

Passing the Torch

A Mother and Daughter

BY WANDA THOMAS BERNARD AND CANDACE BERNARD

Les auteures sont des Canadiennes de souche africaine qui ont connu l'oppression, la perte de pouvoir, les combats, la résistance et ultimement un regain de contrôle. Elles se penchent sur leurs rôles de mères et de filles tout en notant comment elles ont développé leur relation mère-fille dans des situations où elles vivent à la fois l'oppression et l'accès au pouvoir.

This article is written by a mother and daughter, one a social work educator, the other a social work student, engaged in critical reflection on their relationship. It is meant to be a personal piece, within a politicized context. We also want it to be accessible to a wide audience, therefore it is written in plain language. (When we want to distinguish our individual voice, M is for Mother, and D is for daughter).

M. As the first woman in my family and community to pursue and attain graduate and postgraduate education and to hold a tenure-track academic post I am considered a role model and mentor. Yet, in these academic achievements, I do not, and cannot take individual credit, for I recognize that these successes have been attained on the back of, and in the footsteps of my many ancestors, great African women and men, whose past labours of love have made the present easier for people like myself. When reflecting on my learning journey, I always pause to honor my mother who was my first role model, and my first teacher. This article provides a space for me to reflect on my duality as a daughter and a mother, to assess the

simultaneous sites of empowerment and disempowerment and how I have dealt with these in both roles.

D. I am a young African-Canadian woman who has grown up in a climate of social injustice and an ongoing struggle for freedom. My mother has been a social worker for as long as I can remember, which has helped me to grow up with a keen awareness of injustice, and a sense of struggle, empowerment, enlightenment, and tenacity to fight for change. As a daughter of this phenomenal woman I have had to struggle to define my own identity, making our personal relationship a political one. As a social work student I have learned more about

myself and my social location and the power of first voice. Much of my learning about the African-Nova Scotian experience has been through the legacy of storytelling. This article provides an opportunity to share our story of struggle and resistance.

In this article we will explore our mother-daughter relationship, in the context of the institution of the Black family as a simultaneous site of empowerment and disempowerment. We begin with our definitions of empowerment and disempowerment, followed by a brief discussion of the politics of Black motherhood which helps to situate our voices. We conclude with a dialogue about some of our experiences.

Empowerment and disempowerment

Empowerment and disempowerment are themes which have gained prominence in the social science literature during the last decade (Labonte; Collins; Baistow; Breton; Bishop). For the purpose of this paper we define the terms as follows: empowerment is naming, analyzing, and challenging oppression on an individual, collective, and/or structural level. Empowerment, which occurs through the development of critical consciousness, is gaining control, exercising choices, and engaging in collective social action. We believe that empowerment transforms individual strength into collective power (Breton).

Disempowerment is not recognizing and therefore, not naming or analyzing the oppressive forces in one's life. Oppression frames everyone's life to varying degrees. Oppression is rooted in social structures such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, disability, etcetera. It operates on individual, cultural, and structural levels. These systems of oppression are interlocking, each needing the others to function (Collins). Breton argues that oppressed people are not people who are without personal, moral, or spiritual resources, but rather people whose life chances and choices are significantly curtailed by inequalities in the distribution of social, economic, political power, and resources. Disempowerment occurs when individuals fail to recognize these oppressive conditions, and/or internalize the oppression.

The politics of Black motherhood

Situated at the intersection of race and gender oppression, Black motherhood may be the site of oppression, or

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Reflect on Their Experience Across Generations

an opportunity for creativity, empowerment, and social action. Black motherhood is fundamentally a contradictory institution. African-American communities value motherhood, but Black mothers' ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions. Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal costs (Collins). Black women are described as the "strength" of Black families and communities (Bernard). However, negative and controlling images of Black women, as mothers, grandmothers, and "othermothers," also permeate the social science literature and popular media. According to McCray,

... the Black woman has either been depicted as the dominating, castrating female under whose hand the Black family and the Black community are falling apart, or as the romanticized, strong, self-sufficient female responsible for the survival of the Black family and of Black people. (67)

Collins argues that externally defined definitions of Black motherhood are problematic, whether they be positive and affirmative, or negative, controlling images. Furthermore, such controlling images, and the resultant impact on the daily reality in the practice of Black motherhood, are designed to marginalize and oppress Black women, children, and families.

