“Who would play with me?”? Childhood Narratives of Racial Identity

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Abstract: Organizations such as the Central Citizens Committee, National Unity Association of Dresden, and the Hour-A-Day Study Club have been critical to raising awareness and addressing racial inequality across Canada during the 1940s and 1950s. Yet, the women and men who established these organizations were also parents and guardians’ raising children, yet research has seldom addressed the day-to-day existential issues of what it meant to Black children living in racist and hostile environments. This paper examines the racialization of Black children and their own understandings of racial identity growing up in Canada during the twentieth century. I explore the day-to-day experiences of, and responses to, racist practices in spaces and places - such as the school, church, and home. I argue that self-understanding and identification was formed through, and in relation to, larger questions about belonging, race and space, resistance and assimilation, which are intricately connected to how Black people are situated within the Canadian nation.

My great grandfather was an escaped slave from Raleigh, North Carolina that came in this bush, this wilderness, and settle down. This is how we got here [via] the Underground Railroad. They sneaked to Canada with one son. He was about a year old, John Scott. Ferbie Ann was a dark woman. George Albert was a fair man. A white woman came across, and they pretended that the baby was her baby, and that Ferbie Ann was the servant. They snuck across and got here to Maidstown Township, right down here. They lived there all their lives (Agnes Scott Ellesworth, 2001).

Agnes Scott Ellesworth proudly recounts the above vignette, with photographs, as a way to solidify and give meaning to her immediate family and ancestors’ presence on the Canadian landscape. Though largely absent from Canada’s national narratives, Black Canadian-born women such as Agnes rely on stories passed down through generations, historical documents, and other artifacts to construct their own narratives, however partial, of what it means to be Black Canadian. Deeply embedded in these narratives is a
discourse about struggle, survival and resistance. For escaped slaves, loyalists, and those who would eventually be free African-Americans, Canada was hardly the land of milk and honey they had envisioned. Although Maidstone Township, located in Southwestern Ontario\(^2\) felt like a sanctuary compared to being enslaved in North Carolina, life for George Albert in mid-19\(^{th}\) century Canada West was still difficult. Racism in its various insidious configurations often marred the material reality of those who had viewed Canada as a beacon of hope and freedom. White Canadians did not willingly extend open arms to these early Black migrants and often reacted with hostility. Albert’s children and grandchildren would face similar challenges as they came of age.

Drawing on oral interviews conducted with 13 Black Canadian-born nurses born between 1929-1949, and autobiographies such as Carol Talbot’s, *Growing up Black in Canada*, Karen Shadd-Evelyn, *I’d Rather Live in Buxton* and Cheryl Foggo’s *Pourin Down Rain*, this paper examines the racialization of Black children and their own understandings of racial identity growing up in Canada during the twentieth century. More specifically, I’m concerned with the day-to-day experiences of, and response to racist practices in spaces and places - such as the school, church, and home. I argue that self-understanding and identification was formed through, and in relation to larger questions about belonging, race and space, resistance and assimilation, which are intricately connected to how Black people are situated within the Canadian nation. Since interviews and autobiographies are the primary source, it should be noted that issues of memory, that is, whether an event happened exactly as the interviewees say it did, or blanks in memory, are not necessarily a concern in this essay. The objective here, as Gemma Romain intimates, is the “documenting of neglected voices and how they remembered their own experiences” (Romain 2006, 6).

Some scholarly attention has been paid to Black Canadians during the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) century. Researchers such as Bristow (1992, 1993), Ross (2001) and Winks (1997) have elucidated how critical organizations such as the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NSAACP), Central Citizens Committee, National Unity Association of Dresden, and the Hour-A-Day Study Club were formed. Formed in 1945, it was the tireless efforts of organizations such as the NSAACP that brought to light the reality that churches, the military, and hospitals practiced defacto segregation (Backhouse 1999, 251). The women and men who established these organizations were also parents and guardians’ raising children, yet this research has seldom addressed the day-to-day existential issues of what it meant to Black children living in racist and hostile environments.

**Black Identity and the School**
When most of the interviewees’ ancestors arrived in Canada during the 19\(^{th}\) century, they were thwarted at every level to procure quality and equal access
to education. Prohibited from attending public schools, Blacks established their own schools, often with limited resources (see for example, Cooper 1994). Decades later, some of the great-grandchildren of these earlier migrants were attending segregated schools which, according to Daniel Hill, were...“underfunded, poorly equipped, and inadequately staffed” (Hill 1996, 35). In discussing segregated schools in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which one of the interviewees attended, historian Robin Winks noted...“the most blind of inspectors could not have pretended that separate education was equal education” (Winks 1997, 376). The message was patently clear, Black children and teachers were hardly deserving of the resources befitting their white counterparts. Conversely, those children who attended integrated schools were consistently reminded of their inferior status by teachers and students alike. Indeed, Talbot notes that “the psyche of the Black child growing up in Canada was under subtle attack in the education system...” (Talbot 1984, 14). Thus, an individual’s identity and sense of self is constituted and reconstituted through contact with institutions such as the school, which operates as a socializing agent, as well as by individual students and teachers.

