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Black Women Teachers Speak

If Black women do not say who they are other people will say it badly for them

Barbara Christian

Ese

Hitting
at
Where
it
Hurts

Ese was born on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts in 1953.¹ The third of four children in a working-class family, she immigrated to England with her mother and three siblings at the age of two. Ese grew up in an industrial town, where her mother worked in a factory and later married a man from the Caribbean. Ese's parents and siblings migrated to Canada in 1978. In 1980, she immigrated to Canada to join them.

How have Ese's experiences at the intersections of race, class, gender, and marginality in/formed her knowledge and practice as a Black woman educator? Her voice lilting with emotion, she explained:

I know what I've been through, **I know** what's out there for the Black kids.² If they don't have a good grounding in education

and stuff like that, they don't stand a chance. Even some of us who have a good grounding in education don't stand a chance, never mind those who don't. So you know, I feel I have an emotional stake because to me, when one [Black child] fail,³ I fail too! So I feel I have to give, not only a hundred percent, but sometimes 2 and 300 percent to make sure the kids them get to a point—give them the coping strategies that they can survive.⁴

Like her colleagues in this inquiry, she emphatically splashed her narrative with “I feel” and “I know.” Perhaps the abundance of what are known as ‘putative verbs’ (i.e., verbs of saying, knowing, thinking, perceiving) seems to validate their subjective knowledge and experience as Black women, in a society that negates them.

Elementary School Days: “I used to go home every night and cry.”

“WHAT I WENT THROUGH AS A CHILD!” Ese recalled. “I had potential, but didn't have anybody who cared enough.” In the following story, she illustrates how her experiences as a Black girl were delegitimated. Ese recounted the culmination of a series of objectifying incidents on the playground at her elementary school:

E: I remember going through that whole issue of the word “nigger” and stuff like that. I remember they would look at you and start to giggle and those kind of—the kind of feelings that—Unfortunately for me, in [my town] at that time, there wasn't many Black kids, and I went through a tough time. [. . .]⁵ I was the *only* Black kid, the first one they'd had in the school. And **life was sheer hell**. I used to go home every night and cry. I hated school. 'Cause they would come out with stupid things like, “Go back to the **jungle**” and “You live in a **mudhouse**” and the **whole crap** you know. But I overcome that by beating up a few of them, you know. (laughs) I don't advocate it but, geez, it helped at the time. You know, because that's the only way I got them off my back [. . .] I remember the first and only fight I ever had, in my whole school career was—because I was always a coward. This particular day, was three

boys who—they were forever teasing me and nagging me 'cause, it was a mixed [sex] school because nobody talked to me. Nobody played with me. So at recess, I was always stuck in some corner somewhere. Because the girls who would talk with me didn't want to because the boys would beat them up and call them names. So I was totally, you know, **isolated**, so to speak. The thing that broke the camel's [back] was one day when three girls came up and they offered me a candy. And I was really sort of thrilled, not for the candy, so much but the fact that they came and they spoke to me. You know, this was a nine-year-old. And I was really sort of in awe and stuff like that. They offered me the candy. And I took the candy and it was one of those pepper candies, so they all started to laugh at me. It was a **big joke** to them. And you know, up to today, I always remember that with real . . . you know the **feeling** of being hurt. . . .

A: (*remembering a similar experience*) . . . Betrayed.⁶

E: **Betrayed.** Oh, it was an **awful** thing. Anyway, I think a couple of days after that I—when these three guys started teasing me and stuff like that I hold on to one and I say, "OK fine, since you lot won't leave me alone and I try and tell you—I don't come from a jungle. In fact, my home is a better home than you guys'. I will show you what we do with people like you in the jungle." And I hold on one of dem and I left the other two, and I bite the shit out of him until I saw blood. (*She laughs*). I—I went in hysterics. The teachers couldn't control me. They had to phone my mother. Call her to come and calm me down because they couldn't calm me down at all. I just went in total hysterics. Oh it was incredible!

A: And you were nine?

E: I was nine years old. And then they had the cheek to tell my mother that "Well we know she's been going through a hard time, but there's nothing we could do about it." And you know that to me that has always symbolized that, yes, teachers can do something about things like that. You know and it's true, they did nothing. They would see the kids teasing me and they would. . . .

