Ruptures: Anti-colonial & Anti-racist Feminist Theorizing

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This book provides tools and theoretical frameworks to make sense of how the world is regulated, governed, controlled with regard to the exclusivity of certain members of the society, and in particular, women from marginalized groups. This book, therefore, engages readers by asking thought-provoking questions to interrogate issues of marginality and oppression in society. The book, as a collective, provides an intellectual discourse on feminism, anticolonial thought and anti-racism. This book is a must read for scholars, activists, theorists and researchers who are seeking to rupture the borders of confinement and move beyond the imaginary margins created by organized structures in society.
Ruptures: Anti-colonial & Anti-racist Feminist Theorizing
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This book is dedicated to Genither Dujon who passed away in 2013 and did not see this publication.
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We acknowledge all contributors to this manuscript and all those who are seeking to make a more just society to live in. We also acknowledge the anti-colonialists who have gone before us.

Last but not least, we thank our Creator who provided us with the strength to see this project from the beginning to the end. We also thank our Ancestors on whose shoulders we stand.
FOREWORD

I had always considered feminism as a paradox - especially its historical fixation with the dominance of patriarchy and how it has remained persistent over time. This has largely been due to the fact that this is not a subject of traditional leisure reading and - outside the academy- little is known about Anti-Colonial & Anti-Racist Feminisms. With so few published works, it did not appear there is much to exemplify the contribution of Aboriginal and racialized women’s Canadian feminisms. In this book, the authors have provided a rationale for addressing this issue by showing both that an important problem exists and that current literature and previous published works and studies have failed to adequately address this problem. Tracing this inadequacy to lack of an appropriate forum, the analysis in the book shows that in many cases, Aboriginal and racialized women in Canada have had to develop their own strategies to confront their exclusion from mainstream feminist movements and create a unique platform to analyze their lived realities. The book explores the sluggish, albeit enduring evolvement of Anti-Racist Feminist theory by tracing the struggles and perseverance of a few less known Aboriginal and Racialized women whose efforts enabled its sustenance and ensured the relevance of its ideas. The analysis of the toils of these early anti-colonialist and anti-racist feminists proves that their efforts were not in vain and the contributing authors in this book have blended well their own knowledge and experiences with the thoughts and ideas of these early adopters. The serious effort to accumulate the work of various contributors to speak to Anti-Racist feminist theory is a timely and relevant addition to the growing body work of Canadian feminist thought. This book will make a valued, sufficient contribution in addressing important aspects of Aboriginal and Racialized Women’s realities that will make a significant and fresh contribution to the field of issues of feminism. As a Black male, it was quite a revelation to read an Anti-Colonial book written from an anti-racist perspective.

Basil Mwawasi
INTRODUCTION

Living a life as an Aboriginal or a racialized woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing scholarship that speaks to their reality, because we live in communities that validate and produce thought within the context of a particular set of historical, material and epistemological conditions. Writing from an Aboriginal or a racialized woman standpoint is therefore an essential ingredient for an informed way of theorizing or scholarship. This can be said of any racialized or an Aboriginal woman. Like any other group of women, racialized or Aboriginal women could not exist consciously until they began to theorize about their lived realities. It was also essential for them to name their feminisms. However, as Hull & Smith (1982) states, “[n]aming and describing our experiences are important initial steps, but not alone sufficient to get us where we need to go…. A descriptive approach… will not result in intellectually groundbreaking or politically transforming work” (p. xxi). They continue to argue that what is needed is to examine the lives of ordinary women’s actions and develop an analytical framework that will enable us to understand their lives as well as ours. As more racialized Canadians enrol in colleges, the more they become aware of the scarcity of a scholarship that speaks about them in positive ways and the more these women take up the pen to write. It is therefore heartening to note that the more racialized women earn their degrees or diplomas, the range of contributions to ruptures of feminist scholarship continues to increase. As we can see from the breadth of the contributions to this book, increasing numbers of racialized women are choosing to ground their work in their own experiences that reflects their own reality and that of their own ethic backgrounds. Rather than being constrained by the confines of the institutions which views them as outsiders, they have chosen to use their outsider/insider status to create innovative ways of knowing to navigate and create a path within the Eurocentric dominated epistemologies. As Hull & Smith (1982) notes, the extremity of Black women’s oppression has been determined by their biological identity. They have also known how to resist the hegemonic discourse to create alternative ways of knowing. How then do we measure the authenticity of work which claims to add to the knowledge base of anti-racist, anti-colonial feminist theory?

The aim of this edited collection is to engage critical thought on serious issues considered by feminists in Canada at the theoretical, personal, academic and practical level. The project provides an alternative range of perspectives to the dominant parochial currents of the feminist debates. We intend to outline an
accessible, productive and proactively critical project, which is unencumbered by the subversive forces that create barriers for us as Black women.

We hope to add to the existing argument that anti-racist and anti-colonial feminists in Canada, can speak for themselves. Indeed, after returning to the drawing board, the subalterns are saying they too have the voice to speak for themselves. The book is socially grounded in anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles that inform the contributors’ experiences and battles (both personal and public) into language which captures this genderized, sexualized and wholly racialized world.

We imagine this project as a configuration of ideas that would take hold of the elements at the core epistemological, ideological and praxis and would make the diversity of ideas and differences work in our favour as assets rather than liabilities for all those who engage with the work. From the various chapters, authors have articulated clearly that as anti-racist and anti-colonial activists and scholars, their theorizing is informed by their practice and their everyday experiences. However, many of them argue that there is need to re-conceptualize alternative paradigms, ways of expressing empowerment collectively and independently as they struggle to create spaces for their scholarship. Theorizing about alternative conceptualizations of being Black women and their daily actions has created alternative spaces, which empower them as individuals and as members of communities. In this book, we argue that the common everyday lived experiences of racialized and Aboriginal women make them experts in articulation of their lives.

In the book, we employ various anti oppression theoretical frameworks, like anti-colonialism, antiracism, Black feminist theoretical frameworks to centre our debates that challenge and rupture schools of thought that have marginalized and pushed to the margin the experiences and voices of non-European women. The experiences necessitate that there are struggles for ideological and epistemological spaces through which women express themselves as feminists and articulate notions of spirit injury. One of the aims of the book is to provide space for the injured spirits to exhale. This is because the issue of spirit injury cannot be addressed when people are expected to silence their own experiences and live or write about their oppressions from a mainstream white heterosexual point of view. Adopting or remaining to write through the white heterosexual point of view is colonizing and reproduces the invisibility of the minoritized women. Above all, that mode of writing and expressing oneself obliterates the Aboriginal women of Canada and hinders their expression of their oppressions. Without the visible expression of Aboriginal women about their experiences, it leaves room for the status quo to legitimize official oppression of all minorities in Canada.

In summary we can argue that *Ruptures: Anti-colonial & Anti-racist Feminist Theorizing* emerged as a collection in response to the dearth of resources addressing and including Black, racialized, Indigenous, queer and trans experiences and theorizing, and their multiple intersections. Although there are multiple works which deal with many of these social categories as discreet entities, it is rare to find a collection which commits itself to exploring the convergences and contradictions
between all of them. The aim of the collection, therefore, is to present readers with multiple entry-points to myriad discussions around race, gender, equity, colonization and social justice. In doing so, we encourage each of these discussions to broaden their scope and analysis in context of each other. Ultimately, the collection aims to spur conversations between and among activists, academics and community workers about the ideas, issues and possibilities raised by our authors. Within the diversity of this volume it becomes evident that activism cannot be confined to a singular method, voice or site, and that activists must be willing to create different avenues to engage in a dialogue if we are to break away from the commoditized, mechanistic system that is so dominant today. The book seeks to show the value of engaging with multiple sites of oppression: colonial, racism and gender among others, as a way to address the lived experiences and personal knowledges of activists, anti-racist and anti-colonial feminists in the hope of creating a transformative discourse of theorizing and activism. This volume has a wide array of viewpoints which all point to the importance of ways of knowing in women’s lives, their communities and society at large.

Many authors in this anthology realize that they are “minority within the minority” (Madibo, 2005), what W.E.B. DuBois had referred to the double identity of being black and an American. The authors represent different ethnic groups other than Europeans and as a result they have developed multiple consciousnesses to enable them to navigate through the system. Many of the issues articulated in the anthology are shared by white women (sexism, homophobia, classism, ability etc), however, racialized and Aboriginal women face double forms of marginalization in terms of race and gender; and the fact that their very presence simultaneously challenges traditional boundaries, may they be disciplinary, epistemological, racial, or sociocultural (Aparicio, Frances R, Spring, 1999. “Through my lens: a video project about women of color faculty at the University of Michigan” in Feminist Studies).

Ruptures has created a space for the authors to talk back (bell hooks), to clarify ideas, and to rupture normalcy of stereotypes that have dominated the thinking of mainstream discourse for the longest. Many times the distortions are unthinkable and speaking out clarifies what many take for granted. Most of the time, many of these women are spoken for and never given a chance to articulate their lived experiences. This anthology has given these women an opportunity to tell their stories and share their experiences being in the margin where they have created centers of empowerment. Through these chapters, women share their stories of victory not victimhood. They share their insights of collaboration and how to go about solving or dealing with challenges, and most importantly, insights on how to build coalitions. The anthology honors the spirit of anti-colonial feminism activism that is echoed in all the women’s writing. Creativity and anti-colonial feminist Scholarship form the invisible thread that interweaves the different chapters to form a collective whole.

The collection is currently divided into three sections: Practicing Anti-Colonial & Anti-Racist Feminism in Classrooms & Communities; Anti-Racist Feminism at
the Interstices; and Decolonizing the Heart. The essays grouped into the first section apply anti-racist and anti-colonial feminist theorizing to the authors’ experiences. Through this, the papers develop methods, frameworks and concepts for engaging in various forms of activism, community, knowledge and identity building, and curriculum development. These papers build on existing anti-racist feminist theorizing, connecting theory to the practice of living and working as racialized women. The second section presents papers, art and poetry which construct theory around multiple points of identity, power and oppression. These pieces draw from, contribute to and make interventions in established conceptions of how race operates with other social locators to order our existence in the world. The third set of papers and poetry address a wide set of problematics, from solidarity to decolonizing the imagination. Each chapter mingles theory, reflection and story to engage the notion of the self and community as important sites at which decolonization is required in the pursuit of social justice and survival. As a whole, the collection of papers offer a diverse range of complicated and complicating ways of addressing social justice, oppression, and one’s own implications and experiences with each. The variety of the papers strengthen one another, adding to the richness of each argument by presenting in one collection a number of multi-centric ways of addressing similar issues. The following section provides a summary of the chapters in the anthology. Although there are other works that have been written on the above topics, this book differs from those that try to synthesize the discourse of anti-colonial and anti-racist feminism in classrooms and communities. It seeks to work with a vast diversity of viewpoints and knowledges, in hopes that, through valuing individual voices and experiences, a transformative discourse can be anchored through the valuing of personal experience. This book is also unique in its explicit focus on resistance and activism as a methodology in this process.

The book opens with *Uncovering the Well: Black Feminism in Canada*, by Njoki Wane. In this chapter, Wane, advances the notion that Black Canadian feminist thought is a theoretical framework that illustrates the historical, social, political, cultural, and economic experiences of Black Canadian women. Reflecting on qualitative research with African/Black Canadian women across the country, Wane, establishes the context and discursive content for Black feminism in Canada. With analysis of relevant literature and research on race and gender in the Canadian context, the Wane, provides profound narratives of women’s resistance and various forms of self-determination. From the women’s narratives, it is very clear that they do not see themselves as victims but as survivors and advocators for others. *African-Canadian Black Women Leaders: Impacting Change in the Diaspora* by Genither Dujon, examines African-Canadian women leaders. The chapter explores the crucial role that Black women leaders play in transforming Canadian society. African-Canadian women in the diaspora have and are using their shared knowledge to organize activism and to resist oppression. They have used it to empower themselves, and to assume leadership roles in the community. Even though African-Canadian women reside on the periphery of society, they are constantly engaged in
resistance and self-determination, and are constructing their lives according to their own visions. Consequently, many are emerging as community leaders. This study examines specifically the lives of four outstanding African-Canadian community leaders. It contends that Black women leaders still face difficulties in trying to negotiate their space and place in Canadian society.