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However, despite living with such oppressive conditions, a tradition of resistance and a collective Black women's consciousness does exist (Bernard). For many Black women, the acts of resistance are best articulated through the practice of motherhood. As Collins states,

... Black motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment; for some it may be a burdensome condition, whilst for others it is a

catalyst for social activism and provides a base for self-actualization. (qtd. in Bernard 118)

More than a personal act, Black motherhood is very political. Black mothers and grandmothers are considered the "guardians of the generations" (Bernard). Black mothers have historically been charged with the responsibility of providing education, social, and political awareness, in addition to unconditional love, nurturance, socialization, and values to their children, and the children in their communities. They have been expected to fulfill these roles, while fighting the contradictory role prescriptions and externally imposed definitions of their roles. Such political expectations affect the ways in which Black mother-daughter relationships are developed and defined. For mothers of daughters of African descent, this tension is exacerbated by the necessary dualism of preparing their daughters for a life of other-imposed disempowerment, and the vision and courage to resist and overcome such oppression. The socialization process that characterizes Black mother-daughter relationships is one which emphasizes resistance, survival, creativity, and empowerment (Guy-Sheftall). Whilst struggling to deal with their own oppression, Black mothers' anguish is most visible when they have to pass the torch on to their daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers, or othermothers, to guard future generations. In the final section of this paper, we dialogue about our experience as mother and daughters.

Mother and daughter: a dialogue

M. My mother is our family matriarch, as was her mother, and her mother's mother. We are descendants of a long line of strong Black women. This is a tough legacy to live up to. In addition to the "normal" issues of race, gender, and class which my mother had to grapple with, she also had sole responsibility for raising a very large family. My father died suddenly and tragically when I was 12 years old. Mom was left to raise nine children and two grandchildren on her own. The eldest was 18 years, and the youngest was 18 months old. Many women would not have been able to cope with the stress of being a widow with eleven dependents. However, for Mom, it seemed to me that she managed the transition from a two-parent to one-parent family fairly well. She had responsibilities which she fulfilled in an apparently effortless way. This

legacy of strength is one which I have admired, with trepidation.

D. It is empowering to know that I have come from such a long line of strong Black women, however, it is also a lot to live up to. I am the first woman in my family to be raised in a middle-class lifestyle, and there is a constant struggle between dominant values, and those that are part of my traditional heritage. My survival has really depended upon maintaining a balance between these two very different world views. I have used some of the same coping mechanisms that my grandmothers used. Scott argues that Black women use habits of survival to deal with race and gender oppression. These habits of survival may be positive and affirming, or negative and ineffective. Through critical examination of other women's survival experiences, especially the women in my family, I have been able to adopt those habits of survival which are positive, affirming, and empowering.

M. I have had a similar experience. For example, work was a habit of survival that I learned from my mother. My earliest memories are of Mom working, and us children being cared for by othermothers in the community. Therefore when she went to work full-time after Dad died, it seemed normal. It also seemed normal that my older sister and I, not our older brothers, helped to run the house and care for the younger children. These experiences did not feel oppressive at the time; they were "normal." Mom had expectations that I would do well academically. The message "stay in school" was paramount, yet I also had to look after my younger siblings, experiencing early in life the ethic of caring and taking on responsibility. Through Mom's guidance and direction, I learned the value of hard work, self-determination, goal-setting, and shared responsibility. I also learned the power of self-definition and social activism. I experienced empowerment through Mom's ability to survive in a climate that was not conducive to survival. She taught me so many things. In addition to full-time work "in service" (that is working in the

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homes of white men and women), and raising her family alone, Mom engaged in social action through the church and volunteer work. However, while this was an empowering process to see Mom work in these different arenas, it was also disempowering in some ways. I grew up expecting to assume similar roles, a thought that was reinforced by the fact that Mom often took me to work and community events.

