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## Black Nova Scotian Women's Experience of Educational Violence in the Early 1900s: A Case of Colour Contusion

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS ARGUE that black people's experience in North American educational structures has been one of blatant oppression.<sup>1</sup> According to Jonathan Turner and his associates:

to the extent that a population for any part thereof is denied access to the educational system (s) or given unequal treatment while in the system(s) educational oppression exists in a society.<sup>2</sup>

This interpretation of educational oppression is supported by the testimonies of black women schooled in the early 1900s in Nova Scotia. The in-depth interviews I conducted with the women in

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<sup>1</sup> Doris Evans and Gertrude Tynes, *Telling the Truth Reflections: Segregated Schools in Nova Scotia* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1995); Karen S. Brathwaite and Carl E. James, eds., *Educating African Canadians* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1996); Bridglal Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks* (Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1991); Linda Carty, "Black Women in Academia: A Statement from the Periphery," *Unsettling Relations*, ed. Himani Bannerji et al. (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991); Peggy Bristow et al., *'We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up': Essays in African Canadian Women's History* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994); Sylvia Hamilton, "Our Mothers Grand and Great: Black Women of Nova Scotia," *Canadian Women Studies* 4 (1982): 33-37, and many others.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Turner et al., *Oppression: A Social History of Black and White in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1984) 113.

this study revealed the shocking reality of the educational oppression they experienced. It is my contention that, through the medium of educational violence, black women experienced grievous colour contusion.<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this study, the term “colour contusion” may be understood as the everyday baneful, internal injuries that were inflicted on the women’s individual and collective self-worth by the white educational system in the early 1900s.

We will find this to be true as we listen to the voices of a few black Nova Scotian women recalling the organized ways in which they were excluded from ‘proper’ education and their resistance to that exclusion. The women’s words reveal that the colour of their skin and elements of their ‘otherness’ contributed to their educational oppression. Their words also help us to understand the excruciating pain they carried buried deep within their collective and individual histories. They talk about the gate-keeping role of white female (and male) teachers who protected, at any cost to the women, white educational exclusivity.

It is evident that in a very complex way the women experienced colour of skin (race), gender and class, as relational and interrelated social weapons used by the educational violence, meted out to them in their pursuit of white formal education. However, in order to understand the impact of educational violence on women in this study we must know something of the socio-historical background from which it evolved. The literature mentioned throughout this study reveals that, as a result of slavery (1628–1834 in Canada and 1619–1864 in the United States) and segregation (1834–1960s in Canada and 1864–1960s in the United States), black women in North America, and more specifically in Nova Scotia, suffered the overt effects of individual, institutional and cultural racism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> “Colour contusion” in this study is not to be dismissed lightly as an academic or medical abstraction, or as a theoretical or philosophical obfuscation that cannot be reified. It is important that the reader understands, very practically, how the invisible abusive injuries voiced by the women in the study had an impact on their self-esteem, on their individual, group, and cultural identity, and on their entire lives for decades. One cannot deny the evidence of colour contusion from the violent educational history of these women and their foreparents. The results are everywhere in the black community to this day.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Leonard Elliott and Augie Fleras, *Unequal Relations: An Introduction to Race and Ethnic Dynamics in Canada* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall, 1992).

The results were widespread illiteracy, underemployment, unemployment, economic deprivation, political powerlessness, social rejection, spiritual exclusion and other negative elements imposed on the black community by white Nova Scotian society.<sup>5</sup> Also, the women inform us that, in addition to this imposed violence on their community, on a more personal level, they lived with the constant realization that they were/are perceived as being less than society's conception of womanhood, a sort of 'coloured brand.'

The theoretical framework that informs this social problem is the black feminist approach as advanced by bell hooks in her book, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984), and supported by the theoretical works of other scholars among women of colour.<sup>6</sup> hooks conceptualizes the marginality of black women and the centrality of the oppressor class by showing how the physical, economic, political, social and intellectual location of both groups reveals their positions of power and powerlessness. Needless to say, black women occupy the position of the powerless 'in the margin.' The author argues, however, that black women use their position 'in the margin' to conceptualize the oppressor's power over them and to strategize a resistance which enables them to survive:

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<sup>5</sup> See Colin Thomson, *Born With a Call: A Biography of Dr. William Pearly Oliver, CM* (Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, 1986); James W. St.G. Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada: A Study Guide for Teachers and Students* (Ottawa: Ministry of State for Multiculturalism, 1980); Carrie Best, *The Lonesome Road: The Autobiography of Carrie Best* (New Glasgow, NS: The Clarion Publishing Company, 1977); P.E. McKerrow, *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1783-1895*, ed. Frank Stanley Boyd, Jr. (Halifax: Afro Nova Scotian Enterprises, 1976); Lydia Lucas-White, "Blacks and Education in Nova Scotia: Implication For Social Work and Practice," *Social Work in Atlantic Canada* (1975): 35-50; William P. Oliver, "Cultural Progress of the Negro in Nova Scotia," *The Dalhousie Review* 29 (1949-50): 293-300; and others.

<sup>6</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Patricia Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Harper Collins, 1990); Roxanna Ng, "Sexism, Racism and Canadian Nationalism," *Race, Class, Gender: Bonds and Barriers*, ed. Jess Vorst et al. (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1991); Dionne Brand, "Black Women in Toronto: Gender, Race and Class," *Fireweed* 19 (Fall 1984): 26-34; Agnes Calliste, "Blacks' Struggle for Education Equity in Nova Scotia," *Innovations in Black Education in Canada*, ed. Vincent D'Oyley (Toronto: Umbrella Press, 1994); and others.