Using Black Canadian Feminist Thought as an Approach to Teaching Science, Thelma Akyea’s chapter leaves the reader with some food for thought as she explores the experiences of Black students’ struggles in Toronto’s inner-city schools. She argues that poor performance by these students is “not an indication of what inner-city students of African descent lack in terms of academic fortitude, rather these test scores are symptomatic of barriers to success put in place and maintained by the colonialist education structure that is reinforced by the expectations outlined in the Ontario curriculum”. The chapter provides some insights as to how racialization and racism can affect school performance of many Black students. The paper then proposes a lesson plan template that science teachers might follow or draw from in constructing anti-racist classroom spaces which endeavour to address the marginalization and meet the needs of Black students.

Mary Louise McCarthy’s chapter: Sistership: Talking Back to Feminism, explores the role of sistership. She uses the term sistership to refer to a process of bonding and mentoring for women. She argues that sistership can provide supportive alliances for graduate students as they work through the process of life within the ivory tower of academia. While Nadia Salter’s chapter on Caribbean Slave Women's Resistance as a Form of Preservation: takes a closer look at how the Black women’s pain and determination made them to survive the middle passage. These women were forced to work relentlessly in the hot Caribbean sun and provide their capturers with the means to obtain their lavish wealth. Despite their inhuman treatment the women kept their hopes and dreams in the pit of their stomachs, envisioning the day when they or their decedents would be free. These were her ancestors. By deconstructing the experiences of these women, she acknowledges their spiritual strength and perseverance to survive whilst enduring unspeakable violence, hate and oppression that have produced pain.

Ser Madre, To be Mother in Cuba: The life of Maria de los Reyes Castillo Bueno by Bixidu Lobo-Molnar is based on the real life story of Maria de los Reyes Castillo Bueno, whose lived experiences as a Black Cuban woman and othermother informed her understanding of healthy community building and mutual stretching. Using a Black feminist lens, this article examines the life of an ‘ordinary’ woman known as ‘Reyita’ and explores the ways that her contributions to Cuban society make her a living thinker and true revolutionary. The importance of weaving Black women’s experiences into Latin American culture and history is stressed in this article through the telling of Reyita’s story.

Jennifer Jagire chapter on Indigenous African Knowledges and African Feminism: Resisting Eurocentric Ways of Knowing stresses the importance of documenting the stories of Indigenous communities. She argues that these stories act as catalyst
for decolonization of knowledge systems. She further states that documenting “Indigenous African knowledge in Canada or North America is a means of enriching multiple ways of knowing and in the processes offers challenges to epistemic oppression”. This essay focuses on the women of East Africa in a Canadian context. Nicole Seck’s chapter, *The Hypersexualization and Undesirability of Black/African Women*, is a piece that was borne out of a necessity to confront the media bombardment of hypersexualized images of Black/African women, which in large part is not balanced out by alternate/positive images. This chapter challenges the diminishment of Black women to exploitable oversexualized bodies and uses Black feminist thought to deconstruct the processes by which mainstream media performs this diminishment. In *African Canadian Women and the Criminal Justice System* by Njoki Wane examines the experiences of Black people at the hands of the social justice system. Wane argues that in “comparison to other racial and gender group in Canada, African Canadian women are over-represented within the criminal population in Canada. Nonetheless, when it comes to feminist theorizing, their voices are unheard and of avail”. If, this is the case, she continues to state, “this victimization needs to be explained from a feminist perspective”. This chapter attempts to provide a textual analysis that may lead to the design of specific theoretical models for explaining the criminal activity of black females. The analysis highlights the implicit and explicit assumptions, narrative strategies and rationales facing Black female offenders in the criminal justice system.

*December 6th* by Kenji Haakon Tokawa is a spoken word poem that call for more depth and honesty in December 6th Remembrance. *Symbolic Proximity: Rihanna Face-to-Face* by Lauriann Wade examines a concept that she calls ‘symbolic proximity’ in relation to Black women’s subjectivity within a culture of middle class women in the context of Eurocentric, capitalist, consumer society. Symbolic proximity she argues “emerges from socially constructed ideals internalized by Black women. These internalized ideals are necessary in accessing and participating in social spaces of power and inclusion, ultimately determining how close or how distant one is from a particular ‘desired mark of acceptance’. Entry into these spaces and sustained occupation of said spaces is achieved through education, aesthetics, materiality, consumption and social visibility and acceptability; traditional components linked to the image of white middle class female respectability”. Media attention to the images of pop star Rihanna after being assaulted by her lover Chris Brown exemplify the instability of Black female alignment with white middle class culture, and bring to focus how symbolic proximity emerges within this neo-colonial era. The chapter investigates the power of this particular image in popular culture in relation to the symbolic proximity of Black middle class women to this image.

Kirsten Edwards’ chapter, *Fluidity and Possibility: Imagining Woman of Colour Pedagogies* explores, through personal narrative, the colonial nature of the Academy. As theorist Achille Mbembe (2001) argues, once colonized we are never free of the colonial state. She conceptualizes higher education institutions as Academic
Colonies whose original intent in the United States was to prepare the colonial elite to rule the new colony (Solomon, 1985; Thelin, 2004). Black, female, scholar she asks herself how she can “disrupt the space of Euro-American scholar? And what are the possibilities available in these disruptions? How do the contradictions of the Black, female, scholar (and I would argue woman of color scholar) deconstruct the hegemony inherent in the White, male, middle to upper-class colonizer space of Professor?” Through this chapter, she hopes to explore these questions, possibilities, and potential educational liberations.

_Taking Seriously the Power of Racialized Self-misrepresentation: Authenticity, White Supremacy and Consequence_, by Kenji Haakon Tokawa examines dependence of colonial representation on racialized bodies, racialized imitation, the authority of the authentic other, and the limited universality of audience. While _Appetites: Destabilizing the Notion of Normalcy and Deviance Through the Black Woman's Body_, by Sarah Stefana Smith explores the work by Kenyan visual artist, Wangechi Mutu who uses mixed media tools, like watercolor, glitter and dirt (among others) as well as magazine clippings in order to create her collage representations. Smith provides an examples of Mutu’s series entitled _The Arc Collection_, a post card of a photographed Maasai women of Kenya and Tanzania that was re-appropriated by an American photographer Carol Beckwith in 1970’s. Through an engagement with Mutu’s _The Arc Collection_ and a consideration of African American science fiction writer, Octavia Butler’s book _Kindred_ (1979) and _Wildseed_ (1980) the chapter considers what it means to be human and how is it that we “order” human subjectivity.

_Tomee_ by Elisha Lim is art piece which is part of a graphic novel coming out with Magnus Books in November of 2011. The piece is currently on display at the Feminist Art Gallery debut, run by Deirdre Logue and Allyson Mitchell. This work is a reflection on the particular harassment that dark-skinned men deal with from authorities representing state and private interest. It arises from a conversation between masculine queers who have started to face more and more of this harassment as they pass more as men.

_The Masks We Wear as We Search for a Home: Experiences of Homelessness for Those Who Have Non-normative Sexual Orientations within a Canadian-South Asian Community_ by Chandni Desai, Kian Iaj, Ami Patel, Nitasha Puri, unpacks the experiences of two South Asian youth who self-identify as LGBTQ. Using poetry, narratives, and ideas from recent critical thought literature, a central theme of homelessness that is present in these stories is discussed. This thematic analysis is followed by an exploration of solidarity-building modalities that may be used to minimize the oppression of LGBTQ youth in South Asian diaspora. Suggestions for this unifying process (from both the South Asian youth and literature) include minimizing, normalizing, and moralizing non-normative sexual orientations by raising awareness in community venues such as temples, schools, and cultural events, as well as queering Bollywood and popular culture. _Complexities in the Margin: Queering Black Feminism in Canada_ by Njoki Wane juxtaposes the voices
of black women with an analysis of relevant literature by queer writers of colour who are resisting the processes of marginalization imposed by various sites of heteronormativity in the US and Canada. The chapter makes the case for locating the voices, struggles and accomplishments of queer Black Canadian women as one of many constituent centres within Canadian Black feminism, by taking up a number of key questions arising from the interviews and literature outlined in section one.

Min Kaur’s chapter, *Lumbah Rasta (A Long Journey): From Spirit Injury to Spirit Repair* is based on her personal narrative of survival of sexual violence and trauma, and the impact on the spirit. Through the exploration of some Indigenous medicines in everyday life, she attempts to create a process of healing her spirit. These medicines, with their individual stories of forced and necessary relocation (as a result of colonization) have a sense of collective connectedness to many formerly colonized peoples and may contribute to a larger work of spirit repair.

*Imperial Imaginations & Decolonizing Dreams: Storying Emancipations* by Zahra Murad examines Nalo Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* as a response to ongoing colonial projects which target the imaginations and spirits of oppressed peoples. Using the work of Indigenous feminists and feminists of colour who theorize spirituality as one of the central components of anti-colonial feminisms, Zahra looks at Hopkinson’s novel as a response to and reclamation of the notion of apocalypse, non-Christian feminist spirituality and cyclical notions of time to inform imaginings of change. The book concludes with a spoken word poem *Great Canadian Love Stories brought to you by the Canadian National Railway* by Kenji Haakon Tokawa, a lyric navigation of CBC morals, an 1800s Chinese gender fucker, and Tim Hortons in a Toronto heat wave.

In many ways, *Ruptures: Anti-colonial & Anti-racist Feminist Theorizing* has shown the complexity and paradox of feminisms. Whatever the uses of this anthology, it is our sincere hope that many will take up their pen and write their stories, theorize their experiences and contribute to the feminist scholarship.
PART ONE

PRACTICING ANTI-COLONIAL AND ANTI-RACIST FEMINISM IN CLASSROOMS AND COMMUNITIES
I am interested in Black feminist theory because I have looked around and I ... have realized there are many things we as Black women can share with each other. A book would help pass on our secrets of resistance and resiliency to the next generation

p. 2 (tape 1) – Rudia.

Black women’s activism [in Canada] has taken many forms, individually and collectively. They have not only asserted their womanhood by initiating activities in their own communities but have seen themselves as an active part of a larger citizenry

(Bristow, 1993:146).

INTRODUCTION

Black Canadian feminist thought has been conceptualized as a theoretical framework that illustrates the historical, social, political, cultural, and economic experiences of Black Canadian women (Wane, 2002, 2007). According to Brand (1999), theorizing on Black women’s lives provides the basis that informs feminism relevant to Black women in Canada (p. 85). Feminism raises and analyses issues of gendered and racialized women in Canada. However, while scholarship in the US has addressed the experiences, agency and historical challenges faced by African American women (see Hill Collins, 1992) the Canadian context has for too long gone without a comprehensive and formal research based-analysis of Black feminism in Canada. What constitutes Black Canadian feminist theory has yet to be sufficiently researched in its complexities and dynamisms. An articulation and understanding of Black feminism in Canada is possible only through an analysis of various realms of discourse and experience of African Canadian women. In this paper, the interviews provide an empirical basis from which I will be making interpretive analyses and building up a theoretical argument on what constitutes Black Canadian feminism.

This paper is based on the results of a three year (2005–2008) research project on Black Canadian Feminist thought that was funded by Social Science and Humanities Research of Canada (SSHRC). The paper highlights the gendered and racialized experiences of Black women in Canada. The first section provides the methodological context under which the research was conducted. This section also
lays out some basic theoretical principles and examines some of the relevant literature addressing the struggles, ideas and work of African Canadian women. In the second section, I address the interlocking systems of oppression, by locating the struggles, achievements, wisdom, agency, ideas and potential of African Canadian women within and without varied discursive sites. The arguments presented thus, provide a basis for moving toward a holistic and definitive articulation and understanding of Black Canadian feminism.

