

# Book Reviews

## **I KNOW WHO I AM: A CARIBBEAN WOMAN'S IDENTITY IN CANADA**

Yvonne Bobb-Smith  
Toronto: Women's Vision Press,  
2003.

REVIEWED BY AMOABA  
GOODEN

*I Know Who I am: A Caribbean Woman's Identity in Canada* presents a cross-cultural view of Caribbean women in Canada, women who have a rich legacy of "interconnectedness and interrelatedness that was created through the shared and mixed historical experiences" of imperialism (genocide, servitude, slavery, indentureship and colonialism). Acknowledging the centrality of an African identity in the complex diversity of the Caribbean, the author, Yvonne Bobb-Smith argues that individual identities, under the system of colonization, bear certain resemblances and similarities despite the "varying contexts of race, colour and class in their histories". These similarities have produced a "totality of experience of colonialism" which shaped a collective resistance and, hence, a collective identity for Caribbean women. Bobb-Smith maintains that how Caribbean women understand and survive oppression produces a culture of resistance, a learnt entity, which centralized the educational setting of "home". Collectively Caribbean women, despite ethnic, cultural or class differences have a notion that home taught them resistance, and hence they transported that

knowledge with them when they migrated to Canada.

Bobb-Smith, an African Caribbean Canadian professor of Caribbean Studies both at Ryerson University and New College, University of Toronto uses her own experiences as an immigrant woman in Canada, as well as the stories of 45 other Caribbean women from different backgrounds and heritages, in order to understand how Caribbean Canadian women speak of the consequences of racism and sexism in their everyday lives as a means of strategizing resistance. Aptly argued, this text puts one in the mind of the work of Rosalyn Terborg-Penn or Filomina Chioma Steady, both of whom are known for their theoretical work on African Feminism. I think the most central value in Bobb-Smith's methodological approach, like Terborg-Penn and Steady, is that one is able to trace through the experiences of the women how they use "agency to self-define through goals of education, network coordination, and community organizing".

Using an anti-essentialist approach Bobb-Smith shows us women who can "grasp the power to act aggressively within patriarchal and imperialist systems", as well as women who ascribe to themselves multiple heritages while they simultaneously deconstruct a stereotypical identity (immigrant women as victims pathologised through racism and sexism in Canadian society). She challenges general assumptions that Caribbean women's identity is essentially that of the immigrant woman, "with all the negative connotations of blackness, passivity, and working in unskilled jobs". For example, she shows us one black woman who chal-

lenges notions of passivity in her first job at one of the largest banks in Canada where she engaged in activities to unionize a group of tellers (all of who were white women) against continued labour exploitation.

Organizing the book in nine chapters Bobb Smith first introduces her Caribbean Canadian subjects through their personal stories. She historicizes their experiences from the colonization of the Aboriginal peoples to twentieth-century nationalism, and explores Caribbean women's identity through regional and diaspora feminist writings by Caribbean women. Next Bobb-Smith illustrates, again using the voices of the women, their strategies to resist and to engage in efforts of survival driven by learning to employ an 'ethic of independence'. She appropriately confirms that for Caribbean women independence is not a trait but a direct means of responding to domination.

One highlight of the text is Bobb-Smith contextualizing home in a Caribbean-centred way. She explores historical factors that have produced rootlessness, fragmentation and stratification as part of the process that institutes a collective Caribbean's subjectivity. She argues that home is not a fixed place because home according to the experiences of many Caribbean women entails "geographical locations and creations of spaces that can be mobilized". Home then becomes imagined and a part of their subjectivity. This "imagined home" helps them to define their identities in the new geographical and economic space of Canada. Although the women's memory of home embraced a range of experiences from negative to positive, they

remembered home as a place where older women negotiated boundaries between the private and the public; a place where women established ties with the community in social work, teaching, and in the politics of social or racial upliftment; a place where women seem to be independent enough to challenge and resist racist and patriarchal oppression; and finally, despite their experiences of psychological or physical violence, the women remembered home most of all for its communal sharing, for diversity and for having taught them to survive oppression. The significance of which enables some Caribbean women to survive in Canada. I think that these survival imperatives can be characterized as i) resisting oppression, ii) defining female leadership and iii) redefining economic, social and political roles for women.