Schools are far from neutral sites; they are influenced by the larger political, social, cultural, ideological and economic context in which they function. Simply put, schools do not exist in a vacuum, but often reflect and reinforce the norms, ideals, beliefs, and values of the wider society. Regardless of racism in the educational system, Blacks believed it was a vehicle for better opportunities. A formal education, they hoped, would not only facilitate access to better jobs, but empower Blacks individually and collectively to participate in Canadian society as equal members of the citizenry (Oliver, as quoted in Winks 1997, 376). But, whatever positive meaning education held for Blacks, reminders of their Otherness marred the act of attending school. Reflective of the larger Canadian society, schools are “troubled by questions of race and space” as they too foster the myth of a homogeneous white Canadian identity devoid of blackness (Walcott 1997, 21). In these schools, Black teachers were virtually unheard of, and the curriculum was Eurocentric, privileging European historiography. While the aforementioned factors, including subjects and grades, were important in framing the experiences of Black students, it was the social relationships involving teachers and their peers that the biographers and interviewees particularly emphasized. It was against this backdrop that Black children struggled with their self-identity, the need to be accepted and to belong.

Teachers are intrinsic to the education apparatus, as they are instrumental in the socialization of students. Besides determining students’ academic success, teachers can, and do, impact their identity formation. Thus, if teachers operate from the premise that Black students are intellectually inferior, they will treat them accordingly. Alternatively, if teachers ignore, or have
no understanding of how race and class operate to circumscribe the lives of Black people, then they might inadvertently force students to ignore their racial and cultural background thus emphasizing a neutral ‘student first’ identity, which requires a certain amount of self-negation in order to be accepted. In the context of the school, Black identity involves constant negotiation and assimilation as a resistive tool against white dominance.

The biographers and interviewees generally held favorably recollections about their teachers. There were moments, however, in elementary and high school where some of the interviewees felt a series of emotions in relation to discussions about race, or experienced marginalization as a result of the bodies they occupied. Virginia noted that “there were some negative experiences in public school and high school . . . the teachers were often biased, and there were those times when I was not chosen to do certain things. For example, I knew for a school play, it was a racial issue” (Travis 2001). Excluding Black children from these productions not only reinforces their marginality, but maintains the representation of whiteness as norm as part an extension of nationhood.

Instead of being champions of equity and fairness in the classroom, similar to white students, some teachers were not beyond using racially charged names to refer to Black students.

Agnes recalled that in elementary school there were some “teachers who would call us names which was reported to the school authorities, but they ‘didn’t do anything, we had to live with it, and I don’t remember anything being done” (Flynn 2011, 49). Still, Agnes pointed out, “We confronted it” (Ibid). When Black parents and students challenged negative representations of Blackness they were participating in a counter-hegemonic project about racial identity, where Blackness signified attributes linked to their supposed inferiority. Beverly remembered an experience in elementary school that reflected dominant attitudes about the perceived place of Blacks in Canadian society. Beverly explained, “It was about grade 3, and we had this needle threading contest, the teacher made some remark that had racial overtones, ‘cause I was a whip at threading the needle, this was stereotype kind of remark…” (Salmon 2007). While Beverly was unable to recall the precise details regarding this encounter, she knew the teacher made a correlation between her ability to quickly thread the needle and her being Black. An article in the Dawn of Tomorrow, a newspaper that served London, Ontario and surrounding areas included an article that echoed Agnes and Beverly’s experience. Students complained of speakers referring to them as “nigger in the woodpile,” or teachers who “[made] remarks that the Negro boy is lazy and good to step dance or strum to a banjo, and the girls [made] good mammies to English girls’ babies” (Dawn of Tomorrow 1944, 4). The writer of the article further pointed out how little regard teachers have of their students as there were those “who have the habit of
wise-cracking for the fun of seeing a student squirm, or laughed at” (Ibid). These comments are a reflection of how the education system generally designed to maintain the status quo also codifies those who do not fit as Other.

Even though identities are fluid and are contingent on so many factors, including social forces and circumstances, for white teachers and speakers, Black students were seen as biologically destined to occupy lower subject positions in Canadian society. Thus, race as it intersects with gender becomes the ultimate signifier of where one is structurally situated in the political economy of Canadian society. The possibility of belonging in certain spaces is infused with racist discourses. Black girls then hardly possessed the penchant to become physicians, scientists or even teachers; they were channeled towards servitude in white women’s homes. These narratives of difference reveal how one’s racial identity is never forged in isolation or solely within the individual. Indeed, various systems and structures are implicated in identity formation forcing the victims at different stages growing up to reflect on what certain social interactions mean.

Even as Black Canadians invoked the value of a formal education, they expressed concern about the ways in which the education system reinforced white supremacy. V.I. Petegrave, President of the Brotherhood of the Sleeping Car Porters, in an address on the Observance of Race Relations Day that appeared in the *Dawn of Tomorrow*, relayed a story involving his child. For Petegrave, this incident was evidence of systemic and institutionalized racism in the Ontario Education system. He explained that on a school visit to the public library, he found the booklet of nursery rhymes the children were reading to be extremely offensive. Petegrave then alerted the attendant at the library, who in turn defended the library and school’s choice of study material, much to his surprise. In his address, Petegrave expressed his fears that if the educational process teaches white children that they are superior to Black children, then their relationships will be shaped by their belief in their superiority, “making in the end a very complex undertaking for any race relations agency to remedy” (*Dawn of Tomorrow* 1944, 6).