EXPOSING THE DEPTHS OF THE WELL: METHODOLOGY AND BLACK FEMINIST LITERATURE

In 2000 I introduced a course entitled Black Feminist Thought. The main objectives of the course were to examine among other things: central tenets of Black feminist thought, what informs it, and how different scholars have conceptualized it. In addition, part of the course was going to be devoted to feminist theory and in particular, strands of feminisms with emphasis on feminisms as advocated by the visible minorities. The course was going to analyse the divergences and convergences of Black feminisms not only in Canada but in the United States and Britain. Subsequently, I started searching for funds to carry out research in this area and more specifically on Black Canadian Feminist thought. The aim of the study (2005–2008) was to bring together the many strands of Black feminist thought emerging across Canada by examining the historical, cultural and ideological factors that have influenced Black Canadian feminist theorizing.

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative approach and document analysis, the project focused on two major goals: 1) to examine what informs Black Canadian feminist thought; 2) to focus on how personal, social, political and economic experiences, cultural background, and other feminisms influence the basic tenet of Black Canadian feminist thought. Four hundred women participated in this research either in focus groups, in face to face interviews, or over the telephone. The age range of the women was from twenty two to sixty seven years. Participants were drawn from stay- at- home mums, students, and professional women, working 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. Through this qualitative approach, the women were asked to talk about their lived experiences in relation to schooling, work, family dynamics or community involvement. This discussion led to the question of how the women defined and understood Black Canadian feminist theory. They were also asked to explain how Black feminist theory may be applicable to their work, research (if they were in the academy) or their everyday life. Most of the women who participated in the study
indicated that there was a need to make this theory more public and accessible not only for the women in the academy but outside as well.

I employed focus group discussions because such methods engender group dynamics that explore how diversity shapes Black people’s experiences in Canada (James, 2001). Although conflicts and differences in Black Canadian feminist thought stood out from the focus groups sessions, as well as the interviews, this paper focuses on uncovering the well of Black feminism in Canada. The well in this instance makes reference to the wealth of knowledge and experience of Black women in Canada that has gone untapped and unacknowledged. The project provided an opportunity for Black English-speaking women living in Canada to express their understanding of feminism according to their subjective and multiple realities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING AND ARTICULATING A BLACK FEMINIST THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Black Canadian feminism has slowly been emerging alongside mainstream feminism, as illustrated by Renie below:

To talk about feminism especially black feminism – is to talk about our lives…. So much of our various fragmented parts of our history are very intricately intertwined…complicated by our racialized experiences that we cannot talk of a neat compact body of theory that will tell our stories…there is so much… beyond the things that we talk about intersections such race, class, gender, all the sexualities… Those things come with a level of pain and joy and … you can’t really capture it in a lot of ways how these things can be articulated in mainstream feminism…and it is also difficult to capture a neat history of how this has manifested itself over the last 100 years, however, we know it is there and we know it is growing – that is why we are sitting here today talking about it. It is a journey around that doesn’t really get captured in mainstream theories. Our feminism we live it… almost everyone sitting here listening to each person talk, what are we doing, we are working towards crystallizing our theory into a neat bundle for purposes of centering our lifes. I said to myself each person is a chapter in itself on black Canadian feminist theory… your whole life is made up of many projects that you can examine, analyze and write about … how do I look at this experience? How do I look at what happened to me when I came here thirty years ago, connect that with what is happening to me now and each particular person’s experience…. I believe this is the theory we are trying to harness together (Renie, Tape.7. 2005 interview).

Renie’s quotation articulates the notion of intersectionality that is constituted by interlocking systems of oppression thus rejecting “the single-axis framework often embraced by both feminist and anti-racist scholars” (Nash, 2008:1). Renie’s analysis shows the various ways in which “race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s” (Nash, 2008: 1) lived experiences. It is quite clear that
Renie equates a discussion of feminism with a conversation about the multilayered aspects of her life. She acknowledges the fact that there is no neat pile for each aspect of black women’s lived realities; everything is intertwined and shaped by historical experiences. Therefore, as a Black woman, one cannot talk about race without making reference to issues of class, gender, ablelism or sexual orientation. This is clearly articulated by Nash (2008) who advocates for intersectionality: “…it (intersectionality) subverts race/gender binaries in the service of theorizing identity in a more complex fashion” (p. 1).

To be Black and female was first described by Frances Beale (1970) in her writing: “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” and later by Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman’s (1997) “Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Implications of Making Comparisons Between Racism and Sexism (or Other Isms.)” These works closely examine the racial and sexist contexts under which Black women have to struggle within these multiple sites of oppression. We can also draw on the voices of African Canadian women, in whose words, ideas and experiences we can clearly observe the intersecting and interlocking nature of different sites of oppression.

The theme of double or multiple intersections of oppression dominated most of the conversation during the interview sessions. The oppressions of race, sex, class and culture crush the voice and spirit of Black women until often, collective resiliency becomes their only connective thread left to pull them from the weight of oppression. Race, a socially constructed term with material consequences, shackles people as social norms and values are ascribed to a person’s skin colour or hair texture. The pain involved in each form of oppression, as well as the synergistic suffering that results needs to be acknowledged. As stated by Meni (a participant):

> We all respond differently to different forms of oppression, but that does not negate the fact that they all hurt and their presence become so much part of us that we tend to normalize them and downplay their impact in our lives… we need to pay attention to that pain, the spirit injury caused by the pain and how our lives get regulated invisibly by that normalized pain.

There are very few published works on Black Canadian feminist thoughts that deal with every aspect of Black women’s realities. What my work has done is to bring the Black women’s voices together and crystallize as Renie says, “our theory into a neat bundle”. Although I may question whether it is possible to create a theory that is neat, with no flaws, this work is an attempt to harness bodies of work that speak to Black Canadian feminist theory. The scarcity of Black Canadian feminist literature is also due to the fact that the Black population in Canada was not large in the past. However, in the past few decades the Black population has increased considerably. The African-Canadian population is made up of individuals from a range of places across the globe including the United States, South America, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, and Canada. In the past, African-Canadians were referred to by many different terms, such as negroes, or coloured people. Today, Black people in Canada primarily refer to themselves as Black (a political or cultural concept, not just an adjective)
or as African-Canadian (Sadlier, 1994). Black Canadians, Caribbean Canadians and African Canadians are names used for people of African ancestry who live in Canada.

Black people in Canada represent only 2% of the 33,777,304 Canadian populations (2007 Census). The majority of Black people in Canada have relatively recent origins in the Caribbean, while some trace their lineage to the first slaves brought by British and French colonists to the mainland of North America in 1605. There are few Blacks who have migrated to Canada from Africa in the last fifty years (Sadlier, 1994).

Many Canadians identify as Black even though they may have multi-ethnic ancestries (Canadian Social Trends, 2004). The Black population in Canada has encountered structural, institutional and systemic forms of oppression which either silenced or made them invisible (Tastsoglou, 2002: 93; Mensah, 2002).

Blacks and other Canadians often draw a distinction between those of Caribbean ancestry and those of African descent, which sometimes results in controversy around the terms used to label and identify the Black community. Unlike in the United States, where African American is the most widely accepted term, Blacks of Caribbean origin in Canada largely reject the term African Canadian as an elision of their Caribbean heritage.

In the mainstream feminist movement, Black women did not have a public voice, and as a result of this exclusion, Black women developed their own strategies for social resistance. Like many other social movements stemming from modernity, the mainstream feminist movement which was once rather unified has undergone fragmentation over the past decades due to its inability to transcend the limits of race, class, and sexuality (Segal, 2002).

THEORY AND LITERATURE

When I think of Black feminism in Canada I can’t think about it without how I am leading my own life...in terms of my community and connecting with other people and building relationships... I am not sure whether that is called Black feminism... or whatever... for me it is more than a name... it is my search for meaning in life, which I think is what any theory should help you be able to do...not just understanding things cognitively but speak to your soul. I honestly think I was born a feminist what I am learning now is just putting the icing on the cake because....some of the strategies I have used whether in my relationships or ...with males within my family...I have been a black feminist and I have always used it (Rudia, tape1:P1: 2005).

Many have voiced their discontent and disagreement over the use and application of “feminism”. For Rudia, feminism is more than just a name, it is her “search for meaning in life”, because according to her, she was born a feminist and she has always applied it to her life. Rudia’s arguments are different from some African women’s view of feminism who argue the inapplicability of the term to wholly represent their issues.
One argument is the word itself which is of foreign importation and its ideology is a representation of White European women (Aidoo, 1998: 46; Hudson-Weems, 1998; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 9). Nfah-Abbenyi continues to argue that, accepting the word is tantamount to submitting to imperialistic conquest (1997:9) and that when “...appropriated and defined by the west, [feminism] has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism” (Kishwar, as cited in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 9). Similarly, Aihwa Ong deprecates the use of “feminism” because of its imperialistic connotation: “...[W]hen Western feminists look overseas, they frequently seek to establish their authority on the backs of non-Western women, determining for them the meanings and goals of their lives” (cited in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 9). These views are supported by Tsama, and Lisa, participants in the study who said:

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\text{what comes to mind when I hear about Black feminism, I view it as distinct from White feminism... In my view Black women have different concerns and their articulation of feminism is therefore different.} \text{" (Tsama)}
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\text{I have a lot of difficulty identifying myself as a feminist...because any form of feminism has problems with either racism or sexual orientation etc... there seems to be a conflict... somehow feminism does not speak to me... I know what Black feminism is based on what I have read and politically what I have lived. But there is something missing for me" (Lisa).}
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Secondly, the word “feminism” was originally defined by White women whose oppressions were vastly different from African women (Hudson-Weems, 1998; Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997; Steady, 1987). The oppression experienced by Black women cannot be identified within the paradigm of Western feminism. While Western women struggle against patriarchy and work equality, Black women are struggling to obtain the most basic needs, such as food or shelter for survival (Emecheta, cited in Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997: 11). African women, therefore, feel the Western feminist movement does not adequately reflect or address their experiences.

Although the polarities of thought on Black feminism by scholars and lay people alike suggest more differences than commonalities, closer examination reveals the intersections that traverse the differing perspectives. Theories that intersect provide a firm foundation for a collective and united understanding of Black Canadian feminism. While all African Canadian women experience the world they inhabit differently, they face common struggles in the Canadian context specifically, and the North American context more generally. As mentioned elsewhere (Wane, 2004), 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, Black women’s experiences at school, at work, at home, on the streets as well as historically and those of their mothers and grandmothers.

For literature, this has led to a plethora of different writings, theorizations and articulations of the African Canadian and African American woman’s experience. For instance Linda Carty (1991), a Caribbean-born scholar who studied in Canada,
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recalls her marginalized status during her academic years, often encountering many racist and stereotyped perceptions regarding Africa and Black people and being discredited for her knowledge and experience. Sharing her experiences from her student and professorial roles as a Black woman in academia, Carty delivers a unique perception on how marginalization continues from the social context to the academic. Carty (1993), argues that since the arrival of Black women in Canada, either as slaves, runaway slaves, Caribbean, African or British immigrants, they have always been assigned lowest status of any group in Canada and this has played a role in defining their place in contemporary Canada.

Despite this, authors of “We’re Rooted Here and They Can’t Pull us up: Essays in African Canadian Women’s History,” (1993) by Peggy Bristow, Dionne Brand, Linda Carty, Afua Cooper, Sylvia Hamilton and Adrienne Shad have, documented the transhistorical presence of African Canadian women (and, to a certain degree, men) and their contribution in Canada. Peggy Bristow, coordinator of the book, assembled a unique and profoundly important collection, unparalleled in the Canadian context in the presence of black people in Canada. Dionne Brand is an African-Canadian author, activist, scholar and poet, explored Black women’s contribution to the labour market. Linda Carty, as mentioned above, assembled her own important collection on absence and presence of Black women in the academy and in particular their contribution to the field of Black feminism in Canada.

Afua Cooper an academic, writer and historian looked at specific histories of Black women and their contribution. Cooper’s other writing has explored the life of one of Canada’s first Black educators in “Black Women and Work in Nineteenth-Century Canada West: Black Woman Teacher Mary Bibb”. Her research on Mary Bibb and her fight to open a school for Black children reveals the tenacity of Black women. In her work, Cooper shows how much Black Canadians craved to have an education despite the fact that there was very little financial aid from the provincial government to assist in the education of Black children. By maintaining an inequitable education system, the government ensured the Black Canadians remain on the lowest levels of society. Without education, Black people would face more difficulties and challenges in elevating their status and eradicating racism.

