‘We, the Invisible’: Women of the Civil Rights Movement in Canada

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While black history has become well established in the United States, the history of black Canadians has been inadequately documented. The historiography that does exist embraces men as the focus; women have been rendered invisible. No significant historiographical base exists for black Canadian women in the civil rights era, particularly involving historical inquiry centered on the twofold nature of race and gender subordinations. This study explores the nature of women’s roles in, and contributions to, the civil rights movement in Canada. Case studies explore women’s resistance to discrimination through non-violent direct action, the extent to which women participated in and often led organized efforts to advance civil rights, and the significance of religion and community organization to women’s work in the movement. While the historiography on black American women in this era has been expanding steadily in more recent years, adequate sources on black Canadian women are particularly scant. The value of this study thus lies in the fact that the current historiography of black Canadian women in this period is profoundly deficient. The study, steered by a gender perspective intersected by race, is unique in its research on Canadian women’s contributions to civil rights efforts. Through the use of narratology and historical newspaper accounts, it investigates a critical period in Canadian history from a decidedly different point of view and places notable black women back into the history of civil rights activism in Canada.

If you read the traditional history books you will find that we have never been here and indeed are not here even now - the invisible people - because where judicious prodding might unearth the names of one or two of the males who made contributions in the past - the digging has to be deep indeed to find the women.

-- Rosemary Brown (Hill, 1996)

Introduction

In the above excerpt from her speech at the first meeting of the National Congress of Black Women, Brown articulates a significant facet of history which has been largely neglected by scholars. While black history has become well established in the United States, the history of black Canadians has been inadequately documented. The historiography that does exist embraces men as the focus; women, as Brown maintains, have been rendered invisible. No
significant historiographical base exists for black Canadian women in the civil rights era, particularly involving historical inquiry centered on the twofold nature of race and gender subordinations. As Peggy Bristow argues in one of few studies covering the history of black women in early Canada, “[h]ow we have managed historically to survive both racial and gender subordinations deserves special attention” (Bristow, 1994, p. 4).

This study explores the nature of their roles in, and contributions to, the civil rights movement in Canada. Case studies explore women’s resistance to segregation through non-violent direct action, the extent to which women participated in and often led organized efforts to advance civil rights, and the significance of religion and community organization to women’s work in the movement. Women in Canada were irrefutably present when the fight for racial equality was being fought in the twentieth century. In fact, their efforts were critical to the advancement of civil rights.

Given the extent to which women’s involvement in civil rights struggles has been largely overlooked, it is not at all surprising that the current historiography of the civil rights movement brings about difficulties in researching this topic. While the historiography on black American women in this era has been expanding steadily in more recent years, adequate sources on black Canadian women are particularly scant. The study, steered by a gender perspective intersected by race, is unique in its research on Canadian women’s contributions to civil rights efforts. Through the use of narratology¹ and historical newspaper accounts, it investigates a critical period in Canadian history from a decidedly different point of view and places notable black women back into the history of civil rights activism in Canada.

The Story of Viola Desmond

Years before Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama public bus helped spark what would become a national civil rights movement in the United States, a small-framed beautician and businesswoman from Halifax, Nova Scotia was the focus of one of the most legendary incidents of racial discrimination in Canadian history when she refused to sit in the ‘coloured’ section of a New Glasgow theatre. Viola Desmond’s refusal to go along with Jim Crow laws allowing the segregation of public spaces brought national attention to the rampant racism in the province.

The Roseland Theatre had a policy in the 1940s which designated its balcony seats for black patrons, and reserved its lower seats for ‘whites only’ (‘The Story of Viola Desmond and Racial Discrimination in Nova Scotia,’ 2006). In November 1946, after requesting a

¹ Narratology (the analysis of narrative) adds depth to empirical evidence by supplying vital context to the research. Frances Henry and Carol Tator (2009) reveal the effectiveness of narrative inquiry, citing its power as an “educating and organizing tool … [which] create[s] a link between individual experience and broader societal systemic patterns” (37).
ticket for a house seat and paying the two cent fee, Desmond sat in her seat in the lower section of the theatre. The theatre manager approached her, demanding she move to the balcony to which black patrons were restricted; she refused, asserting her right as a paying customer to sit in the lower seats (Ibid). Employing the strategy of passive resistance which would later become a hallmark of civil rights activism, Desmond maintained her poise and dignity through the ordeal, which escalated into the violent dragging of her person out of the theatre and her subsequent arrest. Bruised and bloodied from her physical removal by the manager and several policemen, she faced criminal charges for her moral stand.

