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## **Black Girls/ Black Women-Centered Texts and Black Teachers as Othermothers**

“I feel we should all know about black history. We don’t learn it in school and nobody cares about it...but I care so I want to know...” (Marie-Jolie Rgwigema Didas is 12 years old. *The Black Girls*, 1995: 25)

“I want to add that while it’s hard to be black, it’s hell to be a black woman. You get double the pressure. If we do get to learn black history, we’re probably going to learn about the men first. I want to come closer to home, to learn about black women’s history, I can relate to a black woman because my mom is one.” (Tovah Leihax Dixon is 15 years old. *The Black Girls*, 1995: 26)

“We fought for a year to get a black history course put into the curriculum...Then we found out it wasn’t a black history course, but a regular English course that would sometimes use books by black authors.” (Jillian M. Dixon is 19 years old. *The Black Girls*, 1995: 27)

### **Hearing their voices demanding the inclusion of black women’s history**

While researchers concerned with redressing gender inequities in the curriculum of public schools increasingly caution practising educators to acknowledge that “gender is only one of girls” identities (Bourne, McCoy, Novogradsky, 1997) and that race and ethnicity are also of central importance, black girls in Ontario schools are still having to speak loudly and insistently in opposition to a curriculum which excludes black women’s lives and realities. In the excerpts above from *Black Girl Talk*, Tovah, Jillian, and Marie-Jolie (The

Black Girls, 1995) powerfully represent resistant voices of black girls in schools today who explicitly challenge the absence of black women centered studies in classroom texts.

In this paper, I focus on examining the counter hegemonic process by which a group of grade eight black girls from Highgate School (located in Southern Ontario) and their South African/Canadian teacher called upon and connected with black women centered texts. Their engaged readings of texts authored by writers of the African Diaspora, were part of an emancipatory process which they actively claimed while working toward confronting gendered racial exclusion in their experiences of the official school curriculum. In the process of rendering important the selection of black women centered texts they re-interpret and challenge their silenced realities on two sides of the Canadian educational experience as black students and teachers.

The present paper is informed by a series of in-depth conversational interviews (Holguin and Uttal, 1999) I had with my mother, Goodie Tshabalala Mogadime, which detailed her community othermothering/ black feminist work in education (Mogadime, 1997) teaching a lunch time and after school drama program to adolescent black girls who were not her regular classroom students).<sup>1</sup> I use the term “community othermothering”<sup>2</sup> to signify ethics of caring which black women teachers<sup>3</sup> impart to black children as a part of their “commitment to the survival and wholeness of the communities” children (Henry, 1998). At the same time, Goodie’s struggle for the transformative education of black girls also intersects with black feminists agenda for the education and social transformation of black women from gendered racial oppression (Omolade, 1987).

At the time when this research was conducted in 1996 (from June–October), Goodie taught a grade six class in a suburban, middle class, multiracial school setting. The school had a high ratio of first generation students of Caribbean and South Asia descent. Goodie’s unofficial work outside the “normalised” curriculum of the school with “the Black Adolescent Drama Group” or BAG, led to a student production of the play “When the Rattle Snake Sounds” by African American playwright Alice Childress (1986) and demonstrated the productive roles black women educators play, when they incorporate othermothering and black feminist subject positions into their teaching. The ways in which these subject positions inform student teacher relations speaks to the transformational possibilities black educators offer to black students in terms of changing their experiences of marginality.

BAG’s access to black women’s literature and their narratives of resistance and struggle presents the opening up of oral genres “within the homeplace” that are critical for black female adolescent socialization toward self-definition, critical voice and community activism (hooks, 1990). Black feminists have argued that the development of these identified skills are vital for young girls full participation in furthering their own social, political and economic empowerment, as well as that of other black women and the communities of which they

are a part (Radford-Hill, 1986). However othermothering black children of the Diaspora occurred for both teacher and students under conditions in the school which were layered with racial tensions. As the only black teacher in a staff of white teachers whose pedagogy paradoxically embraced “multicultural” education, on the one hand, while omitting black studies with the other, Goodie’s work involved “teaching against the grain” of a token “inclusive” education. Othermothering and student resistance to selective inclusion provided the link between self and social empowerment. Students and teacher were positioned in a struggle to gain voice in determining what is “legitimate knowledge” (Perry and Fraser, 1993) for them to learn within the school. In the process they claimed an active role in defining for themselves “what narratives are important” to learn in relation to their own lives.

