on flower and tree bark.
Its noise makes me run and
hide in my room.

These clothes make me wish
I was pure beast, a sleeked-furred carnivore
that gave birth in a den
fed carrion to my children.
These clothes make me ugly and
keep me meek.

This bed makes me wish
I was alone, or something with claws
that I had my own scent, and not that of the
man
that lumbers in here at night
and says that I'm his.

Holly Day lives in Minneapolis.