Sylvia Hamilton, in addition to her writing, has produced and directed a number of groundbreaking films about the history of African peoples in this country; films which stand alone in the breadth and scope of the information presented. Films such as: Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia; The Little Black School House; or Black Mother Black Daughter just to name a few. Adrienne Shadd (1994) captures the neglected history of Black women who participated in the Underground Railroad (UGRR). These women were frequently overshadowed by the valour of Harriet Tubman who contributed to the freedom of the female fugitives fleeing from the bonds of servitude. When American legislature outlawed the overseas slave trade in 1807, the case to maintain Black slave women became more pressing, as these women were the reproducers for the slave capital. The economic loss of a slave woman would be a blow for the slave owner for his future slave capital would
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disappear (Ibid: 62). Those, (especially women), who risked their lives aiding the Black slaves knew the dire consequences—imprisonment, torture, or worse, death—if caught. Shadd also, represented Black people issues by initiating one of the earliest newspaper publications by and on Black people’s issues.

In addition to the above feminist writers, there has been some literature which has focused primarily on Black feminism in Canada including “African Canadian Feminisms: Back to the Drawing Board,” (2002), a book that I edited with Erica Lawson, Katerina Deliovsky. In this book the various chapters explore different topics ranging from the absence of Black women’s voice in mainstream feminism, issues in the Academy, to the interlocking systems of oppression of Black women. Dominique, Riviere, D. (2004), a young and upcoming feminist wrote on “Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of Herself: Some Thoughts on Canadian Feminisms”. In this article, she is searching for a place to locate her voice within the feminist writing. In light of these varied contributions made by Black Canadian women, I have come to identify how they have articulated issues of black women in Canada as a separate discourse from mainstream feminism.

It is from the experiences and wealth of knowledge of African Canadian women that I draw in my work to create a coherent Black Canadian feminist theoretical framework to identify, name, interpret, and write about this meaning making in Black women. Therefore, writing from a Canadian context I assert that Black feminism is a tool for analyzing the social world; it is an epistemology that seeks to provide a voice for women who are not represented in mainstream feminism, which is based on the experiences of White, middle-class, heterosexual women whose lived experiences are analyzed without interrogation of race or color, ability, religion, language etc. Further I state that, “Black feminist thought is … meant to elucidate and analyze the historical, social, cultural and economic relationships of women of African descent as a basis for development of a liberatory praxis” (p. 38). Stasiulis (1991) observed that Black feminism “… conveys and conceptualizes the historical circumstances of Black women and other women of color” (p. 282).

Although works focusing exclusively on the US paradigm are largely beyond the scope of this work, some important scholarship on Black feminism has come from United States of America such as “Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,” by Patricia Hill Collins (1990). This is a ground breaking and impeccably researched book, essential for understanding Black feminism in the US. It is important to note that, some of the participants in my project frequently made reference to Collins’ work, and expressed the need to have a Black Canadian book that provides a coherent material of Black Canadian feminism. Other works include bell hooks (1992), who explores different topics in her writing including, violence, marginalization, Black feminism etc. On the question of violence, hooks notes, the violence Black women exhibit towards other Black women in one of her group discussions. Of interesting note, many of the Black women expressed how they had received continuing care from other Black women and often, this care provoked feelings of pain and alienation, rather than soothing
them. “Among black women, such deeply internalized pain and self-rejection informs the aggression inflicted on the mirror image—other black women” (p. 42). The violence that occurs between Black women is a reflection of the suppressed rage that a Black woman keeps bottled inside. Black women constantly receive messages of self-hate then direct their hostility towards other Black women (p. 43).

Again in terms of spirit murder or spirit injury, both Williams (1997) and Wing (1997) identify “spirit injury”, covert or overt forms of violence upon one’s spirit, as a form of violence. Discrimination and prejudice are some of the contributors to spirit injury (Williams 1997). While spirit injury is not as readily apparent as assault or murder, it nonetheless harms a person if the injury is deep or continuously strikes one’s spirit. When Black people are asked to distance themselves from White mainstream society, they injure their spirit. Williams provides the case in which White shopkeepers have installed buzzers at the entrance to their shops for control and security measures and have asked Black people to put themselves in the White shopkeeper’s shoes. Through this distancing, Williams argues that it is a form of spirit injury as the self and the identity permit others to make values and judgments that ultimately harm the individual. “…relinquishing the power of individual ethical judgment to a collective ideal risks psychic violence, an obliteration of the self through domination by an all-powerful other” (p. 233).

In addition to spirit injury, “spirit murder” means the death of one’s spirit and body. Williams uses the case of a 67 year-old Black arthritic Bronx woman, Eleanor Bumpurs, who was shot and killed by one of the three officers at the scene. Questioning the fatal killing, Williams characterizes this murder by a gun as the final bullet to an already ‘dead body’. While violence in any form is injurious, the spirit injuries of emotional or psychological violence are effectively hidden. When violence, particularly a ceaseless and protracted case, is internalized, it festers and spills over into feelings of rage, despair, or hopelessness. Wing offers hope for those who experience spirit injury but often, it takes great perseverance and strength from the individual and support from the community to begin the first steps in healing spirit injury.

CURRENT VOICES FROM THE WELL: BLACK CANADIAN FEMINIST THOUGHT

As mentioned earlier, 400 women participated in this project. The themes that emerged from the study ranged from discrimination, to various forms of resistance, spirituality, resilience, agency etc. However, in this section I focus on two fundamental themes that continuously arise in my research findings: The first is the struggle against dominant and dominating histories. This is clearly articulated in the following quote by Enora:

*It is a troublesome thing for dominant structures of knowledge when Black women begin to produce knowledge by and about ourselves, claim subjectivities, and presume to know that we are the experts of our own experiences. There are risks involved, and accusations of essentialism are not uncommon. 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. This was my experience in the Black Feminist Thought course, which brought together this collection of reading. 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. In her book *Fighting Words*, Patricia Hill-Collins asks, “What challenges confront Black women in fields where the absence of Black women is central to the discipline’s definition of itself as a science?” (1995:105). For me, any debates or discussion on what constitutes Black Canadian feminist theory provides answers to this crucial question in some way. (Tape 2:1:2004)

African Canadians, in general, and African Canadian Women, in particular, find themselves excluded from the content and processes of mainstream Canadian history. Absent are not only the contributions of African peoples here and abroad, but also the narratives of struggle of those peoples. Many Canadians, for instance, are unaware that slavery ever occurred in Canada.

The task of excavating the histories of traditionally muted subjects has by no means been an easy one. The ruling class that is constituted through the hegemony of White male patriarchy, controls the production of knowledge and processes of validation and affirmation in our society. This community of “experts” has the power to define and give credibility to other forms of knowing. It has translated into a situation where marginalized people consistently encounter major obstacles in the advancement of their knowledges.

This strategically constructed blind spot in Canadian history is so wide it often denies the very existence of Africans as being among Canada’s founding peoples. Indeed as the Native populations were systemically murdered and colonized, the French and the British were not the only newcomers to “Canada”. Indeed, for as long as European Whites have been in North America, so have African Blacks (Speaks, 1994).

The second recurring theme is the notion of identity formation within the strategically de-historicized society and how an oppressive system can be injurious to the spirit. The notions of where we come from and how we are historically situated are crucial to how we understand and articulate our identity. Identity formation thus takes place in a historical and transhistorical context. According to Magi,

*In Canada we are denied access to our own history...our history is never taught in schools – yes, during the history month, slavery stories are told and we hear a lot about different heroes and sheroes, but nothing about our African histories, pre-colonial histories, etc. and this causes us to experience displacement when forming our identities*” (Magi Tape 4: 2005).
Further, by virtue of our relationship to oppression, we navigate a world which has already passed judgment on the nature and content of our identity. In understanding the way African-Canadian women struggle in identity formations, it is important to consider the notion of spirit injury and address it in order to operationalize Black Feminist theory for the Canadian context. To understand this, one needs to look at theoretical articulations as well as lived experiences of African Canadian women. One woman (Angelina), with whom I spoke to, describes her struggles in the ‘professional’ world in relation to her identity and fleshes out some of the ideas expressed above:

*My first job after law school was on Bay Street. After that I went to the crown attorney’s office as an assistant crown attorney. With a name like Angelina Powell nobody knows who you are and presumed I [was] White. I walk in and the challenges that I faced with sitting on the other side of that table was winning them over, somehow getting the blindness off. It became a real challenge for me and I am not sure if I am communicating to you clearly but when I walk in there and sit down they see a Black woman and with that label comes all their experiences not mine. So the challenge, when I met them was to get them to see me (p. 38–40 - L Group 2).*

Angelina is describing the lived reality here of mediating what W.E.B Du Bois (1997) called ‘second sight’, or ‘double consciousness’. In this scenario, Angelina is forced to mediate between the way she understands herself and her abilities, and the way her colour and gender are read by the White faces looking on. The people interviewing Angelina were not seeing her, but seeing a Black woman. For Angelina, she wanted them to see her and not a Black woman. This demonstrates the potential impact of oppression on identity formation. She continues her description:

*I smiled a lot even when the inappropriate questions were asked. Some of those inappropriate questions would pierce my soul. How come you speak so well? Or what made you go to law school and do you think you ever get to practice? I don’t know how I smiled through them but you somehow manage to smile through them and save the tears for the drive home, crying that you have not gotten the job because you weren’t able to win them over. So the negative part of being a Black woman is that extra bit of effort that you have to put forward just to be able to get them to look at you.*

Angelina points to the spirit injury caused by the navigation of gendered and racialized processes she is forced to inhabit at a disadvantage, due to the ways her body is read. Through all of this, Angela maintains a sense of discomfort which is not easily read or even recognized by the interviewer. Even though her eventual job offer comes at a high emotional price, she feels obliged to demonstrate that indeed strong intelligent and capable Black women are by no means an oddity. She says:

*So, the positive and somewhat negative for me is that I am so Canadianized that I was given a chance - a rope was thrown to me and the rope was a job*
offer. They said “You are somewhat different from what we expected. You are actually kind of interesting. I think you will be neat to have around but not because of what is on the paper.” Because I am an oddity. Because I am really not what a common Black woman is in their eyes, and that is one of the hard things because unfortunately if that’s the crack; if that’s the chance they have given me, I am going to go for it even though it changed me. I have to take that chance. It would have been nice for them to take a chance on me because of my potential not because I am different from what they expected of a Black woman. They think I will fit in, in spite of being Black.

Angelina is working, against her will, with the dominant notion of a “common” Black woman. This is not a position she has chosen, but it is none the less a mental, physical and spiritual position with which she is forced to contend. As with many of the women whose voices I’ve had the opportunity and privilege to hear, Angelina resists these strictures and holds herself accountable to her community in as much as she works to dispel the strategic misconceptions she encounters in her professional life. These experiences or power imbalances are common in most spaces within the Canadian landscape, and in particular the academy as articulated by Jane:

In the academy there is double weight on our shoulders… at our university our discussion is centered around critical race theory… these theories we work with sometimes they challenge us and sometimes they enable us to make sense of what is happening within the academy or even at work… but some other times, these theories cannot explain why for instance we get discriminated against or why we oppress each other… there is something missing for me… I am not questioning what that something is… that is why I said, my whole life is a journey of political consciousness… I am searching for answers to the inequalities in our society, racism, sexism … name them all… I need answers and solutions as well… I guess we need to start somewhere – theories – is it?

Jane is problematizing the power dynamics of theory, reality, and the need to explore Canada’s deeper imperial past and present, and its construction of the “other” within its borders (Wekker, 2004). It is quite clear we need to nurture a theory that operates within, between and beyond the academic frameworks or even the nation-state framework. This is crucial for Black Canadian theory that seeks to theorize from the vantage point of women who must negotiate how they will engage the Canadian nation state as women who have been constructed in a particular way.