D. It makes me angry to see how hard my grandmother had to work, and I see you working hard as well Mom. Things have changed a little, but not enough. When can we just be women without struggle? When can we just be together in dialogue,

without discussing heavy political issues? We are still fighting the same battles, although they are in different arenas. Oppression is still there. I see you working so hard, and I question "after achieving so much educationally, why aren't things different?" Why do we have to work so hard? Why is there so much oppression? I now know that

... Black daughters learn to expect to work, to strive for an education ... and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because these skills are essential to their own survival and those for whom they will eventually be responsible. (Collins 123)

M. What I find particularly rewarding, is that at your young age you are able to recognize and deal with this oppression. As previously noted, I realized later in life that much of what I considered "normal," were acts of oppression and disempowerment. The women in our family helped with the cooking, cleaning, and child care. We enjoyed doing these things, and learned a great deal as a result of this work, but our brothers, except for the oldest, who's role was different because of this location, did not share those responsibilities, nor did they have the same expectations placed on them inside or outside the home.

I am very grateful to Mom for the many sacrifices she made, to keep her family together, and to have each of us become contributing citizens in society. Mom deferred her dreams, because of the responsibilities of motherhood. She raised us alone emotionally, during the early years of her marriage, then physically when Dad died. Mom gave me some wonderful gifts, things I wanted to pass on to my daughter, for example, unconditional love, self-sufficiency, self-determination, responsibility, and the ethic of care. However, when I became a mother, while I was determined to pass on the "gifts" of empowerment and growth enhancement, I was equally passionate about not passing on those values and practices which I experienced as disempowering and stifling of personal growth.

A good example of this is the way we experienced discipline across the three generations. Discipline appeared easy for Mom, although I am sure she must have had a lot of fear facing the reality of raising her children on her own. For the majority of the time she used fear tactics, a practice of an adult exercising power over their children, a practice she learned from her own parents. This was very disempowering, for my mother and for me. As an adult, when I became a mother myself, I knew intuitively that I would do things differently. My goal as I shifted focus from my role as daughter, to that of a mother of a daughter, was to provide creative opportunities to facilitate my daughter's empowerment, and to prevent oppression or her disempowerment. It is my privilege to share some of those previously "unspoken" things with you at this time. First of all to facilitate your empowerment your father and I tried to create an egalitarian household, without a gendered breakdown of roles and responsibilities.

ties. We shared the household tasks, and we shared the parenting responsibilities.

D. Although I was raised in a gender neutral environment, I still felt pressure from society to conform, to identify with feminine things. I did not appreciate the values that you were trying to teach me. For example, I did not appreciate the value of being able to make my own decisions. It was not until I was much older, when I formed my own identity, not conforming to outside influences, that I came to truly appreciate how gender and race oppression frame my life. The values I learned as a child helped me to critically analyze this oppression, to empower myself to challenge and break those oppressive conditions. This is ongoing.

M. We also tried to give you choices and age-appropriate freedom. We wanted you to have a sense of your power to make decisions and choices, and live with the consequences that came along with each decision and choice you made. Discipline was never a challenge, as we tried to establish clear boundaries, and set consequences for misbehavior. My recollection is that this was never an issue until your teen years, when you seemed to challenge almost everything. As your mother I desperately wanted to shield and protect you from the pain I knew you would experience as a Black woman. I find the words of bell hooks in *Bone Black* quite empowering in helping me to understand why I was not able to protect you; hooks says “[Mama] no longer stands between me and all that would hurt me.... [T]his is my dream of her—that she will stand between me and all that hurts me, that she will protect me at all costs.”

When I realized that while an improvement in social class may keep you from class oppression, nothing could keep you from race and gender oppression, I first felt pain, then tried to equip you with tools to both understand, and deal with the oppression you would face in your life. This education, the power of analysis, and the vision of social change, was as important as your formal education. This

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was most difficult to facilitate at critical points in your life, and a definite struggle, although I did not think it compared to my mother's burden. Her life experiences, and those of her peers, helped to prepare me for these trials of motherhood. The film *Black Mother/Black Daughter* produced by Sylvia Hamilton, emphasizes the important role that older women play in passing on values and traditions to the younger generations. I am very grateful that my mother and our community othermothers were able to pass on these traditions to me.

D. At a young age I learned the ethic of work and the value of deferring gratification. I recall that at a

very young age I knew that if I wanted a certain lifestyle, then I would have to be prepared to set long-term goals, and to expect to work twice as hard as my peers. These high expectations that were placed on me at such a young age felt disempowering at the time. However, I am grateful to you, Mom and Dad, for teaching me such valuable lessons that I look forward to passing on the next generation. As Collins states, work for Black women has been an important and valued dimension of Africentric definitions of Black motherhood.