Living as we did—on-the-edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality ... a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

These black women in the early 1900s, living on the margins of the white power centres and eager for formal education, displayed a resistance to educational, and other forms of violence, through their way of knowing and being expressed and manifested in their socio-spiritual solidarity. The black church, the created centre of black marginality, offered the avenue through which the women resisted the full impact of the infliction of colour contusion in their everyday educational struggle.<sup>8</sup> Because my argument focuses on the women's voices, I have deliberately excluded an extensive theoretical discussion of the topic under study.

#### *The Black Women in the Study*

The voices of ten women, who received their early formal or institutionalized education at white schools in Nova Scotia in the early 1900s, are heard in this paper. They are part of a larger group of women whom I interviewed, between 1990 and 1991, for a research study concerned with the influence of race, gender and class on their educational experience. I found it culturally unacceptable to enquire about the women's personal lives. Therefore, I respected their privacy in this regard.<sup>9</sup>

The families of these ten women lived on the margins of white townships and cities in the province in the early 1900s. With few exceptions, all the females in their families worked in the white

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<sup>7</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* i.

<sup>8</sup> George Elliott Clarke, ed., *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing*, vol. 1 (Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1991); Pearleen Oliver, *A Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia 1782–1953* (Halifax: African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, 1953); Sylvia Hamilton, "Naming Names, Naming Ourselves: A Survey of Early Black Women in Nova Scotia," *'We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up': Essays in African Canadian Women's History*, ed. Peggy Bristow et al. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994); and others.

<sup>9</sup> Bernice Moreau, "Black Nova Scotian Women's Educational Experience 1900–1945: A Study in Race, Gender and Class Relations," PhD diss., U of Toronto, 1996.

power centres as domestic servants for upper- and middle-class white families.<sup>10</sup> Nine of the women are of British nationality and one is French. Six of the women are from black parents while the other four are visibly 'racially mixed.' These are significant distinctions for they influenced the quality and the duration of the educational programs the women were allowed at white schools in the province.

I have employed pseudonyms, with the permission of the women, for the sake of anonymity. Also, the women addressed each other by terms of endearment used mostly by 'blood relations' (e.g. Sister —; Aunty —; Mum —; Nan, etc.). I have used their method of respectful 'naming' of each other in this paper. It is worthy of note that in most cases, these black women chose not to be socially acquainted with the concepts 'race' and 'black' as they are understood today. For many of them the term 'black' was derogatory when they attended school in the early 1900s. Moreover, most of them were not comfortable with the concept as part of their individual identity. This is understandable since many of these women were not a part of the generation of blacks who, in the 1960s, reclaimed 'black' and 'African' as our socio-political identity.

All ten women identified themselves as 'coloured' instead of black; and 'skin colour,' with all its contusion, had the same derogatory meaning as race. Because of the frequent use of the term 'coloured' to describe the racial, cultural and group identity, the terms 'coloured' and 'black' are used interchangeably in this study. Interestingly, the women's use of the term 'coloured' as their ethnic identity put them in what Roger Simon, in his article, "Being Ethnic/Doing Ethnicity: A Response to Corrigan," calls 'the culture of the Other.' Simon states that the phrase

is in part defined through the collective expressive practices which articulate the boundaries on a social map of difference. For those displaced as Other, such practices or 'habits' continuously define and preserve a position in subjectivity as a place of identity/shelter.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Maxine Tynes, *Woman Talking Woman* (Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1990), and "In Service," *Fireweed* 26 (Winter/Spring 1988): 8–11.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Simon, "Being Ethnic/Doing Ethnicity: A Response to Corrigan," *Breaking the Mosaic*, ed. Jon Young (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1987) 36.

It is interesting to note that, on the one hand, these women's 'otherness' did preserve their cultural identity and protected to some degree their coloured or black selves. On the other hand, their visible 'otherness' exposed them to the onslaught of the colour contusion they were subjected to, by white teachers and the society at large, in their pursuit of a formal education and social inclusion. One of the strengths of the 'culture of the other' was the shelter it offered the women and their community from the curse of societal alienation, one of the visible and invisible injuries which were a part of their daily lived experience in that white dominant society.

Consequently, colour contusion contributed to the shaping of the women's educational experience. As I indicated earlier, the educational violence inflicted on the women was exacerbated by negative social relations, gender and class status. Although the women believe that they suffered more on account of their skin colour (or race) than their gender, being female and black meant that they were also subjected to economic exploitation, thus adding another dimension to the problem, that of poverty. For example, all black girls, including those who were privileged to attend white schools, were expected to be poor domestic servants. It can be argued that these women were schooled for the specific economic position of servitude in that society.<sup>12</sup> Needless to say, the women resisted that expectation of themselves, and as a consequence, met with opposition from the white educators and others in the educational system and society at large.

### *A Brief History of Black Education*

From the 1780s, when the first group of physically freed blacks was brought to Nova Scotia from United States by Britain, they were promised formal education. Those Black Loyalists honestly believed the 'white man's' words that they would have the right to meaningful education equal to whites. Then they would be totally free from the ignorance that was associated with slavery. The black

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<sup>12</sup> Thomson, *Born With a Call: A Biography of Dr. William Pearly Oliver*; Carter Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (New York: AMS Press, 1977); Daniel Thompson, *Sociology of the Black Experience* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976). These authors, like many others, agree that the education of black people served the oppressor class.

women, like the men, believed then and now that education was/is the way to freedom in its entirety. hooks supports this notion of freedom through education when she states that:

Education as the practice of freedom becomes not a force which fragments or separates, but one that brings us [blacks] closer, expanding our definitions of home and community.<sup>13</sup>

The freedom which the black women believed came through formal education was not a reality for them. In fact, there was never a period in the history of formal education in Nova Scotia that black Nova Scotians were offered formal education willingly or allowed to obtain some limited amount thereof without a struggle. Moreover, the freed blacks who were taken to Nova Scotia—the Loyalists (1784); the Maroons (1790); the Refugees (1812); Caribbean workers (late 1800s to early 1900s)—were all denied the opportunity to pursue formal education of any significance. Every request blacks made, of the owners and disseminators of the credible standardized type of education, was consistently denied.<sup>14</sup> It is worth repeating that from the late 1700s to the late 1900s black Nova Scotian women and men were limited in the opportunities allowed them to develop their intellectual capabilities in meaningful and profitable ways.