### **A textual analysis of “when the rattlesnake sounds”**

The play selected and performed by the Black Adolescent Girls Drama Group entitled “When the Rattlesnake Sounds” by African American playwright Alice Childress can be singled out as part of Diaspora maternal revisionist history. In an essay entitled, “A Woman Playwright Speaks Her Mind,” (qtd. in Barlow, 1994: 469) Childress addresses her commitment to working toward revising the denigrated image of black women and mothers as the nameless and voiceless. In her role as “black literary mother,” Childress envisions liberatory ends for the young black audience she directs her work to. Similar to other black women writers who envision their task as writing the literature they wished they could have read as young girls (Walker qtd. in Collins, 1991: 13; Shange qtd. in Lester, 1995: 28, Morrison qtd. in Birch, 1994: 149), Childress documents the significant role black women have played in history. Childress’s characterization of black women in her plays attempts to: “... better tell her story, with the full knowledge and appreciation of her constant, unrelenting struggle against racism and for human rights” (Childress qtd. in Barlow, 1994: 49).

The characters in the play, “When the Rattle Snake Sounds,” represent black women dynamically positioned as actors in history, working in opposition to racial and gender dominance, particularly in the lives of children held in the bondage of slavery. The setting of the play is Cape May, New Jersey, close to the abolition of slavery. This play highlights the involvement of freed black slaves in the abolition movement. More specifically, it reflects black women’s activist role in the emancipation of themselves (Shadd, 1994), and their commitment to “the upliftment of the race” (Bristow, 1994b: 69). Hence the underlying theme of the play is black women’s demonstration of leadership and resistance amid larger structural forces which contribute to their personal experiences of gendered racial oppression.

Two women, Lennie mature (in age) and Celia (a youth), join Harriet Tubman at a hotel in Cape May to work as washerwomen. The extremity of the physical hard labour is heightened by their objective to use their payment to

contribute toward the underground railway—an underground network designed to support run-away slaves (including young children) escape to freedom. The women's individual reaction to the demands of the work contradicts the notion of black women as a homogeneous group under the rubric of "strong" women. At the opening of the play, Celia, the youngest of the three women, loses sight of the purpose behind the work, and is about to give up "the good fight," as a result of becoming too "bone-weary" from the physical demands of cleaning "four bundles of wash" a day (Childress, 1986: 57).

The scene deals with at least two interrelated concepts which are historically relevant to black women's maternal consciousness; first, the need to articulate racially located experiences of oppression through the female bonding genre of storytelling within the homeplace is raised; second, the revelation of storytelling as a visionary tool for teaching revolutionary maternal critical consciousness, for both the liberation of oneself and the community's children, is highlighted. The main character, Harriet Tubman, narrates her own personal struggle against racism and sexism in a story form. She does this in order to nurture a critical oppositional standpoint in the life of the two women (characters) who are listening.

Harriet draws from black women's cultural understanding of leadership, and a critical oppositional consciousness, in order to become an agent of change in her community. The notion of community othermother and cultural worker operate as interlocking subject positions for both self and community empowerment. Harriet underscores a cultural understanding of black women's leadership in her storytelling dialogue with Celia. Her aim is to renew Celia's waning commitment to work toward the freeing of other blacks held in the oppression of slavery:

"Give me your hand Celia. Look, see the skin broken across the knuckles. Counta you some man or woman gonna have warm socks and boots to help em get to freedom. See the cuts the lye soap put in your skin. Counta you some little baby is gonna be born on free soil. It won't matter to him that you was afraid, won't matter that he did not know your name. Won't nothin count ceptin he's free. A livin monument to Celia's work" (Childress, 1986: 74).