A: Ignore it.

E: Either they didn't know what to do or they didn't know how to do it, but I know at that time I felt alone in the world, but the teachers wouldn't come in to my defence. And I expected them to. This kind of thing, so. . . . but over the years I developed a, you know, I didn't get a chip on my shoulder—just got certain preferences, you know . . . How I like to term it.

Having grown up in a predominantly White society, Ese experienced firsthand the ways in which schooling can assault the humanity of children of African heritage. Her elementary school days were characterized by the alienation of being the sole Black child in her school. "Go back to the jungle" mirrors nineteenth-century racist thought (Gould 1981) well anchored in the minds of Ese's young classmates. She experienced at a young age that gender sameness does not guarantee solidarity. She also experienced how boys can silence and control girls' social interactions in school.

Ese's trust was violated. Yet when she took action against the serial attacks on her person, *she* was the one to be punished. Ese became reinscribed into dominant representations of Black females as angry, out of order, wild, and even animalistic (Evans 1992; Gilman 1985; Mama 1996). How much agony and torment can a child bear in silence? How does a young Black girl develop a healthy self-identity in such environments? How often does it happen in schools that a Black child is reprimanded for her response to what may be a series of racial incidents?

Ese's teacher buried her responsibility in the first-person plural: "We know she's been going through a hard time. But there's nothing *we* could do about it." The teacher was aware of Ese's inner pain. Yet she failed Ese. Through Ese's eyes, her teacher seemed to collude with the other children. She negated Ese's experiences, pushing her into a deeper realm of alienation. The memory of her teacher's flaccid response has informed Ese's contemporary teaching practice and activism. The pain never abated. Ese recalled an event from her teaching experience in Canada in 1988:

Last summer, when our kids went to another school, a White school, for track and field, our kids was ripping the pants off of

them [winning], you know. They [the other school] started to get into the racial slurs and the racial names and that, you know. And I remember when the kids came back and were giving an account—I was sitting there and I had to get up and leave—I had to leave the room—tears were coming to my eyes. It brought back all the old memories from a child. I didn't realize that they were still there although they were deep down in my subconscious; it sort of brought it all back up! Although that was **years ago** when I was a child—**the feeling of the hurt, the feeling of being alone**, you know. And I thought, "Gee whiz." When the kids said they start calling them "nigger" and stuff like that, I walked away. I couldn't believe it! I never realized how . . . deep rooted it had been inside of me, how much it had really hurt!

Secondary School Curricula: "The White side was always validated"

By the time Ese reached secondary school, there were more Blacks in her town and more of a sense of community. Yet, life in school was still "sheer hell." During the sixties, Ese struggled with what she termed "an identity crisis," a quest for self-understanding in a racially diverse but hegemonically Anglo/Euro society:

Why am I always feeling that I wish I was White? I don't want to wish I was White, because I'm Black, and I'm proud of that. [. . .] You want to be on the winning side. And because of the color of your skin, you're always on the losing side, which seems to be so unfair! Because nothing you do or say is validated. [. . .] The white side was always validated.

Ese's struggle with the "White side always being validated" exemplifies the pervasiveness of systemic racism and the consequent ambivalences and feelings of self-erasure experienced by Black children in North America and the United Kingdom (Evans 1992; Fordham 1996; Mac an Ghail 1993; Yekwai 1988). Her metaphors of the "winning" and the "losing" sides raise issues deeper than 'feelings.' As Cheryl I. Harris (1993, 1758) elaborates:

Whiteness retains its value as a “consolation prize”: It does not mean that all Whites will win, but simply that they will not lose, if losing is defined as being on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy—the position to which Blacks have been consigned.

School curricula contributed to assuring this place of consignment:

There was nothing in the history books apart from slavery. So I was never taught anything! British history, yes! Right way back, you know? All the Kings and Queens! But when it comes to Blacks it was always from slavery! I always remember going through school and when we got to the slavery part, they would really milk it,—think they were doing us a favor! And I used to feel **BAD!** you know? And you have to sort of look, and smile, and pretend it doesn't bother you or affect you, you know? It damn well did! It would have been good to know Blacks had achieved all these wonderful things that you could've counteracted and say, “Yeah, **before** slavery we were this and we were that, and we've contributed to this world. **WE** weren't just factory fodders. That's not what God created.”