Viola Desmond’s anger over the blatant discrimination and violent handling she endured compelled her to take action against her criminal prosecution, uniting a ‘considerable portion’ of equally outraged members of the black community in her fight (Backhouse, 1999, p. 245). Desmond elicited support from Pearleen Oliver and her husband William, two influential leaders of the black Baptist community in Nova Scotia and founders of the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NSAACP), which had been established the year prior to Desmond’s arrest (Alexander and Glaze, 1996, pp. 149-154). The NSAACP’s involvement in Desmond’s symbolic fight was significant. In addition to funding her court fees through the NSAACP (the case was taken all the way to the Supreme Court), Pearleen Oliver was particularly outspoken on the incident and worked to publicize it on a national level. The NSAACP also supported Desmond’s efforts to confront Canadian Jim Crow laws by publicly defending her actions (‘Ban All Jim Crow Rules is Comment on N.S. Charge,’ 1946, p. 3). While the case lost on a trivial technicality (having been charged the two cent fee for a balcony ticket, Desmond was convicted of failing to pay the tax on the lower seat ticket, the difference of which was one cent greater), Viola Desmond’s defiant stand against racial discrimination and segregation in public spaces brought the African Canadian community together in combating Jim Crow rules and drew national attention to the gravity of racism in Nova Scotia. Her decision to stand against the racial segregation so deeply entrenched in Nova Scotia’s society made this petite, soft-spoken woman one of the first women in Canada to challenge such discrimination in the courts (Backhouse, 1999, p. 243). Her story exemplifies the profound presence and strength of black Canadian women in the history of civil rights activism.

Pearleen Oliver: Elevation through Religion, Education and Civil Activism

In the 1940s and 1950s, while eastern Canada was teeming with racial discrimination, the black community persevered in consequence of ‘extraordinary individuals’ (Ibid, p. 154), whose activism advanced considerable civil rights. Pearleen Oliver’s commitment to the progression of black Nova Scotians in her lifetime was inextricably linked to her devotion to the Maritime Baptist churches, with which she worked tirelessly to develop.
Her conviction that religious faith was the key to the advancement of the black community in Nova Scotia is reflected in Oliver’s *A Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953*: ‘Things that other races and groups can take for granted we have had to win through prayer and the intervention of the Holy Spirit’ (1953, p. 78). Alongside her husband, Dr William P. Oliver, she was deeply involved with the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia, serving as the executive supervisor to the Baptist Young People’s Union within the association from 1945-1948, and was one of seven members of the African Baptist Association to be presented to Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh during their Canadian tour in 1951 (Ibid). The centrality of the church for black communities is in fact a recurrent theme in the history of civil rights in Nova Scotia, as the story of Africville further demonstrates (see below). Oliver’s enduring presence in the development of her Baptist community is very much connected to the advancement of the wider black community in Nova Scotia, in the era of civil rights.

Yet when considering the means for developing her community, Oliver looked not only to the church but to education as well. To her, the inherent value of the two institutions could not be overlooked, nor could they be divorced from each other: ‘[Y]ou can judge a people by the condition of their church. Let us add, and their school …. The people who work for better schools are the same ones who pray and worship in our churches’ (Ibid, p. 79). In 1944 she spearheaded a campaign of the Halifax Coloured Citizens Improvement League, which led to the removal of racially offensive material from the Department of Education’s public school textbooks (Backhouse, 1999, p. 246). Several years later, in the early 1950s, she wrote optimistically in *A Brief History* of the increasing numbers of black youth succeeding in institutions of higher learning, and lauded the school improvements being done during that time (1953, p. 78). Proving to live by example, Oliver further demonstrated her unwavering belief in elevation through education in her own life: she was the first black student to graduate from New Glasgow High School in 1936 and, together with her husband, she raised five sons who each obtained at least one university degree (Avis and Glaze, 1996, p. 154).

