

Mixed-Race Identity Black and Maliseet: My Personal Narrative

“Do not go back any further in our family history,
and do not ask any more questions,
or you will be sorry what you might find out.”¹

DIVIDED INTO FOUR SECTIONS, THIS IS A FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE of my experiences of identity and the subsequent challenges that I have come to grapple with and reflect upon. The first section will explain my personal identity and will give some background to my life and my formative years. The second section will define my ancestral journey, specifically discussing my great aunt’s genealogical notes and how they are interpreted and blended with my personal experience. The third section follows my spiritual journey and how I came to enter doctoral work. Here I will discuss my hidden and suppressed mixed-race identity and why my extended family’s identity has been elided and silenced. The final section will consider some basic and thought-provoking questions that I am attempting to answer as a person of colour and as a settler of colour on the stolen land called Turtle Island. I conclude with a discussion of how colonization has played a role in creating division and contributes to the fractured relationships among contemporary black and Indigenous communities in New Brunswick.

Who am I?

I will begin by locating myself. I am a woman of African descent, born in rural New Brunswick. As long as I can remember, I have been socialized and colonized to call myself or claim the identity of a person of African descent. I am a seventh-generation descendant of the African Diaspora to Atlantic Canada and my son is the eighth generation. My father was a labourer until he had to retire due to injuries he sustained in the Second World War. My mother was originally a teacher, having been recruited to teach in the segregated school system in Nova Scotia. Once married and back living in New Brunswick, my mother was a housewife for many years and returned to the working world in the mid-1970s. I am the only sibling with a bachelor of arts degree as well as a master’s degree, and the only sibling to commence a doctorate. My educational journey has had many challenges, and I continue to grapple with my choices and the sacrifices I have made.

My province was developed on land stolen from the Mi’kmaq and Maliseet peoples, who are the caretakers of this land. My ancestors were either brought to New Brunswick as property by United Empire Loyalists or came to New Brunswick as free persons to establish this land, leaving either Nova Scotia by land or water, migrating from the Caribbean by sea, or travelling by land or sea from the United

¹ This quotation is from my great aunt Ypres Dymond-Norton’s family history journal, August 1975 (unpublished diary).

States. It is telling that, when researching the presence of slaves or the institution of slavery in Maritime Canada, Harvey Amani Whitfield noted “slavery lasted longer in Maritime Canada than in any New England state, and continued well into the early nineteenth century, as it did in New York and New Jersey.”²

I am a mixed-race woman – African, First Nations, and perhaps Chinese – who was raised as a person of African descent. I spent my younger years hidden in books and doing many solitary tasks as the middle child of nine siblings. I was surrounded by boys and much older and much younger sisters. I felt alone in my family. I grew up very mature and learned the importance of keeping silent when needed, listening to all conversations, and reading between the lines. As I became aware of who I was and started to find my path in life, I always wondered why any reference to or acknowledgment of our Aboriginal identity was silenced. Why was the possibility of even our Chinese blood silenced also? I believe it would have helped me, in terms of my struggles as a youth, had I been given the full picture of my identity. I do know now that I have a legacy to pass on to my son, and will fully disclose to him who he is and how proud he should be of his mixed-race heritage.

Who I am is also inseparable from the legacy of colonization, seen in the role of white supremacy in creating divides and promoting gaps in relationships between contemporary Aboriginal and black communities. I like how Paula Madden, in her book, *African Nova Scotian-Mi'kmaw Relations*, brings out the inner structures of nation state and identity: “Citizenship, identity, place and belonging are contested ideas within a nation. The meaning of who belongs and how they belong is never fixed, but continuously negotiated among citizens, and also between the state and its citizens. Racial identification, whether fashioned in response to with limited independence from, external definition, though sometimes useful in historic moments as a transformative or organizing tool, fails to dislodge the racial order that marginalizes, disembodies and dispossesses many of those seen as ‘other’.”³

