Missing: Black Self-Representations in Canadian Educational Research

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Black educational theory and practice have not been a priority in mainstream Canadian education. I discuss some epistemological issues underpinning alternative conceptualizations of education of children of African descent. My starting point for the construction of such conceptualizations is the agency and subjectivity of Black women educators, a constant yet overlooked critical presence in the education of Black children. Having sketched some tensions and possibilities in African-centred and Black feminist discourses, I conclude that these standpoint epistemologies are useful tools to forge new and more relevant theory and practice, but that they must be re-shaped to the pedagogical realities of Black teachers and students in Canada.

L'éducation des Noirs, dans ses aspects théorique ou pratique, n'est pas une priorité dans l'éducation canadienne. L'auteure discute de certaines questions épistémologiques qui sous-tendent des approches éducatives différentes pour les enfants de descendance africaine. Le premier élément servant à l'élaboration de ces approches est le rôle et la subjectivité des éducatrices de race noire, une présence constante et pourtant oubliée dans l'éducation des enfants noirs. Après un survol de certaines des tensions et possibilités dans les discours axés sur l'Afrique et les propos des féministes noires, l'auteure conclut que ces épistémologies sont des outils utiles pour forger de nouvelles théories et pratiques plus pertinentes, mais qu'elles doivent être repensées en fonction des réalités pédagogiques des enseignants et des élèves noirs au Canada.

It is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves we will be defined by others for their use and to our detriment.

— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (1984), p. 45

. . . it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping-out.

— Stephen Lewis, *Consultative Report on Race Relations* (1992), p. 2[1]

In this article I discuss some epistemological issues central to my research on Black womanist[2] pedagogy and the education of African Canadian children[3] (Henry, 1992; Ladson Billings & Henry, 1990). Specifically, I discuss the signi-

ficance of Black women's subjectivities, agency, and voice in Canadian educational research. I also discuss some tensions and possibilities of two "standpoint epistemologies" which I am grappling to re-shape in my research: African-centred and Black womanist/feminist perspectives.[4]

At this historical moment, social scientists are increasingly acknowledging that there are multiple readings of the world, multiple ways of producing and validating knowledge. Some scholars argue that the present post-modern era represents a period of epistemological destabilization, an epochal shift refuting the totalizing thought of "grand narratives," a period recognizing multiplicity and difference, a period in which disempowered groups might more easily carve out a historical and social space (Giroux, 1989; S. Smith, 1987). Perhaps. But not without great struggle.

At this time in Canada, African people are struggling to carve out historical, political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual, and emotional spaces for themselves. African voices have been speaking in Canada for a very long time; yet, their discourses are pushed back to the margins. For example, the theoretical knowledge about education of African Canadian children advanced in Ontario by such Black theorists as Karen Brathwaite (1989), Carl James (1990), Enid Lee (1989), and Patrick Solomon (1992), to name only a few, are rarely read or cited by Euro/Anglo-Canadian scholars in critical ways that challenge the status quo. Mainstream scholars seemingly prefer to cite Euro/Anglo-Canadian, British, or American research.

We African Canadians are at a critical point in our lives. Black parents, educators, and community members have increasingly exposed Canadian meritocracy as a myth (see Toronto Board of Education, 1988). Dissatisfied with mainstream practices, Black educators and Black community groups are increasingly mobilizing to define their own educational agenda, and to seek alternative models and approaches for educating their children. They know that Canadian schooling is systematically failing Black youth (Canadian Alliance of Black Educators, 1991).

DANGEROUS DISCOURSES: BLACK STUDENT UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND THE PATHOLOGICAL BLACK FAMILY

> We invented the family.
> — Ali Mazrui, *Afrocentricity and Multiculturalism* (1992)

We need new paradigms. We need new frameworks for understanding teaching and learning in multiracial urban contexts. As a Black woman researcher, my commitment is to conduct educational research that reconstructs Black realities amid social science categories based on European and patriarchal discourses. I envision my research as part of a Black liberation struggle against the Western hegemonic categories and ideologies in social science research that have sup-

pressed and thwarted Black self-representations. Many scholars in the African diaspora have written about the necessity and even urgency for endogenous scholarship grounded in popular tensions and realities (Cruse, 1967; Gordon, 1990; V. Harding, 1974; Ladner, 1973; Malson, Mudimbe-Boyd, O'Barr, & Wyer, 1988; Saakana & Pearse, 1986; Woodson, 1931/1990; Yekwai, 1988). This is what I attempt in my research.