M. I was so relieved when you developed your own analysis of the issues that impact on your life, and when you took on the challenge of social change. Simultaneously, I felt fear and anxiety. “What sort of legacy have I passed on to my daughter?” was the question I asked myself. As a 20-year-veteran of social work, I have not seen enough change. “Is this the torch I want to pass on to my daughter?” “Is this to be my legacy to you?” I hope not! I have seen some of my dreams realized through the life you have lived, just as Mom has realized some of her dreams through my achievements, and those of my siblings. For that I am grateful, and truly thankful to our Creator for such blessings. It is a pleasure to see you empower yourself through reflection, analysis, and action. Thank you for also taking the risk to develop your creative spirit; I see this as empowerment in action. The development of our mother-daughter relationship has been an act of resistance and empowerment for me. It has fostered my creativity, and has been what Collins defines as a mothering of the mind and soul.

D. At first I was so afraid and angry that we are expected to take on such roles as Black women. I almost chose a career that would not have been as rewarding for me because of this anger. I saw social work as an oppressive profession that I could not imagine being a part of. However, I realize that we must do more than want things to change, we must be willing to help make change happen. Interestingly enough, I have chosen to follow your path in social work. I resisted it for so long and so hard because of my anger and feelings of disempowerment. In the film *Black Mother/Black Daughter*, Sylvia Hamilton says the young people should not be angry, however, I argue that as survivors of race and gender oppression we must be angry and use that anger as a tool for empowerment rather than a stumbling block. I feel honoured that you feel I am able to carry on the struggle you began a generation ago.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that although we have both experienced disempowerment in our relationships as daughters, and through our mother-daughter bond, these experiences have led to our empowerment, helping us become stronger women. Like our African-American sisters, the psychological, mental, and physical hardships that we have had to endure as Black women in this country

have not changed much over the past three generations (Joseph). We carry on the tradition, the legacy, the strength of our powerful Black mothers, grandmothers, and othermothers, who have passed on those skills which enable us to survive and succeed in a world that is often hostile and oppressive. May other mothers and daughters be encouraged to "carry the torch."

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MARILYN IRWIN BOYNTON

Our Daughter is Leaving Home To Go To College

We travel in my car to Huron College.
We reminisce about growing up Mary.
Telling the stories and reliving those years,
a patchwork quilt we passed back and forth.
Father and mother and daughter recalled
the family history we hold to be true.
Mary tells her own tale.
Her eyes have seen life from the inside out.
We delight, are astonished, as we hear her speak
Wonderful, bittersweet, we celebrate this day.

Our journey to college, is welcomed by signs;
Humour beckons the highway traveller.
Welcoming "frosh" to a week of ritual.
Our son John is a 2nd year student;
he shows us around his new house.
He becomes our guide, our anchor safe,
in this university town.
We leave our daughter in her own care;
We leave our son—"look after her please."

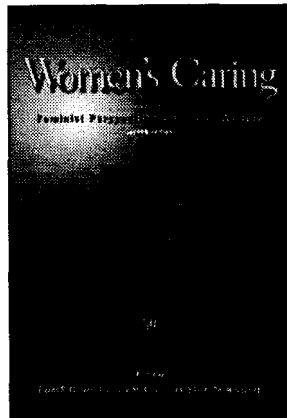
Marilyn Irwin Boynton is a psychotherapist and consultant practising in Toronto. She is co-author of the book, Goodbye Mother, Hello Woman: Reweaving the Daughter Mother Relationship. Marilyn has spoken extensively on behalf of daughters and mothers.

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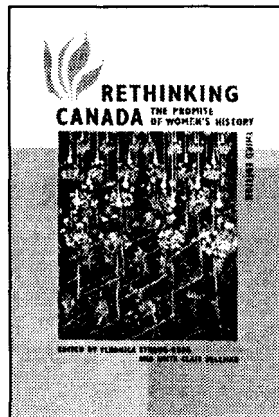
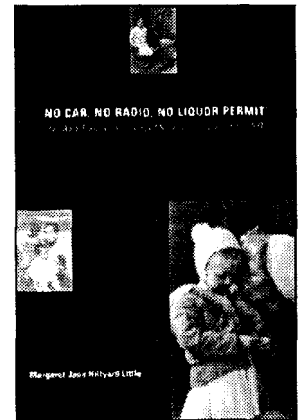
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