Oliver’s contributions to her community were deeply connected to her involvement with the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NSAACP), which she and her husband founded in 1945 (Ibid, pp. 149-154). The NSAACP supported efforts to develop quality education programs for black citizens of the province. For example, between 1943 and 1953 school improvements and the building of new schools were done in Halifax’s neighbouring communities of Hammonds Plains, Preston East, New Road, Cherrybrook and Beechville. These new schools provided improved quality education for local students and, with the establishment of adult education programs, provided the opportunity for adults who lacked schooling to obtain adequate education. These school
improvements were in large part thanks to financial support received from the NSAACP (Oliver, 1953, p. 78). The significance of the NSAACP in the struggle for racial equality in Nova Scotia (and concomitantly Canada) cannot be understated, and as one of its most consequential leaders, Pearleen Oliver’s unwavering belief in the advancement of her people through religion, education and civil activism was reflected in her work both in the African Baptist Association of Nova Scotia and the NSAACP.

**Africville Women: Nurturing the Survival of a Community**

In the 1960s, a community of African Canadians living on the fringes of Halifax’s north end became the subject of national attention when city council made the decision to force relocation on the area’s residents, and develop the segregated settlement for industrial use. This community was known as Africville, and it was home to over seventy families for generations- many of whom owned their own land and property there (‘Africville Faces Bulldozers,’ 1967, p. 13; Mackenzie, 1991). The debate over whether the residents of Africville should be forced to relocate was a hot one, appearing in national newspapers and in much discourse among city council members. Many pointed to the poor condition of the district as justification for bulldozing Africville: ‘We, the members of the council, chose relocation over all other alternatives … [because] the total Halifax community was embarrassed by the degree of publicity about a so-called slum as part of the city’ (Mackenzie, 1991). Much criticism was made about the dismal state of Africville which, although the city of Halifax collected taxes from the district’s homeowners, was not provided with basic services such as running water, sewers or paved roads. Flanked by the city dump, Africville was ‘a picture of neglect’ by the city (Ibid; Oliver, 1964, p. 2). City planners argued that residents would be assisted in finding new dwellings in Halifax, and that the standards of living would be raised to a more acceptable level than what they were relegated to in the slums of Africville. The claim that plans for development of the land on which this community was situated were ‘both just and humane’ thus became the reasoning many stood behind in their support for relocation (Casey, 1962, p. 7). Apparently, forced relocation was for the good of the residents.

Most of Africville’s residents, however, did not agree with this line of reasoning and did not want to leave their homes. To them, Africville was not a ‘slum,’ as others had written it off; rather, it was home to families who had lived among one another for generations, united by a church which was at the core of their community. Despite having been neglected by their city council, a spirit of strength and independence emanated from this community, reflected in their independent maintenance of a church, post office and school. Sociologists Donald Clairmont and Dennis Magill argue that the high value residents placed on ‘the historical continuity of the community, on the church, and on the possession
of homes which they could leave to their children … none of these considerations appeared especially significant from the point of view of the experts’ (1987, p. 234). This segregated settlement provided an independence and sense of mutual support for its residents which would not endure once relocation to Halifax was forced upon them. Former resident Laura Howe, for example, explains how the decision-makers involved destroyed the foundation of the community: ‘Once the church was taken, it was no longer a community. Because we looked to the church … when that left, it was a part of us that left …. That’s all we had was our church’ (Hamilton and Prieto, 1989). Former residents also contended they were much better off financially in Africville than in Halifax. Resident Daisy Carvery protested: ‘We had it a lot better out there [in Africville] than some places they put us in the city. They put us right in, a lot of us, down in the slums …. We haven’t even got enough to put down one payment for a home. I’m living on welfare’ (Mackenzie, 1991). Many of them had no choice but to rely on welfare after moving into Halifax. ‘You look in the records,’ Carvery angrily contended at a meeting post-demolition, ‘and see how many Africville people had to humble and come to the city for welfare [before being relocated]. We were too independent!’ (Ibid). Daisy Carvery, Laura Howe and many others worked to call attention to the city’s inequitable treatment of Africville residents, the damage done to their community, and the history of racism in Nova Scotia as reflected in this story.