Mainstream psychological and sociological frameworks have participated in what British educational theorists Frank Reeves and Mel Chevannes (1983) call the ideological construction of Black underachievement. American educational research has led in disseminating this discourse, which has been espoused in Canada. In the minimal educational literature about Black children in Canada, most mainstream work still reflects the language of theories of Black cultural and linguistic deprivation, notions of "disadvantage" and "underachievement," of "immigrant deviance." In other words, research, for the most part, has perpetuated White supremacist ideological thinking (Lawrence, 1981; Saakana & Pearse, 1986; Yekwai, 1988).

In the dominant paradigms, the attitudes and values of Black people have been given as explanations for their economic and educational plight (Collins, 1986; Lawrence, 1981; Malson et al., 1988; Zinn, 1989). For example, a Toronto Board of Education report on Black students (1988) shrivels racism to a perception within the minds of African people—"Black parents feel . . ." (p. 26), "they say . . ." (p. 26), "perceiv[e] 'streaming' of their children into basic level and vocational programs" (p. 6)—despite statistical data demonstrating in *fact,* and not just in "perception," a higher ratio of Blacks than of any other racial or ethnic group in special education and basic and general level programs. The tone of the report suggests that since the school board is doing its utmost, Black students' lack of success must be a consequence of attitudes and values intrinsic to Black families:

> The parents readily acknowledged that despite the schools' best efforts . . . some parents are not sufficiently well informed to offer appropriate guidance in their children's choices of schools and careers. . . . Black parents come from a variety of countries, backgrounds and educational systems. As a consequence, they are not aware of the differences among the levels of secondary school courses. (pp. 27–28)

Although some parents may need assistance in understanding the educational system, the report's statements "blame the victim." Educators in the dominant group thus absolve themselves from perpetuating, and more importantly, from challenging institutional practices and social relations that "stream" Black children or deny them the kinds of education acquired by the "successful Toronto student," who is "female, bilingual, from a two parent family with professional degrees" (Poor Pupils Doing Better in School, 1989, p. A9).

The Black family, especially the poor and working-class Black family, and the Black mother have been distorted as sites of pathology and oppression. Rarely is the Black family conceptualized as a site of political, cultural, and spiritual resistance. Rarely examined are the complexities of Black women's lives as activists in their families and communities. Rarely examined are their lives in the complex relations of power in Black community life or in the greater society.

We need reconceptualizations of Black lives, Black education, and Black family and community life that inscribe Black women's participation in the analyses (Collins, 1990; Dill, 1979; King, 1988; Ladner, 1973; Murray, 1987; Sizemore, 1973; Zinn, 1989). Discussions about the consciousness and the experiences of Black women, about the tensions in their struggles for their children's academic achievement and social and economic empowerment, then, are curiously absent from educational literature. In particular, discussions written by women of African descent are flagrantly absent. Influential texts and theorists perpetuate the dominant ideological representations of loud, domineering Black matriarchs and/or promiscuous, slovenly welfare mothers. These popularized images represent "scientific" legitimizations of commonsense racist ideologies which de-emphasize the matrix of political, economic, and historical oppressions that have caused Black school failure. Instead, the racialized image of Black family life dates back to European slavocratic accounts in which Black women were portrayed as licentious breeders (Bush, 1986).

Clearly, the power of an ideology is that it infiltrates everyday thoughts and actions. How, then, does a researcher exonerate herself from the often unnamed and implicit normative referents (White, Anglo-Saxon, male, heterosexual, Christian/Protestant, middle-class)? Living day to day in North American society, how does one disentangle oneself from the hegemony of White supremacist ideology? Within the language of dominance lurks a racialized discourse of pathology, deviance, and deficiency concerning Black people. Those of us who would construct an alternative world must rethink, deconstruct, reconstruct the language of theorization. Without challenging dominant social science paradigms and categories, we easily acquiesce in our own oppression as African people.