Thus, Ese grew up “thinking that Blacks did nothing, contributed nothing.” Here she described the devastating effects of a Eurocentric curricular perspective which cast aside humanizing interpretations of histories, cultures, and peoples. Her classroom memories lay bare the need for multiperspectival discussions and texts. Ese's lament that “there was nothing in the history books apart from slavery” raises questions not only about themes for curricular inquiry, but also about the framework from which they are approached: “like they were doing us a favor.”

The sixties was an epoch in which we as Black people in the African diaspora not only struggled but broadened our sense of solidarity, possibility, and vision:

I think a lot of Blacks went through that in the sixties. Although I was young, I was still actively involved in knowing what it was like to be Black. I think for me, it was my late teenage, early twenty years when the Black power movement became quite strong and positive in England. You know, Angela

Davis, Stokely Carmichael, George Jackson. You know, those people. When it became, you no longer felt the need to hide the fact that you were Black, and that you had to **press out you hair wid di, you know, put hot ting in you hair** and stuff like that. It became, as I said, I was going through my own identity crisis then because unfortunately for me, most of my school life, I went to—I was either the only one or just one of three or four. So I went through my school life and I never had a Black teacher. Having been in company of a lot of white people, apart from my own family.

Here, Ese consciously shifted from so-called 'Standard English' to a Caribbean Creole (commonly called patois, "Patwah," by its speakers) when talking about Black women, hair and identity, thus affirming her subjectivity as an African-Caribbean woman.⁷ In the words of Michelle Cliff (1984), she was "claiming an identity they taught me to despise." As Jamaican feminist Honor Ford Smith of the theatre collective, Sistren, (1986, xxix) writes in *Lionheart Gal*, "Patwah expresses the refusal of a people to imitate a coloniser, their insistence on creation, their movement from obedience towards revolution."

Career Counselling: "We become 'factory fodder'"

Ese's narrative reflects the political, social, and economic climate of Britain in the sixties and seventies. As Black migration to Britain increased, Ese, like many Black students, was streamed into nonacademic programs, to become what she calls "factory fodder." In her secondary school, Black girls were tracked into one of two programs, nursing or typing. Ese and a classmate resisted this "tracking": "We were rebels at the time, we didn't want to do nursing or typing. Simple as that! And so, they didn't know what to do with us."

The nursing program was not a registered nursing program, but rather what is termed "practical nursing" in Britain, similar to nursing aide programs in Canada and the United States. Neither typing nor practical nursing can be accurately termed "factory fodder" jobs. However, Ese's metaphor recalls the broken dreams of African Caribbeans who migrate to places such as Britain, Canada,

and the United States in the hope that more social and economic opportunities will abound for their children in these foreign lands. Although the children of Caribbean immigrants, like Ese, may not literally be in a factory, their race, class, and gender often structure them for certain service sector jobs in the labor force with little opportunity for promotion and economic advancement (Bryan et al. 1985).

Ese's narrative corroborates what many Black activists/educators have pointed out: school counselors and teachers often view and advise Black and White girls differently (Bryan, Dadzie, and Scafe 1985; Carby 1982b; Henry and Ginzberg 1985; Omolade 1994; Parmar 1982). Training schemes are all too often racially and sexually specific.⁸ Ese's rejection of "factory fodder" work precipitated another race and gender specific career stereotyping:

So we wound—ended up going into catering. [. . .] They counselled us by saying, "What do you like doing best?" You know, I was always a child, I like me food. So obviously they looked at that and they said, "Oh you like cooking?" Obviously I am going to say yes. So they geared both of us into catering. I suppose the teacher, when you didn't want to be a nurse or a secretary, she stereotyped us and thought of a cook. We weren't smart [politically conscious] enough to realize that we were being stereotyped.