One strength of the book lies in the fact that the author integrates her own experiences into the framework of the text while she problematizes notions of identity viewed in binaries (black/white; women/men; African/Indian). This shows us that Caribbean Canadian women do not comprise a one-dimensional identity. The other strength is Bobb-Smith's advancement of the concept '*Caribbean woman's identity*'. She captures within that concept the lived experiences of the women, women who are free spirited and women who resist homogeneity while they remain rooted in their community. This concept contains common values originating in the Caribbean cultural context. Values which include encouraging self-reliance through female networks and developing survival strategies which then become institutionalised in many Caribbean communities.

## L'ESCLAVE

Micheline Bail  
Montreal : Editions Libre Expression,  
1999.

### REVIEWED BY JEANNE MARANDA

Micheline Bayle a choisi le roman historique comme forme littéraire pour parler d'un sujet délicat : l'esclavage au Québec. L'historien Marcel Trudel a été le premier à fouiller ce pan de notre histoire et nous a laissé une excellente documentation sur la présence d'esclaves Indiens et Noirs, femmes et hommes, aux premiers temps de la colonie canadienne-française. (1)

L'esclavage noir n'était pas très répandu à cette époque au Canada au contraire des pays du Sud où ils étaient employés surtout par les gros planteurs de canne à sucre, de café et de tabac. Au Québec d'alors, les esclaves étaient un luxe que seuls les riches marchands pouvaient se payer et ils étaient avec les Indiens, employés comme domestiques.

L'historien Marcel Trudel rapporte que parmi les propriétaires on relevait des officiers, des évêques et même des religieuses qui les employaient dans les hôpitaux.

Le régime français utilisait les Indiens « panis » qui provenaient des états américains du Sud et de l'Ouest, eux-mêmes achetés de l'Afrique, des Bahamas et des Bermudes avec la permission de l'Angleterre. Ils étaient revendus aux Français et aux Anglais. « Les Noirs plus rares et plus coûteux étaient pour la population un symbole de réussite et de prestige social » M.B. Louis XIV a approuvé le commerce des esclaves en 1689 et de nouveau en 1701.

L'esclavage noir a connu un nouveau souffle en 1783 avec l'arrivée des Loyalistes qui ont fui la rébellion américaine et ont emmené avec eux leurs esclaves. L'influence du clergé, chargé d'âmes, a converti et baptisé les quatre-cinquièmes des esclaves ce

qui leur permettait d'être inhumés dans le cimetière catholique. De plus, ils pouvaient se marier entre eux mais avec le consentement de leurs maîtres. Les mauvais traitements comme le logement minable dans les combles ou les caves humides, la nourriture infecte, quand on leur en servait, sans oublier les maladies transmises par les Blancs, ont fait que l'espérance de vie chez les Indiens était de 17 ans, chez les Noirs elle était de 25 ans.

La dernière esclave fut vendue en 1791 et est morte en 1821. Ce n'est qu'en 1833 sous le régime anglais que l'esclavage fut aboli.

*L'Esclave*, c'est une jeune fille de 16 ou 18 ans, (elle ignore son âge) qui fut vendue en Afrique à l'âge de 8 ans à des négriers qui l'ont transitée via New York jusqu'à Montréal dans les années 1730. Un riche marchand de Montréal, monsieur François Poulin de Francheville l'a payée 700 livres et l'a présentée à sa femme et au personnel de sa maison qui comprenait en outre quelques Indiennes, aussi esclaves. Elle fut tout de suite détestée! Elle était noire, jeune, trop jolie, fière et un peu mauvaise tête. Elle avait connu trop de misère dans sa jeune vie!. Elle était l'image même de l'exotisme, la sensualité et surtout la liberté, toutes qualités qui n'étaient pas l'apanage des femmes de l'époque, pieuses et bigotes, engoncées dans leur sévère robe grise, très profondément influencées par l'Eglise. On ne lui a ménagé aucune humiliation, aucune insulte, aucun mauvais traitement. Seuls les hommes lui ont montré leurs faveurs, mais quelles faveurs!!

Kawindale, baptisée Marie-Josephe-Angélique a été jugée, pendue et brûlée sur la place Royale à Montréal, accusée d'avoir mis le feu à la maison de ses maîtres, ce qui entraîna la destruction quasi complète de Montréal, c'est-à-dire une quarantaine de maisons de bois. On lui connaît un amant, un coureur des bois, Claude Thibault, avec lequel elle devait s'enfuir. Ils ont été repris et condamnés. La fuite d'un esclave