BEING "PRO-VALUE": IN THE INTERESTS OF AFRICAN PEOPLE

No research is "value free." No knowledge is neutral. Rather, all knowledge flows from ideological assumptions shaped by such factors as gender, culture, sexuality, class, ethnicity, language, and religion. Joyce Ladner (1973) advocates that the Black researcher be "pro-value," promoting the interests of Black people in her work. She argues that mainstream social science

> reflects the ideology of the larger society, which more often than not excludes the lifestyles, values behavior, attitudes and so forth from the body of data that is used to define,

describe, conceptualize and theorize about the structure and functions of [North] American society. (p. xxiii)

Epistemologies, methodologies, and methods that inform Black women's cultural matrices are needed, since the dominant research paradigms and perspectives often reflect racist, sexist, and classist thinking. Thus, African North American people and our causes have been either excluded from or misrepresented in most educational research.

As a result, an African-centred researcher must make pivotal decisions before conducting her research. The situation in Canada is quite grave: there is hardly any community of Black educational researchers. The University of Toronto is a shameful example. In 1991 African Caribbean feminist and political theorist Linda Carty conducted a survey at the University of Toronto, the largest university in Canada, with over 50,000 students and approximately 3,000 full-time faculty. She found only three Black professors with tenure — now full professors — who were hired in the 1960s and 1970s (Carty, 1991).

What community and collaborative political work is possible among African scholars in Canada? With whom can one work if one's research and writing are from standpoints of difference? From my own experience, to conduct one's research from an African-centred womanist/feminist perspective reduces the possibility of a research community. As Black women researchers, our competence and credibility remain both marginal and dubious within the portals of academe; our knowledge, research, and the kinds of courses we teach are trivialized or deemed exclusionist. This phenomenon is related to the hierarchization and privileging of certain knowledges and experiences. A discussion about studying Black women brings out the racial and sexual politics in research. White critics challenge that in my research I am "overglorifying" Black women because I do not portray them in the usual negative racist stereotypes. Conservative Black people, especially men, suggest that in some way I am "dividing the race." I am beleaguered with the following questions: Why only Black women? (not an issue when a privileged group does research on Black people). Why are there no White women in your research cohort? Why not also Black men? Are you implying that only Black women can teach Black children? Why are you concerned solely with the education of Black children in a multicultural society? These questions may, of course, be critical, reflexive, and dynamic. More often than not, however, they suggest the inability, to quote bell hooks, "to look at Blackness with a new eye" (hooks in an interview with Julie Dash; Dash, 1992, p. 40). It becomes unsettling and disruptive to focus solely on Black women. The questions reveal the depth of Black women's devaluation. How can Black women be a research cohort? How can one possibly collect valid data without a "control" group like Black men or White women?

THE VOCATION OF BLACK WOMEN SCHOLARS

In my project of Black self-representations, I take up the responsibility to examine critically the missing subjective experiences of Black people in Canadian educational research. As Black Canadian scholars, we need to conduct research relevant to the lived realities of Black communities, so that we can begin to claim a praxis resonant with our everyday lived realities. Such perspectives are needed especially for ongoing critical Canadian educational practice.

In my research and writing, I am attempting to "raise those questions that have not been raised," as theologian and historian Vincent Harding (1974) exhorts. Eloquently and fervently, he reminds African scholars to probe every fissure of the community, the family, church, works of art, and schools, "to free ourselves for building in and with the Black community" (p. 25). The exhortation of educational theorist and activist Joyce Elaine King (1988) adds another dimension to this vocation. Writing from a Black womanist standpoint, she names an often unacknowledged site of political, cultural, and spiritual resistance: Black motherhood. She emphasizes that we cannot abdicate our responsibility to carry out educational research from our subjective experiences as Black women:

> My research is both a form of leadership and praxis — action and reflection — for social change. What I am trying to do is redefine the role of a Black academic and the nature of Black scholarship so that scholarship, community/public service, and parenting (another aspect of the Black liberation struggle) are compatible and interdependent. (p. 49)

Harding and King name important sites of Black resistance, including the church, family, and school. However, the leadership, activism, constraints, and possibilities of Black men and Black women differ within these institutions, according to power relations. For example, Black men are more often the visible political activists, figureheads, and spokespersons. The kinds of "surreptitious" activism performed by Black women in these institutions is often unacknowledged as political work (Collins, 1990; Gilkes, 1988).