In spite of the barriers erected through educational violence and its consequence, invisible colour contusion, blacks' determination to be educated, even at the most basic level, motivated them to establish their own black schools. The first black school was established and controlled by the community as early as 1784. It was held in a log cabin built by the black community in Preston. Sylvia Hamilton informs us that "in 1787 Catherine Abernathy, a Black Loyalist teacher, instructed children in Preston. . . . She taught twenty children in a log cabin built by the people of the community."<sup>15</sup> The program was limited to the knowledge which she ob-

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<sup>13</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1989) 83.

<sup>14</sup> Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada*; Lucas-White, "Blacks and Education in Nova Scotia."

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton, "Our Mothers Grand and Great" 24–25.

tained clandestinely while still in slavery. During the time the Black Loyalists remained in Nova Scotia, before emigrating to Sierra Leone in 1790, they started little black schools in a few of the other settlements scattered across the province.

The ideology of black inferiority *vis-à-vis* white superiority that permeated Nova Scotia's society from the 1780s to the late 1900s declared black females undeserving candidates for formal education. In spite of the heroic attempts made by the Black Loyalists to educate themselves, they were unable to attain the level of education required by whites to be of any value. White custodians of formal education were adamant in their refusal to allow them to advance educationally and in other areas of their lives.

James Walker informs us that Black Refugees, like their predecessors, were not deterred by an education of violence. They lobbied the government enthusiastically for the opportunity to be educated. "Beginning in 1820 almost every Black settlement petitioned the provincial government for assistance in establishing schools"<sup>16</sup> with little or no success. On rare occasions when they were allowed some basic formal education it was always for the socio-economic benefit of their white employers. But their relentless struggle to be educated caused such an uproar that the white politicians in the 1830s made it legally impossible for them to acquire education equally and/or together with whites. The possibility for them to acquire the level and quality of education that was necessary for socio-economic mobility and societal respectability was legally prohibited.<sup>17</sup> A contradiction to this political move was that black parents, who lived in the margin of the white cities and towns, were compelled to pay school tax while their children were not provided with adequate schooling. In reality they contributed to the 'proper' education of white children who in turn suppressed them.

A striking example of the attitude of white leaders to black education is demonstrated by the school committee of the legislature of 1836. When school places were sought for black children living on the edge of the city of Halifax it was reported that:

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<sup>16</sup> Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada* 43.

<sup>17</sup> Selina Pratt, "Black Education in Nova Scotia," MA thesis, Dalhousie U, 1972; Donald Clairmont and Dennis Magill, *Nova Scotian Blacks: An Historical and Structural Overview* (Halifax: Dalhousie Institute of Public Affairs, 1970); Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1977).



room could be found in three [white] schools for the admission of these children were they not of African extraction. But the known repugnance of whites to mix with them, shuts them out from the benefit of the other institutions, and if they are to be taught at all, they must receive their rudiments of knowledge in a separate and distinct establishment.<sup>18</sup>

The literature mentioned throughout the study reveals that Nova Scotia's history of consistent hostility towards black children of school age is paralleled by much lobbying of government. Generation after generation of blacks resisted the decision of government to exclude them from adequate formal education.<sup>19</sup> When the government finally decided to allow blacks admission to formal education they were careful to segregate them by colour and community. Only those children whose parents lived on the margins of white communities and worked for white families were allowed this limited educational opportunity. This pattern of segregated and unequal education for blacks continued until the late 1950s when the provincial government took steps to reform the education policies to include blacks and other non-whites.

However, for most of the women who were involved in this study the education they received was inferior by society's standard, and in most cases superficial. They were not allowed to study mathematics beyond the primary grades; natural science and advanced social science subjects were forbidden. Secondary courses which would have prepared the women for university careers and meaningful employment in the white centres were denied. Interestingly, the justification white leaders gave for this educational violence was shrouded in the impositions, myths and platitudes of blacks' immaturity, intellectual incapability, uncanny religiosity, stupidity, social inabilities, mental and physical slothfulness, etc. Based on the women's discussion, these compounded, as it were, the colour contusion they experienced.

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<sup>18</sup> Public Archives of Nova Scotia, *Statutes of Nova Scotia: Education Committee Report* RG.5 Series R 22 (1836) 36.

<sup>19</sup> See McKerrow, *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1783-1895* 37.