In this excerpt, we gain an inside view into black women theorizing their political activities in ways that signal a self-identity which merges the lines between self and one's role in relation to a larger community in struggle (Collins, 1991). This scene is a reminder of what Radford-Hill tells us "... since our earliest recorded history, black women have collectively structured roles within self-identity that assured the survival of our race" (168).

In this narrative, Harriet uses the genre of storytelling, black women's traditional role for the teaching of young, as a visionary tool to strengthen the young Celia in her political convictions for the survival and the continuity of the race. Once more, she authors her own stories of her "collectively structured self-identity role" (Radford-Hill, 1986), as an othermother and community leader, in order to influence the women listeners to envision them-

selves in the same way.

Tubman also retells the story of how her own revolutionary actions, leading hundreds to freedom from the “slaver,” became acclaimed even among men in the abolitionist movement. Harriet narrates her own autobiography with the intention to guide and initiate the young Celia into social activism. As such, she uses her power to influence Celia, by becoming an othermother to the young girl, rather than coercing her into compliance, as does the second mature female character.

In this play, Childress demonstrates how the oral genre of storytelling has been shared by black women in intimate safe spaces with one another, as mother and daughter, and sister to sister, as more than a continuity of indigenous practices. Storytelling in the homeplace also plays an important role in teaching critical [maternal] consciousness and is central for “renewing our political commitment” (hooks, 1990) during the process of continuing the motherline into the next generation.

The dialogue between Harriet and the young Celia, confirms the necessity for teaching a black women’s maternal knowledge to young black girls. In their attempts to grope for structures of meaning and self-definition (hooks, 1990: 48), this knowledge furthers their own growth as young women. The textual analysis of the play “When the Rattle Snake Sounds” which I have presented, demonstrates the ways in which black women’s literature opens up counter narratives “within the homeplace” and exposes the young reader to these. That is, this literature provides knowledge of black women’s maternal knowledge and the development of critical oppositional consciousness, all of which is crucial for black female adolescents developing notion of an empowered self definition.

### **Finding their power through black women’s literature**

In this section I discuss how Goodie’s students experienced the critical storytelling genre as a source for self and community empowerment. I am basing my discussion here on Goodie’s observations of her students experiences of self transformations which she believes grew out of their exposure to black women’s literature (Goodie qtd. in Mogadime, 1997):

*The idea that black women showed strength and challenged racism in the face of oppression and brutality made them to want to know more. It gave them the vision and the strength to want to claim the savvy they came to know as theirs too.*

In the excerpt above Goodie discusses the BAG Drama Group’s engagement with the Childress play and how it assisted them in locating their own struggle for voice as young black females. The desire to write resistance scripts amid discourses that subjugate black women’s lives marks the intergenerational struggle of black females, therefore, seeing themselves in relation to this

historical struggle of black women held transformative possibilities for these adolescent learners.

The exposure to black women's history of activism allowed them the opportunity to claim the tradition of black women's assertion of critical voice and community leadership as their own. This comes through in Goodie's observations of the group: "They wanted to be unafraid and powerful like those women and it really showed through in their desire to take on leadership roles in the school." Goodie suggested that providing black female students with the access to knowledge about black women in history characterised as "bold and brave," gave her students "the power to take on an issue without being afraid and run with it" (qtd. in Mogadime, 1997). She conveyed the view that "as these girls presented the play they took over the women's lives." That is, they enacted a mode of consciousness where they felt they were empowered, to bring out their own talents and abilities.

Knowledge of black women's leadership became a bridge to self-discovery in the way black literary mothers envision for their black female readers (Lester, 1995: 29). In this way, Goodie's observations (see Mogadime 1997) connect with black women writers vision of their work for young black female audiences. Their vision and hope (as literary mothers) for young girls is that their work will assist them toward a self-discovery that includes building their confidence about themselves and their possibilities as self-reliant black females (29). A pedagogy of hope, rising out of the maternal literary lessons for young black girls, has also produced a literature which aims to assist them in discovering a greater self-knowledge (Childress, 1986; Shange, 1975). Black women-centered literature not only aims to assist girls in the development of a critical awareness of their racial and gender location, it also attempts to assist them in cultivating an inner self-definition which they can use in their own lives in order to resist domination. In other words, these counter narratives provide a pedagogy of hope, which envisions transformative possibilities for their female reading audience.