Ese's schooling reflects a contemporary theme of Black life in Britain and in North American societies: Black students are sifted, sorted, and filtered into dead-end programs (Brathwaite 1989; James and Brathwaite 1995; King 1992a, 1992b; Talbot 1984; Toronto Board of Education 1988; Yekwai 1988). Ese experienced firsthand the particular ways in which race, class, and gender structure Black girls' lives. This sorting phenomenon had consequences for her when she immigrated to Canada in 1980. By that time, she had returned to school and had earned two university degrees, in social work and education respectively. However, in 1980, there was a surplus of teachers in Ontario. Consequently, Ese immigrated to Canada stamped with the qualification of "cook." Her job status upon entering slotted her once again into the subordinated realm of what is considered "Black women's work" out of which she had determined to climb through higher education. Ese recalls, "So they

never bothered to look and see what other degrees I had; those were the kind of jobs they looked for, for me.”

A Trip to the Caribbean: “I suddenly had this impetus and drive. . . .”

Upon completion of her catering course in England, in 1971, Ese became a supervisor for School Meals. However, a trip to the Caribbean at age twenty gave her a vision of what her life purpose might be:

So for me, the turning point, and I can remember one of the main reasons why I went into teaching was [. . .] when I went to the Caribbean for the first time as I said and it was just like, I got off the plane in Antigua, and I looked around and for the first time in my life I wasn't—[. . .] **in the minority! I was suddenly a majority person and WOW what an exhilarating feeling! I remember walking through the airport and seeing all these Black faces, and it was just fascinating for me. I was no longer a minority. I was a majority.** And the whites were in the minority. And then I went to St. Kitts. I stayed overnight in Antigua and I stayed with the Prime Minister [the relative of a friend], who was a **Black man**. It was just fascinating for me! These were just things you read or saw on television, you never associate them as being reality, you know. [. . .] So that's what was a turning point for me, because I went home and I saw these people in positions of power and responsibility—doctors, lawyers, you know, and people, and I thought, “Yeah, I can do this too! So I came back to England, after about six, eight weeks down there, and I suddenly had this impetus and drive, to prove to the white man, “yeah I can do this. You're not going to stop me.” And I have never stopped since! (She laughs)

Ese commented earlier that she had no Black teachers. In fact, she grew up only seeing people of African descent working on the low rungs of the societal ladder. (Her mother worked in a factory and later cleaned White people's homes.) The significance of her trip to the Caribbean raised her consciousness and enlarged her vision of her possibilities as a Black woman.

Ese enrolled in a university in 1972. She completed a degree in social work. In 1976 she became a home economics teacher in the same school she had attended as a child. By the seventies, there were more children of African heritage in the school. She considers teaching in her community as “giving back” to her people. Arguably, both of Ese’s careers were entrenched in racial/sexual divisions of labor (Apple 1986; Brand 1991; Cooper 1991; Von Werlhof 1988). The majority of Black women working outside of the home are employed in low-level clerical jobs, service occupations, or service professions such as nursing and teaching (AAUW 1992; Statistics Canada 1986). However, within these class, race, and sex-specific constraints, her postsecondary educational choice exemplified her political self-definition. As Black feminist scholars have pointed out, often, Black women’s educational decisions and career choices are not for individualistic gain, but for Black community empowerment (see Collins 1990; Washington 1980).

Pedagogy and Cultural Identity: “They assume that because you teach, you would eat roast beef and Yorkshire pudding”

Growing up, and working in the same area, Ese’s life as a school-teacher became an extension of her already well-established community leadership:

At lunch time I used to always have a group of kids who used to be known as “Miss Hawthorne’s gals,” much to the disgust of the other teachers. Well I’d have ‘em into my classroom and we’d sit and make tea and cocoa and we’d learn—teach them to plait hair, you know. Braiding. Because then braiding was just coming in, you know, to braid your hair and to be proud of that. So those kinds of things I would do with the kids at lunch time. The teachers—the other white teachers resented that. The fact that I would have these kids, instead of making them go outside, and do stuff like that.

In differing ways, both the playground incident and the hair braiding sessions point to the difficulty for African children to know the splendor of who they are, in everyday school interactions. De-

spite resentment from colleagues, Ese yearned to give her students what had been lacking in her own schooling: a sense of community and pride in one's culture/race. Her work with young girls included nourishing their Black female identities. Her own playground story evokes the pain that Black girls can experience in a society still based on White superiority/Black inferiority.