In addition, the belief that to educate blacks was to make them unfit for life as the servants of whites, was practised as a pious, almost religious justification for not educating them.<sup>20</sup> But their resistance to this form of educational deprivation, as demonstrated in their community's solidarity against educational oppression, was so persistent that a few of them were allowed some formal education. However, whites made it so unbearably difficult for them that many had no choice but to flee the violence associated with their presence in most white educational institutions in Nova Scotia. Lydia Lucas-White informs us that the heroic efforts by some blacks to gain literacy is praiseworthy, but the success rate was always minimal.<sup>21</sup>

*The Women's Struggle With Colour Contusion*

It is worth repeating that in the early twentieth century Nova Scotia educational laws prohibited blacks from freely attending white schools. Any exception to this rule was an individual favour granted by white, male, middle-class inspectors of schools and the white, male committee for education established by the government in power. The Education Act of 1918 allowed school inspectors to recommend separate educational facilities for the different races and sexes. And as Robin Winks reminds us, separate education was also unequal education for those few blacks allowed such a privilege.<sup>22</sup> In a society where education was considered to be a right for whites only, black women tell how very difficult it was for them to prove that they were deserving of it.

Education was even more difficult for black women when they happened to be of British background and racially mixed. Those women who were racially mixed were treated worse than those who were perceived as being 'pure' blacks, by most white teachers and peers. The racially mixed women from British parentage reported that they experienced more hostility by white female teachers than all the other women, including one woman from French parentage. For example, Sister Lily, racially mixed and of British nationality, who lived on the margin in the town of Truro,

<sup>20</sup> Oliver, *A Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia 1782-1953*.

<sup>21</sup> Lucas-White, "Blacks and Education in Nova Scotia" 35-50.

<sup>22</sup> Winks, "Negro School Segregation in Ontario and Nova Scotia," *Canadian Historical Review* 50 (1969): 164-91.

had a different experience to the non-racially mixed and French women. She recalled being alienated and eventually forced to stop school at grade five. She spoke as follows:

My white teacher, who was a woman, treated me as a pet cat, stroking my wavy hair and my tanned looking skin. Beyond that she never took any interest in my education. I wanted to be a nurse, but the white society then would not allow me to become a nurse or anything but a domestic servant. I hurt an awful lot inside to this day from the way we were treated because of what I looked like and because of my parents, they broke the rule.<sup>23</sup>

This woman's experience of educational violence is significantly different from that of the racially mixed French woman. Sister Anna, whose French white mother and black father lived with their family in a mixed French and British Canadian community in Yarmouth, had relatively fewer negative interactions at school than the other racially mixed women whose mothers were white British Canadians. It is clear that the nationality of the woman (French-Canadian) had some influence on the attitude of the white British-Canadian female teachers toward her. She remembered:

My teachers, who were all white, encouraged me to study hard and get a senior high diploma. They were disappointed when I stopped at grade eleven one grade away to get the certificate. I was not teased or called names by the white school children at school. I was talked about by the teachers as "the pretty little coloured French girl."<sup>24</sup>

Sister Anna was the only racially mixed female to have attained a grade eleven level education. The other three racially mixed women got to grade five level and were forced out of school by white female teachers who had the support of white school authorities.

Sister Lois, who is also of mixed racial parentage but British Canadian, found that her experience at a white public school in

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<sup>23</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

the farming community in Amherst, where her family lived, was quite different to what she experienced in a city school where other black children attended. She remembered that:

The school nearest our home was all white. Until I went to school nobody told me that I was coloured and no good. I thought that I was like the children who were at the school. I was introduced to the class by the white lady teacher as coloured which seemed to have surprised the white children. From then I was molested by the white boys, shunned by the white girls and sometimes beaten by the children my age who called me horrible names. Every day I ran home crying. My mother who was white went to the school. The teacher told her she couldn't help if the children call me names and beat me up. The teacher said, if my mother chose to have a nigger child she must expect that the children would beat me up. Another thing that was very hard was hearing the Sambo story. Every day the teacher read a story called "Little Black Sambo" to the class. I hated it because the children would call me Sambo and laugh at me for being coloured and silly like Sambo. I hated the school so much that I would get sick every school morning. At this point my father took me to the city school where there were more coloured children. It was not as bad there as in the all white school.<sup>25</sup>

Sister Lois' testimony reveals the role of the white female teacher as the gate-keeper of white education. She found that it was easier for her at the school where there were other black children. In spite of the fact that black children at the city school were having difficulty also, the presence of other black children made her feel a bit safer. The three women of mixed race who attended white schools mentioned how difficult it was for them to be constantly experiencing colour contusion at the white schools because they were neither pure black nor pure white. Also, teachers used stories about slavery and Black Sambo to remind them that they were the

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<sup>25</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

children of slaves. Sister Merle tells us that “the daily reading of this horrible Black Sambo story gave me the creeps. As a coloured child I hated it.”<sup>26</sup>

The three women who completed grade twelve told me that they desperately wanted to attend university, but were denied the opportunity by society and the educational institution. The other seven wanted to complete grade twelve and be allowed to work at their chosen careers (nursing, music teacher, etc.). The sad reality of these women’s experience of educational violence was the unobtrusive and subtle manner in which it was administered. In spite of the measure of educational success some of them seemed to have achieved, in their accounts they tell of their desire to attain the highest educational level offered to whites and of being deliberately deprived of opportunities to excel. Sister Enid recalled that:

It was normal for us coloured kids to be called names, laughed at, threatened and beaten. We lived in constant fear of being killed by whites any time. At the elementary school level it was not so threatening. The whites wanted women to work in their kitchens who could read directions and recipes. We had problems with whites when we got to the junior and secondary school levels. Coloured pupils were allowed to take drawing, music, home economics and gardening, but not maths, languages and sciences. It was decided by the teachers who among the coloureds would be allowed maths and those more important subjects, and who would not. In most cases we were not allowed to do maths and science. I wanted to be a dietician but I had great difficulties in getting the permission to do biology and maths.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear from this account that the interlocking social relations of race, gender and class were the weapons used to inflict colour contusion on these women and their entire community. They were established by society for the purpose of violence against a powerless and disadvantaged group of women. This woman was

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<sup>26</sup> Interview (Jan. 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

not allowed to do science because she was coloured, female and poor. Also, the education she wished to acquire was not in keeping with the job she was expected to perform. As a domestic servant she would not have required a knowledge of science. Sister Enid received a grade twelve diploma. She was allowed to attend Teachers' College, but she was denied the right to undertake teacher training courses which would have given her the qualification for teaching in a specialized area reserved for whites only.