Goodie recounted the way in which the BAG Drama Group's participation in the play influenced areas of their learning outside the context of the play in positive ways. For instance, the girls involved with the performance were among those selected to present public speeches for senior school competition. They were also chosen to introduce their classes during their graduation ceremony. In Goodie's view, the memorization of an enormous amount of lines for performance had also offered them the opportunity to develop in the area of public speaking. They had further learned that they could project their voices and articulate with confidence in public settings. Goodie:

Black students really need drama, they need to develop that self-concept, they need to go up on stage and really let go, and find themselves, it's an incredible way of developing self concept, drama and theatre. When I went to the Bahamas I discovered that the

Bahamian schools are very much into drama, and that they are promoting it in their schools. In fact we read several Bahamian plays together before the [BAG] Drama Group decided on the Childress play about Harriet Tubman.

They preferred it because it involved an almost all female cast and, since they were basically a group of friends wanting to put on a play, it suited their purposes best. In the play a group of women are having a conversation about their years in slavery, and how they felt about it, they talk about it and sing about it. Singing is a way of healing. They were healing themselves, it was a way of survival, it was a way of saying that in spite of all this we know that we can do it. And the students, just got right into that.

They chose gospel songs from the churches where they come from. And they are blacks from different areas, some are Guyana... One girl was from Somalia, she brought in drum music. We all talked about how we might incorporate this piece of music into the play.

Really this project was grounded in their own personal experiences, so that was very exciting for them.... The project was theirs. They decided what props they would use and what kind of attire they would wear in order to suit the time period of the play. They really showed an incredible amount of initiative in deciding to do this project and orchestrating it. (Goodie qtd. in Mogadime, 1997).

A new sense of confidence grew out of the girl's participation and performance of the play. The BAG Drama Group responded to invitations to perform, "When The Rattle Snake Sounds," in various public venues. Within this capacity, they experienced the process of dynamically reaching out into the community as leaders among their peers. As an outcome of their participation they were provided with the opportunity to begin to envision their own ability to engage in the much needed work of raising community awareness about black women's history and contributions. The BAG Drama Group's participation in the play and the resulting community activism meant that they were provided with experiences in their youth of coalition building with and for black females. These kinds of early experiences might inspire young black females toward participation in community development, in the black Diaspora, as adults (Radford-Hill, 1986; Collins, 1991).

In her work with young black girls in the Diaspora, Goodie envisions the future of young black girls as leaders of their communities. Similarly, the vision to create leaders who are committed to changing the position of black women and their communities is also a central concern of black feminist pedagogy (Radford-Hill, 1986). What the story of the BAG drama Group does is to help illuminate the ways educators might begin to explore the links between self and social empowerment( Giroux, 1988: 134) for black female students, as it is made possible through the provision of black women-centered materials. Black

women centered material provided the members from BAG with a context for an empowered black female socialization because the thought and action arising from black women's day to day grounded experiences are documented into stories written by black women authors.

Today's schools can become more responsive as democratic institutions in relation to the black community, by providing black female students with a black women-centered curriculum. Seeing women as actors in history becomes a bridge for black girls own self discovery by assisting black females to locate themselves, their hopes, and their possibilities as actors in the world. In this way, their voice, desire and interest connect to the larger minority community struggle for democracy, equality and social justice.

The notion that "teachers are human beings who bring their cultural perspectives, values, hopes and dreams to the classroom" (Banks, 1991: 139) does not necessarily mean that a teacher has to be black and a feminist in order to deliver a curriculum which assists black female youth in their development of empowered self-definitions and leadership. It does however mean that white educators, as the majority of teachers who teach black female students, need to arrive at the point where they can openly learn and accept a knowledge basis which is informed by black women's location and their role as othermother in their relations with black students. As Henry (1993) points out in, "Missing Black Self-Representations in Canadian Educational Research," restructuring the curriculum" to include black women's voices and issues does call for "new paradigms" and "new frameworks for understanding teaching and learning in multiracial urban contexts" ( 207).