More importantly, however, these women have also worked hard to preserve the community’s heritage. In Black Mother, Black Daughter director Sylvia Hamilton reveals that while part of Africville’s heritage has been stolen from them, the ‘true bond and spirit that was Africville which was carried [there] by the black slaves, loyalists and refugees survives …. Black women, … mothers and daughters … have patiently fostered and nurtured the survival of [their] black culture and community’ (1989). The Africville Genealogy Society, for example, was established by three women who were former residents to preserve the memory of the community (‘Africville Genealogy Society Annual Picnic,’ n.d.). The society’s annual picnic hosts up to 1,000 people at Africville’s former site, one of many indicators of the community’s survival in the hearts of former residents. The continual dialogue by women and their daughters on memories of Africville reflects the nurturing of a community’s spirit which has had to struggle to survive.

Making History in Politics: Rosemary Brown

Civil rights activism burgeoned across Canada in the 1960s, and many efforts to bring an end to discrimination were made through legislative changes, as exemplified by Rosemary Brown’s career. Analogous to Pearleen Oliver’s vital role within the NSAACP, Rosemary Brown’s early struggles in pursuit of equality were reflected in her involvement with the B.C. Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (BCAACP) during its
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formative years. Like Oliver, Brown sat on the executive of the organization, and worked within it to effect positive legislative developments in education, housing and employment for black men and women in the west. The BCAACP raised ‘consciousness of the Vancouver community around Black issues … and in time it became the organization that spoke for all Black British Columbians, its opinions being respected by all levels of government’ (Brown, 1989, p. 54). This organization was staunchly dedicated to the advancement of black Canadians in the west, and as one of its most consequential members, Brown helped pave the way for significant advancements for the black community.

Yet while Brown’s dedication to the BCAACP was undeniable, her ambitions to ‘change the world’ were not limited to her involvement with this organization (Ibid, p. i). Indeed, much of Brown’s work to effect change was done through her political career. Her commitment to civil rights, socialism and feminism greatly informed her work, as is evident in many of the positions she held in various organizations: Brown was the president of the B.C. Council of Black Women, the western representative of the National Black Coalition and, in 1970, became the first ombudswoman for the Status of Women. On her position as ombudswoman, Brown had written that it was a challenge she ‘had been preparing for all [her] life’ (Ibid, pp. 89-90). Two years later, having realized the desperate need for women to be more involved in politics and decision-making, Brown made history as the first black woman in Canada to be elected to a provincial legislature when she won her place in the British Columbia legislature in 1972. Soon after, Brown made history again when she ran for the leadership of a major national political party in the National Democratic Party (NDP) leadership race (‘Some facts about black history in Canada’ 1993, p. 13). Although she lost, this campaign set a precedent for other women to be more involved in politics, inspiring others to effect change through the political arena. The extreme proportional discrepancy between men and women in the Canadian government, at all levels, made the political arena an often hostile venue for women seeking to contribute to progress. Rosemary Brown’s precedent-setting political career helped pave the road for women of colour in politics.

Anne Cools and the Montreal Race Riot

By the 1960s, the American civil rights movement was in full swing. Student activist groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had begun a legacy of protesting bigotry in an age of dissent, and the world- including Canada- observed their demonstrations. In Montreal, meanwhile, racial discrimination had become apparent to students of an assistant biology professor at Sir George Williams University, whom they alleged was failing all his black students. Hundreds of students brought their concerns to the university, which sought appeasement with the formation of a committee to investigate
the allegations. This committee, however, was chosen by the administrators, and the only two black professors on the committee resigned, insisting that the committee was “not impartial” (Kirzner-Roberts, 2000). After a failed attempt to have the university look into the allegations, the students organized to take action.