To be sure, there are multiple ways of interpreting how teachers and students responded to the use of these books in the classroom. Surely, there were some teachers and white students who viewed the stereotypical characters in the nursery rhymes as fictional characters and thus harmless. And in the case of books such as *Little Black Sambo*, there are sure to be some who view this as an artifact reflecting the time period. Others might see little difference between the characters in the books and the Black students in the classroom, which then serves to regulate social interactions and relationships.

Regardless of whether these books were viewed merely as fictional literature or not, some Blacks students were humiliated by their usage. Surely,
these moments helped to shape Black children’s understandings of self and feelings of belonging. On the one hand, Beverly recalled, “I remember in grades 1 and 2, reading Little Black Sambo and [books] with monkey-like characters, and I’d just simply want to crawl under a desk. I mean, that was awful” (Salmon 2007). Talbot, on the other hand, enjoyed the book Little Black Sambo in class, at least for the “stack of pancakes dripping with butter and syrup that looked so good” (Talbot 1984, 14). Aware, however, of the implications of being associated with the caricatures in the book, she explained, “I did not often indulge in its delights because I did not want anyone to identify me [italics hers] with that thick-lipped, big-eyed, nappy-headed ‘jungle’ boy” (Ibid). Schools and by extension libraries are hardly the loci of anti-racist activities, but were complicit in imputing Black subjectivity as inferior and primitive. By lobbying to remove books such as the Little Black Sambo from the curriculum and complaining to the school superintendents, Petegrave and others were articulating a particular Black Canadian identity that is rooted in defiance.

While as a group teachers did not actively challenge racial inequality, a few interviewees remembered some whose actions affirmed them in positive ways even if they practiced a form of colour-blindness. Frieda and Marlene felt that some teachers valued their intellect, and subsequently wrote positive recommendation letters upon their leaving high school. Arguably, it is in these moments—however ephemeral—that Black students were viewed as students without some form of deficiency because of the body they occupy. As a young girl Edna recalled that one of her favorite leisure activities was memorizing and reciting poems. At the time, the local radio station CFRB invited children to recite poems live on air. Edna told Mr. Humphrey, her grade school teacher, that she too wanted to be on the radio, an opportunity that he encouraged her to pursue. Once she practiced the poem at home, Edna auditioned for CFRB and was accepted to recite her poem. Pleased about her accomplishment, Mr. Humphrey then “let all the children go home from school early to hear me. He was a great guy,” Edna noted (Searles 1999). Mr. Humphrey’s gesture can be viewed symbolically as giving voice to a child who belongs to a community that has been invisible.

When asked about the segregated Five Mile Plains School located in, Windsor Plains, Nova Scotia, Marlene sighed deeply and said, “it was fine those first 8-9 years” (Watson 2000). Notwithstanding segregated schools that had Black teachers who genuinely cared about their well-being, whether the school had a positive or negative impact on her racial identity is unknown. Marlene quickly eschewed any discussion of her experience at the segregated school, but was elated when she talked about attending Windsor High, a disproportionately white school. This was a space where she excelled academically and was accepted by whites. She explained, “I had good teachers in high school and they really
encouraged us” (Watson 2000). Considering the neglect of Black Nova Scotians generally by mainstream institutions and their experiences of racism, it is hard to conceive of Windsor High as devoid of the racist practices manifested in Nova Scotia overall. It is likely that due to the absence of a large Black population at the school, it was easier for teachers to perform colour blindness, which indirectly is also a message about racial identity. If teachers pretended that Marlene was just another student there, they are inadvertently ignoring how racial identity is a key component in structuring the opportunities and experiences of people that look like her; and the ways in which this necessarily shapes cultural and other understandings of the self. Since Blackness is fraught with negativity, perhaps as a response to this fear, or as a result of her desire to be accepted by whites, Marlene chose instead to downplay her racialized self-emphasizing instead her identity as a student (Watson 2000).

Black Children and the “N” Word

White children learned quite early that Black children were their social inferiors; armed with this knowledge, they responded in kind, mostly by the common use of the epithet nigger. The use of the term was how some Black children first became aware of their difference. Frieda recalled the moment that could be interpreted as her first experience dealing with her racial identity. “I experienced an incident in kindergarten; one of the little boys called me the “N” word. And I didn’t really know what it meant, but I knew it wasn’t a good thing” (Steele 2001). Growing up in Kentville, Nova Scotia during the 1940s, Laura contends that in addition to her family being the only “Blacks in a whole community of whites… there was a lot of prejudice, and it was pretty blatant.” Often, Laura explained, “they called you nigger…they were always some nasty kids around that would do that” (Tynes 1999). Even if white children could claim ignorance regarding the meaning of the world nigger, this did not make the angst and hurt any less painful. Talbot is worth quoting here, “They” taught us the meaning of humiliation very young. “Their” children could gain immediate superiority over us merely by uttering the hated epithet “nigger…”(Talbot 1984, 14). White children then were active participants in a racist project that often seeks to invalidate Black children’s subjectivity. Notwithstanding Canada did not formally enforce the tradition of the “one drop of Black blood rule” it appeared that white children subscribed to this notion in relation to bi-racial children. Bi-racial children, even in cases where they could have possibly passed for white, were subjected to the same treatment as their darker-skinned peers.