Historically, Black women have been compared to monkeys, gorillas, and orangutans. Western society has constructed discourses of beauty, which efface Black females (Gilman 1985; hooks 1993). Cosmetic surgery and "de-Africanizing" beauty products (and their concomitant health problems) are evidence of the weight of pervasive Eurocentric norms for hair textures, facial features, and skin tone in quotidian life.⁹ The braiding sessions in Ese's classroom must be understood in the context of what it means to be Black and female in a society of White norms. They are oppositional acts of self-love.

Ese also encouraged her students to see her as an *African-Caribbean* teacher:

I remember when I used to teach the food [in home economics] I used to tell them, "I eat pig snout and pig tail and things like this." It was like, "Wow!" you know, and curry goat and yam and stuff like that. [. . .] you know because they still assume that because you teach you would eat your roast beef and Yorkshire pudding you know. (She laughs) **I eat di same ting like dem.** So those kinds of things when they feel accepted like, "Yeah. My food is important too. Never mind she might be educated, she **eat it.** She like she food."

What does it mean that children of African descent express surprise at their teachers' cultural commonality? Ese has made a profound statement on the contradictory location of Black educators in a White middle-class teaching profession. Bringing one's self-identity, language, and culture as a Black teacher into the knowledge creation process in the classroom changes the notion of who can be a teacher and its meanings. Ese acknowledged her African-Caribbean identity as a deliberate strategy. She recalled that in her school days in England, if a teacher would ask questions about favorite foods, she would name "bangers and mash" or "fish and chips" instead of Caribbean dishes, out of shame and fear of derision. She wanted her pupils to feel proud of their cultural practices. Remembering her

own experiences, Ese whispered pensively, "teachers play an important role . . . what comes out of their mouth, [can] form a child's mind. And also, how you make that child feel."

Teaching as "Giving Back" to the Community

Ese's activism extended beyond the classroom walls:

I lived in the area also. I grew up there, lived there, I know most of their parents. And so the kids related to me because, if they were in trouble, nine times out of ten they always found where I live and they'd show up on my doorstep. When their mothers can't find them, they'll come and tell me, "You know, so and so hasn't been home, is she—" This kind of thing. The parents would phone me up and say, "So and so is gone, is in some trouble with the police. Would you come and help me?" And call, you know? A real sense of community and commitment there.

Caribbean sociologist Olive Senior (1991, 10) explains that for Caribbean people, "childrearing is usually a shared responsibility between mother and others, in many cases another does become the substitute mother, moving from caring for to rearing the child." Growing up, working, and living in the same community, Ese became a community "othermother," caring for the children in her neighborhood as if they were her own.¹⁰

In the 1970s, Ese coordinated a Saturday school for Black children. It began as a school of dance, but once teachers, professionals, and university students enrolled as volunteer tutors, all core school subjects were eventually offered. By 1974, there were three hundred children of African heritage enrolled in this school.

Now that Ese lives and works in Canada, she continues her advocacy in the neighborhood where she resides. She remains committed to the academic and social development of her pupils, as well as for the Black children in her area:

[E]ven in the area where I live, I live in a coop. Now I see it's my duty to gather those children and help them, even if it's only giving the parents some advice, or you know, or letting

them come by my house for an hour or so on the weekend and help them with their math or their language arts or giving the mother some, the parents some worksheets that would help them with their children. I see that as my . . . duty and responsibility as an educator.

Parents in her neighborhood know her. They trust her. They regard her as an advisor, a mentor, a leader, an organizer, and someone they can call upon in time of need.

Ese started an African dance group for the children in her neighborhood. She lobbied at her local public library for ample relevant books and displays for children of African heritage all year round, not solely during Black History Month. Her political activism is at the grass roots level:

So I've got a few groups, I've got a group of parents involved trying to get together to form some kind of group. That would give these kids some kind of direction. [. . .] A couple of the parents, in the coop where I live, you know, some of them are doctors, some of them got good jobs and stuff like this. I've got connections, and we can channel those instead of waiting for it to end up like Davisville area or a Black [area]—because sooner or later, someone's gonna realize where a lot of Black kids go to and the next minute the drug pusher's going to be there and this kind of thing. And these are nice kids. They're not bad kids. It's just that they've nothing else to do but go and hang out at the community center. [. . .] So hopefully we can get that off the ground, get the kids involved in all kind of activities. And more directions, you know? So I'm more into community work [. . .] I'm not into joining a big organization and then become Mr. This and Mrs. That. I'm a real small-minded person. I like to get down to the grass roots. Where the people are at. 'Cause I'm a people kind of person.