It is our responsibility as Black women to interrogate our silences and omissions, our consciousness and experiences within these institutions. Such a project requires a reconceptualization of Eurocentric and patriarchal definitions of power, activism, and resistance (Collins, 1990; Gilkes, 1988; Lorde, 1984). King (1988) exhorts that our work be a form of praxis, linking theory and practice, reflection and action, grounded in the concrete, empirical realities of our communities and toward the vision of an alternative society. Accordingly, the epistemological point of departure in my research is the empirical and popular knowledges of Black women educators whose daily lives raise many issues about race, gender, culture, and pedagogy.

STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGIES: TOWARD AN AFRICAN-CENTRED EDUCATIONAL PRAXIS RELEVANT TO BLACK WOMEN

African-Centred Tensions

> . . . retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, . . . and speaking in the *patois* forbidden us.
>
> —Michelle Cliff, *The Land of Look Behind* (1985), p. 14

An African Canadian teacher in Toronto once described her greatest challenge as "putting more Afrocentrism in the curriculum." Increasingly, African educators in Canada, the United States, and Britain are expressing this desire (Canadian Alliance of Black Educators, 1991; Harris, 1992; Yewai, 1988).

I interpret the plea for "more Afrocentrism" as a desire for liberatory practices for children of African descent in Canadian schools. The present approaches are not working for Black children (Lewis, 1992; Toronto Board of Education, 1988). Progressive educators are speaking out against the Anglocentric/Eurocentric biases that exclude, deny, sift, and sort children of African descent. "African-centred education" is one critique of contemporary forms and content of the ethnocentrism in Canadian education in particular and Western education in general. The notion is useful in re/conceptualizing educational theory and practice.

When I speak of an African-centred perspective, I emphasize the cultural and historical myths, symbols, knowledges, values, constructs, *and* contradictions of African cultures in our lives as people of African descent (Asante, 1987; Cliff, 1984; Cobbah, 1993; Diop, 1974; Joseph, 1988; Karenga, 1988). Such a perspective (whether in research or pedagogy) represents a counter- position to the ethnocentrism and exclusion perpetuated in Western ideological thought. The diverse and emergent names of Afrocentrism, Afrocentricity, Africentrism, and African-centredness represent relatively new terms to describe a historical river of Black social and political resistance. African-centredness represents a politics of self-representation poised against the hegemony of dominant groups.

I am not suggesting that, as diasporic Africans, we should over-romanticize our relationships with continental peoples and issues. Let us not overmythicize the pre-capitalist, pre-colonial African past, nor the African-derived "cosmology, ontology and axiology" (Banks, 1992, p. 266) that we have inherited and re-adapted as people of African descent under various systems of political and economic oppression. But let us embrace and examine it—in all of its contradictions and ambiguities.

As people of African descent, we have been unable to celebrate or critically investigate our historicity because our realities have been distorted and repressed. This act of reclamation is dissimilar from romanticization. We must celebrate in the truth-telling that results from uncovering Africa and her descendants from

humanizing perspectives. I am not using "celebrate" in the dominant liberal sense of "celebrating cultural diversity," but rather in an African sense. As Wole Soyinka (1980) reminds us "the human and African habit of celebration, is also an act of recollection, assessment and rededication" (p. 19). Such celebration, then, requires solemn examination of ourselves by ourselves. It requires profound critique of the contradictions, oppressions and ambiguities created at the juncture of Black lives in North American society. It requires sober introspection and re-dedication to the important theoretical and practical work yet to be done.

Tensions exist. . . .