“Diminished” was the term Beverly used to describe the racism she encountered while attending elementary school in Toronto during the 1940s. After relentless teasing including being called the “N” word, Beverly went home for lunch one day, and according to her, “went up to my mom’s room and got out her talcum powder and put it all over my arms and face” (Salmon 2007). Embarrassed by the colour of her skin,
Beverly in her child-like imagination hoped that by putting talcum powder on her skin, she could be white. At such a young age, Beverly had yet to acquire the knowledge that there was nothing inherently superior about her white classmates, or begin to understand race as a fiction. Hence, in a school devoid of Black teachers and peppered by a few Black students, it was difficult to escape the stultifying effects of otherness. At this particular historical moment, it was almost impossible for Beverly to develop a positive racial identity or feel safe in an environment where systems of power and privilege govern the relationship between children.

Like Frieda, who admitted not knowing what the “N” word meant but knew that it was a derogatory term, Betty expressed similar feelings. But instead of wondering, she asked her mother what “nigger meant.” According to Betty, her mom first pointed out that the correct word is “Negro” and then followed up with an emboldened statement, “tell them to go and look in the mirror, and if anybody is the nigger, they’re the nigger” (Clarke 2007). That Betty’s mother makes the distinction between “Negro” and nigger to avoid the possibility that her daughter might conflate the two can be viewed as conscious effort to shape her daughter’s identity at the same time that she empowered Betty to redirect the insult back at the perpetrators. Sharon invoked a similar response during a tearful conversation between her and her younger cousin Foggo, who had been repeatedly terrorized by the Webber boys. According to Foggo, “the Webber boys were part of the largest, cruelest family that I knew. Recently, they had taken to intercepting me when I was playing with my dolls. They would tear off the doll’s clothing and fling them back into the street, and then hurl the dreaded words, “Nigger! Blackie!” (Foggo 1990, 39). Rocking her back and forth, Sharon assured a distraught Foggo that nigger was not in the dictionary, and that “It means that the person saying it is a nigger. When someone calls you a nigger they are really talking about themselves” (Ibid). According to Foggo, “I was comforted by this new knowledge, that the Webber boys were making fools of themselves, but were too dim to realize it” (Ibid). Sharon was also able to- even if it was temporary- elide the possibility of her cousin internalizing the Weber’s boy’s racist rants by offering a counter narrative where Nigger becomes emblematic of the speaker’s ignorance.

The home - as illustrated by conversations that children had with parents and family members - was a site where identities were created, recreated, contested, and affirmed.

Public and private spaces and places
The notion that “identity and place are mutually constructed when geography, and the production of space, are uneven and perpetuate inequalities,” (Peake and Ray as quoted in McKittrick 2001, 28) is embodied at the local level in childhood recollections regarding particular places. The construction of racial identity has to be considered in tandem with the
constraints imposed by society and how relations of power are enacted beyond the home and school.

Black children experienced further ambivalence about themselves when white children refused to physically associate with them, even in play. This act on the part of white children suggests an attempt to regulate the playground as a space which, like the Canadian nation, belongs to them. Born to an Irish mother and Black father in Windsor, Ontario, similar to Beverly, Dorothy hardly felt privileged by her light skin, or the other superficial European phenotypical traits, such as her long hair, that distinguished her from the few other darker-skinned girls in the school. In the first few grades at Prince of Wales School in Windsor, where all of the students were white, Dorothy was not biracial; she was Black, and her classmates knew this. Dorothy dreaded recess, as she was often the target of white students’ hostility. Dorothy recalled them saying, “Don’t play with her.” She continued, “If you went to play with them, whether it was playing ball or getting on a swing or whatever, everybody would walk away...oh yeah, there used to be a lot of that” (Flynn 2011, 39). Dorothy eventually realized that she was shunned and excluded from playground cliques and recess activities not because she was difficult to play with but because she was not white enough. Jean Daniels (1955), the columnist for the “Woman’s Window” in the Canadian Negro, relayed an incident involving her granddaughter Sylvia at Queen’s Park in Toronto which echoes Dorothy’s experience at the playground.

Daniels explained that on two separate occasions, Sylvia attempted to show her doll to a white girl but, each time the child ran back to the car and hid. The child’s mother made the situation worse by insisting that Sylvia “go away” (3). Here is the conversation that took place between Daniels and her granddaughter following the incident:

...“Why did the little girl run away, Nanny?” she asked. “Why did the lady say, ‘Go Away?’”

“I don’t know for sure, darling,” I said with a heavy heart, “but maybe because you are a little Negro girl.”

“And because she’s white?”

“I’m afraid that’s it, Sylvia. Because you’re Negro and she is white” (Ibid).

