

African Canadian Women and

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En relisant la vie de trois femmes remarquables, Dr. Sopia Jones, Mary Branton Tule et la révérende Jennie Johnson, l'auteure a remarqué la sexualisation des migrations des communautés afro-canadiennes vers les USA après leur émancipation et la guerre civile américaine.

As a woman of 19, Hallie Quinn Brown moved with her family to Chatham, Canada West in the tumultuous year of 1865. The family's fortunes were, for the moment, in Canada, but Brown's heart remained in the United States. While a member of what she clearly viewed as a community in exile, Brown wrote of her passion to return to American soil. The prayer ("Oh Lord, please send me back to Wilberforce!") recorded in her autobiography came true for Brown when she followed her sister to Wilberforce University, the African Methodist Episcopal college in Xenia, Ohio, where Brown would later join the faculty as professor of elocution. Yet among the Wilberforce papers of Hallie Quinn Brown is a collection of photographs labelled portraits of Brown's "Canadian friends, 1880-1905."¹ The portraits of these women—or more precisely, Brown's treasuring of them—reminds us that Brown was shaped by her time in Canada. To those of Brown's generation, Canadian emigration strengthened a sense of racial identity beyond national borders and political system.

Previous scholarship on African Canadian history has argued that women, like men, either returned to the United States during the Civil War with anticipation and a sense that Canada had served its purpose,

or stayed because they had already settled into the life suggested in the title of the well-known collection of

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essays on African Canadian women's history: *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up* (Bristow, Brand, Carty, Cooper, Hamilton and Shadd; see also Yee). I am arguing for a third possibility that distinguished some women's experience from either of these alternatives. The remarkable careers of three women—Dr. Sophia Jones (1857-1932), Mary Branton Tule (1860-1923) and Rev. Jennie Johnson (1868-1967)—suggest a fascinating pattern. They made the most of connections—religious, educational, and intellectual—that were flexible rather than fixed, and found opportunity in the transcending of boundaries (national and otherwise) drawn around them. In the post-war years, it would be African Canadian women who would craft their identity from the materials of

New World diaspora itself.

The importance of women's ability in this regard becomes clearer against the backdrop of the options available to men. The choice of identifying either with Canada or the United States was made plain, though not necessarily easy, because men expected that they had reasonable prospects for citizenship, freedom, and a public life. Would they choose, as one group of emigres had put it, to stay "under the beneficent sway of Victoria's sceptre," or would they be drawn back to the United States by what black abolitionist William Whipper called the "promise of a new civilization" (qtd. in Still 740). For women, promises on either side of the border were less obvious. What did the world hold for them? Of course men, too, were constrained by racial prejudice, and were no less concerned with racial justice, prosperity, and opportunity. But men's clearly defined roles in black political organizations, churches, and colleges provided them with institutions that could both command and contain their loyalties; women were less thoroughly provisioned in this respect, and were therefore more likely to stay on the move, pushing the boundaries of what was expected of them. In the end, they were more adept at holding onto the ideological promise of Canadian emigration.

Jones, Branton and Tule were all born in Canada, between 1857 and 1868, a period in which civil war in the United States brought transformation to African Canadian communities. Such communities had always carried, to borrow C. Peter Ripley's term, an "unavoidable symbolic value" in the abolitionist move-

New World Diaspora, circa 1865

ment (11). In this ideological setting, the Canadian experience was not simply a matter of escape from slavery or from the pressures of the federal Fugitive Slave Law, nor of material improvement. It was about constructing the terms of racial equality, both for its own sake here, and as an abolitionist strategy in the United States. As Elizabeth Rauh Bethel has argued, this meant that African Canadian communities remained “firmly located on the African American cultural map” (157). Canadian emigration occupied a central place in African American political discourse, particularly after the Cincinnati riots of 1829. In the following decades, proponents of emigration used Canadian success stories to silence those who questioned the emigrants’ “suitability” for freedom. Canadian emigration also held the power to encourage those whose paths had not yet turned northward, and most emphatically, the power to call the deadly failures of the American political system into account. Among emigrants themselves, however, the symbolic meaning of Canada was worked into the texture of everyday life. From that combination, African Canadian communities acquired an activist stance that was not entirely controlled by the course of American abolition. Addressing African Canadian readers in 1857, William Whipper reminded those gathered to celebrate emancipation in the British Empire that they had “emancipated themselves, independent of Republican governments, or Parliamentary legislation” (2).² The pioneers to whom Whipper wrote in 1857 shared an ideological landscape both rich and complex, lending a

political intensity to life in those communities created by the parents of Sophia Jones, Mary Branton and

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Jennie Johnson. Their experience of emigration to Canada had taught the value of identifying across national boundaries, and of creating and maintaining a sense of racial history apart from the narratives of nationhood so important to the creation of both Canadian and American identity in the nineteenth century.