Great-aunt Ypres Dymond-Norton’s family history journal

My great-aunt, Ypres Dymond-Norton, was a sister to my grandmother. In her oral history, which has been transcribed, the first few lines and the end section both contain the warning quoted at the beginning of this piece that asking questions of family history may bring unwanted knowledge. The genealogy itself is priceless. The document reveals to me that our family blood has both Iroquois and Maliseet connections. But the warning puzzled me. I was confused by the almost intimidating and threatening tone that I felt when I read the documents. When I asked my cousin Roberta what was meant by her mother’s statements, she replied that she did not know but she thought what my great-aunt was referring to was some Chinese heritage. Roberta seemed to recall hearing from her mother and other elders that one of our great, great-grandmothers was part-Indigenous and part-Chinese. We had a smile and laughed at what her mom, my great-aunt, thought was such scandalous information that it should never be discussed or brought out in public or even

2 Harvey Amani Whitfield, “Black Loyalists and Black Slaves in Maritime Canada,” *History Compass* 52, no. 10 (2007): 1984.

3 Paula Madden, *African Nova Scotian-Mi'kmaw Relations* (Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2009), 38.

allowed into general family discussions. But the new information has also caused me to question and disrupt the process of silencing our truths. And this is just on my mother's side of our family. I also know that there is Aboriginal heritage on my father's side, but where do I go to find and confirm this history? I want to be able to draw from my community and relatives, so I must be aware of their sensitivities while seeking answers to my questions.

In discovering my family history, I learned early on that I was different and on the lower end of the economic scale. I heard many discussions around me about how "large" our family was and repeated questions as to how my parents were able to provide for so many "mouths." This discussion was also driven by my father's actions, as he struggled with his identity and place in our small, rural, white-dominated hometown. He often turned to alcohol to give him what I assume was some sense of relief from all the incidents of racism he encountered in his life. The American author and social activist Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pen name, bell hooks, discusses the pain and frustrations of black men, and this reflects much of my thoughts and sadness as well towards my father's addictions: "What is different for black males, what makes it harder for them to survive than black females, is the dearth of healing theory and practice addressing black male pain and possibility (which includes support networks and therapeutic interventions) as well as the collective refusal on the part of black males to constructively use the resources that are available for their empowerment."⁴

I believe it is enough to say that as my family grew, and my mother watched my father's health deteriorate, she made a conscious though silent decision to conserve and dedicate her energy to see all nine of us through to at least the completion of high school. It was clear that my mother was the matriarch of the household and her word was final.

My mother focused on getting us through school, supporting us, and not allowing anything like rumours, gossip, racism, systemic oppression, and general lack of finances to restrict us from having a life in which we felt protected, loved, and nurtured. Looking back, I realize how hard it must have been for my mother to hold her head high after the local police brought my drunken father home. I am not sure that I could have been as strong as my dear mother. We always had food and clean clothes and a comfortable home. We were a typical family: we all had part-time jobs, played numerous competitive sports, and we were successful in completing high school. Some of my siblings took trade or community college courses, so my mother's wishes came to fruition. I also believe my mother was spiritually connected to her higher power and our ancestors; she walked with her head high, proud of her family. I am proud to be her daughter.

My journey – my ancestors

I left my home to take on the role of a full-time student after having completed both my bachelor's and master's degrees on a part-time basis while being fully employed. I relocated approximately 1,000 miles from my home to begin a new educational journey. Although I have never been entirely alone on this journey, there have still

4 bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 135.

been times when I experienced profound moments of deep loneliness. I sense, in retrospect, that loneliness and homesickness formed a necessary part of my journey, and that these deep moments provided me with the much-needed personal growth I required to move forward. I chose the University of Toronto because I sought further academic support from professors who could mentor me on critical race theories, and an institution that was located in a diverse and multi-ethnic city.

As I had come closer to my decision to move, one major influence that had prompted me to think and reflect about my heritage was my involvement in restoring a rural graveyard. My ancestors of African descent lay in graves that were located in a segregated section of the property, which had been overgrown and completely ignored. I felt so personally attacked that I joined the community organization that was restoring the graveyard, as I felt my ancestors needed a voice. I referred to my ancestors being marginalized and segregated in death, and I wanted to speak up and advocate for them in the face of this injustice. I slowly became aware of my ancestors' voices and felt compelled to learn more. I also felt deeply frustrated by the lack of public awareness of my ancestors' lives – particularly their lived experiences and their subsequent contribution to my province.