Sylvia then asked her grandmother the question that no doubt many Black children had asked family members or asked themselves; “Are white little girls [boys] better than Negro little girls [boys], Nanny?” As she hugged her granddaughter close, Daniels responded, “No, darling. No they aren’t at all” (Ibid). Similar to a number of the interviewees’ family members, Daniels was quite candid in the conversation that ensued with her granddaughter. She did not deny that there were people who believed that a person’s skin colour is associated with “being good or bad” (Ibid). For Daniels, her responsibility was to ensure that Sylvia did not leave Queen’s Park feeling
inadequate but confident and empowered in her skin.

Whether white or Black, living in Dresden, Ontario involved some form of racial consciousness. For whites it was reveling in their superior position in the racial order, and having the power to deploy racial labels as a means of reinforcing social distinctions, and for Blacks, it was the constant reminder of their marginality. Ross Lamberston noted that the Association of Civil Liberties (ACL) in their “brief referred to discrimination against blacks in a number of Ontario communities but noted that, “the height of expression of Jim Crow in Canada is to be found in the town of Dresden, Ontario” (Lambertson 2001, 70).

Dresden was dubbed the “Dixie of the North,” due to the pervasiveness of racism. Virginia, who was born and raised in Dresden had no qualms admitting that she lived in a community that “had racist attitudes.” Dresden, however, was particularly unique in that various social groups lobbied together to implement the Fair Accommodation Practices Act to end discrimination in public places (Lambertson 2001). Here, Virginia described how her family attempted to protect her, but also how she came to her own realization that her skin colour determined who she befriended and could play with: “I was allowed to go outside the boundaries of my home to play with other children, but there were differences as to who would play with me and who wouldn’t. That was the first time I observed being different. White children separate themselves from Black children. So, I predominantly played with my cousins and the people who were willing to play with me…” (Travis 2001).

The practitioners who reinforced white superiority and privilege in their daily encounters with Blacks made no exceptions towards young children. H.R. Burnette (1954), secretary of the National Unity Association of Dresden, tells the following story reported in the Canadian Negro “of one occasion where three children, whose ages ranged from five to seven, went to a restaurant for ice-cream and the waiters not only refused to serve them; they just stood there looking at them” (1). Making parallels to the United States, Burnette noted that “school children learn about Jim Crow before they learn to read and write” (Ibid). A seemingly innocent activity of purchasing ice-cream could easily turn into a humiliating experience for Black children who at very young ages were being told in no uncertain terms that they do not belong in the community. In response, Virginia’s parents prohibited their children from going “to get ice-cream cone where you were discouraged from eating inside” (Flynn 2011, 37). These and all other gestures that parents adopted were about protecting their children but can also be viewed as ways to reinforce a positive self-identity.

When a very young Foggo asked what Jim Crow was, her mother explained how their family members came to Kansas from Canada to escape from being told, “that they had to sit up in the balcony (at the movies) or at the
back” (Foggo 1990, 6). Foggo nervously asked whether “Kansas was Canada” to which her mother replied, ‘we don’t have that kind of thing here.” Foggo remembered thinking, “As for me, I was relieved to learn that Kansas was not Canada. Here was yet another story, another horrific tale of life in ‘The States’ fuelling my growing belief that I was lucky to have been born in Canada” (Foggo 1990, 7). Foggo’s mother was articulating a specific discourse that juxtaposed an idealized Canada against a backward United States, where segregation practices operate to contain Black bodies. In this discourse, Canada was exceptional and a safe place for Foggo.

Even though Darlene and Foggo were born around the same time that formal discriminatory policies identified by Backhouse were being eliminated, they both had different recollections of how the Canadian nation was configured in their memory at different points growing up. Unlike Foggo’s mother, who denied—possibly as a way of protecting her daughter—the reality that defacto segregation existed in Canada, Darlene’s father was more forthright. Similar to members of Foggo’s family, Darlene’s father also migrated to Canada hoping to find refuge from racism only to discover that “Canada was no better than the United States” (Flynn 2009, 140). For Darlene’s father, segregation, especially in public spaces, was what he found most objectionable, which led Darlene to conclude that, “Canada truly wants the world to believe that racism did not exist here—that—that was an American thing. But guess what; it was as blatant as all hell in this country” (Ibid). Growing up Darlene and a few other Black children were accustomed to comparisons being made about the treatment of Blacks in Canada to the United States evidenced by the use of the terms “Jim Crow” and “Dixie of the North” to refer to racist practices and policies in Canada. The articulation then of a Black Canadian identity was also being forged in relation to African-Americans struggle for equality. As discussed thus far, Black children’s subjectivities and identities are shaped by the power relations embedded in the places and spaces they occupy. In the town of Kentville, Nova Scotia, Blacks and whites generally shared a similar subject position in relation to socio-economic status. The latter’s investment in maintaining white privilege precluded the development of meaningful interracial relationships. Laura described Kentville as a place “where there was a lot of prejudice, and it was pretty blatant” (Flynn 2011, 36). As a result, she continued, “we were restricted as to where we could go, like certain restaurants and hair salons” (Tynes 2011). These restaurant and salon owners had the power and exercised it to decide who did and did not belong in their establishments, forcing some Blacks to make decisions about entering segregated spaces.