The voices of the women in my research interrogated the politics of Diaspora, demonstrated an understanding of the intersections between race, gender, class, sexual orientation, sexuality ethnicity. The women interrogation and understanding speaks to the works of Brah (1996) who shows us the complexity of the dynamics of the politics of Diaspora, sense of belonging and identity. According to Brah (1996), the concept of Diaspora is “an interpretive frame for analyzing the economic, political and cultural modalities of historically specific forms of migrancy” (p. 16).
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This concept offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins while taking account of a homing desire, as distinct from a desire for a home. The women’s words, expressed their struggles with the sense of being part of Canada and their voices provide the collective struggle which provides the bedrock for collective memory (Brah, 1996). The following dialogue between two respondents fleshes out the relevance of multiple subject locations:

Rudia:

My identity has been shaped by my socio-economic class, my geographical area and my educational background. When I grew up in Jamaica race was not an issue. I did not grow up with the title of ‘African Caribbean woman.’ I just grew up as a Jamaican and that is how my identity was shaped; until I came to Canada and suddenly I found out that being a Black woman in Canada has negative stereotypes. I mean, I have always seen it on TV but to assume that people thought of you basically in derogatory terms it was rather annoying. Little comments like ‘oh you speak English so well.’ I grew up in Jamaica of course I am going to speak English. (p. 3–4, tape one, Erie and Rudia interview):

Erie: Can you say little bit about the class issues that you run into? (p. 3–4, tape one, Erie and Rudia interview):

Rudia:

Well in Jamaica, because I would be considered middle class, even getting stuff like immigration papers, I or members of my family would not have problems because we were in that social category. In Canada, I found that my race superseded my class, that is what I am judged by and people assume a lot because they see I’m Black. It has been assumed that I am docile, and I have no idea where they get that from - that I am weak. It has also been assumed that I am spoiled and unable to manage my life. I chuckle when I think of those things because nothing is further from the truth. I am not docile. I am quiet but I am not docile. I know what I want and I go after it. I can manage life. I am a survivor (p. 3–4, tape one, Erie and Rudia interview).

This is perhaps quite telling about class arrangements in Jamaica, another former British colonial project. Black women, like all women, are never one thing. In the Canadian context, class has been trumped by race for Rudia. It is easy to see why any feminist analysis which does not treat race as a central component of its analysis misses the mark as far as truly understanding the issues facing African Canadian women. Indeed any approach to understanding oppression and effecting change which does not consider a multiplicity of factors (race, class, gender, ability, sexuality etc) risks falling victim to a shallow politics of identity. The politics of identity encourages a world of essentialism. Nellie argues:

I am sure that I am part of what challenges all of us. It is that we are not simple. To be human is a complex thing. At any one time we are an intersection of so
many religious feelings intuitions, and understandings that are coming from us and that are being placed on us. What is it that we want to understand about this? I resist being put in anybody’s category: as female, as Black, as being overweight any of those things. Anything that you could perhaps point at and say ‘Oh, she is that’ is dangerous because I am also ‘this’ and I am ‘that’ too’ (14–15, A, Group one).

This brings up the notion of categories and categorization. African Canadian women face a crisis of definition. It is of the utmost importance that when categorization is necessary, it is we who choose the category and not the category that chooses us. While some women use intersectionality to self-locate and identify it as a path toward accountability, other women point to the challenges and potential limitations of the integrative approach as articulated by Anana:

I remember a woman sitting on a panel speaking to women of color and giving her analysis; she said ‘hearing all this stuff about intersectionality of identities, you know my identities are not like a street you stop at a crosswalk and the intersection changes.’ She said ‘I only need to look at myself for an example of how identities exist and I look at my hair, I look at my skin, at my life - interwoven because there is always the relationship. It is not linear and like everybody who has previously presented said it is.’ I was moved by her words. We need a common denominator and a common language (p. 26–27 – L, group one).

The link between gender, race and economic violence is present in the Canadian context today. This is to say that the construction of each subject location comes in conjunction with the construction of the others. The case of so-called ‘new Canadians’ demonstrates this point, as gender-coded and race-coded behavior are expected to ‘justify’ one’s presence in Canada. Monique addresses this point:

I wasn’t aware of racism at all when I came to Canada... It was not that obvious... one needs to live here to make sense of it...however I felt the brunt of racism when I tried to find a place to live.... (p. 3 – C, group one)

Newcomers to Canada learn it the hard way about the race and racism. Where racism is present, the racialized newcomer is asked to chalk it up to a general intolerance of the foreign body. Monique speaks of her experience of renting an apartment in downtown multicultural Toronto:

My friend Mary used to make the phone calls for me when she saw adverts listing rooms for rent because people assumed from my accent that I could not afford an apartment. She would make the phone call and they said “yes $25,” that was very common. Once I knocked on the door though, and showed my face and asked “do you have the room for rent?” they would slam the door to my face and say it’s gone. Then I began to doubt myself. I thought it must have been my English. I said “Room for rent”. They said “gone”. I would go back
to Mary and say “Mary it’s gone” and she would say “no it can’t be.” This is the area around the University of Toronto. She would say “no, it must be your imagination.”...later when she accompanied me to check the room, she found out, yes, the rooms were there, but the owners did not want to rent it out to me – a Black women... that was the first experience of racism that I faced in Canada (p. 3–4 – C, group one).

Those in positions of power and privilege have to recognize how their actions or lack thereof, maintain oppression. In the nineteenth century, Black women and their skin colour became associated with deviancy and immorality. “…Black women are constructed in terms of animals, lesbians and prostitutes” (Gilman 1986 cited in Loomba, 1998: 160). This continues today. The voices of the women in our focus groups are instructive as far as the ways these ideas are still epistemologically powerful and are still in play today. This is articulated below by Monique:

Somehow I managed to get an apartment: #6 New Brunswick Avenue. I asked the landlord to “please give me a chance”. My friend Mary came with me. He allowed me to rent but he said as a Black woman, I was not allowed to bring lots of men and this and that. Never mind bringing home men at that time. I was worried that I didn’t even have the money for my daily bread... (p. 4 – C, group one).

There are also epistemological consequences as well, when racialized newcomers are devalued on sight. This comes with a negation of many of the qualifications which one might assume afford currency in Western contexts. Phil discusses her struggle for recognition:

I have had trouble with the concept of ‘black’ for a long time. When I worked at World Vision people asked me if I went to school - of course I went to school, do you think I went to school in the bush?! I just feel like being rude. I mean for someone like me (it may be different as far as my mom’s experience here, because she also studied abroad) I did not grow up in a colonial system; I grew up in an independent system. I should be entitled to that job at World Vision. So because I come from somewhere else, people assume the best I can do is not very good. I felt like asking them, “excuse me why are you questioning my intelligence?” That is what hurts. I felt so bad when I heard people’s experiences - they have really good jobs at home (in Kenya) but the struggles they face here are extreme. I went through that an “oh gosh this is a big mistake” phase when everyone looked at me when I first came and wouldn’t recognize my education. They don’t recognize that I might be better than my manager at communicating because I am from the third world. I am immediately disqualified (p. 1–2, tape 3, P1).

The result of living through and within implicit and explicit epistemic binaries can be an internal division of oneself – between two solitudes. Within the non-dominant
community, tensions arise as well, as varying levels of integration, or more specifically various levels of performing Whiteness, can further divide people. The notion of blackness, women, race etc is a very complex debate as is advanced by Katrina below:

Because we are black women right? There are certain common experiences that are common but there are other experiences that are not common. I find that in terms of sexuality and even in terms of class that I am recognizing right now. We all have a very similar academic language. Even in terms of the way I am speaking right now, it is academic. There is something that is academic that is common here... So I feel like sometimes I make the choice, which is getting to your question...about race, class, sexuality, ability...I cannot identify with all, but with some...that make it very complex for us Black women...yes, we are raced and classed....but we should not forget what is not those identities that are not visible that are very significant to some of us. Sometimes I make the choice to champion an issue, that is the most uncomfortable,... because it is the challenge that encourages that growth. The challenge then that I have when I choose to put things on the table again and again and again. The challenge is what then are my responsibilities in that?..... So those are my thoughts...

(Tape 1 Group 1)

Black Canadian women have held on to hope and faith, and continued to struggle, survive and wage war against the oppressive forces that impact their lives to no avail. However, it would seem that the time has come for them to evoke the African philosophies of community and solidarity in order to collectively engage their cultures of struggle, exclusion and rejection. Although Black women cannot universalize Black experience, they need to make a commitment to forge intellectual and cultural linkages that are grounded in the commonality of African ancestry origin. Black women are survivors and have always played central roles in Black history as the custodians of tradition and values. Even under the most dehumanizing conditions Black women have worked to ensure the survival and well being of their peoples and their communities. And while the times have changed, they are continually confronted with new, seemingly ever-changing challenges. Yet despite the prevalence of such oppressive forces, African women have developed coping mechanisms for dealing with the violence inherent in the system, and the oppressive conditions that constitute our lives and our experience.

Black women in Canada have multifarious backgrounds, thus any understanding of identity formation in the Canadian context must involve an analysis and valuing of Black women experiences and their histories. This historical diversity of experiences brings Black women to equally varied understandings of Blackness, as evidenced in debates about what Black is, or should be. The following comment by two participants speaks to this:

I mean deep inside there is some colour stuff and you hear it but I really was not identifying with this when I was in Jamaica. I was 'from Jamaica,' that
is how I knew myself — people in my village were mixed because you know
during slavery there was a lot of mixing. They [the mixed people] considered
themselves Black too. Then I came here and all of a sudden I had to choose
between being Black, Jamaican or Canadian (p. 15–16, Enne, tape 1).

There is a certain expectation as to what Black is and if you don’t perform it
then it’s a problem. But why should others dictate to you what Black is? You are
just as much entitled to make up what Black identity is. It’s a struggle, which
you might not want to take on because God knows you have other things to
worry about like your education and the stuff that you experience at work. But
I think it is really important to be present and be given a voice (p. 50 – Lena,
group 2).

Clearly, it is crucial to bring epistemologies of colour not just into the room, but
to the forefront of dominant discourse. African Canadian women must not only
sort out diverse historic and transhistoric variations within the Diaspora, but also
must fend against dominant understandings of these histories, many of which
are pathologizing stereotypical mishistories, strategically designed to celebrate
mainstream accomplishments and epistemologies.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have provided some ideas as entry points for discussion on Black
Canadian Feminisms. Uncovering the well of Black Canadian feminist thought is
not an easy journey as the voices of the women have indicated. However, theorizing
on Black women’s lives provide the basis that informs feminism relevant to Black
women and the community they come from. The paper is based on results of a Social
Science and Humanities Research of Canada (SSHRC) funding that addressed the
gendered and racialized experiences of Black women in Canada and the interlocking
systems of oppression. Through out the paper, I have shown the wealth of knowledge
and experience of Black women in Canada and how that informs their understanding
of Black Canadian feminist thought. The arguments presented thus, provide a basis
for moving toward a holistic and definitive articulation and understanding of Black
Canadian feminism.

The arguments also indicate that there is no single standpoint from which
to theorize Black women’s experiences in Canada. The various ways in which
different oppressions interlock and intersect shape the multiple dimensions of Black
women’s” lived experiences. Additionally, the participants argued that there is no
neat pile from which Black women’s lived realities can be analyzed; everything
is intertwined and shaped by historical experiences. There was consist reference
through out the paper that Black woman cannot talk about race without making
reference to the intersectionality of gender and other identities and the complex
interplay that ensues thereafter. The notion of double or multiple intersections of
oppression dominated most of the conversations during the interview sessions.
Also, issues of difference between Continental African and African Caribbean were discussed because sometimes tensions arose during the interview sessions around the terms used to label and identify the Black community, such as Black or African. I have also shown that some Blacks of Caribbean origin in Canada largely reject the term African Canadian because they feel it is an elision of their Caribbean heritage.

The paper has also highlighted the notion that African Canadians, in general, and African Canadian Women, in particular, find themselves excluded from the content and processes of mainstream Canadian history, and hence the need to have a feminist that speaks to their own experiences. Additionally, I have argued that in order to understand identity formations of African Canadian women, it is important to consider the notion of spirit injury as a form of violence. Some of the participants who were interviewed were forced to mediate between how one understood themselves and their abilities, and the way their colour and gender were read by the society, that sometimes saw a Black woman and not the person in front of them. The voices of women who talked about this showed that, this can be a source of spirit injury.

There is a clear need for compilation of work on frameworks that speak to a theoretical understanding that can be referred to as Black Canadian feminist theory. In the Canadian context, colonial relations continue to structure the way power, privilege and punishment are exercised by and against different bodies. This is an important element of Black feminism - as part of a larger de-colonizing project. This means interrogating ourselves and the world around us.