I have spent many months and moments ruminating over the tensions that arise from a discourse of an African-centred education. I have at times wrestled with African-centredness for its seeming impossible realization — given the pervasive and hegemonic anchor of Eurocentric ideology. Critics point out — and rightly so — that some African-centred discourses promulgate a narrow, neo-nationalist, heterosexist, and Black masculinist fundamentalism (see, for example, Fox, 1992; hooks & West, 1991). It would be helpful to devote an entire discussion to critical examination of the range of "Afrocentrisms" from Egyptologists to Black feminists; however, these important subjects will have to be examined at another time. What I want to emphasize here is that, indeed, there is a broad range of "Afrocentrisms" across disciplines, that promise, in coming years, to be stretched out and defined more fully. I mentioned earlier that I do not want to participate in a simplistic and competitive mirror-image politics — a kind of Eurocentrism in Black face. I have at times struggled with the concept for fear of regenerating dualisms about race/culture. Any "centrism" risks reductionism, especially if it is postulated as a reverse image, in this case of Eurocentric thought. I seek new definitions. Yet, in any attempt to write oneself into one's own discourse one realizes, disturbingly, that words are historiographical, often reflecting oppressive discursive practices. One soon realizes that she is held hostage by the oppressor's language. The language manipulates her. She finds herself not totally independent of the very dichotomies she yearns to shatter. "Every word gives of the scent of a profession, a genre, a current, a party, a man a generation, an era, a day, an hour" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 16).

Keeping these caveats in mind, African-centred discourses hold great value at this historical moment. As I deconstruct the concept, I see the layers of meaning and desire it portrays for an alternative, oppositional, and liberatory pedagogy for children of African descent in North American schools. It opens up possible ways to re-articulate the needs of African Canadian students and to reconceptualize educational theory and practice in the light of concerns advanced by, for example, Toronto activists such as the Organization of Parents of Black Children. These are a few of their concerns:

— lack of Black teachers as role-models in the system;
— the persistent "invisibility" of Black studies and Black history within the curriculum;

— the present ignorance of teachers about Black culture and the history of Blacks in Canada;
— the assumption that Black people are not part of the fabric of Canadian society. (Toronto Board of Education, 1988, pp. 6–7)

Culture-centred education for students of African descent seems to cause much more malaise for those in the mainstream than do other heritage language/cultural school programs. In December 1992, newspapers across the country described Black-focused education as, for example, "southern style segregation" (Black Focused Schools Sparks Debate, 1992, p. A3) and as raising the "spectre of segregation" (Black Focused School Plan Raises Spectre of Segregation, 1992, p. B9).

To conceptualize "centredness" is exhilarating for those of us who live and move as marginalized and dispossessed. What if advocates of the dominant liberal discourse of "child-centred pedagogy" considered how it might be reshaped as an "African-centred pedagogy," a "child-centred" pedagogy that nourished the emotional, academic, spiritual, and cultural lives of children of African descent? How might it effect the children's possibility to contribute to Canadian society as citizens with well-formed individual and social identities as African Canadians?

I embrace a version of African-centred/Black-focused education, not only as a pedagogy of Black self-representation, but as a form of what Veve Clark (1990) calls "diaspora literacy," which she describes as the "ability to read and comprehend the discourses of Africa, Afro-America and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective" (p. 304; see also King, 1992). Such a pedagogy must underscore the dynamic relationship of hybridization and fertilization across cultures, countries, dialects, histories, and margins. I advocate the concept as explained by African American feminist Gloria Joseph (1988), who writes: "The Afrocentric conceptual system is not exclusively Black or exclusively African. It is a journey toward wholeness that requires seeing the world not Black or white, but in its full spectrum" (p. 178). Such a dynamic and intertextual view necessitates reinterpretations across races, histories, and cultures. Indeed, for a fuller reading of Black social texts, we need to take into account the diverse historical, political, and economic forces within which Black lives are embroiled. This reformulation challenges the foundations of the Western world and its legacy of colonialism.