"I'm a small-minded person" illustrates how Ese considered her community activism to be an extension of her cultural pedagogy as a woman with working-class roots, and as a mother, and teacher of Black children. "I've never wanted to work in a middle-class area," Ese once said, beaming proudly. She remains energized to transform educational experiences for poor and working-class Black children.

Ese's subjectivity as a working class African-Caribbean woman, mother, and teacher of Black children spills out into her community work.

Ese was committed to counteracting negative stereotypes, low teacher expectations and consequent sorting and sifting processes she experienced in her own schooling:

We've been told over the years that Black kids 's **dumb**. They can't do this; there's so many studies that show a low IQ. I **even more emphatically believe** that **all** Black kids can learn [. . .] So, it's my own little crusade in a way to see to it that all Black kids learn [. . .] My philosophy is very plain and simple. All kids can learn. Education is a means of elevating themselves. [. . .] They are capable of it. It's just a matter of pulling out that potential. They need an awful lot of encouragement and push and drive, and give them a goal to work for. And let them know there is a light at the end of the tunnel. It is possible.

"All kids can learn" refutes pervasive, biased Eurocentric thinking against certain non-White groups (i.e., African-Caribbean and South Asian descent in the United Kingdom, African American, Latino, Native American in the United States, and African Canadian, Aboriginal students in Canada). This maxim embodies many teachers' desires to draw out the potential of their students. In this sociocultural context, it underscores a struggle to transform unjust educational practices in a context of race and class oppression.

Ese described education as "a means of elevating" Black people. Historically, Black people have envisioned education as means of liberation from continued economic and political exploitation. However, historically, Black people have been denied the same good schooling as members of the dominant group, a phenomenon which continues in these present times in many countries, including Canada.

Ese's "crusade" rejected the 'deficit /deviant' thinking housed within much social science theory (e.g., Douglas and Rushton 1987; Herrnstein and Murray 1994; Jensen 1980). She and her four colleagues culled their strategies at the intersections of many life experiences: for example, Ese was African-Caribbean Canadian, an immigrant, a woman from a working-class background; she knew

firsthand how schooling traumatized Black children's spirits. In this place of "multivocality," (Olguin 1991) she was ever constructing her pedagogical standpoint.

Ese also sought to preclude the discouragement and alienation that she experienced as a schoolgirl. She remembered only one teacher who "took the time" to understand her. By contrast, she painstakingly used to observe her pupils:

I get to know them inside out, closely. I can tell you mostly at least 95% what makes that kid tick. [. . .] I will see them and I will watch them and observe them and I will find out as much as I can, then from conversations with the parents. I'm normally very "right-on" as to what make that child tick.

Ese sought to let each child know that s/he was loved and that s/he had something important to contribute to the classroom, to the community, and to Canadian society. In this predominantly African-Caribbean Canadian setting, pupils of all cultural backgrounds learned that people of African ancestry are significant members of Canadian society and members of a larger community of African people that has made contributions to North America and the world. Ese recognized that the historical legacy of colonialism has ingrained itself into the psyches of all the ethnocultural groups she taught. But, as a Black educator, she felt a special commitment to nourishing the intellects and spirits of African Canadian children. Ese often spoke of the importance of not "killing the spirit of Black children," but rather developing strategies with them to cope with, and even transcending the "rejection . . . and injustices that we have to put up with day in day out in our lives."

"Othermothering" in the Classroom and in the Community

Black womanist resistance spawns diverse forms of motherhood. As a divorced mother of two school-aged children, Ese habitually counteracted racist school practices on their behalf. She remained constant and vigilant, meeting often with their school principals and classroom teachers. But her "children" extended beyond her offspring. Ese and her colleagues often referred to Black youngsters as

"family": "my children," "my kids," and "our Black kids." "My children" referred to children in the African-Canadian community, her students and her own children. Ese, and Makeda often used to say, "When you look at the children, you see your own. Many teachers refer to pupils as "my kids." By contrast, Ese's remarks about "giv[ing] something back—especially to my people. To my kids" epitomizes a specific *herstory* of Black women's struggle for education in a context of racial oppression, a womanist struggle, as Alice Walker (1983, ix-x) defines, of "commitment to the survival of the race, both male and female."