In the usual telling of the story, the political intensity that once attended Canadian settlement shifted back across the border once the Civil War began. In the wake of American emancipation, Canadian communities, largely bereft of their symbolic power, were pushed to the periphery of African *American* consciousness. But the development of what Bethel calls a “Pan-African vision” continued among Canadian-born women, who saw new potential in its power to

inform their own sense of place in the world. The story of women in this next generation has drawn less attention than has the story of their parents, for whom the narrative of “following the North Star” provided clear expectations, fulfilled and disappointed in turn. Nonetheless, the experience of a new migration to the United States from Canada was gendered in ways which make it both more hopeful and more complicated than has been commonly recognized by historians of either country. In fact the characteristics of this phase of New World diaspora—women’s ability to move through the boundaries of race, gender, and nation—have conspired to make women such as Jones, Tule, and Johnson less visible within the often separate streams of historical memory feeding the currents of scholarship on women, African American and African Canadian identity. The consideration of these three remarkable women is offered here as a preliminary investigation. They are not meant to stand in for the whole—but in following them, we can begin to piece together the fabric of a wide-ranging intellectual history woven through their travels.

Each of the three used a network of higher education that propelled them out of local communities of limited possibility and into a world that rewarded their willingness to move. In so doing, they repaired to the abolitionist legacy of their parents, returning to Wilberforce University and Oberlin College, even as they helped to establish the importance of new institutions, such as Spelman College in Atlanta. Sophia Jones, born in Chatham in 1857 to the activist family of James Munroe Jones and Emily

Frances Jones, illustrates the point. Sophia Jones became a physician and first black female faculty member at Spelman College in 1885.³ Her father remained in Canada after emancipation, a prominent businessman and Chatham magistrate (Robinson 33). Post-civil war Canada offered James Jones continued opportunity to build on the promise of freedom that had drawn him here in 1849; such opportunity for his daughter lay elsewhere. Her path to Spelman began at the University of Toronto. Discouraged by the limited medical education then offered female students at that institution, Sophia Jones studied medicine at the University of Michigan, graduated in 1885, and moved to Spelman College, established as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary. Her work there on behalf of black women's medical education was informed by the philosophy of "racial uplift" shared by many of her African American contemporaries, but the career of the highly mobile Dr. Jones was also shaped by the understanding that a wide-ranging ideological community could be as important as any other sort. Hers was an intellectual migration that in its scope was reminiscent of the black abolitionists of her father and mother's generation. It is a suggestive point that while Jones was recommended for a post at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, she did not go there, but rather became resident physician at Wilberforce when she left Spelman. One suspects that Jones—educated even as a child in the most academically rigorous school in Chatham—was not of an intellectual temper to side with Washington's emphasis on technical training for manual labour.

Sophia Jones exemplifies the way in which women followed the opportunities of higher education opening to them in the United States, and used that education as passage through and beyond the restrictions on women's public roles in late-Victorian Canada. A similar trajectory characterized the career of Mary

Branton Tule. Born near Chatham in 1860, Mary Branton began tracing a path southward in the 1880s, when she moved first to Amherstburg, and then into the fellowship of Second Baptist Church in Detroit. Supported by the missionary society of this congregation, Mary Branton followed Sophia Jones to Spelman College in 1890-92. From here, she became a Baptist missionary to South Africa, and married an African convert and missionary, John

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Tule. In finding a sense of racial identity that extended from Chatham to Amherstburg, Detroit, Atlanta, South Africa, and finally to Monrovia, Mary Branton, shared the nineteenth-century black Baptist dream of bringing Christianity to Africa and gathering the threads of diaspora in an act of redemption; in her insistence that she must go herself, Mary Branton Tule parted company with many of her contemporaries. Her migration, retracing the path taken by her parents and moving beyond the United States, across the Atlantic to Africa, transcended national identity, but it also shattered the expectation that North American women's interest in missions be used only to support men in the field. It is important to remember that black missionary work

was cast in this period as a matter of saving Africa, not from unbelief but from white colonial power.⁴ When Mary Branton Tule fought against the exclusion of black missionaries from South Africa in the 1920s, she carried the old and expansive emigrationist dreams of justice with her.

A final example supports the intriguing conclusion that African Canadian experience of migration and return offered a unique set of resources to women. Jennie Johnson, born in Chatham Township in 1868, became the first ordained woman in Canadian ministry. She attended the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) seminary in Wilberforce, Ohio, the alma mater of Hallie Quinn Brown. Johnson's original plan was to prepare for missionary work in Africa. Denied that opportunity (the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) was even more reluctant than black Baptist churches when it came to sending women into the mission field), Johnson sought ordination in order to serve the Baptist congregation in Ontario, where she had preached since the age of 16. In 1909, she was ordained in Michigan by the Michigan Association of Freewill Baptists, and returned to Ontario, where she revived a small Baptist congregation and secured the support of her Michigan friends to construct a church. Peripatetic in the model of Jones and Branton Tule, Jennie Johnson founded a downtown mission in Flint, Michigan in 1925, and ministered there through the Great Depression.⁵

Johnson was both linked to and yet separate from women on both sides of the border who accepted their own spiritual authority but who also accepted the containing of their piety and activism and hunger for racial justice (the "righteous discontent" of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's women in the black Baptist church) within roles outside ordained ministry.⁶ A distinctive culture of liberation, both indebted to and distinct from its foundations in African American abolition, shaped the theo-

logical alternatives at Johnson's disposal. Within that culture, Johnson found the latitude she needed to throw off the expectation that Christian womanhood meant discipleship without ordained leadership. Most significantly, she did so even as similar paths were closed to African American women in the AME and Black Baptist churches, and to white Canadian women before the United Church of Canada ordination of Lydia Gruchy. The path Jennie Johnson followed to ordination thus tells us a great deal about her starting point in a community born of resistance and well-accustomed to balancing on borders.