It is my contention that the women in this study were not only 'educated' according to the dictates of the white educational system, but like their foremothers, these black women were expected to develop docility in subservience, with a grateful attitude toward their oppressors. The data reveal that specific methods were used by those in authority to discourage the women from attaining the education they desired. Among them were the derogatory references made about their African physical features (i.e. thick lips, funnel nose, ugly, worthless niggers etc.); negative remarks about the menial work done by their mothers, members of their families and community (i.e. dirty cleaners); slurs about their poverty (e.g. poor, nasty niggers); and constant reminders of their inferior status in society (i.e. black paupers). When all else failed to stop blacks from seeking formal education, they were physically abused.

These tactics were perceived by the black women to be the justification used by whites to deny them meaningful formal education, decent jobs and civil rights. Sister Merle, one of the three retired teachers of the women in the study, explained in a rather direct way:

We are coloured and so we must be poor. All kinds of barriers are set up to keep us from getting education and good jobs. White people made it very difficult for us to go to their schools which were better than ours. Even when we struggled and got education we were not given jobs. I wanted to be a nurse but I was not allowed. We had no choice, most of us had to work in their homes as servants or teach in our own schools when it was possible for us to build a school in our community.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Interview (Jan. 1990).

The women's frequent reference to their skin colour motivated me to inquire about their experience with the issue. I found that they had strong feelings about the way their skin colour held them captive to educational and occupational slavery. They used the phrases 'our skin colour'; 'we are coloured'; 'the colour of our skins'; 'we coloured folks'; 'our coloured churches'; 'our home for coloured children'; 'our coloured schools'; 'we coloured girls'; and other similar terms to identify themselves and their institutions. Moreover, most of these women experienced 'coloured' as alienation, as institutional or systemic and cultural racism. When I asked them whether they created the name 'coloured' the unanimous response was, "no them, the whites, called us coloured."<sup>29</sup> The women's understanding of race as coloured presents for me a difference in the conceptualization of race in analysis of the data.

For example, the colours 'black' and 'white' occupied so much of the women's thinking that it was incredible how they visualized their subjugation by colour. Sister Joyce put it aptly in an analogy of her life as a black woman in Nova Scotia:

My life is like a patchwork quilt made up of only two colours—big white pieces and small black pieces stitched together but with no true pattern.<sup>30</sup>

I did not seek an interpretation of her imagery of collective oppression for, as a black woman I too, as well as other black foreign students, have experienced colour contusion by white male and female professors at the university level, and I know how painful it could be to talk about the personal internal colour contusion we experience. However, it is worth repeating that the women's constant references to colour of skin in conversations about their interactions at school reveal the impact that being coloured at a white school had on their everyday educational activities. They are convinced that the colour of their skin was responsible for their educational oppression, their poverty, their social rejection, their political powerlessness and other structural social problems.

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<sup>29</sup> Field-notes (Jan. 1990 to April 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Interview (Jan. 1990).

Earlier we found from the women's testimonies that colour of skin (or race) is the overwhelming factor in their educational deprivation. In addition I will argue that gender and class were also interconnected aspects of social relations that shaped the women's educational and all other life experiences. For instance, Sister Joyce, a very reserved and sedate woman, shared with me what it was like for her as a black child growing up in a mixed community in Halifax over fifty years ago. She was one of the three in this group who got her grade twelve diploma. She was the only one in her age group in her community and church to have acquired such a high level of education at one of the more prestigious high schools in the city of Halifax. Sister Joyce recalled:

It was expected that if you were coloured you were from the lowest class. Because of my colour every white person believed that I was poor, not too intelligent, and inferior. Therefore I was not a threat to the whites once I remained quiet and caused no trouble. My mother had eleven children and she had to work hard and we had to help her do her domestic. The white women allowed little coloured girls to come in after school and help our mothers. They believed that we were in training to take over when our mothers were too old to work. But my mother did not want me to be a domestic servant so she worked long hours and hard to help us get our high school diplomas. My mother died before I completed high school and it was even more difficult to remain at school. But I managed to stay because I knew that was what my mother wanted. I promised her I would get it and I did. I trusted in the great God, my mother's God, to help me complete my high school. The teachers, both males and females, discouraged me. They gave me no help when I asked. The white girls laughed at my clothes because I could not wear new clothes. They were always second-hand. I had no friends at school. I ran home straight after school and never took part in school activities. But I got my grade twelve.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Interview (Jan. 1990).



What a struggle and what an accomplishment! This woman's identity, as prescribed by society, was that of a poor, coloured, scared, female, religious child with a legacy of slavery.