This action resulted in an historic demonstration which took place in the computer centre of the university’s main building in February, 1969. Well over 70 student protestors, in the spirit of the times, organized a sit-in to demand the dismissal of the alleged racist professor, and were supported by hundreds more demonstrating outside. A riot ensued. Police were rushed in to forcefully remove the demonstrators from the building while fire-hoses flooded the corridors and tables and chairs were thrown down escalators. Fires were set. Thirty women were arrested, along with the sixty men arrested on charges of conspiracy to commit mischief and conspiracy to commit arson; all were denied bail (“90 arrested in Montreal campus riot,” 1969, p. 1). Anne Cools, a 27-year-old Barbados-born student, was one of the thirty women arrested. After a week-long trial, Cools was found guilty of willfully obstructing the use of the computer centre, sentenced to six months in jail, and fined $1,500. In passing sentence, Judge Kenneth Mackay described Cools as one of the “leaders” of the 13-day occupation (“2 blacks jailed, girl fined over Montreal computer riot,” 1972, p. 2).

The biology professor who had originally sparked the demonstration because of his alleged racist treatment of black students was never dismissed. The sit-in, however, drew international attention to the issues at hand, appearing in national newspapers and igniting uprisings in other countries: students in Barbados organized to protest the arrests of West Indian rioters at Sir George, and the staff association of the University of Guyana pushed for a boycott of Canadian banks and businesses in a act of solidarity (“Students in Barbados burn flag and effigy of Trudeau,” 1972, p 2). Anne Cools’ leadership in an affair history would dub the Montreal Race Riot helped to expose a heritage of racism all too often concealed by bureaucracy, and “awakened the Black Power movement in Canada” (Brand, 1994, p. 68).

Conclusion

In her autobiography, Rosemary Brown relates her ‘resentment and anger concerning … the trivializing of [women’s] contribution to the civil rights struggle’ (Brown, 1989, p. 84). While black history as a whole has been scantily investigated by Canadian scholars, major studies of the lives of black Canadian women have been almost nonexistent. Scholarship of the civil rights era in particular frequently ignores black women as agents for positive change, and instead subordinates their experiences to those of black men. Yet black history cannot be reduced to a genderless account of the past, for black women’s experiences were
not the same as black men’s (Brand, 1991, pp. 12-13). Women struggled against both racial and gender subordination, thus their experiences were markedly different.

Writer Dionne Brand describes this unique position of being black and a woman—the intersection of these dual identities—in her prose: “Bathurst was the site of new definitions [in 1970] … where young women like me … walked out of the conservative, keep-quiet, talk-right, act-like-a-lady-even-though-nobody-considers-you-one, get-a-nice-job, find-a-husband, know-your-place, you-can-only-hope-for-so-much-as-a-Black-woman, pull-in-your-lips, corset-your-hips, smile, take-what-you-get dream that society laid out for us and our mothers urged on us, and walked into our naturals-no make-up, no bra, no corset, no European idea of beauty—walked into the Afroed and African no-bullshit-rhetoric beauty of ourselves” (Brand, 1994, p. 69). Viola Desmond, Pearleen Oliver, Daisy Carvery, Laura Howe, Rosemary Brown, and Anne Cools similarly defied the gender norms of the time to battle racial discrimination and advance civil rights. Their contributions were valuable to both black and feminist struggles.

This paper has attempted to place these notable women back into the history of civil rights activism in Canada while making that crucial connection between race and gender, in an effort to expose black Canadian women as “historical actors in their own right” (Bristow, 1994, p. 7). Their conventional marginalization in Canadian scholarship has left a critical piece of the puzzle absent from black Canadian historiography, rendering them invisible. The case studies have been presented with the intention of restoring these women’s rightful place in the history of the civil rights movement in Canada. With the continued generation of historical inquiry arising from a gender perspective intersected by race, women of colour will no longer be invisible in historical scholarship, and we will no longer have to dig deep to uncover their contributions.

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