

*The Color of Gender* addresses important debates for feminists working in Western contexts. The relevance of the book is unlikely to be limited to the 1990s, not least because the questions addressed by Eisenstein will not easily be resolved. She sees these issues as challenges rather than unfortunate problems in an optimistic approach to politics which views conflict and contradiction as spurs to thought and action rather than as matters for embarrassment or retreat. One can only hope that her optimism is not too misplaced: according to Eisenstein we simply cannot afford it to be misplaced. I closed the book with a new (or renewed) appreciation of the need for an international feminist politics that dissolves the usual focus on First World contexts and recognizes the similarities and differences between women around the world. This is not the book that Eisenstein has written, but it is to her credit that *The Color of Gender*, despite its US focus, does not close off discussion but manages to leave the way open for further debate.

Christine Griffin

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## **We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up. Essays in African Canadian Women's History**

**Coordinated by Peggy Bristow**

University of Toronto Press: Canada, 1994

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Rebellious slave woman and valiant fugitive. Devout Baptist church sister; abused, underpaid domestic; exploited wartime factory worker. Pioneering nurse and resolute teacher. 'Womanist' artist, academic and poet. African Canadian women emerge in this anthology in portraits which find parallels in other geographical areas of the African diaspora; they are punctuating their 400-year presence in Canada with testimony of their exclusion from and marginalization within Canadian life. These essays cover the history of African Canadian women from their arrival in the seventeenth century to the immediate post-war period. The relationship between the various organs of the state and Black women is a central theme and is discussed in the context of economic and social changes. The relations of African Canadian women to the Canadian economy are correctly both considered in the context of Black people in general and analysed in terms of gender, by the introduction of oral testimony, biographical sketches, analysis of census, government records and other official data.

Here is a panoramic documentation of women's experiences from the period of slavery which, as Sylvia Hamilton shows in the opening essay,

'was well entrenched before the arrival of the United Empire Loyalists in 1783'. Although the Black Loyalists believed they were coming to a land of liberty, they were frequently abused. Frustration led to mass migration to Sierra Leone, West Africa, just at the time when events in Jamaica, West Indies, led to the migration of the Maroons to Nova Scotia. Hamilton's interesting discussion adds a valuable dimension to the unfinished history of Black women in the diaspora and points to the need to weigh the correspondences between Black women's post-slavery cultural forms based on our growing knowledge of migration. Unchronicled journeys are also the subject of Adrienne Shand's essay on the Underground Movement.

Recognizing that the story of Harriet Tubman is already well known, Shand focuses on unsung heroines who escaped to Canada West before the American Civil War and explains the gender considerations of 'running away'. Motherhood, pregnancy and the more limited freedom of movement associated with domestic work forced many young slave women to stay put; however, there were exceptions such as Ann Marie Jackson who fled with her seven children, a pregnant woman who escaped in a box and others who 'cleverly donned suits of mourning' and eluded their owner!

Throughout *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up*, the reader is conscious of the difficulties these Black feminist scholars have faced in reconstructing this history. Their subjects have been ignored in white feminist histories such as Anita Clair Fellman's *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (1986) and even in popular Black histories the achievements of significant women are 'minimised' (p. 7). While such recent secondary sources are full of disappointments, the paucity of good primary sources continues to be the main drag. In Afua Cooper's portrait of the pioneer teacher Mary Bibb who began a school in 'a dark, ill-ventilated room' in her house in 1850, a handful of letters and newspaper reports are stitched together to show how Bibb coped with financial insecurity, government indifference and parental poverty in mid-nineteenth-century Sandwich. A broader sweep of this same period is taken by Peggy Bristow whose thorough account of women's experiences in Chatham and Buxton is grounded in a wider social/political history and explores the achievements of leaders such as journalist Mary Shadd Cary as well as community development, kinship and family structures, labour and cultural practice.

Finally, this century is discussed in the last two essays alone. Dionne Brand, using extensive oral testimony, gives a lively account of Black women's experiences in interwar Canada, showing how the racial/sexual division of labour militated against them and illustrating how women attempted to 'navigate the race barrier': 'Other times I would phone and they would say,

“Well, are you dark?” and I would say, “Well I’m not dark,” and then they might say, “I’m sorry, the reason I’m asking is because we’d like our coloured help to be unquestionably coloured” (p. 176).

Linda Carty revisits some of the material examined in earlier chapters, but adds in her discussion of the state, a section on immigration and the West Indian Domestic Scheme of 1955, which like British post-war measures set the stage for the present economic position of Black women.

Not surprisingly, this anthology brings us back to some of the images and ideas which we have come to expect from the Black feminist debate – the destructiveness of sexism and racism, the simultaneity of oppressions, the challenges of researching Black women in hostile environments, the need to make coalitions across the diaspora.

And so what?

All this is a necessary base for any group of Black feminist scholars to build upon and to which they can attach the specifics of their histories. In this way they generate ‘knowledge’ that is grounded in experience while happily boasting universal resonance.

Delia Jarrett-Macauley

## **Women & Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective**

**Edited by Janet H. Momsen**

Ian Randle Kingston: Indiana University Press Bloomington and Indianapolis; James Currey: London, 1993

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The strength of this text resides in its refreshing insights into the myriad of Caribbean women’s life experiences, many of which have previously been masked by the Eurocentric perceptions which blinker many scholars researching into this region; others have been blinkered by their ‘gender blindness’ regarding Black women. In historical and social sciences literature gender distinctions remain overshadowed by class and race consideration. In short gender, race and class limitations have prevented numerous scholars (as the text goes on to illustrate) from investigating the special dynamics reflected in Caribbean women’s relationships.

The essays in this book are strongly supported by comprehensive field work which serves to bring together and challenge a number of misconceptions, in particular that of allocating Caribbean women’s