<sup>1</sup>The interviews draw from a larger oral history project in which I document my mother's life and work as a change agent in educational institutions both in South Africa (the place she will always call home) and Canada (the country we emigrated to in 1970) (see Mogadime 1997).

<sup>2</sup>In traditional African societies, community othermothers accept a culturally based maternal responsibility which extends beyond one's own children to other children from the community. According to African American (Collins, 1991; Gikes, 1989) and African Canadian researchers (Henry, 1992a, 1992b), the manifestation of community othermother in Americas is a recreation of traditional African women-centered social networks and community based child care (Henry, 1992a: 30). These researchers apply the term community othermother in order to explain the cultural dimension expressed through black women's community activism. The sense of cultural accountability inspires black women to become community leaders, "in response to the need of their own children and of those in their communities" (Gikes qtd. in Collins, 1991: 131). Community othermothers model a value system in leadership, which is based on connectedness with others and ethics of caring and personal accountability that are intended to move communities forward.



<sup>3</sup>Attempts to redress the gaps in research about teachers which omit the contributions of black women educators in Canadian history, has inspired a recent African Canadian “revisionist” scholarship Bristow, 1994; Cooper, 1991, 1994; Henry, 1992a, 1993, 1996, 1998; Shadd, 1994). The first aim of this specialized academic research community is to open up inquires into the otherwise hidden lives of black women educators. Afua Cooper (1994), in her research on Mary Bibb, one of the most influential black women educators in the nineteenth century Canada West, and Peggy Bristow (1994b), in her study of black women in Buxton and Chatham, 1850-65, identify the historical ideological commitment of black educators as aimed toward the improvement of their race or “race upliftment” (Bristow, 1994b: 115). The collective ideology of the black educated middle class of which teachers were a part was to commit themselves to elevating the social, economic and physical conditions of the poor.

The studies in this research community are significant in that they demonstrate how Canadian black educators’ work with black children is historically informed by a larger politic, which is to better the position of black people and children in particular. These aims, as they have been raised by researchers, reaffirm (Perkin’s 1983) comparative analysis of how black women teachers in the Americas aspired to a different agenda than white teachers. While white women’s “professional model” in the early nineteenth century was articulated through the “cult of true womanhood,” black women were encouraged to become educated for the “upliftment” of the race (Bristow, 1994). According to Henry, black women educators continue to do race uplift work by envisioning education as a means to liberate black children from racial, social and economic imbalances in society.

Henry shows how black children in the Canadian school system are subjected to processes of reproduction which position them in society. For instance, she points out that: “... [A] low percentage of African Canadian youth enter university and a great percentage of black youth experience unemployment” (1992a: 3). These implications arise out of black students experiences of exceedingly “high drop-out rates, low self-esteem, an over representation in low academic streams, and lower academic achievement than other racial/ethnic groups” (Toronto Board of Education qtd. in Henry, 1992a: 2). In her doctoral research, Henry studies the life history and teaching practices of five black women teachers. She focuses on examining how their daily lives are: “...[C]ontemporary examples of a tradition of black women teachers as cultural workers [othermothers] and activists both in their mainstream professions and in alternative community sites. Their steadfast political work has contributed significantly to black cultural survival and social transformations” (4). The social transformations which Henry theorizes on, are rooted in the committed work of black women teachers. Henry advances the idea that the teachers she interviewed live varied sites of consciousness as black mothers, teachers of black children, and community othermothers (88) which help them to reshape the

curriculum to meet the need of [black] children (8). Henry identifies their task as black educators as that of “taking back” control of black children’s education from the hegemony of Eurocentric educational institutions. These teachers, like my mother, are politically committed to working toward changing the marginalized experiences of black students in the Canadian educational school system.

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