Western patriarchy defines any household outside of the nuclear family as an aberration. But for many people from Caribbean backgrounds, "child-shifting," or informal adoption, is "a well-established feature" of family and community life (Senior 1991, 12). As an 'othermother', Ese often had near and distant relatives, the elderly as well as the young, stay at her house, sometimes for years, often under various circumstances of personal and economic hardship. These cooperative living arrangements, familiar to Black communities, have always contradicted Western bourgeois, individualistic notions of the patriarchal nuclear family and children as private property (Bush 1986, Collins 1990, hooks 1984, Senior 1991). Bernice Johnson Reagon (1987, 177) writes:

One can use the concept of a mothering generation to mean the way an entire community organizes itself and nurtures itself and its future generations.

Ese envisaged the Black community as "family." Her life illustrated an historical tradition of mutuality and collective responsibility familiar to Black women in Canada and abroad. Like many of those she has othermothered, Ese's life exemplifies the tenuous status of Black women in Western political economies. Within a few years of immigrating to Canada, getting married, and having two children, Ese and her husband separated. Even with two university degrees (in social work and teaching respectively), Ese briefly found herself engulfed in a dominant, stereotypical image of Black women: a single parent on social assistance. She eagerly took a dead-end, low-paying job as a file clerk to escape this mirthless existence. Later, she did social service work for a local Sickle Cell Foundation. In part, due to Makeda's antiracist hiring strategy, she was happily

able to find work as a classroom teacher in 1989. Ese explained her commitment and passion as a Black woman teaching Black children:

I love and enjoy teaching. I think if I didn't . . . I wouldn't be here because it's hard work. It's not easy. Especially for a Black teacher. It's hard work. Especially if you're committed to the cause, so to speak, and seeing—and wanting to help your people, wanting to give something back. God was good enough to sort of give you a little bit of brains, you know. Put you where you are. I feel as though I have to give something back—especially to my people. To my kids. You know. So, I-I love teaching. I love seeing when a kid, a student, it clicks, the jigsaw puzzle's fit into place. It gives me a high. I really get a high off of the fact that the kids feel "Gee, this is easy isn't it, Miss?" And I says, "**YES IT IS! NOW YOU'VE GOT IT!**," you know, and you see them **soar on**, you know? That is my high! I really do get a high out of that. Sort of keeps me going for another year. This is what I dig, this kind of thing, you know. So I enjoy teaching, I love my children.

Makeda

"I can't
Go out of this world
Not having done
Anything."

Makeda, principal of Bedford Elementary School, was born in Jamaica in 1944. She always aspired to be a teacher: "I never remember wanting to be anything else." Her family immigrated to Canada in 1961, when she was fifteen years old. She had already completed her secondary schooling. Although middle-class professionals in Jamaica, Makeda's parents imagined that Canada would offer "more opportunity."

Makeda came from "a strong family"; her parents helped her develop a "strong sense of self." She passed her 11 plus exam (to enter secondary school) at nine years of age, rather than at eleven. Jokingly, she recalled, "I think I just had pushy parents." Makeda's middle-class privilege allowed her to attend elite private schools in

Jamaica where she was taught by British (all White) teachers under a colonialist system. Living in a predominantly Black society, Makeda escaped the alienation experienced by Ese and many Black students in predominantly White, Canadian public schools.

Lessons in Canadian Schooling: "Your child is out to lunch"

The difficulties encountered by Makeda's younger siblings were ominous apprehensions of racist filtering processes that take place in Canadian schools. Her youngest sibling, now a "successful" civil servant, was entirely schooled in Canada. Makeda reminisced that "the system did him in, really . . . he's the one who's done the worst in terms of academic performance." Makeda's sister, Jacqueline, won a full high school scholarship in Jamaica; but in Canada, her (White) grade-nine guidance counsellor decided to place her in a non-academic track. Makeda's parents insisted that Jacqueline be placed in an academic program. Makeda's family experiences alerted her that, regardless of place of origin or socioeconomic location, racism positions students of African descent in particular ways.