NOTES

1 Black Canadian and African Canadian will be used interchangeably in this paper. This is because some women referred to themselves as African Canadian even though they were born in Canada or in one of the Caribbean Islands. They do acknowledge the importance of locating themselves within the African Continent although they do not know which particular countries their ancestors were taken from. They do this as a form of resistance because they feel that the purpose for creating all these multiple ways of referring to themselves is to create divisions among women of African ancestry. It is important to note that there were some women who did not want to be referred to as Africans. They said they had nothing in common with African peoples except the skin color. It was also interesting to note that some African women did not want to be referred to as Black. They said, they were not Black and only became Black when they landed in Canada, that Black is opposite of white. Later in the paper, I have taken up this debate as I reference another paper (Wane, 2009) that highlights the tension in Blackness.

2 See Marimba Ani’s book: Let the Circle be Unbroken for a discussion on who is African who is not in the Diaspora.

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AFRICAN-CANADIAN BLACK WOMEN LEADERS: IMPACTING CHANGE IN THE DIASPORA

It is useless for us any longer to sit with our hands folded, reproaching the whites; for that will never elevate us...Possess the spirit of independence...Possess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted (Maria Stewart, as cited by Collins, 1991, p. 3–4)

INTRODUCTION

Very few other groups of women have been oppressed and discriminated against like Black women. Their oppression has been contextualized based on race, gender, and class. The oppression of Black women has also been analyzed along three dimensions; first, the exploitation of their labour, for which they were brought over from Africa to work as slaves in the New World; second, the political environment that denied them the same rights and privileges that were awarded to white men; and, finally, the controlling of Black women’s images through ideological representations, which have been used as stereotypes to further subordinate them (Scarborough 1989, as cited by Collins, 1991). However, historically, Black women have always resisted and struggled against the system of oppression to obtain their rightful place in society. These struggles stimulated the minds and ideas of Black women intellectuals (Collins, 1991). Black feminists are now rewriting their histories according to their own perspectives, thus raising awareness, empowering Black women, and arousing their resistance (Collins, 1991). In Canada, African-Canadian women in the diaspora have and are using their shared knowledge to organize activism and to resist oppression. They have used it to empower themselves, and to assume leadership roles in the community. Although African-Canadian women reside on the periphery of society, they are constantly engaged in resistance and self-determination, and are constructing their lives according to the way in which they envision life for themselves. As a result, many are emerging as community leaders. This study examines this phenomenon, and specifically the lives of four outstanding African-Canadian community leaders: Ayan Hersi, Sherona Hall, Debbie Douglas, and Renee Rawlins Thomas.
This study is organized into sections as follows: The Literature Review examines the work of various researchers, academics, theorists, and educators; while the Historical Context of Black Women explores the lives of Black women from a historical context. Black Women and Resistance looks at the methods that Black women have used to resist over a period of time. This section presents an overarching portrait and historical perspective of Black Women in Canada. Black Women and Community Leadership will bring to light the important role that Black women have played as community leaders. Discussion and Conclusion summarizes the findings, and shows that Black women still face difficulties in trying to negotiate their space and place in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a lack of research on African-Canadian women leaders in the diaspora. Dujon (2010) inform us that the term diaspora, as used in the study, refers to a group of people who reside outside of their country of origin. They are often identified by their culture or identity, which is associated with their native homeland. Most African-Canadian women are immigrants, and thus diasporic, and have made Canada their homeland. Additionally, leadership, as defined in this research, is a process which involves influence, power, authority, vision, and goals. Leaders and followers engage in a relationship in order to bring about change (Daft, 2005). They often work in the best interest of their followers. Daft’s work examines leadership from the dominant perspective, and does not take into consideration leadership based on gender, race, and class.

James (2007) argues that people of African descent came to Canada as a result of “transatlantic slavery, the colonization of African geo-political systems, or the economic and civil unrest set forth by the outcomes of colonization and globalization” (p. 228). However, his work fails to examine the types of positions held by black women. Women of African descent have always needed to contend with the issue of race because of its historical connection with slavery; as a result, race has been proposed as being responsible for the marginalization and oppression of Black women in society. Galabuzi (2006) states that race is a concept that has been formulated over time within our society. Empirical research has proven that race is a social construct rather than a biological one. The perception of race is used to classify human beings according to physical characteristics such as skin colour, hair texture, and facial features. However, Galabuzi’s work does not examine black women and leadership.

Giddens (1991) and Smith (1989) argue that race can be used as a basis upon which to embrace or exclude individuals, and to apportion rewards, opportunities, and life chances. Racism has been the main source of legitimization for policies and practices which result in differentially distributed material resources and political rights according to “physical criteria”. Nevertheless, Giddens and Smith’s study is based mainly on the concept of race, and does not examine leadership.
Smith (1989) and Cell (1982) inform us that the reaffirmation of the concept of race has as much to do with contemporary lifestyles as with the legacy of colonialism. Although blatant racism is much less prevalent today, racial ideologies still exist and help to generate and sustain racial differentiation. Today’s racism is more subtle than the crude racism of colonial times, and its de facto form has proven to be more flexible. In essence, it encapsulates an interlocking system of economic institutions, social practices and customs, political power, and law and ideologies. Although today, race is still seen as a form of stratification of the economy.

Chafetz (1991) discusses that in North American societies, the concept of gender is highly contested. She posits that gender is structured based on sexual division in society. Men’s work is associated with the public sphere, while women’s is connected to the private sphere. This structure creates a separation between men and women, which perpetuates inequality. Men’s power works to create differences and inequalities in society. Most individuals are raised in ways that cause them to be exposed to gender perspectives as children. This approach is transferred to adulthood, thereby creating gender-biased behaviours. However, the research of this study was confined to gender only.

Collins (1991) argues that the concept of gender developed from the context of the middle-class American and European nuclear families. Collins further discusses that three areas of this approach are problematic to Black families. First, the ideal family is defined as a home with a heterosexual couple residing with their children in a self-contained, economically-independent household. Second, in this setting, men are employed while women take care of the children. Finally, the father is the head of the household, and the mother nurtures and guides the family. However, not all Black women identify with this type of representation.

Black feminist theory (Hill Collins, 1991; hooks, 1981; hooks, 1984) is deeply embedded within the historical experiences and ideas of black women. It gives an in-depth understanding concerning the difficulties, oppression, and complexity of their lives in society today. Black feminist theory informs us of the way in which black women’s historical context plays a significant role in their current access to leadership; this historical context is far different and more complex than that of white women. Black feminist theory, also known as Black feminist thought, is an ideology whereby “Black scholars and critics, read, analyze, and theorize” works and text that are brought forward by black women writers in spite of their “race, ethnicity, or gender” (Hinton, 2004, p. 2). Instead of raising awareness, Black feminist thought confirms and rearticulates the already existing awareness; and this awareness empowers Black women and arouses their resistance. Even so, in Canada, a country in which Blacks have resided and contributed for about four hundred years, their presence, as well as the contributions of Black women, has largely been ignored (Wane, 2002). These types of research are extremely important because they raise awareness of black women’s contribution in Canada.

Wane (2002) discusses that in contemporary society, Black women in Canada differ culturally, linguistically, sexually, and physically. Black women, along with
Black Canadian feminists, have created their own body of knowledge that is geared toward their own experiences. This demonstrates that black women are taking control of their lives, because Black women in Canada are faced with the same situation as others residing within the contemporary African diaspora: denial and invisibility.

Collins (1991) contends that Black women’s oppression is contextualized along the lines of gender, race, and class, and that their work in the economy has sparked ongoing debates within the context of social class. Collins (1991) also tells us that the word class is typically examined within the framework of economic success and social prestige. Since, historically, Black women were enslaved; their social class has been conceptualized differently from that of white women. Since their work was economically exploited, they were seen as politically powerless units of labour. Hence, black feminist theory has empowered black women to strive for leadership.

The legacy of slavery has accompanied Black women in everyday life, particularly work. According to Brewer (1993), there have been three major changes in terms of Black women’s waged labour: first, a shift from domestic to industrial and clerical work, a process that is still seen in terms of region and class; second, an assimilation of Black women into low-paying service jobs, for which the pay is insufficient to meet family needs; and third, an increase in poverty, as well as a fragmentation of Black women, children, and families. However, Brewer’s work is more situated in a United States, rather than a Canadian, perspective.

Black women have been oppressed through ideological representations such as the mammies and Jezebels (the “breeder women” of slavery), the smiling “Aunt Jemimas” on pancake mix boxes, Black prostitutes, and welfare mothers (Collins, 1991, pp. 6–7). These representations are interplayed in a system of oppression that is set within the political economy of the society. The systems of power that work to oppress Black women are multifaceted. They are made up of both structural (set up by the system) and ideological elements. The structural components work to maintain political and economic domination by men — often times white, elite men — who discriminate against racial and ethnic minority individuals and, in particular, against women (Neville & Hamer, 2001). Studies like those conducted by Collins, Neville, and Hamer cannot be ignored because they inform of the way in which representation operates in society.

In contemporary society, Black women have created their own practical and liberating sense of knowledge regarding their subordination. Black intellectual women today examine the struggles that take into consideration all of the dialectics of oppression and activism of Black women, as well as the knowledge, work, and talents of their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and sisters (Collins, 1991). Collins further discusses that Black intellectual women are reclaiming the ideas that Black women share with one another as mothers, as other-mothers (women not biologically related) in the Black community, as members of Black churches, as teachers, musicians, poets, writers, vocalists, and other artists, and using this to empower others (p. 15). Black women today are not only making history but rewriting it from their perspective. They are rediscovering themselves and their place in the
state. Consequently, African-Canadian women in the diaspora have been using their shared knowledge to organize activism and to resist oppression. They have used it to empower themselves, for community building, and to take on leadership roles in the community. These leadership roles encompass more than just holding public office; they include community building and leadership through influence, guiding others in particular directions (Genovese, 1993). But, in general, few women rise to power; because of the patriarchal system in which we live, leaders are more often men. However those who have become leaders are bent on making a difference in the community.

According to Wane (2002), a number of Black women leaders have contributed significantly to society. For instance, former Ontario Member of Provincial Parliament (Canada) (MPP) and educator, Zanana Akande, has championed education awareness among Black Canadians. Dr. Miriam Rossi, a medical doctor and professor at the University of Toronto, co-founded the Summer Mentorship Program for Black children at the University of Toronto, a program which has been highly successful.

Black women, as well as Black women leaders, have used spirituality as an instrument to fight oppression and bring about change in the community. Spirituality (connection with a greater force in the universe) has provided them with the inner strength to criticize as well as to reconstruct against racism, classism, sexism, and the “potential bondage of embracing feelings of self-degradation, hopelessness and bitterness” that have plagued the community (Dantley, 2005, p. 655). Over time, Black women leaders have used spirituality to create, examine, and transform negative situations that continuously plague their community.

In other words, spirituality has been used as pedagogy (method of teaching/examining situations) to fight oppression and to liberate the oppressed. Freire (1970) posits that the only way in which the oppressed can achieve their goal of transformation from their dehumanization is through “pedagogy” (p. 33). He further discusses that this pedagogy will make oppression, as well as its causes, the subject of reflection by those who are oppressed; and out of that reflection will emerge a suitable engagement for liberation.

Black women leaders often recognize the situation in the community, and use their knowledge in various capacities to advocate for change in society (DeLany & Rogers, 2004). DeLany and Rogers contend that most Black women leaders take on their roles because there is no representative to effectively address the issues and injustices that confront their community. They also take on leadership roles because of their belief in their own capabilities, and because they believe that they can create better solutions to address the problems that surround them. Meanwhile, research on Black women leaders has been undertaken more within an American (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Parker, 2005) than an African-Canadian context. However, African-Canadian researcher Johncilla (2006) examined Black women leaders in Canada from an indigenous perspective, while the work of Braithwaite and Ireland (1993) and Sadlier (1994) provided biographical information about Black women leaders.
in Canada. In attempting to set up a conceptual framework of African-Canadian women leaders, some empirical research will be borrowed from U.S studies. The work of African-Canadian women leaders will be examined within the concept of gender, race, and class. The study incorporates a theoretical framework of black feminist theory and black feminist thought and spirituality. It will explore the work of Sherona Hall, Debbie Douglas, and Rawlins Thomas. The study contends that Black women leaders still face difficulties in trying to negotiate their space and place in Canadian society.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF BLACK WOMEN

Harriet was now left alone . . . She turned her face toward the north, and fixing her eyes on the guiding star, and committing her way unto the Lord, she started again upon her long, lonely journey. She believed that there were one or two things she had a right to, liberty or death (Harriet Tubman: The Moses of Her People, para. 2).