Similarly, Sister Mavis attended school in Middleton, where she lived in a racially mixed poor community. Both her parents worked in white homes; her father was a boiler engineer and her mother a domestic servant. Sister Mavis, like all the other women, had some problems with skin colour at school. As a black child she was taught how to survive by her mother. She said, "I had to be quiet, mind my own business, to walk straight home from school and not answer back whites when they call me names."<sup>32</sup> Sister Mavis' story is like that of the other women; colour of skin, gender and class (the work her parents did) controlled how she behaved, what she said, when she said it, how she said it, and to whom she said it. "Coloureds said very little to whites. We did not trust them because we knew them better than they knew us." Sister Mavis continued:

I would have loved to become a teacher but I was too afraid of leaving home and having to be with whites alone at the Normal School for teacher training. I was afraid of them. They were cruel to us, especially coloured girls. I needed proper clothes and the lack of money kept me from trying to be a teacher. We were called nigger by the children at school and in the community. The poor whites felt that they were better than us because we were coloured. Never mind how poor and unmannerly they were, they believed that to be a dirty white was better than being niggers. My teachers never encouraged me to complete school. They acted like they were surprised that I could think. Few of us made it to high school and when we were there we were not to be seen and not to be heard. When I got to grade eleven there were very few blacks at that level so I got discouraged and left school and did domestic work. I was more educated than my white mistress.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

<sup>33</sup> Interview (March 1990).

In any case, to be called 'coloured' by whites was more acceptable to the women than to be called 'nigger.' I have found also, that in the earlier records the term 'coloured' negro was used more often than race to describe black Nova Scotians in the late 1800s and early 1900s.<sup>34</sup> In spite of the colour line, blacks continued find ways to resist the education oppression they were subjected to. Carrie Best offers a striking example of this as recent as the mid 1940s. Best found what she refers to as a 'Kitchen School' that was run by a white woman in Lower Sackville, for black children who were rejected from school because their parents were unable to pay the provincial school tax.<sup>35</sup> It is interesting to note that even the black women and their community's resistance to educational oppression was seen by most whites as typical of their persistence to be like whites. This persistence was not perceived as praiseworthy but rather as presumptuous or niggers' arrogance. Sisters Eva and Edith recall that the white children at their schools repeated unpleasant rhymes to harass them. Among them was this one: "nigger, nigger never-die / flat nose and chinkey eye."<sup>36</sup> In spite of the colour contusion they experienced, they continued at school, which shows the nature of their perseverance in struggle. Although derogatory racist expressions, such as the one mentioned above, were a common part of the everyday world of black women (and men), in every case they are remembered by the women as having shaped the education they received.

The literature mentioned throughout the study reveals very emphatically that the struggles blacks had in making a decision to pursue formal education were never simple. Some women responded by fighting harder for education, while others withdrew from the difficult process. This gives us some indication of the complexity of the barriers used to discourage black women (and men) from seeking educational advancement.

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Fergusson, *A Documentary of the Establishment of the Negroes in Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1948); Oliver, "Cultural Progress of the Negro in Nova Scotia" 293-300; G.A. Rawlyk, "The Guysborough Negroes: A Study in Isolation." *The Dalhousie Review* 48 (1968-69): 24-36; G.A. Freiker, *Education in the Atlantic Provinces* (Toronto: Quance Lectureship in Canadian Education, 1950).

<sup>35</sup> Best, *That Lonesome Road* 225-26.

<sup>36</sup> Interviews (Jan. and Feb. 1990).

Through the voices of the women in their discussion of the colour contusion they experienced and the ways in which they perceived the effects of those invisible injuries, we get glimpses of the contradictions and the subtleties evident in their struggle for formal education in the early 1900s. This may help us to understand and appreciate the women's limited educational accomplishments. It also addresses the question, why after more than two hundred years (1780s–1980s) not one indigenous black Nova Scotian woman has acquired a PhD at an institution of higher learning in that province. It is clear that while colour contusion hurt beyond measure the black women, it protected, rather successfully, educational exclusivity for whites. I propose that the educational deprivation of the women in the study, especially those of mixed parentage, was to some extent a successful deprivation 'colour scheme' employed by the white educational system.

The question arises, 'Was there a hidden motive for injuring the women's intellectual development apart from bigotry?' The data suggests that there were socio-economic advantages for the upper-class whites and a sense of superiority for poor whites of equal economic status with blacks. Nan, as she was lovingly called, informed us:

The coloured people kept quiet about not having the right kind of education and everything else. We didn't like what is done to us and we sometimes say so. But we couldn't always fight to win them. We are coloured and no coloured could win in Nova Scotia. The white folks had their own selfish reason why they didn't want us to get the same schooling they got. We must never be as good as them. Then they could say that we are ignorant. In this way the only jobs we could find to do was to clean their clothes, clean their children, clean their houses, clean their streets, clean their offices, clean their chimneys, and do all the other dirty work they gave us to do. We were there to keep them clean. And as far back as I can remember it was always so. We clean the rich and the poor whites make mock of us.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

Interestingly, this woman, like the others in the study, was able to recognize that the educational deprivation of her people was of socio-economic advantage to 'white folks.' In addition, a few women were also sexually exploited by white men on the grounds that they were unlearned and therefore sexually permissive. Sexual exploitation of black women by white men, in North America, dates back to slavery (1619). Black feminist writers have called attention to the sexual crimes committed by white men against black women, crimes which, for the most part, have gone unnoticed for centuries. There are observable connections of power and control between educational deprivation, sexual exploitation and servitude in the lives of black women from slavery to the early 1900s,<sup>38</sup> but this is not the focus of my study.

The women spoke also about their resistance against the educational violence they faced every day because of the colour of their skin. Although they were not always able to erase the colour line as it revealed itself in their education and economic activities, they fought courageously against it. Carrie Best, one of the first black Nova Scotian women to author a book, *That Lonesome Road* (1977), gives us a striking example of her mother's fight to protect her children from white violence. The author informs us that her mother, "who could neither read nor write, educated her children about whites' brutality to Blacks."<sup>39</sup> She warned her children about the ideological barriers set up by whites to demean and destroy them, and taught them how to overcome what appeared to be a hopeless life situation.