I want to emphasize that "standpoint epistemologies" (see S. Harding, 1986, and Olguin, 1991), such as Black feminist and African-centred thought, must be taken up in critical and historical terms. I consider dangerous *any* theoretical interpretations that homogenize the contradictions and complexities of human existence in its varied historical social and economic contexts. I agree with Bonnie Thorton Dill (1979), who when writing about Black women stresses the need for a "dynamic and contradictory framework to understand the complexities

of their relations to all aspects of society" (p. 553). At the same time, this framework must acknowledge the commonalities of experience as well as the specificities along such dimensions as religion, language background, sexuality, and so forth. Paul Gilroy (1982) correctly reminds researchers that "the distinct political traditions of African people must be borne in mind. Contrary to the views of sociologists of acculturation, they are present in the practice of Black movements today" (p. 290).

Black Women Teachers and Non-Dichotomous Ways of Knowing

> We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. *We understood both.*
>
> —bell hooks, in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984), p. ix

Finally, I want to discuss the significance of a framework that examines the kinds of knowledges and experiences Black women teachers bring to their pedagogical practice. Black feminist pedagogy, explains Barbara Omolade (1987), "sets forth learning strategies informed by Black women's historical experience with race/gender and class bias and the consequences of marginality and isolation" (p. 32). Black feminist thought, explains Patricia Hill Collins (1990), "encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's realities by those who live in it" (p. 22). Collins argues that Black women have a self-defined standpoint, culled at the intersections of their consciousness and experiences in the kinds of communities they live in, the kinds of relationships they have, and the kinds of paid and unpaid work they perform. This standpoint is not monolithic. Rather, it "contains observations and interpretations about Black womanhood that describe and explain different expressions of common themes" (Collins, 1986, p. 16).

Collins posits an "Afrocentric feminist epistemology" in which she envisages Black women's lives as a point of contact between feminist and Afrocentric analyses. She writes:

> On certain dimensions Black women may more closely resemble Black men; on others, white women; and on still others Black women may stand apart from both groups. Black women's both/and conceptual orientation, the act of being simultaneously a member of a group and yet standing apart from it, forms an integral part of Black women's consciousness. Black women negotiate these contradictions, . . . by using this both/and conceptual orientation. Rather than emphasizing how a Black women's standpoint and its accompanying epistemology are different than those in Afrocentric and feminist analyses, I use Black women's experiences as point of contact between the two. (1990, p. 207)

A "both/and" conceptual orientation opens up possibilities in re/conceptualizing Black women's pedagogical practice. It contests the either/or dualism dominant

in Western social thought (Butler, 1981; Collins, 1990; Halpin, 1989; Haraway, 1989; hooks, 1984; Olguin, 1991). Such dichotomous thinking in colonialist discourse has objectified Black people as "The Other."

"That Black women should embrace a both/and conceptual orientation," writes Collins, "grows from Black women's experiences living as both African [Americans] and women, and in many cases, in poverty" (1990, p. 29). Collins' conceptualization can be opened out even more to explicate other subjectivities, such as those of the teachers in my Canadian research: post-colonial African Caribbean women teachers living in Ontario, whose experiences cross cultures, heritages, continents, and dialects. Collins does not acknowledge that, for example, sometimes Black women may have more in common with other "women of colour" than with either Black men or White women.

Seeing the world in "both/and" ways is not unique to Black women. All subjectivity is multiple. Positionalities, however, differ. Chicano theorist R.A. Olguin (1991) elaborates:

> Our very existence as peoples created out of oppression and conflict renders us multivocal. We resist when we can and submit when we must, but we do not assume our submission to indicate assent. This lived reality must surely give rise to a non-dichotomous way of knowing. (p. 160)

Indeed, Black women have particular ways of seeing reality from particular subordinated and multiple locations within the interlocking matrix of domination. Barbara Smith (1983) underscores the "simultaneity of oppression as the crux of a Black feminist understanding of political reality" and argues that this simultaneity of race and gender oppression is "one of the most significant ideological contributions of Black feminist thought" (p. xxxii).