Regardless of how Laura’s father’s wrestled weekly with his decision to allow his children to attend the segregated theatre, he usually relented because he knew how much they enjoyed this outing. With 25c in hand, Laura and her siblings walked 2.5
miles to the theatre, only upon arrival to be reminded again of their othered status. Their special treat was interrupted by the reality that according to Laura, “we didn’t have a choice, we had to sit upstairs, were not allowed to sit on the main floor, Blacks were not allowed to sit on the main floor” (Tynes 2011)). In the movie theatre seating in the balcony-looking below at white bodies, Laura’s and her siblings tried to ignore the gross injustice perpetuated against them based on their skin colour. And, although none of the movies they saw included Black people, Laura and her siblings focused instead on the ability to afford the theatre, and the joy of being independent of their parents for a few hours. Maybe, this small act of allowing his children to sit in the segregated theatre was Laura’s father’s way of making “space and place theirs” (Walcott 1997, 37). If white Canadians took for granted separate seating arrangements in Nova Scotia’s movie theatres, this would change with Viola Desmond. An entrepreneur and native of Nova Scotia, Desmond brought national attention to the issue of segregation in Canada when she was ejected from New Glasgow’s Roseland Theatre in 1946 for sitting in the section reserved for white patrons (Backhouse 1990, chapter 2).

The “absented-presence” (Walcott 1997, 37; McKittrick 2006, 94), which often denies the existence of slavery but acknowledges Canada as the terminus of the Underground Railroad, makes it possible to not know of Desmond’s story, or if hearing it, automatically assumes that it is a by-product of the Southern United States. Yet, as Darlene’s father stressed and Laura’s experience confirmed, segregation was not just a United States phenomenon. Constance Backhouse further explains that, “while no consistent pattern ever emerged, various hotels, restaurants, theatres, athletic facilities, parks, swimming pools, beaches, dance pavilions, skating rinks, pubs, bars were closed to Blacks across the country” (Backhouse 1999, 251). Clearly, spaces and places are hardly neutral and innocent, but are implicated in the formation of social identities engendered in, for example, the exclusionary and segregationist practices mentioned above. With the increased migration of immigrants and people of colour to Canada, attention has been paid to how certain spaces and places become racialized as a result of the bodies that occupy them. Yet, the spaces mentioned by Backhouse in the early to middle twentieth century were about normalizing whiteness and white people’s presence. Despite their own heterogeneity, whites were unified in their desire to occupy these spaces and places using whatever power they possessed to determine who is excluded and who is accepted.

Clearly, Black Canadians have varied memories growing up regarding space and place in relation to their identity formation that was both disempowering and empowering. The significance of space is aptly summed up by V. Rosa (2006) who maintains that, “everything is spatial; one’s life begins, is lived, and ends in and through space” (18). Thus, the space one lives in plays a central role in one’s development.
as “one not only defines space, but is also defined by space” (Ibid). Growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, some Black children did not have the privilege of growing up colour blind that is pretending that race was insignificant as a maker of identity. Even if there were moments when Black children believed they were just like any other children; their racial identity could be crystallized when confronted with certain situations.

While the first incident involved her family and another couple being denied service at a restaurant, the second event involved Frieda directly. When she was 9 years old, Frieda’s mother arranged for her to take music lessons at the Urseline School of Music. When mother and daughter arrived at the location, Frieda was denied admittance, much to Eleanor Parker’s surprise. According to Frieda, “the Mother Superior had mistaken my mother for being white” (Steele 2001). Frieda was absent when her mother had initially inquired about enrolling her at the school. In refusing to admit Frieda to the school, the Mother Superior was letting a young child know that learning to play the piano was beyond her, and that she was unworthy of a place in the school. These incidences undoubtedly affected the psyche of young children who do not have a developed comprehension of the dynamics of racism. During the interview, Frieda, spoke less about her own disappointment, but focused on her mother’s dignified response. Frieda’s mother relied on a religious logic to expose the hypocrisy of the school without “losing her class” (Steele 2001). As Christians, Frieda’s parents knew followers of Christ are held to a higher calling and are required to embody the principle of love and acceptance. Unfortunately, many churches in Canada reflected the attitude of the Mother Superior, acting as gatekeepers determining who belonged in their church. The Black church emerged as oppositional sites where the interviewees and biographers felt validated, nurtured, and accepted as unique individuals.

**Church**

Developed largely as a response to white racism, the Black church served multiple purposes. On special holidays, during the summer, or on selected days during the week, the Black church served “the social, recreational and educational needs of its members” (Shreve 1983, 13). Regardless of the abuse they suffered in their daily interactions with whites, in the church, “the Black subject was at the center” (Hall 1993, 392). In summarizing her childhood in Buxton, an original Black settlement, Karen Shadd-Evelyn underscored, “the home centered lifestyle, the emphasis on education, the rarity of alcohol, the strict upbringing and dominance of religion in our lives…” (Shadd-Evelyn 1993, 9). Commenting specifically on religion, Shadd-Evelyn maintained that her father - and most families in Buxton - took seriously the biblical verse “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Shadd-Evelyn 1993, 30). For most of the interviewees and biographers church attendance was never optional, it was mandatory.
The Black church then becomes a critical space in the production of Black identity embodied, for example, through styles of worship, and the critical roles children played in this particular space. Black Canadians wanted to worship God in a manner that was consistent with their African heritage. It is hardly surprising that Shadd-Evelyn paid homage to Reverend William King, the Presbyterian minister who had founded the community for refusing to restrict the ex-slaves to Presbyterianism, as he knew that the Methodist and Baptist denominations provided an “outlet for more demonstrative forms of worship consistent with the background of the congregation” (Shadd-Evelyn 1993, 30).