According to Best, her mother—a domestic servant who spent all her working years in service for whites—understood how whites perceived blacks. She understood the white centre of power and control and what went on there. She explained to her children the prejudices of white ideology:

Society has said you are an inferior being, born to be a  
hewer of wood and a drawer of water because you are

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<sup>38</sup> Angela Miles and Geraldine Finn, *From Pressure to Politics* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989) 350; Frances Beale, "Slave of a Slave No More: Black Women's Struggle," *The Black Scholar* 7(1975): 2–10; Angela Davis, "The Black Women's Role in the Community of Slaves," *The Black Scholar* 3 (1971): 3–15; Beth Day, *Sexual Life Between Blacks and Whites* (New York: World Books, 1975).

<sup>39</sup> Best, *That Lonesome Road* 173.

Black. Remember you are a person, separate and apart from all other persons on earth. The path to your destiny is hidden—you alone must find it . . . . Take the first turn right and go straight ahead.<sup>40</sup>

Similar words of wisdom were offered to generations of black women by their mothers, 'grand and great.'<sup>41</sup> They may have been denied meaningful formal education, but they were taught to resist and thus survived. In her historical account of black women in Nova Scotia, Best encourages us to:

Think about our grandmothers who fought to read and write and often died never knowing how—And the books and the plays and poetry that died with them. She dreamed of being a dancer—She scrubbed floors. Her mind's eye created a painting—She picked cotton. She wanted to sleep all day in her man's arms—She arose before dawn. Medicine and science, arts and letters, business, politics, law, leisure, travel, history, a house with more than two rooms, indoor plumbing, schools that were good and free, a warm coat in winter, a pair of shoes just for pretty, a soft bed, more food,—less weary—more time to live. Our grandmas' dreams, so many unfulfilled.<sup>42</sup>

This brilliant Afro-Nova Scotian woman does no stop at the point of our grandmas' unfulfilled dreams; instead she encourages black women to remember that in spite of the hardships that our foremothers experienced:

... somehow, though their cups were often empty and battered, these women with their work-scarred hands dared to hope as they dried our tears and rocked us to sleep in the fullness of their bosoms, that their dreams would become a reality in us.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Best, *That Lonesome Road* 82.

<sup>41</sup> Hamilton, "Our Mothers Grand and Great."

<sup>42</sup> Best, *That Lonesome Road* 173.

<sup>43</sup> Best, *That Lonesome Road* 173.

For centuries black women like Carrie Best, her mama, the women who participated in this study, and the many other unnamed black women in Nova Scotia and across the western world, generation after generation, have fought for the freedom to be educated and other civil rights. Best reminds us, in poetic verses of Alice Walker, how our foremothers struggled and survived:

They were women then  
 My Mama's generation  
 Husky of voice—stout of  
 Step  
 With fists as well as  
 Hands  
 How they battered down  
 Doors  
 And ironed  
 Starched white  
 Skirts.  
 How they led  
 Armies;  
 Headragged Generals  
 Across mined  
 Fields  
 Booby-trapped  
 Ditches  
 To discover DESKS  
 To place for us.  
 How they knew what we  
 Must know  
 WITHOUT KNOWING A PAGE  
 OF IT  
 Themselves.<sup>41</sup>

*White Female Teachers and Black Women's Education*

Sister Eva told me what it was like for her as a student at one of the common white schools in her area. In retrospect she was amazed at the power and control her white female teacher had over her

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<sup>41</sup> Best, *That Lonesome Road* 186.

education. The teacher demonstrated that she had the power to decide how much education Sister Eva got, how long she stayed at school, how she was treated, by what name she was called, and eventually what job she would have after school. In Sister Eva's words:

The school I went to was white. They were forced to accept us coloured children because our parents paid school taxes and we were not allowed at white schools. My mother was white and my father was black as we say today. In those days we were called coloured. My teacher was a young white lady. She never called me by my name, I was not called by my name by the white students either. I was called nasty names like 'mix-breed nigger' and many others like that. I wanted to be a music teacher but I was not allowed. -I had to be what my teacher said I would be, only a domestic. The coloured children were beaten, and jeered by the whites. So often the coloured boys would fight back but then we got into trouble with the teacher the next day. The whites would say nasty verses about the coloureds that caused the fights. It was so painful to listen to them day after day after day. I would cry so much that my mother was very worried. At grade five she took me out of school and sent me to work for a white family at age of twelve. I was taking care of white babies, washing and scrubbing floors. At school I was not called by my name because of the colour of my skin. I was always described as 'that mix-breed nigger' over there, never by my name. But when I went to work as a domestic servant the white lady called me by my name.<sup>45</sup>

I asked Sister Eva whether her teacher called the other coloured girls by their names. Her response was "yes, but they were pure, I was mixed. She didn't like me because I was mixed."<sup>46</sup> Sister Eva's white physical features could have been a problem for

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<sup>45</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

<sup>46</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

the teacher, or it could have been that she was perceived as an impostor who belonged to the culture of the Other. This woman was treated as a 'no name brand.' She was assumed nameless and therefore, invisible until she fulfilled the role that was expected of her as domestic servant for a white woman and her family. She was deprived of the opportunity of becoming a music teacher.