What I want to suggest here is the importance of a non-unitary, non-dichotomous analysis of Black women who live and move in multiple and sometimes contradictory sites of consciousness. Black feminists have often discussed the multiple consciousnesses of Black women (Bryan, Dadzie, & Scafe, 1985; Collins, 1990; Dill, 1979). In Britain, Black feminists Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe (1985) discuss how the multiple consciousnesses of Black women have informed their struggle for the education of Black children in Britain:

> So it is our consciousness as Black people, rather than as feminists, which has led us to take collective action against the education authorities. For us to campaign for non-sexist text-books or careers guidance, when the racism in those areas has already pre-determined what our daughters could do; or to demand their right to do motor mechanics or play football, when our sons could aspire to nothing else, would be a denial of reality. Nevertheless, the campaigns we have taken up as mothers, teachers and schoolgirls have been given added strength and direction by the experience we have brought to them as women. (1985, p. 59)

These authors bring out not only the interconnectedness of the multiple subject positions of Black women but also the specificity of Black women's perspectives on educating Black children.

Unlike Collins, I think it may be limiting to conceptualize Black women's experiences as a point of contact between "feminist" and "Afrocentric" analyses. I am presuming here that Collins means *White* feminist analyses. It might be perilous to locate Black women's experience as being somewhere between that of White women and Black men, for this conceptualization might obfuscate the very specificities Black women are trying to investigate. It might contribute to continued distortion of the specificity of Black womanist/feminist standpoints at this nascent stage in the historical process of interrogating Black women's subjective experiences in Canada.

Too often, whether in African/Black studies, women's studies, or education, Black women's experiences are rendered invisible or subordinate. The specificity of their popular and differential knowledges are lost when subsumed under another rubric (such as that of women, visible minorities, women of colour, or Blacks). Such categorizations hierarchize oppressions and knowledges. They might also unfairly require Black women to prioritize their various and interconnected subjectivities. It is within this framework of bringing together oppositional Black-focused thought and Black womanist/feminist thought, that I am attempting to explore significant approaches for educating African Canadian children. At this critical time in Canadian race relations, Black self-representation is axiomatic.

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude by emphasizing the importance of epistemologies that unearth Black women's perspectives on Canadian education. Apart from the work of Black womanists/feminists, much African-centred/Black-focused writing is located in a (masculinist) Black nationalist discourse that excludes the specialized knowledges of Black women. This is one reason that Black feminist thought is a complementary epistemology to re-shape and extend African-centred discourses. Educational research from such perspectives is greatly lacking. Such approaches, however, are useful only if they do not singularize the notion of "Black woman." As Chandra Mohanty (1988) writes, "Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender. It must be forged in concrete historical and political praxis" (p. 67).

Indeed, we need alternative epistemologies, alternative pedagogical approaches in teaching and learning. We need to move beyond amorphous theorizations about "multicultural education," "visible minority youth," "inner-city education." The historical and contemporary meanings of Black women's educational activism are quite specific to their material and social location (Brand, 1991; Cooper, 1991). Black women's social, political, and cultural understandings can broaden and re-shape notions we may have of research data, curricula, and pedagogy.

Writing our consciousness and experiences as Black women into Canadian educational research challenges the dominant meanings, functions, and purposes of that research for us. For instance, the findings of my research demonstrate that African Canadian educational activism takes place in a number of sites, often outside the mainstream classroom. Moreover, contrary to the plethora of racist studies on the Black family, the family is an area of significant pedagogical work. The family is a place where Black women teachers and mothers "undo" the deleterious effects of mainstream schooling on their children's psyches and scholastic achievement. Indeed, in an earlier discussion (Henry, 1992) I introduced the concepts of "community othermothers" and "classroom othermothers" as culturally resistant subjectivities for Black women. That is, the Black women teachers with whom I work continue a West African/Caribbean cultural tradition of mothering other people's children as an emancipatory practice. Black women's pedagogical work is inextricably linked to a historical ideology of "race uplift" (Perkins, 1983).

Understanding the roles Black women play in their own cultural framework has implications in teacher education programs in multiracial urban environments. The discursive practices in teacher education promulgate particular Western, Anglocentric, individualistic, middle-class conceptualizations of what it means to teach and what counts as worthwhile teacher knowledge, conceptualizations inimical to African Caribbean cultures. Furthermore, the educational activism of the Black women teachers with whom I work raises questions concerning the intents and purposes of recruiting so-called "visible minority" teachers. In what ways could teacher education programs encourage "visible minority" teachers to *use* their culturally specific knowledges to resist the hegemony of the dominant culture? In what ways can educators in faculties of education encourage teacher candidates to work in classrooms with progressive Black educators whose philosophies and practice are oppositional yet liberatory?