In the “dominant regime of representation,” (Hall 1994, 394), these “demonstrative” forms of worship, such as call and response, energetic singing, and dramatic sermons, were viewed as overly emotional unlike the more rationale, formal, and sterile mode of worship in the white churches. Even in the most conservative Black congregation, there was a stark contrast to their white counterparts’ ways of worshipping. Thus, Shadd-Evelyn enjoyed the fellowship and singing even if at times her consciousness was “preoccupied with its own meanderings” (Shadd-Evelyn 1993, 31).

In the church, Black children could find refuge from being seen, and experiencing themselves as the subjugated Other. Similar to their adult counterparts, as subjects they were also at the center. Besides regular church attendance, the interviewees participated in theatrical and youth activities, and a few held various positions in the church. Once she was old enough, Frieda helped plan the activities for the BME Vacation Bible School until she entered nurse training at the age of 18. The VBS was a joint venture of not just the BME but also included First Baptist and the African Methodist Episcopal (AME). Talbot noted that the VBS was “a very special time for Black children in Windsor (Talbot 1984, 32). The Dawn of Tomorrow often included information regarding the church activities that Black Canadian youth were involved in, and encouraging adults to show their support by attending these events. Indeed, the women in this essay who attended church growing up would concur with Dawn of Tomorrow writer that “our church is our home,” (Dawn of Tomorrow 1946, 4).

Of course identities are hardly fixed and are far from being mutually exclusive, which is exemplified in Naomi’s retelling of growing up in a strict Christian family whose lives were literally centered around the activities of the Mount Zion Church of God in Christ. “We were very, very active in church. We knew if there was a program, we knew our family was going to be at the forefront. We had to be the example in the church,” she emphasized (Naomi Banks 2006). Indeed, it was Naomi’s religious identity that was more salient growing up than a racial identity. To reference Naomi is a way to avoid essentializing Black identities or even the Black church.
Attempts to fashion a religious identity and find a way to belong as Black child was difficult for Laura who attended a white Baptist church. She referred to the congregation as cold, pointing out that “they didn’t like us… they would gather their clothes up around them when you sat in the pew with them,” (Flynn 2011, 69). Audre Lorde recounted a similar childhood experience on a subway train to Harlem where the white woman seated next to her, “jerks her coat closer to her….,” (Lorde as quoted in Riddick 1996, 136). Lorde thought the woman saw a roach, but eventually realized that...“there is nothing crawling up the next seat between us; it’s me she doesn’t want her coat to touch” (Ibid) In her analysis of Lorde’s experience, which is equally applicable to Laura, Susan Riddick contends that “it illustrates the enormous weight that that everyday encounters carry in inscribing racialized subjectivities...” (Ibid). She further added that...“these accounts reveal the ways in which such encounters deeply scar the psyche, inscribing in the very bodies of people their understanding of themselves and their place in a racialized hierarchy” (Ibid). The ability to forge a Black Canadian identity even as children were marred with the insidiousness of racial categorization and exclusion.

**Resistance to Unbelonging**
Parents and family members were faced with the task of ensuring that children developed a sense of self that was not predicated on white people’s definition, or perception. Thus, they employed a variety of resistive strategies though far from uniform as way to fashion children’s sense of a Black identity. The intention was to offer children a way to resist taunts that terrorize and to claim spaces where they were shunned as their own. Children were reassured that nigger does not define them that the term was empty and without meaning. Even when racism was not openly discussed attempts were still made to insulate children from white hostility. Parents consistently told their children that they were just as good as whites, and others ensured that growing up, their children engaged various forms of extra-curricular activities involving other Blacks. Black identity then was not only fostered in opposition to white racist discourse but also by involvement in, for example, the Black church, whereby the latter operated to sustain a positive racial and self-identity.

The imperative of hard work, or the protestant work ethic, was an additional strategy that parents and guardians adopted to help their children fashion a positive Black Canadian identity, but also to dispel whites of racist stereotypes held about Blacks. Eventually, these children would develop the requisite human capital needed to be successful and participate as equal members of the Canadian nation. Even though she grew up in Buxton, ‘Shadd-Evelyn eventually learned at the age of nine that Blacks folks were a minority. She also learned ... of a “world beyond my universe; a white sky where black stars would have to shine doubly bright to just to be seen” (Shadd-Evelyn 2011, 57). To shine “doubly bright” often meant going beyond what was expected of them, a
reality that reiterated in the homes of most of the interviewees.” I was raised in a home where you were capable of doing things, but you had to work for it” (Travis 2001) Virginia maintained.