Black women have undertaken leadership roles throughout history. In 1849, after escaping slavery in the United States, Harriet Tubman, a Black spiritual woman, made about nineteen trips back to the south, where she smuggled more than three hundred slaves to freedom from the United States into Canada, in what has come to be known as the “Underground Railroad” (Towards Confederation-Influence of the American Civil War, para. 1) Throughout history, Black women have fought to attain their freedom, independence, and dignity in society, in the attempt to eliminate the effects of slavery and oppression. Over time, these women have experienced four major life-changing transitions, which left legacies that continue to influence the lives of their community. The first transition was being brought to the United States to work as slaves in the cotton fields, and as domestic servants in the “master’s” house. For most of these women, this transition included a total loss of their personal freedom, and they consequently had to restructure their lives (Walter, 1995, pp. 572–573).

The second major change in the history of Black women was emancipation by means of which Blacks were freed from slavery. Although they were free, Black women occupied a very demeaning and restrictive position in society (Walter, 1995). This position would take them from their roles in the agricultural industry into domestic work. Higginbotham (as cited in Collins, 1991, p. 55) argues that studies in the United States indicate that in 1910, 38.5% of all Black women who were employed were domestic workers; by 1940, this number had increased to almost 60%. As domestic workers, Black women were oppressed and economically exploited, even under the best situations. Rollins (as cited in Collins, 1991, p. 57) recalls that, even though she was present in the room, her employer behaved as though she was invisible: “To Mrs. Thomas and her son, I became invisible; their conversation was as private with me, the Black servant, in the room as it would have been with no one in the room.”
Third, Black women later found work in specific industries, but these jobs often restricted them to the bottom of the economic market (Collins, 1991). Discrimination played a major role in the companies’ hiring patterns. Today, Black women are more often employed in service jobs such as maintenance, janitorial, cleaning, and restaurant work, including jobs as cooks, counter workers, and cashiers. They were and continue to be employed as personal service workers, orderlies, aides, babysitters, and housekeepers in nursing homes, child care facilities, and residential homes for the handicapped (Woody, 1992).

Finally, portraying Black women as “mammies”, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and “hot mommas” has also contributed to factors of oppression. The mammy, seen as the faithful, obedient domestic servant, reinforces the “connection” between Black women and domestic service. Depicting Black women as matriarchs allows society’s dominant groups to think that Black women are responsible for the failure or success of their children, and assumes that Black poverty can be passed down in families. These perspectives cause one to overlook the political and economic inequalities that affect Black mothers and their children. Rather, Black women are blamed for their own situations (Collins, 1991).

Images of Black welfare mothers provide the justification that interlocks the systems of race, gender, and class oppression. Black women are often seen as lazy and not passing on good work ethics to their children. They are often portrayed as being unmarried, with a number of children and no male figure to assist them, thus reinforcing the notion that a woman’s true and financial security is founded in a heterosexual relationship (Collins, 1991). The image of the “hot momma” (Jezebel), or sexually aggressive woman, has been prominent in elite white male images of Black women, because attempts to control Black women’s sexuality have been strongly connected to Black women’s oppression. Black women portrayed as Jezebels came about during slavery, when Black women were seen as “sexually aggressive wet nurses” (Collins, 1991, p. 77).

Conversely, in order to be in control, elite white men must put in place representations that manipulate certain symbols associated with Black women. This representation or stereotype does not reflect or stand for things that are realistic; its main purpose is to disguise or mystify objective social relations (Collins, 1991). These images are interwoven in a way that makes racism, sexism, and poverty look natural, normal, and a part of everyday life. Even though Black women’s lives are not what the images portray them to be, the stereotypes are central in keeping Black women oppressed, and in maintaining the system of race, class, and gender oppression. These images and stereotypes classify Black women as “outsiders” or strangers in society. As a result, they are seen as “other” in society; in other words, as individuals who are a threat to the moral social order. At the same time, Black women are actually essential for the survival of society. According to Collins (1991), they are the ones who are on the periphery of society, and consequently, delineate its boundaries. Thus, oppression has also allowed Black women to take control of their lives, because they see themselves as unfinished products; products that
must constantly reinvent themselves in relation to the surrounding, ever-changing conditions.

BLACK WOMEN AND RESISTANCE

For most Black women, spirituality has been instrumental in their process of personal reinvention. It is regarded as a connection to a life force, a higher power of purpose, a great mystery, or a greater meaning in life. It also gives them a sense of wholeness, healing, and a connection to life in this world (Wane, 2007). Spirituality has been used as a form of resistance, connection, and identity. Over the years, it has also been used as a tool to combat, analyze, make sense of, and develop ways and means of finding solutions to problems in society. It has provided Black women with the inner strength to criticize and reconstruct against racism, classism, and sexism, and the “potential bondage of embracing feelings of self-degradation, hopelessness and bitterness” that have plagued the Black community (Dantley, 2005, p. 655). According to Dantley, it has been used as pedagogy to bring about changes to the negative nihilism that has continuously denigrated their communities. In essence, Black women leaders have used spirituality as an impetus to create, heal, innovate, and transform degenerating conditions with which they had to contend. Wane (2007) contends that spirituality has always been the bedrock upon which Black women have built their homes and communities.

Combined with notions of spirituality, Black feminists are equipping Black women with the knowledge and leadership skills to enable them to challenge race, gender, and class oppression. Hooks (as cited in Collins, 1991) argues that oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, and telling their story. Black women are now resisting their oppressive conditions by equipping themselves with knowledge that has been produced by their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and by Black intellectual women in the community. Consequently, they are defining themselves as different from the writings of the dominant group, denouncing notions that have been written about them, doing away with negative stereotypes, and embracing knowledge that has been written for them by other Black women. According to Reynolds (2002), an increasing amount of literature and academic texts that address certain aspects of Black women’s lives is being produced. Patrice L. Dickerson posits that “a person comes into being and knows herself by her achievements, and through her efforts to become and know herself, she achieves” (as cited in Collins, 1991, p. 35).

Black women want to voice their experiences and collectively organize themselves around key issues, such as motherhood, family, education, employment, and community activism (Reynolds, 2002). This would not be possible had it not been for the help of Black feminist theory. Black feminist theory has been the foundation upon which thought and action have merged to bring about change in the community. Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) argues that Black feminist theory has brought forth Black women’s issues as a vital category of analysis, taking into consideration sociological,
cultural, political, anthropological, historical, as well as other implications. Black feminist theory has been used to empower the lives of Black women, as well as to help fight oppression and various forms of discriminatory practices.

Reynolds (2002) contends that Black women can organize themselves, locally and even on small-scale levels, to challenge discriminatory situations and practices in their employment conditions in an effort to bring about change. For instance, Black women in Britain who were employed as manual workers in a factory successfully organized themselves to challenge their working hours, and to have these hours changed by the factory manager. By so doing, they were able to pick their children up from school and spend more time with them. Black women have used their concerns to organize themselves to change their communities. In the United States, the concept of “community mothering” has been taken up by both Black women and women of other races in local communities to address the welfare concerns of children, and to develop related welfare programs. This was done even though these women had no biological connection to the children (Reynolds, 2002). The women’s primary focus was the well-being of these children: seeing to it that the children’s needs were met. A similar situation in Britain demonstrated Black women’s desire to resist oppression, and to help improve the lives of Black children. In one particular case, upon realizing the high rate of underachievement among school age Black children, a number of Black women established and tutored the children in supplementary Saturday school sessions (Reynolds, 2002) which made a significant difference in the lives of those children. Evidence from these studies indicate that the primary focus of many of these women is to develop and deploy strategies to challenge racial inequality in their lives, their children’s lives, the community, as well as in society.

BLACK WOMEN IN CANADA

African-Canadians have been in Canada for a long time, but their contributions have been largely ignored. Canadian scholars have written extensively about the English and French, but they have excluded non-European populations from their research. Since Black history has not been present in the work of Canadian scholars, Black women’s lives and experiences have not been revealed in their entirety. Dionne Brand (1991) argues that African-American Black women, such as Harriet Tubman, are highlighted much more than African-Canadian women. Additionally, Black history in Canada is defeminized and, to a lesser extent, demasculinized: Black women’s experiences in Canada are not as distinguished from that of Black men as they are in the United States. Brand further discusses that Blacks in Canada also worked as slaves, and, after slavery, Black women were employed as domestic workers. They also worked in the fields, and attended to livestock to make a living and take care of their children, family, and grandchildren in a racially stratified society.

Life was certainly difficult for most Black women in Canada, who were totally excluded from a number of positions of power. Nevertheless, they found ways of resisting systematic racism and sexism. For instance, in 1951, Addie Aylestock
became an ordained minister of the British Methodist Episcopal Church, when it was impossible to become a female minister (Brand, 1991). Moreover, although Black women did not generally hold positions of power in most Black churches, they were, nonetheless, the driving force of these churches. They worked in missions, visiting the sick, and raising money for those in need in both Canada and Africa. Black women worked tirelessly to organize the social life of the Black community (Brand, 1991). In 1882, with the help of the Women’s Home Missionary Society in the Baptist church, Mary Branton — a Baptist missionary who was born in 1860 in Chatham, Ontario — became a founder of a school in South Africa. She later went on to do missionary work in Liberia. Additionally, Mary Ann Shadd, a former teacher who was educated by the Quakers, was the editor of her own newspaper, Provincial Freeman, and an outspoken critic in the community. In 1855, she wrote a cynical report directed at Black men who were criticizing her role as a community spokeswoman. She wrote in her lingo: “It is fit that you should deport your ugliest to a woman. To coloured women, we have ‘broken the Editorial Ice’ for your class in America; so go to Editing, as many of you as are willing and able” (Brand, 1991, p. 19). Further, she wrote extensively about Black settlers. She assumed that these settlers, as individuals and as a group, should be integrated into the community to work as soon as possible, and should not be dependent on charity (Tulloch, 1975). During her time, Shadd stood as a pillar in her community, and worked tirelessly on behalf of Blacks.

Blacks are extremely diversified in contemporary Canadian society. The text Multicultural Canada (Africans, 2008) indicates the community is made up of individuals who differ culturally, physically, and linguistically. It includes people who were brought to Canada as slaves in the 17th and 18th centuries, former slaves from the United States who arrived between the American Revolution and the Civil War, free American immigrants, people from the Caribbean, and those who came directly from Africa. When people refer to “African-Canadians” in Toronto, they are generally referring to Blacks who immigrated from Africa and the Caribbean. In the Canada 2001 Census report, Blacks made up the third largest ethnic group in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and Black women made up 18% of racialized individuals (Galabuzi, 2006).

One important feature of Caribbean migration is the pattern of women immigrating alone. In 1998, the ratio of men to women was 0.83 (Henry, 1994). Henry further discusses that this imbalance, particularly in the early years of Caribbean migration to Canada, was a result of the government-run domestic labour scheme, in which women were allowed to enter the country as domestic workers. These women were allowed to remain in Canada on condition that they work for a designated employer, while European domestic workers entered Canada as landed immigrants (Bakan, 1997). The text Multicultural Canada (Caribbean Peoples) indicates that they were strongly stimulated by the pull factors of the demand for labour in North America, and the push factors of high unemployment in the Caribbean. From 1986 to 1996, the number of racialized women increased from 800,000 to 1.6 million in Canada,
and in 1996, they made up 11% of all women. Black women make up 18% of that group (Galabuzi, 2006).