As we aim to generate our own theories and practices from our own educational standpoints, how do we theorize as Black women researchers? With whose meanings, with whose standards, and with whose theories are we to interpret our research? Often, interpretations of Black lives are either mis-appropriated, misinterpreted, or disregarded by the Euro/Anglo-Canadian power structure. As Black women researchers, we also realize the consequences of generating research that academe judges too marginal.

So, *how then do we theorize?* We must ask ourselves, for whom is our work? For what purposes do we conduct our research? As political women of African descent, our research is necessarily a form of activism, revisionism, and reconstruction, which can involve re-shaping extant discourses for a specifically Canadian context. As Black womanist/feminist educators writing our own versions and theories, we must also reclaim an ancestral memory as part of a larger and prior community that needs explication from within rather from

without. We must reclaim the intergenerational and womanist responsibility to the commitment Joyce Elaine King and Thomasyne Lightfoote Wilson (1990) call for:

> to freeing Black children and all humankind from violence and oppression . . . to decolonizing current schooling that formally continues human bondage through abductive and pollutive learning environments. A related task for all of us as educators is to develop a theoretical and epistemological base of teaching, learning and culture that embraces the fundamentals of Afro-humanity and can regenerate human vitalness and restore the continuity of history and cultural memory of African people. (p. 21)

ENDNOTES

1 The alienation of African Canadian youth was ephemerally highlighted in the in the spring of 1992, when North Americans and the world witnessed a cascade of horrifying events. On April 30, four policemen were acquitted of brutally beating Rodney King in Los Angeles. Riots broke out throughout the United States. On May 2, Toronto police shot and killed the eighth Black man in four years. On May 4, looting and rioting broke out at an anti-racist rally in Toronto. In the aftermath of these events, Ontario Premier Bob Rae commissioned Stephen Lewis, former Ambassador to the United Nations, to prepare within one month a consultative report on race relations. This quotation is from that document.

2 I use the term "womanist" for Black women who do not consider themselves "feminists," who are political, cultural, and spiritual activists working toward the survival and liberation "of an entire race, both male and female" (Walker, 1983, p. ix). At times, I describe myself as a womanist, at other times, as a Black feminist. Although there are many feminisms, Black women often associate the term feminism with White middle-class mainstream agendas. I desire to move beyond dualisms. I seek an alternative, more critical language with greater explanatory relevance to the lives African people. I agree with Elaine Savory Fido (Davies & Fido, 1990) that the adjective "Black," in "Black feminist," shifts the agenda and changes the term. I am partial to Alice Walker's term "womanist" for a number of reasons. I find it pleasing from a psycho-phonetic standpoint; it emphasizes community (Grimes, 1992); it has "strong Caribbean roots" (Davies & Fido, 1990); it encompasses the spiritual. In fact, theology is a domain in which Black women are extending the concept in exhilarating ways (see the entire issue of *Feminist Journal of Religion, 8,* 1992). In this discussion, I sometimes use womanist/feminist because, as Elaine Savory Fido says, "I simply cannot accept that all white [and all Black] feminists are *x, y, or z* . . . We are complexly involved with various intersecting agendas" (Davies & Fido, 1990, p. xii).

3 I use the term *African Canadian* to signify people of African descent living in Canada, regardless of country of birth. In this way, I am emphasizing a common place of origin as well as a common experience and struggle under Anglo/European domination and exploitation.

4 African theorists and practitioners use a range of terms to denote perspectives committed to understanding African peoples throughout the diaspora from endogenous perspectives. Some such terms are Afrocentrism, Afrocentricity, Africentrism, and African-centredness. *Africa* and things *African* have been truncated and distorted enough. Furthermore, I do not want to suggest a mirror-image politics of Anglocentrism/Eurocentrism. Therefore, I use the word in its fullness, preferring the term *African*-centred. I am beginning to think that the prefix "Afro" should only be used when speaking about someone's hairdo.

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