At a young age, these young children were inadvertently asked to bear the burden of their race-as a form of racial uplift. Talbot illustrates this, in the following statement:

As a youngster, I, for one, believed that I could be almost whatever I wanted, largely because my parents instilled this belief in us, but I knew it would be a challenge. From a very young age I tried to win honours for our people. I saw it as a challenge to prove we were just as good or better in sports, academics, or whatever… we had (italics, original)” to be better-so outstanding that we could be denied, a distorted view arising out of being member of a visible minority group”(Talbot 1984, 80).

Born involuntarily Black and girls, and clearly aware of the consequences of what that meant in a society where “race mattered,” Talbot, Virginia, Beverly and others knew that while they had virtually no control over systemic and institutionalized forms of racism, they had some control over how they behaved.

There is no one solution to dealing with the physical and emotional damage wrought by growing up in a racist and hostile environment. Beverly’s parents moved into a neighborhood where they hoped to avoid schools where Black students were streamlined into technical or commercial courses, which did not prepare them for university. More specifically, Beverly explained that her dad moved them into an area where “the school was, and still is one of the leading schools in the province, that would lead you to the university stream (Salmon 2007). Besides church related activities, family outings, and vacations when parents could afford it, were ways that Black children growing up felt valued. For Foggo the visits to Chinatown to eat were wonderful memories. Here, she describe the outing, “All of my family- my mother, father, sister, and brothers; all of our aunts, uncles, cousins and a few people who not Black at all, but were so much a part of my world that I thought they were Black in a different way-all of us went to Chinatown.” Of the Chinatown visit she continued, “we were stared at, of course. In 1965 it was rare to see a large group of mostly Black people in Calgary. I believed that the staring was something we had earned, an acknowledgment of our status as important and beautiful people” (Foggo 1990, 1).

Given how these spaces fortified whiteness while dehumanizing blackness, parents were critical in furnishing their children with the tools to help them navigate their social world. Cathy who was born in Chatham pointed out that her father often reiterated the following: “if you walk right, you won’t
get into trouble,” and insisted that she “prove them (whites) wrong” (Williams 2007). Once they were older, some of the interviewees relied on their own sensibilities to create their own personal identity. How both her parents responded to discrimination taught Frieda a valuable lesson about defending Black identity, as well as how to navigate similar situations. Once some of the interviewees entered high school, they were much more confident (with the help of parents and others) in navigating the school environment. In terms of choosing friends, Virginia noted that “she had friends from both races,” but was “always cautious and chose my friends carefully” (Travis 2001). In response to how Blackness was denigrated, Virginia and others developed strategies that speak to their agency in the fashioning of the self in response to racist discourses. While admitting how painful some of these experiences were, these women did not paint themselves as victims, but as actors who made conscious decisions about how they would make high school more welcoming. Growing up these women embodied resilience, which can be described as “the processes by which people overcome life challenges to achieve their sense of well-being (Wexler 2009, 267).

**Conclusion**

At home and in the Black church, Black children learned racial identity in specific ways, but struggled to negotiate a positive self-identity within the context of the dominant racial script where Blackness meant racist name-calling, exclusion and marginalization from, and in certain spaces. Talbot noted that, “to be a Black child in Canadian society, even in my generation, was a painful experience.” She further added that, “The positive vibrations and the wholesome warmth of family and church could not counter-balance the forces of the dominant white world” (Talbot 1984, 80). While everyone did not share some of these sentiments, most of the interviewees would concur with Talbot that aspects of their childhood were difficult as a result of how race was deployed to categorize and marginalize them. Yet, they drew strength from family members, progressive whites, and the church; they learned over time to appreciate and value Blackness. Once they reached a more mature age, Blackness became a signifier of resistance, a commitment to social justice, and challenging white supremacy. Even those interviewees who could have taken refuge in passing as “white” or some other more “acceptable” racial identity chose to identify as Black. They learned to see value in what was seen as an aberration to the norm. At some point most reached the realization as Foggo succinctly pointed out:

**This may not be comprehensible to someone who has not lived as a peculiarity, the idea that a child must one day tell herself, “I am allowed, I was meant to be, I have a right to exist. But when you are a Black child who looks out in the world and sees hostility toward Blackness, you begin**
to ask yourself why, you look for rationality behind hostility, until the day you realize that racism is not your responsibility, it is the responsibility of the perpetrators. That day, you say, “I belong in the world. I belong here in Western Canada where my family has lived for four generations” Foggo 1990, 83).

Indeed, identities, whether personal, gendered or racial, are intricately connected to the simple need to belong. These biographies and the interviewees’ narratives then can be viewed as a way to cement Black Canadian identity.

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**Endnotes**
1 Even though Agnes and her descendants make settler claims, they are hardly “true settlers” as they too have settled on Aboriginal land. For an in-depth analysis see, Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence, “Indigenous peoples and black people in Canada: Settlers or allies,” in A. Kempf (ed). 2009. *Breaching the Colonial Contract: Anti-Colonialism in the US and Canada*. New York: Springer.

2 Maidstone Township is located in Southwestern Ontario.