African-Canadian women’s identity, and their “cultural traditions as colonized people, created and maintained the ideal situation for ‘otherness’ prior to and upon arrival at Canadian borders” (Massaquoi & Wane, 2007, p. 77). Various images of Black women during the time of slavery inspire the ideological aspect of Black women’s oppression (Collins, 1991). Black women’s oppression has been centered on exploitation of Black women’s labour, “ghettoization” in service jobs, and the economic dimension of oppression (Collins, 1991, p. 6).

African-Canadian women have the lowest income in comparison to the general population, and are more likely to be poor (Smith, 2000; Ornstein, 2000; CASW, 2006; Massaquoi & Wane, 2007). Interestingly, an increasing number of female-headed families in Canada are headed by Black women. A report by Statistics Canada based on the 2001 Census indicated that more than half of all Canadian Black children lived in a single-parent home; 46% of Black children under the age of 14 lived with one parent as compared to 18% of other children (More Black Children Live in One-Parent Homes, para. 2). A large number of Black single mothers live in neighbourhoods made up of a large proportion of recent immigrants and neighbourhoods that are subject to a high rate of poverty and crime. A 1995 income report on women of African, Black, and Caribbean origin indicated that, on average, these women earned CDN $15,000, in comparison to European women who earned CDN $25,000 (Khosla, 2003). Black women’s work is often caught up in a racially segmented labour market, the capitalist structure of gender differences, issues of race, and class segmentation. They experience more unemployment, poverty, and racial discrimination, and can be found more often in certain types of employment categorized as “women’s work” in comparison to white women.

Black Canadian feminist theorists acknowledge that in order to understand what it is to be Black, female and a member of the Canadian state, one must take into consideration the global economic and political situation that is responsible for the movement of Black women across borders (Massaquoi & Wane, 2007). Additionally, the Canadian state is organized based on struggles of capitalist development, gender, and class formation, and the radicalization of the Canadian economy. More so, the country organized itself on gendered bodies, particularly with the increase in the numbers of transnational Black women. To be Black, female, and a member of the Canadian state also calls for certain types of privilege and certain types of experiences of migration over others, in that Black women who are mainly from third world countries are not given the same opportunities as white women of European ancestry. These differences are solely based on how an individual or a group of individuals come to this country, their country of origin, and their time of arrival (Massaquoi & Wane, 2007).

Therefore, African-Canadian perspectives on gender take into consideration culture, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, oppression from the legacy of slavery, class, imperialism, modern-day neo-colonialism, apartheid, colonization, and decolonization (Massaquoi & Wane, 2007).
BLACK WOMEN AND COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Black Canadian feminism provides an ongoing analysis of the existence of Black women in a white patriarchal society. Black women are now using the principles of Black Canadian feminism as tools to equip themselves to resist racism and oppression; and, by resisting; many are now becoming leaders in their communities. In society, the leaders who are most successful are usually those who take full advantage of their opportunities, their skills, institutional power, the immediate situation, the timing of power, and the political culture. Men typically hold more positions of power than women; Genovese (1993) states that only .005% of world leaders were women. This is simply because thoughts of leadership have been centred on the great man approach, which is based on a male model of leadership (Northhouse, 2001). These factors have been proposed as contributing to women’s underrepresentation in the public sphere: political socialization, situation/structural factors, and active discrimination against women. However, when a Black woman is in leadership, particularly at the highest level of decision making, issues of gender and race are always at the forefront. When a leader is “obviously different” from mainstream society, it calls for a particular type of scrutiny, test, and proposals. The individual is scrutinized, criticized, and challenged more than white males or individuals from mainstream society.

Despite the barriers with which Black women are confronted, many of them have achieved outstanding leadership positions in their communities. Most have taken on their roles because of the lack of a representative who effectively addresses issues that confront the Black community, and the injustices with which they are faced. They also take on the leadership roles because of belief in their own capacities, and that they can create solutions to their problems. Their knowledge and capabilities are used in various capacities to advocate for change (DeLany & Rogers, 2004). Even though Black women may not reside in a particular community, because they identify and understand the needs of the community, they are committed to bringing about change to that community. James (1993) contends that belonging is not connected to one’s physical proximity. Even though one may not reside in the neighbourhood within which he/she was born, one tends to keep the locus deep within him/her because of shared connection, because the people in the neighbourhood tend to be seen as their “family” or “people” (p. 112), and this is simply the case with black women leaders.

Black women leaders tend to use their influence to empower others, encourage the development of their community, analyze problems, propose solutions, as well as to take collective action to work on behalf of the common good in society. Ayan Hersi, an immigrant from Somalia, is a typical example. Hersi has won several awards — including the 2008 YWCA Young Woman of Distinction, and the Flare Magazine Volunteer and Canadian Urban Institute Leadership Awards — for her work in raising AIDS awareness (Javed, 2008). During her years at university, she became a well-known and influential advocate for the empowerment of youth both
locally and internationally. After her graduation, she spent most of the summer working with the United Nations Development Program in Namibia, Kenya, and Somalia on the issue of AIDS awareness. Whilst in Africa, she was the head of the human rights training program for women and youth. During her stay, she developed a project that gave women between the ages of 15 and 24 the opportunity to talk about elusive issues such as sex, HIV, homosexuality, and domestic violence, using theatre and art. By so doing, she became a key player in influencing public policy and inspiring change. Hersi’s work, which has touched and transformed many lives, has now been produced through videos, and distributed throughout Canada and Africa (Javed, 2008).

In contemporary society, Black women leaders are seen as role models, and their work is used as a learning tool to help educate others in the community. It is evidently clear that the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of former slaves in the Canadian diaspora are using various forms of oppression that their ancestors experienced as a stimulus for crafting and passing on the subjugated knowledge of Black women’s culture of resistance (Collins, 1991). Black women, as agents of change, are now scholars, teachers, politicians, professors, community builders, and the list goes on. Through their work, they have created authenticity in their communities, and have transformed lives through the principles of Black feminism in a number of ways, such as mutual stretching, community mothering, resistance, collectivism, self-determination, and promoting revolutionary visions.

Although, Black women leaders have done outstanding work in various contexts in the community, none stands out like Sherona Hall. Hall was born in Jamaica, and was influenced by the teaching of Marcus Garvey from a very early age. In her native country, she became very much involved in community activism. Upon her arrival in Canada, she also became deeply involved in a number of community organizations, involving Black issues (Braithwaite & Benn-Ireland, 1993). Hall was also a Black feminist and activist who worked relentlessly and tirelessly to bring about transformation in the Black community. Silvera (2007) contends that prior to her death in 2007, Hall had a significant impact on the lives of many individuals in the Black community. Whenever there was the need to act, she would lend a hand. She became passionately involved with the Black Action Defence Committee; labour struggles; the International Women’s Day Committee; feminist organizations; HIV and AIDS groups; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans groups. She also contributed her time and money to a number of events such as the African Heritage Month, and to Kwanza celebrations during the holiday seasons. Her life was totally devoted to the St. James Town community in Toronto, as well as other economically deprived communities. She worked diligently to improve the lives of those who were most deprived, particularly young people. Prior to her death, she held a position as a community youth advocate with the Toronto Housing Authority (Silvera, 2007). Hall, who was employed as a court reporter in Toronto, worked both in and out of the judicial system. Her position in the court allowed her to experience firsthand the legal system and its problematic relationship with the young Black men who
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walked through its doors. Tired and fed up with the way in which young Black men were treated, she decided to do something about it. From 2004 until her death in 2007, she worked with other community advocates from the Malvern and St. James Town area to help eliminate the criminal records of young Black men who had been charged with minor crimes and had criminal records. Her actions were a major factor in helping them to secure meaningful employment. She met with these young men every Friday evening, informing them of the law and their legal rights (Silvera, 2007), and by so doing, transformed many lives.

Douglas’ (2004) work encapsulates three aspects of Black feminist resistance: collectivism, self-determination, and revolutionary vision. Debbie Douglas was born in Grenada. She immigrated to Canada with her family in 1973, and became active in the community at a very young age. She served on the boards of several organizations and working groups. She also served as the co-chair of the National Immigrant and Settlement Working Group at the Canadian Council for Refugees. Douglas has worked diligently, trying to improve the lives of women and girls in Toronto. Also, she spent a number of years working in the area of race relations and social justice and, by so doing, has brought these issues to a new level. In her position as the executive director of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI), she brought tremendous change to the lives of many immigrants. In fact, Douglas has been very instrumental in the settlement and integration of Canada’s immigrant population. Her work focused on the basic needs of recent immigrants in terms of housing, social services, and integration, thus becoming very involved locally, provincially, and federally. Douglas has a tremendous passion for the issues that confront immigrants on a daily basis in Canada, particularly in Toronto, where 43% of the total population is made up of recent immigrants. Based on her leadership position, she brought about transformation to injustice and poverty situations among people of colour, particularly women and children, as well as to barriers to accessing the labour market, and the plight of undocumented immigrants (immigrants without immigration status), in order to come up with practical solutions (Douglas, 2004). Douglas has also been instrumental in the development of Toronto’s Black feminist community in an effort to transform the lives of Black women.

Finally, no one seemed more passionate and committed to transforming the lives of young Black women than Renee Rawlins Thomas. Thomas is a Toronto high school guidance counsellor, and a former Barbados beauty queen (Former Miss Barbados, 2007). She is the co-founder and executive director of an organization called Black Pearls, founded in 2005. All her work encapsulates the principles of Black feminist thought — to aspire, empower, and transform the lives of others, and she aspires to do just that. Her desire to bring about change is also reflected in the organization that she developed, which was born out of concern that stereotypes and negative images were disempowering Black women. “‘The media is not seeing the educated, upwardly mobile Black community in the GTA who are working very hard,’ says Renee Rawlins Thomas, executive director of the Black Pearls Community Services Inc.” (Crawford, 2007).
Black Pearls is a not-for-profit agency. Its main focus is to help empower young Black women through the development of a book club, financial seminars, and scholarships for young Black women. The Black Pearls’ monthly financial planning seminar is co-sponsored by particular financial institutions. They too have realized the gap in the lives of young Black women, and have a desire to assist in their transformation. Financial seminars help to provide banking, real estate, and investment information for everyone involved; this information helps them to “buy a house, get out of low-income housing and get good credit” (Crawford, 2007). Another program, called “Taking Care of our Roots”, donates Black hair care products and supplies for Black women to shelters across the GTA annually. In addition, the Empowerment and Etiquette Development Program is committed to helping young girls to develop certain etiquette, which helps them to move into leadership positions in society (Crawford, 2007). Black Pearls contributes tremendously to the well-being of the community, transforming the lives of Black women, and everyone else involved, one at a time. Through Black Pearls Thomas desires to give hope, confidence, and a voice to those who are silent not by choice, but because of prevailing dominant social structures.

DISCUSSION

Despite the role that Black women leaders play in their communities, they still face difficulties in trying to negotiate their space and place against elite white men’s interpretations of the world. Their life experiences and the way in which they are resisting have to be understood and seen from a different perspective. However their suppression has caused them to develop and use alternative ways to empower their lives; these ways have evolved from their own experiences and knowledge, as well as through knowledge of Black feminism. Moreover, because African-Canadian women reside on the periphery of society, they are constantly engaged in resistance and self-determination. Hegemonic ideologies and practices render Black women oppressed; therefore, they have to reconstruct their lives according to how they envision things (Massaquoi & Wane, 2007). Being a Black woman is also seen as an advantage by some because, as a result of their marginalization, they develop a particular perspective from which they can criticize the “dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony, as well as [to] envision and create counter-hegemonies” (Massaquoi & Wane, 2007, pp. 274–275) for themselves and others.

In closing, in contemporary society, Black women have contributed and continue to contribute to society, touching and transforming the lives of many. Black women are fighting back as a result of their experiences, and with the assistance of Black empowered knowledge. Black women are now using information based on Black feminism and empowering themselves to resist the oppression and discrimination with which they have had to contend for centuries. By so doing, they are now constructing their lives in a way that is suitable to the way in which they envision life for themselves. More so, apart from Black feminism, Black women in the diaspora are using their shared knowledge to empower themselves, for community building,
and to take on leadership roles in the community in order to dismantle the insidious nature of racism and discrimination not only for themselves, but for society at large.

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AFRICAN-CANADIAN BLACK WOMEN LEADERS: IMPACTING CHANGE IN THE DIASPORA