Writing of the American experience, historians such as Nathan Huggins, Ira Berlin, and Barbara Fields all bespeak the dangers of forgetting that concepts of race, and freedom are not "frozen in time." The dangers hold for historians of Canada. To speak of Chatham's black community in the 1860s as a community of refugees, for instance, is partly true, but such a designation collapses a wealth of distinctions and experience into what is in the end a not terribly helpful category. African Canadian history is obscured rather than illuminated by what Huggins calls our assuming that "freedom ... meant something absolute" (41; see also Berlin; Fields). By extension, it is also obscured when such "frozen" categories are left in place without regard to gender difference. The stories of African Canadian women surely cast light on a wider comparative question of gender, race, and national context. If we go one step further and consider the examples of border-crossing and race recently proposed by Martha Hodes, then it becomes important to explore the consequences of our "thawing" those frozen categories of analysis. It may well be, as Hodes argues, that "the power of race lies within the very fact of malleability," and that the historian's recognition of fluidity in concepts of race clarifies the nature and source of that power "within the ca-

pricious exercise of racial categorization in everyday life" (85).⁷ A similar argument could be made with respect to ideas about gender. At the same time, we would do well to note that the *resistance* to the oppressive force of such categorization was also fluid. There is thus a theoretical as well as a practical dimension to reminders that women such as Jones, Branton Tule, and Johnson crossed borders and remained otherwise curiously detached from a particular sense of place, even as they remained completely committed to a wider vision of racial unity.

If W. E. B. Dubois' "double consciousness" provided the quintessential self-description for African American men, what metaphor could serve the same purpose in sorting out the competing claims of national, racial and gender identities among African Canadian women? Jones, Branton Tule and Johnson were swift to identify with others across such boundaries and to appeal to a common humanity; they did so by allowing the history of diaspora to be written anew in their own travels. On the day she died, Sophia Jones is reported to have said, "I was in hopes that I would awake in another country this morning" (qtd. in *The Crisis* n.p.). To historicize her experience is to invite the combining of Canadian and American scholarship on race and an expanded discussion of women and the New World diaspora. It is also to recognize that the crossing of borders ultimately served as a metaphor of transcendence.

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¹Brown's correspondence and other papers are also housed at Central State. Brown's best-known published work is her collection of biographies of African American women, titled *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*.

²William Whipper to the First of August Committee, Dresden (H. Damrell, Wm. Crosby, D. Smith, Aaron Highgate, J.B. Hollensworth), printed in *The Provincial Freeman*, 22 August 1857.

³Spelman College History, available at <www.spelman.edu/history> lists Sophia Jones as the first black female faculty member. Jones also practiced medicine in St. Louis, Kansas City, Philadelphia, and Monrovia, California. On Sophia Jones and the Jones family, see also Robinson (32-33); Higginbotham (34, 241 n.46). Biographical material is also collected in the Jones file, Heritage Room at the Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society, Chatham, Ontario. On the Jones family at Oberlin, see "Catalogue and Record of Colored Students, 1832-1865," RG 5/4/3 Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio. Jones' sister, Anna, was also an Oberlin graduate and distinguished educator.

⁴There is an extensive contemporary literature on the belief that African American missionaries in Africa were agents in a providential redemption. On Baptists, see for example Rev. E.C. Morris, who echoed the common theme that "God intends to redeem Africa through the instrumentality of her own sable sons" (67). This was also the belief of AME Bishop Henry Turner, the founder of the AME church in Liberia (see Angell). A biographical sketch of Mary Branton Tule can be found in *Pathfinders of Liberty and Truth: A History of the Amherstburg Regular Missionary Baptist Association, Its Auxiliaries and Churches* (66-67) and in Shreve.

⁵I am currently completing a biography of Reverend Johnson that places her story within a synthesis of feminist scholarship on African Canadian history, religion and the history of women.

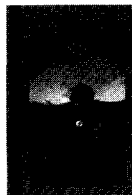
⁶As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's chapter on feminist theology points out, "the feminist theology of the black Baptist church never altered the hierarchical structure of the

church by revolutionizing power relations between the sexes, nor did it inhibit ministers from assuming men's intellectual and physical superiority over women.... Although the black feminist theologians opposed this line of thought, they did not challenge the basis for male monopoly of the clergy, nor did they demand equal representation in conventions in which women and men participated. But feminist theology stirred women to find their own voice and create their own sphere of influence" (147).

⁷Martha Hodes extends the analysis of Fields' 1982 essay "Ideology and Race in American History" by arguing that "no matter how chimerical we prove 'race' to be, that wisdom alone remains inadequate to diminish the might of racism, for the power of race lies within the very fact of malleability" (85).

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