I wanted to be a vehicle for my ancestors to tell their stories. This particular graveyard restoration happened in 2004, and I am still active on the board with this community organization. In my ongoing research about the history of segregated graveyards in New Brunswick it has been difficult to find any written documentation. In *Blacks in Deep Snow*, though, Colin A. Thomson provides a good indication why this might be so: “The ‘black presence’ brought displeasure to Canadians in all parts of the country. In Saint John, all restaurants and theatres closed their doors to Blacks in 1915. In Halifax, Fredericton and Colchester, Blacks could not be buried in Anglican churchyards. A St. Croix, Nova Scotia by-law passed in 1907, read: Not any Negro or coloured person nor any Indian shall be buried in St Croix cemetery. As late as 1968 the by-law was cited to prevent the burial of a black child in the cemetery.”⁵

Another reason I chose to pursue studies for my PhD was because I live in New Brunswick. In the only bilingual province in Canada, the discourse that emphasizes Caucasian British and French heritages is one that constantly reminds me that my ancestors' stories have been silenced and are slowly being erased. Upon the completion of my master's degree at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, I realized that there was a lack of any curriculum diversity within my program, the Critical Studies Program, which is a speciality in the Master of Education program. My master's thesis, completed in 2007, is a critical analysis of a woman of colour, specifically a woman of African heritage growing up in post-colonial Canada. I used myself as the subject, and the thesis is a testament to the daily lives of racialized women in Canada. It is entitled “Releasing My Critical Chatter: An Autobiographical Narrative from the Black Diaspora,” and was published in 2011 by Nsemia Publications in Ontario. Part of the problem that I wanted to address is that my ancestors' contribution to history, oral stories, and

5 Colin A. Thomson, *Blacks in Deep Snow: Black Pioneers in Canada* (Toronto: Dent & Son, 1979), 87.

folklore were gradually becoming invisible. I speak to my ancestors' stories being erased because I have done much research and there is very little written on the early African settlers in New Brunswick. My sole purpose in completing my doctoral studies is to further listen to my ancestors' voices and to re-tell their stories in order to speak to the gaps in and lack of presence of these early black settlers.

The final push that inspired me to apply for doctoral work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) came after my dear mother passed away on 23 September 2009. Her death gave me the courage to take this journey, to even consider moving in this direction. I was so close with my mother. My greatest joy is a statement I had never heard until my mother's death: "You are so much like her." I am one of five daughters, and when I heard it said that my personality resembled our mother's – and I have heard those words often since September 2009 – my chest swells and I am so grateful to be her daughter. I like how Cynthia Dillard, a professor of multicultural education, described the pain of losing her immediate relatives and having them become her ancestors. Dillard linked this experience to her intellectual as well as her emotional growth: "The deaths of my beloved father and elder sister and their becoming my ancestors is not an abstract notion in my life and work: it is rather the catalyst for an intensely intimate emotional storm that is allowing me to access the inner wisdom needed to guide me through the vacuum their deaths have created."⁶ My ancestors also are guiding me on this journey through my PhD. I have a serenity that I never knew prior to allowing their spiritual presence in my life. I came to realize that to write my ancestors' stories and to write the document that has needed to be written, I had to obtain the tools and mentoring from the leading Canadian scholars on critical analysis of race, on Indigenous and African peoples, on spirituality, and other crucial matters. My proposed research area is demystifying the relationships of my ancestors. I plan, through oral history and archival research, to create a path of the relationships that led to my very identity. I want to look at the relationships of those early Maliseet elders and the African ancestors – how they married, exchanged trades and secrets – and through those relationships write about how my family has come to be because, as bell hooks states, "In keeping with the spirit of ancestor acknowledgment, the memory of earlier communion between African and Native American laid the groundwork of an interaction based in mutual respect and reciprocity."⁷ There is a hidden and oppressed oral history in New Brunswick – one that speaks to the relationships among the Aboriginal people and the African descendants. I wish to present this research about my family relationships into the mainstream and highlight specifically how I came to be and look like the person I am.

Conclusion and final questions

I have had many experiences of having my identity challenged while here in Toronto, within the academic community and outside of that community within the city of Toronto. I could list multiple experiences that challenged my identity, but I will focus

6 Cynthia B. Dillard, *On Spiritual Strivings: Transforming An African American Woman's Academic Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).