Like her own parents and so many mothers of Black children, Makeda continually interrupts schooling practices that filter students according to race:

You know, my youngest one learned to read when she was two and a half, three. And then she went to school and in grade four, the teacher tried to tell me there was something wrong with her. Well, I asked for her to be given just the educational part of an assessment because I wanted them actually just to test her I—just to give her a CAT [Canadian Achievement Test] test to take a look at her math and reading skills, to say "Does this kid . . . ? How . . . ? Where is this child having difficulty?" Therefore, what it is that we need to be doing? I didn't want to give her the whole battery. When they did the reading part of the assessment, the psychologist called and said, "I really want to advise you to do the whole battery of tests because we could be looking at a gifted placement for your daughter." This is from a teacher, who said, "Your child is out to lunch," essentially. Now, it turned out that she tested in the very su-

perior range, not in the gifted range, but, however, that's not the issue.

As a mother of two Black daughters, Makeda has been obliged to do what schools have not done and undo what they have done:

Because constantly for my own children, I have to keep saying and talking about the successes in our family and talking about what people in our family do. To say, "You come from a family of people who succeed, you come from a family of achievers." So they will have their self-esteem intact, because they get bombarded the other way, they hear nothing out there. Just by virtue of all they see around them. Nobody has to actually say it. But by virtue of school practices, by virtue of books, by virtue of the media, by virtue of how you get treated out there, it tells you that.

The experience of racial oppression knows no class boundaries. Despite being from a professional family, Makeda's children are not exempt from internalizing negative dominant images. Black children live in a society with contradictory discourses. They are led to believe that Canada is a meritocracy, "a society where everyone starts life with an equal chance" and where "neither wealth, race, gender, ethnicity, nor religious affiliation . . . hinder any citizen in the pursuit of his or her personal ambitions and social goals" (Mazurek 1987, 142–43). On the other hand, as Ese pointed out, school lessons teach them that their lives are really rather insignificant. Makeda related the following story to illustrate that being a successful middle-class professional Black women cannot override racism:

I was going to the Faculty [the education department at a local university] to speak to a group of students. And I had my fur coat on, and brief case, leather boots. And I looked wonderful (laughing). I was going down on the subway. And I went onto the subway here at Charleton. And as I was standing there, [. . .] two or three White boys, looked-sort-of-the-skinhead-type-but-not-quite. You know, not quite that far. Walked by, and as they **passed** me, one of them said, "fucking nigger." And I thought—I laughed. I laughed to myself as I stepped on the train because, I thought, here I was (both laughing). I was just thinking I was—[chic]. I was hit between the eyes. But it is

good that those things happen, because then you remember. You remember what you have to do and remember that out there, that's how—, it doesn't matter, what you do, it doesn't matter what your position is, it doesn't matter whether you're the chief executive officer or whatever, that's how you're seen as a "fucking nigger," and we've got to get the kids to understand that, you know, to get that self-esteem so they don't believe they're "fucking niggers."

As school principal, Makeda desired to help Black children transcend racism rather than to internalize it. Makeda's activism with her daughters has served as frames of reference in teaching, especially with her pupils at Bedford:

I think perhaps if I wasn't a mother, that maybe I would look at things a lot differently. But I think that there always has to be the feeling that if my child was in this class. When I was a teacher, I always felt that way. . . . if my child was in this class, is this what I would want for my child? [. . .] I always made sure kids learned. But it was because I always kept that in mind and I do the same here as an administrator. I think "if my child was coming to this school, would I be happy with what was happening in terms of general school practices and classroom practice? Would I be happy about that?"

Classroom Activism: "I decided I just wasn't going to allow that to happen again!"

As a classroom teacher, Makeda had to make grave political choices. As she put it, she "stuck her neck out" to combat racist school practices. The following poignant story marks a turning point in Makeda's political-pedagogical activism:

The school that I left from, and I took a year off and the reason that I took a year off was because I had advocated for a Black child the previous year, and I had such a terrible time with that principal that I decided that nobody was ever going to do that to me again! Because I was teaching, and I was quite happy teaching, you know, and doing whatever. But the child had, was