Sister Lily told me that white women talked to black women only when they worked in the madams' kitchens. She recalled:

They treated us like animals when we tried to work anywhere else but in their homes. I know now that coloured children were called by nasty names and had horrible things done to them so as to keep us from going to their school and getting education.<sup>47</sup>

Whether the black females in the early 1900s attended white schools, little black schools or no school at all, they were all regarded as nameless, invisible, worthless by whites who accepted their role as servants and cleaners. Black women were always called by their first names by both the white adults and the white children they cared for, unless they were very old and no longer in 'service.'<sup>48</sup> Most older black women in service were referred to as 'mammies' by their white employers and families.

These women's stories reveal several of the forms of colour contusion mentioned above which ensured perpetuation of their educational, social, economic and political deprivation. These may have been demonstrated in various ways but the outcome was the same. Nan, in discussing her school experience, remembers:

all my teachers were white ladies. We lived on a hill that the white people called nigger-hill in dem days. The teachers never allowed the black and white girls to play together. The boys could play games together but not the girls. When doing the roll call the teacher would say, 'Is

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<sup>47</sup> Interview (Feb. 1990).

<sup>48</sup> Maxine Tynes, "In Service," *Fireweed* 26 (Winter/Spring 1988): 8–11; Frances Foster, "Changing Concepts of the Black Woman," *Journal of Black Studies* 3 (1973): 443–53.



Mary from nigger-hill here today?' I would then answer yes Miss —. White children would say that blacks were dirty and carry diseases right in front of us. The girls were told to keep away from blacks. They didn't sit near to us. We had to sit at the back and keep quiet. Our parents worked for them but protected us from them because they hated us, they called us names.<sup>49</sup>

Eugene Genovese, in his study of early black slaves, claims that the process of naming someone in the early black community was a very serious activity. The naming of a newborn child was a significant ceremony among black African Americans whether freed or bond. They seem to have understood the psychological impact that naming had on people. Genovese notes that "slaves ... understood that names identified class and status (and power) and marked an appropriate degree of respect"<sup>50</sup> among themselves as well as among whites.

For those women attending mixed schools in the early 1900s, being nameless was not only a part of the colour contusion they suffered, it was the constant reminder and enforcement of their nothingness, their invisible presence, their underclass status as lesser than the lowest in society.<sup>51</sup> In the light of this, we can understand the women's anger about the way they were de-named, and re-named by white society. The literature reveals that, as part of their strategy for dealing with this social problem, black women looked to their church for support. Through their black spiritual experience the women who were 'no-named' or 'de-named' found comfort that they were respected by those of their kind. They all talked about having found strength in the name of the Lord. There are several hymns they mentioned that focused on the importance of naming. The women recalled how they sang these hymns to help them as a part of the survival and healing process. One such hymn which was casually mentioned is based on the scripture found in St. John's Gospel 14.13 and is entitled "In the Name of the Lord."

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<sup>49</sup> Interview (Jan. 1990).

<sup>50</sup> Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 445.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas G. Glasgow, *The Black Underclass* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980).

Its words are as follows:

There is strength in the name of the Lord;  
 There is power in the name of the Lord;  
 There is hope in the name of the Lord!  
 Blessed is (she) he who comes in the name of the Lord.<sup>52</sup>

These black Christian women resisted attacks on their personal identity by referring to each other as sisters in the name of the Lord. They address one another respectfully, not by the white titles of Mrs. or Miss but rather, by the endearing titles of Sister to younger women, and Mother, Mum or Auntie to older women, even when they are not related. They have found their equality in the name of Christians and talked about being one in Christ. In this higher form of naming to which they have associated themselves, in the name of the Lord Jesus, the God in whom they trust, they have found solace even in their semi-literate situation.

William P. Oliver, one of the most educated black Nova Scotians of that era, calls attention to social interaction between blacks and whites in his discussion of the poor socio-educational conditions that existed among most indigenous blacks in Canada in the early 1900s. He points to the practice of colour exploitation by whites of blacks as the major factor in the socio-educational deprivation of black Canadians. Oliver claims that the colour of skin of a black woman or man was the greatest barrier to her/his acquisition of adequate education and social mobility. He further states that "every Black in Canada realizes that the colour of his (and her) skin determines how he (and she) will be received in society," and concludes by pointing to the far-reaching effects, "the denial of the right of Blacks to be worthy Canadian citizens after being in the province and serving whites there for over two hundred years."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Field-notes (Jan. 1990).

<sup>53</sup> William P. Oliver, *Human Rights for the Negro in Nova Scotia: A Brief Presented at a Human Rights Conference* (Toronto, 1975) 2.

*Conclusion*

The information provided by these ten black women who attended white schools in Nova Scotia in the early 1900s reveals, without a doubt, that the acquisition of any level of formal education was not a given, but a rare opportunity. I found that the social relations of skin colour (race), gender and class (poverty) were the visible weapons employed by the white educational system to inflict the colour contusion that deterred the women in their pursuit of formal education. Colour contusion was therefore a painful reality for all these women who attended white schools in the early 1900s in Nova Scotia.

In spite of the overwhelming educational barriers, they all succeeded in acquiring some institutionalized knowledge, which is a credit to their ability to learn in adverse circumstances. Somehow they found the strength to persevere; they drew on the support of their parents, and the faith of their community in God as Spirit, who they believe gives strength to overcome hardship. It can be argued that their suffering was not in vain, for on an average these women attained the highest levels of education of black Nova Scotian women in the province of Nova Scotia to 1945.

Finally, I am left with the conviction that these black women were able to survive their lonesome journey in white schools through black women's ways of knowing and being. Included in those strategies for survival was their quiet resistance through female solidarity, an inner strength, as a result of their faith in their God, and an uncanny knowledge of the ways of the oppressor class.



Potato Harvesters—Annapolis Valley, NS, 1930s. National Archives of Canada. Neg. no. PA74527.