7 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: Southend Press, 1992), 181.

on the most recent example. This incident happened in May 2011. I was accused of shoplifting while in a drug store. This incident, which I felt was racially motivated due to looks, is still going through the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal process. I grow tired of responding, but realize that to be an educator is to consistently educate others. Many challenges have individuals of other races asking me to define my identity – what mixture of races comprises my identity? Am I mixed-race, black, Native, white? These questions are constantly thrown at me in different forms as people try to determine what race I am. I have based my research on my identity and the relationships between the early African settlers in New Brunswick and the Indigenous people from the Maliseet communities on critical race theory, which is a theory based on critically analysing the presence or lack thereof of systemic racism and power in all forms of our society. It is written in a narrative format, using multiple forms of research such as archival research, in-person interviews, and academic literature. This work is an anti-colonial project. In essence, I intend to write about my ancestors in a holistic, spiritual, and indigenous way that is academic, realistic, and also grounded in everyday knowledge. As a narrative writer, I consciously try to keep my work written so that the everyday person or non-academic can read my work and understand its meaning and intensions.

I feel it necessary to include a spiritual connection or component in my research, and in doing so I want to have my ancestors, both Aboriginal and African, assist me. I am blessed to have the presence of both sets of my ancestors close, and I know that I am at OISE to do the work I need to do. Within my first few weeks at OISE, Cynthia Dillard gave a visiting address on memory, remembering, and how we need to remember what we forgot – and especially of the necessity, as black people, to remember. Dillard has written: “And we have cultural memory, memory of our unique and collective ways of being on this earthly journey. That cultural memory is at least part of what these scholars of color raised up in these studies and in their (African American ancestors) ongoing quest to be ‘seen’ and ‘heard’ and ‘unlimited’ in the myriad ways they approach their questions, their scholarship.” She goes on to suggest that memory is also about an awakening, an opening to the spirit of something that has, until this moment, been asleep within us.⁸

Others have often asked me what heritage or ethnicity I fall under. Part of my family’s oral history is very clear: we have Aboriginal blood, even though memory of it was silenced in my family. I now know that I am of Maliseet and Iroquois descent on my mother’s side, and I have yet to determine to which clan I belong on my father’s side. Yet I also find the reflection of Zainab Amadahy, a writer and activist of African-American, Cherokee, and European descent, compelling: “Today I really wonder how Indigenous I can claim to be given that I am clanless, my Indigenous family history – African and Cherokee – has been lost in the colonization process and I do not have any familiar relationship with the land. I have come to understand that this self-doubt is as common to urban Indigenous people whether with White or African ancestry. It is a consequence of genocide.”⁹

8 Cynthia B. Dillard, “Re-membering Culture: Bearing Witness to the Spirit of Identity in Research,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 11, no.1 (March 2008): 87-93 (esp. 89).

9 Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence, “Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada: Settlers or Allies?” in *Breaching the Colonial Contract: Anti-Colonialism in the US and Canada*, ed. Arlo Kempf (New York: Springer, 2009), 108.

As a person of African descent who has brown or fair skin, I have been called upon by people of many races to define where I fit in. Most recently my challenge has been to acknowledge fully my Aboriginal roots. I am certainly not denying my Aboriginal heritage. I like how Laurel Lewey, an Aboriginal professor from Atlantic Canada, defines difference: “The way in which ‘difference’ is constructed tells us as much about the constructors as it does the constructed. . . . Outside of the microcosm of family and friends we see evidence of the construction of ‘difference’. Comments are made that are not intended to be hurtful but highlight racial identity.”¹⁰ Lewey names here a reality that is evident but rarely talked about. It is hurtful and exhausting continually to have to define who you are and answer questions that are imposed upon you. The questions of difference are perhaps the subtle tools of the colonizer to keep oppressed people re-oppressing each other. In essence, I am saying that when you belong to an Aboriginal or racialized group, you are constantly asked to define your difference. In new social situations, work situations, and academic environments, there is always that pressure about who you are and where you belong. I always felt a caution that arose from seeking the ability to feel safe and yet not be part of the dominant group. Like Lewey, I grew up the brown person in the room. As Lewey recalls, “Growing up I was the only person in my town with a brown face. My mother brought diversity into the family by marrying a Micmac man. . . . On our weekly forays into the city often people would look from my mother to my brown face and back again. Did they wonder, am I really her child?”¹¹

Does identity matter, or is identity a colonial facet that has been imposed on us? My argument here has been that identity is truly a colonial concept, which has been woven so tightly into our makeup that we are unable to shake its penetration. Of course, I am fully aware that I am as guilty as the next person, when I encounter new people, of attempting to slot them into a category. Or when I describe a person to someone, I use race and ethnicity as ways of defining. My research will help me explore why we as humans do this, and to what extent it is another subtle but permeating thread of colonialism. Accordingly, my reason for exploring my identity goes far beyond simply trying to determine a percentage of Aboriginal blood. I wish to investigate further the complexities and challenges that come with a mixed-race identity. I would never deny my heritage, as people often tell me my Aboriginal blood is so visibly prominent.

Focusing on my Aboriginal self, however, has become newly consistent during my time in Toronto. While I was living and working in New Brunswick, this element of my identity was never the issue for me. Rather, I was the little black girl on the block. I was the person of African descent on the census form. I was the brown girl in a sea of white faces for most of my early years. It has been an experience of familiarity and yet discomfort. As Dionne Brand, a professor and writer who explores the themes of gender, race, sexuality and feminism, has stated: “To be Black in a predominately white society, with all its incumbent difficulties, forces one constantly to evaluate experience against an active and external mechanism of

10 Laurel Lewey, “Fragments from the Edge,” *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 12, no. 1 (2001): 4.

11 Lewey, “Fragments from the Edge,” 3.

subordination. That is, laws, rules, policy, attitudes, all designed to inhibit one's activities and aspirations, have to be responded to, so these analyses become part of how life is articulated; these laws, rules, policy, attitudes, etc., are the obstacles through which life is negotiated."¹²

My ancestral research raises broad questions on the relationship between heritage and colonization, and also questions of community/family involvement and why I was never informed of my true heritage. I am currently exploring more of these questions in my doctoral research on how the relationships manifested with my blended identity. Why was the Aboriginal side of my identity suppressed for so many previous generations? What happened in New Brunswick to the early African settlers, and why did their marriages, relationships, and future descendants not have access to their true genealogy? Why was our Aboriginal blood denied? And why were we not introduced to our Aboriginal way of living? I am currently working on untangling my roots in this very important research. Such questions will be integral to my future work, as I attempt to analyse the experiences of my family so that this information can be passed to the future generations. As I look continually to the scholarly literature for answers, I am also aware of the elders I have around me and their advancing age. I realize that part of my research will involve oral history recordings and creating a library of oral interviews. Key questions will need to be addressed from all of these sources. What role has colonization played in creating divides or lack of relationships among contemporary black communities in New Brunswick and with First Nations peoples? Has the process of colonization created such a divide in our communities (African-descended and First Nations in New Brunswick) that I can never belong to a First Nation, and can do no more than be an ally to support my sister community?

In closing, I wish to draw some support from bell hooks in her *Black Looks*: "An important strategy has been the historical erasure and suppression of documents and information affirming the depth of these ties or their perverse rewriting of history from the colonizing standpoint." bell hooks further states: "True for both Native and African Americans, it has been hard for the two groups to recover from this colonizing process and assert full agency in documenting and interpreting their reality, their mutual bond."¹³ But now, as the Indigenous Hawaiian educator Julie Kaomea has written, "It is time to tell more uncomfortable stories."¹⁴ I want to understand the history of my mixed race identity and to tell those "more uncomfortable stories" because it is necessary in order to understand how the process of colonization played a role in the act of hiding my Aboriginal identity. My doctoral research continues as an anti-colonial project that I hope will contribute to challenging and pushing back the subtle pervasive acts of a colonialism that is present in our daily academic and mainstream lives.

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12 Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s to 1950s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991), 32.

13 hooks, *Black Looks*, 182.

14 Julie Kaomea, "Reading Erasures and Making the Familiar Strange: Defamiliarizing Methods for Research in Formerly Colonized and Historically Oppressed Communities," *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 2 (March 2003): 23.